Uneasy Bedfellows: Bloggers and Mainstream
Media Report the Conflict in Lebanon

Hanady Salman, an editor at the Beirut-based newspaper *As-Safir*, knew the worst images of the war between Israel and Hizbullah would not reach many outside the Middle East. The gruesome photographs of the Lebanese dead and injured were simply out of bounds for Western print or television. So Salman began dispatching regular email updates to a group of friends and colleagues, relaying her personal accounts, analyses of developments and dozens of graphic photographs from around Lebanon:

> Dear all,
>
> Some of these pictures are very strong. I can not confirm reports talking about the use of unconventional weapons, but for those of you who dare to look, you will notice the nature of wounds and burns is not very 'familiar'. Today the Israeli government said its "operations" will not end before at least one week. People are afraid the next few days will be worse than the past ones. They're expecting that as soon as the evacuation of the foreigners will be completed, the Israelis will have a 'freer' hand.[1]

Salman specifically asked her readers, many of whom kept blogs, to circulate the images widely, especially to Western viewers who would almost certainly not encounter them in their mainstream press or on television. Many bloggers inside and outside Lebanon prominently featured Salman's messages, and would make hers one of the most powerful voices emanating from Beirut during the war.

More than ever before, blogging came to play an integral role in the coverage of the war (see also Sune Haugbolle). This reflects long-term trends in Internet use which are profoundly affecting the way news is created and consumed. Consider these statistics*:* Britons between 15 and 24 report spending 30% less time reading newspapers once they start using the web and the payrolls of the American newspaper industry fell by 18% between 1990 and 2004.[2] These figures correspond to the first phase of traditional media migration onto the Internet where companies were forced to put much of their content online in response to Internet competition, usually at considerable extra cost. The *Israel-Hizbullah* war is part of a second phase of traditional media's embrace of the Internet, marked by a flurry of experimentation with ways to cash-in on the success of individual bloggers and popular aspects of the blog format such as serial narrative and user participation. During the war, mainstream media outlets piggybacked off stories researched and broken by bloggers, ran pieces profiling prominent blogs, and in one case, recruited a student living in Beirut to keep a blog-style journal featured on a major U.S. network's website.

Hanady Salman's use of bloggers to get out her message, which was ill-suited to the norms of Western print or television, taken together with the efforts of traditional media to cash-in on the advantages of blogging, points to a maturing relationship between blogging and traditional broadcast and print formats. This change is marked by an increasing ability of bloggers and traditional media outlets to cross or blur lines of format strategically in order to expand market share or, as in Salman's case, to reach new audiences altogether. To be sure, harsh criticism of the mainstream media continues to

motivate many bloggers who see themselves as watchdogs of a biased and analytically

lazy mainstream media. There are also difficulties going the other way, as traditional

media outlets are reluctant to relinquish control of content to bloggers for ideological or

editorial reasons. Nevertheless, a look at blog- and traditional media-coverage of the

Israel-Hizbullah war suggests attitudes of mutual hostility between bloggers and

traditional media now coexist (albeit uncomfortably) with an appreciation of the

possibilities of each others' medium and increasing cross-format experimentation. This

article provides several examples of the cross-format trend through both online and

traditional-media coverage of the conflict and also sketches some of the ways members

of the diverse and influential Lebanese blogosphere wrote about the war and its coverage

in print and on television.[3]

New Realms of Interaction, New Inequalities of Access

      While blogging allowed for wider participation in covering the war, these effects

were not distributed equally across Lebanese society. In Lebanon, blogging tends to be a

hobby of the wealthy, socially conscious, and usually urban elite. In the sectarian terms

pervasive in Lebanese politics, this translates to a heavier online representation of

Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims. Many of the most vocal bloggers during the

Israel-Hizbullah war, such as Mustapha, the web master of Beirut Spring, cut their teeth

writing about the "Cedar Revolution" protest movement that forced the withdrawal of

Syrian troops and intelligence apparatus following the February 2005 assassination of

former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Al Hariri. In a typical blog, dashes of Arabic and

French flavor the English, a product of the tri-lingual schooling wealthy Lebanese

receive.

The sectarian nature of Lebanese politics often shapes the outlook of Lebanese

bloggers. In a post from Vox's Den, a blog claiming to be driven by concern that "The

rise of Islamism is threatening to bring oriental Christians back to the dark ages," the

author writes: "'80 per cent of the Lebanese support Hizbullah' or so said a poll that was

carried out during the war. But I know Lebanon better: all the Lebanese I talked to

during the war were in the 20 per cent camp."[4] Public opinion polls are common in

Lebanon and contesting them is a hobby shared by bloggers across the political spectrum,

but there is something more here. As Marc Lynch remarks, the Lebanese blogosphere is

unique in the Arab world for being "very self-conscious in opening itself to the Western

media and trying to present itself as the interpreter of Lebanon."[5] This observation is

helpful to keep in mind not only when reading Lebanese blogs but also Western coverage

of Lebanon by journalists potentially influenced by the vocal Lebanese blogosphere. It

also underscores the importance of remembering that blogging is not equally spread

across Lebanon's extremely diverse political landscape.

But it was not just the Lebanese in Lebanon who blogged about the *Israel-*

Hizbullah war. Around the world, bloggers in the large Lebanese diaspora created by the

1975-1990 civil war recorded their own perspectives of the 34-day war. They often

blasted traditional news outlets in the West for their coverage of the conflict, which they

could compare with Arabic news sources and reports from friends and family still in

Lebanon. The strong participation of the Lebanese diaspora in blogging the war

demonstrates the potential of the medium in bringing together shifting and disparate

commentaries, and in juxtaposing multiple overlapping identities. The ability of the

Lebanese diaspora and others outside the Middle East to follow Lebanese sources, and of

Lebanese bloggers to influence new worldwide audiences demonstrates the globalizing

potential of the medium. This potential is what traditional media outlets, often limited to

national or regional audiences, are struggling to come to terms with.[6]

Taunts and Sideswipes: Bloggers and Mainstream Media on the Conflict

The *Israel-Hizbullah* conflict may have been the most intensely blogged-about

war in history. Despite heavy Israeli air strikes, the lights and phone lines in Beirut

mostly stayed on, leaving an army of Lebanese to present their political analyses,

experiences and practical wartime information for the wired world to see. Glancing at

the sidebar of Blogging Beirut, a personal site that switched to war coverage during the

conflict, a user could check which bridges were hit the night before and which food

supplies were running low alongside traditional blog fare.

Outside Lebanon, bloggers told their own version of events, sometimes in stark

contrast to what major television networks and newspapers were saying. When the

conflict broke out on July 12th 2006, As'ad AbuKhalil, a Lebanese-American professor of

Political Science and blogger, had just returned from Lebanon. As he followed the war,

his site, the Angry Arab News Service, went into overtime, shooting from an average of

around ten daily posts to over thirty at the height of the conflict. AbuKhalil is no fan of

organized politics and religion, but reserves some of his harshest criticisms for the

American media which he sees as driven by profit motive to reinforce the views of its

consumers. In his view, profit underpins the American media's bias towards Israel at the

expense of Arabs. "Finally, an American news source pays attention to the victims of the

Israeli war of aggression on Lebanon," AbuKhalil writes, tagging the MSNBC headline,

"Israeli zoo animals show signs of stress."[7]

But his favorite target by far is *The New York Times*, whose editorial page he

accuses of cheerleading the destruction of Lebanon and its reporters of going to great

lengths to humanize Israeli soldiers while ignoring the human costs in Lebanon and

Palestine. The following is a sentence from an article in *The New York Times* followed

by AbuKhalil's commentary:

> 'Ohad [an Israeli soldier] said he called his wife to say goodnight before going into battle,
> and called her when he came out to say he was O.K.'
> Don't you feel bad for this occupier? Are you not getting goose bumps reading
> about the emotional strain of killing women and children in Lebanon? Do think it is easy
> to kill for hours on end, especially in a land of inferior people? Do you now know how
> difficult it is for Israel to maintain its racist occupation of Arab lands?[8]

While AbuKhalil's politics and ultra-sarcastic style have ruffled feathers in the

American media, where he used to appear frequently as a Middle East commentator,

he also regularly criticizes the Saudi-controlled media corporations that own the

lion's share of Arabic language newspapers and the Al Arabiya satellite channel. In

the new Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar*, AbuKhalil points out the great pains the

Saudi-controlled media took to please America by sparing its ally, Israel, from

criticism:

> [Al Arabiya] dealt with the war as if it were not a political event; as if Lebanon was being
> faced with an unexpected hurricane or a destructive earthquake. The title of Al Arabiya's
> coverage was the slogan 'The Hot Summer,' with the perpetrator left unidentified...[9]

In a phone interview, AbuKhalil described his sense of humor and blogging persona as

deeply personal and insisted that he does not write with a particular audience in mind.

But in recent years his has noted a sharp increase in the number of hits from the Middle

East, especially Saudi Arabia.[10]

And while prominent Lebanese bloggers were critiquing Western coverage of the

war, American bloggers were also monitoring what Lebanese journalists were up to. No

one who followed the *Israel-Hizbullah* war in the American press could escape the story

about the doctored Reuters photographs broken by the American blog Little Green

Footballs (LGF). Previously known for helping discredit memos aired on CBS during the

2004 campaign that purportedly proved George W. Bush's absence from duty in the

Texas Air National Guard, this time LGF found evidence of manipulation on photos of a

bombed-out Beirut cityscape. In the shots, purchased by Reuters from a freelance

Lebanese photographer, plumes of smoke rising from buildings are digitally enhanced

and buildings are duplicated using a copy and paste tool.[11]

Mainstream US print and television had a field day with the story. LGF web

master, Charles Johnson, packaged his blog entries on the photos in an unmissable link at

the top of his site and was feted in American newspapers and cable news networks. The

newspaper coverage hints at the controversy surrounding his blog which has been called

both a "vicious, anti-Muslim hate site"[12] and "an incredibly useful guide to global

Islamist encroachment."[13] But CNN and Fox News made no such attempt to explain this

controversy to viewers as Johnson was trotted-out twice as an expert guest, complete with

side-by-side monitors to compare the before and after shots. While LGF and the cottage

industry of post-9/11 Middle East commentators are largely ignored by the academic

community, their savvy in garnering TV and print attention for their message is

undeniable. Perhaps no moment during the war better summed up the dynamic of the

blogger-mainstream media crossover than when CNN asked for Johnson's take on his

role as a blogger, to which he replied, "It's a sort of a taking-back the reins of

information, I guess you might say, from the mainstream media and just double-

checking."[14] Despite the irony of CNN giving airtime to a commentator who openly

charges the network with "whitewashing radical Islam,"[15] both parties were winners that

day; CNN got a ready-made story, and Johnson's blog got a plug on national television.

With their ability to post photographs from other sources irrespective of copyright

laws or editorial controls, bloggers can circulate images to new audiences in imaginative

ways. Hence, the "Reutersgate" Beirut photograph was not the only famous image to come out of the war. The most talked-about and linked-to photos in the Lebanese blogosphere showed a group of young Israeli girls writing messages such as "To Nasrallah with love" on artillery shells. The shots, taken by an AP photographer, were run by the Washington Post and a few other newspapers, but received little or no TV coverage, and garnered nowhere near the attention of the Reuters doctoring story. Quick to condemn the girls as the product of an Israeli culture of violence, Lebanese bloggers were responsible for the wide reach of these pictures, often posting them next to shots of dead children to great chilling effect.[16] A June 20th piece in the Columbia Journalism Review's daily online publication provides some background on the now-infamous images by revealing that the Israeli girls had just emerged from five days in an underground bomb shelter in a town a stone's throw from the northern border. Other photographs from the same series reveal the girls' fathers standing around directing the show.

Getting in on the Act: Mainstream Media Take up Blogging Themselves

During the early days of the war, Fox News—a US cable channel known for its right-leaning editorial slant, sensationalistic coverage and high ratings—recruited Spencer Witte, an American who decided to stick out the war in Beirut, to keep a regular blog. In his first entry Witte writes, "I'm not writing to take sides or make political points. I'm merely relating what I've seen and heard, firsthand, as one American in the

middle of a big conflict that seems only to be getting bigger."[17] Witte goes to great

lengths to hide his politics—and this was no accident: his contact at Fox made it explicit

that he did not want "political opinions" entering into the posts.[18] His entries center on

accounts of his daily life during the war and, despite the prohibition on politics, come

across as markedly more nuanced than Fox's usual red, white and blue coverage. Witte's

entries were featured prominently on Fox's website and gave the most detailed picture

available in Western mainstream media of Beirut as the bombs fell. But while the feature

generated significant site traffic and in most ways looked like a blog, the restrictions Fox

placed on Witte's posts speak to the biggest problem of attempting to fuse the

blogosphere and mainstream media. The ability of bloggers adopted by large outlets to

write freely will always be limited by those outlets' need to appeal to a much wider

audience and by their desire for editorial or ideological control.

The Arab media is also taking some steps towards recognizing blogging and

incorporating the user-participatory online formats. The Lebanese paper *An-Nahar* ran a

short profile piece during the war on Blogging Beirut, and Al Arabiya launched a Video

Club feature on their website that allowed users to upload short movies. The clips

dealing with the Lebanon war are mostly montages of injured faces set to patriotic music.

It seems the normal tight level of editorial control in the Saudi-controlled media is in

place here and it is probable that users seeking an uncensored forum for political

expression have already gone elsewhere. The Qatar-based satellite channel, Al Jazeera,

is said to be considering incorporating a more interactive website format, and if its TV

call-in shows are any guide, would most likely offer a less restricted forum.[19]

Conclusion

The *Israel-Hizbullah* conflict was the first war where large numbers of bloggers on all sides were able to swap both practical information and political rants in real-time. More than ever before, bloggers were able to influence the agenda for traditional media coverage—but they will not overtake mainstream media anytime soon. Bloggers are loosening the news corporations' ability to frame wars, but in a localized way, by targeting influential audiences rather than the public at large. The huge difference in audience size between the two media makes it way too early to talk about a large-scale loosening of traditional media's ability to shape public opinion. And as much as some bloggers attack the mainstream media, the more it becomes clear that the blogosphere depends on traditional outlets for fodder for both denunciation and regurgitation. For their part, large newspaper and TV outlets in both the Arab world and the West are turning their attention to popular bloggers for material while simultaneously searching for ways to cash-in on the advantages of the format for themselves. During the war, stories researched and broken by bloggers increasingly found their way into mainstream press coverage, while savvy individuals were able to pick and choose among different media channels to extend their reach. User-participatory online formats are expanding both in Western and Arab media.

While bloggers are increasingly able to harness traditional media to get out their message, traditional media formats tend to be mimicking blogs in style but not content. As shown by the strict editorial constraints Fox News placed on Witte's blog, the things that make a blog great to its comparatively small and self-selecting audience—unpublishable rumor, polemic rants, the delicate balance between insight and incitement—will not fly in the profit-driven Western press or the largely state-dominated Arab media. While corporate and state media enterprises may increasingly borrow from the blogosphere's format, political and profit motives will continue to encroach on the ability of those they employ to produce independent blog content.

But, if corporate or political interests do succeed in stifling bloggers' independent voices, As'ad AbuKhalil has already told us what to look for:

> If I get corrupted, these are the signs: a) advertisements of Qatar Airways appear on the top of my site; b) I suddenly become the Happy Arab; c) my next book's title becomes 'In the company of kings and princes;' and I insist on being called Prince Angry or Prince Arab.[20]

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[1] Message posted on multiple blogs. See for example: http://beirutjournal.blogspot.com/ 16 July, 2006

[2] "Who Killed the Newspaper?" *The Economist*, 24 Aug 2006.

[3] The blogs and media covered in this article were not chosen to present a statistically significant sample of the range of views on the war, but rather to present colourful examples of the blogosphere interacting with traditional media formats.   I follow some of the blogs covered here; others were found through Internet searches, recommended by friends or seen in print or TV articles. My personal experience living in Beirut during the early days of the war also shaped my choice of blogs, some of which I relied on for the latest information on the conflict.

[4] http://cedarsawakening.blogspot.com/ 2 Sept 2006.

[5] Phone interview with Marc Lynch, 13 Sept 2006.

[6] There is much need of research into the distinctions between bloggers inside and outside of Lebanon as well the distinctions that fall along internal sectarian lines.

[7] www.angryarab.blogspot.com 15 Aug 2006.

[8] www.angryarab.blogspot.com 25 July, 2006.

[9] AbuKhalil, As'ad. "A Criticism of the War Media: Television (1)." *Al-Akhbar.* 23 Aug 2006.

[10] Phone interview with As'ad AbuKhalil 14 Sept 2006.

[11] http://littlegreenfootballs.com/ 5 Aug 2006.

[12] Quoting Ibrahim Hooper in Paul Farhi "Blogger Takes Aim at News Media and Makes Direct Hit." *The Washington Post.* 9 Aug 2006.

[13] Berhnard, Brendan. "Reuters' Image Problem." *LA Weekly News* 9 Aug 2006.

[14] CNN appearance from August 2006, posted 11 Aug 2006 on youtube.com.

[15] http://littlegreenfootballs.com/ 4 Oct, 2006.

[16] See for example, http://sabbah.biz/mt/   17 July, 2006.

[17] An American in Beirut: As War Approaches." Foxnews.com 21 July 2006.

[18] Email correspondence 19 Sept 2006.

[19] Phone interview with Marc Lynch, 13 Sept 2006.

[20] http://www.angryarab.blogspot.com/ 26 Feb 2004.