

Bloggers Take Note: The Web Is a City

The influence of business blogs has become a terrific way for organizations and individuals to tell their stories to a skeptical marketplace. Blogging provides experts and wannabes with an easy way to make their voices heard in the Web-based marketplace of ideas. Companies that ignore independent product reviews and discussions about service quality found on blogs are living dangerously. And those companies that already have employee-bloggers are likely to reap benefits.

Many members of the media don't understand bloggers' role on the Web and simply react with a cry of "not real journalism!" Huh? Did bloggers ever claim to be journalists? Unfortunately, many continue to think of the Web as a sprawling online newspaper, which justifies their need to (negatively) compare blogging to what they do. The metaphor of the Web as a newspaper is inaccurate on many levels, particularly when trying to understand blogs. It is better to think of the Web as a huge city teeming with individuals and blogs as the sounds of independent voices just like the street corner soapbox preacher or that friend of yours who always recommends the best books.

Consider the "memogate" example: just hours after Dan Rather broadcast his story about George W. Bush's National Guard service, www.freerepublic.com posted a message from "Buckhead," who said the memos Rather used as the basis of his story appeared typographically impossible. Buckhead's post was soon followed by entries on blogs including Little Green Footballs and PowerLine that raised questions about the documents' authenticity. For days, Rather dug in while CBS dismissed the bloggers as a bunch of geeks in pajamas typing away in the dead of night.

Bloggers never claimed to be journalists

Okay, so bloggers aren't journalists. Traditional media tripped up because executives misunderstand bloggers actual role in information dissemination. Consider it from the Web-as-a-city perspective: the woman next to you at the bar may not be a journalist, but she sure knows something and you can choose to believe her or not. Scott Johnson of PowerLine describes his blog's role as a clearinghouse for information circulation. Ana Marie Cox of Wonkette likens blogging to throwing spitballs from the back of the class.

Seeing the Web as a city also helps make sense of other aspects of online life. Craigslist is like the bulletin board at the entrance of the corner store; Ebay, a garage sale; Amazon, a bookstore replete with patrons anxious to give you their two cents. You've even got the proverbial wrong-side-of-the-tracks spots via the Web's adult-entertainment underbelly.

Huh? Reliable and Accurate?

It is interesting that the respected USC Annenberg School's Center for the Digital Future, in its nationwide survey monitoring how the Internet influences American life, asked: "How much of the information on the Internet do you think is reliable and accurate?" The study found that 50.1%

believe that most online information is reliable and accurate. Hmm...That's akin to believing everything you hear on the street or over the phone. To be fair, the study also found that established media news pages and government sites were thought more accurate than information pages by individuals. Phew! I'm glad people trust the government and media to be more accurate than the man on the street.

Thinking of the Web as a city, rather than a newspaper, provides implications for all netcitizens. Security is important (watch where you go) and use spyware-blocking software while traveling on the Web. Consider the source (don't trust strangers) and find out if information comes from the government, a newspaper, a big corporation, someone with an agenda, or some Nigerian oil minister's ex-wife who is just dying to give you \$20 million.

Blogs and bloggers are now important and valuable alternative sources of information, not unlike your next-door neighbor. Take them with a grain of salt...but ignore them at your peril. Just remember that nobody ever said your neighbor was the same as a newspaper. The challenge for the econtent business is to make sense of the voices out there and to develop easy ways to access the Web's many diverse and potentially valuable opinions. It won't be easy, but I suspect a smart econtent company or two will become tremendously rich and successful by harnessing the millions of conversations found in Web city.