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Authority and Objectivity: The Politics and Ideologies of  
Bloggers and Journalists  
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The entrepreneurs behind Technorati, a website devoted to tracking weblogs, has estimated that there are over 70 million blogs on the World Wide Web (2007). What was once the domain of technophiles has expanded to include anyone with: a desire to have their voice heard, a very basic fluency in navigating a web page, and Internet access. Mainstream media outlets have incorporated blog-like features on their websites, though these “are often dismissed by critics as token gestures because of the fact that journalists are unwilling to give up their power over the flow of information” (Hutchins, 2007, p. 210). What motivation constitutes the cynicism displayed by bloggers toward corporate mass media? Examining the historical context of the birth of weblogs will bring focus to the motivation for such cynicism, as well as, deeper political and social issues made relevant by the use of this communication technology.

### Theoretical Background

The supposedly acrimonious relationship between weblogs and traditional journalism has attracted a considerable volume of discussion and literature in recent years. Applying a common historical approach to this tension, between weblogs and journalism, constructs what appears to be an obvious connection between the practices. The Internet and weblogs have provided the established practice of journalism with a new medium for the electronic age. Deuze (2003) utilizes this historically continuous framework to discuss the implications of new web journalism, “Online journalism can be functionally differentiated from other kinds of journalism by using its technological component as a determining factor in terms of a (operational) definition” (p. 206). This standard approach bares two assumptions that create a false sense of theoretical

transparency though: technological novelty defines the context of the debate, while journalism's well-documented history places the debate in a narrative that extends several centuries back in time. Focusing on technology and linear historical development fuels the epic battle between technological determinism and the social construction of technology in this context.

Theo Röhle (2005) believes that a lack of theoretical foundation plagues most studies of new media, in that "much of the field's experimental character seems to be attributable to the enthusiasm in the face of the experimental possibilities of the new technologies themselves" (p. 404). Approaching issues in new media from the imperative of technological change produces a priori logical inertia supporting technological determinism. As an alternative to the frustrating cause and effect discourse of determinism and social construction, new perspectives on the relationship between technology and society may be fruitful. Graves (2007) discusses the notion of affordances as the possibilities that a technology suggests for use, but does not require. Through cultural feedback, the use of a technology becomes more refined and specific in practice.

Looking back at the history of the telephone as an example communication technology, Graves postulates how society could have accepted the technology for different purposes. Eventually, the physical properties of the telephone were adapted through cultural feedback and ritual to the current configuration that supports an individual and private use. This provides a middle-ground philosophy of technology and society, "technology and sociocultural practice evolve together, feeding back into the other" (Graves, 2007, p. 343). In a similar analysis of the history of the telephone,

Carlson (2001) states, “artifacts do have politics, and conversely that politics have artifacts” (p. 28). It was the adoption of the telephone by the middle-class, though constrained by certain technical characteristics, that shaped its place within society. From this perspective, it is impossible to disentangle the “social” from the “technological.” A deeper, more complex understanding of the specific factors associated with the friction between weblogs and journalism prevails from this theoretical foundation.

The historical inertia brought to discourse by literature of journalism hides the specific political context of weblogs and journalism. The institutional study of journalism in the “academy” brings with it a long history of internal politics and conceptualizations of power. Michel Foucault’s genealogy focuses on the often discontinuous history of specific power struggles (Flyvbjerg, 1998), with the current discourse surrounding weblogs and journalism providing evidence for the need of a discrete analysis of the noted tension. With this approach histories of journalism that broadly connect to the Enlightenment (Singer, 2007) for example, are made less relevant, though not unimportant in the current study of weblogs and journalism. “The establishment of a concrete genealogy opens possibilities for action by describing the genesis of a given situation and showing that this particular genesis is not connected to absolute historical necessity,” states Flyvbjerg (1998, p. 225) to support the utility of Foucault’s approach in matters of civil interest and power. The future is not unavoidable when political momentum is considered in this way.

#### Historical Significance

The excitement that has energized the literature related to weblogs and journalism can be partly attributed to the theoretical connection made between the “blogosphere” and Habermas’s ideal of the public sphere (Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, & Jeong, 2007). The historical evidence for the public sphere as Habermas (1989) conceived it has been repeatedly attacked and the idea has been described as utopian and unattainable (Flyvbjerg, 1998), yet media theorists and journalists still strive to achieve its democratic goals (Hutchins, 2007). Hutchins describes how rational debate in the public sphere relies on an informed populace. Traditionally, journalists have been granted the role of “gate-keeper,” deciding what information to provide to the public with the ideal goal of open discourse. Though the attainability of the public sphere is doubted, it has remained in journalistic and media discussion because of its ability to support regular commentary regarding the failures of the modern mass media (Dahlberg, 2007).

Two strong channels of criticism have been leveled against the modern mass media with its responsibility of serving the public and democracy. The public sphere was constructed as a reaction to the gate-keeper characterization of the mass media, its position between government and civil society added communicative noise to rational discourse. Garnham (2007) writes, “the notion of ‘undistorted communication’, and the conception of a life-world characterized by communicative rationality being colonized by the instrumental rationality of the system world does carry with it a bias against mediation” (p. 206).

Related to the criticism of the mass media as a broker of information is the corporate, profit-making motives of most media institutions. Corporate media must

balance its position as public informer with its role as profit generator for shareholders. Advertising revenue becomes a primary concern for commercial media institutions (Bracci, 2003). Media corporations must assume a conservative approach in this system to avoid offending advertisers. Content is programmed to ensure widespread audience interest, to attract advertisers, rather than presenting unpopular or troubling messages. Furthermore, the trend toward conglomeration and convergence and the associated financial savings for mass media companies decreases the number of perspectives that are needed to ensure a “democratic health that relies on a knowledgeable, engaged citizenry” (Bracci, 2003, p. 116).

The Internet’s architecture and governance have been the focus of many utopian visions that foresee the reestablishment of a public sphere. Manuel Castells (2001) describes the potential the Internet has as a democratizing technology by pointing to the history of the Internet’s development. The U.S. Defense Department’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) funded the birth of ARPANET, the Internet’s precursor network. Castells believes the Internet’s democratic potential can be found in the attitude towards openness displayed during the Internet’s formative developmental years. ARPA had a relatively *laissez-faire* approach to the project, allowing affiliated scientists at various U.S. universities to use their discretion in plotting out the standards the Internet would utilize. Through a process of requests for comments (RFC), anyone with an interest in the project was allowed to submit suggestions and feedback related to the eventual standardization of the TCP (Transmission Control Protocol) and IP (Internet Protocol) suite of protocols that underpin the Internet’s decentralized architecture. The

idealized governance of the Internet and the Internet's intrinsic democratic structure, according to Castells "offers extraordinary potential for the expression of citizen rights, and for the communication of human values... This is why people's control of this public agora is perhaps the most fundamental political issue raised by the development of the Internet" (2001, p. 164).

A decade after ARPA opened ARPANET to other networks to form an Internet in its infancy, the network was still limited in use to large corporations and universities, primarily in the United States. At this time, two events can be seen as the catalysts for the Internet's exponential growth. Around 1990, Tim Berners-Lee invented what is now known as the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee, 1999). The Web provided an easy to navigate graphical interface, based on the use of hyperlinks, to bring together the Internet's divergent and idiosyncratic resources. HTML (HyperText Markup Language) brought people together, in the same way the Internet's architecture had in a broader sense. It provided a common language for web developers to encode their content and for web browsers to decode these resources. Ironically, the second factor that brought the Internet to millions more people was the commercial investment by Internet Service Providers in the early to mid-1990s to bring the Internet into homes via telephone lines (Castells, 2001). Proponents of the Internet's democratizing effects often overlook the early relationship corporations played in "mediating" the infrastructure of the Internet.

The social relevance attributed to the Internet can be categorized either as a positive, democratizing force or more cynically as a technology that perpetuates past relationships of power and other social processes. Proponents of the Internet as a

technology of social benefit, refer to it in a vestige of the public sphere because of the ability of individuals to communicate over broad physical distances. Global movements have emerged via the Internet, focused on specific issues of civic concern (Capra, 2004). According to Reese et al. (2007), “The internet has increased the speed, reach, and comprehensiveness of journalism available to the public and lowered the cost of entry to anyone seeking to participate” (p. 236). These developments have been contextualized as supporting a vision of a public sphere rather than in terms of the discrete benefits such processes can provide.

Critics of the utopian perspective find difficulty in accepting the selective appropriation of characteristics of the public sphere while ignoring other empirically noted social processes and power relations. Dahlberg (2007) believes communicative practices on the Internet, in fact, lead to fragmentation of discourse rather than consensus. Other practical difficulties cited by Dahlberg that undermine notions of the public sphere being revitalized on the Internet include inequalities in access to the Internet, corporate domination, and state surveillance and censorship. Thus it appears that relying on ideas of the public sphere alone does not support claims of the Internet’s possible democratization. It is necessary to examine the messy, in-the-world observations made about the Internet, weblogs, and journalism rather than relying on a metaphilosophy for explanation. Foucault’s (1984) perspective supports this methodology:

Nothing is fundamental. That is what is interesting in the analysis of society. That is why nothing irritates me as much as these inquiries-which are by definition metaphysical-on the foundations of power in a society or the self-institution of a society,

etc. These are not fundamental phenomena. There are only reciprocal relations, and the perpetual gaps between intentions in relation to one another. (p. 247)

Current empirical evidence (Reese et al., 2007) seems to support an idea of many, context-bound blogospheres or manifestations of the public sphere. A focus on context satisfies Foucault's methodologies while proposing the creation of bodies of consensus supports a more practical version of Habermas's thought. Bloggers tend to link more often to other websites in the same country. This undermines the portrayal of weblogs as constructing a global sphere of communication. Bloggers also link more frequently to websites that share their political affiliation. Rather than engaging in rational discourse, bloggers may use the web to reaffirm their beliefs. In any context, Habermas's model is too ideal and divorced from empirical evidence to gain understanding in practical settings.

It seems important to examine why blogging has been given a special status in discourse surrounding amateur and professional journalism. Again, a focus on the technological aspects of blogging does not fully illuminate the unique characteristics attributed to it. Hypertextuality, interactivity, and multimediality have been proposed as defining technological developments that contributed to the emergence of blogging and online journalism (Deuze, 2003). These technical possibilities have been in place since Berners-Lee's work in the early 1990s, yet blogging as a genre of online journalism has been dated with a birth in the early 2000s, often with the 2004 U.S. election as the signifying date of the form's emergence (Graves, 2007; Robinson, 2006; Singer, 2005).

The lag between technological affordance and adaptation highlights the ritualistic and complex feedback involved in the shaping of social practice (Graves, 2007).

A Foucauldian analysis situates the emergence of weblogs within the context of a power struggle. Conceptualizations of objectivity and authority in journalism have been suggested as the focus of this power struggle (Ruggiero, 2004). Foucault would also search for the events in the world that have precipitated the turn in discourse that has positioned weblogs and traditional journalism as adversaries. This would provide understanding as to why this issue emerged when it did. Brett Hutchins (2007) describes how the independent, online news source *Tasmanian Times* was created as a direct reaction to the perceived non-critical, superficial stance mass media has taken with government issues. An analysis of the conservatism of mass media journalism in recent years in relation to the global political environment may be relevant to the issue of journalistic authority.

#### Authority and Objectivity

Traditional journalists defined professionally have been documented to doubt the value of online news reporting, especially during the early and mid 1990s (Ruggiero, 2004). The professional ideology of objectivity has provided journalists with a basis for claiming authority in the provision of news and information for public discourse. Journalists have been socialized through institutional and professional culture and practices to uphold and portray a monopolistic view of objectivity. To achieve this hold on objectivity, journalists have limited sources of news information. Ruggiero writes, “by using authoritative sources, journalists are provided a safeguard for their own

professional reputations and their notions of objectivity. Reliance on authoritative and ‘acceptable’ images, reinforced by deadline pressures and economy of presentation, create a paradigm of objectivity” (p. 95).

In their efforts to maintain journalistic authority, Ruggiero found anecdotal arguments within professional documents used by journalists to attack Internet based news. Online news sources, it has been portrayed, lacked the accountability associated with traditional journalism because of a lack of explicitly stated moral and ethical standards. Appeals were made to journalistic authority on the grounds of the detrimental social effects of poor Internet journalism. The credibility of sources was undermined and the authenticity of data and information was put into doubt. Curiously, all of these arguments could be reversed to undermine the objectivity of journalists.

As a reaction to the decreasing opinion the public has had in journalists, paradigm repair at the cultural level has been mounted. Regarding this, Ruggiero writes, “rhetorical evidence concerning paradigm repair suggests that up until recently many journalists tended to characterize the internet in several negative ways: as a source of bogus news, as a perpetuator of hoaxes and urban legends, and as a purveyor of unreliable electronic documents” (p. 99). It is noted that this trend has diminished in recent years. Journalists have been forced online for economic and technological reasons. To undermine the value of Internet news now would further erode the image of professional journalists.

In an attempt to define journalists professionally, Deuze (2005) proposes a holistic approach to discover common ideological traits of journalists shared across organizations, nations, and cultures. Among the core beliefs in the ideology of journalists

as a profession are: provision of public service; neutrality, objectivity, and fairness; editorial autonomy; a sense of immediacy; and a sense of ethics. Deuze identifies two salient issues that will challenge this ideology in the short-term: multiculturalism and, relevant to weblogs and the Internet, multimedia.

Most analysis of multimedia, the Internet, and network technology in relation to journalism focuses on the site of interaction between journalists as creators of content and the audience they target. Within journalistic communities though, these technological developments change what it means to be a journalist. The independence of the journalist is being sublimated into the multimedia team where each member brings specialized skills to a production. Traditionally, journalists independently crafted their work in coordination with editorial staff. Convergence is also creating competition within news organizations where members strive for as much journalistic autonomy as possible. More broadly, these changes can be related to the commodification of news media. Thus the new media environment is changing the ideology of journalism from “within” the profession.

The ethical codes of journalists encourage objectivity through non-partisan reporting of political issues. Bloggers have discarded the notion of objectivity with their personally worded reportings. How do journalists behave when blogging? Singer (2005) found that they do write with more partisan language, especially columnists who have already established room in their work for personal opinion. How do journalists interact with the technological tools of democratization on the Internet? Hyperlinking is seen as a primary form of Internet interactivity and an avenue for transparency by linking to

original sources and documents within text. Journalistic bloggers do link extensively, but these links point to other established news organizations or within the web space of the journalist's own organization, effectively limiting the information available to viewers, keeping control of the "gate."

Singer concludes "for the moment, though, it does not appear that the blog format is revolutionizing the journalistic notion of democracy, in which journalists see themselves as central to the task of creating an informed electorate" (p. 193). In a similar vein, O'Sullivan (2005) referring to the personal views of Irish journalists in regard to online news reporting, commented, "most, even those who enthusiastically welcome the development of news online, decline to see it other than as an extension of the older order" (p. 65).

More recent literature is painting a picture of a closer relationship between the ideologies of bloggers and journalists though. As the symbiotic relationship between professional and amateur communicators of news and information develops, the normative features for each group is increasingly under outside influence (Singer, 2007). Truth and transparency are important guiding notions for professional journalists and amateur bloggers. Truth for journalists has descended from the intellectual foundation of the Enlightenment era, they "defined truth as what is verifiable, replicable and universal" (p. 82). Bloggers possibly represent the first wide-spread public display of postmodern idealizations of truth in its personal and multiple forms. Transparency has been institutionalized in the canons of professional journalists as the need to serve public interest in an open and accessible way. Bloggers are almost intrinsically transparent with

the personal grounding of their content and the off-the-record tone of their communication.

As a professional group, journalists have strived for internal control of ethical norms in both the establishment of these norms and their policing. Bloggers meanwhile, because of the decentralized nature of their network medium have developed conventions within a broad community. Bloggers' use of professional journalists' content as a primary source impacts future normative issues for journalists as amateur bloggers have become a watchdog of the traditional watchdogs. To remain relevant through a trend of decreasingly positive perceptions of journalism, traditional media sources will have to negotiate their ethical codes with the criticism and power of bloggers as a primary concern. Bloggers, though transparent to an extent in their personal and subjective accounts, are following the lead of journalists in explicitly stating conflicts of interest and addressing other issues of transparency.

Of practical concern, as amateur journalists, bloggers have limited resources to pursue investigative reports for example. Thus, bloggers rely on traditional media for the "raw" content of journalism to a large extent. As localized journalists, bloggers often witness first-hand, the events that shape the news, while journalists are centralized in urban centres. Increasingly, bloggers will feed mainstream media with storylines for further explication.

The adversarial relationship between bloggers and journalists seems to have been constructed in haste as the media landscape continues to adapt in practice. Theoretically, the tension that has been constructed does lend itself well to a Foucauldian analysis of

underlying issues of power and politics. Views of objectivity and authority have been softened, when compared to their modernist embodiments, to align with a decentralized and plural notion of reality. This philosophical shift can also be related to the alternative methodology employed by this study, through the “discontinuous” history of Foucault and the “affordance” perspective to technology and society.

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