Exploring political blogs as a form of alternative media

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Blogs as alternative

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.
Journalism, in the broadest sense, examines proximate topics that involve prominent
dividuals 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 (thpnhhnhh!)
tangerine-flake streamline baby (rahghhh!) Around the bend (brummmmmmmmmmmmm)…” As the title might suggest, New Journalism relied upon experimental and subjective writing that directly countered many of the standardized norms of mainstream journalism. The concomitant timing of New Journalism with the politically turbulent sixties suggested that “when political and cultural crises arose, new forms of news might also appear” (Wall, 2005, p. 155).

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

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 research uses both critical discourse and content analysis to examine four political, current events blogs as a case study of blogs as an ‘alternative’ media space. This particular type of blog was chosen as it can easily be conceptualised within most definitions of alternative news media as a counterpoint to traditional mainstream news fare. There is also a wide range of political, current events news blogs across the ideological spectrum, providing strong potential for a cross-pollination of ideas and content.

Blogs

There has been an explosion of blogs on the Internet. In 1999, there were about 50 existing blogs and they were only known by a few individuals (Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, & Wong, 2007). However, by 2006, 29 percent (57 million) of American Internet users accessed blogs (Lenhart & Fox, 2006) and by 2007, 8 out of 10 Americans knew what a blog was and almost half of America had visited blogs (Synovate, 2007). As an example of blog proliferation, the readership and authorship of political blogs had already exceeded that of political print magazines and columns by the year 2004 (Mayfield, 2004).
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
large-scale mobilization efforts online. And, for all its suggested points of difference, current events blogs have also been found to be remarkably similar to mainstream journalism — at least in terms of journalistic norms. Reese et.al (2007) examined six news blogs and found that in the regurgitation of mainstream content, these blogs provided “an important secondary market” (p. 257) for corporate journalism. However, they also found that current events blogs did manage to retain citizen voices that are not found in traditional media. These authors did not uncover a resounding echo-chamber and found a significant number of links to other, external sites (Reese et al., 2007). This conclusion is not shared by other research, which has found that current events political news blogs link primarily to their own respective, ‘like-minded’, ideological communities (Adamic & Glance, 2005). However, in this same study of 40 ‘A-list’ blogs, it was also found that blogs were more likely to link to mainstream news sources than to each other (Adamic & Glance, 2005).

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

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

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

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

H3: 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.

Blogs, unlike other forms of news, have been said to emphasize personalization and audience participation in the creation of content (Wall, 2005). Haas (2005) counters previous research
in the area and cautions scholars not to take these claims at face value, but instead, urges researchers to see blogs as part of a continuing trajectory in modern media. Yet, the differences between mainstream and alternative media can be vast and placing the two areas of journalism on the same trajectory risks missing fundamental defining characteristics of each. Academic research into alternative media is still developing (Atton & Wickenden, 2005). At a time when the “media at the dawn of the 21st century is broader than ever before” (Downing, 2001, p. v), research needs to better address and understand the complex, yet distinct, differences and similarities that exist across the mediated spectrum. However, it is yet unknown how current events blogs perform against theoretical conceptualisations of an alternative space.

What makes an alternative media alternative?

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

Alternative media have the capacity for “transforming spectators into active participants of everyday dealings and events affecting their lives” (Tracy, 2007, p. 272). Indeed, alternative media often view their role as “one of educating and mobilizing the ‘masses’ in the service of the cause or movement” (Hamilton, 2000, p. 359) and generally avoid one-way forms of communication. The 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).
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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…and 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
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.
After quantitatively coding the blogs, an organic exploration of narrative will be undertaken. In line with the previous work of Gamson (1992), this deductive approach first begins with a loose, preconceived idea of the discursive elements that may exist in content and then slowly proceeds in an attempt to reveal narratives utilized that may not have been considered. These studies can be difficult to replicate and are quite labour intensive (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, such an analysis of narrative allows for a more complex and detailed understanding. By combining content analysis with discourse analysis, this study aims to gain both breadth and depth in the subsequent analysis.

Content Analysis

Sampling

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

Since the most popular blogs are constantly changing, this study went through all of the ‘top 100 posts for the last week’ on Friday, 18 June 2008. For each of these posts, the first and last five blogs were recorded, meaning that two lists were generated. One list had 500 (5 blogs x 100 story posts) of what were ranked by Tailrank as the most popular blogs on the Internet and another list consisted of the 500 least popular blogs or those blogs that did not have many common links with other users, text relevance, high weblog rankings, etc. The two most commonly found blogs from the list of 500 popular blogs were selected for inclusion into the study. These were crooksandliars.com (found 61 times) and thinkprogress.org (found 83 times). Technorati provides further evidence of the popularity of these blogs. On 29 July 2008, Crooks and Liars received an authority ranking of 4,544 from Technorati and Think Progress received a ranking of 6,314. These numbers represent the
number of blogs linking to the website in the last six months and places both of these blogs in the top 10 most popular political blogs.

Blogs that were only found once on Tailrank’s list of non-popular blogs were separated into a different category. Two blogs were then randomly selected from this list. Initially, one of the selected happened to be politically liberal and the other happened to be politically conservative. Given that the two most popular blogs were both considered to be politically left, it was decided that for consistency sake, the two least popular blogs should also be the same. Therefore, another two blogs were randomly selected. Eventually, the least popular blogs included were oliverwillis.com and the-osterley-times.blogspot.com, both represented as liberal. Their authority ranking from Technorati was 708 and 135, respectively.

Each blog was recorded at the same time every day for seven days. The period of seven days was purposeful given the ethereal – and plentiful – nature of the blogosphere. This research aimed to examine a specific period in time. Therefore, an expansive longitudinal period of analysis was not sought. The period of analysis had to allow for enough time to gather a plentiful sample to examine as well as enough content to detect overlap in content between blogs. After examining a subsection of blogs on the first day of research, it was determined that seven days would provide a sufficient sample for study. The entire blog, rather than only a portion of the site, was the unit of analysis.

**Coding Categories**

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

**Statistical Analysis**

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

Inter-coder reliability

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

Discourse Analysis

After this quantitative stage, a qualitative discourse and narrative analyses will be introduced
to help address the research questions at hand. When applicable, specific strategies of signification
(Mitra & Cohen, 1999) will be identified in news content. As Foucault (1989, 1991) argued, discourses
are inevitably not about a particular person, place or thing. Rather, discourses are part of a complex
network of identity and power relations. This research engages in a critical discourse analysis in the
hopes of understanding the language used and also in whose interests and to what possible effects
the language may have in society (Matheson, 2005). Drawing from the original work of Fairclough
(1995) and the later work of Atton and Wickenden (2005), this methodology examines the
interdependencies between textual, discursive and social practices.

This critical approach also involves a systematic process and examination of lexical choices,
questioning the range of possible vocabulary items that could have been utilized otherwise
(Matheson, 2005). Given that mainstream media has been found to report on contemporary issues in
very specific ways, this research questions what alternative discourses could have been used in
current event blogs. As Hodge and Kress (1993) argue, the use of terms such as “freedom fighter”
rather than “terrorist”, for example, demonstrates how social forces engage the text. Within any news
text, there are limitless linguistic options available for description. Yet, some are chosen more than
others (Kress, 1983). These discursive approaches are used, presumably, for a publisher to relate
better to their audience (Reah, 2002). Therefore, they are instructive in analyzing how current event
blogs conceptualize their readers.
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
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
what is perceived as unfair treatment of Barack Obama, despite his popular standing in the polls. Without any substantive support, Oliver Willis suggests that it is ‘conventional wisdom’ to support Mr. Obama and a small, opposing group, are chipping away at his overwhelming support. This headline is indicative of the polarizing language found throughout the blogs sampled. Using the presidential campaign as an example, there is no discussion of those who may actually agree with both candidates or mention of those who favour a third party candidate. The prevailing discourse is of a smarter ‘us’ versus stupider ‘them.’

The text of the blogs sampled relies heavily on obvious ridicule and distance between the author and the opposition. The ridicule of those who oppose the blogger’s position is unflinching. Oliver Willis writes, “someone forgot their Centrum Silver again” when discussing how McCain inaccurately referred to an Iraq-Pakistan border. Again, in reference to John McCain, Willis writes, “John McCain bitching about someone else supposedly getting preferential media coverage is sort of like attacking Jeffrey Dahmer for cruelty to animals and ignoring the other stuff. Seriously. This guy.” Such obvious ridicule depends little on contextualization and relies on an absolutist, binary analytical approach. One of many examples comes from John Amato at Crooks and Liars who writes about McCain’s response to being questioned about affirmative action. Amato states: “That McCain answered by talking about his opposition to ‘quotas’ was, of course, ridiculous. ‘Quotas’ and ‘affirmative action’ are not the same thing.” The blog then immediately proceeds to discuss the politics of his answer in the context of McCain’s previous voting record. This example illustrates a common blogging tactic. First, denigrate your opposition and then offer a reductive analysis in retort. Here, Amato labels McCain as ridiculous without explaining exactly why that is and instead describes McCain’s voting record in reductive, simplistic terms. One of the benefits of hyperlinking is the endless amount of information that can be attached to a topic. Using this instance as an example, one can assume readers would be better informed with supplementary sources describing quotas and affirmative action as well as links to independent reporting that might address the impact of affirmative action in society. Without such ancillary material, the reader is left to choose a side and argue according to the simplistic arguments provided.

On 28 July, Willis states plainly, “you can’t trust republicans with your money” and “republicans can’t govern” in post headlines. On 25 July, Think Progress writes, “there’s no doubt that Doan (General Services Administration Chief for the United States) has first hand experience with
leadership that doesn’t work.” Such reductive analysis obviously obfuscates the complex factors inherent to economic policy and governance. Certainly, there are Republicans who have prudent fiscal policies and some who believe Doan is a qualified leader. Yet, such simplistic and direct challenges may be fundamental in creating a community that feels valued by like-minded peers. One has to wonder if political bloggers would garner much of a dedicated audience if they wrote in more measured tones.

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

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

Dependent reporting

There was no evidence of any primary reporting from the four blogs sampled here. In each case, the blogger followed a similar pattern of representation. A typical post opened with an initial, oppositional, and at times, cynical opening sentence that introduced the viewer of the content to
follow. Second, a quotation or excerpted paragraph from a mainstream outlet was flowed in the text and finally, the blogger closed with a statement challenging the mainstream position that was either based on opinion or drawn from a mainstream source. This format integrates mainstream reporting throughout its derivative posts.

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

*Think Progress*, a blog that tended to use less polarizing language than the others in this sample, continues this format, but with a more measured tone and a stronger reliance on quotations for substantiation. For example, in reporting on the hiring practices of Monica Goodling, a former U.S. government lawyer and political appointee in the George W. Bush administration, *Think Progress* begins on 28 July by writing that “today’s Justice Department report – which faults department aide Monica Goodling for “violating federal law” through politicised hiring practices – reveals Goodling’s bizarre and thorough way of ensuring she hired only the most tried and true conservatives.” The post then moves into an extensive quote from the Justice Department report and ends by saying, “The report noted that Goodling refused to hire one Assistant U.S. Attorney because she thought he was a ‘political infant’ who had not ‘proved himself’ to the Republican party…” While relying on the words of other official sources, rather than constructing this sentence as pure opinion, this post still maintains the same format that is frequently seen in blog postings. In this case, the blogger first identifies with like-minded readers by distancing *Think Progress* with the upcoming text. Here, *Think Progress* immediately labels Goodling as “bizarre” then sources related information from the official Justice Report. The blogger closes with a challenging statement that purposefully quotes “political infant” and
“proved himself” from the Justice Report to metaphorically connect back to the original charges of ‘bizarreness.’ By using quotation marks here, the blogger marginalizes Goodling and calls her legitimacy into question. The viewer, who was first alerted by Think Progress to Goodling’s penchant for ‘bizarre’ behavior, is eventually rewarded for being given this knowledge with a final righteous confirmation from the blogger.

**Story Redundancy**

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

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

**One-way communication**

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

It is important to note that almost none of the total 23,081 comments were openly solicited. Meaning, there were very few ‘open threads’ evident on these blogs and no direct encouragement of audience contributions. Crooks and Liars was the only blog to utilize the open thread function whereby users are directly encouraged to create the entire content for a particular blog posting. On
the 25th of July, Crooks and Liars wrote an open thread that read, “here’s a fun game to play in comments, kids. Finish this sentence: “Bill O’Reilly is the new __________” Enjoy!” Such an approach entices users to participate directly in the blog. There was no evidence of a similar entreaty for comments on any of the other sites sampled.

There was little evidence of other types of invitations to communicate, such as asking questions of their audience. Questions would serve to recognize at least the possibility of a communicative relationship. In the instances that did exist, it was difficult to deconstruct whether the question was meant to be rhetorical or directed purposefully at the viewer for engagement. For example, on 27 July 2008, in reference to the notion that Barack Obama might employ Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman as his running mate, John Amato, the author of Crooks and Liars, wrote “he is kidding, isn’t he?” Given there is a possibility for exchange in the commentary, one could initially assume that this is an invitation for communication with the readers. However, after examining the 259 comments in response to this article, it becomes clear that this question was meant to be rhetorical. At least, in so far as the author exchanging further information and ideas with the readers.

Out of 259 comments, eight viewers stated their reply to Amato directly. This suggests that the audience do not appear to assume any direct, communicative link with the author. Their efforts at communication appeared to be directed to others commenting on the site, rather than the author. Of the 259 comments to this post, there were 110 comments that were directed to another person that had already commented. This constitutes 42.4 percent of all comments.

Continuing with this particular post as an illustration, one of the eight comments directed toward John Amato was negative. The negative comment resulted in a relatively rare response from Amato. The comment, from ‘Alex,’ read “Um, John, I suspected all along you supported Hillary in the primaries. Now your true colors are at last emerging.” It is not necessarily revealing that Amato responded to a viewer, but that he then chose the next comment space to respond to a person that thanked him for his measured and restrained commentary during the primaries. Amato responded, “Thank you so much. I received hundreds of emails like that.” This is a unique illustration of how the text is, in fact, selected by the blogger and does not constitute a conversation, even when the pretence is a conversational relationship. Amato points to the ‘hundreds’ of emails received (that can not be substantiated from the viewers’ perspective) as proof of his measured approach. He certainly may have received all of the emails cited here, but the possibility of an engaged and equally informed
conversation did not transpire. Amato squelched the discontent directed at him on his site and quickly changed the focus to a positive representation of his work. The only other instances of Amato posting a comment in response to other commentators within the entire sample period were in three ‘soft’ stories about music and sports.

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

The unknown author of *The Osterley Times* posed nine questions to readers in four separate posts that received no comments in response. There was also no example of the *Osterley Times* blogger responding to any comment from viewers. There was no evidence of direct engagement with the audience from *Think Progress* and no evidence of the same from any of the viewers. The comment section of each post from *Think Progress* was searched for any direct comment, statement or question to the person who wrote the post or to “*Think Progress*” as an entity. None were found. There was also no evidence of any responses from the writers at *Think Progress*. This lack of engagement in the comments may be because *Think Progress* is not the creation of just one person and several people post stories on the blog. Such a practice may inhibit readers from creating a relationship with an individual writer. The institutional nature of the blog name, may also work to exclude any direct response or engagement.

As a counterpoint to the other three blogs in this sample, comments aimed directly to Oliver Willis were generally responded to quickly. Positive comments, such as “Oliver, I’m blogrolling you on mine, you rock!!” from ‘GOPnot4me’ were left without a response. However, there were several instances where Willis did engage his audience with repeated comments. As an example, in response to a post titled “conservatives compare train with 727,684 daily riders to ‘Bridge to Nowhere,’” Willis responded to disagreeing reader comments three times, in each instance offering his own position to counter a contradicting commentator.
One key component to the growth of blogs has presumably been the relationship bloggers have with their viewers (Kayes & Johnson, 2004) and a high level of communication has been found between the blogger and viewers in the past (Wall, 2005). This research finds a much more mainstream model of communication with bloggers posting infrequent responses to commentators, rarely soliciting input, and scarcely answering audience questions. The principal area of engagement and interchange on these blogs occurred between the commentators themselves and did not involve the blogger at all.

Caustic commentary

Except for the notable exception of oliverwillis.com, none of the bloggers here utilized the comment section for any meaningful level of communication with their readers. This may be due to the sheer amount of blog comments received. _Oliver Willis_ had far fewer comments than _Think Progress_ or _Crooks and Liars_, which may be a contributing factor to Willis’ increased engagement with commentators. As comments continue to rise within a blog, the level of reciprocity may be likely to decline. But, the selectivity of comments demonstrated here on the part of the bloggers may reflect what Herring et. al. (2004) labelled the ‘asymmetrical communication rights’ between bloggers and the audience, whereby bloggers “retain ultimate control over the blog’s content” (p. 6). These authors were referring to the bloggers’ control over the creation of content and the moderation of comments. Yet, this research argues that the bloggers response, or lack thereof, to reader comments may also play an integral role in the manipulation of communication processes online. By only responding sporadically, if at all, to the multitude of relatively pithy comments, the bloggers’ status remains eminently superior to those commenting and removes any possibility of a meaningful, communicative exchange.

However, if the blogger does not contribute to commentary content, then this section might be better understood as a separate communicative sphere from the blog itself. When viewed in that context, it could be argued that these comments represent a democratic effort at community building. Yet, the overwhelming majority of discourse found within these blogs did not suggest much interest in exchanging information. As Wall (2005) correctly argues, comments can work to form more of a ‘neighborhood bar’ than a Habermasian public sphere. There are indeed a few occasional insights, but, the scorn, cynicism, mockery and generally obnoxious statements make up the overwhelming majority of comments in these blogs sampled. A cursory look through comments finds numerous
examples, such as one from ‘kel’ who commented on The Osterley Times that “McCain is a fool,” and ‘thebhc’ who stated flatly, “Great work, Brokaw, you toad.” Crooks and Liars comments included one from ‘P.D.’ who wrote that “McCain and respect in the same sentence? It’s like saying Karl Rove has a conscience” and another from ‘St. Paul Scout’ who wrote, “I want to know, who dresses (John McCain)? And how does he manage to eat with a fork and not stab himself in the eye?” A commentator, ‘Leftside Annie,’ to an article about Pat Robertson advocating an Israeli airstrike on Iran, said “I hope Jesus comes and raptures his evil old ass STAT.” On Oliver Willis, ‘Jay’ wrote, “Christ, this (blog post) is beyond stupid.”

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

Outside of the general derision aimed at the subject of each blog posting, there are one or two commentators who receive the weight of comments and disdain from others. The result is something akin to a relentless taunting, childhood fight where much bigger, and much louder, bullies hurl abuse at the smallest child on the playground. In the case of Think Progress, a commenter named ‘Daryll’ receives most of the abuse. Many in the community vocally wait for his first response and then start the conversation. For example, in response to “Washington Times joins conservative media in publishing McCain’s error-filled op-ed,” ‘shoeless’ writes the second comment and says “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
“Is Daryll here yet?” When ‘Daryll,’ an apparently religious conservative, inevitably does begin posting, the negative comments ensue. Oliver Willis has the conservative ‘Jay’ and Crooks and Liars has the equally conservative ‘peaceful easy feeling.’ The Osterley Times showed no evidence of an oppositional commentator, but there were also very few commentators in general on this blog.

As has already been mentioned, the vitriol directed toward these commentators in specific and those who oppose their views, in general, may serve to coalesce the community by helping to confirm what the majority of commentators believe to be right. Habermas (1989), who articulated this notion of a public square, certainly argued that democracy can be messy. But, by almost any definition, a self-assured, one-dimensional and oppositional fighting front does not equate to democratic debate within a public sphere.

**Coded language**

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

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

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

**Apathetic online participation**

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

**Conclusions**

Blogs contradicted most of the characteristics that define alternative media. The blogs in this sample largely linked with mainstream journalism and other like-minded political blogs rather than independent media outlets or a diverse range of sources. There was also a strong reliance on reductive analyses, relying on basic contradictions and frequent use of coded language that only frequent readers would understand. There were no meaningful invitations for two-way communication. There was also no evidence of independent information and little instance of unique analysis across the blogs sampled. There was widespread redundancy in stories across these blogs, which mirrors mainstream ‘pack’ reporting and a frequent use of caustic commentary. There were also very few open invitations to create content and no clear arguments made for democratic participation. While there was frequent reliance on personalized reporting, this alone would not qualify these political blogs as an ‘alternative’ media space when balanced against the weight of these findings.
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
alternative communication. The re-mediation of mainstream news found in this research may serve to
strengthen, rather than weaken or challenge, views found in the elite, mainstream press as these
blogs are providing a much wider audience for mainstream views.

The analysis of actual discourse on these sites, suggest that the blogs sampled in this study
are not reflective of an alternative media form, at least in the way that as scholars initially envisioned
the blogosphere. There appeared to be a strong reliance on reductive analyses, relying on basic
contradictions and frequent use of coded language that only regular viewers would understand. This
prohibited casual users from engaging with the text and perhaps participating on a larger scale.
There were no meaningful invitations for communication and conversation. Rather, these blogs
operated as a one-way linear form of communication with a parallel, and sarcastic, sphere of
communication occurring within the commentary. This is not necessarily surprising, given other
research (i.e. Pedersen & Macafee, 2007), which has found that personal blogs can be used for a
whole range of satisfactions, such as representing an outlet for creative work, principally as a leisure
activity. Yet, these results suggest a diversion from previously conceptualised notions of the
blogosphere as a form of alternative media.

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

Atkinson (2006) defines alternative media as “any media that are produced by non-
commercial sources and attempt to transform existing social roles and routines by critiquing and
challenging power structures” (p. 252). By this definition, the political blogs sampled here could not
quite meet this definitional hurdle. All four blogs were non-commercial sources, but they all also were
arguing for one entrenched power structure over another. In this case, all four blogs readily critiqued
mainstream content and argued against the conservative, politically powerful, Republican Party.
However, these arguments were drawn heavily from mainstream positions and were on behalf of the
liberal, politically powerful, Democrat party. The bloggers’ critiques and their solutions both depended
upon the existence of those power structures.
Hamilton (2000) argued that alternative communication constructs different traditions and values. Yet, the structure of these blogs largely followed a one-way communication model grounded in mainstream media practices. There was widespread redundancy in stories across the four blogs sampled, which mirrors mainstream ‘pack’ reporting. There were also very few open invitations to create content. The ‘open thread’ in Crooks and Liars was the lone instance of explicit commentator contribution and there was also very little communication between blogger and commentator. If the goal of alternative media is to subvert the “hierarchy of access,” (Atton, 2002) and “emphasise first person eyewitness accounts by participants” (Atton, 2003, p. 267), then again, the blogs sampled for this study did not qualify as alternative, rather these blogs strongly adhered to the mainstream model of a distanced and knowledgeable content creator and a generalized body of apathetic readers.

It has been suggested that alternative media offer a platform for groups and individuals that have been marginalized by the mainstream media (Atton, 2002). Arguing whether or not the mainstream media has marginalized political bloggers, is somewhat akin to arguing whether or not the mainstream media are liberal or conservative. It depends who is asking. Conservatives argue that the liberal media has shut them off from media access while liberals claim the exact opposite is true. Yet, all blogs undeniably offer people a platform to speak to a wide audience - something that has not been historically possible through mainstream outlets. But, while these bloggers write from outside the walls of mainstream institutions and from a personalized perspective, which is also outside of mainstream journalistic practices, the text of these blogs still derived from within the institutional framework of mainstream society that the bloggers purportedly critiqued. There was no evidence in this sample of bloggers establishing a new way of organizing media or sharing meaningful self-disclosure that reported on personal experiences or struggles; no resistance narratives outside of established political norms and practices; no facilitation of democratic participation and cultural disruption.

Downing (2001) has argued convincingly of the complete mainstream blockage of public expression and the necessity for alternative media to fill the cultural and social gap. There is little evidence here that political blogs are fulfilling this idea. Rather, these blogs exist as somewhat of an overlapping sphere between mainstream and alternative media, extending and drawing upon mainstream practices just without corporate sponsorship, and at times, with a personal voice. Many of the values these blogs appear to critique are the same values they have subsumed from mainstream
Blogs as alternative journalism. What emerged from this study, was a sample of blogs that acted as contract ombudsmen for the mainstream press. The principal difference was that they were not on the mainstream payroll - a welcome relief for newspapers facing continual budget cuts – and, rather than ‘answering’ to public concerns about content, these blogs were driven by individual interests created within the culture of mainstream media.

This study agrees with the recent trend in scholarship about alternative media, which has found that alternative media simply can’t be explained or understood without placing it in relation to mainstream media (Harcup, 2005). There was very little in this research that supported an ‘alternative’ blogosphere as has been defined by other scholars (i.e. binary analysis, dependent reporting with mainstream sources, story redundancy between blogs resembling mainstream pack-journalism, one-way communication with readers, caustic commentary, coded language and little encouragement of online participation). Yet, the personalization of blogs in this sample draws directly from alternative media practices and is rarely found in mainstream content. Downing (2001) has argued that scholars should reject “binarism” (p. ix) between mainstream and alternative media given that alternative media practices draw heavily from, and then subvert, mainstream skills and techniques (Atton, 2002, p. 151) and those in the mainstream often draw from their counterparts in alternative media (Harcup, 2005). However, this research argues that these political blogs, which have been conceptualised within academia as an alternative to mainstream media, actually draw very little from what has been defined as alternative media. Further, these blogs appear firmly grounded within the ideological mainstream and make no attempt to create alternative identities outside of entrenched, elite systems of power. The ability for citizens to speak with a broader reach was one of the few ‘alternative’ qualities found here. But, ironically, this ability may have actually served to strengthen mainstream media given that bloggers simply re-mediated mainstream content and therefore gave these perspectives much more consideration and voice than they had prior.

More research examining the distinctions between different “types” of media are vitally important as technologies continue to create new communicative spheres. As this research shows, there is extensive overlap between what was once considered ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream.’ The blogs in this sample critiqued mainstream content with mainstream ideology and practices through a far-reaching, once ‘new’ and ‘alternative’ medium. Indeed, it was likely the medium itself that first garnered the ‘alternative’ moniker and not the content. If one does examine the content, it becomes
apparent that there is far more overlap between the blogs in this sample and modern political talk radio, rather than alternative media. This illustrates that it is not enough to label what was once alternative media, something like ‘citizen media’ without careful consideration of what separates the two. Simply because content is produced by an individual citizen, does not mean it does not rely upon corporate models of communication, mainstream ideologies and corporate content. There is important work in the area of citizen media (Schaffer, 2007; Wilkins, 2000), but more effort into the distinctions between citizen and alternative media are needed.

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Itself</td>
<td>Hyperlink to another location within the same blog site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apparent like-minded blog</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apparent opposite-minded blog</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog with unknown political position</td>
<td>Hyperlink to another blog that does not appear to be conservative or liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream news source</td>
<td>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 to perceived credibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream news blog</td>
<td>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 to perceived credibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative news source</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative news blog</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream pop culture source</td>
<td>Hyperlink to a popular, non-news source that contributes to common culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-profit organization</td>
<td>Hyperlink to a non-news organization that does not aim to make any financial profit and serves the broader community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition</td>
<td>Hyperlink to an online petition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal website</td>
<td>Hyperlink to a non-news and non-professional website constructed by an individual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Hyperlink to a government website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Hyperlink to a website that does not warrant inclusion into any of the aforementioned categories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For Peer Review

Blogs as alternative

Figure 1

![Bar chart showing the distribution of link types. The y-axis represents the number of links, ranging from 0 to 40, and the x-axis represents different types of links. The chart shows a significant peak at a certain link type, followed by a decline in frequencies for other types.]
Figure 2

Type of Links in Blog Sample

Blogs as alternative
Blogs as alternative

Figure 3

Type of Links within Categories of Blogs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Blog</th>
<th>Type of Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hot</td>
<td>Government source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alt news blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alt news source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non profit org</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mstrm pop culture</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mstrm news blog</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mstrm news source</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Blog politic unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opposite - minded blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Like - minded blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Itself</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
References


Blogs as alternative


Blogs as alternative


