

Newspapers, social media a good fit



By [Vincent Maher](#)

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Since early 2005 when I started working with Colin Daniels at the Rhodes New Media Lab, my thinking about the web has been saturated by the language, principles and ideals of Web 2.0 and specifically the sub-set of uses we call "social media". So I had to laugh at the provocative piece written by Paul Jacobson for *The Times* the other week, called Social Media is Dead.

My sentiments more closely reflect those of Steve Rubel who argues that all media have become social and so the definition "social" vis-a-vis "traditional" is dead. I feel the same way about "citizen journalism" in its antagonistic form - all media now have elements of user-generated content so the revolution has been absorbed and sorry for those who pinned their reputations on it. I predict a similar thing will happen with Creative Commons - the more successful it is, the more redundant it will make itself in the long run, but that's a good thing.

[Rubel says](#): "In 2006 all media went social. Pretty much every newspaper, TV network and publication has wholeheartedly embraced these technologies. Newspapers have comments, RSS feeds, blogs, wikis and other forms of two-way communications. TV networks have a presence in Second Life and more. The lines have blurred. Even some of the marketers themselves are producing content that could be called 'media'."

That year in South Africa was 2007. What this has meant for me personally is that I can align the work I do in the formerly traditional media with the formerly revolutionary social media without any contradictions. Given that the bulk of what we call social media is text, I want to analyse why newspapers and social media make a good fit.

Historical reasons

For a number of murky historical reasons newspapers have tended to be more left-leaning in their political outlook. Let me put it another way: those that have been more left-leaning have tended towards better analysis and less entertainment and so have become associated with better quality reporting. By "better" I mean more informative, balanced, accurate and less emotive - the recipe for a good piece of information in the Habermasian Public Sphere model of deliberative democracy.

Of course, not everyone thinks the Public Sphere model is worth its length in words. However, and I learned this over the years meeting newspaper journos, the journalists themselves have a sense that what they do is important and in the public interest, theory is something you can drape over it to make it sound good.

In the months before the Mail & Guardian Online launched [Thought Leader](#), we had been approaching our journalists and trying to drum up some excitement. There wasn't a lot of that to go around. There was a mixture of negative perceptions

about blogging that ranged from a sense that this was suddenly extra work to questions about the credibility of the medium itself.

All the while I was painfully aware of what the [Bivings Report would confirm](#), that 96% of US newspapers had their journalists blogging and we were behind. *The Times* had launched its new blogging platform in spectacular fashion with [Bullardgate](#) and all the while we had been launching blogging systems that didn't enable our own journos to blog. And there was this sense of resistance.

Talking a tactical error

When we did launch Thought Leader, Matthew Buckland, Riaan Wolmarans and I pitched the idea to the weekly editorial staff meeting and finally, when they could see what we were talking, about a lot of them became enthusiastic. Looking back now I suspect that talking rather than showing was a tactical error on our part, because the talk tends to be quite nebulous and clouded with intimidating jargon.

Two of our investigative journalists, [Percy Zvomuya](#) and [Zukile Majova](#) got on board straight away and both were excited about the prospect of being able to let off a little steam and publish some of the stuff that was either too long for the paper or too subjective. This is a common frustration for journalists and it is a shame that so many have learned to live with it to the extent that they now don't see the value in this new opportunity.

In the beginning of newspapers and newsletters, there was a closer alignment to what blogging is today than the current configuration of commercial newspapers. Newsletters, for instance, were letters people would post to their friends about their travels and experiences. They were circulated to many readers in a social network. So there is a natural affinity between blogging and the need to spread news.

I met with Percy and Zukile late last week to ask them about their experience so far and both were fired up. Both of their initial posts had met with substantive criticism by the readers and I was concerned, going into the meeting, that they would be put off by this. In fact, they explained, the contrary was true. Both felt that getting that type of feedback was helping them understand how to write opinion pieces better and form better structures for their arguments. Blogging was helping them be better journalists because, unlike the traditional newsroom situation, the readers were challenging them on issues of ideology and political stance from an emotive perspective. This harkens back to the days when Rhetoric was as powerful a catalyst for the formation of knowledge as Reason.

Emotional catharsis

It is also, I think, a type of emotional catharsis for a journalist to be able to say, out loud, that they support the ANC emotionally or think Mugabe is getting a raw deal. Those kind of sentiments have to be kept in check most of the time.

Another important factor is how journalists get boxed into beats by the political structure of a newspaper. Writers who have a keen interest in sport but can't get the space from the editor because there are several other, more experienced writers covering the topic end up not being able to get the experience they need in the first place. Blogging makes this possible.

But aside from the journalists and their personal situations, social media and blogging in particular is something that newspaper staff are equipped to deal with better than some of the other media. Editors are used to filtering long arguments for legal liability, false logic, baseless truth claims and so on. It is, for many, in their blood. They love the written word. This too, is a reason why many have balked at the prospect of a massive explosion of writing that the blogging phenomenon has brought about since 2001 when it started going mainstream. To think that so much badly constructed writing is flowing around the web can be unnerving.

Type of public servant

Finally, I believe that a journalist is a type of public servant and so must maintain a level of interaction with the public they

serve. In many cases, revealing the truth in a corruption scandal, or the plight of the poor, brings about a form of social development and change, for the better. We understand, in this day and age, that knowledge is one of the primary criteria for action to be possible but many journalists have forgotten that the corollary is the necessity for a level of interaction with society as a whole. The unidirectional nature of the traditional media has made this second aspect of journalism quite difficult, practically. Letters to the editor aren't good enough.

As Rubel points out, most of the media have gone social and are talking in a slightly less formal and more transparent way to their audiences. This is going to seem like a watershed moment, from the vantage point of the future.

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