Australian Newspaper Blogs

Laurel E Dyson
Alan Sixsmith
Thien Kim Than
Faculty of Information Technology
University of Technology, Sydney
Australia
alan.sixsmith@uts.edu.au

Abstract

Blogs have become one of the most prominent forms of social media on the Web. This paper reports on the first part of a comprehensive study of how a mainstream Australian media organisation is integrating blogs into their business. The research used a qualitative approach and data collection was undertaken using semi-structured interviews with newspaper staff. The findings presented provide an insight into the opportunities to be gained and the challenges to be faced by Australian media organisations as they incorporate blogs in their online offerings.

Keywords: Blogs, Newspapers, Australian Media, Organisational change

1   INTRODUCTION

In the last few years blogs have become one of the most prominent forms of social media on the Web. In April 2007, Technorati (the Internet search engine for searching blogs) was tracking more than 70 million blogs and estimated that around 120,000 blogs were being created each day [20]. By August 2007 Technorati had indexed over 112 million blogs worldwide [23]. A blog consists of an interactive web journal which forms an asynchronous online conversation between the author of the blog (the blogger) and blog users who can post comments on the blog. The increased availability of web-based blog tools has allowed almost anyone with access to the Internet to establish a blog on any topic of interest to them.

While many blogs are personal diaries, blogs have also been adopted as a corporate tool [8]. A good blog adoption strategy can create excellent commercial opportunities, such as fostering communities to win customer loyalty, creating new markets or reaching untapped market segments.

One of the most debated areas of the blogosphere – the blogging world – is the use of blogs in mainstream media. Blogs provide the possibility of changing news and information publishing from the privileged reserve of large media organisations and publishing houses and opening it up to members of the public. Blogs are effectively a democratic medium which can decentralize and challenge the publishing power of the media. In their turn, media organisations, particularly newspapers, have been forced to acknowledge the important role of blogs in the new media ecosystem. However, there are many challenges to the media adopting blogs, some of which will be examined in the pages that follow.

A study by Wairua Consulting in May 2006 compared 26 OECD countries on broadband markets and Australia was ranked as number 17 [24]. Sweden was rated highest in this study, followed by the Netherlands and then Norway. The USA was ranked number six. In view of bloggers being more likely to have broadband connection [7], Australia is lagging behind in the broadband market and this could also be a barrier for the Australian blog adoption.

There is limited, if any, academic literature that examines the role of blogs in mainstream media in Australia. Therefore the research reported here is significant in being the first comprehensive study of how a mainstream Australian media organisation is integrating blogs into their business. Most available literature about blogs is from American sources. The different business environment and the differences in adoption of Internet technologies in Australia suggest that conclusions arrived at overseas need to be tested for their applicability in this country.

In our research project we investigated the use of blogs in an Australian newspaper as part of its strategy for the twenty-first century. The aim of this research was to investigate the opportunities and challenges faced by a mainstream Australian media organisation when incorporating blogs into their online offering. In order to do this we sought information about the use and implementation of blogs from within the newspaper via the online editor and a journalist blogger.

The first part of the paper details a review of the literature on blogs and the print media and is followed by our research methodology. We then

present our research findings and discuss the implications.

2 THE LITERATURE ON BLOGS AND THE MEDIA

Newspapers have been operating in a declining market for a number of years. There are no doubt a number of reasons behind this trend but dwindling circulation will continue as generations that have grown up with the World Wide Web lose the daily habit of reading their news in print [14].

At the same time, newspapers and other media organisations are reinventing themselves: for example, the *Times* has adopted RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds to deliver its daily news to subscribers' computers [16]. An important part of this reinvention is to move beyond the one-size-fits all news delivery and offer a more personalized service: the BBC has now expanded from its RSS feeds and desktop news alerts to include the establishment of presences on Second Life, Youtube and MySpace [22].

Blogs form an important part of this media landscape and are growing in popularity. A survey of business journalists found that 72% read blogs, in addition to using other user-generated content to source information for their stories [1]. Increasingly news media organisations are assigning their journalists to blogging, as well as blogs becoming the new tool of citizen reporting [13].

There are diverse opinions on how blogs will relate to and affect mainstream media. Mainstream media has regarded blogs with ominous eyes in fear of the threat to mainstream media's role as news gatekeepers [5, 10, 19].

Mainstream media take pride in their professionalism as news gatekeeper with standards and ethics [19]. They endeavour to provide information in an objective format that appeals to the masses. Blogs are often expected to filter information, act as fact-checkers, criticise, analyse and add depth to the story through a different and subjective perspective [11, 19]. Bloggers are often accused of not breaking news but tend to rely on existing material from mainstream media. Mainstream journalists normally seek the source directly and interview people via phone or in person [19]. Also, since blogs avoid the editing process universally employed in mainstream media, they enjoy the advantage of being able to publish the material instantly. As opposed to mainstream media, blogs in general have a reputation for being poorly written and lacking standard ethical guidelines. Roth [19] notes that the editor of the blog-site Microcontent News, proposed a blogging code of ethics but was soon shouted down by bloggers though most journalist seem to support the

idea [19]. Blood [4] suggests "…it is unrealistic to apply the standards of journalism to bloggers who rarely have the time or resources to actually report the news". She further argues that transparency is a better touchstone for ethical blogging than fairness and accuracy.

Blogs have also pushed for structural changes in the media universe. Lasica [11] notes that the traditional mainstream media publishing process is first edit, then publish the material, whereas in blogosphere it is published first, then edited (mostly by the readers). Blogspaces develop a gatewatching model and simply direct readers to useful sources rather than controlling the flow of information [5]. Equipped with blogs as a tool, the public can publish news and information and thereby neutralise the privilege of mainstream media to publish information to the public, and hence create a media of the masses [3]. Witt [25] concurs by describing an evolution in journalism where public journalism is now thought of as the *public's* journalism.

However, some literature tends to have a less pessimistic view of the mainstream media's battle against blogs and suggests a convergence of the blog communities and the mainstream. Hiler [9] talks about the blogosphere as an emerging media ecosystem where mainstream media could pick up story ideas from blogs and publish them and finally circulate the same stories back to blogs for filtering. This idea is supported by many others and Palser [18], an American journalist, believes that the newsroom could benefit from borrowing a few tricks from bloggers.

Irrespective of what the future might bring, the general conclusion in the literature is still that the blogosphere possess such an immensely growing power that mainstream media simply can not ignore it. Blood [4] is convinced "weblogs will be used in mainstream journalism, without question". Media corporations that disregard the force of blogs may jeopardise the whole business by finding themselves lagging behind the competitors in the highly competitive and commercial media market.

Still, it seems that traditional media organisations are reluctant to explore the full potential of the online world. They hang on to the inherently conventional business concepts from the time of the print press in fear of losing profit and risking their well-established reputation as a respectable media corporation. The traditional news organisations defend this view by arguing that there is no business case in online advertising and that the online version would cannibalise the main paper product [6]. Witt [25] quotes Jimmy Breslin, a newspaper journalist and Newsday columnist, in

warning about this inadaptability: "the Internet will decide what you print, and if you don't care, if you want to stay in the past, then stay there with your dead newspaper". In order to adapt the traditional business models of the print media to online publishing things must change. Part of this is convincing sponsors and advertisers that placing advertisements on blogs is effective. In addition, there is the need to encourage readers or new customers to blog.

3   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This preliminary case study research followed a qualitative approach as the intent was to investigate the area under study in some depth [15, 17]. Following an extensive literature search, a number of strategies were launched to collect data in order to obtain views from a variety of perspectives. In our research project we sought information about the use of blogs in the Australian media from bloggers and users *outside* the newspaper. Also from *within* the newspaper we researched how the newspaper implemented and utilized blogs. For this paper, due to word limit restrictions, we are only presenting results of the data collected from *within* the newspaper.

Two qualitative techniques were used for the collection of data: an open-ended survey and a semi-structured interview [15, 17]. Common themes were identified in the data [15, 17] and thematic analysis used to consolidate the preliminary findings [2].

3.1   The Research Participants

Data from inside the newspaper about how the organisation was employing blogs was collected from the following people, designated by their role:

- An interview with the Online Editor. The interview was conducted in person and took 30-minutes. It was semi-structured with questions aimed at discovering what strategies the newspaper had in mind when implementing blogs, if they had reached the intended goals and what plans they had for the future. The interview was audio recorded and notes were also taken during the session.
- An open-ended survey (via email) with the Blogger Journalist who is responsible for the newspaper's second-most popular blog. The interview was conducted via email because the blogger did not have time to meet face-to-face and was aimed at discovering background information on their blog, the use of advertising on the newspaper's blogs, why do newspaper blogs attract readers and whether blogs can be an asset for the newspaper. Interviews were sought from journalists who

keep other blogs for the newspaper but they did not respond.

- Information was also obtained from the radio broadcast of a panel on blogging conducted at the Australian Museum in Sydney at which the General Manager (GM) of Digital Media of the newspaper's online sector participated [12] The radio interview was examined for themes which supported the information gained from the Online Editor and the Blogger Journalist, these included: the type and quality of content, revenue generation opportunities and encouraging readers to participate.

3.2   The Research Setting - The Newspaper

This Newspaper is the oldest and one of the most prestigious in Australia, a quality broadsheet produced by one of Australia's largest newspaper publishing groups. The Newspaper's blogs are under the control of a separate digital arm of the organisation which represents the online business of the publishing empire. This Newspaper was selected because as it is one of the most advanced blog adopters in mainstream Australian media organisations. This is unusual in Australia, a country typified by a low blog adoption rate compared to many other nations and this is supported by the general blogging community who estimate the Australian media is about three years behind its US counterparts [21]. Moreover, it has a reputation for quality journalism which poses an interesting research question of how a newspaper can maintain its credibility for accurate news reporting while opening its web pages to content generated by the public. In August 2007 the Newspaper held the top three (3) spots in the top ten (10) media blogs in Australia [21].

4   THE NEWSPAPER AND ITS BLOG STRATEGY

This section describes main themes that were identified following data analysis. The themes are:
1.   The Adoption of Blogs by the Newspaper
2.   Fostering Interactivity through a New Publishing Model
3.   Niche and Local Content Production
4.   Maintaining Quality and Reputation
5.   Revenue Generation through a New Business Model

4.1   The Newspaper's Blog Adoption

The Newspaper started their first blog in 2000 called Web Diary. This was the first blog in mainstream Australian media, a political blog that lasted for five years. The initial focus was to acquire the experience of having a conversation with the readers through blogs. In that sense, their

blogs began as a creative experiment without any particular revenue model in mind (Online Editor).

The turning point, according to the GM Digital Media, was the US election of 2004. As a result, in 2005, there was an opening up of the online newspaper to blogs more widely. The effect of that was to make the Newspaper realize that blogs were a serious part of the new media landscape: "it was like a tsunami: it washed over us – we weren't expecting it" (GM Digital Media). As measured by the number of visitors and comments, the Newspaper's blogs are now considered highly successful, although the Online Editor states that blog popularity cannot be determined by simply counting the number of comments: blog readership and substance in the comments are important factors as well.

Blogs are delivered via the Newspaper's website and are provided by two types of bloggers: paid bloggers and staff writers who partly blog for free. At present, there is a separation between the journalists who write on paper and those who write online, but in the future this distinction could become blurred. Promotion of the blogs occurs on the site's front page, which gets 5.5 million unique browsers per month. This approach is far more powerful in generating traffic than writing about blogs or advertising them in the print version (Online Editor). Even though their digital arm sells stories and videos to mobile service providers, there is as yet no plan to develop moblogs or multimedia blogs. The Online Editor believed that Australia had not reached the stage where users were interested in blogging on mobile websites but had no doubt that these would become more common in time as people's understanding and comfort levels increased.

The Online Editor believes that Australia was lagging behind most of the world in its adoption of blogs. The lack of a technical audience for the Newspaper's website meant that RSS, which would help promote blog use more, was not well known among the users. He believed that RSS as standard in the current version of Windows could be a way to attract a broader audience and improve market segmentation.

4.2 Fostering Interactivity through a New Publishing Model
Prior to blogs the only method of users' interacting with the news organisation was to write a letter to the editor. With the launch of blogs the Newspaper adopted a new publishing model. The digital news service moved away from the Web 1.0 approach of pushing very tightly controlled information out from one to many (in effect an online adaptation of the traditional publishing model), to a Web 2.0 paradigm where the audience became storytellers and partipators in news generation [12]. Blogs are providing a way of connecting with the audience and encouraging two-way communication. Blog users can satisfy their need for self-actualisation within the online community space (Online Editor), while the journalists love the blogs because they can get real feedback from their audience and have a chance to interact with them in a way they could not have done previously [12].

The launch of the Newspaper's blogs revealed a previously unmet demand for user interaction. One example is the dating and relationship blog Sam and the City. This blog has become the second most popular blog for the Newspaper, attracting a new audience (15-18 year-old girls) who do not normally figure in the readership of the broadsheet newspaper [12]. The Blogger Journalist who conducts this blog believes that her success is because the topics are genuinely interesting to the readers and close to their hearts. They also provide a participatory space previously lacking in news media:

> "I think people are given a chance to voice their opinions as well as sharing their opinions with others and having genuine debates. People give each other advice – it's so great." (Blogger Journalist)

The Blogger Journalist tries to respond to all emails, answers questions raised on the "Ask Sam" page, and sometimes posts comments replying to questions raised by the blog.

4.3 Niche and Local Content Production
The long term strategy is to move towards citizen journalism by developing specialised untapped markets that traditional media cannot cover. The Online Editor believes this could be implemented by allowing readers to start their own blogs: they could fill segments in the news market that are impractical or impossible for journalists to cover. One way to approach citizen journalism is to find trusted readers that can write high quality blogs that cover narrow topics or localised content, for example a blog written by an expert in DVD recorders, or bloggers reporting local news from their suburb.

Enthusiasts who are specialists in particular areas are sought after to provide this niche content. The GM Digital Media quotes the example of a blogger on a specialized topic like Mac G computers:

> "They're the ones who are really passionate about it and they're the ones that bring in all these people who talk very narrowly abut Mac Gs. We could never, in a traditional publishing model, have paid for a journalist, the newsprint, the editors and the subeditors. So it's a really

interesting way to broaden the amount of topics we can talk about." [12]

4.4   Maintaining Quality and Reputation

The Newspaper has a long reputation for quality journalism which the website is keen to maintain. There are several strategies which management employ to ensure that the blogs meet the standards for quality journalism traditionally established by the broadsheet.

The most important strategy is moderation. Currently, all blogs are moderated, which creates a big overhead for the corporation. However, the strict defamation laws in Australia make management nervous about abandoning all forms of censorship on blogs. As a publisher, they could be held responsible for what views their users express on their website, whatever disclaimers they place on the site. So moderation has two aims: firstly, to maintain a high standard of quality and, secondly, to protect the organisation from legal action. The strict moderation means that all postings are vetted before they go live. In addition, clear rules are posted on the site, such as the requirement that all postings must materially enhance the discussion. As the GM Digital Media commented:

> "So you'll notice, if you look at our blogs and other news publishers' blogs, you'll see a real difference in the quality of the postings. A lot of that has to do with that very strict moderation." [12]

Another means of preserving their image as a strong news provider is care over the choice of blogs. For this reason, elite academic blogs are included and there is a restriction on the number of light entertainment blog, such as celebrities or gossip. This is also a reason why they focus on choosing the right blog topics before selecting the appropriate blogger.

The traditional way that the Newspaper has always maintained the credibility of its news product is the separation of editorial from sales, and this has been rigorously carried over from the broadsheet to the way blogs are managed. The Online Editor warns against the risks of connecting the two domains together: "…they [the readers] will know when editorial is tainted by commercial interests...". Journalists must stick to their job in editorial to protect the quality of the news. If they get involved in the commercial side, the readers will suspect and stop reading the stories. The Blogger Journalist, when interviewed, stated that she had no dealings with advertising at all and that there were only one or two ads on each blog which did not affect the quality. The Online Editor believes that transparency is a way to maintain the equilibrium

between writing subjective blog posts and at the same time displaying ads related to the topic.

4.5   Revenue Generation through a New Business Model

Blogs offer both opportunities and challenges with regard to cost control and revenue generation. On the one hand, the cost of content produced by bloggers and their audiences is much less than paying for journalists, subeditors, editors and newsprint [12]. In a traditional newspaper every word is expensive. This is not so for blogs where good blogs ignite discussion and the journalist has only to post comments if the readers demand explanations or criticise the blogger, or if there are few comments or the discussion lacks depth. However, the extensive moderation of blogs costs money as all bloggers are paid to undertake this role. That means that before any blog is launched a thorough business case must be made for how it will attract sufficient revenue to pay for the moderation [12]. Revenue is generated from advertising and sponsorship, with each new blog approved on the basis that it is expected to bring in a lot of traffic or a lot of sponsors [12].

Blogs like Sam in the City, which attract a different demographic than the normal broadsheet readership, have the potential to attract new advertisers [12]. The niche journalism aspect of blogs means that they lend themselves to targeted selling campaigns: each blog community can be regarded as a market segment with specially tailored ads for products or services (Online Editor). This is in contrast to the marketing model for the mainstream Newspaper.

Despite the success of the blogs in terms of quantity of comments and number of visitors, the blogs are not making much money yet. The Online Editor confesses that there are problems selling ads on blogs and that the USA is far more advanced in this field. Even though the Newspaper's blogs are moderated, currently advertisers are worried that critical readers might damage their name by posting negative comments: "It's taking us a while to commercialise blogs". Their short term strategy is to convince advertisers that blog ads are useful and effective by informing advertisers what a blog really is. Advertisers must be cured of their fear of blogs and get used to the dynamic nature of blogs and what this type of journalism is all about.

Moreover, though the digital arm of the Newspaper conducts focus groups to collect information from their users, they do not match up user data with visits to the website or use this in advertising. The advertising market in Australia is not sophisticated enough and advertisers are not really interested in

tailoring ads in terms of one-to-one marketing. The Online Editor believes that there are great business opportunities in utilising demographical information from the users in order to tailor ads and content to them in a way not possible with traditional print newspapers.

In addition, management is not convinced that an extensive use of blogs is a suitable strategy because it places economical constraints on their business model with the potential for journalists to "be like an orchestra conductor and conduct a discussion about a story all day long" (Online Editor). That is, journalists could be tied up all day with a single blog story instead of writing three stories in this time. The Online Editor thinks one solution is to have trusted community leaders run their own blogs: they would be rewarded with publicity and self actualisation instead of wages. The essence of this approach is to identify lead users, or mavens, who have great influence and who can build a strong, lasting social network.

Notwithstanding their lack of commercial success to date, advertising will probably continue as the main model to generate revenues in the near future. The Online Editor thinks that blogs have a great potential to attract advertising and sponsorship.

5   CONCLUSION

Mainstream Australian media organisations are now realising the importance of seeing blogs in a broader context. For a 175 year old broadsheet newspaper with only a decade of website experience the challenge is to fit the two business models from the two media together. The organisation does not invest heavily in the online newspaper because they want to sustain the print newspaper. This logic is based on the investors' interest in short term shares, although management realise that the Internet is the future media arena.

For Australian mainstream media organisations the adoption of blogs as a fundamental component of their online offering is paramount. The interaction this provides with their readers can only strengthen their reputation. Based on the findings of this preliminary research, Australian mainstream media organisations must endeavour to make blogs a commercially viable product. By offering quality content and undertaking some level of readership analysis mainstream media organisations can provide a mass market for targeted advertising campaigns hence providing potentially large revenue generation possibilities.

As mentioned in the Introduction this paper reports on a component of a research project. The next step is present a combined view of the research findings, that is, the findings from outside the newspaper and from within the newspaper (see Research Methodology section). This combined view can then be used to develop a research model and survey to enable further and more detailed research into the use of blogs by other mainstream media organisations in Australia.

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