

Blogs, News and Credibility

Barrie Gunter, Vincent Campbell, Maria Touri

*Department of Media and Communication, University of Leicester,
Leicester, UK*

Rachel Gibson

Institute of Social Change, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the emergence of blogging in the news sphere. If blogs represent a genuinely new breed of news provision, then they should adhere to some of the founding principles of mainstream news and journalism. A key principle in this respect is news credibility.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper presents a review of recent literature about news blogging and assesses whether news blogs manifest many of the core attributes of mainstream news and journalism. The review considers the attributes that have previously been identified as defining good quality news and competent journalism and then applies some of these principles to “news” blogging.

Findings – There is no doubt that blogs have emerged as news sources of increasing significance and there have been occasions when they can be influential in setting news agendas. The essential qualities of credibility and capturing public trust in the news sphere, however, then depends upon the established reputation of known news “brands”. Although some blogs have emerged as reliable information sources in some specialist areas, they have yet generally to assume the key characteristics of mainstream news that drive public trust.

Originality/value – This paper provides an up-to-date review of a topic that is rapidly developing and attempts to set out some foundations on which further analysis of news blogging can be constructed.

Keywords: Electronic media, Internet, Information media, Trust

Paper type: General review

Introduction

The Internet has emerged as an important news source. Most major and minor news organisations have established an online presence and rapidly growing numbers of internet users increasingly tune in online for their news information (Pew Research Centre, 2000). One of the most significant phenomena to occur within this context is the arrival of personalised news sites often produced by individuals with no formal training in journalism (Allan, 2006). Any news consumer can now be a news provider. These privately produced web-based news logs may offer a personal view on specific issues, current news events or on the status of mainstream news reports. Weblogs of ‘blogs’ as they have come to be known have, within a short space of time, become established as a form of citizen-based journalism with a growing influence in the wider sphere of news provision (Albrecht, 2006).

 Blogging, as it originally emerged, was about more than just news provision. Many bloggers are not involved in the discussion of news. Their sites represent personal diaries or forums in which they talk about subjects of personal interest. The technology has also been utilised, however, to enable ordinary people (and some professional journalists) to sound off about current issues and events and to become involved, publicly, in debates about political affairs. Blogs have thus democratised the news. They have opened up the news environment such that everyone has access to a public platform on which they can voice their opinions to mass audiences around the world and engage in networked debates with others (Albrecht, 2006).

 The increasing importance of blogs in the context of news has been manifest in a number of ways – in terms of the numbers of news blogs that have emerged, the use of blogs by mainstream news organisations, and the role they have played in checking the veracity of news stories published by the major news media and in some cases

finding their inaccuracy to be debatable with sometimes devastating consequences (see Allan, 2006).

Positioning news blogs in relation to other kinds of blogs is an important starting point, but it is equally important to position news blogs in relation to news and journalism. Debates about the relative merits of news blogs compared to conventional journalism are quite extensive with quite stridently oppositional viewpoints apparent, even where there is agreement about claims for distinctiveness of news blogs (Berlind, 2005; Matheson, 2004; Robinson, 2006).

In considering the implications of news blogging for news provision in general, there are two particularly critical positions that have been articulated. First, the emergence of independent blogs can lead to a loss of control by traditional news organisations that could lead to shift away from journalism that is healthy for democracy. Some sites may label themselves as news sources, but are actually little more than online platforms for self-interested groups that have a specific agenda other than the provision of accurate and impartial news (see Kovach and Rosensteel in Bowman and Willis, 2003, p.11).

Some mainstream journalists regard (non-journalist) bloggers 'as self-interested or unskilled amateurs' (Bowman and Willis, 2003, p.13). This is because they (are perceived to) have no editorial oversight, no journalism training, and no respect for the profession's rules and standards (Lasica, 2003, p.70). Second, in contrast to this, is the position that blogging and related developments are good for journalism and good for democracy. They represent a world in which audiences are no longer passive, where there is an increased range of perspectives and a decentralization of control over news production and dissemination. According to one commentator 'if modern American journalism has been a lecture, it is evolving into something that

incorporates a conversation and seminar' (Dan Gilmour in Bowman and Willis, 2003, vi).

Bloggers, and their proponents regard mainstream journalists 'as an arrogant, exclusive club that puts its own version of self-interest and economic survival above the societal responsibility of a free press.' (Bowman and Willis, 2003: 13). In this context, news blogs are virtuous because knowledgeable bloggers (and those that respond to them) can correct errors and add detail to stories, blogs provide a wider range of opinions and perspectives than traditional media, and blogs can alert journalists to new stories and initiate stories.

Blogging and News

There are conflicting positions about the concept of news blogging. One issue that can be debated is whether 'news blogs' can be considered as genuine sources of 'news' at all. If they can, another issue concerns whether there are specific conditions that must be in place for blogs to qualify as 'news. Resolving this debate begs the question of what are the critical aspects of news that blogs must observe to be classified as news providers. For instance, must news blogs be produced only by reputable news agencies and providers or professional journalists to be regarded as credible news sources? Are there restrictions in terms of the types of content reported or formats of presentation adopted to permit a blog to be treated as a legitimate source of real news? Or has the time come to introduce a new taxonomy for 'news' and the ways it can be provided?

This analysis of blog sites is likely to be informed by studies of online news provision in general. Here there have been debates about the status of online news sources, discussions about the increasingly diverse ways in which news can be provided online compared with more traditional print and broadcast platforms, and

analysis of the emergence of new suppliers outside the established mainstream (Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll, & Casey, 2005; Allan, 2006). Have new and alternative forms of news provision emerged that have equal legitimacy to the major and best known news suppliers? Or do some online providers of content adopt the guise of being news suppliers, but without being the genuine article? If this is the case, how do we tell the difference between genuine news and that which is not?

The legitimacy of news suppliers is founded upon reputation that is, in turn, grounded in performance over time. Thus, in understanding what comprises genuine news, we must examine online news provision in the broader context of news in general. Can the information value of online news sources through reference to the wider provision of news by offline as well as online media?

One position is that the best news derives from high quality journalism. One of the critical issues in determining the quality of journalism is the degree to which it observes standards of objectivity. That is not to say that there is no place for opinion. Indeed, some analysts have argued that news provision can be enhanced by highly informed opinion and that this is a direction that could increase the competitiveness of established offline news providers in the future (Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002). It is also true that online news providers operating in the print arena include editorials and commentaries as routine and quite legitimate aspects of their news services, and yet these elements comprise opinion as much as factual reporting. Blogging may therefore be conceived, in respect of personal opinion blogs on current issues, as the online equivalents of long-established 'op-eds' (opinion columns and editorials) of print newspapers. Even though many people may turn to mainstream news media for accounts of events or issues of major importance, they can now also explore blogs as alternative sources of analysis of these events and issues (see Lasica, 2003).

In Search of the Defining Attributes of News

The legitimacy of news sources is ultimately a matter of branding. Does a particular news brand have credibility among news professionals and also among news consumers? The analysis of news blogs therefore must, in part, involve an analysis of the way news audiences engage with these information (or opinion) providers.

In general, the authenticity of news is linked to its credibility. News reporting should strive to attain the highest standards of credibility – a concept that embraces notions of trustworthiness and reliability (Rosengren, 1977). Elsewhere, it has been argued that objectivity is a key performance criterion. Objectivity in news means that it should be free from bias and that it should be factual. The factuality of news is determined by its truthfulness and its relevance, while impartiality is defined by neutrality and balance in news coverage (Westerhahl, 1983).

These terms have been further elaborated. McQuail (1992), for example, identified factualness, accuracy and completeness as key defining aspects of the truthfulness of news. Thus, fact should be clearly differentiated from opinion. News reports should correspond with separately verifiable versions of reality. Reports should also provide sufficient detail about stories that news consumers receive an accurate impression about what happened. ‘Relevance’ was a further key concept in that the news can only have value to consumers if it touches upon or deals with matters that are of current concern to them. Relevance is a complex concept, however, because it must be defined through reference to particular receiver communities. For whom is the news relevant?

The degree of impartiality observed by news can be operationally determined at a number of levels. In the first instance, bias may occur in the news stories selected for coverage. Thus, impartiality conceived as a lack of balance in the way events and

issues are covered may be determined by whether certain types of news are preferred over others by news providers. Then, there may be bias *within* the stories selected with more attention being given to specific sources or to particular points of view than to others (Gunter, 1997).

Determining the impartiality of news can also be ascertained through a number of modes of analysis. One taxonomic classification of approaches distinguished between output criteria, external criteria, professional criteria and audience criteria (Gunter, 1997).

Output criteria analysis has focused upon the content of news and embraces the use of methodologies such as content analysis and discourse analysis to examine biases in relation to the use of sources (Donohue, Olien & Tichenor., 1985; Tutt, 1992), biases in choice of words or phrases in reports (Graber, 1976; van Dijk, 1991), and the use of different presentational styles and, in particular, the choice of news pictures and way they are used to support the news narrative (Kepplinger, 1983; Nimmo & Combs, 1985; Robinson & Levy, 1985). In terms of the traditional aspects of news reporting and presentation, early comparisons between offline and online news found few differences, with the same conventions being observed in both spheres (Gubman & Greer, 1997). Some online news operators, however, were observed quickly to become more sophisticated in their presentation of news online as the full potential of the new technology was realised (Kamerer & Bressers, 1998; Peng, Tham & Xiaming, 1999). Yet in some markets, the interactive capabilities of the internet were still not always fully realised among online trail-blazers (Massey & Levy, 1999).

External source criteria are concerned with the search for accuracy and truthfulness in news reporting by counter-checking the facts provided against

independent sources of evidence. These sources of verification may comprise independent experts (Berry, 1967; Tillinghast, 1983) or direct observation of events that can then be compared with their representation in news reports (Halloran, Elliott & Murdock, 1970; Altheide & Snow, 1979). Comparisons can also be made between reports of the same events provided by different news providers to determine the extent to which they tally or differ from each other (McQuail, 1977). Verification of facts and details of stories is an essential process underpinning good journalism (Newhagen & Levy, 1998). In the context of the internet where vast amounts of information are in circulation and a central part of the ethos is relentless updating, there may be pressures or temptations to take short-cuts. Within the blog context, however, it has been argued that bloggers check out each others' facts and do so very quickly so that inaccuracies are rooted out and not tolerated for very long (Allan, 2006).

Professional criteria refer to the gate-keeping role that journalists and their editors play in selecting stories for coverage. Story selection is determined by newsworthiness criteria that are often intuitively applied (Gans, 1979). There is evidence, however, that certain types of story are more likely to be selected than others for a range of reasons associated with beliefs among news providers about what will attract an audience (Bogart, 1979). Some commentators have argued that this 'news values' orientation has often led to disproportionate focus on bad news (Haskins, 1981; Haskins & Miller, 1984). In the internet context, as examined further below, the professionalism of news produced online has been questioned particularly in relation to fact checking (accuracy) and the impact of new forms of story-telling on the established norms and integrity of journalism (Deuze, 2005; Online News Association, 2002; Ruggiero, 2004)

Audience criteria derive from research conducted amongst news consumers. Media researchers working in this area have surveyed public opinion about the perceived credibility or impartiality of news channels (Gunter & McLaughlin, 1982; Gunter, Sancho-Aldridge & Winstone, 1994), news suppliers or 'brands' (Gunter, 2005), and the impact of news presentation and narrative features on audience memory and understanding of news (Gunter, 1987; Robinson & Levy, 1985). Other research has studied the impact of the way stories are written and emphasise specific points of view on audience perceptions of issues (Entman, 1991, 1993; Iyengar, 1990).

These credibility judgements have, to some extent, been observed among online news consumers. The credibility of online news is linked both to the specific news provider and its reputation (Center for the Digital Future, 2005; Pew Research Centre, 2000) and to a holistic perception of the internet as a medium (Choi, Watt, & Lynch, 2006). The remainder of this paper will focus on audience criteria in relation to rating news credibility and in turn for determining the significance of blogs as genuine news providers.

Online Versus Offline News Credibility

For many years the mainstream news media have commanded a significant level of public trust. Objectivity has represented a core principle in professional journalistic practice (McQuail, 1982). While political partisanship has flavoured the perspectives of print media, news broadcasters have been further constrained by the need to observe strict conditions of balance and neutrality in their news provision. Among the public service broadcasters in countries such as the United Kingdom, the requirement to ensure that news is presented with due impartiality is enshrined in broadcasting legislation and the charters and licences of the broadcasters. Such principles have

contributed significantly to how much these mainstream news sources have come to be trusted by the public.

In comparisons between news media, television has frequently emerged as more trusted than other news media, especially print media. It has been identified as the most objective news media (Finberg, Stone & Lynch, 2002), and the medium to which people turn first for coverage of major national and international news (Gunter, Sancho-Aldridge and Winstone, 1994). It is also the medium people said they would trust most if faced with conflicting reports in television and newspapers (Lee, 1975; Rubin, 1983).

Critical incidents can call into question the reliability of even the most trusted news institutions, as the BBC discovered in 2003 after one of its premier radio news broadcasts contained a report questioning the veracity of the UK government's case for the Iraq war that turned out to be based on inaccurate details. A subsequent public enquiry criticised the BBC editorial procedures on this occasion and also called for more sweeping changes to BBC journalistic controls and practices and to the governance of the Corporation. Public opinion surveys found that confidence in the BBC had been shaken at least temporarily and that a number of key individuals involved in this case have behaved improperly (Gunter, 2005). Even so, significant majorities of people still trusted the major news organisations in the UK and saved their distrust for those news brands that were traditionally regarded as more partisan anyway (Gunter, 2005).

In some news markets, however, trust even in the major broadcasters has waned. Research conducted by the Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press in 2006 reported that only minorities of the US public said they believed all or most of what they saw on NBC News (23%; down from 30% in 1998), ABC News (22%; down

from 30%), or CBS News (22%; down from 26%), in every case a reduction in prevalence of trust over time. Even CNN fared little better, with its approval rate falling from 40% in 1998 to 26% in 2006 (Crupi, 2006). Print news media have also experienced a fall in public trust. American research revealed a sharp drop in the percentages of people who said they believed what they read in newspapers from 84% in 1985 to 59% in 2006 (Pew Research Centre, 2006).

The emergence of the internet as a news source since the mid-1990s has altered the news landscape and introduced people to an alternative news reception platform, although one that is not totally disconnected from established news media. A number of comparisons of the relative perceived credibility of online and offline news have been published, but their findings reveal a complex picture of disparate and volatile opinions. Some studies of credibility perceptions have also been carried out among media professionals who have been invited to give their own opinions and to estimate the nature of public opinion (Middleburg/Ross Media Survey, 2002; Weaver, Beam, Brownless, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2003).

At the turn of the millennium, internet news was found still to lag behind newspapers, television and radio in perceived credibility terms (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Kiouisis, 2001). Over time, though, the internet has caught up with the mainstream media in platform comparisons (Online News Association, 2002). Perceptions of lack of accuracy or bias in internet news provision have arisen from observations that standards of fact and source checking are less stringent than they are in the case of mainstream offline news provision by major news broadcasters and newspapers (Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll, & Casey, 2004; Bucy, 2003; Sundar, 1999).

In the UK, comparisons between levels of public trust in mainstream broadcast news sources and the internet as a news source saw the internet trailing. In 2006, clear majorities said they would place trust in news on BBC (85%) and ITV (78%), the two biggest public service news providers, a narrow majority (56%) said they would trust Channel 4, and a minority (42%) expressed their trust in Five News. The internet commanded the trust of markedly fewer people (29%). What is significant about these results, however, is that in every case, the extent of public trust in news on the mainstream public service television operators' services declined in 2006 compared with 2002, while prevalence of trust in the internet over that period increased (Ofcom, 2007).

In the United States, research among a sample of internet users found that not only was online news preferred to offline news, but it was also trusted as much. Among this sample, the medium obtaining the most prevalent endorsement as the 'most credible' news source was newspapers (35%), with the internet on level pegging with television (18% each) (Bello Interactive, 2004). The most preferred online news source varied, however, with the type of news being considered. For local news, for example, a web site associated with a local newspaper (by 48%) was preferred ahead of one provided by a local TV station (42%). For sports news, a local newspaper site was again the most often preferred (by 51%). For international news, a national TV network site (33%) was preferred ahead of a national newspaper web site (21%). These findings reveal that news source preferences and perceptions can be affected not only by the impressions about the credibility of a news medium, but also of a news brand. Moreover, specific news sources may be regarded as authoritative in respect of one type of news and not another (Bello Interactive, 2004).

Comparisons of the credibility of major news media have sometimes focused on their coverage of specific events. In this type of case, the pre-existing orientations of news consumers can represent powerful mediators of judgements about news media performance. One online survey of the responses of US citizens to coverage of the 2003 Iraq war found that the relative credibility of the internet and other media as news sources varied with whether respondents supported or opposed the war. Among supporters of the war, television was regarded as the most credible war news source ahead of the internet. Opponents to the war, in contrast, rated the internet as the most credible medium, followed by newspapers, television and finally radio. Television was judged in a separate analysis to have been mostly supportive of the war. In consequence war supporters regarded it as a significantly more credible source than did war opponents. The internet was seen as carrying both anti-government and pro-government material in relation to the war, and offered war opponents more content supportive of their perspective (Choi, Watt & Lynch, 2006).

In view of the observation about making comparisons between news sources, it is questionable when investigating the credibility of online news just how useful blanket comparisons between the 'internet' and other mass media can be. Equally, comparisons between the 'internet' as a general news source and specific TV news channels or newspapers may be meaningless. Such comparisons may have more meaning in special cases such as the nature of reporting in different media of major events, such as wars ((Choi et al., 2006). What could be more significant, however, is to determine the perceived credibility of specific news suppliers identified by brand name, whether they operate in the offline or online world.

Having said that, research with news professionals has revealed that many journalists believe that online news sites fail to meet the same journalistic standards as

those found in mainstream print and broadcast news (Online News Association, 2002). This judgement was made independently of any distinctions by news brand. This perception is reinforced by the admission of some online news editors, that less time is spent verifying facts with online posts compared with news intended for publication via a mainstream, conventional news medium (Arant & Anderson, 2001). Yet journalists who work for online news providers place greater trust in web-based news sources than more traditional sources in terms of perceived source accuracy, believability, fairness and overall credibility (Cassidy, 2007).

At the same time, the negative views of online news voiced by news professionals may represent a defensive reaction to a new medium perceived as a threat to traditional journalistic values and procedures. Changes to established journalism practices are certainly encouraged by online news because the available technology allows for different forms of news presentation and allows for a different quality of (interactive) engagement with news audiences (Deuze, 2001). The internet also invites news audiences to become news suppliers or even publishers in their own right. Some professional journalists are uneasy about the impact of amateurs on the quality of content that is published as 'journalism' and the eventual knock-on effect on the reputation of the profession (Ruggiero, 2004).

Even the opinions of journalists have been found to vary and to have changed over time. Journalists have been observed increasingly to use the internet as a news gathering tool and to utilise online sources (Weaver et al., 2003). Further, in comparisons of perceptions of journalists who worked for print and online newspapers, the latter held the internet in significantly higher esteem as a credible news source than did the former, although even those working in print journalism did not dismiss online sources as totalling lacking in credibility (Cassidy, 2007).

As a news source, the reputation of the internet remains fluid. Ultimately, the credibility of news, whether derived online or offline, is mediated by the reputation of the supplier 'brand' and the relative neutrality or partisanship of news consumers in relation to specific news issues. It may be less insightful to conceive of the internet as a single news 'medium' and instead to think about it as being a repository of news content provided by a multitude of suppliers. In that respect, the focus, in terms of credibility should be placed on specific news suppliers. This view has been reinforced by empirical evidence from news audiences. Internet users have been found to trust online news produced by established and well-known news providers more than that generated by independent online news sources (Center for the Digital Future; Pew Research Centre, 2000). Even more poignantly, with major news brands, their online news provision is trusted more than their traditional news provision (Rainie, Fox & Fallows, 2003).

The research reviewed in this section that has compared the internet as a medium with other news media may provide some insights into initial stereotyped image formation about the 'community' of online news, but did not single out blogs as a particular type of online news supplier. In view of the apparent significance of news 'brand' to news credibility, this is an important omission.

News, Blogs and Credibility

The blogging phenomenon as it occurs in relation to news has opened up many fresh opportunities for new news suppliers and established news providers to reach audiences for news. Different sources of evidence have been considered in determining whether blogs are credible news sources. First, the extent to which blogs are used has been taken as one type of evidence. The volume of traffic blogs attract is indicative of their significance as news providers on the self-evidence grounds that if

they had nothing useful to contribute, no one would use them. Second, the responses of users to blogs in terms of judgements about the accuracy, authority, believability, comprehensiveness, and timeliness of their content provide another indication of credibility. Third, the nature of the source behind a blog and the transparency of their agenda represent a further indicator of credibility.

It has been argued that more people are turning not just to the internet, but to blogs because they are losing faith in mainstream news media. The fact that many qualified journalists have joined the community of bloggers has eroded the distinction between journalists and bloggers. Even so, users must be able to trust bloggers – even if they are also professional journalists. Citizen journalists also have to earn credibility. The hope must then be that quality will rise to the top and that blogs conveying news have the same credibility as that attached to mainstream news providers (Berlind, 2005).

Any consideration of the significance of the ‘audience’ in connection with blogs, however, is complicated by the fact that members of the audiences for blogs are often producers of news as well as its recipients. Traditionally, of course, it is nothing new for professional news providers to monitor each other’s news agendas and to gauge the newsworthiness of issues and the best presentation practices from the outputs of competitors. With blogging, however, the status of news producers has been opened up to anyone to join in. Bloggers may follow and feed off one another, and bloggers and professional news media may also follow and feed off each other. Producers are audience members and audience members increasingly have become producers of news.

The Use of Blogs as News Sources

There is ample anecdotal evidence about the spread of news blogs, especially following the events of 11 September 2001 (see Allan, 2006). At that time, bloggers filled a niche left by the mainstream news media. There was unprecedented demand for up-to-the-minute information about the dramatic events of that day which even major news agencies own web sites could not cope with. Bloggers offered not just alternative sources but sources that were at least accessible.

A number of agencies have published statistics on the spread of blogs and blogging behaviour, but these have rarely separated out blogs devoted exclusively or primarily to news. One online source collated data on blogging from a variety of agencies since 2001 (Caslon.com, 2006). Caslon noted that *Wired News* had found 41,000 bloggers in January 2002 using Blogger to create weblogs. By mid-2006, this number had grown to 500,000+. Another blog auditor, *Blogcount*, reported between 2.4 million and 2.9 million active blogs in June 2003. *Perseus* apparently claimed there were 4.1 million blogs by October 2003. *Technorati* tracked down 2.4 million blogs in May 2004, but this figure has increased dramatically by June 2005 to 11.7 million.

Systematic audience research studies of the use of news blogs have so far been rare. Perhaps the most substantive data have derived from the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Data published by Pew in 2006 indicated that nearly four in ten (39%) American internet users reportedly read blogs. Fewer than one in ten (8%) said they actually kept a blog (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). Nonetheless, this still amounted to 12 million American bloggers in total.

A small-scale survey was conducted by Pew that focused on bloggers indicated that one in twenty (5%) indicated that they maintained blogs with news or current affairs themes. The most popular types of blogs concerned the bloggers' personal life

experiences (37%). Thus, in the United States, fewer than half of one per cent of internet users reportedly produced news blogs (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

Over half of bloggers (54%) were aged under 30 years whereas fewer than one in four (24%) of American internet users fell in this age bracket. Hence, bloggers – in the United States at least – have a younger age profile than do internet users in general. Interestingly, bloggers were evenly split in terms of gender.

Blogging takes up time. Nearly six in ten US bloggers (59%) said they spent between one and two hours a week working on their blogs. One in ten spent more than 10 hours a week on this activity.

Although just five per cent of US bloggers said they produced sites with news or current affairs themes, a far higher percentage (34%) considered their own blog as a form of journalism. More than half of all bloggers (56%) also reported spending extra time on verifying facts before posting content to their blogs.

Bloggers are reliant on the internet for their news. Compared with under three in four internet users in general (74%), over nine in ten (95%) of bloggers said they get news from the internet. Bloggers (72%) were also proportionately more likely than general internet users (58%) to go online for news about politics. A significant minority of American bloggers (45%) said they preferred to get their news from sources that do not have a particular political point of view – largely in line with general internet users. It also emerged that many bloggers seek out sources of political news and commentary that challenge their own viewpoint (24%), while others (18%) seek out sources that share their political opinions. One of the clearest differences between bloggers and internet users in general emerged in relation to their respective use of blogs as news sources. Proportionately five times as many bloggers (47%) as

general internet users (9%) said they get their news from blogs (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

The Pew research also found that news-seeking bloggers and general internet users were very similar in their respective levels of endorsement of online news as a convenient source to use (42% and 40%) and both found online news sources appealing to similar degrees because they provide a more diverse array of viewpoints against which to check out stories (28% and 29% respectively). What is also clear however is that blogs represent a specific category of online news source that attract other bloggers proportionately much more often than non-blogging internet users.

Caslon.com (2006) reported research in the United Kingdom by the British Market Research Bureau conducted in April 2006 that found that seven in ten people surveyed (70%) had heard of blogging. The same survey also found that just two per cent of UK internet users had published blogs and one in ten (10%) said they viewed a weblog once a month or more. It is not clear from these results to what extent blog users visited news blogs.

The same online source reported a further survey conducted among internet users in the UK by Metro and Telegraph Media that found that one in seven respondents (13% claimed to have read a blog in the preceding week (Caslon.com, 2006). This figure was lower than equivalent comparison figures obtained for the United States (40%) and France (25%), but higher than Denmark (12%). More relevant to this review, the same study found that 12 per cent of UK readers had read a newspaper blog during the week they were surveyed, lower than the equivalent figure for the United States (24%) but higher than France (10%) and Denmark (9%). In more general terms, around nine out of ten UK internet users (89%) said they had used a website for news in the past week (compared with 95% in US, 81% in France

and 78% in Denmark). What is significant here is that the data seem to indicate that blogs produced by established news providers are attracting much of the news blog traffic.

Perceptions of Blogs as News Sources

One central aspect of impression formation about news sources is their credibility. This is a factor taken into account by news consumers when judging the quality of journalism normally associated with established news brands. It has been recognised by news producers as having important implications for business success (Schweiger, 2000). If the quality of journalism of a news supplier is called into question publicly for reasons of accuracy of reporting, behaving in a non-ethical fashion or presenting news in an unattractive fashion, the credibility of the news brand can suffer (Arant & Anderson, 2000; Lasica, 2001). Credibility attaches to media platforms as well as to specific news suppliers.

In the traditional offline context, 'brands' have tended to be associated with platforms. In other words, specific news providers tended to work primarily in one medium only, with the exception of a provider such as the BBC that operated within two media (television and radio) in the broadcasting sector. With the emergence of the online world, the news media landscape has radically altered. Today major news providers more often than not operate across more than one platform. Newspapers and broadcast news suppliers compete directly against each other on the internet. However, there is evidence that the reputation of established news brands can follow them from the offline to the online world (Gunter, 2005).

A number of researchers have made comparisons between the internet and other media in terms of their relative credibility as news sources. One of the key observations about the internet is that information can be uploaded and published

without necessarily having to go through a rigorous editorial and fact-checking process (Johnson & Kaye, 1998). With other major newspapers such as television, radio and newspapers, published news has been carefully selected and checked. This difference raises questions about the veracity of online news from unknown news brands or from sources that deploy uncertain quality control procedures (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000).

The relative credibility ratings of different media have been found to vary between countries. Despite the greater trust placed in television as a medium than any other within the UK (e.g., Gunter et al., 1994), in Germany, newspapers were rated as more credible than television (Schweiger, 2000). Meanwhile the German public rated the internet as having similar credibility to television and newspapers across a range of credibility ratings (Schweiger, 2000). In the USA, evidence has emerged that people rate newspapers more highly than television or the internet in terms of their respective credibility levels. News on the internet, however, was trusted more than television news (Kioussis, 1999).

Although the public may have begun to accept online news as a credible news source, journalists themselves have been found to disagree with this view. Media professionals have voiced scepticism about the credibility of online news sources, while recognising that such sources have captured public trust (Finberg, Stone & Lynch, 2002). What has emerged from research into public trust in news in the UK is that the most trusted news sources, whether offline or online, are those with the longest established brands (Gunter, 2005). Hence, one wonders how meaningful it is to ask people to rate 'media' in terms of credibility when each specific medium – whether television, radio, newsprint or the internet – provides a platform for a multitude of different news providers. Even more sophisticated approaches to

assessing perceived credibility of news media utilising a range of different ratings (e.g., accuracy, balance, believability, bias, fairness, factuality, honesty, objectivity, reliability, sensationalism, timely, trustworthiness, etc) still focus on each medium as if it is a homogenous news supplier, which it is not (see Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll, & Casey, 2005; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2000; Sundar, 1999).

Trust in Blogs

A question that applies to all online information sources is, ‘how much can the information provided be trusted?’ The answer to this question will play a critical part in determining the reputation of any news sources, whether it operates online or offline. This principle may apply to blogs as well especially given their highly personal and opinionated nature and the fact that anyone can create a blog and publish their thoughts on any subject they like, regardless of whether they are qualified to do so. The more prominent and influential news blogs become, the greater the imperative will be to know whether they can be trusted

Concerns about news blogs’ reputation can be set against broader questions about credibility of any media outlets with audiences. Public trust in news sources can be mediated by their experiences and contingent perceptions linked to the news medium through which those sources operate as well as by their experiences with specific news brands. Thus, trust in the information supplied by blogs may partially be grounded in general perceptions about the internet as a news medium. In addition, specific blogs may establish a brand image defined by the credulity and accuracy of the information they usually supply.

Many studies so far have looked at blogs as a generality, whereas a more accurate impression of their reliability may be gleaned from a closer examination of

specific brands. Previous research has shown that both media and brands invoke varying degrees of public trust in the context of news provision. Television has commanded more trust from the public than newspapers, for example (Gunter, Sancho-Aldridge & Winstone, 1994). Even among television news suppliers, however, trust in them as news sources can vary (Gunter, 2006). Once trust is established, however, even severe criticisms of news brands cannot shake public confidence – at least for very long. This observation was underpinned by surveys of public opinion concerning the trustworthiness of the BBC and other major news ‘brands’ in the aftermath of the Hutton enquiry in the UK during 2004 and 2005 (Gunter, 2005).

While the internet in general has some way to go before it commands the level of trust of longer-established media such as television and the quality press, within the online environment, trust levels vary with the brand of the supplier. Established news brands offline that have migrated online tend to command greater trust than newer online-only brands (Gunter, 2006).

There are signs, however, that the gap in trust in the internet and other longer-established media is eroding, at least in some media markets. By 2005, the proportions of American online users who felt they could trust news most or all of the time in newspapers and television news broadcasts (56%) and on news web sites (54%) hardly differed at all (Consumer Reports Web Watch, 2005). However, it is likely that many of the same brands were being compared here in their offline and online guises. Perhaps more significantly, consumer advice web sites (31%), corporate web sites (29%) and blogs posted by individuals (12%) were far less likely to be regarded as accurate and reliable most or all of the time. Indeed, in respect of

blogs, most respondents (57%) felt that these could be regarded as accurate and reliable only sometimes or never.

Research by the Center for Digital Future at USC Annenberg School confirmed the above findings with only a minority of web users surveyed (12%) saying they felt that most or all information posted on web sites by individuals was accurate and reliable. In contrast, a significant majority (79%) recorded an opinion or trust in the information on web sites set up by established news organisations such as *The New York Times* and *CNN* (Center for Digital Future, 2005).

There are mixed opinions emerging specifically about blogs, however. It may be unfair to compare them directly in trustworthiness terms with larger and longer-established news brands. This may be the case especially if we conceive of the role of blogs as being different from that of mainstream news organisations. Research in the United States, for example, has indicated a demand for opinionated commentary that makes no pretence at impartiality. One survey of 3,747 regular web users in the US (predominantly white, male and wealthy) found that for such users blogs are perceived to be the most reliable information outlet, partly because they offer more 'depth and thoughtful analysis' than traditional media (Johnson and Kaye, 2004: 633).

While online news consumers may seek opinion as well as fact, there is mounting evidence that they need to know which it is they are confronted with on specific web sites. Most online users, for instance, consider that it is important that news web sites clearly advertising content from news content (Consumer Reports Web Watch, 2005).

Technorati Japan and Edelman Japan (2006) surveyed Japanese bloggers. In this survey they asked bloggers about how much they trusted online sources when seeking

to find out about products. The most trusted sources were corporate web sites of manufacturers (by 70.4% of bloggers), followed by a corporate news release (62.9%), and then a long way back in the rank order, business blogs (28.6%), a blog by a company employee (19.7%), and then other general blogs (15%).

Comparisons with data from bloggers in North America and Western Europe indicated different patterns of trust in online sources among Japanese bloggers than among those in the west. In the west, the most trusted online sources were general blogs (62.9%), followed a long way back by corporate websites (26.2%). Other sources commanded little trust: business blogs (6.1%) and corporate news releases (4.9%).

Trammell, Porter, Chung and Kim (2006) examined the use of blogs by communications professionals via an online survey of journalists and public relations personnel. Those individuals who used blogs more often also attached greater credibility to them. Banning, Trammell and Trammell (2006) reported on links between credibility, the third-person effect and blog use. A national telephone survey was conducted with 575 respondents. Blog authors felt that blogs had greater credibility than did non-bloggers. Such findings are consistent with the opinions of online versus offline journalists about the credibility of online news sources. Those who worked within the medium trusted it more than those who did not (Cassidy, 2007).

Who and What to Trust?

People tend to trust the news media they opt to use or use most often. For instance, online news users have been found to trust online news more than television news viewers trust television news and more than newspaper readers trust newspapers

(Abdulla, et al., 2005). Such research is limited in what it reveals about trust in news sources because it focused on generalised perceptions about news media and not about sources that operate within those media. Nonetheless, it does represent part of mounting evidence that growing numbers of people are turning to online news and do so because it is trusted and because it is current and up to date.

In their search for current and authoritative news, news consumers demand both alternative perspectives in news presentation and delivery and also news they can trust. Well known brands have an advantage in that they enjoy long-established reputations that pull consumers to their news outputs, whatever the platform on which they operate.

The need for assurances about the quality of online news has been reinforced by cases where even supposedly mainstream news providers have been duped in cyberspace. One prime example of this sort was the case of 15 year-old Tom Vandetta who posted fake online press releases claiming to be Google's youngest employee. Hours after posting this release, he found through leading news search tool, Digg, that it had become established as a news story on the internet, with even Google news displaying a reference to it. The story was later exposed as a fake, but it also exposed a credibility problem for the Google News system (Hedger, 2006).

A paradox is found in the apparently contradictory positions that news credibility can be strengthened if the source is a well-known news brand and yet the emergence of blogs has been driven in part by an appetite for alternative to mainstream news sources. There is evidence that blogs can become trusted without alignment to the mainstream and that blogs directly associated with major news organisations may lack public confidence because for some it is part of the intrinsic definition of blogs that they are not part of the mainstream. Yet, there needs to be

some way of judging the authority of blogs and this must ultimately derive from evidence of the authority and agenda transparency of the source.

Established brands have great power to authenticate online news sites. Among online news users in the UK, many sought out the sites operated by the big news brands of the television stations they usually watched or newspapers they usually read. These news providers were also the most trusted. Among newer online news suppliers, again the big brands fared best. Although not yet attaining the heights of public trust enjoyed by certain major news broadcasters and newspapers, Google news and Yahoo News attracted patronage that surpassed that of some longer established offline news suppliers (Gunter, 2006). Blogs, of course, must tread a delicate balance between display of signs of credibility and distinctiveness from the mainstream of news provision.

The willingness of blog authors to disclose their identity and motivations can go a long way towards enhancing their credibility. This information, in turn, establishes their quality as news sources. For some writers on this subject, authority underlines credibility. In a comparison of blogs produced by clearly identified authoritative or expert sources on selected issues versus those produced in the same domain by authors who did not disclose their identity or qualifications, evidence emerged that the former produced blogs with more unquoted content and more links to other news sources, and were much more likely to present posted comments from others on their sites (Ulicny & Baclawski, 2007).

Do Blogs have to be Mainstream to be Credible as News?

The significance of established and mainstream news providers in the blogosphere is further underlined by the observed centrality of traditional news media outlets to the

activities and influences of blogs. Rather than producing news themselves, many 'news' blogs essentially provide distinctive kinds of contents that relate to, comment on, interrogate, analyse, and sometimes, seemingly when mainstream news media omit information, or make factual mistakes, influence the agenda of mainstream media news news. In that sense, the term of 'j-blog,' for journalism-blog, would seem a more pertinent classification of these kinds of blogs, as news reporting is only one kind of journalism.

A potential emerging relationship between mainstream news media and news blogs in terms of routines of news reporting, however, cannot be systematically appraised through a focus on detailed examination of a few high profile news events. Partly this is because, as Robinson (2006) usefully notes, some blogs 'are 'spot blogs', meaning they are created for one particular event or story' p. 70) quite often in relation to a major crisis or other high profile event (like an election), and thus may not be typical.

In order to appraise news blogs in more routine context, a trend is evident in studies that examine blogs through a variety of conventional models of news and journalism. One of these approaches has been to look at one particular j-blog, and try to analyse it in relation to established conventions of journalistic practice and theory. Matheson (2004), for instance, attempted this in relation to the British national newspaper, *The Guardian's* blog, monitored for a month in 2002 (p. 447). Matheson's analysis focused on evidence of the 'rules, routines, and procedures' that characterised the news blog through looking at aspects of 'layout, style, voice, textual coherence and forms of hypertext reference, and most particularly by implicitly contrasting these with the textual practice of Anglo-American print news' (Matheson, 2005, pp. 447-448).

Matheson (2004) highlights how debates about news blogs are routinely couched in traditional concerns within journalism, including their role as ‘a space for journalistic thinking for which institutional journalism provides little room... a challenge to corporate journalism; and... as a democratic, interactive space’ (p. 451). Matheson’s (2004) analysis of *The Guardian* weblog does not sit within that traditional critical framework, instead seeing the blog as responding to new media ‘along three dimensions: the establishment of a different interpersonal relation, of a different authority and of a journalism focused upon connection rather than fact’ (p.453). These responses indicate changes, in this case within an established traditional news organisation, in how journalists relate to their audience, their sense of professional authority, and the markers of credibility, authority and trust. Instead then, of seeing blogs simply as a kind of binary opposite (either it is journalism or it is not), Matheson (2004) suggests that ‘the weblog is grounded in traditional notions of the role of the journalist, but provides evidence of those notions undergoing some change’ (p. 460) (see also Rosen, 2005 for a discussion of the blogging/journalism relationship along these lines.).

A study by Robinson (2006) study in some ways extends Singer’s, but looked in more qualitative depth at a range of mainstream media blogs. He identified seven different forms of news blog: ‘a reporter’s notebook of news tidbits and incidentals; a straight column or opinion for the Web; a question-and-answer format by editors; a readership forum; a confessional diary written by the reporter about his or her beat; a round-up of news summaries that promote the publication; and a rumour-mill blog that the report uses as an off-the-record account’ (Robinson, 2006, p. 70).

In fact, within the variety of types of content offered by blogs ‘rarely do blogs contain news’ in the sense of conventional definitions (Robinson, 2006, p.76).

Instead, echoing the ideas of Matheson and others, Robinson suggests the emergence of a post-modern form of journalism, which is more ‘nonlinear and interactive’, and involve breaking the boundaries of conventional news reporting through things like first person narration, contradictions, speculation and so on (Robinson, 2006, p. 78). However, Robinson (2006) saw these developments within mainstream media outlets as a kind of ‘corporate answer’ to independent blogs and as a ‘way for journalists to reclaim journalism’ standards (p.79). Like Singer then, Robinson saw mainstream media j-blogs as a kind of appropriation and normalising of the potential of blogs within conventional journalism. For instance, j-blogs in the study were found to attempt ‘news repair’ through criticising non-journalists’ blogs (Robinson, 2006, p. 80). So, whilst differences and developments are evident in j-blogs, these are very much ‘framed in tradition’ (Robinson, 2006, p. 81).

An emergent view is that blogs may not offer ‘pure’ news but they have an important role to play in assisting news consumers to organise, interpret and make sense of the growing volumes of news that the internet has facilitated. This objective is being achieved by opening up opportunities for news consumer to engage more directly with traditional news producers and to join the latter if not as *bona fide* news producers to have to chance to respond directly and publicly to the news from professionals and to serve as news fact checkers. The most influential bloggers are those who have, among other things, established a reputation for being helpful in these respects. Such developments underline a sea change in journalism whereby journalists not longer have sovereignty over content creation (see MacKinnon, 2005). Instead, blogs have created a new public discourse around news that has opened up the formation and framing of news reports to a wider constituency that now has the power to change news.

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