Blogging North Korea

The Web provides a good opportunity for ‘niche’ audiences to find more international news.

By Rebecca MacKinnon

It’s not every day that one gets an e-mail from “Special Delegation – DPR of Korea”. Mr. Alejandro Cao de Benos – a Spanish-born North Korean citizen and Special Delegate to the Government of the DPRK – regretted to inform me that I am not welcome to visit his adopted country.

Mr. Cao de Benos, who is also president of the Korean Friendship Organization, is a gatekeeper of sorts for people who want to get into North Korea. (Why this Barcelona native decided to become a North Korean citizen and representative of the North Korean government is another story.) The door has been shut to American journalists since mid-2002, thanks to tense relations between Pyongyang and Washington. While it is possible for non-American journalists, tourist and businesspeople to visit, American visitors are generally not welcome.

Still, always hoping for an exception, I had e-mailed Mr. Cao de Benos to inquire whether I might apply to join an international group of peace activists and journalists that he plans to lead on a trip to North Korea this summer. I introduced myself as a former CNN reporter with experience covering North Korea, now an independent freelance journalist, running a Weblog focusing on North Korea at www.NKzone.org. His response:

“I decided to allow the possibility of ‘fair journalism’ to those individuals and companies with a clean record on information about North Korea.

Unfortunately the line you decided to take is the same like many others that talk and comment so much about our government and system without real knowledge. NKZONE is contributing to the jungle of lies sponsored by Washington.”

His main beef: NKzone includes an interview with the German doctor and North Korean human rights activist Norbert Vollertsen, as well as other information provided by him about activities condemning the North Korean government for its human rights abuses. In the view of Mr. Cao de Benos, “fair journalism” about the DPRK requires omitting the perspective of such human rights activists.

Linking to News About North Korea
Despite the fact that a North Korean government official labeled my Weblog a “jungle of lies,” “North Korea zone” actually aspires to be a new form of alternative media. It aims to provide a place in cyberspace for the exchange of information, opinion and analysis on North Korea – one of the most badly-covered countries on earth, thanks to officials like Mr. Cao de Benos. If North Korea did not possess nuclear weapons, the implications of this lack of coverage might not be so dire. But as the United States faces difficult options in its efforts to disarm North Korea, our lack of knowledge and basic verifiable information about that country could have serious national security implications.

NKzone was launched in February 2004 as the empirical part of my project for the Shorenstein Center for the Press, Politics, and Public Policy, in which I examined the way in which online, interactive, participatory forms of media can enhance the way in which international news is consumed and reported. For commercial reasons, American newspapers, magazines and TV news outlets have a limited “news hole” for international news. The Internet provides an opportunity for people who want more information about what is going on around the world to find it – and a cheaper way for news organizations, interest groups, or amateur enthusiasts to deliver it.

But the Internet does more than provide a new, more cost-effective and convenient vehicle for news and information. As Dan Gillmor wrote in the Fall 2003 issue of Nieman Reports in his article “Moving Toward Participatory Journalism”, new interactive techniques and Weblog software tools are changing the relationship between the broadcaster/publisher and the reader/viewer from that of “lecturer” condescending to a passive “audience” into a two-way conversation.

As a long-time foreign correspondent who is concerned about big media’s shrinking “news hole” for international news, I hope that we can use new web-based technologies to find new ways to engage the public on events in distant countries. New forms of interactive participatory media can enable the public not only to have greater access to international news, but also to become more directly engaged with that news by participating in interactive discussion and information exchange.

Using the Typepad Weblog-hosting service – one of several commercial Weblog tools available which require no previous Web-design or HTML-coding skills or programming knowledge – I can quickly and easily post daily updates to the blog. I link to English-language articles from non-U.S., specialist, or obscure media sources containing more extensive information and analysis about North Korea than one would get from reading The New York Times and watching CNN. I provide my own insight and analysis of North Korea-related news developments based on my experience as a journalist who has worked in Northeast Asia for over a decade. (I covered the North Korea story as part of my beat, and had the rare opportunity to visit North Korea five times.) Most importantly, I invite anybody who has traveled to North Korea or who has engaged in the study of that country to share their own information and analysis.

Because of the lack of Western media access to the country, there are many non-journalists with greater insights to North Korea than we, as journalists, have. My goal is
to tap into their knowledge and expertise by inviting them to contribute – either by e-mailing information to me, or by posting information in the “comments” section and topical sub-blogs. No one journalist can hope to adequately shine the light into North Korea’s vast information black hole. The idea behind North Korea zone is that the collective effort of many people – a combination of professional journalists, other experts, and informed amateurs – might do a better job.

Anybody visiting North Korea zone can join an online discussion in the “comments” section following each blog post about the information and views on the site. Opinions range from extremely pro-engagement to hard-line pro-regime change. Occasionally there are strong online arguments. I’ve had to admonish people who trade personal insults in the comments section, and I have had to delete a couple of posts by a Nigerian who was soliciting funds, but other than that I have not censored a single comment or post.

The NKZone Weblog

As of this writing, the site – which is not advertised or commercially promoted – receives an average of 500 visitors per day, with about 150 more on an e-mail subscription list and an unknown number reading it through RSS aggregator programs – programs which conveniently distill updated content from large numbers of blogs and news sites onto one Web browser page. I get the impression that many of NKzone’s most loyal visitors and readers are either “North Korea-watching junkies,” people’s whose jobs relate to North Korea in some way, people who closely follow human rights issues, and a certain category of news junkies who seem to make a point of following “axis-of-evil” related news.

Best I can tell from I.P. (Internet Protocol) addresses and voluntary polling, about half of my visitors are in the U.S. and roughly one quarter are visiting from South Korea. The rest come from elsewhere – other parts of Asia, Canada, Europe, and even 7 people polled who claim to be visiting from North Korea. (If they aren’t playing pranks, I assume they’re North Korea-based foreigners with Internet access who work for NGO’s, diplomatic missions, or businesses.) This is a niche audience, not a mass audience. But the hope is that NKzone can serve as a resource and public service for those who want to go beyond what they’re getting from their usual media diet.

Writing for a Weblog, I can be completely transparent about my successes and failures, and this seems to be a subject of great interest to my readers/participants. If I had made my query to Mr. Cao de Benos as a journalist with a conventional news organization, my readers most likely would never have known about my attempt to get into North Korea. Audiences of conventional news media hear only about our successes – not our failures. As a consequence, I think that audiences generally are not aware of the effort required for journalists to cover certain kinds of stories.

With a Weblog, it was easy for me to recount my exchange with Mr. Cao de Benos in full, including my reply in which I invited him to supply his information and analysis on North Korea, which I would be happy to reproduce in full, unedited, on NKzone. Not
only did visitors to the site leave a lively series of comments to this post. One commentor brought our attention to something I was not aware of: a link to a segment of streaming video on a pro-North Korea Web site in which Mr. Cao de Benos proclaims his love for North Korea’s leader Kim Jong Il (and at one point even sings about it). This provoked more reactions and discussion. More importantly, the whole exchange provided insight into the nature of the North Korean regime and the people who support it in a very different way than a conventional news report could have done: Visitors to the Weblog were able to experience and participate in the process of discovery. Another story that my visitors helped me uncover was the fact that the chairman of a pro-North Korean organization in the United States – quoted with great fanfare by North Korean media – is actually a homeless person living in Oregon.

**Weblogs and Journalism**

Is this journalism? Yes, I believe it is a form of journalism, albeit a very raw, unvarnished and uncontrollable form that still makes most professional journalists uncomfortable, and gives their editors goosebumps. NKzone is not fact-checked or sub-edited, although as a trained journalist I make a point to credit my sources and fully disclose their biases and backgrounds. I don’t make things up – NKzone’s visitors must trust me on that, despite the fact that I do not have the credibility and weight of a major-brand news organization behind my work. However if my readers detect error, bias, or omission of important information in my blog posts, they quickly inform me in the “comments” section at the bottom of the offending post.

As of this writing, NKzone is primarily a derivative journalism – drawing upon the first-hand reports of professional news sources and people who have been to North Korea more recently than I. Since I’ve been in Cambridge, MA for a semester-long fellowship, it could not realistically be otherwise. However, some Weblog authors have managed to raise sufficient money from their readers to finance travel and original reporting. This could be NKzone’s next evolutionary step. NKzone is unlikely ever to be a profitable enterprise, but it might be able to survive as a non-profit public service funded by grants and donations.

Am I trying to compete directly with conventional mainstream media? No. There are kinds of investigative and life-threatening journalism that I believe will always be difficult if not impossible to do well without the deep financial pockets, legal staff, and reputation of powerful media companies. There are some kinds of stories that will always be best told by long, well-crafted, highly-edited and fact-checked pieces of text, audio or video – not by blog posts.

Still, after a semester of blogging I do believe that a Weblog like NKzone can fill a niche demand that mainstream media are not filling in their current formats.

There is no reason why mainstream newspapers, TV companies and newsmagazines with online editions can’t try to fill some of these niches themselves by utilizing the techniques and technologies of Weblogs. In taking this step, there will be fears – and real
risks – of losing control over information and brand image. Many major American media companies such as CNN do not allow their reporters to blog. Others – including The New York Times, The Washington Post, and MSNBC have begun to experiment with Weblogs and Weblog-like forms of journalism.

These companies have come to realize that if they don’t expand into this new, raw and personal kind of reporting, technology has made it easy for enterprising individuals and upstart media companies to do so.

It is a new media frontier to be occupied by whoever gets there first.##

Rebecca MacKinnon is a fellow at the Harvard Law School’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society. She was a spring 2004 fellow at the Shorenstein Center for the Press, Politics and Public Policy, and her research paper on interactive participatory media and international news can be found at http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/presspol/Research_Publications/Papers.shtml. Before coming to Harvard, she was CNN’s Tokyo bureau chief and correspondent, and before her posting there in 2001, she was CNN’s Beijing bureau chief. She is the founder of a Weblog about North Korea at www.NKzone.org.

E-mail address: rebecca_mackinnon@yahoo.com