

The First Amendment as a Frame: A Content Analysis of Top Blogs

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Abstract:

With blogging emerging as a "citizen media," authors have documented the rise of a grassroots journalism that has blurred the distinction between producers of news and its consumers. This paper investigates whether bloggers will use the traditional mass media tool of framing to create perspective in their audiences. In addition, the paper tests a hypothesis that the First Amendment, and its recurrent themes of liberty, will be a dominant frame in bloggers' commentaries on the news and events. The paper analyzes the content of ten popular political blogs over a period of four weeks during January 2005.

Introduction

This paper analyzes bloggers' use of the First Amendment to frame their commentaries. Dan Gillmor terms the increasing popularity of blogging as "grassroots journalism,"¹ and proclaims bloggers to be the "citizen media." Gillmor claims that blogs have blurred the lines between producers of news and its consumers, creating an age that is distinguished by "we the media."² Conceived in this manner, blogs may be expected to use several tools, such as framing, that the mass media have traditionally used to influence their consumers' understanding of issues.

The definition of blogs as citizen journalism makes it likely that bloggers may present news and commentary by anchoring them in frames. Akin to the traditional media, blogs are likely to employ frames as a subtle mechanism to define and control culture. By a description that Tuchman³ had originally used for news producers, bloggers would transform discrete bits of news information into powerful, socially meaningful narratives that contribute to the social construction of reality and identity.

This study investigates blogs for their use of the First Amendment, and its inherent values of freedom of speech and liberty, as a frame.

Mass communication researchers have for long documented that media coverage usually does not objectively reflect the world,⁴ because the media use frames to provide their consumers with themes that organize information and provide a context for understanding its meaning. Media frames, which Reese⁵ defines as "organizing

¹ See Gillmor's blog at <http://dangillmor.typepad.com>

² Gillmor, Dan (2004). *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, For the People*. Sebastopol, California: O'Reilly Media. A free electronic version of the book is available at <http://authorama.com/we-the-media-1.html>.

³ Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making news: A study in the construction of reality*. New York: Free Press.

⁴ McQuail, D. (1972). *Sociology of mass communications*. Baltimore: Penguin.

⁵ Reese, S. D. (2001). Prologue_Framing public life: Abridging model for media research. In S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy, Jr., & A. E. Grant (Eds.), *Framing public life: Perspectives on media and our understanding of the social world*. (pp. 7731). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (p. 11), act as a tool to shape and manipulate information and influence how people understand issues and perceive themselves.⁶ Entman and Rojecki define frames as fixed patterns of presentation and commentary that organize the political debate to make it easy for the public to grasp.⁷ Other authors have defined frames as concepts of "cognitive categorization"⁸ and as an "extension of agenda setting."⁹ Often, readers are not fully aware of the framing process¹⁰ and, therefore, are even more likely to be influenced by it.¹¹

Frames lend the news a different meaning than would be transmitted had the subject not been placed within such a frame.¹² Nevertheless, frames are often metaphorical, and hard to directly incorporate into research questions.

The community state

If in 1966 McLuhan suggested that the printing press was responsible for the rise of the nation state,¹³ forty years later, it may be argued that Weblogs, or simply blogs, are responsible for the rise of the "community state." As a disruptive technology that challenges hierarchical access to information, blogs fall "somewhere between writing a column and talk radio."¹⁴ Blogs may function as personal diaries, technical advice columns, sports chat, celebrity gossip, political commentary, or all of these.

⁶ McQuail, D. (1994). *Mass communication theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

⁷ Entman, Robert M. & Andrew Rojecki, 1993. 'Freezing Out the Public: Elite and Media Framing of the US Anti-Nuclear Movement', *Political Communication* 10(2): 155–173.

⁸ Entman, Robert M., 1993. 'Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm', *Journal of Communication* 43(4): 51–58.

⁹ McCombas, Maxwell; Donald L. Shaw & David Weaver, 1997. *Communication and Democracy: Exploring the Intellectual Frontiers in Agenda-Setting Theory*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

¹⁰ Beniger, James R. & Jodi A. Gusek, 1995. 'The Cognitive Revolution in Public Opinion and Communication Research', in Theodore L. Glasser & Charles T. Salmon, eds, *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent*. New York: Guilford (217–248).

¹¹ Paterson, Thomas E., 1998. 'Time and News: The Media's Limitations as an Instrument of Democracy', *International Political Science Review* 19(1): 55–67.

¹² Scheufele, Dietran A., 1999. 'Framing as a Theory of Media Effects', *Journal of Communication* 49(1): 103–122.

¹³ McLuhan, M. (1966). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

¹⁴ Siemens, G. (2002, December 1). *The art of blogging—Part 1: Overview, definitions,*

The roots of the blogging idea may be traced back to CompuServe's electronic bulletin boards of the early 1990s or Internet newsgroups of the mid-1990s, in which the like-minded "cyber-convened." ¹⁵ One study estimated that by 2005, over ten million blogs would have been created, ¹⁶ which would dramatically impact ways in which information is exchanged in a variety of fields. As of January 2005, about 62 per cent of Americans had no idea as to what a blog was, but, on the other hand, as many as 8 million Americans had created blogs. ¹⁷

Top blogs

According to an brief survey ¹⁸ conducted by the blogger Daniel Drezner, the ten most popular blogs read by media elites were the Daily Dish by Andrew Sullivan, Instapundit by Glenn Reynolds, Kausfiles by Mickey Kaus, the Corner by National Review Online, Talking Points Memo by Josh Marshall, Media News by James Romenesko, Eschaton by Atrios, Daniel Drezner's own blog, the Volokh Conspiracy by Eugene Volokh et al., Boing Boing by Cory Doctorow and the Bleat by James Lileks.

Hypothesis

A discussion of the literature on media framing and the motivations and nature of blogs, leads to the following hypothesis that this paper will test:

The First Amendment is a predominant frame in the presentation of news and commentary by the top political blogs.

Method

uses, and implications. Retrieved September 13, 2004, from http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/blogging_part_1.htm

org/Articles/blogging_part_1.htm

¹⁵ Richardson, W. (2004, January/February). Blogging and RSS—The “what’s it?” and “how to” of powerful new Web tools for educators. *InfoToday*, 11(1). Retrieved March 9, 2004, from <http://www.infoday.com/MMSchools/jan04/richardson.shtml>

¹⁶ Henning, “The Blogging Iceberg.”

¹⁷ Pew Internet & American Life Project survey available at http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/144/report_display.asp

¹⁸ See the informative paper, “The Power and Politics of Blogs,” by Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell, available at <http://www.danieldrezner.com/research/blogpaperfinal.pdf>.

Content analysis, which Babbie¹⁹ describes as an "unobtrusive" method, will be the method of this paper. In this study, the artifacts examined are blogs. This study is a close textual reading of the ten most popular blogs, over a period of four weeks in January 2005, to identify the frequency of occurrence of a First Amendment frame. More specifically, this study will analyze how often bloggers use values such as "freedom of speech," "freedom of expression" or other democratic liberties, as talking points in their commentaries or presentations of events.

Introduction

Agenda-setting,²⁰ by which the mass media "may not be successful in telling us what to think but [are] stunningly successful in telling us what to think about"²¹ is a well documented media effect. In the last decade, however, the agenda-setting effect seems to have undergone a reconceptualization: Researchers have found evidence that in certain circumstances, the media indeed tell their audience what to think, by providing to their audience an agenda of characteristics of newsmakers. Individuals mentally link these characteristics, or attributes, to the newsmakers to a degree proportionate to the extent that the media mention these characteristics.²²

While agenda-setting is traditionally an effect on audiences, this paper conceptualizes it as a meta-effect on the mass media itself, caused by Weblogs, or blogs. In other words, the mass media serve as audiences for blogs, which is evident in dozens of cases in recent months when blogs have determined the agenda of news coverage for the major news organizations. The reports, rants and criticism of bloggers is increasingly creating the news in the traditional mass media. This paper selects six major news events of the 2004 presidential campaign that were born in blogs but were consequently picked up and explicated by the elite media. The six stories are selected from between

¹⁹ Supra note 1, at 285.

²⁰ The term agenda-setting was coined by McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972) in their pioneering article "The agenda-setting function of the media," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 176–187.

²¹ Bernard Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

²² Steven Chaffee, *Political Communication*, April 2001, Vol. 18 Issue 2, p237.

September 2, 2004, when the Republican National Convention closed and candidates of both major parties had been formally nominated, and November 1, 2004, the day before the general election when campaigning formally ended.

The paper analyzes the process by which a rant, comment or report on a blog is picked up and developed by the mainstream media. The six stories are dealt with as case studies to understand how blog comments can evolve into a full-fledged news story. The paper attempts to identify patterns, if any, in the processing of blog items into mainstream news stories.

A weblog, also called blog, is a Web page with minimal to no external editing, providing online commentary that is frequently updated and presented in reverse chronological order with hyperlinks to other online sources.²³ As a disruptive technology that challenges hierarchical access to information, blogs fall "somewhere between writing a column and talk radio,"²⁴ Blogs may function as personal diaries, technical advice columns, sports chat, celebrity gossip, political commentary, or all of these.

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A Web phenomenon

The number of blogs has galloped over the last five years.²⁵ In 1999 the number of blogs was estimated at under fifty; at the end of 2000, estimates ranged into the thousands.²⁶ Less than three years later, such estimates ranged from 2.4 million to 4.1

²³ A useful glossary of blogging terms can be found at <http://www.samizdata.net/blog/glossary.html>.

²⁴ Siemens, G. (2002, December 1). The art of blogging—Part 1: Overview, definitions, uses, and implications. Retrieved September 13, 2004, from http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/blogging_part_1.htm

²⁵ For histories of blogging, see Rebecca Blood, *The Weblog Handbook*, and Blood, "Weblogs: A History and Perspective," in *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs are Changing Our Culture*.

²⁶ Rebecca Mead, "You've Got Blog," *The New Yorker*, 13 November 2000

million,²⁷ with thousands more in the offing.²⁸ One study estimated that by 2005, over ten million blogs would have been created,²⁹ which would dramatically impact ways in which information is exchanged in a variety of fields such as journalism, education and business. As of January 2005, about 62 per cent of Americans had no idea as to what a blog was, but, on the other hand, as many as 8 million Americans had created blogs.³⁰ Blogs are used by some corporations to gather feedback on new products.³¹

A majority of blogs are written in English,³² and created using user-friendly, inexpensive blog-publishing tools such as Blogger (offered by Google), MSN Spaces (by Microsoft Network), Journals (by AOL) and Weblogs (by Macromedia). Corporations such as Sun Microsystems (SUNW) and GM (GM) use blogs to facilitate conversations among their executives and customers. Marketers track comments about their companies on blogs, and target influential bloggers the same way they target professional reporters. Companies such as Google, which acquired the popular Blogger publishing tool, use blogs not only as a business opportunity but as a tool for internal collaboration and communication as well.³³

²⁷ Henning, "The Blogging Iceberg,"; Phil Wolff, "The Blogcount Estimate," 23 June 2003. Accessed at http://dijest.com/bc/2003_06_23_bc.html#105638688729256217, 20 September 2003. At the time of writing (July 2004), the Technorati aggregation service lists over three million blogs.

²⁸ Richardson, W. (2004, January/February). Blogging and RSS—The "what's it?" and "how to" of powerful newWeb tools for educators. *InfoToday*, 11(1). Retrieved March 9, 2004, from <http://www.infotoday.com/MMSchools/jan04/richardson.shtml>

²⁹ Henning, "The Blogging Iceberg."

³⁰ Pew Internet & American Life Project survey available at http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/144/report_display.asp

³¹ CNN. (2003, March 10). Blogging goes mainstream: Success ofWeb journals heralds an even bigger future. Retrieved September 13, 2004, from <http://www.cnn.com/2003/TECH/internet/03/10/bloggers.ap/>

³² Robyn Greenspan, "Blogging by the Numbers," 23 July 2003. Accessed at http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/applications/article/0,,1301_2238831,00.html, 20 September 2003.

³³ USA Today, January 17, 2005. Section: News; Page 11A

Alongside business blogs, student blogs have emerged as a recruitment marketing tool, as blogging becomes part of higher education culture. With students taking to blogging in the same way as they earlier did chat rooms, personal Web sites, P2P downloads and IM messaging, university administrators have got into the act with how-to advice.³⁴ In order to attract potential students, some schools such as Clarkson University in New York have launched blogs updated daily by volunteers who post daily life experiences at the Clarkson campus. St. Michael's College in Vermont has a similar outreach blog.³⁵

With blogs being a rage, newspapers are attempting to cash in on the trend, overhauling their Web sites to make them more blogger-friendly.³⁶ Blogs also act as an empowering tool for the minorities, as seen in the well-edited literary site Seeingblack.com, created by the former New York Times reporter Esther Iverem, in the blog Popandpolitics.com created by the political commentator Farai Chideva, and in the media notes column by Richard Prince of the Maynard Institute.³⁷ Some authors such as Veronica Chambers have used their own personal blogs³⁸ to feed their fan base.

The community state

Blogging as a social phenomenon may well transcend the conceptualization of the Web. If in 1966 McLuhan suggested that the printing press was responsible for the rise of the nation state,³⁹ it may be argued today that blogs are responsible for the rise of the "community state." Blogs enable an idealistic conceptualization of the Internet as a true

³⁴ See sites such as Weblog Educator, www.weblog-ed.com, and Educational Bloggers Network, www.ebn.weblogger.com.

³⁵ See University Business, Jan2005, Vol. 8 Issue 1, p19.

³⁶ See Jesse Oxfeld, *Editor & Publisher*, January 2005, Vol. 138, Issue 1

³⁷ Prince's column is accessible at www.maynardije.org/columns/dickprince.

³⁸ See www.veronicachambers.com

³⁹ McLuhan, M. (1966). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

democratic medium where anyone can be a publisher and where all users have equal voice. As Andrew Sullivan, creator of the well known blog *Daily Dish*, suggested, blogging “harnesses the web’s real genius—its ability to empower anyone to do what only a few in the past could previously pull off . . . [it] actually harnesses rather than merely exploits the true democratic nature of the web. It’s a new medium finally finding a unique voice.”⁴⁰ Critics such as Putnam, however, suggest that the Internet could turn out to be no more revolutionary for politics than was the telephone, questioning whether the Internet amounts to more than an efficient way to do things people have been doing for a long time.⁴¹

According to media reports, the blog search engine Technorati now tracks 6 million blogs, with over 12,000 added daily, and that's probably only half the total.⁴² Technorati claims that a blog is created every 5.8 seconds, amounting to about 15,000 new blogs a day (no indication of how many of these actually continue).⁴³ A technical standard called Really Simple Syndication (RSS) and a new class of software called aggregators link the postings on those blogs together into a massive virtual global conversation, known as the blogosphere. There are also handy aggregating services such as Bloglines, which offers notification of new content. A recently launched free tool is Pub-Sub, which monitors blogs, newsgroup postings, press releases, and more. Pub-Sub Concepts, Inc. says that its "matching engine" is now tracking more than 6.5 million Weblogs, making it "the Internet's most comprehensive blog-monitoring service."

While a survey by the National Endowment for the Arts released in July 2004 documented a national decline in literary reading (reading novels, short stories, poetry and plays), the same survey recorded that the number of people engaging in creative

⁴⁰ Ibid, note 5.

⁴¹ Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

⁴² USA Today, January 17, 2005. Section: News; Page 11A

⁴³ See Paula J. Hane, Information Today, January 2005, Vol. 22 Issue 1, p7.

writing has increased over the past 20 years to nearly 15 million people.⁴⁴ This phenomenon is evident in blogs.

With broadband accessible in more than 40 per cent of online U.S. households, about 31 million people are able to stream video easily, resulting in a new trend in blogs - video blogs or vlogs.⁴⁵ Vlogs are boosted by the widespread adoption of blogging software known as RSS, which lets people customize content. The vlogs have video fare available to visitors, from self-indulgent art clips to earnest citizen journalism to eccentric cultural rants to sly political commentary.

Dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster crowned "blog" the most-searched word of the year 2004. Bloggers were on the cover of The New York Times Magazine; they created the brief frenzy over Democratic presidential contender Howard Dean and brought down PBS star anchor Dan Rather, and they are still getting slammed for publishing leaked Election Day exit polls predicting a Kerry win. Wonkette's Ana Marie Cox rode her collection of sex jokes and capital gossip to mainstream prominence. There's even a blog called "Regret the Error," launched in October 2004, devoted to newspaper corrections. Some blogs and meeting sites⁴⁶ were instrumental in getting like-minded groups of voters together to promote their candidates. In fact, early in the 2004, these were seen as a huge boost in the candidacy of Howard Dean for the Democratic nomination.

Most popular blogs

According to an brief survey⁴⁷ conducted by the blogger Daniel Drezner, the ten most popular blogs read by media elites were the Daily Dish by Andrew Sullivan, Instapundit by Glenn Reynolds, Kausfiles by Mickey Kaus, the Corner by National Review Online, Talking Points Memo by Josh Marshall, Media News by James

⁴⁴ Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America, available at National Endowment of the Arts site at <http://www.nea.gov/news/news04/ReadingAtRisk.html>. Accessed January 31, 2005.

⁴⁵ See Business Week dated January 10, 2005.

⁴⁶ For example, see www.meetup.com

⁴⁷ See the informative paper, "The Power and Politics of Blogs," by Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell, available at <http://www.danieldrezner.com/research/blogpaperfinal.pdf>.

Romenesko, Eschaton by Atrios, Daniel Drezner's own blog, the Volokh Conspiracy by Eugene Volokh et al., Boing Boing by Cory Doctorow and the Bleat by James Lileks. Some bloggers have proved so news savvy that they have been hired to provide content for mainstream media publications. In March 2004, *The Washington Monthly* hired Kevin Drum – whose CalPundit blog was attracting over 1.2 million unique visits per month by February 2004 – and transferred his blog to their web site. *Slate* magazine transferred Mickey Kaus' blog to its online site more than a year before that. Other political content providers – such as *Slate*, *The American Prospect*, *The New Republic*, MSNBC, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal* – have either published prominent bloggers or hired them as regular contributors.

Drezner and Farrell record that the top five political blogs together attract over half a million visitors per day.⁴⁸ Jimmy Orr, the White House Internet director, recently characterized the "blogosphere" (the all-encompassing term to describe the universe of weblogs) as instrumental, important, and underestimated in its influence. Nobody knows that better than Trent Lott, who in December 2002 resigned as U.S. Senate majority leader in the wake of inflammatory comments he made at Sen. Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party. Initially, Lott's remarks received little attention in the mainstream media. But the incident was the subject of intense online commentary, prodding renewed media attention that converted Lott's gaffe into a full-blown scandal.

Every day, millions of online diarists, or "bloggers," share their opinions with a global audience. Drawing upon the content of the international media and the World Wide Web, they weave together an elaborate network with agenda--setting power on issues ranging from human rights in China to the U.S. occupation of Iraq. What began as a hobby is evolving into a new medium that is changing the landscape for journalists and policymakers alike.

(This is a paper in progress).

⁴⁸ *Web Of Influence* by Daniel W. Drezner and Henry Farrell, Foreign Policy, Nov/Dec2004, Issue 145