

News blogs: strengthening democracy through conflict prevention

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Abstract

Purpose - To offer greater insight in the role of blogs in the creation of a more transparent news media system and a more democratic political reality.

Design/methodology/approach - Framing theory is employed as a conceptual tool to re-interpret existing evidence of the performance of news blogs during situations of political conflict and war. A theoretical analysis is developed setting out the premises of the challenge that blogs can pose to the framing of conflict by mainstream media. The analysis incorporates empirical examples of reporting conflict and war in the blogosphere. Finally, with the aid of international relations theories, the role of blogs is evaluated in terms of the political transparency and accountability they could offer during conflict and war.

Findings - The analysis demonstrated that by promoting alternative and progressive voices, blogs have the capacity to shift the power over framing away from the usual sources in the news reporting of political conflict and turn the media system into a greater constraining factor for governments than even before.

Originality/value - Presents a novel approach to the interaction between blogs and mainstream media by combining theories from the disciplines of communications and international relations. The analysis generated a hypothesis that can be empirically assessed with the investigation of the framing output of influential news blogs and mainstream news media during political conflict and war.

Keywords News blogs, Framing, Political conflict

Paper Type Conceptual paper

Introduction

For more than a decade, extensive debates have assessed the democratic potential of new media in relation to their capacity to empower citizens and enable them to enjoy the opportunity not only to process information at greater speed, but also to express political opinions and contribute in political change. In this setting, blogs have received considerable attention with their alleged power to enhance democracy preoccupying communications and media theorists at length.

Among the key determinants of the democratic quality of blogs is their interaction with traditional media and the profession of journalism. Discussions of the role of bloggers as the new journalists and their authenticity as news sources have indicated a symbiosis of blogs with mainstream media through which the latter can provide a more interactive and healthier form of journalism. In an effort to offer greater insight into the democratic role of blogs, this paper considers their ability to challenge the construction of meaning by mainstream media in situations of political conflict and war. It develops a theoretical analysis by interpreting current evidence of the input of blogs in the news production process within the context of *framing* theory. Framing research enables a connection between news texts and processes of production and reception and highlights the construction of meaning as a product of framing contests among various actors and within a wider political context (Carragee and Roefs, 2004).

It provides a valuable conceptual tool for unpicking key underlying forces in the construction and impact of news and helps set out the premises on which blogs have the power to dispute the framing of news by traditional media.

Based on an examination of the news framing procedure as it unravels in situations of conflict and war, the paper theorises the ability of blogs to infuse the media system with dissenting voices and frames that could change the media-government power relations and the ways that western governments establish the frame of discourse in which conflict is understood. Empirical examples of reporting and commentary on situations of conflict and war in the blogosphere appear to enhance this hypothesis, validating the power of blogs to turn the news media system into a greater constraining factor for governments and an agent that is capable of facilitating conflict prevention.

A brief description of blogs

The emergence of blogs (short for “web log”) has marked the arrival of a “new form of mainstream communication” (Rosenbloom, 2004, p. 31), one that allows millions of people to publish and exchange knowledge and information. Blogs can generally be described as a more dynamic version of a personal website that is regularly updated (Wall, 2005) and as web pages “with minimal to no external editing, providing on-line commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources” (Drezner and Farrell, 2004a, p. 5).

Several attempts have been made to identify the capacity of blogs to enable individuals to establish an online presence and involve in a form of networked expression of opinion (Allan, 2006). Through this online presence, citizens can effectively “emerge from the spectating audience as a player and a maker of meanings” (Coleman, 2005, p. 274). Facilitating citizens to declare their presence in the social production and distribution of knowledge could be conceived as the root of the multiple influences of blogging on modern democracy, the most transformative of which is believed to be upon journalism (ibid).

So far, studies regarding if and to what extent blogs qualify as original news sources and platforms for citizen journalism have offered different and, at times, contradictory evidence of their position in the production and reporting of news. Although the core argument in the present work sprouts from the notion of citizen journalism, the paper does not intend to offer conclusive answers to this question. It addresses the blogging phenomenon in its deeper and broader sense focusing upon its power to create a more open media landscape and a more democratic political reality. A somewhat narrow focus is taken in relation to so-called “news blogs” that offer information on politics and current affairs and are thought to have the greatest impact on mainstream media (Tremayne, 2007). Such blogs include those maintained by news organisations, by professional journalists outside news organisations and by individuals with an interest in politics and policy issues, often referred to as “citizen journalist” blogs.

The potential of blogs to influence mainstream news media stems primarily from existing knowledge about journalists and opinion leaders being among the consumers of blogs, through which they obtain meaningful analysis that helps them interpret and predict political events (Drezner and Farrell, 2004a). Although only a relatively small

elite of well known and highly influential blogs could attract adequate attention to function as aggregators of information and analysis, the vital force of the blogging phenomenon is among those who discover news and originate content. Hence, news is more likely to start with a trend or event that is first noticed by a less-known blog, then amplified by a social network until it comes to the attention of a power blog, and even enter the mainstream news media (Public Journalism Network). This paper addresses the potential impact of news blogs on mainstream media with the employment of framing theory, through which it seeks to address key underpinnings of the news construction process that would exhibit the contribution of blogs in promoting greater political transparency and government accountability.

News framing and the challenge of blogs

In general terms, the concept of framing embodies the social construction of reality approach to the news media (Adoni and Mane, 1984; Berger and Lukmann, 1966; Gamson, 1992, in Wolfsfeld, 1997). Often, it is associated with the principles of selection, salience and exclusion that “enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely [and to] package information for efficient relay to their audiences” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7). In what Carragee and Roefs (2004) describe as the most significant contribution to framing research, Gitlin (1980) and Tuchman (1978) linked the production of meaning through frames to structural and ideological processes that involve journalists, news organisations and their sources (Carragee and Roefs, 2004, p. 216). Since news frames are not shaped in a vacuum but through the frames sponsored by multiple social actors, news stories become a platform for framing contests, where political actors compete by sponsoring their preferred meanings. In essence, as framing sponsorship is determined by the distribution of economic, political and cultural resources across the various actors, examining the media construction of reality through framing, necessitates that focus be placed on the role of power in the production of meaning (Carragee and Roefs, 2004). The issue of power forms the basis on which the contribution of blogs is located. Seen by users as conduits to raw information that are less corrupted by power, blogs may constitute the antidote to the skewed representation of political reality offered by mainstream news media.

Blogs offer an effective combination of expertise, real-time collective response to breaking news, and public-opinion barometer. They can give journalists and other bloggers free access to first hand newsworthy information (Thompson, 2003) from multiple areas, offering voice to a wider range of progressive groups and access to alternative interpretations. Considering that most news originates from standard official sources (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Livingston and Bennett, 2003; Schudson, 2003), by exposing more and diverse voices, blogs can push journalists to richer sourcing, outside traditional halls of government and corporations (Andrews, 2003). As Tremayne (2007) suggests, mainstream media can learn from bloggers how to take advantage of active citizen writers to generate a better product. The power of blogs in this case derives not from the accuracy but from the collective power of the reporting. The so-called “Rather-gate” scandal offers a clear example (Tremayne, 2007). When CBS News’ *60 Minutes II* questioned President Bush’s fulfilment of his National Guard service obligations through the use of damaging memos, it was the “buzz” generated by bloggers challenging the authenticity of the documents that prompted Dan Rather to apologise and announce his early retirement (Scott, 2007).

The credibility and impact of the information that bloggers provided was ultimately generated by the collective effort and its speed, rather than its depth, balance and objectivity (Tremayne, 2007). Dan Rather's case underlines the power of blogs to inject an alternative view in mainstream news coverage through a combined effort.

The distinctive content often found in blogs that relates to, comments on, interrogates and analyses information already on mainstream media news (Kivikuru, 2006; Thelwall and Stuart, 2007) allows blog authors to re-access current news material and produce frames that divert from the official meanings traditionally sponsored by political elites. This is especially the case for blogs maintained by professional journalists, who use the blogosphere as a conduit to a writing that is free from journalistic constraints. These sites provide journalists with the opportunity to be creative without worrying about compromising the objectivity that traditional news organisations try to maintain (Gilmor, 2003, p. 80), to shed light on how they arrive at the opinions they publish (Regan, 2003) and even criticise newspapers and television, adding depth and thoroughness to current events (Matheson, 2004). Robinson's (2006) study of 130 blogs published within mainstream news media outlets in the US showed that blogs could supply various interpretations of the day's news. Reporters were able to let loose in some creative and interrogating writing, and build stories using feedback and contribution from readers (Robinson, 2006, p. 79). However, it also needs to be born in mind that journalists' independent writing in the blogosphere is not without constraints. A case in point is the war blog of CNN correspondent Kevin Sites, which was one of the first to combine text, digital images, and audio to provide readers with a behind-the-scenes look at the war in Iraq along with his own commentary. The blog was eventually suspended after a request from CNN, a decision that highlights the restrictions that journalists face as bloggers and implies the determination of mainstream media to eliminate this new form of reporting (Allan, 2006, p. 108).

The knowledge, experience and opinion of the audience can also be of great value to the production of frames that divert from the usual sources. Many journalists who blog are exposing the raw material of their stories-in-progress, asking for the readers' input to write follow up articles (Lasica, 2003, p. 73) and using the expertise of individual bloggers on the issues of the day. Perhaps the most notable contribution of individual, non-journalist bloggers to the news construction process is through the concept of the citizen journalist. Citizen journalists are here perceived as non-journalists who provide news reporting in the form of complete and self-contained alternatives or supplements to the products supplied by the traditional media outlets, as well as reactions to news as the mainstream media report it (Cooper, 2006, p. 254). Whether these types of blogs engage in original news reporting - a question for which evidence is still scarce - is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, an imperative contribution in the construction of news rests with offering insight, commentary, analysis and dissenting views originally unavailable in the news media.

A category of bloggers that fulfil this function are the so-called "policy bloggers" – bloggers who choose to specialise on a particular political topic. McKenna (2006) underlines their significance by comparing them to the policy entrepreneurs that, according to John Kingdon, constitute a central component to policy formation. Motivated by personal interests, entrepreneurs are willing to invest time, energy, reputation and money to promote a preferred policy that suits an identified problem

(Kingdon, 1984). In a similar way, policy bloggers find a way to fit their expertise and interests into news events, offering valuable analysis to journalists. McKenna cites the example of the activity in the policy blog *The Oil Drum* when Hurricane Katrina hit. She describes how its authors engaged in continuous writing and expanded on the impact that such an incident would have on oil production in the Gulf Coast (McKenna, 2006, p. 23). The attention the blog received from the news media came as no surprise, considering the dissenting analyses and less “routinised” frames that journalists could draw from such writing.

The plethora of information sources made available through blogs, allows for a greater number of actors to enter the framing contest that could gradually diffuse the power over news frames. At the same time, by incorporating the readers’ responses in news reporting through mainstream media blogs or drawing from the analysis offered in individual “citizen journalist” blogs, journalists can enable alternative truths to merge with their own definitions of meaning. The transformative impact of blogs in the reporting of conflict and war, where the power relations between political leaders and news organisations are the primary determinants of frames, could not only prompt greater frame parity, but also greater government transparency and accountability.

The framing of conflict

In an era when technology continues to modify communications and media systems, the intersection of communications and conflict is pivotal. A growing body of work in cyber conflict, information warfare and media diplomacy has addressed the pervasive role of communications technologies and the media in the formation of a more open political environment that can change the type of political strategies that work on an international level (Brown, 2005). At the same time, there are those who see media technologies as no more than tools in the hands of politicians rather than a force that transforms diplomacy and foreign policymaking (Gilboa, 2002c). At the heart of this perspective lie the power relationships in which politicians and traditional media in particular are involved. The issue of power that defines the framing of conflict by traditional news media, serving primarily the interests of authorities and of media organisations, raises questions with regard to the openness of the political environment that communications technologies enable; and the constraints this environment entails for politicians in waging war. Within this context, blogs signify a technological development that, by diluting the traditional process of frame production, could prove powerful enough to transform the role of the news media system in situations of conflict and war.

In the study of frame production during conflict and war operations, the compelling work of Wolfsfeld (1997) and Entman (2004) can offer a solid basis for the evaluation of the influential power of blogs. A central premise of Wolfsfeld’s work is that political power offers important advantages in influencing the news media frames during conflict. He asserts that the inherent importance of those with political power, can lead to dignified frames, while progressive groups that divert from the official line can only compete with their more powerful adversaries if they produce frames that resonate with the media’s culture (Wolfsfeld, 1997, pp. 42-45). Wolfsfeld makes clear how the power of political actors to shape news framing is embodied in their ability to interpret events in a way that resonates with the media’s political and professional culture.

To this, Entman has added the importance of promoting frames that resonate with the wider culture of a given political environment. In his cascading activation model, Entman (2004) introduces the concept of cultural congruence as the ease with which a news frame will fit the schemas habitually used by most members of a society and will be more likely to induce similar responses among the majority of these members. Consequently, a great deal of an actor's power to ensure their preferred interpretations are successfully adapted by the media and public alike, lies in their ability to promote frames that are congruent with the schemas that dominate the respective political culture. Culturally congruent frames tend to stimulate similar reactions by elites and the public, minimising the possibility for domestic opposition and rendering news framing easier for governments to control. They can prove professionally useful for the news media too, enabling journalists to process large amounts of information and fit it in a culturally familiar narrative. Wolfsfeld cites the example of the conflict between the Catholics in Northern Ireland and the British Government and its coverage by the American press. He explains how the frame of terrorism was established as culturally congruent and professionally useful, making it virtually impossible to find alternative explanations such as the struggles by an oppressed people against British occupation (Wolfsfeld, 1997, p. 34).

According to Entman, the more culturally ambiguous a frame sponsored by a political leader is, the less sense it will make with the media and the public, paving the way for more alternative perspectives to enter the news framing process (Entman, 2004). The implications of ambiguous frames lie in rendering the anticipated reactions of the public less predictable, reinforcing the media's role in representation (Entman, 2004, p. 21) and, consequently, in holding governments accountable. However, the tendency of the news media to defer to the best-packaged official political story and frame conflict in accordance with a given political and professional culture leaves little scope for the media to provide the degree of transparency that can prevent conflict. As other areas of research have also demonstrated, democratic political structures and institutions, such as the news media, can even provide opportunities for political leaders to obtain benefits from war (Van Belle, 1997, p. 406). In effect, if power over news framing creates a controlled communications and media system, by amplifying public sources and voices, blogs may have the capacity to advance the democratic qualities of mainstream news media.

Framing conflict in the blogosphere

The popularity of blogs in reporting conflict was boosted during the recent Iraq war, with the blogosphere functioning not just as a news source, but also as a means for soldiers to remain connected to their families (Palser, 2002; Seipp, 2002; Smolkin, 2004). Not content with the one-sided news reporting of the conflict offered mainly by the US media, significant numbers of the public turned to the Internet for information. As Allan (2006) remarks, from the moment news of the first attacks was reported on 19 March 2003, Internet traffic increased dramatically. The demand for more comprehensive coverage of the war led audiences to the search of information through news websites and blogs.

Although, according to Pew Research, only 4 per cent of Internet users would turn to blogs during the Iraq war (Rainie, Fox and Fallows, 2003), Johnson and Kaye (2007)

underline the fact that their influential power exceeds their readership. Their increased popularity during the war was the resultant of featuring writers with varied political perspectives that offered insights different from those of the American traditional media (Hamilton, 2003; Hastings, 2003; Reynolds, 2004). They also provided links to other sites and allowed readers to respond to the postings, enabling a healthy debate about the war (Hastings, 2003). Their influential power becomes even more apparent, when one considers the efforts of the military to censor or shut down several blogs posted by soldiers in Iraq for fear they would contradict the Pentagon's official version of events (Schulman, 2005, in Johnson and Kaye, 2007, p. 165).

An even more profound impact of the blogosphere could perhaps lie beneath the reporting of the war by the US mainstream media. Although media coverage in the US may not have been very efficient in elevating sources outside official Washington power circles and posing a serious challenge to official stories, the frame promoted by the Bush administration - to build a case for the US invasion of Iraq - remained ambiguous enough to create some space for a few opposition voices. This enabled a framing of the war that, overall, was less controlled than in past operations (Bennett *et al.*, 2007; Entman 2004).

The Iraq war is not the only example where mainstream media and blogs offered contradicting coverage. As Murilo (2006) points out, with reference to the East Timor crisis, the Anglophone media would report a different story from Portuguese language blogs. The latter expanded awareness of the many sides of the conflict, bringing the gaps in interpretation within the different language spheres into high visibility. Considering the reported dependency of journalists on blogs for news and analysis they did not see elsewhere (Reynolds, 2004), blogs cannot but reinforce the anticipated impact of their challenging voices and views on the framing of the war by mainstream media.

Based on current theoretical and empirical evidence from the blogosphere, the following paragraphs attempt to build a theoretical case of the *why* and *how* blogs can enable the diffusion of control over news frames during conflict and create scope for a more transparent and democratic political environment. The core argument lies in the ability of blogs to make a wide range of sources accessible to mainstream media, representing voices that are distanced from political power and able to provide intelligent commentary without sponsorship of a corporate news company. This does not only enhance their credibility (Kaye and Johnson, 2004; Wall, 2005, p. 165), but also gives them the potential to erode the barrier of political power that blocks alternative voices from entering the framing contests. Considering that political power translates into one's ability to sponsor news frames that resonate with the wider political context and the media's professional culture, challenging the issue of power could consequently enable a frame diversity that is central to the creation of a more democratic media and political environment.

Challenging procedural framing: alternative voices, alternative frames

Empirical evidence of the multiplication of the sources cited and quoted in blogs during the Iraq War 2003 offers some first indication of the diversity of frames that could de-centre the process of news media coverage. In a content analysis of newspapers and blogs covering the operation, Vaina (2007) examined five major newspapers and six popular political blogs and counted the number of sources they

cited over seven days in late March 2007. Overall, he found that blogs included a higher number of total sources and a slightly wider range of sources. Even if the gap between newspapers and blogs was considerably narrower when evaluating the types of sources, Vaina underlines the fact that blogs were still more diverse in their sourcing. Hyperlinks offered another route for voices and perspectives to proliferate and dispute the trustworthiness of mainstream media during the Iraq war. Matheson's (2004) investigation of *The Guardian* blog demonstrates how linking to other newspapers and sources from the Middle East, indicated the end of the monopoly of the media's professional logic (Matheson, 2004, p. 459).

Among the most prominent sources that offered independent investigation and in-depth commentary and analysis, were those knowledgeable and passionate professional and citizen journalists that participated actively in the coverage of the Iraq war. Allan (2006) remarks on the number of front line bloggers that were not even associated with a news organisation but worked as "solo journalists" writing their own copy for online print and broadcast media during the war. Being always on the move and equipped with mobile technologies, these bloggers became popular among blog users and distinctive news sources due to their ability to share their eyewitness experiences, divert from official lines and the mainstream media's editing scrutiny and counterbalance the more traditional forms of the reporting of war (Allan, 2006, 108-109).

The case of the so-called "solo journalists" resembles the self-styled "unilaterals" in the Gulf War 1991, a number of journalists that decided to break away from the pool systems organised by the military and get stories that were at variance with the official line offering alternative perspectives originally unavailable in the coverage of mainstream news organisations. Taylor (1998) underlines the contradictory views offered by the unilateralist version of events in comparison to the unanimity of the official line; but at the same time, he questions the effectiveness of this activity and its contribution to a wider public understanding of the war. In fact, unilateral journalists were only a small minority and their interpretations created more confusion than the clarity they had intended. With this in mind, the reporting of bloggers emerges as a unique opportunity for independent sources to provide more clarity to a conflict operation by multiplying the already existing alternative voices in its reporting and challenging mainstream media frames in a more forceful manner.

The anticipated influence of this amplification of voices is embodied in the "procedural" framing of an operation such as a conflict, once these voices get noticed by mainstream media. Procedural framing is described as the framing that focuses on the process and politics of decision-making, in which case some aspects of a given process are selected and highlighted to promote the desired interpretation. This could include mentions of the president's leadership, attributions regarding consultations with other leaders and comments concerning the manner that policy was formulated and carried out and it could also relate to the likelihood of military success or failure (Althaus, 2003; Entman, 2004). Procedural framing is distinguished from "substantive" framing. The latter addresses policy decisions, such as unilateral military action, conducting weapons inspections, opposing the option of war and other proposals, and the logic used to support and justify them (Althaus, 2003; Entman and Page, 1994; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Mermin, 1999).

The so-called “milblogs” – blogs posted by soldiers in Iraq - represent a useful example of a potential source of procedural framing of events. Schulman (2005) describes the case of a milblog written by an Army infantryman named Colby Buzzell, who posted his account of a vicious firefight with insurgents on his blog, *My War* describing the horror of the battle. Interestingly, the Pentagon ensured the operation received scant media coverage by playing down the extent to which Buzzell’s brigade had been involved in the fighting. When a report in the Tacoma, Washington, *News Tribune* noted the discrepancy between Buzzell’s version and the Pentagon’s, Buzzell’s officers ensured his and other blogs were either censored or ordered to shut down. The specific incident draws attention to the potential silencing of such blogs by officials fearing the exposure of information that would contradict the government’s line. Nevertheless, at the same time it illustrates the power of the alternative versions of the unfolding events, featured in blogs, to attract the attention of mainstream media and disrupt their procedural framing line.

Cooper (2006) cites another example of a blogger offering a dissenting interpretation that could have potentially influenced later media coverage. He describes the framing of an Iraqi insurgent attack on an American military convoy, with 24 Iraqi insurgents left dead, by *The New York Times* in March 2005; and how it was disputed by communication Professor Cori Dauber on her blog, *Rantingprofs*. Cooper explains that Dauber’s critique was triggered by the way the otherwise factually accurate story misled the audience by framing the Iraqi assault as an unusually large and bold battle and glossing how they were eventually routed badly by the Americans (Cooper, 2006, p. 106). Another misleading aspect of the story, according to Dauber, was the way the *New York Times* reporter stated that morale was deteriorating among the Iraqi civilian population as a result of insurgent attacks. As Dauber noted in her blog, the story explicitly concealed the optimism that prevailed among Iraqi people as well as the existing polling data confirming this optimism (Cooper, 2006, p. 107).

Dauber’s disputing of *The New York Times* frame offers a clear example of the different procedural framing and interpretation that individual sources can provide, especially when they are not limited by professional standards and/or nationalistic incentives. Constructing a news story necessarily involves a choice of which facts to highlight and which to play down. Since the frame is a central idea that organises the salient facts in the story, disputing the story frame may take the form of highlighting different facts that provide an alternative perspective of a key event. If critiques like Dauber’s create enough “buzz” to attract the attention of the mainstream media, they can prompt more comprehensive and transparent media coverage of the actual procedures and outcomes in a conflict. This will be a crucial step towards hindering government efforts to control the substantive news framing and public justification of the legitimacy of the conflict in question.

Challenging substantive framing: justifying policies

Through the multiplication of sources, blogs can give access to those dissenting voices that divert from the culturally resonant beliefs and, using their expertise and knowledge, are able to recognise the existence of alternative justifications of the government decisions made during an operation. Dissenting voices could entail a more subtle criticism and disputing of mainstream media frames, challenging the production of substantive framing. Such challenge could comprise the promotion of culturally incongruent interpretations and justifications, and frames that do not fit the

media's professional standards. Especially in situations of conflict and war, where national interest could be under risk, the blogosphere can provide citizens with a platform where they can publicly question the government's justifications of a decision that might jeopardise the country's interest and dispute the framing of a conflict by mainstream media. Individual bloggers could in this case offer critique of media framing – be it in the form of disputing the frame of a news story, reframing facts or re-contextualising a frame – which, as Cooper suggests, seems to be a natural response of the reader to news reporting that finds an outlet in blogs (Cooper, 2006, p. 106).

Drezner and Farrell (2004b) cite the example of Juan Cole, a Professor of History at the University of Michigan, who channelled his expertise on the Muslim world and the war in Iraq into his blog *Informed Comment*. Cole's scepticism about the US invasion and occupation of Iraq diverted from the optimistic mainstream media coverage. In the summer of 2003, he wrote,

The Sunni Arabs north, east and west of Baghdad from all accounts hate the US and hate US troops being there. This hatred is the key recruiting tool for the resistance, and it is not lessened by US troops storming towns. I wish [the counterinsurgency operation] well; maybe it will work, militarily. Politically, I don't think it addresses the real problems, of winning hearts and minds. (Drezner and Farrell, 2004b)

His comments and analysis attracted wide attention from bloggers and journalists and Cole began appearing on media outlets such as National Public Radio (NPR) and CNN to provide expert commentary. As Drezner and Farrell remark,

Cole's transformation into a public intellectual embodies many of the dynamics that have heightened the impact of the blogosphere. He wanted to publicize his expertise, and he did so by attracting attention from elite members of the blogosphere. As Cole made waves within the virtual world, others in the real world began to take notice. (Drezner and Farrell, 2004b)

Cole's example is noteworthy as the attention he received by bloggers and news media was the result of his expertise and implicit challenge of the official interpretations of the decision to wage the war in Iraq and, by extension, of the cultural congruence of mainstream news framing.

The case of Jeff Jarvis, director of the new-media programme of the Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York, offers another similar illustration (Cooper, 2006). Jarvis attempted a substantial reframing in response to a *New York Times* story on the suicide bombers in the 7/7 London attack. Although the story concerned a crisis event, rather than a conflict, the framing included elements, such as a problem definition and cause identification, which are typical of the coverage and framing of conflict. Jarvis's critique of *The New York Times* story addressed the explanation advanced by the newspaper for the specific terrorist activity, which presented the atrocity as the resultant of the despair of angry young men in Arab nations who have no hope of economic prosperity and freedom. Jarvis's objection to the frame stemmed from observing that the London bombers did not fit that explanation. In contrast, they were young men living in a land of freedom and opportunity, which in reality made them just murderers. Cooper cites the following text from Jarvis' blog:

The problem with the analysis is that though it does not justify their actions – it tries to understand them – it gives a tacit logic, even a justification to the horribly illogical, unjustifiable, uncivilised crime. What they did is a crime. That’s all it is, nothing more. A crime. (Cooper, 2006, p. 112).

To support his reframing, Jarvis offered several cases of criminal acts and made a distinction between understanding criminal motives and disregarding criminal behaviours. These cases included manslaughter under the influence of alcohol, if alcoholism is treated as a disease, and corporate fraud, with the excuse that the perpetrator was raised in a culture of competition (Cooper, 2006, p. 113). The example demonstrates how different media can offer conflicting frames of the same incident including different justifications of a given problem and the causes of this problem. In the case of blogs, this could entail applying a form of implicit pressure on journalists to re-consider their own interpretations. By questioning the frame of the “angry young man”, Jarvis draws attention to what is perhaps the strongest asset of blogs: the capacity to engage in a more thorough evaluation of the causes of problems - such as terrorism – that could shed light on the deeper failures of a given political culture and attribute responsibility to those who are accountable. In situations of conflict and with the aid of traditional media, this capacity could eventually place the political realm under greater public scrutiny, facilitating peaceful resolutions.

Blogs and conflict prevention: toward a more democratic news media system

The potential transformative impact of blogs on the framing of conflict by mainstream media can effectively reduce the ability of political leaders to have complete control over the definition and framing of events in conflict and war, and can contribute in generating a more public political landscape. This would essentially derive from their capacity to allow audiences to blend with producers, reflecting a growing rejection of institutional authority (Putnam, 2000 in Wall, 2005, p. 167), and more importantly, enabling ordinary people to discover their own political voices and participate in collective problem solving (Wall, 2005). The democratic relevance of this development becomes apparent when one considers the implications that an open communications and information ecosystem can have on political decision-making. International Relations (IR) theories can be particularly informative in this case.

During the last two decades, IR has increasingly acknowledged the importance of communications and information in decision-making processes. The impact of publicity and transparency on human behaviour is of course hardly new with Kant being amongst the first to argue that the principles of human action could be ethical only if they were public (Kant, 1963 in Brown, 2005, p. 58). Based on Kant’s observation that even if state leaders do not suffer personally from war, they suffer through the loss of office (Schultz, 1999), Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman (1992) argue that an open political environment facilitates the unseating of a government that undertakes costly strategies.

Scholars of the so-called “informational approach”, who deal with the issue of openness encountered in democracies, suggest that domestic political institutions in democratic states facilitate the disclosure of information about governmental

incentives and preferences in a given crisis and prompt the dissemination of more genuine signals or threats (Fearon, 1994; Schultz, 2001). As governments become less likely to engage in bluffing behaviour and misrepresent their incentives, the possibilities for a bargaining process to result in a peaceful solution increase. According to Siegel (1997), the news media are integral in this system. They influence decisions about conflict and war by taking the control of information out of the government's hands and reducing the opportunities for deception.

Needless to say, to suggest that the news media system operates as a domestic institution that mirrors political decision-making and discloses government incentives and preferences in a conflict, thus preventing the adversary and the public from being deceived, would imply neglecting the media-government power relations and the skewed representation of events they produce. In response to this conceptual deficiency, this paper suggests that studying the blogging phenomenon within the context of the news framing process is an opportunity to reconsider the role of the news media as a truly democratic institution.

The conception of the news media as a domestic institution that offers transparency during situations of conflict corresponds to the 19th century journalism ideal, which enabled rational observations and discourses by elites that held governments accountable and contributed to democracy. As Wall implies, it is this form of news media that blogs could help stimulate by pulling more people into public conversation (Wall, 2005, p. 167). As the discussion in this paper suggests, blogs provide the grounds for greater news frame parity, multiple perspectives and alternative interpretations of decisions and events. So long as blogs can attract the attention of, be acknowledged and utilised efficiently by mainstream news media, they can help create a media ecosystem capable of raising the cost of war for governments and pave the way for more peaceful alternatives and a more democratic political process altogether.

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