

The Politics of Sourcing: A Study of Journalistic Practices in the Blogosphere

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Abstract

Digital media lowers barriers to entry and has the ability to renegotiate traditional news-making power structures. However, it remains to be seen whether or not the people that use tools like blogs actually challenge those frameworks. Offline reporters predominantly use government officials as sources while online journalists and newspaper institutions typically cite their own pages and posts. In order to understand whether or not journalistic norms are challenged in the blogosphere, we look at the sourcing practices of a diverse group of 40 bloggers. Specifically, we sample 400 blogposts that discussed global warming between 2004 and May of 2007. Operationalizing hyperlinks as sources, we then code the 3264 hyperlinks in these posts. Results indicate that government sources are linked to the least. Instead, bloggers tend to link to the online versions of traditional news media as well as to other blogs. However, we find that bloggers also link to miscellaneous and civic sources such as academics and non-profit organizations about one-quarter of the time, somewhat challenging the dominance of government and traditional media. We conclude that blogging on non-traditional topics may subvert who gets heard in an online world, but further research is needed on this topic.

Introduction

Developments in digital media facilitate participation, allowing traditional consumers of media to take part in the creation of news. For example, blogs enable diverse people to publish stories and op-eds free from the dominant hand of traditional news gatekeepers like editors and large publishing organizations. (For the purpose of this study, we define weblogs, or blogs, as online publications consisting of a series of entries or posts usually presented in reverse-chronological order. Most blogs allow visitors to publicly comment on blog entries or posts.) Some researchers contend that blogging exemplifies a new form of journalism in which neo-journalists challenge and renegotiate traditional journalistic conventions (Matheson 2004; Robinson 2006; Wall 2005). Others believe that journalist bloggers have normalized this new media creating an echo chamber in which mass media voices are

reverberated among bloggers (Singer 2005). Although Sunstein and others contend that blogs can function like an online democratic public sphere where diverse voices have the ability to be heard (Kerbel and Bloom 2005; Sunstein 2007), many including Sunstein worry that blogs may just as likely create polarized and fragmented audiences (Adamic and Glance 2005; Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane 2008; Sunstein 2007). Furthermore, some scholars argue that bloggers maintain many normative journalistic practices, reinforcing the power structure that the traditional news media creates (Haas 2005; Singer 2005).

To be sure, the ability of digital media to turn traditional consumers of media into producers empowers Internet users to challenge those practices. However, the fact that the postmodern press experiences lower barriers to entry with fewer gatekeepers does necessarily not mean that bloggers subvert the dominant power structure. In this study we use one measurement of the hegemonic structuring forces of the news media, sourcing, in order to understand whether or not diverse types of bloggers challenge journalistic norms.

News Making and Power Structure

Scholars have studied traditional news gatekeepers on both individual (Lichter and Rothman 1981; White 1950) and institutional levels (Schudson 1995). More recently, they have examined gatekeeping through the ways that people gain both access to knowledge (Williams and Delli Carpini 2000) as well as a role in the production process (Wall 2005). Although some studies illustrate how ordinary citizens produce journalistic content, fewer explore whether or not this non-traditional press follows or challenges traditional news norms.

Digital media researchers interested in this social construction of news attempt to understand and explain the processes involved in the creation of knowledge. Some have adapted theoretical constructs grown out of print and video news research to the online production of content via theories such as gatekeeping (Williams and Delli Carpini 2000) and sourcing (Adamic and Glance 2005; Dimitrova et al. 2003; Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane 2008; Singer 2005;

Wall 2005). The growing popularity of blogs and their tendency to focus on hot-button issues has enticed many scholars to use this medium to test such ideas. In this study we examine whether or not bloggers diverge from traditional journalistic conventions, looking specifically at the sources that bloggers use when constructing and creating online content.

Sourcing in Offline News

The sources that journalists use to tell their stories are one example of the power structure that supports normative journalistic practices. Sourcing studies attempt to discern this framework as information ebbs and flows between both online and offline producers and consumers of content. Understanding whom journalists cite in news stories indicates whom they value. Furthermore, those who are cited have the ability to gain power as their voices and opinions are published. As the adage goes, “No news is bad news.”

Journalists heavily cite the government. Previous studies of traditional news media reveal that the government, government officials and elite voices dominate sources (Althaus et al. 1996; Brown et al. 1987; Entman and Page 1994; Hallin, Manoff, and Weddle 1993; Lacy and Coulson 2001; Sigal 1973). In doing so, these journalists bestow a level of legitimacy and credibility to sources associated with political administrations. In an early study of news citations, Sigal analyzed the sourcing practices of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* over a twenty-year period, discovering that eight out of ten sources were affiliated with the government (1973). More than a decade later, Sigal’s study was replicated with the inclusion of four North Carolina newspapers to test for differences between newspapers with national and local circulations (Brown et al. 1987). The results were nearly identical. These findings support traditional news media’s preferences for government voices.

Other studies have looked at specific events or issues in order to understand whether some types of news are more prone to citing government sources. In 1993, Hallin and colleagues discovered that government sources comprised 75 percent of the total citations by national security reporters for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Coverage of the Gulf War relied similarly on government sources (Entman and Page 1994). Althaus and colleagues measured coverage of the U.S.-Libya crisis of 1985-1986 in *The New York Times*, discovering that foreign government sources dominated the topic. When combined with U.S. government sources, the authors credited 91 percent of the total sources to some type of government official (1996). Even a study of the sourcing patterns of environmental beat reporters found that government sources dominated, and these journalists tended to marginalize consumers and environmentalists (Lacy and Coulson 2001). Thirty years of sourcing studies show an

abundance of research in a variety of traditional news media contexts, all providing the same result; government sources dominate the news.

The corollary to these findings is a lack of civil or non-governmental sources in traditional news media. Lacy and Coulson found that journalists marginalized civil sources in coverage of the Clean Air Act (2001). Hallin and colleagues reported only 5.8 percent civil sources in coverage by national security reporters (Hallin, Manoff, and Weddle 1993). Interestingly, even a study of an alternative newspaper in the U.K. found very few non-elite sources (Atton and Wickenden 2005). Sourcing patterns of traditional news media reinforce the dominant knowledge structure, assigning authority, credibility, and legitimacy to government officials while simultaneously pushing civilians to the margins.

Sourcing in Digital Media

Research on sourcing in digital media paints a different picture, revealing an alternative but equally elite knowledge structure where the online versions of traditional news media sit atop a hierarchy of authority once again diminishing civilian voices. Viewing hyperlinks as sources, blogs and online news media extensively cite the webpages of traditional news media (Williams et al. 2005). An analysis of the blogosphere during the 2004 presidential campaign reported that political bloggers linked to the traditional news media 61 percent of the time (BlogPulse 2004). Blogs and online news sites commonly link to internal articles or sources within their own online pages further diminishing diverse voices (Dimitrova et al. 2003; Williams et al. 2005). For example, in an analysis of fifteen online newspapers reporting on the Timothy McVeigh execution, Dimitrova and colleagues found 94.8 percent of hyperlinks to be internal (2003). Digital media outlets tend to cite internal pages as well as the online versions of traditional news media (BlogPulse 2004; Dimitrova et al. 2003; Williams et al. 2005).

Unfortunately, many of these studies have chosen to focus only on political topics, political bloggers or online news sources in which one would expect government sources and traditional news media sources to dominate (i.e. BlogPulse 2004; Williams et al. 2005). They do not aim to understand whether or not blogging about fringe topics has the ability to subvert power hierarchies. Alternatively, the present study analyzes the sources of a diverse set of bloggers surrounding both a scientific and political topic, global warming. We specifically ask the following research question:

Do the sourcing practices of bloggers differ from the sourcing practices reported in previous sourcing studies and, if so, how?

Sample and Methods

In this study, we explore 40 political and science blogs. Today, the blog-tracker, Technorati, tracks over 112 million weblogs (Technorati 2008). A January 2006 Pew Internet and American Life survey shows that 39 percent of Internet users ages eighteen and over have read blogs, while eight percent have created blogs (Lenhart and Fox 2006). Popular political blogs like *The Daily Kos* report over 650,000 visits per day, on average. In comparison, *The Chicago Tribune* reported a Sunday highest circulation of 937,907 in September of 2006 (Top 200 newspapers 2006). These statistics hint at the importance of blogs in the production of online news.

Specifically, we sampled twenty political (ten liberal and ten conservative) blogs and twenty science blogs that discussed global warming in at least ten of their blogposts between 2004 and 2007. (See Table One for a list of blogs.) The “culture war” over global warming provides a fertile topic with which to access the sourcing practices of a diverse group of bloggers including political and science authors. Much research into blogs as a form of news concentrates on political bloggers and political processes such as elections and campaigns (BlogPulse 2004; Lawson-Borders and Kirk 2005; Singer 2005). By focusing on global warming, we are able to examine a bipartisan issue that promotes heated debate both inside and outside the political sphere. Recall that Lacy and Coulson examined coverage of the Clean Water Act, finding that 82 percent of total sources were government or business while science and environmental sources accounted for only six percent of total citations (2001). Some have argued that blogging allows non-traditional voices to be heard (Wall 2005), and studying an environmental topic such as global warming allows us to test such an assumption.

Due to the difficulty of sampling web-based populations (Andrews, Nonnecke, and Preece 2003; Kaye and Johnson 1999; Li and Walejko 2008), we employed sampling techniques that best suited our populations of interest: political and science blogs. We defined political blogs as those that self-identified as political blogs. For example, a blog that used the word “liberal” in the “About” section or title of their blog was assumed to be left-leaning; thus, we categorized the blog as “liberal.” In some cases, political blogs and conservative/liberal blogs were inferred by their content. Past research also informed the distinctions between liberal and conservative blogs (Adamic and Glance 2005; Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane 2008). Similarly, we defined science blogs as those that self-identified as science blogs, those that were published through the meta-site ScienceBlogs, or those that were written by individuals claiming to be scientists at a university.

We sampled political blogs based on popularity, utilizing the ranking systems of BlogPulse, Technorati, and Truthlaidbear to select those blogs that ranked highest. For science blogs, we employed a ranking system based on BlogPulse and Technorati. (Because Truthlaidbear focuses on the highest ranked blogs in the blogosphere they do not

Table 1. List of sampled blogs

Political	Science
Bring It On [L]	Bad Astronomy
Captain’s Quarters [C]	A Blog Around the Clock
Crooks and Liars [L]	Climate Science
Daily Kos [L]	Deltoid
Eschaton [L]	A Few Things Ill Considered
Hugh Hewitt [C]	The Frontal Cortex
The Jawa Report [C]	The Intersection
Jesus’ General [L]	Living the Scientific Life
Little Green Footballs [C]	The Loom
Michelle Malkin [C]	Migrations/ A Concerned Scientist
Outside the Beltway [C]	Mike the Mad Biologist
Power Line [C]	Pharyngula
Red State [C]	Prometheus
Right Wing News [C]	Pure Pedantry
Skippy the Bush Kangaroo [L]	RealClimate
Shakespeare’s Sister [L]	The Scientific Activist
Talking Points Memo [L]	SciGuy
Think Progress [L]	Stayin’ Alive
The Volokh Conspiracy [C]	Stoat
Wonkette [L]	Thoughts from Kansas

[L] Liberal; [C] Conservative

rank many science blogs.) In general, science blogs tend to be less popular and lower ranked than political blogs. For this reason, we also used awards as a ranking criterion for this portion of the sample. We gave extra consideration to blogs that had won the 2005 Scientific American Science and Technology Web Award even if they were not highly ranked in Technorati and BlogPulse. It should be noted that just because we sampled the most popular science and political blogs does not mean that our sample consisted of only extremely popular blogs. In fact, most science blogs are relatively unpopular when compared to political blogs. For example, Technorati ranks the most popular science blog sampled, *Pharyngula*, only 307th.

From these ranking systems, we employed quota sampling until we had obtained a list of ten liberal, ten conservative and twenty science blogs with ten or more posts on global warming. That is, we compiled lists of the highest-ranking conservative, liberal and science blogs, giving preference to those that ranked high on multiple lists. We then worked down each list in ascending order examining whether each blog had at least ten posts on global warming and stopping when we had filled our quotas.

We placed several constraints on the sampling frame including limiting our sample to English-language blogs that contained ten or more posts on the topic of global warming. In order to establish whether or not blogposts were about global warming, we searched each blog for the phrase “global warming,” using either an internal search engine or limiting a Google search to the parent website. We then counted the number of posts for each blog, generating ten random numbers in this range. These ten random numbers represented the posts that we sampled. Before including each randomly selected blogpost in the sample, we read the post for content. We did not sample posts that mentioned the phrase “global warming” in passing. When this did occur, we sampled the next chronological post. Due to the fecundity of many bloggers, we limited our post search to the timeframe between the months of January 2004 and May 2007. For each post, we recorded the name, date and author of the post as well as a link to the post.

We then coded each source in each post, analyzing 3264 hyperlinks and eight non-hyperlinked sources in total. Due to the extremely low number of non-hyperlinked sources, subsequent analysis includes only hyperlinked sources. Whereas traditional news media use quotations as a legitimizing tool for the objective news standard (Tuchman 1972), hyperlinks can be substituted for quotations in an online arena (Dimitrova et al. 2003; Singer 2005; Williams et al. 2005). Similar to the way in which traditional news media use quotes to signify authoritative knowledge, bloggers use hyperlinks to assign legitimacy and renegotiate the online hierarchical knowledge structure. Matheson argues that “a kind of mesh of authority is built up where the weblog’s linking accords a certain status to the linked article” (2004). Furthermore, most digital media sourcing studies use hyperlinks as sources.

For the purposes of this study, we used a source as our unit of analysis. We developed a coding schema based on a pre-study subsample of blogs and blogposts, as well as categories used in previous studies. These coding categories were then applied to the entire sample of sources. We analyzed each hyperlink in a sampled blogpost, disregarding all links in the sidebars, headers or footers of the sampled blogs. Coding categories included blogs, traditional news sources, government sources and other sources including academic, non-profit and reference websites. For example, a hyperlink was coded “newspaper” if it linked to a website or article in an online version of a newspaper. Both hyperlinked and non-hyperlinked sources were coded using the same categories. We achieved an intercoder reliability score of .83.

In order to measure the relative proportions of each source-type, we aggregated the hyperlinks and assigned each to one of three groups: liberal, conservative or science. We then summed the number of hyperlinks and calculated the percent of total hyperlinks for each source-type in each group. Using proportional measures allowed us to control for blogs that may have had more or less

hyperlinks as well as address the potential of a skewed data distribution.

The Sourcing Practices of Bloggers

Most research shows that government sources dominate offline and broadcast media (Althaus et al. 1996; Brown et al. 1987; Entman and Page 1994; Hallin, Manoff, and Weddle 1993; Lacy and Coulson 2001; Sigal 1973). The results of this study indicate much different sourcing patterns in the blogosphere. (See Table Two for a complete breakdown of hyperlinked sources.) We find that *government sources comprise less than four percent of all sources*. This figure appears even more profound when one recalls that even sourcing studies that focused on environmental reporting (Lacy and Coulson 2001) found that government sources account for upwards of 70 percent of total sources. This difference is most likely due to the fact that websites and online newspapers often use secondary sources. In fact, online research shows that internal links and links to online versions of traditional news media dominate sources (BlogPulse 2004; Dimitrova et al. 2003; Williams et al. 2005).

This study partially supports previous research on the sourcing practices of digital news media that report that traditional media sources dominate (BlogPulse 2004; Singer 2005; Williams et al. 2005). In this study, traditional news sources account for 35.6 percent of all sources. This proportion is nowhere near the 61 percent reported by BlogPulse, but it does indicate a strong relationship between journalists and the mainstream media. A 2005 survey of 1,202 journalists from around the world indicated that most journalists utilize blogs for their jobs, and nearly 70 percent report using them for work-related activities. In fact, the study reports that 33 percent use them to stay informed with breaking news while over one-quarter (28%) use them for daily reporting (Euro RSCG Magnet 2005). A 2007 study supports these claims, showing that one quarter of journalists agree that “blogs make their job easier and one-fifth have reported on stories that originated on a blog. Furthermore, over one-half of the journalists interviewed say that they get story ideas from blogs (Arketi Group 2007).

In partial support of previous research on the sourcing patterns of digital media, we also find that bloggers link extensively to other blogs (27.8%). Bloggers link to blogs in general 34.9 percent of the time although they infrequently link to internal pages (7.1%) Recall that Dimitrova and colleagues found 94.8 percent of hyperlinks in online newspapers to be internal (Dimitrova et al. 2003).

Possibly reflecting a mild preference for secondary rather than tertiary sources, this percentage may be lower than expected because bloggers choose to cite traditional news media (secondary) instead of blogs (tertiary). To clarify this distinction, a primary source would be the original offline source cited in an article posted to a traditional news media website. A secondary source would be a blogger citing that article while a tertiary source

would be a blogger citing another blogger who cites the traditional news media article.

Table 2. Within group percentages of hyperlinked sources

	Liberal	Cons.	Pol. Total	Sci.	Total
Blogs	35.5	29.2	33.1	35.4	34.9
Other	13.6	21.1	16.5	30.4	27.8
Own	21.9	8.1	16.6	5	7.1
Traditional News	33.0	37.5	34.7	35.7	35.6
Newspaper	20.8	17.9	19.7	12.1	13.5
Magazine	2.7	4	3.2	2.6	2.7
Radio	0.3	0.9	0.5	0.9	0.9
Television	4.1	3.1	3.7	3.6	3.6
Web	4.6	4	4.4	6.2	5.9
Other	0.5	7.6	3.2	10.3	9
Gov.	5.2	3.6	4.6	3.3	3.5
Other	26.2	29.6	27.6	25.7	25.9
Academic	1.1	1.8	1.4	6.4	5.5
Non-profit	7.6	1.3	5.3	3.7	4
Reference	1.1	0.9	1	1.2	1.1
Misc. Website	16.4	25.6	19.9	14.4	15.3

Perhaps most intriguing, we find that bloggers link to academic, non-profit, reference and miscellaneous websites 25.9 percent of the time. Although this proportion is smaller than traditional news sources and blogs, it appears sizeable when one recalls that most offline and online sourcing studies report extremely small percentages of non-government, non-traditional news media or non-internal links and sources. Whereas most of these sources are miscellaneous websites (15.3%), academic and non-profit sources comprise 5.5 and 4.0 percent of these sources, respectively.

Some of this discrepancy might be explained by the fact that the global warming debate requires scientific sources. However, academic sources amount to less than six percent of total sources in our study. Even political bloggers cite a large proportion of miscellaneous sources (27.6%). Still, this difference may be topic-specific. Wall finds that war blogs fill a gap in mainstream war reporting, emphasizing things such as personalized content and audience participation (Wall 2005). The large percentage of miscellaneous citations in our study may indicate a new genre where science and environmental topics give traditionally marginalized sources voice and power.

Unfortunately, the large percentage of miscellaneous citations is a notable concern. This category consists of a wide range of personal and group webpages, online

retailers, video websites and other sources that did not fit into our coding schema. Future research should expand and explain these coding categories in order to minimize the percentage of miscellaneous citations.

In addition to revising the coding schema, the present study could be strengthened by extending it in three ways. First, replicating the present study on another topic would contribute to its generalizability. Second, increasing the sample size would allow for more rigorous statistical tests of intergroup differences (e.g. t-test comparing means between political and science bloggers). Finally, extending the study to primary sources would improve our comprehension of power and knowledge structures existing between bloggers and their sources, both online and offline.

Blogging, Sourcing and the Importance of Online Media Events

In previous research on the sourcing practices of both offline and online media, journalists used government and traditional media as sources (Althaus et al. 1996; BlogPulse 2004; Brown et al. 1987; Entman and Page 1994; Hallin, Manoff, and Weddle 1993; Lacy and Coulson 2001; Sigal 1973; Singer 2005; Williams et al. 2005), simultaneously marginalizing civilian voices even when reporting on topics such as the environment (Lacy and Coulson 2001). The present study unearths a different pattern; bloggers rely equally on other bloggers, traditional media and miscellaneous and civic sources for referential source information. Together, blogs, traditional news media and miscellaneous sources account for 96.4 percent of total sources. Conversely, government sources amount to only 3.5 percent of the total percent of sources. It appears that, rather than predominantly linking to government sources or traditional news media sources, bloggers offer nuanced and diverse linking patterns that include other typically marginalized sources like the websites of scientists and non-profit organizations.

These sourcing practices contribute to a renegotiation of the blogospherical power structure where bloggers assign themselves, traditional and non-traditional online sources authority, credibility, and legitimacy at varying levels. Just as journalists rely on blogs for news and reporting, bloggers seem to rely on traditional news media journalists for their posts. One could argue that such a renegotiation encourages an online public sphere where diverse voices are heard, reminiscent of Sunstein's hope (2007). In this way, the blogosphere gives power to experts in niche topics like science and environment issues.

However, we would do well to recognize that a renegotiation of power structures in an online world does not herald in a postmodern form of journalism where consumers of information become equal producers. The online news environment still maintains a power structure, although this architecture shifts as the event-centered world of traditional news reporting transforms in the webpage-centered blogosphere.

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