Blogging and the eCommunication paradigms: 10 principles of the new media scenario*

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Introduction

The digital age arrives with a set of big communication challenges for traditional mainstream media: new relations with audiences (Interactivity), new languages (Multimedia) and a new grammar (Hypertext). But this media revolution not only changes the communication landscape for the usual players, most importantly, it opens the mass communication system to a wide range of new players.

As far as enterprises, institutions, administrations, organizations, groups, families and individuals start their own web presence, they become "media" on their own, they also become "sources" for traditional media, and, in many cases, they produce strong "media criticism": opinion about how issues are covered and delivering of alternative coverage.

The blogging phenomenon represents the ultimate challenge for the old communication system because it integrates both: the new features of the digital world and a wide democratization in the access to media with a universal scope.

A recent article by Noah Shachtman at *Wired News* "Blogs Make the Headlines"[1] brings back the always polemic relations between weblogs and journalism. And once again the *Poynter* debate "Are Weblogs Journalism?"[2] has to be quoted because of its clarity: "Wrong Question". Blogs could be many things, and even journalism, but they are not journalism for the sake of being blogs.

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[1] Shachtman, N., 'Blogs Make the Headlines', *Wired News,* 23 December 2002. http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,56978,00.html

[2] Herrell, A., 'Are Weblogs Journalism?', Poynter Online, 15 September 2002. http://www.poynter.org/forum/default.asp?id=27299

Every time a new communication technology emerges, old media and journalism start the debate about the limits and identities of the old and the new. In 1996 I gathered from the Net a list of issues from e-mail lists and news groups related to

On the other hand, when mainstream media start blogging with their own columnists or hiring famous bloggers (which is recently the case of the Argentine newspaper *Clarín*) the debate that arises in the blogosphere becomes: "Is that blogging?"[3]. When the powerful tool of the media revolution is used by media, then is the blogosphere community who turns to the defensive.

While both debates were taking place, Google bought Pyra Labs, and the surprised blogosphere together with mainstream media seem to arrive late to understand what Google saw first: neither traditional media alone, nor just para-media blogging, the issue is now "Where is the knowledge?"[4]. Google could become a global news agency and a global news media, joining the power of its database with the human knowledge of thousands of bloggers, from then on, also a global nich advertising channel.

The Iraq war was the first big test to check the relations between traditional media coverage and weblogs, and also to evaluate the media power of blogs. Even when the last Pew Report, *The Internet and the Iraq war*, reveals a limited influence of warblogging as news source, a trend emerges: blogs are catching the interest of young Internet users[5]:

> "There has been much early discussion about the role of blogs or Web diaries in shaping opinion about the war and allowing Internet users to gain new perspectives and sources of information about the war. Our first soundings on the subject show that blogs are gaining a following among a small number of Internet users, but they are not yet a source of news and commentary for the majority of Internet users. Some 4% of online Americans report going to blogs for information and opinions. The overall number of blog users is so small that it is not possible to draw statistically meaningful conclusions about who uses blogs. The early data suggest that the most active Internet users, especially those with broadband connections are the most likely to have found blogs they like. In addition, blogs seem to be catching on with younger Internet users – those under age 30 – at a greater pace than with older Internet users".

Pluralistic views, not necessarily more balanced, but more transparent and out of the mainstream, turn blogs in the favorite source and tool for the anti-war movement.

One of the most important effects of Iraq war coverage to the debate old media vs. new media is that old media discovered the emergency of blogs as non conventional sources, not only for news and views, but also for media coverage criticism. Experiences

the impact of online communication over journalism: Orihuela, J. L., 'Impacto de la Comunicación Online sobre el Periodismo Tradicional', Pamplona, (15 February 1996) http://www.retena.com/usuarios/jlori/usenet.htm

[3] Follow the debate with more than 100 comments after the first post: Amartino, M. 'Weblogs: el último "boom" de Internet desembarca en los medios argentinos', *Clarín.com Weblogs*, 10 February 2003.

[4] Orihuela, J. L., 'Google, Blogger y el valor del conocimiento en red', *Blogonomía*, 21 February 2003.
http://www.infonomia.com/tematiques/index.asp?idm=1&idrev=46&num=3

[5] Pew Internet & American Life Project, 'The Internet and the Iraq war: How online Americans have used the Internet to learn war news, understand events, and promote their views' (1st April 2003)
http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/pdfs/PIP_Iraq_War_Report.pdf

like Technorati's *Current Events in the Blogosphere*[6] show an interesting trend and strategic function for blogs: the blogosphere becomes a system for media control and balance.

Once calm returns, maybe we will see that blogs are becoming a very valuable source for the media, a sort of early alert system to detect news, trends, and opinion states. And media could transform some of their columnists into bloggers and also integrate famous bloggers in the staff.

The blurring limits between journalism and blogging, between data and knowledge, between news agencies and semantic search engines, between readers and writers and between old and new media, reveals the need for a set of intellectual tools that contribute to understand by rethinking the changing nature of media and communication in the digital age.

Ten paradigms of this new scenario are proposed, and the term eCommunication is coined to describe it in a single word. The global process could be understood as a big shift from the classical mass media models to the new media paradigms: the user becomes the axis of communication process, the content is the identity of media, multimedia is the new language, real time is the only time, hypertext is the grammar, and knowledge is the new name of information.

The 10 Paradigms of eCommunication

The formulation of this set of ten theorethical models in terms of "switching" should not be understood as if the old model is replaced with the new one, because, as a mater of fact, both sets of models are, and will be, coexisting.

Paradigm I: from audience to user

The passive unidirectional way of media consumption is replaced by the concept of active user seeking for content, exploring and navigating info-spaces. Users become also content producers in many web environments, mainly the blogosphere.

In a recent RFC for a book project, Dan Gillmor focus on this, right from the title: *Making the News: What Happens to Journalism and Society When Every Reader Can Be a Writer (Editor, Producer, Etc.)*[7].

The communication process in the eCommunication scenario is user centered: users have the control to choose, to decide, to search, to define and configure, to subscribe or unsubscribe, to comment and, most important: to write, talk and film. *Self media*, *Nanopublishing* or *Thin Media* are the new names for the strategy of those users who decide to become even more active and start low profile media activities.

[6] http://www.technorati.com/cosmos/currentevents.html

[7] http://weblog.siliconvalley.com/column/dangillmor/archives 000924.shtml#000924

Paradigm II: from media to content

The focus shifts from the industrial production constrains (press, radio, television) to content authority in order to define media. *National Geographic* and *CNN*, for example, are not a particular kind of media, but brands which represent authority over an area of content (natural life) or expertise in current affairs content management (journalism).

This particular focus on content rather than in the technical process of communication is one of the reasons of the popularization of blogs as an easy way for a wide dissemination of content. Experts and academics from all the disciplines found in blogging a practical tool to communicate findings, share sources and news, conduct research, find colleagues and help students.

Nich-blogging and expert blogs are the natural expansion of traditional media experts columnism, with the advantage of freedom from agendas different from one's own in relation with themes and frequency.

Paradigm III: from monomedia to multimedia

Text, audio, video, graphics, photos and animation could be used together on a single (digital) media for this first time. This is the reason why media distinctions related to use of language (textual, audiovisual) tend to be erased. Once you are online you are multimedia. Multimedia blogging started its way from photoblogging and audioblogging, and now is reaching videoblogging.

The rule that successful content writing requires skills and talent also applies to multimedia language: the multimedia capacities of the digital platforms require skills and talent to be properly activated.

The fact that, in a context of self media, skills related to content and to presentation are required from the same people explain things like: the success of templates, wonderful designed blogs without content, great content and very poor design and some gems of content and design becoming sooner or later blogs of cult.

Paradigm IV: from periodicity to real time

Regular frequency was a strong paradigm of the old scenario to the point that many media were defined in relation to its time constrains (daily, weekly, monthly). Online media assume that they have to be real time updated to survive in the new environment and this live paradigm can be found at mobileblogging.

What we lost in the road from periodicity to real time is reflection. What we gain is dynamism and conversation styles. What we can learn from the blogosphere is post updating and post correction (by crossing out, not by deleting or editing). Rebecca Blood put it this way in *Weblog Ethics*: "Write each entry as if it could not be changed; add to, but do not rewrite or delete, any entry"[8].

Fast thinking and fast reaction are natural skills for bloggers as far as posts are dated and timed, and from that on it will be a common practice to "draw" the life of a

story on a minute by minute basis as already happened with the Google-buys-Blogger announce. Publicly correction of mistakes and change of views is the backup for being fast but accurate.

Paradigm V: from scarcity to abundance

Space of the media platform ceased to be the limit to content and now the time of the user is the only limited resource. Directories, ranking and blogtracking are the attempts to help users to find what they need in the blogosphere. News aggregators and readers also help the users in managing their time.

One of the strong effects of "readers becoming writers" is the proliferation of online information without clear attribution of source authority and heterogeneity of content quality. The overflow of information calls for new skills and tools to manage data, news and opinions, and here again the experience of the blogosphere could be very useful to find ways to deal with abundance in the eCommunication landscape.

Content syndication, news aggregators, news readers, popularity rankings, recommended reading, "most linked" directories, neighborhoods, rings, thematic and geographic blogospheres, blogtracking and blogrolling, are but just a few of the tools developed by the blogging community to manage the chaos of abundance.

Paradigm VI: from editor-mediated to non-mediated

The gate-keeper paradigm to explain the role of media editors and the agenda-setting theory to describe the functions of media in defining the daily issues should be revisited nowadays at the light of the decentralized nature of the Net. Together with mainstream media, many other informal sources become relevant to establish the agenda. Daypop, Popdex and Blogdex are some of the tools that help us to establish what is important for the community.

World wide publishing without editors, but with a close peer review daily process and in most cases open to comments from readers is the nature of web and weblog publishing. As a result of that, the agenda of relevant current affairs goes beyond the established media land and now is shared with a wide variety of new sources, most of them not media, including web portals, mailing lists, e-bulletins, search engines, news groups, forum and weblogs with their respective feeds when available.

Paradigm VII: from distribution to access

The broadcasting paradigm of one to many unilateral distribution is replaced by both: many to one access and many to many communication. Client-server architecture of the Internet started a new model based upon the decisions of the users.

The access paradigm is complementary with the user centered paradigm and both explain the strong interactive nature of the new environment. Access means seek, search, navigate, surf, decide: an active attitude, a will to connect and communicate, the contrary of the passive reception of media content.

"My daily visits" or just the blogroll are expressions of this personal way to seek for content, and the last attempts of contextual advertising show how the old dynamics

has changed: now advertisers are looking for targets outside the media arena, testing ways for a personal approach based on key words searching and data base mining.

Paradigm VIII: from one way to interactivity

In the new environment the user has the ability to choose between content options and to define the time for access, but interactivity also means the capacity to change the aspect of the content, to produce content for a system and to communicate with other users.

The first level of interactivity has to do with the possibility for the user to choose the format of information display (browser and navigation interface configuration).

The second level of interactivity is the possibility for the user to produce input for a system. This contribution could be co-authoring, writing comments, answering pools and tests, posting news, and so on.

The third level of interactivity has to do with the possibility for the user to communicate with other users of the system in real or delay time.

The blogosphere is the strongest representation of the interactive capacities of the new eCommunication scenario. The blogosphere is community and conversation.

Paradigm IX: from linear to hypertext

From linear temporal media we are shifting to non linear spatial content. Hypertext becomes the grammar of the digital world.

Reading text lines, listening or watching temporal (linear) audiovisual media are typical activities of traditional media consumption. The digital nature of the eCommunication environment opens the way for a spatial, rather than temporal, organization of content. Web sites and blogs are spaces to visit. Virtual spaces where users perform activities: they meet each other, learn, gather and share news and opinions, do shopping and gaming, entertain and create.

The pathways of the info-spaces are built on links. Creating and activating links on websites and blogs could be the new name of alphabetization. Reading and writing by linking, this is, exploring and creating hypertextual environments on a daily basis is the most strategic skill bloggers are achieving.

Paradigm X: from data to knowledge

The blogging ecosystem reveals the crucial role of human knowledge to identify, comment, link and discuss the data available online, turning it into valuable and usable knowledge. This is one of the reasons why Google bought Pyra Labs and could be the starting point of the long time dreamed Semantic Web.

Human information mining and data processing, personal evaluation of sites, resources, tools, news, opinions, campaigns, coverages, initiatives are the ways by which bloggers transform data into knowledge.

Even when it is highly self-referential (which is also the case of both, the academic and media worlds), the blogosphere is a global meritocratic community, with its own hierarchies, rankings and codes, performing a multilateral transnational conversation, generating a sort of peer reviewed content, widely and speedly disseminated and thus becoming one of the most important knowledge factory nowadays.

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