

CJR AMERICA'S PREMIER MEDIA MONITOR COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

EMERGING ALTERNATIVES

Blogworld

The New Amateur Journalists Weigh In

BY [MATT WELCH](#)

This February, I attended my first Association of Alternative Newsweeklies conference, in the great media incubator of San Francisco. It's impossible to walk a single block of that storied town without feeling the ghosts of great contrarian media innovators past: Hearst and Twain, Hinckle and Wenner, Rossetto and Talbot. But after twelve hours with the AAN, a much different reality set in: never in my life have I seen a more conformist gathering of journalists.

All the newspapers looked the same — same format, same fonts, same columns complaining about the local daily, same sex advice, same five-thousand-word hole for the cover story. The people were largely the same, too: all but maybe 2 percent of the city-slicker journalists in

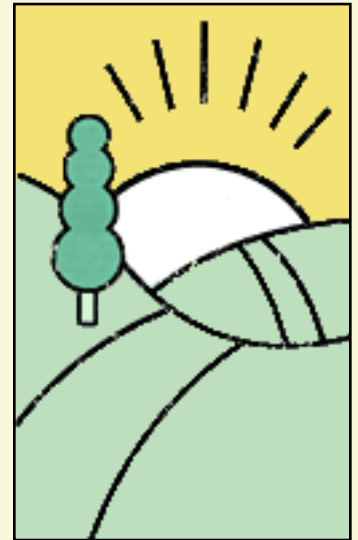


Illustration by
Stephen Savage

attendance were white; the vast majority were either Boomer hippies or Gen X slackers.

Several asked me the exact same question with the same suspicious looks on their faces:

"So . . . what's your alternative experience?"

At the bar, I started a discussion about what specific attributes qualified these papers, and the forty-seven-year-old publishing genre that spawned them, to continue meriting the adjective "alternative." Alternative to what? To the straight-laced "objectivity" and pyramid-style writing of daily newspapers? New Journalists and other narrative storytellers crashed those gates long ago. Alternative to society's oppressive intolerance toward deviant behavior? Tell it to the Osbournes, as they watch *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Something to do with corporate ownership? Not unless "alternative" no longer applies to Village Voice Media (owned in part by Goldman Sachs) or the New Times chain (which has been involved in some brutal acquisition and liquidation deals). Someone at the table lamely offered up "a sense of community," but Fox News could easily clear that particular bar.

No, it must have something to do with political slant — or, to be technically accurate, political correctness. Richard Karpel, the AAN executive director, joined the conversation, so I put him on the spot: Of all the weeklies his organization had rejected for membership on political grounds, which one was the best editorially? The Independent Florida Sun, he replied. Good-looking paper, some sharp writing but, well, it was just too friendly toward the church. "And if there's anything we all agree on," Karpel said with a smile, "it's that we're antichurch."

I assumed he was joking — that couldn't be all we have left from the legacy of Norman Mailer, Art Kunkin, Paul Krassner, and my other childhood heroes, could it? Then later I looked up the AAN's Web site to read the admission committee's rejection notes for the Florida Sun (which was excluded by a vote of 9-2). "The right-wing church columnist has no place in AAN," explained one judge. "All the God-and-flag shit disturbs me," wrote another. "Weirdly right-wing," chimed a third.

The original alternative papers were not at all this politically monochromatic, despite entering the world at a time when Lenny Bruce was being prosecuted for obscenity, Tom Dooley was proselytizing for American intervention in Vietnam, and Republicans ruled the nation's editorial pages. Dan Wolf, cofounder of the trailblazing Village Voice, loved to throw darts at what he called "the dull pieties of official liberalism," and founding editors like Mailer were forever trying to tune their antennae to previously undetected political frequencies.

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The dull pieties of official progressivism is one of many attributes that show how modern alt weeklies have strayed from what made them alternative in the first place. The papers once embraced amateur writers; now they are firmly established in the journalistic pecking order, with the salaries and professional standards to match. They once championed the slogan

"never trust anyone over thirty"; now their average reader is over forty and aging fast. They have become so ubiquitous in cities over a certain size, during decades when so many other new media formats have sprung up (cable television, newsletters, talk radio, business journals, Web sites), that the very notion that they represent a crucial "alternative" to a monolithic journalism establishment now strains credulity.

But there still exists a publishing format that manages to embody all these lost qualities, and more — the Weblog. The average blog, needless to say, pales in comparison to a 1957 issue of the Voice, or a 1964 Los Angeles Free Press, or a 2003 Lexington, Kentucky, ACE Weekly, for that matter. But that's missing the point. Blogging technology has, for the first time in history, given the average Jane the ability to write, edit, design, and publish her own editorial product — to be read and responded to by millions of people, potentially — for around \$0 to \$200 a year. It has begun to deliver on some of the wild promises about the Internet that were heard in the 1990s. Never before have so many passionate outsiders — hundreds of thousands, at minimum — stormed the ramparts of professional journalism.

And these amateurs, especially the ones focusing on news and current events, are doing some fascinating things. Many are connecting intimately with readers in a way reminiscent of old-style metro columnists or the liveliest of the New Journalists. Others are staking the narrowest of editorial claims as their own — appellate court rulings, new media proliferation in Tehran, the intersection of hip-hop and libertarianism — and covering them like no one

else. They are forever fact-checking the daylights out of truth-fudging ideologues like Ann Coulter and Michael Moore, and sifting through the biases of the BBC and Bill O'Reilly, often while cheerfully acknowledging and/or demonstrating their own lopsided political sympathies. At this instant, all over the world, bloggers are busy popularizing underappreciated print journalists (like Chicago Sun-Times columnist Mark Steyn), pumping up stories that should be getting more attention (like the Trent Lott debacle), and perhaps most excitingly of all, committing impressive, spontaneous acts of decentralized journalism.

Blogging's Big Bang

Every significant new publishing phenomenon has been midwifed by a great leap forward in printing technology. The movable-type printing press begat the Gutenberg Bible, which begat the Renaissance. Moving from rags to pulp paved the way for Hearst and Pulitzer. The birth of alternative newspapers coincided almost perfectly with the development of the offset press. Laser printers and desktop publishing ushered in the newsletter and the 'zine, and helped spawn the business journal.

When it burst onto the scene just ten years ago, the World Wide Web promised to be an even cheaper version of desktop publishing. And for many people it was, but you still had to learn html coding, which was inscrutable enough to make one long for the days of typesetting and paste-up. By the late 1990s, I owned a few Web domains and made a living writing about online journalism, yet if I really needed to publish something on my own, I'd print up a Word file and take it down to the local copy shop. Web publishing was theoretically possible and

cheap (if you used a hosting service like Tripod), but it just wasn't easy for people as dull-witted as I.

In August 1999, Pyra Labs changed all that, with a product called Blogger (responsible, as much as anything, for that terrible four-letter word). As much of the world knows by now, "Weblog" is usually defined as a Web site where information is updated frequently and presented in reverse chronological order (newest stuff on top). Typically, each post contains one and often several hyperlinks to other Web sites and stories, and usually there is a standing list of links to the author's favorite bookmarks. Pyra labs, since bought out by Google, had a revolutionary insight that made all this popular: every technological requirement of Web publishing — graphic design, simple coding for things like links, hosting — is a barrier to entry, keeping non-techies out; why not remove them? Blogger gave users a for-dummies choice of templates, an easy-to-navigate five-minute registration process, and (perhaps best of all) Web hosting. All for free. You didn't even need to buy your own domain; simply make sure joesixpack.blogspot.com wasn't taken, pick a template, and off you go.

The concept took off, and new blogging companies like LiveJournal, UserLand, and Movable Type scrambled to compete. Blogger cofounders Evan Williams, Paul Bausch, and Meg Hourihan, along with Web designer Jason Kottke, and tech writer Rebecca Blood — these were the stars of the first major mainstream-media feature about blogging, a November 2000 New Yorker story by Rebecca Mead, who christened the phenomenon "the CB radio of the

Dave Eggers generation."

Like just about everything else, blogging changed forever on September 11, 2001. The destruction of the World Trade Center and the attack on the Pentagon created a huge appetite on the part of the public to be part of The Conversation, to vent and analyze and publicly ponder or mourn. Many, too, were unsatisfied with what they read and saw in the mainstream media. Glenn Reynolds, proprietor of the wildly popular InstaPundit.com blog, thought the mainstream analysis was terrible. "All the talking heads . . . kept saying that 'we're gonna have to grow up, we're gonna have to give up a lot of our freedoms,'" he says. "Or it was the 'Why do they hate us' sort of teeth-gnashing. And I think there was a deep dissatisfaction with that." The daily op-ed diet of Column Left and Column Right often fell way off the mark. "It's time for the United Nations to get the hell out of town. And take with it CNN war-slut Christiane Amanpour," the New York Post's Andrea Peyser seethed on September 21. "We forgive you; we reject vengeance," Colman McCarthy whimpered to the terrorists in the Los Angeles Times September 17. September 11 was the impetus for my own blog (mattwelch.com/warblog.html). Jeff Jarvis, who was trapped in the WTC dust cloud on September 11, started his a few days later. "I had a personal story I needed to tell," said Jarvis, a former San Francisco Examiner columnist, founding editor of Entertainment Weekly, and current president and creative director of Advance.net, which is the Internet wing of the Condé Nast empire. "Then lo and behold! I discovered people were linking to me and talking about my story, so I joined this great conversation."

He wasn't alone. Reynolds, a hyper-kinetic University of Tennessee law professor and occasional columnist who produces techno records in his spare time, had launched InstaPundit the month before. On September 11, his traffic jumped from 1,600 visitors to almost 4,200; now it averages 100,000 per weekday. With his prolific posting pace — dozens of links a day, each with comments ranging from a word to several paragraphs — and a deliberate ethic of driving traffic to new blogs from all over the political spectrum, Reynolds quickly became the "Blogfather" of a newly coined genre of sites: the warblogs. "I think people were looking for context, they were looking for stuff that wasn't dumb," he said. "They were looking for stuff that seemed to them to be consistent with how Americans ought to respond to something like this."

There had been plenty of news-and-opinion Weblogs previously — from political journalists such as Joshua Micah Marshall, Mickey Kaus, Andrew Sullivan, and Virginia Postrel; not to mention "amateurs" like Matt Drudge. But September 11 drew unpaid nonprofessionals into the current-events fray. And like the first alternative publishers, who eagerly sought out and formed a network with like-minded mavericks across the country, the post-September 11 Webloggers spent considerable energy propping up their new comrades and encouraging their readers to join the fun. I'd guess 90 percent of my most vocal early readers have gone on to start sites of their own. In April 2002 Reynolds asked InstaPundit readers to let him know if he had inspired any of them to start their own blogs. Nearly two hundred wrote in. (Imagine two hundred people deciding to become a columnist just because Maureen Dowd was so

persuasive.) Meanwhile, Blogger alone has more than 1.5 million registered users, and LiveJournal reports 1.2 million. No one knows how many active blogs there are worldwide, but Blogcount (yes, a blog that counts blogs) guesses between 2.4 million and 2.9 million. Freedom of the press belongs to nearly 3 million people.

What's the Point?

So what have these people contributed to journalism? Four things: personality, eyewitness testimony, editorial filtering, and uncounted gigabytes of new knowledge.

"Why are Weblogs popular?" asks Jarvis, whose company has launched four dozen of them, ranging from beachcams on the Jersey shore to a temporary blog during the latest Iraq war. "I think it's because they have something to say. In a media world that's otherwise leached of opinions and life, there's so much life in them."

For all the history made by newspapers between 1960 and 2000, the profession was also busy contracting, standardizing, and homogenizing. Most cities now have their monopolist daily, their alt weekly or two, their business journal. Journalism is done a certain way, by a certain kind of people. Bloggers are basically oblivious to such traditions, so reading the best of them is like receiving a bracing slap in the face. It's a reminder that America is far more diverse and iconoclastic than its newsrooms.

After two years of reading Weblogs, my short list of favorite news commentators in the world

now includes an Air Force mechanic (Paul Palubicki of sgtstryker.com), a punk rock singer-songwriter (Dr. Frank of dokterfrank.com), a twenty-four-year-old Norwegian programmer (Bjorn Staerk of <http://bearstrong.net/warblog/index.html>), and a cranky libertarian journalist from Alberta, Canada ([Colby Cosh](http://ColbyCosh.com)). Outsiders with vivid writing styles and unique viewpoints have risen to the top of the blog heap and begun vaulting into mainstream media. Less than two years ago, Elizabeth Spiers was a tech-stock analyst for a hedge fund who at night wrote sharp-tongued observations about Manhattan life on her personal blog; now she's the It Girl of New York media, lancing her colleagues at Gawker.com, while doing free-lance work for the Times, the New York Post, Radar, and other publications. Salam Pax, a pseudonymous young gay Iraqi architect who made hearts flutter with his idiosyncratic personal descriptions of Baghdad before and after the war, now writes columns for The Guardian and in July signed a book deal with Grove/Atlantic. Steven Den Beste, a middle-aged unemployed software engineer in San Diego, has been spinning out thousands of words of international analysis most every day for the last two years; recently he has been seen in the online edition of The Wall Street Journal.

With personality and an online audience, meanwhile, comes a kind of reader interaction far more intense and personal than anything comparable in print. Once, when I had the poor taste to mention in my blog that I was going through a rough financial period, readers sent me more than \$1,000 in two days. Far more important, the intimacy and network effects of the blogworld enable you to meet people beyond your typical circle and political affiliation,

sometimes with specialized knowledge of interest to you. "It exposes you to worlds that most people, let alone reporters, never interact with," says Jarvis, whose personal blog (buzzmachine.com) has morphed into a one-stop shop for catching up on Iranian and Iraqi bloggers, some of whom he has now met online or face to face.

Such specialization and filtering is one of the form's key functions. Many bloggers, like the estimable Jim Romanesko, with his popular journalism forum on Poynter's site, focus like a laser beam on one micro-category, and provide simple links to the day's relevant news. There are scores dealing with ever-narrower categories of media alone, from a site that obsesses over the San Francisco Chronicle (ChronWatch.com), to one that keeps the heat on newspaper ombudsmen (OmbudsGod.blogspot.com). Charles Johnson, a Los Angeles Web designer, has built a huge and intensely loyal audience by spotting and vilifying venalities in the Arab press (littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog). And individual news events, such as the Iraq war, spark their own temporary group blogs, where five or ten or more people all contribute links to minute-by-minute breaking news. Sometimes the single most must-see publication on a given topic will have been created the day before.

Besides introducing valuable new sources of information to readers, these sites are also forcing their proprietors to act like journalists: choosing stories, judging the credibility of sources, writing headlines, taking pictures, developing prose styles, dealing with readers, building audience, weighing libel considerations, and occasionally conducting informed

investigations on their own. Thousands of amateurs are learning how we do our work, becoming in the process more sophisticated readers and sharper critics. For lazy columnists and defensive gatekeepers, it can seem as if the hounds from a mediocre hell have been unleashed. But for curious professionals, it is a marvelous opportunity and entertaining spectacle; they discover what the audience finds important and encounter specialists who can rip apart the work of many a generalist. More than just A.J. Liebling-style press criticism, journalists finally have something approaching real peer review, in all its brutality. If they truly value the scientific method, they should rejoice. Blogs can bring a collective intelligence to bear on a question.

And when the decentralized fact-checking army kicks into gear, it can be an impressive thing to behold. On March 30, veteran British war correspondent Robert Fisk, who has been accused so often of anti-American bias and sloppiness by bloggers that his last name has become a verb (meaning, roughly, "to disprove loudly, point by point"), reported that a bomb hitting a crowded Baghdad market and killing dozens must have been fired by U.S. troops because of some Western numerals he found on a piece of twisted metal lying nearby.

Australian blogger Tim Blair, a free-lance journalist, reprinted the partial numbers and asked his military-knowledgeable readers for insight. Within twenty-four hours, more than a dozen readers with specialized knowledge (retired Air Force, former Naval Air Systems Command employees, others) had written in describing the weapon (U.S. high-speed antiradiation missile), manufacturer (Raytheon), launch point (F-16), and dozens of other minute details

not seen in press accounts days and weeks later. Their conclusion, much as it pained them to say so: Fisk was probably right.

In December 2001 a University of New Hampshire Economics and Women's Studies professor named Marc Herold published a study, based mostly on press clippings, that estimated 3,767 civilians had died as a result of American military action in Afghanistan. Within a day, blogger Bruce Rolston, a Canadian military reservist, had already shot holes through Herold's methodology, noting that he conflated "casualties" with "fatalities," double-counted single events, and depended heavily on dubious news sources. Over the next two days, several other bloggers cut Herold's work to ribbons. Yet for the next month, Herold's study was presented not just as fact, but as an understatement, by the Guardian, as well as the New Jersey Star-Ledger, The Hartford Courant, and several other newspapers. When news organizations on the ground later conducted their surveys of Afghan civilian deaths, most set the number at closer to 1,000.

But the typical group fact-check is not necessarily a matter of war. Bloggers were out in the lead in exposing the questionable research and behavior of gun-studying academics Michael Bellesiles and John Lott Jr. (the former resigned last year from Emory University after a blogger-propelled investigation found that he falsified data in his antigun book, *Arming America*; the latter, author of the pro-gun book, *More Guns, Less Crime*, was forced by bloggers to admit that he had no copies of his own controversial self-defense study he had

repeatedly cited as proving his case, and that he had masqueraded in online gun-rights discussions as a vociferous John Lott supporter named "Mary Rosh." The fact-checking bloggers have uncovered misleading use of quotations by opinion columnists, such as Maureen Dowd, and jumped all over the inaccurate or irresponsible comments of various 2004 presidential candidates. They have become part of the journalism conversation.

Breathing in Blogworld

Which is not to say that 90 percent of news-related blogs aren't crap. First of all, 90 percent of any new form of expression tends to be mediocre (think of band demos, or the cringe-inducing underground papers of years gone by), and judging a medium by its worst practitioners is not very sporting. Still, almost every criticism about blogs is valid - they often are filled with cheap shots, bad spelling, the worst kind of confirmation bias, and an extremely off-putting sense of self-worth (one that this article will do nothing to alleviate). But the "blogosphere," as many like to pompously call it, is too large and too varied to be defined as a single thing, and the action at the top 10 percent is among the most exciting new trends the profession has seen in a while. Are bloggers journalists? Will they soon replace newspapers?

The best answer to those two questions is: those are two really dumb questions; enough hot air has been expended in their name already.

A more productive, tangible line of inquiry is: Is journalism being produced by blogs, is it

interesting, and how should journalists react to it? The answers, by my lights, are "yes," "yes," and "in many ways." After a slow start, news organizations are beginning to embrace the form (see [The Media Go Blogging](#)). Tech journalists, such as the San Jose Mercury News's Dan Gillmor, launched Weblogs long before "blogger" was a household word. Beat reporting is a natural fit for a blog — reporters can collect standing links to sites of interest, dribble out stories and anecdotes that don't necessarily belong in the paper, and attract a specific like-minded readership. One of the best such sites going is the recently created California Insider blog by the Sacramento Bee's excellent political columnist, Daniel Weintraub, who has been covering the state's wacky recall news like a blanket. Blogs also make sense for opinion publications, such as the National Review, The American Prospect, and my employer, Reason, all of which have lively sites.

For those with time to notice, blogs are also a great cheap farm system for talent. You've got tens of thousands of potential columnists writing for free, fueled by passion, operating in a free market where the cream rises quickly.

Best of all, perhaps, the phenomenon is simply entertaining. When do you last recall reading some writer and thinking "damn, he sure looks like he's having fun"? It's what buttoned-down reporters thought of their long-haired brethren back in the 1960s. The 2003 version may not be so immediately identifiable on sight — and that may be the most promising development of all.

