The BBC goes blogging: Is 'Auntie' finally listening?

By Alfred Hermida

Abstract

This study examines how the world's largest news organization, the BBC, has sought to incorporate blogging in its journalism, both as a format for new journalistic thinking and as a platform for greater accountability and transparency. The research covers a period of seven years, from 2001 to 2008, when the BBC came under intense scrutiny over its journalism and mechanisms for public accountability. It is based on an analysis of internal and public policy documents produced by the BBC, blog content on BBC and personal websites and the personal recollections of senior editors at the corporation. The findings suggest that the BBC is approaching blogging as a tool to enhance trust with audiences through expanded transparency and accountability, in an attempt to transform its historical elitist attitude towards its audiences. But, at the same time, the BBC is grappling with fitting this online format within its long-established journalism norms and practices, seeking to normalize blogs within existing journalistic frameworks.

Keywords: *accountability, BBC, broadcasting, blogs, Internet, journalism, news, transparency*

Alfred Hermida
Assistant Professor
Graduate School of Journalism
6388 Crescent Road
University of British Columbia
Vancouver V6T 1Z2 Canada

Tel: +1 604 827 3540
E-mail: alfred.hermida@ubc.ca

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Introduction

This paper examines how the BBC has adopted the new media technology of blogging as a tool of accountability and transparency in its journalism, offering an important case study of the relationship between culture, innovation and the news in the United Kingdom. The BBC as an organization was a late adopter of blogging despite being an innovator in the field of online journalism in the late 1990s with the launch in 1997 of the BBC News website (Allan, 2006; Kung-Shankleman, 2003). It launched its first news blog in December 2005 after a period of experimentation with elements of blogging and internal debate over the role of blogs in the BBC's journalism.

The introduction of blogging at the BBC followed a period of turmoil in the corporation over its journalism and its governance in 2004 when the broadcaster's reputation for accuracy and impartiality was called into question. This resulted in substantial new commitments by the BBC to impartial and fair journalism (Neil, 2004), as well as the end of 80 years of self-governance. BBC policy documents from this period, as well as public statements by its management reflected concerns over the need to earn the public's trust, rather than to take it for granted (Born, 2004).

This paper examines the BBC experience as a case study for a potential greater engagement with the public through blogs and the impact of this new media form in mainstream journalism. Blogs are of particular interest to researchers in the field of online journalism, as they are unique to the web and provide an example of the adoption of journalism to a new context (Matheson, 2004). The findings suggest that the BBC is approaching blogging as a tool to enhance trust with audiences through expanded transparency and accountability, changing its previous paternal relationship with its audiences. But, at the same time, the BBC is grappling with fitting this online format within its long-established journalism norms and practices, seeking to normalize blogs within existing journalistic frameworks.

Literature review

Defining the J-blog

The blog format has been increasingly adopted by news organizations, which have either co-opted the technology for their own journalists, employed bloggers on their staff, or teamed up with blogging and citizen journalism operations (Gant, 2007). Research shows that 95 percent of the top 100 newspapers in the United States offered at least one reporter blog in 2007, up from 80% in 2006 (Duran, 2007). There has been a similar expansion of blogging in the British news media, with the number of blogs at the leading newspaper websites jumping from seven in 2005 to 118 towards the end of 2006 (Hermida & Thurman, 2008).

The rapid adoption of blogging by mainstream media is in stark contrast to the cautious approach to blogs in the early 2000s when established news outlets regarded them as "amateurish, filled with errors and not credible" (Tremayne, 2007: 261). Much of the academic and popular discourse on blogs at the time centered on the debate over whether blogging was journalism (McKinnon, 2004; Lasica, 2003; Rosenberg, 2002; Rosen, 2005), and concerns over the impact of blogging on professional journalistic values (Boyd, 2004; Gillmor, 2004).

At the core of this debate was the perception that blogs were unedited, unfiltered and opinionated. But it was also due to ambiguity about the definition of the terminology, with the word blog often used to describe a plethora of online publications. Blogs share certain organizational, technological and social features. They are easy to create websites, with short, regularly updated posts in reverse chronological order, containing links to sources mentioned (Wall, 2004; 2005). Blood (2003) suggests that blogs can be defined by their conversational tone, frequently a personal or subjective writing style, with limited editorial oversight. These factors have more to do with the form rather than the content of blogs. As a result, there is considerable variation in terms of the adoption of the blog platform by mainstream news outlets, both in terms of form and content (Robinson, 2006).

Blogs and journalistic norms

The starting point for much of the discourse on blogs comes from the argument that the Internet has the potential to change the way news is covered and reported (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001; Singer 2001) offering a break with the norms and practices of established journalism. Some contend that new forms of journalism could emerge online (Landow, 1997; Murray, 1997; Wall, 2005), with blogs cited as a new form of real time reporting that does not have the filtering or editing associated with traditional media (Wendland 2003).

Singer (2005) maintains that blogs challenge long-standing professional norms and practices, namely non-partisanship and the traditional gate-keeping role. Thus blogs can be considered as challenging the historically static core set of news practices found in journalism. Allan (2006) suggests that blogs are inherently subjective, in line with authors' perspectives or predispositions. Tensions within newsrooms over reporters' blogging and perceived impact on impartiality led to several full-time journalists being forced to stop blogging by editors in mid-2003 (Allan, 2006). Wall (2004) has characterized blogs as black market journalism, arguing they defy some of the accepted practices that have historically defined news within the mainstream corporate media. She argues that the informal practices of bloggers are influencing mainstream media, who are adapting certain aspects of the format. As Matheson (2004) found, some professional journalists have found blogs offer a format for expressing experiences that do not conform to the conventions of traditional reporting.

The participatory nature of blogs offers an additional challenge for journalists in terms of accountability and transparency. Historically, journalists have been reticent about letting the public see the inner workings of the profession, while at the same time holding others to account. There is much debate over the ability of an interactive communications technology such as blogging to change the nature of the relationship between journalists and audiences by creating a conversation (Gillmor, 2003). Blogs have even been described as an emancipatory tool for communication with the potential of challenging traditional hegemonic notions of information delivery (Herring et al, 2004). Some of the discourse in the literature argues that transparency between the news industry and the audience can lead to a more equal and communicative relationship between the two (Andrews, 2003; Singer, 2003). The suggestion is that blogs can offer a more transparent way of working for journalists, with Andrews (2003: 64) arguing that "by widening the disclosure circle through information-sharing, blogs have contributed to the truth-finding process." As early as 2004, U.S. publications started experimenting with the blog format as a window into internal editorial discussions (Glaser, 2004).

The literature reveals a duality in the attitudes of the mainstream media to blogging at a time when it is determining how to adapt to the "howling and kicking blogosphere" (Tremayne, 2007: 271). Blogs have been described as "evidence of journalism's attempts to rethink its values and relations with its publics" (Matheson, 2004: 462). But there are also indications that established media are seeking to normalize this emergent format within existing practices. Some of the research suggests that blogs are being co-opted by the mainstream as a way of fighting back against competition from user-driven news reporting and commentary that bypasses traditional channels. Singer (2005) suggests that journalists are normalizing blogs by maintaining a traditional gatekeeper function, even in a format that is characterized by its participatory nature. This is supported by Lowrey (2006), who argues that "news organizations may be more interested in containing and directing the blogging phenomenon than in fostering democratic participation" (Lowrey, 2006; 493). Robinson (2006) argues that while journalists engage in new forms of writing in blogs, they are also attempting to recapture journalistic authority online.

The BBC and its audience

The BBC provides a unique case study into how established media organizations are implementing new forms of audience participation, accountability and transparency. "Auntie", as the corporation is affectionately known, has been Britain's national instrument of broadcasting since its creation in the 1920s (Blumler, 1992). Over its 80-year history, the BBC has earned "a place in hearts and minds of British viewers and listeners by being a great cultural institution, a patron and purveyor of information, education and popular entertainment", (Grade, cited in Barnett & Curry, 1994: 5).

The corporation is recognized as a global news leader and a cultural institution renowned for its journalism. As a publicly funded media organization, it has a public service ethos at the core of its activities. It is mandated ostensibly to be accountable to the people ((BBC Editorial Guidelines, n.d.), yet the broadcaster is often described as a

"bloated monolith" (Birt, 2002) bearing "traces of its monopolistic origins" (Kung-Shankleman, 2003). It has been accused of being culturally elitist and centralist throughout its existence (Born, 2002), and branded by critics as complacent, been poorly managed and lacking in entrepreneurial spirit (Blumler, 1992).

The roots of its relationship with the public lie in the elitist philosophy of the BBC's first director general, John Reith, of broadcasting as a social, cultural, educational and moral force (Born, 2004): "Few know what they want, and very few want what they need" (Reith, cited in Congdon, 1992; xvii). Early examples of audience interaction at the BBC are symptomatic of the paternal tone associated with the broadcaster (Kung-Shankleman, 2000). The literature suggests that the funding mechanism of the BBC encourages such a relationship. The broadcaster is funded by a universal fee paid by all households with televisions. This provides a direct fiscal relationship between the service provider and the consumer, but it does not offer a direct mechanism for viewers to express their choices. Scholars suggest that this arrangement leads broadcasters to impose elitist tastes on their audiences (Garnham and Locksley, in Blumler and Nossiter, 1991).

Pressure over the issue of audience accountability rose in 1980s and early 1990s, with the BBC facing "a crisis in the legitimation and the funding of the corporation" (Born, 2002, 69). Initiatives taken in the 1990s largely took the form of a series of official statements – An Accountable BBC (1994), Governing Today's BBC (1997), The BBC Beyond 2000 (1998) – and the annual Statement of Promises. Born (2002) argues that these were less about listening to the public and more about shoring up the BBC's legitimacy, tending to be "placatory rather than self-questioning simulations of open self-assessment," (Born, 2002, 77).   Interactivity, fragmentation and personalization due to the advent of digital technologies placed further strains on the notion of a public service broadcaster (Born, 2002; Enli, 2008) and renewed calls for the abolition of the compulsory licence fee that funds the corporation (for example, see Gibson, 2004; Luckhurst, 2005)

The defining event for the BBC during the period of particular interest for this study was the Hutton inquiry and subsequent report as it raised significant questions about the BBC's journalistic standards and its reputation for accuracy and impartiality (Born, 2004). The Hutton inquiry came about due to a confrontation between the Labour government and Britain's national broadcaster over allegations about weapons of massive destruction in Iraq. The government –appointed judicial inquiry investigated the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr David Kelly, a weapons expert scientist identified as the source for a BBC news report on the issue. The Hutton report cleared the government of any wrongdoing but strongly criticized the BBC over its reporting and for defective editorial and management processes. There was widespread questioning of the report, with press accusations of a whitewash, (Born, 2004; CNN, 2004)

Director General Mark Thompson described the Hutton report as "the biggest crisis in BBC journalism's 80-year history" (Thompson, cited in Douglas, 2004).   As a consequence of the crisis, the BBC commissioned the Neil Report to assess its editorial

standards. Part of this self-examination seemed driven by a realization at the corporation that "the BBC does not have the public's trust as of right; it has to earn and maintain it" (Thompson, cited by BBC Press Office, 2004).

Thompson's statement reflected the discourse in official BBC documents on its relationship with the audience. A BBC document entitled Building Public Value, produced in response to the crisis,,talked of the need to "recapture the full trust of audiences and participants in BBC journalism" (BBC, 2004; 12) and that the "BBC remains highly trusted by the British people. But we know this trust cannot be taken for granted: it must be earned, day in and day out" (BBC, 2004; 32).

The Hutton report led to resignations of senior management members at the time including the then Director General, Greg Dyke, and set in train a series of reforms of the BBC. The process resulted in the end of 80 years of self-governance and the appointment of an independent body, BBC Trust, to oversee the organization, with its chairman, Michael Lyons, putting listening to the public at the core of its mandate (BBC Press Office, 2007). This shift in attitudes to audiences is reflected in policy documents, with a 2007 internal report stating that the "days of deference towards, or paternalism from, the BBC are over – or should be" (Bridcut, 2007)

This study explores how the BBC has incorporated blogging in its journalism, both as a format for new journalistic thinking and as a platform for greater accountability and transparency. It charts the development of blogging within the corporation, examining the internal debates that led to the adoptions of blogs. It explores the factors that led to the establishment of blogs and questions how far the corporation has succeeded in its ability to "listen to the public" (Born, 2002). It seeks to determine the impact of blogging on BBC journalistic norms and identify whether the corporation is adopting this new platform as a way of reclaiming journalistic authority

Methodology

This study is based on an analysis of internal and public policy documents produced by the BBC, as well as blog content on BBC and personal websites. The internal documents date from 2005 and 2006 and were made available by the authors of the reports who were working at the BBC at the time. The public policy documents dating from 2004 to 2007 were accessed online via the BBC website and the website of the BBC Trust.

Much of the documentary material for this study was drawn from BBC News online sources, including the BBC News website and the BBC blog network over a period from 2001 to the present. Due to the nature of this data, this was complemented by content from the personal blogs of BBC editors and senior journalists who played a role in the development of blogging at the corporation. These blogs exist outside of the technical framework of the BBC's Internet infrastructure, and as such allow for multiple personal perspectives on the topic.

The documentary evidence was complemented by e-mail correspondence with a small number of key BBC people involved in drawing up and implementing the corporation's blogging strategy. These included past and current heads of the BBC News website. As a former BBC journalist of 16 years, the author of this study was also able to bring to bear personal knowledge of existing professional and cultural norms with BBC journalism.

Findings

The conflict within

An analysis of the blogs hosted by the BBC revealed that there had been a dramatic adoption of blogging within a relatively short period of time. The first official BBC blog was not launched until December 2005 (Robinson, 2005), but the number across the BBC rose to 43 in less than a year (Hamman, 2006). It should be noted that not all of these were related to news and journalism, but it does indicate the speed at which blogging was incorporated by the BBC.

However, the BBC had been experimenting with ideas from the blog format for some time before the official introduction of blogs. As early as 2001, the BBC News website described a political column as a weblog (BBC, 2001), even though it lacked many of the features commonly associated with blogging. Other early experiments included coverage of the US 2004 presidential vote (Anderson, 2004) and the UK 2005 general election (BBC, 2005).

These initiatives shared some of the characteristics of blogs but lacked some of the key conventions associated with blogging, such as the ability to comment in real-time on a post. This omissions were partly due to technical limitations of the web publishing system used by the BBC but also due to editorial concerns about the presenting BBC content alongside contributions from the audience (Nixon, 2008). The experience highlighted the need for investment in the technical infrastructure at the BBC. It also led to a re-assessment of the use of the word "blog" to describe aspects of the BBC's online activities, with then BBC News website editor Pete Clifton taking the unusual step of banning the use of the word in July 2005:

> The site has called all manner of things blogs in recent months, even, briefly, this column. None of them have been blogs, and our publishing system does not currently have the tools to produce them properly. So we've looked pretty dumb. (Clifton, 2005)

Comments by senior editors working in online news at the BBC provide an insight into the ambivalence towards blogs within journalistic circles. In 2003 the then editor of the BBC News website, Mike Smartt was dismissive of blogs: "Dissemination of information is great, but how much of it is trustworthy? They are an interesting phenomenon, but I don't think they will be as talked about in a year's time." (Smartt, cited in Raynsford, 2003). The head of BBC News Interactive at the time, Richard Deverell,

was cited as saying in 2004 that "there are a lot of very mediocre blogs out there," as well as a "number of very good ones" (Thurman, 2007; 144).

An article on the BBC News website published in 2005 acknowledged that the corporation could not ignore blogging, even though "with none of the traditional journalistic checks, [blogging] spawns errors, hoaxes and downright lies which can be right round the world before the truth has its boots on." (Douglas, 2005). The article aired the debate taking place within the BBC, largely quoting BBC journalists arguing in favour of blogs. An internal report produced in 2005 by BBC journalist Kevin Anderson recommended that the BBC implement blogs, framing blogging as a platform that would "develop a conversation with our audiences, increasing transparency, trust and responsiveness" (Anderson, 2005: 1). It chided the BBC for its attitude in the past, saying that "like many traditional media organizations, we have been inconsistent in our language and our approach to weblogs, which has confused our audiences, alienated bloggers and missed opportunities" (Anderson, 2005:1).

The report recommended that the BBC News website focus on a small number of blogs initially, primarily an editor's blog, a technology blog and specific event-based blogs. It also suggested a greater integration of external blog content in the BBC's journalism. Shortly after the report was delivered, Clifton publicly stated his priority to create a blog to "explain some of our editorial decisions, our priorities, answer criticisms" (Clifton, 2005). This marked a turning point in the development of blogs at the BBC, as it was the first time the editor of a department within news made a pledge to develop blogging. The initial focus of this editorial blog was the BBC's online journalism, but Clifton added that it would "hopefully draw other parts of BBC News into the process as well" (Clifton, 2005).

Change within a journalistic institution

It is significant that tentative steps into blogging took place within areas of the BBC that enjoyed an unusually high level of independence from BBC news management such as the news website. The site became the forum for early experiments by BBC political correspondent Nick Robinson and BBC journalist Kevin Anderson that incorporated elements of the blog format. Similarly, the first news blog by a BBC journalist Paul Mason came out of Newsnight, a BBC program that enjoys a great deal of autonomy. The "Newsni8ht G8" summit blog went live on June 16, 2005, after being approved by Newsnight editor Peter Barron (Mason, 2005). The blog was an unofficial BBC blog in the sense that it was published independently of the corporation's technical infrastructure, yet it was written by BBC correspondent Paul Mason and sanctioned by a senior TV news editor:

> Apparently the BBC bosses had just had a big away day where they decided to stop being clipboard merchants and prioritize innovation, so no one felt like nixing it. And yet there was nothing that said it should be allowed. (Mason, cited in Douglas, 2005)

This marked a break with usual practices at the BBC, where new initiatives would often have to be approved centrally by committees. Other early BBC forays into blogging outside of news also took place at the edges, notably BBC Scotland's Island Blogging community project in 2003 (Sambrook, cited in Hypergene, 2005).

Remarks by figures involved in the early blog initiatives provide an indication of the institutional resistance to blogging at the corporation. The 2005 Anderson report contained a considerable educational section explaining the nature of blogs. Anderson spoke of blogs as " the latest Internet phenomenon of which much is said and little understood", before going on to add that "there is general confusion over the definition of a blog so we can be forgiven for the level of confusion that exists internally" (Anderson, 2005). Both the Anderson report and an internal blogging guide for correspondents produced by BBC News website world features editor Rachel Nixon in 2006 devote much space to explaining the aims of a blog and promoting its benefits for journalists:

> This mid-terms' blog would be a different channel for your journalism as well as a platform for your observations, comments and anecdotes. We think it will make an interesting and important addition to the coverage and if we are right we'll use the same model for other major stories. We hope you'll be able to help us make it work. (Nixon, 2006)

A self-assessment of the first year of official blogs at the BBC by Newsnight editor Peter Barron acknowledged there had been "fears by some that a new openness would lead to embarrassing disclosures and uncomfortable headlines" (Barron, 2007a). Some of the observations by BBC staff involved in blogging initiatives also suggest a degree of opposition. A 2006 posting on a BBC blog by BBC Senior Community Producer Robin Hamman hinted at the institutional tensions:

> The idea of blogging - and by blogging I mean fully engaging in the use of blogs as a technique, not just as a technology - can, on the face of things, sit awkwardly alongside some of the BBC's editorial values: truth and accuracy, impartiality and diversity of opinion, editorial integrity and independence, serving the public interest, fairness, and privacy. (Hamman, 2006)

Lucy Hooberman who worked on a project that led to the launch of the BBC Blogs Network in 2006 recalled "the people who argued vehemently that it was not the route for the BBC to go down" (Hooberman, 2007). An additional leading advocate of blogging at the BBC, Global News Director Richard Sambrook wrote of "lots of grappling with very practical problems and frustrations" in a blog post without going into detail. But he suggested the BBC had no alternative but to continue its blog experiment as "it's fallen to us to reinvent the industry and we won't do it with heads in either the sand or the clouds" (Sambrook, 2007).

Another BBC staff member at the time, Ben Metcalfe, who was involved in the process as the unofficial blogosphere and technical platform advisor, hinted at the challenges that led to the official unveiling of the BBC Blogs Network in 2006:

Rather than a round of momentous back-slapping, the initial launch was commemorated more with a sigh of relief that we can finally be seen to be 'getting it'. I think it was worth the wait, just. (Metcalfe, 2006)

A public example of the tensions within the BBC over blogs came to light at the We Media conference, hosted in part by the corporation in London in May 2006. During a panel on citizen journalism, the head of BBC News, Helen Boaden, indicated a mistrust of blogging, questioning who held bloggers to account and suggesting a blog would be behind a big news hoax in the coming year (Anderson 2006; Kiss, 2006). Another sign of the tensions over blogging within an established journalistic institution like the BBC came in 2007, when veteran BBC correspondent Kate Adie was reported to have criticized fellow journalists who wrote blogs. She was quoted as describing blogs as "egotistical nonsense" and saying that "journalists shouldn't have any time to blog - there are too many stories waiting to be told," (Mullane, 2007).

The acceptance by BBC journalists of blogging as a legitimate platform for journalism appears to have been largely influenced by the perceived success of the blog of political correspondent Nick Robinson. This was the first official blog by a BBC journalist, produced as part of the corporation's online news offerings. It was launched in December, 2005 with the words; "Now I never thought I'd find myself writing this but... My name's Nick Robinson and I am a blogger." In his first post, he described the blog as a "conversation" that "can really change the relationship between author and reader" (Robinson, 2005). Within the space of just under two years, the BBC went from having one to ten blogs written by senior BBC correspondents from the world of broadcast (Herrmann, 2007).

As an early adopter, Robinson is considered to have shown how blogs could play a role in the work of established journalists. Clifton (2008) described the Robinson blog as the best example of a BBC News blog, while Herrmann (2008) called it almost required reading for senior editors and managers at the BBC. One of the more recent correspondents to start blogging, Rory Cellan-Jones, explained the impact of Robinson's blog:

At first there was some skepticism about this form of journalism as a use of a busy correspondent's time. But that has changed - first Nick Robinson's political blog proved a big success, but more importantly Robert Peston (Business Editor) started a blog which has become essential reading in the City. It's a prime example of how a subject which is hard to discuss on TV or radio can be illuminated by a blog. (Cellan-Jones, 2008)

Both the Robinson and Peston blogs won awards in 2007. Robert Peston won the digital media category of the BVCA Private Equity & Venture Capitalist Journalist of the Year Awards while Nick Robinson took the political journalist of the year award from the UK's Political Studies Association. These awards are an indication of how blogging has been more widely recognized as a valid form of journalism.

Maintaining editorial values

The recognition of blogs as a legitimate form of journalism at the BBC marks a shift from the early discourse on blogging. In 2003, BBC columnist Bill Thompson categorically stated that:

> Blogging is not journalism. Often it is as far from journalism as it is possible to get, with unsubstantiated rumor, prejudice and gossip masquerading as informed opinion. Without editors to correct syntax, tidy up the story structure or check facts, it is generally impossible to rely on anything one finds in a blog without verifying it somewhere else - often the much-maligned mainstream media. (Thompson, 2003)

> The perceived impact of blogging on existing notions of impartiality presents dilemmas for news organizations. In its editorial guidelines, the BBC states that "impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC's commitment to its audiences", while a section on accuracy states that "our output will be well sourced, based on sound evidence, thoroughly tested and presented in clear, precise language," (BBC Editorial Guidelines, n.d.). The issue of objectivity is revisited in another section of the guidelines that state the BBC "will be objective and even handed in our approach to a subject. We will provide professional judgments where appropriate, but we will never promote a particular view on controversial matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy," (BBC Editorial Guidelines, n.d.).

These guidelines formed the backdrop for the debate at the BBC of the role of blogs in its journalism. After all, this is an institution whose reputation has been built on years of impartial and objective reporting. The Anderson report on blogging concluded that the BBC should adhere to editorial guidelines in the blogs just as it does in its traditional journalism. The author, Kevin Anderson, cited his own experience in producing blog-style content for the BBC News website as proof that blogs could work within BBC editorial policies:

> From my experience doing the US election blog, writing a weblog does not need to conflict with our journalistic values. In fact, it will help us communicate those values to our audience. Everything that I wrote was signed off by an editor before it was posted. If I thought something was coming close to crossing a line, I flagged it up for an editor and made sure that a few people weighed in on it. (Anderson, 2005: 15)

The BBC has blogging guidelines for the personal blogs of staff but these do not refer to BBC editors and correspondents who contribute to official journalism blogs. Instead there appears to be an implicit assumption that journalists will apply existing BBC editorial values across all output, including blogs. For example, during the BBC's first experiment in live blogging at the We Media conference in 2006 in London, the blog's author was given little editorial direction and his posts went live without any editorial vetting[i].

Similarly, guidelines issued to 15 BBC journalists who contributed to a blog on the US mid-terms in 2006 contained little editorial advice to reporters, saying "one word of caution: the blog is as public as all other items on the News website, so please bear in mind how key phrases might appear in tomorrow's Telegraph," (Nixon, 2006).

This suggests that the BBC tacitly acknowledge that journalists would apply existing editorial guidelines on accuracy and impartiality. It also suggests that editors implicitly trusted the handful of journalists selected to blog to apply standard BBC norms and values to their blogging:

> Same rules apply as on air – impartiality is the watchword. Which means bloggers have to tread a careful line – they can be engaging and judgmental, but must not take sides. So I can say Vista appears to be a bit of a turkey, or Leopard does not deliver, but can't say that it means you should switch from Microsoft to Mac or vice versa. (Cellan-Jones, 2008)

An example of this was the first posting on the personal blog of the BBC Director of Global News, Richard Sambrook, in which he explained that his long career at a organization committed to objectivity and impartiality had "left their mark and formed strong habits and some discipline" (Sambrook, 2006).

A platform for rebuilding trust

Much of the discourse on blogging at the BBC is framed in terms of making the corporation more accountable to its audience. Within the news division, the main vehicle for this has become The Editors blog, launched in May, 2006. The blog provides a platform for news editors at the BBC to explain editorial decisions. The first posting explicitly set out the commitment by BBC News to its audience:

> The BBC wants to be open and accountable, and so this site is a public space where you can engage with us as much as the medium allows. We're happy for you to criticize the BBC in your e-mails and comments, and to ask serious, probing questions of us - we'll do our best to respond to them. (BBC, 2006)

The Editors blog was launched after a period of much internal BBC debate over its journalism and the perceived need to regain the public's trust. The language used by senior BBC editors to describe the purpose of the blog format indicates a pre-occupation with the notion of trust. In a speech in January in 2008, the head of the BBC tri-media newsroom, Peter Horrocks, said:

> We do have an interest in hearing the public's views about our news coverage, so we run an Editors' blog and host discussions about that – an essential part of a push towards greater accountability and openness and a way of enhancing and repairing the damaged trust in the BBC. Sometimes it can be pretty uncomfortable to own up to mistakes in real time, but we have found that making redress

quickly, whatever the fallout in adverse press coverage, is better than trying to hide from audience criticism. (Horrocks, 2008).

Clifton described The Editors blog as "part of our drive to be more accountable" (Clifton, 2008), while Herrmann called it " a means to provide greater accountability and transparency and hopefully foster greater audience understanding and trust" (Herrmann, 2008). By January 2008, The Editors featured posts by 93 editors from 31 BBC news and current affairs outlets.

Similarly, blogs by correspondents have been described as a way of introducing greater transparency to the workings of journalists. Herrmann wrote of the greater flexibility in format, tone and length of blogs compared to "traditional text or broadcast, saying that "they help us convey not just the stories, but what we think of them and how we get them," (Herrmann, 2008).

Guidelines produced in 2006 for correspondents new to blogging sought to explain how journalists could adopt blogs as a platform for greater transparency into processes of news:

> It allows us a different tone of voice which, being less formal, can convey more of an insight into the perspectives, predicaments and personalities of our reporters (and editors); we can show better what goes into the whole newsgathering and reporting process, showcasing the BBC's strengths in this area. (Nixon, 2006)

An interesting aspect of this is how blogs fit within a broadcast organization such as the BBC. TV correspondent turned blogger Rory Cellan-Jones described this new platform for journalism as a way "to engage in the kind of debate with the audience that it is hard to achieve in a two-minute piece for TV news" (Cellan-Jones, 2008).

Limitations of the conversation

Remarks by BBC staff indicate there are limits on how far the corporation is willing to let the public influence editorial decisions. In 2007, the TV news analysis program, Newsnight, started sending out its morning prospects not just to producers but also to anyone, inviting viewers to comment on the show's blog. But comments by the program editor Peter Barron showed the limits of this interaction with the audience. "First, that it's our job, not yours, to come up with programme ideas," wrote Barron in a posting on The Editors about the experiment. He used the analogy of a restaurant menu, saying that "instead of simply serving up what we hope you might like now we're showing you a menu and asking how you'd like your eggs," (Barron, 2007b).

Moreover, there are indications that the BBC has not achieved its aim of a conversation with the audience. A review conducted for the BBC by the Headshift consultancy found that only about one in eight posts provided links to other websites, including blogs (Hamman, 2007b). In his informal review of BBC blogs, Hamman also

suggested only a handful of BBC bloggers use tools such as Technorati to track and engage in conversations on related topics taking place in the wider blogosphere:

> We're pretty good at using blogs as a publishing platform. But we're not doing as well as we could engaging with the conversations our blogs could, and in many instances should, be a part of. (Hamman, 2007b)

One of the leading problems has been having editors and correspondents respond to comments from readers. A posting on The Editors by Herrmann taking stock of the blogging initiative acknowledged "responding to comments consistently across the blogs continues to be one of the biggest challenges for all concerned (Herrmann, 2007). This was one of the main findings of research commissioned by the BBC to analyze its implementation of blogging:

> They did not feel genuinely interactive. It was still too much of a one-way process of people at the BBC writing and various comments then being posted without further response from the blog writer. This is a fair criticism of some of the ones we do in News. It is very hard to get correspondents to write posts and then respond again to comments, but it is something we should strive for. (Clifton, 2008)

The BBC moderates comments before they appear on blogs and this has implications for resources. As other news organizations have found, the more popular a blog becomes, the more time and effort needs to be dedicated to its upkeep (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). BBC blogs have found a steadily growing audience, with the number of monthly visits to all blogs rising from under one million in April 2006 to more than seven million by October 2007 (Hamman, 2007a). The experience of the BBC blog on technology, dotlife, provides a snapshot of the issue facing journalists. One of its contributors, TV correspondent Rory Cellan-Jones, explained the dilemma, saying that the blog had "proved both successful - in terms of audience - and time-consuming. Eleven weeks in, we've posted 143 entries and received over 7,000 comments," (Cellan-Jones, 2008).

The growing popularity of the blogs and the rapid increase in the number of blogs themselves has led to technical challenges for the BBC. These are common when news organizations seek to integrate new technology into their editorial processes (Thurman, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008). In an assessment of the first 18 months of blogs, Hamman wrote of the "increasingly unstable" nature of the infrastructure, noting that the blog database server was at times running at 100% capacity (Hamman, 2007a). The most visible aspect to users was problems with leaving comments as BBC servers were overloaded with spam:

> Worryingly, the amount of spam comments submitted is on the increase and, across the network, we can now get as many as 50,000 spam comments per week. In one particularly bad day last week, the comment cgi was hit well over 30,000 times. (Hamman, 2007a)

The technical issues resulted in one blog, World Have Your Say, abandoning the BBC system for independent hosting, while editors were frustrated "by pretty catastrophic technical problems here at the BBC which made publishing anything on the blogs - and on several other parts of the BBC website – impossible" (Barron, 2007). An internal report commissioned by the BBC recommended an overhaul of the two-year old blogging infrastructure. This is taking place in 2008 (Reynolds, 2008).

Discussion and conclusion

This study provides considerable insights into the adoption of blogging at an established news organization. It suggests that the mainstream media is incorporating this emergent communications technology as a way to not only maintain, but also re-assert, its journalistic authority in line with much of the literature on this topic. It is noteworthy that the expansion of blogging at the BBC coincided with one of the most turbulent periods in its history and at a time when its journalism was under intense scrutiny both from outside and inside the corporation, as reflected by policy documents and remarks at the time by senior management.

This may have contributed to the rapid growth of editorial blogs at the BBC by creating an atmosphere conducive to greater self-reflection. It may explain the high number of senior editors across the organization who have contributed to the Editors Blog, an initiative that originally emerged from one department of the BBC's news operation. While providing greater transparency into BBC editorial decisions, the Editors Blog also serves to justify these decisions, reinforcing established news values. This study supports Robinson's assertion that journalists who blog "do attempt to discuss the standards that allow them to keep their jobs and sell the corporate brand of news - even if they are not explicitly following those traditional norms," (Robinson, 2006; 79).

This study also backs up Matheson's suggestion that "many journalists working online are enthusiastic about the potential to rearticulate practice in the new forms that are available online" (Matheson, 2004:444). This may be even more relevant in the context of a broadcaster like the BBC, going beyond Matheson's (2004) characterization of blogs as a space for journalistic thinking that does not fit within the confines of institutional journalism. Broadcasting by its very nature is a one-way medium, designed to reach a wide audience, and often governed by the constraints of the on-air newshole.

Blogging certainly offers a broadcast journalist a space for elements that do not make it on air. But its participatory nature also creates an environment where a journalist can foster a closer and more personal relationship with the audience than is possible on television. However, this analysis of blogging at the BBC suggests that the organization has yet to fully embrace blogs as a platform for a conversation with the audience. This study shows that technical difficulties, as well as issues with the time and effort needed to respond to comments, resulted in limited engagement with the public via the blogs. This was a concern raised by several senior editors and correspondents. It suggests that there

may be a need to rethink the function of the journalist to incorporate a role as community leader.

The BBC experience with blogging suggests established journalistic norms of impartiality and accuracy can be incorporated within blogs. This study suggests that concerns that blogging undermines traditional journalistic values may be over-stated. Indeed, there may not be a need for specific guidelines about blogging at news organizations where there is a strong institutional culture of editorial integrity. This is an area for debate within both professional and academic circles that would benefit from further research. Additionally, this research did not analyze the content of the BBC blogs or attempt to determine how the journalism differs from the reporting on the more traditional platforms. But the study suggests that this would be a suitable topic for further investigation.

The history of blogging by the BBC offers some valuable indicators into how the established media adopts new communications technologies. Many of the advocates for blogging came from departments within the broadcaster that enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy. This created an environment where early adopters at the BBC News website and the Newsnight program could try out new online formats. These initial experiments in blogging were not so much approved by senior BBC management, but rather the absence of a pan-BBC policy on blogs allowed these trials to take place. Senior editorial figures played key roles in promoting blogs, but this study suggests they were able to do this partly due to lack of active opposition from senior management, rather than due to their tacit encouragement and support. While this study indicates that individuals played a key role in the promotion and dissemination of blogging at the BBC, more research is needed into the motivations by journalists to adopt new journalistic formats.

This study shows how digital communication technologies, coupled with societal and cultural factors, are impacting on one of the world's most established and respected news institutions and its mandate to be accountable. Blogging is such a recent phenomenon at the BBC that it is too early to say how far this is indicative of a lasting change in the corporation's relationship to the public. And there are indications that the BBC is entering a period of reassessing its blogging after several years of rapid growth (Clifton 2008). But this research suggests that blogs are playing a considerable role in BBC journalism, coming as the public service broadcaster seeks to reinvent itself for a digital age.

Footnotes

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[i] This is based on the personal recollection of the author of this study, who was working at the BBC News website at the time.

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