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Weblogs, Pamphlets and Public Citizens: Changing Modern Media

Over the last ten years, the availability of the Internet to society has had serious consequences with regard to the way that society conducts not only business, but also discourse and politics. This change in communication, that embraces not just the value of established media, but also annotation and commentary by public citizens, has had serious effects on political commentary, as well as on media actors in the public sector. These new media personnel, bloggers, have made strides toward public effect that this nation hasn't seen on a broad scale since the Revolutionary War era, when pamphleteers steered public opinion toward independence from Britain and establishment of a democratic republic.

These past ten years have provided a great deal of media intrigue on the Internet. As newspapers began to publish online versions of their printed products, often made freely available to the general public, but still controlled heavily by editorial groups. Seeking either to combat the appearance of bias, many webbloggers began to use their websites as a form of rebellion against the

mass media. Frequently, these bloggers have different ideological strictures than the enforced neutrality required of the journalistic code of ethics which states: “Good faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism. Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly.” (ASNE, Statement of Principles, Article IV)

Bloggers, like their counterparts in pamphleteering, are public citizens creating media and reports that have had drastic effects on current mainstream media. This change is not just in conclusions, but also in the sources that are cited by the authors: “An effect that may not be as apparent from the visualization is that even though we started with a balanced set of blogs, conservative blogs show a greater tendency to link. 84% of conservative blogs link to at least one other blog, and 82% receive a link.” (Adamic & Glance, 4)

Bloggers have a tendency to interlink their arguments to form a communications mesh that is often linked not only by ideology but also by technical proficiency. Instead of containing their arguments as single responses to mainstream media, they are often responses to their own fellow bloggers.

This process of communication between blogs was rapidly aided by the development of weblog search engines like Feedster and Technorati. These services allow an author to easily list their personal weblog, as well as contribute

data to the search engines that track the intermingling of data between multiple weblogs to track conversations. A simpler explanation would come from Technorati themselves, though: “Technorati is a real-time search engine that keeps track of what is going on in the blogosphere — the world of weblogs.” (Technorati, “About Us”) Using behind-the-scenes tools, weblogging engines can easily integrate data with Technorati and Feedster to make their weblogs more easily linked with other sites.

It was not always simple to create a weblog. Weblogging has come a long way since it was editing computer code and display markup language. The invention of the managed weblog system, which allows a user to only have to enter plain text into an online form, is one of the primary enablers in the creation of citizen media and citizen journalism. Before tools like Movable Type, WordPress and Blogger, anyone who wanted to create a frequently updated website would have to know a great deal about web publishing. This frequently included a working knowledge and mastery of Cascading Stylesheets, JavaScript, and Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), which are fairly dense and esoteric in their nature. With all the challenges of technology, and the requirements necessary for maintenance, the number of personal websites updated on a daily basis was small in 1998, numbering around 5 (Menzie & Raicheva-Stover, 3).

When tools like Blogger and Movable Type removed the necessity for deep understanding of HTML, the ability of a non-technical person to create a good website was increased. This resulted in significant growth of the number of blogs and in the number of subject they covered:

“The advent of software that allowed blogs to be created without computer coding helped expand the number of blogs. By 2001 there were close to 80,000 blogs and by 2003 there were more than one million blogs.” (Menzie & Raicheva-Stover, 3)

This growth continued through to the present, when Technorati announced that they are tracking 35.3 Million blogs:

“I continue to marvel at it, but the blogosphere continues to grow at a quickening pace. Technorati currently tracks 35.3 Million weblogs, and the blogosphere we track continues to double about every 6 months.” (Sifry, 1)

Removing the requirement of technical literacy caused a major explosion of new weblogs, and with it came a new media sphere, separate from the established mainstream, the rules vastly different. Built on personal voice, instead of impartiality and neutral language, blogs became a way for individuals to make their opinions known to large audiences without the requirement of a third party exercising editorial control.

The effects of blogs in a new media environment are twofold: Weblogs cover stories that their mainstream media counterparts, for editorial reasons or other gatekeeping practices common in modern professional media, omit or miss entirely; and weblogs also bring to bear an ever-vigilant group of diverse

problem solvers that fact-check the work of many reporters and journalists in the mass-media arena. This makes the blogosphere an excellent addendum to mass media, operating as both appendix and *errata* to the main compendium of stories that the mass media puts into the public sphere using trained reporters and journalists. Two incidents make this role very clear: the statements of Senator Trent Lott at Strom Thurmond's 100th Birthday party, and the scandal after Dan Rather's report of incriminating documents from President Bush's Texas Air National Guard service. In the first, weblogs act as a lens to focus on stories that have not received mass-media attention, whereas in the second they help ensure the accuracy of the mass media through their advocacy and correction. After demonstrating the effects of weblogs on mass media, I will draw some conclusions about the credibility of webloggers and their effects on modern media.

When Senate Minority Leader Trent Lott spoke at Senator Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party on December 5th, 2002, he said,

"I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either," Lott said at last week's party." – (Edsall, A06)

These remarks would go undistributed by the mainstream media until December 7th, 2002 when the Washington Post's Thomas Edsall would report also the response of Representative John Lewis of Georgia:

Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), a leader of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, said yesterday he was stunned by Lott's comments, which were broadcast live by C-SPAN. "I could not believe he was saying what he said," Lewis said. In 1948, he said, Thurmond "was one of the best-known segregationists. Is Lott saying the country should have voted to continue segregation, for segregated schools, 'white' and 'colored' restrooms? ...That is what Strom Thurmond stood for in 1948." (Edsall, A06)

In the days that would follow, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times* and other newspapers of record would follow suit and print stories concerning Senator Lott's remarks. However, what's remarkable in this story isn't the Senator's remarks, or the rebukes that came from the mainstream media in the days following the original remarks, but rather the two-day delay between the remarks and their appearance in *The Washington Post* and the five-day delay between the remarks and the front page of *The New York Times*. In that period, though, the internet and webloggers were far from silent. On December 6th, immediately following the remarks in the late afternoon of the 5th, weblogger Joshua Micah Marshall wrote:

There's a sort of agreement in Washington these days -- with Thurmond's retirement and hundredth birthday -- to sort of forget about all that unpleasantness.

But look at what Trent Lott said about that candidacy yesterday...

Oh, what could have been!!! Just another example of the hubris now reigning among Capitol Hill Republicans. (Marshall)

Marshall was far from alone in his outrage over Senator Lott's comments, though, and bloggers were certainly far less charitable in their responses to

Senator Lott's comments:

"Since political correctness is the scourge of society, I won't mention that the problems Lott is referring to are the Civil and Voting Rights Acts.

UPDATE: To be fair, as people have pointed out, Lott is also likely referring lots of other horrible things like the Brown decision as well."

(Black, December 6th, 2002)

"It's one thing to say that Strom Thurmond should be allowed to celebrate his 100th birthday without people focusing on his allegiance to a hateful and oppressive ideology half a lifetime (er, his lifetime -- for most people it would be a *whole* lifetime) ago -- just as youthful flings with Marxism may be forgiven later on even if they're nothing to be proud of.

But to say, as Lott did, that the country would be better off if Thurmond had won in 1948 is, well, it's proof that Lott shouldn't be Majority Leader for the Republicans, to begin with. And that's just to begin with. It's a sentiment as evil and loony as wishing that Gus Hall had been elected."

(Reynolds, Instapundit.com, December 6th, 2002)

Reynolds and Black are just a few of the voices from the Internet in that 48-hour gap between Lott's utterance on C-SPAN and that first article by Edsall in the *Washington Post*. The outraged responses of the political bloggers on both sides of the political spectrum began to build into the mainstream media, which would begin to push the story to the forefront over the coming weeks, forcing a series of apologies from Lott that ranged from the curt to the profuse. Eventually, it also led to his resignation from the Senate Leadership. However, had bloggers not been so loudly decrying the remarks, is it likely that the

Washington Post would ever have written about Trent Lott's remarks at Strom Thurmond's birthday party? The *Post's* original coverage of the event omitted the controversial remarks entirely, focusing instead on quotes from former Senator Bob Dole, incoming Senator Lindsay Graham and Thurmond's son. Oliver Burkeman of The Guardian (UK) wrote the most telling observation about the entire scandal, two weeks later:

The momentum that ended in Trent Lott's resignation yesterday as the Senate majority leader did not, primarily, come from the traditional behemoths of the US media - the New York Times, the Washington Post and the main TV news networks.

Instead, the controversy has proved a defining moment for the vibrant online culture of weblogs - nimble, constantly updated, opinion-driven internet journals, freed from many of the constraints of the established media.
(Burkeman)

No longer solely the province of mainstream newspapers and television to affect the controversies of the current political sphere, weblogs were entering political discourse and public discussion. In 2006, much as in the beginnings of the United States, citizens are directly confronting current events and responding in public. Citizens' voices matter on a national scale. What followed the initial reports from Marshall, Reynolds and Black was nothing short of astounding, and it's best summed up in the words of Edward Ashbee:

"They turned their attention to Lott's comments the day after they were made, and by the following Monday, 'the blogosphere had gone ballistic.' By the next

day, the mainstream press and news channels had followed the bloggers' cue." (Ashbee, 362)

Without weblogs, Lott's remarks may have gone without notice. The original author of the *Washington Post's* coverage of Strom Thurmond's birthday did not feel that the remarks were newsworthy originally, or they were omitted as part of the editorial process. This decision dramatically affected the eventual scope of the article, as the gatekeeping process of mainstream media kept that story hidden. Christopher Harper best sums up the gatekeeping process:

... [T]he editor's personal prejudices and values affected his news judgment and the newspaper's content. Other factors that determined whether an article made it through the gate and into the newspaper included: immediacy, available space, and the quality of writing. (Harper, 6)

This process of gatekeeping on an institutional level, in mainstream media, means that stories are often omitted for the sake of brevity, disinterest or the need to make room for paid advertisements. These are often decisions that weblogs do not have to make, and as a result, stories that would be left out of newspapers or television, make it into print because of a weblogger's personal interest or personal opinion.

Weblogs which cover stories that mainstream media omits encourage a diversity of coverage that even multi-outlet metropolitan regions cannot keep up with. As technology had advanced further, producing Really Simple Syndication (RSS), a distribution method that allows for easy and automatic syndication of

new additions to weblogs, it has become possible for a consumer of media to add weblogs to their daily news diet. This allows for readers to mix and match their media, creating a new media outlet that is personally tailored to their interests and to their pursuits. Using an RSS-reader application on a personal computer, a sports fan can have a forty-page sports section and a one page local section, or a political junkie can have page after page of differing commentary from a variety of sources. The reader becomes their own editor and gatekeeper, combining multiple weblogs and conventional media sources, which have also adopted RSS, into their own personal fountain of news and commentary.



Source: "We Media" Bowman & Willis, p. 11

The above graphic is an excellent summation of this new media format,

countering the old “one-way” model that is best represented by a fenced-off newspaper building. The new participatory model “is the result of many simultaneous, distributed conversations that either blossom or quickly atrophy in the Web’s social network.” (Bowman & Willis, 10) This participatory model allows for a broader spectrum of coverage not just by major media players like newspapers and television, but also by individual blogs written by dedicated individuals. A broader spectrum of opinion and coverage effectively storms the gates placed by managed and edited media to prevent the omission of a story that might otherwise be missed by an editor with an unseen bias.

Weblogs, in addition to covering stories that mainstream media will miss, also play an important role in fact and analysis checking of mainstream media works, as well as of the works of other bloggers. On September 8th, 2004, CBS News’ Dan Rather aired a report on *60 Minutes Wednesday* that brought forth documents which concerned the service of President Bush in the Air National Guard. These documents were not properly vetted as part of the report, and what followed over the next three months lead to the firing of four CBS staffers and the retirement of Dan Rather. The process was remarkable, though, in that weblogs played a dramatic and primary role as the debunkers of the documents that CBS aired in their televised report. In the end, an independent panel asked to investigate the story by CBS would write:

“While the focus of the Panel’s investigation at the outset was on the Killian documents, the investigation quickly identified considerable and fundamental

deficiencies relating to the reporting and production of the September 8 Segment and the statements and news reports during the Aftermath. These problems were caused primarily by a myopic zeal to be the first news organization to broadcast what was believed to be a new story about President Bush's TexANG [Texas Air National Guard] service, and the rigid and blind defense of the Segment after it aired despite the numerous indications of its shortcoming." (Thornburgh & Boccardi, 4)

Immediately following the airing of the episode, commentary concerning the documents discussed in the *60 Minutes Wednesday* story was far-reaching in the blogosphere. Leading the charge was a group called *Power Line*, written by John Hinderaker, Scott Johnson and Paul Mirengoff. Also contributing were Bill Ardolino, author of *INDC Journal*, Jeff Harrell, author of *The Shape of Days* and Mike Krempasky and Kevin Craver at Rathergate.com. These four blogs devoted significant personal resources to checking the authenticity of the original documents provided by CBS, and fact checking the rest of the story.

When the documents were released to the public, in the form of PDFs downloadable from the CBS News Website, many bloggers downloaded and examined the memos supposedly issued as part of President Bush's military record, and signed by Lieutenant Colonel Jerry Killian. What would come out over the next week or so would be that the documents were, in fact, produced by a modern word processor on a computer, not on an early-1970s typewriter. The discrepancies in the documents were identifiable because of the lack of monospacing and a typographical technicality called "pseudo kerning." This

obvious detail would go unnoticed by CBS News' experts in their vetting of the original story.

Webloggers at *Power Line*, *The Shape of Days* and *INDC Journal* would, over the following weeks, track down experts in typography and ask them to examine the CBS documents for their authenticity. Jeff Harrell made one of the first replicas of the CBS documents, re-typing the Killian memos into Microsoft Word, and comparing them against the originals, only to conclude:

“... Maybe these memos were re-typed using Microsoft Word at some point. But there's a problem with that explanation, and it's a really good one: Lieutenant Colonel Jerry Killian, the man who signed two of these four memos, died in 1984” (Harrell, 1)

The death of Colonel Killian in 1984, before the widespread use of Laser Printers and the invention of Microsoft Word, made it far more likely that the documents were fraudulent and that Rather's story was no longer credible. Bill Ardolino of *INDC Journal* wasn't satisfied with the diagnosis, though, as he contacted Dr. Philip Bouffard, whose work with the Lake County, Ohio Crime Lab and with NCR Corporation qualified him to be an expert in forensic typography. After examining the documents, he was able to draw conclusions with caveats for not having the originals in hand:

I asked him to put a percentage on the chances that this was a fake, and he said that was "hard to put a number on it." I then suggested "90%?" Again he said it's "hard to put an exact number, but I'd say it's at least that high, sure. I pretty much agree that that font is Times New Roman." (Ardolino, 2)

Handling the duty of aggregator of related reports, Rathergate.com served as a clearinghouse for stories that appeared across the Internet concerning the scandals that followed, becoming an instant anthology and rally point for webbloggers concerned with the story. Through Rathergate.com, many people interested in the story would find an unvarnished and often admittedly partisan view of the scandal surrounding the story and its documents. As the story progressed from scandal to disciplinary action, many bloggers' attentions were turned to other stories, but Rathergate.com's entire purpose was to cover the effects of the scandal on the media, and CBS' disciplinary efforts through the report issued by Thornburgh and Boccardi. Blogs proved their worth as ongoing bibliography and annotation of the Rather scandal. Even if the viewpoints were often biased, the facts were no less convincing to the CBS Independent Report.

Where does this leave us? What value do blogs carry as sources in the wake of these events? Blogs accelerate the news cycle and connect public debate with mass media. While the acceleration is noteworthy, the idea of a connected public debate is the more compelling consequence of weblogs. The *Washington Post* in November of 2005 began to publish in their online version a section in each article detailing which weblogs were linking to the web copy of the story. By spotlighting the response of local and non-local writers to original

articles, the *Washington Post* began to publicly accept feedback from webloggers and other interested parties. This process of recognizing the nascent popularity of weblogs, not just for their often combustible content but for their contributory nature and the value of public debate, is an important step for the mass media to have taken. Recognizing the power of the weblog as an unfiltered media option for consumers of information and leveraging it through your own coverage promotes internal and external debate between journalists and public citizens.

As online citizen journalism becomes a hobby, or a devotion as some refer to it, it puts the professional media in a bit of an awkward financial position. With online media taking a more prominent role in reporting, since the lead times are shorter than print or produced media, the need for journalistic outfits to remain profitable is an important one:

Essentially, online news needs some value-added element that it can use to market itself in distinction to the gazillion other news purveyors plugged into the news wires—anything to make a site “stickier” to surf-numbed eyes.

(Scott, 10)

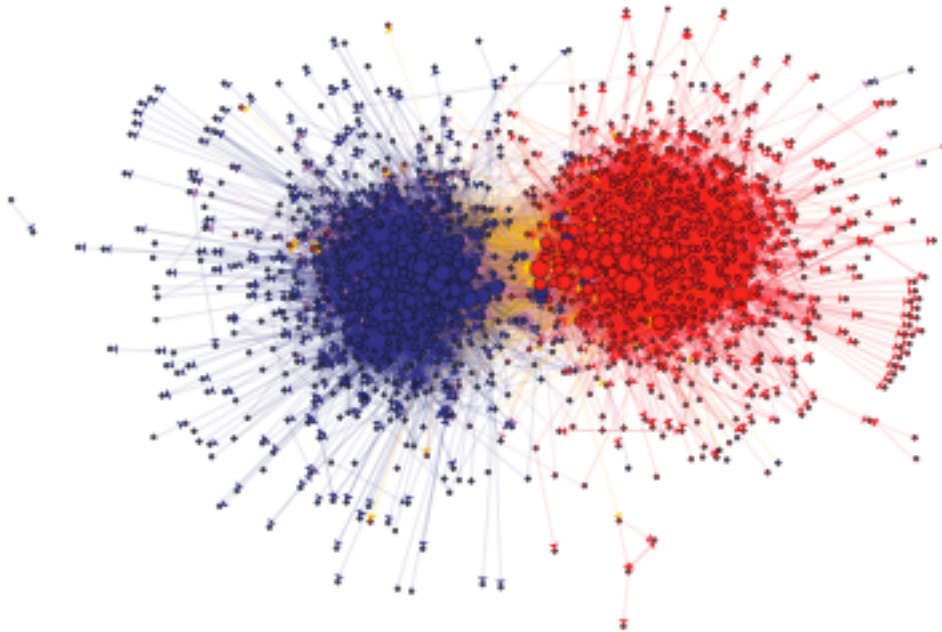
The process of adding value to their online presence requires there to be both advertising content to drive revenue, but also new material that’s not available for 35¢ in a corner newspaper box. Turning to weblogs to extend debate online, and also to extend the online presence of their authors and add new material, newspapers like the *Washington Post* are hoping to leverage weblogs as part of their business plan.

The combination of weblogs and newspapers is not unnoticed by statisticians:

“Even more common than links to other blogs are links to news articles.

Overall, the 20 left leaning bloggers cited the media 6,762 times, while the top 20 right leaning bloggers cited media 6,364, or, on average, about once every other post. “ (Adamic & Glance 10)

This symbiosis between weblogs and media is made possible through the interlinking of documents on the Internet. While bloggers could quote, and sometimes do, from print-only sources, the ability to inherently link the source document in question adds a sense of credibility to their writings. They can send readers to the original work in its entirety, instead of those same readers depending upon excerpts given in the original entry. The same symbiosis that exists between weblogs and media is just as prevalent between weblogs. This graphic, created to show connections between weblogs, shows the connection not just between weblogs and media, but between webloggers and other webloggers, even of opposing opinions:



Source: Adamic & Glance, page 4

The interconnection of weblogs becomes an interconnected collection of documents, which fosters a community much like the Royal Society in Britain, or like the group of Pamphleteers who wrote the Federalist Papers:

“Circulating documents played a critical role in binding together of this group [The Royal Society]... Printed journals provided members of the community with more-or-less identical documents to analyze. But they also consolidated the sense of a public scientific community among a body of people who did not know each other or communicate directly with one another...The sense of common membership and pursuits seem to have occurred first; the scientific information followed later.” (Seely Brown & Duguid, 191-2)

The process of creating community through shared documents perpetuates the process of citizen response and dialogue in the political sphere, much the way that the Royal Society conducted much of their discourse through shared letter writing.

As the number of weblogs increases, and according to Technorati the size of the blogosphere doubles every six months (Sifry, 3), the economy of choices becomes another matter all together. Weblogs begin to fall in line with power laws like the Pareto principle. Clay Shirky simplifies the relationship further in his paper on *Power Laws, Weblogs and Inequality*:

In systems where many people are free to choose between many options, a small subset of the whole will get a disproportionate amount of traffic (or attention, or income), even if no members of the system actively work towards such an outcome. This has nothing to do with moral weakness, selling out, or any other psychological explanation. The very act of choosing, spread widely enough and freely enough, creates a power law distribution. (Shirky, 1)

This is best summed up: as the options expand, a topology of the blogosphere develops. Webloggers that connect with their audiences through little truths and through compelling evidence and reasoning will advance along the curve, either through gaining an audience by personal correspondence with bloggers further up the curve or by providing original and compelling evidence and reasoning that reaches many readers. This process is one of honesty, through small truths, and through the correction of their own errors. Dan Gillmor, author of *We The Media* and formerly of the *San Jose Mercury News* said:

I'll note here that the better bloggers are among the most avid correcters of their own mistakes; their reputations rise and fall on their credibility, at least for the ones I read, and a stand-up admission of error wins the writer points for credibility -- at least if the mistakes don't happen repeatedly. (Gillmor, 5)

In order for weblogs to advance along Shirky's Power Law curve, they must also be honest, forthright and willing to issue their own corrections willingly and

quickly. It took CBS several weeks to issue their own correction and disclaimer with regard to the *60 Minutes Wednesday* story, and their lost credibility was significant in the process. As weblogs gain prominence, and through their symbiosis with mass media they will continue to do so, they gain the public's trust the same way that individual pamphleteers and scientists did in previous generations: by speaking honestly and convincingly with gratuitous use of evidence and rhetoric.

The symbiosis between bloggers and journalists is best summed up by Glenn Reynolds in *An Army of Davids*:

“Nonetheless, weblogs are not likely to mark the end of traditional media, any more than Martin Luther marked the end of the popes. Yet the Protestant Reformation did mark an end to the notion of unchallenged papal authority, and it seems likely that the blog phenomenon marks the beginning of the end to the tremendous power wielded by Big Media in recent years.” (Reynolds, *Army of Davids*, 92)

The process whereby weblogs acquired some of “Big Media’s” power, and began to craft their own notions of public dialogue and discourse have everything to do with capturing public trust. One cannot write on a weblog, “The sky is green,” and expect it to be a respected and trumpeted opinion. The process whereby trust is gained in the public eye has been one that has slowly snowballed for weblogs, much as it did for newspapers and other media outlets slowly over a period of time. Events like the Dan Rather and Trent Lott scandals lend a lot of credibility to weblogging as a distributed group of public

citizen journalists.

Technologies like weblogging systems and weblog search engines, such as Technorati, that easily cross-reference between sources, lower the technical hurdles necessary for a public citizen to report their own findings, share them with others, and link their work to the original resources. Slowly the topology of a group of “trusted weblogs” has been revealed by conditions like Power Laws and economies of choice, which create a mesh of credible sources among the noise. Some would remark that there is an awful lot of noise out there, but for a little signal. The power remains in the hands of the audience, sorting out which subset of the interconnected collection of documents known as the Internet is most credible, of most interest and is most satisfying. With weblogs on the rise, their credibility bolstered by victories in the public sphere, the role of the public citizen as part of the new mass media is not just an audience member, but also as a contributor.

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