

Profiles in Blogging: How Bloggers Around the World Practice Their Craft

By Christopher Connell

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for Democracy**
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Introduction: Filling the Information Voids

Though blogs—a portmanteau for “Web” and “logs”—sprang up in the 1990s to fill a niche role, they have quickly evolved into the mainstream. They exploded from laundry lists of useful links shared by the tech savvy into a global platform for personal opinion and the sharing of news and ideas. By the end of 2011, NMLincite, a Nielsen/McKinsey company, was tracking more than 181 million blogs around the world, up from nearly 36 million in 2006.¹ Today, in addition to Tumblr’s 110 million blogs, WordPress hosts 65 million, and LiveJournal has almost 40 million. The number of active blogs is usually just a fraction of those figures as many blogs lie dormant for months or years. The arrival of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube on the social media scene in the mid-2000s got millions more hooked on microblogging and sharing insights, information, photos, and videos on the Web.

Today, blogging serves as an example of how the digital media have broken down barriers between producers of content and audiences: Those who once passively received information now have the ability to interact with it, to create forums for debate. Content distributed by mainstream producers is mixed, mashed up, refurbished, expanded upon, and released back into the Web with a unique piquancy. The diversity of views espoused via blogging platforms brings with it a host of challenges in the blogosphere, among them, increasing restriction on speech or prosecution for opinions. As bloggers are increasingly targeted in repressive states and treated with the same impunity as journalists, the line between blogs and news blurs—a voice online is of value, whether its owner holds a press pass or not.

The new media space has opened up legitimate avenues for bloggers to organize and establish credibility in filling information gaps and voids. Sites such as Global Voices often provide context and analysis for news in the world through the expertise of their writers. Elsewhere, individual bloggers work to build credibility through the medium as representatives of public opinion. This credibility is built sometimes unintentionally, with audiences stumbling upon blogs as viable information sources. However, a more common theme is emerging, as consistent reporting from bloggers leads them to partner with mainstream news outlets.

The blogosphere—both long form and micro—has provided news outlets with hosts of opportunities to connect with and use their audiences to further their mission. News organizations’ use of citizen-generated content is becoming the rule, rather than the exception. Some have even gone so far as to structure their entire site around the blogosphere: take, for example, the *Huffington Post*.

Credibility is digital currency, and bloggers spend their online lives trying to establish it. This report examines how regular bloggers in different parts of the world approach their task, the role they play in filling information gaps in their countries and their relationship with mainstream media. It looks at what motivates them, how they find an audience, how they find the time and means (since only a tiny fraction of bloggers draw any income from their posts), and how much of what they write about is opinion versus what they have seen and reported themselves. It addresses the question of who reads their blogs in countries where access to the Internet is constrained by poverty or constricted by government decree and whether it is sufficient to reach those who possess digital access, devices, and skills. It also takes note of what appears to be a worldwide shift in social media away from long form blogs toward microblogging and Twitter (although a co-founder of both Twitter and Blogger recently launched a writing platform called Medium to let users hold forth in much more than 140 characters).

It examines the impact and reach not only of well-known bloggers such as Cuba’s Yoani Sánchez but also the independent Saudi journalist Ahmed Al Omran, who started writing the Saudi Jeans blog as a pharmacy student

to improve his English skills and combat stereotypes about his country; Atiaf Alwazir, the Yemeni activist and researcher who writes the “Women from Yemen” blog; Kajsa Hallberg Adu, a young Swedish political scientist who has become a leader of the blogosphere in her adopted country of Ghana, and Iris Cecilia Gonzales, a Filipina reporter whose desire to put a human face on economic stories helped her gain an international platform for her blogs about inequality. Finally, it considers what these influential bloggers see as the future for social media in their own lives and in their societies.

“The People Formerly Known as the Audience”

Blogs give ordinary citizens in rich and poor countries alike an outlet for free speech and a way to make their voices heard without the filters of the mainstream media. Instead of sending a letter to the editor that stood little chance of being published or gritting their teeth as they watched state-controlled television networks tell only one side of a story, people suddenly had the opportunity to talk back and to hear what others had to say on their own media platforms. Citizen journalism champion Dan Gillmor dubbed them “the former audience,”² and fellow media critic and journalism professor Jay Rosen later embellished that appellation into “the people formerly known as the audience.”³ Robert Mackey, the *New York Times* journalist who is the editor and main writer for The Lede, the newspaper’s breaking news blog, said social media outlets give the public independence from the news media. “Through Twitter and now through YouTube, people are making themselves into their own little news agencies,” he said.⁴

To the chagrin of authorities who had been secure in their ability to control what was reported in print and on air within their borders, it has proved difficult to ignore, muffle, or silence these new, alternative voices. Regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria have shut down access to the Internet, but usually only for a few days, because much of their economy and infrastructure depends on Internet access, too. China’s infamous “Great Firewall” blocks thousands of Western websites and its censors patrol Sina Weibo—China’s version of Twitter and Facebook—to strike words and topics considered too sensitive for open discussion. But 10 million Chinese managed to post comments in five days after two high-speed trains collided in Wenzhou in July 2011, noted journalist, blogger and activist Michael Anti (*Zhào Jing*). “Chinese social media is really changing Chinese mindsets and Chinese life ... They give the voiceless people a channel to make your voice heard,” Anti said.⁵

Blogs in the Mainstream: iReports and News “Remixes”

The man-in-the-street interview is still a staple of mainstream news coverage when disasters strike, but every major news organization now scours social media and blogs for eyewitness accounts, photos, and videos on breaking stories. In the civil wars in Libya and Syria and in places such as Iran where Western journalists cannot move freely or safely, they will avail themselves of photos and videos supplied by rebels and their sympathizers, if satisfied of their authenticity—and at times even when they are not entirely sure. CNN says more than 500 videos are uploaded each day to its iReport website, a small fraction of which it vets and an even smaller number it puts on the air.⁶ It has more than 1 million registered iReporters,⁷ one of whom is Shreedeeep Rayamajhi, a citizen journalist and activist in Kathmandu, Nepal, who has filed more than 180 iReports since 2008, with six making it to a broadcast.⁸

The *New York Times* and the *Guardian* draw heavy traffic to their news blogs when major stories break. On the second day of Egypt’s May 2012 elections, the *Guardian* ran 7,700 words and hundreds of photos and videos on its News Blog, including links to the running commentary by Zeinobia, a well-known and widely followed journalist and author of the Egyptian Chronicles blog. The *Guardian* frequently cited her coverage of the bloodshed in Syria. Zeinobia continued to Tweet up a storm during the upheavals in 2013 in her own country.

The *New York Times*’ Mackey made extensive use in The Lede of posts by Iranian bloggers and expatriates during the 2009 election protests in Tehran.⁹ The Lede (the intentional misspelling is reporters’ argot for the

first paragraph of a story) describes itself as “a blog that remixes national and international news stories, adding information gleaned from the Web or gathered through original reporting to supplement articles in *The New York Times* and provide fresh perspectives on events.”¹⁰ Mackey, who used to produce multimedia content for the newspaper’s foreign desk, was once a fact-checker for its Sunday magazine, which he calls “incredible preparation for blogging things on the spot where you don’t know about how to verify them or what’s happening. What it teaches you is, first, being incredibly suspicious and secondly, being very open about what you do and don’t know and how you think you know it.” He added, “We don’t just throw up everything.”¹¹

The Staying Power of Voice and Ideas

Eyewitnessing history is one way to attract a lot of followers on social media. Pakistani IT consultant Sohaib Athar had 750 Twitter followers late one night in May 2011 when he sat down at his keyboard and heard helicopters overhead in Abbottabad. After the world learned that he had “live tweeted” the killing of Osama bin Laden their ranks swelled to upwards of 100,000.¹² Two years later Athar-@ReallyVirtual-still has 62,000 people reading what he has to say.

What gives blogs staying power are not just once-in-a-lifetime circumstances or happenstance but the voice and ideas of the author. Few bloggers will attract a million readers, as political blogger Andrew Sullivan does with his Dish.¹³ But Larsen, the Global Voices editor, said, “There is an Andrew Sullivan-type blogger everywhere in the world. Every country has people who are really interesting and worth reading.”¹⁴

Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani schoolgirl shot by the Taliban in October 2012, first drew the world’s attention in 2009 when the BBC began publishing on its Urdu language website the precocious 11-year-old’s blog about her life and dreams in strife-torn Swat Valley.¹⁵ That led the *New York Times* to do a video documentary on her.¹⁶ Most bloggers do not run risks that severe, but it takes courage to blog in places where free expression is constrained or entirely unwelcome, and ingenuity to start a culture of blogging in a country where few such voices once were heard. Here are eight such bloggers.

Featured Bloggers

Shreedeep Rayamajhi,
Nepal

Ahmed Al Omran,
Saudi Arabia

Kounila Keo,
Cambodia

Kajsa Hallberg Adu,
Ghana

Atiaf Alwazir,
Yemen

Iris Cecilia Gonzales,
Philippines

Michael Anti (zhao Jing),
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Yoani Sanchez,
Cuba



Photo: Courtesy of Shreedeep Rayamajhi

Shreedeep Rayamajhi, Nepal

Shreedeep Rayamajhi occupies a position at the intersection between the worlds of social media, activism, and mainstream media in Kathmandu, Nepal. He is a blogger and IT professional who makes his living as an operations manager for an online company that books holidays for foreign travelers to the Himalayan country. He is also a travel writer, crusader against sex trafficking, advocate for addressing climate change, and a prolific citizen journalist. He has filed more than 180 video stories to CNN's iReport website¹⁷ and written more than 260 stories for GroundReport.com,¹⁸ which encourages people to post stories from around the world. Neither website pays citizen journalists for their contributions.

Rayamajhi blogs and reports about crime, corruption, traffic jams, tourism, and politics. He says he began receiving e-mail threats to stop his political reporting and then was waylaid and beaten up in November 2010 by a gang as he rode a motorbike home from work. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists decried the alleged assault.¹⁹ His story on the resettlement of

75,000 Bhutanese refugees was honored by the GroundReport's editors as the global news organization's third-best story of 2012.²⁰ His GroundReport stories now have drawn 371,000 views.

Rayamajhi has done his blogging and reporting during a tumultuous period in the former monarchy, which is awaiting national elections scheduled for November 19, 2013, to break a deadlock among political parties. Rayamajhi was an unpaid intern for *The Rising Nepal*, the country's oldest daily newspaper, for two years while he earned two business degrees.

What drives him is a fervent desire for change, Rayamajhi said, and a conviction that blogging offers a purer form of journalism than possible in mainstream media. "When you talk about blogging, the real content, the real feeling of change, moral, ethics and news, that is very limited in Nepal. That is done by a handful of people," he said.

"It's how you make change," he added. "I am a writer. I can write. That's how I can spread my thing and bring change." And what change has happened from the things he has written about? Rayamajhi, who is treasurer of Internet Society Nepal, said he was in the thick of protests by Nepal's Internet service providers over restrictions by the Nepal Telecommunications Authority, that would make telephone calls by voice over Internet protocol (VOIP) illegal. An article he wrote for a travel magazine put a stop to a gang charging tourists \$20 to use free baggage trolleys at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu. "Today there is a sign that says 'Free Trolley.' That came about because of my article," he said.

Rayamajhi blogs in English because "my target audience is the global audience, not the local. If you look at the reach of the Internet [in Nepal], it is very limited. It is still today like a prize possession for the city areas only," he said. "But I write a lot in Nepali in my Facebook."

He writes several blogs, including ones on climate change and exploitation of women, as well as one called the Manifestation of Propaganda, and he runs a news aggregation site he calls *RayzNews.com*. "Ninety percent of my work is what I see and feel," he said. He turned down a job offer at a national magazine recently because he was afraid he would not be able to express his opinions.

"A blogger's voice is important," he said. The Internet is powerful "because once you write something there, it stays there. People see that, the hits are there. The reality is you can change the newspaper, but you cannot change the blog ... I may not be there tomorrow, but my blog will be there to remind people what happened."

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Photo: Courtesy of Ahmed Al Omran

Ahmed Al Omran, Saudi Arabia

Growing up in the city of al-Ahsa, in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, Ahmed Al Omran always knew he wanted to be a journalist, “but my family was against this, especially my father, because he thought it would be extremely difficult to make a living,” especially for someone from the Shiite minority.²¹

Al Omran went off to King Saud University in Riyadh to study pharmacy, but during his second year he started writing a blog he called “Saudi Jeans.” He calls the name “a good symbol for a lot of ideas and things that we are tackling inside Saudi Arabia at a time when the country is changing.”

It shifted quickly from a personal journal into a commentary on public issues that eventually attracted 30,000 readers a month, primarily from the United States, Europe, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states. Al Omran mixed light-hearted observations about Saudi life with pungent

political commentary. When a friend asked why he was following the 2006 elections in neighboring Kuwait so closely, he wrote:

I was impressed by Kuwaitis, especially the youth: how smart, active, and politically savvy they are. I was also impressed by the way they used blogs to express their views, organize their movement, rally for change and reform, and protest against corruption. I was so impressed I wanted to be a part of what was going on there.²²

In another post he wrote, "I would die a happy man if blogs could increase awareness on the importance of values such as collective action, freedoms, plurality, etc. . . . We just need to get started, and hopefully someday in the near future we will get there."²³ He became an early contributor to Global Voices, and foreign journalists began ringing him up for interviews. He wasn't worried about his words getting him in trouble. "I thought, 'I'm just a guy with a blog who writes what he thinks.'" But then a friend and fellow blogger was jailed for four months, and in 2009 someone from the authorities "told my family that the government is not happy with my work," he said. He ignored their pleas to stop.

Al Omran's life took a surprising turn in 2010 when the Saudi Ministry of Education gave him a scholarship to pursue a master's degree at the elite Columbia School of Journalism in New York. "My case was actually an exception," he said. "A lot of people had to get involved to make it happen." Upon graduating, he spent a year working for Andy Carvin on the social media desk of NPR in Washington, then returned home. He free-lanced for *Foreign Policy* magazine and other news outlets while he sought a full-time reporting job. That search continues, but in October 2012 he launched his own, one-man, news aggregation website, *RiyadhBureau*. "It's doing pretty well. It gets between 40,000 to 60,000 page views per month and it has already been quoted by the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Reuters* and other places," he said. He quit updating Saudi Jeans, although its archive of 3,600 posts remains on the web. He has more than 55,000 Twitter followers and has sent out nearly 58,000 Tweets.²⁴

Did Saudi Jeans make a difference? "It's hard to say. I never thought that I actually did anything special or great," said the multimedia journalist. But getting stopped by young people in the streets of Riyadh who tell him the blog has inspired them "is enough for me." He has no regrets about working outside the Saudi mainstream media. It's the content and ideas that matter today, not the medium, he said. "If you have something interesting to say, it doesn't make any difference if you said it on a blog or in a newspaper. If it's a good thing, people will find it."



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Photo: Courtesy of UNESCO

Kounila Keo, Cambodia

When Kounila Keo heard that the Agence France-Press office in Phnom Penh had an opening for an intern, she persuaded classmates at the Royal University of Phnom Penh not to apply for the job. “It was really naughty of me,” the Cambodian blogger, social media trainer and strategist and event organizer acknowledged with a laugh. “But I got it and from there I took it to another level.”

The 25-year-old Keo has a string of accomplishments as a journalist, including by-lines in international newspapers and clips from a stint as a lifestyle columnist for the *Phnom Penh Post*. But she is best known for her Blue Lady Blog, which she started in college and where she holds forth on topics small and large, from travel and technology to corruption to the genocide trials of the aging former Khmer Rouge despots who once ruled Cambodia. She’s traveled to and spoken at digital media conferences in Asia, America, Europe, and Africa.

When she signed up to help organize a TEDx Phnom Penh technology conference in 2011, she was surprised to wind up as one of the speakers. Many university students in the audience looked blankly when she asked if they knew what a blog was. Keo said that was okay, but “you’re going to hear about it soon.” Blogging “gives me the best thing in the world, and it’s freedom of speech,” she went on. “Cambodia is still a conservative society, which doesn’t offer opportunities to open up and speak my mind and discuss things, especially for women ... Blogging takes all those difficulties away.”

Keo said she always loved telling stories, and when she got to the university she “was eager to write something and publish it on my own. At the time, I thought to get something published it had to be really, really well done and I wasn’t really good.” But then blogging “gave me a means to publish my own stories.”

Her parents were farmers who subsisted mainly on what they earned from a small vegetable garden. Their daughter was driven to do more with her life. She was also then, by her own account, a bookworm who spent hours studying and tutoring other students in English to supplement the family income instead of going out with friends. In a July 2012 blog, she expressed frustration with young people who come up to her and say, “I love your life” or “Your life is so exciting. Can I have yours?” She wrote:

I don’t normally go around and tell people this part of the life I’ve lived. It’s not so fun when you had to study and support a big family at the same time. But that sure makes me feel stronger and ... more responsible for my own life. I have owed gratitude to every experience that I’ve gathered over the years. I love independence, and it annoys me when girls tell me they cannot do this or that and that they want a piece of my life. I can say that a hundred times to other people as well, but I chose not to do that and fight for what I belong to.²⁵

Like it or not, Keo’s aplomb and globe-trotting continue to make her a role model for young Cambodians in a society where even a university degree does not guarantee entry to the embryonic middle class. In a recent interview with a travel website, she offered this advice to young people: “Keep travelling. Never accept the status quo. By travelling, I don’t mean that they have to purchase a plane ticket and step into the plane right away. What I’m saying is that they have to start observing wherever they are and make the best of their moments” and blog about them or keep a diary “to learn about their own thought process.” The journey they take “might go on a long, winding road, but every moment is worthwhile.”²⁶

For her part, Keo intends to keep writing and speaking out about the need for people to make their own opportunities and to break down cultural barriers that inhibit women in particular from speaking their minds and taking charge of their destinies. Blogging is a powerful tool to break those barriers, Keo said, “because in Cambodia it’s a taboo to talk so much, and I mean about anything, regardless of topic.”



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Photo: Courtesy of Nii Odzenma

Kajsa Hallberg Adu, Ghana

When aspiring political scientist Kajsa Hallberg moved from Sweden to Ghana in 2006 with her future husband, she began a blog called Rain in Africa to let friends and family know that everyday life in the West African nation was not what they thought. "A lot of them thought I would die from malaria when I moved here," she recalled. The fact that it was possible to grow a bountiful backyard garden surprised many. "It's such a rich place. It's just unfair to the Continent that that is what people think is going on here," she said.

At first she downplayed the inconveniences, including the almost daily power outages, but after a while, "I took a conscious move away from just framing it in rosy words and talking about the beauties of Ghana," said the blogger and college lecturer, now Kajsa Hallberg Adu. "Now I tell it from my perspective" with the frustrations ("Sometimes I just want to cry because why can we

not get our act together and provide water?”) and joys (the “beautiful opportunities” for students crowding a career fair at her college). Now she labels her eponymous Kajsaha blog as “personal, political and sometimes positive.”²⁷

She co-founded BloggingGhana, an organization nurturing Ghana’s infant blogosphere, in 2008. Eight people showed up for the first meeting at a bar with Wi-Fi in Accra. “We kept meeting every month. It was more like a group of friends,” she said. But the circle and the pace of activity kept widening. Today BloggingGhana hosts several hundred blogs. More than 500 people turned out in March 2013 for its second BlogCamp, an event that attracted sponsorship from Google, Intel, Samsung, and the U.S. Embassy, which in Ghana and elsewhere actively supports the spread of social media.²⁸ The blue ribbon sponsors were not hard to attract, Hallberg Adu said. “Lots of companies are interested in talking to this group of people who are interested in technology and content and writing.”

The political scientist got an unusual opportunity during Ghana’s 2012 elections. Despite no experience as a journalist, broadcast or print, TV 3 Ghana, an independent channel, gave her a weekly, one-hour public events show where she interviewed the candidates for president and other key personalities. “Talking to the people who want to lead the country forward is a dream when you have been thinking yourself about what needs to be done,” she said. But she couldn’t convince station executives to allow her to harness social media to enhance their election coverage. “It was so frustrating. I wanted to use my followers and involve them in a discussion. I saw an enormous possible merge of these two worlds which would lead to more exposure for the TV channel and more excitement around the program, but also a quality discussion around the elections,” she said. Station managers “didn’t understand they would gain something out of it.” If bloggers wanted to be plugged on air, they thought, they should buy an ad. She and other bloggers did create a website called GhanaDecides.com for the purpose of fostering “a better-informed electorate for free, fair and safe 2012 Elections.”²⁹

Hallberg Adu said fellow bloggers were first to break news of a fatalities in a crash at Accra’s Kotoka International Airport, and social media erupted with complaints about lax building codes after a department store collapse in the Ghanaian capital. Hallberg Adu wants mainstream media “to realize what social media can do for them. There’s an enormous opportunity for bloggers and people who just post content on the web to directly influence legacy media.” She is pleased that professional journalists no longer hold all the cards but share the public sphere now with the bloggers. “For me the beauty of the Internet is the way we can interact. If I hear a story on the radio or see something on TV, I can write my response or, with video blogging, I can record my response and put it out there [on YouTube]. I can film my own life and say, ‘Whatever you’re saying is not correct; look at this.’”³⁰



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Photo: Courtesy of Foreign & Commonwealth Office, USC

Atiaf Alwazir, Yemen

Atiaf Alwazir, democracy activist, researcher, and blogger, has spent most of her 33 years outside her native Yemen, but after the Arab Spring revolution that broke President Ali Abdullah Saleh's 33-year grip on power, she became both the Woman from Yemen—the name of her blog—and a woman inside Yemen. In thought-provoking long articles, dispatches from protests, photos, videos and even poems, she has written thousands of words and posted hundreds of images that capture life in Yemen at this dramatic juncture. She is a leader of a group of activists inside and outside the country working for the establishment of “a democratic civic state where the constitution gives people freedom, equality, and social justice.” The group's Twitter account is @SupportYemen.³¹

Alwazir says her father and uncles were opponents of Saleh's regime who had to flee the country. “We moved a lot,” said Alwazir, who has lived in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the United States (she

has bachelor's and master's degrees in international relations from American University in Washington and once worked for the National Endowment for Democracy as a program officer for the Middle East and North Africa, Egypt, "and now I'm back in Yemen." She began *Woman from Yemen* in 2007 while living in Cairo. "It was more a public diary and travelogue" back then, she recalled. "It didn't have the same objectives that I have now." When the revolution started, "I noticed there wasn't much written about it from the Yemeni perspective in English, and so I started blogging and documenting what was happening in the country."³²

Alwazir makes her living as a free-lance researcher and consultant with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but also has written for *Foreign Policy* magazine, the Arab Reform Initiative, Project on Middle East Democracy, *Jadaliya*, *Al-Akhbar*, and others. "I normally do not consider myself a journalist. Some people consider me a journalist. Usually I identify either as a blogger or a researcher more than a journalist simply because ... I'm not employed by a media outlet, and I didn't go to journalism school, although that doesn't mean much. Many journalists didn't," she said. "I'm not registered with the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate. I actually tried to register with them, but they don't recognize free-lancers."

Even before the revolution Yemen allowed more freedom of expression than other Arab countries, Alwazir said. "People were writing and able to express themselves, not necessarily in the social media realm, but in the printed press." But it was not completely free. Independent newspapers have been attacked, and in 2009 Saleh's government shut down *Al-Ayyam*, the country's leading newspaper, and charged its editor with corruption. "Independent voices are always fought because the mainstream media is controlled by either the government or opposition," Alwazir said from Berlin, where she was on a two-month research fellowship with the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. "That's why many people have turned to either blogging or writing on Facebook or Twitter because it gives people the space to write what they want and to have an alternative voice that is not dominated by what the mainstream media in the country says."

But Alwazir is also sharply critical of Western media which she says paint a misleading picture of Yemen and the influence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). "The mainstream media abroad only focuses on certain aspects of Yemen and forgets everything else. That's why I think blogging is important. It highlights certain issues that are usually ignored," she said. In an article on "The Flawed Media Narrative on Yemen" that first appeared in the digital newspaper *Your Middle East*, Alwazir complained, "Reading mainstream media, one imagines that AQAP has taken over the entire country and that most Yemenis are militants." She likened it to a foreign journalist's visiting the United States, interviewing the families of victims and perpetrators of school shootings, and writing an article about "the bloody Americans" and their culture of violence.³³



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Photo: Courtesy of Iris Gonzales

Iris Cecilia Gonzales, Philippines

Like many hard news journalists, Iris Cecilia Gonzales felt an itch to write stories outside of the two-stories-a-day required on her beat as a business reporter for the *Philippine Star* in Manila. She likes to travel off the beaten path and share behind-the-scenes stories from events she covered and interesting figures she interviewed for the *Star*. Most of all there were human interest stories everywhere she looked in Manila and across the Philippines, a country of 97 million people and a host of economic and social challenges including a poverty rate of 27 percent.³⁴ So Gonzales

started blogging, stealing time at the end of long days at work and raising a child to put her thoughts up on the Internet on an eponymous blog that describes itself this way: “Iris Cecilia Gonzales (In between deadlines. In between flights. In between time and space. In between dreams and nightmares).”³⁵

“It was something very personal for me, the stories behind stories, the things my paper wouldn’t print, like color stories, the kind of stories you get at coffee shops, said Gonzales, 36. “It was a personal space for me.”³⁶ Her beat, the economy and public finance, “can be pretty technical. I liked giving a human face to the economic issues.”

While pursuing a master’s degree, she was encouraged by her professors to enter a blogging competition called TH!NK3 sponsored by the European Journalism Centre in Maastricht, Netherlands, to encourage writers in developing countries to report on the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals. She won and was invited to become a regular, paid blogger for the *New Internationalist*, a 40-year-old print and online publication with 45,000 subscribers that reports on poverty and development issues. That has given the business writer a global audience and a platform for penetrating reporting on topics from human rights, slum clearance, gun violence, corruption, inadequate mental healthcare, and the Roman Catholic Church’s fight against divorce and contraception in the Philippines. She has written 100 posts for the *New Internationalist* since September 2010.

Blogging also has opened doors for Gonzales, with invitations to conferences and opportunities to report in India, Malaysia, Qatar, Germany, and Portugal. She took part in the Vital Voices of Asia Women’s Leadership and Training Summit in New Delhi in 2010, blogging about both the high-powered sessions at the Taj Palace Hotel and the scenes that confronted her on the drive in from the sprawling Indira Gandhi International Airport. “Street children sleeping on the cold pavement, slums and beggars abound. I wonder what I can do. I wonder how my presence here—a speck in this vast universe—could actually help,” she wrote. The summit inspired her to keep trying.

By blogging, she said, she is helping to create “a better informed public.” The mission of journalism “doesn’t end in a day’s work for me. I want to keep telling people what I see and what I hear and what I know. If my blog will help me do that, I will keep on doing that, or in my Twitter account, whatever outlet I can do.”



Featured Bloggers

Shreedeeep Rayamajhi,
Nepal

Ahmed Al Omran,
Saudi Arabia

Kounila Keo,
Cambodia

Kajsa Hallberg Adu,
Ghana

Atiaf Alwazir,
Yemen

Iris Cecilia Gonzales,
Philippines

**Michael Anti
(Zhào Jing),
China**

Yoani Sanchez,
Cuba

Michael Anti (Zhào Jing), China

Michael Anti, or *Zhào Jing*, is a Chinese political journalist, blogger, lecturer and Internet freedom crusader who believes social media are transforming Chinese life, even with Beijing's Great Firewall and censorship of political speech. Anti turned to journalism after studying industrial electrical automation at Nanjing Normal University and doing a stint as a hotel receptionist. He has been a commentator for the Huaxia Times and a researcher for the Beijing bureaus of the New York Times and Washington Post. He was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University and a Wolfson Fellow at Cambridge University, two prestigious journalism programs. Twice he has run afoul not of Chinese authorities but the technology titans Microsoft and Facebook; Microsoft, perhaps under pressure from the Chinese government, removed his Myspace blog in 2005, while Facebook deleted his page in 2011 because he insisted on using the pen name Michael Anti instead of his real name. Noting that Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's sheepdog had gotten its own page (now with 1.5 million likes),³⁷ Anti tweeted, "So according to Facebook, I am more fake than Zuckerberg's dog?"³⁸

According to *Time* magazine, he began calling himself Michael in high school because he was a fan of the pop star Michael Jackson and later adopted Anti for its literal meaning: one in opposition.³⁹ In a 2007 talk at the Berkman Center, Anti said, "If you have no name on the Internet, who cares about you? ... It is very safe for me [if] I blog without my name. I never write any articles without my name, Anti, because I think name is about power. Without my name, I just lost some of my power. For example, if Tom Friedman writes an article without his name, who cares? Who cares? It's a very tiny, little article, only that. Only names matter."⁴⁰



Photo: Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Anti has spoken at length at universities around the world about the challenge that the Internet poses to China's authoritarian regime and how it has given people a channel to speak back to power. He also summarized his views in a recent policy report from the European Council on Foreign Relations. "Social media have changed the way the Chinese think. More and more Chinese are embracing freedom of speech and human rights, not as a privilege imported from Western countries but as their birthright. For the first time, it has also given Chinese people a national public sphere that is training them for citizenship and preparing them for future democracy," he argued.⁴¹

In a talk at the TEDGlobal conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, in July 2012 that has been viewed online 695,000 times, Anti elaborated on "the cat and mouse game" that Chinese Netizens play with the censors.⁴² China's Web is not "a wasteland," Anti said. "In China, we have 500 million Internet users. That's the biggest population of Netizens, Internet users, in the whole world ... You have Google, we have Baidu. You have Twitter, we have Weibo. You have Facebook, we have Renren. You have YouTube, we have Youku and Tudou. The Chinese government blocked every single international Web 2.0 service, and we Chinese copycat everyone." Sina, the digital media giant, rolled out its microblogging platform Weibo in August 2009 just one month after the government blocked Twitter and Facebook, and "it immediately became a media platform itself. It became the media. Anything not mentioned in Weibo, it does not appear to exist for the Chinese public," Anti said.

The government recognized a need to satisfy the public demand for a social network because "people really love social networking," Anti said. Unlike such dictators as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, who tried shutting down the Internet at the outset of the Arab Spring, Chinese authorities understood that "once Netizens can't go online, they go in the street." He cited the 10 million angry comments posted online in the first five days after the fatal collision of two high speed trains in Wenzhou in July 2011. That happened, he said, because the government, too, was unhappy with the rail minister, later sacked and sent to jail.

"Chinese social media is really changing Chinese mindsets and Chinese life. They give the voiceless people a channel to make your voice heard," said Anti. "The cat, the censorship, is not sleeping. It's so hard to post some sensitive words on the Chinese Weibo," he said, but the Chinese are adept at coining puns and phrases to evade them. It is a battle between "the grass-mud horse" as the Netizens call themselves—the phonogram of a common obscenity—and "the river crab," a play on the phonogram for harmonization or censorship, he said.

He urged those outside China to cheer on the spread of social media and keep letting the Chinese people know that the Internet is a good thing, rather than harping on the Chinese government's throttling free speech. "Chinese people don't like blame. It's not like America. American people like some kind of criticism ... we just like good words," he said at the Berkman Center. "Blogging's become very popular in China. It's just because we say blog is good. If we say blog is revolutionary to the social change, oh, my God! Who will have a blog in China?"⁴³

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**Yoani Sanchez,
Cuba**

Yoani Sánchez, Cuba

It did not take long for Yoani Sánchez to become one of the best known and celebrated bloggers in the world. One year after launching her *Generación Y* blog in 2007, the Cuban dissident and digital activist received Spain's Ortega y Gasset Prize for Digital Journalism⁴⁴ and a Best of the Blogs (BOB) award in Deutsche Welle's annual competition.⁴⁵ *Time* magazine named her one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2008.⁴⁶ The following year brought a special Maria Moors Cabot Prize citation from Columbia University's Columbia Journalism School honoring the best journalism in the Western hemisphere,⁴⁷ and in 2011 she received an International Woman of Courage Award⁴⁸ from then-Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, which like all the earlier honors was bestowed in absentia since the Castro government repeatedly rejected her requests for permission to travel outside the one-party, communist state.

When President Raul Castro eased the restrictions and issued Sánchez and other dissidents travel visas in early 2013, she picked up the prizes on a three-month, three-continent speaking tour that included a visit to the White House (President Barack Obama, who had done an interview by e-mail with Sánchez in 2009, was out of town) as well as meetings with lawmakers on Capitol Hill. She also met leaders in Mexico, Brazil, Germany, Italy, the Czech Republic, and elsewhere in addition to encountering pro-Castro demonstrators at many stops. Although she supports lifting the five-decade-old U.S. embargo against Cuba, the charismatic, charming Sánchez, with her long hair and peasant skirts, even found a welcome audience at Miami's Freedom Tower, long a bastion of intransigent Cuban-American sentiment in favor of the embargo.

Cuba has other bloggers, pro and con the Castro regime, who engage in often broiling arguments on the Web, but their words and debates, like the installments of Sánchez's personal life and free speech crusade, are invisible to the vast majority of ordinary Cubans, who lack access to the Internet. But speech is not without its perils. The government jailed 75 dissidents in 2003 in what came to be known as the Black Spring. The free-spirited Sánchez was in Switzerland then during a two-year attempt to start a new life outside Cuba. She returned home to Havana from exile in 2004 determined "that I would live in Cuba as a free person, and accept the consequences."⁴⁹ Trained as a philologist (she wrote her thesis at the University of Havana on "Words Under Pressure: A Study of the Literature of Dictatorship in Latin America," guaranteeing she had no future there as an academic.⁵⁰), she also possessed advanced tech skills and had built her first computer herself. With husband Reinaldo Escobar, a journalist turned elevator mechanic, and like-minded friends, she started a digital magazine, *Consensus*.⁵¹

What has made Sánchez and her blog a global phenomenon are the power of her ideas and the vividness of her writing. The vignettes she sketches of everyday life in Cuba read as if they



Photo: Courtesy of Christopher Connell

came from the pen of a novelist. She is intrepid, conducting her activism not in the shadows but in the sunshine. She and fellow blogger Orlando Luis Pardo were assaulted by plainclothes security agents as the pair made their way to a protest in November 2009, sparking international outcries,⁵² but she has never been imprisoned and has outsmarted the authorities at almost every turn. She would pose as a German-speaking tourist to gain access to the Internet in hotels for foreigners (she once earned a living as an interpreter and guide for German visitors), recruit bloggers openly for her *Voces Cubanas* (Cuban Voices) Web project, and stubbornly return again and again to the Plaza Municipality Office of Immigration and Emigration in a quest for a travel visa. She uses thumb drives, text messages on her mobile phone and email to get her words onto the Web. She blogs about standing up to a police state, but also depicts quotidian life in a land where toothpaste and even sanitary napkins can be rare commodities, and where the gifts for a friend's hospitalized mother facing cancer surgery include a pillowcase, bucket, detergent, syringes, and surgical thread. Readers feel they were there when she writes about a parents' meeting at her son's middle school, where a directive from the Ministry of Education is read announcing that selection for the best high schools will be based not just on grades but participating in "political/patriotic activities."⁵³

In her book *Havana Real*, Sánchez culled 184 blog posts from the more than 500 posts she wrote in the first four years of Generación Y, which had attracted "nearly a million reader comments converting my private, cathartic space into a public square."⁵⁴ The blog is named for those, like Sánchez, with unusual first names beginning with Y born in Cuba in the 1970s and 1980s—an era marked by "Russian cartoons, illegal emigration and frustration."

Speaking at the Cato Institute in Washington in March 2013, Sánchez recalled that during the Black Spring, it seemed that the Cuban government had found a way to silence dissent on the island. "However, here we are 10 years later and we look around the island and we find an effervescence of new movements, new voices, demanding to be heard, speaking their voices independently from the government, using these new technologies," she said.

"Today a simple Cuban citizen with only an old generation cellphone in his or her hand can take that technology and stand up against a very carefully constructed, monopolistic state media that has silenced them for decades," she said. "It is unimaginable how fragile a system becomes that is based on distorting or manipulating information or hiding it from its people." Blogs, Twitter, and cellphones have created "little cracks, little holes in the walls of censorship."

"I am not under any illusions. The technology by itself will not save us, will not democratize Cuba, but it has an important role to play to help us in this struggle to achieve a freer and more democratic country," said Sánchez, who now hopes to publish Cuba's first independent newspaper, digital at first but in print when that becomes possible.⁵⁵

"I am going to devote the rest of my life to spreading information," she said. "I want to be someone who makes others uncomfortable as a journalist, someone who provokes, who gets into problems presently in the current Cuba but also in a future Cuba ... It is essential to have a responsible, objective journalism that can chronicle what's happening but also analyze it in terms of understanding what needs to be done and holding people accountable as we move into this other future."

Ted Henken, a sociology professor at Baruch College, City University of New York, who served as Sánchez's interpreter on the U.S. visit, said that the audience for most Cuban bloggers, regardless of their views, "is foreign. There's a very small internal audience for any of them. Most would like to have the audience of the person next door but cannot because the Internet is so restricted" and the government controls the official media. "The

people in Cuba who hear and are exposed to these ideas are maybe 5 to 10 percent of the population. But they are an important part because they are opinion makers ... They have access to the Internet itself or through proxies or flash drives or other ways to read these things. So even though [social media] have a small impact on the mass of people, their debates are very influential among a small, influential elite."⁵⁶ The Cuban government recently opened a string of sanctioned Internet cafes with high speed connections to the island's first fiberoptic line to the outside world, but at \$4.50 an hour the cost is beyond the reach of the average Cuban earning about \$20 a month.

In a July 2011 interview in Havana by Tracey Eaton, a Florida journalism professor and former Havana bureau chief for the *Dallas Morning News*, Sánchez described herself as "someone who learned to be a journalist on the fly," while coping with "censorship, self-censorship, my own fears, the stifling of expression in this country, and ... the technological difficulties that limit my work." When she began writing *Generación Y*, she said, "the words blog, blogger, mobile phone, Blackberry, iPhone, iPad, in Cuba meant nothing. And today any person on the street knows what they mean. These are, perhaps, the primordial particles of free expression."⁵⁷

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