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Poignancy in the US political blogsphere

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Abstract

Purpose – To suggest methods and approaches to the study of relationships between the blogsphere and news, and to show, through a preliminary study, how the blogsphere makes particular political contributions through the manner in which social issues are discussed.

Design/methodology/approach – The article provides a set of research questions as well as general methodological approaches to undertake empirical, comparative analysis of the blogsphere and news. It reports on a preliminary study of the contribution of the blogsphere to politics using semantic analysis. Hyperlink analysis of the right-of-center US political blogsphere is also provided in a figure.

Findings – It was found that the contribution of the blogsphere to political issue formation is distinctive from that of the news, for the blogsphere provides to issues a poignancy not found in the news.

Research limitations/implications – The reported study is suggestive of a particular contribution the blogsphere may make to issue formation.

Practical implications – The article outlines a research agenda.

Originality/value – The article seeks to reorient the study of the blogsphere.

Keywords Worldwide web, Search engines, Politics

Paper type General review

Introduction: relationships between the internet and news

When we read that bloggers, in 2003, focused media attention on dubious remarks uttered by Trent Lott, ultimately prompting the then Speaker of the House to resign, or when we read that bloggers dealt a decisive blow to the credibility of CBS news by exposing as fake the memo that alleged to show George W. Bush's duty-shirking, ushering in a retirement and frings at the established broadcasting company, questions arise about the distinctive contribution blogs may make to news. Is the contribution made by blogs to media, as opposed to that made by other "spheres" of the internet, peculiar? Here it is argued, in the opening sections, that blogs reinstate and perhaps extend the reach of the informal of the internet, also making it more serious. After providing means and questions for the study of the blogsphere, and in particular mini-blogspheres, the author concludes with a finding from a small case study concerning blogs' contribution to the debate surrounding the FCC's proposal to relax media concentration rules. It was found that an issue-oriented, political mini-blogsphere offered a particular poignancy to the issues, distinctive from the news sphere. (For the third "sphere" – the web sphere – see Foot *et al.*, 2003; Schneider and Foot, 2005.)

Prior to blogs, the relationship between news and the internet was discussed, mainly, in two senses. First, the internet was *informal*, both in its use and its contents. The informal made the internet into a special "real". For example, it would put on view a picture of a scientist's domestic pet, beneath the more well-known list of publications,



on his or her “homepage”, with bits and pieces of code and graphics picked up from the web (the visitor counter, the animated gif). Showing the unpolished, amateurish and some of life’s backstage, the particular “real” on offer on the internet became well suited for “dirt-diggers”, not only in the sense of the Drudge Report (where dirt would be sent in and Drudge might report it), but also in terms of “native content”, where, for example, a search engine query ultimately led to the newspaper headline, “UN weapons inspector is leader of S&M sex ring” (Rennie, 2002). With the internet, importantly, we witnessed at the same time the *circulation of the informal*. “Stories circulating on the internet” became a well-known expression, but the significance of the expression lies not so much in its connotation of the web’s incredulity, however important it may have been for journalists’ leaving the dirt well alone, but more in the idea that many have heard, and more soon will know. Perhaps it is the reach of the informal towards the more formal that the net strengthens. Whilst not necessarily treated in the serious press as worthy of reporting, the internet stories, so-called, nevertheless could be circulated further even by the seriously minded to colleagues, friends and family with smilies, in the day when e-mail was seen as a means for relaxed communication as opposed to official or well-formatted letter-writing. (Relaxed communication has moved to chat software.) Bloggers could be said to maintain, or reinstall, the informal medium, which arguably was in decline owing to “new media concentration” issues, such as the idea that web usage has become more habitual (more regular site visitation, less “surfing”), the marketing reports that fewer and fewer sites receive greater majorities of all hits and such like. The blogsphere could be said to bring back, and lengthen the reach of the informal, and also make it more serious. One recent example is a case in point. That blogging employees at Waterstone’s Book store (UK) and at Google (US) would be fired for their informalities expressed on the internet provides at least one indication that it remains a realm for “dirt-diggers”, however much more serious that dirt is perceived to be taken, in this case by book buyers and search engine users. Journalists also have been asked to stop blogging.

The second sense in which the internet was discussed with respect to news was the idea that it put more time pressure on journalists, *shortening the time* and potentially lessening the amount of care that could be taken by news people, especially at the dailies, and weeklies. Whilst some could take solace in the expression that internet stories remained “too fresh to be true”, others watched news “catch up” to the internet, as the normal 24-hour collection activities of the news (again the back-stage) was put, in part, on the front end. Feeds, once reserved for newsroom eyes, were pulled in to web sites and displayed. News became fresher on the internet, as well as more readily available and searchable. Feeds themselves became transformed. Where once only the single source was available at a site – the press agency news ticker or story list from one organization – multiple-source sites (aggregators) and news reader software rose in use. By virtue of RSS (rich site summary or really simple syndication), bloggers and others fetch into their own “Daily Me” RSS readers not just the press agencies but newspapers and other news outlets (broadly defined or indeed redefined). Accessed, also, were news source aggregators such as Google News and Yahoo News, where “news” changed. Google and Yahoo redefined news outlets as also primary sources, as opposed to secondary sources only. Whitehouse.gov press releases, for example, are news to Google news. Through the aggregators, news, like blogs, arguably has become a “sphere” on the internet, in the sense that news is accessed by separate devices. Thus,

news has adjusted to the internet not so much in the sense of the shortening of editorial decision-making time about whether a story is too fresh to be true (however important such an observation), but rather in its delivery formats. News also redefined itself with the internet: traditional and non-traditional news are placed together by aggregators that allow for news search. As with the rise of the “day trader” in the 1990s (more likely, the “freetime trader”), information tools have enabled the “freetime newspeople”. What is being reported is not gleaned from the place where news happens (both in an eyewitness as well as in a Lippmann sense of the official gateways of what has happened), but from the internet.

With regard to the idea of bloggers as “freetime newpeople”, the blogosphere is not an amateur-only space, or something between lay and expert. It is all at once, or appears to be. It also has its own hierarchy, one source of which is reported in Table I. Of the top dozen blogs, according to technorati, five are “political”: two are by “elusive bloggers” (*atrios* and *kos*), fitting certain ideas about who bloggers are, whilst Andrew Sullivan is former *New Republic* editor and *The New York Times* writer, *instapundit* is a law professor at the University of Tennessee, and *common dreams* is a progressive NGO, filtering the news.

Blog studies

Studies concerning blogs have defined the term, categorised genres of blogs (as “filters”, “personal journals” and “notebooks”, along the lines put forward by Rebecca Blood and others). They have discussed the extent to which they are a special breed of journalism and/or truly new media (like the homepage, purportedly). Writers have provided a number of case studies of particularly significant impacts bloggers have had on mainstream news or “elite media” (as in the Introduction above), and raised ideas about the part played by blogs – either “A-list” ones, or more readily as interlinked and intertextual “spheres” – in news, information provision, or more broadly the information society (see Niemen Reports, 2003; on individual bloggers see Drezner and Farrell, 2004). Since software (as at *technorati.com*) has made blogs into its own searchable sphere that also recommends information, ideas have arisen that what

Top 12 Blogs	Links	Sources
1. Boing Boing	17,810	11,277
2. Instapundit.com	14,165	9,205
3. Buzznet.com	97,049	7,485
4. Deviantart	10,406	7,438
5. Davenetics	7,546	7,389
6. Gizmodo	9,459	7,204
7. Penny – Arcade	7,873	6,844
8. <i>Daily Kos</i>	9,869	6,825
9. eBaum’s World	9,290	6,347
10. <i>Eschaton (atrios)</i>	7,862	5,600
11. <i>AndrewSullivan.com – Daily Dish</i>	7,257	5,450
12. <i>Common Dreams</i>	9,534	5,385

Table I.
Top 12 blogs on
February 19, 2005

Notes: Political blogs are given in italics; the most authoritative blogs, ranked by the number of sources that link to each blog; last updated 2.03 am Pacific Time

Source: Technorati.com

is happening there is distinctive, and also that it is a “space apart”. For example, the list of top books at technorati or at allconsuming.net, gleaned from references in blogs, is distinctive from bestseller lists, old media “critics’ picks”, or the list made by employees at a bookstore. Thus the “blogosphere” collectively becomes a new source – one, additionally, with a distinctive new media-style “ranking” method that leads to the recommendations (Rogers, 2004, pp. 1-33).

In any case, as one set of authors has put it, the “predominant view of blogs [sees them] as news filters, and bloggers as highly interconnected”, though their study made the counter-intuitive finding (perhaps) that most are journals (diaries) without many links (or comments) (Herring *et al.*, 2004). (That there is also a “dark blogosphere”, many orphan blogs without inlinks and also without comments, would fit with the findings made in the late 1990s and early 2000s with respect to the web and its percentage of pages outside of the reach of search engine crawlers – often dubbed the “dark web”.) Arguably, however, it is the interconnectivity and intertextuality in not the entire blogosphere, but in mini-spheres, that guides the “predominant view”. This piece aims to contribute to the critical inquiry of the blogosphere, generally, by posing a series of research questions, as well as by reporting findings on a small case study. It asks to what extent do blogs, or certain mini-blogospheres, constitute a space apart? Indeed, we are interested in broader understandings of its significance. What is it for? For example, is it a conversation space unto itself, and as such is perhaps suited to provide a distinctive measure of the significance of news articles, as it does with books, too? Is it in (successful) competition with the mainstream media, in the sense of being distinctive in substance (beyond its already aggregated information recommendation culture)? Does it undertake some form of “public journalism” however much that may not be the right term? To begin, Rebecca Blood observes:

In my view, the journalism establishment isn't paying enough attention to the weblog universe. [...] Bloggers say what they think, giving reporters a window into the views of those outside the media. Bloggers often find angles that professional reporters have missed, or ask questions reporters have neglected to ask. And bloggers do amazing research. Professional journalists, often working under extreme time pressure, may not have time to research a piece as thoroughly as they would like. Bloggers have no externally imposed deadlines, and no mandate to research equally the claims of both sides. [...] When bloggers link to conflicting or contextualizing material, smart reporters will further research and verify promising leads, and credit the bloggers who uncovered them (Blood, 2004).

Most importantly, we are interested in the interaction between the news sphere and the blogosphere, and the broader place assumed by the blogosphere in media. There is a series of questions, with brief methodological considerations:

- *Dependency questions* – Do blogs depend on news? The question is the extent to which blogs are parasitic on, or pose an alternative to, commercial media coverage of events. This may be ascertained by the amount and type of references to news sources, also with regards to which collections of events, issues and other they cover, and which they leave aside. One would query the blogosphere for newspaper article references relative to other references made (e.g. through link harvesting) (Halavias, 2003). Is the blogosphere referring primarily to itself?

- *Shared source questions* – News sphere research may find that there are fewer primary news sources than one may expect, with the remaining news being a matter of copying and pasting of text, as well as images and video (see Figure 1). We are interested in whether this holds for the blogosphere. Do blogs talk primarily about few sources? Is their source range distinctive to that of the news?
- *What kind of political contribution is made by the blogosphere?* – We would like to be able to derive insights that allow us to characterize how the blogosphere's contribution to the political realm may be analyzed. Is it more of a literary space, a news space, or a political space? A subset of political weblogs would be studied, relative to the overall blogosphere, with the goal of understanding the blogosphere's relative amount and distinctiveness of political content. Distinctiveness could be measured against the news sphere (and/or the web sphere). One also may study mini-blogospheres that deal with particular issues either as a matter of routine or in occasional postings, and ascertain how the mini-blogosphere frames or "does" the issues as in comparison to the news. A short case study on the blogosphere's contribution to the FCC media concentration debate is discussed below.
- *Blog dynamics relative to the news* – One may monitor the reaction of the blogosphere to a news event. The analysis concerns a comparison of attention cycles. This is a memory metric, if you will, but it also may be described in terms of the blogosphere's commitment to certain themes or issues. Do blogs have longer attention spans and greater "memory"? In asking that question where, for example, the "Bush bulge" is concerned, how long does it take for the blogosphere to "give up" on the story, relative to when, say, *The New York Times* did (Lindorff, 2005)? It should be noted here that there is a peculiarity to the blogosphere that aids in undertaking longitudinal analysis of the type mentioned above. Unless they go offline, blogs retain an archive of past postings as a matter of routine, "built into" the blog software. Additionally, blogs tend to have separate URLs for each posting (the permalink), which allows one to locate a mini-blogosphere from the past – something otherwise not possible on the web, as pages and sites are "refreshed".
- *There is the larger question of who produces the news and the events* – Is it the traditional media (and their traditional feeders) or the bloggers who make news and events? Could the blogosphere provide a measure of what could be safely ignored? (Certain blog engines, e.g. Waypath, monitor which news stories are cited most frequently on blogs, whereby the blogosphere becomes a collective news filter.) When a politician makes a speech, it may be a news event. Is it a blog event? Does the blog space have "events" to recommend, or even its own world of events, so to speak? What is the quality of this world?

Issue poignancy in the blogosphere

The work described here was conducted at the Govcom.org Foundation workshop, "Making Issues into Rights?", held in Amsterdam, June 21-24, 2004. A small study was undertaken. It concerned the contribution of the blogosphere to a classic political undertaking – requests for comments by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) on proposed policies in the media concentration arena. Does the blogosphere "participate", which blogosphere participates, and how? One elementary means of

demarcating the blogosphere's contribution – that is, which blogosphere is engaging in the issue surrounding the FCC hearings on “localism” – is to search technorati or other blog engines, or even a popular search engine, such as Altavista (with the date range, January 1, 2003 to July 19, 2004) for Blog AND FCC AND localism, where there are 144 returns. These 144 blogs (approximately) would be the candidates (or overall population) from which a mini-blogosphere for a particular issue may be sought. One subsequently analyzes the extent to which these 144 pages are densely interlinked, referring to the same sources (e.g. news or other blogs), as well as keywords or phrases. To do so, one “scrapes” (or copies) all the returns. One may crawl each of the pages (the specific postings or permalinks), and enquire into interlinking between them. One also can scrape all the pages, and query them for keywords or phrases. This general technique would provide some understanding about whether the “predominant view” (described above) holds of blogs being highly interconnected, and also intertextually related, in the sense of a conversation with similar (frames of) references (see also Figure 2).

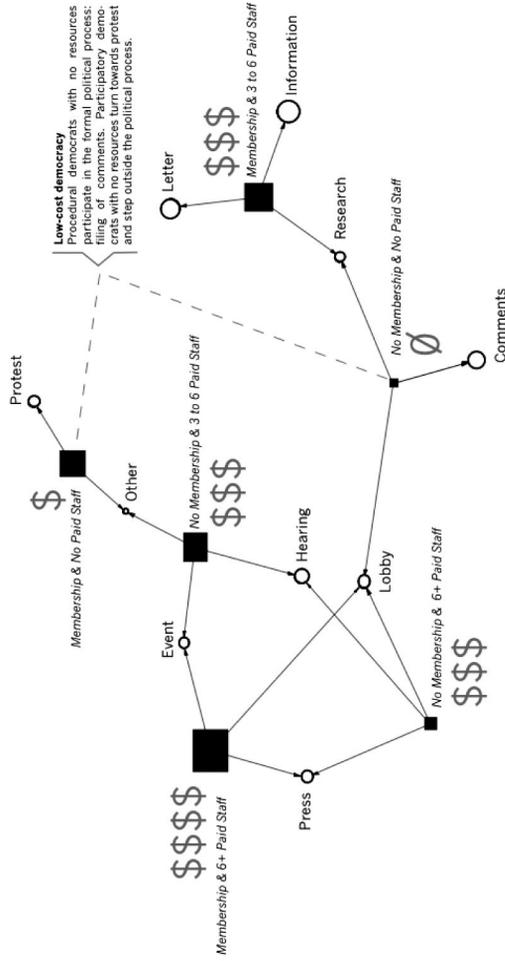
I would like to put the small case study of the (political) blogosphere and its contribution to issue politics (as well as social change) into some perspective with the findings that were made, in a parallel project, with respect to another important set of actors – non-governmental organizations, also contributing to the FCC debate on media concentration. The point to be made concerns the larger context of expectations made by actors – bloggers as well as NGOs – of media coverage. Analyzing the database prepared by the International Center for Media Action (ICMA) of the “hundreds of groups that took action to stop FCC deregulation of media ownership” provided us with the opportunity to understand how NGOs spend their time and money when campaigning for change – in this case the FCC's proposed relaxation of laws restricting media concentration, for example, allowing one corporation to own not 35 per cent, but 45 per cent of the national television market, among other proposals[1]. The procedure requires a participation component (public hearings and requests for comments). Of those hundreds of groups campaigning against media concentration, we found that the ones with the greatest amount of resources concentrated their activities on events and working the press, whereas those with the least amount of resources laboured on comments. Whilst only the smallest indication of the significance accorded to “networking” at events and penetrating the press by issue-oriented actors (and however unfair this portrayal also might be), it was nevertheless a sobering finding. Informal democracy, so to speak, was given more weight than formal democracy (see Figure 3). Thus to be critical of the blogosphere's dependency on news and its desire to shape it could detract attention from the larger assumptions made by politically oriented actors about the significance of getting press. The US government shares similar assumptions, however much the tactics may be different. *The New York Times* reported the recent warning issued by the US comptroller general, after a series of cases where federal agencies were working the press, circulating unattributed “cans” as news:

In fact, it has become increasingly common for federal agencies to adopt the public relations tactic of producing “video news releases” that look indistinguishable from authentic newscasts and, as ready-made and cost-free reports, are sometimes picked up by local news programs. It is illegal for the government to produce or distribute such publicity material domestically without disclosing its own role (Kornblut, 2005).

Figure 3.
The state of US democracy. Relational analysis of activities and resource base of progressive US organizations involved in the campaign against the relaxation of media concentration policies by the FCC

The State of U.S. Democracy

How 'procedural democrats' and 'participatory democrats' differ in resources and approach to the FCC's proposed deregulation of media ownership, 2003.



Low-cost democracy
Procedural democrats with no resources have a high level of political activity, including filing of comments. Participatory democrats with no resources turn towards protest and step outside the political process.

Data from survey of approximately 90 organizations using FCC limits on media ownership, 2003.

Co-occurrence analysis of organization type and activities.

Key
 ○ Organizational activities.
 ■ Organization type according to resource base.
 ∅-\$\$\$\$ Resource scale indication.

To begin to gain an impression of the distinctiveness of the blogosphere's contribution to the FCC media concentration issue, we undertook comparative research of the substance of the news and that of the blogosphere. The researchers chose the terms FCC and coupled it with diversity, concentration, localism, hearings and ownership, and queried engines, looking into the quantity of sources and mentions per term, and also the extent to which the sources concentrated themselves on one or more terms. For news, Google News was queried, for blogs Blogpulse. We found a relatively small quantity of blogs contributing content to the issues, and a much larger quantity of press (see Figures 4 and 5). Focusing on the FCC and public interest, the news, it was found, in a textual analysis, concerned itself with a set of terms different from that of the blogosphere. Whilst the news contained many procedural terms, the blogosphere appeared to "bring the issue home" by connecting it to Howard Stern and Oprah Winfrey, two prominent and popular show hosts, who were the source of indecency complaints made to the FCC, and potentially faced being "silenced" (see Figures 6 and 7). Here one could argue that the blogosphere's contribution to politics lies in granting the issue a poignancy less present in the news.

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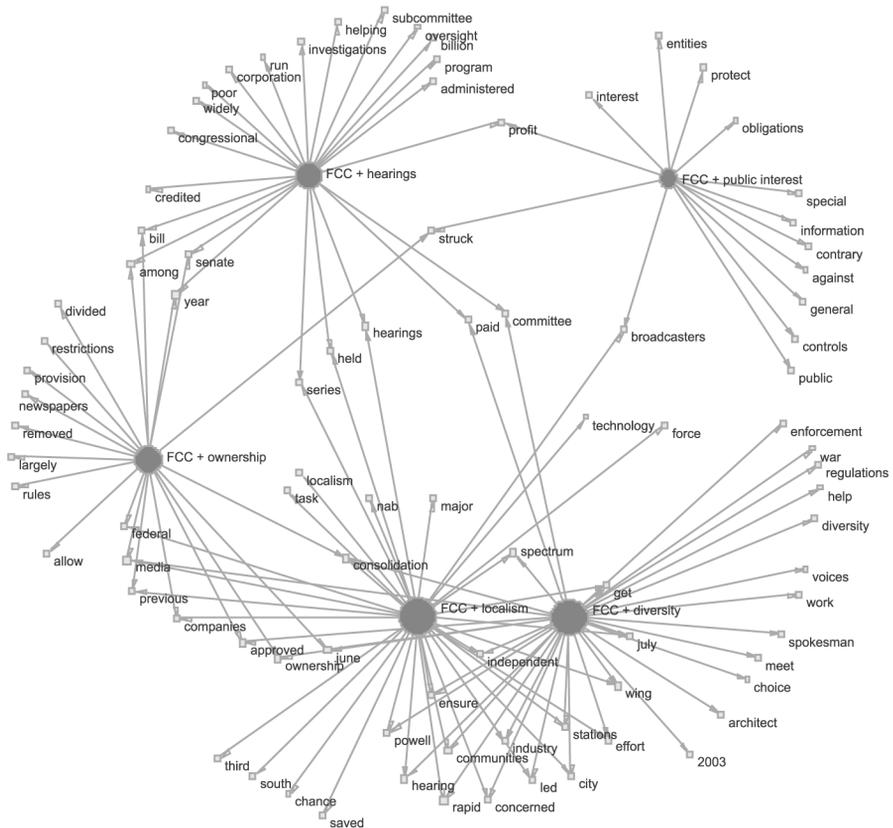


Figure 6. Semantic analysis of mini news sphere around FCC and public interest, hearings, localism, diversity and ownership, where size of nodes indicates frequency of sources mentioning the key words, and placement of nodes according to centrality. Data by googlenews.com, scraped by Govcom.org, and graph by Réseau-Lu by aguidel.com

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