

On Bloggers and Mainstream Media

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*As a preface to the post below, I would like thank everyone who took the time and energy to respond to my questions. By no means is this post intended to be comprehensive, though I have attempted to obtain the opinions of various persons involved in and affected by the issue ranging from organization personnel to members of the media and blogosphere. I have limited my research to the sport of hockey because that is the realm in which I choose to blog and the area in which I am most familiar. As you will soon see, many people were kind enough to respond to my request including **Brian Burke**, **Helene Elliott**, **James Mirtle**, and **Eric McErlain**. Throughout this post, I will indicate my stance with regard to the **Chris McCosky** article found in the Detroit News on November 3, 2007, titled “Bloggers Just Aren’t Journalists.” I hope that the following will be taken as intended: as an opinion.*

The post is split in two parts: the first part discusses bloggers and the media, the second focuses on the future of bloggers’ integration with the media from the organization standpoint.

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PART ONE: IN DEFENSE OF BLOGGERS.

McCosky says: “BLOGGERS JUST AREN’T JOURNALISTS.”

Absolutely true. We aren’t and, for the most part, we have not claimed to be. So let’s start with what and who we are, shall we?

Bloggers are fans and a majority of us identify as such. We write blogs because we are passionate about a sport, a team, or a topic. Some of us aspire to enter the field of sports journalism or management (**Christy** at *Behind the Jersey*, **Bethany** at *Bethany’s Hockey Rants*). Some of us are freelance writers or fiction writers hoping to flex our writing muscles (**Mike Chen**, myself). Some of us are simply interested in using our blogs to refine our understanding and appreciation of the game (**E** at *Theory of Ice*). Others of us use the blogs to fill a void in media coverage (**Kms2** of *Purple Crushed Velvet*, **Cassie** of *Anaheim Ducks Fan*). Those who do not have a void to fill use their webspace as a way to share about the sport/team they love with other fans (**Pension Plan Puppet** of *Pension Plan Puppets*, **Sherry** of *Scarlett Ice*).

We are as diverse as are our reasons for starting blogs, but we are allowed flexibility in our approaches and freedom in our posts because we are fans and not journalists.

McCosky points out that there ought to be a definitive line between mainstream media and bloggers and I agree with him. There are fundamental differences between journalists and bloggers, and it is important for readers to be aware of them.

McCosky outlines these differences in the following manner:

Journalism employs trained professionals. We actually have to go to school for this stuff. We take our jobs seriously. There are rules and standards that we are beholden to. There are ethics involved. We actually talk to, in person, the people we write about. If we rip somebody in an article, you best be sure most of us will confront that person the next day and take whatever medicine we need to take.

With blogging and Web sites, it seems the hard work, standards, accountability, courage all of that is bypassed. Who needs to study this stuff, or attend games, or conduct interviews when you can just sit in your basement and clack out whatever comes through your head, right? If I rip somebody, or if I get something wrong, who cares? Nobody will see me.

The first paragraph is certainly true enough, but McCosky fails to differentiate between the good and bad bloggers. The only line he writes to avoid accusing all bloggers is that he is “not saying every blogger is out to discredit legitimate media.” However, he does not mention that many of the responsible, good blogs offer valuable opinions and insights to their readers not to counter the mainstream media, but to complement it. Often, these bloggers will focus on an aspect of the game usually overlooked by the mainstream media – for **Earl Sleek** of *Battle of California*, that means analyzing the numbers and cranking out spreadsheets to underscore his points. For the women of the group blog known as *Hockey’s Ladies of Greatness*, that means providing a voice from an oft-unheard female fan perspective.

Helene Elliott of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, “I think blogs are great. I enjoy reading them to get a sense of what’s out there. It’s possible to pick up on trends and learn what people want to read about.” However, she points out that it is “often difficult to know which blogs to trust.”

She hints at the point that **Earl Sleek** drove home in his response when he stated that “the mainstream media is best-suited to perform its current function,” but blogs “[fulfill] a different function”.

This is the difference I feel is key to the argument between bloggers and journalists. It isn’t that bloggers are attempting to overthrow journalists; rather, they are attempting to provide a different dimension to what is presently available.

Adam Brady, the Director of Publications and New Media with the Anaheim Ducks and the man behind the official team website’s blog, recognized this difference. He stated that he believes these informative, responsible blogs “fill the void because they are able to have potentially

more content than other media, are able to post much more frequently, and are able to offer a different view that newspaper reporters might not be able or willing to provide.”

The issue Elliott points out regarding the reliability of bloggers can be addressed with the McCosky argument that bloggers often forego the hard work, standards, accountability and courage used in journalism. Members of the media are expected to operate in that fashion due to their jobs, positions, and privileges afforded them by their press passes. However, most respectable bloggers adhere to a self-imposed set of standards that are similar, though not identical. These bloggers are generally also the ones whom a reader can trust.

James Mirtle, an elite blogger with the distinction of working at the sports desk of the *Globe and Mail*, writes that credibility in the blogosphere can be established by paying “attention to the basics (spelling, grammar, accuracy), crediting their sources [...] and focusing on providing quality work.”

With those essentials in place, a blog’s content should speak for itself. From the opinions stated there, a reader should be able to discern whether a blog is reliable and responsible or if it is garbage. Since bloggers do not have an entity to regulate them, readers have some responsibility to be selective in trusting a particular blog. On the other hand, bloggers still have a responsibility to ensure that the material they produce is reliable. And truthfully, not everyone does.

Nevertheless, the bloggers who responded to my request for their opinions have universally acknowledged that they will cite their sources and label rumors as such. They make an effort to self-regulate their posts. If they are incorrect or completely off-base in their argument, they are often called out on it by bloggers and readers alike in their comments section. If the problem persists, eventually that blog loses readership and credibility.

Perhaps **E** of *Theory of Ice* summed it up best when she indicated that it’s true bloggers don’t have [accountability], but neither do we have authority. The tradeoff that journalists get for the restrictions placed on them is that their words reach a wider audience and are presented as those of an expert. They are insiders and their writing is given greater public [credibility] for it. As bloggers, we can say anything we want, but just like the guy on the neighboring barstool, nobody has any reason to listen to us or take our views for anything more than individual thoughts. Most bloggers who gain a large audience do so because they are responsible, thoughtful, careful writers who maintain (independent of any external controls) ethical standards.

As it turns out, the popularity of some blogs has yielded that credibility. Some of us have already gone on to do guest appearances on radio shows and be approached to join prolific sports websites or write freelance articles.**

“Time will help the bloggers’ cause,” states **Mark Whicker**, a journalist for the *OC Register*. “As more of us get used to the new technology, the bloggers will rise in esteem and credibility.”

This rise of bloggers, then, does not indicate the downfall of the traditional media outlets. In fact, it signifies a shift towards the future co-existence between bloggers and journalists – a shift that blogger **Eric McErlain** suggests has been happening for the last few years.

“To me, it’s sort of a moot point now,” McErlain said. “Bloggers are here. We’re not going anywhere. We’re not going to put away our laptops.”

Anaheim Ducks General Manager **Brian Burke** agreed. “Bloggers are a part of a changing landscape in media,” he stated. “We can’t tell bloggers not to write about us.”

So what next? Read Part Two.

In the end, McCosky asserts, “you do have to know most reporters at legitimate news sources work hard to deliver fair, accurate and pertinent information.”

And so do many bloggers.

***Anaheim Duck Fan and I have both been asked to appear as guests for radio shows. Earl Sleek signed a blogging contract with AOL FanHouse. Mike Chen has a contributor arrangement with FoxSports. With any luck, a freelance article written by Christy Finn will appear in a Canadian in-flight magazine near you in January 2008.*

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PART TWO: BLOGGERS AND ORGANIZATIONS/TEAMS

Without the proper credentials, bloggers are unable to provide their readers with insightful quotes from players and coaching staff unless they pull quotes from an already-published article (and cite it).

So when bloggers were asked if they would be interested in a press pass, imagine my surprise when I found the general consensus could be summed up like this:

“It’d be nice – mostly for special features on players and behind the scenes stuff – but it isn’t necessary for everyday posts or post-game recaps.”

To explore the future of bloggers and team relations, I contacted three different organizations, in three different stages of adjustment, concerning their policy on bloggers: the Anaheim Ducks, the New York Islanders, and the Washington Capitals.

THE “IN CONSIDERATION” STAGE: Ducks.

Brian Burke admitted that the Anaheim Ducks have had some internal discussions regarding granting credentials to bloggers, but have decided not to bring in bloggers this season.

Part of his concern was in regard to the credibility and liability of having bloggers associated with the organization.

With a journalist, I know they've had some training. I know there will be a fact checker and an editor to keep them accountable. I will know what to expect from [journalists] because if they take a bribe or report false information, they'll get fired. With bloggers, there's no safeguard and no guarantees. That will change when one of them gets hit with a libel lawsuit, because one blogger is going to be careless with the fact and they're going to get nailed. A lot of people will cite the first amendment and call blogging "freedom of speech," but that doesn't mean they don't have a responsibility to be factually correct.

True, true, and true.

However, the very fact that discussions have taken place in the past indicate that times are a-changing and relatively soon, a number of teams will be moving towards testing various ways to incorporate bloggers, whom Burke identifies as "a permanent part of [the] changing [media] landscape."

As such, eventually teams will need to adjust and find a way to accommodate them.

There is one way Burke has considered the matter. "The only way I would ever give a blogger credentials is if they signed a contract obligating the author to report responsibly and accurately, or lose their credential."

And that would then lead to experimentation.

THE "TEST-RUN" STAGE: Islanders.

The New York Islanders have made attempts to bring bloggers into their inner circle by creating the Blog Box. **Chris Botta**, the Vice President of Media Relations, is in charge of that feature on the Islander's website and he indicates that they operate in a much different fashion than the blogger-super-friendly Capitals do.

Instead of allowing bloggers in the press box, they are allowed to sit in the bowl of the arena with other like-minded fans. "I didn't want to lose [bloggers] as fans," he said. "So they sit in the bowl of the arena where they can hoot and holler, have a beer if they want to, yell at the refs and players. I didn't want to deny them that."

At the time we spoke, Botta explained that they had only had seven home games and they are still making adjustments to their policy since it is still new. Still, after the game, bloggers with

“a press pass with training wheels” are escorted down to sit in on press conferences with Islanders’ players and coaching staff, or are led to the lockerroom. Their blogs are not censored and neither does the blog have to continually sing the praises of the team. Instead, they are only asked to not be profane, not to take/post naked pictures, and to exercise editorial control over their work.

THE PRO-BLOGGERS: Capitals.

The Capitals owner, **Ted Leonsis**, is a well-known AOL-affiliated businessman that is known to be enthusiastic about the inclusion of bloggers in the media.

Leonsis wrote that he has found Capitals bloggers to be “very articulate [and] very well informed.” His passion is evident in his statement that “the casual sports reporters that cover our team can’t hold a candle to the deep knowledge base of the blogosphere. Bloggers and mainstream media can and will live side by side [...] – it is like oxygen – people had better get used to it.”

I asked **Nate Ewell**, the Capitals’ Director of Media Relations, what criteria is used to determine whether or not a blogger will be given a press pass. He indicated that “the primary considerations are the size of a blog’s audience and a demonstrated commitment to consistently covering the team/sport.”

The bloggers that are granted credentials are expected to conduct themselves in the same manner as members of the media. “We expect them to not cheer in the press box, follow our access policies, and act professionally,” says Ewell.

In this instance, they are treated like journalists and are expected to conduct themselves accordingly. As the most progressive organization regarding to bloggers, the Capitals’ approach may not work for every team – but it’s the little steps taken from “in consideration” to “test run” that will eventually form a more widely accepted policy concerning bloggers seeking to obtain credentials.