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Press Freedom Day: Human rights in the Blogosphere

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The new media landscape is evolving at unprecedented speed and one of its most powerful weapons yet is the mighty blog. It is arguably the year of the Blogosphere, a phenomenon that has profound implications for press freedom and human rights.

This online community is made up of over eight million people who regularly post material on the web-logs (blogs). It is built on the foundations of its predecessors -- newsgroups, websites, web forums and chatrooms -- but with some crucial differences. The network of blogs is more interactive than websites, more interconnected than newsgroups or web forums and more permanent than chat.

Blogging opens up unprecedented opportunities for the media and its ability to cover issues around the world. This was clearly shown in the aftermath of the Asian tsunami at the end of last year. It took only a few hours for text and video from Thailand, Sri Lanka and Indonesia to be distributed across the web. These provided not just details for the news story, but also the individual stories that added a powerful personal element to the images of disaster.

Many blogs are connected with specifically political news websites, such as the US sites Znet on the political left (featuring Noam Chomsky's blog) and Frontpagemag.com on the political right (featuring David Horowitz' blog). However, mainstream news outlets are gradually recognising this potential and a number of major websites, notably the Guardian newspaper in the UK and Le Monde in France, have introduced their own blogs. These allow greater interaction between the outlets and their audience and the opportunity for them to learn from each other.

Anyone can start a blog, comment on one and, usually, say whatever they want. Blogs effectively sideline the normal publishing process: there is no editorial control; rarely even a pretence at balance or impartiality; and quite often, no respect for the rules of traditional media, such as fact-checking, confidentiality or adherence to the law.

This is not necessarily always a bad thing. Human rights and freedom of speech activists in many countries use blogs in an attempt to get around censorship laws and other restrictions. Blogs also offer a degree of anonymity for users who are usually afforded the opportunity to post material without identifying themselves. People in Iran and China have used blogs to expose violations by their governments and provide the outside world with information that otherwise might not have been available.

Chinese bloggers flexed their online muscles in one high-profile incident early last year. After a woman was given a suspended sentence for running over a farmer's wife with her BMW in Heilongjiang Province, thousands of web users made their anger known, calling for a retrial. A local court ruled that she was "not concentrating properly and made a mistake in handling the car" and gave her a two-year jail sentence with a three-year reprieve, which meant she never spent a day in prison. Rumours about her husband's political connections were rampant on the web and many suspected corruption in the case. The online pressure became so intense that the police reopened the case; though, ultimately, a special judicial panel upheld the original ruling and ruled out corruption.

Bloggers in Iran set out ideas and advocate policies that are widely regarded to be a step ahead of current social, political and human rights debates. Bloggers' sites addressing women's rights in Iran provide a platform -- or *tribune* -- for pushing forward women's social, political and economic rights. The persistent pressure exerted by bloggers in the case of Afsaneh Norouzi, who was convicted of murdering a high-ranking security and intelligence official who had tried to rape her, played no small part in her recently being spared the death penalty and finally released from prison after more than seven years' detention.

They also provide a means for other bloggers to get in touch with this burgeoning community in Iran. Blogs by members of Iran's ethnic minorities and their organisations, such as the Association for the Defence of Children's Rights, in Sanandaj, Kordestan, help advance this field of rights in a region where awareness is hampered by fewer outlets to international

standards and meaningful ways of transmitting the information to the people who live there in their own language.

Electronic civil disobedience is not without risk. In both Iran and China, the authorities have increasingly targeted bloggers to stifle dissent. Bloggers are sometimes arrested and sites discussing political or social issues shut down or redirected to entertainment forums. In one recent case highlighted by Reporters sans frontières, an Iranian blogger, Mohamad Reza Abdollahi, was sentenced on appeal to six months in prison and a fine of 1 million rials for supposedly insulting the country's leaders and making anti-government propaganda. Police subsequently arrested his wife, another blogger whom they accused of "defending her husband too openly". Najmeh Oumidparvar, who was four months pregnant, spent 24 days in detention before being released on 26 March.

The initial grace period in which bloggers enjoyed complete freedom while the authorities caught up with the technology has ended, but it is still the easiest and fastest way for activists to spread information and many continue to use them, despite the personal risk involved.

This is one downside; another is the amount of information presented as fact. Blogs are individual expressions of opinion. Where "facts" are cited, they should be treated with healthy scepticism. As long as the reader makes his or her own judgments about the information, the fact that blogs do not purport to provide a balanced view can be refreshing, as there is little risk of a hidden agenda or bias. They also offer an immediate right of reply and the opportunity for others to correct information or to put across an alternative viewpoint immediately.

The Blogosphere provides anyone with access to a computer the opportunity to meet like-minded people and organise activities anywhere in the world. For activists and journalists alike, it is a powerful tool.

Links:

Urgent Action - Fear of torture and ill-treatment / Incommunicado detention: IRAN Omid Memariyan (m), aged 30, civil society activist and internet journalist
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGMDE130462004>

Reporters sans frontières <http://www.rsf.org/>