Blogging and Journalism in the Philippines: Journalistic Blogging for the People

By Danilo Araña Arao

WordCamp Philippines
De La Salle College of St. Benilde, Manila
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Abstract

In the same way that HTML, CSS, RSS and WP themes, widgets and plugins should be validated to work properly, the writing and production of blog entries should adhere to acceptable standards.

Just like journalistic outputs, blog entries are part of the public domain. But unlike outputs in the so-called old media, blog entries – owing to the convergence provided by the new media – may not only be read but may also be heard and viewed by various audiences.

Bloggers should know the consequences of whatever content they make available on the Internet. Whether they like it or not, they have the power to shape public opinion through the information they provide.

The ability to reach various audiences is what the blogosphere and the journalism profession have in common, hence the need for both bloggers and journalists to be responsible in the writing and production of media content.

Just as W3C provides the standards for HTML codes (as well as develops protocols and guidelines for the long-term growth of the Web in general), WordCamp can be the appropriate venue for recommending standards not only for the development of WP themes, widgets and plugins but also for writing and production of blog posts and comments.

Standards must not be seen as restrictions or assaults on free expression but as the necessary requirements for bloggers to be more effective in providing relevant and useful information to their audiences.

Introduction

The word "and" in the title "Blogging and Journalism" has a specific purpose: It is meant to highlight the complementation of the two instead of the adversity that is reflective of the tension between the old and new media.

There is always tension when a new form of mass media gets introduced and gains popularity. In the distant past, there were views that television will eventually make radio irrelevant. Remember the 1979 song written by Trevor Horn, Geoffrey Downes and Bruce Woolley intriguingly titled "Video Killed the Radio Star?" Or if you're familiar with Queen, you should also know the Roger Taylor composition in 1984 titled "Radio Ga Ga." These two songs talk about the demise of radio as a result of television. Now that we have the benefit of hindsight, we know that radio is very much around and that its advantage of immediacy over other forms of media still exists.

Fast forward to the 1990s and we can witness the same situation, this time not directed against one medium but against the "old trio," namely print, radio and television. It is argued that the convergence brought about by the new media would make the old media irrelevant and that there would come a time when all electronic devices we use (including refrigerators) will be connected to the Internet.

While developments in the new media leave us all in awe of the possibilities for the future, let us remember that in underdeveloped countries like the Philippines, a limited reach of the Internet is very evident. As other industrialized countries are already applying robotic technology in industrial production, majority of our people are still mired in abject poverty.

Bloggers should exercise a certain degree of tempered excitement in their writing and production of new media content, especially when they discuss Philippine realities. The limited reach of the new media, and the Internet for that matter, makes it impossible to have a wider reach. Television may be older, but it is said to be the most powerful form of mass media in terms of influence and credibility. A study by Pulse Asia in 2004, an election year, had shown that television was the most credible source of information in making people decide whom to vote for.

This kind of level-headedness must be practiced as bloggers go about what they perceive to be their job, commitment or hobby. Journalists should also have this perspective as they try to reach out to a wider audience by straddling different forms of mass media. This is most especially true in the community press where print journalists also work for radio and television networks.

Unlike bloggers, most journalists see their work either as a career or commitment. It is seldom for journalists (even correspondents and columnists) to say that what they practice is just a hobby or passing fancy.

Bloggers and Journalists

Journalism is all about providing relevant information to the people with the objective of shaping public opinion. It adheres to professional and ethical guidelines in the writing and production of various journalistic outputs.

Examples of professional standards are the ABCs of journalism, namely accuracy, brevity and clarity. An ethical guideline when it comes to writing and producing journalistic outputs is avoiding plagiarism.

Blogging, from a technical point of view, entails the use of a CMS like WP to write articles and upload graphics and other media files. Unlike a website that has static pages, a blog has more dynamic content as it distinguishes between posts and pages, the former being the updates provided by the blogger and the latter being seldom updated and are normally meant for first-time and infrequent visitors.

The CMS used in blogs are essentially database programs that make it easier for the content to be categorized. It also has RSS features that can allow online users to read, watch or listen to media content even without an Internet browser and going to the blog's URL.

In terms of content, bloggers are their own gatekeepers, which means that they are left on their own to decide what content to upload. This practice is not apparent in journalism as media organizations have what is referred to as a "gatekeeping function" – there are editors who screen what reporters, photographers and illustrators produce. There are even cases where owners and publishers meddle with media content. In addition, advertisers and other interest groups directly or indirectly pressure journalists in their attempt to promote their own agenda.
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At first glance, bloggers have an advantage over journalists whose works are screened by other authorities and are subjected to other pressures. This particular advantage, however, means more responsibility for the blogger to be certain about the content shared to his or her readers. Unlike journalists, bloggers normally don't have editors to evaluate the form and content of their outputs.

It must be kept in mind that there is nothing wrong about editors constructively screening the journalists' work as it helps improve the quality of the latter. However, pressures exerted by advertisers and other interest groups are counterproductive in the practice of the journalism profession.

This is where the independence enjoyed by bloggers should be appreciated. They don't have to deal with the politics that goes with maintaining and sustaining print and broadcast media organizations. Blogs can be created, maintained and developed at absolutely no cost for a person. However, there are bloggers who spend for domain name registration and web hosting, as well as for advertising and availment of custom WP

themes, widgets and plugins. In any case, the cost of maintaining a blog is relatively cheaper compared to the operational costs of the print and broadcast media organizations.

Blogging for Journalism

A blogger cannot be blamed if he or she refuses to be subjected to the professional and ethical standards of journalism. The blog, after all, cannot be automatically classified as journalistic outputs just because it is part of the public domain.

The mass media, it must be kept in mind, have three major fields: Journalism; Advertising and Public Relations (PR); and Entertainment. Each of the three fields has its own codes of ethics that tend to clash with each other. What's acceptable practice for entertainment and advertising and PR may not be the case for journalism.

The content of blogs, as part of the new media, may also be classified according to the three major fields. What's necessary for bloggers is for them to know and to put into practice what their purpose of blogging is. Are they blogging *mainly* to provide relevant information and social commentaries (journalism); promote products and services (advertising and PR); or tell stories and appeal to the emotions of audiences (entertainment)?

Please note that the classifications for bloggers are not necessarily mutually exclusive, so this means that blog entries can have a healthy mix of "serious" and "light" topics. What is necessary is for the blog's focus or niche to be apparent to the online user. And this cannot be done if the blogger himself or herself is not sure of the nature and orientation of his or her blog.

It is not advisable to use blogs, *even the personal ones*, only as venues for expressing personal rants, unfounded accusations, subjective observations and existential angst. As raised in "A Bloggers' Code of Ethics" which can be retrieved from CyberJournalist.net, "responsible bloggers should recognize that they are publishing words publicly, and therefore have certain ethical obligations to their readers, the people they write about and society in general."

Scott Rosenberg, a blogger, said that the difference between blogging and journalism is a graph and not a line. To be specific, he said that it is a classic four-quadrant graph. "There's an X axis from `not blogging at all' to `blogging all the time' and there's a Y axis from, say, `writes the equivalent of a private diary' to `writes exclusively about public affairs.'"

Using Rosenberg's classification, I can't blame you if you say that you're somewhere in between. I for one am like that. I blog not as regularly as I want to. Even if I am a journalist by profession, my personal blog has its share of what Rosenberg describes as private diary-like.

Having noted an attempt to know the difference, let me stress at this point that the issue between the two is very fundamental: Why is there a need to draw the line between blogging and journalism, or even a graph to illustrate their difference? The challenge for all of us should be to analyze blogging and journalism along the lines of responsibility, and this is where the professional and ethical standards would come in handy.

What proves to be crucial to blogging is adherence to standards and the conscious effort to be responsible for the media content that bloggers write and produce. Even if blogging is only a hobby or passing fancy for some, *all* bloggers should be responsible for whatever media content is uploaded to his or her blog.

Journalism ethics comes into the picture as this is the oldest and most developed in the field of media ethics. That CyberJournalist.net created the model *Bloggers' Code of Ethics* based on the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics illustrates this point. A textual analysis of the specialized *Healthcare Blogger Code of Ethics* (for healthcare professionals and patients who blog) also shows elements of journalistic practice. (See Annex for the full text of the two codes.)

Bloggers must not therefore misinterpret the repeated citation of journalism standards as an imposition coming from journalists as to how writing and production of media content should be done. It would also be *non-sequitur* for bloggers to raise the problems surrounding media organizations (e.g., corruption and irresponsible reporting of some journalists) in their refusal to adhere to a journalism-based code of ethics like CyberJournalist.net's.

Contrary to what a blogger once wrote, this is not a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Just because there is a weakness in the observance of acceptable standards in journalism does not give bloggers the reason to refuse adherence to acceptable standards. In the first place, why should the quality of blogging be dependent on the quality of the journalism profession in the country?

Journalistic Blogging, Anyone?

Even if blogs can serve journalistic, advertising and entertainment functions, it is necessary for bloggers to have a bias for providing relevant information towards the shaping of public opinion. The situation in the Philippines compels *all* citizens to do their share in nation-building.

Regardless of their beliefs, bloggers should maximize the opportunity by engaging in what can be aptly described as "journalistic blogging." They should regularly provide fair commentary to what is happening in Philippine society and encourage other bloggers to follow suit.

Journalistic blogging could be in the form of actual coverage of events or personal reflections. The latter can be considered journalistic outputs as long as proper context is

provided and the factual bases of commentaries are provided in order to avoid subjective tendencies in writing.

Participation in the annual "Blog Action Day" can be a good start. Incidentally, the theme for this year is poverty, a very appropriate topic for the Philippines.

Being relevant is a good way for bloggers to make a difference in society. While it is true that there exists a limited reach of the Internet, online users in the Philippines and abroad can still be made aware of what is happening through informative blog entries.

Through the years, relevant blog posts had even been picked up by media organizations. Traditional media coverage can help a lot in spreading the blogger's intended message. The blog of Salam Pax (an alias) who wrote from Baghdad during the Iraq war in 2003 is a good case study. Journalist Paul Andrews said that Salam's "blogged observations from Iraq provided some of the best eyewitness reporting during the war."

The prospects of being quoted by the media should motivate bloggers to make their posts more informative and meaningful to their readers.

Conclusion and Some Recommendations

Outputs from blogging and the journalism profession are part of the public domain, hence the need for bloggers and journalists alike to adhere to acceptable professional and ethical standards.

One does not need to reinvent the wheel, so to speak, as there is already "A Blogger's Code of Ethics" from CyberJournalist.net. One can review its contents and make the necessary revisions to make it applicable to blogging in an underdeveloped country like the Philippines, mindful also of latest blog-related developments like micro-blogging and vlogging, as well as trends like sponsored posts.

I recommend that WordCamp Philippines take the lead in recommending ethical and professional standards for Filipino bloggers using WP as platform, even if standards cut across different CMS software programs. It must be stressed that these are not impositions on bloggers and they have the choice to accept, reject or even ignore any recommendations given to them.

Just like the journalism profession, it is my firm belief that self-regulation is the key to responsible blogging as legislating (and therefore imposing) ethical and professional standards in blogging could eventually lead to government censorship which is unacceptable in a supposed atmosphere of free expression.

An independent blog monitoring is an excellent way to self-regulate the blogosphere. It can highlight responsible and irresponsible cases of blogging, particularly among blogs that enjoy high traffic and popularity. Indeed, an objective assessment of the quality of

selected blog entries is lacking in the Philippines (i.e., Pinoy BlogWatch, anyone?). The evaluation of such cases could be based on the recommended standards, to which bloggers can show adherence by posting the disclosure on their blogs or installing a badge or widget on their blog's sidebar.

Independent monitoring and assessment of blog contents, if effectively done, can be helpful for newbies to know which practices are worth emulating and rejecting. The more established bloggers, on the other hand, can be motivated to serve as good examples to others.

There is much that bloggers can learn from the responsible practice of the journalism profession, in the same way that journalists should use blogs as an integral part of disseminating their intended message by maximizing the convergence that is characteristic of the new media.

Blogs, after all, must not be dismissed as a simple personal journal. In the right hands, they can be powerful tools in the shaping of public opinion.

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Profile

Danilo Araña Arao is an assistant professor at the Department of Journalism of the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman where he teaches ethics, online journalism and publication design and layout, among other courses. His blog *Rising Sun* (http://risingsun.dannyarao.com) uses WP 2.6. He has been using WP as CMS since August 2005. On the other hand, his personal website *Danny Arao online* (http://www.dannyarao.com), created in 1999, continues to be hand coded using only a text editor.

Aside from teaching and web authoring, he is a member of the Board of Editors of *Bulatlat Online Magazine* (http://www.bulatlat.com) and writes a regular column for *Pinoy Weekly* (http://www.pinoyweekly.org). He is currently director of the Office of Research and Publication (ORP) of the UP College of Mass Communication.

As regards his involvement in refereed academic journals, he is an associate editor of *Social Science Diliman*, managing editor of the *Philippine Journalism Review* and a member of the Editorial Review Board (Communication and Media) of the *Scientific Journals International* (http://www.scientificjournals.org).

Annex

A Bloggers' Code of Ethics
from http://www.cyberjournalist.net/news/000215.php (15 April 2003)

Be Honest and Fair

Bloggers should be honest and fair in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Bloggers should:
- Never plagiarize.
- Identify and link to sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Make certain that Weblog entries, quotations, headlines, photos and all other content do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of photos without disclosing what has been changed. Image enhancement is only acceptable for technical clarity. Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Never publish information they know is inaccurate – and if publishing questionable information, make it clear it's in doubt.
- Distinguish between advocacy, commentary and factual information. Even advocacy writing and commentary should not misrepresent fact or context.
- Distinguish factual information and commentary from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.

Minimize Harm

Ethical bloggers treat sources and subjects as human beings deserving of respect.

Bloggers should:
- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by Weblog content. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of information is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity. Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects, victims of sex crimes and criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.

Be Accountable

Bloggers should:
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Explain each Weblog's mission and invite dialogue with the public over its content and the bloggers' conduct.
- Disclose conflicts of interest, affiliations, activities and personal agendas.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence content. When exceptions are made, disclose them fully to readers.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors. When accepting such information, disclose the favors.
- Expose unethical practices of other bloggers.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

Healthcare Blogger Code of Ethics
from http://medbloggercode.com/the-code (31 July 2007)

1. **Clear representation of perspective** - readers must understand the training and overall perspective of the author of a blog. Certainly bloggers can have opinions on subjects outside of their training, and these opinions may be true, but readers must have a place to look on a blog to get an idea of where this author is coming from. This also encompasses the idea of the distinction between advertisement and content. *This does not preclude anonymous blogging*, but it asks that even anonymous bloggers share the professional perspective from which they are blogging.
2. **Confidentiality** - Bloggers must respect the nature of the relationship between patient and medical professionals and the clear need for confidentiality. All discussions of patients must be done in a way in which patients' identity cannot be inferred. A patient's name can only be revealed in a way that is in keeping with the laws that govern that practice (HIPPA, Informed Consent).
3. **Commercial Disclosure** - the presence or absence of commercial ties of the author must be made clear for the readers. If the authors are using their blog to pitch a product, it must be clear that they are doing that. Any ties to device manufacturer and/or pharmaceutical company must be clearly stated.
4. **Reliability of Information** - citing sources when appropriate and changing inaccuracies when they are pointed out.
5. **Courtesy** - Bloggers should neither engage in personal attacks nor allow their commenters to do so. Debate and discussion of ideas is one of the major purposes of blogging. While the ideas people hold should be criticized and even confronted, the overall purpose is a discussion of ideas, not those who hold ideas.