

THE TWISTED PSYCHOLOGY OF BLOGGERS VS. JOURNALISTS

LE 14 MARS 2011 JAY ROSEN

What is it about bloggers that gets under the skin of journalists? In a speech at SXSW, Jay Rosen examines the psychology behind the profession.

[NDLR] OWNI.fr concourt aujourd'hui au festival South By SouthWest (SXSW), dans la catégorie "News Related Technologies" du **SXSW Accelerator**. L'occasion de mettre en avant quelques articles en anglais, proposés par les éditrices d'**OWNI.eu**

This is what I said at South by Southwest (SXSW) in Austin, March 12, 2011. It went well.

*Many thanks to Lisa Williams for helping with the tech and the backchannel. You can find a live blog of my presentation [here](#). Audio will be available later. When it is, I will link to it. Here's the official **description**.*

There's an old rule among sportswriters: no cheering in the press box. In fact, a few weeks ago a young journalist **lost his job** at Sports Illustrated for just that reason: cheering at the conclusion of a thrilling race. Sportswriters could allow themselves to cheer occasionally without it affecting their work, but they don't. And this rule gets handed down from older to younger members of the group.

So this is a little example of the psychology, not of individual journalists, but of the profession itself. We don't often talk this way, but we could: "No cheering in the press box" is the superego at work. It's a psychological thing within the sportswriter's tribe. You learn to wear the mask if you want to join the club.

Six years ago I wrote an essay called **Bloggers vs. Journalists is Over**. It was my most well read piece at the time. And it made the points you would expect: This distinction is eroding. This war is absurd. Get over it. Move on. There's bigger work to be done.

But since then I've noticed that while the division—bloggers as one type, journalists as another—makes less and less sense, the conflict continues to surface. Why? Well, something must be happening under the surface that expresses itself through bloggers vs. journalists. But what is that subterranean thing? This is my real subject today.

And to preview my answer: disruptions caused by the Internet threaten to expose certain buried conflicts at the heart of modern journalism and a commercialized press. Raging at bloggers is a way to keep these demons at bay. It exports inner conflicts to figures outside the press. Also—and this is important—bloggers and journalists are each other's ideal "other."

In tomorrow's New York Times Magazine, which went online Thursday, Bill Keller **acts out** a version of bloggers vs. journalists. He ridicules aggregators like the Huffington Post and pokes at media bloggers (including me, Clay Shirky and Jeff Jarvis) for producing derivative work that is parasitic on news producers.

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The queen of aggregation is, of course, Arianna Huffington, who has discovered that if you take celebrity gossip, adorable kitten videos, posts from unpaid bloggers and news reports from other publications, array them on your Web site and add a left-wing soundtrack, millions of people will come.

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Of course the Times does aggregation, too. When it reviews a book or play that's...

derivative. We could charge Keller with petty hypocrisy, but that's not my point. This is my point: There's something about bloggers vs. journalists that permits the display of a preferred (or idealized) self among people in the press whose work lives have been disrupted by the Internet. There's an attraction there. Spitting at bloggers is closely related to gazing at your own reflection, and falling in love with it all over again.

This is from an **editor's column** in an Australian newspaper:

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The great thing about newspapers is that, love us or hate us, we're the voice of the people. We represent the community, their views, their aspirations and their hopes. We champion North Queensland's wins and we commiserate during our losses...

Bloggers, on the other hand, represent nothing. They whinge, carp and whine about our role in society, and yet they contribute nothing to it, other than satisfying their juvenile egos.

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Editorial writers as the voice of the people? Are you quite sure, Mr. Editor? Well, compared to bloggers.... yeah, we're sure!

And to go with this preferred or idealized self, a demonized other, the pajama-wearing, basement-dwelling blogger. Andrew Marr is the former political editor of the BBC. **He says:**

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A lot of bloggers seem to be socially inadequate, pimped, single, slightly seedy, bald, cauliflower-nosed young men sitting in their mother's basements and ranting. They are very angry people. OK – the country is full of very angry people. Many of us are angry people at times. Some of us are angry and drunk.

But the so-called citizen journalism is the spewings and rantings of very drunk people late at night. It is fantastic at times but it is not going to replace journalism.

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Now there's a clear risk in trying to do this at South by Southwest: to many people who have been paying attention, especially the digerati, bloggers v. journalists is almost the definition of a played-out theme. *Aren't we past all that by now?* I know this is what some people will be thinking because I thought that way myself. Blogging is far more accepted today. Most journalists are bloggers themselves, so the distinction is getting weirder. Many newsrooms are trying to attract bloggers into local networks. Blogging itself has been overtaken by social media, some people think.

Did you catch that word, *replace*? For this subject, that's like a blinking red light. Or better yet: an icon on your desktop. Click on the icon, and all the contents of bloggers vs. journalists are displayed. Ask bloggers why they blog and they might say: because big media sucks! But they will almost never say: I AM YOUR REPLACEMENT. This fantasy of replacement comes almost exclusively from the journalist's side, typically connected to fears for a lost business model.

Frédéric Filloux is a former editor of Liberation in Paris. His **view**:

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Today's problem is not one media versus another, it's the future of

journalism — it's finding the best possible way to finance the gathering and the processing of independent, reliable, and original information.... I don't buy into the widespread delusion that legions of bloggers, compulsive twitterers or facebookers amount to a replacement for traditional journalism.



Keep clicking on the “replace” icon and other fears surface.

This is Connie Schultz, a columnist for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, which has had a number of run-ins with local bloggers.



As I write this, only half of the states in the U.S. now have even one full-time reporter in Washington, D.C. No amount of random blogging and gotcha videos can replace the journalism that keeps a government accountable to its people. If you're a journalist, you already know that. If you're the rest of America, chances are you have no idea.



Blogging cannot replace the watchdog journalism that keeps a government accountable to its people. Journalists know that, but somehow the American people don't. Replacement-by-bloggers talk is displaced anger toward a public that doesn't appreciate what journalists do, a public that would somehow permit the press to wither away without asking what would be lost.

Here's John Kass, a columnist for the Chicago Tribune:



[Our] reporters work in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions. They do not blog from mommy's basement, cutting and pasting what others have reported, while putting it under a cute pen name on the Internet.

Instead, the Tribune's reporters are out knocking on doors in violent neighborhoods late at night, looking for witnesses after murders. Or they stand in the morgue and talk to the families of the dead. Tribune reporters are not anonymous. They use their own names, put them at the top of their stories and are accountable for what they write.



Bloggers are anonymous creeps. Journalists put it all out there and risk their reputations. Kass isn't instructing bloggers in what makes them suck. He's speaking to readers of the Tribune—and especially former subscribers—who are safely asleep in the suburbs, while reporters investigate crimes and comfort the dead. You can almost feel his rage at the injustice of the Internet.

The Tribune, of course, is currently in bankruptcy. It's also welcoming bloggers to the fold through its **Chicago Now** site, which is a local blogging platform. Julie DiCaro, blogger for Chicago Now, **responded** to John Kass this way:



Being derided by reporters at the Tribune for no apparent reason probably isn't the best way to attract new bloggers to the Tribune's network. And, if I'm being honest, grumbling about bloggers these days is tantamount to yelling at the neighborhood kids to get off your lawn. It makes you look really, really old.



It's not only readers who need remedial instruction in the value-added by journalists. Advertisers, too, need to be schooled. This is from a **pitch** to would-be advertisers by the Los Angeles Times:



What kind of awards coverage are you looking for?

Choose one:

A.) Accurate, in depth stories reported by journalists with years of experience.

B.) Unconfirmed, incomplete rumors spread by bloggers with axes to grind.



Here, bloggers vs. journalists helps underline the self-evident superiority of the professional model. Of course, if it were really self-evident, drawing the contrast would be unnecessary... right?

This is probably my favorite quote of the ones I've collected. It's **from** the West Seattle Herald, in an editorial about its competitor, West Seattle blog. (Hat tip, Tracy Record.)



Professional journalists don't waste your time.

Instead of 3000 words about a community council meeting that was "live blogged" with updates every seven minutes, wouldn't you honestly prefer 300 words that tell you what happened and what was decided?



What I like about this one is that question, "wouldn't you prefer?" You can hear the tone of puzzlement, the plea for reason. The old school news provider struggles to understand why anyone would choose those new goods, like live blogging, that the Internet makes possible.

So far, I have been discussing what professional journalists "get" by hanging on to bloggers vs. journalists. But bloggers get something, too. I do not want to neglect that. Listen to **the teet**, a 25 year-old female blogger and writer in Columbus, Ohio:



I think I have an unnatural obsession with and hatred for the editor of the Dispatch.

Everything he says makes me want to throw my computer monitor out the window. Regardless, I've left him on my Google Reader. I

always flip to the front of the Insight section on Sundays. I secretly love the pain he causes me.



By raging at newspaper editors, bloggers manage to keep themselves on the “outside” of a system they are in fact a part of. Meaning: It’s one Internet, folks. The news system now incorporates the people formerly known as the audience. Twitter and Facebook are hugely powerful as distributors of news.

I’ve said that bloggers and journalists are each other’s ideal “other.” From the blogger’s side, the conflict with journalists helps preserve some of that ragged innocence (which is itself a kind of power) by falsely locating all the power in Big Media. Here’s another blogger in Columbus, **talking** about the same newspaper editor:



Note to Ben Marrison: If you want to pretend that you, as a professional journalist, are somehow better than political bloggers ... because you are less biased and less lazy then you might consider actually NOT being both lazy and biased while writing online rants for the world to see.

Don't you know that's OUR job?



We can be lazy and biased. For we are young and irresponsible. You are supposed to be the grown-ups here. This keeps at bay a necessary thought: we all have to grow up... someday. Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one, and now, because we have the Web, anyone can own one. The press is us. Not “them.” Is this not the very force that brings 10,000 people to South by Southwest Interactive?

I have always found it fascinating that both bloggers and journalists will use the word “traditional” in referring to the model of professional journalism that is taught in boot camp J-schools and practiced at, say, the Washington Post. That tradition is about 80 to 90 years old, at most. But our experiment with a free press is 250 years old. Whole chapters of it were discarded by American journalists when they tried to make themselves more scientific and objective in order to claim elevated status.

But these discarded parts of the tradition live on in the subconscious. And with blogging they have come roaring back. I make reference to this in the tag line to my blog, **PressThink**. The subtitle is: “Ghost of democracy in the media machine.”

Let’s visit one of those ghosts. Lincoln Steffens was the one of the original muckrakers. He exposed corruption in the machine politics of the big cities. **This** is from his 1902 book, *The Shame of the Cities*.



I am not a scientist. I am a journalist. I did not gather with indifference all the facts and arrange them patiently for permanent preservation and laboratory analysis. I did not want to preserve, I wanted to destroy the facts. My purpose was [to] see if the shameful facts, spread out in all their shame, would not burn through our civic shamelessness and set fire to American pride. That was the journalism of it. I wanted to move and to convince.



The part that gets me is, “I did not want to preserve, I wanted to destroy the facts.” No journalist at the Washington Post would say that today. It is not permitted. It would mark the speaker as unfit for the tribe. Although the kind of journalism that Dana Priest and Bob Woodward practice is a direct descendant of Lincoln Steffens and the muckrakers, something dropped out between 1902 and 2002.

“I wanted to destroy the facts... I wanted to move and convince...” This is what dropped out when journalism professionalized itself in the 1920s and 30s. The bloggers, in this sense, are “the return of the repressed.” They write like Lincoln Steffens.

On the surface: antagonists. Dig deeper and the bloggers look more like the ancestors of today’s journalists. They are closer to Tom Paine than Bob Woodward is. They bring back what was lost in the transformation of journalism into a profession and a business that, say, Warren Buffet could invest in.

Here’s another dispatch from the newsroom’s superego. It’s the Washington Post’s social media **guidelines**:



When using these networks, nothing we do must call into question the impartiality of our news judgment. We never abandon the guidelines that govern the separation of news from opinion, the importance of fact and objectivity, the appropriate use of language and tone, and other hallmarks of our brand of journalism.



If you ask journalists why they chose their profession, they give a range of answers: to see the world, something new every day, I like to write. The most common answer is some variation on: to make the world a better place, to right wrongs and stick up for the little guy. Social justice, in other words. No one ever says, “I went into journalism because I have a passion for being... objective.” Or: “Detachment, that’s my thing. I’m kind of a detached guy, so I figured this would be a good field for me.”

And yet... When they get there, people who always wanted to be journalists and make the world a better place find that the professional codes in place often prevent this. It’s hard to fight for justice when you have to master “he said, she said” stories. Voice is something you learn to take out of your work if you want to succeed in the modern newsroom. You are supposed to sacrifice and learn to report the story without attitude or bias creeping in. And then, if you succeed in disciplining yourself, you might one day get a column and earn the right to crusade for justice, to move and convince.

This is a moral hierarchy, which bloggers disrupt. They jump right to voice, which appears to mock all the years of voicelessness that mainstream journalists had suffered through.

Last year a young reporter (and blogger) named Dave Weigel had to **resign** from the Washington Post after someone leaked some emails of his, in which he complained about people on the political right whom he also had to cover. After he was gone, some staffers at the Post **dumped** on Weigel anonymously. Here is what they said:



“The sad truth is that the Washington Post, in its general desperation for page views, now hires people who came up in journalism without much adult supervision, and without the proper amount of toilet-training.”



Without the proper amount of toilet-training . Freud wouldn’t even charge to interpret a quote like that. Which shows that bloggers vs. journalists doesn’t end when a blogger is hired at a big institutional player like the Washington Post. Instead the conflict is absorbed directly into

the institution.

Journalists today are under stress. The stress has five sources. Bloggers put all five right into the face of professional journalism.

One: A collapsing economic model, as print and broadcast dollars are exchanged for digital dimes.

Two: New competition (the loss of monopoly) as a disruptive technology, the Internet, does its thing.

Three: A shift in power. The tools of the modern media have been distributed to the **people** formerly known as the audience.

Four: A new pattern of information flow, in which “stuff” moves horizontally, peer to peer, as effectively as it moves vertically, from producer to consumer. **Audience atomization overcome**, I call it.

Five: The erosion of trust (which started a long time ago but accelerated after 2002) and the loss of authority.

A useful comparison would be to medical doctors: when patients can look up a drug on the Internet, research a course of treatment or connect with others who have the same condition, the authority of the doctor does not disappear. And it's not that people don't trust their doctors anymore. But the terms of authority have to change to allow for patients who have more information, more options, and more power to argue with their physicians.

In pro journalism, it is similar: the terms of authority have to change. The practice has to become more interactive. And this is happening under conditions of enormous stress.

The psychiatrist **Robert Coles**, author of *The Moral Life of Children* and other great works, wrote a book called *The Call of Stories* (which is another reason people go into journalism, to answer that call.) In the beginning of that book he reflects on his early training in psychiatry, at a mental hospital in Boston. He is told to make his rounds and classify his patients by the diseases they seem to be exhibiting, and note any changes in their condition.

After a few weeks of this, Coles is depressed. He's doing the work, classifying and observing, but he cannot see how his patients are going to improve. So he goes to see his supervisor, a wiser and older doctor. Coles complains: I don't get it. I am doing what they told me to do, but how are my patients going to get any better? The older doctor listens to him, and pauses. It's as if he's been waiting for the question. And this is what he says:

Our patients have been telling themselves a story about who they are and where they fit in the world. And for reasons we do not understand very well, their story has broken down. It no longer lets them live in the real world, so they wind up here.

Your job—your only job—is to listen to them, and then get them to see that they have to start telling themselves a better story. Or they won't get out of here. If you can do that—any way you can do that—you are doing psychiatry. Coles got it. And this was the beginning of his career as a clinician.

I think this illuminates the situation with the professional press today. The story it has been telling itself has broken down. It no longer helps the journalist navigate the real world conditions under which journalism is done today. Somehow, journalists have to start telling themselves a better story about what they do and why it matters. And we have to help them. We interactive people.

For people in the press, bloggers vs. journalists is an elaborate way of staying the same, of refusing to change, while permitting into the picture some of the stressful changes I have mentioned. A shorter way to say this is: it's *fucking neurotic*.

Thank you for your attention.

(Dedicated to James W. Carey, 1935-2006.)

>> This article was originally published on Pressthink.org

>> Photo FlickrR CC by : **RedJinn: Questions are not lonely without answers, Mike Licht, NotionsCapital.com**



Very good article. I am not myself a blogger or a professional journalist, but I agree with almost everything you said.

We are, more than ever, in need of the neojournalist, neither the blogger nor the so called professional journalist does a proper job these days, and the powerful have never been more free to impose his truth as THE truth.

The infantile journalist crusade against bloggers (or even wikileaks or the people) – as an excuse not to look itself into the mirror, understand its obsolescence and that journalism has to use the opportunity to rethink itself ; this new huge flow of information, allowed by the internet, literally changed the map of what the people need from a journalist (who needs articles weaker and less referenced than the wikipedia page ?) – is only one aspect of this trend where the old Empire refuses to adapt to reality and accuse the young of its own demise.

On another matter, you have the music industry collapsing under its own weight, years of self content and uncreativity, and finding such a great escape goat in internet piracy – and is given by the governants all other the world all the means to prosecute the bad pirats.

The starsystem is collapsing to, in that case the Empire accuses drugs, mental illness, but never its own flaws, as Bret Easton Ellis points out in its very interesting take on the “Charlie Sheen Case”.

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2011-03-12/bret-easton-ellis-how-charlie-sheen-is-giving-us-what-we-want/full/>

VOUS AIMEZ



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VOUS N'AIMEZ PAS



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LUI RÉPONDRE