Chapter 72

Old Media, New Media Sources: The Blogosphere’s Influence on Print Media News Coverage

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the growing literature on how “new media” is influencing “old media” by tracking references to an extensive list of political blogs in stories run by seventeen prominent print media outlets during the last ten years. The findings presented here show that although journalists frequently use political bloggers as sources in their news coverage, they only reference certain blogs in certain ways at certain times. To be precise, journalists turn to political blogs primarily during national election campaigns and this turn is commonly in the direction of a relatively small group of interactive, liberal blogs.

INTRODUCTION

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) define news sources as “external suppliers of raw material, such as speeches, interviews, corporate reports and government hearings” (178). Beginning with the work of Sigal (1973), numerous studies of news production have attempted to clarify the role that these “external suppliers” play in structuring media coverage. Most notably, Gans (1979) described the relationship between journalists and their sources as a complicated, yet mutually beneficial, dance — where sources seek out journalists in order to reach the media’s large audience and journalists nurture relationships with sources in order to establish reliable channels of access to newsworthy information. According to Gans, the heavy informational demands and tight time constraints of the news business inevitably mean that this dance is more likely to be led by sources than by journalists.

As a result of the fact that journalists so frequently follow their lead, sources are seen to be essential components of so-called media “agenda building” (Dominick, 2009; Scheufele, 2000) or media “gatekeeping” (McCombs, 2004) — the process by which news outlets decide which issues to cover and which to ignore. Unsurprisingly, therefore, academic researchers have conducted numerous studies of sourcing patterns in an attempt to identify the kinds of actors that are most influential in shaping the media’s agenda. While
these studies have tracked media citations to a
diverse array of actors, including interest groups
(Danielian & Page, 1994), anonymous individu-
als (Denham, 1997; Martin-Kratzer & Thorson,
2007) and academics (Herman & Chomsky, 1988;
Lasorsa & Reece, 1990), the bulk of the evidence
shows that journalists draw primarily from a nar-
row range of government sources in their report-
ing on politics (Atwater, 1989; Berkowitz, 1987;

Despite the diversity of actors that research into
sourcing patterns has measured, there have been
relatively few empirical studies of the extent to
which journalists rely on new media figures, such
as political bloggers, as sources in their coverage.
This oversight is somewhat curious given that
countless studies of “intermedia agenda setting”
over the last twenty years have attempted to as-
sess the influence that different kinds of media
outlets have on each other.¹ This oversight is also
strange in light of the increasingly large body of
scholarship on the democratizing potential of the
Internet. In a spate of recent books with titles
such as An Army of Davids: How Markets and
Technology Empower Ordinary People to Beat
Big Media, Big Government, and Other Goli-
aths (Reynolds, 2006), Blog: Understanding the
Information Reformation That’s Changing Your
World (Hewitt, 2005) and Crashing the Gate: Net-
roots, Grassroots and the Rise of People-Powered
Politics (Armstrong & Zuniga, 2006), numerous
media observers and political commentators have
implied that the dramatically lowered costs of
publishing enabled by Web 2.0 applications may
enhance the variety of voices cited in traditional
news reports.

In attempt to contribute to the literatures on
intermedia agenda setting, sourcing patterns and
the political consequences of the Internet, this
study tracks references to an extensive list of high
profile political blogs in stories run by seventeen
prominent print media outlets during the ten year
period beginning on January 1, 2000 and ending on
December 31, 2009. The findings presented here
show that although journalists frequently use po-
itical bloggers as sources in their news coverage,
they only reference certain blogs in certain ways
at certain moments in time. To be more precise,
journalists seem to turn to political blogs primar-
ily during national election campaigns and this
turn is commonly in the direction of a relatively
small group of interactive, liberal blogs – who
are referenced more often than bloggers who use
different software platforms to espouse views from
other areas of the ideological spectrum.

THE BLOGGING EXPLOSION

Blogging has become an incredibly popular activ-
ity in recent years. In 1999, the total number of
blogs was estimated to be around 50 (Drezner &
Farrell, 2004). In 2002, a Newsweek article calcu-
lated that the total number of blogs was 500,000,
with a new blog starting every 40 seconds (Levy,
2002). Only one year later, a survey by the Perseus
Development Corporation discovered that there
were 4.12 million blogs on the Internet. Between
2003 and 2006, the blogosphere continued its me-
teoric growth – with the size of Technorati.com’s
blog database doubling every six months. At the
time of this writing (June 2011), BlogPulse, a site
devoted to measuring activity in the blogosphere,
is currently tracking over 140 million blogs.

The rapidly expanding size of the blogosphere
has been accompanied by a surge in the amount
of research into the factors that drive political blog-
ning. While each of the studies in this burgeoning
literature has demonstrated the importance of a
slightly different set of motivations – ranging from
the need to “let off steam” (Ekdale et al., 2010) to
a hope to engage in dialogue with other citizens
(McKenna & Pole, 2004) – one persistently im-
portant factor in explaining why people choose to
blog about politics has been the desire to influence
traditional media coverage. Surveys of both popu-
lar (Ekdale et al., 2010; McKenna & Pole, 2004)
and less popular (McKenna, 2007; McKenna &