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The Impact of Blogs on State Politics

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THE IMPACT OF BLOGS ON STATE POLITICS

A Dissertation

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by

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August 2008

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To my parents.
Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

“Information is the currency of democracy”
~Thomas Jefferson

This research offers the first comprehensive study of state-focused political bloggers in the United States. Applying original data from the author’s nationwide survey of state-focused bloggers conducted during the summer of 2007, this study addresses three primary research questions: Who are the people creating blogs focused on state politics? What motivates these people to initiate and maintain their blogs? Do these blogs play a discernable role in a given state’s politics, and if so, how?

Rooted in the literature of framing; agenda setting; uses and gratifications; news norms and routines; media and democratic accountability; and political knowledge, efficacy and engagement, this research considers the impact of the blogosphere on politics at the state level, finding many similarities between state-focused bloggers and their already-studied brethren at the national level. Findings presented here include demographic data, information concerning state-focused bloggers’ attitudes toward state and national media, and information about these bloggers’ political attitudes.

To complement the quantitative survey data, this study also includes three case studies using the four stages of frame development presented by Miller and Riechert in their discussion of the spiral of opportunity (2001). To the author’s knowledge this is the first time Miller and Riechert’s work has been applied to the blogosphere. Ultimately defining impact as influencing the framing of an issue in the state political context, this research indicates that blogs are indeed having an impact in state politics.

INTRODUCTION

A Noteworthy Incident

On a Monday in June 2006, one Louisiana blogger authored a commentary critical of a bill that was headed to the governor's desk for signature and urged voters to speak out against it. This bill had received little prior state media coverage and had passed the legislature with broad bipartisan support. Other bloggers soon linked to the original commentary, noting their own concerns with the legislation and providing readers with contact information for the governor so they could express their concerns directly. A statewide talk radio host began discussing it and also urged voters to contact the governor to express their displeasure. What started on Monday ended by Thursday when the governor vetoed the bill saying she had heard the people "loud and clear." And the state's newspapers did not discuss the uproar until after the fact.

This led to the now-familiar pattern of traditional media expressing disdain for bloggers, worrying that democracy is in danger due to ill-informed citizens writing without editors and suggesting that only editorial writers are qualified to write editorials. But as a student once asked me, "Aren't bloggers doing the same thing the editorial writers are, just online?" It is hard to argue against that. If the old mantra was never pick a fight with someone who buys ink by the barrel, perhaps the new mantra is never pick a fight with someone who has no editors but lots of bandwidth.

The research presented here has its origins in the Louisiana incident mentioned above. Members of the online community in Louisiana have been referred to derisively as "Internet kooks," since an earlier governor coined the term. Over time, however, that term has come to be worn as a badge of honor by many in the Louisiana blogosphere.

And when it came to the aforementioned legislation, the “Internet kooks” could clearly claim a victory.

This type of blog-driven political activism has been taking place at the national level for years. The Howard Dean campaign in 2004, Trent Lott’s removal from Senate Majority Leader, and Senator George Allen’s Macaca Incident are all associated with the online environment and activist citizens who have embraced interactive technologies and changed American politics in the process. But to date, no detailed attention has been given to the citizen-activists behaving the same way and having similar impact on the politics of states around the country. This study offers a first look at these state-focused bloggers and yields preliminary insights into who they are and why they do what they do.

As the Louisiana incident illustrates, just because traditional journalists are not covering it does not mean the voters do not care. Are bloggers changing state-level political agendas or are they just changing the way state political news is reported? In Illinois, bloggers responded so negatively to proposed legislation that *The New York Times* eventually reported on the tone of the debate. In Louisiana, bloggers forced the veto of legislation that had easily passed the legislature. And in Kentucky, bloggers fought the insertion of objectionable language into a variety of bills throughout a legislative session.

These incidents suggest that bloggers are indeed having an impact on politics at the state level and what follows offers insight into how and why that is happening. This study offers a first, nation-wide look at the behavior, characteristics and impact of bloggers focused on state politics and provides an analysis of who is blogging and why at the state level.

Blogs and Politics

Following the 2006 mid-term elections, the Pew Internet & American Life Project issued a report whose summary of findings began with this statement: “Blogging is bringing new voices to the online world” (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). This study is an attempt to learn more about these voices: Who they are, what they believe, and how they are influencing politics. However, rather than revisiting studies of national bloggers focused on answering those same questions, this study takes aim at the bloggers blogging away in states around the United States. The results suggest that these state bloggers look much like their counterparts at the national level, not only with respect to demographics and political tendencies, but also with respect to the impact these state-focused blogs are perceived to have on the politics of a given state.

Either way, as one scholar writes,

...at some point (probably one we’ve already passed), weblog technology will be seen as a platform for so many forms of publishing, filtering, aggregation, and syndication that blogging will stop referring to any particularly coherent activity. The term ‘blog’ will fall into the middle distance, as ‘home page’ and ‘portal’ have, words that used to mean some concrete thing, but which were stretched by use past the point of meaning (Shirky, 2003).

A reading of current communication literature and a glance at the nation’s newspapers suggests this process is already well underway.

Until that evolution is complete, however, blogs remain at the center of politics and media coverage thereof in the United States. The significance of this study is that the continued growth of interactive media, much of it facilitated through the Internet, has opened wide the door for citizens no longer content to sit on the sidelines of politics that impact their lives. As Rosen writes in a notice to America’s traditional media, “Think of passengers on your ship who got a boat of their own. The writing readers. The viewers

who picked up a camera. The formerly atomized listeners who with modest effort can connect with each other and gain the means to speak – to the world, as it were” (Rosen, 2006). Calling blogs “little First Amendment machines,” Rosen suggests that this technology has extended the freedom of the press to a much wider audience (2007). This study offers a look at how bloggers operating below the national radar impact politics in states around the country.

New Players, New Pressure Points, New Politics

In 1998, Rakow noted “the new media... increase the number of access points in the political pressure system, improving although not guaranteeing the likelihood that citizens will be heard” (Rakow, 1998). But being heard does not guarantee political impact. A cartoon from *The New Yorker* drives home this point: It shows two dogs talking and one of them saying, “I had my own blog for a while, but I decided to go back to just pointless, incessant barking” (*The New Yorker*, 2005). Still, as Cook writes in his summary of Schattschneider’s findings in *The Semi-Sovereign People*, “the choice of a particular content influences the outcome at least as much as the actual contest itself,” (Cook, 1998, 121). As literature presented in the following chapter suggests, having the ability to introduce a topic into public discussion is itself a powerful weapon.

Interactive technologies such as blogs are no longer “new,” but their disruptive potential continues to be felt. In fact, the disruptions caused when “the former audience” has spoken out are now part of Internet lore: Matt Drudge’s revelation of the soiled blue dress; Trent Lott’s removal from a senate leadership position; 60 Minutes’ error-ridden report about President George W. Bush’s military service, and Senator George Allen’s loss in the Virginia senate race.

Given the complexities of both the Internet and the American political system, it is not possible to assign causality to any single blog or news outlet. However, conventional wisdom about the role of blogs in politics continues to attribute significant influence to the national bloggers who have built their reputations on incidents like those mentioned above.

Although that influence cannot be precisely quantified, the impact of the political blogosphere is felt not just in political circles, but also in the media. This has led NYU professor Jay Rosen to observe that “the people formerly known as the audience are simply *the public* made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable” (Rosen, 2006). Rosen suggests the acquiescence of the public can no longer be taken for granted. This previously overlooked variable of “the public” in the media-and-politics equation has introduced new dynamics into what used to be a straightforward two-way relationship.

But just as “everything old is new again,” the dynamics surrounding blogs and responsive audiences are not unlike those identified since the mid-1990s with respect to talk political radio (PTR) (Hofstetter et al, 1998; Weaver, 1996). Conventional wisdom about PTR, as found in the mainstream media of the time, suggested that the ignorant masses were exposed to horribly skewed political arguments propounded by talk radio hosts and that the quality of democratic argument in the United States was being diminished in the process (Hofstetter et al, 1999). Radio hosts were guilty of “stirring the pot” and of agitating average voters over issues they might otherwise never have known about. The difference between then and now is that members of the mainstream media now readily acknowledge the attention they pay to blogs (Arketi, 2007; Euro RSCG Magnet, 2005). They may be dismissive of the amateurish nature of some blogs and they are certainly displeased with blogs’ failure to adhere to the standards of the journalism

profession (whatever those may be), but surveys suggest that journalists consistently turn to blogs for everything from fact-checking to sources to story ideas.

The focus of this research is the individuals who are creating these blogs to which traditional journalists are increasingly turning at the state level. This study does not attempt to analyze the readers of these blogs; nor does it attempt to ascertain the impact of these blogs on the overall health of statewide media outlets.

With so much attention dedicated to study of A-list bloggers and the impact of the practitioners of this interactive technology on national politics, it is time to dedicate some attention to their lower-profile brethren operating at the state, instead of the national, level.

No longer can politicians look to the media as the best indicator of public opinion. Similarly, no longer do media have a monopoly on the expression and distribution of information and opinion, despite considerable media coverage denigrating blogs and the people behind them (McKenna, 2007). In this context, the words of the Nobel prize-winning writer Maurice Maeterlinck seem particularly apt: “At every crossroads on the path that leads to the future, tradition has placed 10,000 men to guard the past.”

Setting aside statements of one extreme or the other, one can safely suggest that the advent of a more visible public as evidenced by interactive behavior online is not the manifestation of Habermas’ utopian public sphere (1989). But it is clear that the hitherto overlooked role of the public in the relationship between media and politics can no longer be ignored. Mortensen discusses this connection to Habermasian concepts, writing that with respect to his theory, “the main task of the political sphere is to make the ruling body appear to be legitimate and give it credibility” (Mortensen, 2004).

Mortensen also refers to the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) noting,

[C]riticism strengthens the institution which permits criticism. The western political ideal is democracy, and one of the most important functions of democracy is the inhabitants' freedom of speech. Only through permitting criticism can any democratic authority be legitimate, and it is this understanding that confirms the importance of the independent established media (2004).

Surveying the content of political blogs, one can infer two things about the people who write them: First, political bloggers seem to agree with Mortensen that only criticism of authority ensures the legitimacy of said authority, and second, that mainstream media is no longer fulfilling the role of legitimate critic of political authority. This suggests that blogs focused on discussion of politics and on criticism of media, like the state-focused blogs at the center of the research presented here, are appropriate places to seek evidence of a more active – or at least louder – public, now armed with technology to help project its voice.

Blogs in the Political Environment

Commenting on the potential role of the Internet in a democracy, one scholar writes that opinions range from “mindlessly optimistic” to “hopelessly pessimistic” (Salter, 2004, 185). Indeed, examples of both views are easy to find in the mainstream media. At the end of the 2004 presidential election, for example, *The New York Times* published an editorial that led with the following: “Every four years, by journalistic if not political tradition, the presidential election must be accompanied by a ‘revolution.’ So what transformed politics this time around? The rise of the Web log or blog” (The revolution will be posted, 2004). In fact, Joe Trippi, architect of the Dean campaign proclaims, “The Internet is the most democratizing innovation we’ve ever seen, more so even than the printing press” (Trippi, 2005, 235).

Still, three years later, a survey indicates that just 23% of people online used the Internet to acquire political information about the 2006 mid-term elections (Rainie, 2007). Despite this potentially small audience of users and even smaller audience of actual bloggers, much has already been written about the place of blogs in American politics and their potential agenda setting influence (Cornfield et al, 2005; Drezner, 2004; Gillmor, 2003; Karp, 2005).

Much of the discussion surrounding blogs and their political applications embraces idealized notions about the democratization of opinion. Ease of both use and access, it is argued, renders blogs the new *sine qua non* of American political discourse. In fact, one scholar observes, “Blogging in many ways has returned to individuals and small groups the power to affect public discourse” (Hendrickson, 2007). Joe Trippi, architect of Howard Dean’s 2004 run for president observes that “any new medium is going to first be discovered by an insurgent” (Trippi, 2008).

This research does not attempt to suggest that blogs are the antidote to the American public’s malaise with respect to political knowledge or engagement (Putnam, 2000; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). It simply points to blogs as one of several ways a citizen who wishes to become more engaged in politics can take steps to do so.

Researchers generally agree that blogs offer a new information resource for citizens who have both the desire and the resources to be politically engaged (Bennett, 2005; Bimber, 2003; Davis, 1998). As Bimber writes, “Resources confer command over information and communication, and command over these enhances political influence” (89). While Bimber does not suggest that new information technologies automatically lead to political revolutions, he does observe that changes in the balance of political information can have an impact on democracy.

Politics and the Distribution of Information

If, as argued by Easton (1953), politics is about the authoritative allocation of resources, then the role of blogs in politics has become one of ensuring that discussion about the allocation process is transparent, accountable and representative of a wider variety of views than has previously been possible in American politics. Perhaps it is that perceived impact that drives scholars to study blogs and media analysts to parse them.

In terms of subject matter, Lenhart and Fox (2006) estimate that there are more than one million blogs focused on political issues. Another scholar writes,

It would not be an exaggeration to argue that a new form of social accountability is emerging in what I am calling the ‘Fifth Estate’. It is enabled by the growing use of the Internet and related information and communication technologies... Essentially, the Internet is enabling people to network... This is being achieved in ways that can support greater accountability... in government and politics... I will argue that this could be as important – if not more so – to the 21st century as the Fourth Estate has been since the 18th (Dutton, 2007).

Drawing inspiration from that kind of sentiment, scholars have categorized blogs, evaluating their content and their potential for impact on political processes.

Papacharissi, for example, suggests that blogs be divided roughly into nine different categories: *personal*, *interests*, *family*, *combination*, *personal views*, *creative expression*, *support*, *fan page*, and *other* (Papacharissi, 2007). The political blogs at the center of the research presented here are a combination of Papacharissi’s “interests (collection of links and information, including news)” and “personal views (not a diary, but focused on expression of personal opinion)” (22).

McKenna (2007) takes the categorization of blogs a step further, evaluating blogs for the political role they play. She conducts an analysis of blogs focused on specific policy issues and suggests that the role or intent of blogs focused on specific policy issues is six-fold: “filtering information, providing expertise, forming networks, gaining

attention, framing arguments, and using windows of opportunity” (3). The similarities between these roles and the roles of policy entrepreneurs as described by Kingdon (1984) are apparent. Indeed, one of Kingdon’s primary arguments is that “The patterns of public policy... are determined not only by such final decisions as votes in legislatures, or initiatives and vetoes by presidents, but also by the fact that some subjects and proposals emerge in the first place and others are never seriously considered” (3). Blogs, McKenna suggests, have an impact, in part, by entering new issues into discussion – issues that, in Kingdon’s model “are never seriously considered.” Blogs, this research suggests, can be effective in raising an issue for consideration.

Studies about the real-world manifestations of these Internet-based democratic dynamics abound. The nation’s A-list blogs and bloggers have been evaluated for insights (Harp, 2006; Higa, 2006; Trammell, 2005). Their personal histories, their political preferences, the blogosphere’s self-proclaimed political successes, and national bloggers’ ascension to the lofty ranks of “pundit”, a title bestowed by the more traditional American media outlets is, by now, a familiar story for students of modern American media and politics.

Less familiar, however, are the personal histories, grassroots motivations, and perceived or heralded successes of bloggers toiling away under the radar of the national media. These are the bloggers focused on current events, political jockeying and policy debates at the state level. Many of the dynamics at play at the national level -- inconvenient revelation of faux pas, unfortunate video footage, inconsistencies in speeches or voting records -- are as prevalent in state-focused blogs as they are in nationally-oriented ones.

It is natural to extrapolate from both Kingdon and McKenna that blogs focused on the politics of a specific state are likely to fill the same roles, not just with respect to policy-making, as suggested by McKenna, but with respect to politics as a whole, including elections, opposition research, tradeoffs, vested interests, and policy shortcomings. The research presented here suggests that state-focused political blogs are disrupting established patterns of information collection and distribution and are, in the process, bringing to light ideas and issues that otherwise might not have floated to the surface.

The questions this study seeks to answer concern the role blogs and bloggers are playing in state politics around the United States and how this role is being represented in state media. In providing an answer, this research seeks to present a preliminary view of state bloggers and their websites focused on politics and policy at the state level.

Origins of This Project

My interest in this subject developed on two fronts. First, in doing communications research focused on the intersection of media and politics, I saw the potential impact of newer, more interactive technologies on the political environment, particularly when “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006) begin weighing in. Second, for much of the time I worked on this degree I was writing a weekly opinion column for the *Shreveport (LA) Times*. Since I often received input from readers outside the newspaper’s circulation area, I created my own blog to nurture that audience between weekly columns and began experiencing first-hand the dynamics of the interactive technologies I was studying in the academic context.

On multiple occasions as a Louisiana blogger, I observed the blogosphere exerting influence on political discussions and even political outcomes in the state. And,

while Louisiana is indeed a unique political environment, I did not believe it so unique that some of the dynamics at play in the Louisiana blogosphere were not also active in other states around the country.

My experience as both a researcher and a blogger led to this study focused on the impact of blogs on state politics around the United States. This project contains an introduction to the communication literature focused on whether and how the media affect politics and policy-making. It also incorporates insights into who adopts communication technologies and why. Moreover, it considers who in American politics is participating in online political debate and the reasons for doing so. Finally, it incorporates the findings of national-level studies of growing blog readership, bloggers themselves, and characteristics of the national blogosphere to develop hypotheses about what I expect to find in my own analysis of bloggers, their motivations, and their real and perceived impact at the state level.

Organization

With all of the above as background, this research compiles original survey data collected from state-level bloggers around the country. The information collected through web-based surveys includes general demographic information, political characteristics, details about the nature of the targeted state-focused blogs, and blogger-reported assessments about the perceived impact of their websites.

Evaluation of the state blogger data begins with an analysis of the characteristics and motivations of state-level bloggers. I then compare those findings to findings of earlier surveys of nationally-focused blogs. To complete the analysis, this research provides three case studies presenting examples of how blogs are (or are not) impacting politics in states around the country.

This study hopes not only to provide new insights into the characteristics, motivations and influence of political bloggers at the state level; it also hopes to encourage the application of these insights to discussion of political blogs at the national level. Ultimately, I hope this study will influence how media scholars and practitioners alike think about the intersection of media and politics in this interactive age.

While the introduction to this study provides necessary background information about both my perspective and the project itself, it also lays the groundwork for what follows. The second chapter places this state-focused blog research in the context of existing work in the field of media and politics, including the communication-based theoretical grounds for this study, the role of media in a democracy, and the ways in which interactive technologies, specifically blogs, are having an impact on both theoretical and practical fronts in the American political context.

The third chapter begins with an introduction to the research questions this study addresses as well as a brief discussion of the expected findings. The chapter continues with discussion of the project's research methods and an introduction of the survey tool used to collect data.

The fourth chapter provides an analysis of the survey findings, placing them in the context of existing literature.

The fifth chapter presents several case studies selected from cases identified in the original survey. The case studies offer a more detailed analysis of the specifics of situations in which blogs appear to have played a role in politics at the state level and raise interesting questions about the applicability of these findings to other states and to the use of blogs in national politics.

The final chapter offers a review of the findings, presents an analysis of the implications thereof, and suggests future avenues for continued research on the subject of interactive media and politics in the United States.

The appendices include information about websites contacted for this research as well as information about the survey and its results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The questions at the core of this research are *Who is blogging?* and *To what effect?* More specifically, *What motivates the people who maintain state-focused political blogs?* And *How do these bloggers impact their political environment?* The literature presented below discusses the communications and political science literature relevant to these questions surrounding political identity and activism, the media's traditional gate keeping role, and the disruptive potential of technology in the delicate equation of media, politics and democracy.

Overview of the Literature

In the mass communication context, questions concerning who maintains political blogs are best understood within the confines of the theory of uses and gratifications. On the subject of how blogs impact their political environment, two dynamics are at play with respect to theory. First, the concept of framing is useful for helping understand the way a narrative about a certain issue evolves. Blogging technology makes it possible for motivated individuals to raise new issues or old issues in new context, that is, frame, to help tell a story. Second, agenda setting theory, particularly intermedia agenda setting, sheds light on the way issues come to the attention of bloggers, but perhaps more importantly, the way in which blogs influence other media outlets and public agendas.

In addition to presentation of the aforementioned communications theories, discussion of the primary literature of news norms and routines helps place the work of bloggers in the context of traditional media, thus highlighting both similarities and differences between bloggers and professional journalists. Finally, discussion of the literature of democratic discourse in the United States helps place bloggers and their

activities in the context of American traditions of democratic citizenship and political participation.

Uses and Gratifications

To understand what is happening with political blogs at the state level, it is necessary to first know who is creating the blogs and what is motivating them to do so. Why do some people feel compelled to maintain blogs and what benefits do they believe they derive from such activities? The communications theory of uses and gratifications is well suited to this task.

General Theory of Uses and Gratifications

Scholars observe, “In becoming active publishers, commentators, and discussants... bloggers turn into what we can usefully call *producers* a hybrid of producer and user” (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006, 6). This combination of producer and user is what makes users of interactive technologies like weblogs unique in the field of mass communication. Traditionally, the media production-consumption equation has been divided cleanly between those who produce the news and other media content and those who consume it. Much like the original theory of one-way communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949), the production of news was long a task belonging on just one side of the equation and the consumption of news was the only task to which the general public was entrusted.

Shirky summarizes it thusly,

In changing the relations between media and individuals, the Internet does not herald the rise of a powerful consumer... The rise of the Internet undermines the existence of the consumer because it undermines the role of mass media. In the age of the Internet, no one is a passive consumer anymore because everyone is a media outlet (Shirky, 2000).

There are implications radiating in all directions in this shift from media consumer to consumer/producer. As Bruns and Jacobs write,

[A]s blogging and other collaborative media phenomena appear to indicate, there is now an ongoing shift... to produsage-based personal media, where users are active *producers* of a shared understanding of society which is open for others to participate in, to develop and challenge (7).

To appreciate the dynamics of this changed media environment, it is important to recognize how the role of *producer* is both different from and similar to established understandings of uses and gratifications as a communication theory.

The theory of uses and gratifications derives from the work of Blumler & Katz (1974) and focuses on explaining how and why people choose and use media and what gratifications they derive from that use (Palmgreen, 1984; Palmgreen & Rosengren, 1985). Another scholar zeroes in on the dynamic nature of these variables when he describes the theory of uses and gratifications as being framed by social and psychological factors that naturally vary from person to person (Rubin, 2002).

Initially posited as an alternative to the one-size-fits-all Magic Bullet Theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) of direct media effects, uses and gratifications “flips the focus of media effects from what media do to people to what people do to the media” (Rubin, 2002, 525). He further notes that the theory “sees a medium or message as a source of influence within the context of other possible influences...[Therefore] to explain media effects, we must first understand the characteristics, motivation, selectivity, and involvement of audience members” (526).

This distinction is highlighted in the observations of DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) who note that once the importance of psychological variables became evident in studies of how people responded to stimuli, it was no longer possible to view audiences

as uniform and passive consumers. Indeed, as Schroder writes, “Uses and gratifications research, in defining media audiences as ‘active’ broke decisively with the dominant paradigm of media effects in the late 1950s, asking not what the media do to people, but what people do with media” (Schroder, 1999, 39). And as the blogging phenomenon suggests, people are certainly doing something with media.

Generally speaking, uses and gratifications research has established that media users turn to media for several reasons. Those reasons are often divided into four different categories: Diversion seeking; personal relationship promotion; self-identity bolstering; and surveillance-information seeking (Rubin, 2002, 538). Given past applications of uses and gratifications theory it is natural that this explanation for how people interact with media has been adapted to better understanding how people use the Internet.

One scholar writes,

The emergence of computer-mediated communication has revived the significance of uses and gratifications. In fact, uses and gratifications has always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications medium: Newspapers, radio, television and now the Internet. Although scientists are likely to continue using traditional tools and typologies to answer questions about media use, we must also be prepared to expand our current theoretical models of uses and gratifications (Ruggiero, 2000, 3).

This study’s focus on bloggers and their habits and motivations fits neatly into this argument.

Internet Applications of Uses & Gratifications

The uses and gratifications approach is based on the assumption that media users are aware of and able to convey their reasons for using certain types of media. Consistent with Ruggiero’s contention that uses and gratifications proves useful in seeking to understand new communication technologies, several studies have examined the reasons

provided by Internet users for their online media choices. Charney & Greenburg (2002) use open-ended questions to ascertain why people are using the Internet. They conclude that many of the same motivations identified in earlier uses and gratifications research also apply to Internet use.

The key difference, Papacharissi argues, is “The advent of new media technologies – specifically, personalized publishing – has provided communication researchers with the opportunity to examine media audiences not just as consumers, but also as producers of mass media” (Papacharissi, 2007). This is exactly the point made by Bruns and Jacobs in their introduction of the term “produsage” (2006).

But here is the rub: As Bennett notes, the concept of mass media has been understood as a “system defined by sending one-way content to large audiences who faced the task of drawing personal uses and gratifications from centrally produced, common inputs” (2005, 111). When that flow of information is no longer one-way, it is likely the dynamics of motivations for use and gratifications derived from that use also change.

As Kaye observes (2007), reasons for different kinds of Internet use vary with respect to the kind of information offered and the level of interactivity in the site. Kaye looks specifically at more interactive sites such as chat rooms and bulletin boards and finds differences between expectations of users depending on the degree of interactivity. This makes the study of uses and gratifications online more complicated than earlier studies of television or newspapers. Still, studies of online use tend to find that the categories of both uses and gratifications that apply to more traditional media use also apply in the online environment.

With relatively little known about the motivations for blog use, Kaye implements an exploratory study framed in the context of uses and gratifications to identify the motivations (Kaye, 2007). Conducting an online survey with open-ended questions, Kaye uses factor analysis to identify 10 major categories of reasons offered for using blogs. Those 10 categories are: *blog presentation/characteristics; personal fulfillment; expression/affiliation with bloggers and blog users; information seeking; intellectual/aesthetic fulfillment; anti-traditional media sentiment; guidance/opinion seeking; convenience; political surveillance; and fact checking* (135-139).

Kaye's findings about the motivations of people who read blogs are important. But they only provide half the picture. In this age of interactive media, it is no longer enough to ask what kind of media people consume and for what purpose. It is equally important to ask why people produce their own content and to what effect. The answers to that question can only come from identifying the people who maintain blogs and asking them about their politics and their motivations. That is the scope of this study's research addressing state-focused blogs.

Framing

A 2005 conference on blogging, journalism and credibility yielded the following statement: "We are entering a new era in which professionals have lost control over information – not just the reporting of it, but also the framing of what's important for the public to know" (MacKinnon, 2005, 3). Implicit in this statement is concern about whether the public is qualified to frame information for itself without the benefit of media gatekeeping. More detailed discussion of this matter, including the Lippmann-Dewey divide between the benefits of elites versus the benefits of common citizens, is found in

the discussion of democratic discourse below, but the concept of gatekeeping is addressed first.

Any discussion of gatekeeping in the media naturally turns to framing. In his book examining media coverage of the 1960s student movement, Todd Gitlin describes frames as “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (Gitlin, 2003, 6). He further observes,

Media frames, largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us to rely on their reports. Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual (Gitlin, 2003, 6).

The media’s use of frames ensures that all reported news fits established narratives. As Tuchman (1978) suggests, those items which fall outside the established narrative boundaries generally do not qualify as news and thus go unreported.

Gitlin concludes that the media provide pictures of the world but that the pictures are not faithful representations of reality. Referring to media coverage of the student movement, he notes, “the media were far from mirrors passively reflecting facts found in the real world... The media reflection was... the active, patterned remaking performed by mirrors in a fun house” (Gitlin, 2003, 29). This is much the same criticism levied against bloggers both by traditional media and by those who find themselves the target of a “blog swarm.”

The concept of frames and the media’s role in constructing and perpetuating them has been a focus of communication scholars since Gitlin’s book with the result being the development of several different definitions of the concept.

Entman suggests that the media's use of framing has much to teach communication scholars if a general understanding of the term can be established. He identifies four primary functions of framing: definition of problems; diagnosis of solutions; passage of moral judgments; and suggestion of remedies. He notes, "The problem is that facts do not speak for themselves. Choosing how to put facts together and which to emphasize inevitably affects what audiences perceive as reality..." (Entman, 1989, 30).

Goffman describes framing using the term "strip," by which he means "any arbitrary slice of cut from the stream of ongoing activity" (1974). It is this ability to shape what audiences see as reality that is at the core of the media's traditional gatekeeping influence. Tankard discusses the importance of the framing dynamic, writing that frames are the "central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis and elaboration" (2001, 96). He also notes that winning the initial framing battle "means to a large extent winning the debate" (96). Indeed, what the research presented here suggests is that the influence (perceived or real) of bloggers is built in part around the belief that bloggers are playing a role in the framing of issues for public discussion.

The disruptive effect of bloggers with respect to framing stems from the fact that many bloggers are not steeped in the norms and traditions of journalism, which can lead to the presentation of different "strips" of reality than those found in traditional media coverage of the same issues. And this lack of grounding in the norms and routines of traditional journalism is widely viewed as a significant failing on the part of bloggers and their ability to contribute to democratic discourse. It is also mentioned as a principal

means of justification for the perpetuation of professional journalism, however that is defined.

A growing number of scholars are asking the inevitable question: “Now that there is no limit to those who can commit acts of journalism, how should be alter journalistic privilege to fit that new reality?” (Shirky, 2008, 74). But discussion of journalistic privilege is beyond the scope of this research. For the purposes of this research, it is sufficient to cite the conventional wisdom that norms and routines are what separate the journalistic wheat from the blogging chaff.

Providing more detail about the process of framing, Entman refers to the selective highlighting of facts, thus making “them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, 52). This view of the significance of framing is similar to Kingdon’s discussion of issues and windows of opportunity concerning certain solutions (1984). As Kingdon argues, whoever defines the term of the debate wins the battle and all kinds of “solutions” are out there waiting to be framed as ideal solutions for policy problems. The difference is that, in the language of political science, Kingdon refers to the entire process as agenda setting.

In the context of state-focused bloggers, I argue that bloggers are framing issues for discussion in the political environment. The impact that discussion ultimately has on state politics is the realm of agenda setting effects which are intuited here through the case studies but not statistically demonstrated.

The idea that frames stimulate public debate is inherent in Miller and Riechert’s argument that

[S]takeholders articulate their positions and then monitor public responses to those articulations. If a stakeholder's articulation resonates positively with the public, then that group will intensify its effects. On the other hand, when an articulation resonates negatively, the stakeholder group will change its articulation or withdraw from debate (2001, 109).

Miller and Riechert call this dynamic the "spiral of opportunity" (2001, 109).

They distinguish the "spiral of opportunity" from the "spiral of cynicism," (Noelle-Neumann, 1984) by noting that the spiral of silence is driven by fear. Miller and Riechert argue,

We hold to a contrasting point of view; groups and individuals articulate their positions when they sense that they have a chance of winning converts, and they become reticent when they see that their message would fall on deaf ears. The spiral [of opportunity] then is driven by positive motivations to effect change rather than negative emotions to avoid social isolation (Miller & Riechert, 113).

For the first time known to this investigator, the research here builds on the work of Miller and Riechert, pointing to bloggers and their activities as the antithesis of the spiral of silence. In the case studies presented in a later chapter, many of the four cycles Miller and Riechert attribute to the framing process are evident and those cycles are readily applicable to discussion of blogs and their impact on political discourse.

Miller and Riechert divide the framing process into four cycles: *the emergence phase, the definition/conflict phase, the resonance phase* and *the equilibrium or resolution phase* (111-113). These stages are reminiscent of Down's "dynamics of the 'issue attention cycle,'" (1972). The point is that the appearance, development and promotion of frames follows a general pattern and the case studies presented here offer examples of those dynamics at work. I utilize Miller and Riechert's cycles to help describe what happens in the blogosphere of a specific state. Such analysis would also be appropriate at the national level.

This cycle, as applied in my research, does not apply exclusively to issues as discussed by Kingdon (1984). I conceive of it more broadly as a subject cycle. It can revolve around an issue but not necessarily so. It could also involve specific legislation, recurring themes (corruption, good ol' boys network), a grassroots effort, a political campaign and other items attracting the attention of a blogger who is likely, for reasons outlined above, to be highlighting different subjects in a different light than those who consider journalism their profession.

Further extrapolating from Miller and Riechert's spiral of opportunity, I posit that if bloggers ultimately influence political outcomes, then framing is, as Entman argues, intimately connected to agenda setting. He notes that agenda setting is another term for "successfully performing the first function of framing: defining problems worthy of public and government attention" (Entman, 2007, 164). This study's findings suggest bloggers can frequently win or at least play a significant role that first round.

Weaver makes a similar connection writing, "Focusing on framing does not necessarily mean discarding the findings of much agenda setting research that is more concerned with which issues are emphasized (or *what* is covered) than *how* such issues are reported and discussed" (Weaver, 1997-1998, 3).

That is true for the research presented here, too. Indeed, this study's findings suggest that both agenda setting and framing are dynamics to consider when evaluating the influence of political blogs in a given sphere. Moreover, even when the issues on which the bloggers have focused do not resolve in the way they would have preferred, framing has still taken place and has laid the groundwork for battles to be fought another day. Does this mean that bloggers never lose policy debates? No. But it does

significantly broaden definitions of success when it comes to bloggers, their blogs, and political outcomes.

This is not to suggest, however, that blogs single-handedly impact political outcomes in the states. But this does suggest that blogs are well-positioned to have an effect on state-level politics.

Reese argues that framing, however loosely defined, has the capacity to bridge “parts of the field that need to be in touch with one another: quantitative and qualitative...” (2007, 148). Indeed, the research presented here uses framing in an effort to link quantitative and qualitative data I have collected about state-focused bloggers.

As an example of framing in action, Reese points to the frame “war on terror,” noting that “it has proven extremely difficult for any political actors to advance a compelling counterframe” (2007, 152). As a result, he observes, “political debate takes place largely within the boundaries set by the frame with general acceptance of the assumptions built into it” (2007, 152). But as the Louisiana blogging example at the beginning of this paper suggests, blogs are doing more than simply affecting the ways in which news items are discussed -- that is, playing a framing role. The Louisiana example indicates that sometimes blogs are sometimes helping to get items on the agenda in the first place.

Agenda Setting

Writing in the 1920s, Lippmann describes the public as a bewildered herd and the media as a roving searchlight highlighting some subjects and neglecting others (Lippmann, 1922). But that restless attention, long lamented by scholars of media and politics, leads to “the portrayal of recurring issues as unrelated events [and] prevents the

public from cumulating the evidence toward any logical, ultimate consequence” (Iyengar, 1987, 143).

I argue that bloggers guide the “bewildered herd” of mass media in directions they might not have chosen had bloggers not had access to distributive technology to help circulate their opinions. This is consistent with Lim who writes, “The parameters of agenda setting research have expanded from the question of who sets the public agenda to that of who sets the media agenda” (Lim, 2006, 299). With respect to agenda setting, this research considers the question of blogs’ influence to set the media agenda.

The Theory of Agenda Setting

Agenda setting as conceived of by Lippmann and as understood today is predicated on the assumption that what the media highlights as important is in turn perceived as important by the media-consuming public. Indeed, the theory suggests that this has a measurable impact on public opinion and on political decisions in the long run. Graber observes both this dynamic and the resulting shifts in attention and public opinion, and declares, “Media do more than depict the political environment; they are the political environment” (Graber, 1997).

The general hypothesis of agenda setting research in the mass communication context is the prediction of a causal relationship between media content and voter perception, especially a match between the media’s agenda and the public’s agenda at a later date. Such a connection is demonstrated in the early work of McCombs and Shaw when they demonstrate a connection between media content, public opinion and election results in the 1968 and 1974 presidential elections (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1976).

Funkhouser (1973) and others (Lang & Lang, 1981) focus more specifically on the agenda-building process in the media. Lang and Lang, treating the media agenda as a

dependent variable, find that public opinion toward the president began to change during Watergate when the media coverage began to change. To explain this process they identify a four-step process of agenda-building, beginning with the media highlighting a development consisting of conflict-oriented elements combined in a common frame then linked to additional, secondary symbols familiar in the political landscape and giving leading spokespeople a role in promoting the issue to keep it in play. This model helps illustrate the life cycle of an agenda item and the process through which members of the public both become aware of the issue and change their opinions as a result of media coverage.

Walgrave and VanAelst (2006) explicitly link studies of the media's agenda setting effect with research from political science (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Downs, 1972; Kingdon, 1984) examining how issues arrive on the public agenda. They conclude, "The characteristics of the consumers of media messages, in the case of public agenda setting the general audience, determine whether or not media coverage affects the public's priorities. Not all population categories are as susceptible to media cues. Our claim is that the same applies to political actors" (92). This suggests that the agenda setting impact of media coverage on political actors is not uniform. Different conditions will yield different results. The case studies examined here do indeed suggest that different political actors have differing degrees of tolerance for discussion in the blogosphere.

Intermedia Agenda Setting

Concerning the role of agenda setting online, one study considers whether individuals take issue information they learn from the news and pass it along in online forums (Roberts, 2002). Roberts and her colleagues examine the agenda setting effect of

traditional media on Internet-based political discussions. By studying the time lag between appearance of an issue in print or on television and its subsequent reappearance online, they find that the Internet accelerates the process through which the public digests and debates political news from traditional sources. As the authors note, “This study takes an important step in linking the Internet to a mainstream mass communication theory” (453). Indeed, Roberts et al demonstrate that a dynamic recognized to exist among other forms of media is at least as strong, if not stronger, online.

Reese and Danielian consider the intermedia agenda setting effect on coverage of cocaine in the United States. They identify which news sources have the greatest impact on the agenda of leaders in the media and they justify their interest in the intermedia dynamic saying, “we need to be fully aware of all the factors that set the agenda of the media...” (Reese & Danielian, 1989, 65) They find that *The New York Times* plays an agenda setting role for other print outlets and for television journalism. In other words, intermedia agenda setting is at play in both print and television journalism. When it comes to state-focused political blogs, therefore, it is the premise of this research that these blogs have joined extant media outlets in helping set the agenda. They are not, however, taking over agenda setting influence at the state level. They are simply adding to the dynamics that ultimately set state political agendas.

Roberts and McCombs examine the intermedia agenda setting effect between media coverage and political advertisements, finding a strong correlation between political advertisements at time 1 and the resulting media coverage at time 2 (1994). This offers further evidence that not only do the media send signals to the public about what it ought to be thinking about, there is also an agenda setting dynamic within the media outlets themselves, driving coverage in one direction or another. Indeed, some studies

have suggested as much, concluding that blogs can and often do serve as framers of news and issues (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Cornfield et al, 2005; Drezner & Farrell, 2004).

I conducted a preliminary study (Metzgar, 2006) assessing the strength and directionality of the intermedia agenda setting effect among blogs, television and newspapers concerning coverage of a public policy issue rather than of a political campaign. Findings from that study suggest there is a strong correlation between blogs and more traditional forms of media. This is likely due in large part to the aggregative nature of blogs whereby blogs draw much of their content from more traditional media. However, there is also some indication that blogs can lead more traditional media in their coverage of a given topic. It is that possibility that the research presented here explores further.

An article considering the agenda setting effect of blogs in the 2004 presidential campaign finds “evidence of a reciprocal intermedia agenda setting effect between blogs and broadcast news” (Trammell et al, 2008, 16). Further evidence of the intermedia agenda setting effect involving blogs surfaces in a 2005 survey of journalists finding that 51% of journalists reported using blogs regularly, 28% reported using blogs for daily reporting, 53% reported using blogs as a source of story ideas, 43% reported using blogs as fact-checking source, and 33% reported using blogs to get information about developing scandals and breaking news (Euro/RSCG Magnet & Columbia University, 2005). Another study (Johnson et al, 2007) finds that blogs “were judged as moderately credible, but as more credible than any mainstream media or online source” (1).

Similarly, a 2007 survey of technology-focused journalists finds nearly four-fifths of them read blogs on a daily basis (Digital50.com, 2007). Another 2007 survey further confirms the influence of blogs on journalists in the United States (Arketi, 2007). In that

survey, 54% of journalists questioned say that they use blogs as sources of ideas for stories. Moreover, 25% of journalists questioned say that blogs make their job easier. In addition, according to the report, “When it comes to using blogs as primary or secondary sources, 86% of journalists say they would or already have” (2).

As a form of media, albeit in an extraordinarily interactive manifestation of it, blogs seem to have a role to play not just in a highly visible agenda setting kind of way, but also in the behind-the-scenes dynamics that lead media outlets to follow one another’s lead. This ability of blogs to exercise an agenda setting effect in these contexts is taken as a given in the study presented here.

News Norms, Routines and the Agenda

In their summary of scholarship focused on the study of norms and routines, Rowley and Kurpius (2005) write, “Mass communication researchers have argued for decades that the production of news is a function of set routines dependent on official channels of information. The news that it produces, therefore, does not reflect society as much as it reflects the view of those in charge” (170). I argue that state-focused political blogs function much as Rowley and Kurpius argue that statewide public television does, “Gatekeeping comes into play with statewide public affairs television because the traditional media do not control the content being generated” (171).

State-focused bloggers share another advantage with statewide public affairs television, as Rowley and Kurpius understand it: They can offer content “without worrying about advertisers or actual audience numbers” (175). Rowley and Kurpius note further that statewide public affairs television offers a way for reporters to track legislation as it moves through the process (175). Much as recent surveys have suggested about journalists and their use of blogs, when it comes to statewide public affairs

television, reporters say they “take notes from the television coverage and write their stories that way... which is a change from the usual reporting practice” (175). Bloggers are making use of technology to operate in the same way. But they are not necessarily adopting journalistic norms and routines. And, according to the literature of the field, that failure to adopt traditional norms and routines renders blogs suspect as information sources for the public. Without the credibility those journalistic routines confer, the argument goes, it is risky to turn to blogs as sources of political information.

News norms and routines are traditionally viewed as the foundation on which journalistic credibility is built (Cook, 1998; Fishman, 1979; Molotch & Lester, 1975; Schudson, 1978 & 1995; Tuchman, 1978). Thus, it is appropriate to replace the question of whether bloggers are journalists with the question of whether what bloggers are doing can be properly considered newsmaking if they are not following traditional journalistic methods for identifying and reporting the news.

It is worth noting, however, that these same norms and routines have also been categorized as a crutch for journalists, leading them to return to the same sources and narratives again and again (Cook, 1998; Molotch & Lester, 1975; Schudson, 1978 & 1995). This raises the question of whether adherence (or lack of) to journalistic routines is an asset or a liability for bloggers as they operate in the evolving news ecosystem as described by Shirky (2008). That question is addressed through discussion of bloggers’ habits as identified through this study.

But this study’s primary purpose is to identify who is blogging about state politics, why they are doing it, and what impact they are having (or not) on the politics of their respective states. As part of assessing state-focused political bloggers, this survey includes a number of questions about traditional media norms, routines, and ethics. As

the findings in the following chapters suggest, many of the responding bloggers are indeed engaging in many of the norms and routines of the journalism profession and when it comes to ethics they have a strong preference for the truth above all else.

This study's first look at state-focused political blogs suggests "the people formerly known as the audience" have tired of being told what they should pay attention to and have starting asserting the right to choose for themselves. The result is a disruption in politics-as-usual in states around the country.

The discussion of agenda setting, traditional media, and the impact of the Internet takes as an assumption previous findings about the role of norms and routines in news production and the impact of the production process on the final media product. For the purposes of the research presented here, it is assumed that news norms and routines (Cook, 1998; Fishman, 1979; Molotch & Lester, 1975; Schudson, 1978 & 1995; Tuchman, 1978) are a significant explanation for why traditional media coverage looks as it does and that deviation from these norms and routines offers at least a partial explanation for why state-focused political blogs, and political blogs in general, look the way they do.

It is natural to suppose that any news or commentary production process that does not abide by these same norms and routines is going to look different and likely lead to different kinds of effects and that those different effects can yield different results. Some suggest this leads to a less credible product, but judging from surveys of journalists and their tendency to consult blogs as sources for their own reporting, the argument about lack of blogger credibility due to failure to follow journalistic norms and routines seems increasingly specious.

This does, however, raise the question of whether individuals who maintain blogs have been differently socialized, as Schudson (2003) might suggest and if they have been professionalized at all. But this line of discussion can lead to energy-consuming and ultimately pointless debate about whether bloggers are journalists, when the question of greatest import to the research presented here is what impact blogs have on politics at the state level, and who is behind those blogs.

In describing the norms and routines leading to production of news in the late 1970s, Tuchman writes, “The act of making news is the act of constructing reality itself rather than a picture of reality” (14). Perhaps bloggers see the world differently than their traditional media counterparts. Or maybe bloggers’ reactions to reality just look different since their writing stems from a different, if not non-existent, set of norms and routines.

Thus the reality bloggers depict can be out of sync with discussions elsewhere in the media, perhaps leading to heightened attention from traditional media and even from political decision-makers as a result of its “different-ness.” This would stand in contrast to Tuchman’s assertion that “Through its routine practices and the claims of news professionals to arbitrate knowledge and to present factual accounts, news legitimates the status quo” (14). Perhaps that is why blogs are often seen as having such disruptive potential in the political arena: They do not always respect the status quo.

Traditional media has taken a dim view of bloggers. NBC Anchor Brian Williams summarized this view of bloggers when he addressed a crowd at New York University about the challenges of modern journalism: “You’re going to be up against people who have an opinion, a modem, and a bathrobe... All of my life, developing credentials to cover my field of work, and now I’m up against a guy named Vinny in an

efficiency apartment in the Bronx who hasn't left the efficiency apartment in two years" (O'Gorman, 2007).

To Williams's lament, blogs might sidestep norms and routines in their creation and promotion of content, thus producing different products, but experience suggests they are not likely to avoid having an agenda setting effect on the rest of the media or on the political system on which they focus.

Media, Discourse and Political Participation

Since the publication of Lippmann's *Public Opinion* in 1922, there has been debate about the relationship among media, government and citizens in American democracy. Lippmann argued that democracy was based on the concept of an omniscient citizen making decisions based on direct experience with the world. In that perfect world, Lippmann observed, citizens would get the information they needed from the media. But, he lamented, that perfect world did not exist. The public was a bewildered herd and the media were inconsistent in the items it chooses to highlight. Under these circumstances, Lippmann concluded, citizens were unable to perform their duty and a group of experts should be charged with decision-making authority for all.

Responding in 1927, Dewey acknowledged the problems Lippmann had highlighted, but believed it was possible to find a solution that did not involve the creation of elite decision-making groups that would thus impact government policy. Dewey, however, had no solution to offer. Writing in 1998, Schudson revisited this debate between democracy and elite expertise. Acknowledging that democracy places almost impossible informational demands on citizens, Schudson introduced the concept of a monitorial citizen who keeps an eye on things at a general level, but who is also prepared to learn more should the matter become pressing.

Central to the arguments of these three thinkers is the assumption that information is important if only the media would do a better job providing it and the public a better job of digesting it. When Thomas Jefferson proclaimed “information is the currency of democracy,” he highlighted the importance of information. Indeed, Jefferson’s statement raised information to the position of democracy’s *sine qua non*.

While the literature review presented here does not allow for full discussion of the origins of conceptions of citizenship in the United States, it is important to note that over time, ideals of citizenship, particularly in the United States, may be unattainable goals that no citizen, however engaged, could ever attain. Scholars summarize Dewey’s progressive era arguments about the ideal citizen in three words: “responsibility, sociability and communication” (Barnhurst, 2003, 134). But, Barnhurst cautions, there is danger in setting such high ideals since “it appears that the ideal of information-seeking, rationally deliberating citizenship may itself contribute to citizen disengagement”(133).

Indeed, volumes have been published both praising the creativeness of American citizens and lamenting their lack of engagement. Blogs may be “little first amendment machines” (Rosen, 2007) but they do not guarantee engagement.

Of course neither the American system nor any other is a perfect deliberative democracy, and no technology will be responsible for improving the state of citizenship. But shortcomings in the communication of information are often identified as a primary reason for failure to attain the ideal (Delli Carpini, 2004). So, too, is the failure of the public to engage given the information it does have. As one scholar observes, “When we talk of improving deliberation, it is a matter of improving the completeness of the debate and the public’s engagement in it, not a matter of perfecting it...” (Fishkin, 1995, 41).

In the 21st century, questions naturally arise about whether the Internet has a positive impact on deliberative democracy in a place like the United States. Although Bimber (2003) cautions against suggesting a new era of democracy has arrived, he does suggest that the Internet is “accelerating the process of issue group formation and action, leaving the structure of political power in the U.S. altered” (18). This is a theme seconded by Shirky (2008) in his discussion of people’s increasing ability to organize without the benefit of formal organizations.

Dutton thinks similarly, arguing that the Internet changes dynamics of access to information in two ways. “First, it can change the way we do things, such as how we get information, how we communicate with people and how we obtain services and access technologies” (Dutton, 7). This is the condition of information abundance to which Bimber refers. But there is another consequence of this heightened access to information: “Secondly, and perhaps more fundamentally, the use of the Internet can alter the outcomes of these activities” (Dutton, 7). And that possibility has been at the core of discussion about blogs in the political context since 2004.

If, as Rosen (2006) suggests, the “people formerly known as the audience” now have a voice and participate in the conversation through the use of interactive media, then that has implications for the dynamics around which current understanding of media and democratic accountability is built.

It raises questions about what agenda is influencing voters at what times. It also raises questions about what agendas are influencing political decision-makers and when. Perhaps more to the point, it raises questions about the validity of the central role political communication continues to give traditional media formats such as newspaper and television. It is not necessarily that those media formats are no longer relevant. It is just

that those traditional media formats are no longer the only politically relevant forms of media.

Cook, writing about the media as a de facto fourth branch of American government, observes that the news is a negotiation among political actors and journalists (Cook, 1998; Schudson, 2003; Tuchman, 1978). This is how and why news norms and routines impact what ultimately appears in the media. But Cook also notes, “the American news media today are not merely part of politics; they are part of government” (1998, 3). And this has consequences for American democracy.

The perception is that the media are no longer “facilitating the connection between government and citizens” (Kumar & Jones, 2005, 226) and are certainly not serving as the “voice of the people” (Curran, 2005, 122). Curran argues that only journalism oriented-toward giving the people what they need to be informed citizens “can sustain a culture of civic democracy” (128). Although traditional models of deliberative democracy do not often explicitly incorporate the role of media, much of the literature about civic engagement and political knowledge assumes that the media have a role to play in keeping the citizenry informed (Delli Carpini, 2004; Entman, 2005; Popkin 1991; Putnam, 2000).

The act of blogging has become almost synonymous with political activism in media and political contexts. This in turn leads to age-old questions about who participates in politics and why. Verba et al argue that socio-economic status and access to resources over the course of a lifetime are strong predictors of political participation. They write, “both the motivation and the capacity to take part in politics have their roots in the fundamental non-political institutions with which individuals are associated during the course of their lives” (1995, 3).

Another study asserts that opinion leadership -- which is essentially at the core of this project's interest in blogs -- is "largely explained by nonpolitical dispositions such as self-assuredness, innovativeness, and sophistication" (Shah & Scheufele, 2006, 1). The survey results presented here illustrate the extent to which these characteristics apply to the bloggers on which this study focuses.

In terms of political knowledge, observers wonder whether newer technologies lead to increased fragmentation of the voting public and even to the demise of civic society (O'Rourke, 2004; Tewksbury, 2003). The implication of having this range of media content options can have a direct effect on established media institutions. As Tewksbury writes, "With that enhanced control, it appears online readers are particularly likely to pursue their own interest, and they are less likely to follow the cues of news editors and producers" (694). In other words, this "enhanced control" is eroding the gatekeeping influence long attributed to the media and allowing a wider distribution of that ability, extending even to bloggers with no journalism background.

Armed with the technology to disseminate opinion and their versions of news, bloggers have stepped easily into the role of opinion leadership, a role previously held only by media outlets. One study (Shah, Kawk & Holbert, 2001) suggests "that information uses of the Internet are positively related to individual differences in the production of social capital" (141).

Similarly, Shah and Scheufele (2006) find that this "opinion leadership is a consequence, rather than a cause of civic participation... These data also reveal a reciprocal relationship between opinion leadership and political efficacy, indicative of a mutually reinforcing cycle of relational dispositions and political competence" (1).

Those dynamics appear in the blogger data presented in this research. Individuals with a strong sense of political efficacy and a history of engagement in civic behavior are the ones likely to apply those characteristics online. The natural outcome is that people who, in an offline world, were already playing an opinion leadership role, are simply empowered by blogging technology and have an opportunity to influence a wider circle of people virtually than they might otherwise in the world of brick and mortar.

While McKenna & Pole (2004) conclude “blogs can potentially play an important role in improving political participation giving individuals an additional voice in the political process” (1), research to date suggests that those who create blogs are unlikely to be people dipping their toes in political waters for the first time. Blogs are not creating engaged citizens *de novo*, but rather, providing a new outlet for expression of already-established patterns of political activity.

As Popkin (1991) suggests, only when the media provide adequate information and the voters digest it can the public act rationally. He may have been referring to political campaigns specifically, but the more general dynamics to which he refers are understood to be more broadly applicable: the public learns what it knows about politics - - however little that may be according to Delli Carpini & Keeter (1996) -- from the media.

Delli Carpini (2004) summarizes the characteristics of political engagement, identifying them as efficacy, political and social trust, political interest, civic duty and political tolerance. He defines political efficacy as the sense that one’s participation can make a difference (internal efficacy) and that the political system will be responsive to this participation (external efficacy). For the purposes of this research, however, political efficacy resembles the engagement Zukin et al discuss, a term they suggest includes

“such activities as following the news in newspapers, talking about politics with friends and family, or simply being interested in public affairs” (Zukin et al, 2006, 54).

As voter turnout and other indicators of engagement suggest, while people are not always eager to provide input into political decisions, they do want to know that they could have input into political decisions if they wanted to. But the difference between the desire to influence political decisions and the desire to be able to provide input if it were ever necessary is substantial (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002). The potential of the Internet and the disruptive influence of blogs is the ability to bridge the gap between desire to influence political decisions and ability to do so.

Owen notes, “new media ultimately permit citizens to work on their own behalf as effective government ‘watchdogs.’ Thus citizens today can better exploit the potential for conveying information and promoting debate than in the early days of new media” (2005, 142).

Bimber takes it a step further. Writing about the condition of “information abundance,” he suggests that technological developments, such as the spread of the Internet, create conditions where information is more easily available. This, he argues, results in opportunities for new and more dynamic information regimes where, information -- referred to by Thomas Jefferson as “the currency of democracy,” -- is not only more available, but also more easily applied to achieve desired democratic outcomes (23).

Bimber identifies several characteristics of information abundance. They are included here to make explicit the connection between political knowledge, political engagement and online media. Bimber begins by noting that low-cost and easy-to-use technology should make it easier for governments and political organizations to distribute

information. The same technology should also make it easier for governments and organizations to acquire information. This means that campaigns, whether political or public policy-oriented, should be easier to implement with information easier to distribute. But this also means that information is easier for other actors to acquire as well (90-91). Enter the bloggers. One scholar writes,

Blogging, in its most basic form is a type of online publishing best characterized as an interactive diary. This new form of social interaction allows bloggers to post their views for others to see and offers them the opportunity to engage in an online dialogue or conversation. These posts can then be linked to other blogs or sites creating the potential for far-reaching discussions available to anyone who can get online (Maynor, 2007, 4).

Maynor's definition, if well implemented, can translate into a great deal of attention. In their 2006 book *Crashing the Gate: Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics*, Armstrong (MyDD.com) and Moulitsas (DailyKos.com) write,

Both of us started our blogs because we wanted a voice in our nation's politics. We had hundreds, then thousands, of readers, as we somehow tapped into a greater need... that had been shut out of the corporate media outlets. And the online medium allowed a level of participation nonexistent in traditional media. It wasn't us talking down to our readers; it was all of us collectively having a conversation (xv).

Indeed, another scholar writes, "Users – people—have always talked to one another, incessantly and at great length. It's just that the user-to-user messages were kept separate from older media, like TV and newspapers" (Shirky, 99). That separation, however, is no longer guaranteed.

Similarly, Kaye and Johnson write,

In many ways, Internet users appear to be model citizens. In general, Internet users report high levels of self-efficacy, the belief that one has the power to manage prospective situations, in this case influence government officials and the political process. Those who have high self-efficacy may rely on the Internet because it provides individuals a forum to voice their views to government officials and like-minded individuals (2002, 57).

The research presented here focuses on people who use blogs for everything from expression of political sentiment to a tool for becoming political actors themselves, as well why they do it, and what impact they believe they have. As Delli Carpini writes, “A democratically engaged citizen is one who participates in civic and political life, and who has the values, attitudes, opinions, skills and resources to do so effectively” (397). And it is the finding of this research that bloggers are democratically engaged citizens, by almost any definition.

Blogs as Public Sphere

“The Internet promises and delivers a lot.... The net does have a capacity to enhance the public sphere, though it seems not to dramatically transform political life. It allows new communicative spaces to develop -- alternative public spheres -- even if the paths to the centers of political decision making are often far removed” (Bennett & Entman, 2001, 52). The findings presented here, although limited to the population sampled, confirm that sentiment.

More specifically, this study offers an analysis of whether new communication spaces, players and effects have emerged as a result of increased access to and skill in the use of mass distribution tools that were previously accessible only to members of the media. Ultimately, this research seeks to address whether “the paths to the center of political decision making” are still as far removed as Bennett and Entman suggested in 2001.

Jurgen Habermas’s classic work on community discourse examined the evolution of the public sphere in eighteenth century bourgeois society (1989). Peter Dahlgren offers a functional definition of the public sphere based on Habermas’s writings when he describes the public sphere as “a constellation of communicative spaces in society that

permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates -- ideally in an unfettered manner -- and also the formation of political will... These spaces... also serve to facilitate communicative links between citizens and the power holders of society” (Dahlgren, 2005, 148).

Early studies of the Internet, political information, efficacy and engagement expected to find proof that the Internet was, in fact, a manifestation of Habermas’s utopian public sphere. Friedland et al write,

The public sphere is not constituted primarily by a form of speech, rational deliberation, contrary to some of [Habermas’s] critics, nor as a place. Rather, it is a communicative *relation* [emphasis in original] between speakers and hearers that requires a very specific set of institutional settings to emerge (2007, 43).

But, as with other technologies as they become better understood, it is now clear that the Internet, not requiring formal institutions for people to communicate (Shirky, 2008), with blogs as a leading example, are neither all good nor all bad with respect to impact on democratic discourse.

Shirky (2008) discusses the disruption this kind of unfettered distribution of information has caused on journalism as a profession. Although the research presented here is focused primarily on the impact blogs have on politics, it is certainly worth noting that blogs are disrupting more than politics. They are disrupting journalism.

Thanks to blogging and other interactive communication technologies, concepts of the provision of information are evolving “from news as an institutional prerogative to news as part of a communications ecosystem, occupied by a mix of formal organizations, informal collectives and individuals,” (Shirky, 2008, 66). Concern about bloggers and ethics, as alluded to earlier, centers around whether these “informal collectives and individuals” are employing the same standards as formal news organizations in the

creation and distribution of content. Stated differently, the study of the role of blogs in politics is actually a study of one component of this evolving media ecosystem.

Mark Glaser insists that the question of whether bloggers are journalists is no longer relevant. He writes, “Anyone who still believes that bloggers are one breed and journalists are another has been living in a cave since roughly 2002” (Glaser, 2008). This sentiment is echoed by Jim Brady of washingtonpost.com who says,

I think the argument about bloggers vs. journalists has been over for years. We’ve all co-existed just fine for a while now, and the truth is, the distinction is less relevant every day. There are thousands of journalists who now blog, and there are lots of bloggers who are trained journalists (Glaser, 2008).

Released from the false dichotomy of “bloggers versus journalists”, one is free to consider instead the practices of people operating in what used to be known as the media environment and what Shirky now calls the “communication ecosystem,” (Shirky, 66). And, as Shirky notes, this news ecosystem includes many who operate outside the boundaries of traditional definitions of journalism. Questions that arise then stem from concerns about professionalism, ethics and credibility.

Writing about the political economy of corporate media ownership and operation, Dahlgren observes that these structural issues direct “our attention to such classic democratic issues as freedom of speech, access, and the dynamic of inclusion/exclusion.” He goes on to say, and this is central to the development of the blogosphere in American politics, “the structural dimension also points to society’s political institutions, which serve as a sort of ‘political ecology’ for the media and set boundaries for nature of the information and forms of expression that circulate” (Dahlgren, 2005, 149). It now appears that the technology of the Internet, specifically blogging, has succeeded in creating a hitherto untapped public sphere and it is political entrepreneurs who are

stepping in to fill the void. This research offers a look at people now operating in that sphere at the state level.

Blogs at the Intersection of Media and Politics

Lasswell writes about the three roles of communication in society: surveillance, correlation and socialization (1948). That traditional media may be failing in its efforts to play these three roles is an undercurrent in much of the discussion about the role of blogs in democracy. In fact, Papacharissi makes this explicit writing, “Blogs... offer a virtual space where information ignored by mainstream media can be published” (2007, 21).

Another scholar finds that while the blogs in his study

[P]erformed traditional news functions...the focus was [primarily] mediated reporting... Furthermore, bloggers’ surveillance of news media suggests punditry more than journalism, specifically media punditry... However, bloggers not only define and amplify the emerging role of the media pundit, but also alter the notion of punditry by occasionally performing traditional journalistic reporting, again blurring the line between producer and audience (Scott, 2007, 50).

As one blogger observes, blogs can indeed “commit random acts of journalism” (Williams, 2007). Clearly blogs are part of the nation’s political “news ecosystem.”

Others, however, suggest the value of blogs lies in their differences from traditional journalism, specifically, “blogs provide an outlet that is not associated with traditional journalism or media systems and does not conceal itself behind the guise of objectivity” (Kaye, 2007, 141). In fact, suggests another researcher, “One of blogging’s main strengths is in the utilization of unique and dynamic knowledge bases and networks to confront, expose and sometimes debunk political or news events or stories” (Maynor, 2007, 14).

Blogs also “have the comparative advantage of speedy publication -- they have a first-mover advantage in socially constructing interpretive frames for understanding current events” (Drezner & Farrell, 2004, 4). Conventional wisdom also teaches that blogs have proven not only an ability to frame public debate, but also an ability to engage previously unengaged citizens in politics and to perhaps even reduce levels of cynicism about politics in the process.

But is the conventional wisdom correct? Have blogs, in fact, accomplished what so many already credit them with having achieved? Is the blogosphere the new playground for political entrepreneurs? Do blogs now make a significant contribution to agenda setting in American politics?

A report from the Pew Internet & Public Life Project finds “the number of Americans using the Internet as their main source of political news doubled since the last mid-term election” (Rainie & Horrigan, 2007, i). This report found that 15% of American adults reported using the Internet for political news during the 2006 mid-term election period, compared to 7% for mid-terms in 2002, and 18% for the presidential election in 2004 (Rainie & Horrigan, 2007, i).

That same survey identifies a category of users the authors call the “new online political elite,” a group characterized by its creation and sharing of political content online (Rainie & Horrigan, 2007, ii). According to the survey, 23% of Internet users during the campaign “were using the ‘read-write Web’ to contribute to political discussion and activity” (ii).

Accessing the Internet for both journalistic and political purposes is an increasingly common occurrence. But there is still little discussion of the people behind

the online sources of information known as blogs, particularly blogs focused on political issues.

The Bloggers

The Pew Internet & American Life project offers survey results presenting a general picture of people who blog. As the report summary notes, “a nationally-representative sample of bloggers has found that blogging is inspiring a new group of writers and creators to share their voices with the world” (Fox & Lenhart, 2006, 3). In fact, that survey indicates that more than half of the bloggers contacted had never had their work published before starting their blogs. The same survey finds that the demographics of bloggers vary widely, although the numbers are skewed toward the young.

That report also finds that 8% of Internet users maintain a blog and 39% of Internet users read blogs. Moreover, media portrayals to the contrary, the majority of blogs are dedicated to personal diaries and hobbies. The survey also yields a finding that “the blogging population is young, evenly spilt between women and men, and racially diverse” (3). In fact, more than half of all bloggers in the survey are under 30.

More interesting for the purposes of the research presented here is that “relatively small groups of bloggers view blogging as a public endeavor” (3). In addition, bloggers report that they maintain their blogs for personal fulfillment rather than for financial gain. Just over 25% report that they blog in order to influence how other people think (5).

Many of the same survey questions used in the Pew survey have been employed in this study’s online survey. Although the 2006 Pew study did not focus on political bloggers, it did offer a template for surveying bloggers about why they do what they do. I have simply applied it exclusively to state-focused political bloggers.

Blogs and “Buzz”

Another Pew Internet & American Life report (Cornfield et al, 2005) focuses on the ability of blogs to create buzz. The report defines buzz as “the sound heard in public when a lot of people are talking about the same thing” (3). The report suggests that buzz is an analog of agenda setting, noting that “buzz can shift the balance of forces arrayed in a political struggle, and so affect its outcome” (3).

Cornfield et al observe that blogs create conditions favorable to buzz, meaning they are a great forum for discussion, but a nightmare for those seeking to maintain message control. The authors also note that the networks of links spreading to and from blogs help ensure that topics under discussion in the blogosphere get plenty of play (4). This is a phenomenon familiar to those who have been watching the interplay between blogs and national politics and is, perhaps, painfully familiar to those who have lost control of their message in the blogosphere.

The incoming and outgoing links on a blog lead to a willing and easily-accessible audience. As Cornfield et al write,

Blogs are perused voluntarily, and returned to automatically or habitually, because readers are disposed to want information on the same topics as fascinate the blogger. People who share interests are wont to talk about them – and the blog form provides both simulating information (the latest, first) and the means to converse about it (5).

In other words, blogs are a breeding ground for viral communication.

The report also comments on the dynamics highlighted by the Euro/RSCG data mentioned here earlier. It observes, “Journalists, activists, and political decision-makers have learned to consult political blogs as a guide... Accordingly, when bloggers buzz, the big mouthpieces of society notice” (5). This is simply another way of describing agenda setting in the 21st century and giving blogs credit for their role in the process.

Poll numbers, knowledge of agenda setting dynamics in media and politics, and known details about the characteristics of people who use the Internet and read blogs, suggest there is value in developing a better understanding of who comprises this “new online political elite” (Fox & Lenhart, 2006).

Given the influence that traditional media and scholars alike attribute to blogs in the American political landscape, and the relative dearth of attention to blogs and their political influence at the state-level, this study steps into the breach to analyze the composition of the new online political elite at the state level. It also identifies, in the state-level context, specific examples of exactly the kind of influence that traditional media and scholars attribute to the political blogosphere nationally. Whether the examples presented in the case studies are representative of all state blogs is not, however, a claim this research attempts to make.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHODS AND SURVEY

This chapter presents this study's research questions and later presents state blogger survey results, comparing them to earlier studies of bloggers nationwide. Discussion includes the highlighting of similarities and differences between the state-focused bloggers targeted in this study and earlier findings from other sources.

Research Questions

This research seeks to answer three primary questions about blogs and bloggers at the state level around the United States. Those questions are:

RQ1: Who are the people creating blogs focused on state politics?

RQ2: What motivates these people to initiate and maintain their blogs?

RQ3: Do these blogs play a discernible role in a given state's politics? And if so, how?

Methods

To answer these questions I use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Research methods employed for this project are appropriate to the questions listed above. To get a "big picture" view of people who blog about politics at the state level, I conducted an online survey of bloggers and their readers. To get a more in-depth perspective on bloggers' views and blogs' impact I conducted detailed case studies of three incidents identified through the initial survey. Ultimately, all the above information is combined to make a final assessment of whether and how state-focused blogs are playing a role in state politics around the country.

This is admittedly a crude approach for evaluating the influence of blogs in the state political context, but it is an effective way to conduct preliminary analyses of what could potentially be complicated political situations. Moreover, it offers a starting place for further analysis of the myriad issues this study begins raising.

Survey

While the issue of the digital divide remains an important one in discussions of Internet access and applicability to daily tasks, the subject remains tangential to the research presented here. As one scholar summarizes it, “The Internet has already achieved a critical mass, enabling networked individuals to become a significant force even though there are continuing digital divides. The existence of a Fifth Estate [Internet-based interactive media] is not dependent on universal access” (Dutton, 2007, 10).

The same is true here. Universal access to the state-focused blogs at the center of this research is not a prerequisite for influence on the politics of a state, particularly when speaking about opinion leaders getting the attention of elites in a state political environment. Data from 2007 about Internet use in the states report Internet access rates at home or elsewhere ranging from the lowest, 58% in West Virginia to the highest, 84% in Alaska (U.S. Census, 2007). As those numbers suggest, there is much variation in Internet usage across the country.

The survey research presented here includes responses from bloggers in 33 states. Moreover, this survey’s collected data about state blog readers -- not included in this research -- includes responses from readers in all 50 states. This suggests the Internet has indeed “achieved a critical mass, enabling networked individuals to become significant” just as Dutton suggests.

I collected information for the quantitative aspect of this research using an online survey website, WebMonkey.com. Since there is no central clearinghouse for blogs focused on state politics, I identified state-focused blogs and bloggers for participation in this study by following links from DailyKos.com, RedState.com, MyDD.com,

Stateline.org, *National Journal's* hotlineblog.nationaljournal.com, *Governing Magazine's* governing.typepad.com/13thfloor/, the National Council of State Legislatures' ncsl.typepad.com/the_thicket/ and Placeblogger.com.

Following links from the above websites, the first task was to determine whether state politics appeared to be the primary purpose of the blog in question. No specific checklist was used. The question was simply whether the overall impression of a site was that it focused on the politics of a particular state more often than it focused on other issues. This was inexact, but it did effectively screen out websites focused exclusively on national politics, on the hobbies or private interests of the blogger, or on the political happenings of a single municipality. This screening process also excluded blogs run by daily circulation newspapers as well as those sites explicitly linked to major political parties.

If a blog appeared to be independent and focused primarily on state politics, I added it to a master list and saved contact information to a database from which I sent email requests for survey participation in June 2007. See Appendix C for a list of all state-focused blogs contacted for this research.

Also in June 2007 I sent a similar email requesting participation from major national bloggers, political websites, and organizations focused on the intersection of the Internet, politics and democracy. All those contacted were asked to spread the word about the survey and to encourage participation. Requests for participation in the survey were ultimately posted on multiple state-focused blogs and at The Huffington Post. Using this snowball approach, the survey received more than 150 responses from state-focused bloggers and more than 500 responses from the people who read those blogs.

Other researchers have used a similar approach when collecting data for preliminary analyses of categories of online users. Kaye (2007) acknowledges the shortcomings of the non-random selection of respondents saying, “The convenience sample limits the ability to generalize results. Even though respondents were solicited from a wide range of blogs, they were not randomly selected...” (151). Kaye also identifies other Internet-related studies that have employed similar methods: Johnson & Kaye (2003); Kaye & Johnson (1999); Witte et al (2000); and Witte & Howard, (2002). To quote Kaye’s discussion of this type of sampling, “Though not ideal, such nonprobability sampling is an acceptable method when random sampling is not possible” (2007, 141).

Design

The initial online survey was designed to gather bloggers’ insights on several fronts: feelings about their state’s current political and media environment; political preferences and attitudes; and assessments of whether and how their website had influenced politics in their state. Open-ended questions allowed respondents an opportunity to provide specific examples of their blog and its role in state politics. See Appendix A for complete text of the survey.

Questions for the survey were modeled from the following surveys: The Louisiana Survey (2007), The American National Election Studies (multiple years), and the Pew Internet & American Life surveys (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Rainie, 2005; Rainie & Horrigan, 2007). Thus relying upon already-tested survey tools, this research can offer crude comparisons of its results to those of previous studies. While such comparisons are not exact and cannot be used for anything other than information purposes, side-by-side comparison of this study’s results to those of others points to similarities in the

characteristics of bloggers and the circumstances in which they appear to be having an effect on the politics of their chosen environment.

From the outset of this study, the premise was that bloggers at the state level were having an impact similar to that of national, A-list bloggers; their activities were simply not rising to the attention of national media. As the case studies presented in the next chapter indicate, these state-focused blogs have certainly captured the attention of political elites at the state level.

Results

The initial survey, available online in June and July 2007, attracted more than 700 respondents. 150 of those respondents were bloggers (See Appendix B for summary of results). All respondents reported living in the United States and all but one reported being registered to vote in the U.S. The data presented and discussed here is derived only from the responses of the bloggers themselves. Information about the readers of these blogs will be used for later research.

Overall, bloggers from 33 states are represented in the survey. And of those bloggers, nearly three-quarters (71%) do not believe their state is “moving in the right direction.” That statistic alone offers insight into the motivations these bloggers may have for initiating and maintaining their state-focused blogs.

A closer look at the survey results yields the following profile of state-focused bloggers in the United States.

General Characteristics and Demographics

The following data indicate that bloggers devote a significant chunk of time to their blogs, even though the majority is deriving no profit from the venture. Moreover, their readership is comprised of both people they know and people they do not know.

This information helps debunk the conventional wisdom that many blogs, with the exception of A-list sites, have only a small and insulated audience for their work. In reality, these bloggers, acting as opinion leaders in their political context, have an audience that extends beyond their immediate circle of friends and acquaintances.

The Pew Internet and Public Life survey (2006) analyzed data from 233 bloggers of many different interests (24). This survey, studying a much more limited population, obtained responses from 150 state-focused bloggers. The findings of both surveys have some interesting similarities and differences. Those are discussed below.

First is the question of who is blogging. When the Pew Internet & American Life Project reported on bloggers in 2006, the population they sampled was “young, evenly split between women and men, and racially diverse” (Lenhart & Fox, 2006, ii). For example, more than half the people surveyed were under 30. That is in stark contrast to the findings of this survey where 72% of bloggers were 35 or older. However, Lenhart and Fox did note that of the 35% of bloggers who say they focus on just one subject, they tend to be older than 30 with higher incomes and higher education than the general blogging population as a whole (2006, 9). This survey’s results are consistent with those findings.

In this study examining state-focused bloggers, not only are 72% of those maintaining their own blogs 35 years old or older, but 91% of the state-focused bloggers are white, making this sample less diverse than that collected by Pew. With respect to education, almost 40% of the state-focused bloggers have graduate degrees and 80% of them have at least a 4-year college education. 84% of the state-focused bloggers are male, unlike the even gender split in the Pew study.

Another example of differences between the population sampled by Pew and the population highlighted in this survey is the use of pseudonyms. Of the bloggers Pew studied, 55% of them report blogging under a pseudonym (Lenhart & Fox, 2006, ii). This is different from the nearly 70% of state bloggers who report blogging under their own name.

With respect to amount of time dedicated to their blogs, 81% of the bloggers responding to this survey report spending more than 2 hours a week on their blog, with 35% of them spending more than 10 hours a week on that endeavor. This is in contrast to findings from Pew where only 10% of the bloggers contacted report that they spend 10 or more hours a week maintaining their blog (12). In fact, according to Pew, the “typical blogger spends about two hours per week on their blog” (12). The typical state-focused blogger dedicates significantly more time than that to his blog.

Concerning the longevity of blogs, 18% of Pew’s blogging population reports having blogged for less than 6 months; 33% report having blogged for about a year; 30% report having blogged for 2 to 3 years; and 19% report having blogged four or more years. In contrast, of the state bloggers, just 8% report having blogged for 6 or fewer months; 34% report having blogged for between 1 and 2 years; 28% report having blogged for between 2 and 3 years; and 18% for more than 3 years. Overall, the state-focused bloggers profiled here have been working on their blogs longer than the general population of bloggers surveyed by Pew. This may be another artifact of the political subject matter at the center of the state-focused blogs considered here. But the longevity of these state-focused bloggers also suggests extended opportunity for audience recruitment and retention and potentially, influence.

Interestingly, state bloggers are making more money from their online ventures than the general population of bloggers profiled by Pew. While just 8% of Pew's bloggers say they earn income from their blog, 20% of state bloggers say they make a profit from their blogs. This would make sense given that blogs written for personal purposes and to update family and friends are going to be of less interest to online advertisers than the regularly-read and occasionally-influential political blogs at both the national and state level.

Finally, on issues of audience, 50% of the bloggers responding to this survey report that their readership is comprised of both people they know and people they do not know, with just 6% saying their blog is read mostly by people they know. This is in contrast to Pew's survey reporting that 49% of bloggers "believe that their blog readership is mostly made up of people they personally know." This suggests that state-focused bloggers have a wider circle of readers and thus a potentially wider sphere of influence than the general population of bloggers Pew studied earlier.

This survey's results yield the following general profile:

- 37% of bloggers report spending at least 10 hours a week on their blogs.
- 99% of bloggers report being registered to vote in the United States.
- More than two thirds (71%) are 35 years or older.
- 91% of bloggers are white.
- Almost 80% have at least a 4-year college education.
- 81% of state bloggers are employed full-time. They also report that their work is unrelated to their blogs.
- More than three quarters (80%) report having maintained their blog for at least one year.

- Two-thirds (64%) of bloggers have sole authorship of their blogs.
- 70% report blogging under their own name rather than using a pseudonym.
- 62% report updating their blog about once a day.
- 65% report getting at least 100 visits to their site each day.
- 51% report that both people they know and people they do not know read their blog.
- 80% of state-focused bloggers report making no profit from their blogs.

Attitudes About Government

When it comes to attitudes about government, state-focused bloggers tend to disagree with statements about the inability of voters to change their political environment.

Indeed, as the numbers below indicate, four-fifths of respondents have a well-developed sense of political efficacy. They believe themselves to be well informed and perfectly capable of engaging in political discussion with others. In fact, they are dismissive of the idea that it is too much trouble to stay informed or that politics is too complicated for the average voter to understand.

They are also generally dissatisfied with the performance of politicians in their state, finding them to be less-than-trustworthy and more interested in their own self-interest than that of their constituents. A snapshot of the results below suggests that bloggers are engaged citizens with both the desire to make a difference and the belief that one person really can make a difference at the state political level:

- 76% of respondents disagree with the statement that “people like me don’t have any say about what state government does.”
- More than 80% of bloggers believe “voting gives people an effective way to influence what the government does.”

- 88% of respondents believe “my vote makes a difference.”
- 98% of bloggers consider themselves well qualified to participate in discussions about their state’s politics.
- Almost 90% of bloggers disagree with the statement that “staying informed about state government and politics is too much trouble.”
- 96% of bloggers believe themselves to be better informed about state politics and government than most people in their state.
- 49% of bloggers do not believe “my state’s leaders are committed to public service.”
- Only 13% of bloggers believe they can trust the government in the state’s capital to do what is right.
- 50% of bloggers agree with the statement that their state’s public officials “don’t care much about what people like me think.”
- 69% of bloggers agree that their “state’s politicians are out of touch with the real world.”
- Only 4% of bloggers report receiving funding from political parties in their state.
- 3% report receiving funding from state government officials or programs.

Political Beliefs

In terms of political characteristics, the majority of state-focused bloggers identify themselves as Democrat and liberal. This is consistent with national studies of the blogosphere which consistently find the blogosphere to lean more strongly Democratic and liberal than Republican and conservative (Ackland, 2005; Hindman, 2005; Karpf, 2008).

Similar to other studies examining the political tendencies of the blogosphere and the bloggers themselves, this study finds that more than 50% of bloggers identify as strong Democrat, moderate Democrat, or leaning Democrat. Moreover, 60% of bloggers identify as strong liberal, liberal or leaning liberal. This trend is consistent, but according to Pew “use of the Internet for politics did not give particular advantage to either party. Still, online political activists favored Democratic candidates” (Rainie & Horrigan, 21).

Overall, these results suggest that the population of bloggers reached in this survey is not too different from the population of bloggers often studied at the national level:

- Using a 7-point Likert scale, 57% of bloggers identify themselves as strong democrat, moderate democrat, or leaning democrat.
- Using a 7-point Likert scale, 59% of bloggers identify as strong liberal, liberal or leaning liberal.

Views of the Media

When it comes to views of the media, the bloggers do not hold either state or national media in very high regard. In fact, with respect to both state and national media, bloggers believe media outlets “get the facts straight” just half of the time. Moreover, the majority of bloggers believe their state newspapers and television outlets demonstrate bias in their reporting. These findings, too, coincide with earlier studies focused on national blogs, suggesting that a primary impetus for political blogging is media criticism.

Compared to the Pew survey however, results of this study demonstrate a stronger preference for news without a political point of view. In the Pew study, 45% expressed this preference. In the state blog survey, 66% reported a preference for news without a specific political viewpoint. Below is a snapshot of state bloggers’ views about the media:

- 50% of bloggers believe the national media usually “get the facts straight.”
- 66% of bloggers believe their state newspapers and television news sources generally favor one side over another.

Blogs and Attention

Many of the bloggers responding to this survey report that their blogs have won attention from political actors in their state, including the media. Some have even broken through to the national level, gaining attention not only from national political figures, but also from national media outlets. This attention leads bloggers to believe that they have had an impact on state politics, and this belief that they are having an impact, they report, has led to increased political engagement on their part. It appears as if the attention garnered is seen as a reward and feeds further interest in continued blogging.

When it comes to attention, of the bloggers profiled by Pew (2006), only 8% report having won any readers outside their circle of family and friends. As Pew notes, “Precious few bloggers achieve the kind of attention – very public, and perhaps nationally or internationally influential – that may come from political figures or the news media. Just 10% of bloggers have received attention from public officials, political campaigns or politicians. 9% of bloggers have had their blog mentioned by the news media” (Lenhart & Fox, 2007, 19).

For the population of state bloggers presented here, all of whom focus on politics, a far greater percentage -- 72% -- report having received media attention at the state level, but only 3% reported getting attention from their state’s public officials, politicians, or political campaigns. Meanwhile, 34% report getting attention from national media. Clearly this small subset of political bloggers is attracting attention from the media, even if state political leaders are not acknowledging blogs’ existence or potential impact. But

almost certainly, with this media attention at both the state and national level, comes influence and, apparently, increased political activity.

An overview of the findings concerning blogs and media coverage follows below:

- 76% of bloggers report their blogs have received attention from their state's public officials, politicians or political campaigns.
- 73% report receiving attention from their state's traditional media.
- 68% report receiving attention from national bloggers.
- 34% report receiving attention from national news media.
- 55% of bloggers believe their blog has had an impact on state politics.
- 60% of bloggers report that their involvement in politics has increased since starting their blog.

Blogs as Journalism?

On the always-controversial question of whether blogs are a form of journalism, the bloggers responding to this survey mostly believe that their blogs are indeed a form of journalism, despite the fact only about a quarter of them have ever worked as journalists in the past. However, three-quarters of the bloggers report that they have had their work published elsewhere, suggesting that writing is not necessarily a new venture for them. Rather, it is just the technology that is new, in much the same way that blogging does not seem to attract new people to political activity, but instead, offers a new way for those who are already politically involved to be actively engaged. This differs from the Pew report where 54% of the bloggers surveyed had never before had their work published either online or offline (7).

The results of this survey also differ from those of Pew which found just 34% of bloggers consider their work a form of journalism. Note, however, that this number

comes from the total sample Pew took and not from the sub-category of single-subject political bloggers that are the focus of the survey presented here. It is possible that bloggers focusing on politics and media criticism, whether at the national or state level, are more likely to consider their work a form of journalism than those who write about their families, hobbies, travels and personal experiences.

In terms of content of blogs, the Pew survey identified just 11% of bloggers as focused primarily on politics and government (9). This suggests that the subset of the blogging population targeted in and responding to this survey of state-focused bloggers comprises a small portion of the total blogging population, which is itself a small portion of the entire online population. As another caveat, it is important to remember that given the sampling method used for the online survey it is not appropriate to generalize from these findings to the broader blogging population. That said, this study finds:

- 65% consider their blog a form of journalism.
- 28% report having ever worked as a journalist.
- 77% report having had their own writing or media creations published elsewhere, either online or offline.

Bloggers' Norms and Routines

As the literature presented earlier suggests, the process through which media content is created is largely responsible for the final product (Tuchman, 1978; Schudson, 2003). This survey asked bloggers about their routines for gathering and creating content for their blogs. More than half of them report having regular routines for getting material for their blogs. This is not the same thing as saying they following journalistic routines. Instead, it suggests there is a method to what the media likes to believe is the madness of the blogosphere. It appears as if much the preparatory work for blog content resembles

that of the journalists Rowley and Kurpius (2005) interviewed who watched statewide public affairs television to follow issues from a distance.

If physical contact with the news and newsmakers is no longer a prerequisite, then that suggests that bloggers may be more like journalists than either would like to admit. The data presented below suggest that bloggers do more than feed off of the content of traditional media as is often assumed in traditional media's criticism of the blogosphere. While many blogs do serve as aggregators of information found across the media, they also engage in their own research and interviewing, behaving in many ways similarly to the journalists Rowley and Kurpius interviewed who collect information for their reporting from a distance.

Also contrary to conventional wisdom, the bloggers participating in this survey indicate that they work hard to ensure their websites are accurate and often post corrections when mistakes are discovered:

- 61% report having a regular routine for collecting/editing content for their blog.
- 75% report quoting media sources directly for their blog.
- 50% report conducting their own interviews at least sometimes.
- Almost 60% report posting corrections to something they have written.
- More than 95% report referring to content from non-media sources, including government offices, think tanks and polling data.
- 96% report spending extra time to verify facts they want to include in a post.
- 90% report responding to readers' comments at least sometimes.
- Almost 30% report having requested permission to post copyrighted materials.
- 98% report offering original commentary on news reports and editorials appearing elsewhere.

- It is uncommon for these bloggers to rely on someone else to fact-check or copy-edit their materials (16% and 17% respectively).

Blogging Ethics

While there are multiple similarities between the practices of bloggers and modern journalists, there are also some differences, particularly with respect to ethics. For example, when asked to rank the most important of the Society of Professional Journalists' 4 Principles of Journalism (*act independently, be accountable, do no harm, and seek truth and report it*), more than half of the bloggers say that seeking the truth and reporting it is the most important principle of all.

This can come across as recklessness and is often portrayed as such by traditional journalists, but the principle seems to be one held dear by the bloggers. This may be one example of how differences in norms and routines have a tangible impact on the final product. If journalists rely on enduring relationships with sources (Tuchman, 1978; Schudson, 2003), this could, scholars have argued, cause journalists to pull their punches when it comes to reporting particularly negative stories.

Bloggers, not needing to rely on sources regularly to earn their living, have less to lose by telling everything they know. Not surprisingly, this is seen as disruptive behavior in the media-political environment. Discussion of the revelation of Senator Barack Obama's off-the-record comments at a San Francisco fundraiser points to this fact. One need only read this journalist's response to the event to see how disruptive this can be: "There are no private moments anymore," (Tomasky, 2008).

Perhaps not surprisingly, bloggers also point to "do no harm" as the least important SPJ principle. If bloggers have not become part of the fourth branch of government (Cook, 1998) or political elites in their own right, then they have less to lose by reporting

information with the potential to disturb the status quo. In fact, given their attitudes about the nature of political leadership in their states, to have had “do no harm” rank higher in this ranking would have been surprising.

- 52% of bloggers report that “seek truth and report it” is the most important journalistic principle.
- 62% of bloggers report that “do no harm” is the least important journalistic principle.
- 65% of bloggers view their blog as a form of journalism, 25% do not, and 10% are not sure.
- Just 28% of these bloggers have worked as journalists.
- 96% believe it is okay for bloggers to endorse political candidates.
- 93% believe it is okay for bloggers to campaign for political candidates offline.
- 98% believe it is okay for bloggers to endorse grassroots/political action movements.
- 98% also believe it is okay for bloggers to advocate for specific policies or legislative action.

Discussion

Based on the preceding data, it is possible to begin positing answers to the first two of this study’s research questions. Concerning the question of who is creating blogs focused on state politics, the picture developing is one of individuals with characteristics that appeared in Pew’s landmark study, but with greater intensity. State-focused bloggers are overwhelmingly male, white, college educated, dissatisfied with politics in their state, politically engaged, and believers in the ability of voters to make a difference.

The bloggers responding to this survey do believe that their blogs have an impact on politics in their state. The case studies presented in a following chapter consider this question further, presenting data and discussion in order to provide a preliminary answer.

Those characteristics also yield insight into the motivations of state-focused bloggers. They are dissatisfied with politics in their state but believe that individual voters can make a difference. They are skeptical about their states' traditional media coverage and, since they are already politically engaged, taking that political activity to the blogosphere is a natural step.

DISCUSSION

While the preceding chapter provides a broad introduction to the survey and general results, this chapter links those findings with literature cited earlier and further lays the groundwork for the case studies presented in the next chapter.

The General Blogger Profile

99% of the bloggers responding to this survey report being registered to vote in the United States. Certainly definitions of political participation vary, but one constant in all such definitions is registering to vote, and ideally, casting a vote on election day. These bloggers meet at least the first part of this minimum requirement. Whether or not they supported their current governor in the last election is a different matter altogether.

Although 81% of the bloggers report being employed full-time, more than a third of them report spending at least 10 hours a week on their blogs. This suggests a certain degree of commitment on the part of bloggers to their online endeavor, whether they are multi-tasking at work or spending late nights tending to their online presence. Such a profile is not consistent with scholars' bleak assessments about the political disinterest of citizens. It is, however, consistent with Delli Carpini's discussion of political efficacy (2004).

Indeed, it may be that political bloggers are a manifestation of Schudson's "monitorial citizen," (1998) dedicated to tracking information and prepared to alert others when there is a need for increased attention. Moreover, 80% of these blogs have been maintained for more than one year and two-thirds of the bloggers report updating their site at least once a day. This suggests significant commitment to the blog and its mission, however clearly that mission is defined.

This survey was not intended to yield in-depth insight into questions of whether bloggers have been differently socialized over time. However, consistent with the observations of others who have studied the question of drivers of political participation (Delli Carpini, 2004; Putnam, 2000; Shah & Scheufele, 2006; Shah et al, 2001; Verba et al, 1995), these results indicate that state-focused bloggers are both well educated and well into adulthood, with almost three-quarters of them being 35 or older almost four-fifths of them having at least a 4-year college education.

Given the above statistics, blogs may indeed be “little first amendment machines,” as Rosen (2007) declares, but blogging is not a certain outcome of access to the technology. This is put in even greater focus by data about Americans and Internet access in 2007, indicating that 71% of American households have access to the Internet either at home or at work (U.S. Census, 2007). What these numbers suggest is that although Internet access is widespread and growing (Horrigan, 2007) it is still only a small percentage of people who engage in politics through blogging, even though almost 25% of Americans also report using the Internet to get political information (Kohut, 2008).

Political Cynicism and Efficacy

These state-focused bloggers are a cynical lot, particularly with respect to their opinions about government, politicians and the media: 49% believe their state-level elected officials are not committed to public service; almost 70% say that their state’s politicians are “out of touch” with the people they represent; only 13% say they trust their elected officials to “do what’s right,” and 66% of these bloggers believe their state newspapers and television news sources generally favor one side over another. Still -- or perhaps because of that -- they believe their involvement in political discourse makes a

difference. This is clear from the fact that 80% of them believe voting is an effective way of influencing government and 90% of them believe that staying informed about current events is not too much trouble. Indeed, most of them consider themselves to be better informed than their fellow citizens. Altogether, they seem good examples of Shah and Scheufele's observation about opinion leadership as a "consequence" and not a "cause" of participation (2006).

As noted previously, this data also seem to confirm earlier studies about the political dispositions and attitudes of political bloggers (Ackland, 2005; Hindman, 2005; Karpf, 2008). As with other studies, this survey finds more than half of responding bloggers identify themselves as "Democrat", "moderate Democrat", or "leaning Democrat." Similarly, the state bloggers also identify as "strong liberal", "liberal", or "leaning liberal." Although this study has not sought to link individual bloggers' political preferences with the political characteristics of the state on which they focus, such an analysis would lead to increased insights into the motivation for bloggers to first, initiate blogging and second, to continue it.

Many of the bloggers studied here also report that their levels of political engagement have increased since they started blogging. But it is important to note that this is not the same thing as saying blogging is the root cause of their political engagement. Instead, this is consistent with the argument that blogs are simply an additional tool to be used by people who are already politically engaged.

With respect to political engagement and efficacy, the data presented here coincide with Delli Carpini's definition of engagement: "A democratically engaged citizen is one who participates in civic and political life, and who has the values, attitudes, opinions, skills and resources to do so effectively" (2004, 397). The findings

here also match the observations of McKenna and Pole that blogs provide an additional option for political engagement (2004). But there is no evidence to suggest that blogs are the solution to the general disengagement of the American public described by Lippmann (1922), Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) and others.

Blogs and Attention

Few studies have examined the dynamics of media attention to blogs, other than to assess whether blogs are having an agenda setting effect on the rest of the media or on politics in their sphere of influence. By seeking information about what kind of attention state-focused political bloggers report having earned, this research begins to provide the rough outline of the invisible boundaries within which bloggers appear to work.

As an example, 76% of the bloggers studied here report having garnered attention from their state's public officials, politicians or political campaigns. Another 73% report having received coverage their state's traditional media outlets. As noted earlier, this degree of attention from leaders leads bloggers to believe they have some degree of influence on political outcomes in their state. Indeed, 55% report that their blog has had an impact on state politics. One other interesting note is that 68% of these bloggers report attention from national bloggers and more than a third of them report coverage from national news media.

That is decent coverage for the people Brian Williams of NBC described as the "guy named Vinny in an efficiency apartment in the Bronx who hasn't left the efficiency apartment in two years" (O'Gorman, 2007). Of course, it is likely that if these bloggers were not predisposed to believe in their own political efficacy they likely would not have started blogging in the first place. The attention from media, politicians and fellow citizens likely offers encouragement to continue the effort.

Blogs and Journalism

Although this study has dismissed the question of whether bloggers are journalists as no longer relevant, remnants of that debate linger. For that reason, this survey asked bloggers to indicate whether they see their blogs as a form of journalism. Although only 28% of them report ever having worked as a journalist, 65% of them say that they see their work as a form of journalism. That the definition of journalism continues to evolve with the advent of interactive technologies is an issue others are ably tackling (Shirky, 2008).

But the subject of how much bloggers are like journalists leads discussion into trickier territory. It also raises multiple questions about ethics and norms and routines. This survey gathered a first round of data on both fronts and the data are presented in the preceding chapter. As indicated there, bloggers demonstrate a clear preference for truth compared to almost everything else, even traditional journalistic ethics. And although in the eyes of many professional journalists this is an insult to the profession, it nevertheless changes the dynamics of news reporting because if a blogger has it – a document, a quote, a recording, or evidence of a politician’s slip up -- he is probably going to use it.

Jeff Jarvis frames the discussion with this question: “[W]hat happens when you take away the label journalist and just call the person a witness? Does that person have to live by [journalism’s] rules? Or can that person still tell people what she heard and saw? Isn’t that simply put free speech? (Jarvis, 2008). Certainly more thorough research is required on this front.

To the Case Studies

The next chapter presents several qualitative case studies of blogs, bloggers and their impact (or not) at the state level. It echoes a 2005 Pew report about “buzz” and

blogs, which finds “blogger power, the capacity of blog operators to make buzz and influence decision-makers, is circumstantial: dependent on the sorts of information available, and contingent on the behavior of other public voices” (Cornfield et al, 2005, 2).

The following case studies help illustrate that assertion. The qualitative case studies also begin filling in some of the rough framework the preceding survey data and discussion have provided.

CASE STUDIES

This research is based on the premise that bloggers, exploiting the interactive technologies so hyped since the 2004 presidential campaign, are providing new frames for discussion of issues old and new at the state level. In fact, data compiled here show signs of dominant frames among the bloggers themselves. The majority, for example, believe that media bias is a problem, they believe their states are not moving in the right direction, and they have minimal faith in their elected leadership to fully represent their best interests. These frames are evident in the survey data, but also in the case studies below where the bloggers' primary assumption seems to be that government and elected officials are poised to do something that is not in the best interest of the voters and that if such actions were exposed to sunlight, the endeavor would be doomed to failure.

It is important to note that these case studies were selected on the basis of what transpired. These three case studies do not represent the full range of influence that blogs can have on politics at the state level. The case studies below are simply three examples of incidents where the blogosphere's role in development of an issue at the state level could be identified and tracked.

While the general perception of the blogosphere may be that it trends liberal rather conservative (Ackland, 2005; Hindman, 2005; Karpf, 2008), and while the data presented here do not contradict that, the more important point seems to be the common ground on which all these state bloggers stand: common distrust of elected authority; common displeasure with the way public resources are allocated; and common dissatisfaction with the practices and products of national and state media. Whether they lean right or left, these bloggers share the above. As the case studies below demonstrate, these themes appear regularly on state-focused political blogs.

Introduction

In an article appearing in *The New York Review of Books*, Sarah Boxer writes about blogs. She offers many of the usual observations about bloggers being aggregators more often than writers and about the devil-may-care attitude demonstrated by many bloggers, especially those in the political environment where, as she notes, “one of the surest ways to hoist your blog to the top of the charts is to bring down a big-time politician or journalist” (Boxer, 2008). Certainly that has proven true at the national level, but the case studies presented below suggest those dynamics and incentives are at play in blogs at the state level, too.

Boxer also refers to the iconoclastic nature of blogs, writing, “Invective – hilarious, acidulous invective – is everywhere. The law of the blogosphere is Hobbesian: survival of the snarkiest” (Boxer, 2008). One suspects this characteristic is at least partially responsible for the disdain with which many political bloggers are still viewed, at least by many in the mainstream media (O’Gorman, 2008). As incidents detailed in the case studies indicate, snarky-ness is indeed often a useful ingredient when it comes to blogs railing against the status quo.

Boxer offers another observation that puts in context the role of political blogs in the American political environment. “Blogs are golden when they’re at the bottom of the heap, kicking up,” she writes. “Give them a salary, a book contract, or a press credential, though and it just isn’t the same. (And this includes, for the most part, the blogs set up by magazines, companies, and newspapers.) Why? When you write for pay, you worry about lawsuits, sentence structure and word choice. You worry about your boss, your publisher, your mother, and your superego looking over your shoulder. That’s no way to blog” (Boxer, 2008). That comment summarizes the reality of being a political blogger;

that is, being “the little guy” or the “knowledgeable outsider,” who is offering his take on the current state of things.

The three case studies highlight that last point. The incidents presented here involve blogs published by knowledgeable outsiders, that is, people who know the system or the political issue about which they are writing, but who are on the outside of government, and thus play no role as decision makers. They are the informed outsiders, kicking from the bottom up, as Boxer argues. These bloggers’ writings are motivated by political beliefs and a sense of political efficacy, but a bit of media attention and a sense of impacting political outcomes may be what keeps them coming back for the next round. Much as Bimber writes about the political consequences of more effective distribution of information (2003), so too, do these bloggers demonstrate that new pressures – or rather, old pressures exerted in new ways – have an impact on existing political structures and media routines.

In the first example below, conservative bloggers in Illinois fed debate about mandating the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccine for adolescent girls. In the second case, Louisiana bloggers agitated for and ultimately got a legislative veto, doing this with very little traditional media attention to it until after the fact. Finally, in Kentucky, bloggers fought the insertion of objectionable language into legislation through most of a legislative session. Aspects of that battle continue into 2008.

As noted in the literature review, the framework for discussion of these case studies is derived from the work of Miller and Riechert (2003). Their spiral of opportunity argument is appropriate for analyzing situations “in the context of contentious issues where opposing interests and values collide” (Miller & Riechert, 107). In their research, they note they “are especially interested in the processes of mutual

influence by which public opinion, special interest groups, news media, and government officials interact in the debating and development of public policy” (Miller & Riechert, 108).

The dynamic they discuss concerns the reactions of stakeholders to public response to their arguments. They write, “If a stakeholder’s articulation resonates positively with the public, then that group will intensify its efforts. On the other hand, when an articulation resonates negatively, the stakeholder group will change its articulation or withdraw from debate. We label our position “Spiral of Opportunity” (109). The public, they argue, “is created when significant numbers of people become actively engaged in debate about how society at large should respond to an issue” (110). As Hallahan writes, “As a property of a message, a frame limits or defines the message’s meaning by shaping the inferences that individuals make about a message” (Hallahan, 1999, 207).

With their spiral of opportunity thesis, Miller and Riechert suggest the process of frame development has four stages. To the author’s knowledge, this state-blogger research marks the first time Miller and Riechert’s framework for examining emerging issues has been applied to the blogosphere at either the state or national level.

Miller and Riechert present a four-part framing cycle, referenced earlier in the literature review. The first phase of the cycle is “emergence.” They write, “As stakeholders find access to journalists, they may be able to win visibility for their selective issue definition by exposure in mass media,” (112). As Miller and Riechert conceive of it, the only way for a stakeholder’s interpretation to become part of the debate is for the mainstream media to report it. The research presented here asserts that, with the development of blogging technology and dedicated bloggers, all an issue needs

is a vocal supporter not afraid to weigh in on it. The audacity of bloggers is one of the characteristics Boxer highlights in her discussion of the phenomenon (2008).

This researcher's observations of blogs and bloggers at the state level suggest that, at present, all an issue needs to jump onto the public agenda is a blog and a blogger with a little media and public relations savvy to help spread the word. This echoes Bimber's argument that development of new information technologies leads to the development of new pressures on established institutional structures. Through the use of case studies, the research presented here applies Bimber's argument to state political spheres and the media that cover them, although the primary focus is on the political outcomes, not the effect on media.

The second phase Miller and Riechert identify is that of "definition/conflict" (112). They write, "A stakeholder's primary goal here is to establish a specific point of view as the appropriate frame for the issue. This is done by highlighting certain aspects of the issue and downplaying others" (112). As mentioned earlier, the frame of the "war on terror" has proven a successful way to argue for war in Iraq and other offensive measures taken by the U.S. government during the Bush Administration. Indeed, bloggers have focused on this issue with no resulting change in the administration's policies. Now, however, a report suggests the Pentagon has been sponsoring retired military officials as they appear on national news networks offering analysis of the war (Barstow, 2008). One media critic has referred to this as "propaganda" (Greenwald, 2008) and another has criticized the media's failure to explore "the outside roles of their military consultants" (Kurtz, 2008).

Regardless of whether the Pentagon's actions qualify as manipulation, distortion or even propaganda, when a major government player is dedicating resources to a

communications effort, frequently through unexpected back channels, it is hard for bloggers to break through the noise and help another frame emerge. The dynamics at play here are at the center of Miller and Reichert's spiral of opportunity and revelations about the military analysts provide a compelling example of what fails to happen when a strong, competing frame does not emerge.

The third phase in the spiral of opportunity is "resonance" (113). Miller and Riechert write, "As one side of an issue gains support, it gains potency to drive out advocacy for the opposing side" (113). Miller and Riechert compare this dynamic to that identified by Noelle-Neumann in *The Spiral of Silence* (2004). She suggests people will keep certain viewpoints – such as intolerance – to themselves for fear it is not socially acceptable. That silence, she argues, leads to isolation. What Miller and Riechert propose with the spiral of opportunity is the opposite dynamic: Unafraid to voice their opinions, individuals find they that many others agree with them, or are at least willing to tolerate them. Shirky addresses this phenomenon in his book *Here Comes Everybody* (2008). With respect to blogs, this translates into links, mentions in traditional media, and responses from political leaders. All the spiral of opportunity seeks, it seems, is a little encouragement.

The fourth phase of the spiral of opportunity is "equilibrium or resolution" (113). It happens when "the resonance process is complete, one frame comes to dominate debate, and decision makers set public policy to conform to it" (113). Each of the case studies has within it an element of the equilibrium phase, with some of them being more dramatic than others. In the case of bloggers pushing issues, "equilibrium" can actually be a defeat in the framing war and a conscious retrenching to fight another day. Indeed,

as Miller and Riechert note, “Events that bring new factual information to the fore can break the equilibrium and place an issue back on the policy agenda” (113).

With the understanding that the dynamics of the state-level political environment are much like those of national politics -- just on a smaller scale -- these case studies each begin with an assessment of the frame being promoted. The specific frames identified here are well-recognized memes in American politics: sex education in schools; legislators are looking out for themselves instead of their constituents; and budget-making is a process that could use more sunlight. Each of these frames conveys a set of political assumptions and provides insight into the views of bloggers. The case studies examine the appearance of the given frame in the course of blog-based political debate at the state level.

Illinois: Rage Against the Vaccine

In 2006 and 2007, Illinois, like many other states around the country, considered legislation that would mandate the vaccination intended to protect against the human papilloma virus (HPV). The vaccine was licensed by the Food and Drug Administration in June 2006 and in September of that year State Senator Debbie Halvorson of Illinois spoke of her intent to propose legislation to mandate the vaccine in her state.

Illinois was not the only state to propose such legislation and the debate surrounding it was conducted at least partly online and ultimately attracted the attention of the national press. According to the National Council of State Legislatures, 41 states and the District of Columbia introduced legislation “to require, fund or educate the public about the HPV vaccine,” and 17 states successfully passed some kind of legislation on the matter (HPV Vaccine: State Information, 2008).

But passage of legislation regarding the public requirement of, funding for, or education about the vaccine is not the same thing as actually mandating the vaccine. NCSL reports that in total, 24 states introduced legislation mandating the vaccine but little of that legislation was ever enacted.

The result in Illinois was typical of what happened to such legislation around the country. The HPV-related legislation that finally became law in August 2007 required insurance companies to pay for the vaccine and that uninsured girls under 18 years be covered by the state (NCSL, HPV Vaccine: State Information, 2008). There was, however, no requirement for young women to get the shot.

The effort to implement mandatory vaccines nationwide was damaged by the revelation that Merck & Company, the vaccine's manufacturer, was spending large sums of money to lobby state legislatures to mandate its vaccine, Gardasil, and that the motive for doing so was profit. Further controversy emerged when it became clear that Women in Government, a national membership organization for female state legislators was also promoting the vaccine mandate not just in Illinois, but across the country. As a result it is difficult to point to causality in this case study of blogs at the state level since the debate about the HPV vaccine was taking place nationally at the same time it was being addressed in the state legislature.

In Illinois, as in other states, arguments against the vaccine were tied to long-standing arguments about whether sex education belongs in schools, concerns about such education encouraging promiscuity, and more generalized worry about the erosion of parental rights to determine what their children hear, see and learn. In Illinois, one conservative blog in particular seems to have taken the lead as the conservative voice against the mandatory vaccine.

Concern about the vaccine fit nicely into already-existing memes about sexual behavior, public health and education, particularly those views typically associated with conservative pro-family groups. When questioned about the vaccine, a representative of the national group, Focus on the Family was vague, “We are supportive of a vaccine, but we also support parent rights” (Williams-Harris, 2007).

In a June 2007 post-mortem of the spring’s HPV-mandating legislation nationwide, Fran Eaton of *Illinois Review* wrote a piece for the Heartland Institute. The first sentence offers the two frames dominating the opposition to the vaccine, “Parents determined to resist an aggressive campaign by a major corporation and government bureaucracies were heartened this spring as a nationwide, orchestrated attempt to mandate the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccine for their 11- and 12-year old daughters appeared to have been stymied” (Eaton, “HPV vaccine effort encounters strong opposition, “ 2007).

What follows is a discussion of the HPV vaccine issue in Illinois, using the “spiral of opportunity” phases identified by Miller and Riechert (2003).

Emergence

State Senator Debbie Halvorson of Illinois proposed legislation coinciding with a national effort by Merck to promote its HPV vaccine, Gardasil, to adolescent women nationwide. A companion bill, requiring education but not the vaccination, was introduced by Illinois State Representative Naomi Jakobsson, but Halvorson attracted most of the sniping on the issue in the months that followed. The state media attributed the personal nature of the debate to the blog *Illinois Review*. On January 6, 2007, Fran Eaton, editor of *Illinois Review*, referred to Jakobsson’s legislation, “There needs to be a frank discussion about State Rep. Naomi Jakobsson’s rush to mandate another vaccine,

this one geared to preventing the spread of HPV, a sexually-transmitted disease,” (Eaton, “HPV Vaccine Demands Frank Discussion,” 2007).

A month later, *Illinois Review* wrote that Halvorson “does not advocate avoiding a risky behavior that leads not only to HPV but to 20-plus other STDs and their strains, along with unplanned pregnancy. Halvorson merely advocates trying to avoid the consequences of risky behavior. Shame on her,” (Stanek, “Debbie Does...??” 2007).

In a subsequent interview with *The New York Times*, Halvorson commented, “I really thought it was a no-brainer. It just made perfect sense to me, and then everybody seemed to come out of the woodwork and start all this chaos against this vaccine” (Heupel, 2007).

In an editorial, the *Chicago Sun Times* opposed making the HPV vaccine mandatory, but the authors were careful to distinguish their position from those of the conservatives, “We say not so fast. Our objection is not the moral one raised by conservatives: We’re not concerned this treatment would encourage promiscuity,” instead, they argue that the decision to vaccinate young women against a disease spread by more than just casual contact is a decision that should belong to parents and not the state (“Don’t make vaccine legal requirement,” 2007).

But the issues of morality and privacy were already out there, have been first proffered by John Bambenek in January, also writing for *Illinois Review*. His argument was summarized in the title of his post: “Invasion of Privacy: State has no Business Mandating HPV Vaccine (Bambenek, 2007). In Illinois, the debate about the HPV vaccine was going to involve discussion of sexual behavior.

A later article in *The New York Times* discussing efforts in state legislatures around the country to mandate the HPV vaccine joined the Illinois debate *in media res*:

“And in Illinois, a bill introduced by a legislator who had the virus the vaccine is intended to prevent prompted a conservative group’s blog to speculate that she had been promiscuous” (Saul & Pollack, 2007). The increasingly uncivil tone of Illinois’s online discussion about the HPV vaccine had caught the attention of one of the nation’s leading newspapers.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the post to which *The New York Times* referred came from *Illinois Review*, where a blogger had written, “So when state Sen. Debbie Halvorson [IL] admitted she had HPV and worried others might get it, you would think she’d focus on her behavior that caused her to contract that sexually transmitted disease” (Stanek, “Debbie Does...??” 2007).

That same post also offered a list of “potential topics” for Halvorson to discuss with the public: “Halvorson could discuss the number of sex partners she has had throughout her lifetime and how each one increased the likelihood of contracting HPV. If Halvorson even had only one sex partner aside from her husband, she could discuss how one can contract HPV from a sole encounter; Halvorson could discuss whether she realized at the time her sex partner carried HPV, which most trusting, vulnerable women don’t. Halvorson could disclose whether it was her husband who passed HPV on to her after sleeping with other women, demonstrating another reason for chaste behavior outside the marriage bedroom. More uncomfortably, if Halvorson contracted HPV through rape, she could discuss ways to avoid rape” (Stanek, “Debbie Does..??” 2007). Judging Halvorson for having contracted HPV soured the tone of debate even further.

Two weeks later, the *Chicago Tribune*’s local politics blog described the above post and related comments noting that Halvorson, “has come under fire personally from conservative critics and those opposed to vaccination requirements. Halvorson had a

hysterectomy after contracting HPV. Some vocal critics have questioned Halvorson's morality in getting HPV and have said she should instead promote the dangers of risky sexual behavior. Halvorson said she finds it ironic that many of the same conservative critics are promoting abstinence as the only form of sexual education that should be taught in schools” (Pearson, 2007). This research uncovered no evidence of Halvorson doing anything but advocating for the vaccine for reasons of public health. Despite the personal attacks, she remained focused on her goal.

Thanks to discussion introduced by the blog *Illinois Review*, the battle against mandating the vaccine in Illinois turned into a personal attack against the state legislator proposing it. That is how the issue emerged in Illinois politics, just as Miller and Riechert theorize: by getting exposure in the media, vocal stakeholders gained visibility for their framing of an issue.

Definition/Conflict

In a round-up piece about efforts nationwide to mandate the HPV vaccine, The New York Times painted a picture of growing opposition: “Racing to embrace a new vaccine, at least 20 states are considering mandatory inoculation of young girls against the sexually transmitted virus that causes cervical cancer. But a roaring backlash has some health experts worried that the proponents, including the vaccine’s maker, Merck, have pushed too far too fast, potentially undermining prospects for the broadest possible immunization” (Saul & Pollack, 2007).

The debate about making Gardasil a mandatory vaccine was defined in multiple ways not just across the country, but also in Illinois. The most vocal opponents of the mandate raised concerns about the erosion of parental rights, privacy issues, and the possibility that inoculating adolescent girls would lead to promiscuous behavior and thus

STDs and pregnancy. Other themes woven throughout the debate included the usual tropes of “evil pharmaceuticals,” legislators being overly influenced by campaign donations, and lingering questions about the effectiveness and longevity of the vaccine itself.

The New York Times quoted the editor of *Illinois Review*, Fran Eaton, when she summarized opposition to the vaccine: “If you’re a conservative, you’re going to be worried about parental rights. If you’re a liberal, you’re worried that the pharmaceutical companies are taking over the United States” (Saul & Pollack, 2007). In the case of Illinois, a review of the media coverage suggests that the conservatives’ objections – and their methods of raising them – were what both state blogs and mainstream news outlets focused on when covering the debate in the state. Thus, as Miller and Riechert suggest in their presentation of the spiral of opportunity, the definition of the issue is framed around conflict.

Resonance

In mid-February, the *Chicago Tribune* summarized the situation in these terms, “The topic is controversial because the virus... is sexually transmitted. Conservative groups, who concede that the vaccine should be available, vehemently oppose making it mandatory because they believe it implicitly encourages premarital sex” (Peres & Japsen, 2007).

Later that month, another blogger on *Illinois Review* introduced a new, but not unexpected, variable into the debate: Political partisanship. John Ruskin used the emergence of the HPV vaccine debate as an opportunity to raise old issues in this new context: “Democrats are anti-choice”; “Democrats are pro-corporate welfare”;

“Democrats are anti-freedom”; “Democrats are obsessed with sex” (Ruskin, 2007). With politics thus made explicit, debate about the vaccine resonated in the public on multiple fronts.

Earlier that same day, Stanek, also on *Illinois Review*, had linked to a report from the Associated Press and another from *The New York Times* reporting, “Merck & Co. has suspended its lobbying campaign to persuade state legislatures to mandate that adolescent girls get the company’s new vaccine...” (Stanek, “Merck admits influencing legislators,” 2007). She quoted again from *The New York Times* saying, ““Reacting to a furor from some parents, advocacy groups and public health experts,’ Merck is going to ‘stop lobbying state legislatures... Part of the states’ rush to embrace the vaccine has been instigated by Merck efforts that began before federal regulators approved the product last year...”” (Stanek, “Merck admits influencing legislators,” 2007). The blog entry also referred to Halvorson’s comment that although she would continue to support the legislation, she approved of Merck’s decision to back off.

While the national effort to promote the vaccine was imploding with coverage in *The New York Times* as noted above, *Illinois Review* linked to an editorial in the *State Journal-Register*. Titled, “Should HPV vaccine opponents be insulted?” it cites a paragraph from the editorial, “An effective vaccine for a virus most of us will contract is now available. Would we be arguing against this vaccine if the disease were polio or whooping cough? Women should not die, or suffer other maladies, due to puritanical politics” (“Should HPV opponents be insulted?” 2007).

But that blog post omitted the first paragraph of the *State-Journal’s* editorial which began, “The debate over whether to make mandatory a vaccine that could prevent most cervical cancer cases has gotten particularly ugly in Illinois,” (“Puritanical politics,”

2007). The editorial also notes, “The opponents demanding Halvorson’s sexual history want to paint her as responsible for contracting a virus that is spread through sexual contact. They want to make the case that this vaccine is not needed if we all just ‘behave’ and stay ‘pure.’” The *State Journal-Register*’s editorial alludes to an earlier post on *Illinois Review*, also referred to in *The New York Times*, where the blog turned the tone of discussion from one of public policy to one of the senator’s morality.

At this point, the issue of the HPV vaccine mandate has bounced around the media from the blogosphere, to the national media to the state media and back again. This is a good illustration of Miller and Riechert’s discussion about resonance.

Further linking Illinois to the broader national debate about the HPV vaccine, one post at *Illinois Review* linked to the National Council of State Legislatures’ page dedicated to following HPV legislation around the country. But not only did the *Illinois Review* blogger link to that list, she also did her homework on the pending legislation in different states and offered a synopsis of each bill’s progress (Stanek, “HPV vaccine round-up, 2007). Despite the ugly tone of debate it was helping to nurture, *Illinois Review* did keep its readers informed about developments concerning the legislation through until March 2007.

Equilibrium/Resolution

After March 2007, relative silence from *Illinois Review* on the subject of the vaccine suggests either a battle won (although no announcement was made to that effect) or a battle lost where the subject simply disappears from comment threads.

In reality, a much-watered down version of Halvorson’s bill passed the Illinois legislature in late spring. Its ordeal was summarized in a newspaper: “Faced with growing controversy over a plan designed to protect young girls from a cancer-causing sexually-

transmitted diseases, Illinois lawmakers sent the governor a proposal Tuesday that nixes the vaccine requirement and focuses on education” (Ellis, “Controversy alters HPV vaccine plan,” 2007).

The most direct published response Senator Halvorson offered to critics of her legislation was, “It’s very unfortunate that some people have really put more stigma to something where it doesn’t belong. People want to have a say, and I don’t want to ram something down anybody’s throat” (Ellis, “Senate OKs education, not vaccination,” 2007). Perhaps one reason this issue was able to recede from the headlines was because Halvorson never engaged directly with *Illinois Review*. The blog seemed to be looking for a fight, but Halvorson never responded in kind.

Ultimately, the Illinois senate approved Halvorson’s revised legislation, focused on “more education about the virus and future funding for the vaccines three-shot regimen” (Ellis, “Senate okay educations,” 2007). This resolution was neither a clear victory nor a clear failure for either Senator Halvorson or the bloggers at *Illinois Review*. Miller and Riechert did not predict this, but it seems even the spiral of opportunity can result in a draw. The failure of the legislation to attain its initial goal suggests some degree of defeat for the legislators promoting it. It also suggests that the argument against making the vaccine mandatory resonated on enough fronts that the effort was eventually sidelined.

Discussion

Illinois Review followed the HPV vaccine debate closely at both the national and state levels. An article in *The New York Times* even referred to some of *Illinois Review*’s posts on the subject. That is certainly an indicator having an impact on the debate.

Some respondents to this study's online survey listed *Illinois Review* as an Illinois-focused blog that they read regularly. More generally, respondents from Illinois indicated that blogs in Illinois had had an impact on the discussion of the HPV vaccine. Fran Eaton, editor of *Illinois Review* noted in her response to the survey, "We focused on stopping the HPV vaccine mandate and drew national attention for our efforts. First time blogs ever affected legislative action in Illinois."

There is little doubt that blogs were an important part of the discussion in Illinois about legislation requiring the HPV vaccine. More difficult to ascertain is whether the outcome would have been different without blogosphere involvement in the debate. What is clear, however, is that the online community introduced a frame that the media began reporting as news in itself. But neither the bloggers nor the state media developed their chosen frames on their own. Both groups tapped into already existing memes, and indeed, rather than initiating their own controversy, tapped into an already growing one at the national level.

Kentucky: Keeping the Doors Open

Toward the end of February 2007, the Kentucky blogosphere took on a piece of legislation that would have, as the *Lexington Herald-Leader* later reported, "allowed a few legislators to make laws in secrecy under the guise of producing a budget" ("Legislative to-do, not-to-do list," 2007).

On an earlier date, the same paper had described the bill as "arcane, legalistic and procedural. But what it essentially says is that when a few powerful House and Senate members get together to hammer out the final details of the budget that, in addition to fiddling with appropriations, they can change anything that's been passed that session" ("Last March, most legislators," 2007). How the issue ended up a major story in a

leading state newspaper is a good example of Miller and Riechert's spiral of opportunity at work online.

Emergence

In mid-February 2007, a blog called *Kentucky Progress* posted an entry with the title, "Battle for Kentucky Constitution in Frankfort," (2007). The post directed readers' attention to a bill set for a vote that day. The item was unequivocal in its opposition to the proposed legislation and suggested that the "favorite trick" of the legislator who had introduced it, Representative Harry Moberly, was to "sneak permanent laws into budget bills, a practice the Constitution prohibits" ("Battle for Kentucky constitution, 2007).

There was animosity in the presentation of the legislation and toward the legislator promoting it. There was also an explicit call for readers to "stop this kind of abuse now," by which was meant not allowing legislative committees to meet behind closed doors and overturn legislation that had been passed previously by the entire body of legislators ("Battle for Kentucky constitution, 2007).

It was not until two days after the post on Kentucky Progress that the *Lexington Herald-Leader* reported on the legislation at all. In fact, one of the first comments in response to the February 13 post focused on this fact, saying "You're the only one reporting on this... Keep it up because this is a horrible, horrible bill" ("Battle for Kentucky constitution, 2007).

When the paper did begin reporting on the bill, it connected HB 184 to an issue from the previous legislative session, noting that in March 2006 "most legislators, many reporters, some ordinary citizens and, from time to time, the governor sat outside a closed door guarded by state troopers as a few people made law in secret for all of Kentucky," ("Last March, most legislators, many reporters, some ordinary citizens..., 2007).

According to the *Herald-Leader*, the issue of secrecy in budget negotiations, had been a politically volatile one during the legislative session the year before. Nevertheless, research here suggests *Kentucky Progress* was the first to point to the legislation in the new session. These facts are important when considering definition of the problem in the media.

Definition/Conflict

Referring to the legislation in a later article, the *Lexington Herald-Leader* framed it as an old issue in new clothes indicating this was a repeat effort by the bill's promoters: "Some leading lawmakers are *again* [emphasis added] pushing a controversial measure that would make it easier for a handful of legislators to effectively change state law without first having a public debate" (Stamper, "Lawmakers try to bypass public debate," 2007). The legislation was introduced into an environment already negatively predisposed to condemning efforts to allow closed-door budget meetings.

The question at the core of the round of policy debate launched by *Kentucky Progress* was revisiting the issue of whether legislators had the authority to use the budget process to establish new laws. It was a question already under consideration by the state supreme court at the time of the bill's proposal (Stamper, "Committee rejects measure," 2007). As the *Herald-Leader* observed sarcastically, "The bill's champions... say it's really a simple matter, a way of setting things straight because courts can't seem to understand this is the way laws are supposed to be made" ("Last March, most legislators," 2007). But as another critic observed, the legislation would have the effect of stripping committees of any influence over the budget process (Stamper, "Budget secrecy bill faces broad opposition," 2007).

Concerning the distinction between “emergence” and “definition/conflict” in this incident, the record suggests the frames, definitions, and lines of battle were drawn long before this particular bill was introduced, but it was the blog that introduced HB 184 to readers and activists who were likely to react strongly to the bill’s content. Again, dynamics of Miller and Riechert’s spiral of opportunity are at play.

Resonance

When the issue of secrecy emerged in connection with Representative Moberly’s proposed legislation, it tapped into lingering anger from the year before when the legislature had met behind closed doors under the guard of state troopers because of the crowds gathered to express their displeasure at the secret discussions. The issues were pre-defined. For bloggers and the media, it was just a question of reactivating an already-familiar debate. And once re-introduced it resonated.

This fresh attempt to block public knowledge of debates on budget and other policy issues rang hollow with voters in Kentucky. In covering HB 184, more than one news outlet alluded to the previous year when there had been turmoil as the budget committee met in private sessions, guarded by state troopers and with voters and even the governor standing outside the meeting room awaiting the results. Indeed, as the *Herald-Leader* noted, “in recent years, lawmakers have increasingly been using the [budget] bill to make permanent changes to the state’s statutes” (Stamper, “Lawmakers try to bypass public debate,” 2007).

That was exactly the frame promoted by the blog *Kentucky Progress* and its first mention of the new legislation was like blood in the water for readers who were disappointed to see the issue resurrected from the year before. It is consistent with Miller and Riechert’s discussion of frame resonance.

Equilibrium/Resolution

As the preceding discussion indicates, a blog, some editorials and a bit of sunlight led to the death of a bill that made a lot of enemies pretty quickly. Although HB 184 was withdrawn, “some of its key elements resurfaced in HB 228...” (“Legislative to-do, not-to-do list”, 2007). The *Lexington Herald-Leader* kept tabs on the bill and its reincarnations once alerted to it by the blog *Kentucky Progress*. This fits nicely into Miller and Riechert’s template for equilibrium in the framing process.

A week later reporting on HB 228, the *Lexington Herald-Leader* reported that the committee had rejected a, “measure allowing budget bill secrecy,” noting that a secrecy amendment had been withdrawn from yet another bill, HB 400. This suggests that although the initial offending piece of legislation was killed, the issue did not die with it and a major state newspaper was dedicating its resources to following the trail of the secrecy-driven legislation.

In late March, the issue was still around. As the *Herald-Leader* reported, “a senate committee turned back a third attempt yesterday to pass a measure that would make it easier for a handful of legislators to effectively change the law without first holding a public debate,” (Stamper, “Committee rejects measure,” 2007).

After the bill’s defeat one state senator said, “I think the public still wants to have full access, as much as possible, to these budget meetings. I just didn’t want to legitimize a smoke-filled room and a closed-door meeting” (Stamper, “Committee rejects measure,” 2007). If he were a reader of *Kentucky Progress*, he would have found the same sentiment expressed there. In explaining his position in the fight for openness in the budget process, he was preaching to the choir. In fact, the choir was positioned to play back up as needed.

Discussion

While the *Lexington Herald-Leader's* coverage of the issue undoubtedly had an impact on the final outcome, the blog *Kentucky Progress* does seem to have initiated the discussion in 2007. In fact, without consciously doing so, the blogosphere shepherded debate about the proposal through all four stages of Miller and Riechert's spiral of opportunity. And the outcome was ultimately one favorable to the blog's authors and readers.

This incident from Kentucky shows the bloggers and the state media working in tandem – whether intentionally or not. Given surveys cited earlier indicating that journalists often mine blogs for story ideas combined with the timeline of events in this situation, it seems reasonable to suggest that *Kentucky Progress* actually introduced the issue of HB 184 and secrecy more generally into political discussion in mid-February. The *Herald-Leader*, taking its lead from the blogs, took the issue and ran with it through the resolution of the cycle. The blogosphere also continued to track the matter, referring often to media coverage of developments, until the last piece of related legislation was killed.

Ultimately, however, both the blog and the newspaper were promoting the same frames and working toward the same end. The fact that the issue in question was one with almost universal opposition and a history from the year before helped feed the synergy between two groups (bloggers and state media) not often favorably disposed toward one another. But it is worth noting that although the order of events suggests the blog initiated the discussion, the newspaper never acknowledged the blog as the impetus for its coverage. Interestingly, Miller and Riechert's writings about the spiral of opportunity did not anticipate the possibility that the media responsible for initiating

discussion might never get credit for it. That adds a new level of complexity to consideration of Miller and Riechert's four-stage process.

Louisiana: Internet Kooks Intervene

Louisiana's former governor, Mike Foster, used to refer to him as an "Internet kook" (Elie, 2005), but C.B. Forgotston, proprietor of Forgotston.com is more than just an opinionated blogger. He has real-world experience in the world of Louisiana politics. An attorney by training, Forgotston has served as everything from legislative counsel for the state legislature to lobbyist for Louisiana's statewide business advocacy organization. So although frequently dismissed as a curmudgeon, Forgotston is often sought out by the state's traditional media, its conservative talk show circuit, and other bloggers for insight into what is happening in Baton Rouge.

Sophisticated and cynical, Forgotston chooses his issues carefully. The result is when he raises an issue, it is almost certain to get an airing in Louisiana's political circles. His blog is a simple, single-author operation devoid of all the usual bells and whistles and commercial efforts to monetize his expertise. But Forgotston has an email list and when he has something to say his subscribers hear about it.

The case study presented here examines the result of Forgotston's observations about a piece of legislation awaiting signature from the governor. What happened immediately following passage of the bill in question is a clear-cut example of how the Internet has begun to impact politics at the state level.

Emergence

In mid-June 2006, Forgotston drew attention to legislation that had just passed the state legislature with near unanimous support from both sides of the aisle. The bill, HB 1028, was designed to provide coverage of health insurance premiums for current, future

and recently retired legislators and their families. His introduction of the issue was simple, “Take a look at your own monthly health insurance premium,” he suggested. “Think about how big of a perk it would be if the taxpayers of LA picked up 75% of that premium for the rest of your life” (Forgotston, “Leges continue to reward themselves,” 2006).

Once Forgetston posted his comments online, the emergence of opposition to HB 1028 was rapid. In May 2006 before passage, the bill’s sponsor, Hoppy Hopkins had declared, “If we don’t do something, we’re going to end up with no one down here but rich people” (“Briefs,” 2006). The statement came in the context of concerns that retired lawmakers would not be able to afford health insurance if it were not subsidized by the state and that as a result, only rich people would run for public office. This quote, however, resurrected after the fact, earned Hopkins little sympathy from Louisiana blogosphere and talk radio audiences.

HB 1028 had passed out of the legislature with broad bipartisan support (87-5 in the House, 33-2 in the Senate). As mentioned above, bill was designed to ensure that the state would pay 75 percent of the health insurance premium for legislators and their families for life. The bill had received little coverage in the state’s major media with the exception of minor mention in newspaper legislative round-ups. Consistent with Miller and Riechert’s spiral of opportunity, Forgetston’s blog post was responsible for introducing the idea of opposition to HB 1028.

On Monday, June 19, 2006, the day of the bill’s passage, Forgetston posted a comment on his blog decrying passage of the bill and observing that the “leges continue to reward themselves” (Forgetston, “Leges continue to reward themselves,” 2006). Several other websites picked up on the story. Then, a statewide radio talk show raised

the issue, with the host expressing dismay at the bill and urging people to call the Governor's Office demanding the bill's veto (Griffon, 2006).

House Bill 1028 was headed to the desk of then-Governor Kathleen Blanco for her signature. The next day *The Times-Picayune* reported, "lawmakers have voted themselves and their former colleagues a substantial perk" (Anderson, "Lawmakers approve insurance perk bill," 2006). *The Advocate* also reported on the bill's passage (Shuler, "Proposal provides healthy perk," 2006). Both articles referred to the bill's unknown, but likely substantial costs. But there was no mention of any organized opposition to the bill.

On June 21, after opposition to the bill had been online for two news cycles and in major state media, *The Times-Picayune* ran an editorial condemning the bill, calling it "a self-serving piece of legislation that harms the public interest" ("No time for new perks," 2006). *The Advocate* followed the next day with an editorial calling for the governor to veto HB 1028, noting "At a time when so many Louisianans struggle with health-care costs, it's appalling that the Legislature would ask taxpayers to pay for most of the cost of health insurance for some term-limited legislators" ("Veto perk for legislators," 2006).

Consistent with Miller and Reichert's spiral of opportunity, events concerning HB 1028 were picked up by the traditional media. However, the timeline indicates that it was blogs that first raised the issue.

Definition/Conflict

The quick emergence of this issue can be attributed to long-standing public cynicism about the work of the Louisiana state legislature. *The Advocate's* editorial came on the same day that Gannett's state capitol reporter announced that in excess of 400

people had called the governor's office encouraging her to veto the bill (Hill, "Legislative benefit hits roadblock," 2006).

That same article noted that the chair of the House Republican caucus had earlier been on talk radio "saying he saw the need for offering continuing health care benefits as a means of recruiting candidates to run for the Legislature" ("Legislative benefit hits roadblock," 2006). In other words, the Republican leader had defended the bill on air.

But that same leader, Hill reported, "said the Republican leadership took another look at the bill after receiving all the protest phone calls" (Hill, "Legislative benefit hits roadblock," 2006). "It just got past us," he was quoted as saying in *The Advocate* ("GOP urges veto of term-limit perk," Shuler, 2006). Clearly the political leadership could see how the issue was resonating with the public.

The same day state Republicans were scrambling to get their message straight, the Democrats were involved in similar struggles. The chair of the state Democratic party also called on the governor to veto the bill (New Orleans CityBusiness, 2006).

The timeline of events here is short: Passage of the bill took place on June 19. Forgotston posted his opinion about it on his blog that day. *The Advocate* and *The Times-Picayune* reported the bill's passage the next day, but it was another news cycle before any commentary opposed to the bill began to surface in the press. By then, the issue had been online for at least two news cycles and talk radio was already encouraging listeners to stop the bill by contacting the Governor's Office and expressing their opinion. Reports indicate that hundreds of people were calling and emailing the Governor's Office to express their displeasure with the bill.

In terms of resonance as Miller and Riechert understand it, HB 1028 tapped into Louisiana's long-standing voter dissatisfaction with its legislators and, for many, was

proof of legislators taking better care of themselves than their constituents. It was an issue tailor-made for the state's conservative-leaning political blogosphere. The fact that many people in the state could not afford their own health insurance also probably aided in the resonance of opposition to the bill.

Resonance

Recognizing that people were agitated about HB 1028, as was evident from a short listen to the radio or checking in on the blogosphere, the chairman of the House Republican Caucus felt compelled to defend, on talk radio, his delegation's vote in support of the bill. Then, perhaps alarmed by the apparent universality of opposition to the bill, this same legislative leader reappeared on talk radio the next day to revise his position and to report that the Republican delegation had sent a letter to the governor asking her to veto the bill that they had helped pass. Democratic leadership also asked the governor to veto the bill – the same bill that had originally passed by a margin of 87 to 5 and 33 to 2 in the House and Senate respectively.

In the meantime, reports suggested the Governor's Office was receiving hundreds of calls urging her to veto HB 1028. Information about contacting Governor Blanco was on the air and online all week. Eventually the state Democratic Party began urging the governor's veto. The state's traditional media did not weigh in against the bill until two news cycles after the issue had first appeared on Forgotston.com. Not long after the Democratic Party of Louisiana reversed its position on the bill.

Because one blogger had raised the issue, the governor was barraged with input from voters asking her to veto a bill that had sailed through the legislature with broad, bipartisan support. This is a good example of Miller and Riechert's spiral of opportunity at work in the blogosphere.

Equilibrium/Resolution

What started on Monday ended by Thursday when the governor vetoed HB 1028 saying she had heard the people “loud and clear” (Blanco, 2006). On June 23, *The Times-Picayune* reported the governor’s veto of the bill, noting that it had “become a focal point of criticism in newspaper editorials and fodder for talk radio hosts,” (Anderson, “Blanco vetoes lawmaker health coverage bill,” 2006). But this report failed to mention the origins of the outrage concerning the bill -- outrage that had begun online before any of the state press had reported public dissatisfaction with the bill. Only John Hill, writing for Louisiana’s Gannett publications, attributed the outrage to “talk radio and Internet political Web sites,” noting that the brouhaha resulted in more than 700 calls to the governor’s office (Hill, “Lawmaker health bill killed,” 2006).

Public displeasure grew as legislators scurried to explain their position for and against the bill at varying legislative stages. Those who could change their vote for the official record – a unique characteristic of the Louisiana Legislature -- did so. Initial votes on HB 1028, however, did haunt some legislators as they ran for re-election or higher office in fall 2007. Although the bill was dead in June 2006, fallout continued as legislative elections and references to HB 1028 and the efforts of legislators to distance themselves from their original vote continued to appear online (Courreges, 2006).

This tempest in the proverbial Louisiana political teacup serves as a compelling example of how the blogosphere is, at a minimum, becoming part of the political equation when it comes to politics in state capitals. In this case, the blogosphere raised an issue before traditional media outlets did. The issue, once raised online and over the airwaves, caused such public outcry that elected officials had no choice but to respond

and the state media had to somehow report about what had transpired -- even if it was after the fact. Interestingly just one reporter gave credit to blogs for launching the discussion.

Discussion

All but one of the state's mainstream press references to the bill and its veto failed to mention the role of the Internet in raising the issue. In fact, an editorial in *The Times-Picayune* credited the press with raising the issue, saying "once the press and public figured out that the Legislature had overwhelmingly supported the self-serving bill, it instantly became too hot to handle" (Grace, 2006). But this opinion piece makes no reference to the mechanism through which the issue became "too hot to handle."

An editorial in the *Monroe News-Star* observed, "State Rep. Hoppy Hopkins, D-Oil City, said it's difficult for some legislators to get insurance after they leave office. Well, welcome to a little place known as reality. Citizens who never served in the Legislature also find insurance unaffordable or difficult to obtain. Louisiana needs health-care reform and more health-care coverage. We don't think the idea is to take care of lawmakers first. Citizens quickly got involved and made their voices heard loud and clear. They made a real difference" ("Our View, Monroe (LA) News-Star, June 2006). This is what resonance looks like when it hits a nerve, regardless of where it starts.

Ultimately reporting on the governor's veto, Louisiana's Gannett News capitol reporter noted, "Bowing to public outcry and legislators who flip-flopped on the issue, Gov. Kathleen Blanco on Thursday vetoed the bill that would have granted lifetime health-care benefits to some term-limited legislators. The governor vetoed House Bill 1028 by Rep. Roy "Hoppy" Hopkins, D-Oil City, that provided for the state to pay 75 percent of the premiums of those departing legislators elected in 1995 or thereafter who

had opted for the coverage for at least 10 years. Although only 10 of the 69 term-limited legislators were even eligible, public outrage generated by talk radio and Internet political Web sites generated more than 700 calls of protest to the governor's office" (Hill, "Lawmaker health bill killed," 2006). Again it was the Gannett reporter who attributed any influence to the blogosphere.

Perhaps most intriguing about the press coverage of HB 1028 and the bill's demise is that the incident had almost played out entirely before the press began reporting opposition to the bill. The state's traditional media was left to play catch up and only one member of that group even alluded to that fact.

Another way of considering this incident from a research perspective is to recognize that trying to follow the series of events regarding HB 1028 is not possible using LexisNexis and other electronic databases. That is not because one cannot get access, but rather, because there is nothing to find. The state's mainstream media was behind the curve from the moment Forgotston posted the first comment on his website. This incident serves as a good example of how the blogosphere, bypassing the traditional news networks in Louisiana, has had a discernible impact on politics in the state.

Only Louisiana's Gannett news service gave credit to alternative media, and even then, the inclination was to credit talk radio. However, research conducted for this study suggests that while talk radio helped amplify Forgotston's initial message, it was Forgotston's posting of his concerns on his blog that initiated statewide discussion. Although Forgotston has never sought credit for his role in the incident, analysis of the order of events suggests it was Forgotston who got the HB 1028 veto rolling.

This incident did not involve competing frames between the bloggers and state media. Instead, it involved the presentation of facts in a particular online context, not

fully reported by the state media until after the fact, and even then, reluctance on the part of the media to attribute much influence to the bloggers for their role in initiating the discussion. The governor never acknowledged Forgotston or the blogosphere either. Her only reference was to the people of Louisiana whom she had heard “loud and clear” (Blanco, 2006).

Miller and Riechert’s four stages of framing are all met in this Louisiana case study. More than that, the scenario seems a good illustration of Shirky’s discussion of the arrival of news coverage surrounding an event. He writes, “Indeed, the news media can end up covering the story *because* [emphasis in original] something has broken into public consciousness via other means” (Shirky, 2008, 65). That statement and the lessons gleaned from this case study provide interesting new perspectives on previous literature about newsmaking (Cook, 1989; Gitlin, 2003; Tuchman, 1972 1978; Schudson, 1978, 1995, 2003), framing, and the role of the Internet in politics.

Concluding Thoughts

Although every state’s political environment is unique, some variables are consistent across states and many of these variables have been visible since the first studies of bloggers at the national level were released years ago. First, as these case studies suggest, the Internet has become a useful tool for fighting old political battles. As the survey data presented earlier indicated, bloggers are not new political activists, but rather, a blogging is a new outlet for people who are already politically involved.

Second, not only is there tension between bloggers and the people targeted in their online efforts; there is also lingering animosity between a state’s traditional media and online activists or bloggers. Sometimes this animosity is explicit. Other times it is more subtle, resulting in omission of the online environment in post-incident reporting.

These three case studies selected for examination here suggest that established state media outlets are reluctant to attribute influence to bloggers. The only thing state media seem willing to acknowledge is that the bloggers make a lot of noise and sometimes make some mistakes. When bloggers get something wrong, the media is quick to report it.

It seems clear that established state media outlets do not view state-focused bloggers as “one of them.” But the feeling is mutual: Neither do state-focused bloggers see themselves as part of the state media establishment. Indeed, one of their primary goals is to critique the coverage produced by state media establishments.

One senses this animosity toward the traditional media is because media organizations nationwide have come to be viewed as part of the power structure rather than as unbiased outsiders representing the common man. This is a dynamic that Miller and Riechert could not have anticipated. One can infer from the language bloggers use about asserting their rights, influencing votes, and overturning legislation that they see themselves as activists and as more properly representative of the voting public which has, in bloggers’ opinion, been misrepresented by the traditional media for too long.

More broadly, these case studies seem to confirm Shirky’s observation that “getting the free and ready participation of a large, distributed group with a variety of skills – detective work, legal advice, insider information from the police to the army – has gone from impossible to simple” (18). Continuing with this line of reasoning, Shirky notes, and the case studies presented here indicate, “the difficulties that kept self-assembled groups from working together are shrinking, meaning that the number and kinds of things groups can get done without financial motivation or managerial oversight are growing” (22).

Shirky, in his discussion of group formation, also points to the fact that before the age of interactive media and the Internet it would have been difficult for people to discover others who shared their view on a given political issue, “much less [be] able to do anything with that information. Now, however, the cost of finding like-minded people has been lowered and, more important, deprofessionalized” (63).

Well-known examples of blogs’ impact on national politics – Howard Dean’s presidential campaign, Trent Lott’s removal from senate leadership, and George Allen’s re-election failure following the “Macaca Incident” -- are just a few examples of how groups are forming online for the purpose of achieving political goals or at least promoting political discussion and then disassembling as the groups’ goals are met or changed. This is consistent with Bimber’s argument that the new availability of information can change established political equations. These case studies only hint at it, but the impact on politics is likely to be profound.

CONCLUSIONS

Recognizing that most of the work describing the impact of blogs on politics in the United States had been conducted at the national level, this research set out to provide a first look at state-focused bloggers and their impact on politics at the state level around the country. The collection and analysis of information concerning state-focused blogs and bloggers has yielded a rich variety of data that, for the first time, begin shedding light on a busy world operating beneath the radar of the national media and academic studies of A-list blogs.

This preliminary study of state-focused bloggers has found a vibrant universe of bloggers at the state level. It has found that many of the same dynamics recognized to be at play among national blogs, traditional media and the American political system are also at play at the state level. But while the snapshot of state blogs provided here suggests that each state blogosphere shares many characteristics with both the national blogosphere and with the blogospheres of other states, each state has unique players in the form of bloggers, political actors and established media outlets.

The analysis presented in earlier chapters, using Miller and Riechert's spiral of opportunity model as a guide, provided multiple examples of state blogs operating in unique political systems. Both the differences and the similarities that emerge from the analysis are striking. But it is important to remember that the data collected for this study represent only a small part of the world of state-focused bloggers and their characteristics. It would be inappropriate to infer too much about the general nature of state-focused bloggers from the limited information provided here. Still, this study offers a good starting point for learning about the people blogging about politics at the state level.

Putting the Findings in Context

The results presented here suggest multiple opportunities for future research, some of it continuing to use the data collected for this study. Those possibilities are discussed at the end of this chapter. But the study presented here has sought to address three questions about state-focused political blogs:

RQ1: Who are the people creating blogs focused on state politics?

RQ2: What motivates these people to initiate and maintain their blogs?

RQ3: Do these blogs play a discernible role in a given state's politics? And if so, how?

Through analysis of data collected in a nationwide online survey, the first outlines of the profile of state-focused bloggers began to appear. Three case studies then examined different blogs operating in three different states to analyze possible examples of blogs having an impact on politics in a particular state. What follows are observations drawn from the results presented in preceding chapters. The implications of these findings stretch in multiple directions and are broken into nine categories for discussion below.

Audience, Public Sphere and Democratic Discourse

There is something interesting about the states and the dynamics therein which seem to allow bloggers easy access to both information and an audience. Whether the blogger is just a “little guy” with a passion for politics or a “knowledgeable outsider” with real expertise to apply, blogs are compiling and distributing politically-relevant information in ways not before seen at the state level.

While it is tempting to point to this as a modern manifestation of Habermas's public sphere – and indeed, many have -- actual results considered here suggest a more nuanced reality. The interactive technology and easy accessibility of blogs have

produced an environment where anyone who wants a soapbox has one available to him. But this is no guarantee of democratic engagement. As Lippmann, Schudson and Delli Carpini and others have argued, the availability of information does not necessarily lead to political knowledge, engagement or influence.

Incidents uncovered in this research suggest that rather than being drivers of the modern equivalent of the public sphere, blogs, when in the hand of an informed and motivated citizen, are more reasonably described as good illustrations of Bimber's arguments about information revolutions and their ability to disrupt existing institutions. In this case it is both political and media institutions at the state level that are affected.

The periods of disruption in business-as-usual in these institutions do not necessarily lead to dramatic political upheaval, but it is likely that changes in the availability and distribution of political information will have an impact on democratic discourse in the long run. This is the sentiment contained in Thomas Jefferson's observation that "information is the currency of democracy." Considered in that context, perhaps this study of blogs would be better considered an analysis of an emerging currency in a changing economy.

Blogger Characteristics

This study's findings about the bloggers themselves are consistent with earlier studies concerning political tendencies and party affiliations. According to the data presented here, state-focused bloggers tend to lean both liberal and Democratic. Despite that, the Illinois case study presented here focused on conservative-leaning blogs and their impact on political discourse at the state, and eventually even at the national level.

The two other case studies considered blogs where, although the blog itself typically had a distinct political orientation (Louisiana's being conservative and

Kentucky's less so) – the incident in question dealt more with issues of good government than partisan politics. Interestingly, in the case of Illinois where the tone of debate was much more partisan, direct evidence of blog impact on the outcome is harder to identify.

Interestingly, the demographic data associated with state-focused bloggers examined here differed considerably from earlier studies of bloggers at the national level (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Rainie & Horrigan, 2007). At the state level, bloggers in the sample examined here were more likely to be male, over 35, holders of at least a 4-year degree and employed full-time than bloggers identified in other studies.

Given the sampling methods use here, it is inappropriate to draw firm conclusions about the exact make up of state bloggers. However, given that this is the first study dedicated to examining state-focused bloggers and their blogs, these findings are worth noting and deserve consideration in future research about state blogger demographics.

Limited State Media Resources

As has been established elsewhere, the decline of traditional media resources dedicated to coverage of state politics has left a vacuum into which other media forms have leapt (Rowley & Kurpius, 2005). Add to this the fact that many state legislatures are part-time, that fewer reporters are assigned to state capitols, and that financial difficulties beset the news industry as a whole, and it becomes likely that some legislation will slip through the process and the newsnet without a careful read by anyone but the drafter or those with special interest in its contents.

Because traditional media outlets at the state level do not and cannot track hundreds of pieces of legislation through a session, this leaves space for a blogger, whether the “little guy” with passion for politics or a “knowledgeable outsider” with special insight into the situation, to jump into the fray. The three case studies discussed

here illustrated several ways in which blogs can engage in the state-level political process.

Although bloggers do not have the resources to replace detailed state media coverage, they do have, as noted earlier, tenacity. That tenacity often translates into regular coverage of a particular issue or politician or piece of legislation. The blogger's focus may be on only one item of hundreds, but that blogger may be promoting the most interesting, informed or controversial discussion available about the subject, thus attracting readers and perhaps having an impact on political outcomes. However, it is clear that blogs could not wield influence without the traditional media also playing a role in the communications ecosystem. What this study's results suggest is that blogs can play an intermedia agenda setting role – not that blogs can set the agenda all by themselves.

States as Policy Labs

Another implication of reduced media coverage of state politics and the implications thereof pertains to the increasingly important role of states as policy laboratories (Volden, 2006). As Rowley and Kurpius write, the decline in coverage “is important because more and more power has shifted from the federal government to the states. Policies and laws that most affect the public increasingly are being determined at the state level” (Rowley & Kurpius, 2005, 168). While those words were written to illustrate the importance of statewide-level CSPAN-like networks, those same words are equally applicable to state-focused bloggers monitoring politics in a given state.

Given the growing role of states as laboratories for federal policy (Berry & Berry, 1990; Volden, 2006), the impact of a blogger weighing in during the early stages of state-level policy debate could potentially impact future national policy on that issue. If state-

focused political blogs are impacting political outcomes at the state level, as the research presented here suggests, then these bloggers also have the potential to effect federal policy. Imagine what might have happened had blogs been involved in discussion of Texas education policies that eventually came to be known nationally as No Child Left Behind. The impact of those tinkering bloggers might ultimately have been felt nationwide.

Failure to Attribute

Using the terminology of Miller and Riechert (2001) the failure to attribute emergence of an issue to the online environment is increasingly difficult for the traditional media to justify whether at the national or state level. As surveys mentioned earlier in this study suggest, journalists around the country increasingly turn to blogs for news, sources and spin (Arketi, 2007; Euro RSCG Magnet, 2005). Of course, it is impossible to confirm the emergence of every frame of every political debate in the media. But whether they get credit for it or not, bloggers may already be affecting, however indirectly, political outcomes in the state and state media is not yet recording it.

State media may regularly neglect to mention the role of blogs in political debate in a given state, but in the long run, those ignored bloggers could also have a significant impact in national political outcomes. As the three case studies presented here demonstrated, traditional state media outlets can be reluctant to acknowledge the impact of the online environment. At a minimum, this raises the question of whether, if “the revolution will be posted” as was suggested by *The New York Times* (2004), it will actually be covered in the mainstream press?

Big Fish, Small Pond Effect

As the case studies presented here demonstrated, it is possible for bloggers to become a “big fish” in the “small pond” of state politics by developing a readership, nurturing a trademark issue and sometimes just by showing up. The smaller scale of the state environment and the correspondingly smaller number of political players may make it easier – relative to the national stage --for bloggers to develop relationships and to get attention from opinion leaders in both media and politics across the state.

As Charney and Greenberg observed in their study of uses and gratifications theory applied to the Internet (2002), many of the same factors identified when that theory first appeared are proving equally relevant to study of online behavior. With that as background, one surmises that ease of insinuation into the environment and the possibility of becoming political players themselves may also be a motivating factor behind bloggers and their behavior. It is also equally possible that bloggers blog for no more nefarious reason than that they just have something to say, and with a blog, now have a place to say it.

As a corollary, the smaller scale of the state political environment may yield a sense of satisfaction with outcomes or sense of political efficacy as a result of having joined in the public debate. Many of the blogs examined in this study had been mentioned in their respective states’ media on multiple occasions. One surmises it is easier to get attention at the state level than at the national level. It may also be easier to have a tangible impact on outcomes. But as these case studies have illustrated, that does not necessarily translate into getting credit for having influenced the process.

Sensitivity to Constituent Input

While elected officials in Washington may be accustomed to frequent interactions with constituents and are familiar with the work of interest groups lobbying both directly and through the public, it is likely that officials at the state level are more sensitive to a campaign directed at defeating a piece of legislation or pressing leadership to act in a particular fashion. They are also almost certainly less prepared to deal with a blog swarm.

As a case in point, the Louisiana legislation designed to provide health benefit premiums for all legislators for life yielded far more (hundreds) than the normal (dozens) volume of correspondence between the Governor's Office and the public. While a Member of Congress would note an influx of calls or emails on a given issue, the raw number of individual contacts as a percentage of constituency necessary to cause a ripple in the decision-making process is probably much lower for officials at the state level. In other words, the tolerance of state officials for constituent input is likely to be lower than that of officials at the national level.

Because such citizen engagement is often rare at the state level, when it does emerge, it can serve as a powerful force. Moreover, on the public relations front, if the target office is not prepared for the sudden onslaught of attention, their initial reaction to the blogswarm can aggravate a situation rather than put it to rest. And as Boxer noted (2008), the blogosphere is "at its best" when bloggers are the underdogs kicking upward.

Unaccustomed Attention for Uncommon Players

A dynamic similar to constituent sensitivity is lack of preparation to deal with major media. When a blog swarm erupts, it can catch many an unsuspecting official in

its buzz. There may suddenly be national media monitoring every word in addition to the blogger whose posts somehow initiated all the attention.

The media attention may be harsh and come without warning to a usually-overlooked corner of state government or to glossed-over language in legislative processes. For these usually quiet offices in the state capitol, a blog swarm can bring much higher volumes of attention to their operations than that to which they are normally accustomed. The usual lack of scrutiny increases the likelihood that the blog swarm will unearth less-than-perfect behavior, decisions, spending habits and with all this, thrust into the spotlight a spokesperson unaccustomed to the intense attention and subsequent media coverage. Few operations can fare well under such conditions.

But it is from those conditions that some of the “victories” of state-focused bloggers are often won. If sunlight is the best disinfectant, as suggested by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, then blogs and the bloggers behind them may be the scouring powder of state politics, sparing no delicate areas and often rubbing people and the system the wrong way and leaving a mark or two in the process.

Identification of Trade-Offs

The relatively small scale of state budgets compared to the national budget means it may be easier to track funding through the budget at the state level. Given that state budget documents are rarely given careful public scrutiny, when a blogger identifies questionable funding or even the existence of questionable funding recipients it is easier for people with knowledge of the process to trace the funding streams. It is also easier for opponents of certain budget decisions to point to the frivolity of a questionable program while simultaneously profiling the work of an over-performing but under-funded office hiding somewhere else in the state government. Perhaps the “guns for butter”

debate can be more potent at the state level simply because the sums in questions are more manageable and the decision-makers are closer to home – and as discussed above, more sensitive to constituent input.

Beyond the Basics

So far, this discussion has focused on possible explanations for the findings resulting from analysis of state-focused blogger data. The section below outlines a research agenda for further pursuing these lines of inquiry.

Prospects for Future Research

There is more work to be done with the state-focused blogger data introduced in this research, despite the data's limitation as discussed elsewhere. For example, regression analysis of bloggers and their characteristics could yield outcomes linking certain characteristics to particular online political behavior. Such analysis is likely to identify differences in blogger behavior based on variables such as age, education, gender, race, political preferences and region of country.

In addition, when I targeted both state-focused bloggers *and* their readers I collected a great deal of data. Data concerning the readers have not been incorporated into the research presented here. Future research will exploit that additional data to profile the readers of state blogs and to assess whether and how the readers are different from the bloggers themselves.

The readers of political blogs are an interesting subject of study. The Pew Internet & American Life Project's reports on bloggers and those who use the Internet for political purposes are a good place to begin (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Rainie & Horrigan, 2006; Cornfield, 2005). But it would be useful to have more information about the political tendencies of the audience for political blogs. As mentioned earlier, the data set

for this research includes responses from 500 readers of state blogs. In a future project I intend to analyze state-blog readers just as the bloggers themselves have been studied here. Additional study would help shed light on whether bloggers tend to hold more extreme views than their readers and perhaps whether it is these views that attract readers in the first place. Although it would be inappropriate to infer too much from data representing just a small portion of political blog readers, analysis is nonetheless likely to lead to insights concerning political engagement, political efficacy, and the role of the Internet in American politics, especially at the state level.

Other research for which this data set will be used is analysis of state political bloggers' procedures for compiling and posting information. Preliminary information gathered in the survey suggests a range of patterns in the behavior (read: norms and routines) of bloggers as they prepare information to post online. The question of a blogger posting Senator Barack Obama's off-the-record comments at a San Francisco fundraiser recently framed these issues in leitmotif. How bloggers' different methods can lead to sometimes controversial outcomes is a subject deserving more analysis.

Issues of ethics are also implied in the data gathered here. Responses to questions about which Society of Professional Journalists' principles bloggers find either most important or least important suggest that while bloggers may commit occasional acts of journalism, the tenets of journalism and journalistic practices are not necessarily important to them. After all, as the twenty-first century media maxim goes, "Information wants to be free" and bloggers continue developing their arguments to justify decisions to publish information when it is available, regardless of possible consequences. More detailed discussion of bloggers' rationale and the impact it has on the news and political ecosystems is needed.

In addition, although the state-level blogosphere is a long way from Habermas' idealized public sphere, state-focused bloggers seem to appreciate the potential for interaction and even organization online. And they tend to exploit that capacity. The implications of this for both journalism and civic life in the United States are worth further study. Shirky (2008) and Bruns and Jacobs (2006) are approaching these issues at an oblique angle when they discuss the implications of the disappearance of consumer-producer relationships in the mass media context. Analysis of the evolution of other two-way dynamics (ie. mass versus micro communication, reporter versus reader, etc.) is also needed.

Also related to the issue of definitions of journalism is the question of access. If bloggers are indeed committing random acts of journalism or, at a minimum, are determined to seek the truth and report it, then when it comes to the issue of press passes and access for members of media, should bloggers be granted similar access? Bloggers are being issued press credentials for the major political parties' nominating conventions for example, but what about access to state legislatures? Must bloggers stand in the gallery with the tourists or can states offer bloggers an opportunity for the same access as print and television media?

Failure to offer such access to bloggers who have established reputations for themselves online could produce more trouble than it is worth for reluctant state officials. The calculation states may be faced with is whether it is easier for the clerk of the house or senate to issue bloggers credentials within certain set limits or if it is preferable to risk the potential cyber uproar if bloggers are not granted equal access. Observers of blogs at both the national and state levels can agree on at least one thing: One of political bloggers' chief characteristics is tenacity. Their track record indicates they are

disinclined to hold back when they perceive an injustice. Almost certainly the keepers of these “little first amendment machines” will be unlikely to let such perceived oversights go unnoticed, particularly when much of the work they do centers around media criticism. Ironically, equal access for bloggers could lead to improved impressions of traditional media. After all, how could bloggers continue criticizing the traditional media if the bloggers themselves cannot perform any better when given the same access?

Additional research could also shed further light on the socialization of bloggers and why they are different from the general United States population, Internet users, or people who use the Internet just to acquire political information. In the tradition of Schudson, Verba and others, bloggers deserve closer analysis to ascertain why they become active online as well as what other characteristics separate them from the general population even before they venture online.

On another front, bloggers demonstrate a reasonable awareness of their audience. There is thus an opportunity for future research to focus on the development of opinion leadership and the evolution of blogs into regularly-checked sources for people who want information, regardless of whether it comes from an established media outlet. Savvy bloggers intent on having a political impact already seem to value quality over quantity when it comes to readership. According to the data presented here, many state-focused bloggers already recognize their potential to serve as opinion leaders. Future study of bloggers’ conscious efforts to exploit that leadership position is needed.

Another possible course of research would be additional in-depth case studies of incidents where state-focused blogs have had an impact on politics in a given state. This kind of study would further illustrate the extent to which many of the dynamics attributed to national blogs in American political environment have analogs in the realm of state

politics. Moreover, additional detailed case studies tracking the interaction among blogs, the media, politicians and the public would yield more information about the dynamics of intermedia agenda setting, something which studies to date already indicate is taking place. This work could be done to examine both state-level and national-level political blogs and the media and political ecosystems in which they operate.

Finally, while the general perception of the political blogosphere may be that it trends liberal rather conservative, and while the data presented here do not contradict that, the more important fact may be the opinions these bloggers share: That media bias is a problem, that the government is not moving in the right direction, and that without careful supervision elected leadership will fail to fully represent the people's interests. These frames are evident in the survey data, but also in the case studies where the assumption is that government and elected officials are poised to do something that is not in the best interest of the voters and that if exposed to sunlight the endeavor in question would be doomed to failure. Future study could look more closely at these recurring themes and develop a typology for political blogs, not unlike the work begun by McKenna and Pole in 2004.

Of course the data presented here are only a snapshot of what this collection of state-focused bloggers was thinking when they answered the survey. But this snapshot suggests that a profound dissatisfaction with the status quo with respect to the media and politics is driving much of the work that these bloggers are doing – much of it for no remuneration. The techniques and the outcomes may not be pretty, but these bloggers are putting what they believe into practice and they are disrupting the political environment in the process. What is more, they are proud of it.

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APPENDIX A: STATE BLOGGER SURVEY QUESTIONS

This survey was posted online at SurveyMonkey.com in June and July 2007.

Survey questions are designed to allow incorporation of existing knowledge about:

- Agenda-Setting Theory (AS)
- Theory of Uses & Gratifications (UG)
- Political Knowledge (PK)
- Political Efficacy (PE)
- Political Cynicism (PC)
- Norms & Routines (NR)
- Media Habits (MH)
- Characteristics of Bloggers (BC)
- Characteristics of Blog-Readers (BR)

Many of these questions are modeled on surveys conducted by others, including:

- Kaye (2005)
- Kaye (2007)
- Kaye & Johnson (2004, A Web for all reasons)
- Lee (2005)
- Lenhart & Fox (2006, Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet's New Storytellers)
- Louisiana Survey (2006)
- Nisbet & Scheufele (2004)

SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. ALL/PK -- Would you say things are generally going in the right direction in your state or do you think things are going in the wrong direction in your state?
 - Right Direction
 - Wrong Direction
 - Don't Know

2. ALL/PK -- How much attention do you pay to news specifically about state politics and public affairs from television, newspapers, radio or the internet?
 - A Great Deal
 - Quite a Bit
 - Some
 - Very Little
 - None

3. ALL/PK -- Where do you get most of your news about state public affairs and politics?
 - Television
 - Newspapers
 - Radio
 - Internet
 - Other

4. ALL/MH -- Thinking about the different kinds of news available to you, what do you prefer?
 - Getting news from sources that DON'T HAVE a particular political point of view
 - Getting news from sources that CHALLENGE your political point of view
 - Getting news from sources that SHARE your political point of view
 - Don't know

5. ALL/MH -- About how often do you go online?
 - Several times a day
 - About once a day
 - 3-5 days a week
 - 1-2 days a week
 - Every few weeks
 - Every few months
 - Less than every few months

6. ALL/MH -- Do you ever use the internet to do any of the following things?

a. MH -- Create a blog that others can read on the web

- Often
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever
- Never
- Don't know

b. MH -- Look online for news or information about politics or political campaigns

- Often
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever
- Never
- Don't know

c. MH/BR -- Read state-focused, politically-oriented blogs:

- Often
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever
- Never
- Don't know

d. MH/BR -- Post comments on state-focused, politically-oriented blogs:

- Often
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever
- Never
- Don't know

7. ALL/BR -- The state-focused, politically-oriented blogs I read the most are:

- Name up to three
(Fill in blanks)

8. ALL/UG -- Which of the following comes closest to describing why you go ONLINE to get news and information?

- Because getting information online is more CONVENIENT for me
- Because I can get information from a WIDER RANGE OF VIEWPOINTS on the Web
- Because I can get more IN DEPTH information on the Web
- Combination of the above
- Don't know

9. ALL/MH – Do you maintain your own state-focused, politically-oriented blog?

- Yes
- No

10. BC -- The web address of my blog is:
(Fill in the blank)

11. BC – How long have you maintained your blog?

- Less than 3 months
- Between 3 and 6 months
- Between 7 and 12 months
- Between 1 and 2 years
- Between 2 and 3 years
- More than 3 years

12. BC/UG -- Why do you maintain a state-focused, politically-oriented blog?
(Fill in blank)

13. BC -- Are you the only author of your state-oriented, politically-focused blog, or are there multiple authors?

- I am the only author
- There are multiple authors
- Don't know

14. BC -- Do you blog under your own name or do you use a pseudonym or made-up name?

- Blog under own name
- Use pseudonym/made-up name
- Don't know

15. BC/NR -- How often do you typically post new material on your blog?

- Several times a day
- About once a day
- 3-5 days a week
- 1-2 days a week
- Every few weeks
- Less often
- Don't know

16. BC/NR -- What prompts you to post something to your blog?
- I only post new materials when something inspires me to
 - I usually post new materials on a regular schedule
 - Both
 - Neither
 - Other (open-ended)
 - Don't know
17. BC/NR -- In a typical week, I spend approximately _____ hours working on my blog:
- 1-2
 - 3-9
 - 10 or more
 - Don't know
18. BC/NR -- Does your blog include a list of links to other blogs, like a blog roll, or not?
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
19. BC/NR -- Approximately how many links are on your blog roll or list?
- Fewer than 10
 - 10-49
 - 50 or more
 - Don't know
20. BC/NR -- How often do you read other people's state-focused, politically-oriented blogs?
- Several times a day
 - About once a day
 - 3-5 days a week
 - 1-2 days a week
 - Every few weeks
 - Less often
 - Don't know
21. BC/NR -- Is your blog included on anyone else's blog roll or list of links?
- Yes, my blog is on others' blog roll
 - No
 - Don't know

22. BC/NR -- Approximately how many other blogs link to your site?
- Fewer than 10
 - 10-49
 - 50 or more
 - Don't know
23. BC/NR -- In a typical day, about how many hits do you get on your blog?
- Fewer than 10
 - 10-99
 - 100 or more
 - Don't know
24. BC/NR/AS -- Who reads your blog?
- Mostly people I know
 - Mostly people I've never met
 - Both
 - I don't know who reads my blog
25. BC/NR/UG -- Overall, would you say you blog....?
- Mostly for yourself
 - Mostly for your audience
 - Both equally
 - Neither
 - Don't know
26. BC/NR -- Do you allow comments on your blog or not?
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
27. BC/NR -- Do you provide an RSS feed of your blog or not?
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
28. BC/NR -- Do you make money through your blog or not?
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know

29. BC/NR -- I make money on my blog

- Through advertising
- Through reader contributions, like a “tip jar”
- Through premium content that is only accessible by paying a fee
- By selling items on my site
- Some of the above
- All of the above
- None of the above
- Other

30. BC/AS -- Has your blog ever received attention from or been mentioned by any of the following:

a. BC/AS -- Public officials, politicians, or political campaigns

- Yes
- No
- I don’t know

b. BC/AS -- State news media

- Yes
- No
- I don’t know

c. BC/AS -- State bloggers

- Yes
- No
- I don’t know

d. BC/AS -- State non-political organizations

- Yes
- No
- I don’t know

e. BC/AS -- National bloggers

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

f. BC/AS -- National news media

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

g. BC/AS -- National non-political organizations

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

31. BC/NR -- How often, if ever, do you do each of the following things on your blog?

a. BC/NR -- Quote other people or media sources directly

- Often
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever
- Never
- Don't know

b. BC/NR -- Post corrections to something you have written

- Often
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever
- Never
- Don't know

c. BC/NR -- Take content from other sources and remix it into something new

- Often
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever
- Never
- Don't know

d. BC/NR -- Discuss current events or news

- Often
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever
- Never
- Don't know

e. BC/NR -- Include links to original source material you have cited or used in some way

- Often
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever
- Never
- Don't know

f. BC/NR -- Spend extra time trying to verify facts you want to include in your post

- Often
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever
- Never
- Don't know

g. BC/NR -- Respond to posts or comments from others

- Often
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever
- Never
- Don't know

h. BC/NR -- Get permission to post copyrighted material

- Often
- Sometimes
- Hardly ever
- Never
- Don't know

31. BR/BC – Do you consider blogs a form of JOURNALISM or no?

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

32. BC -- Do you consider your blog a form of JOURNALISM or no?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

33. BC -- Aside from your blog, have you ever published your own writing or media creations anywhere else, either online or offline – or is your blog the only place you have published original material?

- Have published my writing or media creations elsewhere
- Have not published my writing or media creations elsewhere
- Don't know

34. BC -- If you had to say, do you think you'll still be blogging a year from now or not?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

35. ALL/MH -- In general, how would you rate the job YOUR LOCAL NEWSPAPER does covering state politics and public affairs?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Not very good
- Poor

36. ALL/MH -- In general, how would you rate the job YOUR LOCAL TELEVISION STATION does covering state politics and public affairs?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Not very good
- Poor

37. ALL/MH -- In the past week, how many days did you go on-line to get news about public affairs and politics?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7

38. ALL/MH -- Do you think state newspapers and television news sources usually get the facts straight or are they often inaccurate?

- Usually gets facts straight
- Often inadequate
- Don't Know

39. ALL/MH -- Do you think state newspapers and television news sources are generally fair to all sides or do they favor one side over another?

- Generally fair to all sides
- Generally favor one side of another
- Don't know

40. ALL/MH -- Do you think state-focused, politically-oriented blogs are generally fair to all sides or do they favor one side over another?

- Generally fair to all sides
- Generally favor one side of another
- Don't know

41. ALL/PK -- Sometimes state politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

42. ALL/PE -- People like me don't have any say about what the state government does.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

43. ALL/PE -- Voting gives people an effective way to influence what the government does.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

44. ALL/PE -- My vote makes a difference.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

45. ALL/PE -- I consider myself well-qualified to participate in discussions about my state's politics.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

46. ALL/PK -- I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing my state.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

47. ALL/PK -- I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people in my state.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

48. ALL/PC -- Most of my state's leaders are devoted to service.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

49. ALL/PC -- I don't think public officials care much about what people like me think.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

50. ALL/PC -- How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in the state capital city to do what is right?

- Just about always
- Most of the time
- Only some of the time
- Rarely

51. ALL/PC -- It seems like the state's politicians only care about themselves or special interests.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

52. ALL/PC -- It seems like state government is run by a few big interests who are just looking out for themselves.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

53. ALL/PC -- The state's politicians are out of touch with the real world.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

54. ALL/PK -- Staying informed about state government and politics is too much trouble.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

55. ALL/PE -- I don't care much about voting.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

56. ALL/PC -- Voting is a hassle.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

57. ALL/PK -- Generally speaking, I consider myself:

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- Other

58. ALL/PK -- When it comes to politics, I consider myself:

- Liberal
- Moderate
- Conservative

59. ALL/PK -- In the past week I have talked about politics with my family or friends.

- 0 days
- 1 day
- 2 days
- 3 days
- 4 days
- 5 days
- 6 days
- 7 days

60. ALL/PE -- I am currently registered to vote in my state of residence:

- Yes
- No

61. ALL/PK -- I consider my state's current governor to be:

- Liberal
- Moderate
- Conservative

62. ALL/PE -- I voted for my state's current governor:

- True
- False

63. ALL/AS --I think politically-oriented, state-focused blogs have the potential to impact politics in my state.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

64. BR/AS -- I think politically-oriented, state-focused blogs have already had an impact on politics in my state.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

65. BC/AS -- I think my blog has had an impact on state politics:

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

66. BR -- A specific example how politically-oriented, state-focused blogs have had an impact on politics in my state is:

Open-ended. Please provide specific example

67. BC -- A specific example of how my politically-oriented, state-focused blog has had an impact on politics in my state is:

Open ended. Please provide specific example

68. BC/UG -- One reason I maintain my politically-oriented, state-focused blog is because:

Open ended. Fill in blank.

69. BC/UG -- Another reason I maintain my politically-oriented, state-focused blog is because:

Open-ended. Fill in blank.

70. BC/NR -- I conduct interviews to gather content for my blog:

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

71. BC/NR -- I comment on news reports and editorials appearing elsewhere to generate content for my blog:

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

72. BC/NR -- I rely on friends & acquaintances to steer me toward content for my blog

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

73. BC -- As a blogger, I consider myself a journalist.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Have No Opinion
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

74. BC -- I allow comments on my blog

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

75. BC -- I have advertising on my blog

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

76. ALL/UG -- I use politically-oriented, state focused blogs to follow politics in my state (select state)

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

77. ALL/UG -- I use politically-oriented, state-focused blogs to follow politics in another state

(select state)

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

78. BC/PE -- Since creating my blog, my involvement in politics has:

- Greatly increased
- Increased
- Stayed the same
- Decreased
- Greatly decreased

79. ALL/D -- My age is:

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 and over

80. ALL/D -- My level of education can best be described as:

- Less than 9th grade
- 9th through 11th grade
- high school diploma
- Some college or vocational school
- A 4-year college degree
- Some graduate work
- A graduate degree

81. ALL/D -- I identify myself as:

- White
- Hispanic
- African-American
- Asian
- Other

82. ALL/D -- I have lived in the state where I reside now for:

- Less than 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-20 years
- More than 20 years

83. ALL/D -- I am currently:

- Employed full-time
- Employed part-time
- Retired
- Unemployed and looking for work
- Not employed and not looking for work

84. ALL/D -- I am:

- Male
- Female

85. ALL/D -- I do/do not live in the United States

- I live in the United States
- I don't live in the United States

86. ALL/D -- I live in (select state)

87. ALL/D -- I am registered to vote in (select state)

APPENDIX B: STATE BLOGGER SURVEY RESULTS

RESPONSES TO STATE BLOGGER SURVEY (June – July 2007)

NB: This summary includes only responses from bloggers, not from blog readers

States represented in this survey of bloggers: 33
Total number of state bloggers in this survey: 150

AL	5	MT	0
AK	0	NC	1
AR	0	ND	0
AZ	5	NE	0
CA	1	NH	2
CO	1	NJ	0
CT	2	NM	0
DC	0	NY	0
DE	3	NV	2
FL	2	NC	0
GA	8	OH	16
HI	2	OK	1
IA	2	OR	1
ID	7	PA	0
IL	4	SC	3
IN	4	SD	1
KS	0	TN	6
KY	1	TX	14
LA	43	UT	0
MA	3	VA	2
MD	0	VT	0
ME	0	WA	0
MI	1	WI	1
MN	2	WV	1
MO	0	WY	0
MS	0		

A profile of state bloggers

Is your state generally moving in the right direction?

Crosstab #5 [dir_st] & #15 [own_blog]

Yes:	21%
No:	71%
Don't Know:	7%
No Response:	.1%

#22 How many hours a week do you spend on your blog? [hrs_wk]

1-2 hours/week:	13%
3-9 hours/week:	46%
10 or more hours/week:	35%
Don't Know:	1%
No Response:	5%

#24 How many blogs link to yours? [num_linx]

Fewer than 10:	8%
11-49:	41%
50 or more:	34%
Don't Know:	12%
No Response:	5%

Do you live in the United States?

Crosstab #2[live] & #15 [ownblog]

Yes:	100%
No:	0%
No Response:	0%

Are you registered to vote in the United States?

Crosstab #3 [vote] & #15 [ownblog]

Yes:	99%
No:	.5%
No Response:	0%

#17 How long have you maintained your own blog focused on state politics? [length_own]

Less than 3 months:	4%
Between 3 and 6 months:	4%
Between 7 and 12 months:	11%
Between 1 and 2 years:	33%
Between 2 and 3 years:	27%
More than 3 years:	17%
No Response:	5%

#18 Are you the sole author of your blog? [sole_auth]

Yes:	64%
No:	32%
No Response:	4%

#19 Do you blog under your own name or do you use a pseudonym or made-up name? [real_nam]

I blog under my own name:	67%
I blog under a pseudonym:	29%
Don't know:	.5%

#20 How frequently do you post on your blog? [freq_new]

Several times a day:	34%
About once a day:	27%
1-2 days a week:	12%
3-5 days a week:	22%
Every few weeks:	2%
No Response:	3%

25 How many hits does your blog get on an average day? [hits_day]

Fewer 10:	2%
11-99:	22%
100-999:	45%
1000 or more:	20%
Don't Know:	7%
No Response:	4%

#26 Who reads your blog? [who_rds]

Mostly people I know:	5%
Mostly people I don't know:	31%
Both:	49%
I don't know who reads my blog:	11%
No Response:	4%

#28 Do you make a profit from your blog? [profit]

Yes:	19%
No:	77%
No Response:	4%

#36 Has your blog ever received attention for your state's public officials, politicians or political campaigns? [st_attn]

Yes:	76.4%
No:	11.8%
Don't know:	11.8%

#37 Has your blog ever received attention from your state's traditional media? [st_med]

Yes:	72.9%
No:	18.1%
Don't know:	9.0%

#39 Has your blog ever received attention from national bloggers? [natblattn]

Yes:	68.1%
No:	19.4%
Don't know:	12.5%

#40 Has your blog ever received attention from national news media? [nat_med]

Yes:	34.4%
No:	56.6%
Don't know:	9.1%

#53 Do you consider your blog a form of journalism? [blog_jou]

Yes	64.2%
No	25.6%
Don't know	10.2%

#55 Have you ever worked as a journalist? [j_work]

Yes	27.9%
No	72.1%
Don't know	0.0%

#60 Which of the following principles of professional journalism do you is most important for bloggers like you? [imp_princ]

Act independently	14.1%
Be accountable	30.4%
Do no harm	3.0%
Seek truth and report it	52.6%

#61 Which of the following principles of professional journalism do you is least important for bloggers like you? [unimp_princ]

Act independently	28.0%
Be accountable	6.8%
Do no harm	62.1%
Seek truth and report it	3.0%

#63 *I think my blog has had an impact on state politics.* [impact]

Strongly Agree	23.9%
Agree	31.3%
Have No Opinion	21.6%
Somewhat Agree	15.7%
Strongly Disagree	7.5%

#67 *Since creating my blog, my involvement in politics has:* [involvement]

Greatly increased	31.6%
Increased	28.7%
Stayed the same	38.2%
Decreased	1.5%
Greatly decreased	0.0%

Comparing blogger & reader profiles

#71: *Do you think state newspapers and television news sources usually get the facts straight or are they often inaccurate?* [acc_st_media]

BLOGGERS (out of 137)

Usually get facts straight: 68/137	50%
Often inaccurate: 61/137	45%
Don't know: 8/137	6%

READERS (out of 471)

Usually get facts straight:	175/471	37%
Often inaccurate:	262/471	56%
Don't know:	34/471	7.2%

#73 *Do you think state focused, politically oriented blogs usually get the facts straight or are they often inaccurate?* [bl_acc]

BLOGGERS (out of 136)

Usually get facts straight 66	49%
Often inaccurate 45	33%
Don't know: 25	18%

READERS (out of 470)

Usually get facts straight	235	50%
Often inaccurate	128	27%
Don't know	107	23%

#74 Do you think state newspapers and television news sources are generally fair to all sides or do they favor one side over another? [fair_st_media]

BLOGGERS (out of 137)

Generally fair to all sides	3.7%
Generally favor one side or another	66%
Don't know	6.5%

READERS (out of 445)

Generally fair to all sides	27%
Generally favor one side or another	73%
Don't know	6.7%

#75 Politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on [complex]

BLOGGERS (out of 134)

Strongly Agree	2.9%
Somewhat Agree	21.6%
Have no opinion	2.9%
Somewhat Disagree	23.1%
Strongly Disagree	49.3%

READERS (out of 455)

Strongly Agree	3.7%
Somewhat Agree	24%
Have no opinion	2%%
Somewhat Disagree	31%
Strongly Disagree	39.3%

#76 People like me don't have any say about what state government does [no-say]

BLOGGERS (out of 135)

Strongly Agree:	4.4%
Somewhat Agree:	16.3%
Have no opinion:	3.7%
Somewhat Disagree	34.1%
Strongly Disagree	49%

READERS (out of 455)

Strongly Agree	13.2%
Somewhat Agree	29.0%
Have no opinion	2.2%
Somewhat Disagree	30.5%
Strongly Disagree	25.1%

#77 Voting gives people an effective way to influence what the government does [vtg-infl]

BLOGGERS (out of 135)

Strongly Agree:	40.7%
Somewhat Agree:	41.5%
Have no opinion	2.2%
Somewhat Disagree	13.3%
Strongly Disagree	2.2%

READERS (out of 392)

Strongly Agree	35.4%
Somewhat Agree	55.3%
Have no opinion	1.0%
Somewhat Disagree	4.1%
Strongly Disagree	4.1%

#78 My vote makes a difference [vote_diff]

BLOGGERS of 135

Strongly Agree:	43%
Somewhat Agree:	46.7%
Have no opinion:	1.5%
Somewhat Disagree	6.7%
Strongly Disagree	2.2%

READERS of 452

Strongly Agree:	33%
Somewhat Agree	47%
Have no opinion:	1.5%
Somewhat Disagree	14.2
Strongly Disagree	3.8%

#79 I consider myself well qualified to participate in discussions about my state's politics [qualif]

BLOGGERS of 135

Strongly Agree:	74.8%
Somewhat Agree:	23%
Have no opinion	2.2%
Somewhat Disagree	0%
Strongly Disagree	0%

READERS of 452

Strongly Agree	58.2%
Somewhat Agree	35%
Have no opinion	2.2%
Somewhat Disagree	1.8%
Strongly Disagree	.44%

#80 I think that I am better informed about state politics and government than most people in my state [bet_inf]

BLOGGERS of 133

Strongly Agree:	80.5%
Somewhat Agree:	15%
Have no opinion	3.8%
Somewhat Disagree	.75%
Strongly Disagree	0%

READERS of 453

Strongly Agree	60.5%
Somewhat Agree	29.4%
Have no opinion	6.4%
Somewhat Disagree	3.8%
Strongly Disagree	0%

#81 Most of my state's leaders are committed to public service [st_ldrs]

BLOGGERS of 135

Strongly Agree:	6.67%
Somewhat Agree:	33.3%
Have no opinion	3.7%
Somewhat Disagree	33.3%
Strongly Disagree	15.5%

READERS of 451

Strongly Agree	6.2%
Somewhat Agree	25.3%
Have no opinion	6.2%
Somewhat Disagree	33%
Strongly Disagree	29.7%

#82 My state's public officials don't care much about what people like me think [st_care]

BLOGGERS of 134

Strongly Agree:	15.7%
Somewhat Agree:	5.2%
Have no opinion	3.0%
Somewhat Disagree	32.8%
Strongly Disagree	6.0%

READERS of 453

Strongly Agree:	27.2%
Somewhat Agree	35.5%
Have no opinion	5.1%
Somewhat Disagree	26.0%
Strongly Disagree	6.2%

#83 The state's politicians are out of touch with the real world [st_out]

BLOGGERS 134

Strongly Agree:	22.4%
Somewhat Agree:	46.3%
Have no opinion	8.2%
Somewhat Disagree	17.9%
Strongly Disagree	5.2%

READERS of 453

Strongly Agree	37.7%
Somewhat Agree	9.9%
Have no opinion	5.1%
Somewhat Disagree	22.5%
Strongly Disagree	2.6%

#84 Staying informed about state government and politics is too much trouble [trouble]

BLOGGERS of 135

Strongly Agree:	.1%
Somewhat Agree:	1.0%
Have no opinion	.14%
Somewhat Disagree	32.6%
Strongly Disagree	56.3%

READERS of 452

Strongly Agree	1.5%
Somewhat Agree	.2%
Have no opinion	3.8%
Somewhat Disagree	34.3%
Strongly Disagree	51.3%

#85 How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in the state's capital to do what is right? [trust]

BLOGGERS of 134

Just about always	0%
Most of the time	12.7%
Only some of the time	56%
Rarely	29.1%
Never	0%

READERS of 455

Just about always	0%
Most of the time	13%
Only some of the time	47.5%
Rarely	33.8%
Never	0%

#86 *Generally speaking, I consider myself a [pol_id]*

BLOGGERS of 131

Strong Democrat	36.6%
Moderate Democrat	8.4%
Independent, but leaning Democrat	11.5%
Independent	9.9%
Independent, but leaning Republican	9.9%
Moderate Republican	5.4%
Strong Republican	3.1%

READERS of 454

Strong Democrat	16.1%
Moderate Democrat	12.3%
Independent, but leaning Democrat	9.3%
Independent	14.8%
Independent, but leaning Republican	14.1%
Moderate Republican	16.1%
Strong Republican	17.4%

#87 *When it comes to politics I consider myself a: [consider]*

BLOGGERS of 131

Strong liberal	32.1%
Moderate liberal	16.0%
Moderate, but leaning liberal	10.7%
Moderate	6.9%
Moderate, but leaning conservative	5.3%
Moderate conservative	9.2%
Strong conservative	19.8%

READERS of 451

Strong liberal	6.3%
Moderate liberal	13.7%
Moderate, but leaning liberal	7.8%
Moderate	9.3%
Moderate, but leaning conservative	9.5%
Moderate conservative	25.1%
Strong conservative	19.5%

APPENDIX C: BLOGS CONTACTED FOR THE SURVEY

1 <http://community.adn.com/?q=adn/blog/>
2 <http://juneaublogger.com/akleg/>
3 <http://abamablog.blogspot.com/>
4 <http://captainbama.blogspot.com/>
5 <http://www.politicalparlor.net/>
6 <http://www.politicsinalabama.com/>
7 <http://arkansastvnewswatch.blogspot.com/>
8 [http://www.arktimes.com/blogs/arkansasblog.](http://www.arktimes.com/blogs/arkansasblog)
9 <http://www.arkansasnews.com>
10 <http://cactusalliance.org/>
11 <http://hotazitgets.com/>
12 <http://arizona.typepad.com/>
13 <http://www.azcongresswatch.com/>
14 <http://www.arizonawatch.com/>
15 <http://espressopundit.com/>
16 <http://www.azpoliticalnews.com/NT/>
17 <http://bayneofblog.blogspot.com/>
18 <http://weblog.signonsandiego.com/weblogs/afb/>
19 <http://www.sacbee.com/static/weblogs/insider/>
20 <http://www.calitics.com/frontPage.do>
21 <http://www.flashreport.org/>
22 <http://www.aroundthecapitol.com/>
23 <http://www.kqed.org/weblog/capitalnotes/blog.jsp>
24 <http://camajorityreport.com/>
25 <http://billbradley.pajamasmedia.com/>
26 <http://www.calitics.com/frontPage.do>
27 <http://www.squarestate.net>
28 <http://coloradopols.com/frontPage.do>
29 <http://soapblox.net/colorado/frontPage.do>
30 <http://www.headwatersnews.org/>
31 <http://blogs.rockymountainnews.com/denver/rockytalklive/>
32 <http://coloradopols.com/frontPage.do>
33 <http://www.coloradoconfidential.com>
34 <http://www.ctlocalpolitics.net>
35 <http://ctbob.blogspot.com/>
36 <http://www.ctconservative.blogspot.com/>
37 <http://ctnewsjunkie.com/>
38 <http://www.myleftnutmeg.com/frontPage.do>
39 <http://www.newhavenindependent.org/>
40 <http://connecticutblog.blogspot.com/>
41 <http://delawarewatch.blogspot.com/>
42 <http://firststatepolitics.wordpress.com/>
43 <http://www.delawaregrapevine.com/default.asp>
44 <http://www.delaforum.com/>

45 <http://kilroysdelaware.blogspot.com/>
46 <http://betterdealfordelaware.wordpress.com/>
47 <http://www.flablog.net/>
48 <http://floridapublicpolicy.blogspot.com/>
49 <http://www.sayfiereview.com/>
50 <http://www.changeintallahassee.com/>
51 <http://peerreview.blogs.com/fl/>
52 <http://www.flapolitics.com>
53 <http://www.peachpundit.com>
54 <http://www.thecitizen.com/>
55 <http://www.georgiapoliticaldigest.com>
56 <http://georgiaunfiltered.blogspot.com/>
57 <http://www.goodwillhinton.com/>
58 <http://www.jasonpye.com/blog/>
59 <http://www.georgiapoliticaldigest.com/>
60 <http://www.poinography.com/>
61 <http://www.hawaiireporter.com/>
62 <http://www.hawaii.gov/lrb/libblog/>
63 <http://www.hawaiiankingdom.info/>
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VITA

Emily Metzgar will receive her doctoral degree from Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication in August 2008. She has accepted an appointment as assistant professor of journalism at Indiana University's School of Journalism to begin in August 2008. Her research focuses on the disruptive impact of interactive technology on established media and political institutions.

Emily has a bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan and a master's degree from The George Washington University. She is a former U.S. diplomat with additional professional experience at the National Defense University and the United States Institute of Peace.

Emily has extensive writing and editing experience. In addition to academic and professional publications, she also served as a community columnist for the Shreveport (LA) Times from 2003 through spring 2007. Her work has appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Los Angeles Times* and *International Herald Tribune*.

She has been named a Graduate Fellow of the American Academy of Political and Social Science and a Fellow of the Society for New Communications Research.