

Blogging and Journalistic Practice

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## Abstract

### Blogging and Journalistic Practice

A decade ago, the word *blog* didn't really exist. Today, however, Weblogs, or blogs, have had a profound impact on the storytelling of the World Wide Web. This presentation will analyze how the theories of agenda setting and gatekeeping apply to the practice of blogging. The research also will focus on whether bloggers have used the Web as a means to step outside of the traditional journalistic standards of accuracy, fairness, and objectivity to return to perhaps a mixture of the partisan press during the 18th and 19th centuries and the muckrakers of the early 20th Century.

## Introduction

Weblogs, or blogs, have become one of the latest forms of online communication to gain widespread popularity and notoriety. Although blogging has existed—depending on one’s perspective—since the early to late 1990s, it played a significant role in a variety of stories in the past year. These instances included, but were not limited to, the resignation of U.S. Sen. Trent Lott as the leader of the Senate; the resignation and dismissal of several top CBS executives and the acknowledgement of inadequate reporting by CBS and its then-principal anchor Dan Rather in a story about President Bush’s National Guard record; the clarification or attacks—depending on one’s point of view—of President Bush and U.S. Sen. John Kerry, the two president candidates in 2004; and the resignation of CNN’s Eason Jordan for comments he made about the U.S. military.

*The State of the News Media*, published in March 2005 by The Project for Excellence in Journalism, notes some significant trends in the news media:

- Several new models of journalism exist, including blogging. This trend, the report noted:

The blogosphere, while adding the richness of citizen voices, expands this culture of assertion exponentially, and brings to it an affirmative philosophy: publish anything, especially points of view, and the reporting and verification will occur afterward in the response of fellow bloggers. The result is sometimes true and sometimes false. Blogs helped unmask errors at CBS, but also spread the unfounded conspiracy theory that the GOP stole the presidential election in Ohio.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Project for Excellence in Journalism. (2005, March 14). *State of the Media*. Retrieved March 14, 2005, from [http:// www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2005/index.asp](http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2005/index.asp)

- To adapt, journalism may have to widen its the scope of reporting.

Journalists aspire in the new landscape to be the one source that can best help citizens discover what to believe and what to disbelieve--a shift from the role of gatekeeper to that of authenticator or referee. To do that, however, it appears news organizations may have to make some significant changes....And rather than merely monitoring the official corridors of power, news organizations may need to monitor the new alternative means of public discussion as well.<sup>2</sup>

Blogs take a variety of forms, but share some basic components. Blogs can be defined as Web pages with posts typically in reverse-chronological order. Posts are primarily textual, but many include photos and other multimedia content. Many blogs post commentary and invite interactive comment from readers. Many blogs link to other sites on the Internet.<sup>3</sup> Blogs took on their current form in 1997 with the creation of Dave Winer's Scripting News at <http://www.scripting.com>, a record of his reflections and commentaries on a wide range of topics and considered to be the longest-running blog on the Web.<sup>4</sup>

The blogosphere, the name given to the blogging community, has grown exponentially since the introduction of computer programs and centers for creating blogs. For example, at the beginning of 1999, slightly more than 20 blogs existed.<sup>5</sup> In April 2005, more than nine million blogs existed on the Internet, according to the Web site,

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Schiano, D., Nardi, B., Gumbrecht, M., & Swartz, L. (2004, April). *Blogging by the Rest of Us*. Paper presented at the Conference on Human Factors and Computing Systems, Vienna, Austria.

<sup>4</sup>Gillmor, D. (2003, April 11). Making the News. *E-Journal: News, Views and a Silicon Valley Diary*. Retrieved March 14, 2005, from

[http://weblog.siliconvalley.com/column/dangillmor/archives/0009\\_24.shtml](http://weblog.siliconvalley.com/column/dangillmor/archives/0009_24.shtml)

<sup>5</sup>Blood, R. (2000, September 7). Web logs: A History and Perspective. *Rebecca's Pocket*.

Retrieved February 17, 2005, from [http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog\\_history.html](http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html)

<http://www.technorati.com>, which tabulates information about blogs.

Blogs exist on a wide variety of subjects: politics, international affairs, science, business, religion, the military, and many other subjects. A 2003 survey of blogs by Perseus Development Corporation found that slightly more than 50,000 blogs were updated on a daily basis.<sup>6</sup> This survey occurred at a time when an estimated four million blogs existed, so it is likely that the number of blogs updated daily has increased.

This paper will focus primarily on the blogs that update daily and those with the most visitors to assess the role of these sites and their impact on agenda setting, gatekeeping, and generally accepted standards of journalism.

### **Literature Review**

**Agenda setting.** In his 1922 book, *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann argued that the media provide the primary source of information about public affairs with which the average person lacks continuing and direct knowledge. Although Lippmann did not specifically call his theoretical construct, *agenda setting*, his book provided a coherent analysis of the power of the media in modern society. As Maxwell McCombs, the researcher who in 1976 dubbed the influence as *agenda setting*, puts it:

The news media exert great influence on where public attention and concern is focused. Not only do people learn factual information about public affairs and events in the world from the news media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic from the emphasis placed on it in news coverage. In other words, the news media set the agenda for public attention and lay the groundwork for public opinion.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Perseus Development Corp. (2003, October 4). *The Blogging Iceberg*. Retrieved February 15, 2005, from <http://www.perseus.com/blogsurvey/index.html>

<sup>7</sup>McCombs, M. (1999, February 16). News frontiers in agenda setting: Agendas of attributes and frames. Retrieved April 25, 2005, from [http://www.utexas.edu/coc/journalism/SOURCE/faculty/facul/McCombs/Agenda\\_Setting.html#6](http://www.utexas.edu/coc/journalism/SOURCE/faculty/facul/McCombs/Agenda_Setting.html#6)

Dozens of studies throughout the world have confirmed the underlying thesis from McCombs's 1976 research.

**Framing.** Social psychologists developed the theory of framing, which provides context based on cultural, economic, and social values. The theory has been applied frequently in the past thirty years to journalism and has become a central theme of communications research. Gamson defines a frame as “a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue.”<sup>8</sup>

Simply put, agenda setting provides the overall structure. Framing provides a basis to assess the details from specific contexts or particular points of view.

**Gatekeeping.** White (1950) introduced the theory of *gatekeeping*—a term originally used in sociology—to communications in an article in *Journalism Quarterly*. White studied the decisions of an Iowa editor, known by the pseudonym “Mr. Gates”, and his decisions about what would appear in a daily newspaper. The gatekeeper chose and rejected wire service stories from the Associated Press, the International News Service, and United Press about national and international news.<sup>9</sup>

White determined that the gatekeeper made subjective judgments based on his attitudes and experiences. As a result, the editor's personal prejudices and values affected his news judgment and the newspaper's content. Other factors that determined whether an article made it through the gate and into the newspaper included: immediacy, available space, and the quality of writing.<sup>10</sup>

Other researchers extended the definitions of gatekeeping and gatekeepers. In

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<sup>8</sup>Gamson, G. (1989). News as framing: Comments on Graber. *American Behavioral Science*, 33, 157.

<sup>9</sup>White, D. (1950) The gatekeeper: a case study in selection of news. *Journalism Quarterly*, 27, 383-390.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

1965, for example, Galtung and Ruge isolated factors influencing the flow of news:

- *Impact or intensity of threshold value.* A story has major significance for the community served by the media outlet. For example, a major airplane crash will generally appear in the news because such an incident rarely occurs. Also, many people travel by airplane so this news will interest them.
- *Timeliness.* A journalist generally covers stories that occur recently.
- *Unexpectedness.* Unexpected stories will be treated as news.
- *Sociocultural values.* Values of both the gatekeepers and their readership can also influence selection of the news. A newspaper with a large ethnic group in its area of coverage will likely pay more attention to issues involving that group.
- *Continuity.* If an event or news story passes through the media gate once, it is likely that it will pass through the gate again.
- *Clarity or lack of ambiguity.* Events whose meaning is clear are more likely to pass through media gates.
- *Consonance.* Expected events are likely to pass through media gates.
- *Composition.* Because gatekeepers look at the day's news in its entirety, some news items are selected because they contrast with others.<sup>11</sup>

**Accuracy, Fairness, and Objectivity.** Accuracy is a common goal of journalistic practice, although the speed of delivery and the fallibility of humans who practice journalism often result in errors. The Society of Professional Journalists states in its Code

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<sup>11</sup>Galtung, J., & Ruge, M. (1965) The structure of foreign news. *Journal of Peace Research*, 2, 65.

of Ethics, “Journalists should test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error.”<sup>12</sup>

The SPJ code—along with other professional organizations—also embodies the notion of fairness. For example, the Radio-Television News Directors Association’s Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct states, “Professional electronic journalists should present the news fairly and impartially, placing primary value on significance and relevance.”<sup>13</sup>

The tenet of objectivity has existed in journalism for many years, particularly during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when press organizations attempted to bring more professional standards to journalism. It is interesting to note, however, that the term, objectivity, has become somewhat suspect in recent years. News organizations prefer the use of terms such as balance and impartiality. The American Society of Newspaper Editors, for example, uses impartiality as a cornerstone of its Statement of Principles:

To be impartial does not require the press to be unquestioning or to refrain from editorial expression. Sound practice, however, demands a clear distinction for the reader between news reports and opinion. Articles that contain opinion or personal interpretation should be clearly identified.<sup>14</sup>

Brent Cunningham, the managing editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, argues in his magazine that journalists may have to alter the traditional viewpoint of objectivity or impartiality. “In a world of spin, our awkward embrace of an ideal

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<sup>12</sup>Society of Professional Journalists. (1996). Code of ethics. Retrieved April 26, 2005, from [http://www.spj.org/ethics\\_code.asp](http://www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp)

<sup>13</sup>Radio-Television News Directors Association. (2000, September 14). Code of ethics and professional conduct. Retrieved April 27, 2005, from <http://www.rtnda.org/ethics/coe.shtml>

<sup>14</sup>American Society of Newspaper Editors. (2002, August 28). Statement of principles. Retrieved April 27, 2005, from <http://www.asne.org/index.cfm?ID=888>

[objectivity] can make us passive recipients of the news,” he writes.<sup>15</sup>

### **Research Questions**

The research questions center on whether blogs conform to standard communications theories and generally accepted journalistic principles.

RQ1: To what degree do blogs play a role in agenda setting?

RQ2: To what degree do blogs play a role in framing important issues?

RQ3: To what degree do blogs adhere to generally accepted journalistic practices, including accuracy, fairness, and objectivity?

### **Methodology**

Two Web sites, <http://www.technorati.com> and <http://www.truthlaidbear.com>, have created systems to determine the most important blogs. The Truth Laid Bear has two criteria: the number of discreet visits and the number of links a blogger has from other sites. Technorati determines the reach of a blog based on the number of links and the number of precise sources that link to the blog.

On March 20, I compared the lists to select ten blogs that held the most prominent positions on the two monitoring sites. The ratings were chosen by combining the scores from the lists with the lowest score receiving a higher ranking.

As a result, the following blogs proved to be a combination of the most frequently visited and most frequently linked sites during this period:

1. boingboing (<http://boingboing.net>)
2. Instapundit (<http://www.instapundit.com>)
3. Daily Kos (<http://www.dailykos.com>)

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<sup>15</sup>Cunningham, B. (2003, July-August). Re-thinking objectivity. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved April 1, 2005, from <http://www.cjr.org/issues/2003/4/objective-cunningham.asp>

4. Gizmodo <http://www.gizmodo.com>
5. Talking Points Memo <http://talkingpointsmemo.com>
6. Eschaton <http://atrios.blogspot.com>
7. Common Dreams <http://www.commondreams.org>
8. Andrew Sullivan <http://www.AndrewSullivan.com>
9. little green footbals <http://littlegreenfootbals.com/weblog>
10. Wonkette <http://www.wonkette.com>

During the period from March 20-April 19, an analysis was done on each site, including the number of posts and the sourcing for the post information. These sources could include blogs, the mainstream media, the non-mainstream media, business Web sites, and other sites, which included educational and not-for-profit organizations. It should be noted the total number of links may exceed the number of posts because one post may include a variety of references.

A content analysis was done to determine whether the subject of the posts dealt with the United States, international issues, technology, business, or features stories that did not fit well into the other categories.

It should be noted that classification sometimes proved difficult. Stories about the United Nations, for example, were placed in the international category, as were stories about U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq.

It should be further noted that a variety of significant stories occurred during the time period: the court battle over and subsequent death of Terri Schiavo; the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Pope Benedict XVI; the congressional battle over federal judicial nominations; and the debate over changes in Social Security. Some less

significant, but noteworthy, stories occurred during the period, including the beginning of the baseball season and the national college basketball championship.

Table 1. Type of sources in blog posts

Name of blog	Number of Posts	Blogs	Mainstream Media	Non-mainstream Media	Business	Other
boingboing	601	45%	100+%	9%	11%	2%
Instapundit	905	79%	15%	2%	4%	1%
Daily Kos	455	50%	40%	1%	0%	20%
Gizmodo	567	1%	2%	0%	97%	0%
Talking Points	316	39%	53%	6%	0%	9%
Eschaton	334	63%	45%	1%	0%	5%
Common Dreams	266	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Andrew Sullivan	122	62%	41%	1%	1%	5%
little green footballs	456	36%	62%	4%	1%	4%
Wonkette	415	34%	65%	2%	0%	1%

Table 2. Type of content in blog posts

Name of blog	Number of Posts	United States	International	Technology	Feature
boingboing	601	4%	12%	43%	41%
Instapundit	905	43%	34%	3%	11%
Daily Kos	455	82%	14%	0%	4%
Gizmodo	567	0%	0%	99%	1%
Talking Points	316	95%	4%	1%	0%
Eschaton	334	97%	2%	0%	1%
Common Dreams	266	55%	44%	0%	1%
Andrew Sullivan	122	62%	30%	4%	4%
little green footballs	456	48%	49%	1%	2%
Wonkette	415	81%	8%	8%	3%

## Discussion

The ten selected blogs provide a relatively representative sample of the blogosphere with the exception of personal blogs and religious blogs.

beingboing, which was recently voted the best overall blog in an international competition, is an eclectic mix that touts “a directory of wonderful things.” The blog combines the interests of several individuals. Mark Fauenfelder is a Los Angeles illustrator, writer, and co-founder of the magazine from which the blog evolved. Cory Doctorow is a Canadian writer and illustrator in London who serves as European coordinator for the Electronic Frontier Foundation. David Pescovitz is a writer about technology, art, and science from San Francisco. Xenj Jardin is a Los Angeles-based writer about technology whose work has appeared in a variety of print and broadcast outlets. John Battle is a co-founder of *Wired*.

The blog can include stories and commentary about mainstream stories, such as the death of car guru John DeLorean, to out-of-the-mainstream articles on the usefulness of maggots, and the healthy qualities of chocolate.

Instapundit, the Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo, Eschaton, Andrew Sullivan, and little green footballs focus on news events, although each blog has its own personality. Wonkette is a gossipy news blog that focuses on Washington politics, while Gizmodo is almost entirely devoted to modern technology.

Glenn Reynolds, the author of Instapundit, is a law professor at the University of Tennessee with a relatively conservative approach to the law. Reynolds writes short blurbs and commentaries with links to other sites, including liberal ones. Reynolds also

includes some personal blogs, including his fondness for cats and his interest in music.

The Daily Kos is run by Markos Moulitsas Zúniga, a Hispanic American who served in the U.S. military and practices technology law in California. The Daily Kos, which rhymes with rose, is based on his nickname in the military. Kos is a liberal, but he does encourage comments and hundreds of people join in each day.

Joshua Micah Marshall, who created Talking Points Memo, is a contributing writer for the *Washington Monthly* and a columnist for *The Hill*. A liberal Democrat, he holds a doctorate in American history from Brown. He lives in New York City.

The blog deals almost entirely with national politics.

Eschaton, which means the end of the world of or humankind, is written by Duncan Black, an economics professor from Philadelphia. A liberal, Black engages in sarcasm, commentary, and a good bit of profanity on his blog. He also comments frequently on economic matters.

Andrew Sullivan is a former editor of the *New Republic*. A British citizen who lives in the United States, Sullivan is a gay with HIV. He is a conservative on fiscal issues and a liberal on social issues. Sullivan often writes on gay issues, although his main focus is politics.

Charles Johnson, who heads little green footballs, is a former musician and Web designer who often writes about Middle East politics. Johnson played a key role in uncovering the problems with Dan Rather's discredited report on President Bush and his National Guard duty. The name, *little green footballs*, comes from a private trip to Japan, but Johnson has not divulged its meaning.

Ana Marie Cox, who lives in Arlington, Virginia, writes Wonkette. The blog is a

satirical gossip site about Washington and the people who live and work there.

Common Dreams is an aggregator of information from the Progressive Blog Alliance, which includes sites in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Gizmodo is an aggregator of information about technology, primarily from business sources.

Do these blogs and others play an important role in agenda setting? For the most part, these blogs depend upon other sources to provide the overall framework for the issues discussed. As the posting and content analyses demonstrate, many of the blogs depends upon the mainstream media for primary information.

beingboing provides commentary about the information in many cases, but the site depends largely on the mainstream media for the agenda. Common Dreams depend almost entirely on the mainstream media for its agenda, while Gizmodo relies upon business Web sites for much of its basic information.

The political sites—Instapundit, Daily Kos, Talking Point Memo, Eschaton, Andrew Sullivan, little green footballs, and Wonkette—depends upon the mainstream media to a varying degree for an agenda. For example, Instapundit relies on the mainstream media in only 15% of all cases, while Wonkette stands at 65%.

Nevertheless, the large and targeted part of the blogosphere can collectively create an agenda. In his book, *Blog: Understanding the Information Revolution That's Changing Your World*, Hugh Hewitt, a conservative blogger and radio host, writes:

When many blogs pick up a theme or begin to pursue a story, a blog swarm forms. A blog swarm is an early indicator of an opinion storm brewing, which, when it breaks, will fundamentally alter the general public's understanding of a person, place, produce, or phenomenon.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, only one of the ten Web sites in this research played a role in one of the agenda-setting swarms Hewitt describes. little green footballs helped to discover that the documents were probably forged in the CBS report on President Bush's National Guard service.

If the top ten news organizations would agree that a certain story would be moved to the top of the agenda for readers and viewers—a decision that often happens—that agenda takes hold. These top ten blogs, however, cannot set an agenda that will exist for the entire country. As Hewitt points out, however, the collective power of the blogosphere has and can set some specific agendas.

These and other blogs play a significant role in framing the issues based on an agenda often set by mainstream media. Remember that a frame is a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and providing context for that information. Many examples exist of framing in these blogs. On March 20, for example, the Daily Kos highlights a his view of the Schiavo case:

If I were a congressional Republican, or a supporter of the Schindler family's (the parents) efforts to obtain federal intervention in the Terri Schiavo case, I'd be more than a little troubled by the high profile being assumed by the infamous anti-abortion extremist, Randall Terry. Terry accompanied Mary Schindler to a press appearance earlier today, and is also organizing an effort to get Jeb Bush and Florida legislators to visit Terri Schiavo.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Hewitt, H. (2005). *Blog: Understanding the information revolution that's changing your world*. Nashville, TN: Nelson Books. 1.

<sup>17</sup>Armando. (2005, March 20). Message posted to <http://www.dailykos.com>

More than 200 people commented on the subject during the course of only a few hours.

On the same day, Charles Johnson attacks Google for adding what he described as a “neo-Nazi site,” National Vanguard, among Google’s index of “legitimate news sources.” Within twenty-four hours, other bloggers have taken up the issue, and Google removes the site from its news service.<sup>18</sup>

It is also important to look at the manner in which blogs apply gatekeeping and the factors influencing the flow of news. Like the infamous Mr. Gates, the bloggers use their experience, enhanced or tainted by personal experience and taste, to choose what to include on the blog. It is interesting to compare the attributes that determined the flow of information into the newspaper and compare them to the flow of information into a blog.

The first factor influencing the traditional gatekeeper—impact of intensity of threshold value—changes significantly for the blogger. While the traditional news editor determines the significance of an individual story for a geographic community, the blogger has no defined community. Therefore, the blogger does not have to worry about meeting the needs of a community other than what interests him or her. As a result, boingboing has a number of stories about Asia because one of its writers finds Japan and China interesting. Joshua Micah Marshall and those who follow his blog find the debate over the use of the filibuster in the U.S. Senate far more interesting and important than many readers or viewers of a national news organization.

The second factor—timeliness—has an impact on bloggers, but it is not as significant as for a daily newspaper or television outlet. The blogger often writes about

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<sup>18</sup>Johnson, C. (2005, March 20). Message posted to <http://littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/>

what interests him or her. That may be topical with any given day, but it may be something that has no immediacy. During the period studied, there were stories that the mainstream media reported almost instantly and extensively: the death of Terri Schiavo, the death of Pope John Paul II, the election of Pope Benedict XVI, and specific events in Iraq.

Some of these stories did not even appear on the blog sites studied, such as boingboing and Gizmodo. Other bloggers, such as Glenn Reynolds at IStapundit, shied away from the Schiavo case, while others such as Talking Points Memo covered the Washington legislative process of the Schiavo case on a continuing basis.

The third factor—unexpected stories—often interests bloggers, as evidenced by the death of Pope John Paul II. Eight of the ten blogs spent some time in assessing the importance of the late Pope, but, as noted earlier, boingboing and Gizmodo, offered no commentary whatsoever about the death of either Terri Schiavo or Pope John Paul II.

The fourth factor—sociocultural values—does play a factor in the selection of information of blogs. Again, however, it is a community of intellectual interest rather than cultural similarities that brings the blogger and his or her readers together unlike the newspaper, which may use more stories about a particular ethnic group because a large population of that group live within a specific geographic community.

The fifth factor—continuity—plays the same role in blogging as it does in the mainstream media. Once a story makes it through the gate, it is likely to continue to make it through the gate. Many examples exist on each blog of previous references to specific issues or products that have received notice or commentary in the past.

The sixth factor—clarity or lack of ambiguity—plays an insignificant role in the blogosphere. Ongoing debate plays a significant role for bloggers. Therefore, a lack of clarity and a large dose of ambiguity—the opposite of what is important for gatekeepers—allow for the bloggers to continue on.

The seventh factor—consonance—means that expected events are likely to pass through media gates. This factor plays almost no role in the blogging sites studied. In fact, the unexpected nature of events provides much more interesting material for the blogosphere than the expected events of a city council meeting or a sports score.

The eighth factor—composition—plays an important role for traditional gatekeeping because news organizations, such as newspapers, magazines, and broadcast outlets have finite space and time to present the material. The Internet has unlimited space. The overall composition of a blog site has little bearing on content, primarily because the blogs often do not attempt to provide the full range of information that the mainstream media do.<sup>19</sup>

The generally accepted newsroom practices of accuracy, fairness, and objectivity demonstrate the significant divergence between the mainstream media and blogs. Accuracy, however, is important to many bloggers, primarily because the Internet has a self-correcting feature to it. Bloggers routinely make corrections to stories or amplify a point of view by linking to another blog or a story from the media. Moreover, these blogs all encourage contributions and comment through which corrections are easily made.

Fairness and objectivity are demonstrably different on the ten blog sites studied—an accurate representation of the blogosphere at large—than mainstream media. For the

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<sup>19</sup>Galtung, J., & Ruge, M.

most part, these bloggers take a particular point of view to present and discuss that point of view with their readers. Furthermore, there is no differentiation between news reports and opinion, as outlined in the American Society of Managing Editors' code.

It is interesting to note that bloggers often represent a view of an earlier period in U.S. journalism and the current trend in much of European journalism, where opinion is valued over simple factual news reports. In the case of the United States, that period was known as the era of the partisan press, which existed before and after the Revolutionary War. In fact, that era created some of the most memorable examples of informational writing, such as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*.

The blogosphere does tend toward criticism and analysis of specific viewpoints, particularly in the political blogs studied in this paper. Take, for example, The Daily Kos's posted response to a *USA Today* story about military recruiters attempting to influence parents to help enlist their children:

I wouldn't be half the person I am today without my military service. I used to always say I'd want my children to follow in my footsteps.

But that was before we made a habit of unprovoked wars of aggression.

The best way to talk parents into letting their children join the service? Stop using them as cannon fodder in unnecessary [sic] wars waged for political expediency [sic]. You see, in wars like Bush's, the bodybags [sic] don't seem worth the sacrifice to your average parent.

But hey, if the Army and Marines want a heck of a PR score to encourage parents to sacrifice their children, here's how to do it. It's a guaranteed winner:

Have the Bushes -- all of them with military-aged children and grandchildren—ship their kids off to basic training.<sup>20</sup>

Conservative Charles Johnson, the author of little green footballs, attacks Kos for

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<sup>20</sup>Zúniga, M. (2005, April 7). Message posted to <http://www.dailykos.com>

his stance toward the deaths of four mercenaries in Iraq. He wrote:

Markos relentlessly disparaged the four brave Americans who were burned alive and dismembered in Fallujah, calling them “mercenaries” over and over, and cloaking himself in concern for “the men and women in uniform.” Here’s a reminder of the kind of people those four really were—the kind of people who died for the country that gave Markos the ability to pay off his credit cards: Army Vets, Ex-SEAL Among 4 Killed in Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

When the bloggers are not attacking one another, the conservative and liberal bloggers among the ten sites surveyed here often turn to criticism of the mainstream media. Again, this technique harkens back to an earlier era of U.S. journalism, the period in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century before World War I when investigative journalists, known as muckrakers, analyzed business practices, labor misdeeds, and public graft. Although the bloggers may not use traditional investigative techniques, commentary on existing data often plays a fundamental role in the blogs studied in this paper.

For example, Duncan Black, the author of Eschaton, attacks the mainstream media for allowing conservative Christians to gain the upper hand in a debate over Justice Anthony Kennedy of the U.S. Supreme Court:

For too long the mainstream media has either ignored these people, marginalized them as kooks, or mainstreamed them by having them on while ignoring their creepier beliefs/statements/pasts.

I think one reason (and there [sic] others) for this is that by cloaking their wingnuttery [Note: a reference to conservatives] in religion they shield themselves from criticism. They've fought long and hard to make sure we know that in this overwhelmingly Christian country, anti-Christian bigotry is the number one problem. The media just will not go there.<sup>22</sup>

Johnson of little green footballs plays particular attention to Middle East events.

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<sup>21</sup>Johnson, C. (2005, April 10). Message posted to <http://littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog>

<sup>22</sup>Black, D. (2005, April 7) Message posted to <http://atrios.blogspot.com>

He quotes for a dispatch about a video showing Iraqis killing a U.S. airman whose plane had crashed in April 2005:

...The survivor then tries to walk, limping with his back to the **insurgents**, who then say something to him that makes him turn around.

He raises his hands to somebody off camera as if gesturing to them to stop what they are about to do.

The **militants** open fire, continuing to shoot him after he fell to the ground as someone shouts “**Allahu Akbar**.”<sup>23</sup>

Johnson clearly detests what has happened, but he also criticizes the way in which the U.S. media have covered the incident:

One of the worst things about this story: mainstream media’s reflexive excuses for these foul murderers. Look at the highlighted words above, and consider the subject matter. This is why LGF has a recurring topic titled **The Media Are The Enemy**.<sup>24</sup>

In another approach, Ana Marie Cox of *Wonkette* uses satire, creating her own awards for the Washington press corps dubbed “The Inside the Bubble Washington Journalism Awards.”

In her blog, Cox awarded two to Elizabeth Bumiller of *The New York Times*: The Sam Donaldson Award for Most Overrated and Big Diva. “Why? Also voted ‘Most Likely to Mentions Where She Works in First Five Minutes of Conversation,’” she writes. She also provides the award for being the laziest to everyone.<sup>25</sup>

Even though some mainstream journalists seemed concerned about the growing influence of blogs and their sometimes vitriolic attacks, other writers think the development is good. Keep in mind, that bloggers have been responsible for attacking CBS’s Dan Rather, CNN’s Eason Jordan, *The New York Times*’s Howell Raines, and

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<sup>23</sup>Johnson, C. (2005, April 21). Message posted to <http://littlegreenfootballs.com>

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Cox, A. (2005, April 29). Message posted to <http://www.wonkette.com>

others. As Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post* notes:

The rise of the blogosphere remains one of the most exciting communications developments in decades, giving ordinary folks the chance to bite back at a media establishment widely viewed as arrogant. It's little surprise that mainstream media types don't like being questioned, challenged and chided by critics typing from their basements and bedrooms.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusions

It is noteworthy that Kurtz, one of the most influential critics in the mainstream media, understands the growing influence of the blogs. As outlined here, it is apparent that blogs have taken upon some of the standard characteristics of the media, while, in some cases, returning to the roots of the partisan press of an earlier era in U.S. journalism.

To return to the basic questions raised in this paper, to what degree do blogs play a role in agenda setting? At times, blogs establish agendas. For the most part, however, the blogs react to the agendas set by the mainstream media and those who create and make the news, such as politicians.

Second, to what degree do blogs play a role in framing important issues? Here blogs can play a central role, particularly within established political camps and among specific readers of what the important aspects of the issues may be. Blogs play the role of dissectors and expanders of the agendas by framing debate over current events, primarily on the political blogs about U.S. domestic and international issues.

Third, to what degree do blogs adhere to generally accepted journalistic practices, including accuracy, fairness, and objectivity? It is somewhat ironic that blogs tend to

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<sup>26</sup>Kurtz, H. (2005, April 18). For every story, an online epilogue. *The Washington Post*. C01.

correct errors more quickly and perhaps more frequently than the mainstream media. At the same time, however, blogs often reject the mainstream media's preoccupation with fairness and objectivity. Blogs usually present a point of view with the ability of readers to respond and react to that viewpoint. Whatever the case, it is the author's firm belief that blogs have provided people with an ability to interpret and discuss the issues of the day in a far more expansive and engaging way than when the mainstream media dominated the news. As a result, the Internet has enabled individuals to assume more control over what they read, what is said, and how that information is interpreted in the public sphere.

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