Weblogs and the War in Iraq

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During the recent US-led invasion of Iraq, familiar modes of war reporting were actively re-inflected, sometimes in surprising ways. While much debate ensued over the relative merits of ‘unilateral’ or ‘embedded’ news coverage, other developments enabled by the proliferation of new media technologies, from digital cameras and computer notebooks to satellite telephones received far less attention. Among these new approaches to reporting war was the warblog, a mode we argue deserves particular scrutiny.

This chapter proposes to examine the emergent forms and practices of blogging as an augmentation of and at times challenge to war reporting. As will soon become apparent, however, we have not attempted the difficult task of comprehensively surveying the multiplicity of warblogs concerned with the invasion and its aftermath. Rather, we have chosen to investigate a small number of warblogs, grouping them into three categories: warblogs associated with major news organisations; warblogs produced by freelance or ‘sojo’ reporters, as well as ‘personal’ or ‘amateur’ journalists; and warblogs posted by Iraqi citizens. In the course of our analysis, we draw upon insights provided by bloggers themselves, both from interviews conducted by ourselves as well as from other sources.\(^1\) We suggest that these writers valued the use of blogging as journalism for the ways in which it – characterised as it is by informality, subjectivity and eye-witness experience – cuts across the fundamentals of ostensibly impartial news reporting. In this chapter’s evaluation of warblogging’s relative strengths and limitations, then, care will be taken to discern the extent to which it represents a challenge to certain longstanding tenets of war reporting.

Blogs as News Sources

The advent of weblogging is currently the subject of intense debate within certain journalistic circles, with some of its more passionate advocates prepared to go so far as to suggest that the phenomenon is recasting the very definition of what counts as journalism in an online environment. Indeed, in their view, blogging deserves to be heralded as a new form of reporting that promises to revolutionise journalism in a manner that can be likened to the arrival of the printing press in the fifteenth century. Its detractors beg to differ, of course, with some even disputing the claim that blogging can be aptly described as a form of journalism at all. Blogging, they argue, is more akin to a form of subjective commentary, one where short, sharp bursts of opinionated argument about mainstream news items or events typically take the place of dispassionate, balanced and – crucially – investigative news reporting. Evidence to support these and related positions is readily available, needless to say, depending on where one looks in the virtual universe of the ‘blogosphere’ around us.

Weblogs, or blogs for short, may be aptly described as diaries or journals written by individuals with net access who are in possession of the necessary software publishing tools (e.g. those provided by sites such as Blogger.com) to establish an online presence. Emerging in the mid-1990s, they are currently believed to be flourishing in the hundreds of thousands across the webscape. Many news bloggers – a small minority compared to the number of ordinary netizens involved overall –
consider themselves to be ‘personal’ journalists, intent on transgressing the border between ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ reporting. While it is difficult to generalise, most seem motivated to share their analysis, comments or background knowledge about news events which matter to them so as to counterbalance mainstream news media coverage (Matheson forthcoming). Some post little more than ad hoc musings, offering a passing insight in the form of an occasional sentence or two, sometimes with accompanying excerpts and/or hyperlinks to pertinent news or information sites elsewhere. Typically the more influential blogs, though, are those associated with a particular issue or concern, and are thereby committed to providing a fresh, ‘unfiltered’ perspective which sets them apart from other, rival blogs.

News oriented blogs vary in form and practice, but many are informed by a shared ethos, namely that newsgathering and commentary need to be democratised. By acting as ‘unofficial’ news sources on the web, these blogs link together information and opinion which supplements – or, in the eyes of some advocates, supplants – the coverage provided by ‘official’ news outlets. Here it needs to be noted, however, that very few blogs actually provide new information. Instead, most bloggers pull together their resources from a diverse array of other sites, thereby situating a given news event within a larger context, and illuminating multiple dimensions of its elements. The apparent facts or claims being collected are usually time-stamped and placed in reverse-chronological order as the blog is updated, thereby making it easier for readers to follow its ongoing narrative. Customarily the sources of the blogger’s information are acknowledged explicitly, with the accompanying hyperlink enabling the user to negotiate a network of cross-references from one blog to the next, or to other types of sites altogether. In principle, the facts or claims presented in any one blog can be subjected to the relentless double-checking of users, some of whom may be even better informed about the events in question than the initial blogger. Any attempt by a blogger to present a partisan assertion as an impartial statement of truth is likely to be promptly recognised as such by other users.

In this way, then, a blog provides the basis for a new interactive form of participatory journalism while, simultaneously, serving as forum for discussion and debate. The potential of blogs in this regard was widely recognised during the tragic events of September 11, 2001. In the early hours after the attacks, most of the major news sites in the US, as well as others such as the BBC’s site in London, were so besieged by user demand that they were largely inaccessible (see Allan 2002, 2004). As one site after the next refused to load properly, users turned elsewhere for news of breaking developments. Hundreds of refashioned websites began to appear over the course of the day, making publicly available eyewitness accounts, personal photographs and in some cases video-footage of the unfolding disasters. Ordinary people were transforming into ‘amateur newbies’, to use a term frequently heard, or instant reporters, photojournalists and opinion columnists. Taken together, these websites resembled something of a first-person news network, a collective form of collaborative newsgathering. ‘Anyone who had access to a digital camera and a Web site suddenly was a guerrilla journalist posting these things,’ said one graphic designer turned photojournalist. ‘When you’re viewing an experience through a viewfinder, you become bolder’ (cited in Hu 2001).

Various observations about ‘personal journalism’ posted by readers of different webpages suggested that these forms of reporting may have provided some members of the online community with a greater sense of connection to the crisis than that afforded by ‘official’ news reports. In any case, though, of particular importance here was the crucial role played by blogs in making these forms of journalism
available. ‘Most of the amateur content,’ Leander Kahney (2001b) observed, ‘would be inaccessible, or at least hard to find, if not for many of the Web’s outstanding weblogs, which function as “portals” to personal content.’ Managers of these blogs spent the day rapidly linking together any available amateur accounts and photographs onto their respective sites. ‘Some people cope by hearing and distributing information in a crisis,’ wrote the owner of one popular blog. ‘I’m one of those people, I guess. Makes me feel like I’m doing something useful for those that can’t do anything’ (cited in Kahney 2001a). Another blogger stated: ‘I found that for me, posting videos and sharing these experiences was the best therapy. It’s a modern way of a survivor of a disaster declaring, “I’m still alive; look at this Web site. I got out”’ (cited in Hu 2001). In rendering problematic the criteria defining what counts as journalism, so called ‘amateur newsies’ and their bloggers together threw into sharp relief the reportorial conventions of the mainstream news coverage, the implications of which are still being debated today.

In the weeks following September 11, a new type of blog began to emerge, described by its proponents as a ‘warblog’. Taking as their focus the so-called ‘War on Terror’, these blogs devoted particular attention to the perceived shortcomings of the mainstream news media with regard to their responsibility to inform the public about possible risks, threats and dangers (see also Zelizer and Allan 2002). Warbloggers were divided, as one might expect, between those who favoured US and UK military intervention in the Middle East, and those who did not. In both cases, however, an emphasis was placed on documenting sufficient evidence to demonstrate the basis for their dissatisfaction with what they deemed to be the apparent biases of the mainstream news coverage of the ensuing conflict in Afghanistan. For pro-war bloggers, a ‘liberal bias’ was detectable in much mainstream journalism, leading them to call into question the patriotism of well-known reporters and news organisations. In sharp contrast, bloggers opposed to the war were equally convinced that mainstream journalism, with its over-reliance on official sources, was failing to provide fair and balanced coverage. Many were able to show, with little difficulty, how voices of dissent were being routinely marginalised, when they were even acknowledged at all. For warbloggers of either persuasion, then, it was desperately important to seek out alternative sources of information from across the web in order to buttress their preferred perspective.

Few of these online sources originated in Afghanistan, however, due to the severity of the official restrictions imposed on journalists, as well as because of the limited availability of telecommunications services (an average of two telephones per 1,000 people). Accordingly, for many in the blogging communities, it was the US-led invasion of Iraq that proved to be the ‘breakthrough’ for this grass-roots movement. Steven Levy (2003), writing in a Newsweek web exclusive, suggested that blogs ‘finally found their moment’ as bombs were dropped on the city of Baghdad. The formal initiation of hostilities, he maintained, and ‘the frustratingly variegated nature of this particular conflict, called for two things: an easy-to-parse overview for news junkies who wanted information from all sides, and a personal insight that bypassed the sanitizing Cuisinart of big-media news editing.’ In Levy’s view, blogs were able to ‘deliver on both counts’. Adopting a similar line of argument were those who pointed to the success of blogs in attracting attention, especially that of individuals largely indifferent to mainstream reporting (here young people are frequently mentioned), by virtue of their shared intimacy. ‘I think that sort of clarity of voice and immediacy is more possible on Web logs than in any print media,’ argued Dean Allen of textism.com. ‘I can’t think of another broadcast medium that has such a potential
for directness. Someone reporting live from the battlefield for CNN can’t come close’ (cited in Allemang 2003). Commenting on this type of ‘horizontal’ communication, Glenn Harlan Reynolds (2003) of Instapundit.com noted wryly that ‘the term “correspondent” is reverting to its original meaning of “one who corresponds,” rather than the more recent one of “well-paid microphone-holder with good hair”.’

Beginning in the next section, we examine three relatively distinct (yet necessarily interrelated) approaches to warblogging. In essence, their distinctiveness is defined in relation to the institutional basis, or lack thereof, underpinning their status as war reporters. We turn first to warblogs associated with major news organisations, such as the BBC (news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/2866547.stm), CNN (www.cnn.com), MSNBC (www.msnbc.msn.com/), the Spokane Spokesman-Review (www.spokesmanreview.com/) and Guardian Unlimited (www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq). Next, attention focuses on warblogs produced by solo or freelance journalists, including Christopher Allbritton’s Back to Iraq 2.0 (www.back-to-iraq.com). And, lastly, warblogs posted by Iraqi citizens, such as that belonging to Salam Pax (dear_raed.blogspot.com/), are examined, before the chapter draws to a close with several preliminary – and we hope conceptually suggestive – conclusions.

**Blogging From A War Zone**

While it is difficult to generalise, most warbloggers posting from Iraq seemed to have been motivated to share their eyewitness experiences of the conflict so as to counterbalance mainstream news media coverage. At the same time, however, this motivation needs to be contextualised in relation to more pressing issues concerned with the logistics of filing stories from the field. Needless to say, in the day to day grind of reporting from the war zone, communication with colleagues (let alone loved ones back home) was typically difficult. A number of journalists began keeping weblogs as a way of recording their impressions and, simultaneously, to show that they were safe.

BBC producer Stuart Hughes, who reported from northern Iraq during the war, typically posted entries to his blog immediately after filing his news items to the Corporation. He told us:

> I didn’t think I was doing anything particularly pioneering. To go one step further and explain how my weblog came to be set up, it was never intended to be anything approaching journalism. I…only set it up for my immediate family and friends because I knew it would be difficult to stay in touch with my family and friends when I was Iraq. So I thought I’d post a picture and a few words every now and then and at least they’d know I was OK…And then gradually word started to spread about it and there were a few newspaper articles and it became a warblog, which it was never intended to be. It was just sort of, it was like a daily dispatch to family and…I wrote] literally what came into my head: this is what I’ve been doing, this is who I’ve spoken to. But, interestingly, that tone and that approach and that style were exactly what people latched onto and they seemed to trust what I was telling them. They had no reason to, I mean I could have been making all those quotes up, for all anybody knows (Hughes, interview).
Hughes’s warblog, titled ‘Beyond Northern Iraq (stuarthughes.blogspot.com), focused on daily minutiae and personal responses to life on the ground, rather than on the major events of the war. Describing his blog as his ‘guilty secret’, he regards it as a kind of ‘sketchbook’ for subjects to investigate. Meanwhile BBC News Interactive assignment editor Cathy Grieve observed that the Corporation’s ‘Reporters’ Log,’ the weblog authored by its correspondents in Iraq, was often used by colleagues in the UK to check they were still alive and well (Grieve, interview). Indeed, she also recalled that it was used on one occasion by British officers, who had temporarily lost their charge in the desert. Significantly, then, a public dimension to such sites blurred with interpersonal priorities.  

In the main, however, news organisations tend to be interested in the potential of warblogs to augment their coverage of the Iraq war. M.L. Lyke’s weblog for the Seattle Post Intelligencer was written onboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, while the Christian Science Monitor sent online journalist Ben Arnoldy as its ‘embedded’ war correspondent. Guardian Unlimited posted the blogs of Audrey Gillan, an ‘embedded’ reporter ‘living with a hundred men from the Household Cavalry at war in the Iraqi desert,’ as well as those of Jason Burke in Kurdish-controlled Chamchamal and Burhan Wazir in Basra, amongst others. Each inflection of a warblog format gave prominence to the latest information, much as newspaper front pages and broadcast line-ups do, and news organisations valued blogs partly because of their sense of immediacy. The Spokane Spokesman-Review’s online editor Ken Sands talked of the print newspaper as ‘hopelessly behind’ his newspaper’s weblog (Sands, interview). The newspaper’s print version was updated once a day, while its weblog, sitting to the side of newsroom routines, was updated with wire stories, links to newspaper and broadcaster websites around the world and commentary as often as Sands found something worth posting. Moreover, warblogs simultaneously promised immediacy in a further sense, namely as means of taking readers vicariously to the scene of the conflict through an intimate, diary format.

This type of immediacy, as one might expect, posed problems for established news practices. Even when codes separating ostensibly ‘objective’ reporting from ‘subjective’ comment were applied to their news blogs, news organisations often found that certain long-standing tensions between reporters and their editors were exacerbated. A decision to post material as soon as it became available, regardless of how ‘raw’ (un-edited) it might be, frequently sparked disagreements. Bill Mitchell (2003) was one of many who argued that the combination in any one journalistic blogger of such diverse skills as reporting, writing, editing and news judgement puts at risk the reputation of the news outlet publishing it (2003: 66). To counteract the absence of institutional safety mechanisms, he suggested only experienced journalists should write news blogs.

Such an attitude partly explains the response of CNN’s executives to the warblogging of one of their correspondents in Iraq, Kevin Sites. In addition to filing his television reports, Sites wrote ‘behind the scenes’ features for CNN.com, all the while maintaining a multimedia blog. Published on his own site, Sites’ blog provided his personal commentary about the events he was witnessing from one day to the next, along with various photographs and audio reports that he prepared. Perhaps in light of the media attention Sites’ blog received, however, CNN ask him to suspend it on Friday, 21 March, 2003. A spokesperson for the network stated at the time that covering war ‘is a full-time job and we’ve asked Kevin to concentrate only on that for the time being’ (cited in Kurtz 2003). Sites agreed to stop blogging, later explaining that ‘CNN was signing my checks at the time and sent me to Iraq. Although I felt the
blog was a separate and independent journalistic enterprise, they did not’ (www.kevinsites.net). Reactions from other bloggers were swift. CNN’s response, according to Steven Levy (2003) of Newsweek, ‘was seen in the Blogosphere as one more sign that the media dinosaurs are determined to stamp out this subversive new form of reporting.’

In contrast, MSNBC’s support for blogging meant that three warblogs were focused on war coverage at the height of the conflict. ‘Weblogs are journalism,’ argued Joan Connell, one of the site’s executive producers. ‘They can be used to great effect in reporting an unfolding story and keeping readers informed’ (cited in Mernit 2003). Nevertheless, while she does not share CNN’s stance that blogs lack a sufficiently ‘structured approach to presenting the news,’ she does believe that there is a necessary role for an editor in the process. In her words: ‘Unlike many Weblogs, whose posts go from the mind of the writer straight into the “blogosphere”, MSNBC’s Weblogs are edited. Our editors scrutinize our Weblogs for accuracy, fairness and balance, just as they would any news story’ (cited in Mernit 2003).

Other news organisations similarly welcomed staff warblogs, and a few took the experiment with blogging a little further. Cathy Grieve, an assignment editor at BBC News Interactive (as noted above), said her colleagues were motivated to produce a joint weblog of BBC foreign correspondents’ thoughts because they ‘wanted to do something more immediate’ than more packaged news (Grieve, interview). Immediacy, in this sense, meant finding ways to engage with audiences in a more direct, less formal manner. The language of warblogs was usually much more colloquial in vocabulary and emotive in judgement. As Grieve stated:

I just think it had more chatty language and was easier for people to understand and also correspondents were able to say what they really meant because it was a bit more personal and was about their thoughts. They weren’t delivering a scripted and proper English Radio 4 piece as opposed to somebody having a chat with you (Grieve, interview).

For these journalists, warblogs went some distance to close the gap between the event and the telling of it, by taking the reader to the experience. It was literally more immediate because less mediated by editors. Thus rather than produce polished foreign correspondent’s performances, taken to an empty extreme by the correspondent on the hotel rooftop reading to camera a précis of what he or she has just read on the news wires, the weblog could be used to give voice to the reporter on the ground bearing witness.

**Independent Voices**

Not all bloggers on the front lines were associated with a major news organisation, of course. Many worked as a ‘sojo’ or ‘solo journalist’, writing and editing their own copy for both online and print or broadcast media. Being almost constantly on the move meant relying on mobile technologies, such as a notebook computer and digital camera, or even a videophone and mini-satellite dish. Still, for these bloggers, their relative freedom of movement enabled them to pursue the stories which mattered most to them – and the readers of their warblog. Herein lay the popularity of the warblogs amongst users, which in the opinion of journalist Bryony Gordon (2003) was hardly surprising: ‘if a television reporter’s movements aren’t subject to Iraqi
restrictions, then his [or her] report is likely to be monitored by the Allied Forces. Devoid of such regulations, the internet is thriving.’

For some journalist bloggers we interviewed, sites such as the Spokesman-Review’s and the BBC’s were not ‘real’ blogging, precisely because they sought to curtail immediacy with editing. Real blogging, for them, involved the personal voice of the writer outside the confines of the news organisation altogether. This sense of the incompatibility of conventional news routines and what blogging could offer can be summarised as a set of structural oppositions, which included pairs such as:

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<thead>
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<th>raw</th>
<th>polished</th>
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<tr>
<td>subjective</td>
<td>objective</td>
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<td>first-hand</td>
<td>second-hand</td>
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<tr>
<td>unmediated</td>
<td>processed or packaged</td>
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<tr>
<td>independent</td>
<td>dependent</td>
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<tr>
<td>connective</td>
<td>distanced</td>
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<tr>
<td>behind the scenes</td>
<td>the official version</td>
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<td>interactive</td>
<td>top-down</td>
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Such oppositions could be argued to be at work not only in blogging but also in a wider foreign correspondent tradition. The personal weblogs of a number of journalists in Iraq therefore made sense to them partly in terms of longstanding tensions around the role of the independent reporter, as well as a conviction that direct, eye-witness testimony was the most valuable mode of truth-telling. Equally important for war bloggers, however, was the personal control they experienced over their writing (the absence of an external editor being key), and the personal relationship they felt was constructed in the blog with their readers. This allowed them to construct a claim to connect readers to the ‘real experience’ of Iraq. Such oppositions appeared to inform, in turn, an implicit appeal to a sense of authenticity and trustworthiness in the blog itself.

Freelancer Christopher Allbritton (formerly a reporter with the AP wire service and New York Daily News) had announced his intention to be the web’s first independent war correspondent in the months leading up to the invasion. His blog, titled Back to Iraq 2.0 (www.back-to-iraq.com), called upon readers to help contribute to the financial support necessary to fund his travel and expenses in Iraqi Kurdistan. ‘It’s a marketplace of ideas,’ he maintained, ‘and those who are awarded credibility by their readers will prosper’ (cited in Warner 2003). Support was such that his expenses were met by some 320 donors, allowing him to file daily stories from the country using a borrowed notebook computer and a rented satellite phone. As his blog’s daily readership grew to upwards of 25,000, he became accustomed to receiving emails which posed questions and suggested story leads, while others provided useful links to online materials. ‘My reporting created a connection between the readers and me,’ Allbritton (2003) later observed, ‘and they trusted me to bring them an unfettered view of what I was seeing and hearing.’ This involvement on the part of his readers in shaping his reporting worked to improve its quality, in his view, each one of them effectively serving as an editor. ‘One of the great things about the blogosphere,’ he maintained, ‘is that there’s built-in fact-checking.’ Given that so many people will ‘swarm’ over posts, ‘generally the truth of the matter will come out’ (cited in Glaser 2003).

By gaining this independence from the institution, however, journalist-webloggers such as Allbritton gave up the privileged access to power and authority
which journalists attached to news organisations possess. He also forfeited the benefits associated with the assumed trustworthiness which newspaper mastheads and broadcast credits proclaim. ‘This was journalism without a net,’ he remarked, on the Net’ (Allbritton, 2003: 83). Or rather, Allbritton used the blog to bring together an audience and to establish afresh his role as a journalist in speaking to that audience. Blogger and academic commentator Jay Rosen (2003) described the site as journalism that cut out ‘the media’, providing direct contact between writer and readers. ‘Here you have a journalist collecting his own mini-public, a few thousand people on the Web,’ he observed, ‘who then send him to report on events of interest to the entire world, via a medium that reaches the entire world.’

Of particular value here was what Allbritton (2003) called ‘the personal connection that can be established through the interactivity of the medium’ (2003: 84). He wrote after he returned from Iraq: ‘Throughout it all, I maintained a personal tone in my writing as I tried to let people know what it felt like to be working and surviving during such an extraordinary event’ (2003: 84). He quoted one of his readers who liked:

[…] the independence it gave you the reporter. No agendas except your own, which is perfectly acceptable to me. No one is totally objective, but you gave more personal perspectives of ‘behind the scenes’ of what it takes to do what you do, which was terribly fascinating to me (Allbritton, 2003: 83)

Thus a claim to credible reporting emerged not from the expert authority of the professional news organisation, but from the personal attributes and relationship with readers of the reporter. As the quotation above suggests, independence, a consciously subjective telling which makes no claim to objectivity and access for the reader ‘behind the scenes’ are interdependent aspects of this claim. Allbritton’s posts appealed as ‘real’ accounts precisely because they crossed the line between the public persona of the reporter and the individual filling that role, allowing us to go behind-the-scenes to the life of the correspondent, soldier or civilian writing them.

A considerable amount of ‘sojo’ journalism, as one would expect, found its way onto the news sites associated with major news organisations. In the case of the Spokesman-Review’s ‘War in Iraq’ weblog, for example, priority was given to filtering third-party material, some of it provided by ‘sojos’, but even more provided by ‘personal’ or ‘amateur’ journalist bloggers. Its editor, Sands, as noted above, valued the site for its immediacy, but he also argued that the blog’s links to news material from around the world gave it a broader view of events than the news agencies and syndicated news services his print colleagues used. He thus gave users ‘really interesting and important stories that simply were not picked up by the usual wire services’. He told us:

We had amateurs around the world acting as editors, as aggregators actually, scanning the media and providing links to sources as varied as the BBC, Jerusalem Post, Al Jazeera, Washington Post and The Spokesman-Review (Sands, interview).

Sands also encouraged users to send in suggestions, thereby inviting an enhanced sense of interactivity between reporter and reader. It was precisely this interactivity which anchored, in turn, the authority of the warblog (see also Matheson 2004).
Across the blogosphere, a wide array of individuals – some self-described as ‘personal’ or ‘amateur’ journalists – did their best to contribute to news, comment or analyses about the invasion. Amongst the most popular, as judged by web user statistics, was the blog of ‘L.T. Smash’ (www.lt-smash.us), who claimed to be a reserve officer in the US Navy who had been recalled and deployed in the Gulf. His site, with its tagline: ‘Live from the sandbox,’ promised ‘unfiltered’ news – and received some 6,000 ‘hits’ a day at the height of the conflict (doubts were initially raised about its authenticity, given that the pseudonym ‘L.T. Smash’ is also the name of a character on television’s The Simpsons). On one occasion, he even provided a self-interview of sorts, which included this Question and Answer exchange:

Q. Can't you get in trouble for this sort of thing? Isn't this a violation of Military Regulations?
A: I'm in the military -- I can get in trouble for just about anything. But generally speaking, this form of communication is bound by the same rules as e-mail. . . . I am voluntarily observing my own, stricter guidelines in regards to operational security (Smash cited in Kurtz 2003).

A vast number of similar blogs were posted by soldiers witnessing events firsthand, providing observations, impressions and opinions which, taken together, covered every facet of the pro- and anti-war continuum. Moreover, weblogs were posted by members of military families back home, almost always offering support for the troops, but some expressing reservations (at times passionately so) about the legitimacy of the war itself. Blogs also appeared from those on the ground in Iraq, but outside of the military. Wade Hudson, an anti-poverty worker from the US, posted his Baghdad Journal (www.inlet.org/wade/). Jo Wilding, a human rights campaigner living in Baghdad, posted her diaries on the Guardian Unlimited and the Voices in the Wilderness sites (www.vitw.org).

Iraqi Bloggers

The warblog’s rootedness in subjective experience is particularly prominent in the weblogs of Iraqi citizens posted during the war and in its aftermath. Precisely what counts as truth in a war zone, of course, is very much in the eye of the beholder. Above dispute, in the view of many commentators, was that some of the best eyewitness reporting being conducted was that attributed to the warblog of ‘Salam Pax’ (a playful pseudonym derived from the Arabic and Latin words for peace), a 29 year-old architect living in middle-class suburban Baghdad. Indeed, of the various English language warblogs posted by Iraqis, none attracted a greater following than Salam’s Where is Raed? (dear_raed.blogspot.com), which had begun to appear in September 2002. His motivation for blogging was later explained as a desire to keep in touch with his friend Raed, who had moved to study in Jordan.

In the months leading up to the initial ‘decapitation attack’, to use Salam’s turn of phrase, the blog contained material ranging from personal – and frequently humorous – descriptions of everyday life to angry criticisms of the events around him. It was to his astonishment, however, that he discovered that the international blogging community had attracted such intense attention to his site. As word about Where is Raed? spread via other blogs, email, online discussion groups, and mainstream news media accounts, it began to regularly top the lists of popular blogs as the conflict
unfolded. For Salam, this attention brought with it the danger that he would be identified – a risk likely to lead to his arrest, possibly followed by a death sentence. At the same time, speculation over the identity of the Baghdad Blogger – and whether or not _Where is Raed?_ was actually authentic – was intensifying. Some critics claimed that it was an elaborate hoax, others insisted it was the work of Iraqi officials, while still others maintained that a sinister CIA disinformation campaign was behind it. Salam responded to sceptics on 21 March, writing: ‘please stop sending emails asking if I were for real, don’t believe [sic] it? then don’t read it.’ Moreover, he added, ‘I am not anybody’s propaganda ploy, well except my own’ (cited in BBC News Online, 25 March 2003).

Enraged by both Saddam Hussein’s Baathist dictatorship and George W. Bush’s motivations for the invasion, Salam documented life on the ground in Baghdad before and after the bombs began to drop. This was ‘embedded’ reporting of a very different order, effectively demonstrating the potential of blogging as an alternative means of war reporting. His warblog entry for 23 March, 8:30 pm, was typically vivid:

> Today's (and last night's) shock attacks didn't come from airplanes but rather from the airwaves. The images al-Jazeera are broadcasting are beyond any description. [...] This war is starting to show its ugly face to the world. [...] People (and I bet ‘allied forces’) were expecting things to be much easier. There are no waving masses of people welcoming the Americans, nor are they surrendering by the thousands. People are doing what all of us are doing - sitting in their homes hoping that a bomb doesn't fall on them and keeping their doors shut.

(Salam Pax, dear_raed.blogspot.com)

Salam’s posts offered readers a stronger sense of immediacy, an emotional feel for life on the ground, than more traditional news sites. For John Allemang (2003), writing in _The Globe and Mail_, ‘what makes his diary so affecting is the way it achieves an easy intimacy that eludes the one-size-fits-all coverage of Baghdad’s besieged residents.’ As Salam himself would later reflect, ‘I was telling everybody who was reading the web log where the bombs fell, what happened [...] what the streets looked like.’ While acknowledging that the risks involved meant that he considered his actions to be somewhat ‘foolish’ in retrospect, nevertheless he added: ‘it felt for me important. It is just somebody should be telling this because journalists weren’t’ (cited in Church 2003).

This approach to warblogging, then, possesses the capacity to bring to bear alternative perspectives, contexts and ideological diversity to war reporting, providing users with the means to connect with distant voices otherwise being marginalised, if not silenced altogether, from across the globe. In the words of U.S. journalist Paul Andrews (2003), ‘media coverage of the war that most Americans saw was so jingoistic and administration-friendly as to proscribe any sense of impartiality or balance,’ hence the importance of the insights provided by the likes of Salam Pax. This ‘pseudonymous blogger’s reports from Iraq,’ Andrews believed, ‘took on more credibility than established media institutions.’ This point is echoed by Toby Dodge (2003), who argued that Salam managed to post far more perceptive dispatches than those written by ‘the crowds of well-resourced international journalists sitting in the air-conditioned comfort of five star hotels.’ Communicating to the world using a
personal computer with unreliable internet access, he reported ‘the traumas and more importantly the opinions of Iraqis as they faced the uncertainty of violent regime change.’

In the aftermath of the invasion, the number of warblogs appearing in occupied Iraq has multiplied at a remarkable rate. Such blogs provide web users from around the globe with viewpoints about what life is like for ordinary Iraqis, viewpoints otherwise routinely ignored, or trivialised, in their country’s mainstream news media. The blog ‘Baghdadee’ (baghdadee.ipbhost.com/) has as its tagline ‘An opportunity to hear from witnesses inside Iraq. ‘A Family in Baghdad’ posts the online ‘diaries’ of mother Faiza and sons Raed, Khaled and Majid. This excerpt, written by Faiza, is indicative of its content:

Wednesday, 21st, May, 2003

Electricity is on at the hours : 6-8 p.m., 2-4 a.m., the Americans are spreading news about achievements they have accomplished…but on actual grounds we see nothing… we don't know whether they are truthful or not… The schools are open, they are teaching whatever, the importance being for the children to finish their school year. Some schools were destroyed during the war, so, they merged the students with others from another school, and made the school day in two shifts, morning and afternoon […] (afamilyinbaghdad.blogspot.com/)

‘Baghdad Burning’, posted under the name ‘Riverbend’ (a ‘Girl Blog from Iraq’), posted this entry on August 07, 2004:

300+ dead in a matter of days in Najaf and Al Sadir City. Of course, they are all being called ‘insurgents’. The woman on tv wrapped in the abaya, lying sprawled in the middle of the street must have been one of them too. Several explosions rocked Baghdad today- some government employees were told not to go to work tomorrow.

So is this a part of the reconstruction effort promised to the Shi’a in the south of the country? Najaf is considered the holiest city in Iraq. It is visited by Shi’a from all over the world, and yet, during the last two days, it has seen a rain of bombs and shells from none other than the ‘saviors’ of the oppressed Shi’a- the Americans. So is this the ‘Sunni Triangle’ too? It’s déjà vu- corpses in the streets, people mourning their dead and dying and buildings up in flames. The images flash by on the television screen and it’s Falluja all over again. Twenty years from now who will be blamed for the mass graves being dug today? […] (riverbendblog.blogspot.com/)

Words from blogs such as these ones speak for themselves, their importance for users looking beyond the narrow ideological parameters of much Western news coverage all too apparent. From our position as western media academics, what strikes us as strongly, however, is the authority sometimes accorded to such voices by major western media organisations. GuardianUnlimited invited Salam to edit the newspaper’s weblog for a week, the BBC interviewed him as an authority on the views of Iraqis on their invaders/liberators. The Daily Telegraph interviewed a Kuwaiti blogger for first-hand testimony of life on the edge of the war-zone. News
organisations, aware since Evelyn Waugh’s *Scoop* of the limitations of ‘parachuting’ journalists into war zones, had no shortage of articulate, English-speaking correspondents only a mouse click away who understood the country they were talking about, and appeared to be willing to give them status of authorised knowers.

**Conclusion**

In light of this chapter’s discussion, there can be little doubt that no definitive statement can be made about the larger implications blogs pose for journalism, in general, or war reporting, in particular. In some ways, it is too early to tell. The blogs under scrutiny here represent a tiny fraction of those posted across the blogosphere, hence the need to avoid extrapolating from them to characterise broader trends or patterns. We would be cautious in describing the phenomenon as either a Napster-like threat to the news industry (Regan, 2003: 69) or ‘the first real democratisation of the web’ (Guardian, 2003). The understanding of the blog as news source explored above suggests to us, however, that the ideas and ideals of war reporting, which are so important to journalism’s understanding of itself more widely, do not emerge unscathed from journalism’s encounter with the online diary.

The dominant model of the foreign war correspondent, developed during the relatively information-scarce nineteenth-century, relied upon the correspondent having a monopoly of information and the status of an expert by dint of being present on foreign soil and having general journalistic skills. Such a model becomes less tenable when news editors and readers have instant access to multiple voices, both journalist and lay, experiencing the news event in question from an array of perspectives in multiple locations. In particular, the authority of the reporter as a witness to and interpreter of events carries less weight when he or she is only one among many witnesses being heard. Editors and news consumers are often, in fact, in a better position to judge the overall picture than the journalist (Pollard, 2001).

The often subjective and impressionistic weblog fits into this context. While bearing in mind the relatively small audiences involved – from a few thousand for the *Spokesman-Review* weblog (Sands, interview) to tens of thousands for the most famous – such sites are likely to have a disproportionate effect upon the editors, producers, columnists and reporters who make up media elites. While a number of webloggers noted that the information about the war which they communicated was not necessarily suppressed or unavailable elsewhere (Hughes, interview; Allbritton, 2003), they emphasised the different nature of the knowledge they communicated. The *Christian Science Monitor* columnist Tom Regan (2003) notes unsympathetically that ‘bloggers promise a more immediate experience of the news, one in which accuracy isn’t regarded as being the most important element’ (2003: 69). As we have seen, the emphasis upon the weblogger’s subjectivity rearticulates the foreign correspondent tradition, working to establish a sense of connection and therefore an interpersonal trust. The BBC’s Stuart Hughes describes his weblog posts as ‘unchecked stories’ whose accuracy he did not vouch for, but whose truth as his experience he did attest to. He observes: ‘what I noticed when I was in Iraq particularly is that that kind of unmediated unfiltered flow of news was something that people really latched onto’ (Hughes, interview).

It goes without saying, of course, that few readers of warblogs would have interpreted the reports posted as being unbiased or objective. Instead, the reports, at their best, were socially situated takes from the blogger’s perspective, at once provisional, contingent and, at times, deeply emotive. For many users, the honesty of
a report that acknowledges its political stance or commitment is to be valued over and above one which makes an appeal to a principle of detachment. Accordingly, we are inclined to theorise the rise of the weblog during the war as a partial revaluing of the subject of social knowledge, alongside the ostensibly objective record. The phenomenon thus belongs to a steady trend in western culture towards a weakening of the boundary between such opposed categories as public and private, shared and personal, real and imaginary, to which the increasing media saturation of culture has contributed. To draw on Manuel Castells’ (1996) terms, we live within a culture of ‘real virtuality’, that is, ‘a system in which reality itself (that is, people’s material/symbolic experience) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make-believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience’ (1996: 373; see also Allan and Matheson 2004). The blog’s emphasis upon daily experience fits therefore into a cultural mode where the media embrace ever-widening facets of lived experience, and where, as a result, there is a general reorientation of life around media representations of the social. ‘Weblogs,’ as J.D Lasica (2003) observes, ‘expand the media universe’ (2003: 69).

Indeed, as we have suggested throughout, blogs are not separable from the mediasphere to which they respond. The experiential journalism of Allbritton, for example, becomes a spectacle, an adventure of bribing his way across the Turkish-Iraqi border and hitch-hiking across Iraq with a borrowed laptop. The form therefore finds part of its logic in the wider mediasphere. And, although many of the webloggers discussed here resist being turned into spectacles and seek to remain pseudonymous – Salam Pax, for example, for quite practical reasons of personal safety (BBC, 2003) – the warblog phenomenon has become a spectacle of radical democritisation of the web and of reality evading the propaganda. As Howard Rheingold (2003) notes, the key factor in the impact of new media on journalism and politics is not about the technology but ‘a species of literacy – widespread knowledge of how to use these tools to produce news stories that are attention-getting, non-trivial, and credible’ (Rheingold, 2003). The multiple uses of warblogs during the invasion and occupation of Iraq, we would suggest, provides a case study of such a literacy emerging.

References


Allan and Zelizer


http://www.ojr.org/ojr/workplace/1049381758.php

http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/03-3NRfall/V57N3.pdf

http://www.cf.ac.uk/jomec/reporters2001/pollard.html

http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/03-3NRfall/V57N3.pdf

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http://www.ojr.org/ojr/technology/1057780670.php


Sreberny and Morrison 2004


Tumber and Palmer 2004


**Annotated Guide to Further Reading**

(max of ten suggestions)
The Fall 2003 *Nieman Reports* (http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/03-3NRfall/V57N3.pdf) gather together a large number of journalistic webloggers and commentators from within the U.S. on the impact of weblogs. In particular, the uncomfortableness of journalism’s institutions about blogs is foregrounded here.

Salam Pax’s blog entries during the invasion have been collected into book form as *Salam Pax: The Baghdad Blog* (Guardian Books, 2003), and in the U.S. as *Salam Pax: The Clandestine diary of an Ordinary Iraqi* (Grove Press, 2003).

There are few analyses of the different nature of the knowledge in a journalistic blog, but see Matheson’s ‘Blogging and the Epistemology of the News’, *New Media and Society* 6:4.

The complex position of weblogs which are at once personal, interpersonal and public is something we touch on only briefly. Herring, Kouper, Scheidt and Wright ‘Women and Children Last: The Discursive Construction of Weblogs’ (http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere, 2004) argue that academic interest in blogging has been skewed towards male-dominated ‘filtering’ blogs and neglected the cultural politics of intimate online diaries.

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1 Four interviews were conducted in September and October, 2003: the U.S. soldier moja_vera and Ken Sands, online editor of the US *Spokesman-Review*, were interviewed by email; Cathy Grieve, assignments editor at BBC News Interactive, was interviewed by telephone; and Stuart Hughes, BBC news producer, was interviewed in person.

2 For critiques of mainstream news media reporting of the Iraq war and its aftermath, see Allan and Zelizer; Sreberny and Morrison 2004; Tumber and Palmer 2004; see also Thussu and Freedman 2003.

3 Grieve reports that some 70 percent of the material on the ‘Reporters’ Log’ was gathered when correspondents phoned in to file stories for the news network generally: ‘when people were filing we’d have a quick chat and get something more impressionistic’, or sometimes use material already filed for other BBC programmes or websites’ (Grieve, interview).
The focus of Digital War Reporting is on how and why digital technologies shape what is reported in war, and is on the impact of digital technologies on perhaps the most important question that media scholars of war reporting can raise, namely how the rhetoric of war legitimises certain configurations of ‘us’ and ‘them’. The authors, Donald Matheson and Stuart Allan, situate this question within the wider context of journalism’s representational forms, practices and epistemologies. Written in a clear and accessible style, the book explores issues raised by the transition to digital war report The Iraq War was a protracted armed conflict that began in 2003 with the invasion of Iraq by a United States-led coalition that overthrew the government of Saddam Hussein. The conflict continued for much of the next decade as an insurgency emerged to oppose the occupying forces and the post-invasion Iraqi government. An estimated 151,000 to 1,033,000 Iraqis were killed in the first three to four years of conflict. US troops were officially withdrawn in 2011. The U.S. became re-involved in 2014 at the Donald Matheson delves into the murky world of the warblogs and concludes that they can be subject to as much political control as traditional forms of journalism. Save to Library. Critiquing the critical: A reflection on critical discourse analysis more. by Donald Matheson. This paper is a reflection upon a central tension within discourse analysis. On the one hand, the use of the word discourse signals a desire to understand social interaction as it emerges for the people engaged in that interaction, yet on more. Weblogs and the War in Iraq: Journalism for the Network Society more. by Donald Matheson. Publication Date: Jan 1, 2003. More Info: Co-authored with Prof Stuart Allan. Publisher: Editions L'Harmattan. Publication Date: Jan 1, 2004.