

Foreign Correspondence in the Digital Age:

An analysis of *India Ink*—the *New York Times*' India-specific blog

Newly Paul

Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University

Abstract

This paper is a case study of *India Ink*, the *New York Times*' first country-specific blog, launched in September 2011. This paper examines the blog's content in order to analyze the ways in which participatory Web 2.0 tools have changed foreign coverage. Findings indicate that through interactive multimedia, crowd-sourced content, and collaboration between Indian and American reporters, *India Ink* is helping foreign correspondence thrive amidst drastic newsroom budget cuts.

Introduction

In May 2011, when 33-year-old Sohaib Athar from Abbottabad, Pakistan, began sending out live Twitter messages about a helicopter hovering above the city at 1 a.m., a mysterious blast and shaking windows, he did not realize that he was documenting the U.S. military attack that took down al Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden. In 36 tweets, Athar described what he heard and saw around him, reports from his local network of friends and rumors from the web.

“Osama Bin Laden killed in Abbottabad, Pakistan.: ISI has confirmed it << Uh oh, there goes the neighborhood :-/,” he tweeted, just hours after Operation Neptune Spear ended, 1.5 miles away from his home (McCullagh 2011), thereby becoming one of the most-interviewed citizen journalists in recent times. In the years before Twitter and social networking sites (SNSs), readers would have to wait for traditional foreign correspondents to get news from around the

world. But with Twitter and SNSs, the world is flatter and news travels faster. As Hamilton (2009) points out, “Until recently, journalists had a virtual monopoly on news gathering and dissemination... The foreign correspondent was indispensable. The weblogs or bloggers are evidence that the monopoly no longer exists.”

The widespread use of the Internet means anyone with a camera and Internet-enabled phone can be a journalist. This changing media landscape is causing a swift evolution in the role of the foreign correspondent. While dismal economic conditions in American newsrooms do not allow for editors to maintain traditional foreign bureaus, they do not mean that foreign correspondence is dying. It’s simply changing in tune with the changing times and technologies (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004). An example of these changing times is *India Ink*, the *New York Times*’ first country-specific blog, launched in September 2011. In this paper, I aim to conduct a case study analysis of this blog. By examining the blog’s content and the reporters’ use of digital media tools (video, slideshows, embedded links, etc.), I attempt to answer questions about the nature of the *New York Times*’ coverage of India-related topics in the digital age. Have participatory Web 2.0 tools improved coverage in any way? What kinds of stories appear in the blog? How do American and Indian journalists influence the content? These are some of the questions my paper seeks to answer.

Previous scholarship on foreign correspondence approaches the topic from a number of perspectives. The historical perspective (Marr, 2004; Hamilton, 2010) traces the growth of foreign correspondence through the ages—from the age of telegraphs and telephones to satellite phones and the Internet. Technological determinism guides this theory, the argument being that evolving technology has guided the evolution of foreign correspondence. The feminist perspective (Geertsema, 2009) on the study of global news argues that in an era of increasing globalization, women are underrepresented and stereotyped in national, international and global news media. Giving the example of the representation of Arab women in Western media, Geertsema (2009) notes, “The problem is exacerbated when geographic boundaries are crossed and the media in one country report on issues and events, particularly those that impact women, in another country.” The critical cultural perspective (Berger, 2009) is similar to the feminist perspective in some ways. It reflects on imbalanced flows between developed and “developing

nations.” As Berger, 2009 argues, the developing world experiences the Internet as an international medium, from a subordinate cultural and linguistic position.

Compared with the amount of scholarship on foreign correspondence, there is a lot more research on digital media and online journalism. Many scholars have studied the blog as a news format and the changes it has brought to the traditional news format. Robinson (2006) defines a news blog as “a cross between a column, a news story and a journal.” Tracing the history of the development of blogs, she says in the beginning blogs were a way for people “out there” to take back their news, to comment on mainstream journalism and to present their own analysis of news events. Wall (2004) called it a sort of “black market” journalism. But the trend of mainstream publications such as the *New York Times* starting their own blogs gives an interesting twist to the attempt to recapture journalism authority. Wendland (2003) notes that blogging consists of “news that is happening now almost in real time – not filtered, edited, or delay delivered, as with traditional media” (p. 94). According to Pohlig (2003), journalism blogs are popular because, “they allow the reader to see the journalist as a human being, connecting with them without the stiff, imperial voice that turns so many young people off. And most blogs allow– indeed thrive on–reader interaction” (p. 25). As Robinson sums up, the very notion of blogging challenges traditional journalism framing practices, and the result could be different frames, or no frames at all. My study analyzes *India Ink* from each of these perspectives.

My sample for this study includes 87 items published on the blog between September and December, 2011. This sample includes interviews, news and feature articles, photo-essays and videos. I think this study is relevant because it explores a rapidly changing aspect of the news industry in America, especially at a time when the news industry is undergoing rapid change. A census of foreign news bureaus taken by the American Journalism Review (AJR) in December/January 2011 stated that the number of foreign correspondents employed by U.S. newspapers had decreased markedly since the last AJR census in 2003. “A count largely conducted in July shows that 10 newspapers and one chain employ 234 correspondents (including one vacancy) to serve as eyes and ears to global events. In 2003, AJR found 307 full-time correspondents and pending assignments,” said a report (Kumar 2011). Further, surveys such as the State of the News Media conducted by the Pew Research Center, show worrying trends about the importance of foreign news in American newsrooms. “Barely a quarter (26%) of

editors from larger papers still consider foreign news as “very essential,” compared to just 6% of their colleagues from smaller dailies,” reports the State of the News Media, 2008 survey (Pew 2011).

At the same time, however, it has perhaps never been more important to know what’s happening in the other parts of the world. Expectations from international news reporting are changing, mostly because of “the growing interconnectedness of the world, through global communications, ease of travel and increasing migration” (Sambrook, 2010, p. 47). International political and economic interdependence has made it important for the “foreign” to be well-known. Then there is the ever-expanding diaspora community that pays special attention to news from the homeland. As Hamilton (2010) points out, “The foreign-born population of the United States is the largest it has been in the past hundred years,” (p. 479) and it is important that the American news media serves “these immigrants and their offspring in the way African-American correspondents served their audience during World War II—by providing news specially tailored to their interests” (p. 479).

India Ink: Background and Structure

The Times has maintained a long tradition of commitment to foreign news. One of the reasons it has managed to carry on this tradition is that publisher Albert Ochs’s heirs have maintained control over the majority of Times stock voting rights. This has made the newspaper “less susceptible to the sentiment of investors who want bigger returns” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 484). The launch of the India-specific blog, however, was not completely free from financial considerations. A report about the launch said the *New York Times*’ new venture suggests “Western publishers may look to the large Indian market for growth potential, especially as broadband penetration and incomes rise there” (Kaplan, 2011, para 1). By sharpening its India focus, the company was following a series of U.S. websites, broadcast channels and newspapers, such as *Wall Street Journal*, The History Channel, *Forbes* and *Fortune* that entered the Indian market in the past few years through content, partnerships and collaborations. For now, access to the blog is exempt from the *New York Times*’ digital subscription package, hence it’s unclear what the site’s revenue model is. Currently, *India Ink* has one prominent space for advertisements toward the top right corner of the site.

Describing the editorial content of the blog, Jim Schachter, associate managing editor, NYTimes.com, said in a press release that the aim is to provide “a richer, deeper, wider report for an audience in India – and the Indian diaspora – that is hungry for independent, authoritative coverage reflecting Western journalistic values.” The blog is edited by the NYT staff in India and the *International Herald Tribune* in Hong Kong, led by lead writer Heather Timmons, who has covered business in India for the NYT for the last four years. The blog lists 22 writers—a mix of Indian and American nationals based in India and abroad—who contribute to the content. Of this pool of writers, 10 work exclusively for the Times, writing articles for the main newspaper as well as *India Ink*, and the rest are freelancers. The blog’s producer, Pamposh Raina, is based in India.

The blog’s webpage design is similar to that of the main website. A blue and black logo of a fountain pen appears beside the site’s headline: India Ink—Notes on the world’s largest democracy. The site is updated several times each day, and there is an average of seven to nine stories per day. Though it is a news site it does not provide breaking-news updates on everything that happens around the country. Instead, as Schachter explained, the journalists “attempt to lead a conversation through the day about the most important news of and about India, and to frame the big issues of everyday life in a fast-changing society.”(citation?) The site provides news summaries of the day culled from leading Indian dailies, commentary on society and culture, photo or video features, and special series on topics such as education, economy and poverty. Each article has a section for readers’ comments and share options using Facebook and Twitter. The website offers an RSS feed and an option to sign up via email to receive daily headlines.

The blog is divided into two columns. The left column carries editorial content, while the right has assorted items. Below the main advertisement on the left is the site’s Twitter feed, where journalists provide links to interesting stories from the NYT website, usually *India Ink* content, re-tweet followers’ content, and interact with followers by asking questions, commenting, or answering questions. Another feature is a chart displaying information from the financial markets of India, Asia, U.S., Europe, and the commodities market, and currency exchange rates. Apart from this there are two sections, one titled “Global Business News,” which has a collection of links to articles that appeared in the NYT Global edition’s business section, and the archives section where articles that appeared in *India Ink* are searchable by the month in

which they appeared. A blogroll titled “What we are Reading,” with a list of the most popular news and opinion websites from India, and a section linking to opinion pieces by Thomas Friedman, Nicholas Kristof, Paul Krugman and Roger Cohen complete the rest of the elements on the site. The articles of each of these writers, except Kristof, are accessible only to subscribers.

Content and Themes

The growth in news opportunities to consume is in direct contrast to the freeze across professional newsgathering. News distribution channels have expanded exponentially. If we want to find out country-specific news, we can use a simple Google search to get it directly from the website of newspapers in that country. It is unnecessary to rely on the *New York Times*’ coverage of country-specific news. Similarly, news for radio and television stations is available online, complete with video and audio packages and podcasts, encouraging readers to download and listen to their favorite at their convenience. With the market for fact or evidence-based journalism becoming highly competitive, it is hardly surprising that opinion-led journalism is becoming popular with news editors. The *India Ink* blog, however, is positioned in a unique place because it offers a mix of facts and opinions.

In 2005, remarking on the changing media landscape, David Hoffman, the *Washington Post*’s assistant managing editor for foreign news said: “We now live in a nanosecond news cycle. Correspondents must be ‘information warriors’” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 450). He expected reporters to write first for the web and then for the newspaper. That double process, he argued, “makes the second story better organized and written with more flair, which is essential if a reader is going to pick up a newspaper when the main points of the story are already out via television or the Internet” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 450). Though *India Ink* is web-based, it functions more like a newspaper in Hoffman’s sense. While every article is built off current events, there are no breaking news updates—the emphasis is on commentary and explanation.

Choosing opinions over facts has an advantage. Opinions are useful compared with other papers that make use of news agencies, thereby creating an echo-chamber effect where the same points of view reverberate repeatedly, or worse, causing factual and other errors to get

disseminated widely. As Paterson (2006) notes, discourse on international events of consequence within the global public sphere is substantially determined by the production practices and institutional priorities of two information services—Reuters and the Associated Press. By minimal use of news from the wire services, and by using original reporting in its feature, in-depth, and opinion articles, *India Ink* successfully builds credibility with readers.

In the following paragraphs, I perform an in-depth analysis of the various components of the blog.

News in *India Ink*:

Every week, a reporter summarizes the week's events from around the country as reported in the Indian press, in a section called "Newswallah." The write up provides a succinct summary of news, with special emphasis on the biggest political and social stories. These snippets have embedded links leading back to the original articles in the national English-language newspaper websites. Newswallah has several editions. The long-reads edition, as the name suggests, summarizes profiles, feature-length articles, interviews, and other examples of long-form journalism in the Indian press. For example, the Newswallah long-reads edition on September 11, 2011 (Polgreen 2011) included a profile of Arvind Kejriwal, the man behind India's most popular anti-corruption movement in recent times published in *The Caravan*; an essay in *Tehelka* magazine by veteran journalist and analyst Prem Shankar Jha who argued that the only real way to tackle corruption is through election reform; a piece in *Outlook Magazine* dissecting the reasons behind the calm that has settled over the terrorism-ridden Kashmir Valley; and "a scholarly but highly readable look" by *Economic & Political Weekly* at the legacy of the 1971 war for independence. The Bollywood edition of Newswallah is written by Indian film critic Anupama Chopra and includes original writing. Its content varies from opinion to interviews of Bollywood actors, filmmakers etc. The Bharat (India) edition summarizes one interesting article of the week from an Indian state. Occasionally, this section carries straight news reports with original reporting. For instance, on September 14, 2011, the site carried a story about a terrorist chief being killed by the police in Kashmir (Kumar Sept. 14, 2011). The day a fire broke out in a Kolkata hospital killing dozens, *India Ink* did a summary of the event, with an embedded link to an *Associated Press* story, and then followed up with an interview of the chief fire officer in Delhi, written by the *India Ink* producer (Raina 2011).

By providing summaries, this section helps readers get quick access to some of the most pertinent news items of the week without investing time in in-depth reading or searching on the web for region-specific news. By providing embedded links to the original articles, this section makes great use of digital media to counter the concern of some theorists about dominant media (in this case Western or English) speaking on behalf of the “natives.” Readers who wish to read more about a particular issue, or get the Indian media’s interpretation of events can do so by clicking on the links embedded in the article. In addition to giving a voice to Indian media on a global platform, this practice reduces the possibility of misrepresentation or misinterpretation of a subject with which the foreign media might be unfamiliar. By keeping an eye on the latest events, the blog keeps itself relevant to readers in India and abroad, and by doing follow-up stories on breaking news events, the blog performs an important function of journalism—that of acting as a watchdog—and draws attention to important issues that might easily get lost in fickle public memories. **Features and Special series in *India Ink*:**

In his book, *My Trade: A short history of British journalism* (2004), journalist Andrew Marr says technological development goes two ways for journalists. On the one hand it brings speed and vividness, and on the other it reduces the time a reporter has to watch, think, listen and compose. By investing in commentary and analysis instead of breaking news, I think *India Ink* largely sidesteps the issues that arise out of technology disempowering the reporter. The blog’s salient content is in-depth features, and by giving a story the long-form treatment, the blog allows more room for reporters to explicate complex issues. For instance, in a series titled “The Long View: Current events from the view of history,” author Samanth Subramanian traces historical precedents of events currently in the news (Subramanian 2011). The first article in this series was about Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi’s hush-hush trip to the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. Instead of reporting on rumors that Gandhi was in the U.S. to undergo treatment for cancer (which most media outlets did) Subramanian’s article traced the established tradition of Indian political leaders guarding news of their health as if it were a state secret. “Not for them the publicly fought battles of Rudy Giuliani against his prostate cancer, of Dick Cheney against his troublesome heart, or of Hugo Chavez against his recent pelvic abscess,” he wrote.

Another example is a multi-authored in-depth series titled “India’s Way: The messy and maddening road to progress in India,” which appears as a permanent feature on the home page of the blog. The idea is to feature examples of the juxtaposition of the traditional with the modern in India. Articles in this section offer comprehensive coverage of complex issues, and are often published in the New York edition of the newspaper, as well as in the for-subscription-only section of the main NY Times website. From time to time, the blog launches in-depth coverage on particular events. In the sample I analyzed, I saw an example of this in the coverage of the anti-corruption movement led by social activist Anna Hazare. Between October and December 2011, the blog carried 16 articles on the movement. These articles covered the issue from a variety of perspectives: some provided just the facts and tracked the progress of the movement, some critiqued the methods used by Hazare and his followers, and others analyzed the nature of the demands set by the group. Some of these articles were cross-posted on the global section of the main *New York Times* website. It was interesting to note that while most Indian media outlets were reluctant to criticize Hazare’s protest tactics, and often drew comparisons between him and Mahatma Gandhi’s protests, the reports in *India Ink* were more critical. For instance, Manu Joseph, an Indian journalist, talked about self-interest and corruption in the key leaders of the movement, (Joseph 2011) while *New York Times*’ economic correspondent, Hari Kumar talked about the hypocrisy among Indian politicians who say they want an effective and strong anti-corruption squad, while in reality they want the exact opposite.

The best of both worlds: Collaborative articles in *India Ink*:

Collaborative efforts between reporters in local and national media are nothing new, but it’s increasingly becoming a common feature of foreign correspondence. As Sambrook (2010) said, “In increasingly multicultural societies, national identity is more complex, and a white middle-class male reporter may not be an adequate cultural bridge between the country he is reporting and the audience at home.” In a digital environment, this dilemma is magnified as “digital media ensures that foreign journalists can no longer ‘get away’ with more because their subjects would never read, see or hear what had been said.”

Several of *India Ink*’s in-depth feature stories are written through collaborations between NYT reporters in America and India or two NYT reporters in India. Collaborative works benefit from the richness of ideas that two or more minds working together can produce; they are also a

depiction of the tactics used by changing foreign news bureaus to balance tight budgets with quality news coverage. Hamilton (2009) mentions new kinds of journalists that have emerged in foreign bureaus as a result of the changing media landscape. “The American foreign correspondent for the *New York Times* or CBS News—the familiar Traditional Foreign Correspondent—continues, but not alone. Three other types of correspondents have become integral to traditional mass media news-gathering abroad” (p. 465). These types are: the foreign foreign correspondent, local foreign correspondents, and citizen journalists.

Hamilton (2009) defines foreign foreign correspondents as “non-American reporters, often citizens of the countries they cover.” He cites a survey conducted 2000 that found that 69 percent of foreign correspondents for American news organizations were not Americans. At *India Ink*, 17 out of 22 correspondents are Indians based in India. The 2000 study also found that nearly one out of every foreign foreign correspondent earned his or her highest degree in the United States. This appears to be true to a large extent for *India Ink* reporters, and 10 of its Indian reporters have advanced degrees from abroad (U.S., Canada or England). Hamilton (2009) noted that though American and foreign foreign reporters “had remarkably similar news priorities for politics, economics, culture, social programs, sports, religion, environment/energy, and human rights” (p.466), these reporters are not the identical twins of American reporters. He noticed a number of trade-offs arising out of collaborations between different kinds of reporters working together. While foreign foreign correspondents may have a lesser understanding of the needs of American news consumers, they are, at the same time, better equipped to understand and interpret events abroad. Another paradox is that these correspondents may have more appreciation of local circumstances, and have a greater propensity toward bias. In short, “Foreigners have an intimate feel for local customs and politics, possess local language ability, and are convenient to hire (and if things did not work out, easy to let go)” (Hamilton, 2009, p. 162).

The second type of correspondent Hamilton (2009) mentions is local foreign correspondents, i.e. correspondents who cover the world from within the United States. There is a handful of this type at *India Ink*. For instance, *The Times*’ technology reporter, who is listed as an *India Ink* correspondent, is based in San Francisco. Similarly, contributor Shivani Vora, whose reports examine the diasporic Indian community, is based in New York. As Hamilton

(2009) explains, “Sometimes these reporters are dedicated full-time to stories involving local ties to foreign events and trends. Sometimes they cover foreign news as part of their work on another beat; for instance, a business reporter may look at the impact of foreign competition on a local manufacturing concern” (p.466). In short, local foreign correspondents are an expression of growing global interdependence, in which foreign affairs shape Americans’ lives every day in tangible ways.

In the sample examined for this study, *India Ink* did not have any examples of the third kind of correspondent—the citizen foreign correspondent—described by Hamilton (2009). According to him, these correspondents are “individuals without journalistic training or affiliation who become de facto journalists when they report on foreign events and issues, often by posting the information directly on the Internet.” Since they are unsupervised, self-appointed and work for free, they are not answerable to an editor for fairness or accuracy. They are highly partisan and unreliable in terms of delivery. Yet they provide valuable information often available nowhere else, as seen in late 2008 when terrorists attacked Mumbai, and victims and onlookers became citizen journalists by providing information through tweets. By soliciting tips, stories, and reactions from readers, however, *India Ink* is encouraging a particular form of this kind of correspondence. For now, these correspondents are represented on the blog through the blogroll, which links to some of the most popular citizen journalism blogs written by Indians in India. It might be a matter of time before articles in *India Ink* link directly to news or commentary from these blogs, or mention them as sources.

In addition to these three types of correspondents, *India Ink* has three traditional foreign correspondents—“Americans who are sent abroad by an established news organization to maintain a permanent bureau or who work abroad for years as freelance correspondents for such media” (Hamilton, 2009). *New York Times*’ South Asia bureau chief, Jim Yardley is an example of this kind of correspondent. Two other *India Ink* reporters, Heather Timmons, who has been in India for four years, and Lydia Polgreen, the *Times*’ Africa and South Asia correspondent, are other examples.

The Personal Touch

In keeping with the nature of a blog, *India Ink* sometimes publishes articles carrying deeply personal opinions, usually stemming from the author’s own life experiences.

Interestingly, these articles are not separated visually from the regular news and feature articles. In two such instances, readers flooded the comments section with their responses. The first instance was an article titled (Mungee 2011) “Why I Left India (Again),” about the author’s inability to adjust to life in India, after having spent 11 years in the U.S. “India’s wealth and lifestyle disparity is still impossibly great; I probably spent more on pizza than on my maid,” he wrote. Readers responded with 450 comments—mostly vitriolic. They accused him of being unpatriotic and hypocritical. The attacks continued on the author’s personal blog, and he reported, “A nice gentleman on Twitter said he’d hunt (him) down in the U.S.” The response was so overwhelming that a week later, the site’s editor Heather Timmons put together an article based solely on readers’ responses. She posted links to some of the reactions of readers from around the world, and then summed up the main themes that emerged from the tweets and comments. In another case, when New-York based author Shivani Vora wrote about her motherhood experience (Vora 2011), and the post-delivery care offered by her mother, readers accused her of propagating stereotypes about Indian parents. Most people took offence at her generalized observations about middle-class Indian parents’ aspirations for their daughters. “My parents pushed me to study, rather than learn how to make traditional Indian food. Instead of focusing on finding me a suitable husband, they wanted me to find a career which would make me independent,” wrote Vora, who moved to the U.S. when she was seven, pointing out how her parents were different from “traditional” Indians. Readers called her out on her generalization of gender bias. “My wife, an Indian, born and raised in India never had to choose kitchen over education,” commented a reader. “I have nine female first cousins—some of them came of age in the 1940s and others in the 1980s. The older cousins are now retired and some retired as Professors, others as principals of high schools or professional colleges,” wrote another.

In my opinion, these are examples of the way in which *India Ink* uses the form and structure of a blog platform to add an informal and personal touch to articles. While opinion columns in newspapers might generate similar discussion among readers, the blog’s comments section works differently. One, it is public—which means readers can read and respond to each other’s comments, which in both the examples above they did. Second, the digital platform allows a certain swiftness in response, both from readers and the author, allowing for better chances of a meaningful discussion. And lastly, the ease of distribution of a blog’s content—readers shared the story on social networking sites and emailed the link to their friends, which

helped the article attract readership and attention, and generate more readership for the site. The blog went one step ahead by acknowledging its readers opinions and ascribing value to them, when it published a follow-up article based purely on the reactions the article generated from all over the world.

Depicting the subaltern

As discussed in the sections above, technology and the blog format have helped free foreign correspondence of several binds imposed on it by traditional methods of news reporting and traditional mainstream media. How applicable is this freedom to the depiction of women? Does technology allow for a “true” depiction of India, without the tinge of “othering” that a Western lens could produce? As Geertsema (2009) points out in her feminist critique of foreign correspondence, there are many examples of the lack of representation of women and of negative or stereotypical representations, whether on the national, international, or global level. The news media commit both sins of omission and sins of commission (Made, Lowe-Morna & Kwaramba 2003). The Global Media Monitoring Project (WACC 2005, p. 17) found that women are more than twice as likely as men to be portrayed as victims, and that they primarily appear in the news as celebrities, royalty or “ordinary people.” Women are also frequently represented within their domestic roles and sexual appeal to men (Ceulemans & Fauconnier 1979), or as wives and mothers, sex objects and glamour girls, virgins or whores, or passive, dependent and indecisive (Gallagher 1981). According to Valdivia (1995), postcolonial women are forced to remain silent partly because of “the Western press’s inability to envision such women as speaking subjects on public issues” (p. 15). Luthra (1995) argues that the mass media embody modernity whereas women embody tradition. The intersection of race and gender contributes to the “othering” of women, as news reports about the Third World often create an us/them dichotomy, with the “other” represented as unstable and violent, while “us” are being shown as industrialized, ordered and stable (Dahlgren 1982). Hosken (1996) points out that the focus in international news is typically on political problems, disasters, conflicts, and war, and very little is reported on the lives of women in the limited space dedicated to international affairs.

India Ink’s unique mix of reporters from varied backgrounds combined with its use of technology, which allows for diverse voices to get heard, and promote interactivity, helps it avoid most of the pitfalls of biased reporting. It’s true, however, that the blog lacks adequate and

sustained coverage on women. Its regular series on women, “Ms India,” only had one feature over the four-month period of sample collection for this study. The article was about women running a printing press in South India (Roy 2011). Contrary to Valdivia’s (1995) assertions, the coverage was far from stereotypical. It portrayed women from a lower socio-economic strata in an empowered role and allowed them to represent themselves. Another series, “The Other India,” by author Sonia Faleiro, carried stories from India’s small towns and villages: stories of farmers, weavers, teachers, dancing troupes, small-time politicians, pickle-makers, housewives, and circus artists, who are usually depicted as disempowered and victims in traditional media. The topics for this series could be considered stereotypical by some scholars in that they portray the exotic, the poverty and the grime in India. The stories, however, are very sensitively written, and are accompanied by photographs of specific characters in the story, thus avoiding generalizations about social situations. The text is written in a way that allows agency to the main characters, and is devoid of the author’s judgments. Thus, I would conclude that in its limited space and capacity, *India Ink* makes an effort to focus on issues related to the marginalized population in a respectable way. But considering the vast digital divide in a country of 1.2 billion between those with computer access and those without, it is debatable whether and to what extent the subjects of these stories have the opportunity to engage with the reporter and provide their feedback.

Use of Multimedia in *India Ink*:

Though *India Ink*’s scope and volume of multimedia components do not match with that of the main *New York Times* website, the blog makes a decent attempt to parse out stories through different media. Some of the most memorable instances of video use include a story about the endangered profession of traditional Indian music bands that play at wedding processions (Teng 2011). Shot by a freelance videographer, the story has a short write up and uses mostly on-camera interviews to tell the story. Another example is a photo slideshow, with video and text on Calcutta, by father-son photographer duo Alex and Sidin Vadukul (Vadukul 2011). Through images, words and sound the two provide their personal take on the city of their origin. Though seen from a Western lens, there is no attempt to exoticize Calcutta. The article was cross-posted from the *Times*’ magazine section.

Interaction with readers

One of the components of the multimedia elements used by *India Ink* is audience interaction methods. Almost every article is accompanied by a question asking readers for their reactions and recommendations in the comments section, or encouraging some other kind of participation. In cases where the comments become particularly lively or interesting, the reporter might join the debate and make a new point, clarify a misunderstood aspect of the story or answer a question. Apart from engaging readers in the comments section, *India Ink* uses crowdsourcing techniques to generate ideas for stories. This is a particularly savvy way of keeping the website relevant for readers. For instance, at the height of the anti-corruption movement by social activist Anna Hazare, *India Ink* started a special feature called “I Did Not Pay a Bribe.” The site identified this as “a collaborative project with readers, devoted to showing how some people manage to get things done in India, without paying extra (bribes).” This is the appeal it sent to readers:

“Did you get a driver’s license, a government job, a home, an electricity connection or your daughter admitted to school without paying a bribe, when others around you did? Write us at IndiaInk@nytimes.com and tell us in detail about your experience. Your tale may help your neighbor or someone across the country.”

The first issue of this feature reported on a dental assistant and her family who stood in line for six hours, rather than pay seven times the actual fee for her family’s vaccinations.

In another instance of soliciting reader involvement, the blog asked readers to send stories of “Indians far from home, working unlikely jobs, keeping traditions in unusual ways.” This question was attached to an article giving a roundup of Indian immigrants around the world and their stories of resilience (Bajaj 2011).

Ethical Issues:

In my opinion, *India Ink* does a commendable job of negotiating tricky ethical situations by using digital tools. For instance, in an article about the 7 billionth baby of the world being born in India (Gottipati 2011), the reporter visited a “half dozen maternity wards in Delhi.” The article appeared on the blog with a series of photographs depicting conditions inside the maternity ward. The report painted a grim picture of these wards:

Dozens of pregnant women lay splayed, groaning on rusty beds with creaky wheels. Some clutched their heads and watched the filthy fans whirring above them. Blood and body fluids were everywhere. In dingy rooms with peeling walls and grimy peach tiles, these women knew little about the world's 7 billionth person, nor really seemed to care.

At first glance, the article may appear biased—a reader commenting on the article questioned why the reporter was looking at a developing country's underfunded healthcare system through a First-World, Western lens. She also commented on the photographer violating the patients' rights to privacy. Merely reading the text of the article might give this impression. But when one clicks to the photo slideshow, a wholly different context emerges. The slideshow is accompanied by several paragraphs of text by the photographer, which gives a very detailed background of how the story came to be. In her explanation, the photographer (herself seven months pregnant) mentions her long career of photographing women in maternity wards all around the world—from Haiti to Africa, Sierra Leone, Congo, Afghanistan and Pakistan. She describes in detail the reason behind choosing that particular hospital (it was one of the largest maternity hospitals in Delhi, and possibly Asia) and the process of gaining access and permission to shoot pictures. "It's important to be respectful to the people that you're photographing. In a maternity ward/health story, it's hard because things are very graphic and women are very exposed," she explained, referring to the process of making the patients comfortable and informing them about the project, before photographing them.

In a print publication, providing this kind of transparency would have been impossible due to limitations of space. Readers might have been left with resentful questions about what went on behind the scenes, especially for a complex story such as this. But with the use of digital tools, the blog was able to avoid an ethical dilemma.

Conclusion

On November 30, last year, Athar tweeted: "About to answer questions with @KateBussmann for her book #twinterview2011." Athar's act of citizen journalism—live tweeting Osama's death—had turned him into an example of the forms journalism could take in the future. As Hamilton (2010) notes, in the future we will see "endless mixing of old and new models."

I think *India Ink* is an important step in exploring a model for expanding the possibilities of foreign correspondence in the digital era. In its two and a half years of existence, the blog's well-thought out and credible coverage has provided readers a useful tool to experience India. The articles on the blog provide in-depth coverage and context, which can be hard to find in today's media-saturated times of excessive information. Regardless of news budgets, the importance of foreign correspondents and of having a team on the ground will never cease, and *India Ink*, is a good example of the way forward.

References:

- Bajaj, V. (2011, September 12) From Sikhs and Cheese to Patels and Motels, *India Ink*. At <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/12/from-sikhs-and-cheese-to-patels-and-motels/>
- Berger, G (2009). How the Internet impacts on international news: exploring paradoxes of the most global medium in a time of 'hyperlocalism,' *International Communication Gazette*, 71(5), pp. 355-371.
- Byerly, C. & Ross, K. (2006). *Women & Media: A Critical Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Ceulemans, M. & Fauconnier, G. (1979). *Mass Media: The Image, Role, and Social Conditions of Women: A Collection and Analysis of Research Materials*, UNESCO, Paris.
- Dahlgren, P. (1982). The third world on TV news: western ways of seeing the "other." In Adams, W. (Ed.) *Television Coverage of International Affairs*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, pp. 45-66.
- Geertsema, M. (2009). Women and News: Making connections between the global and the local. *Feminist Media Studies*, 9(2), pp. 149 -172.
- Gottipati, S. (2011, November 2) Numbers Aside, India's Newborns Face Challenges, *India Ink*. At <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/02/numbers-aside-indias-newborn-face-challenges/>

- Marr, A (2004). *My Trade: A short history of British journalism*. New York: Macmillan.
- Hamilton, J.M. & Jenner, E. (Fall, 2004). Foreign Correspondence: Evolution, Not Extinction. *Nieman Reports*, pp. 98-100.
- Hamilton, J. M. (2009). *Journalism's Roving Eye: A History of American Foreign Reporting*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Joseph, M. (2011, October 26). In India, a Movement Frayed by Self-Interest, *India Ink*. At <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/27/world/asia/27iht-letter27.html?pagewanted=all>
- Kaplan, D. (2011, September, 10). NYTimes.com Launches English-Language India News Blog. [paidContent.org](http://paidcontent.org). Retrieved April 26, 2012, from paidcontent.org/2011/09/10/419-nytimes-com-launches-english-language-india-news-blog/
- Kumar, P. (2011, December/January) Foreign Correspondents: Who Covers What. www.ajr.org. Retrieved April 25, 2011, from <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=4997>
- Luthra, R. (1995). The “abortion clause” in U.S. foreign population policy: the debate viewed through a postcolonial feminist lens. In Valdivia, A. (Ed.) *Feminist Media Studies in a Global Setting: Beyond Binary Contradictions and into Multicultural Spectrums*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 197–216.
- Made, P. A., Lowe-Morna, C. & Kwaramba, A. (2003). Gender and Media Baseline Study: *Southern African Regional Overview, Gender Links*, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- McCullagh, D. (2011, May 4) Sohaib Athar on Twitter fame after bin Laden raid (Q&A). www.news.cnet.com. Retrieved April 25, 2012, from http://news.cnet.com/8301-31921_3-20059868-281.html
- Mungee, S. (2011, October 22, 2011) Why I Left India (Again), *India Ink*. At <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/why-i-left-india-again/>

- Paterson, C. (2005). News Agency Dominance in International News on the Internet. In Skinner, D.; Compton, J. & Gasher, M. (Eds.), *Converging Media, Diverging Politics: A Political Economy of the News Media in the United States and Canada* (Lanham, MD: Lexington).
- Pew Research Center (2008). *The State of the News Media, 2008: An annual report on American journalism*. Retrieved from <http://stateofthemediamedia.org/2008/special-reports-the-future-of-advertising/the-changing-newspaper-newsroom/>
- Pohlig, C. (2003). 'How a Newspaper Becomes H.I.P.,' *Neiman Reports* (Winter), 24–6.
- Polgreen, L. (2011, September 11) Newswallah: Long Reads Edition, *India Ink*. At <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/newswallah-long-reads-edition/>
- Raina, P. (2011, December 9, 2011) 'What Can the Government Do?' *India Ink*. At <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/09/q-and-a-on-kolkata-hospital-fire/>
- Robinson, S. (2006). The mission of the j-blog: Recapturing journalistic authority online. *Journalism*, 7(1), 65-83.
- Roy, N. S. (2011, September 14). Ms. India: The Women's Printing Press, *India Ink*. At <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/14/ms-india-the-womens-printing-press/>
- Sambrook, R. (2010). Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant? The changing face of international news. *Challenges*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford.
- Subramanian, S. (2011, September 12) The Long View: Current Events from the View of History, *India Ink*. At <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/12/the-long-view-current-events-though-the-lens-of-history/>

- Teng, P.S. (2011, October 10) When the Music Stops, *India Ink*. At <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/10/when-the-music-stops/>
- Tuchman, G. (1978). Introduction: the symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media. In Tuchman, G.; Kaplan, D. & Benet, J. (Eds.) *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 3–38.
- Vadukul, A. (2011, November 17) Filthy Gorgeous, NYTimes Travel. At <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/17/filthy-gorgeous/>
- Vora, S. (2011, October 1). Modernity and Tradition Merge in Motherhood, *India Ink*. At <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/01/modernity-and-tradition-merge-in-motherhood/>
- Wall, M. (2004) ‘Blogs as Black Market Journalism: A New Paradigm for News,’ Berglund Center for Internet Studies. At <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2004/02/wall.php>
- Weintraub, D. (2003, 7 April) ‘Daniel Weintraub: Why a Blog?,’ *Sacramento Bee*. At <http://www.sacbee.com/content/politics/columns/weintraub/story/6414174p-7366437c.html>
- Wendland, M. (2003), ‘Blogging Connects a Columnist to Story Ideas,’ *Nieman Reports* (Fall), Lexis-Nexis database.
- World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) (2005). Who Makes the News? *Global Media Monitoring Project 2005*, [Online] Available at: www.whomakesthenews.org.

Biography

Newly Paul is a doctoral student at the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University. Her research focuses on race and gender issues in political communication. She also has a special interest in ethnic media.