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Bennett, Daniel - *Digital Media and Reporting Conflict, Blogging and the BBC's coverage of War and Terrorism*, Routledge, New York, 2013, pp. 292 ISBN: 9781136688072

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It is the nightmare of any ethical journalist working for a huge broadcasting network. It is the hoax that works, first in a news agency story, then backed by a fake website. Interestingly it does not crop up in the index of this dense, jargon-heavy book. But it is intriguing that the BBC was duped by a 'spokesperson' for the Union Carbide chemical company in a live TV interview from Paris with an offer of compensation for the thousands of people who died in the Indian city of Bhopal during gas leaks from a pesticide factory in 1984. The payment would have been millions. Reporters from a splash of outlets wanted to know more. This was, as the 'Beeb's' Defence Correspondent Caroline Wyatt, then in Paris, puts it 'a failure of research at the most basic level' (93). Worse was to come, however.

Ten terrorists who attacked the city of Mumbai for more than 60 hours from November 26 to 28 in 2008 left 174 dead and hundreds wounded. The BBC's website recorded 6.8 million unique users on the second day. '… everything is being recorded by the media. Inflict the maximum damage' (148) was a command by mobile phone to the gunmen, according to Indian security. A British businessman trapped in the Taj Mahal Hotel told the BBC he was in a salon. Again asked about his location, he said he was locked in. This was posted on the BBC website and transcribed for an eyewitness piece nine minutes later. He died 13 hours after the interview. While the death was nor linked to the interviews, one BBC journalist was concerned about what had happened and that security worries were not sufficiently considered. The BBCV, said a senior editor, would have been more cautious had the attack been in the UK.

The dread of such failures looms large at the BBC, most notably when it comes to terrorism. It may comes as no surprise then, that one of the more senior BBC gatekeepers distrusts 'any source' on such a story, government or extremists – and that includes blogs. Concerns over accurate reporting are amplified in the context of defence and security, where erroneous reporting might cost lives [thus] bringing the

organisation under legal or moral scrutiny,' writes Daniel Bennett (96). Rather, seeing for yourself and using trusted sources and contacts, the tried and tested way, is preferable.

In his useful but somewhat jargon-heavy book, Bennett looks at new forms of online reporting of the BBC's coverage of war and terrorism between 2007 and 2011 based on interviews with more than 60 staff. His book is a useful primer as the future of journalism becomes dependent on an 'uneasy truce' between traditional media organisations and the 'collective intelligence' of the 'networked society' as a result of changing circumstances and values. Like the old joke about 'army intelligence' however, it remains to be seen just how worthwhile or even basically reliable that society is.

That said, it is impossible to understate the effect of Salam Pax. Lightning struck when a 29-year-old architect in Baghdad started a blog to stay in touch with a friend in Jordan in September 2002. As the US invasion of March 2003 approached, this 'witty and insightful' anonymous column grabbed a global audience. Both *The Guardian* and the BBC used his pieces. He evolved from being a 'new media' blogger into a central journalistic source, war correspondent, author and filmmaker. The web had produced a new voice. Straight away however, it was one that clashed with the entrenched values of 'objective' news, impartiality, accuracy, expertise and authority.

Of course the blogs could not be stopped as an 'important alternative source of information when first-hand reporting is too dangerous or in contexts when militaries and governments are managing information and access to conflict areas'. On the other hand, editors' blogs were used by the BBC 'as a tool of accountability' (5). Given the ease with which online criticism may cascade and the demand of some bloggers for greater transparency in the news process, it is unsurprising that new channels were opened between journalists and their audience. Making much use of Janus, the Roman god of gatekeepers and doors with his gaze on the past and future, Bennett mulls over the tension between the BBC's editorial approach and what he calls a new face of journalism, 'which is consciously subjective, transparent, publishes as it verifies and seeks to harness the "collective intelligence" of the audience' (7).

Bloggers were quickly into this fresh realm, highlighting perceived bias in reporting and criticising the lack of transparency in production and how journalists sourced stories. In came stories that the bloggers thought had been ignored or not seen as newsworthy; often they were raw and emotional, contra traditional journalism, but they fundamentally changed how newsrooms work. And they produced scoops, such as the *Drudge Report's* revelations on Monica Lewinsky in 1997, and other disclosures, such as a US Senator's allegedly racist comments and the use of fake documents by CBS News.

Blogs blossomed into big deals such as the *Daily Kos* and the *Huffington Post*. With breaking stories streaming across the top of their pages, hyperlinks and comments garnering a wider community, a new era dawned. War led to bloggers on the ground and, in the case of countries such as Lebanon, blogs from the diaspora, amplifying the message, spreading news and adding commentary. And they were seized upon to add to the coverage. While gruesome images were not distributed, they would have an impact on journalists seeing them. It is in this context that Bennett, who blogs *Mediating Conflict and Reporting War* (*The Frontline Club*) and is described as an independent scholar and author, plunges into the emergence of web-blogging, including a celebrity and gossip website whose author had a clear view of the World Trade Centre on 9/11. Cut to Mumbai in November 2008 and the carnage is flashed from phones almost instantly.

The following year, *YouTube* played a big part in the election crisis in Iran, especially with footage of a woman protester being killed. Pictures of Tunisians bringing down their president inspired Egyptians to oust Hosni Mubarak. Libya and Syria are spotlighted as activists send out images. *Twitter* came into play in a bombing in Bangalore when a technology entrepreneur used several mobile phones contacts to feed into his *Twitter* account.

Where news goes, there must also go PR however, so we learn that the British, US and Israeli militaries blog to project their views or, to use the author's jargon, 'offer a narrative of conflict online which is unmediated by the traditional media' (32). Then again, no PR could camouflage the fact that a volunteer British soldier blogged just days before he was killed on patrol in Afghanistan that promised new body armour had not arrived. The media in turn links with bloggers for mutual benefit, using NGOs, charities, activists and independent journalists to tell of dangerous places, learn about conflict and get stuff quickly. Journalists rushing to get to terror attacks are trumped by high-speed internet and phone cameras. In turn, journalists harvest these sources such as in the 2004 tsunami, London bombings of 2005 and the Middle East uprisings.

In taking hard look at journalists' sources, Bennett upends the accepted line on Vietnam, for instance, saying that during this war the media was mostly a follower and not a leader, offering 'just the facts' and of course, the efficient, powerful and authoritative official sources filled a 'vacuum of meaning'. The quotations are from Daniel Hallin's (1989) book *The 'Uncensored' War: The media and Vietnam*. Hallin writes that the media failed to reflect the antiwar movement until discontent emerged in the political mainstream.

There is useful material here, too, in an examination of the overriding aim of journalists in choosing sources: efficiency. A study by Herbert Gans and Mark Fishman (2004) found these six reasons to choose a source: past suitability, productivity, reliability, trustworthiness, authoritativeness and articulateness. Regular sources are seen as requiring less fact-checking, information can be 'sourced' to them without the need to verify every detail.

But what of blogs for accuracy as well as speed? There is no doubt journalists use them widely. Of 72 foreign journalists surveyed in China, the 42 who responded revealed 66 percent had used blogs as sources for a story in the previous three months.

The usefulness of the blogs could not be denied especially:

- As they exposed US use of poisonous white phosphorous
- Because BBC journalists incorporated blogs into the Corporation's output
- When commissioned reports created an acceptance of their use
- When the BBC adapted its structure to allow for their and other user-generated content.

One result was the acceptance of a greater range of views in which was called 'radical impartiality', perhaps showing that if you come up with an important-sounding name you can make changes. Where you should not have to make changes however, is in checking facts. So it is perhaps odd that Bennett devotes so much space to the BBC rigidly checking material on the net. Why wouldn't this be done? Since the book arose from a PhD thesis it should not perhaps be surprising, but it is astonishing, that the author's seemingly interminable use of the term 'access' in its various non-forms and even the word 'pressurise' (which is what happens to tyres) when he means 'pressured'.

As for the nub of the book, blogging with all its faults, according to the grandly titled Executive Editor of the BBC College of Journalism, has done more to change how journalists work than possibly anything else so far. He does omit the telephone. But the innovations are there: a reporter 'filing' by *Twitter* is edited as if it were a live broadcast. And so are the blunders: an alleged massacre by pro-government militia in Syria was illustrated on the BBC by a photo later found to have been taken in Iraq almost a decade before.

It is stating the obvious that the tsunami-like rise in mass self-communication, with its blogs and other outlets, multiplies the job of sifting, organising, aggregating and curating. Simply put, more editors are needed. So to this old hand at least, it comes as a relief that in a book devoted to the march of technology the author notes the need for journalists to act as human 'redactors', or as he puts it, 'human search engines in an era with automation is improving, but cannot yet be taught the elusive and ever-shifting concept of "news value"'(192). So computers are not after all, going to take over as subs.

Such relief is soon followed by a serious rider however. Bennett finds that correspondents reporting from London have a news cycle with such a pace and so much information , plus so many outlets that need feeding that they did not have time to hunt for blogs and verify the information on them. Certainly those reporting on conflict and terrorism use their contacts and not blogs. Over four years the author was an observer of the BBC, a blogger (learning by doing) and an energetic interviewer of many journalists.

Interestingly, he concludes that *Twitter* is emerging as the journalist's tool of choice for finding online newsworthy material. The Beeb did away with its blog network, moving to 'correspondent pages' where the personalities of these journalists, the Corporation's 'crown jewels', enhance its authority. For the future, he sees soldiers, citizens, activists, governments and the military providing material for an evolving range of online media platforms which would contribute to the BBC's journalism. Sounding somewhat like the Corporation, he concludes that its impartial and objective approach to covering conflict will be complemented by a more collaborative tone reflecting the views of correspondents and the 'authentic views of those experiencing conflict' (204). Could it be that this is what we occasionally see and hear?

References

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About the reviewer

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