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Think globally, blog locally

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GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

Quiz time! Say you're given access to a global network of computers -- let's call it an "Internet" -- with which you can pass information back and forth from any of the world's four corners. Question: Do you use it more often to a) read news and opinions on foreign sites to gain a global perspective on pressing issues, or b) check the weather?

Given this choice, most people opt to leave the bloggers of Ghana to their own devices, and instead opt to visit websites that bear on them more directly. There's been a lot of talk about "virtual communities" that link people with shared interests - motorbikes or collector dolls or international development.

But the last few years have also seen a flowering of blogs that chronicle local corners of the real world, from Planet Jackson Hole (<http://www.planetjh.com/blog>) -- as in, Wyoming -- to SaskatoonLive (<http://www.saskatoonlive.com>). Sites like these focus on the comings and goings of communities: places to eat, things to do, stories to gab about. Sometimes they break news, but more generally, they offer residents things that their newspapers don't: that wealth of daily items that might not be "newsworthy," but are perfectly engaging all the same, and a place to talk back.

Last summer, Lisa Williams, a blogger and former analyst who runs just such a site about Watertown, Mass. (www.h2otown.info), made a public bet that she could find 1,000 such sites in the United States alone. And, in conjunction with some of the Internet's leading lights of "citizen journalism," she set about compiling a database of them.

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The result went on-line on Jan. 1, and the result is Placeblogger.com, the first comprehensive directory of what she calls "hyper-local" websites. Between the sites that Williams herself catalogued, and sites submitted by visitors, Placeblogger now lists well over 1,000 sites from 38 countries, including 50 in Canada. (And of those, Vancouver alone hosts 20.) The site isn't particularly high-concept: It's a rather modest directory service that's cleanly laid out and easy to browse. Its own blog keeps track of news of interest to "placebloggers," in the hopes of providing support to that community. Placeblogger also keeps track of where each blog is physically located; little interactive maps pinpoint where each one is located in the world.

But the site's biggest achievement might prove to be semantic. Williams didn't coin the term "placeblog" -- that honour, she says, goes to a blogger named Tim Lindgren -- but her work has popularized the term. And in so

doing, she's shed a new light on the role that local blogs play in the befuddling new world of journalism.

"I started to use the term as an alternative to 'citizen journalism,' " Williams writes in an e-mail interview. "In general, placeblogs represent the lived experience of a place, while newspapers, by contrast, represent the slice of that experience that is news.

"Placeblogs certainly contain what might be called 'random acts of journalism,' " she says, noting that some are more news-oriented than others. But in general, their focus is on that "lived experience" of a place, which can mean "where to get good take-out, find a handyman, or simply connect with neighbours on-line."

Indeed, the avenues of "citizen journalism" are many and varied, some amazing and others ugly, from experts in their fields providing input on the day's pressing questions to angry bloggers staging partisan take-downs of media figures they dislike. "Citizen journalism" itself is a troublesome term, and not only for its broadness. It manages to imply that, on one hand, bloggers are junior scout journalists, and on the other, that professional journalists somehow aren't citizens. So any term -- like "placeblogger" -- that helps to whittle down the scope of "citizen journalist" into something more understandable and less universally insulting is a welcome addition.

Placeblogger.com also points towards another emerging trend on-line: geotagging, or the act of putting a geographical tag on something that you put on-line. For instance, if you take a picture with a GPS-enabled cellphone and upload it to Flickr.com, a photo-sharing site, Flickr will remember exactly where the camera was when the photo was taken. With its latitude and longitude tucked away, the service can pinpoint the photo on a map, and correlate it with other photos taken at similar locations. (Flickr has amassed millions of such photos, which are coming in at a rate of more than one every second.) Since Placeblogger records the physical address of each blog it catalogues, it sets the stage for interesting uses of this information down the road, as more and more information on-line comes with geographic dog tags.

For now, the site isn't without its lumps and startup hiccups, but it's already a remarkable entry point into the world of placeblogs. Expect to hear more and more about them: Inevitably, we will always be more interested in what's on the other side of our front door than what's on the other side of the world.

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