New competencies in democratic communication?
Blogs, agenda setting and political participation

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Abstract Contrary to initial predictions Internet-mediated forms of communication have not become mediums of mass communication. Traditional media still reach far more people than even the most popular websites. Still, there is evidence that blogs in particular help mobilize opinions, and set the agenda for political elites such as journalists and politicians, while providing interested citizens with a new technology of knowledge as well as a surprisingly effective way to participate in politics. This study focuses on how the presence of blogs has altered the structure of political communication.

Keywords Political communication · Blogs · Democracy · Discourse · Agenda setting

1 Introduction

While the development and ascendancy of the Internet as an informational medium has not overturned the routines and norms of political communication that existed before its widespread usage, it has altered the information environment in which political elites and interested citizens function. Blogs in particular, may be coming to serve a unique political role. Contrary to initial predictions, neither the Internet nor Internet-mediated forms of communication such as non-interactive websites, chat-rooms, bulletin boards and blogs, have become mediums of mass communication. Traditional media still reach far more people than even the most popular websites. Still, there is evidence that blogs help mobilize opinions, and set the agenda for political elites such as journalists and politicians, while providing interested citizens with a new and surprisingly effective way to participate in politics. We have already seen some evidence that blogs may have direct and/or indirect effects on political outcomes (Drezner and Farrel 2007) as well as various benefits to both citizen consumers and elite users that are distinct from traditional news media (Rosen 2007).

This study focuses on how the presence of blogs might alter the structure of political communication. I argue that blogs are a new technology of knowledge that has begun to be

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used by traditional media, political professionals and politically interested citizens, modifying the process of agenda setting, elite opinion formation and even strategies of political mobilization. In addition, blogs may alter the options for and the experience of the political participation of some citizens. Blogs modify this process because of the kind of communication that they make possible. They are an immediate, horizontally linked dialogical space, which has the effect of expanding the scope of public space and providing a structure that is closer to conversation than any traditional news medium.

I will begin by giving some background on the structure and routines of political communication as it has been studied in the U.S. Second, I elaborate the characteristics that make blogs a unique form of media in the communicative environment of American politics. Third and finally, I argue that blogs are a new technology of knowledge, which has altered the way that elites and interested citizens identify, gather, aggregate, evaluate, and deploy political knowledge.

2 The democratic intention of the press as an institution

The notion of the press as a democratizing institution, which had been only peripherally present in 18th century articulations of democracy, became a central consideration for the democratic theorists of the early 20th century (Lippmann 1922; Dahl 1956; Cater 1959; Luskin 1972). New ideas about the crucial political and particularly democratic role that news ought to play inspired both professional and principled reforms in American journalism. The sensational yellow journals which had been funded by political parties through the 19th century slowly disappeared as the idea that the American press ought to be a nobler (less partisan and more profitable) institution began to take root. By the 1920s most "newspaper men" were being trained at schools of journalism, which attempted to instill the notion that their professional obligation was to be an essential aid to democracy; proficient facilitators of political publicity as well as public discussion, debate, and decision making (Lippmann 1922; McChesney 1997; Waldman and Jamieson 2003).

These good intentions have lead journalism to become a more standardized and professional occupation and advances in technologies of communication have allowed a greater quantity and wider distribution of news output. However, scholars and laymen alike have become increasingly disappointed with the quality and variety of information offered by American news media. As the 21st century has dawned, news organizations are responsible for attempting to inform a public that has never seemed less interested in what they have to share (Bennett 1983; Gans 1979; Schudson 1995; Bennett and Entman 2001; Putnam 2000; Waldman and Jamieson 2003).

The increasingly anemic interest of most Americans in politics is certainly not all the fault of news media, but communications scholars have long noted that the news itself is ailing, not only by the standards of the democratic hope for the free press, but also by the professional expectations which developed at the turn of the last century. The roots and characteristics of the news media's condition are attributed to different causes depending on the focus of the study, but there seem to be four major areas that are consistently noted as problematic. First, the news is biased toward elite opinion, especially White House opinion. This bias is not necessarily the result of a normative preference for the opinions of officials, but instead the consequence of a number of constraints and standard operating procedures that are characteristic of the modern press (Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Bennett 1983; Entman 2004, 1989). Second, the presentation of the news is increasingly episodic and sensational. Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams have referred to this

phenomenon as the rise of "infotainment": the increased centralization, nationalization, economic motivation and entertainment orientation of public affairs media (Carpini and Williams 2001). Third, the professional ideology of American journalists, which holds sacred the idea that "objectivity" is the chief guiding principle of news reporting, may paradoxically prevent journalists from adequately reflecting reality. Fourth and finally, the mass reach of news is complicated by the consolidated ownership of media outlets, which diminishes the diversity of news content that is produced (McChesney 1997; 2004).

3 Traditional media's routines and symptoms

The four symptoms of the truncated efficacy of traditional news media demand further elaboration. While certain failings of traditional media have some colloquial cache, such as the rise in the prevalence of infotainment, others are somewhat more obscure, or even counterintuitive. In each of the following sections I will not only describe each of the four relevant symptoms, but also attempt to present the range of reasons that political communications literature offers for each impediment.

3.1 Elite bias: hegemony, indexing, and the informational cascade

In their analysis of news, political communication scholars have suggested that the evident preference for stories that originate with public officials is the result of structural arrangements that condition the acquisition, validation and dissemination of information and opinion in contemporary democracies. The main analytics that have emerged to explain this phenomenon are hegemonic and indexical theories of political communication.

Hegemony theorists like Todd Gitlin and Michael Parenti see the overabundance of news stories and news frames that originate with public officials in mainstream media as a symptom of the way that the Gramscian notion of hegemony functions in contemporary politics. Theorists who take this view contend that despite the appearance of conflict, elites have a relatively unitary interest in controlling the field of ideas that circulate in society. Therefore a main objective of elites is to underscore and preserve their political authority. Though the issue positions of elites may differ, they do not differ very much on which issues they think are worth discussing. Political elites generally aim to protect the control they have over popular political epistemologies, including the ideological range of political information that is produced and validated, thereby shaping and bounding public debate in a way that serves current distributions of power.

Some political communications analysts argue that indexical models of elite discourse have more explanatory power. The indexical model emphasizes elite conflict, arguing that the news acts as an 'index' of elite dispute, playing up divisions between one party and the other or between the White House and Congress (or any elites that can be likewise opposed) as though all possible relevant perspectives are contained within the D.C. beltway (Mermin 1999). Indexical theorists are more likely than hegemony theorists to recognize that media coverage can and does avoid the blind transmission of official spin on news stories, especially when the American public regards the issues they cover as both salient and controversial. However, they consider criticism of the frame(s) of officials, especially high ranking Washington officials, to be anomalous 'interruptions.' In this view, the emergence of public dissent into mainstream discourse is rare and counter to the normal course of discourse, a diagnosis that is demoralizing for many scholars concerned with the democratic promise of the press. Instead of functioning as investigators who unveil and clarify little

known political truths, the press functions as either the referees of elite debate or merely as political announcers.

Robert Entman attempts to improve on these two analytics by offering a theory of political communication that combines some insights of both the hegemonic and indexing perspectives. He calls his theory the "cascading network activation model of political communication" (Entman 2004). In his cascade model, Entman argues that in normal political communication, story frames or, the way in which a news story is to be told, extend down from the acting administration to other elites, then spreads to journalists who then distribute the information they have received to the public.

Each node in the cascade (administration, other elites, media, news frames, and public) functions, not as a unitary actor, but as a network of individuals, groups, and even institutions, which interpret and evaluate the information that they have received from the proceeding level according to its "cultural congruence." Cultural congruence, according to Entman, is the "match between the news item and [the] habitual schemes," which people who share the same political culture use as interpretive heuristics. He contends that the closer the fit between the event and a regularly deployed frame, the more easily the frame will pass from one level in the informational cascade to the next with few challenges or modifications. This movement stimulates similar interpretations of the definition of the problem and the endorsement of remedies at each level of the cascade from the Bully Pulpit to the woman on the street.

One of the virtues of Entman's model is that it highlights the importance of sequence; that is, the metaphor of the cascade emphasizes the hierarchal organization and evaluation of the voices present in the public sphere. In evaluating problems, arguments and solutions, each level is responding to the one above. The decision about what is worth talking about is made at the top of the cascade. Likewise, the initial way of talking about the subject—the problem or puzzle, the interests involved, the criteria of evaluation— can often circumscribe debate at subsequent levels. Entman's model makes it clear that the original or, 'first take' framing, usually the purview of the White House, shapes the scope of questions, problems and arguments at each succeeding level.

Each of the models that attempt to explain the organization of political communication assert a top–down relationship between officials, the originators of the content, subject matter, and scope of the debate, and all other nodes in the public sphere. None account for the emergence of debates that bubble-up from the populous into the awareness of political elites. This is odd, not only because democratic communication should, in theory, have institutional avenues for bottom-up agenda setting and the registration of dissent (not only in its electoral process, but also in its communication process), but also if there were an absence of paths for non-elite dissenting voices it ought to arouse the curiosity of scholars. In addition, it is empirically evident that the concerns of interested and organized citizens do percolate upwards on a fairly regular basis (Dahl 1956). Many of the articles in this volume highlight political situations in which blogs have functioned as the facilitators of this bottom-up communication—sustaining attention on and the (re)consideration of issues that are not originally the purview of political officials.

3.2 Infotainment

The second symptom of journalistic routines that interfere with the production of high-quality news has to do with presentation of stories rather than the organization of the communicative environment. In his 1983 study of the news, W. Lance Bennett argues that both the producers and consumers of news regard it as a commodity. For this reason, news is

expected to entertain just as surely as it informs. As such, Bennett argues, the mainstream news has developed four basic presentational characteristics in order to fulfill these functions simultaneously: personalization, dramatization, fragmentation and normalization. Bennett's normative position is that pursuing both these goals requires a trade-off—one that often results in the decreased quality and democratic usefulness of news content. Through the personalization and dramatization of stories, news is packaged in just the way a perfume might be. The content is "dressed up or down" and "gives off signals about social status (real or desired)" in the same way clothes or cars might. This kind of presentation is troubling because it might compromise the integrity of the information presented for the style of presentation that sells best (Bennett 1983).

In addition, since journalists are generalists, in order to cover the array of subjects that they are responsible for, they often use formulaic *frames*, or prescribed ways of organizing and relating disparate ideas about people, places, things and concepts. In journalistic parlance these regular frames are called "angles" or "pegs"—the facts or perspectives of the subject matter that must be highlighted in order to prove that the information is not just a dry collection of facts, but a *story*—that the events depicted are timely, potentially interesting to the public, and relevant in the existing political context as it is generally perceived. These routinized forms of presentation make a broad and often disparate assortment of events easier for journalists to quickly synthesize and organize into stories. An unfortunate consequence of such standardized framing techniques can be that complex events are squished into a slim range of familiar narratives inhibiting both the thorough information collection and innovative questioning that news is supposed to contain in democratic societies (Bennett 1983; Gamson 1992). The consequence of these presentational routines combined, presents readers with news stories that tend to be "fragmented, analytically superficial, hard to remember, and difficult to use meaningfully" (Bennett 1983, p. 2).

Normal news fare then, presents a slim range of elite- biased stories that favor the high drama of sensationalized conflict over the substance of grievances, the celebrity of personalities over the analysis of social conditions and the emphasis of the exciting singular event over the coherence of "political changes, issue linkages or historical patterns" (Bennett 1983, p. 7). While infotaining, news can make national politics look like "a sometimes amusing, sometimes melodramatic, but seldom relevant spectator sport" (Bennett 1983, p. 2). This reality leaves interested citizens to fend for themselves in a disturbingly anemic public sphere in which their major sources of political information cover "only a narrow range of issues, from the viewpoints of an even narrower range of sources" (Bennett 1983, ix; Iyengar 1991; Gitlin 1980).

3.3 The trouble with objectivity

In addition to the weakness of the organization and presentation of regular news media, media scholars and more recently journalists themselves have noted the bad effects that one of the foundational ethics of professional journalism, objectivity, can have on the ability of reporters to convey contextual facts. Gans (1979) and Bennett (1983) have noted that there is a "newsroom bias" or "paraideology," which is not the result of politically-based bias (political ideology), but is instead the result of professional biases that shape the acceptable content and presentation of the news in ways that are potentially destructive to news accuracy. The seemingly benign and even admirable ethos that demands that the questioner appear to be neutral and the product objective can tie reporters' hands in unexpected ways.

Brent Cunningham, of the *Columbia Journalism Review* explains that the press is vulnerable to a particular failure which allows "the principle of objectivity to make us passive

recipients of news rather than aggressive analyzers and explainers of it." For example, in the 2 September 2004 *Columbia Journalism Review* it was reported that:

> Recently, a CJR intern, calling newspapers letters-page editors to learn whether opinion was running for or against the looming war with Iraq, was told by the letters editor of the Tennessean that letters were running 70% against the war, but that the editors were trying to run as many pro war letters as possible lest they be accused of bias.

In this case facts have been distorted to serve the norm of objectivity, an unintended and paradoxical, but not unusual result of the way that the ethic is applied. The tendency to imply equivalence even where none exists, the inability to inject new issues into debate and the analytic impotence of journalists in the face of obviously manipulative official spin, are all potential consequences of objective reporting. In this way, the professional ideology of objectivity often functions as a support for the structural and presentational limitations of the press detailed above.

3.4 Profit and conglomeration

The final aspect of the organization of the media that has inspired both scholarly and grass-roots concern is media consolidation. At the present moment nine major corporations dominate a media market that has become, since the 1980s, global in its scope and influence. For those concerned with the critical function of a free press in democracies this development has been extremely alarming as it may cause a drastic reduction in the diversity of information sources and content available to citizens. Robert McChesney writes, "The crucial tension lies between the role of the media as a profit maximizing commercial organizations and the need for the media to provide the basis for informed self-government (McChesney 2004, p. 17)." McChesney is concerned that this tension is routinely relieved to the benefit of the bottom lines of media conglomerates and the detriment of the public. Journalists themselves have begun to express concern about the influence their corporate parents sometimes have on the production of news. Ben Bagdikian, a professor at the Columbia School of Journalism, describes the nature of this influence as the "dig here, not here" phenomenon, in which the pursuit of stories that might discourage advertisers or cast suspicion on parent corporations are subjected to greater scrutiny and higher evidentiary thresholds than other stories (Bagdikian 2000). Furthermore, a 2004 poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that 66% of national media professionals felt increasingly concerned that "bottom line pressures" were "seriously hurting" news quality and integrity (Pew Research Center 2004).

3.5 Communicative characteristics of blogs

Now that we have vetted the impediments that traditional media suffer from the standpoint of both the theoretical responsibilities of the press and on their own professional terms, let us turn our attention to the communicative characteristics of blogs and how the differences in structure, presentation, and norms have altered the kind of political communication that is now possible. In the following sections, I argue that the popularity of blogs with official and media elites has altered the landscape of the communicative environment. That is, blogs are an additional node in the web of mass political communication that function differently than any traditional news medium. In addition, blogs offer information that is distinct in its form and content, offering readers a democratic experience that can not be offered by any

traditional form. As noted above, in comparison to traditional news media blogs carry only a tiny proportion of readership, however, their influence in the American public sphere is shaping up to be more than puny.

3.6 The organization and norms of blogs

The speed of publishing, the custom of using the hyperlink as in-text reference, the incorporation of comments into posts, and the current independence of most top bloggers from corporate ownership makes this form of political communication unique. As a discursive form blogs stand between traditional print and broadcast media and small group discussion. The structure of communication that has developed in the blogosphere results from a combination of the unique technological capabilities engendered by the Internet and the norms that have developed to make use of those capabilities. Horizontal linking and its surrounding customs along with the norm of incorporating reader comments into the content of blog posts creates a virtual space that is particularly conducive to extended dialogue.

The use of hyperlinks is not only definitive for blogs as a form of communication, but also changes the kind of information blogs make available. It does so in two ways: first, it enables an in-text reference system. In traditional media, broadcast or print, the only information immediately available to the audience is that presented by the reporter and editors or producers. Blogs on the other hand, build in an at-your-finger-tips citation system that readers can use to obtain not only the location of referenced material, but often the full text. Secondly, the material referenced can be anything, not only primary sources (studies and statistics, speeches and statements), but summaries, features or editorials published by traditional media sources (articles published or transcribed and posted online), or parallel conversations taking place on other blogs. The final resource, links to additional dialogues, is particularly important for bloggers and blog readers. Since the parallel discussions have the same structure as the original (utilizing the horizontal hyperlink) but contain different content, the quantity and variety of information and perspectives available to readers in one blog post is much vaster than in traditional mediums.

Not only is the form of the information that blogs make available distinct from that of traditional news media but so is the substance. Remember, the content of traditional media is limited by elite bias, the necessity of attention-grabbing presentation, the professional ethic of objectivity and the conglomeration of corporate ownership. Blogs do not share traditional media's elite bias. While it cannot be said that bloggers avoid focusing on the pronouncements of officials in their content, it is the case that bloggers lack the objectivity-based credibility structure and financial constraints that often limit the depth and scope of news in traditional media. While official statements might inspire attention to a particular subject, the content of those statements does not act as a boundary on inquiry or commentary. One of the reasons for the development of this norm might be a question of access. Unlike top mainstream journalists, most bloggers do not have, or are only just acquiring the insider status required to talk to high ranking officials. Most blog posts simply could not be made up of original quotes from "both" official sides. For this reason, bloggers tend to ask questions and make arguments by examining public facts or engaging with non-elite viewpoints that have been left out of traditional coverage in favor of elite he-said-she said.

Second, one of the most important norms for establishing and evaluating credibility in the blogosphere relies on perceived independence from the influences of traditional media and the officials who are the objects of their seemingly automatic obsession. Whether this custom arose due to limited access to officials or for ethical reasons (or both), it is the case that bloggers tend to seek sources beyond official's statements and to contribute analyses that highlight arguments and opinions that officials have missed, ignored, deflected or denied.

Blogs can also avoid the "infotainment" trap. While it cannot be said that blogs are invulnerable to gossip and fads, it is the case that political blog posts do not face the same pressures that lead traditional media into the infotainment trap. Even if the blogger posts only a few lines to highlight an aspect of a political phenomenon, those short posts can and often do engender extended discussion, either through the enabled comments section or through additional posts where the author responds to and incorporates emailed information s/he has received. The assertion that blogs are more likely than traditional media to present information thematically (or, in context) might seem counter-intuitive, however, one of the advantages of blogs as a form is that bloggers can update frequently without sacrificing depth of discussion. Since blogs are only partly constituted by the thoughts of the author, blog readers are free to continue to carry on discussion and make inquiries about any recent post that suits their interest or speaks to their expertise. In this way, the speed or brevity with which subjects are presented for discussion does not fundamentally compromise the thoroughness with which the topic can be discussed.

Since the construction of credibility in the blogosphere is not based on access to or validation from officials, there is also little need to avoid charges of bias. While one of the major tenets of professional journalism is neutral objectivity, bloggers often frankly disclose their political leanings and affections, eschewing the dictate that equates analytical balance with ideological innocence. Since there is no prohibition against making political allegiances and positions known, the substance of blog posts, unlike the content of articles or broadcast news stories, can and often does take the form of critical appraisal instead of objective reportage. Unfortunately, to date there has been no empirical content analysis comparing blogs and traditional news media. Therefore, the differences presented here are somewhat conjectural; however, they are derived not only from anecdotal observation but also from the logical contrast and comparison of what we know about traditional media and blogs. At this point, it is also important to stress that the reality of the blogosphere is still evolving. Part of the vibrancy of the medium is the ability to adapt and change. As blogs become more popular some of the norms that have guided the news form up until this point may change or disappear, making blogs closer to traditional media in practice if not in form. But these changes can also be avoided, as the structure of the communicative medium as well as the norms that have developed up until this point are uniquely suited to deliver dialogue, narrative and detail focused information rather than broad-based, general, elite derived data for mass consumption.

To some observers changes in the blogosphere that make it more like traditional media might seem an evolution because it is not self-evident that freedom from constraint is a particularly positive aspect of the blogosphere. After all, there were good reasons for the development of the professional norms of "balance," "neutrality," and "objectivity," that now guide traditional media. Without these norms doesn't political talk devolve into partisan propaganda?

Such a danger is worth considering. It is always possible for a lack of constraint to be used as an excuse for a lack of restraint. However, there is reason to suspect that cascades of slander and misinformation do not usually percolate up to high traffic blogs. Bloggers do not publish in a vacuum. Political blogs have become popular and influential because for the most part they offer good information, the sources of which are openly and habitually disclosed. The opinions, arguments and analysis presented in political blogs, especially those that have large readerships, are generally built around, not in spite of whatever factual information is offered. It cannot be said that all political bloggers abide by this norm at all times, but most do most of the time because their credibility (and hence popularity) depends upon it. I should note that the constitution of credibility is particularly important in

the blogosphere because good information and reputation is all that bloggers have to "sell" or attract readers. Of course, this situation could change as blogs become more popular, if bloggers develop a relationship with elites that is similar to that of traditional journalists.

Unlike the journalistic ethic of objectivity which has come to operate paradoxically, the standard required of good bloggers is that of a credible and intelligible judgment, a reasonable "here's what I think and why" standard. It seems more important to readers in the blogosphere that writers are insightful than that they are balanced. Unlike traditional media, in the blogosphere fairness seems to be demonstrated through argument, not merely represented through agnosticism in preferring one quoted side or the other. Instead, bloggers are free to weigh alternative arguments, interrogate the intentions and sincerity of public officials, and comment on what they believe to be likely, useful, or true.

Because of the structure of the blogosphere, authors are often in direct dialogue with readers on the various topics they cover and readers have no reason to hesitate to point out statements that are incorrect, points of the author's argument that are inconsistent or merely opinions that the author expresses that they think are misguided. But unlike online chats or other forums that maintain multiple and continually updated conversation strands—all of parallel relevance—the dialogue that takes place on a blog is structured so that the author is responsible for the subject of discussion (raw information as well as frame), providing a starting point for the focused yet dynamic participation of commentators. These characteristics make the form closer to face-to-face, small group conversation.

There are, of course, forums for opinion and argument in traditional news media. Editorial pages, regular columns, and listener call-in shows have long been popular traditional forms. But there are several notable differences between these three forums. Editorials unlike newspaper columns or blogs are opinion pieces that appear only one time. The author crafts his analysis of a topic and puts it out to the readership for consumption, but is not obliged to engage reader responses. Further, readers do not necessarily expect to see further pieces from the editorial writer and they are unlikely to come to rely on them for regular analyses.

Columns and blogs are closer kin because columns offer regular commentary on a variety of topics and the authors may even privately respond to reader comments sent to them by letter or email. However, reader comments almost never make it into the text of the column where they would become available to the whole population of readers for consideration, deliberation and evaluation. In this way, the traditional newspaper column more closely resembles a regular monologue than an ongoing dialogue between author and readers.

Still, there are dangers that can result from the wide latitude blog participants enjoy. The accuracy and quality of information presented in blogs might suffer without the oversight of editors and publishers. Unfortunately, to date there has been very little empirical research on this question so the prevalence of the potential informational degradation is unknown. Logically though, one might suppose, as Sunstein has in this volume, that the blogosphere might be more prone than traditional media to "negative information cascades": misinformation, gossip, or rumors that spread quickly, leading readers to make false evaluations or reach bad conclusions. In addition, the blog form does not escape the potential dangers of deliberation itself. Indeed, if group discussion is generally plagued with hidden profiles, amplified errors, and group polarization, then blogs are more vulnerable than traditional news forms.

One might also be legitimately concerned that the quality of information generally offered on blogs is simply less broadly relevant than that provided by traditional news media. It is important to note that this worry is probably entirely justified. Though there has yet been little evidence, it is reasonable to believe that the political discussion that happens on a blog in a given day will probably not reflect the breadth of stories carried in even a small

traditional newspaper. This is because blogs generally lack the resources to provide anything like broad based, general interest news coverage. It is important to remember though, blogs have not developed to serve the same communicative function as newspapers or broadcast news. Instead, they are a space of specific attention, dialogue, argument, and persuasion. The blog format is uniquely suited to these purposes and few bloggers seem to harbor illusions about their ability to replace traditional news media.

It should not necessarily alarm us that blogs serve a specialized function in political communication. News magazines too have long produced content that is more specific and in-depth than that offered in daily, general interest news media. However, news magazines do not share the advantage of speedy publishing with blogs and the content they offer, while it may be argument-centered, is not conducive to interactive comment. These differences underline the fact that the structure of blogs might enable them to serve a distinct and democratically useful purpose, which print and broadcast media are unable to fulfill because of the limitations of their format as well as the norms and constraints that have developed in professional journalism.

The final and most obvious difference between blogs and traditional news media is that blogs are so inexpensive to produce that they need not depend on patrons, corporations or ad revenue to enable and insure their existence. While it is becoming more common for bloggers that sustain high traffic to sell ad space, the vast majority of political bloggers derive little or no income from what is necessarily a part-time endeavor. Bloggers do not solicit for advertisers out of necessity so when they do sell ad space they may pick and chose advertising content. This means that ad content on blogs often conforms to their reader's sympathy and interest. In traditional media this relationship is reversed.

As blogs become more popular and familiar to elites, this crucial difference may cease to be significant. Some high-traffic blogs have already been picked up by major media distributors. For example, Andrew Sullivan's popular blog is now published by Time Warner. In addition, most traditional media outlets that have an online presence now employ bloggers to produce their online, non-subscription content. However, for now, blogs offer interested citizens a dialogic space that is different in kind from that available in and through traditional media.

4 Blogs change the way political communication works

Most evidence seems to suggest that the majority of blog's political impact is indirect (Drezner and Farrel 2007). Where blogs have a direct effect, it seems to be that they have altered the communicative practices of democratic elites and interested citizens. Despite the fact that only a small number of people read blogs they seem to routinely effect the constitution and content of political discourse in several ways. First, blogs seem to have an increasing influence on traditional media. Second, they've proved themselves to be effective tools of communication in opinion mobilization. And finally, non-media elites have begun to use blogs to survey and influence the debates that interested citizens engage in.

Media professionals far outpace the average Internet user in terms of their awareness of and reliance on blogs. According to a study of 140 editors, reporters, columnists, and publishers conducted by the University of Connecticut, 83% of media producers consume blogs, and of those 55% reported that they used blogs specifically to support their work as professional journalists. Although it is fair to say that compared to traditional media, blogs can not be considered the most direct tool of mass communication, neither are they languishing in obscurity. In fact, for those people who decide what's news, blogs are strikingly popular.

While Katie Hafner of the *New York Times* wrote of blogs in a 2004 editorial, "Never have so many people written so much to be read by so few," the important question in terms of political communication may not be how many, but *who*. The influences of the political discussions (and occasional revelations) that take place in the blogosphere have effects that are quite disproportionate to the absolute number of participants because journalists, elected officials and other influential elites are consuming them. As scholars of American politics have shown time and again, information which is consumed and valued by elites, even if it does not directly reach a wide swath of the general public, often has significant political effects (Schlozman 1984).

As the articles in this volume have argued, the interaction of professional news media with blogs can alter what is covered by either directing media attention to new facts or sustaining media attention on stories that might otherwise disappear after one or two news cycles. Additionally, since the blogosphere is organized around argument and opinion, those issues that encourage criticism and debate across ideological divides might particularly stimulate the interest of mainstream media. If journalist use talk across the blogosphere as evidence of generalized interest and dissatisfaction then they might be reassured that carefully covering widely discussed topics can not be considered evidence of bias. Furthermore, if reporters take breadth of discussion in the blogosphere as evidence of an untapped general public concern, it could even activate journalists' professional fear that they are being "scooped" by amateurs.

In addition, it seems blogs have become a source of interest to political elites. This phenomenon makes intuitive sense. A political system which is ostensibly authorized by the people ought to care when citizens attend to the processes of governance and policy making with the temerity that political blogs have exhibited. Not only because good democrats ought to care what the public thinks, but because the need to anticipate and benefit from the direction of public opinion has been a long-standing practical concern for elected officials.

Besides the indirect effects that blogs may have on political activity through their influence on mainstream news media, they have direct effects on the interested public. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life project during the 2004 presidential campaign, interested citizens used blogs to supplement their knowledge about issues and candidates. Even more remarkable, those Americans who were using the Internet for campaign news were exposed to more ideas than those who did not.

> At a time when political deliberation seems extremely partisan and when people may be tempted to ignore arguments at odds with their views, Internet users are not insulating themselves in information echo chambers. Instead, they are exposed to more political arguments than non-users. [...] Wired Americans are more aware than non-Internet users of all kinds of arguments, even those that challenge their preferred candidates and issue positions (Horrigan et al. 2004).

This is a striking finding given the concerns expressed by Cass Sunstein and Eszter Hargittai in this volume that blogs as a deliberative space tend to isolate participants from ideas that do not confirm their own position.

Although data is so preliminary that it is still premature to generalize about individual cases, professional political mobilization in recent electoral politics provides us with compelling reason to suspect that blogs can also have an effect on traditional political activities. For example, during the 2003 presidential primary race, Howard Dean's campaign used his blog as a major tool for mobilizing the Democratic Party's base. The Dean campaign's savvy use of new communication technologies, including Dean's blog, generated so much excitement that from July 2003 until January 2004, he was regarded as the presumptive party nominee. In January, when his discomfiting post-Iowa Caucus growling became

the source of universal mainstream media ridicule, Dean's momentum cooled. Despite this eventual embarrassment, Dean became an undeniable national presence as a result of his 2004 ingenuity. In this way blogs have been used as an effective tool of bottom-up opinion mobilization, serving a function that used to be the purview of national and local party organizations (Fiorina 1980; Rosenstone et al. 1984). The bottom-up potential of the blog as an organizational tool can be overstated, considering that blog users are overwhelmingly white, male and have incomes and education well exceeding the national mean. Still, the demographic domination of the blogosphere by those who are already most privileged in politics writ large, is not a fault of the medium in particular, but a reflection of the generally asymmetrical distribution of political and communicative resources in American politics.

A second example of the potential of blogs to shape public opinion can be found in *Washington Monthly* contributor and freelance journalist, Joshua Marshall's small blog empire which includes several sites. Marshall has become extremely influential with the inside-the-beltway crowd precisely because he has shown himself able to not only uncover new information and post it on his blog faster than print or broadcast news, but also because he has shown his blog exceptionally successful at shaping political opinions.

Marshall's method includes several steps. First, he picks an issue of political concern and states his initial opinion and analysis. Second, he solicits additional information from his readers. In most cases this process leads to a meticulous catalogue of mainstream news mentions and errors, creating an exhaustive (or at least exhausting) repertoire of factual and rhetorical resources for his readership. Third, beyond fact checking and information acquisition, Marshall pays attention to and takes advantage of the contingency of political meanings. He notes not only what officials, media and pundits say, but *how* they say it, as well as what impact the characterization of alternative arguments and opponents can have on issue salience. It is not unusual for Marshall to make language itself a focus of his blog's political critique. However, the norms of questioning and argument that are characteristic of blogs as a form make it possible for Marshall to follow the preceding steps. The interactive blog form encourages blog participants to both reevaluate meanings that have cascaded down from officials and also make meaning that might percolate up to political elites.

For example, between December 2004 and February 2005 as the Bush Administration began to focus on plans to overhaul Social Security, Marshall wrote extensively not only about the political and economic damage that he believed would result from Bush's proposed plan, but also devoted countless posts to discrediting the usage of the Administration's favored descriptive terminology. In the middle of the Social Security debate, White House officials began to refer to the cornerstone element of their Social Security overhaul as "personal accounts" instead of the original descriptive phrase "private accounts." Republican Party elites hoped this one word change would make a big difference in the public warmth toward the proposed policy.

However, the change in terminology never took. While the causal factors for the persistence of the unfavorable terminology and the cold public response are many, it may have been due in part to Marshall's efforts. Recall that although the mass public may not have been privy to Marshall's careful campaign, journalists, beltway elites and interested citizens paid close attention as *Talking Points Memo* both publicized and argued against the administration's rhetorical strategy. During the height of Marshall's engagement with the Social Security issue he scrupulously counted *every* mention of the altered phrase "personal accounts" that appeared in mainstream media. He alternately applauded and booed daily news organs for their editorial policies regarding which phrasing their writers employed. Marshall also held elected representatives accountable for both the terminology they used and the policy positions they declaimed in public (Marshall 2004/2005).

Here's how the blog's coverage unfolded: on 15 December 2004, Marshall made a few initial notes on what he believed the Democratic Party's strategy should be in the face of the Bush Administration's push for their Social Security plan. An important part of this strategy, he asserted, was capturing the terms of debate:

> Next, as we've discussed before, this isn't a debate about 'reform,' 'privatization' or 'saving' Social Security. It's about phasing out the Social Security program, or not. Framing it any other way concedes half the battle before the fighting even begins (Marshall 2004/2005).

Even though most political communications literature notes the advantage that officials (particularly White House officials) have in framing issues, this example plainly shows that effective frames needn't always trickle down an Entman-style communicative cascade.

By December 16, the day after the opening post, Marshall had informed his readers that the Democrat Congressman from Florida, Allen Boyd, had come out "for ending the Social Security Program." In that post Marshall explicitly enlisted his readers' help, suggesting: "let's find out where everyone else stands on the issue too." Such a line might be printed in a traditional media outlet, but only as a rhetorical rallying cry. Marshall, on the other hand, was actually relying on his readers to participate as researchers and his request was very specific: "Where do your representatives and senators stand on phasing out or keeping Social Security? If you find out by press accounts or by calling up and asking your representative or senator, let us know what you hear" (Marshall 2004/2005).

Because of the structure of blogs as a communicative form, Marshall was able to combine meticulous, fast-paced record keeping with equally speedy information aggregation and nearly instantaneous publicity. In this way, he was able to use his blog as a political watchdog—a watchdog with half a million eyes and on-the-spot publication capabilities. Such an endeavor would be inconceivable for a journalist working in a traditional medium. Not only because it would be impossible to update and amend such data, but because it would be quite a bit outside professional protocol to outsource research to readers, and completely beyond the scope of journalistic ethics to explicitly and purposely mobilize political activity toward any particular end. Bloggers on the other hand, regularly ask their readers for information, especially specialized information, and their readers customarily respond. Since the burden of finding-out is distributed among users on a voluntary basis Marshall was able to track the statements of representatives even as they adjusted, changed, or confused their positions in public appearances. Though it is impossible to generalize form this example, we do know that other bloggers have used similar methods to discover the authenticity of official documents, or the accuracy of official's statements (Drezner and Farrel 2007). Regardless of the information to be acquired, the form is equipped to function the same way.

The unique structural characteristics of blogs have given rise to a distinctive experience for blog readers. Unlike a reader's experience of traditional media, blog participants have the option to produce information that then has a direct effect on the news dialogue they consume. That means, blog readers are direct practical participants in and producers of the information-gathering and discursive capabilities possessed by any particular blog. In this way, blogs are a communicative space characterized by dialogue among interested peers—a form of political communication that is distinctly different from the communicative capabilities exhibited by or suited to traditional media.

5 Conclusion

It is certainly true that blogs do not overturn the effect of traditional mass media in the public sphere. Nor do they, by their mere existence revolutionize the typical citizen's experience of American politics. In fact, the structure and routines of the blogosphere do not seem suited to such purposes. But there is ample evidence that blogs do affect the structure of political communication in the United States. Since traditional media have begun to use blogs in a number of ways that effect the selection and presentation of news stories and thus, widely circulated and accessible political information, blog participants are sometimes able to influence what counts as newsworthy. Because blogs are not (at least not yet) elite-biased and their content is argument-centered, they can sometimes expand the range of political knowledge that is available to journalists, political elites and interested citizens. In addition, the habits of use that are, thus far, characteristic of the form have altered the pathways of political communication, providing an effective conduit (although not the only one) through which opinions and analyses can percolate up, instead of always cascading down. The second kind of impact blogs have is not primarily on political debate, but instead on participants. Blog readers are able to contribute to dialogue with amateur authors that they have *made* legitimate and influential by and through their sustained readership. Their comments, voluntary research, and specialized knowledge may all be partially constitutive of the news they consume—news that is also consumed by opinion and policy makers about whom they make political decisions.

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