

News Blogs, Mainstream News and News Agendas¹

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Introduction

This chapter examines the role of news blogs in the process of news production focusing specifically on their capacity to set the agenda in relation to the mainstream news media. While there have been a number of high profile cases where blogs appear to have had a major role in bringing new issues to the news agenda or shaping the coverage of an existing issue, an important question that such cases raise is how far they are simply exceptional or can they be seen as signaling an emerging and increasingly prominent role for blogs in news reporting? In order to explore this question this chapter examines news blogs in light of agenda-setting theory. In particular we ask how blogs can be understood in terms of theories of first- and second-order agenda-setting and formulate a series of propositions regarding the circumstances that appear to be associated with blogs' effectiveness in this regard. We then examine a series of cases in which blogs played a prominent role in shaping news agenda in light of our expectations to establish how far such success can be explained through the lens of agenda-setting. Based on our findings we conclude by proposing a new classificatory scheme that seeks to distinguish news blogs in terms of their relationship to the mainstream news media.

The rise and rise of the blogosphere

The explosion in the number of 'weblogs' (now commonly truncated to blogs) in recent years is a well-documented phenomenon. Recent figures from *Technorati*, the online monitor of blogs, show there to be close to 90 million in existence (25/07/07) with 120,000 new sites being created worldwide every day (The Guardian 07/04/07: 31). Advances in the 'user-friendliness' of blogging software during the late 1990s and particularly the launch of *blogger.com* in 1999 did much to promote this growth, moving the practice from a small highly IT-literate elite to the domain of 'everyman'. This shift in the locus and ease of blog production also changed the nature and practice itself. In their initial incarnation blogs were rather simple creatures consisting of a set of annotated hyperlinks and little else. Certainly the site of Jorn Barger who is said to have coined the phrase 'weblog' in 1997 in reference to his own site, *robotwisdom*, typified this minimalist approach, comprising little more than a list or log of the web pages he found interesting (Du and Wagner, 2006).

Taking this definition as a starting point, observers have gone on to argue that the first weblog actually pre-dates Barger, belonging to the Web founder, Tim Berners-Lee, who in 1991, listed new websites on a dynamic web page at CERN (Auty, 2005; Winer (1999). Prior to the turn of the millennium, however, it was clear that blogging had taken on a new form, with 'filter' type blogs rapidly superseded by a newer 'free-style' mode that centred on individual self-expression and personal journal keeping (Blood, 1998)

This proliferation and re-fashioning of the so-called blogosphere has meant producing a definitive description of a blog or the practice of blogging something of a moving target. Certain features do appear to recur among the descriptions provided by leading writers in the field, however. Pacquet (2003), for instance, itemizes a range of central characteristics or traits that identify a blog including personal editorship by the owner/creator, the inclusion of hyperlinks, regular updates, free public access and maintenance of a postings archive.

Along similar lines, Coleman (2005) defines a blog as "...a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal (or log) for an individual...[that is] updated daily, providing an ongoing account of the beliefs, discoveries and personality of the author." (274). Drezner and Farrell (2004) similarly emphasize the commentary and links components of blogs along with periodic updating and entries being presented in reverse chronological order.

The importance of chronology or timing in blogs is underscored by Hopkins and Matheson (2006) in their study of the NZ election blogs which they describe as 'online diaries' or "webpages which are regularly updated, with the most recent material appearing at the top, usually date-stamped."(94). Lawson-Borders and Kirk (2005) also describe them as 'online diaries' in which "information is electronically posted, updated frequently, and presented in reverse chronological order" with the added dimension (compared to print media) that they allow responses from readers (p.548). Of course there are some areas of disagreement that arise such as whether presence of a blogroll or a 'trackback' facility is required, or if multiple authors can write a blog, Furukawa et al (2006) for instance note that 'one blog is updated by one user'.

Parallel to this increasing focus on identifying what unites blogs have been continuing attempts to categorise them. Following Blood's (1998) basic distinction

between filter and journal-style blogs, Krishnamurthy (2002) offered a four category schema that divided blogs according to two criteria – their individual vs. community orientation and topical vs. personal focus. Highly personalized and individualized blogs are largely the free-style journals identified by Blood and the highly individualized and topical ones - the filter blogs, Additionally the typology included space for highly personalized, community-based blogs (friends/social networks group blog) and more topical community blogs. Actual examples of these latter types proved somewhat thin on the ground however.

Subsequent work by Herring et al (2005) confirmed this predominance of filter and particularly personalized journal-style blogs in an empirical analysis of randomly selected blogs from a blog tracking site, although a new category - k-logs – was proposed, these being corporate and project-specific blogs. More recently the list has been expanded yet further to include a range of more topically oriented blogs such as warblogs, campaign blogs (run by politicians, their supporters and opponents), legal blogs (discussing developments in law and legislation), science and technology blogs, disseminating information to user communities and, of course, news blogs, focusing largely on politics and current affairs (Gordon-Murnane, 2006).

The development of news blogs

Defined as ‘Web logs dedicated to the dissemination of news’ (MacDougall, 2005: 575), the first reported use of a blog as part of a breaking news story appears to have occurred in the *Charlotte Observer’s* coverage of Hurricane Bonnie in 1998 (Dube, 2004; Singer, 2005). The events of September 11th 2001, however, probably did most raise the profile of blogging in relation to news reporting. The dramatic quality and unprecedented scale of the disaster fueled public hunger for regularly updates and the mainstream media struggled to cope. The internet provided an alternative platform for reportage by those caught up in the events, offering a more direct and immediate channel of communication to those seeking information about the tragedy.

Arguably the next key landmark for news blogs was the U.S. Presidential election of 2004 which saw an explosion in the practice with candidates and journalists, as well as a number of amateur independents introducing blogs to their home pages and official

news sites (Lawson-Borders and Kirk, 2005; see also PoliticsOnline's Netpulse 2004 'Year of the Blog'). The election also provided the setting for one of the most talked about blogging news 'coups' to date, the so-called 'Rather-gate' scandal which led to the early retirement of one of America's most revered broadcasters, CBS anchorman Dan Rather. In this case bloggers effectively challenged the authenticity of documents that Rather had presented on air that 'proved' President Bush had lied about his National Guard service. A subsequent internal enquiry by the news organization, corroborated the opinions of a number of 'expert' bloggers, confirmed the documents were fraudulent and led to the dismissal of several CBS newsroom employees, including the story's producer.

This apparent growing influence of blogs in shaping the news agenda has, not surprisingly, spawned increasing efforts by academics to characterize and assess their place within wider journalistic practices and processes of news production, dissemination and consumption. These efforts have generally taken one of five basic approaches: (1) a series of detailed case studies of high profile news events featuring blogs such as the Rather incident (Allan, 2006; Thelwall and Stuart, 2007; Kivikuru, 2006); (2) in-depth accounts of various individual news blogs (Matheson, 2004); (3) analysis of a sample of news blogs within traditional news organisations (Singer, 2005; Robinson, 2006); (4) attempts to theorise and categorise news blogs vis-à-vis one another (MacDougall, 2005) or in relation to online journalism more generally (Deuze, 2003); and finally (5) attempts to place news blogs in the wider democratic sphere and assess their implications for increasing public knowledge and citizen involvement in politics. (Coleman 2005).

While these analyses have yielded somewhat different insights into the function and significance of news blogs, a common theme running through them, either implicitly or explicitly, is the need to interpret them in the context of the mainstream news media. In particular, most accounts seem to point toward a dependency of news blogs on mainstream news media for their notoriety and contents. Thus, although protagonists might see news blogging as a new style of journalism bringing power to the people and new issues to the fore, many of the most influential early blogs were produced by professional journalists or political insiders seeking to free themselves from the editorial shackles of mainstream newsrooms or central party HQ. Indeed, in terms of content, as

Thelwall and Stuart (2007) revealed in their analysis of blog coverage of several major crisis events in 2005, postings focused largely on mainstream news media reports (538).

While there has been much discussion of the inter-dependence of blogs and the established news media, to date there has been a lack of systematic empirical or theoretical attempts to unpick exactly how this relationship works. It is, therefore, the goal of this chapter to explore and detail the relationship between blogs and the mainstream news media in a more formalized way. In particular, we are interested in the extent to which blogs can really be seen to occupy an agenda-setting function and act as news producers in their own right. Thus, before going on to consider the evidence for blogs as agenda-setters, therefore, we first re-visit the origins and meaning of agenda-setting.

The Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting is employed as a departure point for the interpretation of existing findings on the role of the blogosphere in the news production process and the shaping of the media agenda. A key objective is to draw some first inferences regarding the power of blogs to challenge the status of mainstream news journalism.

There has been much debate about agenda-setting that has centred on conceptual issues concerning how to define the term 'agenda,' the meaning of agenda-setting, and the different levels at which it can potentially be measured (Edelstein, 1993; Kosicki, 1993; Rogers, Dearing & Bregman, 1993). Some writers have also helpfully differentiated different sub-areas of agenda setting (Rogers et al., 1993).

In their original analysis, McCombs and Shaw (1972) were concerned primarily with the public agenda. This type of analysis examines the extent to which the issues perceived as important by members of the public are the ones that received the most coverage in the news media. Then, there is policy agenda which entails the study of which issues are of current significance to governments, public bodies or elected officials (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). An important question that emerges in this case is about the extent to which the policy agenda becomes a media agenda. Finally, there are studies of the media agenda, which involve the investigation of the selection of news stories for coverage and the kinds of emphasis they receive. In many studies, attempts are made

directly to link the media agenda to the public agenda. However, some research is concerned also, or exclusively, with elucidating the different factors that can underpin the media agenda.

In its original formulation, agenda-setting focused on links between the media agenda and the public agenda and was conceptualised as the analysis of how the media, through their coverage of topics or stories, could effectively tell the public what to think about. This was the basic agenda-setting hypothesis put forward by McCombs and Shaw (1972) in their seminal study. As the research literature in this area evolved, however, recognition was given to a different form of agenda-setting in which media content – most especially news content – could also tell people *how* to think about particular objects of coverage (McCombs, 1992; McCombs & Shaw, 1993). Thus, the news media could raise the salience of an issue, which could then become translated into a public perception of the current importance of that issue.

Selection and salience are therefore fundamental in the agenda-setting process, underlining also the way the news *frames* a story (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). This additional level of agenda-setting is encapsulated in the so-called ‘two-level agenda setting’. In the domain of traditional agenda-setting effects or first-level agenda-setting, the media agenda is defined by a set of objects. These objects have a variety of characteristics and traits, which are then emphasised selectively in what can be described as a second-level agenda-setting process. This distinction is useful in unfolding the different components of the agenda-setting function in which the role and impact of blogs could be located as well.

In our discussion of blogs, we are concerned with the (news) media agenda and its interaction with the ‘blog agenda’. This interaction may generate a cascading effect upon the public agenda, whereby the blog agenda is assumed initially to influence the mainstream news media agenda, which, in turn, impacts upon public perceptions of news issues. Another possibility the chapter examines is the direct impact of the ‘blog agenda’ upon the public agenda, by-passing the mainstream news media.

Based on the key components of the agenda-setting process, the following sections reflect an attempt to re-conceptualise existing theoretical and empirical evidence of the role and status of the blogosphere in the news making process. Hence, through the

theoretical formulation of three roles, named here as the news *originator*, *resuscitator* or *re-framer*, this chapter seeks to evaluate the prominence of blogs as influential news sources and offer some insight into their role in the future of newspapers and print journalism in its entirety.

Blogs and First-Level Agenda-Setting: The News *Originator*

As the number of news-related blogs grows and new evidence of their use and consumption among both journalists and citizens emerges, various theoretical assumptions are formulated predicting a drastic influence induced by this new form of journalism on mainstream media and often being discussed with reference to agenda setting theories as well.

The suggested impact falls within the notion of first-level agenda-setting, with blogs functioning as *originators* of the objects covered by mainstream media. Relevant to this concept, Brosius and Weinman (1996) approached agenda-setting through the prism of the two-step flow model in which opinion leaders mediate between journalists and the publics. They linked the two-step flow to agenda-setting research, arguing that agenda-setting is a process in which influential individuals ‘collect, diffuse, filter, and promote the flow of information’. This could ultimately be the right description of journalistically-focused blogs, which can change the agenda-setting question from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues bloggers tell the media they want to think about.

Along similar lines, Drezner and Farrell (2004) have suggested that if a critical number of elite blogs raise a particular story, it can attract the interest of mainstream media outlets. If the mainstream media therefore construct focal points through which political actors must operate, the blogosphere has the capacity to construct focal points through which mainstream media operate. If blogs generate a consensus about a particular issue, this acts as a barometer of interest and opinion on the issue. The media will be affected by that consensus in the same way that the mass public is affected by the media.

In addition, Branum (2001) identified the blogging phenomenon as a form of hybrid between interpersonal and mass communication, in which case the blogging community could define the parameters of discussion on those issues that the mainstream

media avoid, setting the agenda for their readership on certain topics (Klopfenstein 2001, in Branum, 2001).

Effectively, the potential role of blogs as originators of the news agenda could revolutionise the journalistic process as a whole, creating scope for the so-called ‘citizen journalism’ to materialise. However, the above are mostly theoretically based observations elaborated with limited or no empirical data. A key reason for this might be that the opportunities for blogs to originate news seem to be limited to circumstances in which mainstream news media’s capacity to cover a news story is compromised in one way or another. Moments when blogs become originators of news are often linked to circumstances such as limits in mainstream media’s communication capacity (as for US online news providers in the immediate wake of 9/11), the speed and location of the new event (as in the Asian tsunami of 2004), or the difficulty and danger of getting to important event locations. The wars in Afghanistan and particularly Iraq provide some of the best known examples of circumstances that have provided a niche for blogs to become news originators, not least a variety of “soldier blogs” or “miliblogs”, but also blogs from locals caught up in the conflict.

Among the best known war-related blogs was ‘Where’s Raed?’ produced by the “Baghdad blogger” - “Salam Pax”. Pax’s blog accounts of daily life during the war, gave a degree of eyewitness detail that Western journalists, embedded or otherwise, simply were not able to provide at the time. Interestingly, Pax’s blog was intended as a personal diary for a friend in Jordan, and not as an explicit attempt to influence news and/or public agendas. Similarly, many soldier blogs were also started for reasons other than to influence news and public discourses, for instance, that of US GI Colby Buzzell (Kline & Burstein, 2005). What made these blogs end up standing out was, at least in part, their being picked up by mainstream news media outlets extensively monitoring the web alongside their more conventional newsgathering techniques.

Questions regarding the degree of dependence of news blog authorship and content on the mainstream media organisations could render the originator’s role, outside of circumstances limiting mainstream media’s capacity to cover issues and events which create opportunities for originating news, an unrealistic conception. However, examining evidence concerning the status of blog authors and content through the agenda-setting

prism can ultimately lead to the formation of two additional potential roles of the blogosphere: the *resuscitator* and the *re-framer*.

Blogs and Inter-Media Agenda-Setting: The News *Resuscitator*

Perhaps a more realistic approach to the role of blogs as mainstream media agenda setters can be obtained through the further unfolding of the agenda-setting theory and the pattern of news coverage that defines the media agenda in the first place. McCombs (2005) referred to the norms and traditions of journalism, the interactions among news organizations and interactions of journalists with sources and their agendas as the ‘intermedia agenda setting’, in other words, the influence of the news media on each other (McCombs, 2005: 548-549).

The role of blogs as part of an inter-media agenda-setting process could be verified through evidence that media elites – editors, publishers, reporters, and columnists – are regular consumers of blogs. *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman gave a lengthy interview to one blog, in which he discussed the blogs that he read on a daily basis (Drum, 2003, in Drezner, 2004, p.14). Other opinion columnists, including Michael Barone, Walter Shapiro, and Fareed Zakaria, have indicated that blogs form a part of their routine information-gathering activities. Prominent political reporters and editors at the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *ABC News*, *New Yorker*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* have also made similar statements (Smolkin, 2004; Packer, 2004; Eosen, 2004).

In line with McCombs, who argues it is the popularity and wide use of blogs among journalists themselves that could yield an agenda-setting role on the media agenda (2005: 549), the empirical evidence from online authors points towards an inter-media agenda setting role. In this case, the potential impact of blogs on the mainstream agenda could be assessed as the power of journalists [and other prominent bloggers] to re-build the media agenda and, free from the constraints of journalistic professionalism, return to and *resuscitate* past news items. A key ingredient of this function lies in the expertise that journalist-bloggers can provide on substantive issues. As Drezner argues, general interest intermediaries in the media suffer a deficit of specialised knowledge. He suggested that ‘blogs can serve as repository of “local knowledge” for relevant policy issues or current

event histories' that mainstream media reporters can use when the issue in question emerges as a news topic again (Drezner, 2004: 16).

Locating news blogs as a component of the inter-media agenda-setting process is encouraged by established theoretical assumptions and empirical evidence as well. From a theory-driven perspective, Bennett (2003) conceived of new media technologies being utilised extensively for political activism through outlets he called 'micro media' (such as pressure group websites, and political discussion fora); whilst mainstream news media outlets were 'macro media', providing the primary sites of mainstream political reporting and discussion. Bennett saw blogs as sitting somewhere in between these, as 'middle media', sometimes bridging the gap between the mainstream and alternative/underground media (Bennett, 2003), a process that resembles the interaction among journalists, sources and other external news agenda-setters defined as inter-media agenda-setting by McCombs.

The resuscitation role of blogs has been illustrated by the part they have played in the coverage of major political scandals. In one well-documented case, blogs kept alive a story that finally resulted in the resignation of the prominent US political figure Senator Trent Lott, who was Senate Majority Leader. In a speech to celebrate the 100th birthday of Senator Strom Thurmond, Lott endorsed racist sentiments attributed to Thurmond to an audience that included journalists from the major news media. Only one newsroom (ABC News) picked up the story, however, and even then gave it only passing coverage.

The story might have been forgotten but for the fact that it was subsequently followed up by ABC News' own blog, *The Note*. This gave rise to much 'blog chatter.' The chatter reached a crescendo further helped by additional postings by *The Note*. Within a matter of a few days the mainstream news media picked up the story again, after Lott himself had issued a public apology for his remarks. Even President George W. Bush was drawn into the story and expressed disappointment about Lott's comments. The story reached such a pitch that in the end Lott was forced to withdraw from his position as Senate Majority Leader. This outcome was trumpeted as a significant 'result' for blogging that placed centrally on the news agenda a story that the major news media had initially chosen to ignore.

On a general basis, it emerges that, in the context of current affairs journalism in particular, blogs become increasingly normalised as a communication format (e.g., Kerbal and Bloom, 2005); with any potential impact of news blogs on the mainstream media agenda being filtered through journalists' use and consumption. This normalisation process was among the findings of Singer's (2005) study, which provided evidence of the dominance of experienced journalists in the production and dissemination of blog content. The study examined 10 national news blogs in the USA and 10 regional/local blogs published within mainstream media news outlets, in an attempt to derive some general principles of their status as journalism. Looking quantitatively at political news blogs in particular, Singer examined the existence and extent of journalists' opinions, of 'user-generated content' (such as reader comments, or readers being able to post new articles), and the extent of links (Singer, 2005, p.182).

The findings suggested to Singer that within mainstream media blogs are undergoing a 'normalizing' process (Singer, 2005, p.192) in which it is mostly journalists that retain control of the news medium and incorporate blogs into established practices. Combined with the fact that four-fifths of the examined sites contained links and around three-quarters of these were to mainstream media outlets (Singer, 2005, p.187), Singer's findings demonstrated a strong interconnection between political news blogs and journalists. This can be indicative of blogs' position in the inter-media agenda-setting circle and as a platform where news items can be re-accessed and re-assessed by journalists themselves before they re-appear on the mainstream news agenda. In effect, the increasing normalisation of news blogs within the structure of mainstream media renders their role as resuscitators a more realistic approach than that of the originator.

Blogs and Second-Level Agenda-Setting: The News *Re-framer*

A key constituent in the emerging role of blogs as resuscitators is the status of the author, with journalists and elite bloggers being the key players in this intermediate agenda-setting function. The suggestion made here is that looking at the type of content provided by blogs, yet independent of the author, can give rise to an additional function that blogs operate in the agenda-setting process. In this case, the content that news blogs

traditionally disseminate can generate a direct impact on public perceptions and focus of public attention.

In relation to the impact of blogs on the public agenda, a central assumption that has emerged is that the introduction of myriad online news sources and channels has resulted in a highly fragmented audience and the generation of multiple personal agendas (McCombs, 2005). In this landscape blogs are seen as highly individualised news sources composed by a selection of links, online news and information. They turn into personal agendas leading to the fragmentation of the public agenda and the dispersal of public attention. From this standpoint, blogs could, in theory, define the issues the public thinks about through a first-level agenda-setting process. This phenomenon could imply an indirect impact on mainstream media agenda as well. As Branum (2001) argued, the fragmentation of the public agenda triggered by the multiplication of news outlets could result in the decline in the power of mainstream media. However, such an impact is debatable considering that readership on the Web and in the blogosphere is highly concentrated with many of the popular news sites and/or blogs being subsidiaries of established traditional media.

Data released on 17 January 2007 by media measurement company Nielsen//NetRatings showed an increased readership particularly among the visitors to blog sites affiliated with the largest U.S Internet newspapers , rising to 3.8 million in December 2006 from 1.2 million a year earlier (Reuters, 17/01/2007). Such findings are suggestive of the centrality of mainstream media in relation to audience readership preferences in the bologosphere. Thus, a potential blog influence on the public agenda could be seen as a consequence of the distinctive content and framing offered by blogs about existing news items, rather than as a consequence of the selection of news items to be discussed. In this case, blogs can influence the public's understanding of the news through the attribute promotion of objects and news items, already in the mainstream media agenda.

One prominent case that illustrates the way blogs can act to re-frame a story has gone down in the annals as the 'Rathergate Affair'. Here, bloggers claimed primary credit for the early retirement of revered, veteran CBS news broadcaster Dan Rather. This case involved a story produced by CBS News and read by Rather during the 2004 presidential

election campaign. It concerned the authenticity of memos acquired by CBS that allegedly presented evidence that President Bush had lied about his National Guard service. The authenticity of these memos was called into question by a blogger whose initial post on the matter was quickly reinforced by evidence and insights from other bloggers, many of whom had relevant expertise in such matters. These bloggers argued that the memos displayed by CBS appeared to be forgeries. The blog chatter was picked up by the *Washington Post* that immediately gave the story more weight and credibility. CBS eventually bowed to the pressure from expert critics in the blogosphere, backed up by other mainstream news coverage and conceded that the memos were not authentic. Following an internal enquiry, CBS dismissed several newsroom employees, including the story's producer, and Rather announced he would be stepping down a year earlier than he had originally planned.

The emerging predominance of information in the form of commentary and analysis renders the blogosphere a platform where bloggers could not only revisit and resuscitate news items but *re-frame* them as well, re-distributing focal points for public attention. Blogs could then be seen as integral parts of the journalistic and news making process, not necessarily as a domain for original news reporting; but as sources of opinion, analysis and discussion, contributing in the development of a more open and interactive form of journalism.

Evidence of this distinctive content provided by blogs in relation to current news items emerges from a number of studies that have attempted to explore the nature of blogs. An analysis conducted by Matheson (2005) of *The Guardian* weblog looked at aspects of 'layout, style, voice, textual coherence and forms of hypertext reference...by implicitly contrasting these with the textual practice of Anglo-American print news' (Matheson, 2005, pp.447-8). Matheson assessed the blog's content as responding to news media 'along three dimensions: the establishment of a different interpersonal relation, of a different authority and of a journalism focused upon connection rather than fact' (Matheson, 2005, p.453). Although, as Matheson suggested, 'the weblog is grounded in traditional notions of the role of the journalist' (p.460), the information output it provides tends to complement rather than replace traditional media's news. The nature of this output could then operate a form of salience transfer in relation to the

attributes of the items placed on the media agenda, leading to second-level agenda setting effects on public perceptions.

Along similar lines, Robinson's (2006) study of 130 blogs published within mainstream news media outlets in the USA identified seven different forms of news blog. These included 'a reporter's notebook of news tidbits and incidentals; a straight column or opinion for the Web; a question-and-answer format by editors; a readership forum; a confessional diary written by the reporter about his or her beat; a round-up of news summaries that promote the publication; and a rumour-mill blog that the report uses as an off-the-record account' (Robinson, 2006, pp.69-70). These forms are also indicative of an attempt to comment on, evaluate and even re-frame existing news, which Robinson describes as the emergence of a post-modern 'nonlinear and interactive' form of journalism. This involves breaking the boundaries of conventional news reporting through features like first person narration, contradictions, speculation and so on (Robinson, 2006, p.80). Moreover, studies that have looked at the position of blogs within wider news media coverage of specific events, especially large scale crises, have also shown that 'news' blogs essentially provide distinctive kinds of content that relate to, comment on, interrogate and analyse information already on mainstream media news (Thelwall and Stuart, 2007; Kivikuru, 2006).

The reliance of blogs on mainstream news media and the distinctive types of information they disseminate is therefore suggestive of news blogs' attempt to perform a 'news repair' through commentary, opinion and criticism of the news items already in the media agenda. The re-framing process involved in these blog activities could offer new focal points for the public's attention regarding news events promoted by the mainstream media agenda.

The idea of the blogs' role within the context of second-level agenda setting could be reinforced through research findings from the study of non-mainstream media blogs. In particular, Wall (2005) conducted a content analysis of non-mainstream blogs during the Iraq War in 2003 focusing explicitly on the nature of the news content in blogs produced by a variety of sources. Looking at the narrative style of reporting in the examined blogs, she described blog news as 'personal, opinionated [and] one-sided', promoting a personal outlook that is a key characteristic of how they frame [or reframe]

the news. It was also suggested that blogs presented stories in an open, incomplete and fragmented form giving audiences the possibility to follow links that could transfer them to different views. Moreover, there was no indication of the writers taking a more neutral stance and tailoring their messages to appeal to the greater audience, while they were also not afraid to offend others or would include information about themselves (Wall, 2005, p.162). Wall suggested the emergence of a so-called 'post-modern' journalism, highlighting the key differences between the content provided by mainstream media and blogs, and creating scope to locate news blogs in the agenda-setting process as potential initiators of public agenda effects, triggered through the reframing of the mainstream media agenda.

The Nature of Links between Blogs and the News Mainstream

The three approaches discussed in the preceding sections sought to offer a more systematic organisation of the existing knowledge of blogs as components of the production and dissemination of news and of the routes through which their influential power could be evaluated. The evidence used in this analysis, regarding the alleged influence of news blogs on the mainstream news agenda, has depended mostly upon case studies associated with specific news stories. These stories have tended to comprise challenges and alternative views on stories released in the mainstream, stories initiated as exclusives by bloggers themselves, or stories that have been dropped by the mainstream media and then rejuvenated by bloggers (Allan, 2006). Although some high profile stories have served to underline the significant impact that independent bloggers can have on the biggest news media, it is less clear whether this remains an unusual occurrence or whether it is becoming more normative. What we also need to know, however, is whether news blogs have become a part of the normative news environment and represent sources with which mainstream news organizations maintain regular links. Or is news agenda-setting via blogs still an unusual phenomenon?

One exploratory attempt to shed light on this question was undertaken by the authors in a project funded by the Nuffield Foundation that investigated the online information flow links between the news web sites of mainstream news organizations (broadcast and print) in the UK, sites operated by independent bloggers, and sites operated by

professional journalists who worked for major media organizations (Gunter, Gibson, Campbell, Touri & Ackland, 2009). The research utilized web crawler software that could measure the volume of communication links between different web sites and the direction in which information flowed between them over pre-designated time periods (see Ackland, 2005; Ackland & Gibson, 2004; Ackland, O'Neil, Standish & Buchhorn, 2006).

This research was an exploratory study that was conducted to test a methodology for examining links between independent news bloggers and the news mainstream. It was conducted entirely within the online world, on a limited time scale and with UK seed site samples. The authors' eventual aim is to expand this work to a larger and international scale.

The analysis began with the selection of three seed sets of mainstream news media sites, blogs associated with major news media and operated by professional journalists affiliated to major news organizations, and independent news bloggers who had no affiliation with major news organizations. An initial set of 18 mainstream news media sites selected on the basis of online traffic data. A further set of 20 independent news blogs was also selected on the same basis.

The online web site mapping software was used to conduct an initial crawl of the mainstream news media sites. This analysis found the each of these seed sets linked to thousands on other sites, among which were a number of blogs produced by journalists who worked for major news organizations. To create more manageable sets of data, the seed sets were reduced to the top five sites in each category. URLs were page grouped to further reduce the overall numbers of sites. Further crawls were then run with all three seed sets. These revealed that mainstream news media sites and blogs operated by professional journalists associated with major news organizations occupied larger networks (3000+ sites each) than did the independent news blogs (2,500 sites).

The networks were further reduced to more manageable sizes by excluding less well-connected sites. This analysis revealed that independent news blogs linked mostly to other sites within their own category and relatively rarely to sites of mainstream news organizations or blogs run by professional journalists who worked for major newspapers or news broadcasters. The blogs of professional journalists affiliated to major news

organizations in contrast linked evenly to independent news bloggers, the sites of major news organizations, and to the sites of other affiliated professional journalists, as well as to a catch-all miscellaneous ‘Other’ category.

The sites of major news organizations exhibited most links to ‘Other’ sites (e.g., operated by government departments, political parties, politicians, regulators, commercial organizations and other institutional web sites) followed by links to independent news bloggers.

In general, it emerged that independent news bloggers appeared to work harder to establish links to other sites of all kinds, while the sites of mainstream news media had many other sites linking to them, indicating that they had authority as news sources. Independent news bloggers linked out to other independent bloggers more than they did to mainstream news media or the blogs operated by affiliated professional journalists. The blogs of affiliated professional journalists were linked *to* mainly by ‘Other’ sites and by independent news bloggers, and linked *out* mostly to the sites of major news media and to selected independent bloggers. The sites of the major news media were linked *to* mostly by ‘Other’ and by independent bloggers, with little evidence of links *out* emerging.

This research was an exploratory study that was conducted to test a methodology for examining links between independent news bloggers and the news mainstream. It was conducted entirely within the online world, on a limited time scale and with UK seed site samples. The authors’ eventual aim is to expand this work to a larger and international scale.

The evidence that emerged from this initial study indicated that independent news bloggers and mainstream news organizations are connected. At least within the context of the wider Web the mainstream news media appear to be the more dominant and authoritative voices of online news. Within the smaller online sphere of news producers, however, online communication linkage patterns show the major news media are more likely to direct their readers to information posted in the independent blogosphere than the latter are to link into the mainstream sources (either news sites or blogs). As such, the findings of this preliminary empirical study lend some support to the idea of an independent news blogosphere as a somewhat separate if not equal source of news

content to the mainstream media. While news blogs may receive a lot of attention and potentially traffic from the likes of the Guardian, Times and BBC, they occupy their own densely populated networks and display a preference for one linking to one another over and above the bigger news producing sites. The notion of the blogs generating a ‘buzz’ and alternative agenda outside of the domain of regular news reporting would seem to be a credible way of interpreting its influence, therefore, according at least to these early data.

Conclusions

Many of the conceptual considerations of the impact of blogs on news are normatively concentrated on the question of whether blogs are significantly altering the nature of news and journalism. Much hyperbole exists on both sides from those relishing the perceived undermining of mainstream news media and their failings, to those concerned about the undermining of the professional processes and standards of “proper” journalism by the activities of untrained and unthinking amateurs. Trying to test such positions requires placing them in a conceptual framework within which to evaluate some of the high profile examples of blogs impacting on the news. The conceptual framework of agenda setting is useful in this regard for providing different levels of potential influence, and this chapter has suggested three potential agenda setting roles of blogs.

Despite the claims of blog proponents, first-level agenda setting, or blogs as *originators* of news, is limited to circumstances when mainstream media are compromised in their ability to cover issues and events. Moreover, in such cases, bloggers often have specialist knowledge or access to events of such specificity that when the news agenda inevitably moves on (and when mainstream news media catch up), they lose their currency as a primary news source. However, opportunities for more sustained influence through second-level agenda setting of mainstream news agendas are evident in at least two ways.

Blogs can act as *resuscitators*, for instance, following up stories mainstream media fail to follow up or give low priority, and give a story enough new impetus to remerge on the mainstream news agenda. Blogs can also act as *reframers*, interrogating, challenging

and making transparent elements contributing to mainstream media framing of news events.

The challenges these kinds of influence have created for some mainstream news organisations have seen blogs sometimes dubbed as parasitic, but whilst these are certainly examples of symbiosis between blogs and news, there's no reason to presume that the relationship is necessarily detrimental to mainstream news. For newspapers in particular, the possibility that blogs are not necessarily parasitic, but commensal (of neutral impact), or even mutualist (of mutual benefit to both) is evident in the way that blogs, as both a newsgathering tool, and a format of content delivery, gradually being incorporated into and normalised by mainstream news organisations. Exploratory research has yielded empirical data within the world of online news to show that independent news bloggers display links with mainstream news organizations, but that information seems to flow in much larger volumes from the major news media to bloggers than the other way around (Gunter et al., 2009). This evidence does not deny the possibility of bloggers setting or influencing major news agendas, but indicates that it has not yet emerged as a normative phenomenon.

To conclude, the examination of blog coverage of certain news items through the prism of agenda setting theory leads to two main observations. First, the distinct content and approach of blogs to news events is perhaps the key element of any influence they might exert on the media and/or public agenda. Second, while by *resuscitating* and *re-framing* the news, blogs could challenge media organisations and newspapers in particular, this process appears to remain in the hands of major news operators. The instrumental role of blogs in providing more in-depth, interactive and accessible news is clearly being recognised by journalists who seize the opportunity to give audiences more reasons to read, draw more attention to newspapers' web sites and help maintain trusted brands. So long as journalists recognise and respond to the reality created by the internet as a whole, blogs can prove a means of revitalising newspapers.

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