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**BLOGS, DEMOCRACY AND THE MEDIA:
FRIEND OR FOE?**

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BLOGS, DEMOCRACY AND THE MEDIA: FRIEND OR FOE?

INTRODUCTION

In October 2006 the New Zealand Parliament debated controversial legislation to retrospectively validate unlawful election spending by political partiesⁱ. And, on the second day of debating under urgency, as the Opposition screamed corruption and complained of a stolen election, a curious slogan was uttered by several MPs. They talked of a “mutual validation society”ⁱⁱ between the New Zealand Government and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe.

It was not the first time Opposition MPs had compared Helen Clark’s Labour-led Government to Robert Mugabe’s regime. The tone of New Zealand’s political debate at the time was particularly ugly and deeply personalisedⁱⁱⁱ. The slogan itself was not particularly clever or noteworthy, and it passed unreported.

But its origin is of note. Shortly before it was first used in the Debating Chamber a leading New Zealand web-log, www.kiwiblog.co.nz, posted an image of the New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark and the Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe with the caption “mutual validation society.”^{iv} In fact, it took less than half an hour from the time the website’s author^v clicked his mouse to publish the image on his website before MPs were referencing it in Parliament.

It was a stark illustration of the emerging impact of political web-logs – the mostly amateur citizen-journalism that has exploded across the Internet. Political reporting, analysis and commentary - so long the preserve of specialist journalists – is now open to anyone with an interest and an Internet connection. Even in the relatively small market of New Zealand there are dozens of blogs dedicated to politics.

Their impact thus far in New Zealand has mainly been at the periphery – they are keenly read by political insiders, but have yet to really crossover into the mainstream. But it may only be a matter of time. Internationally, some political blogs are beginning to wield real influence, most notably in the United States of America.

The blogging revolution comes at a time of turmoil for the traditional media, as digital technology changes the way people consume news, information and entertainment. Audiences and readerships are falling, along with profitability. Many mainstream news organisations have rushed to embrace user-generated content as they seek to fine-tune their business model for the new age.

This paper aims to examine the impact of political blogs on the traditional media. Are they a threat to the power and position of the traditional Press Gallery? Is the media losing its role as a gatekeeper? How should reporters and news organisations respond to the challenge of competition from bloggers? And - perhaps most importantly of all – is political blogging a great flowering of democratic participation, or is it more

likely to represent the ill-informed preaching of a handful of self-appointed commentators to a relatively small audience of the like-minded?

This paper sets out to examine a simple thesis; “That blogs are good for democracy, but bad for the traditional media.” In doing so, it will look primarily at the United States and the United Kingdom, with some comparison with the situation in other countries. Chapter One will canvas recent research into the nature of blogs and their readers. Chapter Two will examine the similarities and differences between blogs and traditional journalism. Chapter Three looks at the potential democratic value of blogs, while Chapter Four focuses on the response from the traditional media to the challenge of bloggers.

CHAPTER ONE:

Free speech – but who is listening?

It is hardly a new observation, but the Internet is possibly the most democratic communications medium ever created. It offers anyone with an Internet connection - and with the time and inclination - the chance to create and publish their own content and engage with people from around the world. With Internet access at high levels in developed economies,ⁱ in many countries there are now virtually no barriers to participation; blogging is free speech writ large. The Internet can, therefore, be considered a democratic space – and it is no surprise to find that political debate is flourishing online. And what is perhaps the most encouraging is that at a time of falling voter turnouts and low political party membership, it is happening at a grassroots level.

The history of blogging is relatively brief. The first blogs were born in the mid-1990s, when the Internet was still largely the preserve of academics, students and computer geeks. Typically they were online diaries, personal observations intended for a small audience of friends and family. Some were built around research or software projects as a way of updating communities of interest and seeking feedback. And a few focused on discussion of politics and current events.

They attracted small readerships, and no media interest. But those that survived developed a dedicated following, attracted not only by the thoughts and writings of the blogs authors, but also by the involvement of the audience through discussion forums and comments threads.

It was not until the early years of this decade that blogging hit the mainstream. Suddenly the media was full of articles about blogging and by the 2004 US presidential elections bloggers were being used as commentators by CNN.

But was the hype justified then and now? How widely read are blogs? Are they truly the next big thing in journalism – or just another creation of the media in its eternal quest for the opinion of the so-called “The Man On The Street?”

The “Blogosphere”: how big is the next big thing?

Calculating the influence of blogs is a difficult and largely subjective task. But there is no denying the sheer weight of numbers involved.

The exact size of the blogosphere (the term used by bloggers to describe the online community of both bloggers and readers) is unknown. Estimates vary wildly.

In October 2005 one count claimed that 100 million blogs had been created,ⁱⁱ and another site pointed to 70 thousand blogs being created every day.ⁱⁱⁱ However, a year later another count put the number of blogs at 57 million and growing at a rate of 100 thousand per day.^{iv} But by any measure, there are tens of millions of blogs, with thousands more being created daily.

Every day there are about 1.3 million new blog postings.^v And blogging is an increasingly global pursuit. While 39% of blog posts are in English, 33% are in Japanese and 10% in Chinese.^{vi}

Online diaries still account for the largest slice of the blog pie. Detailed US research^{vii}, involving 233 active bloggers found that 37% cited “my life and experiences” as the main topic for their writing. Politics and government came in a distant second at 11%, with general news and current affairs identified by 5% of bloggers. Interestingly the same research found that bloggers as a group are more interested in political news (72% use the Internet to look for political news) than the general online population (58%).

But just because people are writing blogs, it does not necessarily follow that anyone is reading them – many attract just a tiny audience. Based on the sheer number of blogs it would be easy to over-emphasise their reach.

Yet to be released research from Britain’s Ofcom^{viii} found that the use of the Internet for news has jumped from 26% to 35% from 2002 to 2006. But some 60% of that online news was sourced from “old media,” that is websites associated with established broadcasters and newspapers. 35% of the consumption of online news identified in the Ofcom research was from purely online news providers – while just 7% was from web logs and personal homepages. From these figures it would appear that the death of the traditional media has been greatly exaggerated^{ix}.

Political Blogs: who actually reads them?

In an age of widespread disenchantment with politics and politicians, political news is often considered a turn-off for readers, listeners and viewers. Many newspaper readers will skip lightly over political articles and commentary. Publications and broadcasts purely about politics attract a niche rather than mass audience. The same is inevitably true of political blogs – politics it seems is an acquired taste.

That said, the latest research of the top 100 US blogs, one in four is devoted to politics.^x However, measuring the exact number of readers a particular website attracts is still a difficult task. The most common method of rating a blog’s influence is not based upon the number of unique visitors it attracts, or the number of page-views, but by the number of other blogs that link to it^{xi}.

Recent research by the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet (IPDI) at the George Washington University estimated that the total readership for political blogs in the United States numbers in the millions, rather than the tens of millions^{xii}. The research was based on an online survey of 7,863 people (drawn from a database of registered voters). It found that 40% of respondents had looked at a blog “that discusses politics or current events” at least once in the previous month. 7% said they visited such sites several times a week, while 9% read political blogs almost every day.

The same research reveals that daily readers are three times more likely to be male than female^{xiii}, and are more likely to place themselves at the ends of the political spectrum

(this is true both in party-political terms (Democrat or Republican) and a liberal-conservative continuum).

The IPDI research shows that daily readers are also more likely to be political active than average. Of those surveyed 77% had contacted a politician in the previous year compared with 61% of all others^{xiv}. Almost half, 44% had been a member of a group that tried to influence public policy (28% for all others).

Interestingly, although the Internet is generally considered to attract a younger audience, this does not appear to hold true for political blog readers. 80% of daily readers are aged over 35.^{xv} This is perhaps a reflection of the conventional picture of the age of those interested in politics, rather than the Internet as a medium favoured by the under 40s.

Daily readers are also slightly better educated and slightly less religious than the base sample of registered voters.

The portrait of the regular audience for political blogs that emerges from the George Washington University research is of a relatively small group of political aware and active readers. They are heavy users of the Internet, and as we will see later in this paper, many use blogs to express their political beliefs and support their political party. Other research by advertising company Blogads suggests that almost one in five (17%) of political blog readers have their own blog^{xvi}.

Although the media now often quote the comments left on blogs as a form of vox populi, it would seem they are not representative of “The Man on the Street,” (if for no other reason than that they are overwhelmingly men).

So many blogs, so few readers: the pull of the big blogs

If the blogosphere is a democratic space, it is also a marketplace. With literally tens of millions of blogs out there, there is a staggering amount of choice available to readers. Even within the smaller political blogging realm there will be hundreds and hundreds of blogs in a country the size of the UK. But the reality is that the blog market in each country is dominated by a few big names.

Finding hard data on the number of readers individual blogs have is not easy. There is no reliable source of data that compares traffic across all blogs. Measuring readership largely relies on individual bloggers using a site-meter to recording incoming traffic. Even then, different site meters may record different activity, making strict comparisons difficult.

Top US politics blog *The Daily Kos*, for example, gets close to half a million visits per day, (although, oddly, according to the site-meter the average visit lasts just 2 seconds).^{xvii} Other major US politics blogs *Instapundit* (151,000), *Little Green Footballs* (139,000), and *The Daily Dish* (82,000) all attract sizeable audiences^{xviii}. What is unknown is how large the overall readership across all political blogs is, as regular readers are likely to read more than one blog.

The picture in the UK is even less clear – as fewer of the leading blogs use site-meters. But what is clear is that audiences are far smaller, even adjusted for population size. Leading Conservative blogger Iain Dale’s blog, *Dale’s Diary* records more than 6,000 unique visitors per day, which he estimates is drawn from a regular pool of readers of 50,000 to 60,000 readers,^{xxix} (by way of comparison, the weekly *New Statesman* magazine has a circulation of 30,000 per issue^{xxx}). Another leading UK site, the libertarian blog Samizdata.net, gets an average of just 3,600 visits per day.^{xxxi} From these figures alone it is clear that few political blogs in Britain attract anything but a niche readership. In fact, in the UK it is generally accepted that only the top ten or twelve political blogs attract readerships of over a thousand.^{xxii}

The difference in scale (and indeed impact) of blogging between the US and the UK is clearly considerable. Not only do US blogs attract far larger audiences, but they have a greater track record of breaking and influencing stories (from Dan Rather and the fake George Bush memo, to Trent Lott’s resignation). Exactly why this should be (whether, for example, it is a reflection of their respective media markets), would be an interesting topic for further research and analysis.

Conclusions

Blogging is an emerging area of academic and market research. While there is a body of research about blog readers, there is little hard data about bloggers themselves – and estimates about the size and reach of the blogosphere overall vary greatly. In terms of political blogs, the data is even thinner.

We know that the political blogging scene is dominated by a few big players and that their readers are largely well-educated males, aged 35 and over, who are more politically active than the general population. We know that political blogs make a small chunk of the blog market, but attract a dedicated readership. It is also undeniable that there is rapid growth in blogging, both in terms of the number of blogs, and their use as a news source.

CHAPTER TWO:

By any other name – is blogging really journalism?

The growth of the Internet and blogs is just the latest in a long line of technological developments that have changed the face of news production and distribution. From the printing press to the telegraph, the radio to the television, the medium has always influenced both the shape of news and access to it.

Indeed, the current flourishing of political blogs echoes the pamphleteering of the 16th and 17th centuries. The printing press facilitated the birth and growth of hundreds of opinion sheets and newsletters that were the forerunner of modern newspapersⁱ. Pamphlets were typically the creation of one individual, expressing his views and philosophy to readers. Pamphleteers are credited with creating a new public sphere for the discussion of politics and religion – of opening up debate within their communities of readers. It is almost as if the Internet has brought us back full circle, and recreated the simple pamphlet for a new age.

Most pamphlets – like most blogs – had limited reach, and limited impact. But others become genuinely influential (for example, Daniel Defoe in Britain and Thomas Paine in the US). If bloggers are the 21st century pamphleteers, they have a potentially global reach. But as we have already seen, just a handful of political blogs attract audiences above a few thousand. A tiny number can even make a living out of blogging.ⁱⁱ So does that make them de-facto reporters – is there a point at which the distinction between bloggers and journalists ceases to make sense?

If the dedicated audience for political blogs is relatively small, it is also growing. And it is inevitably drawn from the same pool of potential viewers, listeners, readers and advertising targets that the traditional media is struggling to hold onto. As audiences and readerships fall and advertising revenue shrinks or shifts online, the traditional media outlets are struggling to realign themselves for the digital age.

What lessons are there for news organisations in the emergence of political blogs? Are blogs straight-out competition – or are they a complementary read that sits alongside the output of the print and broadcast media?

This chapter examines the similarities and differences between bloggers and journalists - not to decide which is the superior form, but to look at the way each relates to the other and its audience.

Follow the leader

Spend any length of time reading a range of blogs and you will find repeated railings against the failings of the mainstream media - complaints of bias or incompetence. Indeed, the phrase “mainstream media” (or MSM as it is habitually referred to) is often used dismissively or even derisively.

But, despite this seeming antipathy towards the media, the reality remains that many political blog postings are in response to stories published by the mainstream media.

Apart from a few exceptions, mostly notably in the US, blogs have little track record of breaking genuinely new stories. More often than not they contain reaction and comment on the news of the day - as reported by the mainstream media.

But, while they may not break many stories, Stephen Coleman argues political blogs are playing an agenda setting role.ⁱⁱⁱ They may not have a wide readership, but they are keenly monitored by journalists and politicians alike (US research found that blogs were read in over 90% of congressional offices, although not always regularly).^{iv} In the UK, Conservative blogger Iain Dale says that political editors of four newspapers told him that they followed up a post he made about Cherie Blair auctioning a copy of the Hutton Report because they thought their competitors would pick up on it.^v The story had originally appeared in the *Mail on Sunday* but had been ignored by other media. Iain Dale's post on the issue the following Tuesday resulted in front page coverage on Wednesday.

You say objective, I say subjective...

The debate over objectivity in journalism is surely as old as the trade itself, and does not need to be re-litigated here. While it is now generally accepted that pure objectivity is unattainable, the principles that under-pin "objective" journalism (fairness, balance, accuracy) remain sacrosanct for most serious journalists and news organisations.

Blogs, by comparison, are by definition a subjective form. They are an outlet for the thoughts and opinions of an individual (although some blogs are collective efforts, each posting is generally the product of a single author). There is no attempt at being objective. Indeed, one of the attractions of the medium – both for bloggers and readers - is its highly personal nature. The open acknowledgment of political partisanship is fundamental to bloggers, and is often pointed to by bloggers as a point of superiority over the mainstream media.

Perhaps the correct comparison, then, is not between bloggers and common or garden journalists, but bloggers and that more exalted breed, the columnists. The mainstream media has long published personal opinion – as long as it is identified as such.^{vi} Indeed, those bloggers that have "crossed-over" into the traditional media usually appear as columnists on the op-ed pages or commentators on radio and television.

But even in the op-ed pages, newspapers observe editorial standards of balance, fairness and accuracy. The essence of opinion-based journalism is open debate. Newspapers provide a forum where all sides of a story should (and for the most part do) get the chance to put their case.

This is not to suggest that the news media is without bias, both acknowledged and unacknowledged. But even those outlets with an open political preference will present a range of views in the interests of balance – if not always in equal measures.

The case for balance is even stronger in public service and publicly funded broadcasters, where there is an absolute expectation of political neutrality. Institutions such as the BBC have a duty and a legislative requirement to present all sides of a story. It is a measure of how important this is, and how difficult it is, that

the BBC is constantly under attack for displaying bias and now acknowledges it has not always achieved the goal.

Balance, Fairness and Accuracy

So, if newspapers, radio and television have a tradition of striving for balance and fairness, what of the emerging blogosphere? Are bloggers interested in the old media's editorial standards – and do their readers care either way?

British blogger, and professor emeritus of politics at Manchester University, Norman Geras, accepts the need for fairness in blogs – particularly when representing the views of others.^{vii} But he maintains that he has no duty to present differing views on his blog in the name of balance.

“Balance? I’m not so sure. I’m a blogger, not the BBC. I mean no-one is paying me a licence fee. There are certain points of view that I want to argue for – I hope in a fair minded way.”

As a blogger with political goals,^{viii} Norman Geras has an agenda that he unashamedly pushes. His very motivation for starting to blog (supporting the Iraq war from a leftwing perspective) was to articulate a viewpoint he believes was not being well represented in the media.

Norman Geras' position on balance reflects the editorial freedom that bloggers enjoy. Why should an individual offer up his or her blog to opposing views – particularly if they see their writing as a form of political activism?

Norman Geras also argues that, because of the diversity of the blogosphere, alternative views are easily available at the click of the mouse on other blogs. Indeed blogs often link to others with opposing views (as well as the mainstream news media). And ultimately there is a blog for just about every political persuasion imaginable – although, as we have seen already, there is a definite hierarchy of influence, with a handful of top blogs accounting for the vast majority of readers.

If balance is optional for bloggers, accuracy is less so. Just one in three bloggers considers their writing as journalism but more than half (56%) fact check either often or sometimes, 40% quote other media or people directly, and 57% link directly to original source material.^{ix}

Such figures are encouraging, but are no guarantee of accuracy. With no sub-editing process or second eye cast over the copy before it is published, errors are inevitable (and that is leaving aside the question of quoting out of context or misrepresenting a political opponent's position). In place of subediting, the blogosphere relies on post-publication fact checking by readers and other bloggers. Errors, omissions or political spin are regularly challenged in comment sections and in other blogs. This self-policing does result in a sort of collective fact-checking - although just 38% of bloggers say they publish corrections either often or sometimes.

Bloggers also fact check the mainstream media. The most well known example came during the 2004 US presidential election, when CBS' *60 Minutes Wednesday* based a

report on a fake memo about George Bush's service in the National Guard. It was bloggers who pursued the authenticity of the memo and quickly established it was a fake, ultimately leading to the early retirement of one of the institutions of US television, Dan Rather.

The memo scandal was a breakthrough moment for the blogs – a genuine news story and an online scoop. But it is not unique. Blogs regularly challenge the accuracy and competence of the media. It may not be comfortable for journalists to have the limitations of their work exposed, but it is a valuable function.

Facts, rumours, gossip

Balance, fairness and accuracy are not the only editorial standards, of course. News organisations exercise choices everyday about taste, relevance and the public interest, amongst others.

Reporting gossip is the stock and trade of many journalists and bloggers. The case of the British deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's affair is illustrative. The story of his infidelity with his secretary, Tracey Temple, was broken by the *Mail on Sunday* (in April 2006), which published extracts of her diaries. The British media has long considered the personal lives of politicians fair game. But even the conservative *Mail on Sunday* chose to withhold elements of the Prescott affair. It did not print every intimate detail of the affair, such as Mr Prescott's alleged use of Viagra.

That honour went to the Conservative blogger, Iain Dale^x – who also raised question marks about the size of Mr Prescott's penis (picked up by the *Sun* on May 4 2006 under the memorable headline "Two Shags has two inches").

Iain Dale says he received a tip-off and unpublished diary extracts from a *Mail* reporter, who was disappointed at the decision not to publish all the details (and by Mr Prescott's talk of complaining to the Press Complaints Commission). It was only because of his post on his blog that the most intimate details of the affair made it into the public domain.

In New Zealand, political blogs have also proved adept at spreading rumours and smears that the mainstream media have left alone. New Zealand's media has traditionally been reluctant to publish allegations involving the private lives of politicians. Affairs are not routinely reported, even when they are common knowledge within political circles. But there appears to be no such reluctance in the blogosphere.

In 2006, rumours about the then leader of the Opposition Don Brash's affair were circulating for months on blog comment forums before they broke in the media (and then only after one of Dr Brash's own MPs questioned his suitability to lead based on his affair). In a similar vein, untrue rumours about the sexuality of the New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark's husband were available online for several months before finally making their way into the media.

With blogs allowing virtually anyone to publish virtually anything, the media has lost the power to act as a gatekeeper. Blogs are, of course, subject to the same laws of

defamation that apply to the media. In the US there has been a number of defamation and libel cases brought against bloggers (although not, so far, against political bloggers).^{xi} But suing individual bloggers is unlikely to be as lucrative as suing a newspaper or TV station – their lack of financial resources (and insurance) makes them a less attractive target for legal action.

Credibility and authority

But how seriously do people take what they read on blogs – let alone the comments sections – anyway? In a ten-country opinion poll commissioned by the BBC, Reuters and the Media Centre blogs were the least trusted source of news.^{xii}

Just one in four of those surveyed trusted blogs, with almost the same number distrusting them. More than half did not know, or had no opinion (perhaps reflecting the still limited reach of blogs). Just 3% of people named blogs as their most important news source.^{xiii}

The survey shows the mass media – TV, newspapers and radio – topping the trustworthy stakes. It is perhaps not surprising that the top two most trusted sources are also the top two most used sources of news. Deeper analysis showed that the perceptions of accuracy and balance drive peoples' overall trust in the media – that is, the more people believe in the editorial standards of a news outlet, the more they trust it.

This poses a challenge for bloggers. If balance is one of the key determinants of public trust – but is not a key feature of blogs, how do blogs establish themselves as trusted and authoritative?

As a new medium, blogs face an inevitable struggle for credibility. Not only is there the inherent suspicion of the new, but their subjective nature raises questions about their trustworthiness as a news source. But it would be wrong to judge blogs purely by the standards applied to the news media.

Trust is a commodity necessarily earned by individual blogs, rather than blogs as a medium. It is fair to assume, then, that those blogs that attract large audiences are more trusted than those that do not. And it seems reasonable that the public will hold blogs to different standards than the traditional media. Ultimately balance may be considered less important in a blog than other standards such as fairness and accuracy – and more prosaic factors such as readability and entertainment value.

On the face of it, the BBC/Reuters/Media Centre research may be reassuring to journalists and mainstream media outlets. But it also contains some warnings for the news industry. Just 65% of people across the ten countries believe the media reports accurately - worryingly in the US it is just 46% and the UK just 43%^{xiv}. Such figures do not reflect well on an industry for which accuracy is such a basic requirement. And in an increasingly competitive market with a myriad of potential news sources, those outlets that fail to meet the editorial standards the public expect of them can anticipate a backlash. More than one-in-four (28%) of those surveyed had stopped using a specific media source because it had lost their trust.

The news business: economic imperatives in the media

The differences between blogs and the traditional media run deeper than editorial standards. The basic model of the mass media carries with it imperatives that blogs do not face.

The vast majority of news outlets are commercial operations – they deliver consumers to advertisers. In the end the news business is just that; a business. Excepting publicly funded news organisations (which have their own peculiar pressures and obligations), mainstream media live and die on their ability to attract advertising revenue and sales. This fundamental reality necessarily influences virtually every aspect of a newspaper, TV or radio station. Advertising revenue determines the level of content supplied, the number of staff employed – even the sort of stories that are covered (i.e. those that deliver and maintain a desirable audience).

Publicly funded news organisations, on the other hand, are largely free of commercial imperatives. They operate under a different set of pressures, political, financial and legislative. Their mission is in many ways more complicated than commercial media (where measuring success or failure is a fairly simple exercise) – state funded organisations must be accountable to the public.

In comparison, the pressures on blogs are almost entirely internal. Up until now, most blogs have been essentially non-commercial operations. They are, therefore, free of the need to deliver readers to advertisers – free to tackle any topic no matter how obscure or controversial. In theory, at least, bloggers in western democracies have almost perfect freedom of expression (within the constraints of their respective legal systems covering defamation, sedition etc).

The reality is less utopian. While bloggers are largely free of the constraints of advertising and economic viability, they have none of the income and resources that advertising delivers to the traditional media.

The quantity and quality of blogging may also be constrained by time. Most bloggers squeeze their writing in around work and home life. Few can devote the sort of time to their blogs that a full-time journalist can to his or her work. In fact, 59% of all bloggers spend just two hours per week working on their blog.^{xv} Most blogs are a labour of love, and many fall by the wayside after an initial burst of enthusiasm due to a lack of time.

But already the blogosphere is changing, as advertisers look online for audiences and new ways of targeting their advertising spend. It is estimated that the advertising spend on blogs in the US is just \$40 million a year^{xvi} - a tiny fraction of the total online advertising spend of about \$15 billion. That \$40 million will grow, however, and grow fast. It is estimated that the market for blog and pod-casting advertising is currently growing at a rate of more than 100% per year.^{xvii} There is no data available that breaks down the advertising spend by blog type, so it is unclear exactly how much is heading the way of political bloggers. But read any major US political blog and there will be advertising. That trend will continue to develop as advertisers tap into the potential of blogs to deliver highly specialised audiences. Ultimately,

however, the ability to target advertising online to specific audiences may shelter blogs from some of the pressures that advertising can exert on a mass media outlet.

Jay Rosen, associate professor of journalism at New York University argues that the debate over whether or not bloggers are journalists is over - they are sometimes, he concludes.^{xviii} He argues that blog reports during coverage of the Asian Tsunami proved the point; bloggers can and do produce journalism and sometimes beat the old media at their own game. And it is not just in breaking news that Jay Rosen sees blogs having an impact – he points to the emergence of blogs as an alternate source of opinion and analysis. He argues the media is in turmoil, as it learns to adapt to the new environment where individual citizen journalists can and do have a valid voice.

Conclusions

The blogosphere is now part of the broader media scene. It is not traditional journalism (although it can be at times), but it is genuinely part of the public debate. The next chapter looks at the democratic potential blogs have, before we return to the challenges facing traditional political reporting in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER THREE: Blogging and Democracy

The democratic potential of the Internet is hard to deny.

It allows fast and easy access to information, and email is already a (if not the) major form of communication between politicians and the public. In recent years Western governments have gradually embraced the Internet, publishing more and more reports and discussion documents online, and used email and the web to seek public feedback. Never before has so much Government information been so freely available, nor have politicians been so easy to contact (at least in theory).

But the growth of e-government and the Internet has not prompted a great flourishing of democratic participation in the West. It may be a blunt measure of citizen engagement, but voter turnout in Britain at the last two elections has hovered around an historically low 60%,ⁱ while in the 2000 and 2004 US presidential elections it was 51% and 57% respectively.ⁱⁱ

Professor Stephen Coleman from Leeds University's Institute of Communications Studies believes the Internet has thus far failed to deliver on its potential:

“By and large that interactivity hasn't reshaped political institutions very much. They've been very resistant and rather conservative.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In this chapter we look at the role blogging can play in encouraging democratic participation and accountability.

The greatest democratic potential for blogging inevitably comes in repressive and non-democratic societies. As an almost pure form of free speech, a blog can be used to challenge the status quo and expose the excesses of the state in a way that traditional media can struggle to do.

A case in point is Iran, where media censorship is strong, and journalists are regularly arrested. It is estimated that Iran has upward of 700,000 blogs,^{iv} (with the local blogging community colloquially known as Blogistan). It is a sign of how seriously the Iranian authorities take blogging that many bloggers have been arrested for what they have written, with one, Arash Sigarchi, sentenced to 14 years in jail.^v (Interestingly Mr Sigarchi is a newspaper editor, but it was his blogging activities that lead to his arrest). In 2004 Reporters Without Borders noted that some 20 Iranian bloggers were arrested (although the numbers have fallen away in subsequent years). And Iran is not alone in arresting bloggers it does not like. Reporters Without Borders has recorded arrests in Bahrain, Singapore and Iraq. Recent media reports have also highlighted at least one arrest in Egypt, while the new military government in Fiji is actively seeking to track down the authors of the Intelligentsiya blog^{vi} (which seeks to highlight human rights abuses in post-coup Fiji).

In comparison, bloggers in the West face an easy ride, free to say whatever they like (within legal boundaries such as defamation). But while they may not be challenging repression, they can still play a useful role within democratic society.

Blogging to the converted

Research out of America suggests that, broadly speaking, conservative blogs attract conservative readers and liberal blogs liberal readers. A study of political blogs at the 2004 US Presidential election^{vii} concluded that not only do conservative and liberal blogs not link to each other very much, but they discuss different topics, news articles and political figures. Based on detailed research comparing the top 20 liberal blogs with the top 20 conservative blogs, it paints a picture of two distinct communities that do not necessarily talk to each other.

More recent research found that 45% of daily blog readers say they use blogs “as a way to support my political party,” while two out of three see blogs “as a way to express my political beliefs.”^{viii} At the same time, 43% of daily readers believed that political blogs make their readers more partisan (with 37% having a neutral response and 20% disagreeing).

Such findings do not surprise Emeritus Professor Norman Geras from Manchester University. As a blogger himself, he believes in the democratic potential of blogs, and argues that it allows people who were previously silent to take part in the national political debate. But he agrees that blogs tend to attract like minded readers:

“Now there’s no denying that a lot of what happens on blogs is polarising. It becomes an echo chamber where people sound off and echo each other.”^x

Matthew Taylor, Tony Blair's former chief adviser on political strategy and the former head of centre-left think tank the Institute of Public Policy Research, is more strident in his criticisms.

“The Internet has immense potential but we face a real problem if the main way in which that potential expresses itself is through allowing citizens to participate in a shrill discourse of demands.

What is the big breakthrough, in terms of politics, on the web in the last few years? It's basically blogs which are, generally speaking, hostile and, generally speaking, basically see their job as every day exposing how venal, stupid, mendacious politicians are.”^x

Matthew Taylor is equally trenchant in his criticism of the media. His comments must, of course, be taken with a grain of salt – given his political position and vested interest. But his characterisation of blogs as essentially “shrill” and “hostile” is not unusual. The level of discourse – particularly in un-moderated comment forums – is not always edifying. Matthew Taylor is not denying the potential of the Internet, he is rather lamenting the current level of debate.

The echo-chamber effect – where bloggers, readers and those who leave comments effectively reinforce one another’s already established views – is obviously not the

democratic ideal. From a democratic standpoint, the ideal is of a well-informed citizenry that engages in debate across the political spectrum, rather than a series of insular communities that reinforce their own views, prejudices and biases.

But the echo-chamber effect is not new, nor is it exclusive to the Internet.

Newspapers also attract non-representative readerships. Research by polling company Mori found that at the 2001 British general election just 6% of Guardian voters backed the Conservatives, with 52% voting Labour and 34% Liberal Democrat.^{xi} In fact none of the major dailies come close to reflecting the true election result (Labour 40.7%, Conservative 31.7%, Liberal Democrats 18.3%):

How newspaper readers voted in 2001 (%)				
	Labour	Conservative	Lib-Dem	Other
The Sun:	52	29	11	8
Daily Mail:	24	55	17	4
Daily Express:	33	43	19	5
Daily Mirror:	71	11	13	5
Daily Star:	56	21	17	6
Daily Telegraph:	16	65	14	5
The Times:	28	40	26	6
The Guardian:	52	6	34	8
The Independent:	38	12	44	6
Financial Times:	30	48	21	1

Source: Mori

The Mori findings suggest strongly that a paper’s editorial line attracts like-minded readers – just as blogs do. There is a sense in which both blogs and newspapers develop communities of interest.

These online communities flourish not just because of shared interests and values, but also because of a real dialogue between bloggers and readers. Most blogs allow readers to make comments and engage in discussion with the original writer and other readers. It is this virtual community that represents something genuinely different about blogs. While newspapers have long published letters to the editor, and broadcasters have taken to soliciting and reading out occasional pieces of correspondence, the level of reader involvement in blogs is at a far higher level. Blogs are a truly interactive medium – a feature the mainstream media is quickly trying to adopt.

Grassroots democracy in action

One such online community of interest can be seen in the development of the [Euston Manifesto](#). The *Euston Manifesto* is a declaration of centre-left principles set out by a group of writers, academics, journalists and bloggers. It reflected a view that the British left had lost its way and was too critical of Western Governments.

The *Euston Manifesto* was launched in April 2006, with immediate media coverage in several British magazines and newspapers. One of its key authors, Norman Geras says it is initiative that “definitely came out of the Internet.”^{xii}

“It just came out of a group of bloggers and a few other people meeting and saying let’s put down in a short document what we stand for.

I’m not saying it’s changed the world because it hasn’t – but it expressed a point of view which got into the public domain that become the subject of a lot of discussion, some of it quite heated.”

On the face of it the impact of the *Euston Manifesto* was pretty limited. It did not change a single Government or Opposition policy, it did not result in public demonstrations or petitions. But it has created real debate (both in support and opposition), and a genuine discussion of democratic principles. It has added focus to a particular voice in the political debate within Britain and elsewhere. It is online that the *Manifesto* has taken on a life of its own. Calculating its influence is an impossible task, but just one year on from its publication the search engine Google now indexes close to 500,000 references to the *Euston Manifesto*.

The *Euston Manifesto* is a prime example of the strength of blogs and the Internet in building communities of interest, but there are plenty of others.

[They Work For You](#), although not a blog in the strict sense of the word, is another product of a small grassroots group of online activists. It is a clearing house of information about the activities of MPs and members of the House of Lords, bringing together everything from Hansard debates to individual MPs’ voting records. It even allows registered members to leave comments on MPs’ speeches (although few do). [Downing Street Says](#) offers unofficial summaries of daily media briefings from the British Prime Minister’s official spokesperson. [Write to Them](#) makes it easy for any user that knows their own postcode to contact their local MP, councillors or MEP.

These sites demonstrate the positive impact blogs and the Internet can have on democratic participation. They complement (and sometimes exceed) the online efforts of government departments and Parliament. They inform and educate. They encourage political engagement and introduce new ways to hold political leaders and the institutions of the state to account.

But what of the politicians themselves – are MPs set to exploit blogging?

When Politicians Blog: direct communication or unmitigated spin?

Politicians have not always been fast adaptors to the Internet. But ever since Howard Dean used the web to launch and finance his push for the 2004 US Democratic Party nomination, the politicians have been increasingly eager to exploit the Internet.

Blogging (and related forms of communication such as podcasting and webcasting) is fast becoming “the next big thing” in political communications. From Hillary Clinton’s confirmation that she is running for President, to David Cameron’s [webcameron.com](#), politicians are embracing the possibilities of communicating directly with voters via the Internet.

As with all blogs, a politician's own blog is a forum for self-expression and self promotion. For a politician the appeal of a blog or webcast is obvious; it means they can control both the medium and the message.

The MP for Sittingbourne and Sheppey, Derek Wyatt, believes his blog allows him to "tell constituents what you are doing in a way the local press cannot."^{xiii} At a time when relations between the British Government and the British press are at a real low, it is the direct and unfiltered nature of the communication that appeals to Mr Wyatt (who says he trusts what he reads on blogs more than what he reads in the media).

The British Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, David Milliband puts it like this on his blog:

"This blog is my attempt to help bridge the gap - the growing and potentially dangerous gap - between politicians and the public."^{xiv}

The focus of Mr Milliband's blog is firmly on his portfolio responsibilities. Indeed, as it is hosted by his department there are limitations on the level of party-political activity that would be appropriate on the site. It is a seemingly genuine vehicle for the discussion of government policy and performance, and attracts a steady trickle of comments from readers. It is an interesting exercise in democratic communication and public accountability.

The Conservative Party leader David Cameron's slick webcameron.com site is more openly party political. With text and video blogging it provides a vehicle for Mr Cameron and his advisors to inform the public of his activities, attack the government and discuss policy. It is unashamedly a platform for promoting Mr Cameron and the Conservatives. But, even so, it includes the sort of participatory elements which can encourage democratic debate and engagement. Its "Ask David" feature (where readers pose and then collectively rank questions for Mr Cameron to answer) provides a potentially exciting forum for democratic conversation.

Such initiatives are laudable. Direct communications between politicians and the public in a representative democracy can only be a good thing. But to pretend politician blogging is a form of unfiltered communication is wrong. All that is happened is the independent media filter has been replaced by the politician's own filter. Politicians answering questions from blog readers may appear to be an exercise in democratic accountability – but who decides which reader's questions are answered and when (let alone whether or not the answer supplied reflects the original question)? Who decides which are the issues of the day?

Professor Stephen Coleman from Leeds University's Institute of Communications Studies is in the process of researching both Mr Cameron and Mr Milliband's blogs. He argues that while there is obvious appeal in direct, unmediated communications between voters and politicians, blogs are also an obvious vehicle for spin:

"Politicians are risk-averse characters and opportunist characters and they will do with their blogs what they think they can get away with. And I'm sure they can get away with more... [on their blogs]... than they can with journalists."^{xv}

As part of the mix of political conversation, MP blogging and interacting with constituents online is a good thing. However, it must continue to sit alongside independent media scrutiny of, and access to, politicians. The media filter may not be perfect but it is preferable to unfiltered spin.

The media is fiercely protective of its Fourth Estate role, but in an age where politicians can communicate directly with voters, via blogs, email and web-casts, the Press Gallery cannot afford to take its position for granted.

In Canada in 2006 the incoming Prime Minister Stephen Harper's handling of press conferences prompted Ottawa Press Gallery reporters to stage a walk out and boycott of future conferences.^{xvi} Undeterred, Stephen Harper effectively sidelined the Press Gallery by cancelling press conferences and handpicking journalists from outside the Gallery that he would deal with. The tactics worked. He continued to get media coverage, and gradually the Press Gallery boycott crumbled.

Conclusions

Blogs may not have changed the face of democratic conversation in Western democracies. Their impact thus far is relatively modest. But there is exciting potential for new forms of engagement between politicians and the public, and new ways for the public to hold the institutions of the state to account.

Blogging represents a new outlet for grassroots activism. It allows and even encourages the development of communities of interest, and fosters debate within those communities (if not between communities). It also offers a new medium to discuss politics for the under 35s,^{xvii} who are turning away from the mass media and politics at an equally worrying rate.

But, as we will see in the next chapter blogging is not a replacement for the traditional Fourth Estate.

CHAPTER FOUR: A challenge to traditional political reporting?

The blogging phenomenon has proved a seductive development for journalists and media executives alike. News organisations have fallen over themselves to embrace the new age of user generated content and citizen journalism.

Thus far, the biggest impact of user generated content has been on spot news. Eyewitness accounts, videos and photos can now be transmitted around the world almost the moment a major disaster strikes such as the Asian Boxing Day tsunami. Not only is the content often delivered faster than a traditional news organisation can get reporters on the ground, it carries with it the stamp of immediacy and authenticity that can make for compelling news. User generated content also has the attraction for media executives of almost always being free.

Citizen journalism is also making its mark in local news – the sort of parish pump product that rarely makes it into the mainstream media. In the US it is estimated that there are 700-800 “hyper-local” news and information sites, the majority launched in the last two years.ⁱ

But politics is not like spot news or local news. It is not easily accessible, it largely happens behind closed doors, hidden away from the general public.

Bloggers vs political reporters: an uneven playing field

Politics presents real challenges for citizen journalists. Political reporting relies heavily on off-the-record briefings, tip-offs and inside knowledge. It is a specialist subject that attracts specialist reporters, who in turn get specialist access to politicians, officials and information. It is for these reasons that Professor Stephen Coleman believes the traditional Press Gallery is not under threat from blogs.ⁱⁱ

As has already been noted, political blogs generally rely on the mainstream media for the stories and topics that they discuss, and they have few of the resources available to the media to break genuinely fresh stories. Rather than challenging or replacing the traditional media’s coverage of politics, blogs sit alongside offering alternative voices and an outlet for discussion and debate.

But while the role of the Press Gallery or the Washington Press Corp may buffer political reporting from the competition of citizen journalists, it does not mean that political journalism is unaffected by the rise of new media. Political reporters may enjoy a position of some privilege – but they are still vulnerable to the economic conditions within the news industry.

Market Fragmentation

Perhaps the greatest challenge to political reporting is not the content of blogs per se, but rather the fragmentation of audience that they are contributing to. Political blogs may attract a comparatively small audience, but nonetheless they are in competition with the mainstream media for readers.

In the United States, the audience for the major TV networks nightly news broadcasts has halved in the last 25 years.ⁱⁱⁱ In 1980 the big three (ABC, NBC, CBS) attracted more than 50 million viewers. In 2006 the number was just over 25 million. But the rate of drop-off has remained relatively constant since 1980 – with no signs that the arrival of the Internet has hastened the decline. In fact, the networks have lost viewers to competition from within the TV industry, rather than to other media. Overall TV viewing levels have declined only slightly, and total news viewership across all TV broadcasters has even increased slightly since 2000.

The decline in newspaper readership is more worrying. In the last three years cumulative circulation of daily papers in the US fell by 6.3%.^{iv} Since 1990 the total weekday circulation of dailies has dropped from more than 60 million copies a week to just over 50 million. And the future looks even bleaker. Just 35% of 18-24 year olds reads a newspaper in an average week (down from 42% in 1999). Unlike with television, the loss of audience cannot be attributed to increased competition within the print industry. Newspapers are losing readers to other media – including blogs and the Internet news sites.^v

While a diversity of voices is the friend of democracy, it is not necessarily the friend of business. Producing quality news is a resource-hungry undertaking. It takes time and money to break stories and provide in-depth coverage, analysis and context. Shrinking audiences mean shrinking advertising revenues, which in turn mean shrinking newsrooms and a reduction in quality. It is this vicious circle that the media industry is struggling to overcome.

The MSM strikes back: Old media adopts blogging

The traditional media may feel itself to be under siege from falling audiences and advertising revenue, but it is also proving itself adept at latching on to new media techniques. From newspaper websites with audio and video, to radio websites with text and pictures, the old media is adapting to new technology and the expectations of Internet-savvy consumers.

The adaptation to the online world is driven by necessity. The Project for Excellence in Journalism maintains that “consumers will come to demand the ability to interact with the news producers, or they will migrate elsewhere.”^{vi} The message has been loud and clear for some years: adapt or wither.

Virtually every major news organisation now has at least some of its own staff writing blogs – including political reporters and editors. But for all the co-option of the blog format – informal writing style, comments sections, links to news articles (although usually only in-house) – blogs by political reporters are not like standard political blogs in several important respects.

The BBC political editor Nick Robinson’s [Newslog](#), for example, contains posts about the news of the day, and often solicits feedback from readers (although these are moderated before being published). It has the conversational tone of a blog, but it often reads more as a teaser for the news to come, rather than as a finished product (perhaps unsurprisingly, given the time pressures of his job). It also lacks the open

acknowledgement of political bias or agenda that is an almost defining feature of political blogs. Because of his position as an “objective” journalist, working for a state-funded news organisation, there are inevitable limits upon what Nick Robinson can say on his blog. This is not to say that *Newslog* is inferior – it is just different.

The Guardian’s Comment is Free site is something altogether more ambitious. It brings together not only blogs and articles by its regular contributors, but also a vast array of different voices. From academics and politicians to a dentist in Bagdad, Comment is Free is a clearing-house for opinion pieces and discussion between the paper, contributors and readers. Comment is Free represents a new relationship between the paper and its readers. Building upon the long-established concepts of letters to the editor and submitted op-ed pieces, it seeks to build the sort of online community that blogs attract.

Media accountability

Blogs offer news organisations, particularly those that are publicly funded, a ready made vehicle for public accountability. In this area, the BBC is taking the lead. Through its blog [The Editors](#) viewers and listeners can engage directly with the BBC’s top level editorial staff.

The Editors’ stated aim is “to explain the editorial decisions and dilemmas faced by the teams running the BBC's news service - radio, TV, and interactive.”^{vii} To that end, editors of individual programmes and heads of departments will post discussions of editorial decisions and respond to criticism in the media, or from the blog itself. Public comments are encouraged, although they are moderated before being published.

Although often an outlet for predictable criticism about bias at the BBC, The Editors blog does create space for a meaningful discussion of editorial decisions and standards. Everything from the use of swearing in the Six o’clock News, to the representation of minorities on screen is up for debate. As an exercise in openness and accountability, the Editors blog is significant advancement on traditional letters to the editor, reading emails on air or even dedicated shows (such as Radio Four’s feedback).

The arguments for media accountability are at the clearest for publicly funded organisations – but commercial operations too should not overlook the value of blogs as a form of accountability to consumers. News organisations – which so often invoke the public interest – surely have some duty to engage with and listen to the public. Those that do not run the risk of being left behind, as blogs and Internet news sites become increasingly ambitious.

Blogs 2.0

While blogs currently rate lowly as a source of news, the traditional media cannot take it for granted that it will always be like that. Blogging has come from virtually nowhere in 2000 to be a small but vigorous part of the broader media scene in 2007. While the majority of “pure” amateur blogs may struggle to attract readers, there are

signs that the second generation of blogs may be capable of mixing it with the mass media.

In the US it is becoming possible to turn blogging into a professional and profitable operation. Sites such as *The Huffington Post* have arguably crossed over from being pure blogs to becoming new-media news operations. As well as aggregating dozens of left-leaning blogs and news articles from the mainstream media, it now has its own political editor, 24 hour staffing and in-house reporters.^{viii}

In the UK, Conservative blogger Iain Dale has co-founded *18 Doughty St*, a politics focused web-casting operation which puts out 5 hours a night of interviews, comment and citizen journalism with a right-wing tinge. It has been “on air” since October 2006. It currently attracts a viewership of just a couple of thousand – at a cost of about a million pounds a year.^{ix} It is currently funded by a private backer.

Such a venture is in direct competition with traditional broadcasters. Production costs on the web can be kept low (indeed *18 Doughty St* has relatively high production standards for a web-only venture), and the potential for niche web-casting operations

The development of such well-financed, well-resourced blog-style politics and news sites does represent a new level of competition for the newspapers, radio and television. And it is likely that more and more specialist interest sites will seek to carve out an economically viable niche on-line. But are these “blogs 2.0” sites effectively new journalistic outlets? The *Huffington Post* may publish exclusively online, and have the editorial standards and approach of a blog, but if it is employing reporters is it just another arm of the media?

CONCLUSIONS: FRIEND NOT FOE

Despite the hype, the truth is that blogs are currently at the margins of politics – and political news.

The latest research suggests few people use blogs as a news source – and those that do are suitably sceptical about what they read. Although closely followed by many political insiders and political reporters, they are of limited influence. Political blogs are a complementary read. They sit alongside the traditional media, offering varied voices of comment and reaction to the news of the day. But that does not mean they are a sideshow.

Returning to the hypothesis set out in the introduction, “That blogs are good for democracy, but bad for the traditional media” we find that the first half of the statement stands.

The impact of blogs on national politics and government thus far maybe negligible - but that measure of influence alone is insufficient.

Blogs have already enhanced access to democratic debate. Thousands of people who otherwise would have little chance of airing their views beyond friends and family are using blogs to express and exchange political opinions. Through comment forums and linking between sites, blogs are creating communities of interest that can surely only encourage democratic engagement. There is an encouraging emergence of grass-roots activism in the blogosphere – from the simple (and flawed) online petition, to websites that provide new tools for holding politicians and the state to account. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, there is some evidence that regular blog readers are more politically active than the general population.

One qualification worth noting, however, is for the potential abuse of blogs and the web as a way of by-passing the media. Traditionally the media has been the only way to communicate to the masses, resulting in a high level of scrutiny. Politicians, lobby groups, businesses and state agencies all now have the means to ignore the media and communicate directly to the public. The possibility of unfiltered spin becoming the norm in political communications is worrying. The continuing Fourth Estate role of the media must be fiercely guarded.

The second clause of the hypothesis – that blogs are bad for the media – is less convincing.

The mass media can ill afford to be complacent about blogs. Already in South Korea some 17% of people use blogs as their preferred news outlet, and the success of the user-generated site OhMyNews shows the potential of the citizen journalism model. But while it is true that blogs are in competition for the same audience that used to be available exclusively to the mass media, political blogs currently attract a small, niche readership. They are not a threat to the position of the Press Gallery and its Fourth Estate role, and act more as a “second chamber” for commentary and debate. They

are not responsible for the decline in audiences or advertising revenue that threatens the size and quality of newsrooms (that is coming from the proliferation of digital TV and the broader move to Internet-based publishing).

Political blogs may not currently be a commercial threat, but none the less they are influencing the mainstream media. In recent years, the media has been forced to adapt to the digital and Internet age. Print media is incorporating audio and video, broadcast media is offering text – and both are moving to co-opt blogging as they try to harness interactivity into their business models. Indeed, blogs are now providing a talent pool for the mainstream media to cherry-pick from (both in terms of talent and style).

Political blogs have not changed the face of either politics or political reporting. Much of what is written in the blogosphere would never make it into the traditional press. But the best sites create a new level of interaction between writer and reader. They add distinct new voices to the democratic conversation. They are a friend to democracy, not a foe. The relationship with the media is more complicated, but it is increasingly symbiotic – political blogs feed of the news media, while the media is moving to absorb elements of blogging. Blogs and the media may not exactly be the best of friends, but neither are they a simple foe.

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ⁱ The anonymous sounding Appropriation (Parliamentary Expenditure Validation) Act 2006 retrospectively made lawful the misuse of more than a million dollars of taxpayers' money by New Zealand political parties in the 2005 election. The vast bulk of the inappropriate spending identified by the Auditor General Kevin Brady was by the governing Labour Party

ⁱⁱ [New Zealand Hansard, 18 October 2006](#) National MPs Jo Goodhew and Hon. Tau Henare

ⁱⁱⁱ Neither side of New Zealand politics emerges with much credit from the debate over election spending. While the Opposition resorted to comparisons with Robert Mugabe and talked of the most corrupt government in a hundred years, the Prime Minister Helen Clark referred to the Opposition leader, Don Brash, as a "cancerous and corrosive" influence on New Zealand politics.

^{iv} <http://www.kiwiblog.co.nz/2006/10/> Post titled "From an artistic reader" 11:10am October 18, 2006



^v [David Farrar](#), market researcher and long-time [New Zealand National Party](#) member, worker and activist

CHAPTER ONE

ⁱ Research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in April 2006 showed US Internet penetration at 73%. <http://www.Internetworldstats.com/top25.html> lists 35 countries with penetration rates over 50% - compared to a global figure of just 16.6%

ⁱⁱ <http://www.blogherald.com/2005/10/10/the-blog-herald-blog-count-october-2005/> October 10 2005. Note that while 100-million blogs had been created, not all were active, and some were commercial sites rather than actual blogs

ⁱⁱⁱ [News.com.com](#) October 6 2005

^{iv} Technorati "State of the Blogosphere October 2006" report, cited at <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000443.html>

^v Technorati "State of the Blogosphere October 2006" report, cited at <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000443.html>

^{vi} Technorati "State of the Blogosphere October 2006" report, cited at <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000443.html> 7 out of the ten top blog posting languages are European. Of the top 100 blogs (as ranked by Technorati) 84 are in English, 5 in Japanese, 4 Chinese and 7 in other languages.

^{vii} Pew Internet and American Life Project: "Bloggers: a portrait of the Internet's new storytellers" July 19 2006

^{viii} Initial findings presented to the Oxford Media Convention 2007, research due for publication April 2007. The research allowed those surveyed to select more than one source for online news

^{ix} This is not to suggest that all is well for traditional media outlets. The Ofcom research pointed to a drop in the use of newspapers for news from 78% in 2002 to 61% in 2006, and for radio from 60% to 46%. But it would appear that at least some of that lost audience is in fact being transferred to the online presence of traditional media outlets

^x "The State of the News Media 2007" report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, Citizen Media section, available at <http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2007>

^{xi} This is the methodology used by [Technorati](#), the most widely reported and respected source of statistics on blogs

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- xii “The Audience for Political Blogs: new research on blog readership” Joseph Graf, Graduate School of Political Management, The George Washington University, October 2006. The research identified 723 “daily readers” of political blogs.
- xiii Interestingly, the same applies to the readership of the *New Statesman* magazine, according to information it supplies to prospective advertisers (available online at <http://www.newstatesman.com/pdf/2007mediapack.pdf>)
- xiv Instinctively these figures seem high, although a 2006 survey of 36-thousand political blog readers by the company [Blogads](#) came up with a similar figure for contacting politicians (75%). Joseph Graf acknowledges in footnotes to “The Audience for Political Blogs: new research on blog readership” that he believes his sample is “a bit more engaged in politics online” than other research samples, citing a report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project which found that just 27% of people read blogs. But even if the Graf report does overstate the level of interest in political blogs, its findings about the nature of daily readers stand.
- xv Again, this is backed up by the [Blogads](#) 2006 survey, which found that 70% of political blog readers were over 40.
- xvi [Blogads](#) 2006 survey of 36-thousand political blog readers
- xvii <http://www.sitometer.com/default.asp?action=stats&site=sm8dailykos>
- xviii Statistics drawn from individual site meters on each blog, or via <http://truthlaidbear.com/> which ranks blogs
- xix Iain Dale in interview February 12 2007
- xx Audit Bureau of Circulations, for six months to December 31 2006, <http://www.abc.org.uk/cgi-bin/gen5?runprog=nav/abc&noc=y>
- xxi <http://truthlaidbear.com/showdetails.php?host=http://samizdata.net/blog>
- xxii Blogger Norman Geras, in interview 22 February 2007 and blogger Iain Dale, in interview February 12 2007

CHAPTER TWO

- i By the time the first British daily newspaper, the Daily Courant, began publishing in 1702, pamphleteering had a history stretching back well over a hundred years
- ii The number of political bloggers earning a living at it probably is fewer than a dozen – and even then probably more through work in the mainstream media. Just 8% of bloggers earn any income from their blog according to “Bloggers: a portrait of the Internet’s new storytellers” Pew Internet and American Life Project page 15.
- iii Stephen Coleman in interview March 8 2007
- iv T. Neil Sroka “Understanding the Political Influence of Blogs: a study of the growing importance of the blogosphere in the US congress” Institute for Politics Democracy and the Internet/Graduate School of Political Management, George Washington University, April 2006
- v Iain Dale in interview February 12, 2007. Iain Dale says as a result of the episode he also learnt his blog was summarised along with traditional media reports for distribution to the Conservative Party shadow cabinet
- vi Arguably the distinction between opinion and news reporting has broken down in recent years, as the media has sought to make itself more accessible to readers
- vii Norman Geras in interview, February 22, 2007: “One shouldn’t distort the material that you are discussing. Say if you are taking issue with someone’s argument you should give a fair account of it.”
- viii Norman Geras was one of the left-wing activists behind the “Euston Manifesto,” which will be discussed later in this paper
- ix “Bloggers: a portrait of the Internet’s new storytellers” Pew Internet and American Life Project, July 2006, page 10/11
- x “Exclusive: what the Mail on Sunday didn’t print” Iain Dale, May 01 2006, http://iaindale.blogspot.com/2006_05_01_archive.html
- xi In one case a woman was awarded US \$11.3 million dollars after being accused of being a crook and a fraud – not uncommon language on some political blogs, story in USA Today 11 October 2006, http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-10-10-Internet-defamation-case_x.htm
- xii BBC, Reuters, Media Centre Poll: Trust in the Media, poll of 10,230 people conducted by Globescan in March and April 2006. The margin of error is +/- 3%
- xiii The notable exception to this is South Korea, where 17% identified blogs as their most important news source with 38% of people trusting blogs versus 25% who did not
- xiv The UK figure has risen from just 29% in 2002

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- ^{xv} “Bloggers: a portrait of the Internet’s new storytellers” Pew Internet and American Life Project, July 2006, page 12
- ^{xvi} “Blogging for Dollars” by Paul Sloan and Paul Kaihla, Business 2.0 Magazine, October 2, 2006. It should be noted that the blog advertising market is just a few years old
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- ^{xviii} “Bloggers vs. Journalists is Over” published on Press Think blog, available at http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2005/01/21/berk_essay.html

CHAPTER THREE

- ⁱ Political Science Resources, Keele University, <http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/area/uk/ge05/turnout.htm>
- ⁱⁱ US Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Stephen Coleman in interview March 8 2007
- ^{iv} <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/objects/pages/PrintArticleEn.jhtml?itemNo=676697>
- ^v http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/02/24/iranian_blogger_jailed/
- ^{vi} Intelligentsiya is a good example of the role a blog can play in challenging a repressive regime. It describes its aims as; “Free. Fair. Fearless. Intelligentsiya is made up of Fiji Islanders who are libertarians in their own way and who cherish the free flow of news, ideas and information and will peacefully resist any attempts by the country's military rulers to stifle free speech. Intelligentsiya will also bear witness, report and discuss human rights abuses by the authorities.” There are several such blogs in Fiji, including Down With Dictatorship (<http://kaivitifreedom.blogspot.com/>) and Free My Fiji (<http://freemyfiji.blogspot.com/>)
- ^{vii} Adama and Glance, “The Political Blogosphere and the 2004 US Election: Divided they Blog.”
- ^{viii} “The Audience for Political Blogs: new research on blog readership” Joseph Graf, Graduate School of Political Management, The George Washington University, October 2006. Those surveyed who were less frequent readers of political blogs were far less likely to see their use of blogs as a form of political expression; just 38% saw blogs as a way to express political beliefs and just 28 as a way to support their political party
- ^{ix} In interview February 22, 2007
- ^x Quoted in “Web 'fuelling crisis in politics’” by Brian Wheeler, political reporter [BBC News online](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-17112006) 17/11/2006
- ^{xi} Mori research cited by Roy Greenslade in “How the press sways the voters”, The Guardian, April 25 2005
- ^{xii} In interview February 22, 2007
- ^{xiii} In reply to email questions, February 6 2007
- ^{xiv} http://www.davidmiliband.defra.gov.uk/blogs/ministerial_blog/default.aspx
- ^{xv} In interview March 8 2007
- ^{xvi} Ira Basen, “Stephen Harper's Press Gallery Put Down” published 31 October 2006 at http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/10/31/harper_basen.html
- ^{xvii} US research found that at the last congressional mid-term elections 35% of those under the age of 36 who have broadband Internet connection use the Internet as their major source of political news, compared with just 18% who cite newspapers - “Election 2006 Online” Pew Internet and American Life Project, January 17 2007.

CHAPTER FOUR

- ⁱ “The State of the News Media 2007” report by The Project for Excellence in Journalism, available at <http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2007>
- ⁱⁱ In interview 8 March 2007
- ⁱⁱⁱ The State of the News Media 2007” report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, Television Audience chapter
- ^{iv} “The State of the News Media 2007” report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, Newspaper Audience chapter
- ^v Of course some of the lost readership for newspapers has switched to reading papers online. But that transfer of readers does not translate into similar revenue from online advertising – which is still considerably less profitable than traditional print advertising.
- ^{vi} “The State of the News Media 2007” report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, Citizen Media chapter, available at <http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2007>

vii Welcome to the Editors webpage,

http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2006/05/welcome_to_the_editors.html

viii “Softbank Capital invests \$5 mln in Huffington Post,” Reuters, August 7, 2006,

ix Iain Dale, in interview February 12, 2007