

Welcome to The

TEXT: GLEN CLIFFORD



CHALLENGES

Many of us have contemplated starting a blog, but being an expatriate blogger is far from a breeze. Our long-term English language bloggers are not only passionate about writing, being people who can easily tap off around seven hundred words a day, five days a week. They are also people who have had to constantly question their motives, assumptions and ideals, and balance these with the fact they live in a culture that is substantially different from that of their home country.

Rejection and ignorance are common responses faced by bloggers. Some issues that interest them are not covered by mainstream Taiwanese media, and yet airing an opinion online is not always appreciated. Below, Taiwan's leading English-language bloggers discuss their personal experiences in these areas.

As his PhD students lower their heads to study that day's reading, Professor Michael Turton cannot wait any longer. Picking up a pen, he starts scribbling notes for that evening's blog entry, until he is happy with the order of his stories. Turton writes early in the morning and often again late at night, especially when there is a big issue cooking. The "big issue" for that particular day, was a connection between betelnut stores and illegally shipped Japanese brand cigarettes, research that Turton and university colleagues had been collecting for months. He chuckled when it was put to him that "Blogger Michael" may be the reason why he is yet to complete his own PhD.

MEET THE BLOGGERS

Turton (from Cleveland, USA) never suffers from writer's block. In any week he has at least 15 stories in mind and says, "The real question is, when am I going to find time to put this post up?" Turton's online creation, 'The View from Taiwan' which covers Taiwan politics and closely related issues has, without doubt, become the most frequently visited English language blog in Taiwan. It has been read and analyzed not only by the public, but also the political elite from both Taiwan and abroad and has daily statistics of up to 1,100 unique visitors.

If politics is not to your liking and you are in need of a little linguistic guidance, try a blog titled 'Doubting to Shuo' written by fellow American Mark Wilbur. Here you will find extensive information about learning the Mandarin language, particularly from a Taiwan and technology perspective. At the other end of the scale is Canadian-born 'Scott Sommers' Taiwan Weblog', a blog about teaching and education issues in Taiwan. Then there's 'David on Forumosa.' Here, Australian David Reid deals with almost anything of popular interest.

Blogs, blogs and more blogs.... You can now find Taiwan blogs on subjects as diverse as photography, fashion, martial arts and herbal medicine, all written by native English speakers and long-time residents of Taiwan.

SPEAKING ALOUD IN PUBLIC

Professional 'correspondent' reporters are known to take risks. Many of these risks can be as simple as making an observatory statement. No matter how objective or balanced the statement may be, in an open and fully democratic society, people are quite entitled to disagree. Yet, when easily recognizable foreigners speak too 'loudly' or openly, they sometimes also place themselves in a position of conflict or even danger. Concerns about education, health and quality of life are much the same in Taiwan as elsewhere. However, the way in which certain people express disagreement can cause problems, particularly from the perspective of the average North American blogger, who cherishes nationally enshrined ideals of free speech and democracy. What bloggers see as 'free speech' can be dishearteningly viewed by others as 'causing trouble.' Turton, Sommers and Wilbur all relate how they have been either 'threatened', 'abused' or 'felt intimidated' at some point during the time they have been



Blogosphere

- Online Voices of Taiwan's Expat Community

blogging, either in soft or hard attempts to impose limitations on what they have been trying to talk about.

BRUSHES WITH HOSTILITY

Michael Turton details, "I've put up posts [on various issues] because I don't know what's going on. I just discuss some phenomenon in a soft, controversial way and people will get on the blog and threaten me." A few years ago, Turton decided to stop publishing pictures of his family after obscene threats were made. He recalled how the issue discussed online had been very long and contentious, but had absolutely no relationship or connection to his family. "Nonetheless, this person took the disagreement to an absurdly personal level," causing him to reconsider the security of his family. Turton now moderates all feedback on his blog and has studied various journalistic methods in order to protect himself.

Scott Sommers has also had brushes with hostility, "... sometimes the hostile feedback bothers me. I've had feedback that's intended to intimidate me." Interestingly he says, "none of the negative feedback I have received has come from Taiwanese people, even though the majority of my visitors come from Taiwan. The negatives are usually made by either native English speakers in Taiwan or abroad." Sommers says that some feedback has made him realize the importance of his work, such as a few years ago when he wrote a series of original investigative articles on unaccredited schools, "I received a series of very directly worded Emails asking me for more and more sourced information. Although they were not intimidating, I remember it as being a turning point in my writing, as it made me realize that people were interested in what I had to say."

Mark Wilbur has even received hostile criticism at the high-tech end. "Once I wrote a review about a Chinese learning site; at the time the site had many bugs to sort out, so my initial review wasn't all that positive. The next day you should have seen my inbox." "Basically they were trying to say I had no right to talk about this thing, but it was only a review of a language learning service." However, to reveal again the frequent and strange inconsistencies of the blogosphere, Wilbur recalls how none of the emails were from the owners of the site reviewed. In terms of personal editorial guidance, Wilbur says, "if I'm writing about my own life, then I will pretty much tell it how I see it, but if it's a broader issue affecting other people, I'm more reluctant to take a strong stand, especially on local issues."



A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Observing political commentary, David Reid says, "People here are very passionate about their politics. In Taiwan, the English language blogosphere is mainly very "Green" [pro-DPP]. If people were to only read the English blogs, they may not get a wide range of viewpoints and that can be a problem for some."

Reid again: "generally, I don't find blogging scary, but I think you have to have a sense of responsibility, check your facts, be aware that somebody might be offended, and most of all, know that people do read what is being written; if you get something wrong, they are going to call you on it." He continues, "I rarely get any negative feedback, only sometimes comments that I will strongly disagree with. You've got to be careful about what you put into the public domain and what should be kept private, but remember, this is the same for any type of expression."

TRADITIONAL MEDIA VERSUS BLOGGING

Blogging brings many challenges to many people, from the technology involved, to the values and opinions that bloggers have and write about. Then there is how they are received by the larger community as ideas of free speech and a new form of mediated expression. Until very recently there has been a touchy relationship between the world of blogging and traditional mass media. This applies to Taiwan as much as any other country with established Internet and media systems. In true blogger fashion, Turton and Sommers paint a picture of Taiwan journalism as an elitist fashion activity, where media starlets prance around in high heels, reporting anything they are told by public relations people, rather than being truly interested in digging deeper to find a meaningful and original story. The bloggers are particularly critical of television. Turton complains that TV news reporting is also very Taiwan-centric, rarely putting Taiwan in a wider context where locals can understand how they relate to the rest of the world. When comparing media practice, Reid details how, "bloggers

don't have the same constraints as traditional media; we don't have to deal with deadlines or style issues, we have a lot more freedom in what we can write about, and we decide what is newsworthy, not some godlike editor". Still, Reid reiterates what other bloggers say by adding, "there is a big problem with media bias in Taiwan, and most of the main TV stations are very Blue [pro-KMT]."

bloggers fed off the content of mainstream media, we now see the mainstream frequently feeding off bloggers for story ideas and leads.

There are strong signs that the issues and topics expatriate bloggers write about in Taiwan are increasingly being taken seriously by external media outlets. As Sommers details, "Sometimes I have written posts that have attracted international attention. One was on children of foreign residents in Taiwan that was picked up by several major linguistic programs; likewise my work on accreditation of Taiwanese universities, which was mentioned on some large pro-Democrat websites in California."

Turton has also been contacted by two US government departments, asking for more information related to pieces he had written about research on foreign policy. At a much lighter level, David Reid says he gets a lot of international contact when he covers popular cultural stories, such as the University Cosplay Competitions, the recent Betelnut Beauty Exhibition and the Taiwan High-Speed Rail.



BLOGS: AN EVOLVING MEDIA FORM

These are all common criticisms held by bloggers against mainstream media from both Taiwan and abroad. In return, it is not surprising that mainstream media have attacked blogging at its weakest points. Comments that blogs are usually poorly written, hyper-opinionated and produced by self-important amateurs are sometimes not far from the truth. When blogs first started to emerge as channels of news, bloggers were heavily criticized for their ignorance of basic ethics and total disregard for editorial function. Yet over a very short period of time, irresponsible bloggers who simply wanted to create a sensation found themselves on the outside of the blogosphere when they discovered that editorial responsibility did actually exist, through the harsh and instant live feedback received whenever their untruths or inaccuracies were uploaded. Unlike mainstream media material, which is written and then edited before publication, in the blogosphere stories are published and then, if need be, edited through interactive criticism. As for ethics, our bloggers pointed out that some of the mainstream media in Taiwan and elsewhere are hardly in a position to boast, guilty as they are of some hideous invasions of privacy, among other media crimes.

A NEW ALLIANCE

As blogs have grown older (many have now been up for over four years) and their writers have become more experienced, newspaper sales and TV viewers have dwindled. The 'big boys' of the media world have also seen bloggers out-scoop them on hundreds of occasions. A huge newspaper such as the *New York Times*, with almost four-hundred journalists, cannot possibly compete with the eyes and PCs of an entire nation. Therefore, large papers have more recently tried to integrate what they see as 'citizen journalism' into the day-to-day news gathering process. With substantial press-media acceptance, other mass media are now starting to think again about blogging, using a range of terms such as 'participatory journalism', 'grassroots reporting' and 'annotative reporting'. Even more substantial is the fact that, where previously,

A REPORT CARD ON TAIWAN

The challenges that bloggers make to traditional mainstream media are similar to those they pose to various community values the world over. Although recognition from mainstream media is welcomed by bloggers, this recognition pales when compared to the much larger impact the voices of bloggers are making on some communities. Media come and go, but communities 'stay' and bloggers see themselves equally as part of the community and a voice of free speech 'for' the community, even if a community is sometimes not receptive to what is being written. In many countries, bloggers are changing long outdated concepts of 'free speech' and 'appropriate behavior' in the media and in the wider community. Our bloggers are not only passionate about communicating their subjects, but also about free expression and more open discussion and debate, having made, and continuing to make, a very positive contribution to Taiwan, as they push back boundaries of what 'is' and 'isn't' acceptable.

A major test for a society's level of democracy is the ability of its citizens and residents to express political and other personal beliefs without fear of reprisal, either personally or politically. Whether Taiwan can still be classified as a 'fragile' or 'developing' democracy is a hot issue. However, so far our expatriate bloggers have been generally well received by local Taiwanese citizens and officials, some of whom are frequent readers of the material being written, and this can only be a good sign.

Before moving to Taiwan, Glen Clifford was a full-time commercial radio producer and announcer. In Taipei he has established 'Oodio Audio' which specializes in English voice work for marketing, education, presentation and broadcast media. He has a degree in Media/Multimedia Production with graduate studies in International Journalism. For a comprehensive list of Taiwan blogs, visit: www.oodio.net/twblogs/