

## Tom Glocer's Blog

### Trust in the Age of Citizen Journalism

Here is a speech I made at the Globes Media Conference in Tel Aviv on Monday 11 December 2006. It's about trust in media today, taking into account the growing popularity of blogging and all other types of citizen journalism.

Ladies and Gentlemen, good afternoon. I would like to thank Globes for inviting me to speak before such a distinguished professional audience today. As someone with close family ties to Israel, I also take special personal pleasure in being here.

The issue in front of us is one that has been on my mind for the past several years. In this, I know, I am not alone. It is also an issue that is challenging the minds of the owners, the publishers, the editors, and the reporters, of the media the world over. It is the defining issue of our media generation.

What does the future look like in a world in which the consumer has taken over the printing press, the dark room, the television studio? What does the result of a mash-up of professional and "amateur" actually look like?

And more importantly – is trust the victim in a world of millions of news sources – will we live in a world where truth is passed through a sieve of opinion and commentary?

The comfortable one-way model of publisher to editor to journalist to reader has changed forever. There is no turning back. It kind of happened before our eyes, but like those frogs slowly boiling in water as the heat is turned up, we may not have noticed – unless of course you run classified ads at the local paper.

For anyone in any doubt of this fact I have two words for you – blogging nuns. That's right, you heard me - blogging nuns, perhaps not Israeli nuns – I'll allow that, but the bloggin' orthodox nonetheless!

#### Blogging Nuns

A week back a news report in the Sunday Times in London caught my eye. It reported that a group known as the "sister bloggers" had formed. The online diaries of the "sister bloggers" were giving a behind the scenes look at what life was like inside the convent.

One blogger is Sister Sarah – her blog, called The Ear of Your Heart – details her experience as a third year Novice. Her profile lists her interests as St Benedict, and the Christian band Mercy Me.

Blogs are so ubiquitous now that they are appearing in the most unlikely of places - convents. So, you heard it here first - the tipping point for social media – nuns.

Closer to home, IDF forces on the ground in Lebanon gave first hand accounts of war, much to the consternation of military commanders, and raising difficult questions as to how to wage war in an era of ubiquitous coverage. In short, the internet has made us all publishers. It is our Gutenbergian moment.

So this is a fascinating time to be running a media company. The model has changed in many exciting ways. Not only is the internet providing a low-cost, almost free publishing channel. But it is has transformed how information moves around the world - we no longer have a choke-hold on the flow of information, whether technological, professional or financial.

We don't decide what people see and when they see it. They have demanded and created the Two-Way Pipe.

#### The Positive Power of the Web

The internet has in many ways democratized information – with 3G wireless, wifi and wimax on the way, information is available almost anywhere in the world. You can read, publish, and comment from your laptop, as well as distribute on a scale never before possible.

This is an important point. Take the Prophet Mohammed cartoons controversy. There is no more local. In the past, if a small Danish newspaper published a set of provocative cartoons, the rest of the world would only see them if distinguished editors – like those in the room today - decided to republish them.

In this case, most professional news organizations decided to hold back. But it made no difference. Across the world people who wanted to incite the masses did just that – via the internet.

The cartoons published in Denmark's Jyllands-Posten brought about a violent demonstration in Pakistan, deaths in Afghanistan and Somalia, and attacks on embassies in Syria and Lebanon. A barrier had not just been overcome – it has been smashed to pieces.

News and pictures also transcend national and other boundaries. And so, broadcasters and publishers who want to survive have to understand the new model.

Look at this positively. The great thing is that the power of the web has delivered a truly engaged audience. They decide what they want to watch or read, arrange for it to be saved, and pull it up with their remote control devices at times of their own choosing. People are participating in the debate.

The couch potato has found a voice and is off the sofa – you'll find him on YouTube, MySpace or Facebook.

At Reuters we announced last week a groundbreaking agreement with Yahoo, parent of Flickr, to encourage amateur photographers to tag and submit their photographs to Reuters – to put them to work as super stringers.

For me the advantage of the Internet is just that. It's about the return of the conversation, something we lost with the advent of mass broadcast communication.

The ancient Greeks regarded dialogue as the most effective means of communication- a two way conversation – a Socratic dialog at its best. The development of print, and more significantly television, dampened that conversation. It replaced it with a one-way broadcast model.

The world we live in today is one in which everyone is a consumer, everyone a distributor, everyone an aggregator, everyone a producer.

We live in the era of the two-way pipe.

#### Equal Rights and Equal Voices

News organizations must realize everyone is both a potential partner and competitor. A 19-year-old sitting in a dorm room cranking out gossip, a well-established journalist blogging for her news organization, or a respected academic all have equal right to have a voice. Whether they have an equal voice is another matter.

For too long the public has been a face without a voice, a simple and unheard recipient of media reports, television footage and news pictures. The internet has changed all that, giving access to all voices on all sides of any debate.

But Techorati's estimate that one blog is created every second also carries important consequences for all of us. All the voices on the internet are not positive. Everyone from child molesters to terrorists lurk in the dark corners of the web.

In some cases, the power of the internet is being used as a recruiting tool, to incite others to action and to propagate hatred and violence. Take the case of those Danish cartoons or the Pope's recent speech in Germany, the internet was used to cut-off debate, to distribute and to polarize.

Special interest groups too, while not encouraging violent action, use the web to promote their own hard-line views. In this world, other opinions are not valid, other views not reasonable or just. It's like speakers corner on acid. Debate has become impossible. The bridging voices are a minority.

The risk we as an industry face is that amid all the noise, all the amateur pictures and editorial, the victim could be the truth and fact-based journalism.

It was Mark Twain who said, "Truth is more of a stranger than fiction", and on the web how do you find the truth?

#### Trust and Transparency at the Heart of Reuters

How do you know what information to trust? What information is accurate? That the images you see are genuine. The trust of your audience is fragile, something we know well at Reuters.

I have no doubt that all of you in the room today are familiar with this picture. Taken at face value it shows the aftermath of a bombing raid on Beirut last summer. Plumes of smoke mark where the bombs fell.

This was a photograph taken by a Reuters freelance photographer named Adnan Hajj. It was a photo that sparked a global debate. Back in August an American website alleged that the photo had been manipulated. The allegation was that Hajj had added an additional plume of smoke using digital editing. The internet carried the picture and the allegation around the world – other bloggers started to add layers of commentary. But the allegation was well founded. Here is Mr Hajj's original picture.

We immediately launched an investigation and suspended Hajj. After a second doctored photo emerged –this of an F-16 with suspected additional flares added – we acted without hesitation.

Hajj was fired; his editor was fired and we took the decision to remove every photograph he ever took in his freelance career at Reuters – all 920!

The Reuters Trust Principles of independence, freedom from bias, and integrity are at the core of what we do and what we believe in. These are not lofty words from some Mission Statement on the wall of our offices; they are written straight into the constitutional documents of the Company and enforced by an independent board.

So when after 155 years of building up a reputation of trust, we found it challenged, we acted swiftly and directly.

I had seen what happened to other media organizations like the BBC, CBS or the New York Times, and I wanted none of that. Instead we moved quickly to admit the mistake, take disciplinary action, and reaffirm our commitment to the highest standards.

We analyzed our coverage of the war in Lebanon to assure ourselves there was no systemic bias at Reuters, and we learned that the issue of manipulating photos was a wider industry issue, involving not just digital manipulation, but staging of photos as well.

It seemed that Hajj's doctored photo had raised a much bigger issue – trust in media, and propaganda in wartime. I may be alone in this, but I think the debate over the coverage in Lebanon, including our own, is healthy. These were important issues that needed to be aired and there were important questions that we also needed to ask internally. It also meant news organizations – like mine – had to rethink how they could guarantee their photos in the future.

At Reuters we did a lot of soul-searching. How could this have happened and what can we do to prevent it happening again? I talked at length with Reuters senior editors and we agreed a plan.

We conducted a review which concluded this was a case of an individual photographer, ignoring Reuters rules, and embellishing two photographs for aesthetic, not political, reasons.

In addition to the disciplinary action I described earlier, we wanted to get the message out to our entire staff. So we updated and reissued our guidelines for all editorial staff, including a new way of captioning photographs. If for example a photo is taken while on a tour organized by Hezbollah we will now make this 100% clear in the caption. We want to let our users know the full context and make up their own minds.

This helps address the issue of photo ops staged by combatants, but we still needed to address the issue of digital manipulation, so we reiterated our strict rules banning the use of Photo-Shop to do anything you could not legitimately do in the darkroom, and we ensured that every photographer, staffer or freelancer, signed up to these rules. If you didn't sign, you didn't work.

But getting photographers to sign up to an enhanced code went some of the way but not all of the way. As a geek myself, I searched for a technical solution that would prevent digital manipulation.

I am pleased to announce today that we are working with Adobe and Canon to create a solution that enables photo editors to view an audit trail of changes to a digital image, which is permanently embedded in the photograph, ensuring the accuracy of the image.

We are still working through the details and hope this will be a new standard for Reuters and I believe should be the new industry standard.

It is important to say that we sought this technical solution, not because we don't trust our photographers – far from it. I am incredibly proud of the amazing and dangerous work our photographers and journalists do. They all too often risk their lives to get the photograph that tells the true story of a conflict or captures the horror of war. The threat of injury or death is a daily hazard for many.

No, we sought a technical solution so that we had total and full transparency of our work. It's what we stand for. It's what we've always stood for. And we hope that it will provide reassurance to editors and consumers of our services.

When I discussed this innovation with one of our best photographers, Ahmed Jadallah, in Dubai last week, he welcomed the transparency. He almost died three years ago in his native Gaza photographing the Intifada, but he wants the world to know his

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photos are 100% truthful. By the way, Ahmed is still grateful for the medical attention he received in Jerusalem after he was shot by the IDF, so perhaps peace is not as impossible as it sometimes appears.

So, transparency and truth are important to us.

### The Lessons Learnt

We employ staff from all countries, from all religions and all backgrounds. We operate from almost 200 news bureaus in 130 countries and publish our news service in 20 different languages.

We are not a British news outlet but an international one – one that has no agenda, other than to deliver the news truthfully and accurately. We stand only for objective reporting.

So what does the Hajj incident tell us? There are three key lessons:

The first is accountability. The upside of the flourishing blogosphere is that beyond our own strict editorial standards, there is a new check and balance. I take my hat off to Charles Johnson, the editor of Little Green Footballs. Without his website, the Hajj photo may well have gone unnoticed.

The blogosphere provides accountability. They're not always going to be right. Indeed, many of the accusations levelled at traditional media are partisan in nature – but some are not. We have to listen to the bloggers – we shouldn't ignore them.

The second lesson is about the trust of our audience. We learned at Reuters that the action of one man – a man who wasn't even a full-time staff member – could seriously hurt the trust in our news, built assiduously over 155 years. His stupid decision to clone smoke cost us.

We learned that your reputation is only as good as the last photograph you transmit, or the last story you file.

The final lesson we learned was this – more than ever the world needs a media company free from bias, independent, telling it as it really is, without the filter of national or political interest.

If you searched across the Web during the Lebanon conflict you saw many entrenched and extreme views – on either side. There were thousands of voices opining on the war from their own particular standpoint. This cacophony of voices is exciting and it does for the first time give a true flavor of all views. It is also provides a marketplace for ideas.

But I strongly believe that in the mixing of different voices we will always need a place for the news organization whose watchword is trust. Trust will be the differentiator in the new media dynamic. Your independence and impartiality will mark you out.

Telling the story truthfully is more important than ever. Reporting it without spin and without editorializing is critical if history is to accurately record events.

### Valuable Voices, Whosever They May Be

So let's try to draw this all together.

Collectively, we face real challenges and opportunities to move away from being the sole creators of content. As I mentioned earlier, the pipe is now a two-way medium.

News providers will always need to perform the traditional job of letting people know what is happening, but they have the opportunity to do more. It ought to be possible to integrate professional journalism with the insights of amateur contributors in a valuable way for our audiences, as we at Reuters have begun to do.

The future will be about mixing and matching the voices that deliver the most value - be they professional or "amateur."

Our professionals bring something extremely important to a story. They write in accordance with a professional code and brand, and they are mindful of the standards they must uphold. They are trained to sift through facts and provide perspective and context, to provide insight without spin. And they are human beings born in places like Tel Aviv or Gaza City or Dublin or Belfast. They seek to leave their inherent biases at home, but they are human like you and me, and they also make mistakes – again like you and me.

Amateur content provides something else – they often bring immediacy that we cannot deliver, just like the tourist photographs of the immediate aftermath of the Asian Tsunami, or the London bombings on 7/7.

But in the excitement and enthusiasm of this new collaboration we mustn't forget the value of trust. We mustn't forget that our actions and ideas must remain guided by impartial accurate information.

The real opportunity – besides more voices – is that in a world of multiple choices, brands become billboards guaranteeing an experience. If your brand stands for accuracy, for truthfulness, for trust, you become a beacon – a trusted source – a hub in a plural media universe.

Trust is what draws our audiences to our brand. Trust and professionalism is what makes our product cut through the clutter. Today - trust is more important than ever. I recognize that there are some here today who may question how West Bank and Gaza Palestinians can possibly report objectively for Reuters, but if it is any comfort, the first thing that I heard when I went to Ramallah earlier this year to visit Abu Mazen was that Reuters was pro-Israeli.

Perhaps we are destined to be unpopular, but this will not deter us from our mission.

Thank you.

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### Comments

#### correobasura said:

Mr. Glocer, as a photojournalist I wholeheartedly welcome the idea of being able to track changes to an image. I think that will go a long way in helping rid news photos of images whose content has been unethically altered. And for personal purposes, it will allow a photographer to see what changes she has made to her own file of images--to replicate a previous toning technique, etc.

You addressed aspect the presence of doubt when an amateur works with an image, i.e. has the content been radically altered? But what about the actual content of the image when it was captured? How will you trust amateurs to not stage photos or to not arrange/move items in a scene or to avoid being influenced or directed by political or PR actors at the scene? While nothing is 100% sure, at least most professional photojournalists have journalistic ethics training and the goal to at least strive for objectivity (the ones that I know and work with, at least).

Lastly, I wonder how you could "fire" a freelancer? A freelancer is by definition an independent entity and as such can not be fired. You can stop using their services, sure, but since a freelancer is not an employee, you can't "fire" one.

Thanks for posting an interesting speech.

December 13, 2006 1:47 PM

#### jtdriscoll said:

Excellent commentary from someone whose perspective has not been clouded by too many hours in the newsroom. Most journalists I encounter still presume the moral high ground and the last word. Not many have woken up to the fact that the Brave New World of News is an Interactive Dialogue in the Democracy of Cyberspace, not a Top Down Lecture by Press Barons camped out on the pages of tabloids or the public airwaves. Nevertheless, old line Media Titans will try to jump on the New Media Juggernaut (Murdoch bought My Space). But hopefully more will emulate the kind of thinking evident here and respect and engage the audience.

Bravo Glocer!

Good to see a media CEO who writes his own blogs and who listens to the Grateful Dead.

John Driscoll

Oil Trader

Reuters Subscriber

May 10, 2007 4:50 AM

*Anonymous comments are disabled*