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Defining Media through Organizational Practices

Gans (1979) was among the first to argue that journalists' personal values and beliefs affect how they frame stories and what types of stories they report. Gans found that journalists held certain values that could not be extracted from their writing and that those values were taught to journalists through his or her education, co-workers and superiors. The values of journalists were originally said to be ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderate positions, adherence to social order and national leadership. Gans argued that these specific values were learned through principally two sources: formal education and the individual organization. In his seminal piece examining a socialist at *The Wall Street Journal*, Reese (1990) argued that journalists must work within the broader value system or ideology of an organization when creating media content. If a reporter deviates from this norm, she or he will face an inevitable reprimand or 'repair' from within the organizational system. Tuchman (1978) concurred that it is not the news topic itself that makes a subject newsworthy but its relationship to the values of the news media. These values dictate the normative behaviour of those in the news and help to define what kinds of sources are used and what types of routines are followed.

These early studies established the salience of organizational values on resulting content and ushered in a stream of research examining organizational norms. These evolving norms are in no way fixed and are perpetually in flux. A wide array of more contemporary research has found contributory values that do not appear to necessarily correlate with those on Gans' original list. For example, autonomy (McDevitt, Gassay & Perez 2002), controversy (Graber 1997), objectivity, fairness, timeliness and proximity (Shoemaker & Reese 1990b), a promotion of political accountability (Bennett 1996), drama (Hershey & Holian 2000), and an emphasis on the 'horse-race' or game-oriented aspects of political issues and events (Jamieson & Capella 1998) have all been said to constitute at least a part of mainstream journalism's values and are therefore constitutive to the norms of modern mainstream journalism – at least for now. The compounding and complex influences embedded within media content have led scholars and practitioners to argue that objectivity,

one of the longest held values within the media, should now be seen as an organizational goal, rather than a template for practice – at least if one equates objectivity with neutrality. This shift away from objectivity stems from knowing that each media worker crafts their own content from an interconnected nexus of their own personal values, organizational values and commercial influences.

Indeed, the entire normative structures that exist within media systems are created through a demanding interplay of converging factors – many of which are outside a media worker's direct control. One study examining mainstream media in Argentina found that the capacity for watchdog journalism fluctuated over time in response to external influences (Pinto 2008). This research examined three newspapers over 20 years and discovered that the political and economic environment, as well as journalists' relations with elite actors and their own shifting ideologies, played a role in building – and destroying – the propensity for watchdog journalism in Argentina (Pinto 2008). This highlights the delicate balance of internal and external influences embedded within every media institution, which somewhat precariously coalesce to form the values that journalism has long suggested are absolutely fundamental to its existence.

While the notion of personal and organizational values has historically been revered within the journalistic community, the public does not appear to share in that enthusiasm. With respect to the public acceptance of traditional journalism values and norms, 'in many cases, the public and the press, including traditional journalism and the civic journalism movement are on separate tracks headed in different directions' (Heider, McCombs & Poindexter 2005: 962). For example, the public is far less supportive of watchdog reporting or rapid responses than journalists are and the public also widely support the notion that journalists should offer solutions (Heider *et al.* 2005) – a model of reporting that has historically been eschewed by mainstream journalism but is now gaining acceptance. These solutions and calls for action have historically been more readily found within the alternative press.

In comparing contemporary perceptions of the mainstream press with earlier estimations, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press recently wrote that 'today, the public considers the news media even less professional, less accurate, less moral, less helpful to democracy, more sensational, more likely to cover up mistakes and more biased' (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism 2004, cited in Heider *et al.* 2005). Perhaps in response to audience disdain, many major mainstream news organizations, such as the *Guardian* (Singer & Ashman 2009), have extended their historically closed sources and routines to include engaging with audiences and drawing from user-generated content. Citizens' input ranges from acting as contributory sources to the sole creators of media.

Gans (1979) argued years ago, sources with economic or political power are far more likely to influence content than those without as much money or political sway. This obviously still holds largely true across the media spectrum. This means that a public relations representative, for example, might be much more likely to get their position into news content than a victim of crime or a local victim rights advocate. These normative structures within a media system are very likely not be the result of any malicious intent but rather, the logical response to a long relationship between organizations that is cultivated over many years. Similarly, entrenched interest groups, such as the Sensible Sentencing Trust, a Napier-based organization, which argues for stricter prison sentences in New Zealand, have systemic connections throughout the media industry. These connections have been cultivated over years and result in the Sensible Sentencing Trust being used as a frequent source in crime stories.

Although power and money still allow many to gain wider access to the media, the inroads by citizens into mainstream media does represent a fundamental shift in the normative structure of mainstream media organizations. There is still a strong sense of caution within some mainstream media outlets and not all have readily accepted using citizen-created content (Paulussen & Ugille 2008). Yet a recent study examining the BBC found that the managers have moved to user-generated content because of 'public service broadcaster obligations toward inclusivity and mass reach; a means to combat viewer disengagement with mainstream news; a response to increasing competition for audiences; anticipation of the constantly changing skill sets of audiences and the increasing and changing capacities and forms of ICT and, the editorial ability of the BBC to make UGC fit its own traditional news values' (Harrison 2010: 243). Harrison's (2010) examination of the BBC argues that successful integration of user-generated content has ranged from unsolicited to solicited, expeditious to an audience watchdog perspective. Examples of positive – and to be precise profitable – use of citizen-created content at the BBC that were both solicited and unsolicited abound: emails about contaminated petrol, reports from those in the army as to the morale in Afghanistan, pictures of tsunami damage, narratives about emergency rule in Pakistan and recent images of a man who had reportedly deceased long ago.

This shift in media routines, or the repeated practices embedded within a job, changes not only how the media view their audience but also how they view their own position within society. Routines form the context by which we consider and define our jobs and determine how quickly we succeed (Tuchman 1977); they are the practices of a larger group or organization in which a person knowingly or unknowingly participates. Thought of another way, routines are the values of a specific organization put into practice. The routines one follows are predicated upon what others in that specific organization have historically done. Following routines of collecting sources, journalists essentially dictate – to a large extent – what is included in a report and what is omitted (Berkowitz 1992).

These consistent contact procedures in newsgathering consequently define what is expected and what constitutes news. Over time, repeated practices result in predictable patterns of coverage that are dictated by organizational assumptions about the audience and circulation trends. These shifted routine patterns may form media values that are different from the historical values of conflict/controversy, the unusual, and timeliness. As the incorporation of citizen-generated content into mainstream media continues to rise, the patterns of coverage are likely to refocus on the local as represented from within a community and result in a stronger sense of communal values.

This shift in values will happen as long as citizens continue to increase their levels of input into the media system. However, the actual reality of such an evolution is still questionable. For example, blogs pose a very real challenge to journalistic norms and practices, especially objectivity, gatekeeping practices, accountability and transparency. If embraced, the possibilities of blogging could drastically transform modern journalism across the mediated spectrum. Yet early evidence suggests that blogs, as an example of participatory communication, are actually moulding to fit traditional journalistic norms and practices. 'Blogs, in other words, are being "normalized" by journalists much as other aspects of the Internet have been' (Singer 2005: 174). Blogs largely maintain tight control over their own information and perform traditional gatekeeping roles for their readers. This normalization of sources, routines and gatekeeping practices is continuing unabated even though the format of blogs is 'explicitly about participatory communication' (Singer 2005: 192). Others disagree and argue that the same kinds of participatory communication are needed, and presently relied upon, in mainstream media as well. In an examination of Indymedia, Platon and Deuze argue that the independent, alternative outlet 'is not that much different from established forms of journalism in the kind of problems, issues and editorial discussions it faces in the practice of everyday publishing' (Platon & Deuze 2003: 352).

Indeed, the normative structures of media may be converging as mainstream journalists find themselves increasingly open to accepting input from average citizens rather than elite sources – and as alternative media workers assimilate mainstream practices into their own routines. Atton and Wickenden recently argued that radical and mainstream outlets are increasingly adopting 'elements from each other, whether in writing style or in news values and framing' (Atton & Wickenden 2005: 491). They also found that the alternative publication, such as *SchNEWS*, relied on a 'counter-elite' of sources who hold significant 'power, legitimacy and authoritativeness' (Atton & Wickenden 2005: 355) in their community. Pools of sources can be hierarchical and represent a relatively narrow range of voices within the publication. Such practices obviously mirror much of the criticism often directed at the mainstream media.

Conversely, an extensive survey of the media industry found that a very large proportion, 72 per cent, of journalists supported giving average citizens a

forum in the mainstream media to express their personal perspectives on public affairs. Further, over half of journalists surveyed thought that an important role of journalism was to provide possible solutions to societal problems (Weaver *et al.* 2006). Obviously, the overwhelming majority of news generated by mainstream media is still generated by professional journalists, but this type of engaged input into mainstream content was almost non-existent even a few years ago. While BBC managers have pointed to rather altruistic reasons for engaging citizens, some within mainstream media fear that these changes are primarily due to cost-cutting measures (Harrison 2010). Without a serious and reflective investigative enquiry with decision-makers at major mainstream media outlets, it is impossible to prove whether the shift to citizen-created content is purely for financial gain or not. However, it is worthwhile to note that such a change does allow for large newsrooms, which are already under incredible financial pressure, to draw heavily from the notion that ‘the world is your freelancer’ (World Editors Forum 2008: 96, cited in Harrison 2010) – all for the relatively low cost of an internal moderator and an open line of communication.

Whether the motivations of a relative openness in the normative structures of sourcing, routines and values can be traced to monetary concerns or not, the change does signal a shift in the normative structure of the media. Media have traditionally existed within two organizational frameworks: participatory and hierarchical. Mainstream media have historically operated almost exclusively within the latter category, although as this chapter illustrates, some of the hierarchical structure is now under modification. Conversely, larger alternative media have also co-opted this professionalized, hierarchical format as well. Atton’s fascinating review of the relative outsider British National Party website found that it operated as a hierarchical organization that prevented ‘members from sustained, active involvement in the construction of their own identities’ (Atton’s 2006: 573). In some cases, the philosophy of alternative media cannot be reconciled with the reality of the normative processes inherent in a commercially minded alternative media outlet (Gibbs 2003). A compelling example of such a disconnect was found in the *Honolulu Weekly*, an alternative publication in Hawaii that was aligned with the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies. While ‘alternative’ in its stated philosophical approach, *Honolulu Weekly* found itself constantly conflicted between the ideals of an alternative publication and ‘the *business* of running a successful alternative paper’ (Gibbs 2003: 590). The alternative publication operated through largely uncooperative professional norms that were generally hierarchical and anti-democratic. Gibbs (2003) cautions that

[scholarship must not] make the false assumption that alternative newspaper organizations are completely oppositional enterprises that challenge the dominant elite on every count ... In fact, the reality of the *Weekly* is that the ‘alternative’

label at best only thinly disguises its deep roots in capitalist modes of production. At worst, it is used to justify the hyper-exploitation of its workers in the pursuit of matching upscale readers with niche-market products. (Gibbs 2003: 603)

When an organization operates under a hierarchical model of instruction, the ‘agents of resistance’, or the actual receivers of the media message, can be artificially distanced from those who are ‘directing them’ (Atton 2002a: 103). This prescriptive method of alternative media communication is evident within some modern, more commercial, forms of alternative media and can best be explained by the commoditized, mass culture approach to communication. Through professionalized norms and processes, any media outlet, be it under the banner of alternative or mainstream, is far more likely to ‘reach’ a more substantial number of people through a professionalized, hierarchical, interconnected organizational network of communication. This hierarchical norm lends itself to the increased possibility of effectiveness if one measures efficacy by the number of those in an audience who know of one’s message. However, readers can also feel rather discouraged and disconnected from those who disseminate information from what can be perceived as an elite and hierarchical position.

There can also be a lateral form of organization and communication, which includes ‘multiple experiences and concerns’ (Downing 1984: 19) that are in direct opposition to the mass culture approach. This model of media aims to create an alternate ‘value system’ (Rau 1994: 13) from a community of engaged participants. Eyerman and Jamison (1991) call this process of identity creation within a unified membership, knowledge production. In his examination of the alternative publications, *Green Anarchist* and *Do or Die*, Atton (2002a) found that the interspaced writing from movement intellectuals and reader/writers on the same page, ‘offers a challenge to intellectual discourse as well as the opportunity to discuss the ideas in that discourse to an extent unknown in the mainstream media’ (Atton 2002a: 111). One also sees this interdependency of input in mainstream sites of information such as BBC’s Have Your Say or the explicitly collaborative ABC Open in Australia, which teams 50 editors with citizens across the country ‘to share ideas and stories’ (ABC Open 2010) in projects that are offered by the ABC, or alternatively, conceptualized by individual citizens.

More voices within media implicitly democratizes the content. It removes the ‘hierarchy of access’ (Glasgow University Media Group 1976) that has been endemic to much mainstream media reporting processes. Media that welcome a diverse range of input are ‘transformed into an egalitarian, devolved communicational tool for theory and for action’ (Atton 2002a: 111). This input from citizens – at times referred to as native reports – can range from unsolicited letters or writings or video clips that are selected and included within a publication. The concept of native reporting, principally thought of as an approach mainly in alternative media, is actually rooted in the innate and

universal processes of investigative journalism. Robert Chesshyre, traditionally a journalist for mainstream British papers, such as the *Guardian*, *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*, wrote that when he first came home to the United Kingdom after working as a correspondent for *The Observer* in Washington, DC, he 'had to learn again the native idiom' (Chesshyre 1987: 13). Embedded within such a comment is that there is a localness intertwined within compelling storytelling. This sense of familiarity exists within both textual and visual language. It invites the reader within a geographic location, site of knowledge or space of emotional understanding. Within the context of media that embrace citizen-generated content, readers develop a deep understanding of the language because they also contribute to its creation. This is one of the central arguments towards including readers/writers as contributors to media. Otherwise, the creators of content that might be intended as emancipatory in nature, may actually be acting much more like colonists. When readers are removed from any relationship with the content, the creator is 'placed either above or at the centre of things, yet apart from them' (Spurr 1993: 16). Native reporters can actually document their own reality and become empowered by the process. This first-hand information also elevates the knowledge and discussion within the larger community as it is more relevant and far more informed than an elitist perspective from outside the close network of community relationships.

Atton rightly argues that native reporting can 'power away from the mainstream back to the disenfranchised and marginalized groups that are the native reporter's proper community' (Atton 2002a: 115). Native reporting can validate the identity of communities that can be overlooked in conglomerate, mainstream news. Yet as mainstream media continually segment their markets, in the hopes of increasing advertising revenue, they also allow spaces for marginalized groups to enter into more intimate, communal exchanges that now operate within mainstream media. For example, the corporate-owned Discover San Diego, a mainstream blog replete with advertising support from Hard Rock and Warner Brothers, which began in 2007 as an extended lifestyle guide to the local area, now has a predominant 'San Diego Wiki' component that actively encourages local participation, 'ultimately creating an accurate, interactive resource that provides the best information from your point of view' (San Diego Blog 2009). This communal blog and interactive wiki manifests itself as an extension not only of San Diego's identity but also of those who live there and contribute to content. Those who have been previously marginalized by mainstream media have the possibility to shift attention away from celebrating redundant, corporate sites of monolithic consumerism to recognizing unique, independent, sites of cultural regeneration – all through a mainstream media outlet. Through contributing to this mainstream portal of information, lone citizens operating outside of corporate marketing schemes and planned tourist attractions can collaboratively construct what may

eventually be seen as endemic to San Diego and perhaps celebrated within the mainstream.

The influence of the Internet on normative structures of the media

It would be remiss not to discuss the influence of technology on the increased acceptance of citizen-generated content in the mainstream media and the growth of deliberative democratic practices across the media continuum. These technological advances have been supported and fuelled by major global events, such as the 24-hour news channel explosion after the first Iraq War and the proliferation of social media during the revolutions in Iran, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. The Internet is inherently technological, which still prohibits many potential users from engaging with this medium. It also relies on a relatively wealthy infrastructure within its host country that is simply not available in some parts of the world (Hamilton 2000b). With these large caveats in place, the Internet remains widely responsible for increasing the access that citizens have into all media. In 2007, American Internet usage stood at 211 million, which represents 69.9 per cent of the total population. This means that almost 70 per cent of the US population actually used, rather than only had access to, the Internet. With this unprecedented growth of the Internet, has come the potential benefits of self-representation for independent media, non-profit organizations and social movements as well as the ability to communicate with other individuals and organizations that have similar causes – essentially forming a Habermasian public sphere. The technology allows for an extraordinary opportunity to propel democratic participation (Dertouzos 1991: 75), where individuals can assert their ‘ideas, concerns and demands before all others’ (Rheingold 1993: 46). The technology has been said to be ‘a way of revitalizing the open and wide-spread discussions among citizens that feed the roots of democratic society’ (Poster 1997: 209).

However, many of the Internet’s early promises have eventuated through quite an uneven praxis. For example, non-profit organizations could strongly benefit from Internet technology as ‘a resource that has never been available to non-profits before now: affordable, direct, interactive access to the public at large’ (Civille 1997: Introduction). Non-profit organizations and activist groups have long charged that traditional mass media misrepresent their purpose or polarize their issues to the general news audience (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney 1998). The Internet has developed as an important arena for non-profits to ‘get out their message’ given that many are ‘sceptical of what counts as balance in the mainstream media’ (Hume 1995). This ability to pass the traditional media gatekeepers is the central reason for the Internet’s

ability to rival mainstream outlets (Internet World Stats 2007). By cultivating interactive, personalized, one-to-one relationships, non-profit organizations can presumably grow strategically on the Internet (Peppers & Rogers 1999) and encourage participatory behaviour (Hardy & Scheufele 2005). Given the overwhelmingly positive findings relating to interactive technology, it was therefore surprising to find that most non-profit organizations do not appear to engage their readers in any meaningful conversation online (Kenix 2007b). Indeed, almost all non-profits (94.2 per cent) surveyed did not post information about email lists or Listserves; 98.5 per cent did not have any information on or evidence of newsgroups; 98.5 per cent did not list information about discussion forums; and 95.7 per cent of non-profit organizations did not provide chat rooms. This problematizes any notion of the Internet as a haven for deliberative democracy. If there is no forum for discourse between those that are in some way associated with the non-profit organization, there certainly can't be a public sphere – at least not in the Habermasian tradition.

This is not to say that activism has not grown online. Activists are defined as 'two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion tactics, or force' (Grunig 1992: 503–30). Their success depends upon their ability to access and to use power resources (Heath 1997). Because of these capabilities, many have argued that the Internet in particular is useful for activism (Preece 2000; Scott & Street 2000). This is because the Internet allows for increased density and centrality (Coombs 1998) between individuals through strategic, focused information dissemination. In this case, density is the number of links a stakeholder has with other network members while centrality refers to the closeness, degree and 'betweenness' of members within a network. This connective web provides space for individuals to take action (Spencer 2002). Activism has exploded online in heavily interconnected global protests that have never been witnessed prior to the Internet.

The mainstream press argued years ago that the Internet would become a new tool for staging protests and demonstrations (Friess 1999). With no central control point (Berman & Weitzner 1997), activists can quickly mobilize. Sustained collective action thrives on the Internet (Virnoche & Marx 1997), particularly if it originates offline (Wellman & Salaff 1996). The Internet, through alternative media such as blogs, chat rooms, twitter and social-networking websites, is an extremely effective tool for political movements (Curran & Couldry 2003; Kahn & Kellner 2004) that have a long history of agitating for social change in partnership with alternative media. For the first time in history, Internet users now have the ability to produce, receive and distribute information with government officials (Bacard 1993), media outlets and fellow citizens to effectively participate in the democratic process (Atton 2004).

However, many organizations and media outlets online continue to see the Internet principally as a tool for information dissemination (Tsaliki 2003)

and not as a conduit for discursive, interactive communication (Kenix 2008d). Many continue to view the Internet as a portal for information that they themselves can use, but not one that does serve external users with interactive communication in any meaningful way. This is in stark contrast to the widely held assumption that the Internet is an effective tool for activism and democracy; allows for communication with members and readers; makes an organization more visible and credible and leaves those without a website at a decided disadvantage (Kenix 2008d). This disconnect between stated beliefs and actual behaviours suggests a self-reflexive, somewhat fractured mirrored theory of 'communication' that does not resemble traditional theories of communication, which have argued that a sender and a receiver are equal participants within an engaged public sphere.

There are hundreds of thousands of virtual communities in cyberspace, 'flourishing via e-mail lists, electronic bulletin boards, online chat groups and role-playing domains' ('National Voter Turnout in Federal Elections: 1960–2008' 2008). Yet the role of the Internet in creating open democratic spheres and virtual spaces for marginalized individuals and groups should not be overstated. Traditional measurements of democracy have not shown any dramatic shifts in democratic participation and involvement since the Internet's expansion. Over a decade after the world wide web exploded onto the technological landscape, voting in the United States – the principal civic act – still has not surpassed the 'high' of 63.1 per cent in the Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy presidential election campaign in 1960 (Pew Research Center 1998). American citizens do not trust governmental institutions (Becker 2001), and there remain no citizen initiatives at the US national level (Blumler & Gurevitch 2001; Diani 2000). The advent of new democratic processes because of the Internet has remained far from clear (Craig & Flood 1998).

Money and access have largely dictated the growth of the Internet. In the United Kingdom, 62 per cent of Internet users buy products online (Office for National Statistics 2010). The Internet has become synonymous with consumption. This fact, coupled with the knowledge that online shoppers are more impulsive than others (Kenix 2008e), makes the Internet fertile ground for future growth in electronic commerce. Such an emphasis on making money has led non-profit organizations and smaller, independent media to pursue or establish a corporate model (Kenix 2008e). With the rising corporatization of the Internet, one has to wonder if the only avenue for an online public sphere in the modern, corporatized, digital era is squarely within a corporate, economic context. Many independent organizations rush to sell goods and services (that were once free) simply to prove the benefits of the Internet to board members and potential donors. In scrambling to find ways to make money on the Internet, one New York organization stated that they decided to sell previously free items, 'simply to prove that the Internet has some value. We just

really find that we cannot give away that much stuff any more. We've found in this economic environment, people are just going to have to pay a little bit of money for it' (Kenix 2008e). The desperation to raise funds on the Internet has led several participants to even consider selling information that was once considered private. As one New York participant said, 'we get calls every day from people who want to buy our mailing list. That might be something ...' (DiGrazia 2000).

It is hard to imagine a time in recent history when non-profit organizations, independent media or social movements would even consider selling their mailing lists to corporate entities, but this reality is an integral part of the consumption of information that the Internet helped create. Non-profit participants in particular fully believe that the corporate world has established a burgeoning web-based sales process that they simply must follow if they are to remain viable. The corporate development of the Internet has effectively removed many of the technological features of the Internet that were first thought to be a democratic salvation for independent media, non-profits and social movements, such as discussion boards and chat rooms. The apparent *raison d'être* to be on the Internet is to make money and to spread an informational, one-way message. In many ways, the Internet is largely redundant in its efforts to communicate with the public, replete with information that is readily available in print as well (Finberg & Stone 2002). There is also nascent research which suggests that there is widespread redundancy within the entire media spectrum because of the 'Internet effect'. Independent blogs and the mainstream media had a strikingly similar agenda during the 2004 US presidential election, regardless of political leanings (Lee 2007). Perhaps the mantra of focused online economic growth has contributed to why many users believe online content does not hold much credibility (Finberg & Stone 2002) and perceive content to be intrinsically duplicitous. The next study explores how the normative structures of current event blogs are displayed through their online content. The findings are contextualized against that of mainstream journalism in an effort to ascertain what differences remain.

A study of current event blogs

Journalism, in the broadest sense, examines proximate topics that involve prominent individuals and have broad effects (MacDougall & Reid 1987). Using these unique qualities as the foundation for growth, mainstream journalism has evolved into a modern bureaucratic network of organizations that aim to observe and objectively document events in a shared reality (Davis 1996). Yet like all cultural institutions (Williams 1977), journalism's norms, values, sources and practices are constantly changing. The conception of journalism

as a solidified foundation of institutionalized practices, such as news beats and organizational routines (Shoemaker & Reese 1996), continues to exist, but in parallel with a view of mainstream news as a manufactured representation of an elite ideology (Herman & Chomsky 1988; Tuchman 1978).

As this book has argued, it is important that research not polarize mainstream and alternative media as complete, binary opposites. However, there are certainly tendencies that place media on very different points across the alternative/mainstream spectrum. Mainstream media have been seen to be motivated by commercial, for-profit, objectives that privilege institutions over movements (Downing 2001) and operate within a 'hierarchy of access' (Atton 2002a), which generally dictates who is sourced according to perceived credibility. By this definitional framework, *The New York Times* would be considered more mainstream than the blog *The Osterley Times*. The former is replete with advertising and paid subscriber benefits, as well as 'objective' content written only by professional reporters who are paid by *The New York Times*. In contrast, *The Osterley Times*, which has no advertising and is written by an unknown author with no listed professional affiliations but holds a stated ideological position from the libertarian left, would be seen as more alternative.

There was an explosion of current events blogs during the Iraq War and the tumultuous American presidency of George W. Bush (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright 2005). Profit-centred, corporate and multinational news conglomerates, which now own most of the world's mainstream media (McChesney 2004), may also help to explain the rise of political, current events blogs. As mainstream news content continued to emphasize entertainment and sensationalism (Williams & Delli Carpini 2000), more independent, alternative political news blogs gained attention for their perceived different approach to current events (Atton 2004). In 1999, there were about 50 existing blogs and they were only known by a few individuals (Johnson, Kaye, Richard & Wong 2007). However, by 2006, 29 per cent (57 million) of American Internet users accessed blogs (Lenhart & Fox 2006) and by 2007, 8 out of 10 Americans knew what a blog was and almost half of America had visited blogs (Synovate 2007). As an example of blog proliferation, the readership and authorship of political blogs had already exceeded that of political print magazines and columns by the year 2004 (Mayfield 2004).

This phenomenal growth may be due to the dynamic nature of blogs. While some alternative blogs are updated weekly, many more are updated hourly (or even more frequently), with postings in reverse chronological order. Some are interactive and allow viewers to post comments (Lenhart & Fox 2006). Unlike static websites, blogs depend upon hyperlinks not only to boost attention to their own blog, but also to ensure that users can be quickly led to relevant information. At their idealized best, weblogs have been said to be a space to reflect on the 'deluge of data' (Blood 2002) that we receive, offering an antidote to the mass-mediated, corporatized culture that surrounds us. They have the

capability to report news without the constraints of censure or the pressures of advertising and draw upon a diverse range of sources. At their reductive worst, bloggers have been said to be strongly opinionated and even vitriolic in response to those who oppose their political positions (Johnson & Kaye 2004).

While most blogs don't see a fraction of their potential audience, blogs do have far more democratic possibility than previous print or digital publication formats. Blogs, unlike other forms of news, can emphasize audience participation and personalization in the creation of content (Wall 2005). Many blogs continue to remain rooted in personal disclosure (Lenhart & Fox 2006). The majority of blogs contain a personal diary or journal, the possibility for two-way communication (Herring *et al.* 2005; Viégas 2005) and are also available for open access (Lenhart & Fox 2006). In general, blogs remain a relatively easy to construct, interactive, flexible and inexpensive mode of self-publication (Herring *et al.* 2005). Many scholars continue to believe blogs can offer a 'radically different kind of news discourse than the one found in mainstream news media' (Haas 2005: 388). This departure from mainstream news content to an activist, alternative space is rooted within three unique capabilities of blogs: the ability of blogs to steer mainstream news coverage; the possibility for independent and non-corporate reporting, which is based on a wide array of diverse sources (Bruns 2003); and the juxtaposition of alternative, independent reporting with uncensored commentary.

Personal current events news blogs, meant to serve as an alternative to mainstream news (Haas 2005), have begun to proliferate on the Internet and many tend to follow a similar pattern of presentation. These specific kinds of blogs have been found to be extremely influential in politics (Bahnisch 2006; Mayfield 2004; Trammell 2006). For example, New Zealand blogger 'Whale Oil' pushed against that country's name suppression orders in criminal court cases by identifying those accused on his blog. In response, Justice Minister Simon Power recently introduced a bill to Parliament that will not allow widespread use of suppression orders throughout the country. In America, specific examples come from the sudden rise of Howard Dean's 2004 presidential bid (Stromer-Galley & Baker 2006), the resignations of news executive Eason Jordan from CNN (Seeyle 2005), Senator Trent Lott as the Senate Majority Leader (Bowman & Willis 2003) and Dan Rather from the CBS news anchor desk (Glaser 2004). There is also research to suggest that blogs helped fuel the speculation that John Kerry won his campaign based on premature exit polls (Carlson 2007). Drawing from these examples and countless others, political/current events blogging has been heralded as the beginning of the end of journalism's sovereign reign (Rosen 2005). This new alternative form of 'amateur journalism' (Lasica 2003) has been said to be the long-awaited answer to journalism's longstanding weaknesses (Regan 2003).

Yet the breadth and depth of this 'amateur journalism' remains to be seen. Schiffer (2006) examined five of the top political, current events blogs and

found that they had a strong impact on mainstream editorial pages but very little effect on hard news pages or television coverage, despite large-scale mobilization efforts online. And, for all its suggested points of difference, current events blogs have also been found to be remarkably similar to mainstream journalism – at least in terms of journalistic norms. Reese *et al.* examined six news blogs and found that in the regurgitation of mainstream content, these blogs provided ‘an important secondary market’ (Reese *et al.* 2007: 257) for corporate journalism. It has also been suggested that the linguistic discourse of blogs might result in a situation where bloggers are just as easily talking *at* their audience rather than *with* their audience (Clark 2002). This study of current event blogs, of which a portion was published earlier (Kenix 2009a), explores whether the post-modern journalism of current event blogs draws from the norms, sources and values inherent to alternative media or from something more akin to their contemporary mainstream counterparts.

Four blogs (two deemed among the most popular and two among the least) were selected from the instantaneous memetracker, Tailrank, a small start-up company based in San Francisco (Tailrank 2008). The two most commonly found blogs were crooksandliars.com and thinkprogress.org. At the time of this study, Technorati reported that Crooks and Liars received an authority ranking of 4,544 and Think Progress received a ranking of 6,314. The numbers here represent the number of blogs linking to the website in the last 6 months and place both of these blogs in the top 10 most popular political blogs. The least popular blogs included in this study were oliverwillis.com and the-osterley-times.blogspot.com, both represented as liberal. Their authority ranking from Technorati was 708 and 135, respectively.

Within the sample period 1,712 hyperlinks were recorded: Think Progress had 828 hyperlinks within the text of their blog, Crooks and Liars had 565 hyperlinks, Oliver Willis had 215 hyperlinks and *The Osterley Times* had 104 hyperlinks. There were a total of 344 posts during the 7-day time period sampled. Think Progress had 144 posts, Crooks and Liars had 112 posts, Oliver Willis had 57 posts and *The Osterley Times* had 31 posts. Overall, these links rarely led to alternative news sources and overwhelmingly led to mainstream news sources, mainstream news blogs and mainstream pop culture sources. The four current event blogs sampled for this study almost exclusively linked to ‘like-minded’ blogs, rather than ‘opposite-minded’ blogs. These blogs did not link to unofficial sources, such as personal websites and alternative news blogs.

These initial findings challenge some previously held notions of alternative media’s norms and values. Research has traditionally found that the normative structures of alternative media result in expansive, in-depth coverage (Duncombe 1997), independent reporting (Atton 2002a), unique stories not covered elsewhere (Makagon 2000), two-way patterns of communication between the writer and reader (Rodriguez 2001), engaged and open discourse (Ostertag 2007), personalized reporting (Atton & Wickenden 2005) and encouragement

of social participation (Tracy 2007). Yet the blogs in this sample displayed characteristics much different to what has been traditionally considered within the norms of alternative media.

Binary, reductive analysis

The content of the blogs in this sample presented polarized nodes of information with a clear ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ position. Often the text was constructed sceptically to emphasize the division. For example, two posts from Oliver Willis read, ‘Are you S***** Me??’ and ‘Drill Now?!’ The use of repeated punctuation in both headlines work to exclaim the incredulity of those opposing the author’s position. The prevailing discourse is of a smarter ‘us’ versus stupider ‘them’. The text of all the blogs sampled relies heavily on obvious ridicule and distance between the author and the opposition. The ridicule of those who oppose the bloggers position is unflinching. Oliver Willis writes, ‘someone forgot their Centrum Silver again’ when discussing how McCain inaccurately referred to an Iraq–Pakistan border. Again, in reference to congressman and then-presidential candidate, John McCain, Willis writes, ‘John McCain bitching about someone else supposedly getting preferential media coverage is sort of like attacking Jeffrey Dahmer for cruelty to animals and ignoring the other stuff. Seriously. This guy’. Such obvious ridicule depends little on contextualization and relies on an absolutist, binary analytical approach. One of many additional examples comes from John Amato at Crooks and Liars who writes about McCain’s response to being questioned about affirmative action. Amato states, ‘That McCain answered by talking about his opposition to “quotas” was, of course, ridiculous. “Quotas” and “affirmative action” are not the same thing’. The blog then immediately proceeds to discuss the politics of his answer in the context of McCain’s previous voting record. This example illustrates a common blogging tactic. First, denigrate your opposition and then offer a reductive analysis in retort. Here, Amato labels McCain as ridiculous without explaining exactly why that is and instead describes McCain’s voting record in reductive, simplistic terms. One of the benefits of hyperlinking is the endless amount of information that can be attached to a topic. Using this instance as an example, one can assume readers would be better informed with supplementary sources describing quotas and affirmative action as well as links to independent reporting that might address the impact of affirmative action in society. Without such ancillary material, the reader is left to choose a side and argue according to the simplistic arguments provided.

The blogs here also appeared to overstate their claim to ‘truth’ while undermining their opponents’ attempt to do the same. On 28 July 2008, John Amato, from Crooks and Liars wrote that a study by the *LA Times* ‘proves’ the media are harder on Obama than McCain, showing how it was ‘obvious’

that this latest talking point was ‘complete B.S. from the start ... surprise, surprise’. The *LA Times* study certainly didn’t ‘prove’ that the entire media are harder on Obama, but it did suggest that the three network television news programs in America used less positive statements for Obama than they did for McCain. This is an important difference that likely would have been highlighted if the situation had been reversed, as was the case when three of the four blogs reported on Robert Novak’s car accident in Washington, DC. On 23 July 2008, Crooks and Liars wrote ‘Novak hits pedestrian with Corvette, keeps driving ... I’m sorry, but I think most normal people would notice a 66-year-old man rolling across their windshield. I’m just saying ...’. This story was alongside an image of read ‘Robert Novak: Douchebag of liberty’. Also, on the 23rd of July 2008, Think Progress ran the headline ‘Witness: “No way” Novak didn’t know he hit someone; victim was “splayed across the front” of his car’. Only one of the three blogs, Think Progress, reported later that Mr Novak had a brain tumour and that he may have had a temporary ‘blackout’ because of this medical condition. However, none of the blogs, or any of the commentators, made any apologies about their previous statements or coverage.

Dependent reporting

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

An example from *The Osterley Times* on 23 July 2008 opens: ‘It’s a sad day for McCain when even Joe Klein thinks he has gone too far. But his recent unbelievable comments regarding Obama have caused Klein to say this’. The post then re-mediate a two-paragraph quote from Joe Klein and then ends with the blogger writing ‘I expect McCain’s campaign to get more scurrilous as time goes on’. The blogger doesn’t explain who Joe Klein is, and doesn’t link directly to his website, which is an example of the sometimes coded language found in these blogs. However, given the format of other posts, the reader would assume that Klein holds official stature (Klein is a political columnist for *Time* magazine and author of six political books). The personalized, first person closing predicts future behaviour from a decidedly opinionated perspective. By constructing the post in this manner, the blogger ingratiate herself or himself with the like-minded reader and invites the reader

into specialized knowledge that the blogger gained only after doing extensive research through the mainstream media.

Think Progress, a blog that tended to use less polarizing language than the others in this sample, continues this format, but with a more measured tone and a stronger reliance on quotations for substantiation. For example, in reporting on the hiring practices of Monica Goodling, a former US government lawyer and political appointee in the George W. Bush administration, Think Progress begins on 28 July 2008 by writing that ‘today’s Justice Department report – which faults department aide Monica Goodling for “violating federal law” through politicised hiring practices – reveals Goodling’s bizarre and thorough way of ensuring she hired only the most tried and true conservatives’. The post then moves into an extensive quote from the Justice Department report and ends by saying, ‘The report noted that Goodling refused to hire one Assistant US Attorney because she thought he was a “political infant” who had not “proved himself” to the Republican party’. While relying on the words of other official sources, rather than constructing this sentence as pure opinion, this post still maintains the same format that is frequently seen in blog postings. In this case, the blogger first identifies with like-minded readers by distancing Think Progress with the upcoming text. Here, Think Progress immediately labels Goodling as ‘bizarre’ but then sources the related information from the official Justice Report. The blogger closes with a challenging statement that purposefully quotes ‘political infant’ and ‘proved himself’ from the Justice Report to metaphorically connect back to the original charges of ‘bizarreness’. By using quotation marks here, the blogger marginalizes Goodling and calls her legitimacy into question. The viewer, who was first alerted by Think Progress to Goodling’s penchant for ‘bizarre’ behaviour, is eventually rewarded for being given this knowledge with a final righteous confirmation from the blogger.

Hyperlinks ‘represent relationships between producers of web materials, and they can be viewed as structuring connections between sites for web users’ (Foot, Schneider, Dougherty, Xenos & Larsen 2003: Introduction). If indeed hyperlinking is a ‘non-random’ and purposeful act of building associative socio-epistemic networks (Rogers & Marres 2002), then only the preponderance of mainstream news links in this study is meaningful. Similar research examining warblogs (Wall 2005), found a heavy reliance on mainstream sources. It could be argued that both political blogs and warblogs would lose relevance if they did not draw from ‘mainstream agendas of broad social concern’ (Redden, Caldwell & Nguyen 2003: 77). However, relationships formed through hyperlinks are inherently dialogical, meaning that a form of dialogue occurs between these two texts that provide meaning for communities (Burbules & Callister 2000; Mitra 1999). The viewer often infers associations between the producers of information found on these links (Adamic & Adar 2001). In this sample, the associative meaning can

only be one of a strong, albeit critical, relationship with mainstream news. These cognitive, communicative connections extend to online and offline locations (Hine 2000). If this text linked to more 'alternative' sources of news, which provided an independent reporting of events, the remediation of content might have a very different, regenerative and multiplying effect on social communication. Instead, the opposite is actually occurring within this sample of blogs. The blogs that were referenced to more, and seen as 'popular' relied on mainstream sources more than other, lesser known blogs. The popular blogs actually moved away from the sphere of blogs and into relationships with mainstream news, suggesting a conformist process of homogenization.

The associative relationships and political alliances (Park, Thelwall & Kluver 2005) that exist because of hyperlinking, remain whether one is contradicting or agreeing the news content cited. The mutually dependent relationship solidifies the association. The mainstream news outlet depends upon the blog to increase traffic to its own site, while the blog depends upon the mainstream news outlet to provide content for analysis. Within the interconnected sphere of blogs and mainstream news, the blogs sampled for this study become an extension of corporate news rather than an example of alternative communication. The remediation of mainstream news found in this research may serve to strengthen, rather than weaken or challenge, views found in the elite, mainstream press as these blogs are providing a much wider audience for mainstream views.

Story redundancy

There was also much overlap in content between the four blogs. On one randomly selected day, 65 per cent of content was replicated in one of the four blogs randomly sampled. This suggests a substantial level of content remediation, not only from the mainstream sources where this content derived from, but also within the political blogosphere itself. This type of coverage mirrors mainstream 'pack' reporting (Murley & Roberts 2006; Qamra, Tseng & Chang 2006).

The blogging community has a widely used practice of linking to others that have already linked to you. While this can be seen as an act of kindness, there is also a distinct possibility of a self-limiting 'echo chamber'. Kumar *et al.* (1999) were among the first to suggest that like-minded groups quickly form and self-replicate online. Such circuitous behaviour has been called an 'unbearable incestuousness' (Clark 2002). Tateo (2005) examined 77 right wing Italian websites and discovered a highly coherent, tightly knit network of intra-linked groups. Through the circuitousness of such hyperlinks, superstars can be born. In an early and intuitive analysis of digital culture, Mead asserted that being blogged (or hyperlinked) by a well-known blogger

‘is the blog equivalent of having your book featured on *Oprah*’ (Mead 2000: 102). To repay the favour, the blogger quickly becomes the bloggee and a self-referential circle can begin. As this circuitous spiral continues, it inevitably shrinks and an elite A-list (Clark 2002; Trammell & Keshelashvili 2005) of blogs can emerge. Such a group then could rely upon coded and direct messages that only the regular astute viewer could decipher. The result is that the once heralded egalitarian Internet runs the danger of becoming a capitalistic positioning shuffle.

One-way communication

Within the sample period, Crooks and Liars had 10,401 comments, averaging 92.86 comments per post, and Think Progress had 11,778 comments, averaging 81.79 comments per post. *The Osterley Times* had 19 comments, averaging 0.33 comments per post and Oliver Willis had 883 comments, averaging 28.48 comments per post.

It is important to note that almost none of the total 23,081 comments were openly solicited. Meaning, there were very few ‘open threads’ evident on these blogs and no direct encouragement of audience contributions. Crooks and Liars was the only blog to utilize the open thread function whereby users are directly encouraged to create the entire content for a particular blog posting. On the 25th of July 2008, Crooks and Liars wrote an open thread that read, ‘here’s a fun game to play in comments, kids. Finish this sentence: “Bill O’Reilly is the new _____” Enjoy!’ Such an approach entices users to participate directly in the blog. There was no evidence of a similar entreaty for comments on any of the other sites sampled.

There was little evidence of other types of invitations to communicate, such as asking questions of their audience. Questions would serve to recognize at least the possibility of a communicative relationship. In the instances that did exist, it was difficult to deconstruct whether the question was meant to be rhetorical or directed purposefully at the viewer for engagement. For example, on 27 July 2008, in reference to the notion that Barack Obama might employ Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman as his running mate, John Amato, the author of Crooks and Liars, wrote ‘he is kidding, isn’t he?’ Given there is a possibility for exchange in the commentary, one could initially assume that this is an invitation for communication with the readers. However, after examining the 259 comments in response to this article, it becomes clear that this question was meant to be rhetorical and not as an opportunity to exchange further information with the readers. Out of the 259 comments, eight viewers stated their reply to Amato directly. This suggests that the audience do not appear to assume any direct, communicative link with the author. Their efforts at communication appeared to be directed to others commenting on the site, rather than the author. Of the 259 comments to this post, there

were 110 comments that were directed to another person that had already commented. This constitutes 42.4 per cent of all comments.

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

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

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

There were no meaningful invitations for communication and conversation. Rather, these blogs operated as a one-way linear form of communication with a parallel, and sarcastic, sphere of communication occurring within the commentary.

Caustic commentary

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

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

an Israeli air strike on Iran, said, 'I hope Jesus comes and raptures his evil old ass STAT'. On Oliver Willis, 'Jay' wrote, 'Christ, this (blog post) is beyond stupid'.

Given the multitude of asynchronous, largely sarcastic and often angry comments online, one has to consider the function of these statements within the blogosphere. Daily Kos recorded its 20 millionth comment in July 2008 (Libit 2008), but some, like *The Atlantic's* Marc Ambinder, have given up in frustration and closed their site to comments. Executive Editor of LATimes.com, Meredith Artley, recently said that 'I'm not sure what good hundreds of thousands of comments or message boards do for anybody ... I have never known anybody to just read through all of that and think it's worth revisiting' (Libit 2008). Certainly, the ability of ordinary citizens to post comments online is a radical departure from established mass media practices and the ability to post like-minded comments also may facilitate a sense of community online. Participating within a thread of commentary may resemble the previously predicted communication pattern that emphasizes viewers not only consume a mediated product, but also work to help create and construct the meaning of that product (Rheingold 2002). However, one has to wonder what kind of community and what type of meaning is being created. As has already been mentioned, the vitriol directed towards these commentators in specific and those who oppose their views, in general, may serve to coalesce the community by helping to confirm what the majority of commentators believe to be right. Habermas (1989), who articulated this notion of a public sphere, certainly argued that democracy can be messy. But, by almost any definition, a self-assured, one-dimensional and oppositional fighting front does not equate to democratic debate within a public sphere.

Coded language

The political position of these blogs was immediately apparent. Headlines such as 'McCain Caves to Right Wing on Gay Adoption' from Think Progress on 27 July 2008, 'John McCain, Gaffe Machine?' from Crooks and Liars on 26 July 2008, 'Pentagon Told Obama He Couldn't Visit Troops, Republicans Still Stupid' from Oliver Willis on 25 July 2008 and 'McCain Meltdown' from *The Osterley Times* on 23 July 2008 are fairly obviously positioned and purposely evocative. The general reader with a basic understanding of American politics would feasibly be able to ascertain the political position of these blogs.

Yet in the text of these blogs, there are layers of meaning within each post that depend upon a historical knowledge in the area of politics and events in the news. For example, on 24 July 2008, in a post titled 'Pravda at Black Rock', Oliver Willis wrote that 'CBS scrubs yet another one of McCain's

senior citizen gaffes from their coverage. Uncle Joe would be proud'. The reader is expected to have enough knowledge of newspapers and geography to know that *pravda*, translated into 'The Truth' was the most popular newspaper of the Soviet Union and an official mouthpiece for the Communist Party between 1912 and 1991. Uncle Joe, in this case, presumably refers to Joseph Stalin, given the reference to *pravda*. Yet, after reading all of the linked material to this post, this research was still not able to uncover the meaning of 'Black Rock'. Such layers of meaning presumably work to unite a community with shared referential experiences, but they also work to exclude readers who don't have the same historical knowledge or shared cues that combine to form a communal experience. One might assume a similar headline, such as 'evidence of CBS news tampering harkens memories of controlling, Communist regime', would be more inclusive and inviting to readers who may have varying degrees of knowledge in certain areas. Such examples suggest an assumptive, and even elitist, blogger position within what can be construed as a communication hierarchy. Certainly, a reader can find this information on the Internet. However, a political blog aiming to create informational opportunities within an alternative media space could explain histories within different contextual analyses that might not be as readily available to the casual viewer.

Personalization

On 24 July 2008, *The Osterley Times* blogger posted a story on Barack Obama's speech in Berlin. The blogger wrote, 'people living within the most powerful country in the world can have no idea of what it feels like for those of us who live outside it ... we have watched, dumbfounded, as (Bush) has been allowed to act as if the law is what he says it is. Our faith in America is shattered. And that is why we so wholeheartedly embrace Obama'. *The Osterley Times* blogger writes this from a decidedly personal perspective, and repeatedly uses words like 'we' and 'us' and 'our' to invoke a sense of community and intimacy. This quote also illustrates what Fairclough (2003) has called an intertextual mix of populist lexical choices. In this example, the blogger is speaking for all people outside of the United States while also connecting with official and prestigious Democratic nominee, Barack Obama. This gives the blogger, and those who agree with her or him, stature while also placing the blogger in a superior position above those who might support the inevitably weaker McCain.

There are repeated instances of personalization found throughout each of these blog posts except for Think Progress, which writes from a much more formal, and mainstream institutional voice. The other blogs in this sample all use the first person in their postings. Even *The Osterley Times* blogger, whose identity is unknown, constantly writes from this personal position. On 28th July 2008, this blogger writes 'is it just me or is John McCain starting to sound

insane? ... Sorry. This is my third post today on McCain ... I am unaware that anyone had ever suggested that this might be his reason for running for President'. This alternative form of reporting is distanced from any pretence of objectivity found in the mainstream press. It works to provide a sense of transparency to like-minded viewers who believe the blogger 'is someone the readers can believe they know, someone who is not manipulated by a corporate boss or a filter of professionalism' (Wall 2005: 165). In doing so, such highly personalized discourse helps to create a relationship between the reader and author – something that is rarely seen in mainstream media. While there was ample use of personalized reporting, this alone would not qualify these political blogs as an 'alternative' media space when balanced against the weight of this research, particularly as the first person accounts were often used to re-mediate mainstream content.

Apathetic online participation

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

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

Atkinson defines alternative media as 'any media that are produced by non-commercial sources and attempt to transform existing social roles and routines by critiquing and challenging power structures' (Atkinson 2006: 252). By this definition, the political blogs sampled here could not quite meet this

definitional hurdle. All four blogs were non-commercial sources, but they all were also arguing for one entrenched power structure over another. In this case, all four blogs readily critiqued mainstream content and argued against the conservative, politically powerful, Republican Party. However, these arguments were drawn heavily from mainstream positions and were on behalf of the liberal, politically powerful, Democrat Party. The bloggers' critiques *and* their solutions both depended upon the existence of these power structures.

Hamilton (2000a) argued that alternative communication constructs different traditions and values. Yet the structure of these blogs largely followed a one-way communication model grounded in mainstream media practices. There was widespread redundancy in stories across the four blogs sampled, which mirrors mainstream 'pack' reporting. There were also very few open invitations to create content. The 'open thread' in Crooks and Liars was the lone instance of explicit commentator contribution and there was also very little communication between blogger and commentator. If the goal of alternative media is to subvert the 'hierarchy of access' (Atton 2002a) and 'emphasise first person eyewitness accounts by participants' (Atton 2003: 267), then again the blogs sampled for this study did not qualify as alternative, rather these blogs strongly adhered to the mainstream model of a distanced and knowledgeable content creator and a generalized body of apathetic readers.

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

Downing (2001) has argued convincingly of the complete mainstream blockage of public expression and the necessity for alternative media to fill the cultural and social gap. There is little evidence here that political blogs are fulfilling this ideal. Rather, these blogs exist as somewhat of an overlapping sphere between mainstream and alternative media, extending and drawing upon mainstream practices – without corporate sponsorship and at times with

a personal voice. Many of the values these blogs appear to critique are the same values they have subsumed from mainstream journalism. What emerged from this study was a sample of blogs that acted as contract ombudsmen for the mainstream press. The principal difference was that they were not on the mainstream payroll – a welcome relief for newspapers facing continual budget cuts – and, rather than ‘answering’ to public concerns about content, these blogs were driven by individual interests created within the culture of mainstream media.

This research argues that these political blogs, which have been conceptualized within academia as an alternative to mainstream media, actually draw very little from what has been defined as alternative media. Further, these blogs appear firmly grounded within the ideological mainstream and make no attempt to create alternative identities outside of entrenched, elite systems of power. The ability for citizens to speak with a broader reach was one of the few ‘alternative’ qualities found here. But, ironically, this ability may have actually served to strengthen mainstream media given that bloggers simply re-mediated mainstream content and therefore gave these perspectives much more consideration and voice than they previously had.

As this research suggests, there is extensive overlap between what was once considered ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream’. The blogs in this sample critiqued mainstream content with mainstream ideology and normative practices found in mainstream journalism through a far-reaching, once ‘new’ and ‘alternative’ medium. If one actually examines online, alternative blog content, it becomes apparent that there is far more overlap between the blogs in this sample and modern, mainstream political talk radio, than definitional frameworks of what constitutes alternative media. It is not enough to label what was once alternative media, something like ‘citizen media’, for example, without careful consideration of what separates the two. Simply because content is produced by an individual citizen, as was the case here in some of the blogs sampled, does not mean it does not rely upon corporate models of communication, mainstream ideologies and corporate content.