

Bennett, Daniel (2013) *Digital Media and Reporting Conflict: Blogging and the BBC's Coverage of War and Terrorism*. London and New York: Routledge.

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Review by Stuart Allan ©

More than a decade has passed since an anonymous blogger posting under the pseudonym 'Salam Pax' brought to the boil a simmering debate over the perceived impact of the internet on war reporting. This incisive form of citizen journalism – produced, it would be later revealed, by a 29 year-old architect living in middle-class suburban Baghdad – succeeded in documenting telling, frequently poignant aspects of life on the ground in the months before the US-led invasion as well as its immediate aftermath. While sceptics questioned the authenticity of his posts, others praised the raw immediacy of his insights into the lived experiences of besieged Iraqis caught-up in the grisly horrors of conflict. This proved to be 'embedded' reporting of a very different order, effectively demonstrating the potential of online blogging as an alternative mode of war correspondence. As Salam would reflect afterward, 'I was telling everybody who was reading the web log where the bombs fell, what happened [...] what the streets looked like.' Acknowledging the risks involved made his efforts seem almost 'foolish' in retrospect, he added: 'it felt for me important. It is just somebody should be telling this because journalists weren't' (cited in transcript, CNN International, 3 October 2003).

Many journalists were endeavouring to meet this challenge under daunting conditions, of course, not least those employed by the BBC. In offering an account of how the Corporation came to terms with Salam's blog, Daniel Bennett sets the scene for his enquiry. Its first online report, 'Life in Baghdad via the web,' appeared on 25 March 2003, one week after the invasion commenced. 'The online diary of an Iraqi man living in Baghdad is proving hugely popular with net users,' it began. 'The weblog describes what it is like to live through bombing raids, the effect of the bombing on everyday life in the capital and the views of ordinary Iraqis' (BBC News, 2003). Bennett proceeds to explain how Salam's first-person perspective was gradually incorporated into the BBC's reportage from May onwards (*The Guardian* having established his identity by then), his blog providing 'a way of accessing a compelling voice which might never have been heard without the communication possibilities afforded by the World Wide Web' (p.1). In so doing, however, the BBC was rapidly re-writing its own editorial guidelines, particularly where the independent verification of eyewitness testimony was concerned. By July of that year, the 'Baghdad Blogger,' as Salam became known, had begun appearing in a series of short documentaries broadcast on *Newsnight*, a programme at the forefront of BBC experiments with new media strategies. This 'alliance of the amateur and the professional' broke new journalistic ground, Bennett maintains, acting as a catalyst to encourage the wider development of blogging at the Corporation.

Digital Media and Reporting Conflict is based on Bennett's doctoral thesis, conducted in the War Studies Department at King's College London (I was one of its two external examiners, the other being Howard Tumber). The project at its heart was facilitated by the BBC, which enabled the author to secure more than

60 individual interviews with a wide range of staff members – and also observe their working practices – between 2007 and 2011. These findings were supplemented, in turn, by interpreting data gathered via focus groups, informal conversations, email correspondence, open source material, and attendance at various BBC events over the years. The priority given to investigating the evolving role of blogs in the Corporation's coverage of war and conflict narrows the scope of the treatment to advantage, though Bennett's evidence frequently compels him to dwell on issues some distance from this genre of reportage. I would have welcomed a more thorough assessment of the various instances of war coverage under scrutiny so as to further clarify what was distinctive about blogging's contribution (and later Twitter's), while at the same time rendering problematic tacit assumptions made about the changing character of war itself – as well as public perceptions of its relative legitimacy in specific circumstances. Still, while more might have been done to sharpen the ensuing critique, Bennett's engagement is conceptually alert to subtle nuances, being informed by his own experience as a blogger pursuing war-related topics over the years.

Following the Introduction, the first of eight substantive chapters interweaves these types of personal insights with an evaluative appraisal of both the academic and professional literatures devoted to the rise of blogging and its influence on news coverage from war zones. Illuminated against this conceptual backdrop, Bennett's mode of enquiry delves into the BBC's news culture with Chapter 2, revealing how organisational structures were refashioned to adopt to the demands of new media imperatives associated with 'user-generated content' (UGC) with the intent of furnishing 'new voices.' The UGC hub, introduced on a trial basis in 2005, is shown to have become a central feature of the provision by 2008, enabling journalists to swiftly redistribute digital items shared with the BBC – typically supplementing, though occasionally contradicting, material provided by official sources, news agencies and rival news organisations. In Chapters 3 and 4, the focus shifts to examine journalists' attitudes to blogs, especially with respect to their perceived benefits and limitations for conflict reportage. Noteworthy here is how quickly the normalisation, even ritualisation of fact-checking blogs as informational sources ceases to be exceptional, with newly crafted protocols claiming their purchase in relation to the standards associated with more conventional practices. This is not to deny that journalists struggled under pressure to sort the 'wheat from the chaff,' with several of those interviewed by Bennett complaining 'paradoxically both that there is too much information for them to filter and too few blogs offering them useful material relevant to their journalism' (p. 95).

Chapter 5 traces the ways in which several experimental ventures coalesced into the BBC's cross-divisional blog network, pinpointing tensions subject to renegotiation as the Corporation's more traditional journalistic values and principles were slowly reconciled in an 'uneasy truce' with the fledgling culture of blogging (exemplified in personal blogs by Nick Robinson, Paul Mason, and Stuart Hughes, amongst others) and, increasingly from 2008, Twitter. Reaffirming the BBC's longstanding commitments to accuracy, impartiality and accountability proved as necessary as it did vexing in digital environments where technological change demanded constant ad hoc innovation. Further dimensions of audience involvement emerge in Chapter 6, where the BBC's World Service programme *World Have Your Say* (a radio phone-in show) is

contrasted with television's *Newsnight* (a weekday news and current affairs programme). Bennett highlights their respective successes with different forms of interactivity, though credits the latter with consistently attempting to 'shift the journalistic culture away from a knowledge-based authority towards one established on openness, transparency and the programme's role as a host of a moderated debate' (p. 139). *Newsnight*, he argues, was more constrained by staff concerns about preserving its reputation, defined in part by the caution they exhibited in upholding its perceived gate-keeping role.

The next two chapters report on detailed case studies, both of which refocus the discussion on war and conflict journalism. Specifically, Chapter 7 examines how the BBC covered the Mumbai terror attacks from 26 to 28 November 2008, paying close attention to the use of 'live blogging' to relay fast-breaking claims and counter-claims during the 60-hour crisis (Bennett was there to observe journalists updating the blog for six hours on the 27th). Here the vital role of 'nonofficial' sources comes to the fore, with the BBC's UGC hub scouring the web for eyewitness contributions as well as 'audience comment through email, on blogs, via Twitter and on social networking sites like Orkut to provide "colour" and to represent the "public mood"' (p. 166). The BBC's adoption of this 'new style of journalism' with its alternative, audience-driven ethos was subjected to further elaboration a month later, when the Israeli Air Force launched a series of airstrikes on Palestinians living in the Gaza strip, quickly followed by a ground operation ostensibly intended to undercut the Hamas movement. In the immediate aftermath of the hostilities – Bennett cites statistics suggesting up to 1,444 Palestinians were killed, and 13 Israelis – it became clear that the 'information war' waged online impacted on the BBC's coverage in numerous ways. Despite journalists' efforts to include 'the authentic voices of some bloggers into their online coverage alongside more traditional news reporting,' this 'complementarity' failed to register a significant impact on news agendas. 'When bloggers were incorporated,' Bennett argues, 'they tended to be those who articulated the war in an existing media frame evident in the way Israeli bloggers included by the BBC all supported the invasion. There was little room for dissenting voices,' he adds, 'which might have revealed a more complex situation' (p. 186).

By its conclusion, *Digital Media and Reporting Conflict* has succeeded in casting fresh light on what Bennett contends is an emerging, still inchoate model of collaborative journalism slowly taking shape within the BBC. Here he seems especially intrigued with the potential of the live blog format, which was just beginning to be properly tapped as his study drew to a close, particularly with respect to its capacity to present a 'multi-perspectival' flow of news information. Such innovations in embracing audience accounts, views and experiences, ushered into BBC newsrooms in the wake of blogging, will continue to disrupt the 'performative illusions of the authoritative news product,' he confidently predicts, much to the enrichment of the Corporation's online news provision. It is in showing how contingent, uneven - and politically fraught - this transitional process of connectivity has proven to be that the real value of Bennett's analysis shines most brightly.

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