



A Symbiotic Relationship Between Journalists and Bloggers

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A Symbiotic Relationship Between Journalists and Bloggers

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On March 22, 2007, John Edwards' presidential campaign announced that the candidate and his wife would hold an important press conference that afternoon. Shortly before the press conference, CNN, Fox News, and other cable networks began broadcasting stories that Edwards' wife, Elizabeth, would announce that her breast cancer was no longer in remission and that her husband would suspend his presidential campaign. While the story spread across the Internet, the campaign told journalists the rumor was not true. However, the campaign's denial failed to halt the spread of the story.

The problem was that the story really was false. When the news conference occurred, the Edwards family announced they would continue their campaign despite the cancer news. Journalists struggled to explain how and why they had given out false information.

The source for the news media accounts turned out to be a recently-created blog called Politico.com. In contravention of traditional journalistic standards, the blogger, a former *Washington Post* reporter, had reported the rumor after hearing it from only one source. The source turned out to be uninformed. The journalist justified his use of only one source, saying that blogs "share information in real time."¹

The Edwards' campaign story highlights a problem for journalists sharing information "in real time." While a reporter is seeking confirmation, he or she may find the initial source to be wrong. Publicizing that information before it is checked can confuse an audience who, assuming journalistic standards apply to what traditional news media say, will take the story as fact.

But this incident has a larger significance. It also demonstrates how political blogs—online, frequently updated journals that discuss politics—are affecting traditional journalism today. How is a community with long-held traditions and professional norms being affected

by a community that seemingly plays by its own rules? What is the nature of the relationship between these two players?

The thesis of this paper is that journalists and bloggers have formed a relationship based not just on conflict and competition, but also on co-dependency. They battle one another, but they also have influenced each other's approaches to their shared task of news and information dissemination.

Battling the Media

Each new form of news dissemination has trumpeted itself as superior to existing media. Radio brought listeners a human voice rather than the dry printed text. Television added visual images. Similarly, bloggers view themselves as part of a new medium that is superior to existing traditional media.

Blog boasting over traditional media is at least partly driven by a strategy of self-protection. As each new medium arrives, it is required to elbow its way into the universe of existing media. The strategy requires not only advertising one's own virtues but also disparaging the existing order—i.e., the competition. That means bloggers must engage in continual comparison with traditional media in order to acquire their own audience niche. Nor are bloggers alone in making that case. One political scientist heralded blogs because they “provide a channel for authentic expression that is free from the repressive controls of traditional media.”²

It is not surprising, then, that bloggers feed the image of competition between blogs and traditional media. When traditional media critique bloggers, the perception is given further credence. For example, when a *New York Times* story reported Jerome Armstrong, founder of MyDD, had been involved in a stock-touting scheme, his former consulting

partner, and founder of the blog Daily Kos, Markos Moulitsas, sent an email to 300 liberal bloggers and activists urging them not to discuss the article in order to prevent it from being picked up by other traditional media. Instead, Moulitsas' attempt to squelch the story was reported by *The New Republic* and the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, who accused Moulitsas of becoming what he claimed to be railing against.³

In that competitive environment, it should be no surprise that, despite their differences on ideology, blogs almost uniformly criticize existing media—and one survey of bloggers found the vast majority used their blogs for that very purpose.⁴ Such criticism usually centers on media bias. Conservative bloggers fault journalists for catering to the left, while liberal bloggers often write that the news media are cowed into serving the interests of the right wing.

Sometimes the criticism is more personal. One example is the reaction of a blogger at the 2004 Democratic National Convention to the sight of ABC News reporter Sam Donaldson conducting an interview. The blogger wrote that “without being too obvious, I tried to look at the marmoset that lives on his head.”⁵ Another example was a post on Daily Kos that called *Washington Post* reporter Howard Fineman “wimpy” and “slime.”⁶ And one blogger explained that “the only way you can really deal with the press corps is to beat up on them.”⁷

At the same time, bloggers heavily rely on traditional media. One survey of blog content found that 69 percent of blog posts included as a source a traditional media outlet such as the *New York Times*, the Associated Press, or the *Washington Post*. Bloggers rely on the traditional media more than they do each other: his study found that 64 percent of the posts had sources coming from other bloggers.⁸

Also, competition between journalists and bloggers is unusual because the two groups overlap. Many A-list bloggers have traditional journalism backgrounds. One survey of 30 political bloggers found that 12 had journalism experience. These included some of the best known bloggers such as Ana Marie Cox (Wonkette), Hugh Hewitt, and Andrew Sullivan.⁹

Nevertheless, bloggers' comparisons stress their superiority, particularly in the accuracy of their reporting, over traditional media. One blogger wrote: "So far, the blogosphere has a far better record of honesty and accuracy than mainstream organs like the *New York Times* and CBS."¹⁰ Bloggers also point out that they can fix errors more easily because they don't have to wait for the next day's printing.¹¹ One blogger also claimed that checks and balances in the blogosphere "are far stronger and more effective than the alleged 'checks and balances' of the mainstream media, which, in the absence of political and intellectual diversity, may not operate at all."¹²

Some bloggers view journalists as fundamentally dishonest when using a standard of objectivity to distinguish the traditional media from blogs or others who pretend to act as news reporters. However, bloggers contend that the traditional media are masquerading as objective purveyors of information. Josh Marshall asserted that his blog's reporting "is more honest, more straight than a lot of things you see even on the front pages of great papers like the *Times* and the *Post*."¹³

The difference, according to bloggers, is the straight-forward nature of their partisanship. Traditional media, they contend, are biased but refuse to admit it. Bloggers also are biased, they say, but don't lie about it. According to Hugh Hewitt, journalists' failure to tell the audience their own views makes their news product fundamentally flawed: "I am unwilling to trust the conclusions of somebody who won't tell me their opinions and background."¹⁴

The accusation implies that blogging is the true journalism while traditional journalism is false because it assumes that the news professional can be objective. According to Jay Rosen, the criticism is “really an attack not just on the liberal media or press bias, it’s an attack on professionalism itself, on the idea that there could be disinterested reporters.”¹⁵

Bloggers also see the battle between themselves and traditional journalism as one between the past and the future. They decry the media as outdated, relics of the past. One conservative blogger labeled news organizations “obstinate, lumbering, big-media dinosaurs.”¹⁶ The bloggers, on the other hand, are the future—the future of information gathering. According to one blogger, “weblogging will drive a powerful new form of amateur journalism as millions of Net users—young people especially—take on the role of columnist, reporter, analyst, and publishers while fashioning their own personal broadcasting networks.”¹⁷

The battle is not necessarily joined. Journalists still debate whether to respond to blogs. Many likely agree with one former CNN executive who argued that journalists shouldn’t respond to bloggers “until they are held to the same standard that we are.”¹⁸

Even when journalists do respond, the reaction can be dismissive. One news story about blog theories of a jihadist suicide bomber at the University of Oklahoma pointed out that a host of blog “facts” about the student who committed suicide by blowing himself up were inaccurate. The story quoted the student’s father, who said his son was depressed, that “this blog stuff is just smoke. It’s bilge.”¹⁹

But others argue blogs, particularly the A-list ones, are worthy of response. They contend these wide-reaching blogs should be held to a higher standard than other blogs with small or non-existent audiences.²⁰ The argument itself is underlined by an assumption that a medium attracting large audiences should adhere to journalistic standards in serving their

readers. It is, in essence, an assumption of equivalency with traditional media, thus making blogs true competitors of traditional journalism.

Blogs—The New Journalism?

One of the problems with bloggers' relations with journalists is that blogs aren't uniformly defined. Some bloggers view themselves as journalists, even the "new journalists." They disseminate news to an audience, particularly information their readers may not get elsewhere. They seek to abide by standards of objectivity in reporting. They do investigative research.²¹ They have been called "participatory journalists" because they feature interactivity and participation over observation. Blogs also have been termed "black market journalism" because their product is outside of the journalism system dominated by large media conglomerates.²²

Bloggers who perceive themselves as journalists would not necessarily argue that they are unbiased. The news presentation can still reflect their own perceptions of events and issues. After all, they argue, traditional journalists are biased as well and shape news gathering accordingly.

Other bloggers view themselves primarily as commentators, not journalists. John Hinderaker of Powerline said he does not regard himself as a full- or part-time journalist.²³ Eugene Volokh (Volokh Conspiracy) admitted he was "an amateur pundit, which is to say someone whose hobby it is to opine on various matters that are in the news."²⁴ Still others admit that they are not substitutes for journalists and do not claim to be. Instapundit's Glenn Reynolds urged his readers not to rely solely or primarily on his blog for news. "What you get here—as with any blog—is my idiosyncratic selection of things that interest me, as I have time to note them, with my own idiosyncratic comments."²⁵

Others see themselves as activists. For Markos Moulitsas, a goal of his blog, Daily Kos, is to help the Democratic Party win elections. He consults with candidates, raises money for them, and generally helps further the aims of the Democratic Party.²⁶ He is not a journalist and has admitted that, if he were, he would be “breaking half the canon of journalistic ethics.”²⁷ Nor is activism found only on the left. The website ConfirmThem concentrated on raising support for President George W. Bush’s judicial appointments.

Still others see themselves as journalists and commentators and even activists—all at the same time.²⁸ According to Moulitsas, blogging has blended historical roles: “Traditionally it was easier for people to find the niche...you were either an activist or you were a writer or you were a pundit...We’re all of the above.”²⁹

They do not see a fundamental conflict between reporting on the news and commenting on it at the same time, as well as attempting to change policy. In the same post, a blogger can offer news, add commentary, and urge action on the part of the audience and policymakers. One journalist has summed up blogging as having “all the liberties of a traditional journalist but few of the obligations.”³⁰

Bloggers emphasize the differences in their approach to journalism. While traditional journalists value detachment from the story, an emphasis on description, neutrality in presenting conflicts within the story, the unidirectional nature of the communication, and the importance of structure, bloggers emphasize the importance of personal subjectivity, honestly expressed opinions, the role of the audience in the communication process. Also, they have a lesser focus on cohesion and organization.³¹

However, the journalistic style proposed by bloggers is not new. Over time, traditional media have experienced the same angst over the nature of journalism. During the colonial era, printers of broadsheets agonized over their preferred role as commercial printers and the

expected role of foot soldier—either in defense of the crown or in service to the revolution. Then, the same debate erupted during the framing of the U.S. Constitution as newspaper publishers sought to return to their old commercial role but were pressed into service as advocates or opponents of the proposed constitution.³²

Debate over the journalists' role continued throughout the 19th century as some elements in journalism sought a more independent press, while others preferred a press that was a mouthpiece for party principles. Still another conflict came at the end of the 19th century over whether journalists should manufacture news to boost circulation or merely report news as presented by sources.

Only in the 20th century did the practice of interweaving opinion and news begin to give way to a new standard of professionalism and objectivity.³³ Yet, even that change seemed artificial. While the newspapers of the 18th and 19th centuries in the United States were proudly partisan and erected no barriers between news and commentary, even those of the 20th century and early 21st century have contained both editorial opinion and news reporting. The assumption was that by putting editorial opinion and news on separate pages, news stories would be unaffected by the editorial position of the paper.

By the end of the 20th century, explicit news analysis and commentary began to creep out of the editorial pages and into the rest of the news section of the paper. Journalists also appeared to have freer rein in expressing opinions in the body of a news story, particularly a feature story.

Hence, the role of the traditional media is hardly settled in American life. For example, public opinion of journalists has shifted in recent years. News audiences today are less likely than they were ten years ago to view the news they acquire from news organizations as credible.³⁴

And journalists themselves still debate the role of journalism. The appearance of the blogs, with their new standards of reporting, has accentuated that debate. For example, the blogosphere has altered somewhat the role of the journalists as gatekeeper. Through links on blogs, readers now have access to original documents and other sources. They also have access to information that journalists do not regard newsworthy.

Yet, journalists still see themselves helping the average reader make sense of events and developments. Not only does that come in the form of filtering out what journalists believe is unimportant, but also placing that news in context for the reader.³⁵ For the vast majority of readers who are not interested in searching the Internet for additional information, that journalistic function is critical.

If traditional journalism with its centuries-old history in the United States continues to deliberate on its role, it should be no surprise that the political blogosphere, with a much shorter life span, also would be doing so. Moreover, it is important to remember the roots of the blogosphere. While it may be viewed by many as an alternative to the traditional media, blogs did not start that way. Early blogs were personal journals featuring individual expression, primarily by teenagers. Their political role was tangential at best. But as a few of those blogs turned to national politics and attracted large audiences, they morphed from introspective diaries to political news sources. Still featuring personal expressions by their authors (in the tradition of early blogs and the blogosphere generally), these blogs also disseminated news stories about political events, many of which were ignored or downplayed by the traditional media.

As they shifted from personal diaries directed to family and friends to political news and information gatherers and disseminators, some bloggers saw themselves as the future of journalism. They began to envision a new generation of media consumers who would

eschew the traditional media forms and gravitate to the more partisan but more interesting blog sources.

Impact on Journalists

Whether traditional journalists ignore blogs, or express disdain for them, the blogosphere has affected how journalists do their job. The style of reporting by blogs, as well as journalists' own use of blogs, has magnified blog impact on journalism in several ways.

Defining Journalists

One effect is the renewed debate over the nature of a journalist. Should bloggers be considered part of the journalistic community? Should only certain types of bloggers enter the ranks of journalism, for example, those on the A-list or those who report more than they comment or perhaps those who claim to be journalists?

Traditional news professionals are ambivalent about whether to consider blogs as part of the journalistic community. After all, paying attention to them means acknowledging and legitimizing a potential competitor and critic. As one scholar put it: "If they adopt them, it's like having a spastic arm—they can't control it."³⁶

On the other hand, how can journalists ignore blogs like Instapundit, The Huffington Post, and Daily Kos that have larger readerships than most daily newspapers? How do they disregard the work of people who break stories and interview top political leaders? The issue becomes concrete when, for example, journalists are required to have credentials in order to gain access to places such as the White House Press Room or the congressional press galleries. Should bloggers be accorded the same privileges as a reporter for the Associated Press or the *Los Angeles Times*? Do they qualify?

Another wrinkle is the fact that bloggers approach their task differently from traditional journalists. One blogger who was credentialed to the Democratic National Convention decided to blog from his home in Boston after a couple of days because “it was easier to just be able to walk around in my shorts and get something to eat when I wanted to.”³⁷

The question of whether the definition of a journalist should include bloggers is one with which many news professionals are still wrestling. The solution may well be a distinction between bloggers who look like traditional journalists—who have large readerships, work for organizations, and are primarily in the business of newsgathering and reporting—and those who do not.

Accelerating Reporting

Blogs have accelerated the speed of the newsgathering and reporting process. The pressure to get news out fast has long characterized the news business. In the days before radio, newspapers printed several editions throughout the day in order to deliver the latest news.³⁸ The advent of 24-hour television news channels in the 1980s challenged the major network news divisions to broadcast news more frequently. In the mid-1990s, the Internet offered a new venue for constant news transmission, which required a steady stream of news content from media websites. Journalists now were driven by a deadline pressure imposed on them by their own news organization’s embrace of new technology.

The blogosphere is the latest source of pressure. As a medium that is characterized by instantaneous updating, the blogosphere offers a near-constant content feed. Bloggers do not need to take the time journalists do to produce a news media story. The traditional media must first decide whether to cover an event and then must assign a journalist to report on it. This step is followed by an editing process where the story goes through layers of

editors before being approved for publication. Then, in the case of the newspaper, time is needed to physically publish the story. News for the website skips the production stage, but still must go through the rest of the cycle. For television, the process is sometimes more complex due to the constraints of film crew allocation and placement, as well as production requirements, though live coverage is instantaneous.

By contrast, a blogger can post to his or her website in minutes. There is no prior assignment, no need to physically attend the event, no organizational layers, no production time. In less time than it takes for a journalist to be assigned a story, go and cover it, come back and write it, and have it edited (even for the Web edition), a blog story can go through various iterations and become old news.

This advantage provides blogs an important niche in delivering breaking news. In an era of 24-hour news cycles and audience expectation of near instantaneous coverage, traditional news media organizations face enormous pressures to be fast and first in delivering the latest news. Blogs can match, and typically exceed, the traditional media's ability to reach an audience quickly.

Has the traditional media lost their ability to be the first to publicize a story because of the speed of the blogosphere? If so, much like newspapers' adjustment to radio, will they have to find a niche of more in-depth reporting or more informed news reporting in lieu of being the first to report a story?

The media's demise may be exaggerated, to paraphrase Mark Twain. The blogosphere lacks the surveillance and newsgathering capabilities of traditional media. The kind of story that blogs can more easily scoop are those that news media have but don't report because they discount their newsworthiness, or those that emanate from a source in the blogosphere. Although either scenario is possible, such scoops are not all that common.

Another impact on journalism is the ability to frame a story in a way that constitutes the “first impression” for the news audience. Two scholars have called this a “first-mover advantage in socially constructing interpretive frames for understanding current events.”³⁹ One could argue that the Harriet Miers case is an example of that “first-mover advantage.” Blogs disseminated negative information about Miers faster than the White House could initiate its image-making effort.

The blogosphere’s ability to frame is contingent on one major condition. That is the presence of a somewhat universally accepted frame. Since the blogosphere is divided, frame consensus is difficult to achieve. In the case of Miers, the frame of Miers’ shortcomings was accepted across both liberal and conservative blogs. That is relatively uncommon.

Changing Professional Standards

In addition to the speed of the blogosphere, consider the absence of professional standards found within it. While journalists are trained to follow certain norms and codes of professional ethics in the construction of a story, bloggers have no such guidelines. Bloggers are also unconstrained by journalistic standards of reporting. A blogger need not confirm a tip or check the authority of the source, though some may choose to do so in order to maintain their credibility. Andrew Sullivan said blogging is “a way you can throw ideas around without having to fully back them up, just to see what response you get.”⁴⁰

Bloggers even brag about their failure to check rumors. The owner of a network of blogs explained that “it’s implicit in the way that a web site is produced that our standards of accuracy are lower. Besides, immediacy is more important than accuracy, and humor is more important than accuracy.”⁴¹ While blogging on Wonkette, Ana Marie Cox saw herself competing against gossip journalists in print media. She noted that the best known print

gossip columnist in Washington could not compete with her because “he reports, that’s the problem. He, like, checks facts.”⁴²

Such freedom can also be a disadvantage. When bloggers get it wrong—spreading rumor as fact—it should affect their credibility. And blogs often get it wrong. The Edwards story cited earlier is one example. Another was election night of 2004. The broadcast networks were reporting election results from state to state, but the blogosphere was distributing exit poll results supposedly showing John Kerry was ahead in key swing states. Early exit poll numbers, which are incomplete, had been leaked and blogs were reporting that John Kerry would be elected.⁴³

Bloggers admit that blogs can be “raw emotion” and that there are times when they’d be better served by more deliberation. Moulitsas said that there are times when “I’ll write something that later on I’m thinking, yeah, maybe I should have waited ten minutes to post that.”⁴⁴

This type of competition places pressures on traditional journalists who are used to playing by a set of rules. While one operates under journalistic rules of obtaining confirmation, which typically takes time, the other competitor, the bloggers, are able to ignore such norms. As a result, the blogosphere can lead journalists to cast aside their journalistic training in the rush to be first. Bob Steele, a media ethicist, concluded: “The Edwards story speaks loudly to how fast those values can get lost in a hurry.”⁴⁵

The pressure becomes most acute when the story is a blockbuster. Journalists remember the *National Enquirer’s* story of Gary Hart’s dalliance on the boat “Monkey Business” with Donna Rice that helped doom the Democratic front runner’s 1988 presidential campaign.⁴⁶ Eleven years later, the Drudge Report broke an even bigger story—the Monica Lewinsky scandal.⁴⁷

In 1987 and 1998, there was no blogosphere. By 2004, there was one, and the possibility that the blogosphere would affect the presidential election outcome was tantalizing. On February 6, 2004, a little known blog, Watchblog, posted a rumor that John Kerry had been involved in a long-running affair with an intern, and that affair would soon be exposed by *Time* magazine. The Drudge Report picked up the rumor on February 12. Immediately, other blogs repeated the story.⁴⁸ It circulated widely and was reported in the press before it was dismissed when all the parties involved denied it and no evidence of the affair was produced.⁴⁹

Bloggers claim the blogosphere is its own check. Glenn Reynolds of Instapundit contended that the online community is its own ombudsman: “The check on blogs is other blogs.”⁵⁰ Yet, blogs remain popular even when they get stories wrong or merely spread rumors. The best example is Wonkette. There is strong pressure to repeat rumors heard elsewhere on the blogosphere or the Internet simply because they are in circulation.

Usurping the Watchdog Role

Journalists have long viewed themselves as media watchdogs who reveal politicians’ mistakes and government errors. The role became idealized in the wake of the Watergate scandal and the role of Woodward and Bernstein in the fall of Richard Nixon. But bloggers challenge that supposed “watchdog” role. They argue that, rather than checking politicians, traditional journalists have developed cozy personal relationships with politicians and other elites. Bloggers claim they, not traditional journalists, are the real watchdogs today. They contend bloggers can be more critical of political insiders because, unlike journalists, they sit at a healthy distance from politicians. One blogger argued that traditional reporters missed the significance of the Trent Lott story because of “journalistic clubbiness” with politicians.⁵¹

The bloggers' point speaks to the inherent ethical dilemma of a permanent press corps—that is, how to stay close enough to sources to get information but not so close as to become co-opted.⁵² Moreover, some prominent journalists have become establishment figures in their own right. Nationally syndicated columnists, television news anchors, Washington bureau chiefs, political interview hosts—all have become fixtures in Washington and coveted figures at dinners, parties, and other social events.

Bloggers, however, are upstarts. There is still an outsider quality to their content and their approach to politics. Only a select few have acquired insider status. That doesn't mean it will always be that way. This "virtue" likely will fade over time. Integration to Washington social circles is still in its early stages, but will almost certainly increase. However, the fact that many political bloggers today live away from Washington, D.C. or New York may make co-option more difficult.

Watching the Watchdog

Another effect of the blogosphere is that the traditional media have themselves become objects of scrutiny. Bloggers examine the news media's content thoroughly and publicize media mistakes. One blogger warned the press that he would scrutinize every aspect of media content and "the level of scrutiny will make your editors blush."⁵³

Media watchdog groups are not new. Groups on the left (FAIR) and those on the right (AIM) have critiqued the media for years. But there is a difference with bloggers. The new watchdog is a steady critic of media bias and slant. Conservative bloggers particularly charge media outlets with having a liberal bias and twisting events to conform to that bias. For example, some bloggers questioned the accuracy of an Associated Press story of a Bush campaign event in 2004 that stated the crowd had booed when Bush announced former

president Bill Clinton would undergo heart surgery. The bloggers placed audio and video of the event on their sites as evidence of their assertion, which prompted an AP retraction.⁵⁴

For conservatives, the blogosphere is an alternative source of information but also a forum for uncovering liberal bias in what it reports. An example was *The New Republic's* publication of blog postings by a U.S. soldier in Iraq writing under a pseudonym. The soldier related atrocities against Iraqis including an incident where U.S. troops had cut out the tongue of an Iraqi boy who had befriended the troops and another where a soldier had mocked a disfigured Iraqi woman.⁵⁵

Conservative bloggers claimed the accounts were false and criticized *The New Republic* for publishing them without verification and under a pseudonym. A private claimed responsibility for the stories and the U.S. Army issued a report concluding the stories were fake. However, *The New Republic* initially stood by the stories, but later disavowed them.⁵⁶ One conservative blogger wrote that the entire incident is “another chapter in the sad history of ‘fake, and not accurate, either’ news stories.”⁵⁷ Another pointed to “editorial failures and ethical breaches of the magazine’s senior editors.”⁵⁸

However, liberal bloggers have attacked the conservative media as well. The blogosphere played a role in uncovering the identity of a man accredited to the White House press corps for a supposedly independent news service, but who was affiliated with a Republican website. Liberal blogs disclosed that the would-be reporter had set up pornographic websites and even advertised himself, in the nude, as an escort.⁵⁹

In another case, a reporter at The Huffington Post investigated a blogger who regularly contributed to National Review Online about Lebanon and concluded the blogger’s postings were fabricated. The conservative opinion magazine admitted the postings were “misleading.” Other liberal blog posts criticized *National Review* for not exercising better

editorial judgment and using supposedly descriptive stories to further their own ideological agenda.

However, liberal and conservative bloggers have at times joined to criticize the traditional media. Both Michelle Malkin and Andrew Sullivan criticized the Smith postings on National Review Online while Littlegreenfootballs did the same to *The New Republic*.⁶⁰

Left, right, or middle, bloggers enjoy pointing out traditional media mistakes and forcing corrections and apologies from what they call “big media.” The previously discussed example of Dan Rather is best known. But several others have occurred. For example, *The Guardian* newspaper misquoted then Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. Bloggers pointed out the mistake, eventually leading the paper to retract it and apologize to readers.⁶¹ Another instance involved a blogger who accused a *New York Times* arts reporter of a conflict of interest because she served simultaneously as a member of the board of directors of an art institute. The blogger claimed the reporter was giving the art institute more press than it deserved. The reporter denied the accusations but resigned from the board.⁶²

Another element of the watchdog role is covering stories traditional media do not. One blog even has as its slogan “All the News the MSM [Mainstream Media] Forgot to Print.”⁶³ Blogs are most interested in missed stories about journalists themselves. Bloggers view themselves as checking journalists’ tendency not to criticize their own profession. Indeed, mainstream journalists are reluctant to cover their own organizations critically. Nor are journalists quick to criticize one another.

An example is the case of CNN executive Eason Jordan. At a panel of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in 2005, Jordan accused the U.S. military of purposely shooting at journalists. When challenged by others, Jordan backed away from the allegation. But a blogger at the summit decided to write about the incident on the meeting’s

own blog after he noticed traditional media were not doing so.⁶⁴ Two debates arose. One was over the content of Jordan's assertion. The other was whether the news media ignored Jordan's comment because he was a fellow news professional. Bloggers accused the media of ignoring the incident since it involved one of their own, while traditional media responded that the accounts of what Jordan had said were inconsistent and no transcript offered a reliable arbiter because the event was officially "off the record."⁶⁵

The controversy eventually led to Jordan's resignation.⁶⁶ Bloggers gloated over their victory. One called it "Blogs 1 CNN 0." Another claimed "the Blog is turning into a great equalizer."⁶⁷

Political bloggers also take on a watchdog role by including those elements of a story that the traditional media ignore. Bloggers sometimes see themselves as completing the story—offering perspectives that traditional media do not. This is particularly true of conservative bloggers who view traditional media as one-sided.

An example is media coverage of the Iraq war. Some conservative bloggers complain the traditional media only cover the violence and fail to tell their audiences about the successes of the U.S. military or the Iraqi government. "What's important," according to one conservative blogger, "is to fill in both sides of the story or multiple sides of the story."⁶⁸

Although the watchdog role is critical of the media, bloggers suggest their goal is not really to destroy the traditional media, but to reform it.⁶⁹ According to Josh Marshall, the aim is to "get people to practice better journalism."⁷⁰ Similarly, Markos Moulitsas argued the country needs a press that "acts like a check on government that acts like it's working in the public interest, as opposed to just trying to ingratiate themselves with the people in power and get invited to the right cocktail parties."⁷¹

Pitting Elites Against Non-Elites

In addition to a general competition with traditional media, blogs also are affecting intra-media competition between two levels of journalism—elites (prestige newspapers, newsmagazines, networks, etc.) and non-elites. Traditionally, there is a unidirectional relationship where elite press—particularly through wire services and syndicates—becomes the source of content for non-elite publications. Non-elite journalists also pick up cues from national media and add a local angle. Rarely does the relationship move in the other direction where elite media gather stories from non-elite press and include them in their content.

According to Moulitsas, non-elite journalists use blogs to attract the attention of the elite press to a story. By pitching the story to an A-list blog, which is an easier information source to reach than the elite press, a blogger could reach a national audience, and perhaps have the story picked up by elite journalists.⁷² Although blog sources primarily are drawn from the elite press as well, blogs use a wider array of sources, including non-elite press.⁷³ This trend may help non-elite press help shape the news agenda as their content moves indirectly to elite media.

However, this scenario assumes that elite media actually draw from blogs to get stories. But past examples suggest that news media are reluctant to repeat blog content. One example is a story that broke in October and again in December concerning an alleged affair between John Edwards and a video producer who worked on the Edwards campaign. On both occasions, the initiating newspaper was a non-elite source—the *National Enquirer*. The tabloid, which played a role in a sex scandal involving Democratic presidential frontrunner Gary Hart in the 1988 presidential race, ran a story charging Edwards with impregnating the woman and then covering it up by blaming the incident on a staffer. The Drudge Report

repeated the story in blaring headlines, and some A-list blogs mentioned it as well. But, despite considerable attention on the A-list blogs, the traditional media did not report the story.

Competing for a Niche Political Audience

Traditional media have faced increasing competitive pressures from new information sources. Twenty-four hour news channels and Internet news sites offer the most politically interested citizens an unending flow of news. The contest begins with the traditional media competing under a handicap of audience expectations. News media organizations provide news across a broad spectrum of topics—politics, sports, entertainment, weather, etc. Even within political news, news media rarely devote their broadcasts to a single topic. The audience expects stories on varying topics because they expect to be informed across a range of developments.

Bloggers, on the other hand, don't have the same obligation to report the news of the day. Any particular blog can, and will, ignore the vast majority of stories the news media cover and hone in on one or two topics for a post, the day, or even several days. This distinction in roles can be seen in the Trent Lott story. While the political blogs could devote time to this story, news media also had the responsibility to report other breaking news including the resignation of Paul O'Neill, secretary of the treasury, and Larry Lindsay, the White House chief economic advisor, as well as a close election for U.S. Senate in Louisiana.⁷⁴

Bloggers also view themselves as competitors with specialized opinion magazines, such as *The New Republic*, *National Review*, and *The Nation*. Markos Moulitsas wrote on his blog that

the “New Republic is mortally wounded and cornered, desperate for relevance because it “has lost half its circulation since the blogs arrived on the scene.”⁷⁵

De-Bureaucratizing Writing

With its roots in personal journals, the blogosphere still values writing that is not subject to an editorial process. Bloggers claim that the absence of a news hierarchy is a distinct advantage. They argue that the bureaucracy of traditional news media “turns even the best prose limp, lifeless, sterile, and homogenized.”⁷⁶

In response, mainstream journalists have started their own blogs, sometimes separate from their organizations. Also, news media organizations have created blogs in order to attract readers. The style is more real-time, informal, and opinion-laced—much like the blogosphere in general. One editor for the *New York Times*’ website explained its blog as a vehicle for “insights that might not rise to a full article but are worthy of reporting.”⁷⁷

News organization blogs also provide more space for news. Newspapers can disseminate news that won’t fit in the hard copy.⁷⁸ One reporter for the *Washington Post* noted “the bar is lower than getting something in a newspaper.”⁷⁹

The blogosphere poses new dilemmas for news professionals. Journalistic blogs potentially make the newsgathering process more transparent. Reporters need not wait to distribute a final product in the form of a printed newspaper article or a television news story. One reporter-blogger said he informs his readers of what he’s working on and what information he has before posting the story.⁸⁰ On the other hand, the release of information from one source may be contradicted by later sources, even though the reporter may have distributed the information as if it were confirmed fact.

Blogs also raise the question of the role of editing. Should journalists' blogs be edited? Editing is fundamental to the journalistic process but antithetical to the original blog culture. This dilemma is exemplified by a California reporter for who wanted to post a critical statement about a gubernatorial candidate, but was forced to run copy through the editor first. Bloggers complained about the news organization's decision to edit the journalist and the newspaper backed down.⁸¹ However, some of the reporter's colleagues complained about the new double-standard of editing—print stories get edited but blog posts do not.⁸² The dilemma for the news organization is that it bears responsibility for what is written on the newspaper's blog.

Editing practices vary. For example, the *New York Times* blog is edited.⁸³ But others are not. These other organizations may share the view of one editor who claims editing is not necessary because journalist-bloggers are long time reporters who “apply the tenets of good journalism to their Web logs.”⁸⁴ However, what happens when a news generation of journalist-bloggers does not share those experiences? Will editing then be necessary?

Including the Public

Blogging has presented another dilemma for traditional media—how to handle the potential for increased involvement of the public. Bloggers challenge media claims that the news presentation must be dominated by trained professionals. They bristle at the assumption that the news media product is more legitimate because it is written and edited by professional journalists. One blogger opined: “Just because you don't get paid for writing a blog doesn't mean you're any less authoritative.”⁸⁵

While traditional journalists have developed an ethic of professionalism via journalistic education, professional societies, and professional codes of behavior, bloggers have none of

these. Many are new amateurs. One traditional reporter said the power of blogs was “like C-SPAN in the hands of a 19-year-old.”⁸⁶

Despite this kind of criticism, news media organizations are responding to the demand for public involvement. They are opening up the news presentation, particularly online, to additional voices. Major media publications—including elite newspapers, network news divisions, and national newsmagazines—have started their own blogs.⁸⁷ In addition, blogs have proliferated among regional media such as the *Houston Chronicle*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and the *San Antonio Express-News*.⁸⁸ These blogs are dominated by news professionals, but they typically allow reader comments. On media sites such as the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City) comments appear directly underneath the story.

One potential drawback to the increased interaction with readers through newspaper blogs is the potential for journalists to confuse the blog posters with the broad readership. News professionals may become obsessed with those who read the blogs and respond rather than a broader audience. One photojournalist noted, “Thirty years ago if somebody didn’t like a picture I had in the paper, I got some letters passed on by my editor a few week later; now I get a hundred bloggers calling for my blood before I even see the paper.”⁸⁹

Reporters are unused to such criticism and can be thin-skinned. They may lash out at the critics. But they also may begin to tailor the news presentation in response to the vocal few.

Such responses even may lead journalists to discard news judgment in order to increase online readership.⁹⁰ One journalist blogger asserted that “my readers know more than I do.”⁹¹ Although the remark may suggest a humility that any group with power should share, it seems odd in another sense. The fact that journalists receive the news before their audiences, and filter what they gather before it gets to the audience, suggests that journalists

have more knowledge than their audiences. The journalist may perceive that the collective wisdom of the readership is greater than the individual's. However, in the determination of what is news and how to gather and report it (which is the critical component of a journalist's job), the reporter is expected to be more knowledgeable than the consumers of news.

Freeing Journalists

Blogging began as a public form of personal expression, much like writing a personal diary that is photocopied and handed out to perfect strangers. One survey of bloggers found that the most common reason for blogging was to “document their personal experiences and share them with others.” And the most common topic of blog writing the bloggers said was “my life and experiences.”⁹²

That style carries over into political blogs. A-list political bloggers take personal thoughts and broadcast them to hundreds of thousands of people. Joshua Micah Marshall lamented: “In a way I’ve lost my ability to have my own private reflections. I’ve gotten in the habit of just putting everything out there.”⁹³

Through most of the last century, the professional norms of journalism were diametrically opposite to this personalized approach in news writing. As a vehement reaction to the partisan press of an earlier age, journalists were required to hide their true feelings behind the mask of objectivity. It was important that the reader be unaware of reporters’ personal views. Professional norms discouraged personal expression. Over the past several decades, the objectivity model has been eroded by successive challenges from the “new journalism” movement, advocacy journalism, and public journalism.⁹⁴

Blogs are the most recent addition to the anti-objectivity trend of the past half-century. But blogs are different from these previous movements because they arise outside of journalism. One blogger explained that blogs “tend to be impressionistic, telegraphic, raw, honest, individualistic, highly opinionated and passionate, often striking an emotional chord.”⁹⁵

By adopting blog writing, journalists have been freed from the constraints of objective journalism. When blogging, they are more likely to express personal views, make unsubstantiated assertions, and abandon their reliance on sources. The norms of the blog world are beginning to carry over into, and reshape, the norms of journalism. Journalists can act more like other bloggers and less like objective journalists. In fact, adherence to the standard format of newswriting on a media blog would evoke criticism from the blogosphere and, in the current blogosphere, chase away readers.

This liberation, however, leads to the question of how far it will extend into journalism. Will the blog writing style come to dominate outside the blogosphere—that is, journalists’ traditional formats of news presentation?

The answer probably is no. Objective journalism took some time to establish itself as the paradigm for news presentation. Moreover, audience expectations are still relevant. The traditional audience still expects, and wants, a press that is free of a particular point of view.⁹⁶

This creates a tension for journalists who both blog and continue to work as daily reporters covering beats. Perhaps blogging can be viewed as temporary liberation. For a brief time in their daily routine, they can break out of their set patterns and express personal opinions. But will that eventually affect their traditional writing?

Perhaps a more important question is whether journalists will be trusted as neutral descriptors of events once their personal views about those same events are expressed on

blogs. Does “liberation” undermine journalists’ credibility? The question is particularly important given the decline in credibility already experienced by the press.⁹⁷

Following the Blogs’ Agenda

Bloggers view themselves as a vital component of the newsgathering process. One of the predictions by bloggers is that increasingly they will be viewed as the first source. One common line is: “If journalism is the first draft of history, blogs might just be the first draft of journalism.”⁹⁸

Journalists are not likely to allow bloggers to write the first draft of their stories. Following the blogs’ agenda would place journalists in a secondary position. Journalistic culture thrives on the notion that journalists are first with information. They have the news before anyone else, and they get to decide what the public will get to know. This gatekeeping function is now under attack. There are other limitations, besides pride, on any journalistic rush to adopt the blogs’ agenda. Blogs have a reputation for getting things wrong. Many spread rumors and gossip without compunction. Journalists cannot afford the luxury of an eventual “sorting out.” The public will not tolerate unsubstantiated stories in venues where they expect reliable news.

Nevertheless, blog stories are out there. Some of them possess elements of newsworthiness. Worse, what if some other news outlet uses the blog story and scoops everyone else as a result? Blog stories cannot be completely ignored, but neither can they be incorporated into the news product without being subject to professional news standards.

Journalism's Effects on Blogs

Bloggers suggest they are changing journalism, or reforming it. Yet, the effects are hardly one way; journalism is shaping the evolution of blogging as well.

Providing a Governing Model

News writing has a long historical tradition. The evolution from the printer to the partisan editor to the objective reporter occurred primarily in the 19th century, but still heavily influences the news process. Journalism based on accuracy, rapid delivery, and descriptiveness is the governing model for reporting of news. Even the mixing of analysis and commentary within reporting is not a combination blogs invented. Many bloggers cringe at that thought. The news media—with its bureaucracy, biases, and overall bigness—is the epitome of what blogging is replacing, they would say. Bloggers, they would argue, have no business imitating a failed model. Moreover, they might add, aren't blogs evidence of the failure of that model?

Regardless of their antipathy towards journalism, bloggers cannot easily discard the old model of news reporting. Even their audiences expect them to accept much of the journalistic model. It is likely their A-list blogs increasingly will adopt the organizational style of traditional media. Blog owners responsible for the credibility of their blog will create editorial functions to assure that a blog writer does not diminish its status.

Establishing Blogger Standards

The blogosphere is divided over whether to accept journalism's standards. Some bloggers want to be treated as journalists. Others prefer a different model. One blogger

worries that “if you try to put the rules of mainstream journalism onto blogs, you end up sucking the life out of them.”⁹⁹

Nevertheless, the bloggers who will gain the greatest audience will likely be those who adhere to standards of journalism. Such bloggers have created an organization, the Media Bloggers Association, which seeks credentialing for journalists, equal access to sources, coverage under shield laws, and the same respect accorded traditional journalists. The association aims to create a two-tiered blogging world. One part of that world will be bloggers who subscribe to a code of ethics and become journalist-like. The other will be everyone else. The “wild west” atmosphere of the blog—the libertarian dream of no external constraints—is fast evaporating for those blogs who seek to be treated seriously as mainstream players.

Defining a Relationship

Political bloggers willingly (although not consciously) tamed “the wild west” when they forged a relationship with journalists. By adopting the role of commentator on traditional media content, they became dependent on the very news organizations they often inveigh against. And as journalists began to pay attention to that commentary, and bloggers became aware of it, the dependency relationship deepened. Journalist usage of blogs, news coverage of the blogosphere, and use of bloggers as occasional news sources (much as they do politicians or interest group representatives), have all contributed to the dependency. Bloggers felt recognized, appreciated, and useful in affecting traditional politics. Even for an established journalist like Andrew Sullivan, the attention had to be surprising and gratifying. But for those who were unknown such as Markos Moulitsas or Duncan Black or Glenn Reynolds, it was a truly heady experience.

Once the adulation, or at least acknowledgment, occurred for bloggers, it was impossible not to want it to continue. But maintaining the relationship required adapting to it. In order to continue to be read and quoted and courted, bloggers had to adjust to the demands of one of their audiences—the journalists.

A Symbiotic Relationship

Bloggers often describe their relationship with journalists as a competitive one. Some bloggers suggest that the blogosphere will replace traditional media. They envision a future where traditional media no longer serve a useful function. As blogs bypass traditional media filters and news consumers get their own direct information, there will no longer be a need for traditional news media sources.¹⁰⁰ For their part, journalists often criticize bloggers as “wannabe journalists” who lack professionalism. Certainly competitive elements exist in the relationship. Bloggers and journalists compete because they are alike in many ways. They both gather and disseminate news. Bloggers want to be first with the story, as do journalists. Bloggers and journalists tussle over the media’s agenda. Bloggers want media coverage to reflect more the bloggers’ priorities. Journalists naturally seek to maintain control over that agenda.

They compete because they overlap in the nature of their content. Both deal with straight news reporting and commentary. A-list political blogs often report current events as well as comment on them. The degree to which they do so varies significantly. For example, The Huffington Post features hard news coverage with lengthy late-breaking wire service while others such as Hugh Hewitt and Eschaton typically ignore the latest breaking news. Similarly, traditional media have included commentary and analysis in the news

presentation. Newspapers editorialize on their editorial pages and allow others—both columnists and readers—to express opinion on the same pages.

Since the rise of objective journalism, newspaper commentary has appeared in separate sections in order to convey the impression of the distinctiveness of opinion as opposed to news reporting. (That has frayed in recent years as newspapers have included analysis, although not necessarily strict commentary, to be placed adjacent to news stories on the same topic.) In contrast, bloggers, when they do report current news, do so usually through a mixture of news and opinion.

The overlap between the two media, therefore, is hardly complete. If blogs had duplicated journalism, there would have been no appeal. It is precisely because they did not that they have acquired an audience. Blogs emphasize commentary with some hard news, while news organizations offer straight news with some commentary.

Competition is therefore too narrow an explanation of the relationship between journalists and bloggers. What has developed is a symbiotic relationship with mutual benefits and particular costs.

Journalists and bloggers each benefit in the sense that they rely on one another to provide a facet of news that the other has difficulty offering. For journalists, opinion and commentary occupy an uneasy place in the journalistic profession. Bloggers, on the other hand, revel in commentary. Moreover, the type of commentary some bloggers engage in—inside gossip—is outside the bounds of respectable journalism. Their problem is an inability to match the news media's surveillance capability. Therefore, bloggers, like everyone else, must rely on the news media for news. For national political bloggers, that means particular dependence on national media such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and CNN.¹⁰¹ They read media stories every day and use them as springboards for blog posts.

Although critical of traditional media, some bloggers admit their dependence on traditional media. Markos Moulitsas said the media are allies: “I don’t want to do the reporting.... I need the media to do its job and provide the raw data, the raw information that then we can use to decide what’s the best course for our country...”¹⁰² And Jon Hinderaker has articulated the respective roles:

“I don't think that the press has a special role in constitutional terms. I think they have a special role in our economy, and that is as primary news gatherers and news disseminators. We bloggers and others in the field of commentary can do anything that journalists can do. Sometimes we do it better; sometimes maybe we don't do it as well. But we can do it. But we don't have staffs of full-time reporters and budgets to send reporters to far-off parts of the world and so on. Somebody needs to carry out that primary news-gathering and news-reporting function.”¹⁰³

As mentioned earlier, blog posts are replete with references to traditional media stories that bloggers have found. It is no surprise that bloggers themselves admit that the traditional media constitute a vital source of information for them.¹⁰⁴ Joshua Micah Marshall even said his ideas come from the media: “In general, I’ll read an article, then I’ll start thinking about it, and I’ll have this reflex to write about it.”¹⁰⁵

When bloggers argue that their contribution is a substantial part of the consumer’s news package, they are acknowledging the division of labor between themselves and journalists. Notice above that Moulitsas has called the news product “raw data.” The implication is that without the blogs the information provided by the news media is incomplete. It lacks the analysis—the interpretative frame—that blogs provide.

Blogs’ contributions are not new to journalism. Even before blogs, journalistic analysis tentatively had emerged out of objective journalism and been granted a role in the process of news reporting. Journalists today are more likely than their counterparts a generation ago to

include analysis in their reporting and to write separate analysis pieces that do not fit the descriptive model.

However, Moulitsas and other bloggers have a point in claiming that the vast majority of the news hole is dedicated to stories that are highly descriptive in nature. The journalist is not encouraged to inject personal feelings or an overtly subjective frame into the story. That does not mean journalists cannot create a frame, but the norms of the profession impel them to find someone else to say what they would like to say.

The bloggers' contribution is to say what journalists might like to say. For example, journalists reporting a story about the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq after the Bush administration might want to add that the president either lied to the public or was incompetent in seeking the truth. The blogger can, and does, assert that claim.

Nevertheless one can question the input of bloggers. Isn't there already plenty of commentary on editorial pages? Are blogs any different from the newspapers' editorial pages? In sheer numbers they are. While there are a relative handful of newspapers with national scope or others that are read by elites outside of their geographic region (such as the *Los Angeles Times* or the *Chicago Tribune*), there are more blogs to choose from.

Bloggers allow journalists to see reaction from outside the journalistic community. Since bloggers spend little time in news rooms or briefing rooms or press galleries, their reaction becomes another perspective—one that may be seen as the public's reaction or at least a response by people who are different from journalists.

Moreover, the blog analysis appears faster than editorials. Newspaper editorials appear once a day in the morning while blog commentary can be nearly instantaneous. For example, within minutes of the Harriet Miers announcement, bloggers were commenting on her nomination—mostly unfavorably.

The symbiosis goes beyond straight news versus commentary. It is also breadth versus depth of reporting. News media possess the capability to conduct surveillance across a broad array of events. With news bureaus in various parts of the country and the globe, national news organizations are capable of drawing event-driven stories into the press, typically in short segments. Television news stories are one example, but so are newspaper stories that have become shorter over time.

Blogs can perform a complementary function, burrowing more deeply into details of specific events at a level that the news media rarely reach. Wilson Lowrey suggested bloggers “produce content based on stories that have been abandoned by traditional journalism organizations.”¹⁰⁶

Their capability does not mean they actually exercise it. Instapundit, for example, is a blog consisting of numerous brief posts that rarely go beyond brief discussion, or even bare mention, of some issues or events. Others, however, such as Michelle Malkin and Daily Kos, feature lengthy posts with extensive expositions.

In turn, journalists rely on blogs for information that would be more difficult for them to collect on their own. This is especially true for highly specialized blogs written by experts. These specialty blogs may be valuable journalistic sources for knowledge journalists themselves don't possess.¹⁰⁷

The claim of a mutually beneficial relationship with repeated interaction may ring hollow to many journalists, and perhaps even bloggers. And they may be correct. A symbiotic relationship in a general sense does not mean every individual journalist or blogger is part of that relationship. Indeed, there are journalists who do not use blogs or pay attention to them. And there are political bloggers who seldom rely on the news media.

The existence of a symbiotic relationship also does not mean that journalists and bloggers compete at all times. The competition even helps establish the independence of the two entities, thus preventing absorption. Bloggers relish asserting their autonomy by embarrassing the press when they miss a story or make a major mistake.

Moreover, the competition may lead to displacement. As bloggers fight for press credentials, they may well dislodge journalists for coveted spots at hearings, trials, and even in press pools. Similarly, news organizations may replicate blog offerings in an attempt to stave off the threat of blogs.

Nevertheless, the journalistic community as a whole has formed a new relationship. As long as journalists see bloggers as potential news sources, and bloggers rely on the traditional media for news, their work will be intertwined, not distinct.

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