

# The Use of Weblogs in Spanish Mainstream Media

**Maria Bella Palomo Torres and Koldo Meso Ayerdi**

School of Communication. Campus de Teatinos, s/n. 29071 Málaga (Spain)

School of Social Sciences & Communication. Campus de Leioa. 48949 Leioa (Vizcaya, Spain)

bellapalomo@uma.es - koldo.meso@ehu.es

## Abstract

In this paper we aim to draw a picture of what is happening nowadays in Spanish mainstream cybermedia from the point of view of new ways of participation and, more concretely, we analyze remarkable weblogs signed by journalists and/or guests, in order to determine the author's profile. A survey answered by 50 per cent of these bloggers let us know why the use of weblogs represents the key to media success in the online sphere.

## 1. Introduction

The Internet media scene has suffered important transformations from its beginning. One of the most recent examples is the integration of web 2.0 tools in the online media, and the intensive use of participatory journalism.

According to recent reports, there are more than 17 millions Internet users in Spain (Estudio General de Medios, 2008). 70,7 per cent of Spanish population of ages of 15 and above who accessed the Internet from home or work computers in September 2008 visited social networking sites (ComScore World Metrix, 2008). Compared to other countries with Internet populations of at least 10 million monthly unique visitors, Spain had the fifth highest relative penetration in the social networking category. The Social Media Research developed by Universal McCann shows that, in Spain, these activities are focused on weblog reading (78%), picture sharing (46%) and video uploads (30%).

This panorama justifies that most of Spanish radio, television and newspaper websites encourage audience participation in news production everyday. These online media have developed specific sections called "Participation" to group all the possibilities: sharing of news, posts, photos and video; voting and correction of contents; creating weblogs; participating in creative contests...

Ease of use has permitted an indiscriminate creation of blogs in all sectors, with the journalist guild being one of the most active and committed to regular updating. In 2005 we detected only two hundred journalist-blogs (j-blogs) in Spain (Palomo, 2005); one year later that number was multiplied by three (Palomo, 2007). Nowadays, journalist-blogs have also a remarkable place in online media home pages, but this phenomenon has been scarcely investigated. During 2008, we draw the profile of these remarkable weblogs analyzing the most relevant national, regional and local internet newspapers in Spain.

## 2. An Approach to the Spanish Scenario

The first Spanish cybermedia census was created in 2005. The national research project "El impacto de Internet y los medios de comunicación en España", funded by the Department of Science and Technology, monitored 1.250 online media. Some of them have got international awards thanks to their contents and/or design (SND, Malofiej).

Most high-profile citizen media sites in Spanish are from newspapers. In 2006 El Mundo.es had a collaborative weblog under the title "Ciudadano M - Tú haces las noticias". People living in or visiting Madrid contributed and it became noticeably famous because several scoops appeared on it. El País.es launched in 2007 a citizen journalism section, *Yo, Periodista*, where readers are turned into journalists, because they create all the contents. At the end of the same year, Soitu.es was born; a self-funded independent project, developed by Gumersindo Lafuente, El Mundo.es ex-editor, who pays 20 euros to every news story appearing in the home page. In general, national television stations and radios limit user participation to comments, chats or forums.

### 2.1. Vocento: The First Case Study

In 2008, we decided to analyze the special case of Vocento, one of the main multimedia groups in Spain. An exploratory content analysis of the 13 Vocento's online newspapers revealed that many provide interactive options.

Vocento's online dailies redefined their functions in the Internet in 2007, incorporating a new section called "Participation", where the audience becomes the main emitter. While the media of other groups limited the action of the reader to voting the news, correcting them or sending stories to some friends or colleagues, the 13 Vocento's cyberdiaries have incorporated tools that have increased the role of users in the configuration of their contents, allowing them to create their own weblogs, to comment the news, to vote in surveys, to send complaints, videos and their own news.

We also chose this company because it pioneered participative journalism in 2005 by starting to offer free of charge services to let users create their own weblog. Sur.es, one of its 13 online local newspapers, was hosting more than six hundreds blogs generated by users at the beginning of 2008.

**A new loyalty.** These innovations have increased the loyalty to the new medium. After checking audience data in every online cyberdaily, we detected that media with less intensive use of web 2.0 tools had poorer traffic results and shorter visits. According to Spanish control of circulation office (OJD), the users spent 4 minutes and 24 seconds visiting Spanish on line media in 2008. In the case of Vocento's Internet newspapers, the time rises to 11 minutes and 37 seconds.

At the same time this media organization increased its interactive efforts, it invented more innovative features. For example, newspapers are publishing relevant comments of forum discussions in their print editions, and encourage stories written by journalists in close cooperation with readers. Another reason to select Vocento's media was that we observed a huge increase in the number of offered journalist-blogs. While the multimedia group hosted only 30 j-blogs in 2005, three years later this number soared to 176.

**Methodology.** The survey is the most widespread resource for rapidly obtaining information on the maintenance of the weblog and the author's profile. After searching the Vocento's newspapers websites and locating the 176 outstanding blogs in their "Participation" section that are the object of study (cybermedia show in different frames journalist/guests weblogs and weblogs developed by the audience), a universe was built to which the survey with fifty items was then sent by electronic mail in \*.doc format together with a link to an online version of the questionnaire available during February and March 2008, so the respondents could fill in the form in the way they preferred. In this case, different studies centered on the figure of the news professional (Palomo, 2007) have employed this method.

94 answers were received, which were part of a simple random sample, i.e. all members of the population have the same chance of being chosen.

Besides the survey, we interviewed experts like multimedia coordinators as another method for directly determining how citizen journalism is influencing journalistic routines. Authors like Jane Singer (2005) prefer content analysis in order to compare the style and values of journalist-bloggers with "standard" news.

**The j-blogger profile.** The prototype of outstanding blogger in Vocento's Internet media is a man graduated in Journalism (50%), with more than fifteen years of professional experience (47,1%) and a permanent job in the multimedia group (53,8%), and from the point of view of the blogosphere, a self-taught person.

Only 34,4 per cent of j-bloggers show their e-mail address, whereas 36,6 per cent prefer not to because they don't have enough time to answer messages (52,9%), they worry about spamming or receiving virus (29,4%), or because they prefer to respect the essence of blogosphere receiving comments only in a public way. Half of these bloggers disagree with offering their personal profile too.

Most of these authors are male (83%) and 72 per cent of those polled are between 26 and 45 years old. Only 22,2 per cent work in several mass media, and 10,6 per cent of those polled are guests collaborating with the online edition. Life (15,6%) and Local (13,1%) sections journalists show the highest levels of compromise with the creation of weblogs.

The offer of topics is very wide, although journalists try to avoid controversial subjects, like politics. They are in favour of a *relaxed* way of journalism, using alternative point of views, or writing about topics in which they are personally interested (hobbies, sports, travelling...). In fact, only 51,8 of those polled write about the same subjects on their weblog and in their mass media. One of every five blogs is miscellaneous, with a great variety of contents. Weblogs specialized in culture (14,9%) and sports (12,8%) are the second and third most frequent categories, respectively.

**Blogging as a journalistic task.** Most of these journalists (71%) consider maintaining a weblog as a journalist task, because they apply the same requirements: accuracy, simplicity and objectivity. In fact, most of them (84%) believe the contents in their weblogs are as credible as the contents they produce in traditional mass media.

Nearly 40 per cent of these authors feel this task as an entertainment, and 19,2 per cent think it is a social work. Others view it as a way of life, a showroom or an option to escape of the alienating routines.

Half of j-bloggers polled confirm that the editor in chief gave them the assignment of creating a weblog, whereas in 39,2 per cent of the cases it was an individual initiative. Despite this company interest, only 21,5 per cent have received specific training to learn to use these new tools. Eight of every ten journalists polled admit that they are self-taught in the blogosphere context.

**Why do they blog?** The interaction between journalists and the public and its rules resulted to be another interesting subject. They feel free to blog about anything. At the same time, 70 per cent of journalists polled consider their role similar to that of the columnist. In fact, in 92,1 per cent of cases they stated that they were certain that their companies had not developed any rules to apply in weblogs. The only company advice is not to be rude or disrespectful to somebody.

Nearly six per cent of these bloggers have asked for permission to open other weblogs outside the Internet newspaper. But probably the most interesting result is that none of these j-bloggers is receiving any money for carrying out this activity. They are creating more contents for free. So, why do they do it? Which kind of motivation do they have? Nearly 60 per cent have a weblog because it is an opportunity to write about topics they really like; 12,8 per cent use their weblogs to search for sources; 10,6 per cent get news stories, and the rest has very different motivators: they do it just for the fun of it; for personal and professional satisfaction; or as a showcase to promote their contents; or to have influence and getting prestige. One blogger out of every ten polled has received job offers through their weblogs.

Most of the time they insert posts at home (68,1%). Despite 48,9 per cent update contents at newsrooms, they cannot reduce the time devoted to their professional routines. Having a blog is considered an extra task, and because of this they cannot spend more than 30 minutes in writing each post (43,35%).

Based on their experience, some of the consequences of blogging are: to have a fresher writing style (50%); to be able to talk to the audience (50%); to learn from the audience (36,2%); to go deeper into news stories (36,2%) thus avoiding a superficial approach; to avoid editorial pressure (26,6%); to be more popular (14,9%), to write about topics forbidden by their companies (7,5%) or to be capable of writing about mere rumours (4,3%). We have to add one more item: thanks to weblogs, retired journalists keep working.

These j-bloggers feel closer to audience, but 36,2 per cent don't know which differences exist between the readers of their blogs and the ones of the traditional newspapers. 27,7 per cent of them believe that their blog reader is younger and demanding (19,2%). Finally, the impact of their blog contents in public opinion is unknown by 45,7 per cent, because 59,1 per cent never receive any report about the number of visits. Only 14,9% of polled bloggers believe that their weblogs have a high influence on society. Anyway, one third say that their weblogs are more successful than they thought. Only 5,3% consider that their blog is a "complete disaster".

Self-criticism has been too part of the study. The weak points of these weblogs, as considered by their own

authors, are: irregular updating (46,8%), poor website design (30,9%) and develop excessively specific lines (9,6%). The remaining complaints are about management, complex access, inflexible of templates and, finally, they miss visit counters.

**Risky business.** Sometimes people abuse the freedom of speech. 56,4 per cent of those polled have received offensive comments, and other users take advantage of this anonymous system to threaten journalists (16%). When confronted to this kind of situations, bloggers reportedly have taken different approaches. Most authors show absolute respect to freedom of speech (50,9%) and they don't erase negative comments; 47,2 per cent prefer to ignore them; 25 per cent choose to erase disrespectful messages and 9,4 per cent have considered close the weblog at some point of time.

From the perspective of contents, 63,4 per cent are not interested on copyright issues. However, 29 per cent know that people sometimes illegally copy their posts, and mass media make reference to their texts (36,6%).

It was very interesting to analyze their attitude towards new technologies, to check if there was a great influence of their companies on their weblog activity or if they were moved by personal interest. In this sense, 63,4 per cent of j-bloggers are active writing comments in several weblogs. Only 39,8 per cent are subscribed to weblogs.

**Technological attitude.** News about the Internet and new technologies are very important for them (93,6%). Some of them have a personal website (19,2%), weblogs out of Vocento (25%), photoblog (10,6%) and videoblog (1,32%). 6,4 per cent have updated their weblog using the cellular phone in some occasion. In most of their weblogs text prevails over multimedia formats, although 64,9 per cent do apply pictures, audio and/or video.

They are in favour of citizen journalism (70%), and most of them believe it is not dangerous for the journalistic profession. Finally, we decided to propose them an exam at the end of the questionnaire, in order to assess their knowledge about social web tools. Youtube was the only one identified by all of them.

## 2.2. The Mainstream Media Pattern

After this experience, during the last months of 2008 we decided to extend the study to five mainstream online media, focused on five case studies: three national newspapers (Abc.es, El mundo.es, El pais.es) and two powerful regional newspapers (El correo digital.com and Lavanguardia.es).

Recently, dozens of Internet newspapers and mainstream media in general have deployed correspondent weblogs in their websites and have introduced sections where Spanish citizens living in other countries can write about their experiences in a public way having a global connection.

**Similar results.** In total, we found 202 weblogs remarkable in special sections and/or frames, being Lavanguardia.es the one with the bigger offer (66), followed by El mundo.es (58), El país.es (31), Abc.es (28) and Elcorredigital.com (19). Applying the same methodology and tools, results have been significantly similar to Vocento's investigation. Most demographic questions and opinions described in previous paragraphs are shared by these outstanding Internet newspaper bloggers. That is why we are going to discuss only the differences.

The first one we found is that 40 per cent are just collaborators with the medium, while 32 per cent have a full-time job and 28 per cent work as correspondents. The last percentage justifies that the best represented section in national newspaper blogs is international affairs.

Most of these bloggers don't receive any income because of this activity, but the percentage of paid weblogs (30%) is much higher than in regional and local cybermedia, represented by Vocento. Probably related with this item, their compromise with internet newspaper weblogs is higher too. Looking for a quality production, 68 per cent of those polled spend more than 30 minutes working on their posts, and they try to add contents more often. 42 per cent of outstanding bloggers write posts several times per week, and only 5 per cent consider blogging a daily task. These bloggers are more exposed to offensive comments (66 % have received rude messages).

National newspapers have a great echo in society. In fact, 39 per cent of those polled know that people have reproduced their posts, and mass media make reference to their texts (51%).

From the formal point of view, the structure of blogs in Spanish mainstream cybermedia is very similar, as they normally respect the template provided by the web where they are housed or they make only small modifications, which is why graphic creativity is almost nonexistent, with the result that their visual elements attract little research interest. Despite this context, 53 per cent of studied bloggers add multimedia contents, and the number rises to 88 per cent in picture usage.

### 3. Conclusions

Spanish journalistic websites are exploiting the opportunities offered by the new medium. By offering outstanding weblogs, media obtain a significant amount of online content automatically and with no investment needed. This helps to increase the website traffic, to lengthen the time spent by visitors; and to obtain a better place in web search engines. Since the number of visits is the main indicator used by media when negotiating advertising fares, it can be concluded that in the case of

Vocento, as well as for other media groups in which blogs have been deployed, these are used to leverage higher audiences and therefore increase their advertising income. Founding or updating weblogs implies no extra cost for the local, regional or national mass media company, and six out of every ten notable bloggers is maintaining a weblog because it is the only way to talk about the topics he or she is really interested on. Collaborative blogs are not very extended (18%), but there is great potential to grow.

The attitudes towards the new media of many Spanish journalists are anything except reticent or skeptical. Notable journalists share their free time writing for the Internet users, and they are very generous because they normally don't receive any money with this activity. Only some national newspapers are paying bloggers, and they practice a kind of discrimination, because they don't pay to all their bloggers. This situation shows that digital journalism is still underestimated by mass media companies. In general, we can conclude that journalists are preparing themselves for an age of participatory news, acquiring a new active role in the process of generating more contents for an informal context.

### Acknowledgements

This work is part of the national research project "Convergencia digital en los medios de comunicación. Profesionales" with the reference number SEJ2006-14828-C06-04/SOCI, supported by the Department of Education and Science.

### Referencies

- Domingo, D.; Quandt, T.; Heinonen, A.; Paulussen, S.; Singer, J.; and Vujnovic, M. 2007. Participatory journalism practices in the media and beyond: an international comparative study of initiatives in online newspapers. Paper presented at the Conference "The Future of Newspapers". Cardiff, Wales.
- Meso, K. 2005. Periodismo ciudadano: voces paralelas a la profesión periodística. *Chasqui. Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación*, 90, June. <http://www.comunica.org/chasqui/90/meso90.htm>
- Palomo, B. 2005. Periodistas en la red. *Informe Anual de la Profesión Periodística 2005*. Madrid: Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid. 309-319.
- Palomo, B. 2007. Blogs en el espacio iberoamericano. *Medios de Comunicación-Tendencias 2007. El escenario iberoamericano*. Madrid: Fundación Telefónica y Ariel. 215-225.
- Singer, J.B. 2005. The political j-blogger. 'Normalizing' a new media form to fit old norms and practices, *Journalism* 6(2):173-198.