

Module 5:

Blogging

This module will help you understand:

- What a blog is and how blogging has changed the media landscape
- How blogging can drive global conversations and social change
- Different ways of telling stories and developing your voice
- How to write for the internet
- How to build your audience

How citizen journalists can help drive the news agenda

Blogs can take many different shapes and forms, but they are websites where an individual can write stories and share information, opinions and ideas. Whereas news reporting requires a journalist to conform to standard approaches when writing stories, blogging allows creative freedom and, most importantly, is about being an individual and having an opinion.

Since blogging emerged in the 1990s, it has revolutionised mainstream media. Along with other forms of digital media, blogging has broken down barriers between content producers and consumers. News is no longer controlled by professional media organisations; readers and ordinary citizens now have the option to interact, comment and even produce their own stories.

As long as you have access to the internet, self-publishing is now completely affordable and has democratized the process of who controls the news agenda. Citizens now have a platform and the potential to reach a global audience with the things they want to talk about.

In particular, blogs can play an important role in advocacy. They can be a place to gather information and evidence and have even been used in courts of law and debates in parliaments. We've already discussed one example of this in the advocacy module with Noha Atef's blog *Torture in Egypt*. Another blog, *I Paid a Bribe*, compiles and collects citizens' experiences with corruption in India.

The most successful blogs are focused on topics or themes. The better you define what you will cover in your blog, the easier it will be to write and to gain readers. Think carefully about why you want to blog and the types of stories that will help you achieve your objective.

Every time you write a blog post, you should know (1) why you are writing it, and (2) what impact you hope it will have on your readers.

And, like any worthwhile endeavor, blogging demands discipline. It can be helpful to set up a routine and decide how often you will blog.

News stories:

Formal and factual style of writing

Written in the third person (he, she, it, they)

Follow the inverted pyramid format

Have a strong news hook/angle

Never contain the opinion of the reporter

Any opinions come from quoted sources

Blog posts:

Written in the first person (I, we)

Contain the blogger's opinion as well as facts

The writing style reflects the blogger's individual voice, bringing colour and personality to stories

No set structure or format

Less time-critical and reliant on news hooks



© Sheikh Rajibul Islam/duckrabbit/International HIV/AIDS Alliance



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Once you've settled on why and how often you will blog, it's time to get creative. Start generating ideas for stories and thinking about what approach to the topic will really connect it to your audience. The possibilities are nearly endless, but here are some standard approaches to consider.

Writing personal stories

In writing for change, connecting to a personal story can be a powerful way to understand the plights that individuals face. You may be blogging from your own experience or you may be telling the story of someone you've interviewed. But remember to consider the following:

- To create a strong emotional response, you might tell a story about a deeply personal experience, giving details of how it impacted you and made you feel.
- To influence your audience's point of view on a particular subject, you might write a piece that strongly expresses your opinion, based on knowledge you've gained and evidence that you can refer to.
- To educate your readers about the impact of an issue and the need to address it, you might think about an in-depth feature. This could incorporate your analysis and viewpoints from different individuals and community leaders along with fact-based data that highlights a potential solution to the issue.

Tips for making a personal story powerful:

- What is your role in the community? Who are you to the readers and how will they see you?
 - Why does this story matter right now?
 - Are there privacy or security risks? Should the individual be anonymous?
 - Does the story have different relevance for different readers – such as members of the community or policymakers?
 - Will it help build trust with your community or will it alienate you?
- Make a confession – write something about yourself that the reader won't know
 - Talk openly about your experiences and how they made you feel
 - Leave room for interpretation – you don't have to explain everything

Above left: Youth group member Samson, 17, takes part in an Ethiopian coffee ceremony

Above: Sex workers at a brothel in Cambodia discuss sexual health issues



Oksana co-ordinates the Kazakh Red Crescent's TB and HIV programme in Almaty

Oksana's story: inspiring people with HIV

At my eighteenth birthday party, I witnessed my fiancé being stabbed to death by a group of guys over an argument about his scooter.

I was deeply traumatised and depressed for months. Eventually my neighbour offered me heroin – he said I could take it and just forget about my problems for one day. But it didn't work like that and I became addicted.

A few years later, I met a guy at a party and we started dating. He had money and I would steal from him to buy drugs. When he found out, he tried to get me help. Sometime later, he proposed, and we got married. But I was still addicted to drugs.

Falling for my dealer

In 2006, when I was 30, I fell in love with my drug dealer and I left my husband. Then, eight months later, I was arrested for possession of drugs. While I was being held in prison waiting for trial, I found out I was HIV positive.

After six months, my husband found me in prison and I told him about the HIV. He forgave me and arranged to get me out of prison. Even though he doesn't have HIV, he took me back. He encouraged me to go to the AIDS centre and also helped me get support to quit drugs. We've been married now for 13 years, and I've been clean now for two and a half years.

I knew nothing about HIV when I was diagnosed. I cried all the time and I was sure I would die soon. But a few years ago I met Rosa, who co-ordinates the Kazakh Red Crescent's TB and HIV programme in Almaty. She has been living with HIV for 15 years. I'd really been thinking my days were numbered, but she assured me I could live with this disease.

Red Crescent support

I attended all the Red Crescent campaigns and seminars and started to feel more confident. I did so much training that I became a trainer myself and, about a year ago, I was offered a job as a social worker on the TB and HIV programme. Because I'm HIV positive, people can talk to me and there's more trust.

The people I meet have many problems. Maybe they are a drug user or an ex-prisoner and they can't find a job, or maybe they are a single mother struggling to feed their children. I explain about the support we can offer – especially as we have a lawyer and psychologist on our team.

Our support groups show people that they are not alone and there are ways to cope and carry on living a normal life.

This is the first job I've ever had. Before, I was supported by my family and then my husband. Now I earn money and I've even taken a holiday to Turkey, which was my life's dream. I love working, especially when people come and thank me and tell me they have been inspired. It feels wonderful.



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Exercise one

Analyse the effectiveness of Oksana's story:

- What do you think about the opening line in this story?
- How would you describe the structure of the story?
- How did the story make you feel?
- What do you think of the use of language?
- Who do you think was the intended audience?
- What do you think was the objective of this story?
- Is anything missing from the story?
- What would you change about the story?

Exercise two

Write your own personal story.

1. Think of an experience you have had that is hard to forget. Did your attitude or perception change at all after the experience?
2. Write a one-paragraph introduction that will make the reader eager to know more.
3. Now do a speed writing exercise. Write as much as you can about the experience in 10 minutes.
4. After you've written it all down, read it and decide what's missing or what you could leave out.



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Above left: Women and children wait for counselling before having an HIV test through the Family Planning Association of Malawi's outreach work

Above: Aida Sow is a teacher at Jamra primary school for children whose lives are affected by HIV, drugs or poverty, Dakar, Senegal



Community outreach and HIV education in rural Burkina Faso

Writing opinion pieces

When you feel passionate about a subject and have a clearly defined point of view, particularly on something that is topical and/or controversial, it's worth considering writing an opinion piece.

Make sure you include:

- A lead that grabs readers' attention by posing a question or making a tight argument
- A clearly defined statement of your opinion
- Evidence to back it up
- A rebuttal to existing counter-opinions
- A conclusion that makes a strong final recommendation.

Exercise three

Visit the Key Correspondents website and in the search box type: A major paradigm shift is needed in the politics of HIV. Read this story, which was written by Elena Obieta, a correspondent from Argentina.

Analyse the effectiveness of the opinion piece and answer the following questions:

- What is the author's opinion?
- Who do you think was the intended audience?

- How did the piece aim to impact its audience?
- What evidence is provided to back up the author's point of view?
- How strong is the case that is presented?
- Is there anything missing from the piece?

Exercise four

Write your own opinion piece. If you choose to write it on an HIV-related topic, you can submit it to the Key Correspondents editor for publishing.

1. Think of a controversial statement that will divide or polarise your readership.
2. What opinion do you have? Are you for or against the statement?
3. List the evidence you have to back your own opinion, and do any further research needed.
4. Write a lead paragraph that will grab your readers' attention.
5. Spend at least 30 minutes writing the rest of the post.
6. Spend 20 minutes editing the post.

Writing a feature story

Features are an opportunity to explore a topic in depth, taking a more objective viewpoint than in an opinion piece. A feature should ideally include:

- snippets of personal stories, including quotes
- facts, figures and analysis of the subject
- expert viewpoints, including quotes
- links between local and global impacts of the issue
- links between the issue and policy
- different sides of an argument.

Exercise five

Visit the Key Correspondents website and read: Lack of HIV test kits in Uganda put unborn babies at risk, written by James Kityo from Uganda.

Analyse the effectiveness of this piece and answer the following questions:

- What problem does the post raise?
- Who is affected by this problem?
- Are the individuals quoted in this piece credible?
- What evidence is provided?
- How strong is the case that is presented?
- Is there anything missing from the piece?

Exercise six

Write a feature piece:

1. Make a list of current issues taking place in your community. Which of these issues do you know the most about?
2. Choose a topic and make a list of the kinds of people impacted and the individuals or organisations that are responsible.
3. Think about your readers and determine what evidence and people will have the most influence on your readers' perspective.
4. Carry out your interviews and further research.
5. Write a feature (maximum 800 words).
6. Pay particular attention to your headline and lead.

Creative ways to blog

There are so many different approaches you can take to writing a blog. Here are a few ideas to spark your creativity:

- Photo galleries
- One strong picture and caption
- Five things you need to know about...(HIV/using drugs/same sex relationships, etc)
- How to... (tell your family you have HIV/are gay/are a sex worker, etc)
- Ten top tips on... (using drugs safely/protecting yourself from HIV, etc)
- Why you should care about... (HIV/women's rights, etc)



Taking regular antiretroviral medication alongside a nutritious diet helps people living with HIV stay healthy



Many grandmothers become the primary carer for young children when their parents die of AIDS-related illness

Writing for the web

Length: The main thing to remember is that people tend to browse the web and quickly scan articles, particularly if they are long. Therefore, a general rule is the shorter the better. Blog posts can even be as short as a photo and a sentence. It's important to vary your article depending on the subject matter. A good guide is 350-500 words. Generally avoid going over 800 words. If you want to write about something in much more depth, it's worth considering writing a series of posts.

Writing headlines: This is an art and the key thing is to be concise. Your headline has the potential to be seen out of context on Facebook, Twitter and Google, so it has to work in those places. As a rule of thumb, take the 140 characters maximum of a tweet and subtract the following. You will need around 20 for the URL link and 20 for people to mention you @username. You also want them to say something like "Brilliant post!", so it's best if you can get your headlines down to 70 characters. Google displays about 65 characters of a headline. The Facebook ticker displays even fewer. Above all, if you want your content to be shared by a lot of people, you need to write headlines that challenge people's assumptions or provoke an emotion or feeling in them.

SEO (search engine optimisation):

People often search for articles using a search engine such as Google. When you're writing your headline, brainstorm the words and phrases you think people use when they're searching for articles on the topic you're writing about. Make sure you choose phrases that will grab their attention.

Comments: What makes writing for the web different to traditional media is the ability to engage and interact with your readers. Ask your readers questions and get them to respond. A good measure of the effectiveness of your writing will be in the quality of comments that you get. You need to engage readers so they pay attention to what you have to say before clicking onto something else. The trick is to pay attention to what they have to say as well, and respond to them. People will stop commenting if they realise that you rarely respond. The only exception to this rule is engaging with people who are not interested in a civilised conversation/debate but simply want to rant and say nasty things about other people. On the internet such people are known as "trolls" and it's best to just ignore them.

Global audience: Remember that your readers could be located all around the world. Making a reference to something local might make sense to you but it will confuse many of your readers. Take this into consideration when using words such as foreign, domestic, local and international – something may be local to you but not to your readers. It's also important to remember to add the country when stating locations. For example, don't say 'in the eastern region'; say 'in the eastern region of Zambia.' Say 'Nairobi, Kenya,' instead of just 'Nairobi.' Also avoid slang because it will probably be meaningless—or have a different meaning—to people in other countries.

Links: Always make sure you include links to relevant organisations, reports, infographics, etc. Google pays attention to links in articles, so including a few of them will help raise the rating of your story in Google searches.

How to build your audience

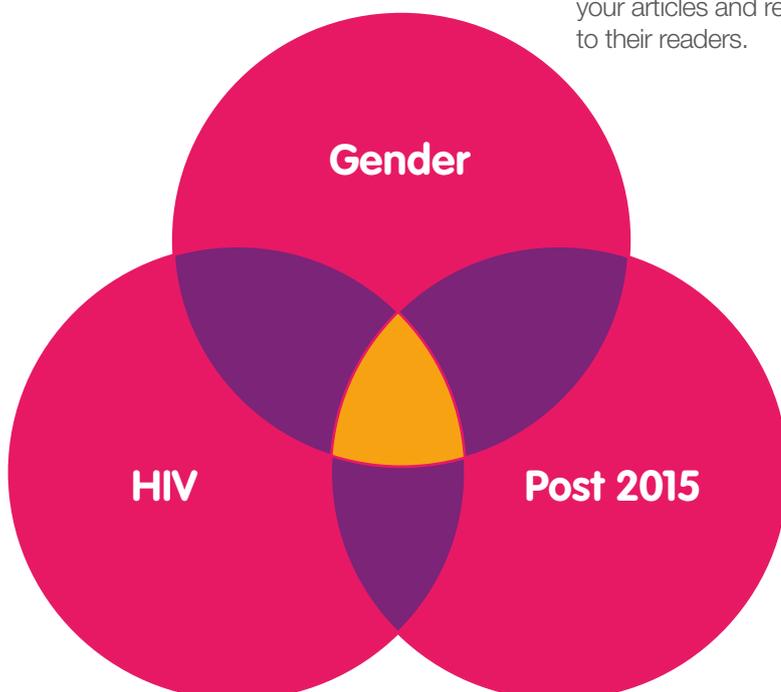
Clearly define your objective by using the following formula:

I want my blog to achieve X so that Y happens.

For example, I want the Key Correspondents blog to be renowned as a credible source for the voices of people living with HIV so that Key Correspondents can influence HIV policy, programming and financing.

Deciding what themes you will write on and sticking to them will help you carve out a reputation as a specialist on certain topics. As a result, your audience will grow. Ideally you should identify three subjects on which you blog – then when you sit down to write a blog post make sure you are sticking to at least one of your themes.

The Venn diagram below gives an example of a blog that focuses on three complementary themes:



To really optimise your stories and build your profile, you want to aim for the orange centre of the diagram, stories which hit all three themes – though this won't be possible every time.

Top tips:

- Be memorable.
- Always use photographs with your stories.
- Provide links to resources where people can learn more.
- Keep the discussion going. If people post comments on your blog, reply to them.
- Use social networking tools such as Twitter and Facebook to let people know about your blog posts.
- Find bloggers who write about the same topics and leave comments on their blogs. Don't say things like "Come visit my blog"; instead, really engage with what they are saying. By showing them that you are interested in the same topics, you can build a relationship with them and they might begin to read your articles and recommend you to their readers.



Outreach workers give medical advice and condoms to a female sex worker, Ukraine



Carnival revellers in Trinidad (2007)

Security

- Think about what you want to keep private in advance – make a list.
- Consider blogging anonymously if you are writing about anything personal or controversial that could compromise your safety and security. However, you should be aware that it is nearly impossible to completely hide your identity online. In fact, blogging anonymously could lead people to believe that you are hiding more than your identity and could tempt them to try to expose you.

How to set up your own blog

Wordpress is a great platform for blogging. It's easy to set up and has an active support and blogging community. It's also free and uses open-source software. For more, see en.support.wordpress.com/getting-started/ and check out the video at the bottom of the page.

Media outlets where you can self-publish your blog posts

Guardian Witness: witness.theguardian.com/

CNN iReport: ireport.cnn.com/

Global Voices: globalvoicesonline.org/for-bloggers/#submitlinks

News Participation: newsparticipation.com/

IndyMedia: indymedia.org/or/index.shtml

Influential blogs from mainstream media, NGOs and citizen journalists

The Huffington Post

New York Times The Lede

Impatient Optimists

Mumsnet

Yoani Sanchez

Ahmed Al Omran

Atiaf Alwazir

Iris Cecilia Gonzales

Further reading

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

cima.ned.org/publications/profiles-blogging-how-bloggers-around-world-practice-their-craft