Blogging –
redefining global modern journalism:
An Omani perspective

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Introduction:

The modern advanced communication technologies have added a new dimension to the production and consumption of news journalism around the world. They have enabled the creation of new publishing spaces where diverse voices can engage in conversations about matters affecting daily lives. The Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) present citizens with many opportunities to produce as well as consume information.

The changes in media usage is becoming a cultural phenomenon characterized by the evolving developments in communication technologies. It has been described as the "interactive phase of modernity" where everyone has the opportunity to communicate with one or many through the modern interactive communication technologies.

The modern mediasphere is now largely characterized by interactive technologies. Mainstream media are no longer the only source of news medium available to citizens[1]. The growing uptake of ICTs by ordinary people has enabled them to become both users and producers of information about public affairs and has clearly indicated that developments in technology, audience needs and media uses are intricately entwined.

ICTs have enabled the creation of alternative online media sites which have added a new dimension to the production and consumption of news journalism around the world. This enables ordinary individuals to become producers, editors and publishers of news content. Users now have the capacity to create multiple spaces for diverse and interconnected public conversations.

These conversations often occur in weblogs or *blogs*. Blogging is a communicative practice that allows people to connect, converse and share information in a digitally networked environment. The global reach of digital networks such as blogs allow people to discuss with local and global participants the issues and events affecting their lives.

In 2003, the Oxford English Dictionary included the terms blogs, weblog, weblogging and weblogger in the dictionary which is now used to describe personal websites that offer "frequently updated observations, news, headlines, commentary, recommended links and/or diary entries, generally organized chronologically"[2].

Late Ms. Catherine Seipp, an American media critic had described the changes in media trends after September 11: "In general, 'blog' used to mean a personal online diary, typically concerned with boyfriend problems or technical news. But after September 11, a slew of new or refocused media junkie/political sites reshaped the entire internet media landscape. Blog now refers to a web journal that comments on the news often by criticizing the media and usually in rudely clever tones, with links to stories that back up the commentary with evidence."[3]

In Oman, it was the accession of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos and his dynamic world that ended the country's medieval isolation and propelled it towards a globally integrated path of development. Under His leadership, Oman has embraced globalization with open arms. With the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) revolution, the pace of integration has further accelerated[4].

With the increasing importance of citizen-journalism on the Internet, which has burgeoned since blogging started gaining popularity in the early 2000s, the new media is making a beginning in Oman too. Blogging in Oman is taking off, although it is still relatively unknown and not very popular among the general public. However, among the journalists and professionals, globalised class, it is an emergent phenomenon. The Arabic and English blogs in Oman reflect the thoughts and concerns of the citizens, about local, regional or national issues.

In this context, this study aims at investigating the nature and characteristics of Omani blogs that are now spreading among the internet users in the world. The study intends to be a springboard to indulge in further study in this area.

Objectives/Aims:

This study aims at investigating the nature and characteristics of Omani blogs that are now spreading among the internet users in the country. Aiming also at investigating the role of the blogger in the new media vis-à-vis the traditional (print) medium.

This pilot study intends to be a springboard to indulge in further study in this area.

Methodology:

Information has been gathered from different sources for the study on blogging scenario in Oman. Internet was used as the main source to review the various aspects of the 'blogosphere'. Mainstream newspapers of Oman were also referred to.

History and Background:

The modern blog evolved from the online diary where people would keep a running account (or blog) of their personal lives[5]. The first of these personal blogs started in 1995. Most of the writers called themselves diarists, journalists, journallers or journalers. A few called themselves escribitionists[6].

Distributed journalism, Open source journalism, Citizens media, We media, Participatory journalism, Grassroots, bottom-up, …. are some the new terminologies used for blogging.

The term "weblog" was coined by Jorn Barger (1997). The short form "blog" was coined by Peter Merholz. He broke the word *weblog* into the phrase "we blog" in the sidebar of his weblog in April/May 1999. "Blog" was accepted as a noun and as a verb. Justin Hall, who began eleven years of personal "blogging" in 1994 while a student at Swarthmore College, is generally recognized as one of the earliest bloggers.

Blogs have gained increasing notice and coverage for their role in breaking, shaping, and spinning news stories. Blogging is a manifestation of the technology-driven new media revolution. This can be seen through the ever-increasing numbers of blogs on the internet globally.

In April 2005, Microsoft announced more than 4.5 million spaces (their term for weblogs) had been created. That was 3 million added in about 90 days since January 2005[7].

In fact, it is this scene which is changing the production and consumption of news in the society. People are no longing depending entirely on the traditional (print) journalism. Alternative sources of news are easily accessible and available, which is making blogging a reality.

Rupert Murdoch, the chairman of News Corporation, summed up the implications of the tremendous developments in a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors[8]:
"what is happening right before us is, in short, a revolution in the way young people are accessing news. They don't want to rely on the morning paper for their up-to-date information. They don't want to rely on a godlike figure from above to tell them what's important. ……..they want their news on demand, when it works for them. They want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it. They want to question, to probe, to offer a different angle.

This scenario is changing the role of 'Consumers' and transforming them to '*Produsers*'. *Produsers* are defined as "users of news websites who engage with sites interchangeably in consumptive *and* productive modes (and often in both at virtually the same time)". They highlight important material as it becomes available. Using internet communication technologies, particularly applications such as blogging software, *produsers* add analysis, commentary and opinion.

Due to such tremendous developments, internet growth and newsroom convergence are moving in a straight and steady path. And we find that *people-powered* or *visitor-generated* content is also increasing.

The appearance of blogs on mainstream news sites is seen as an indicator that corporate news organizations have recognized the vast opportunities presented by weblog technology. Mainstream media is increasingly drawing upon the blogosphere as a source of information and a way to gauge how people feel about particular public issues and events. Since news stories tend to have a longer life in the blogosphere, people have more time to digest and consider important issues. People also have a greater opportunity than they did in the past to express their responses in a public forum. By offering audiences opportunities to circulate, test, dissect, analyse and revise their opinions from many different perspectives, news organizations are effectively engaging the public as partners and stakeholders in the news process. In this sense, they make themselves more accessible, open and transparent.

Practically all media companies have switched to computer network systems, electronic communication traffic and the 'paperless office' are topics of debate in management circles and the convergence of media. The internet is affecting

journalism in general and also the professional ideology of journalism. It has made inroads into newsrooms and desktops of journalists working for all media types in terms of Computer-Assisted Reporting (CAR). The spread of computers, software and the Internet is changing how reporters work. Reporters now routinely collect information in databases, analyze public records with spreadsheets and statistical programs, study political and demographic change with geographic information system mapping, conduct interviews by e-mail, and research background for articles on the Web.

Oman overview:

The use of internet users in Oman is seeing a steady increase. According to the statistics published in the Oman Internet Usage and Telecommunications Report in 'Internet World Stats – Usage and population statistics' the usage has increased from 3.8% in 2000 to more than 11% in 2007[9].

Year	Users	Population
2000	90,000	2,424,422
2002	180,000	2,398,545
2005	245,000	2,424,422
2007	300,000	3,311,640

Globally speaking, there are few credible estimates about the number of online blogs or their growth. "In September 2002, the *New York Times* reported that 'Live Journal' had signed up 690,000 users since 1998 and was gaining another 1,100 bloggers per day" quotes *Caslon Analytics blogging*[10]. In Oman, there are a few active bloggers who indulge in publishing a post frequently.

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has been successful in making Oman (a country which just three decades ago closed the wooden gates of the capital each night, had only three miles of paved road, 12 telephones, 1 school and 7 doctors) into a paragon of development with state of the art infrastructure, education, health and telecommunication systems[11].

Blogging in Oman is taking off, although it is still relatively unknown and not very popular among the general public. Although a few enthusiastic youngsters are indulging in it quite frequently.

Gulf Countries	No. of Blogs
UAE	199
S. Arabia	71
Kuwait	57
Bahrain	40
Oman	30[*]
Qatar	22

[*] The Oman-based blogs mention that there are 50. But it was seen that there are many more who have been blogging individually without being a part of the 'Oman Community Blog'. This indicates that Oman ranking will go up

Generation-next…

A few active bloggers in Oman:
"amjad248", "al-maawali", "omanymous", "muscatis", "undercoverdragon", "suburban", "blue-chi", "Café Muscato", "soccerblaze", "moodygamer", "kishorcariappa", "Oman expat", and many many more….
Some of the bloggers were college students who were in campuses abroad, but were blogging from there. There were also some expatriate bloggers who were considered for the study.

Observations:

Blogging activities in Oman seem to have begun in 2003-04. From then on, there was no looking back for the enthusiastic Oman-based bloggers, who have created a bloggers forum. It was observed that majority of the bloggers were males. Some women bloggers were also seen to be active. The average age group was between 20 to 40 yrs. The bloggers were both Omani citizens as well as expatriate residents, who shared their opinions and views about different issues concerning the people.

Topics like increasing number of accidents, frustrating traffic in the capital, nuisance of telemarketing in Oman vis-à-vis US, incorrect usage of Arabic language/grammar, or wrong translations from English to Arabic or vice-versa reflecting the bloggers concern, etc were prominently seen in the active blogs. It was interesting to note that the bloggers paid attention even to trivial things like cleanliness of restrooms in certain restaurants, and not only serious matters like vehicle accidents, civic sense, or education.

A Qatari blogger was tempted to visit Oman through his Omani blogger friend, and shared his good and not-so-pleasant memories during his 3-day visit to Oman from Doha on his posts.

It is this kind of interaction of people which blurrs the geographical boundaries and unites people across the globe. Earlier this concept was called as 'pen pal', but now the digitized version could be renamed as 'blog pal'.

One blogger was seen to market his skills to earn extra income through his blog. Thus it can be seen that a blog can have various positive facets to it.

In another blog, a female blogger shares her views about the content in Omani blogs: "Have you ever realized how bloggers differ from one user to another and from one country to another? While Omani bloggers maintain a common norm of posting things in general with a reflection towards the country, their daily activities, music or news other bloggers are more daring and venture to discuss issues which we could not conceive of placing on our blogs. We are motivated by nature to be more on the reclusive side and thus present ourselves in a perfectly acceptable light"[12].

The Bloggers Forum had also come up with plans to establish Blogging Awards[13] in 2005. The awards would be created for various categories like:

- Best Personal Weblog (or Diary-type weblog)
- Best Non-Personal Weblob (or Topic-type weblog)
- Most Active Weblog
- Best Designed Weblog
- Most Beloved Weblogger

Categories:

The different categories in the Omani blogs are:

- News
- Sports
- Food/restaurants
- Movies/entertainment
- Books
- Travel
- Discussion forum
- Links – topic-related sites, newspapers, personalities, etc.

Varieties:

- Personal blogs
- Journalistic blogs
- Electronic blogs
- Sports blogs
- Mixed blogs (links, comments, etc)
- Gaming blogs

Since the medium of internet does not oblige the blogger to reveal his/her identity, in some cases it is advantageous for the blogger. Comments can be made freely without the fear of anybody watching over his/her shoulders.

ICT development in Oman media now…

Seeing the global changes, initiated me to study the trend in Oman. Now there are online versions of the mainstream newspapers (Oman Observer, Oman, Oman Tribune, Al-Watan, Times of Oman and Al-Shabiba). 'Times of Oman' and 'Al Shabiba' became the first newspapers in the Middle East to introduce WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) mPaper edition services[14].

Government Intervention

In November 2007, there has been a collaboration been the Information Technology Authority[*] (ITA), Oman and Info-communications Development Authority (IDA) of Singapore formed the Oman-Singapore ICT Business Forum to create a platform for cooperation within the ICT sectors of the two countries. This forum aims to enhance

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[*] Oman's ITA is a public authority created by the Royal Decree and endeavors the consolidation and implementation of Digital Oman Strategy to transform the Sultanate of Oman into a knowledge-based economy. (www.ita.gov.om)

trade, investment, business and technology partnerships and collaborations between Oman and Singapore[15].

The Electronic Transactions Law 69/2008 was issued by His Majesty's Royal Decree on May 18, 2008[16]. This is the first law passed to regulate electronic transactions in Oman. This article provides information on Oman's Electronic Transactions Law and its application to blogging activities.

Conclusion:

Information technology is seeing a very fast upward trend in Oman and more so among the Omani youth.

Developments in technology and media usage are intertwined, continually evolving and constantly reshaping the way audience use media communication globally.

So what have the people contributed to journalism?

Four things: personality, eyewitness testimony, editorial filtering, and uncounted gigabytes of new knowledge.

Besides introducing valuable new sources of information to readers, the sites also force their proprietors to act like journalists: choosing stories, judging the credibility of sources, writing headlines, taking pictures, developing prose styles, dealing with readers, building audience, weighing libel considerations, and occasionally conducting informed investigations on their own.

The growth of online participatory journalism gives rise to ethical question of whether bloggers who gather and disseminate "news" should be classified as journalists. There are opposing views/debates about this. The dividing line between news providers (journalists) and news consumers (readers) is narrowing. Journalists thinks of bloggers as a threat to journalism.

In the long run, professional journalism will always be respected and relevant. Blogging and journalism have their own advantages and disadvantages. Depending on the necessity, the reader/consumer, would access both the traditional mainstream media/news sites as well as the blogs. We are witnessing the blurring of lines between news and entertainment, fact and opinion, even fact and fiction. Today, neither journalists nor the public seem capable of giving clear answers to questions such as, "what is a journalist?" or "what are the rules of journalism?". It would be good to take what is best about journalism's recent past and adapt it to what appears most promising about the new information environment in which we live.

No medium type will disappear *because* of another type, but media types are converging. In fact, further research should look into possibilities, exploring and formulating new divergent theoretical frameworks within which scholars can address changes and challenges ahead instead of trying to capture e-journalism/news dissemination in the restrictive categories of the past. It should be obvious that weblogs aren't competing with work of the professional journalism establishment, but rather complementing it and intersecting with each other. Bloggers and the

phenomenon of grassroots journalism have just as meaningful a role in the future of news on the Net as do professionals.

Citizen-contributed content can do as much to enrich traditional journalism: it will complement as well as compete with mainstream offerings.

The societies today are strongly intertwined and connected due to the rapid advancement of information and communication technology. As a result, the globalization phenomenon is affecting the national interests, cultural identity, stability and images of countries. The Omani bloggers need to be aware of this, and should earnestly play their role in nation-building and enhance strong ties between people.

Recommendations:

- Bloggers could be given some short-term training by media professionals on how to format their content in a reader-friendly precise content.

- Awareness should be created among bloggers that they are not mere bloggers but 'gatewatchers' who share the responsibility along with the 'gatekeeping' journalists.

- Encouraging artists/artisans to create their blogs/websites to showcase/market their talent to the global market

- Encouragement to Omani bloggers through proper channels could attract more foreign tourists and overseas investors to the country, which in turn revolutionize the job prospects for the citizens.

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