

A new spin on blogging

THE PRs ARE EXCITED – THEY'VE FOUND A NEW TOY WITH WHICH TO SPREAD THE WORD. SO WILL WEBLOGS BE USED FOR PRACTISING THE 'DARK ART' OF SPIN, OR WILL THEY BRING ABOUT TRUTH AND TRANSPARENCY? BY TREVOR COOK.

Disenchantment with traditional media has provided the backdrop for the explosion of new media over recent years. Disquiet about the impact on public relations and advertising is even more pronounced. The media is accused of lecturing to people and of allowing only a narrow spectrum of acceptable viewpoints to have access to public forums, while public relations is seen as simply beyond the pale – a dark art caricatured as 'spin doctoring'.

The media has become more concentrated in recent decades, more expensive to run and, consequently, less able to serve local communities and specialist interests – two areas where blogging is growing rapidly. The media is also criticised for adopting simplistic 'he said/she said' formulas while avoiding any analysis. Serious journalism has also suffered from a management belief that people prefer lifestyle coverage to hard news.

Early media coverage of the Iraq war highlighted a general reluctance to criticise the Bush administration when the 'national interest' was in play. Sustained criticism of administration policy was more readily available online (or from the European media). Media timidity created the opportunity for Democrat Howard Dean to go from 'unknown' to presidential candidate frontrunner, by combining an anti-war position with an online campaign.

A massive global surge in micropublishing brings with it new ideas and concerns about the different ways news can be generated and consumed. Dan Gillmor's *We the Media* (O'Reilly), released in August in the United States, has become a major focal point for deliberations about the impact of blogging across a number of fronts including media, politics and business.

With blogging, the importance of traditional media as content aggregators is diminished. People with an interest in a topic, whether it is a hobby, a business pursuit or a political cause, can communicate with each other directly.

In the world of new media, news is being created and distributed through a suite of technologies that include blogs, wikis, RSS (Really Simple Syndication), news aggregators, email and search engines.

Bloggers use aggregators to scan through hundreds of sources each day, looking for items that interest them. It's an entirely different approach to 'reading a newspaper'.

Earlier this year, I initiated what became Global PR Blog Week 1.0, by emailing 20 or so PR bloggers, asking if they would be interested in such an event. Almost all of them responded enthusiastically.

We used the blog-friendly 'open-source' approach to organise what may be one of the blogosphere's first virtual professional services conferences. A PR blogger based in Florida created a wiki and I designed a program with a theme for each day on things like participatory journalism, corporate blogging and crisis communication.

We then invited anyone, anywhere in the world, to put their name forward as a contributor by using the key feature of a wiki – the capacity for anyone to edit (and therefore help create content for) a website. Forty people added their names and together they contributed over 230 extended posts on dozens of subjects of interest to PR practitioners. Although North America provided most of the contributors, people from as far afield as Argentina, Spain, Ireland, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe also got involved.

Our conference website (www.globalprblogweek.com) attracted over 1000 visitors each day between July 12 and 16. The site is still attracting people every day, and the total number of visitors now exceeds 14,000 since it went live in early July. The site and the accompanying wiki (www.thenewpr.com) ➤

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are some of the best resources available to anyone interested in the contemporary practice and future of the PR profession. The contributors are keen to have a bigger and better event next year.

One of the debates that attracted the most interest during PR Blog Week was around the impact of blogging on public relations. Some contributors argued that blogs are just another PR tool, but many others see blogging as an opportunity to move away from the idea of PR as an attempt to control communication through 'messages' and clever media tactics (eg: spin).

There is no doubt that blogs are proving to be useful extra tools in the communications armoury. Many contributors discussed practical applications, from corporate blogs that give customers a stronger sense of connection with an otherwise impersonal organisation, to crisis management blogs that can be used to counter media misinformation in the shortest possible time.

Nevertheless, many PR practitioners agree that PR must stand for real transparency; it was a point made by Jay Rosen, chair of the New York University Department of Journalism, in an interview on the first day of PR Blog Week.

Rosen, who recently blogged both US party conventions, is due to visit Australia next May, as part of the Deakin Innovation lecture series, and his views are likely to draw a lot of interest from media and PR professionals alike.

Rosen believes that spin was only really effective in "the era of few-to-many media, [with] a small number of gatekeepers who could be spun". Now, he says, "Knowledge monopolies are breaking up, and [we are seeing] ... [that] more power has fallen into the hands of the people who were mere receivers before."

With these power shifts the future of PR, in Rosen's view, lies in promoting "real transparency in organisations, and genuine interactivity with publics". Many of us have always believed that promoting transparency and real dialogues has been the true function of PR.

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The trade-off, of course, is that information distributed in this way doesn't come with the third-party validation of an independent media. Bloggers will have to replace this validation over time, by building their own reputations for credibility and fairness.

Bloggers and journalists might be able to help each other build credibility and trust with a disillusioned populace. One of the features of the new media environment is the way in which bloggers and journalists are now tracking each other's output looking for errors and omissions – and flat-out deceptions.

In fact, Gillmor sees this community of fact-checkers as one way we might counter 'the flood of unreliable information' on the internet. Another way is for all us 'grassroots journalists' to acquire some traditional journalistic skills, particularly a determination to 'check sources'.

Rosen's own interest in transparency is far from being purely theoretical. Earlier this year, through his PressThink blog, he was active in the push to address the issue of PR people posing as 'reporters' in video news releases. His efforts helped prompt the Public Relations Society of America to finally declare its opposition to this deceptive practice.

Still the debate goes on. Bloggercon III (www.bloggercon.com) will be held at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, on November 6 this year. Three hundred bloggers will participate – it was fully subscribed in about three days. Gillmor will be involved as will many other blog pioneers and evangelists. Looks like I'll be the only Australian.

It will be just days after one of the most 'polarised' presidential elections for a generation. The focus of the conference will be partly on blogging and the political process, but there are many other issues about the development of this new medium that still need to be explored further.

There will be no media passes issued because the organisers assume most people present will report on the event. Just another small sign of the way things are changing.

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