

What Matters: Blogs and Their Impact on Society

By Sramana Mitra EE '95; Robbie Allen, School of Engineering/Sloan;
and Chuck Eesley, Sloan School of Management

For Further Discussion

[How do you think blogs impact culture?](#)
[Do you write a blog? Share it here!](#)



Weblogs, or blogs, have become an increasingly popular tool for Web devotees, providing political commentary, journalism, personal diaries, and more. But how have blogs affected our society?

Three writers weigh in:

- Sramana Mitra EE '95 argues the [democratic media outlet will lead to Pulitzer-like prizes](#) for Web content
- School of Engineering and Sloan grad student Robbie Allen discusses the [blurring line between journalism and blogging](#)
- and Chuck Eesley, a Sloan PhD candidate, believes [blogs will encourage new subcultures](#)

Democratic New Media Publishing: Is the Game Changing?

By Sramana Mitra EE '95



For the longest time, creative professionals like writers, photographers, film-makers, and musicians have been at the mercy of editors and owners of significant and prestigious media properties like *The New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Business Week*, *The Economist*, MTV, HBO, and more. And yet, a handful of magazines, studios, or TV channels cannot even begin to support and lend a voice to the enormous creative spirit that exists in this world.

Today, with the advent of such phenomena as blogs and podcasting, a new era of democratic electronic media publishing has come upon us. Democratic new media publishing is the name that I give to all the user-generated electronic content being published on the Internet today at the click of a post-and-publish tab with relatively easy-to-use software. Text, photo, and video blogs are the most popular forms of this New Media paradigm.

The nerds have suddenly set free the liberal arts types in droves. The artsies have not yet quite figured out this enormous gift and its full potential. Nonetheless, the phenomenon is well at work, and it will change the rules of the game for creative professionals world-wide. It will also change the rules for marketers and brand-builders.

My Experiment with Blogs

I have been writing for 20 years and have published occasionally—a few articles, some poetry. After working at three startups during the Internet revolution, I began consulting in Silicon Valley. I have led a busy life, professionally and personally, so the idea of chasing editors to get my writings published is one unpleasant business on which I decided not to invest energy.

Years went by until one day, I merged the two and used my love of writing to communicate about strategy and entrepreneurship in a blog format.

I started in April 2005 and had about 7,500 unique visitors that month, with anywhere between 500 and 1,500 on a daily basis, and

rising steadily. Heavy-hitters in Silicon Valley come to my site, read, comment, and participate. Fairly deep and intricate discussions start to emerge. Other writers pick up on the threads and discussions ripple out to a broader universe.

It is an interactive medium and, for someone like me, whose target audience is very focused (investors, thought leaders, and decision makers in the technology and Internet realms), it has expanded my reach and ability to communicate with this universe exponentially, literally within minutes. I can monitor trends and have other experts participate and contribute; the net effect being a richer and deeper knowledge base.

The Bigger Vision

With time, more people will take advantage of these democratic new media publishing opportunities. More serious writers and creative professionals will learn to market and sell their work using the Internet. Micro-payment mechanisms will mature, ad-supported business models will improve, and auctions of good work will become possible. A quality evaluation system will start to emerge as we go along. Good writers, good audio broadcasters, and good filmmakers will be able to monetize their work abundantly and creatively.

The key word, of course, is good. Today's Internet has a small percentage of quality content. The top caliber content producers are still not publishing on the Internet except for a few early adopters, especially those with technical savvy. But with time, the incentive system will also become clearer for the technology-phobic segment, giving them reason to take the medium more seriously. Both fame- and fortune-building opportunities for creative professionals will broaden. As a social phenomenon, I am very attracted by the prospect of the democratizing effect blogs have on publishing in general.

I predict there will be the equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize for Internet content—equally prestigious, equally well respected, equally well-regarded. Recently, a first step in this direction has been taken: an Emmy Award has been announced for small screen entertainment: podcasting, etc. With one difference though: where the *Da Vinci Code* sold 25 million copies over a span of several years, a piece of electronic content could be viewed by 100 million people in a nano-second.

Quality content that's published, managed, distributed, and marketed through blogs, video-blogs, photo-blogs, and audio-casts, is a macro-

phenomenon. We, the MIT community, should not only watch it, we should participate, leverage it to brainstorm on ideas, as well as contribute to enhancing the medium itself. There is a lot of the infrastructure yet to be developed, and in the last few months, I have seen several startups focusing on the phenomenon.

Most of all, those of us who like to write and have interesting things to say, but have not had the time to navigate the murky and political waters of mainstream media to get past their editors, can now take advantage of blogs and access our readership.

About the Author

Sramana Mitra has been an entrepreneur and a strategy consultant in Silicon Valley since 1994. As an entrepreneur CEO, she founded three companies: Dais, Intarka, and Uuma. In her current role as a strategy consultant, Sramana consults with public companies like Cadence Design Systems, Webex, KLA-Tencor, Tesseract, as well as with numerous venture-funded startups and VCs. Sramana has a master's degree in EECS from MIT and a bachelor's degree in computer science and economics from Smith College. She writes a [Strategy Blog](#).

Published December 2005.

Blogging Becomes Big Business and Community Journalism

By Robbie Allen

Master's candidate, School of Engineering and Sloan School of Management



In a span of five years, blogs have invaded our culture and left an indelible mark on society. They are reshaping our notion of how content is created and information is disseminated.

[Technorati](#), a leading blog search engine, has tracked the growth in the blogosphere since 2003. According to their statistics, the number of blogs has doubled every five months for three straight years. Now they are tracking over 22 million blogs with 70,000 new blogs being added every day! While only a small percentage of blogs are regularly updated, this explosion in growth has had an interesting impact on a variety of facets of daily life.

Blogging as a Business

Blogs have become a big business with a couple of recent blog networks being acquired by large companies. America Online purchased [Weblogs, Inc.](#) in October 2005 for an estimated \$25 million. Weblogs, Inc. is a network of over 85 blogs covering a variety of topic areas. Now, new blog networks are popping up and it will be interesting to see if the traditional media outlets acquire the popular blog networks much as they did popular content sites in the late 1990s.

For individual blogs, it is a common practice to use [Google AdSense](#) as a means to earn money through advertising. While most blogs earn in the tens of dollars per month range, some popular blogs reportedly earn tens of thousands of dollars per month.

Journalism

In some cases, nationwide news stories have been sparked by bloggers. The recent [Sony DRM fiasco](#) started when security researcher Mark Russinovich posted a [blog entry](#) about a malicious rootkit he found on his computer. Bloggers played a key role in outing Dan Rather during [Memogate](#). During Hurricane Katrina, [one of the most detailed and widely read survival stories](#) came from a blogger who worked at an Internet service provider in New Orleans.

Bloggers outnumber journalists by a large number and are not constrained by deadlines, editors, or fact-checking. As more stories are scooped by bloggers and as more topics are covered than traditional media outlets can get to, the line between journalism and blogging begins to blur. Yahoo! made headlines of their own recently by including blog entries as part of their news portal. This has become the source of intense debate with some arguing that blogging is a form of journalism (i.e., citizen journalism) and others in fierce opposition. Whether blogging fits your definition of journalism, if you respect a blog's author and find the content informative, there is no reason it shouldn't be available right next to traditional news sources in your

news portal of choice. Just as with journalism, a blog is only as good as its source (or sources).

Fad or Future?

While blogging has certain fad-like qualities because it is new and cool, I believe we've only seen the beginning. People have been writing their thoughts on the web for over 10 years, but in the last five years, blogging has helped legitimize the practice. Is the blogosphere perfect? Definitely not. While it is a great environment to read other people's ideas, those ideas may not always be fact-based, insightful, or politically/culturally correct. However, blogging does provide a way for anyone with access to the web to write about anything they want and potentially have a global audience. This has not been possible in the past and we've only begun to see the consequences. At a minimum, blogging is making our society more transparent and causing an acceleration in the [flattening of the world](#). The only real question is, when are *you* going to start a blog?

About the Author

Robbie Allen is technologist, author, editor, and MIT grad student. He's worked at Cisco Systems for the last nine years in information technology and customer advocacy. He'll graduate from MIT in June 2006 with two master's degrees, one in [System Design and Management \(SDM\)](#) and another in [Information Technology through the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering](#). He's authored or coauthored seven books and over a dozen articles on a variety of IT topics. He maintains three blogs on topics ranging from his experiences at MIT to his favorite college basketball team. For more information or to contact Robbie, visit [his Web site](#).

Published December 2005.

Blogs Work as Innovation Tools for Culture

By Chuck Eesley

Phd candidate, Sloan School of Management



As a Ph.D. student at MIT Sloan and a blogger for about six years, I'd like to present my perspective on the phenomenon of blogs in our culture. Fundamentally, blogs are part of a larger, ongoing trend in society that recognizes that true creativity in any area, whether it's in culture or technology, thrives when the power to innovate is distributed to people who will use it, care about it, and consume it. [MIT Professor Eric Von Hippel](#) articulates this view most clearly in his book *[Democratizing Innovation](#)*. Those who are starting to grasp this are creating easy-to-use tools to allow users to be the entrepreneurs and innovators of content and culture. Letting users innovate by providing them with new tools allows the emergence of applications and content that the tool makers might never have dreamed of creating.

Instead of one view of world events syndicated from the AP wire, homogenized to fit a mainstream audience, blogs offer creative ideas along with multiple and varied perspectives on issues and events. The beautiful thing about blogs, especially when teamed with blog aggregators (such as [bloglines.com](#)), is that you can read just the focused content in the colorful style of delivery that suits you. It's like the satisfying experience of ordering a precise gourmet meal. In addition, blogs are interactive since you can speak back via comments for all to see. It's a shift from mass homogeneous communication in one direction only, to varied niche communication in which specialized interests can find each other and share ideas. History shows that when widely dispersed individuals with niche interests can connect, relate, and recombine their thoughts in new ways, fresh ideas and imaginative new aspects of culture come into being. Blogs then allow newly recombined ideas and cultural artifacts to rapidly spread around the world.

Soon, server space and data storage will be cheap enough to allow large portions of ourselves and our lives to be captured via text, audio (e.g. podcasting and [Odeo](#)), photos, and video and shared publicly on the web. It's as though the public commons is growing exponentially to include more of the thoughts we choose to share.

Thus, blogs are affecting culture by substantially increasing the amount and accessibility of informal, personal knowledge. Blogs are a unique source of recordings of what many people were thinking informally about a range of topics, at *specific moments* in time. Whether you're looking for how a [venture capitalist](#) sees the world, wondering how people perceive a new product or service, or curious about the life of an [American living in Vietnam](#), [blog search tools](#) can chronologically present the thoughts of hundreds of people relevant to your topic.

The MIT Media Lab's new \$100 laptop project will further accelerate the spread of low-cost computing around the world. A new start-up project that I am involved with called [Miranda Stories](#) is creating educational software for these low-cost devices. With the falling cost of information technology, more tools, such as blogs, become accessible to larger fractions of the world. This will allow new technology, art, and culture to form at an unprecedented rate and it will allow the development of subcultures and the blending of ideas across cultures as never before.

About the Author

[Chuck Eesley](#) is currently a first-year doctoral student at the MIT Sloan School of Management specializing in the economics of technological innovation and entrepreneurship. He received his BS from Duke University in 2002. During the past two years, he has worked as a research assistant at the Duke University Medical Center and the Center for Health Policy, Law, and Management. He has also worked with and consulted several startups, including current fundraising efforts as co-founder (with [Ann McCormick](#)) of Miranda Stories, a start-up planning to ride the tide of low-cost computing reaching hundreds of millions of people with high-quality, powerful, playful learning for all.