Are Blogs Reliable as Sources of Information?

Based on an article by TJ Philpott

With all the various information sources available online today, many readers favor blogs as their primary source of news and information online. Free online news has helped to drive the growth of the internet, and there is no sign of its popularity slowing. With all the various sources of information available, however, blogs have gained a reputation for late breaking news. This is due primarily to the fact that blogs are unencumbered concerning the accuracy of what their content contains.

A blog platform typically circumvents the traditional 'red tape' that can slow the delivery of news from syndicated sites. This advantage, however, can also work against a blog since facts may sometimes be distorted. Without any type of regulation in place, blog postings sometimes give the writer’s opinions instead of facts. This leads to the question of whether blogs can be viewed as a source of reliable information. Let’s look at both the pros and cons associated with any news or information that is dispensed from a blog platform as compared to a regulated news site.

The main advantage to blogs as sources of information is speed. Information about an event can be posted immediately, and it can be updated frequently. After the September 11th attacks of 2001, for example, many people followed the story primarily through blogs because they were able to follow events as they unfolded, rather than having to wait for a reporter at the New York Times or the Washington Post to carefully gather facts, double-check the facts, write up the story, and submit the story to an editor before finally posting it. Most information found on a blog continues to 'evolve' due to frequent updating. Syndicated news sites, on the other hand, contain information that tends to 'stagnate' since updates are not frequent. Lacking the regulations of syndicated sites that slow down the process of dispensing news or information, blogs have the ability to reflect 'real time' information. The speed with which information is posted is a major appeal for gathering information from these sites.
In addition to offering fast reporting and frequent updates, blogs can give readers insights into the news that they might not get otherwise. Because blogs are independent entities the writers can freely share their insights on the news and information they deliver. Some of the bloggers reporting on the September 11th attacks were able to comment on the political and social issues surrounding the event in a way that a newspaper reporter would never dare to do. Bloggers were able to theorize about the attackers and their motives, while reporters at the syndicated news outlets were confined to the facts. The personal insights of the bloggers can present the information in such a way that may encourage readers to consider certain perspectives they may have otherwise overlooked.

Although a reader may prefer to read a blog for the speed and the personal perspective that it can offer, she or he should remember that the blog is likely to be more subjective than a regular news outlet. An unregulated blog platform can easily present information or news that leans heavily towards the authors’ personal opinions or perspective. One illustration of this effect is the blogger who leapt to conclusions about who the attackers were on September 11th, speculation that the Cuban government had organized and carried out the act. That author, it turned out, was the daughter of Javier Diaz, a political activist who fled Cuba when Fidel Castro took office in the 1960s and instituted socialist reforms. Because she was so ready to believe that Cuba was behind the attack, the blogger never mentioned any of the facts that gradually emerged about the suspected terrorists. In this way, too much subjectivity can easily distort the information being delivered, decreasing its real value to the reader.

If subjectivity is a problem, inaccuracies are an even bigger problem. In the haste to ‘rush’ news, errors happen. Being unregulated or unmonitored for accuracy, blogs regularly get the facts wrong, and readers need to be cautious not to believe everything they read. On September 11th, 2001, a rumor spread over the Internet like wild fire that 10,000 people had died when the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed. When the dust had settled, however, the number of confirmed deaths was less than half that. If a reader wants accurate information, a blog may not be the best place to go.

Upon reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of blogs as information sources, a responsible reader must admit that questions remain as to their
reliability. Free, syndicated online news sites are typically more regulated, thereby slowing their delivery of the news itself. On the other hand this also helps to validate these sites as reliable sources of information. In fact, the same regulation that may slow news delivery, but is absent on blogs, is why a typical blog posting may be doubted as reliable information. In the end, it appears that many are willing to 'chance' the accuracy of their news in order to receive it in a more expedient manner. In a society dominated by an instant gratification mindset, this is not all that surprising.

[This text has been edited for use in a composition classroom]