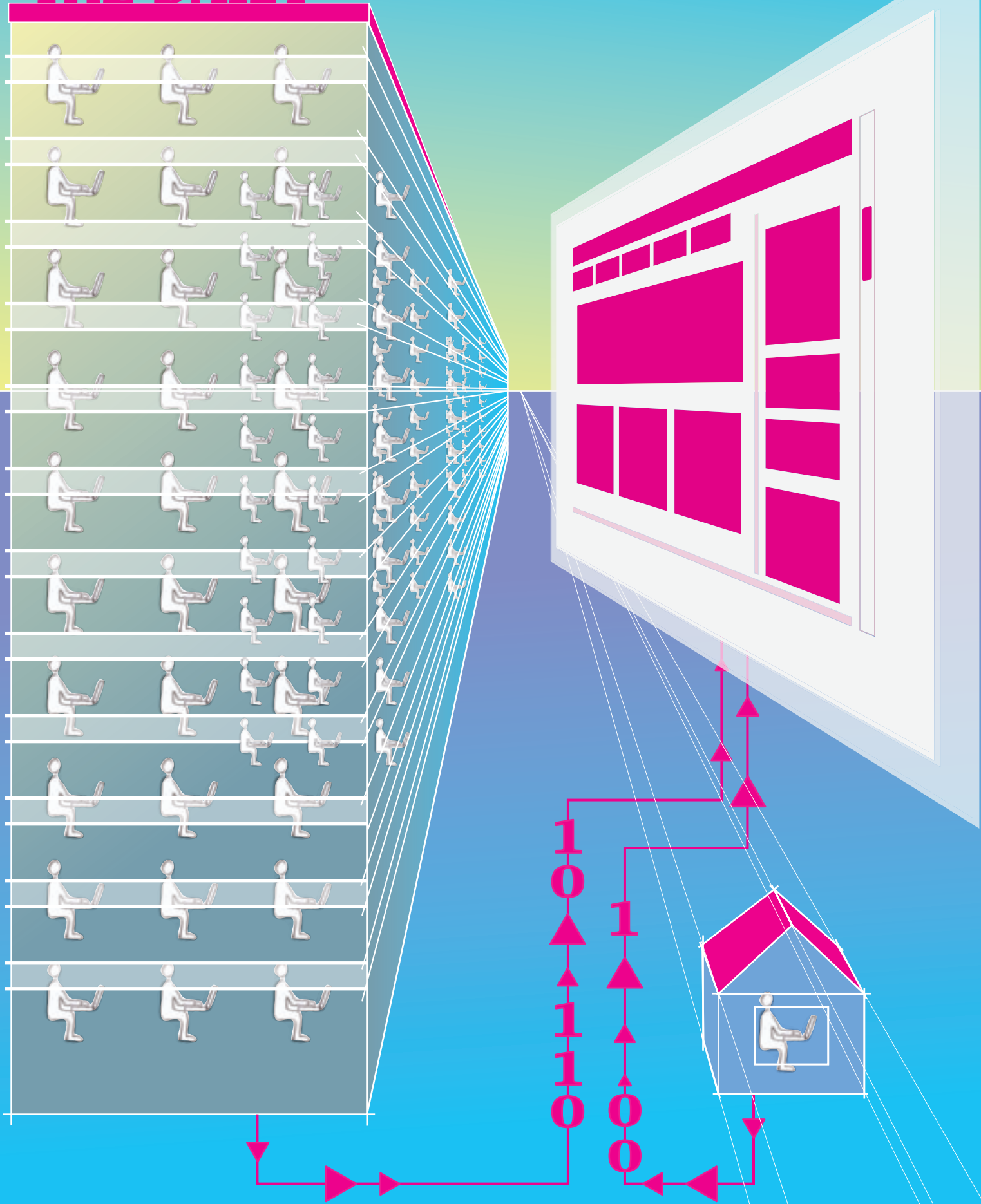


THE DAILY



Brands, content and the future
of publishing – Violet Blue on

journalism's new faces

As the tablet industry disrupts the publishing industry, it's also redefining journalism. Future applications for media consumption will require **a completely new breed of reporter**, prepared to make the most out of upcoming formats and services. **TEXT** Roman Pixell

VIOLET BLUE IS one of the most active bloggers in the San Francisco Bay area in the US. She got her initial book contract 11 years ago and was one of the first to be published on the Kindle, as well as the first blogger contracted by the Hearst Corporation. Aside from authoring two dozen books and audiobooks, Violet Blue also writes for a number of online publications such as *forbes.com* and *oprah.com*, and was named “one of the 40 bloggers that really count in 2010” by the British national newspaper *The Times*. Being a strong proponent of new business models in media, she is a harsh critic of traditional media.

What did traditional publishers think about the social glue of modern publishing platforms when you started your career as an online journalist, and what has changed since then?

It feels a bit ironic to look back at giant media enterprises that were not bothering about what was going on with online media. When they finally started to learn about it, they were stumbling blindly into the space, making a lot

About Violet Blue



Violet Blue

▶ She gained publicity when she trademarked her brand name Violet Blue, but has gotten the most attention for her weekly Open Source Sex column for the San Francisco Chronicle. Blue is the ever-present pundit at conferences and seminars like LeWeb, SXSW and Google Tech Talks, and is also associate editor at the art, culture and tech website Laughing Squid.

- ▶ Main blog on sex and erotica: tinynibbles.com
- ▶ Podcast website: violetblue.libsyn.com

“I think *I’ve got four times as many followers* on my Twitter stream as they [The San Francisco Chronicle] do, and *I don’t know what they can do about it* – take me off their Twitter feed?”

► of mistakes, and treating us online journalists like amateurs. I was first published online in 1999 in Good Vibrations, and there weren’t too many blogging platforms except for LiveJournal available at the time. I was into self-publishing and blogging software before it really took off, and started experimenting early. I explained to the companies I was writing for that they would get much more attention and returning visitors if they published their articles online. It was very frustrating to see how unwilling they were to listen – they said it would be too expensive and take too long to develop a web page, which was very frustrating to hear. I knew that I could put up a web page in minutes, so I started to do things on my own.

THESE PUBLISHERS didn’t understand the value online publishing would bring to their brand, whereas I even started to see myself as a brand. Today, I’m using most of the major blogging platforms for various projects, I love the social media integration of online publishing, and I think to some extent that major media’s inability to use this constructively explains why they don’t succeed in digital distribution.

Talking about personal brands, you have registered your name Violet Blue as a trademark. Can you explain how this happened?

A porn actress had used a couple of names and then started to use mine, occasionally making appearances dressed as me. That, and a couple of other things, made me realize I had to register my personal trademark as a branded name, which is unusual, but becoming less and less uncommon, I think.

How do you think the Google Books project will impact publishing and integrity?

I don’t mind them making my books available, but I was actually involved in their Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) lawsuit. Making my content more accessible is one thing, but it’s not quite as OK that they track what people read. With the introduction of tablets, consumption patterns will change and we need to take the privacy aspects into account. Privacy is not black and white; it has a context. Anonymity can actually be a matter of life and death.

What do you think will happen with all the journalists losing their jobs as the traditional publishing industry crumbles?

The San Francisco Chronicle has had problems for a long time; they’ve been through a number of serious layoffs. What happened with

those journalists is what will happen with the next round of journalists, too. My hope is that they will get hungry and work harder to become better reporters, probably in the online space. As an institution, the Chronicle and its homepage, sfgate.com, hasn’t been nimble enough to act quickly on developments in the online market, or learned how to make the necessary changes in order to adapt.

MY HOPE IS that the journalists will become hungry again and go out and tell real stories. People in newsrooms don’t like to leave their desks anymore. I hope that we’ll get back to what we had in the US during the 1970s, with a lot of investigative journalism. I think we’ll see a lot of upheaval and change in the industry, also with regard to work forms.

But everyone won’t go hungry?

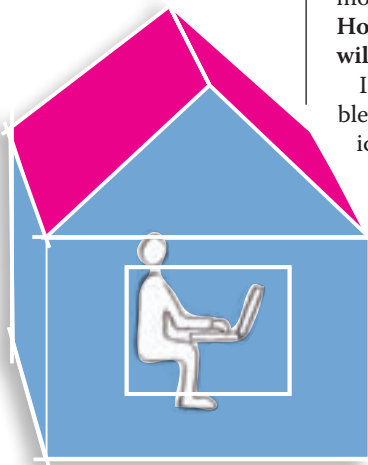
No, this is not for everyone, but people will have to change. We have two types of journalists right now: one that represents old-school journalism and uses traditional channels, which will not be sustainable in the long run; and one that is nimble, adaptive, and understands new forms of best practice within journalism. The latter is also involved in social media and sees themselves as a personal brand.

Do you believe that journalists who work on their own, or in much smaller teams, can deliver more stitched-together content?

Absolutely. Newspaper institutions have been regulated by unions, so that people with specific work tasks could not do other things. One of the things I saw at the Chronicle a while back, when they were planning to launch their own video space, was that they brought in photographers. You’d think they’d bring in people that had been doing online video blogging, but they didn’t – and it didn’t work out that well either.

Can you describe the background of your conflict with the San Francisco Chronicle?

After writing for the Chronicle for many years, I discovered that they were taking my archives and republishing them on heavily search-engine-optimized sub-domains. The new texts were mangled and stripped of identifying content such as links, comments and bios. This was not about old material; my pieces would get republished on sub-domains just a week after the original publishing date. When you would get to such a page from a Google search, you would land on a completely dead page, plastered with ads. I was outraged, since I thought they were distorting my content while maximizing their ad revenue.



The Los Angeles Times is also doing this, and I think it's a big, big mistake, since they're devaluing their archives and screwing up their future search engine optimization. It might be profitable today, but it's banking on a very short-term revenue plan.

What happened when you reacted to this re-publishing activity?

I went out on my Twitter stream and got quite a few reactions. I ended up on the phone with the director of digital content at SF Gate, who told me I was "not to talk about them on my Twitter stream anymore," and I said: "I'm going to talk about whatever I want on my Twitter stream." They just don't get it. Maybe I don't do things that are great for my brand, but that sort of pushback, I thought, was really amusing. I think I've got four times as many followers on my Twitter stream as they do, and I don't know what they can do about it – take me off their Twitter feed?

Isn't stripping out the links something you would object to in particular? Providing links to sources is about serving the reader – after all, the entire notion of the World Wide Web is hyperlinks, right?

Yes, completely. It's about putting a lot of effort into finding those sources. It's a question of credibility. Also, to me, this proves that major media think that the readers don't value links, but this is not the case.

What do you think about major publications like The New York Times leaving out links and denying people the possibility to comment?

You've got to follow the eyeballs and connect to the readers. Your stories are real, living stories, and your readers are real people. A lot of the point of blogging is having a direct relationship with your reader, as well as with your subject. Major media need to understand this; it's no different for them. Two years ago, I found myself in a shouting match in the boardroom of the SF Chronicle with the guy who was then the head of online media. I argued that they were not serving the reader community by omitting the comment function from the published articles. Commenting is in place now, but they don't moderate comments, since they don't recognize the value of a dialog with the readers.

What type of attention do you get as a blogger from companies in the telecom sector?

Some brands really get it. Especially early on, it was surprising to see how some companies would understand the value of co-branding with me as an independent blogger. For example, Qik equipped me with a phone and an unlimited account, so I could use their service freely during the coverage of the US South by Southwest (sxsw) music and media festival in Texas. Many of the interviews I did start with me explaining what the Qik live streaming service is all about, so that's good exposure for Qik. Of course, both I and the companies I work with recognize that there is value in what I do; it's a good handshake

and a symbiotic relationship between the personal and the corporate brand.

How do you think your brand will develop five years from now?

It's really difficult for me to say. I don't really know where things are going to be in social media, how people will use it in terms of media consumption. I'm an early adopter and I'm always looking at the next channel, but even though I can see things changing, it doesn't necessarily mean that I can predict where things are heading.

Who else will succeed, in your opinion?

The Guardian UK. I'm constantly excited about the things they're doing. You still can't embed their videos, so they need to work on their shareability, but they're doing so many things so right. They've got rich user communities that they encourage in an intelligent way with a lot of dynamic content, interesting reports and breaking news – in all giving a really rich reader experience. Another winner is the Daily Beast, a really hungry publication with a lot of original reporting. I'd really like to write for them. Also, I love the BBC, but they need to work more on shareability, just like the Guardian. ●

Footnote

Qik is a mobile live-streaming web application that allows users to record and upload live video from their mobile phones to the internet. Qik videos can be shared via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other websites.