



Exploring political blogs as a form of alternative media

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Review

Abstract

It has been argued that blogs, as an extension of 1960s 'new journalism', have become an important form of alternative media. At their idealized best, blogs have the capability to report news without the constraints of censure or the pressures of advertising. This argument suggests that blogs can therefore offer a deeper analysis, based upon a diverse range of sources and contributing citizen commentators, which is not possible through modern corporate, mainstream outlets. This exploratory study uses both critical discourse and content analysis to examine 344 posts, 1,712 hyperlinks and 10,401 comments from four political/current events blogs within a seven-day period. This research argues that previous conceptualizations of alternative media, at least in relation to the political/current events blogosphere, might need reconsideration.

Blogs as alternative

Journalism, in the broadest sense, examines proximate topics that involve prominent individuals and have broad effects (MacDougall & Reid, 1987). Using these unique qualities as the foundation for growth, mainstream journalism has evolved into a modern bureaucratic network of organizations that aim to observe and objectively document events in a shared reality (Davis, 1996). Yet, like all cultural institutions (Williams, 1977), journalism's norms and practices are constantly changing. The notion of journalism as a solidified foundation of institutionalised practices, such as news beats and organizational routines (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) certainly exists but in parallel with news as a manufactured representation of an elite ideology (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Tuchman, 1978). News is more the result of cultural influences (Gitlin, 1980; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Robert, 1978) than any objective embodiment of reality.

The recognition of ideological forces in the news has led many to believe that mainstream journalism may not be able to serve its democratic function in society (Tuchman, 1978). It is important that research not polarize mainstream and alternative media as complete, binary opposites. However, there are certainly tendencies that place media on very different points across the alternative/mainstream spectrum. Mainstream media are generally in pursuit of commercial, for profit, objectives as the motivation for publication (*Alternatives in print: An international catalog of books, pamphlets, periodicals and audiovisual materials*, 1980). They also privilege institutions over movements (Downing, 2001) and operate within a "hierarchy of access" (Atton, 2002) that generally dictates who is sourced according to perceived credibility. This would suggest, for example, that the *New York Times* can be considered more mainstream than *The Osterley Times*. The former is replete with advertising and paid subscriber benefits, as well as 'objective' content written only by professional reporters, who are paid by the *New York Times*. In contrast, *The Osterley Times*, which has no advertising and is written by an unknown author with no listed professional affiliations but holds a stated ideological position from the libertarian left, would be seen as more alternative.

In response to a distrust of mainstream journalism, 'alternative' media forms have existed in various forms alongside mainstream journalism for centuries (Downing, 2001). New Journalism, an opinionated and stylized form of reporting (Hartsock, 2000) that emphasized the reporter's subjective interpretations, emerged in the 1960s and is said to be a precursor to the modern political current events blog (Wall, 2005). Tom Wolfe was an early pioneer of New Journalism, with the 1963 publication of an essay titled, "There goes (varoom! varoom!) that kandy-kolored (thphhhhh!)

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3 tangerine-flake streamline baby (rahghhh!) Around the bend (brummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm)..." As
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5 the title might suggest, New Journalism relied upon experimental and subjective writing that directly
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7 countered many of the standardized norms of mainstream journalism. The concomitant timing of New
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9 Journalism with the politically turbulent sixties suggested that "when political and cultural crises arose,
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11 new forms of news might also appear" (Wall, 2005, p. 155).

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13 This explanation helps to give some context to the explosion of current events blogs during
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15 the Iraq War and the tumultuous presidency of George W. Bush (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright,
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17 2005). Profit-centered, corporate, multi-national news conglomerates, which now own most of the
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19 world's mainstream media (McChesney, 2004), may also help to explain the rise of political, current
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21 events blogs. As mainstream news content continues to emphasize entertainment and sensationalism
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23 (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000), more independent, alternative political news blogs have gained
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25 attention for their decisively different approach to current events (Atton, 2004).

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27 At their idealized best, blogs have the capability to report news without the constraints of
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29 censure or the pressures of advertising. This argument suggests that blogs can therefore offer a
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31 deeper analysis, based upon a diverse range of sources and contributing citizen commentators,
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33 which is not possible through modern corporate, mainstream outlets. This research uses both critical
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35 discourse and content analysis to examine four political, current events blogs as a case study of blogs
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37 as an 'alternative' media space. This particular type of blog was chosen as it can easily be
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39 conceptualised within most definitions of alternative news media as a counterpoint to traditional
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41 mainstream news fare. There is also a wide range of political, current events news blogs across the
42
43 ideological spectrum, providing strong potential for a cross-pollination of ideas and content.

44 45 Blogs

46
47 There has been an explosion of blogs on the Internet. In 1999, there were about 50 existing
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49 blogs and they were only known by a few individuals (Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, & Wong, 2007).
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51 However, by 2006, 29 percent (57 million) of American Internet users accessed blogs (Lenhart & Fox,
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53 2006) and by 2007, 8 out of 10 Americans knew what a blog was and almost half of America had
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55 visited blogs (Synovate, 2007). As an example of blog proliferation, the readership and authorship of
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57 political blogs had already exceeded that of political print magazines and columns by the year 2004
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59 (Mayfield, 2004).
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This phenomenal growth may be due to the dynamic nature of blogs. While some blogs are updated weekly, many more are updated hourly (or even more frequently), with postings in reverse chronological order. Most are interactive and allow viewers to post comments (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). Unlike static websites, blogs depend upon hyperlinks not only to boost attention to their own blog, but to also ensure that users can be quickly led to relevant information. At their idealized best, weblogs have been said to be a space to reflect on the 'deluge of data' (Blood, 2002b) that we receive, offering an antidote to the mass-mediated, corporatized culture that surrounds us. They have the capability to report news without the constraints of censure or the pressures of advertising and draw upon a diverse range of sources. At their reductive worst, bloggers have been said to be strongly opinionated and even vitriolic in response to those who oppose their political positions (Johnson & Kaye, 2004).

The explosion of blogs on the web was largely made possible by commercial weblog software, such as Blogger (Blood, 2002b). Through such user-friendly software, individual citizens without any institutional affiliations, could feasibly create and publish content on a potentially international scale with little technical knowledge (Blood, 2002a). While most blogs don't see a fraction of their potential audience, blogs do have far more democratic possibility than previous print or digital publication formats. It is important to note that while the technology is available for conversation, the linguistic discourse of blogs can also operate at the authoritarian level of a one-way, linear form of communication. Bloggers could just as easily be talking *at* their audience rather than *with* their audience (Clark, 2002). However, blogs remain a relatively easy to construct, interactive, flexible and inexpensive mode of self-publication (Herring et al., 2005).

Blogs can certainly be on any topic. Indeed, Kelly and Etling's (2008) work examining the importance of poetry in the Iranian blogosphere demonstrates that even the majority of blogs within a society can be on a topic previously undetected by other communities. Most blogs continue to remain firmly rooted in personal disclosure (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). The majority of blogs contain a personal diary or journal, the possibility for two-way communication (Herring et al., 2005; Viégas, 2005), and also are available for open access (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

The blogging community has a widely used practice of linking to others that have already linked to you. While this can be seen as an act of kindness, there is also a distinct possibility of a self-limiting 'echo chamber.' Kumar et. al. (1999), were among the first to suggest that like-minded groups quickly form and self-replicate online. Such circuitous behavior has been called an "unbearable

incestuousness" (Clark, 2002). Tateo (2005) examined 77 right wing Italian websites and discovered a highly coherent, tightly-knit network of intra-linked groups. Through the circuitousness of such hyperlinks, superstars can be born. In an early and intuitive analysis of digital culture, Mead (2000) asserted that being blogged (or hyperlinked) by a well-known blogger "is the blog equivalent of having your book featured on *Oprah*" (p. 102). To repay the favor, the blogged quickly becomes the bloggee and a self-referential circle can begin. As this circuitous spiral continues around, it inevitably shrinks and an elite A-list (Clark, 2002; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005) of blogs can emerge. Such a group then could rely upon coded and very directed messages that only the regular astute viewer could decipher. The result is that the once heralded egalitarian Internet runs the danger of becoming a capitalistic positioning shuffle.

While extremely difficult to measure, a recent content analysis estimated that a substantial 17 percent of weblogs cover news and current affairs (Papacharissi, 2004). Personal current events news blogs, meant to serve as an alternative to mainstream news (Haas, 2005), have begun to proliferate on the Internet and many tend to follow a similar pattern of presentation. Many are created largely from other news providers' content with attached personal commentary. There is usually little or no support from corporate sponsors and, it has been argued, no gatekeepers – at least in the sense typically thought of in mainstream journalism (Lasica, 2002).

Current event blogs have been found to be extremely influential in politics (Bahnisch, 2006; Mayfield, 2004; Trammell, 2006). Specific examples come from the sudden rise of Howard Dean's 2004 presidential bid (Stromer-Galley & Baker, 2006); the resignations of news executive Eason Jordan from CNN (Seeyle, 2005), Senator Trent Lott as the Senate Majority Leader (Bowman & Willis, 2003), and Dan Rather from the CBS news anchor desk (Glaser, 2004). There is also research to suggest that blogs helped fuel the speculation that John Kerry won his campaign based on premature exit polls (Carlson, 2007). Drawing from these examples and countless others, political/current events blogging has been heralded as the beginning of the end of journalism's sovereign reign (Rosen, 2005). This new alternative form of "amateur journalism" (Lasica, 2003) has been argued as the long-awaited answer to journalism's longstanding weaknesses (Regan, 2003).

Yet, the breadth and depth of this 'amateur journalism' remains to be seen. Schiffer (2006) examined five of the top political, current events blogs and found that they had a strong impact on mainstream editorial pages but very little effect on hard news pages or television coverage, despite

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3 large-scale mobilization efforts online. And, for all its suggested points of difference, current events
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5 blogs have also been found to be remarkably similar to mainstream journalism – at least in terms of
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7 journalistic norms. Reese et.al (2007) examined six news blogs and found that in the regurgitation of
8
9 mainstream content, these blogs provided “an important secondary market” (p. 257) for corporate
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11 journalism. However, they also found that current events blogs did manage to retain citizen voices
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13 that are not found in traditional media. These authors did not uncover a resounding echo-chamber
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15 and found a significant number of links to other, external sites (Reese et al., 2007). This conclusion is
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17 not shared by other research, which has found that current events political news blogs link primarily to
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19 their own respective, ‘like-minded’, ideological communities (Adamic & Glance, 2005). However, in
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21 this same study of 40 ‘A-list’ blogs, it was also found that blogs were more likely to link to mainstream
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23 news sources than to each other (Adamic & Glance, 2005).

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25 As this review suggests, there is not yet a clear understanding of how political, current event
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27 blogs operate and in what way they interconnect with mainstream and alternative media. However,
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29 many scholars believe blogs can offer a “radically different kind of news discourse than the one found
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31 in mainstream news media” (Haas, 2005, p. 388). This departure from mainstream news content to
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33 an activist, alternative space is rooted within three unique capabilities of blogs: the ability of blogs to
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35 steer mainstream news coverage; the possibility for independent and non-corporate reporting, which
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37 is based on a wide array of diverse sources (Bruns, 2003); and the juxtaposition of alternative,
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39 independent reporting with uncensored commentary.

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41 Given the relatively nascent nature of research in this area, the following hypotheses will be
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43 tested:

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45 H1: Political news blogs will link to alternative news sources more than to mainstream news
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47 sources.

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49 H2: Political news blogs will link to opposite-minded current event blogs more than they link to
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51 like-minded blogs.

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53 H3: Political news blogs will link to unofficial sources, such as personal websites and blogs,
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55 mainstream and alternative news blogs, and alternative news sources more than to official sources,
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57 such as government websites and mainstream outlets

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59 Blogs, unlike other forms of news, have been said to emphasize personalization and
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audience participation in the creation of content (Wall, 2005). Haas (2005) counters previous research

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3 in the area and cautions scholars not to take these claims at face value, but instead, urges
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5 researchers to see blogs as part of a continuing trajectory in modern media. Yet, the differences
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7 between mainstream and alternative media can be vast and placing the two areas of journalism on
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9 the same trajectory risks missing fundamental defining characteristics of each. Academic research
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11 into alternative media is still developing (Atton & Wickenden, 2005). At a time when the “media at the
12
13 dawn of the 21st century is broader than ever before” (Downing, 2001, p. v), research needs to better
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15 address and understand the complex, yet distinct, differences and similarities that exist across the
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17 mediated spectrum. However, it is yet unknown how current events blogs perform against theoretical
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19 conceptualisations of an alternative space.

20 21 What makes an alternative media alternative? 22

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24 Alternative media have been traditionally very hard to categorize (Downing, 2003). Atkinson
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26 (2006) defines alternative media as “any media that are produced by non-commercial sources and
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28 attempt to transform existing social roles and routines by critiquing and challenging power structures”
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30 (p. 252). The existing social roles and routines that alternative media seek to critique generally stem
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32 from capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy, and the nature of corporations. It is this foregrounding in
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34 social critique that has historically placed alternative media in diametric opposition to the mainstream
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36 press. This opposition allows for an independent ‘alternative communication’ that constructs different
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38 social orders, traditions, values and social understandings (Hamilton, 2000). Alternative media offer
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40 an independent platform for groups and individuals that have been marginalized by the mainstream
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42 media (Atton, 2002) and provides much needed context. Mainstream media have been traditionally
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44 viewed as maximizing audiences through pack-journalism that is conventional and formulaic, resulting
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46 in content that can be binary and reductive. In contrast, alternative media often advocate programs of
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48 social change through the framework of politicized and in-depth social commentary (Armstrong, 1981;
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50 Duncombe, 1997) found through distinctive, independent alternative journalism.

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52 Alternative media have the capacity for “transforming spectators into active participants of
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54 everyday dealings and events affecting their lives” (Tracy, 2007, p. 272). Indeed, alternative media
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56 often view their role as “one of educating and mobilizing the ‘masses’ in the service of the cause or
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58 movement” (Hamilton, 2000, p. 359) and generally avoid one-way forms of communication. The
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60 frequent solicitation from alternative media outlets for feedback from viewers is purposeful so that an
‘egalitarian relationship’ can be formed between the media outlet and the viewers (Rodriguez, 2001).

Blogs as alternative

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Social and political movements that make great effort to forge alliances with alternative media (Atton, 2002; Santa Cruz, 1995). In an examination of historical alternative media, such as *Freedom's Journal*, *Mattachine Review* and *RAIN*, Ostertag (2007) found that these publications played a crucial role in bringing about social change. In another work, he examined five significant movements: woman suffrage, gay and lesbian issues, the underground Vietnam GI press, abolitionism and environmentalism and found that social movement journals, such as *Sierra* and *Earth First!* have pushed forth social change by forcing issues on the public agenda and frequently scooping mainstream media coverage (Ostertag, 2006). Examples of the powerful effect of alternative media can have in fomenting social change, stretch back to the American Revolution when the dissident printed press provoked a trumpet to arms for an entire nation (Armstrong, 1981; Kessler, 1984). The ability of an alternative press to incite change depends upon an engaged relationship with the audience that is not dependent upon caustic commentary that can be read as derisive toward the reader.

One of the central goals of alternative media is to subvert the "hierarchy of access," (Atton, 2002) which often dictates who is sourced in mainstream media content according to perceived credibility. Such practices "emphasise first person eyewitness accounts by participants; reworking of the populist approaches of tabloid newspapers to recover a 'radical popular' style of reporting; collective and anti-hierarchical forms of organization...an inclusive, radical form of civic journalism" (Atton, 2003, p. 267). This type of journalism has been called "native reporting" (Atton, 2002, pp. 112-117), and has been found to be a part of political weblogs (Matheson & Allan, 2003) as well as other open publishing sources online, such as Indymedia (Platon & Deuze, 2003). It is completely open to the reader as a welcome and inviting text without any coded language that might not be understood.

Michael Albert from the independent and "alternative" *Z Magazine*, wrote "an alternative media institution sees itself as part of a project to establish new ways of organizing media and social activity and it is committed to furthering these as a whole, and not just its own preservation (Albert, 2006)." This very important point of demarcation has separated how alternative media have covered important social issues differently than the mainstream press. Alternative media offer the space for journalists to "become reporters of their own experiences, struggles and lives" (Atton & Wickenden, 2005, p. 349). However, proponents of alternative media argue that such personalized self-disclosure is not intended for personal gain. It's purpose is to provide relevant, meaningful news that "is best

Blogs as alternative

realised through the voices of the community itself" (Atton & Wickenden, 2005, p. 349). Such activism on the part of the 'journalist' is often more valued than any traditional mainstream reporting experience (Atton & Wickenden, 2005). This approach favors bystanders to events rather than official voices, that are typically relied upon in the mainstream media (Harcup, 2003).

Atkinson (2003) found that alternative media utilized resistance narratives about multinational corporations. Other research has found that alternative media often draw from ironic "culture jamming" as a form of media activism not found in the mainstream press (Harold, 2004). Most researchers agree that at the most fundamental core, alternative media facilitate democratic participation and cultural disruption while the mainstream press avoids such social critique (Makagon, 2000). The level of audience participation sought from alternative media can be as involved as volunteering ones' own time to filling out an online petition.

Downing (2001) argues convincingly of the complete mainstream blockage of public expression and the necessity for alternative media to fill the cultural and social gap. Blogs have emerged to fill a space in the mediated landscape. However, it remains uncertain as to whether that space is truly an alternative to mainstream media. Previous research suggests that blogs have "moved away from traditional journalism's modernist approach to embody a form of post-modern journalism" (Wall, 2005, p. 154). This research aims to explore whether the post-modern journalism of current event blogs draws from qualities inherent to alternative media or from something more akin to their mainstream counterparts. Therefore, this study explores the following research question:

R1: Are the political current event blogs sampled in this study a form of alternative media?

Method

This study uses both critical discourse and content analysis. The content analysis follows a deductive approach by first defining the variables to search for and then proceeding with a comprehensive examination. While a drawback to this method is that one may not discover all the variables or frames present, these studies can be easily replicated and a strong benefit of this approach is the ability to detect subtle differences between media (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The content analysis depended on frequencies, percentages, one-way chi-square tests and adjusted residuals.

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3 After quantitatively coding the blogs, an organic exploration of narrative will be
4 undertaken. In line with the previous work of Gamson (1992), this deductive approach first
5 begins with a loose, preconceived idea of the discursive elements that may exist in content and
6 then slowly proceeds in an attempt to reveal narratives utilized that may not have been
7 considered. These studies can be difficult to replicate and are quite labour intensive (Semetko &
8 Valkenburg, 2000). However, such an analysis of narrative allows for a more complex and
9 detailed understanding. By combining content analysis with discourse analysis, this study aims to
10 gain both breadth and depth in the subsequent analysis.

19 *Content Analysis*

21 **Sampling**

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23 A comprehensive directory of current event blogs simply does not exist, so a random
24 sampling of blogs is not possible and is not the goal of this research. This work aims to capture and
25 analyze a specific moment in time. Given the ephemeral nature of blogs, any recently generated
26 comprehensive list of 'important' blogs would by definition be historical. This study aims to be as
27 contemporary as possible and therefore draws its sample from Tailrank, a small startup company
28 based in San Francisco. Tailrank is a memetracker that scours millions of blogs and applies an
29 advanced algorithm that "takes into consideration linking behavior, the text of the post, links in
30 common with other users, text relevance, weblog ranking, past performance, and various other
31 factors for recommendations" (Tailrank, 2008) to instantly produce a list of the most popular blogs in
32 the blogosphere at that moment.

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34 Since the most popular blogs are constantly changing, this study went through all of the 'top
35 100 posts for the last week' on Friday, 18 June 2008. For each of these posts, the first and last five
36 blogs were recorded, meaning that two lists were generated. One list had 500 (5 blogs x 100 story
37 posts) of what were ranked by Tailrank as the most popular blogs on the Internet and another list
38 consisted of the 500 least popular blogs or those blogs that did not have many common links with
39 other users, text relevance, high weblog rankings, etc. The two most commonly found blogs from the
40 list of 500 popular blogs were selected for inclusion into the study. These were crooksandliars.com
41 (found 61 times) and thinkprogress.org (found 83 times). Technorati provides further evidence of the
42 popularity of these blogs. On 29 July 2008, *Crooks and Liars* received an authority ranking of 4,544
43 from Technorati and *Think Progress* received a ranking of 6,314. These numbers represent the
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3 number of blogs linking to the website in the last six months and places both of these blogs in the top
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5 10 most popular political blogs.
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7 Blogs that were only found once on Tailrank's list of non-popular blogs were separated into a
8
9 different category. Two blogs were then randomly selected from this list. Initially, one of the selected
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11 happened to be politically liberal and the other happened to be politically conservative. Given that the
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13 two most popular blogs were both considered to be politically left, it was decided that for consistency
14
15 sake, the two least popular blogs should also be the same. Therefore, another two blogs were
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17 randomly selected. Eventually, the least popular blogs included were oliverwillis.com and the-
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19 osterley-times.blogspot.com, both represented as liberal. Their authority ranking from Technorati was
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21 708 and 135, respectively.
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23 Each blog was recorded at the same time every day for seven days. The period of seven
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25 days was purposeful given the ethereal – and plentiful – nature of the blogosphere. This research
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27 aimed to examine a specific period in time. Therefore, an expansive longitudinal period of analysis
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29 was not sought. The period of analysis had to allow for enough time to gather a plentiful sample to
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31 examine as well as enough content to detect overlap in content between blogs. After examining a
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33 subsection of blogs on the first day of research, it was determined that seven days would provide a
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35 sufficient sample for study. The entire blog, rather than only a portion of the site, was the unit of
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37 analysis.
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39 **Coding Categories**

40 Every link found within the text of each blog was coded. The links were coded within to the
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42 following categories: itself, apparent like-minded blog, apparent opposite-minded blog, blog with
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44 unknown political position, mainstream news source, mainstream news blog, alternative news source,
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46 alternative news blog, mainstream pop culture source, non profit organization, petition, personal
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48 website, government or other (see Appendix for an operationalization of coding categories).
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50 **Statistical Analysis**

51 Significance was measured through chi square p values and strong adjusted residual scores,
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53 or the difference between expected and observed counts that demonstrates actual effects of this
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55 relationship. Strong effects of a particular case of one variable on a particular case of another variable
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57 were found if not more than 20 percent of the cells have expected values less than 5 (Krippendorff,
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59 2004). Within these cells, adjusted residual scores that depart markedly from the model of
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3 independence (well above +2 or below -2) demonstrated added strength in relationships and
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5 suggested a directionality of the relationship.
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7 **Inter-coder reliability**

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9 Inter-coder reliability was measured through the Cohen's kappa measure of agreement and
10 Scott's Pi. Both measures gage the agreement between two coders and "can be used as a proxy for
11 the validity of constructs that emerge from the data (Kurasaki, 2000, p. 179)." Scott's pi, which is
12 particularly suited to nominal data, removes the level of 'expected agreement' due to chance. Strong
13 inter-coder reliability measures suggest that the coding scheme used may also be useful for validating
14 conclusions from other studies relying on those same coding categories.
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20 *Discourse Analysis*

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22 After this quantitative stage, a qualitative discourse and narrative analyses will be introduced
23 to help address the research questions at hand. When applicable, specific strategies of signification
24 (Mitra & Cohen, 1999) will be identified in news content. As Foucault (1989, 1991) argued, discourses
25 are inevitably not about a particular person, place or thing. Rather, discourses are part of a complex
26 network of identity and power relations. This research engages in a critical discourse analysis in the
27 hopes of understanding the language used and also in whose interests and to what possible effects
28 the language may have in society (Matheson, 2005). Drawing from the original work of Fairclough
29 (1995) and the later work of Atton and Wickenden (2005), this methodology examines the
30 interdependencies between textual, discursive and social practices.
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41 This critical approach also involves a systematic process and examination of lexical choices,
42 questioning the range of possible vocabulary items that could have been utilized otherwise
43 (Matheson, 2005). Given that mainstream media has been found to report on contemporary issues in
44 very specific ways, this research questions what alternative discourses could have been used in
45 current event blogs. As Hodge and Kress (1993) argue, the use of terms such as "freedom fighter"
46 rather than "terrorist", for example, demonstrates how social forces engage the text. Within any news
47 text, there are limitless linguistic options available for description. Yet, some are chosen more than
48 others (Kress, 1983). These discursive approaches are used, presumably, for a publisher to relate
49 better to their audience (Reah, 2002). Therefore, they are instructive in analyzing how current event
50 blogs conceptualize their readers.
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Findings

Content Analysis Results

The Cohen's kappa measure of agreement between two coders was 94.7 percent for the variables measured. Values of kappa greater than .75 indicate excellent agreement beyond chance alone and suggest a strong standard measure of reliability (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 1998). *Scott's Pi* was computed at .921, representing the inter-coder agreement after chance has been removed.

Mainstream associations

Within a seven day period 1,712 hyperlinks were recorded: *Think Progress* had 828 hyperlinks within the text of their blog; *Crooks and Liars* had 565 hyperlinks; *Oliver Willis* had 215; and *The Osterley Times* had 104. There were a total of 344 posts during the seven-day time period sampled. *Think Progress* had 144 posts; *Crooks and Liars* had 112 posts; 57 posts in *Oliver Willis* and *The Osterley Times* had 31 posts.

The current event blogs sampled for this study rarely linked to alternative news sources. A one-way chi-square test revealed this relationship to be significant ($p=.000$), with no cells having an expected frequency of less than 5. In total, there were 29 links (1.7 percent) to alternative news sources and 18 links (1.1 percent) to alternative news blogs ($p=.000$). This is in contrast to 620 links (36.3 percent) to mainstream news sources ($p=.000$); 65 links (3.8 percent) to mainstream news blogs ($p=.000$); and 66 links (3.9 percent) to mainstream pop culture sources ($p=.000$). (Figure 1) Therefore, hypothesis one, which stated that political news blogs will link to alternative news sources more than to mainstream news sources, was rejected.

The four current event blogs sampled for this study linked to 'like-minded' blogs 315 times (18.4 percent, $p=.000$) and linked to 'opposite-minded' blogs only 10 times (0.6 percent, $p=.000$). Therefore, hypothesis two, which stated that political news blogs will link to opposite-minded current event blogs more than they link to like-minded blogs, was rejected.

The blogs included in this sample linked to official sources, such as government websites and mainstream news sources ($p=.000$), mainstream news blogs ($p=.000$), and mainstream pop culture sources ($p=.000$) a total of 809 times (47.4 percent of total links). These same blogs linked to unofficial sources, such as like-minded ($p=.000$) and opposite-minded blogs ($p=.000$), apolitical blogs ($p=.000$), non-profit organizations ($p=.000$), petitions ($p=.000$), personal websites ($p=.000$), alternative news sources ($p=.000$), and alternative news blogs ($p=.000$) a total of 522 times (30.5 percent of total

links). Therefore, hypothesis three, which stated that political news blogs will link to unofficial sources, such as personal websites and blogs, mainstream and alternative news blogs, and alternative news sources more than to official sources, such as government websites and mainstream outlets, was rejected.

Think Progress, the most popular blog in this sample, was the most likely blog to rely on mainstream sources (Figure 2). The adjusted residual score for this relationship was 10.5, suggesting a very marked departure from the model of independence (well above +2 or below -2) and a demonstrated strength in this relationship. Crooks and Liars, the second most popular blog in this sample was the most likely (adjusted residual score of 9.4) blog to link with like-minded blogs. While not the focus of this study, it is an important caveat to note that there was a significant ($p = .000$) difference between the most popular blogs and least popular blogs in this sample. Popular blogs were more likely to link with mainstream news sources (6.8) than unpopular blogs. These unpopular blogs were more likely than the popular blogs to hyperlink to opposite-minded blogs (2.6), blogs where the politics of the author are unknown (6.9), personal websites (2.4), other types of source (7.8) and alternative news blogs (2.8) (Figure 3).

Discourse Analysis Results

After the quantitative stage of this research was complete, a qualitative discourse analysis then examined blogs according to the characteristics of alternative media outlined above. These characteristics defined alternative media through its in-depth, expansive analysis (Duncombe, 1997); independent reporting (Atton, 2002); unique stories not covered elsewhere (Makagon, 2000); two-way patterns of communication between the writer and reader (Rodriguez, 2001); engaged and open discourse (Ostertag, 2007); personalized reporting (Atton & Wickenden, 2005); and encouragement of social participation (Tracy, 2007).

Binary, reductive analysis

The content of the blogs in this sample, presented polarized nodes of information with a clear 'right' and 'wrong' position. Often the text is constructed incredulously to emphasize the division. For example, two posts from Oliver Willis read, "Are you S***** Me??" and "Drill Now?!" The use of repeated punctuation in both headlines work to exclaim the incredulity of those opposing the author's position. Those in opposition also are constructed to represent a small portion of society. Oliver Willis writes one headline to read, "The death of conventional wisdom by a thousand cuts" in response to

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2
3 what is perceived as unfair treatment of Barack Obama, despite his popular standing in the polls.

4
5 Without any substantive support, Oliver Willis suggests that it is 'conventional wisdom' to support Mr.

6
7 Obama and a small, opposing group, are chipping away at his overwhelming support. This headline is

8
9 indicative of the polarizing language found throughout the blogs sampled. Using the presidential

10
11 campaign as an example, there is no discussion of those who may actually agree with both

12
13 candidates or mention of those who favour a third party candidate. The prevailing discourse is of a

14
15 smarter 'us' versus stupider 'them.'

16
17 The text of the blogs sampled relies heavily on obvious ridicule and distance between the

18
19 author and the opposition. The ridicule of those who oppose the bloggers position is unflinching.

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21 Oliver Willis writes, "someone forgot their Centrum Silver again" when discussing how McCain

22
23 inaccurately referred to an Iraq-Pakistan border. Again, in reference to John McCain, Willis writes,

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25 "John McCain bitching about someone else supposedly getting preferential media coverage is sort of

26
27 like attacking Jeffrey Dahmer for cruelty to animals and ignoring the other stuff. Seriously. This guy."

28
29 Such obvious ridicule depends little on contextualization and relies on an absolutist, binary analytical

30
31 approach. One of many examples comes from John Amato at *Crooks and Liars* who writes about

32
33 McCain's response to being questioned about affirmative action. Amato states: "That McCain

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35 answered by talking about his opposition to 'quotas' was, of course, ridiculous. 'Quotas' and

36
37 'affirmative action' are not the same thing.'" The blog then immediately proceeds to discuss the

38
39 politics of his answer in the context of McCain's previous voting record. This example illustrates a

40
41 common blogging tactic. First, denigrate your opposition and then offer a reductive analysis in retort.

42
43 Here, Amato labels McCain as ridiculous without explaining exactly why that is and instead describes

44
45 McCain's voting record in reductive, simplistic terms. One of the benefits of hyperlinking is the

46
47 endless amount of information that can be attached to a topic. Using this instance as an example, one

48
49 can assume readers would be better informed with supplementary sources describing quotas and

50
51 affirmative action as well as links to independent reporting that might address the impact of affirmative

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53 action in society. Without such ancillary material, the reader is left to choose a side and argue

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55 according to the simplistic arguments provided.

56
57 On 28 July, Willis states plainly, "you can't trust republicans with your money" and

58
59 "republicans can't govern" in post headlines. On 25 July, *Think Progress* writes, "there's no doubt that

60
Doan (General Services Administration Chief for the United States) has first hand experience with

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2
3 leadership that doesn't work." Such reductive analysis obviously obfuscates the complex factors
4
5 inherent to economic policy and governance. Certainly, there are Republicans who have prudent
6
7 fiscal policies and some who believe Doan is a qualified leader. Yet, such simplistic and direct
8
9 challenges may be fundamental in creating a community that feels valued by like-minded peers. One
10
11 has to wonder if political bloggers would garner much of a dedicated audience if they wrote in more
12
13 measured tones.

14
15 Thus, the reliance on vitriolic, binary language continues in posts such as this on 21 July from
16
17 *Oliver Willis*, which leads: "advice from the losing team." Such an approach clearly illustrates the
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19 dualistic tactics driving much of the text, which works to galvanize readers who feel compelled to
20
21 support superior like-minded positions rather than corroborate any oppositional weakness.

22
23 The blogs here also appeared to overstate their claim to 'truth' while undermining their
24
25 opponents attempt to do the same. On 28 July, John Amato, from *Crooks and Liars* wrote that a study
26
27 by the LA Times "proves" the media are harder on Obama than McCain, showing how it was
28
29 "obvious" that this latest talking point was "complete B.S. from the start....surprise, surprise." The LA
30
31 Times study certainly didn't "prove" that the entire media are harder on Obama, but it did suggest that
32
33 the three network television news programs in America used less positive statements for Obama than
34
35 they did for McCain. This is an important difference that likely would have been highlighted if the
36
37 situation had been reversed, as was the case when three of the four blogs reported on Robert
38
39 Novak's car accident in Washington, D.C. On 23 July, *Crooks and Liars* wrote "Novak hits pedestrian
40
41 with Corvette, keeps driving...I'm sorry, but I think most normal people would notice a 66 year old
42
43 man rolling across their windshield. I'm just saying...". This story was alongside an image of read
44
45 "Robert Novak: Douchebag of liberty." Also, on the 23rd of July, *Think Progress* ran the headline
46
47 "Witness: 'No way' Novak didn't know he hit someone; victim was 'splayed across the front' of his
48
49 car." Only one of the three blogs, *Think Progress*, reported later that Mr. Novak had a brain tumor and
50
51 that he may have had a temporary 'blackout' because of this medical condition. None of the blogs, or
52
53 any of the commentators, made any apologies about their previous statements or coverage.

54 55 **Dependent reporting**

56
57 There was no evidence of any primary reporting from the four blogs sampled here. In each
58
59 case, the blogger followed a similar pattern of representation. A typical post opened with an initial,
60
oppositional, and at times, cynical opening sentence that introduced the viewer of the content to

1
2
3 follow. Second, a quotation or excerpted paragraph from a mainstream outlet was flowed in the text
4
5 and finally, the blogger closed with a statement challenging the mainstream position that was either
6
7 based on opinion or drawn from a mainstream source. This format integrates mainstream reporting
8
9 throughout its derivative posts.

10
11 An example from *The Osterley Times* on 23 July opens: "It's a sad day for McCain when even
12
13 Joe Klein thinks he has gone too far. But his recent unbelievable comments regarding Obama have
14
15 caused Klein to say this..." The post then re-mediate a two-paragraph quote from Joe Klein and then
16
17 ends with the blogger writing "I expect McCain's campaign to get more scurrilous as time goes on..."
18
19 The blogger doesn't explain who Joe Klein is, and doesn't link directly to his website, which is an
20
21 example of the sometimes coded language found in these blogs. However, given the format of other
22
23 posts, the reader would assume that Klein holds official stature (Klein is a political columnist for *Time*
24
25 magazine and author of six political books). The personalized, first person closing predicts future
26
27 behavior from a decidedly opinionated perspective. By constructing the post in this manner, the
28
29 blogger ingratiates her or himself with the like-minded reader and invites the reader into specialized
30
31 knowledge that the blogger gained only after doing extensive research.

32
33 *Think Progress*, a blog that tended to use less polarizing language than the others in this
34
35 sample, continues this format, but with a more measured tone and a stronger reliance on quotations
36
37 for substantiation. For example, in reporting on the hiring practices of Monica Goodling, a former U.S.
38
39 government lawyer and political appointee in the George W. bush administration, *Think Progress*
40
41 begins on 28 July by writing that "today's Justice Department report – which faults department aide
42
43 Monica Goodling for "violating federal law" through politicised hiring practices – reveals Goodling's
44
45 bizarre and thorough way of ensuring she hired only the most tried and true conservatives." The post
46
47 then moves into an extensive quote from the Justice Department report and ends by saying, "The
48
49 report noted that Goodling refused to hire one Assistant U.S. Attorney because she thought he was a
50
51 'political infant' who had not 'proved himself' to the Republican party..." While relying on the words of
52
53 other official sources, rather than constructing this sentence as pure opinion, this post still maintains
54
55 the same format that is frequently seen in blog postings. In this case, the blogger first identifies with
56
57 like-minded readers by distancing *Think Progress* with the upcoming text. Here, *Think Progress*
58
59 immediately labels Goodling as "bizarre" then sources related information from the official Justice
60
Report. The blogger closes with a challenging statement that purposefully quotes "political infant" and

Blogs as alternative

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3 “proved himself” from the Justice Report to metaphorically connect back to the original charges of
4
5 ‘bizarreness.’ By using quotation marks here, the blogger marginalizes Goodling and calls her
6
7 legitimacy into question. The viewer, who was first alerted by *Think Progress* to Goodling’s penchant
8
9 for ‘bizarre’ behavior, is eventually rewarded for being given this knowledge with a final righteous
10
11 confirmation from the blogger.

12 13 **Story Redundancy**

14
15 There was also much overlap in content between the four blogs. The only exception to that
16
17 was the *Oliver Willis* blog, which is self-described as “one man’s view of the world, technology, and
18
19 the Washington Redskins.” While the overall majority of posts in *Oliver Willis* centered on political
20
21 current events, there were a few that strayed into sports and technology coverage, which was outside
22
23 the purview of the other three blogs. However, the overlap in content was striking.

24
25 On one randomly selected day within the sample period, there were 57 stories, of which only
26
27 20 were not replicated elsewhere in the sample. This means that 65 percent of content was replicated
28
29 in one of the four blogs sampled. The unpopular blogs were much more likely to have replicated
30
31 stories than the popular blogs. On this particular day, *The Osterley Times*, did not have one posting
32
33 that was not found in *Think Progress* and *Oliver Willis* only had two postings that were not found in
34
35 the other blogs sampled. In total, 44 percent of *Crooks and Liars* was original and not replicated
36
37 elsewhere in the sample; 22 percent of *Oliver Willis* was not replicated in the sample; 0 percent of
38
39 *The Osterley Times* and 38 percent of *Think Progress* was original. This suggests a substantial level
40
41 of content remediation, not only from the mainstream sources where this content derived from, but
42
43 also within the political blogosphere itself.

44 45 **One-way communication**

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47 Within the seven-day sample period, *Crooks and Liars* had 10,401 comments, averaging
48
49 92.86 comments per post, and *Think Progress* had 11,778 comments, averaging 81.79 comments per
50
51 post. *The Osterley Times* had 19 comments, averaging .33 comments per post and *Oliver Willis* had
52
53 883 comments, averaging 28.48 comments per post.

54
55 It is important to note that almost none of the total 23,081 comments were openly solicited.
56
57 Meaning, there were very few ‘open threads’ evident on these blogs and no direct encouragement of
58
59 audience contributions. *Crooks and Liars* was the only blog to utilize the open thread function
60
whereby users are directly encouraged to create the entire content for a particular blog posting. On

1
2
3 the 25th of July, *Crooks and Liars* wrote an open thread that read, "here's a fun game to play in
4 comments, kids. Finish this sentence: "Bill O'Reilly is the new _____" Enjoy!" Such an approach
5 entices users to participate directly in the blog. There was no evidence of a similar entreaty for
6 comments on any of the other sites sampled.
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10
11 There was little evidence of other types of invitations to communicate, such as asking
12 questions of their audience. Questions would serve to recognize at least the possibility of a
13 communicative relationship. In the instances that did exist, it was difficult to deconstruct whether the
14 question was meant to be rhetorical or directed purposefully at the viewer for engagement. For
15 example, on 27 July 2008, in reference to the notion that Barack Obama might employ Agriculture
16 Secretary Ann Veneman as his running mate, John Amato, the author of *Crooks and Liars*, wrote "he
17 is kidding, isn't he?" Given there is a possibility for exchange in the commentary, one could initially
18 assume that this is an invitation for communication with the readers. However, after examining the
19 259 comments in response to this article, it becomes clear that this question was meant to be
20 rhetorical. At least, in so far as the author exchanging further information and ideas with the readers.
21 Out of 259 comments, eight viewers stated their reply to Amato directly. This suggests that the
22 audience do not appear to assume any direct, communicative link with the author. Their efforts at
23 communication appeared to be directed to others commenting on the site, rather than the author. Of
24 the 259 comments to this post, there were 110 comments that were directed to another person that
25 had already commented. This constitutes 42.4 percent of all comments.
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41 Continuing with this particular post as an illustration, one of the eight comments directed
42 toward John Amato was negative. The negative comment resulted in a relatively rare response from
43 Amato. The comment, from 'Alex,' read "Um, John, I suspected all along you supported Hillary in the
44 primaries. Now your true colors are at last emerging." It is not necessarily revealing that Amato
45 responded to a viewer, but that he then chose the next comment space to respond to a person that
46 thanked him for his measured and restrained commentary during the primaries. Amato responded,
47 "Thank you so much. I received hundreds of emails like that." This is a unique illustration of how the
48 text is, in fact, selected by the blogger and does not constitute a conversation, even when the
49 pretence is a conversational relationship. Amato points to the 'hundreds' of emails received (that can
50 not be substantiated from the viewers' perspective) as proof of his measured approach. He certainly
51 may have received all of the emails cited here, but the possibility of an engaged and equally informed
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Blogs as alternative

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3 conversation did not transpire. Amato squelched the discontent directed at him on his site and quickly
4
5 changed the focus to a positive representation of his work. The only other instances of Amato posting
6
7 a comment in response to other commentators within the entire sample period were in three 'soft'
8
9 stories about music and sports.

10
11 While questions weren't found to be used as an invitation for engagement with the audience,
12
13 they were used sardonically throughout blog posts. In one post on 28 July about a recent church
14
15 shooting where the gunman had a library of conservative books at home, Oliver Willis ends his post
16
17 with an obvious rhetorical question: "No Rush?" This is in reference to the conservative commentator
18
19 Rush Limbaugh. A similarly acerbic *Think Progress* leads with the headline, "does McCain speak for
20
21 McCain on affirmative action?" These rhetorical questions guide the audience to the 'obvious'
22
23 conclusion that those receiving such ironic quips deserve marginalization.

24
25 The unknown author of *The Osterley Times* posed nine questions to readers in four separate
26
27 posts that received no comments in response. There was also no example of the *Osterley Times*
28
29 blogger responding to any comment from viewers. There was no evidence of direct engagement with
30
31 the audience from *Think Progress* and no evidence of the same from any of the viewers. The
32
33 comment section of each post from *Think Progress* was searched for any direct comment, statement
34
35 or question to the person who wrote the post or to "*Think Progress*" as an entity. None were found.
36
37 There was also no evidence of any responses from the writers at *Think Progress*. This lack of
38
39 engagement in the comments may be because *Think Progress* is not the creation of just one person
40
41 and several people post stories on the blog. Such a practice may inhibit readers from creating a
42
43 relationship with an individual writer. The institutional nature of the blog name, may also work to
44
45 exclude any direct response or engagement.

46
47 As a counterpoint to the other three blogs in this sample, comments aimed directly to Oliver
48
49 Willis were generally responded to quickly. Positive comments, such as "Oliver, I'm blogrolling you on
50
51 mine, you rock!!" from 'GOPnot4me' were left without a response. However, there were several
52
53 instances where Willis did engage his audience with repeated comments. As an example, in response
54
55 to a post titled "conservatives compare train with 727,684 daily riders to "Bridge to Nowhere," Willis
56
57 responded to disagreeing reader comments three times, in each instance offering his own position to
58
59 counter a contradicting commentator.
60

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3 One key component to the growth of blogs has presumably been the relationship bloggers
4 have with their viewers (Kayes & Johnson, 2004) and a high level of communication has been found
5 between the blogger and viewers in the past (Wall, 2005). This research finds a much more
6 mainstream model of communication with bloggers posting infrequent responses to commentators,
7 rarely soliciting input, and scarcely answering audience questions. The principal area of engagement
8 and interchange on these blogs occurred between the commentators themselves and did not involve
9 the blogger at all.

17 **Caustic commentary**

19 Except for the notable exception of *oliverwillis.com*, none of the bloggers here utilized the
20 comment section for any meaningful level of communication with their readers. This may be due to
21 the sheer amount of blog comments received. *Oliver Willis* had far fewer comments than *Think*
22 *Progress* or *Crooks and Liars*, which may be a contributing factor to Willis' increased engagement
23 with commentators. As comments continue to rise within a blog, the level of reciprocity may be likely
24 to decline. But, the selectivity of comments demonstrated here on the part of the bloggers may reflect
25 what Herring et. al. (2004) labelled the 'asymmetrical communication rights' between bloggers and
26 the audience, whereby bloggers "retain ultimate control over the blog's content" (p. 6). These authors
27 were referring to the bloggers' control over the creation of content and the moderation of comments.
28 Yet, this research argues that the bloggers response, or lack thereof, to reader comments may also
29 play an integral role in the manipulation of communication processes online. By only responding
30 sporadically, if at all, to the multitude of relatively pithy comments, the bloggers' status remains
31 eminently superior to those commenting and removes any possibility of a meaningful, communicative
32 exchange.

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47 However, if the blogger does not contribute to commentary content, then this section might be
48 better understood as a separate communicative sphere from the blog itself. When viewed in that
49 context, it could be argued that these comments represent a democratic effort at community building.
50 Yet, the overwhelming majority of discourse found within these blogs did not suggest much interest in
51 exchanging information. As Wall (2005) correctly argues, comments can work to form more of a
52 'neighborhood bar' than a Habermasian public sphere. There are indeed a few occasional insights,
53 but, the scorn, cynicism, mockery and generally obnoxious statements make up the overwhelming
54 majority of comments in these blogs sampled. A cursory look through comments finds numerous

Blogs as alternative

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3 examples, such as one from 'kel' who commented on *The Osterley Times* that "McCain is a fool," and
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5 'thebhc' who stated flatly, "Great work, Brokaw, you toad." *Crooks and Liars* comments included one
6
7 from 'P.D.' who wrote that "McCain and respect in the same sentence? It's like saying Karl Rove has
8
9 a conscience" and another from 'St. Paul Scout' who wrote, "I want to know, who dresses (John
10
11 McCain)? And how does he manage to eat with a fork and not stab himself in the eye?" A
12
13 commentator, 'Leftside Annie,' to an article about Pat Robertson advocating an Israeli airstrike on
14
15 Iran, said "I hope Jesus comes and raptures his evil old ass STAT." On *Oliver Willis*, 'Jay' wrote,
16
17 "Christ, this (blog post) is beyond stupid."
18

19
20 Given the multitude of asynchronous, largely sarcastic and often angry comments online, one
21
22 has to consider the function of these statements within the blogosphere. Daily Kos recently recorded
23
24 its 20 millionth comment in July of 2008 (Libit, 2008), but some, like *The Atlantic's* Marc Ambinder,
25
26 have given up in frustration and closed their site to comments. Executive Editor of LATimes.com,
27
28 Meredith Artley, recently said that "I'm not sure what good hundreds of thousands of comments or
29
30 message boards do for anybody...I have never known anybody to just read through all of that and
31
32 think it's worth revisiting (Libit, 2008)." Certainly, the ability of ordinary citizens to post comments
33
34 online is a radical departure from established mass media practices and the ability to post like-minded
35
36 comments also may facilitate a sense of community online. Participating within a thread of
37
38 commentary may resemble the previously predicted communication pattern that emphasizes viewers
39
40 not only consume a mediated product, but also work to help create and construct the meaning of that
41
42 product (Rheingold, 2002). However, one has to wonder what kind of community and what type of
43
44 meaning is being created.

45
46 Outside of the general derision aimed at the subject of each blog posting, there are one or
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48 two commentators who receive the weight of comments and disdain from others. The result is
49
50 something akin to a relentless taunting, childhood fight where much bigger, and much louder, bullies
51
52 hurl abuse at the smallest child on the playground. In the case of Think Progress, a commenter
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54 named 'Daryll' receives most of the abuse. Many in the community vocally wait for his first response
55
56 and then start the conversation. For example, in response to "Washington Times joins conservative
57
58 media in publishing McCain's error-filled op-ed," 'shoeless' writes the second comment and says
59
60 "How long until Daryll chimes in to express his admiration for the Moonie Times?" In response to
another article, 'chocolate jesus' said "oh daryll, where art thou?" and 'ralph the wonder llama' says

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3 “Is Daryll here yet?” When ‘Daryll,’ an apparently religious conservative, inevitably does begin
4 posting, the negative comments ensue. *Oliver Willis* has the conservative ‘Jay’ and *Crooks and Liars*
5 has the equally conservative ‘peaceful easy feeling.’ *The Osterley Times* showed no evidence of an
6 oppositional commentator, but there were also very few commentators in general on this blog.
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11 As has already been mentioned, the vitriol directed toward these commentators in specific
12 and those who oppose their views, in general, may serve to coalesce the community by helping to
13 confirm what the majority of commentators believe to be right. Habermas (1989), who articulated this
14 notion of a public square, certainly argued that democracy can be messy. But, by almost any
15 definition, a self-assured, one-dimensional and oppositional fighting front does not equate to
16 democratic debate within a public sphere.
17
18

21 22 23 **Coded language**

24
25 The political position of these blogs was immediately apparent. Headlines such as “McCain
26 Caves to Right Wing on Gay Adoption” from *Think Progress* on 27 July; “John McCain, gaffe
27 machine?” from *Crooks and Liars* on the 26th; “Pentagon told Obama he couldn’t visit troops,
28 Republicans still stupid” from *Oliver Willis* on the 25th; and “McCain meltdown” from *The Osterley*
29 *Times* on the 23rd are fairly obviously positioned and purposely evocative. The general reader with a
30 basic understanding of American politics, would feasibly be able to ascertain the political position of
31 these blogs.
32
33

34
35 Yet, in the text of these blogs, there are layers of meaning within each post that depend upon
36 a historical knowledge in the area of politics and events in the news. For example, on 24 July, in a
37 post titled “Pravda at Black Rock,” Oliver Willis wrote that “CBS scrubs yet another one of McCain’s
38 senior citizen gaffes from their coverage. Uncle Joe would be proud.” The reader is expected to have
39 enough knowledge of newspapers and geography to know that Pravda, translated into “The Truth”
40 was the most popular newspaper of the Soviet Union and an official mouthpiece for the communist
41 party between 1912 and 1991. Uncle Joe, in this case, presumably refers to Joseph Stalin, given the
42 reference to Pravda. Yet, after reading all of the linked material to this post, this research was still not
43 able to uncover the meaning of ‘Black Rock.’ Such layers of meaning, presumably work to unite a
44 community with shared referential experiences, but they also work to exclude readers who don’t have
45 the same historical knowledge or shared cues that combine to form a communal experience. One
46 might assume a similar headline, such as “evidence of CBS news tampering harkens memories of
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controlling, Communist regime,” would be more inclusive and inviting to readers who may have varying degrees of knowledge in certain areas.

John Amato, with *Crooks and Liars*, mentions “dittoheads” on 29 July without any further explication, assuming is a collective knowledge about the nicknamed listeners of the conservative radio talk show host, Rush Limbaugh. Without accompanying links, *The Osterley Times*, wrote on the 28th that McCain “appears to think that Czechoslovakia still exists.” In this post, the blogger assumes that the reader is well-versed enough in current affairs to know that McCain recently referred to Czechoslovakia as a current entity and also assumes that the reader knows that the country divided into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993.

Such examples suggest an assumptive, and even elitist, blogger position within what can be construed as a communication hierarchy. Certainly, a reader can find this information on the Internet. However, a political blog aiming to create informational opportunities within an alternative media space could explain histories within different contextual analyses that might not be as readily available to the casual viewer.

Personalization

On 24 July, *The Osterley Times* blogger posted a story on Barack Obama’s speech in Berlin. The blogger wrote, “people living within the most powerful country in the world can have no idea of what it feels like for those of us who live outside it...we have watched, dumbfounded, as (Bush) has been allowed to act as if the law is what he says it is. Our faith in America is shattered. And that is why we so wholeheartedly embrace Obama.” *The Osterley Times* blogger writes this from a decidedly personal perspective, and repeatedly uses words like “we” and “us” and “our” to invoke a sense of community and intimacy. This quote also illustrates what Fairclough (2003) has called an intertextual mix of populist lexical choices. In this example, the blogger is speaking for all people outside of the United States while also connecting with official and prestigious Democratic nominee, Barack Obama. This gives the blogger, and those who agree with her or him, stature while also placing the blogger in a superior position above those who might support the inevitably weaker McCain.

There are repeated instances of personalization found throughout each of these blog posts except for *Think Progress*, which writes from a much more formal, and mainstream institutional voice. The other blogs in this sample all use the first-person in their postings. Even *The Osterley Times* blogger, whose identity is unknown, constantly writes from this personal position. On the 28th of July,

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3 this blogger writes “is it just me or is John McCain starting to sound insane?...Sorry. This is my third
4 post today on McCain...I am unaware that anyone had ever suggested that this might be his reason
5 for running for President.” This alternative form of reporting is distanced from any pretence of
6
7 objectivity found in the mainstream press. It works to provide a sense of transparency to like-minded
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9 viewers who believe the blogger “is someone the readers can believe they know, someone who is not
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11 manipulated by a corporate boss or a filter of professionalism” (Wall, 2005, p. 165). In doing so, such
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13 highly personalized discourse help to create a relationship between the reader and author –
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15 something that is rarely seen in mainstream media.
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18 **Apathetic online participation**

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20 Only 1.1 percent of hyperlinks were to a petition. *Think Progress* uses perfunctory calls for
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22 action, such as “watch it” for videos and “read the rest of this entry” for text, but these are relatively
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24 banal entreaties for behavioural changes. Interestingly enough, the other three blogs did not even use
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26 this level of direct language in enticing readers through blog material. However, more importantly,
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28 there were no instances of any meaningful call to action. Outside of the few petition hyperlinks, there
29
30 was no evidence of a blogger actually urging a reader to do something in response to what they have
31
32 read in this sample.
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34 **Conclusions**

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36 Blogs contradicted most of the characteristics that define alternative media. The blogs in this
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38 sample largely linked with mainstream journalism and other like-minded political blogs rather than
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40 independent media outlets or a diverse range of sources. There was also a strong reliance on
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42 reductive analyses, relying on basic contradictions and frequent use of coded language that only
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44 frequent readers would understand. There were no meaningful invitations for two-way
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46 communication. There was also no evidence of independent information and little instance of unique
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48 analysis across the blogs sampled. There was widespread redundancy in stories across these blogs,
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50 which mirrors mainstream ‘pack’ reporting and a frequent use of caustic commentary. There were
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52 also very few open invitations to create content and no clear arguments made for democratic
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54 participation. While there was frequent reliance on personalized reporting, this alone would not qualify
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56 these political blogs as an ‘alternative’ media space when balanced against the weight of these
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58 findings.
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Discussion

The patterns of hyperlinks found in this study suggest that the political, current events blogs in this sample serve as an insular echo chamber that extend the reach of mainstream news and continue the professionalised norms of mainstream journalism, which dictate a reliance on official sources. Hyperlinks “represent relationships between producers of web materials, and they can be viewed as structuring connections between sites for web users” (Foot, Schneider, Dougherty, Xenos, & Larsen, 2003, p. Introduction). If indeed, hyperlinking is a ‘non-random’ and purposeful act of building associative socio-epistemic networks (Rogers & Marres, 2002), then the preponderance of mainstream news links in this study is meaningful. Similar research examining warblogs (Wall, 2005), found a heavy reliance on mainstream sources. It could be argued that both political blogs and warblogs would lose relevance if they did not draw from “mainstream agendas of broad social concern” (Redden, Caldwell, & Nguyen, 2003, p. 77). However, relationships formed through hyperlinks are inherently dialogical, meaning that a form of dialogue occurs between these two texts that provide meaning for communities (Burbules & Callister, 2000; Mitra, 1999). The viewer often infers associations between the producers of information found on these links (Adamic & Adar, 2001). In this sample, the associative meaning can only be one of a strong, albeit critical, relationship with mainstream news. These cognitive, communicative connections extend to on-line and off-line locations (Hine, 2000). If this text linked to more ‘alternative’ sources of news, which provided an independent reporting of events, the remediation of content might have a very different, regenerative and multiplying effect in social communication. Instead, the opposite is actually occurring within this sample of blogs. The blogs that were referenced to more, and seen as ‘popular’ relied on mainstream sources more than other, lesser known blogs. The popular blogs actually moved away from the sphere of blogs and into relationships with mainstream news, suggesting a conformist process of homogenisation.

The associative relationships and political alliances (Park, Thelwall, & Kluver, 2005) that exist because of hyperlinking, remain whether one is contradicting or agreeing the news content cited. The mutually dependent relationship solidifies the association. The mainstream news outlet depends upon the blog to increase traffic to its own site, while the blog depends upon the mainstream news outlet to provide content for analysis. Within the interconnected sphere of blogs and mainstream news, the blogs sampled for this study become an extension of corporate news rather than an example of

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3 alternative communication. The re-mediation of mainstream news found in this research may serve to
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5 strengthen, rather than weaken or challenge, views found in the elite, mainstream press as these
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7 blogs are providing a much wider audience for mainstream views.
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10 The analysis of actual discourse on these sites, suggest that the blogs sampled in this study
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12 are not reflective of an alternative media form, at least in the way that as scholars initially envisioned
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14 the blogosphere. There appeared to be a strong reliance on reductive analyses, relying on basic
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16 contradictions and frequent use of coded language that only regular viewers would understand. This
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18 prohibited casual users from engaging with the text and perhaps participating on a larger scale.
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20 There were no meaningful invitations for communication and conversation. Rather, these blogs
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22 operated as a one-way linear form of communication with a parallel, and sarcastic, sphere of
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24 communication occurring within the commentary. This is not necessarily surprising, given other
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26 research (i.e. Pedersen & Macafee, 2007), which has found that personal blogs can be used for a
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28 whole range of satisfactions, such as representing an outlet for creative work, principally as a leisure
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30 activity. Yet, these results suggest a diversion from previously conceptualised notions of the
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32 blogosphere as a form of alternative media.

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34 There was also no evidence of independent information and little instance of unique analysis
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36 across the blogs sampled. These findings complicate the notion of blogging as an alternative media
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38 practice. While there was ample use of personalized reporting, this alone would not qualify these
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40 political blogs as an 'alternative' media space when balanced against the weight of this research,
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42 particularly as the first person accounts were often used to re-mediate mainstream content.

43
44 Atkinson (2006) defines alternative media as "any media that are produced by non-
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46 commercial sources and attempt to transform existing social roles and routines by critiquing and
47
48 challenging power structures" (p. 252). By this definition, the political blogs sampled here could not
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50 quite meet this definitional hurdle. All four blogs were non-commercial sources, but they all also were
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52 arguing for one entrenched power structure over another. In this case, all four blogs readily critiqued
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54 mainstream content and argued against the conservative, politically powerful, Republican Party.
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56 However, these arguments were drawn heavily from mainstream positions and were on behalf of the
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58 liberal, politically powerful, Democrat party. The bloggers' critiques *and* their solutions both depended
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60 upon the existence of those power structures.

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3 Hamilton (2000) argued that alternative communication constructs different traditions and
4 values. Yet, the structure of these blogs largely followed a one-way communication model grounded
5 in mainstream media practices. There was widespread redundancy in stories across the four blogs
6 sampled, which mirrors mainstream 'pack' reporting. There were also very few open invitations to
7 create content. The 'open thread' in *Crooks and Liars* was the lone instance of explicit commentator
8 contribution and there was also very little communication between blogger and commentator. If the
9 goal of alternative media is to subvert the "hierarchy of access," (Atton, 2002) and "emphasise first
10 person eyewitness accounts by participants" (Atton, 2003, p. 267), then again, the blogs sampled for
11 this study did not qualify as alternative, rather these blogs strongly adhered to the mainstream model
12 of a distanced and knowledgeable content creator and a generalized body of apathetic readers.
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16 It has been suggested that alternative media offer a platform for groups and individuals that
17 have been marginalized by the mainstream media (Atton, 2002). Arguing whether or not the
18 mainstream media has marginalized political bloggers, is somewhat akin to arguing whether or not
19 the mainstream media are liberal or conservative. It depends who is asking. Conservatives argue that
20 the liberal media has shut them off from media access while liberals claim the exact opposite is true.
21 Yet, all blogs undeniably offer people a platform to speak to a wide audience - something that has not
22 been historically possible through mainstream outlets. But, while these bloggers write from outside
23 the walls of mainstream institutions and from a personalized perspective, which is also outside of
24 mainstream journalistic practices, the text of these blogs still derived from within the institutional
25 framework of mainstream society that the bloggers purportedly critiqued. There was no evidence in
26 this sample of bloggers establishing a new way of organizing media or sharing meaningful self-
27 disclosure that reported on personal experiences or struggles; no resistance narratives outside of
28 established political norms and practices; no facilitation of democratic participation and cultural
29 disruption.
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33 Downing (2001) has argued convincingly of the complete mainstream blockage of public
34 expression and the necessity for alternative media to fill the cultural and social gap. There is little
35 evidence here that political blogs are fulfilling this idea. Rather, these blogs exist as somewhat of an
36 overlapping sphere between mainstream and alternative media, extending and drawing upon
37 mainstream practices just without corporate sponsorship, and at times, with a personal voice. Many of
38 the values these blogs appear to critique are the same values they have subsumed from mainstream
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3 journalism. What emerged from this study, was a sample of blogs that acted as contract ombudsmen
4 for the mainstream press. The principal difference was that they were not on the mainstream payroll -
5 a welcome relief for newspapers facing continual budget cuts – and, rather than ‘answering’ to public
6 concerns about content, these blogs were driven by individual interests created within the culture of
7 mainstream media.
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13 This study agrees with the recent trend in scholarship about alternative media, which has
14 found that alternative media simply can’t be explained or understood without placing it in relation to
15 mainstream media (Harcup, 2005). There was very little in this research that supported an
16 ‘alternative’ blogosphere as has been defined by other scholars (i.e. binary analysis, dependent
17 reporting with mainstream sources, story redundancy between blogs resembling mainstream pack-
18 journalism, one-way communication with readers, caustic commentary, coded language and little
19 encouragement of online participation). Yet, the personalization of blogs in this sample draws directly
20 from alternative media practices and is rarely found in mainstream content. Downing (2001) has
21 argued that scholars should reject “binarism” (p. ix) between mainstream and alternative media given
22 that alternative media practices draw heavily from, and then subvert, mainstream skills and
23 techniques (Atton, 2002, p. 151) and those in the mainstream often draw from their counterparts in
24 alternative media (Harcup, 2005). However, this research argues that these political blogs, which
25 have been conceptualised within academia as an alternative to mainstream media, actually draw very
26 little from what has been defined as alternative media. Further, these blogs appear firmly grounded
27 within the ideological mainstream and make no attempt to create alternative identities outside of
28 entrenched, elite systems of power. The ability for citizens to speak with a broader reach was one of
29 the few ‘alternative’ qualities found here. But, ironically, this ability may have actually served to
30 strengthen mainstream media given that bloggers simply re-mediated mainstream content and
31 therefore gave these perspectives much more consideration and voice than they had prior.
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51 More research examining the distinctions between different “types” of media are vitally
52 important as technologies continue to create new communicative spheres. As this research shows,
53 there is extensive overlap between what was once considered ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream.’ The
54 blogs in this sample critiqued mainstream content with mainstream ideology and practices through a
55 far-reaching, once ‘new’ and ‘alternative’ medium. Indeed, it was likely the medium itself that first
56 garnered the ‘alternative’ moniker and not the content. If one does examine the content, it becomes
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3 apparent that there is far more overlap between the blogs in this sample and modern political talk
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5 radio, rather than alternative media. This illustrates that it is not enough to label what was once
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7 alternative media, something like 'citizen media' without careful consideration of what separates the
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9 two. Simply because content is produced by an individual citizen, does not mean it does not rely upon
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11 corporate models of communication, mainstream ideologies and corporate content. There is important
12
13 work in the area of citizen media (Schaffer, 2007; Wilkins, 2000), but more effort into the distinctions
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15 between citizen and alternative media are needed.

16
17 Obviously, these findings can only be applied to the blogs sampled in this study. This
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19 research was based on a small sample and any conclusions should be applied only to the blogs
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21 included in this study. This research should serve to continue the trajectory of study into the
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23 blogosphere. All blogs are not made equal. There are blogs dedicated only to primary journalistic
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25 reporting that might be placed differently within the mainstream/alternative media spectrum. Each
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27 type and category of blog needs to be examined individually to have a better understanding of the
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29 blogosphere as a whole. Given the presently personalized nature of blogs, it may seem as if there are
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31 almost as many variants of blogs as there are people on the planet. However, blogs tend to
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33 aggregate within categories. Technorati, which as of June 2008 indexed 112.8 million blogs (2008),
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35 suggested the following: entertainment, business, lifestyle, politics, sports, and technology. Obviously,
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37 this study only addressed one of these categories. Entertainment blogs, for example, may draw much
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39 more extensively from alternative media practices than business, which might rely more on corporate
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41 modes of communication.

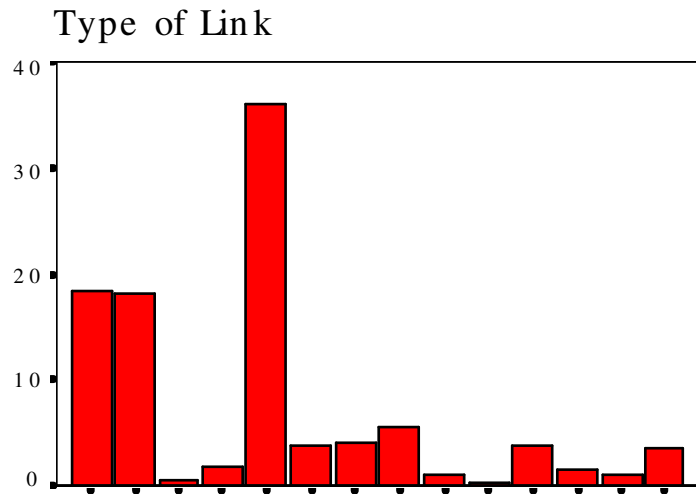
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43 Personal interviews with the bloggers themselves would also be extremely useful in building a
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45 better understanding of blogger motivations as well as exploring their own conceptualisations of
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47 blogging as a mainstream or alternative media practice. Previous research has examining the uses
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49 and gratifications of blogging has revealed that many bloggers create content as a creative hobby
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51 (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007), self-documentation and improving writing skills (Li, 2007), as well as for
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53 personal expression and self disclosure (Papacharissi, 2004). Thus far, there has not been extensive
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55 research examining bloggers who create content with the goal of filling informational gaps left behind
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57 by mainstream media. Further research in this area would be instrumental in developing the field of
58
59 study surrounding blogs and alternative media.
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Appendix

Coding Categories for Hyperlinks

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7	Itself	Hyperlink to another location within the same blog site
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9	Apparent like-minded blog	Hyperlink to another blog that appears to be of the same ideological position as the blog sampled. Given that all of the blogs sampled for this study self-identified as liberal, 'like-minded' blogs were also liberal
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14	Apparent opposite-minded blog	Hyperlink to another blog that appears to be of the opposite ideological position as the blog sampled. Given that all of the blogs sampled for this study self-identified as liberal, 'opposite-minded' blogs were conservative
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19	Blog with unknown political position	Hyperlink to another blog that does not appear to be conservative or liberal
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22	Mainstream news source	Hyperlink to a professional news website that is generally in pursuit of commercial, for profit, objectives as the motivation for publication; privileges institutions over movements and relies on sources according according to perceived credibility.
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27	Mainstream news blog	Hyperlink to a professional news blog that is generally in pursuit of commercial, for profit, objectives as the motivation for publication; privileges institutions over movements and relies on sources according according to perceived credibility.
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34	Alternative news source	Hyperlink to a news website that is generally not in pursuit of commercial, for profit, objectives as the motivation for publication; privileges movements over institutions and relies on sources throughout the broader community.
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39	Alternative news blog	Hyperlink to a news blog that is generally not in pursuit of commercial, for profit, objectives as the motivation for publication; privileges movements over institutions and relies on sources throughout the broader community.
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44	Mainstream pop culture source	Hyperlink to a popular, non-news source that contributes to common culture
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47	Non-profit organization	Hyperlink to a non-news organization that does not aim to make any financial profit and serves the broader community
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50	Petition	Hyperlink to an online petition
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52	Personal website	Hyperlink to a non-news and non-professional website constructed by an individual.
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55	Government	Hyperlink to a government website
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57	Other	Hyperlink to a website that does not warrant inclusion into any of the aforementioned categories
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Figure 1

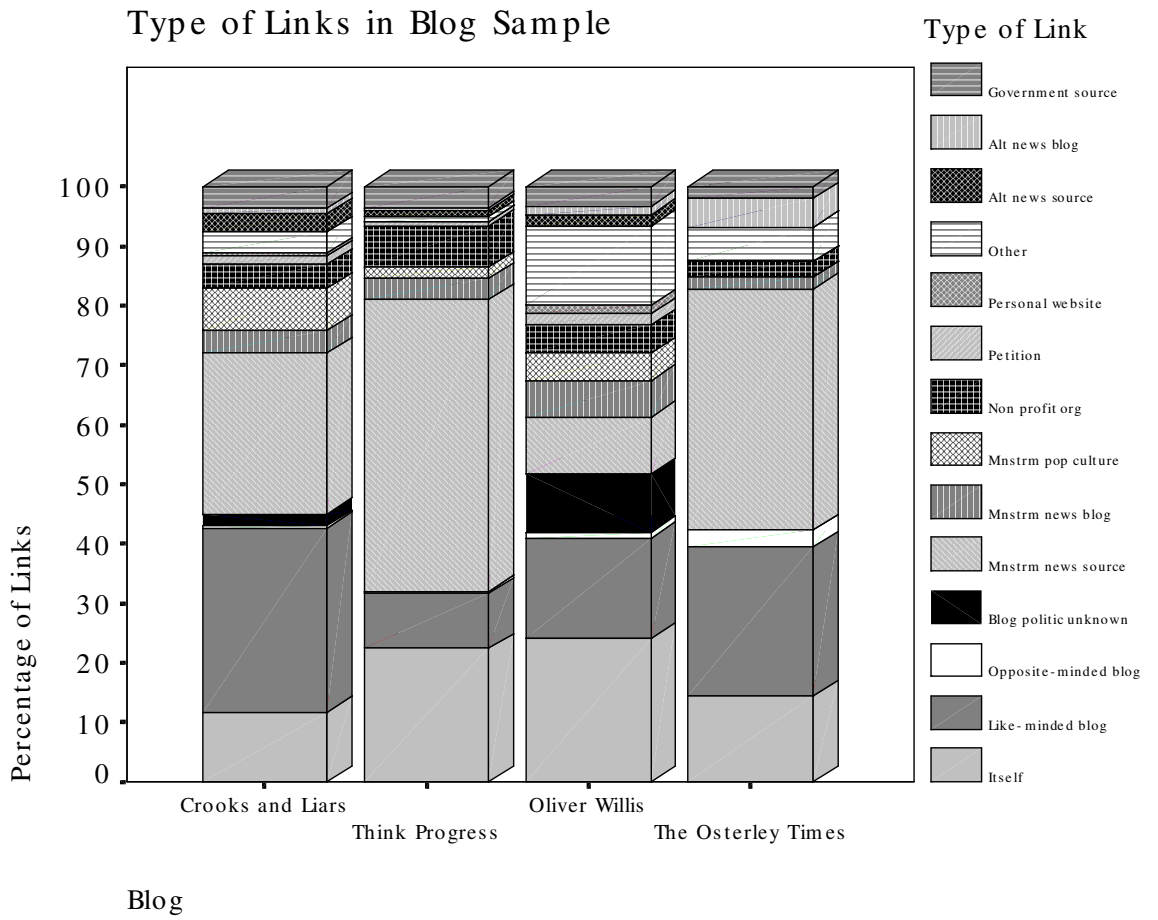


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Figure 2

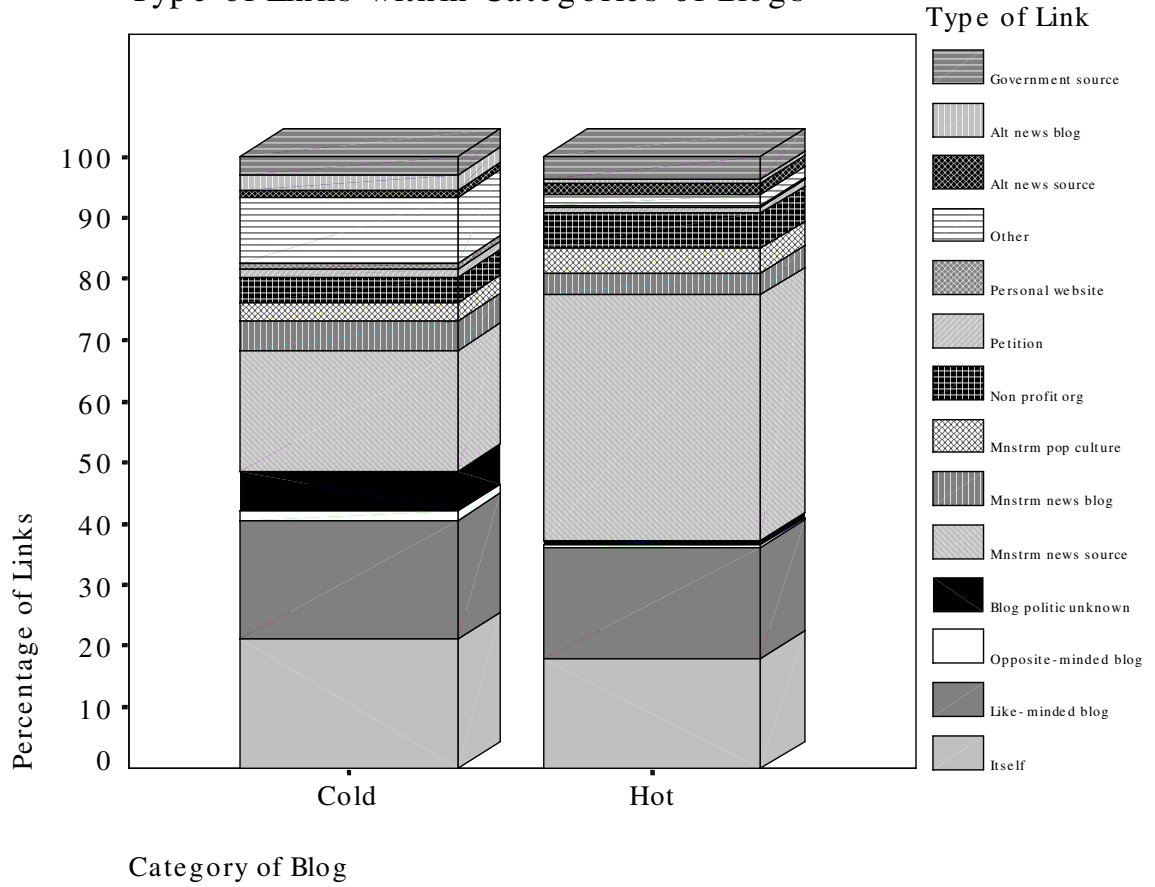


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Figure 3

Type of Links within Categories of Blogs



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Blogs as alternative

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