Tempests of the Blogosphere:

Presidential Campaign Stories that Failed to Ignite Mainstream Media

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Abstract

During the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign, blogs came into their own as a political communications medium. For several years blog champions had promoted the narrative of indefatigable bloggers sniffing out under-the radar stories and challenging mainstream media. However, they were not widely recognized as playing a central journalistic role in the political communications system until blogs fact-checked CBS News' memos regarding President Bush's National Guard Service. Credited with bringing about Dan Rather's retirement, "blog" became the most-searched-for definition online in 2004. But what of blog failures? Among the multitudes of bloggers and their torrents of posts, numerous relevant and engaging stories, such as the Sandy Berger archives theft and the Kerry intern scandal, whipped online muckrakers into a frenzy without achieving commensurate prominence in mainstream media. This paper combines anecdotal observations with findings from a content analysis of four leading political blogs during the last four months of the U.S. 2004 presidential election. Over 6,000 posts referencing the campaign were analyzed for original newsgathering as well as fact-checking other alternative and mainstream news sources across print and broadcast media. By contrasting popular topics in this sample with mainstream media coverage, this paper will identify stories that failed to cross over to mainstream media. Finally, drawing on mass-media news theories such as Gamson's collective action frames and Bennett's concepts of indexing and media strata, this paper will attempt to theorize common attributes of these "blogflops."

Introduction: Civic Stories and New Technologies

In most theories of participatory, liberal democracy, news and journalism are of critical importance as the tellers of factual stories from which citizens' informed decision-making is made. Over the last decade, there has been much analysis and debate surrounding civic news

and journalism in the context of Internet-era technologies. Initial writing waxed utopic over the Internet's democratic potential for providing citizens with higher quality information and circumventing big media and government (Barlow 1996; Negroponte 1995; Rushkoff 1994). Lessig (2001), however, cautions that this democratic potential could merely be a historical moment if corporate and governmental spoilers are not kept at bay. Others see technology staying one step ahead of the dark side, whether it be the "liberation technology" of the open source movement (Unsworth 2004) or a new political philosophy of "Extreme Democracy" borne of the collaborative, decentralized, and distributed work experiences of the "extreme programming" movement (Ratcliffe and Lebkowsky 2004). Indeed, the Internet's potential for individualized wrangling of vast amounts of information seems ideal for Schudson's most recent conceptualization of citizenship, the monitorial citizen, who "scan[s] (rather than read[s]) the informational environment in a way so that they may be alerted on a variety of issues for a very wide variety of ends and may be mobilized around those issues in a large variety of ways" (1998, 310). However, in the first few years of the new century, a reactionary opinion emerged that the Internet complemented rather than displaced other media—neutering both utopian and dystopian visions—and served merely as a self-reinforcing, ideological echo chamber (DiMaggio et al 2001; Hollihan 2004). Yet recent research contradicts this conventional wisdom. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2004d) finds that online Americans encounter a greater diversity of viewpoints on candidates and key issues than offline citizens, and they do not use the Internet to filter out opposing views. Additionally, ten years of study from the Center for the Digital Future confirms that the Internet is actually displacing that devil of mass media, television (Cole 2004). Others see the Internet as not solving all the problems of U.S. political communications, but with cautious optimism suggest that an influential subset of hyper-engaged online citizens

constitute an important new check and balance (Baker 2002; Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet 2004).

What is certain is that the Internet is an unavoidably and increasingly significant component of the U.S. political communications system. The most recent Digital Future study found that 76% of the U.S. population now uses the Internet (Cole 2004). This online experience is increasingly becoming about directed information-seeking. Users connect with data more than they communicate with friends (Consumer Internet Barometer 2003; Pew… and Institute… 2003), and they search and access rather than surf and browse (Morrissey 2003), with information-searching holding the Number Two position behind email for online activity and time consumer (Pew 2005b). As an information source, the Internet is growing in importance. Several sources (Cole 2004; Pastore 2001; Pew 2003c; UCLA Center for Communication Policy 2003) find that, once online, adults use the Internet more and traditional media, especially television, less. As early as 2002, online news was already second only to television as the main news source for Americans under 30 (Pew 2002b). By 2004, of all U.S. Internet users who got news in their lives, 63% were getting news online, 22% were accessing news more often online than from other sources, 17% were getting their news exclusively online (Pew 2004a). Immediately after that year's election, "18% of all Americans cited the Internet as a leading source of political news, as did 28% of all Internet users" (Pew 2005b, 68). On a typical day, Internet users get news more than they participated in any other online activity except email and search engine use (Pew 2004b); and reading news holds as the third most popular online activity (Cole 2004). It remains to be seen whether these trends remain limited to a subset of early adopters—what Pew has referred to as a "trendsetting technology elite" (2003b i)—or will spread throughout the online population with increases in broadband adoption and Internet experience. However, it is important to remember that even

small percentages can exert disproportionate effect. A recent study by the Institute for

Politics, Democracy and the Internet (2004) described an emerging group of Internet-

oriented, politically energized persons as "Online Political Citizens" (2004, 2) who, although

comprising only 7% of the population, are "nearly seven times more likely than average

citizens to serve as opinion leaders among their friends, relatives, and colleagues" (2004, 3).

Keller and Berry's (2003) popular Influentials and Gans' (1995) Bystanders represent

variants on this concept, which harkens back to the "opinion leaders" of mid-century

communications scholarship (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Lazarsfeld and Katz

1955).[i]

The disproportionate impact of a few lies at the heart of much recent critical attention

directed toward one online information medium: blogging. The impact of bloggers' stories on

democracy and journalism has been of particular note within academia, the newsroom, and

the blogosphere.[ii] Originally known as web logging, blogging content ranges from blogger's[iii]

diaries and self-promotional musings to highly personalized real-time news coverage and

analysis. Since blogging's "big bang" in September 1999 with the release of Pyra Labs'

software application *Blogger*,[iv] blogging has spread beyond the technological elite and

continues to demonstrate increasing adoption (Jensen 2003; Kennedy School… 2004; Pew

2005b; Welch, Jensen, and Reeves, 2003). This process has been facilitated by

technology—specifically, point-and-click web publishing software applications that require no

knowledge of writing HTML code, and RSS[v] applications for outgoing content syndication

and incoming personalized aggregation of blogs—as well as current events, such as the

September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the U.S. and the war in Iraq (Kennedy 2004; Whelan

2003).

In 2002, Blogger's registered users reached over 970,000 (Kennedy 2004) and search engine behemoth Google acquired the company (Gill 2004). A 2003 survey (Perseus Development Corporation 2003) put the number of blogs at 4.12 million, although estimated current *active* blogs at far less: around 1.4 million, but still doubling every year. Pew (2005b) found that only 7% of online Americans created bogs, but 27%, or 32 million online Americans, read them – a 58% increase over the course of 2004 —and 9% of online Americans read political blogs frequently or sometimes during the 2004 presidential campaign. Although mass audiences of Internet users in majority numbers have not yet embraced blogs, some observers claim that blogs have become useful and influential to niche audiences such as politicians or media critics (Glaser 2003c, "With the rise…" section, ¶4; Richards 2004), demonstrating the disproportionate effects theories mentioned previously. Meanwhile, blogging as a medium has continued to grow, spawning variants incorporating photography, video, audio, satellite positioning, and mobile technologies (Glaser 2004c; Lasica 2003).

Blogs and blogging have been the subject of conferences, university courses, and several books. They have spawned celebrities such as *Baghdad Blogger* Salam Pax, whose collected postings Grove Press published as a book (Pax 2003), Glenn Reynolds, whose *InstaPundit* currently draws 160,000 visits a day, and Markos Moulitsas, whose *Daily Kos* nabs over 412,000 (The Truth Laid Bear 2005) — both of whom have been subjects of numerous mass-media profiles. Industries as diverse as library science (Thomsen 2002), education (Embrey 2002), demographics (Whelan 2003), and medicine (Brown 2003) note, debate, and apply blogging. As mentioned previously, the field of journalism has been particularly interested in blogging, due in part to the growing litany of situations in which blogs are

purported to have in some way influenced, supplanted, surpassed, or scooped mainstream

news media. These include:

- The Trent Lott scandal (Gill 2004; Kennedy 2004)

- Microsoft's deceptive "Switch" ad campaign (Gill 2004)

- The Iraqi prison abuse scandal (Richards 2004)

- E-voting risks (Andrews 2003)

- The 2003 State of the Union Iraq-Africa uranium retraction (Andrews 2003)

- The September 11 attacks (Andrews 2003; Pew 2002a)

- The Santa Monica Farmers Market car crash (Regan 2003)

- *New York Times* Editor Howell Raines' resignation (Regan 2003)

- The Rhode Island nightclub fire (Lennon 2003), and

- Paul Bremer's Iraqi farewell speech (Leo 2004),

News bloggers have been described as: citizen journalists (Outing 2003; Williams

2003), critical observers in one-on-one "adopt-a-journalist" relationships (Glaser 2004a),

factcheckers and ideological watchdogs for mass media (Glaser 2004c), and mainstream

journalists offering more immediate, speculative, or opinionated reporting (Weintraub 2004).

News bloggers' frequent disregard for traditional journalistic neutrality has been lauded for

introducing voice and personality (Grossman 2004) to "a media world that's otherwise leached

of opinions and life" (Jarvis quoted in Welch, Jensen, and Reeves 2003, What's the point

section, ¶1-2). In 2004, news bloggers' prominence grew to the point of receiving press

credentials to the 2004 Democratic (Weiss 2004) and Republican National Conventions

(Grossman 2004), and acquiring larger readerships than the circulations of traditional print

outlets such as *The Chicago Tribune* or *The Dallas Morning News* (Lasica 2004). A few bloggers

crossed over to mainstream media, as when Kevin Drum's political news blog *Calpundit.com*,

renamed *Political Animal*, was hired by and transferred to the website of *Washington Monthly*

(Grossman 2004). Blog researcher Alex Halavais suggested in early 2004 that that news

blogging hadn't "even come close to a tipping point yet" (in Glaser 2004c, last ¶), and in June

of that year, *Time* magazine declared that many blogs had "lost their amateur status forever"

during "a golden age of blogging" (Grossman 2004).

   As 2004 drew to a close, and the U.S. presidential campaign dominated news stories,

any debate as to whether or not blogs had significant enough effect on mainstream media to

merit study was effectively silenced. On September 8, the CBS News television program *60

Minutes II* aired a segment on the long-running controversy questioning whether President

Bush had fulfilled his service obligations in the Texas Air National Guard. The program

exhibited damaging memos purportedly written by Lt. Col. Jerry B. Killian, Bush's

supervisor in the Guard (Wallsten 2004a; Wasserstein 2004). CBS had delivered copies of the

memos to the White House that same morning. Nineteen minutes into the program's

broadcast, "TankerKC" noted on the conservative message board FreeRepublic.com that the

memos were "not in the style that we used when I came into the USAF" (Wallsten 2004a, *¶7*).

Only four hours later a post by "Buckhead" noted that the memos were written

    In a proportionally spaced font, probably Palatino or Times New

  Roman. … The use of proportionally spaced fonts did not come into common

  use for office memos until the introduction of laser printers, word-processing

  software and personal computers. … They were not widespread until the mid-

  to late '90s. Before then, you needed typesetting equipment, and that wasn't

  used for personal memos to file. Even the Wang systems that were dominant in

  the mid '80s used monospaced fonts" (Wallsten 2004b, ¶s 17-18)

Buzz spread through conservative blogs and discussion forums such as *Power Line* and *Little Green Footballs*, sparking a flurry of research and, among liberal blogs, counter-research. The story quickly escalated to gossip site *The Drudge Report*, talk radio, cable news, and, finally mainstream broadcast and print (Wallsten 2004a; Wasserstein 2004). Buckhead, meanwhile, was identified as no typography expert but Harry W. MacDougland, an Atlanta lawyer with strong conservative Republican ties, including having helped draft a petition for the Arkansas Supreme Court to disbar President Clinton (Wallsten 2004b). Questions over whether he worked independently or was fed information did not prevent CBS anchor Dan Rather from ultimately apologizing and, separately, announcing his retirement. After an internal investigation, CBS dismissed four top journalists from their news division (Steinberg and Carter 2005).

The bloggers had arrived. Post-election, a *Wall Street Journal* editorial compared Memogate to Henry V of England's 1415 defeat of France's much larger army at Agincourt, proclaiming it "a great historical development in the history of politics in America" (Noonan 2004, ¶16). By year's end, Mirriam-Webster announced that "blog" had been the most requested definition in its online dictionaries in 2004 (From blogs… 2004). ABC News named bloggers their People of the Year (People of the Year: Bloggers 2004). The powerful establishment had been brought to its knees by the savvy citizen muckrakers of the blogosphere, heralding a new era of insurgent democracy, fulfilling the promise of much initial e-democracy hyperbole. This media narrative continues to evidence potency, with bloggers credited in everything from Howard Dean's election as Democratic National Committee Chair (Lizza 2005) to exposing safety flaws in Kryptonite bicycle locks (Fillion 2004).

Blogs and the Political Communications System

A useful tool for theorizing the place of bloggers within the U.S. media system can be found in

Bennett's (2004) model of three media strata: the *conventional* layer of mainstream, mass media,

the *middle* layer of prominent blogs, webzines, advocacy groups, etc., and the *micro* layer of

email, mailing lists, and personal blogs. The most successful communications strategies

involve methods of getting a story to access and activate all three strata. Drezner and Farrell's

research demonstrates how this can be accomplished by what they call *focal point blogs*. "Under

specific circumstances," they write, "when key weblogs focus on a new or neglected issue –

blogs can socially construct an agenda or interpretive frame that acts as a focal point for

mainstream media, shaping and constraining the larger political debate" (2004, 2). Bennett,

however, cautions that activity at the micro or middle layer does not guarantee impact on the

conventional layer, citing as an example the rise and fall of Howard Dean's campaign for the

Democratic presidential nomination (Bennett 2004). One strategy for breaching the

conventional layer lies in Bennett's theory of indexing (2003), which he describes as "the

process of the journalistic practice of opening or closing the news gates to citizen activists

(and more generally, a broader range of views) depending on the levels of conflict or political

difference among public officials and established interests with the capacity to influence

decisions about the issue in questions" (2003, 4). In short, conflict between elite political

actors is important for a story to be deemed newsworthy. Gamson (2001) theorizes an

exception to indexing, articulating rare circumstances under which ordinary citizens may

drive an issue into the conventional media layer, even without elite political involvement.

Citing examples of citizen collective action around issues such as abortion and nuclear power,

he develops a theory of "collective action frames," which proposes that the stories most likely

to breach conventional mass media will contain a morally offensive, emotion-laden *injustice*, a

protagonist or *identity* with which viewers can empathize (ideally in opposition to a specified opponent), and an apparent *agency* as the route via which change is possible (2001, 58-59). I will utilize elements of these theories of media strata, focal point blogs, indexing, and collective action frames to stories from blogs I studied during the 2004 presidential campaign that failed to ignite conventional, mainstream media.

During the final four months of the campaign, in the process of conducting a content analysis research project on four leading political blogs, I noticed numerous scandals and stories that tickled bloggers into a tizzy. In fact, there was almost consistently a scandal de jour of which they posted, debated, and dissected. Immersed in research, I received more of my news during this period from blogs than from mainstream sources, and was surprised how often my friends and colleagues had heard nothing or next to nothing about these seemingly urgent, groundbreaking, vital stories I was following in the blogosphere. Even as Memogate unfolded, it became clear to me that not all blogosphere soapboxes reached mainstream media. I grew curious about those that didn't: blogflops. What could such failures reveal about this debutante medium of the political communications system? I will now describe several blogflops I observed during data collection for a larger quantitative study of four blogs' electoral news coverage, and then discuss their implications in light of that study's findings and the political communications theories previously discussed.

In October of 2003, former National Security Advisor Sandy Berger came under criminal investigation for improperly removing copies of documents relating to the Clinton administration's anti-terrorism activities from the National Archives. This story became a hot topic for Glenn Reynolds, main blogger of *InstaPundit*, a somewhat jokingly self-proclaimed liberal blog that actually exhibits a more conservative-libertarian ideology. During the period of observation, *InstaPundit* posted on the story 34 times, which, as "one of the most prominent

bloggers in terms of links and traffic" (Drezner and Farrell 2004, 19), should have exerted

considerable effect[vi] on the blogosphere and conventional media. Amid much big-media

bashing, Reynolds fumed, " I don't know what's more appalling — the thought that Berger is

covering up some dreadful failing, or the thought that the man in charge of national security

for much of the Clinton administration is utterly incompetent at handling supersecret national

security documents" (Reynolds 2004a, ¶5). Yet fellow conservative blog *Daily Dish* only

covered the story in *7* posts, and liberal blog *Talking Points Memo* only addressed it 12 times.

The liberal collective blog *Daily Kos* never addressed the story. The mainstream media covered

the story when it broke, with numerous stories in late July. However, despite Reynolds

continuing to address the story until late November, blogosphere buzz did not give the story

"legs." The *New York Times* ran two articles on the case in July (LexisNexis 2005g) and *USA*

Today addressed the story in five articles in July and August. (LexisNexis 2005h) The story,

with its important national security implications, always-popular Clinton connection, and

humorous details (Berger was thought to have stuffed the copies down his socks or pants)

seemed ripe with potential, yet Reynolds' continued interest never pervaded conventional

media.

Reynolds hosted a smaller-scale controversy on September *7*, when he picked up on an

item posted by *The Drudge Report*, claiming that the gun democratic candidate John Kerry was

shown posing with in a photo op was a rifle of a model he had voted to ban. The *InstaPundit*

post headline read, "DRUDGE OFFERS A KERRY GUN FLIP-FLOP REPORT:

'KERRY COSPONSORED BILL BANNING GUN HE WAVES' " (Reynolds 2004c, ¶1).

Six updates followed, for a total of 923 words on the subject, including links to other blogs,

quotes from the proposed legislation, a photograph, debate on the definition of "pistol grip"

and a rifle photo in an effort to affirm that the rifle fit the definition of "assault weapon" in the

proposed legislation. A follow-up post on September 20th linked to another blog claiming

Kerry had returned the rifle. The only major newspaper to mention the incident, however,

was the London *Daily Telegraph* – as a minor reference in an article detailing sleazy tactics in

the U.S. presidential campaign (LexisNexis 2005e).

　　InstaPundit, with *Drudge* and other conservative blogs, circulated another scandal

rumor on October 3, claiming video of one of the presidential debates showed Kerry with a

cheat sheet in his pocket. After seven updates to the post within the same day, it was

confirmed that it was merely a pen. The only major paper to pick up the story was the

Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, who used the rumor's 24-hour wax and wane to frame an article on

blogs' influence on the mainstream media (LexisNexis 2005d). "And now the accusation,"

claimed the article, "cooked up online, has hit print" (Seper 2004, ¶ 4). Yet the article did not

name any other newspaper carrying the story, nor could I find any mainstream print mention

of it – other than in a humorous column in the same paper the following day (Heaton 2004;

LexisNexis 2004d).

　　Blogflops were not limited to conservative blogs. On October 24, *Talking Points Memo*

blogged this post:

　　　　This has been rumored in Washington for several days. And now the

　　　Nelson Report has broken the story. Some 350 tons of high explosives (RDX and

　　　HMX), which were under IAEA seal while Saddam was in power, were looted

　　　during the early days of the US occupation…" (Marshall 2004c, ¶1-2).

　　Marshall continued to blog almost exclusively on the subject, posting over 19,000

words in 50 posts over six days, until the release of an Osama bin Laden videotape eclipsed

the story. Marshall focused on the story as a case study in the administration's deception and

the media's acquiescent manipulation. When video from an embedded local TV film crew

revealed footage of the explosives after the occupation, Marshall wrote:

> Game. Set. Match. They got caught with a screw-up, their
>
> response was to lie, smear, obfuscate and bamboozle. And now
>
> the unimpeachable evidence is out. It captures the
>
> administration's whole record on Iraq, only fast-forwarded and
>
> telescoped into four days as opposed to four years. (Marshall
>
> 2004d, ¶ 1-3)

The more vehemently liberal *Daily Kos* only covered the story in 10 posts, bested by

conservatives *Daily Dish* with 14 and *InstaPundit* with 17. However, it should be noted that the

right-wing blogs took the story in another direction, spurred on by conservative columnist

William Safire. Safire pointed out that CBS News planned originally to hold the story until 36

hours before polls opened, presumably to influence the election against Bush, but the network

had been forced by bloggers covering the story to release it earlier. "It is absolutely

intolerable," blogged Reynolds, "for a news organization to hold onto a story for the purpose

of breaking it so close to an election as to prevent a fair investigation and response" (Reynolds

2004d, ¶1). Both the right and left blogs used the explosives story as contradictory

illustrations of media bias. The *New York Times* ran 17 articles on this story between October

24 and 29, including editorials referencing it. The bulk of these, however, were not about the

explosives per se but about their use in the campaign as charges and countercharges involving

them flew between Bush and Kerry (LexisNexis 2005a). *USA Today* and the *Washington Post*

each ran 14 stories, which were evenly distributed between addressing both the issue and its

use in the campaign (LexisNexis 2005b, 2005c). So while mainstream coverage did occur, it

did not match the frenzy of Marshall's cross-analysis of media reports, transcripts, and

records. More significantly, bloggers' framing of the story as an example of administration

deception and / or media bias did not make it to the mainstream media, who generally only

reframed the story as an example of campaign mudslinging.

Marshall, himself a working and respected journalist, smelled another scandal

involving the Italian businessman who supplied the forged documents that formed the basis of

President Bush's infamous "16 words" about Iraq seeking to acquire uranium from Africa.

Marshall posted ten times on the subject, suggesting there was more to the story:

In *Newsweek* this afternoon, Mike Isikoff and Mark Hosenball have a

piece that touches on the fact that the FBI still hasn't managed to

interview Rocco Martino, the guy at the center of the forged Niger

uranium documents story. They put the question to the FBI and were

told by a 'U.S. law-enforcement official ... [that] the FBI is seeking to

interview Martino, but has not yet received permission to do so from the

Italian government.'

Please.

The Bureau may well be looking to interview Martino now that

they've been put on the spot.

But are they really willing to take 'no' for an answer from the

Italians?

And more to the point, if it's really a jurisdictional issue, why didn't

they try to interview Martino last month when he was in New York?

Or if not then, how about when he flew here in June?

The White House is now saying that it's imperative to get to the

bottom of who's behind the CBS Memo forgeries. And they're right.

But the US government has never made any serious effort to find out

who is behind the Niger uranium forgeries.

Why not? (Marshall 2004b, ¶1-8)

Although, as Marshall noted, the issue was addressed in *Newsweek*, no major newspaper

in the U.S. addressed the implications of Martino during the campaigns final months

(LexisNexis 2005f). Although Marshall intoned ominously that "everything we'd learned

reporting on Niger uranium case told us that this was a story the US government did not want

to get to the bottom of," (Marshall 2004a, ¶ 18) this aspect of story never ignited mainstream

coverage.

On August 23, *Daily Kos* ran a 640-word, triple-updated post assessing the validity and

meaning of Bush's Texas Air National Guard medals, following a 122-post thread in the

Democratic Underground discussion forums and also linking to a related 275-post *DU* thread

titled "George W. Bush was Photographed Wearing a Ribbon He did not Earn," (Starr 2004).

Using pictures of Bush, his discharge papers, medals sported by Bush and Kerry, and primary

Daily Kos blogger Markos Moulitsas' own discharge papers, the *Kos* post concluded that there

was a disparity between Bush's medals and discharge papers, supporting theories that he did

not serve completely. "WE MUST START THE ECHO CHAMBER. START

POUNDING THE DRUMS" read the first of 148 reader comments (Moulitsas 2004,

Comments section, ¶3). Of the other blogs studied, only *InstaPundit* mentioned the issue, in an

August 28 update to a longer post on Kerry's military record, noting a different blog, *Stop the Bleating*, was covering the medals issue (Reynolds 2004b). Reynolds rather dismissively spun the issue, denigrating a different liberal blogger for using *Democratic Underground* as a source and complaining that the issue was receiving more investigation from liberal blogs than Kerry's Christmas-in-Cambodia claims.

Despite something of a blogospherian reputation for not being exactly level-headed, Andrew Sullivan did not succumb to many tempests in his *Daily Dish*. The one issue that came closest was his blogging on Mary Cheney, daughter of the Vice President, whose lesbianism was pointed out by both Kerry and Vice Presidential candidate John Edwards in not-so-subtle stabs at the Republican anti-gay-marriage platform. While the second mention of this, by Kerry, did achieve heavy coverage in mainstream media, Sullivan, who is gay, pounded on the issue for 30 posts over seven days, dissecting Republican hypocrisy and opportunistic exploitation of constituent homophobia. In contrast, *Talking Points Memo* addressed it in only three posts, *Daily Kos* in two, and *InstaPundit* in one. Although mainstream media did cover the issue, significantly, it was primarily in the Republican frame of Kerry having intruded into the Cheneys' personal matters and not the hypocrisy of the Cheneys' politics.

Findings and Implications

It is difficult to draw broad conclusions from these admittedly anecdotal descriptions of blogflops. However, the findings of the larger quantitative study of political news blogs may have relevance. This was a content analysis of the election-related posts in four widely read blogs with regular political content. The study tracked the final months of the U.S. presidential campaign, capturing and coding various aspects of blog entries in order to provide information about, among other things, whether or not

political news blogs performed traditional news functions of *surveillance* (collecting and disseminating information about a society's environment) and *correlation* (interpreting such information and proscribing conduct in reaction to it) (Wright 1959, 16). Surveillance indicators included the presence of original newsgathering content, non-web content (gathering and bringing it into the online news realm), reporting on the news media, and watchdog functions such as factchecking. Correlation indicators included editorial responses, interpretation, reframing, extracts from more than one source, combinations of extracted source material and original material, combinations of online and offline sources, and calls to action aiming to mobilize readers. The sample consisted of four English-language U.S. blogs with substantial political content, chosen for their frequent appearance in Top 20[vii] rankings of blog popularity or influence created by 13 measurement tools[viii] and 10 peer/media opinion lists[ix]. The blogs observed were *InstaPundit, Talking Points Memo, Daily Dish,* and *Daily Kos.* These were checked daily from July 20–November 15, 2004, examining posts and any updates made to them within the previous day's 24-hour period.

One of the key findings of this study was the preponderance of surveillance activities. In spite of the star turn blogs took with Memogate, however, this was rarely surveillance of direct experience (i.e., very little original newsgathering or factchecking research) but, by a large margin, simple surveillance of the media environment [Table 1]. Mainstream print news was the dominant medium sourced, with alternative news of any medium making a surprisingly poor showing [Table 2]. This contradicted hype around how blogs' threaten traditional media gatekeeping (Regan 2003) by permitting "citizens to challenge the media monopoly in determining what counts as newsworthy and what the narrative frame for those stories is" (Glaser 2004c, Do you consider…

section, ¶2). The presence of numerous other non-news sources to a degree

statistically equal to mainstream print sources seemed to support mainstream

circumvention, except that the most predominant of these non-news sources was other

blogs which, if they followed the same pattern as these four, were primarily reporting

on and reposting stories from mainstream print news [Table 3]. One can infer, then,

something of a feedback loop of political news stories. Furthermore, correlation

activities — helping understanding the subjects of surveillance or proscribing action in

response to them — were relatively low. The most frequent activity was an editorial

response to a source. To their credit, blogs did not appear to be the echo chamber they

have been accused of being: editorial responses to sources were not wholly in

agreement but almost evenly split among agreement, disagreement, or mixed opinions.

But other correlation activities (calls to action, exposing bias, etc.) were hardly present

at all [Table 4].

Combined with anecdotal evidence of blogflops, these findings suggest that

cases such as Memogate are exceptional. For not only did many stories fail to breach

the conventional media layer with commensurate interest, in fact it seems the blogs

were doing actually very little original muckraking. Primarily they were quoting and

commenting upon news stories from mainstream print media, or, it can be inferred,

quoting and linking to others doing the same. Manipulating source material for

investigative or interpretative purposes, such as replicating documents (as in

Memogate), enlarging photographs, posting audiotapes of phone calls, etc. rarely

appeared [Table 4]. When it did, it was almost exclusively in the form of bolding and /

or italicizing quotes from deep within a print news story rather than merely reprinting

the lede — and this is among four of the most prominent political blogs.

To summarize, from these findings, it appears bloggers talk about mainstream print news and other bloggers talking about mainstream print news. If one considers the mainstream news media to be the equivalent of elite political actors within the mediated environment, then this supports Bennett's (2003) indexing theory: A story becomes worthy of blogging when the mainstream media are debating it. In this sense, then, the concept of breaking through to the conventional media stratum is not entirely accurate. In successful cases, such as Memogate, it is not so much that blogs' stories were emerging from the micro and middle strata and then breaking through to the conventional stratum, whether via collective action frames or other means. Instead it is more like an amplification or re-framing effect: a story was addressed initially and widely in mainstream media, but then activity in the blogosphere – where purportedly many mainstream political journalists go to assess public reaction to news (Smolkin, 2004) — keeps the story in the media's eye, uncovers new aspects of it, or encourages mainstream media not to drop it.

But not always. In the case of blogflops, a story appears in mainstream media, is debated and perpetuated in the blogosphere, yet does not continue to become a major conventional news story. It does not grow "legs." In the Berger story, for example, the story did index as newsworthy due to having elite political players, yet they were not in direct conflict. In terms of collective action frames, there was a somewhat clear injustice, yet neither Berger nor the National Archives were subjects with whom readers could empathize or identify. Both Kerry's gun flip-flop and his debate cheat sheet rumor lacked not only conflict and empathy, but also any kind of clear injustice. The missing Iraqi explosives, and more importantly, their framing as an illustration of administration duplicity and / or media bias possessed conflict between elite players but lacked clear injustice against a victim with which

readers could identify or a specific antagonist perpetrating that injustice. Despite the popular

villianizing of The Media – even in conventional outlets such as Fox News – it is more potent

when attached to a specific human face, such as Dan Rather. Even more vague was the Italian

businessman behind the uranium documents. Although he sounded like a shady character, he

was far from a political elite and not in any direct conflict, and it was never clear exactly what

was the larger injustice to which Marshall seemed to allude, and whom it hurt. Bush's medals

had a clear, politically elite villain in the President, but he was not locked in conflict with

anyone over the issue. Furthermore, both the exact injustice — was it intentional or an

oversight? — and the victim of it were diffuse. The Mary Cheney fracas did possess political

elites in conflict, but Sullivan's unsuccessful framing of it can be attributed to lacking

empathetic victims of injustice as potent as the parents who had their personal lives exposed

on television. Finally, an element lacking from all stories was the agency of Gamson's (2001)

collective action frames: readers were not given a route through which to do something about

the injustice.

Conclusion

This examination of blogflops, when stripped of theoretical concepts about indexing and

collective action frames, boils down to a rudimentary lesson in storytelling. Hero, villain,

conflict, audience identification with characters, and emotional appeals are all elements of

good storytelling. Journalism, even at its most elevated political discourse, is still about

storytelling. The blogflops discussed anecdotally here all lacked one or more of these basic

storytelling elements. This was exacerbated by the findings of the content analysis. In their

reliance on dissecting other media, rather than original storytelling, these blogs diluted the

potency of their stories. The heroes and villains, if present, became primarily second-hand,

distanced, and therefore less potent. The lack of correlation – making original meaning out of the stories and proscribing action in response — further sapped them of immediacy or direct relation to readers' lives. The personal, subjective nature of blogs has long been lauded by the medium's champions (Blood 2002), yet it is precisely this element that is lacking from the blogs' stories from the U.S. presidential campaign. Instead of telling their own stories, blogs re-told the stories of others and did not suggest much to do about them. This may help account for the finding of the recent ten-year Digital Future study that "the Internet is viewed by growing numbers of users as a tool for learning about the political process. However, it is not yet perceived as a medium that can help users gain political power or more say in what government does" (Cole 2004, 17).

This is not to say that bloggers and other citizen journalists and muckrakers using digital technologies don't do amazing things. Memogate, and, more recently, the resignation of CNN executive Eason Jordan (Bauder 2005), the exposure of the identity and background of White House reporter Jeff Gannon (a.k.a. James Guckertt) (Strupp 2005), and Howard Dean's capture of the National Committee Chair (Lizza 2005) all certainly attest to that. However, for the 62% of U.S. Internet users who still don't even know what "blog" means (Pew 2005a), I suggest: Don't believe the hype. There's a whole lot of chaff around the wheat. For the mainstream media, who serve these people, I urge them not be charmed by the novelty of the situation into over-reporting it, or to cut corners in their own professional standards of due diligence out of fear of being scooped by those pesky bloggers. To my fellow researchers, I say: Bloggers need to be accepted as part of the political communications system. They need to be understood, but not overestimated. Finally, for the bloggers, the power of your technology and distributed labor is dazzling; your enthusiasm and effort is humbling, yet some basic lessons in storytelling would go a long way toward capturing more

of that large untapped readership, and clearer routes to action might bring about more of your

desired changes.

Appendix: Tables

	Surveillance source types				
	Daily Dish	**Daily Kos**	**Instapundit**	**Talking Points Memo**	**Total**
Surveillance source presence	90.7%	90.8%	97.3%	95.4%	93.5% n = 3481
Mediated	89.1%	88.9%	96.5%	91.9%	91.8% n = 3417
News media	50.6%	62.1%	58.0%	70.9%	60.0% n = 2233
Non-news	51.4%	60.9%	76.6%	60.4%	64.0% n = 2382
Direct experience	6.5%	14.2%	7.3%	24.9%	12.1% n = 450

Table 1
Numbers show percentage of electoral posts containing that particular type of source. There may be multiple types of sources in each post.

	Surveillance news sources				
	Daily Dish	Daily Kos	Instapundit	Talking Points Memo	Total
News source presence	50.6%	62.1%	58.0%	70.9%	60.0% n = 2233
Mainstream news	34.2%	54.5%	45.7%	64.6%	49.5% n = 1842
Print	23.6%	35.7%	30.6%	43.1%	33.0% n = 1228
Broadcast	8.6%	16.9%	17.1%	24.7%	16.6% n = 618
Wire service	0.9%	4.9%	1.6%	8.8%	3.7% n = 138
Web-only	2.2%	8.0%	2.6%	5.3%	4.8% n = 177
Unlinkable	0.4%	2.0%	0.9%	0.9%	1.2% n = 45
Alternative news	19.8%	16.8%	23.3%	14.4%	19.0% n = 707
Print	13.8%	6.5%	12.5%	0.2%	9.6% n = 357
Broadcast	0.6%	0.9%	0.1%	0.2%	0.8% n = 30
Web-only	6.0%	6.8%	11.9%	0.2%	8.2% n = 305
Unlinkable	0.3%	3.7%	0.3%	2.8%	1.9% n =71
Mainstream and alternative together	3.4%	9.3%	11.0%	8.1%	8.5% n =316

Table 2
Numbers show percentage of electoral posts containing that particular type of source. There may be multiple types of sources in each post.

	Daily Dish	Daily Kos	Instapundit	Talking Points Memo	Total
Surveillance non-news sources					
Non-news source presence	51.4%	60.9%	76.6%	60.4%	64.0% n = 2382
Organizatio n/ business	4.7%	27.7%	9.1%	20.7%	16.5% n = 614
Other blog	17.8%	20.4%	62.1%	13.7%	32.1% n = 1154
Own blog or website	6.9%	15.7%	15.3%	25.7%	15.5% n = 577
Individual	24.6%	16.1%	20.5%	18.9%	19.5% n = 726
Other misc. source	2.7%	0.1%	5.2%	6.5%	5.1% n = 190

Table 3
Numbers show percentage of electoral posts containing that particular type of source. There may be multiple types of sources in each post.

Correlation indicators				
	Daily Dish	**Daily Kos**	**Instapundit**	**Talking Points Memo**	**Total**
Correlation presence	41.7%	36.3%	30.3%	30.5%	34.5% n = 1284
Call to action	2.3%	11.5%	4.9%	5.4%	6.8% n = 253
Connection	7.2%	5.9%	4.6%	6.0%	5.7% n = 212
Editorial response	28.2%	9.0%	21.9%	12.3%	17.1% n = 636
Interpreta-tion	1.7%	7.7%	0.9%	2.3%	3.6% n = 134
Reframing	0.6%	1.0%	0.3%	2.6%	0.9% n = 33
Source material manipulation for emphasis	10.1%	9.4%	6.6%	10.7%	8.9% n = 331

Table 4
Numbers show percentage of electoral posts containing each correlation indicator. There may be multiple indicators in each post.

Notes

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[i] All of which argue against blog detractors who cite studies revealing comparatively slight adoption of blogging (Perseus, 2003; Pew Internet, 2004c).

[ii] Literally, the blogosphere is the total network of blogs. However, it is typically used to refer to the most active and actively read blogs, and often their conversations with each other about blogging-related or other hot topics.

[iii] Authors of blog content. May be individual, collective, edited, unedited, attributed or anonymous.

[iv] Technically not the first coding-free web-publishing application, but the first widely adopted.

[v] Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary software applications push text-only versions of posts to a blog's server for user-side versions of the software to then gather and present all together to the user.

[vi] Although it should be noted Reynolds frequently disavows what he considers the overestimation of his blog's impact.

[vii] Or higher if Top 20 not available

[viii] Emerging blog tools attempt to determine the influence of individual blogs through predominantly mathematic methods that are inherently problematic (Adar et al., 2004; Gill, 2004) but represent the best tools available.

[ix] Peer and media opinions are included due to the social nature of blogging, as Nardi (2004) and others (Bausch, Haughey and Hourihan, 2002; Blood, 2002; Stauffer, 2002;) have extensively described.

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