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## **Exploring new journalistic platforms: experiences of Turkish journalist bloggers.**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines how weblogs, as new platforms of journalism, contribute to the transformation of professional journalism in theory and in practice. Drawing on the previous arguments that suggest the necessity of a reform and even a paradigm shift in journalism, this research focuses on a specific type of blog; those produced by the professional journalists outside media organizations. We look in particular at how journalist bloggers negotiate traditional norms of journalism such as objectivity or practices like gate-keeping with intrinsic characteristics of the blog format such as subjectivity and audience participation.

### **Introduction**

In the last two decades it has been argued on several platforms, from academic conferences to news media that institutionalized journalism suffers from a deep crisis. Some even go as far as declaring the end or death of traditional journalism and these claims echo in the work of leading scholars in media studies (Katz, 1992; Manoff, 1995, Hardt, 1996, Bromley, 1997 as cited in Zellizer, 2004, p.204). The decline of circulation and advertising revenues for media institutions (Gitlin, 2009) or the general public distrust towards media are considered symptoms of this crisis. These factors lead to massive journalist lay-offs in many parts of the world.

Besides the detrimental effects of this crisis on news professionals and media organizations, critical scholars also point out a wider problem: the “democratic deficits” (Herman and Chomsky, 2006; Hackett and Carroll, 2006; McChesney, 2007) of traditional

media in general and journalism in particular. They claim that journalism as it is practiced today becomes an obstacle rather than an enabler for democracy.

The critiques that stem from the democratic deficit perspective target different aspects of journalism. The decreasing the quality of political journalism is blamed on the commercialization and tabloidization of the news content (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995, Baker, 2002). In line with this, increasing levels of ownership concentration as well as conglomeration are pointed to as aggravators of the problem by “reducing the range of issues” and voices covered by the media (Anderson and Ward, 2007, p.6). Besides the structural constraints, top-down nature of news media, professional norms such as objectivity (Hackett and Zhao, 1998; McChesney, 2003) and practices such as over-dependence on elite sources (Allan, 2004; Entman et al, 2009) as well as issues related to gate-keeping role have been conceptualized as problematic aspects of journalism as they are claimed to be excluding certain voices and thus reproducing and masking the existing inequalities of power in the society. All these critiques strongly suggest a necessity for reform in journalism. Depending on the perceived causes of the problems, the reform projects focus on the structures (such as policy oriented media activism; McChesney, 2007) or journalistic norms and practices (such as public journalism). Besides – or in some cases as a part of – these reform projects, “discontent with the performance of journalism by the established media” also gives way to “debates about a paradigm shift in journalism” (Domingo and Heinonen 2008, p.5). Within this framework, it has been suggested that the relationship between the audiences and journalists needs to be reconceived and new ways of news-gathering and storytelling should be explored.

In this search for the redefinition and reform, new technologies play an important role by providing “journalistic reformers an ideal opening to try new ideas” (Fulton, 1996 as quoted in

Matheson, 2004, p.444). In accord with this argument, Dahlgren notes that “new tools of journalism offer new practices, new possibilities” (Dahlgren, 2009, p.153). In the online environment, weblogs stand at the fore as, arguably, the most influential news tool to generate such a change. Not only allowing non-professionals to make and disseminate their own news, they also provide professionals and non-professionals a venue to bypass mainstream media’s constraining structures as has been widely observed during the Iraqi invasion. Both outside and as a part of the news organizations this new format is increasingly gaining space in the journalistic field. It offers the possibility of a more interactive, participatory journalism which is more responsive to the needs of the citizens and equipped with the necessary methods to overcome the democratic deficits mentioned above. Although the early debates about the journalism-blogging relationship focused mostly on the question of whether bloggers can be considered as journalists (Blood, 2003; Andrews, 2003), recently researchers started to turn their attention to blogs’ influence on conventional journalism (Matheson, 2004; Singer, 2005; Lowrey, 2006; Domingo and Heinonen, 2008). It has been suggested that the blogs constitute the “evidence of journalism’s attempts to rethink its values and relations with publics” (Matheson, 2004, p.462).

In this research we build on these debates and investigate how journalists negotiate conventional journalistic norms and practices using the characteristics of the blog format in news making. Previous research that dealt with the similar topic in the American context (Robinson, 2006; Singer, 2005) mostly used textual analysis. This study adopts a different approach and chooses interviews as the primary data collection method.

The results suggest that while almost all the interviewees acknowledge the liberating and democratizing characteristics of the blog format for their work, they do not fully use these

characteristics for various reasons. Internalisation of the conventional professional norms leads to the “normalization” of (Singer, 2005) this new journalistic platform.

## **Literature Review**

This section starts with a very brief overview of the emergence of news blogs and continues with the description of different types of news blogs holding a specific focus on each type’s contribution to journalism. Also, we delineate the characteristics of blogs in order to provide background for our research.

### **The rise of news blogs**

In this research we use the terms news blogs and journalistic blogs interchangeably. By these we mainly refer to the blogs “that have a clear intention to collect, analyse, interpret or comment on current events to wider audiences [..]” (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008, p.6)

Although early examples of blogs can be found as early as 1994 (Pisani, 2003), the rise of the blog format as an important news platform coincides to the first half of the 2000s. By this time, certain internet sites started offering free spaces and assistance for the bloggers, contributing to the popularity of blogs. The increased need for information during times of crisis and wars further contributed to news blogs’ emergence in the early 2000s. For instance 9-11 attacks in 2001 is often described as a turning point and even “the birth” of the blogs (Andrews, 2006). During the chaotic few days following the attacks, blogs worked as an important channel of communication for those who searched for their relatives, wanted to share their experiences or simply to express their grief (Allan, 2002). Blogs also constituted an important source of information for the mainstream media in the context of 9-11 by providing materials such as eye-witness accounts, pictures and video recordings (Allan, 2002).

The 2003 invasion of Iraq can be considered as another turning point for the news blogs. As the flow of information from the war zone is mainly controlled by the US Government through the usage of embedded journalists (Aydin, 2007), blogs provided journalist and citizen bloggers alike a space to bypass mainstream media's canonical accounts of the war. Some of these war-blogs even succeeded to impact the international news agenda. For instance, Dahr Jamail, a journalist blogger has been the first to announce to the world the coalition forces' usage of depleted uranium which is prohibited by international treaties (Kurkcu, 2006, p.86). Likewise an Iraqi citizen journalist blogging under the nickname of Selam Pax gained an important readership during the war and has been hired by the British newspaper the Guardian (Pisani, 2003). Besides providing alternative content to mainstream media, blogs allowed journalists to explore new forms of funding for their job. Christopher Albritten, an independent journalist blogger, whose blog B21 received 25 thousand hits per day, traveled to Iraq with the help of his readers' donations to provide full coverage (Albritten, 2003, p.83).

The above mentioned blogs contributed to the acknowledgement of news blogs as an important source of information both for readers and for the news media. Today, blogs became a part of the journalistic arena and their popularity is not limited to times of crisis. They have been appropriated both by amateurs and news professionals and are integrated to the journalism and media in different forms.

### **Different types of journalistic blogs and their impact on journalism**

Domingo and Heinonen identify four types of journalistic blogs based on their relationship with the "established media" (2008, p.7). These are 1) *citizen blogs* "produced by the public, outside media companies" 2) *audience blogs* produced by the audiences "on the

platforms provided by the media” 3) *journalist blogs* produced by professional journalists “outside their companies” and finally 4) *media blogs* published in media organizations by the “staff journalists” (2008, p.7-10). Each type of blog engages with conventional journalism differently and possesses “different characteristics” (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008, p.7). The first two types generated significant amount of discussions among the professionals and scholars. It has been argued that most of the work produced in these blogs that fall into the first category cannot be considered as journalism as they lack original reporting (Blood, 2003, p. 63). Citizen blogs are also criticised because of their producers’ lack of professional standards and qualities (Andrews, 2003). Yet, citizen blogs can and do act in some cases as a monitor for the “work of the professional media” (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008, p.7) and thus contribute to partly overcome journalism’s democratic deficit.

Audience blogs are mostly used as complimentary sources for the media organizations. They create a sense of community among readers and enhance connections between journalists and communities (Reagan, 2003, p.69) by establishing and furthering a “dialogue” between them (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008, p.9). In this sense, they appear to be an important step towards re-establishing the “lost connection between the media and the community” due to the former’s “close affiliation with the big business” (Hallin, 1994 quoted in Turner, 2009, p.391). Also, their existence can be interpreted as the sharing of “journalistic authority” (Singer, 2010, p.277) by professional journalists with non-professionals.

However some scholars call attention to different motivations for the appropriation of the blogs by the news organizations. According to them, by “co-opting” this format, mainstream media “fights back against competition from user driven news reporting and commentary that bypass traditional channels” (Hermida, 2009, p. 3). This way the monitoring function of the

blogs can be disabled. Moreover, previous research on journalist blogs and media blogs (Singer, 2005; Robinson, 2006) suggest reluctance on the part of journalists' to share journalistic authority. Although it has been argued that blogs "end journalism's reign of sovereignty" (Rosen, 2005) in the journalistic arena, Singer's study reveals that journalists resist this in various ways. Singer suggests that journalists normalize the blog format by maintaining traditional gate-keeping roles (Singer, 2005) despite the participatory and inclusive character of online communication. These findings are similar to Lowrey's argument that "...journalists and bloggers may be more interested in maintaining and seeking authority rather than on benefiting society" (2006, p.478). In our research we are going to have a closer look at how this argument resonates with Turkish journalists' experiences. But before that we want to define some of the principle characteristics of blogs in order to determine how they are used in practice by our sample bloggers.

### **Characteristics of Weblogs**

Weblog is a "form unique to the world wide web" (Matheson, 2004, p.444) which is described as a "frequently updated personal web page with links to related sites" (Lowrey, 2006, p. 477). Journalism practiced in the blogs is "identified as a new form of journalism" (Deuze, 2003; Lasica, 2002) and often called as "personal" or "postmodern" journalism (Wall, 2005, p.157). Personal narrative style, audience participation in the content creation, and hyperlinks constitute some of the main features of the news blogs (Wall, 2005, p.153).

Personal narrative style in blogs is often thought to be a shift from the norm of objectivity. Subjectivity is a core theme in blogging. According to Pohlig;

weblogs “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” (Pohlig, 2003, p.25 as quoted in Robinson, 2006, p. 68).

Besides personalization, certain features of blogs such as hyperlinks transform the journalistic formats. For instance, hyperlinks do not only eradicate the need for inverted pyramid, but also “allow readers to change endings (even extend them indefinitely), establish a non-linear story format and bring in other authors” (Robinson, 2006, p. 69). Audience’s ability to enlarge the narrative is often interpreted as a new form of audience agency. Another aspect of blogs that contribute to this agency can be found in the notion of interactivity that Pohlig suggests above. Interactivity is argued to “enhance connections between journalists and the audiences they serve” (Singer, 2005, p.174):

When journalism becomes a process, and not a static product, audiences discard their traditional role as passive consumers of news and become empowered partners with a shared stake in the end result (Lasica, 2003, p.72).

Blogger journalists adopt different strategies to enable this participation. They may “expose the raw material of their stories in progress”, ask “readers for their expert input” or “write follow up stories” based on the feed-back they receive (Lasica, 2003, p. 74). This way, journalists not only share the journalistic authority but also render the news making process more transparent and inclusive. As it can be seen these practices can clash with conventional journalistic norms such as objectivity and gate-keeping.

## **Method**

This research uses semi structured and in-depth interviews as the main data collection method. As Robinson suggests “Interviewing the creators of news products” provided previous researchers such as Gans (1979), Tuchman (1979) or Deuze (2005) “essential insight into journalistic norms and practices” (2007, p.309).

Our sample consists of 9 journalist bloggers (j-bloggers) who have a minimum of 5 years of experience as a professional journalist and who blog outside media organizations. Of the 9 j-bloggers, two have a background in independent alternative media in addition to their academic careers on journalism. The remaining 7 work in mainstream news organizations besides blogging, and write on a variety of issues ranging from politics to arts and fashion. We think that this diversity of the sample group provides us with an opportunity to compare the levels of internalisation of the conventional journalistic norms for journalists with different backgrounds. Although we initially aimed for a larger sample, we were restricted by the rarity of the j-bloggers in Istanbul that meet the criteria of the research.

All the interviews have been conducted in Istanbul by Perrin Ogun Emre between February and May 2009. Four of these interviews were face to face interviews that lasted about an hour. Five journalists have been interviewed through an asynchronous method: e-mails. One of the j-bloggers preferred phone interview due to his workload. All participants have been clearly informed about the research topic and purpose. To avoid any potential trouble that may be caused by their employers, all participants were offered complete anonymity yet none wanted to use it. Interestingly, they have demonstrated a close interest in the research and two j-bloggers even mentioned the interviews in their blogs promising their readers to publish the results of our study. Each interview has been recorded and transcribed by Perrin Ogun Emre and the findings

have been organized by Pinar Gurleyen according to the interview questions and emerging themes.

To initiate the conversation, participants have been first questioned about their motivations to start a blog. Then their opinions about the liberating potentials of blog format for the journalists and readers have been taken. With an additional set of questions j-bloggers have been asked to compare their print and online news work and styles in order to assess how they negotiate conventional journalistic norms and styles with blog format's intrinsic characteristics.

## **Findings**

### **Motivations for starting a blog**

Robinson defines a journalist weblog (j-blog) as a “cross between a column, a news story and a journal” (2006, p.64). The interviewed j-bloggers mostly start their blogs for personal reasons such as “building a personal digital archive for their work” (Dundar; Bayramdede; Tekelioglu and Bagmesli; interview) or to use the extra material they have produced for print media (Gurbuz; Eser; Sahinbas, interview). Therefore the content of the blogs mostly consists of recycled material with few exceptions mostly produced by independent journalists (i.e. Ragip Duran).

While one j-blogger explicitly states that he did not intend to create a participatory platform in his blog (Dundar, interview) another j-blogger; Yaprak Aras Sahinbas emphasizes that she created her blog to enhance her relationship with her readers (interview).

### **Liberating potentials of blogs**

This theme has been brought up by j-bloggers in terms of journalistic work as well as citizens' access to media. From both perspectives, different forms of internet publishing including blogs are conceived as an important platform to break down the concentrated and corporatized ownership structures of the mainstream media that exclude alternative voices (Gurbuz; Duran; Arsan, Interview). That said, j-bloggers mainly emphasized the impact of the blog format for their own news work. The non-existence of editorial control is stated as an important asset by multiple j-bloggers in terms of maintaining the full control of the work:

I've experienced the benefits of the blog in the sense that it (blog) provided me with a space in which all the decisions related to writing and publishing are taken by me (Duran, interview).

While Duran acknowledges the lack of editorial control as a positive aspect for his work, interviewees including him think that this same phenomenon does sometimes enable the circulation of violent or discriminatory content (on the online environment) which would otherwise be eliminated in a news organization due to certain control mechanisms (Duran; Arsan; Tekelioglu and Bagmesli; Gurbuz; Dunder, interview). The fact that this potential danger is mostly associated (by the participants) with the material published by the non-professionals indicates that professionalization and the media organizations are seen as a filter against this kind of unethical practices. In other words, institutionalized journalism equipped with certain norms and practiced in media organizations as a group work with the involvement of several professionals, is seen more trustworthy than personal or amateur journalism.

In terms of the freedom from structural constraints journalists express different points of views. Ozgur Gurbuz finds that, compared to mainstream media, censorship in blogs is "far less significant and the self-censorship is more limited" (interview). Tekelioglu supports this by

mentioning a story that she had not been able to cover when she was working in the mainstream media (Tekelioglu and Bagmesli, Interview):

There are things that we cannot write about in the media.... We (journalists) are using self censorship and I want to use this blog to talk about these subjects. [...] For instance, I've interviewed Emine Erdogan (first lady). The publishing of the interviews has been prevented by the Prime Minister. I've sold the recordings and transcription of the interview to Aktuel<sup>1</sup> two years later. If I had this blog by then, I would have published it here.

Other bloggers did not indicate similar experiences in terms of self or other types of censorship. They do not mention any concerns about a possible conflict of interest relating to their work in media and blogs. Yet, the words of Bayram Dede made us think about a more subtle form of internalized control. Bayram Dede suggests that the bloggers can be held responsible by media organizations for the content they produce in their personal blogs:

When journalists receive negative reactions for an article published in their blog, they cannot tell to their newspapers' executives that this does not concern the newspaper as the article is published in their blog.

This perception of responsibility can act as a filtering mechanism for the journalists and may prevent the full usage of blogs' liberating potentials.

Other liberating functions of the blog stated in the interviews consist of technical aspects such as the possibility to explore a subject in more detail by the hyperlinks and using hypertexts to enrich the material (Sahinbas; Eser, Akyildiz, Interview).

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<sup>1</sup> This is a news magazine published in Turkey.

## **Subjectivity versus objectivity**

Most of the interviewed J-bloggers value their blogs as a personal space where they can express themselves freely. The subjectivity of the blog format means different things for reporters and columnists. Eser, a reporter j-blogger expresses this difference as follows:

In media you always see the same news language, the same words ... reporters are not allowed to make comments. This is rather the columnists' job. The content of my blog looks like my personal observations rather news in terms of language. It has a more pleasant tone...

Thus blogs give reporters the possibility to make their own comments and share the backstage information concerning the events they report. This last aspect is especially stated to be an important and genuine contribution to the news work (Eser, Interview).

For columnist j-bloggers subjectivity mainly consists of being visible as a person in the reader's eyes:

My main aim is to show people different (less-known) traits of my personality through different forms of writings (Akyildiz, Interview).

Despite these statements that embrace the subjectivity of the blog format, certain j-bloggers avoid transforming their blogs into personal diaries. In other words, they want to keep this personal space in the contours of their profession (Tekelioglu and Bagmesli; Eser; Dunder; Interview). This concern for a professional stance in the blog sometimes translates itself into adaptation of a more formal news language which is a reflection of the notion of objectivity in journalism. Bayramdede (Interview) for instance insists on using the same language in his blog and his newspaper articles.

As most of our j-bloggers use the content that were originally produced for the news organizations, their work do not demonstrate a great shift from the notion of objectivity. Moreover, they do not express such a concern. However in some cases (i.e. Eres; Azar, Interview) they prefer to personalize the news stories by including information about the news making processes and the backstage stories. This in turn contributes to the demystification of the news work and can be interpreted as a divergence from the role of the journalist as an objective observer.

### **Participation/Gate-keeping**

Almost all the interviewees acknowledge the importance of the interactive character of blogs. Yet the nature of this interactivity is mostly limited to a feed-back mechanism that consists of readers' comments. We observe in one case that even this type of simple involvement is denied: Tekelioglu and Bagmesli do not allow reader comments on their blog on the grounds that this might be abused by some readers to post "insulting and violent" comments (Interview).

Others mention that they attribute user comments a fact checking function: "The details that you might have missed or mistakes that you make are commented on by the readers" (Bayramdede, Interview). Bilge Eser likens this to Big Brother and mentions constraining aspects:

"[..]at the beginning I was writing in a rather sloppy manner about the elections, politicians or political parties...but I'm receiving more comments now and choosing my words more attentively. However, when I've realized this, I said 'wait a minute I did not start this blog for this'" (Interview).

Journalists also use their blogs to announce (or get feed-back about) their works such as novels or documentaries (Dundar, Interview). Among the nine journalists interviewed only one, who focuses on fashion and trends, uses the readers as news sources and even news produced by the readers (Sahinbas, Interview).

### **Evaluation**

Data collected from the interviews suggest that the journalist bloggers who currently work in a media organization see their blogs as an extension of their columns or work in the mainstream media. They prefer to emphasize their professional identities as journalists in their blogs and often recycle the material originally produced for the mainstream media. Therefore the news production process they follow does not demonstrate a great shift from conventional journalism. Still, certain differences can be observed.

From the perspective of our participants, the most significant change of the blog format for the professionals is the lack of editorial control. This allows journalists to choose the stories/subjects that they really want to cover. Additionally, for the reporters personal blogs provide the opportunity to add their personal comments and views concerning the subjects or events they cover. This can be interpreted as a transformation of the detached observer position attributed to the news reporter. In this sense the columnists do not experience a great difference as their work in the mainstream media already encompasses this practice.

In terms of reader-journalist relationship, the accounts of j-bloggers point out to some changes as well. Both the journalists and readers become more visible in the blogs. This visibility means, for the journalists and especially reporters, to be present with their personality

rather than being a name, a small picture and a signature on the page<sup>2</sup>. This makes the j-bloggers feel more responsible towards their readers (Eser, Akyildiz, Interview). Readers, on the other hand, can be visible through their comments. This is quite different than the traditional mass media where audiences are often represented as numbers in the rating or circulation measurements.

Because j-bloggers can control the whole process of news production, they become less alienated to their work. Moreover, this involvement leads them to engage with the numerous aspects of news work such as writing the texts, choosing the visuals and learn/adapt to the technological developments in communications. However, these are only valid for the work originally produced for the blogs not the recycled material. For the latter the main differences reside in the presentation of the material through features such as videos and links. Also, sometimes j-bloggers change these texts slightly by adopting a less-authoritative language.

When it comes to participation, which is one of the most important features of blogs, we observe different attitudes. Most of the bloggers (with one exception) allow reader comments. However this type of participation can only be possible after the work has been completed. The fact that only one j-blogger allows user generated content and uses readers as sources shows that j-bloggers mainly exclude readers from the news making process. Instead as a novelty, they attribute to the reader a fact checking mission.

## **Conclusion**

Lowrey argues that “Bloggers perceive themselves as a part of community that shares values, rituals and language” (2006, p.479). In the case of studied j-bloggers, we see that they

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<sup>2</sup> Tekelioglu and Dundar who are already known by the audience because of their programs on TV constitute exceptions

mainly identify themselves with their profession rather than a member of the blogging community. In other words, they prefer to operate within the professional norms instead of the new norms brought by the blog format. Therefore, certain bloggers reject informal language that clashes with the norm of objectivity or even avoid user comments.

Most of the interviewees do not perceive blogging as a completely different form of journalism. It constitutes an available platform to build a personal archive or portfolio. Some clearly suggest that they see their blog as an extension of their columns. This finding meshes with Hermida's analysis about bloggers in BBC's media blogs. He states that "correspondents do not view blogging as a significant departure from existing forms of journalism ... instead blogging is seen as a platform of delivering content that compliments broadcast output, albeit in a more personal and informal tone" (Hermida, 2009, p.13). Although our j-bloggers operate outside media organizations, our study shows that they follow a similar pattern.

With one exception we see that the journalistic authority-the authority to make news- is maintained to a large extent by the j-bloggers who remain as gate-keepers of the news agenda. Yet this authority is being challenged by the user comments. As Singer suggests, "users can confront journalistic authority in a direct way through personal attacks, disagreement over opinions and disputes over facts" (2010, p.280).

We contend that although blog format offer the journalists a space where they can challenge the dominant professional norms, j-bloggers are not using or exploring these liberating potentials enough. The internalization of the professional norms by the journalists also affects the way they perceive the blogs. They prefer to differentiate themselves from the readers and other bloggers by their professional identities. In other words professionalization remains to be a form

of legitimisation in the blog format for the j-bloggers. We see that the perpetuation of the conventional roles such as gate-keeping or norms such as objectivity only cease when the journalists find these problematic. That is perhaps why the reporters-who are strictly prevented from reflecting their opinions in the news reports-, are more eager to try new journalistic forms in the blogs. Therefore, despite the arguments suggesting that “many journalists working online are enthusiastic about the potential to rearticulate practice in the new forms” (Matheson, p.444), we see that this re-articulation rarely goes beyond the application of new tools to the old content. Yet a genuine transformation –one that can contribute to overcome the democratic deficits of media by rendering journalism more inclusive and connected to community- of the journalistic norms can only be possible when the journalists are willing to change them. Otherwise for now, it seems that “the social institution called journalism is hesitant in abandoning its conventions, both at organizational and professional levels, even in the ‘Age of the Net’” (O’Sullivan and Heinonen as quoted in Hermida, 2009, p.13).

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