

## 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

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these studies have tracked media citations to a diverse array of actors, including interest groups (Danielian & Page, 1994), anonymous individuals (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 narrow range of government sources in their reporting on politics (Atwater, 1989; Berkowitz, 1987; Sigal, 1973; Solely, 1992; Whitney et al., 1989).

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 assess the influence that different kinds of media outlets have on each other.<sup>1</sup> 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 Goliaths* (Reynolds, 2006), *Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation That's Changing Your World* (Hewitt, 2005) and *Crashing the Gate: Networks, 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 political 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 primarily 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 activity in recent years. In 1999, the total number of blogs was estimated to be around 50 (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). In 2002, a *Newsweek* article calculated 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 meteoric 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 blogging. 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 important factor in explaining why people choose to blog about politics has been the desire to influence traditional media coverage. Surveys of both popular (Ekdale et al., 2010; McKenna & Pole, 2004) and less popular (McKenna, 2007; McKenna &

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