The Relation Between Blogging And Mass-Media

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the relation between blogging, an increasingly online growing phenomena, and mainstream mass media. As a qualitative approach, this research was based on the existing body of literature addressing the blogs and mass media, as primary source and Internet research. The major findings of this paper indicate that blogging, as a form of alternative media, can conceptually challenge mainstream media on four dimensions: ownership, funding, sources and content. From a practical standpoint, blogs can be either drafters or headliners for mainstream media, either follow a separate path and gather independent audiences. At the same time, mainstream media can respond to blogging by being cooperatively inclusive, or exclusive.

Keywords: Blog, Blogosphere, Mainstream Media, Alternative Media

1 Introduction

Blogging stands for the action of online self-publishing. As an increasingly growing phenomenon, blogging entailed a series of framing efforts. One of the most popular attempts, endorsed by both academic and non-academic figures, positions blogging in relation to journalism. Consequently, the blogs are perceived as a newly emerging alternative media form of grassroots journalism, which is capable to challenge the mainstream mass media. Blogging became more and more famous in the recent years. Based on the number of its online users' requests, Merriam-Webster, the online dictionary has chosen ‘blog’ as the word of the year, in 2004. The blog is defined as “a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer.” (http://www.merriam-webster.com/info/04words.htm). A BBC News online article (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4059291.stm) from December 2004 quotes a spokesman for the Oxford University Press, claiming that based on its mainstream use, the word blog was about to be included into printed Oxford dictionaries for children and learners. A national phone survey from 2003, conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Amanda Lenhart et al, 2004), reveals that more than 53 million American adults have used the Internet in activities related to self-publishing or interacting with other online users.

The general trend seems to indicate ascending tendencies. Tehnorati, one of the most important blog search engines (Hewitt, 2005) keeps record on its front page of the currently number the blogs that it tracks. In 2004 the site was counting around 2 million blogs (Gill, 2004), in February 2006 the site was tracking around 28.7 million blogs (Ahrens, 2006), and in May 2006 the site records 40.9 million blogs.
The literature devoted to the blogging phenomenon tends to associate it to a new form of alternative media, capable to actively challenge the traditional structures of mainstream media.

In the first part of this paper, I will try to conceptually define what is mainstream and what is alternative media. Within the capitalist market economy, mainstream media is often portrayed as a biased organism, profit oriented and controlling the flow of the information in a top-down manner. Manipulated and manipulative at the same time, mainstream media allegedly fails to perform its democratic requirements on several levels. By contrast, the spectre of a new media, less corporate and involving the audience in the news making process is endorsed by a number of framing attempts and coined as alternative. My intention is to bring together the two major claims, highlight the tensions and discover how can the blogs fit in as a media form.

In the second part, I will focus on specific case studies in order to explore the relation between blogs and mainstream mass media, and discover what is the nature of their relation, both in theory and in practice.

2 Theoretical perspectives
Mass media represents the sum of all the means of communications used for channeling information towards large audiences. The most important means of communication incorporate the printed press (newspapers, journals, magazines, books) and the electronic media, ranging from radio and television to the Internet and the personal computers. The information is split up between the news or current events, and the entertainment related topics, such as fiction, movies, music, sports, and so on.

The term mainstream media, referred to as corporate media or Big media, has in most cases negative connotations, being perceived as a manipulative force that shapes the information according to specific interests that dominate media organizations.

*Figure 1. Broadcast: Top-down news*

Figure “[1]” (Bowman, Willis, 2003) clearly illustrates the mainstream model and the top-down news-making: the flow of information is totally controlled by the Media Organization, which uses Media Channels (e.g. Web sites, TV shows, newspapers) to reach the Audiences in a top-down fashion. Advertisers (economic interests, political interests) are the ones who control the Media Organization, and implicitly the content of the information. The Audience has no resort for feedback, they are simple receptacles purchasing what is available on the market.
In a similar fashion, Chomsky and Herman (Chomsky, Herman, 1988) propose a model incorporating the potential mechanisms that are activating the mainstream media. The model is based on a set of five filters that are stripping the news from their initially thick ambiguous cover to the concise outcomes, “sold” to large audiences. The authors argue that mass media represents a powerful device that carries messages and symbols to the masses. Besides entertainment and information, the media is responsible for urging on the mind of its recipients with the “values, beliefs and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society” (Chomsky, Herman, 1988). In order to fulfill this role, in the contemporary societies maculated by various political and financial interests and atomized by dispersed concentrations of power, the media becomes the subject of a sum of disseminating elements.

The authors gather together these elements in a set of five filters, endorsed as the propaganda model, in an attempt to frame the mass media’s biases in a coherent framework: size, ownership, and profit orientation of the mass media; advertising; sourcing, flak and the ideological control mechanism.

One critique would be related to the anticommunist ideological filter that became obsolete after the fall of communism. However, the contemporary political realm generously offers substituting frames, such as the neo-liberal perspective on globalization (Boyd-Barrett, 2004) or the newly emerged war on terrorism that can easily replace the anticommunist discourse.

The alternative media, on the other hand, is defined in relation to the highly criticized profile of the mainstream media. Thus, most of the definitions given to the alternative sources of information incorporate elements and features that usually are not embodied by the traditional sources of information.

Alternative media include a wide variety of productions, from printed to electronic outputs. Some of the most recognizable alternative media outlets are the global Indymedia project, blogs, alternative weeklies, fanzines, underground filmmaking scene and independent filmmakers, community and pirate radio stations and so on. Couldry and Curran refer to the alternative media as the “forgotten land” in a context heavily dominated by mainstream corporate media. They define the alternative media as “media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take in different locations” (Couldry, Curran, 2003). It follows that the alternative media performs as a decentralizing agent with the mass-media framework. By not being a part of the conglomerate, and the general aggregation of interests, the alternative media is often pursuing dissident positions towards mainstream media in terms of content, organizational framework, and sources of revenues.

In trying to explain what defines a media organism as alternative, Michael Albert argues that the definitions should focus on the organizational framework of the media agency rather than its content (Albert, 1997). He tries to secure his position by arguing that often, being alternative is only a matter of self-definition. Therefore, in order to avoid false interpretations, labeling a certain media organization as alternative should disregard its mission statements, editorial content or political views, and rather focus on its internal structure.
Another element that could define alternative media is the relation with its audience. Less powerful than the mainstream media, which is tributary to various corporatist elites and seeks large audiences for increasing its profit, the alternative media may seek relevance within specific groups or communities. Within this framework, media outlet range from representing small and medium sized geographical communities, to diverse communities of interests.

The Internet, its subsequent digitized devices and the “computer mediated communication” (CMC) technologies (Diani, 2001) lead to new possible definitions of community. Jankowski points out that within this context, the conceptual definitions of community transgressed from the traditional emphasis on geographical affiliations to a broader one: the sense of collectivity (Jankowski, 2002).

The blog can be defined in a variety of ways. The simplest definition is the following: a blog is an online-publication, most often maintained by single individuals and covering a wide range of topics.

The blogosphere is the term circumscribing all the blogs, regardless of their structure, ownership or affiliations. It is not an organization per se, because virtually everyone with a blog becomes conceptually a part of the blogosphere. “Key-point: offering, not guaranteeing. Anyone can post, and if it is worth reading, it will be read.” (Hewitt, 2005). As the Technorati data suggests, the blogosphere seems to constantly change its shape and involve larger and larger audiences interested to explore the online arena.

3 A practical standpoint

To illustrate each particular argument, I use case studies or examples of so-called successful blogging stories, mentioned in the literature, cultivated within the blogosphere and documented by online newspapers. I have selected the cases based on their reputation, endorsed by the aforementioned sources.

3.1 Blogs as first drafters

One of the major episodes involving the blogs and the mainstream media was the Trent Lott scandal, (Bloom, 2003). Storm Thurman (December 5, 1902 – June 26, 2003) was the longest-serving Senator in US history, holding the office from 1954 to 2003. During his presidential campaign from 1948, he embraced a segregationist platform that was later abandoned. Trent Lott, The US Senate Majority Leader made strong references to Thurman’s political past in December 5, 2002, during his 100th birthday anniversary.

Mainstream media initially overlooked the episode, and it was not picked up until December 10, when The New York Times addressed the incident for the first time (Burkeman, 2002). In the interval, the story was kept alive in the blogosphere, promoted, linked by various bloggers. Blogs such as talkingpointsmemo, or atrios proved very active in covering the event with additional information. After reaching back to the mainstream media, the story turned into the scandal that finally led to Trent Lott’s resignation from the office.
3.2 From drafting to news-making

There are however other examples suggesting that bloggers can be a part of the news not only as drafters, but also as headliners. They still relate to mainstream media, in the sense that their stories gain in shape by being quoted in mainstream media sources. But at the same time, they show evidence that they have a public of their own. In other words, that they are already popular, and that the media covers their stories as news.

A blogger that became a legend on the blogosphere is Salam Al-Janabi, who under the pseudonym of Salam Pax received international attention for covering on his blog the Iraqi events during and after the American invasion in Iraq. His first blog, Where is Raed? (http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/) written in fluent English, provided constant accounts of the Iraqi social and political realm from a non-partisan standpoint. “While the world's leading newspapers and television networks poured millions of pounds into their coverage of the war in Iraq, it was the internet musings of a witty young Iraqi living in a two-storey house in a Baghdad suburb that scooped them all to deliver the most compelling description of life during the war” (The Guardian, 2003).

Another example, this time from the old continent, involves the case of a French blogger, who is credited with a major role in France’s rejection of the European Constitution. Several online-journals like BBC, Washington Post or the Guardian accredit the idea that the vote was influenced by the blog (http://etienne.chouard.free.fr) of a French law teacher, Étienne Chouard, who became a folk hero of the ‘No’ campaigners (Frankel, 2005) on the aftermath of the referendum. “Just ahead of the vote, his blog was getting 25,000 hits a day and his anti-constitution broadside had been photocopied, faxed and blogged about across France.” (Anderson, 2005).

3.3 Blogs as media entities with autonomous audiences

The previous case studies provided an account on how some popular blogs can make the news. However, not all the blogs define their popularity by the lens of the mainstream media. Some blogs remain popular within the blogosphere. Last year, a story about an Iraqi sniper, known as Juba, that operates alone and kills American soldiers in Iraq was covered by a number of media sources (The Guardian, 2005, ABC News, 2006) and were inconsistently responded by U.S. military officials (ABC News, 2006). If mainstream media treated this news without much evidence, several video posts on Youtube, which is one of the leading video(blog)-hosting sites right now, provide a strong and explicit account on the story. The videos, shot in an amateurish style and varying in length from 30 seconds to 9 minutes, contain a series of attacks on various American troops, from the shooter perspective. The long ones contain a series of attacks, suggesting that the sniper is the same person in each case, while others feature only one single episode: the moment of the shooting and the victim falling to the ground (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOZTgbRaF1Q). In this case, the blogosphere does not provide a clear-cut answer regarding Juba’s existence, but allows the audience to decide for itself. If the mainstream media will pick up the story, this videoblog can become either a draft, either a headline. But even in the absence of any mainstream media intervention, the videoblog can remain on the blogosphere and gather online audiences.
3.4 Mainstream responses

The blogosphere did not go unnoticeable for mainstream media companies. Many important media trusts, or online newspapers established blog platforms. Here are a few examples:

- Guardian - http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/news
- BBC News - http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs
- MSNBC - http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032105

The blogs are maintained either by people from the staff, reporters, analysts, editors, and so on, either by affiliated or non-affiliated bloggers. Some newspapers feature regular posts from well-known bloggers, who act like veritable columnists.

The OhmyNews project is another example of how traditional media can successfully incorporate non-professional reporters into the news-making scene, taking participatory journalism to a higher level. Founded by Oh Yeon Ho in February 2000, as a newspaper based on the principle that every citizen “can be a reporter”, OhmyNews became one of South Korea’s most powerful (Gluck, 2003) news services. On the one hand, the project supports civilian journalism, as a challenge to traditional media (Ho, 2004). On the other hand, the online newspaper has specific guidelines regarding the code of ethics of the reporter, and the admission process (http://english.ohmynews.com/reporter_room/qa_board/qaboard_list.asp?page=1&board=freeboard).

This project illustrates that mainstream media, while acknowledging the importance of involving the audience into the news making process, can find options to seriously diminish blogs’ importance.

4 Conclusions

The major findings of this thesis illustrate that blogging, as a form of alternative media, can conceptually challenge mainstream media on four dimensions: ownership, funding, sources and content. In terms of ownership, as opposed to mainstream media structures, blogs are associative, but non-corporate in a mercantilist way. If professional media is dependent on advertising for being able to compete on the market, blogs’ existence does not depend on commercial strategies, except particular cases. In achieving the task of filling up a daily routine, mainstream media often has to make compromises and engage in interdependencies with various political and economic elites. For a blogger, on the other hand, everything can virtually constitute a source, starting from the daily routine to major international conflicts. In terms of content, the blogs are not affected by any frames, but rather challenge the existing ones.

In practice, the relation between blogging and mainstream mass media can follow three distinctive paths: blogs as drafters, when bloggers follow paths, which are overlooked or inaccessible due to various constraints for real-life professional journalists; blogs as headliners, when bloggers can become subjects of the news or
headliners and blogs as independent entities, which is the case of the famous blogs that have their own established audiences, independent of any mainstream trend. At the same time, evidence shows that mainstream media can react towards the blogosphere in a cooperatorly inclusive way, by enabling blog platforms and encourage bloggers to actively become a part of the news-making scene. From another perspective, projects such as Ohmynews that combine participatory principles with professional standards can diminish blog’s importance, if turned into mainstream practices.

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