CHAPTER SIX

TRUTH IN A WAR ZONE:
THE ROLE OF WARBLOGS IN IRAQ

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During the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, familiar modes of war reporting were actively re-inflected, sometimes in surprising ways. While much debate ensued over the relative merits of 'unilateral' or 'embedded' news coverage, other developments enabled by the proliferation of new media technologies, from digital cameras and computer notebooks to satellite telephones, received far less attention. Among these new approaches to reporting war was the 'warblog', a mode we argue deserves particular scrutiny.

This chapter proposes to examine the emergent forms and practices of blogging as an augmentation of – and at times challenge to – war reporting. As will soon become apparent, however, we have not attempted the difficult task of comprehensively surveying the multiplicity of warblogs concerned with the invasion and its aftermath. Rather, we have chosen to investigate a small number, grouping them into three broad categories: warblogs associated with major news organizations; warblogs produced by freelance or 'sojo' reporters, as well as 'personal' or 'amateur' journalists; and warblogs posted by Iraqi citizens. In the course of our analysis, we draw upon insights provided by bloggers themselves, both from interviews conducted by ourselves as well as from other sources.[i] We suggest that these writers valued the use of blogging as journalism – characterized as it is by informality, subjectivity and eyewitness experience – for the ways in which it cuts across the fundamentals of ostensibly impartial news reporting. In this chapter's evaluation of warblogging's relative strengths and limitations, then, care will be taken to discern the extent to which it represents a challenge to certain longstanding tenets of war reporting.

Blogs as news sources

The advent of weblogging is currently the subject of intense debate within certain journalistic circles. Many of its advocates place blogging in the vanguard of new forms of citizen journalism enabled by digital technologies, which it is hoped, will reconnect the profession with its diverse publics. Others speak of blogging and related phenomena as 'we media' (Bowman and Willis 2003), in which professional journalists are becoming marginalized in the course of a digital revolution reminiscent of the arrival of the printing press in the fifteenth century. Its detractors beg to differ, of course, with some even disputing the claim that such forms of discourse have anything more than a tangential relation to journalism. Blogging, they argue, is more akin to a form of subjective commentary, one where short, sharp bursts of opinionated argument about mainstream news items or events typically take the place of dispassionate, balanced and – crucially – investigative news reporting. Evidence to support these and related positions is readily available, needless to say, depending on where one looks in the virtual universe of the 'blogosphere'.

Weblogs, or blogs for short, may be aptly described as diaries or journals written by individuals with net access who are in possession of the necessary software publishing tools (e.g. those provided by sites such as Blogger.com) to establish an online presence. Emerging in the mid-1990s, they are currently believed to be flourishing in the millions across the webscape. Many news bloggers – a small minority compared to the number of ordinary netizens involved overall – consider themselves to be 'personal' journalists, intent on transgressing the border between 'professional' and 'amateur' reporting. While it is difficult to generalize, most seem motivated to share their analysis, comments or background knowledge about news events which matter to them so as to counterbalance mainstream news media coverage (Matheson 2004). Some post little more than *ad hoc* musings, offering a passing insight in the form of an occasional sentence or two, sometimes with accompanying excerpts and/or hyperlinks to pertinent news or information sites elsewhere. Typically, the more influential blogs, though, are those associated with a particular issue or concern, and are thereby committed to providing a fresh, 'unfiltered' perspective which sets them apart from other, rival blogs.

News-oriented blogs vary in form and practice, but many are informed by a shared ethos, namely that newsgathering and commentary need to be democratized. By acting as 'unofficial' news sources on the web, these blogs link together information and opinion which supplements – or, in the eyes of some advocates, supplants – the coverage provided by 'official' news outlets. Here it needs to be noted, however, that very few blogs actually provide new information. Instead, most bloggers pull together their resources from a diverse

array of other sites, thereby situating a given news event within a larger context, and illuminating multiple dimensions of its elements. The apparent facts or claims being collected are usually time-stamped and placed in reverse-chronological order as the blog is updated, thereby making it easier for readers to follow its ongoing narrative.

Customarily the sources of the blogger's information are acknowledged explicitly, with the accompanying hyperlink enabling the user to negotiate a network of cross-references from one blog to the next, or to other types of sites altogether. In principle, the facts or claims presented in any one blog can be subjected to the relentless double-checking of users, some of whom may be even better informed about the events in question than the initial blogger. Any attempt by a blogger to present a partisan assertion as an impartial statement of truth is likely to be promptly recognized as such by other users.

In the months following the September 2001 attacks on the US, blogs became a site of intense debate in that country over the so-called 'war on terror'. A rapidly growing number of blogs – called 'warblogs' – devoted particular attention to the perceived shortcomings of the mainstream news media with regard to their responsibility to inform the public about possible risks, threats and dangers (see also Zelizer and Allan 2002). Warbloggers were divided, as one might expect, between those who favoured US and UK military intervention in the Middle East, and those who did not. In both cases, however, an emphasis was placed on documenting sufficient evidence to demonstrate the basis for their dissatisfaction with what they deemed to be the apparent biases of the mainstream news coverage of the ensuing conflict in Afghanistan. For pro-war bloggers, a 'liberal bias' was detectable in much mainstream journalism, leading them to call into question the patriotism of well-known reporters and news organizations. In sharp contrast, bloggers opposed to the war were equally convinced that mainstream journalism, with its over-reliance on official sources, was failing to provide fair and balanced coverage. Many were able to show, with little difficulty, how voices of dissent were being routinely marginalized, when they were even acknowledged at all.

The heated debate over war in these warblogs (Wall 2005) contributed to growing activism among bloggers, both in relation to government policy and the media. Debates over the impacts of some bloggers are charted elsewhere (see, for example, Scott 2004; Haas 2005; Allan 2006) but there can be no doubt of the growing prominence of this mode of public debate. By April 2006, the news agency Reuters was announcing a partnership with an international network of bloggers, GlobalVoices, providing its members with funding and including their commentary on its newswires. At the same time, warblogs can be argued to have articulated and fed a general lessening of journalism's legitimacy and authority as the sole 'arbiter of events in society' (Zelizer 1993: 80).

Such concern could only be heightened by journalism's inevitably compromised position during the Iraq conflict, where any image construed as unpatriotic in the US was heavily criticized and where key parameters such as the claimed presence of weapons of mass destruction in the country or the claimed end of the war in May 2003 proved so difficult to substantiate. As is discussed below, it was for precisely these reasons that some commentators argue that personal, unedited and non-professional blogs 'finally found their moment' as bombs were dropped on the city of Baghdad (Levy 2003). In this moment, we argue, the parameters of journalism were stretched in significant ways. As Reuters announced (2006), blogs 'help our readers appreciate different perspectives and to engage in a global conversation'.

In order to explore the inter-relation of this phenomenon with the practices of journalism, particularly those of war reporting, we examine three relatively distinct (yet necessarily interrelated) approaches to warblogging below. In essence, their distinctiveness is defined in relation to the institutional basis, or lack thereof, underpinning their status as war reporters. We turn first to warblogs associated with major news organisations, such as the BBC (www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/2866547.stm), CNN (www.cnn.com), MSNBC (www.msnbc.msn.com/), the Spokane Spokesman-Review (www.spokesmanreview.com/) and Guardian Unlimited (www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq). Next, attention focuses on warblogs produced by solo or freelance journalists, including Christopher Allbritton's 'Back to Iraq. 2.0' (www.back-to-iraq.com). Lastly, warblogs posted by Iraqi citizens, such as that belonging to Salam Pax are examined, before the chapter ends with several preliminary – and we hope conceptually suggestive – conclusions.

Blogging from a war zone

A glance at some of the blogs kept by Western journalists reporting on the invasion of Iraq for newspapers and broadcasters suggests there was little consensus at the start of the war about the role of blogging. Their warblogs varied widely in style and in the kind of knowledge they produced. Some, such as *Guardian* reporter Audrey Gillan's 'war diary' written while 'embedded' with the British Household Cavalry in early 2003, read like the more personal kind of newspaper column. The blog was, in effect, further space constructed by the news organization for the reporter's experience of war. Others, such as M.L. Lyke's blog for the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, written during the three weeks she spent onboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, were first-person accounts giving, at times, more space to her own birthday celebrations than the events of the war. Others, such as the 'Dispatches' of the *Christian Science Monitor*'s online journalist Ben Arnoldy 'embedded' in northern Iraq, shifted

between the two styles. Others still, such as the BBC producer Stuart Hughes's blog, were near private sites, designed initially just for family and friends but rapidly gaining readerships of, in his case, the thousands and tolerated by his employer. It was an experimental moment. Yet clearly, reporters, editors and readers were drawn to the warblog form in some numbers to augment the news.

The evolving status of Hughes's blog is emblematic of the fluid state of the warblog at this moment. Hughes, who produced reports for the BBC from northern Iraq during the war's initial months, was surprised that his blog was taken by readers as journalism. He typically posted entries to his blog immediately after filing his news items to the Corporation. He told us:

> I didn't think I was doing anything particularly pioneering. To go one step further and explain how my weblog came to be set up, it was never intended to be anything approaching journalism. I…only set it up for my immediate family and friends because I knew it would be difficult to stay in touch with them when I was Iraq. So I thought I'd post a picture and a few words every now and then and at least they'd know I was OK…And then gradually word started to spread about it and there were a few newspaper articles and it became a warblog, which it was never intended to be. It was like a daily dispatch to family and…[I wrote] literally what came into my head: this is what I've been doing, this is whom I've spoken to. But, interestingly, that tone and that approach and that style were exactly what people latched onto and they seemed to trust what I was telling them. They had no reason to, I mean I could have been making all those quotes up, for all anybody knows (Hughes, interview).

Hughes's blog, titled 'Beyond Northern Iraq' (stuarthughes.blogspot.com), focused on daily minutiae and personal responses to life on the ground, rather than on the major events of the war. Describing his blog as his 'guilty secret', he regards it as a kind of 'sketchbook' for subjects to investigate. Others observed similarly that the line between the public and the interpersonal blurred on these sites. BBC News Interactive assignment editor Cathy Grieve observed that the Corporation's 'Reporters' Log,' the weblog authored by its correspondents in Iraq, was often used by colleagues in the UK to check they were still alive and well (Grieve, interview). Indeed, she also recalled that it was used on one occasion by British officers, who had temporarily lost their charge in the desert.[ii] For many news organizations, this blurring was attractive in that it offered to take the reader further than the formal news text into the journalist's experience of the news, giving them 'a dynamic look at the story behind the story of covering the news in Iraq,' in the sales pitch of the NBC's 'Blogging Baghdad' (baghdadblog.msnbc.com).

A key feature of the blog which strongly attracted news organizations was the prominence the form gives to the latest information, and the ease with which a page can be updated. The Spokane *Spokesman-Review*'s online editor Ken

Sands talked of the print newspaper as 'hopelessly behind' his newspaper's weblog (Sands, interview). The newspaper's print version was updated once a day, while its weblog, sitting to the side of newsroom routines, was updated with wire stories, links to newspaper and broadcaster websites around the world and commentary as often as Sands found something worth posting. The flexibility of blog posting, often without the intervention of subeditors, offered a sense of immediacy, taking readers vicariously to the scene of the conflict.

This type of immediacy, as one might expect, posed problems for established news practices. Even when codes separating ostensibly 'objective' reporting from 'subjective' comment were applied to their news blogs, news organizations often found that certain long-standing tensions between reporters and their editors were exacerbated. A decision to post material as soon as it became available, regardless of how 'raw' (un-edited) it might be, frequently sparked disagreements. Bill Mitchell (2003) was one of many who argued that the combination in any one journalistic blogger of such diverse skills as reporting, writing, editing and news judgment put at risk the reputation of the news outlet publishing it (2003: 66). To counteract the absence of institutional safety mechanisms, he suggested only experienced journalists should write news blogs.

Such an attitude partly explains the response of CNN's executives to the warblogging of Kevin Sites. Published on his own site (www.kevinsites.net), Sites's blog provided his personal commentary about the events he was witnessing from one day to the next, along with various photographs and audio reports that he prepared. Perhaps in light of the media attention Sites's blog received, however, CNN ask him to suspend it on Friday, 21 March 2003. A Network spokesperson stated at the time that covering war was 'a full-time job and we've asked Kevin to concentrate only on that for the time being' (cited in Kurtz 2003). Sites agreed to stop blogging, later explaining that 'CNN was signing my checks at the time and sent me to Iraq. Although I felt the blog was a separate and independent journalistic enterprise, they did not' (www.kevinsites.net). Reactions from other bloggers were swift. CNN's response, according to Steven Levy (2003) of *Newsweek*, 'was seen in the blogosphere as one more sign that the media dinosaurs are determined to stamp out this subversive new form of reporting'.

In contrast, MSNBC supported its correspondents' blogging and maintained three warblogs focused on war coverage at the height of the conflict. 'Weblogs are journalism,' argued Joan Connell, one of the site's executive producers. 'They can be used to great effect in reporting an unfolding story and keeping readers informed' (cited in Mernit 2003). Nevertheless, while she does not share CNN's stance that blogs lack a sufficiently 'structured approach to presenting the news', she does believe that there is a necessary role for an editor in the

process. In her words: 'Unlike many weblogs, whose posts go from the mind of the writer straight into the blogosphere, MSNBC's Weblogs are edited. Our editors scrutinize our weblogs for accuracy, fairness and balance, just as they would any news story' (cited in Mernit 2003).

Other news organizations similarly welcomed staff warblogs, and a few took the experiment with blogging a little further. BBC News Interactive assignment editor Cathy Grieve said her colleagues were motivated to produce a joint weblog of BBC foreign correspondents' thoughts because they 'wanted to do something more immediate' than more packaged news (Grieve, interview). Immediacy, in this sense, meant finding ways to engage with audiences in a more direct, less formal manner. The language of warblogs was usually much more colloquial in vocabulary and emotive in judgment. As Grieve stated:

> I just think it had more chatty language and was easier for people to understand and also correspondents were able to say what they really meant because it was a bit more personal and was about their thoughts. They weren't delivering a scripted and proper English Radio 4 piece as opposed to somebody having a chat with you (Grieve, interview).

For these journalists, warblogs were better able to convince audiences of their realness than more packaged reporting. A study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism of US television news reports in the conflict's first week found a similar attempt to use new communications technologies to produce more immediate accounts. The study found 80 percent of television reports included only reporters' voices, and 60 per cent of the reports were live and unedited. To Seib (2004: 55) the reports were like 'the reality itself – confusing, incomplete, sometimes numbing, sometimes intense, and not given to simple story lines'. Thus these warblogs exemplify a more general struggle within journalism to close the gap between the event and the telling of it, seeking to convince the news audience that they could experience the conflict through journalists' accounts. A claim to a particular kind of veracity is therefore also implicit in this quest for immediacy.

Independent voices

For some journalists, this claim to immediacy was interlinked with one to independence. These were the 'sojo' or solo journalists, a small but significant number of correspondents who were not backed by a major news organisation, but who were able to write and edit their own copy for both online and print or broadcast media because of mobile technologies. Christopher Allbritton, Kevin Sites – when working freelance for NBC in 2003 and then Yahoo! as one of its news correspondents with a brief to tour the world's war zones within a year –

and later in the conflict Steve Vincent (intheredzone.org), were among the more prominent. Equipped with a notebook computer and digital camera, or even a videophone and mini-satellite dish, these journalists had relative freedom of movement and claimed to be able, therefore, to pursue the stories which mattered most to them – and their readers. Herein lay the popularity of the warblogs amongst users, which in the opinion of journalist Bryony Gordon (2003) was hardly surprising: 'If a television reporter's movements aren't subject to Iraqi restrictions, then his [or her] report is likely to be monitored by the Allied Forces. Devoid of such regulations, the internet is thriving.'

Moreover, for some journalist bloggers we interviewed, sites such as the *Spokesman-Review's* and the BBC's were not 'real' blogging, precisely because they sought to curtail immediacy with editing. Real blogging, for them, as detailed below, involved the personal voice of the writer outside the confines of the news organisation altogether. This sense of the incompatibility of conventional news routines and what blogging could offer can be summarized as a set of structural oppositions, which included tensions such as:

raw	polished
subjective	objective
first-hand	second-hand
unmediated	processed or packaged
independent	dependent
connective	distanced
behind the scenes	the official version
interactive	top-down

Such oppositions could be argued to be at work not only in blogging but also in a wider foreign correspondent tradition. The personal weblogs of a number of journalists in Iraq, therefore, made sense to them partly in terms of longstanding tensions around the role of the independent reporter, as well as a conviction that direct, eye-witness testimony was the most valuable mode of truth-telling. Equally important for warbloggers, however, was the personal control they experienced over their writing (the absence of an external editor being key), and the personal relationship they felt was constructed in the blog with their readers. This allowed them to construct a claim to connect readers to the 'real experience' of Iraq. Such oppositions appeared to inform, in turn, an implicit appeal to a sense of authenticity and trustworthiness in the blog itself.

Freelancer Christopher Allbritton (formerly a reporter with the AP wire service and *New York Daily News*) had announced his intention to be the web's first independent war correspondent in the months leading up to the invasion. His blog called upon readers to help contribute to the financial support

necessary to fund his travel and expenses in Iraqi Kurdistan. 'It's a marketplace of ideas,' he maintained, 'and those who are awarded credibility by their readers will prosper' (cited in Warner 2003). Support was such that his expenses were met by some 320 donors, allowing him to file daily stories from the country using a borrowed notebook computer and a rented satellite phone. As his blog's daily readership grew to upwards of 25,000, he became accustomed to receiving emails which posed questions and suggested story leads, while others provided useful links to online materials. 'My reporting created a connection between the readers and me,' Allbritton (2003) later observed, 'and they trusted me to bring them an unfettered view of what I was seeing and hearing.' This involvement on the part of his readers in shaping his reporting worked to improve its quality, in his view, each one of them effectively serving as an editor. 'One of the great things about the blogosphere,' he maintained, 'is that there's built-in fact-checking.' Given that so many people will 'swarm' over posts, 'generally the truth of the matter will come out' (cited in Glaser 2003).

By gaining this independence from the institution, however, journalist-webloggers such as Allbritton gave up the privileged access to power and authority which journalists attached to news organisations possess. He also forfeited the benefits associated with the assumed trustworthiness which newspaper mastheads and broadcast credits proclaim. 'This was journalism without a net,' he remarked, 'on the net' (Allbritton 2003: 83). Or rather, Allbritton used the blog to bring together an audience and to establish afresh his role as a journalist in speaking to that audience. Blogger and academic commentator Jay Rosen (2003) described the site as journalism that cut out 'the media', providing direct contact between writer and readers. 'Here you have a journalist collecting his own mini-public, a few thousand people on the web,' he observed, 'who then send him to report on events of interest to the entire world, via a medium that reaches the entire world.'

Of particular value here was what Allbritton (2003) called 'the personal connection that can be established through the interactivity of the medium' (ibid: 84). He wrote after he returned from Iraq: 'Throughout it all, I maintained a personal tone in my writing as I tried to let people know what it felt like to be working and surviving during such an extraordinary event' (ibid). He quoted one of his readers who liked:

> …the independence it gave you the reporter. No agendas except your own, which is perfectly acceptable to me. No one is totally objective, but you gave more personal perspectives of 'behind the scenes' of what it takes to do what you do, which was terribly fascinating to me (ibid).

Thus a claim to credible reporting emerged, not from the expert authority of the professional news organisation, but from the personal attributes and relationship

with readers of the reporter. As the quotation above suggests, independence, a consciously subjective telling which makes no claim to objectivity and access for the reader 'behind the scenes' are interdependent aspects of this claim. Allbritton's posts appealed as 'real' accounts precisely because they crossed the line between the public persona of the reporter and the individual filling that role, allowing readers to go more deeply behind-the-scenes to the life of the correspondent than blogs on news organisation sites.

A considerable amount of 'sojo' journalism, as one would expect, found its way on to the news sites associated with major news organisations. In the case of the *Spokesman-Review*'s 'War in Iraq' weblog, for example, priority was given to filtering third-party material, some of it provided by 'sojos', but even more provided by 'personal' or 'amateur' journalist bloggers. Its editor, Sands, as noted above, valued the site for its immediacy, but he also argued – as Reuters also did three years later when announcing its partnership with GlobalVoices – that the blog's links to news material from around the world gave it a broader view of events than the news agencies and syndicated news services his print colleagues used. He thus gave users 'really interesting and important stories that simply were not picked up by the usual wire services'. He told us:

> We had amateurs around the world acting as editors, as aggregators actually, scanning the media and providing links to sources as varied as the BBC, *Jerusalem Post*, Al Jazeera, *Washington Post* and *The Spokesman-Review* (Sands, interview).

Sands also encouraged users to send in suggestions, thereby inviting an enhanced sense of interactivity between reporter and reader. It was precisely this interactivity which anchored, in turn, the authority of the warblog (see also Matheson 2005).

Across the blogosphere, a wide array of individuals – some self-described as 'personal' or 'amateur' journalists – did their best to contribute to news, comment or analyses about the invasion. Amongst the most popular, as judged by web user statistics, was the blog of 'L.T. Smash' (www.lt-smash.us), who claimed to be a reserve officer in the US Navy who had been recalled and deployed in the Gulf. His site, with its tagline 'Live from the sandbox', promised 'unfiltered' news – and received some 6,000 'hits' a day at the height of the conflict (doubts were initially raised about its authenticity, given that the pseudonym 'L.T. Smash' is also the name of a character on television's *The Simpsons*). On one occasion, he even provided a self-interview of sorts, which included this Question and Answer exchange:

> Q. Can't you get in trouble for this sort of thing? Isn't this a violation of Military Regulations?

A: I'm in the military – I can get in trouble for just about anything. But generally speaking, this form of communication is bound by the same rules as e-mail…I am voluntarily observing my own, stricter guidelines in regards to operational security.
(Smash cited in Kurtz 2003).

A vast number of similar blogs were posted by soldiers witnessing events firsthand, providing observations, impressions and opinions which, taken together, covered every facet of the pro- and anti-war continuum. Moreover, weblogs were posted by members of military families back home, almost always offering support for the troops, but some expressing reservations (at times passionately so) about the legitimacy of the war itself. Blogs also appeared from those on the ground in Iraq, but outside of the military. Wade Hudson, an anti-poverty worker from the US, posted his Baghdad Journal (www.inlet.org/wade/). Jo Wilding, a human rights campaigner living in Baghdad, posted her diaries on the Guardian Unlimited and the Voices in the Wilderness sites (www.vitw.org).

Iraqi bloggers

Iraqi bloggers, however, did more than any other group of citizen bloggers to extend public debate beyond journalism's previous parameters. These English-language blogs provided viewpoints on the war rooted in the subjective experience of those at the receiving end of so-called 'precision bombing,' amongst other types of 'sanitized' wafare. Precisely what counts as truth in a war zone, of course, is very much in the eye of the beholder. Above dispute, in the view of many commentators, was that some of the best eyewitness reporting being conducted was that attributed to the warblog of 'Salam Pax' (a playful pseudonym derived from the Arabic and Latin words for peace), a 29-year-old architect living in middle-class suburban Baghdad. Begun in September 2002, the blog's original motivation was Salam's desire to keep in touch with his friend Raed, who had moved to study in Jordan. It was to his astonishment, then, that he discovered that the international blogging community had attracted such intense attention to his site. As word about 'Where is Raed?' spread via other blogs, email, online discussion groups, and mainstream news media accounts, it began to regularly top the lists of popular blogs as the conflict unfolded.

Enraged by both Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist dictatorship and George W. Bush's motivations for the invasion, Salam documented life on the ground in Baghdad before and after the bombs began to drop. This was 'embedded' reporting of a very different order, effectively demonstrating the potential of

blogging as an alternative means of war reporting. His warblog entry for 23 March, 8:30 pm, was typically vivid:

> Today's (and last night's) shock attacks didn't come from airplanes but rather from the airwaves. The images al-Jazeera are broadcasting are beyond any description…This war is starting to show its ugly face to the world…People (and I bet 'allied forces') were expecting things to be much easier. There are no waving masses of people welcoming the Americans, nor are they surrendering by the thousands. People are doing what all of us are doing – sitting in their homes hoping that a bomb doesn't fall on them and keeping their doors shut (Salam Pax, dear_raed.blogspot.com)

Salam's posts offered readers a stronger sense of immediacy, an emotional feel for life on the ground, than more traditional news sites. For John Allemang (2003), writing in *The Globe and Mail*, 'what makes his diary so affecting is the way it achieves an easy intimacy that eludes the one-size-fits-all coverage of Baghdad's besieged residents'. As Salam himself would later reflect: 'I was telling everybody who was reading the web log where the bombs fell, what happened […] what the streets looked like.' While acknowledging that the risks involved meant that he considered his actions to be somewhat 'foolish' in retrospect, nevertheless he added: 'It felt for me important. It is just somebody should be telling this because journalists weren't' (cited in Church 2003).

This approach to warblogging, then, possesses the capacity to bring to bear alternative perspectives, contexts and ideological diversity to war reporting, providing users with the means to connect with distant voices otherwise being marginalised, if not silenced altogether, from across the globe. In the words of US journalist Paul Andrews (2003), 'media coverage of the war that most Americans saw was so jingoistic and administration-friendly as to proscribe any sense of impartiality or balance', hence the importance of the insights provided by the likes of Salam Pax. This 'pseudonymous blogger's reports from Iraq', Andrews believed, 'took on more credibility than established media institutions'. This point is echoed by Toby Dodge (2003) who argued that Salam managed to post far more perceptive dispatches than those written by 'the crowds of well-resourced international journalists sitting in the air-conditioned comfort of five star hotels'. Communicating to the world using a personal computer with unreliable internet access, he reported 'the traumas and more importantly the opinions of Iraqis as they faced the uncertainty of violent regime change'.

In the aftermath of the invasion, the number of warblogs appearing in occupied Iraq has multiplied at a remarkable rate. Such blogs provide web users from around the globe with viewpoints about what life is like for ordinary Iraqis, viewpoints otherwise routinely ignored, or trivialised, in their country's mainstream news media. The blog 'Baghdadee' (baghdadee.ipbhost.com/) has

as its tagline 'An opportunity to hear from witnesses inside Iraq'. 'A Family in Baghdad' posts the online 'diaries' of mother Faiza and sons Raed, Khaled and Majid. This excerpt, written by Faiza, is indicative of its content:

> Wednesday, 21 May 2003
> Electricity is on at the hours: 6-8 p.m., 2-4 a.m., the Americans are spreading news about achievements they have accomplished…but on actual grounds we see nothing…we don't know whether they are truthful or not…The schools are open, they are teaching whatever, the importance being for the children to finish their school year. Some schools were destroyed during the war, so they merged the students with others from another school, and made the school day in two shifts, morning and afternoon…(afamilyinbaghdad.blogspot.com)

'Baghdad Burning', under the name 'Riverbend' (a 'Girl Blog from Iraq'), posted this entry on 7 August 2004:

> 300+ dead in a matter of days in Najaf and Al Sadir City. Of course, they are all being called 'insurgents'. The woman on tv wrapped in the abaya, lying sprawled in the middle of the street must have been one of them too. Several explosions rocked Baghdad today – some government employees were told not to go to work tomorrow.

> So is this a part of the reconstruction effort promised to the Shi'a in the south of the country? Najaf is considered the holiest city in Iraq. It is visited by Shi'a from all over the world, and yet, during the last two days, it has seen a rain of bombs and shells from none other than the 'saviours' of the oppressed Shi'a – the Americans. So is this the 'Sunni Triangle' too? It's déjà vu – corpses in the streets, people mourning their dead and dying and buildings up in flames. The images flash by on the television screen and it's Falluja all over again. Twenty years from now who will be blamed for the mass graves being dug today? (riverbendblog.blogspot.com)

Words from blogs such as these ones speak for themselves, their importance for users looking beyond the narrow ideological parameters of much Western news coverage all too apparent. Indeed, Riverbend was nominated for a number of literary awards in 2005 and 2006 after her blog was published in book form.[iii] From our position as Western media academics, what strikes us as strongly, however, is the authority sometimes accorded to such voices by major Western media organisations. From Salam's editing of a section of the *Guardian* to the *Daily Telegraph*'s interviewing of a Kuwaiti blogger for first-hand testimony of life on the edge of the war-zone to Reuters' inclusion of blogger commentary in its news services, the space given to the usually silenced voices of civilians is significant. News organizations had no shortage of articulate, English-speaking correspondents only a mouse click away who understood the country they were

talking about, and they appeared to be willing to give them the status of authorized sources.

Conclusion

In light of this chapter's discussion, there can be little doubt that no definitive statement can be made about the larger implications blogs pose for journalism, in general, or war reporting, in particular. The blogs under scrutiny here represent a tiny fraction of those posted across the blogosphere, hence the need to avoid extrapolating from them to characterize broader trends or patterns. We would be cautious in describing the phenomenon as either a Napster-like threat to the news industry (Regan 2003: 69) or 'the first real democratization of the web' (*Guardian* 2003). The understanding of the blog as a news source and as a mode of communicating the experience of war explored above suggests to us, however, that the ideas and ideals of war reporting, which are so important to journalism's understanding of itself more widely, do not emerge unscathed from journalism's encounter with the online diary.

The dominant model of the foreign war correspondent, developed during the relatively information-scarce nineteenth-century, relied upon the correspondent having a monopoly of information and the status of an expert by dint of being present on foreign soil and having general journalistic skills. Such a model becomes less tenable when news editors and readers have instant access to multiple voices, both journalist and lay, experiencing the news event in question from an array of perspectives in multiple locations. In particular, the authority of the reporter as a witness to and interpreter of events carries less weight when he or she is only one among many witnesses being heard. Editors and news consumers are often, in fact, in a better position to judge the overall picture than the journalist (Pollard 2001).

The often subjective and impressionistic weblog fits into this context. While bearing in mind the relatively small audiences involved – from a few thousand for the *Spokesman-Review* weblog (Sands, interview) to tens of thousands for the most famous – such sites are likely to have a disproportionate effect upon the editors, producers, columnists and reporters who make up media elites. While a number of webloggers noted that the information about the war which they communicated was not necessarily suppressed or unavailable elsewhere (Hughes, interview; Allbritton, 2003), they emphasized the different nature of the knowledge they communicated. The *Christian Science Monitor* columnist Tom Regan (2003) notes unsympathetically that 'bloggers promise a more immediate experience of the news, one in which accuracy isn't regarded as being the most important element' (2003: 69). As we have seen, the emphasis upon the weblogger's subjectivity rearticulates the foreign correspondent

tradition, working to establish a sense of connection and, therefore, an interpersonal trust. The BBC's Stuart Hughes describes his weblog posts as 'unchecked stories' whose accuracy he did not vouch for, but whose truth as his experience he did attest to. He observes: 'What I noticed when I was in Iraq particularly is that that kind of unmediated unfiltered flow of news was something that people really latched onto' (Hughes, interview).

It goes without saying, of course, that few readers of warblogs would have interpreted the reports posted as being unbiased or objective. Instead, the reports, at their best, were socially situated takes from the blogger's perspective, at once provisional, contingent and, at times, deeply emotive. For many users, the honesty of a report that acknowledges its political stance or commitment is to be valued over and above one which makes an appeal to a principle of detachment. Wall (2005) places this inversion of journalism's conventional wisdom within a wider cultural context of 'a growing tendency for audiences to blend with producers' and a rejection of institutional authority. Our discussion above leads us to slightly different conclusions, theorized less in terms of the activeness of the audience than in terms of a weakening of epistemological verities. Accordingly, we are inclined to theorize the rise of the weblog during the war as a partial revaluing of the subject of social knowledge, alongside the ostensibly objective record.

The phenomenon, thus, belongs to a steady trend in Western culture towards a weakening of the boundary between such opposed categories as public and private, shared and personal, real and imaginary, to which the increasing media saturation of culture has contributed. To draw on Manuel Castells' (1996) terms, we live within a culture of 'real virtuality', 'a system in which reality itself (people's material/symbolic experience) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make-believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience' (1996: 373; see also Allan and Matheson 2004). The blog's emphasis upon daily experience fits, therefore, into a cultural mode where the media embrace ever-widening facets of lived experience, and where, as a result, there is a general reorientation of life around media representations of the social.

Indeed, as we have suggested throughout, blogs are not separable from the mediasphere to which they respond. The experiential journalism of Allbritton, for example, becomes a spectacle, an adventure of bribing his way across the Turkish-Iraqi border and hitch-hiking across Iraq with a borrowed laptop, an adventure taken further in Sites's Yahoo!-funded tour around the world's wars in a year. The form, therefore, finds part of its logic in the wider mediasphere. And, although many of the webloggers discussed here resist being turned into spectacles and seek to remain pseudonymous – Salam Pax, for example, for

quite practical reasons of personal safety (BBC 2003) – the warblog phenomenon has become a spectacle of radical democratization of the web and of reality evading the propaganda. As Howard Rheingold (2003) notes, the key factor in the impact of new media on journalism and politics is not about the technology but 'a species of literacy – widespread knowledge of how to use these tools to produce news stories that are attention-getting, non-trivial, and credible' (Rheingold 2003). The multiple uses of warblogs during the invasion and occupation of Iraq, we would suggest, provides a case study of such a literacy emerging.

Notes

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[i] Four interviews were conducted in September and October, 2003: the US soldier, moja_vera and Ken Sands, online editor of the US *Spokesman-Review*, were interviewed by email; Cathy Grieve, assignments editor at BBC News Interactive, was interviewed by telephone; and Stuart Hughes, BBC news producer, was interviewed in person

[ii] Grieve reports that some 70 per cent of the material on the 'Reporters' Log' was gathered when correspondents phoned in to file stories for the news network generally: 'When people were filing we'd have a quick chat and get something more impressionistic, or sometimes use material already filed for other BBC programmes or websites' (Grieve, interview)

[iii] *Baghdad Burning* (Riverbend 2005) won third prize in the 2005 Lettre Ulysses literary reportage award, was long-listed for the 2006 Samuel Johnson non-fiction award and shortlisted for the 2006 Index on Censorship award

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