

# Asymmetrical Warfare: Having a biff with the mainstream media

**Keith Ng**

**When I first started university, all the way back in 2000, the world was a very different place. Wikipedia hadn't been invented, ICQ was still cool, Google was a strangely bland and featureless search engine that only geeks used. Reeling from the dot.com bust and the accumulated mass of well-intentioned homepages with flashing text about nothing in particular, the internet was the subject of scorn as well as hope.**

It took me a while to learn how to reference websites in academic works: You don't. Some lecturers were aghast at the very idea that websites could make a worthy contribution to academia. Who were these people that wrote on websites? Why can't they get published in something respectable? Their central concern wasn't the electronic medium, it was the promise of the internet to democratise information by removing the middleman: Publishers, editors, academics. Without gatekeepers, how will we know what to trust?

Web 2.0 has come to the rescue, using the ever-growing hivemind of users to scrutinise, categorise and evaluate content. In works like Wikipedia, the sheer brute 'processing power' of this method is self-evident. In a wider, less formal way, the 'blogsphere' plays a similar role. But even as it creates new, distributed means of assessing trustworthiness, it is opening up a second front: The democratisation of attention.

Its vision is to break down the broadcast model, where the attention of the many is given to a few. Instead, attention will be distributed among the many; rather than a mountain with established, trusted sources at the top, the new media landscape will be a stormy sea, with attention shifting to where it is deserved, but never quite staying there.

But the Web 2.0 revolution has just begun—though user-driven content is on the warpath, traditional information sources still dominate attention on the internet. Nor is the Web 1.0 revolution anywhere near completion, either. Much of the audience remains in traditional mediums, and even when they surf the web, the authority of established sources of information reign supreme.

Trust and attention are the keystones of informative media, and despite increasing cynicism and decreasing sales, both still rest firmly with traditional sources. Blog can only occasionally match its mainstream media counterparts for trustworthiness, and by definition, it is necessarily outgunned when it comes to attention.

The power to change opinions on a large scale remains firmly in the hands of the mainstream media. And if you find yourself on the wrong side of their opinions, then you are, according to their editorial calculations, in the minority. And they are probably right.

Blogs provide a readily-accessible, flexible and occasionally effective means to combat the mainstream media, or any idea being propagated through the mainstream media (i.e. originating from, say, a politician). But like any asymmetrical

tactic, it is only one tactic within a wider arsenal, and it is only effective when it successfully connects with larger bodies beyond the blogs, most notably when it becomes a story within the mainstream media itself.

This article is concerned with the 'why' and 'how' of using blogs as a combative medium, with a focus on the asymmetrical aspects as it pertains to minority groups and disempowered individuals taking on The Man.

A well-written blog can be used to generate press more effectively than a press release, especially for people without professional PR training.

Journalists are necessarily sceptical about press releases, which explicitly aim to generate stories favourable to their particular agenda. Freed from the news-style format restrictions of the press release, blogs can deliver opinions in a personal way that emphasises what is at stake in a straightforward manner. The mixture of passion and argument creates a readily-accessible human angle that is more usable and easily accepted by journalist because of its transparency. By demonstrating that you are impassioned, that you have a strong and cogent position on the issue and that your contact details are at the ready, you also make yourself a natural interviewee (thus simplifying the logistics of writing the story).

Preparing a good press release requires specific and professional writing skills. Writing a good blog can be as simple as a thoughtful piece from the heart (or a suave shot from the hip).

But unlike a press release or opinion piece, a blog can also be a source for trusted information.

Good opinion pieces are, in fact, torturous to write. Mainstream publications expect a coherent argument in 600 to 800 words, complete with epic hyperboles, pithy invectives and evidence. Of course, it's often the evidence that's left on the cutting room floor.

Blogs can have it all. Most importantly, you can reference

massive statistical tomes with a simple hyperlink. By linking to relevant sources, you are demonstrating that your figures were not plucked from the ether (or from the back of a napkin, which is often the case with many politicians and even some journalists); that you are confident that your analysis will stand up to scrutiny; and finally, you allow journalists to use your analysis while quoting from your original, respectable source.

Hyperlink referencing can lend instant credibility to your argument (provided, of course, that your analysis actually does withstand the subsequent scrutiny!), and it can do so without creating excessive material for casual readers to wade through. Huge volumes of information can be embedded without interrupting the flow of the prose.

In this way, it is a uniquely effective tool for presenting factual arguments. This is especially true when the alternative is a three-paragraph letter to the editor, a medium which requires immense skill and discipline to make an effective point.

The absence of physical limitations in a blog, however, should not be seen as a licence to write without limitations. The length of a blog may be unlimited, but a reader's attention span is considerably shorter.

Audience is king. David Farrar's Kiwiblog and Public Address are the two most influential blogs in New Zealand. Aside from having a large audience, they are also read by an exceptional concentration of opinion- and decision-makers.

Journalists browse through both on a regular basis and they are seen as easy sources of stories. Though they appear in published form, for a news journalist's purposes, they are 'unpublished', in that they have not been published by a commercial rival.

The transparency of a blog means that a journalist can easily trace the story to the source, conduct simple follow-up interviews and publish immediately, often without crediting the original blog. Journalists, for the reasons described in the beginning of this article, do not like to admit in print

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that their story is sourced from a blog. So sometimes, if getting column inches or air-time is the main goal, going uncredited is a convenient trade-off.

Blogs are immediate, but passive. They can be written up in a matter of minutes, and posted in seconds—yet it can take days before the audience comes to read them.

Audience analysis is important. Are you aiming at professionals who surf blogs as part of their job (traffic peaks at the start of the day, steady traffic throughout until 17:00)? Office-workers who sneak a peek at your blog when they can (tea breaks, lunch-time)? Leisurely readers who log on after work?

Readership and update patterns are reflected in the traffic patterns. Public Address receives a huge number of unique visitors, most only visit once or twice during the same day, since the blog is updated on a daily basis, and rarely on weekends (this was before the launch of the Public Address System).

Timing has to be right to get the right crowd at the right time (this is essentially the news-cycle tracking that is part of standard PR practice). For smaller blogs, or for extra attention, the blog needs to be advertised. Getting a link from Kiwiblog, sending out a mass email, or putting the word out via a list like AEN can boost hits dramatically.

Other consideration includes particular media interests. For example, publications in the Fairfax stable are hesitant to attack their own, but would relish a chance to embarrass a rival APN publication, and vice versa.

The source of trust in a blog lies in its transparency. In delivering a personal story, it is simply their un-intermediated thoughts and emotions. In presenting an argument, it follows the process of constructing that argument, facts, figures, sources and all. This transparency opens the blog up to scrutiny, and under this scrutiny, trust is formed.

The source of attention in a blog comes from its place in

the wider blogosphere. As material rises through the blogs, it gains more attention, until it reaches the 'A-list' blogs, which is then fed upon by the mainstream media. Only by maximising both elements can blogs successfully make an impact on public opinion.

In the case of Deborah Coddington's 'Asian Angst' cover article in North & South blogs were extremely effective in counteracting the article<sup>1</sup>.

Immediately after the release of the article, few options were available. Letters to the editor would take a full month to appear in print, offering little in terms of space, and leaving editorial control in the hands of the editor who published the piece in the first place.

An online response was posted the very next day. Linking to official police figures, it was able to offer evidence directly from official sources, as well as make a point-by-point rebuttal. When placed side-by-side, the blog—with its clear and transparent references—proved more reliable.

The speed of the response meant that mainstream publications were happy to pick up the story, which generated more momentum for further stories. If the initial response came a month, or even a week later, it would have been considered old news.

By the end of the week, two Public Address bloggers—Tze Ming Mok and myself—along with Dr Kumanan Rasanathan, had opinion pieces in the Sunday-Star Times and the Listener, reaching more readers than the original article many times over. These opinion pieces were made possible by the momentum generated by the news stories.

In my obviously-biased opinion, the response was effective and proportionally successful—that is to say, it made at least as much of an impact as the original story. In light of the damaging claims made by the article, the most important response was to draw attention to evidence to the contrary. This was done immediately, and the facts

<sup>1</sup> See [www.publicaddress.net/default,3707.sm](http://www.publicaddress.net/default,3707.sm) for the actual argument.

became a reference point for subsequent actions. Rather than calling them racists—which would have allowed them to claim that we were simply political-correctees who did not want to hear the truth—we focused on their errors and sought to embarrass them and attack their credibility as professional journalists. We challenged their facts, their editorial processes, their lack of balance, judging them by the standards of their peers, their trade, their livelihood.

Coddington and North & South avoided direct confrontation, then switched to no-comment mode, which was ultimately successful in starving the story of oxygen. Our response did not reach critical mass, but it was sufficient to outweigh the impact of the original article. As secondary goals, it managed to put a serious dent in Deborah Coddington's reputation and create a rift between North & South Editor Robyn Langwell, her publishers and her staff. In short—the punitive counterattack struck home.

In the past, Asian communities (and others) have been seen as easy targets because of their inability to defend themselves in this sort of public arena. This demonstrated to editors and publishers around the country that the Asian communities are capable of utilising new- and traditional-mediums to organising a media-savvy, bare-knuckled response.

Unfortunately, this may mean it'll be a while before I get to do this again.

**Keith Ng** is currently a homeless freelance journalist traveling through India and Sri Lanka. He also blogs on Public Address and works for evil multinational PR companies when nobody is looking. Aside from the recent skirmish with Deborah Coddington, Keith has also successfully fought a High Court injunction through his blog.