



Krystian Woznicki

This blogging business nowadays

Spectacularization of the "blogosphere" and citizen journalism

The blogging movement's claim to empower the "netizen" is being undermined from two sides. As blogging becomes more and more fashionable, commercial considerations start to come foremost. On the other hand, some of today's most successful blogs are written and read by a media elite. The concept of citizen journalism needs to be re-thought in the light of these developments, writes Krystian Woznicki.

Committed netizens who become involved with blogs either quickly turn into enthusiasts or rapidly become irritated. The term "blog" evokes a whole host of myths. A breakthrough into the new interconnected world, colonisation of cyberspace, the digital revolution, and so on. Blogs, or so their fans commonly believe, keep all the promises made on various fronts in the — so far rather brief — history of the Internet: a more just and more democratic order. And who would not want to be on board when that finally becomes a reality? Advocates of blogging include internet gurus as different as [Geert Lovink](#), the Dutch "net-squatter turned institute founder" and Joi Ito, the Japanese "Pope of e-commerce turned net activist".

Lovink's forthcoming book, for example, is entitled "Zero Comments" — referring to the commentary level of blogs. In contrast, Ito has created a digital monument to the movement in the form of the blog search engine [Technorati](#). Anyone who, like these two, has been involved with the Internet for some time — for example, anyone who experienced something of the anarchic 1980s or the Internet boom in the 1990s and the crash of the New Economy in the early 21st century — might well glimpse a renaissance of the Internet in the blog movement. However, the hype associated with blogs can rapidly start to get on your nerves. Think for example of the bluster of optimistic headlines or the speed with which new business models are supposed to turn the social dynamic into cash. The thing that is really annoying however is that the term itself is applied ad hoc.

By now blogs crop up in every conceivable context. *Playboy*, Samsung, Angela Merkel, Africa, and Joe Bloggs — they all have a blog. This spread of blogs constitutes an enormous ego-boost for the movement; even the bad press it receives in conventional print media simply serves to add further impetus, for this also means that blogs remain the talk of the town. However, it seems that this atmosphere also seduces innovative projects in the "blogosphere" into paying more attention to marketing than to actually getting on with blogging. That would in no small part also involve criticising the movement and calling it into question; doubts should be expressed precisely about matters that appear self-evident, for example, the issue of whether blogs do indeed, as they claim,

practice a kind of grassroots journalism.

In contrast to the common criticism that blogs create "shady opinion formers" (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*), I seek here to address the "lack of a serious approach" in blogs as a counter-reading not in terms of their amateur style but rather in the light of the increasing professionalisation of blogs. First of all, it is surprising how many projects, which years ago simply called themselves "webzines", have suddenly adopted the mantle of the blog. Both large and small online magazines that publish articles on particular topics every day are suddenly presenting themselves as blogs. Or think of websites of artists or other creative professionals working as one-man or one-woman enterprises; just the other day their sole purpose was as a platform for artists to present themselves along with documentation of their own work — now such sites are also presenting themselves as trendy blogs and want to be part of the movement.

It goes without saying that these players contribute to the diversity of the "blogosphere". At the same time, these kind of tendencies water down the "actual" claims of the movement. If one wanted in this connection to overstate the case with reference to journalism, these claims lie above all in the self-empowerment of netizens — vis-à-vis the large and established players, as well as vis-à-vis dominant structures and hierarchies. The idea is to not sacrifice one's capacity for criticism: to refuse to allow anyone to prevent you from speaking out and expressing yourself if you feel lied to, disadvantaged or simply unfairly treated — be it as an unemployed single mother bringing up four children, as a school pupil at a comprehensive, or as a pensioner.

Netizens are non-professionals who take the floor and intervene in discussions otherwise open only to experts. Who make themselves heard even if they have not studied rhetoric, are not PR consultants, and do not hold shares in the media industry, which would guarantee a certain degree of attention for their opinions. People who castigate the brainwashing, deceit and exploitation, the whole swindle of the State in the late capitalist age, who no longer simply accept the business world, which is also in the throes of its late capitalist stages, and who write, write, write whenever it is particularly painful. And they certainly do not mince their words when they write, not even when the opposite number that has provoked them to such an extent is the most powerful newspaper in the land. On the contrary, the more powerful the adversary, the greater the motivation to demonstrate one's capacities as a critic.



It is therefore probably no coincidence that the most popular German language blog is devoted exclusively to the tabloid *Bild Zeitung*: its daily lies, its unbearable journalistic smugness, its influence and its power in shaping opinions. Every day around 50 000 users throng the website of the [Bild blog](#). When compared with the twelve million readers of *Bild*, that is not exactly a huge figure. But it's enough to put the blog top of the "blogosphere" league table. Trailing far behind it come the other blogs, with only up to one-seventh as many visits per day. This state of affairs almost seems to speak for

itself. Civil disobedience has become concentrated at this locus in the Internet and multiplies wherever it is a question of reacting to extreme injustice.

There would be nothing to add to this perfect success story of citizen journalism if the founder of this platform did not happen to be a former employee of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* who gave up his well-paid job at Germany's most famous daily newspaper to set up the *Bild blog*. If it is mentioned at all, the professional background of the brains behind the *Bild blog* is cited as proof of his altruism, his instinct for the next big trend and his credibility. Perhaps even also to legitimise the quality of the project. But the fact that a professional journalist, in conjunction with other professionals, is attacking something that the intellectual middle and upper class find out of the question anyway — couldn't this give us every reason to ask questions?

It certainly could, indeed should, be asked what it says about the "blogosphere" if the branch leader, widely-respected in the blogging world, is steered by a professional journalist, rather than by some average citizen who had simply had enough of being made a fool of by the *Bild Zeitung* day in and day out? Shouldn't one also go on to ask who these 50 000 people that indulge in the *Bild blog* are? Doesn't their interest in the paper virtually boost readership of their declared enemy by a further 50 000? After all, these 50 000 are probably not run-of-the-mill readers of the *Bild Zeitung*, but people who anyway know better and — although this is just a malicious insinuation — simply want to have this confirmed.

This latter point falls into the realm of speculation. One thing is certain though: the blogs with high visitor figures are not produced by the hoi polloi. [TVBlogger](#), [Lawblog](#), [Spreblick](#) and [Mein Parteibuch](#), which rank among the top 5 German-language blogs, along with the *Bild blog*, are anything but amateur projects. However, the *Bild blog* also demonstrates that the grassroots touch is in demand. It is definitely no coincidence that the website of *Spreblick* adopts such a dilettante air. Johnny Haeussler, laureate of the Grimme Online Award and head of this project, could certainly have not had it programmed more deftly. The success of *Bild blog* in no small part also makes clear that citizen journalism works particularly well when it is produced by journalists for journalists or would-be journalists. To that extent, "this blogging business" as such should be thoroughly called into question once again.

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