

**Let's talk: How blogging is shaping the BBC's
relationship with the public**

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Introduction

Auntie, as the BBC is affectionately known, has been Britain's national instrument of broadcasting since its creation in the 1920s (Blumler 1992). Over its 80-year history, it 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, quoted in Barnett & Curry 1994: 5). Yet it has grappled with the issue of accountability. This chapter examines how the world's largest journalism organisation, BBC News, has sought to incorporate blogging as a platform for greater accountability and transparency. This research spans seven years, from 2001 to 2008, when the BBC came under intense scrutiny over its editorial and ethical standards. After a period of experimentation with elements of blogging and an internal debate over the role of blogging in its journalism, the BBC launched its first blog in December 2005. Within a year, the number of blogs across the corporation had risen to 50 (Hamman 2006).

The role of blogs

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 how the established media adapts to a new context (Matheson 2004). While blogging developed largely outside the mainstream, traditional media has increasingly adopted the blog format. 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 percent 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 to 118 in 2006 from seven in 2005 (Hermida & Thurman 2008).

Scholars contend that new media technologies such as blogs have the potential to change the way news is covered and reported (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001; Singer 2001). Advocates argue that bloggers are changing journalism by adopting a more conversational and decentralised form of news (Delwiche 2005; Sullivan 2004) and offering multiple, subjective perspectives in contrast to the institutional nature of news (Bruns 2005; Gallo 2004; Hass 2005). Scholars have begun to contend that new forms of journalism could emerge online (Landow 1997; Murray 1997, Wall 2005). Some, like Gillmor (2004), have suggested that blogging can alter the nature of the relationship between journalists and audiences by creating a conversation between them. Scholars contend 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).

Blogs have been described as “evidence of journalism’s attempts to rethink its values and relations with its publics” (Matheson 2004: 462). 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 some evidence to suggest that the mainstream media is experimenting with the blog format as a way of providing an insight into internal editorial discussions (Glaser 2004). However there are also indications that established media are seeking to normalise this emergent format within existing practices. Singer (2005) suggests that journalists are normalising blogs by maintaining a traditional gatekeeper function, while others consider that “news organisations may be more

interested in containing and directing the blogging phenomenon than in fostering democratic participation” (Lowrey 2006: 493).

Accountability at the BBC

As a publicly funded organisation, accountability is one of the three public principles on which the BBC is based: “Collective ownership confers on the British public the right of collective accountability and the power to monitor the performance and guide the future of the BBC through their civic institutions” (BBC 2004: 7). Despite a mandate to be accountable, 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, poorly managed and lacking in entrepreneurial spirit (Blumler 1992). Senior BBC executives have acknowledged the corporation’s struggle with openness:

It's hardly something the BBC's famous for. Even our nicest buildings tend to have a slightly fortress-like quality, and I don't need a pile of research to know that the BBC can seem fairly impenetrable sometimes to both public and producers alike (Keating 2008).

The roots of its relationship with the public lie in the elitist philosophy of the BBC’s first director general, John Reith, who saw broadcasting as a social, cultural, educational and moral force (Born 2004). Early examples of audience interaction were symptomatic of the paternalistic tone associated with the broadcaster (Kung-Shankleman 2000). Initiatives in the 1990s largely took the form of a series of official statements that

Born (2002) contends were less about listening to the public and more about shoring up the BBC's legitimacy. Pressure over the issue of accountability has increased in the new millennium, as the notion of a public service broadcaster has come under strain due to commercial competition, audience fragmentation, political disengagement and alternative digital delivery platforms (Born 2002; Enli 2008; Lee-Wright 2008).

BBC journalism, one of the foundations of the corporation's public service remit, came under strain following the Hutton inquiry into BBC reports about weapons of mass destruction. BBC Director General Mark Thompson described the Hutton inquiry as "the biggest crisis in BBC journalism's 80-year history" (Thompson, quoted in Douglas 2005). Policy documents speak of a need to "recapture the full trust of audiences and participants in BBC journalism" (BBC 2004; 12), that this trust "must be earned, day in and day out" (BBC 2004; 32) and that the "days of deference towards, or paternalism from, the BBC are over -- or should be" (Bridcut 2007). It was considered that: "Audiences know almost as much about the decision-making process as the broadcasters" (Bridcut 2007: 74), leading the BBC to conclude that greater openness would be necessary for "the maintenance of the audience's trust" (Bridcut 2007: 75). This chapter contends that the changing nature of the BBC's relationship with the audience created an environment that encouraged the rapid growth of blogging at the BBC, specifically as a platform for greater openness and transparency in its journalism.

Methodology

This study is based on an analysis of documentary evidence surrounding the BBC's adoption of blogs covering the period from 2001–2008. These include publicly

available official documents produced by the UK government and documentation produced by the BBC and its governing body, the BBC Trust. The author also had access to BBC journalists' own internal documents on blogging strategy from 2005 and 2006. BBC News online sources (including the BBC News website and the BBC blog network from 2001 to the present) provided much of the documentary material for this study. The research also draws on 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 the technical framework of the BBC's Internet infrastructure, and as such allow for multiple personal perspectives on the topic.

The documentary evidence is complemented by six asynchronous qualitative interviews that took place in non-real time using e-mail. This involved sending out a list of questions to journalists, editors and senior executives selected for their involvement in drawing up and implementing the BBC's blogging strategy. These were:

- Rory Cellan-Jones, BBC technology correspondent
- Pete Clifton, former editor, BBC News website
- Robin Hamman, former head, BBC Blogs Network
- Steve Herrmann, editor, BBC News website
- Nick Reynolds, editor, BBC Internet Blog
- Giles Wilson, editor, BBC News blogs.

E-mail interaction is not comparable to verbal interaction, but scholars have argued it may alleviate some of the interpersonal problems commonly associated with conventional interviewing techniques (see Roberts et al. 1997; Spender 1995; Thach 1995).

Development of blogs at the BBC

BBC political editor Nick Robinson launched the corporation's first official blog in December 2005 (Robinson 2005). This was the first 'real' BBC blog, run on blogging software and offering the format's key capabilities, such as the ability to comment in real-time on a post. But BBC News had been experimenting with ideas drawn from blogging for some years. 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). However the technical constraints of the web publishing system the BBC used limited the capabilities of these initiatives.

Senior editors at the BBC News website had editorial concerns about presenting BBC content alongside contributions from the audience (Nixon 2008). The adoption of blogs at the BBC, and within its news operations specifically, took place against a background of institutional tension (Hermida 2008), summed up in this observation from Robin Hamman, a BBC producer who led the blogging initiative between 2006 and 2007:

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).

Despite these concerns, many across the BBC adopted blogging following the creation of the Robinson blog in 2005 and the launch of the BBC's blog trial in December 2005 (Hooberman 2005). As of July 2008, the homepage of the BBC Blog Network at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/> listed 74 blogs, with a third of these related to news and current affairs.

Blogs and accountability

The UK government's approval for the launch of BBC Online included a condition that it should use the Internet "to forge a new relationship with licence fee payers and strengthen accountability" (BBC Trust 2008). BBC management contends that "the flexible, open and public-facing nature of the website enables people to engage direct with individuals within the BBC". Yet managers admit that in the BBC's broadcast services, the space given to accountability has "generally been limited" (BBC management 2007). However, reviews of the corporation's online activities have concluded that the BBC has not fulfilled its commitment to be more accountable (BBC Trust 2008). The development of blogs, nevertheless, is seen as one way that the BBC may be able to live up to its promises. Audience's use of the blogs has outstripped that of the BBC's corporate site and its Have Your Say message boards (BBC Trust 2008), with 1.2m weekly visitors to BBC blog sites (BBC management 2007). In particular, The Editors blog from BBC News has "rapidly grown to become a key point of engagement between the BBC's journalists and its audiences" (BBC management 2007). Audience research indicates that people greatly appreciate the BBC's blogs, illustrated in this viewer comment:

The Editors blog is a great way of developing a relationship between the BBC and viewers. It allows the editors to explain their decisions and viewers to give feedback, and thus allows a continuous dialogue between the BBC and its audience (quoted in BBC Trust 2008).

The discourse on blogging at the BBC has been framed in terms of making the corporation more accountable to its audience. An internal BBC News report recommended that blogs be introduced, as they would “allow us to engage in a conversation with our audiences, increasing transparency, trust and responsiveness” (Anderson 2005: 1). This report reflected the debates within the BBC, and specifically with the news website, resulting in a news department’s editor publicly pledging to create a blog to “explain some of our editorial decisions, our priorities, answer criticisms” (Clifton 2005). While the editorial blog initially focused on the BBC’s online journalism, it was hoped it would “draw other parts of BBC News into the process as well” (Clifton 2005). This became The Editors blog, launched in May 2006 as a platform for news editors to explain editorial decisions, as explained in the first post:

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 criticise 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)

Clifton described The Editors blog as “part of our drive to be more accountable” (Clifton 2008), while the editor of the BBC News website, Steve 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.

The preoccupation with greater openness and transparency runs through many of the comments by people involved in the launch of blogging at the BBC. In his first post on the first official BBC blog, political editor Nick Robinson described it as a “conversation” that “can really change the relationship between author and reader” (Robinson 2005). An article in the BBC’s internal magazine *Ariel* in 2005 said the primary aim of the blogging initiative was “to have a more direct relationship with our audiences and have different kinds of conversations with them, wherever they are generated” (Hooberman 2005). Other remarks by senior news executives suggest that a concern within the BBC to rebuild trust in its journalism drove this shift towards greater openness:

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).

The adoption of the informal, more personal and conversational tone of blogs has affected how the BBC communicates with audiences. Senior editors contend that blogs allow reporters “greater flexibility in format, tone and length than traditional text or broadcast, helping to “convey not just the stories, but what we think of them and how we get them” (Herrmann 2008). Blogging “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)” (Nixon 2006). It is “effective at giving that individual [correspondent] a voice in a particularly direct and transparent way” (Wilson 2008).

The limits of blogging

However, there are limitations on how far the corporation is engaging with its audience through blogging. One key aspect of blogs is the ability of users to comment, with bloggers responding and creating a conversation online. An internal BBC report said that “commitment from the author to engage and respond to the audience” should be a vital feature of BBC News blogs (Anderson 2005; p1). But the BBC acknowledges that it has not lived up to expectations of the blog format. BBC News website editor Steve Herrmann has recognised that “responding to comments consistently across the blogs continues to be one of the biggest challenges for all concerned” (Herrmann 2007), while blogs producer, Robin Hamman, recognised that “we haven’t quite got the knack of responding to comments, and indeed criticisms, we receive on our posts as well as we should. But we’re getting better” (Hamman 2008).

As other news organisations 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. Technology 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).

Additionally, the BBC has faced technical challenges in coping with the response to blogs. These are common when news organisations 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 (Hamman 2007a), with editors 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). The BBC has addressed these technical issues with an overhaul of its blogging infrastructure (Reynolds 2008).

The BBC's shortcomings in engaging with readers cannot be solely blamed on technology. Research commissioned by the BBC into its blogging initiatives criticised an approach to blogging rooted in broadcasting (Hamman 2007b). Senior news executives shared this assessment:

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 research criticised BBC blogs for failing to link to other websites, even though linking out is considered one of the key attributes of blogging. Only one in eight posts

provided external links and only a small number of BBC bloggers used tools such as Technorati to track and engage in conversations on related topics taking place in the wider blogosphere (Hamman 2007b).

Given these limitations, the impact of BBC News blogs on its relationship with the audience is “unclear”, according to BBC News website editor Steve Herrmann. BBC News blogs editor Giles Wilson said that the impact on the BBC’s relationship with audiences was “hard to say. I like to think a good one -- that people see we are prepared to be honest and open, but I suspect that's slightly wishful thinking” (Wilson 2008). Even blogging advocates such as Robin Hamman admit that there is a risk of exaggerating the influence of blogs on the corporation’s journalism. BBC News employs around 2,000 journalists and “most of our news and current affairs staff, and indeed programmes, continue to completely ignore blogs. They don’t read them, they don’t use them in their work and they don’t author them” (Hamman 2008).

Conclusion

The adoption of blogging took place during one of the most turbulent periods in the BBC’s history, when there were questions over its journalism, radical changes in its governance and scandals over its broadcast ethics (Lee-Wright 2008). The start of this millennium saw an acknowledgement by the BBC that it needed to change its twentieth century paternalistic approach towards the audience, encapsulated in this quote from Director General Mark Thompson: “The BBC does not have the public's trust as of right; it has to earn and maintain it” (Thompson, quoted in BBC Press Office 2004). As Enli has argued, “participation, facilitated by digital technology, is a key strategy for the

public broadcasters in an attempt to regain the position as a national arena” when faced with challenges from deregulation, digitisation and convergence (Enli 2008; 117). These conditions provided fertile ground for the rapid adoption of a form of audience participation, accountability and transparency based on an emergent new media technology. Greater openness became a priority for the BBC as it sought to adapt the organisation for the 21st century, thus creating an environment conducive for blogging to spread beyond a handful of early adopters within the corporation. It explains why the BBC as an organisation was a late adopter of blogging despite being an innovator in the field of online journalism in the late 1990s with the launch of the BBC News website in 1997.

In the space of three years, blogging at the BBC went from being an experimental activity involving a small number of staff to an undertaking cited in policy documents as evidence of the corporation’s aspiration to be more accountable (BBC Trust 2008; BBC management 2007), with senior executives citing The Editors blog as the prime example of the corporation’s new willingness to be transparent and open:

The News Editors’ blog has already become something of a byword in the industry for what you might call proactive candour, with senior figures admitting to varying degrees of error or cock-up, usually before the outside world has even noticed (Keating 2008).

Blogs offered the BBC a platform to address the public in a way that goes beyond the publication of press releases, reviews and policy statements. In BBC News, The Editors blog provides a medium to address editorial issues in a timely fashion. Editors have welcomed the ability to adopt the personal and informal tone associated with blogs,

marking a significant shift away from the impersonal and institutional abstract voice of authority of the Reithian era. There is evidence to suggest that audiences value this, given that blogs have become a favoured way for the public to interact online with the BBC.

During the period covered by this research, blogging was recognised by the BBC as a new media technology that encourages participation with the potential to foster a closer and more personal relationship with the audience than possible in broadcast. However, there are limits on how far the BBC has incorporated the participatory nature of blogs within its institutional structures. This research indicates that the corporation has yet to fully embrace blogs as a platform for a conversation with the audience, suggesting it is still heavily influenced by its broadcast culture and has adopted blogs as a publishing, rather than participatory, platform. Despite a rhetoric of accountability, editors and executives tend to consider blogs as a way to explain and justify decisions, rather than to engage in a discussion. Nevertheless, some editors are aware of the limitations of current BBC blogging practices. Indeed some bloggers are experimenting with ways of fostering greater dialogue -- an endeavour more appropriate to the format's participatory promise.

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