



United Nations Association in Canada
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**The New Media and Avian Flu:
Gathering and Broadcasting Intelligence to All,
from All, and for All**

By: Craig McKie and Kathryn White

In the vivisected Berlin of the 1950s, signs told travelers that they were now leaving “the British zone” or “the American zone”. The Web cybersigns now tell people they are leaving all national zones simultaneously. For some, the Web is the Twilight Zone of rumour and innuendo; for many others, it is the Intelligence Zone par excellence.

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Introduction: Losing Control of the Message

Information on avian flu is reaching citizens of all countries of the world from many sources. But, whereas once-privileged government communications strategies dominated the content of the mainstream media (henceforth MSM), this type of message control is now a thing of the past. In no small part, this is because information and commentary are available to anyone with an Internet connection who can read Websites, email, and the *Web blogs*¹ (henceforth blogs). Since this research was undertaken video logs – vlogs or podcasts -- have also come strongly into their own in this fast moving Web-based medium. Blogs and podcasts distribute near-real-time information nuggets and critical commentary from opinion leaders thereon, mixed inevitably with misinformation and alarmist nonsense. In 2005, this non-governmental flow of information dissemination turned into a deluge as the blogs seemingly suddenly appeared as the primary Web locale where news breaks and hidden facts emerge into the light of day. In fact, the blogs are simply the latest tool of a communication system now at least ten years in the making. What is different today is that millions of people around the world are reading them (see Appendix 2) and a new form of global public opinion is emerging. Blogs are the high volume, self-correcting, fact-checking electronic commons of the future. And since it is a matter of justified public concern, avian flu is a topic growing hot on the blogs and related Web sites today. If some significant event occurs anywhere on the globe, chances are very good that it will be swarmed and thus widely known well before any official has the opportunity to frame its meaning in a press release. Lies now have a short shelf life (and the inherent risk is -- some truths as well). This is what the loss of message control means today, particularly by institutional communicators.

The ‘blogosphere’, or the space on the World Wide Web now occupied by web logs, represents more than what those planning or responding to a public health crisis needs to know, rather it is what they must know. While much of the space is famously taken up by indulgent and self-absorbed accounts of the mundane and quotidian – the space has also become a democratization of informed debate and social critique: the emergence of the citizen ‘columnist’.

Avian Flu Information on the Web

In early September 2005, we did a cursory scan of the Web content available on avian and bird flu. We found that extensive authoritative information was directly available in copious quantity to anyone who wanted it. For instance, we did a search of the (free) *New York Times* articles for bird flu. The search returned 285 articles since 1981, most presumably late in that period. The coverage at the NYT is not at all alarmist and the conclusion we drew at that point was that the threat to North Americans was perceived as remote, and of lesser significance, than any one of a number of matters of more pressing concern. One aspect of the presentation which interested us was the co-located ads, three in number, for antiviral

¹ *Blog* is an established short form for Web log, a diary by another name. The word was in sparing use in computerese for another purpose previous to this usage.

products such as Tamiflu which were available for direct sale to readers. We also did a Google search at that time. Google returned 10,300,000 hits for *bird flu* and 4,010,000 for *avian flu*, indicating, if nothing else, the widespread interest in this subject.² The most important sites presented by the Google search were in fact listed first and would allow anyone with access to Google to find out the basic science easily at sites like <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/> which is the American government's Center for Disease Control (CDC) main site. The World Health Organization (WHO) site is also prominently displayed: http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/. We particularly liked the WHO Fact sheet at http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/, and the site of the United States Department of Labor, *Guidance For Protecting Workers Against Avian Flu* at <http://www.osha.gov/dsg/guidance/avian-flu.html>.

Lastly, we found the *Wikipedia* entry on avian influenza (Wikipedia is the freeform collective encyclopedia project which rolls on all the time and to which anyone can submit material and/or corrections). In fact, the Wikipedia entry is very good (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avian_influenza).

Tamiflu Usefulness: a blogging case in point

While world governments have been scrambling to accumulate official stockpiles of Tamiflu to combat a possible avian flu pandemic and preventing ordinary citizens from doing the same (except in Japan, where citizens have easy access for ordinary flu quite routinely), questions have arisen concerning the clinical utility of Tamiflu in the avian flu context. Blog postings such as that below reinforce this skepticism:

A CONSIGNMENT of antiviral drugs bought by the Government for £186 million to protect the public against a bird flu pandemic could be rendered useless after the emergence of a resistant strain of the virus.

Experts in Hong Kong gave warning yesterday that the human H5N1 virus which surfaced in northern Vietnam this year was showing resistance to Tamiflu, the drug widely considered the best chance of protecting the population.

...

Describing the case of Tamiflu-resistance, William Chui, of the Department of Pharmacology at the Queen Mary Hospital in Hong Kong, yesterday urged drug manufacturers to make more effective versions of Relenza, another antiviral also known to be effective in battling H5N1.

"There are now resistant H5N1 strains appearing, and we can't totally rely on one drug [Tamiflu]," Professor Chui said, adding that general viral resistance to Tamiflu, known generically as oseltamivir, was also thought to be growing in Japan.

² A second search, this time of blog content, using the *Google Blog Search* engine in mid-October 2005 returned 22,670 references to avian flu and 45,334 references to bird flu in the indexed blog content. The blog search page is at http://www.google.com/blogsearch/advanced_blog_search.

Now as we know, and this report confirms, an influenza pandemic is a certainty at some point, next year, five, ten years away. Whether it is avian flu is as yet unknown, of course, but some form of flu is going to sweep round the world at some point, as it has done in the past.

And to find that one of the candidate strains is already showing resistance to one of the only two drugs we have to treat the symptoms (it's worth noting that we still have not cured anyone anywhere of a viral disease. We can, as long as they don't mutate too quickly, like AIDs or flu, vaccinate against them, we can treat and alleviate symptoms, but we do not have a cure for any viral disease at all and never have had.)

Looks like it might be worth adding a few packs of Relenza to that Tamiflu you have stockpiled. And, please, don't use it until such a pandemic does occur, for that will just encourage the evolution of strains resistant to that drug as well.

Source: http://timworstall.typepad.com/timworstall/2005/10/avian_flu_tamif.html

A cursory reading of such a blog posting might well cause the average reader to question what the sound empirical basis for governments, including that of Canada, to accumulate large quantities of Tamiflu is exactly. Large amounts of public funds are being spent in this exercise. Is it just pixie dust? Inquiring minds want to know.

A Short History of Web-based information

Sometimes, the behaviour of the few surfaces into general use by the many in the fullness of time. This was the case with blogs. Now systematically organized, searched, and read by millions daily around the world, they have come to be the growing edge of information collection and interpretation, accessible to all with Web access. There are no authoritative records either of the number of blogs though they surely now number in the millions³, nor on the number and characteristics of readers and commenters⁴. Since most are interactive in the sense that readers have an immediate opportunity to dispute key points of information and opinion, simply counting participants does not really capture the interplay in any case. Notwithstanding this indeterminacy, it is clear that blogs have become the distant early warning system of much of literate humanity -- certainly of literate and connected humanity -- an intelligence service for the literati in other words. With indexing, archiving, and concatenation, they are today's amplifiers of observation, and at the same time a very

³ An updating map of the world's blogs that are geocoded is located at <http://www.brainoff.com/geoblog/>. "Weblogs.com updates about once per minute. the geo-blog poller checks about once per minute. and flash checks in with the server about once per minute. so at worse, it's 3 minutes in the past, at best 1 minute". As to how many there are: "BlogPulse now indexes about 11 million blogs world-wide; Technorati, about 10 million. Over the past six months, both have seen a doubling in the number of blogs on the Internet... Perseus Development Corp., a Braintree, Mass., market-research company, last month reported 31.6 million blogs.... The Blog Herald, a blog about blogs, counted over 60 million blogs this week, relying on figures from operators world-wide." Carl Bialik, Measuring the Impact of Blogs Requires More Than Counting, Wall Street Journal Online, May 26, 2005.

⁴ "In a telephone survey of U.S. Internet users last fall, the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 27% of respondents said they read blogs. (Users were asked: "Please tell me if you ever do any of the following when you go online. ... Do you ever read someone else's web log or blog?)" *ibid.*

important source of material for the MSM. In some respects, they are also an intersectoral nexus point – neutral ground -- for cooperation between the major institutional players in the world. Credible information can be displayed immediately as a corrective for creeping errors with the timely interventions of experts. Credibility is an accumulating asset which accrues to actors whose interventions prove to correct over the long run, no matter where on earth they happen to physically reside, and – this is critical – no matter what their formal credentials happen to be. One can think of this as “track record trust” and might be compared to the old news paper columnist whose opinions resonate with a group of readers.

The idea of using the Internet to share comment and speculation and facts not widely known must have occurred to many independently in the mid 1990s, when those initial Internet users first explored the potential of the World Wide Web software. Most of the first generation Web sites were modeled on the MSM in that they were designed to “push” information from a central location to a wide variety of individuals who voluntarily visited these sites. Understandably, corporate entities already involved in mass communication activities were among the first to take advantage of this new opportunity. Newspapers, for instance, were able to leverage their pre-existing textual content to the new medium with little trouble or expense. By then introducing Web advertising, they were also able to generate a small but growing new revenue stream. But competition between these sites quickly became an artistic design arms race with much more expenditure being required to design and accommodate graphics elements such as photos, graphs, and then archival databases to attract greater traffic. What started as a minor addition to traditional MSM, an aftermarket product as it were, soon turned into a major new activity which demanded fulltime staff and a new type of employee, the Web designer. Positive revenue flow for the most part then ceased.

On the non-corporate side of the Internet however, low priced listservs were developed to disseminate information and to provide a forum for commentary based on mass email lists. These too initially were in “push” mode and for the most part were the personal communications channels of those who set up the listservs and controlled access. Readers could sign up to receive the listserv messages and with the permission of list owner they could also post. As the mechanics of maintaining the listserv grew more complex (some offered members anonymity, protected by technical means), the limits of this technology became obvious. They were simply too cumbersome for providing instantaneous peer to peer distribution. There were, however, some early examples of the use of this device to defeat official attempts to stifle access to information. One obvious example was the use of the *cypherpunks* listserv (still in existence) to distribute public key cryptography to anyone and everyone without regard to official attempts to keep it out of the hands of citizens, and also its successful attempt to keep eavesdropping technology out of electronic devices (the “clipper chip” affair). One of the first persons to make the transition to the use of a website for such purposes was a New York architect named John Young who established a site called *Cryptome*. It began by distributing particularly pertinent scanned articles from the New York Times even before NYT site first appeared. Cryptome quickly became the site for disclosing what might, in another era, have been called official secrets. The initial ‘bloglike’ activity included first person accounts by Mr. Young of his encounters with named FBI agents seeking to interview him about ostensibly confidential information he had posted. The site

still exists and its archives contain much information which governments sought unsuccessfully to keep confidential over the last decade (<http://cryptome.org/>).

It soon became evident, again to many people simultaneously, that a Web site could become a megaphone for any individual who cared to set one up. Millions upon millions of individuals did so at no direct cost at all to themselves. For the most part, these early sites contained personal and arcane content of little interest to the wider community. However, a few started to post recent information and critical commentary. Others started to distribute copyright intellectual property such as books and music, but that is another story. It is from the few overtly political sites of that era that the current 'Blogdom' derived. Today, blogs are very widely read, full of information of varying quality, and collectively they form an ideal and natural venue for the expression of opinion and criticism. The criticism is immediate and pointed and constitutes a new form of peer review. If nothing else, blogs are both very quick at responding to errors of fact and very open to correction. There are few limits on the expression of opinion and, again, instantaneity is the norm. Some few very prominent blogs (such as *DailyKos*: <http://www.dailykos.com/>) are visited and read millions of times per day especially when there is breaking news concerning some matter of public importance, somewhere in the world. While many started with a home country national perspective, and most still retain the nominal connection to a nationality, the successful blogs have readers from all over the world and, indeed, take pride in this fact. They jumped into public prominence in the series of military conflicts in the last ten years (e.g. Kosovo, Iraq II) and have not looked back. Now anyone with an interest and access to the Google search engine can find the blogs best suited to satisfying their curiosity. Selected blogs can provide direct notification of new postings to a reader's personalized My.Yahoo page, for instance, via the RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed system, 24 hours a day. Whether it is on-the-ground interpretation of a recent terrorist incident, or the appearance of a new disease threat, or background information on a political candidate, unfiltered information is immediately available to all. That it is sometimes inaccurate and spun to suit a particular point of view goes without saying. But then MSM have never been blameless in this respect either.

How can we understand the Website/Blog phenomenon?

It is, first of all, a symptom of the **de-massification of communications**. It is not "push" technology; it is interactive, personal, and it is neither filtered through the canons of good taste nor peer review of the traditional sort. Information from wherever is evaluated collectively, on the fly, and reaches a very large audience of opinion leaders who in turn pass that information on to their peers, either by emailing copies of posts or site content to people they think should know, or exchanged in normal face to face and telephone conversations. In many cases now, it is the MSM who receive notice of a new piece of information from the blogs. Such information then shows up in the Old Media as stories in the fullness of time (or not, if they are too hot to handle, too politically inopportune for the publishers, or deals with information which would violate its canons of taste). This transition of the MSM from the finders of truth to the conveyors of previously established facts through established media such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television, traditional academic journals and books is now almost complete. Stories now break on the Web, full stop. The corporate interests which once controlled access to the means of communication and thus to the content of the

message are still puzzling about how to regain the initiative. It is unlikely that they now ever could; they have been overtaken by the new technology.

There are recent examples – some more recent than this scan of the discourse – of MSM introducing blog-like components in the interest of keeping them in the running as communications channels. Whether the daily newspaper which now invites ‘live’ feedback on its articles – often much more salient than the articles; or very early activities and planning for ‘vlogs’ or video blogs produced by print journalists while they are ‘doing’ conventional media. You have read it here first, but it is reasonable to expect that there would be an attempt to use the credibility and virus-like access to new audiences for MSM. This phenomena of seizing emergent modalities, slightly behind or even away behind, its cogniscenti spread is good for the communications business – it will be life-saving and credibility building for governments and agencies if mobilized in the same way for public health.

Blogs also signify **de-compartmentalization of communications**, both with respect to the traditional distinction between commentary and fact-finding, and also between disciplinary compartments. Now, politics, economics, sociology, microbiology and cultural studies reside comfortably together in the consideration of contemporary events on the blogs. Since the connection between blog prominence and career advancement is now becoming clear, there is little incentive remaining to defend academic disciplinary boundaries. The more people read your thoughts, the more esteem you may attract, and the more prominent as a commentator you become, the better your career prospects. Career advancement has, for a long time, very often been simply a matter of established reputation; only the manner in which you establish it today has changed. Already, the blogs have elevated previously obscure academics to international prominence. One shining example of this process is Juan Cole, a Professor of History at the University of Michigan. His blog (*Informed Comment*: <http://www.juancole.com/>) has become one of the major interpretative and news sources on the second Iraq conflict. The fact that he reads Arabic, doesn’t require much sleep, and personally knows and communicates with individuals in the theatre of combat gives him advantages many of his contemporaries lack. It simply no longer matters what his ostensible disciplinary attachment is; his reputation has been made on the Web. Readers demonstrably trust his interpretations but some do take pointed issue with his views on occasion and these colloquies play out on the blog without editorial intervention.

The emergence of **trusted aggregator sites** has greatly simplified ease of access to the information and commentary any individual may seek. A century ago, the MSM performed the role of today’s aggregator sites in an era in which they had a virtual monopoly on fact finding. But today, when it concerns the Web media and while it is still true that there are millions of non-connected websites, it is less the case than in the recent past that an individual has to hunt through them all looking for specific content, much less watch the Associated Press news ticker. Today, valuable content tends to be quickly concentrated on particular aggregator sites which reproduce new or important information as it is reported somewhere deep in the Web shrubbery, on the wire services, or in new editions of newspapers. Aggregator sites tend to have a point of view but the individual user can choose the aggregator site which he or she decides to trust (or more likely a small selection of trusted sites) and these selected sites are checked regularly, perhaps many times a day. If

experience shows that the chosen roster of aggregator sites selected picks up most of what the user is interested in, recourse to MSM sites or Google searches is no longer routinely necessary. In other words, these sites accelerate both the speed and efficiency of the communication process for the user. Again, perhaps the best example of a trusted aggregator site is *DailyKos* (<http://www.dailykos.com/>).

Blogs and Pandemics

With the emergence of the very real threat of a new influenza pandemic the likes of which have not been seen for almost a century, it would seem that the construction of widely respected and trusted aggregator sites on this topic would be very welcome and constructive. They would serve both as communicators and collectors of information and commentary just as widely respected aggregator sites now do on other topics of importance. That such sites have not already emerged on their own is symptomatic of the continued marginal status of the topic. One attempt in this general direction is the *UN Dispatch* site at http://www.undispatch.com/archives/blog_roundup/index.html. It deals with blog commentary on the UN and only tangentially with avian flu. And being associated with a large well known institution inevitably raises a warning flag in some quarters. There are the beginnings of just such an independent site at *The Birdflu Monitor* (<http://www.birdflumonitor.com/>). Another potential candidate is at the *Flu Preparedness – Prosperity Project* (<http://flu-preparedness.prosperityproject.net/blog/>). Other blogs of varying degrees of independence directly dealing with avian flu can be found at *Avian Flu Blog* (<http://avianflu.typepad.com/>), *Bird Flu Updates* (<http://www.bird-flu-updates.com/>), *Effective Measure* (<http://effectmeasure.blogspot.com/>), and *H5N1Blog* (<http://crofsblogs.typepad.com/h5n1/>). Only time will tell whether these sites develop into widely trusted sites. If they do, bandwidth charges may necessitate the inclusion of advertising and public appeals for supporting funds, as has been the case at the widely trusted politics sites previously mentioned.

Such independent sites hold the promise of hosting the information and thoughts of those affected around the world, including countries like China whose government seeks to constrain the use of the Internet for political purposes. If persons in affected countries such as those in south Asia, and now those in the Levant, could easily report incidents to all, the temptation to attempt to seize tight control will be tempered by awareness that such will be noted and reported on to everyone's ultimate benefit. In fact, blogs may host surveillance clusters which would be far more effective than the usual official channels in their timeliness.

Since the current avian flu outbreak is unlikely to be the last or penultimate disease outbreak of concern, we may think of developing an information model for future outbreaks. Certainly, the current concern with dog influenza in North America, and the previous incident with swine flu in 1976⁵, and with the SARS outbreak in Toronto, suggest that more incidents will naturally occur in the future. For, as Thomas Malthus noted long ago, any

⁵ The swine flu scare of 1976 had the Canadian population lining up for inoculations. In fact, the alarm in 1976 was false and no cases occurred in the general population though many people in North America died of the adverse effects of the inoculation itself.

See http://www.haverford.edu/biology/edwards/disease/viral_essays/warnervirus.htm

growing population is at commensurately growing risk from plagues best spread in conditions of social density.

Implications for ‘Official Sources’

At the very least, communicators with large institutions such as governments and NGOs must take into account the existence of the blog/podcasting phenomenon and not merely as a passing fad. Blogs give every indication of being a permanent aspect of the information universe and a quickly growing one at that. In that blogs are intensely individual in nature and often iconoclastic as well, they will often be purposefully and reflexively oppositional to the aims and objectives of official communications and communicators. Especially with respect to those blogs that have established track record credibility, at a minimum the organs of officialdom must pay close attention to what is being said. Blog messages should not be considered as the sounds of trees crashing unheard in the forest. Official communicators should take the phenomenon as encouragement to develop awareness of and knowledge of that part of Blogdom which intersects with their own duties and to become visible in that realm as trustworthy participants and valid information sources for the future. In this way, blogs can be used to amplify well-founded information and contend with error. Developing this sort of interlocutor credibility takes a persistent pattern of participation though. It cannot be attained by sporadic *ad hoc* participation. Such routine participation not only gains potential trustworthiness but also credit for effort and a certain kind of courage which arises from voluntary exposure to criticism.

Meanwhile, governments and many larger civil society organizations face some of the same communications challenges: how to add this dissemination tool and content monitoring, correction and feedback to the communications function – especially at the high speed, critical in a rapid onset crisis? Smaller CSOs will be the ‘training ground’ since this is a comparatively inexpensive media. In many offices both government and NGO, there is a ‘techie’ or techies whose interest and knowledge will be invaluable. For the GPHIN or Government Public Health International Network, now housed with the World Health Organization, this was indeed the model: a couple of very engaged and knowledgeable young people at Health Canada who saw the value in creating a web search engine and archive to troll any news with any relation to public health. Faculties and university departments of journalism and the social sciences will have skills worth acquiring by those with public health responsibilities. This demands not solely a comfort with the sometimes strident or conspiratorial tone of blogs but both analytic skills and judgment to identify emergent blogs of credibility, but also to engage, offer information and correct. This last process is much like convention media relations of course.

The on-line citizen-updated encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, mentioned earlier, it must be noted, is seen as highly credible. It is an instructive example of the potential to harness who, in most communities are early adaptors with sound information and direction in public health. In spite of a recent challenge by a widely publicized piece of misinformation, (an entry suggesting the involvement of an individual in the Robert Kennedy assassination) the authority of the site remains immense. (Wikipedia’s recent history may, in fact, be a tale of how authoritative in that it’s integrity is challenged, as much as any government or

institution might be.) In the December issues of *Nature*, a study was published that asked experts to compare Wikipedia entries in their fields to the same entries in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, without telling them which articles came from which source. They found very similar error rates in most of the 42 entries they studied. Just before submission of this paper, CNN posted statistics on its main newscast, referenced “Wikipedia”. That is the power to influence of blogs.

It has been estimated that during the last American presidential campaign, that candidate Howard Deans raised over \$15 million in the third quarter of 2003. (*Wired*. 2005) Such networks – in this case comprised of reader or blog hosts and informants and others can also be dangerous in the full throes of a significant public health or agricultural outbreak where lives and livelihoods will be at risk. It is imperative that there is institutional strength in health/agriculture and security blogging now, if this enormous resource and potential virus spreader (should misinformation be disseminated). Partnerships with universities and NGOs would be a very useful first step for institutions with responsibilities in what is both a slow onset but potentially then a rapid onset disaster of global proportions.

With daily newspapers from the Los Angeles Times to more modestly financed local broadsheets opening on-line editorial pages to unrestricted contributions, the problems of the ranters and personal invective will give way – as they have in the above example – to information which exploits possibilities and builds self-imposed standards that might have been seen as restrictive by the blogging pioneers of the late nineteen nineties. There is a potential which government recourse could support the creation of a civil society hosted hub with global import on avian influenza, now. Timing would allow credibility to flower. It would be a remarkable and imperative experiment, not without risks. And make no mistake: this is public health management and care. Risk communication tenets expressly call for the engagement of those affected. Governments and civil society organizations both understand their mandates to serve the affected and infected. Adapting risk communication to emergent technologies saves lives, property (livestock in this case) and the environment.

Further Reflections

There are several questions concerning this system of de-massed electronic communications. Routinely, these would be questions for further research. In the case of on-line media they are questions of key import, which can be influenced by the development of technology, access and the willingness of bloggers and their readers to be aware of the issues. Some of these are:

- Since occupation and electronic journalism are being disconnected, how do full-time aggregators and commentators generate sufficient personal income without sacrificing their independence? Is this role likely to be retained only by the economically privileged few in the future?
- Professional communicators from large institutions could conceivably lay verbal siege to particular blogs since there are no tests for truthfulness in poster identity.

How could an independent blogger deal with such a siege? Would this work to enhance the blog and therefore desired dissemination for public health?

- Is there a model for distributed fact-checking? Such ad hoc projects have occurred, particularly where extensive background checks on public figures are seen to be required. Can it be made into a standard operating procedure?
- Several countries are taking a repressive approach to Internet use. What would the consequence of low participation be in the case of a globally-germane public health event occurring in those countries?
- Electronic surveillance of Internet users is on the increase as governments seek to discover threats to their security. Will fear of prosecution begin to constrain the blog system for individuals who pose no threat to national security yet whose views and commentary nevertheless come to the attention of authorities?
- What exactly does freedom of expression and association mean in the global electronic commons?

Appendix 1

This AP item contains most of threads contained in the above text. It is however stated in conventional MSM terms. Corporate news executives know intuitively that their monopoly on truth finding has been dissolved. They are looking for a niche in the new media world.

Execs Ponder Role of User-Generated News
Oct 05 12:32 PM US/Eastern



By SETH SUTEL
AP Business Writer

NEW YORK

The avalanche of high quality video, photos and e-mailed news material from citizens following the July 7 bombings in London marked a turning point for the British Broadcasting Corporation, the head of its global news division said Wednesday.

Richard Sambrook, director of the BBC World Service and Global News Division, told a conference the broadcaster's prominent use of video and other material contributed by ordinary citizens signaled that the BBC was evolving from being a broadcaster to a facilitator of news.

"We don't own the news any more," Sambrook said. "This is a fundamental realignment of the relationship between large media companies and the public."

Sambrook likened the increasing use of user-generated news material to a sports game in which the crowd was not only invading the field but also seeking to participate in the game, fundamentally changing the sport.

Sambrook was speaking on a panel with other media professionals at a conference on "citizen journalism" organized by The Media Center, a media think tank based in Reston, Va., and hosted by The Associated Press at its headquarters building in New York.

Larry Kramer, the head of digital operations at Viacom Inc.'s CBS unit, said CBS was eager for more feedback from listeners via its newly expanded online presence, but he said the company would keep a "filter" on such contributions rather than allow open posting by users.

The goal was to "treat news more like a loop," Kramer said. "Stories don't end when we post them. ... People respond. We wanted to create a vehicle through which people could respond."

Tom Curley, the president of the AP, noted that the news cooperative has used material such as photos contributed by users for many years, pointing out recent examples including video from the tsunami in Asia and photos from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"This is something we do every day," Curley said. However, the emerging area of citizen-generated news was still in the "first inning," Curley said. "There are lots of opportunities _ The audience is growing."

Another member of the opening panel, Farai Chideya, a correspondent for National Public Radio Inc. in Los Angeles and founder of blog called PopandPolitics.com, expressed concern that many big stories may be affecting people who don't have broadband access to the Internet, resulting in a risk that they could be excluded from citizen-generated news.

Chideya said it "breaks my heart" that many poor people and people of color may not be able to participate in the online generation and dissemination of news. The big question, she said, was how to get people "in the caboose of the digital train" involved.

Chideya suggested a "middle ground" where journalists can collaborate with non-journalists, such as distributing tape recorders to people in the area hit by Hurricane Katrina to collect sound, which could then be culled and edited by NPR journalists.

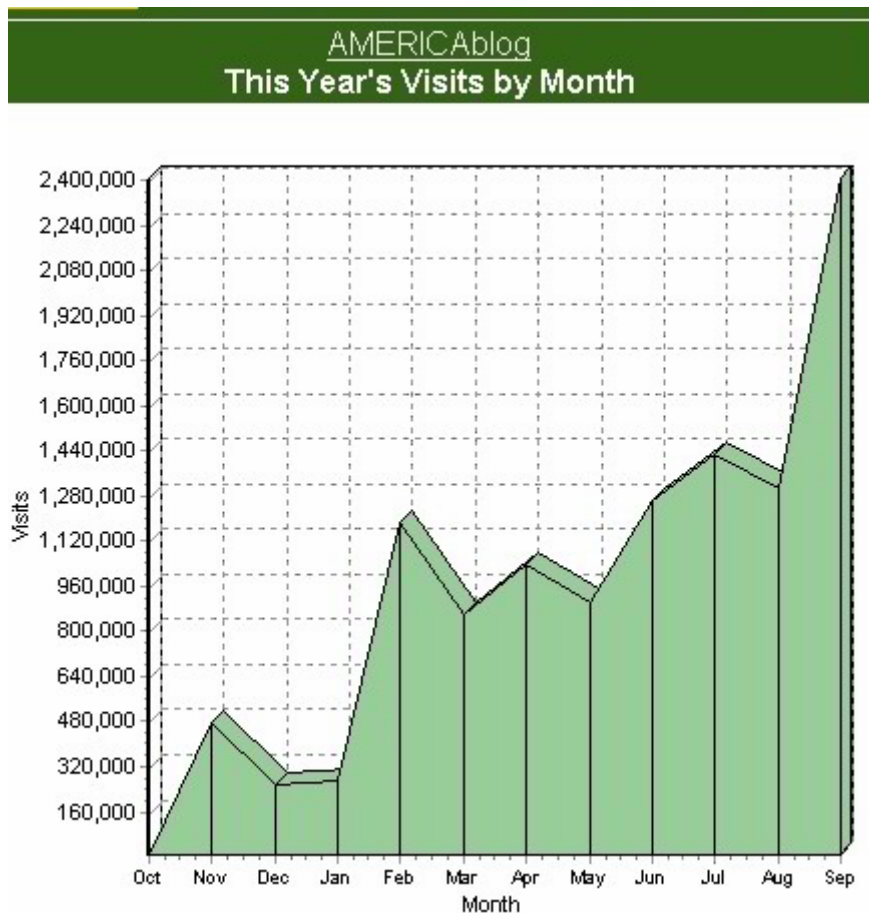
In a keynote speech, former presidential candidate Al Gore, who now runs a cable TV channel that uses user-generated material, railed against the state of television, saying that the growing entertainment focus of newscasts was undermining the country's political dialogue.

"The subjugation of news by entertainment seriously harms our democracy," Gore said. "I'm trying to work in the medium of television to have a multiway conversation."

Appendix 2

Blog Pageviews

It is hard to get a statistical picture of the number of persons who read blogs and who and where they might be. That having been said, it is clear that readership is increasing rapidly. This increase explains why Yahoo in October 2005 began indexing blog content together with and alongside wire service content⁶. Some measure of blog reading increase can be seen in the following graph which represents visits to the *Ameriblog* site (<http://www.americablog.org/>). It is in the first instance a site concerned with progressive politics in the United States. As it has developed however, it has also become a primary source of breaking news.



Source: <http://americablog.blogspot.com/visits905.jpg>

⁶ Monday, October 10, 2005 San Francisco (Reuters) – Yahoo Inc. said on Monday it will begin featuring the work of self-published Web bloggers side by side with the work of professional journalists, leveling distinctions between the two...The move will further stoke the debate between media traditionalists who want to maintain strict walls between news and commentary and those who argue such boundaries are elitist and undervalue the work of “citizen journalists.”