Tony Romm

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Honors Capstone Reflection Paper

<u>*Convergent Media in the '08 Election: A Reflection*</u>

"Politics@theEAGLE sheds the hierarchy upon which dead-tree journalism was once soundly built, seeking instead to tap the unlimited talents of students who wish to engage their own communities in their own unique ways"[1] – or so I optimistically declared in the summer of 2008, a week before my politics blog went live. The goal, I told my friends and advisors, was to offer my audience – the American University student body – a version of election news that other mainstream news outlets would not: a student's take on politics.

Whether or not I achieved that goal, I know I was not alone in my quest to report the news in a unique and relevant way. Although there exists no final tally of how many Americans started similar blogs this year purely to cover the horserace, Web tracking services estimated in 2007 that as many as 22.6 million blogs had already existed on a range of topics, politics included.[2] That number is hardly inconsequential, especially when considered in tandem with recent Web usage trends. Between August 2007 and August 2008, *before* the nominating conventions occurred, political blog audiences grew 4 percent, from 181,257,000 to 188,937,000 unique visitors.[3] On Election Night alone, Akamai, which observes Web consumption statistics, estimated that more than 8 million users accessed news Web sites *per minute* to read about President-elect Barack Obama's victory.[4] That statistic, however, does not even count blog visits, which were also, presumably, record breaking.

But inherent shock value aside, these cumbersome numbers underscore a seismic shift in audience behavior: While it is safe to conclude that major newspapers and

[1] Romm, Tony, "About this page," 1 Aug 2008, <u>politics@theEAGLE</u>, 1 Dec. 2008
        <http://politics.theeagleonline.com/?page_id=2 >.
[2] Technorati, <u>State of the Blogosphere/2008</u>, 22 Sept. 2008, 1 Nov. 2008
        <http://technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogosphere/>.
[3] Cooper, Jim, "Desperately Seeking Signal," <u>MediaWeek</u> 18.34 (2008): 12-14.
[4] Akamai, "Net Usage Index: News," 11 Nov. 2008, <u>Akamai</u>, 1 Dec. 2008
        <http://www.akamai.com/html/technology/nui/news/index.html >.

television channels captured the lion's share of readers and viewers during this presidential race, blogs have certainly assumed a more central role in political journalism. For evidence of this, look no further than every major newspaper; all of their once shovelware-only Web sites now offer some variation of a politics blog, where discussion outside of the newspaper's long form stories and routine op-eds occurs. Whereas, previously, blogs were dissident alternatives to their mainstream "dead-tree" predecessors, the medium, today, *is* that mainstream, inexorably integrated with the media it once criticized – for better or for worse.

The debate, thus, is no longer whether politics blogs constitute political journalism; academics and professionals concluded that argument years ago. The more pressing issue is what effect, exactly, this untamed medium has on other, more regimented forms of journalism. As this reflection paper demonstrates, the answer is rather circular: Journalists depend on bloggers to feed them interesting or undiscovered stories or public sentiments, bloggers thus shape news coverage, and the interplay between those two mediums has drastic effects on campaign coverage, candidates and the reportage itself.

Mainstream journalists depend on bloggers

It was an attack that began on the infamous (and somewhat aesthetically archaic) pages of the *Drudge Report* in September: Barack Obama had the audacity to appear alongside Barbara Streisand, that partisan diva-fiend whom McCain mocked on Saturday Night Live months before, at a big donor fundraiser. [5]

The story itself lacked a substantive punch, but Drudge's argument was still politically clever. Obama, who had spent a large portion of the primaries criticizing other candidates for appealing too much to old money donors, was about to host an expensive dinner for that very reason – and worse, during an unfolding economic crisis. [6]

Within hours, other online publications followed Drudge's lead. *The Los Angeles Times* headlined its story with "Obama raises millions among the stars; TV crews are kept from two Beverly Hills fundraisers as McCain mocks his connection to celebrities." *The New*

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[5] Cilliza, Chris, "Drudge-ology 101: McCain, Obama and Media Bias," 17 September 2008, The Fix, Washingtonpost.com, 22 November 2008 <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/thefix /2008/09/drudge-ology_101_softening_tow.html?nav=rss_blog>.

[6] Drudge, Matt, "OBAMA BOOM ECONOMY: RECORD BANK IN BEV HILLS, $28,500 A PLATE!," 16 Sep. 2008, Drudge Report, 10 Nov. 2008 <http://www.drudgereport.com/flashbh.htm>.

York Times and *The Washington Post* separately noted Obama's fundraising totals that night in respective blog posts. In all, a quick Lexis Nexis search identified more than 250 blog posts and articles related to Obama and Streisand in the 24 hours after Drudge first posted his story.

If the Drudge example indicates anything, however, it is that there is a clear and inexorable relationship between bloggers and mainstream campaign reporters. As Barb Palser wrote as early as 2005, "Bloggers do more than skewer journalists; journalists have come to depend on them as diggers and aggregators of information, conduits of public opinion and even media and policy pundits."[7] Palser thus calls bloggers "journalism's backseat drivers," the parsers of the vast Internet's information glut.[8] Journalists alone cannot cover every corner of the Web, so they tacitly depend on enterprising bloggers to dig on their behalf.

However, not all bloggers are created equal. According to Palser, the nature and impact of the stories and tips bloggers uncover is directly proportional to the personalities reporting them.[9] These media metacommentators and Internet pundits, many of which criticize traditional journalists for their reporting in addition to offering their own, command the public's respect more than the average, unconcerned amateur writer. And combined with the growing eminence of what John McQuaid calls "Dowdism" – the tendency of campaign coverage to orbit the perceivably infallible personalities reporting it[10] – bloggers have come to assume a more central role in political journalism, one almost wholly based on these cults of personality.

Relationship between journalists and bloggers affects coverage, campaigns

Consequently, the emergence of blogger-pundits had two obvious and important impacts on the 2008 presidential campaign.

First, as the Drudge story demonstrates, bloggers possessed more control of the "national news assignment desk" than in years past – that is to say, their ruminations, if mildly popular, compelled mainstream journalists to follow their lead more frequently than

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[7] Palser, Barb, "Journalism's Backseat Drivers," <u>American Journalism Review</u> (2005): 44.
[8] Ibid., 45.
[9] McQuaid, John, "New Media Battles Old to Define Internet-Era Politics," <u>Nieman Reports</u> (2008): 42.
[10] Ibid.

ever before. When *The Huffington Post*, for example, first reported that Obama had labeled

Pennsylvanians "bitter", the sheer volume of blogs linking to citizen reporter Mayhill

Fowler's article necessitated mainstream journalists confirm the story and publish their

own account.[11] Of course, Obama's comments (or the Streisand fundraiser Drudge reported

ad nauseum) were by no means uncorroborated myths – there was no doubt he uttered

those statements, and there was a video to prove it. But as *CBS News'* Bob Schieffer would

later explain at American University, many of the campaign's more ludicrous rumors – from

allegations that Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin was secretly pregnant to the infamous

Obama-William Ayers relationship – originated in the blogosphere and merited

mainstream attention solely because of their popularity.[12] Speaking specifically about Palin,

Schieffer told students:

> "A lot of the scurrilous rumors that popped up about Sarah Palin in the
>
> beginning, the mainstream media took a lot of hits for that. But we didn't
>
> have anything to do with that; that was stuff that was churning around on
>
> the Web. What were reporters from reputable news sources doing? They
>
> were calling and trying to find out what it was about…"[13]

Unfortunately, that historical dichotomy – that bloggers posit myths and journalists

report about their efforts to debunk them – had a second effect on '08 campaign coverage.

As Schieffer later explained, "The mainstream media has (sic) to deal with [the surge in

blog popularity], and the politicians have to deal with it too." In addition to preemptive

damage control – in the previous Palin case, the McCain campaign quickly circulated a

press release about his running mate and her daughter's pregnancy to stem the fallout –

the campaigns themselves have sought to incubate their own blogs and control campaign

coverage from within.

Surprisingly, the technique is as historical as the art of political blogging itself. As

Palser details, other bloggers, including famed DailyKos creator Markos Moulitsas Zuniga

(who openly acknowledged his support for former Sen. John Edwards in 2000), have

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[11] Fowler, Mayhill, "Obama: No Surprise That Hard-Pressed Pennsylvanians Turn Bitter," 11 April 2008, <u>The Huffington Post</u>, 22 Nov. 2008 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mayhill-fowler/obama-no-surprise-that-ha_b_96188.html>.

[12] Schieffer, Bob, <u>Politics & Pundits: The New Presidency and the Press</u>, Mark McDonald (11 Nov. 2008).

[13] Ibid.

assisted political campaigns in the past, accepting financial compensation in return for some political consulting work.[14] Although Moulitsas, at least, denied any editorial conflicts of interest, Palser argues that his coverage of Edwards did frequently trend more positive than negative,[15] a fact some readers overlooked because Moulitsas openly declared his affiliation on multiple instances.

Elsewhere, relationships between bloggers and candidates have been less transparent. In 2004, *CBS News* reported that Republican Senator Jon Thune paid two bloggers, Jon Lauck of *Daschle v Thune* and Jason Van Beek of *South Dakota Politics*, more than $30,000 in consulting fees, which neither disclosed on their blogs.[16] However, the contributions were perfectly legal; although the Federal Election Commission offered bloggers a "media exemption" – the free pass on campaign finance laws that traditional journalists receive[17] – neither Lauck nor Beek had actually committed any wrongdoing.

To some degree, little has changed in 2008. In a study of blogs incubated by the campaigns this election cycle – Web sites both candidates created, fostered or subsidized in any way – Harvard and Columbia University researchers found that[18]:

> "Out of the nearly 500 blogs in these isolated clusters, at least 125 were seeded by a group of volunteers led by long time Republican Brad Marston— a McCain supporter since 2000 and co-founder of the McCain Victory 2008 blogroll. Although the group claims to receive no financial support or direction from the McCain campaign, Marston acknowledges he works so closely with the campaign that Meghan McCain misidentified him as the "McCain e-campaign coordinator" on her blog."[19]

Although McCain's blog networks in particular tended not to draw attention from the blogosphere's biggest personalities, "these clusters of anti-Obama/pro-McCain blogs are useful in helping to generate a buzz for McCain's attacks on Obama" primarily because

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[14] Palser, *Journalism's Backseat Drivers*, 45.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Kuhn, David Paul, "Blogs: New Medium, Old Politics," 8 Dec. 2004, <u>CBS News</u>, 22 Nov. 2008
        <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/12/08/politics/main659955.shtml>.
[17] Faler, Brian, "FEC Hears Bloggers' Bid to Share Media Exemption," <u>The Washington Post</u> 12 July 2005: A19.
[18] Feltz, Renee, "Blogged Down in the Past," 3 Nov. 2008, <u>Columbia Journalism Review</u>, 3 Nov. 2008
        <http://www.cjr.org/campaign_desk/blogged_down_in_the_past.php>.
[19] Ibid.

"[t]hese posts surface in Google searches about Obama, and give the impression of widespread outrage, which can frame news coverage."[20]

Indeed, McCain was not alone: The Obama campaign deployed a slightly more transparent tactic, creating a lateral, in-house social network through which information could be shared among blogging participants,[21] the results of which also appeared in Google search returns. However, as DailyKos contributor Adam Bonin told CJR, the Obama campaign's blog strategy differed greatly from his Republican counterpart. Instead of focusing on punditry, the Obama campaign offered tools based around the notion of candidate-induced activism, which mitigated the blog network's inherent agenda-setting effects: "It wasn't a courtship that seemed to be a priority for the campaign," Bonin said. "They just kind of said this is who we are, this is what the campaign believes, and if you like that, join us."[22]

Regardless of tactics or ideology, both candidates' struggles with – and successes using – blogs perhaps indicates a larger trend: that politicians are able and willing to capitalize on blogging technology to disseminate information about their campaigns, regardless of what effects that strategy has on the medium at large.

Consequences: Mainstream media and blogs

Still, this circular relationship between blogs, mainstream journalists and the campaigns underscores the long-term effects the new medium has on elections and campaign coverage.

First, the mainstream media's shortcomings, many of which were caused by blogs, affect its own credibility. It is important to remember that journalists, as New York University professor Jay Rosen says, are "herds of independent minds" – a collection of individuals and individual publications whose combined editorial decisions contribute to the predominance of a news frame.[23]

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[20] Ibid.
[21] ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Rosen, Jay, "The Campaign Press is a Herd of Independent Minds," 20 January 2008, <u>PressThink</u>, 22 Nov. 2008 <http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/webl ogs/pressthink/2008/01/20/the_campaign_pr.html>.

Put otherwise, it is individual mainstream journalists, not their blogging surrogates or subordinates, who possessed sufficient power and access to shape their own campaign coverage. And unfortunately for the profession, not even campaign trail correspondents seemed comfortable with what they had written or broadcast this year, a fact many reporters discussed openly in the weeks before the election. As *Slate* writer and occasional CNN contributor John Dickerson explained before November 4, an Obama loss "would [have been] disastrous for the media and political establishment," which had spent weeks hypothesizing an Obama win (and the potential makeup of his administration).[24]

Putting aside any suggestion that such an outcome would have actually invalidated the industry, Dickerson is remiss not to question why, exactly, journalists risked losing so much by predicting the future — a feat worth so little. A simple answer would blame the usual suspects — Nielsen ratings, the 24-hour news cycle, inadequate access to the candidates — but those structural limitations do not explain why voters perceived journalists were biased in Obama's favor, and those excuses do not explain why reporters filed twice as many positive stories about Obama as they did about McCain, as the Project for Excellence in Journalism reported.[25]

Unfortunately, the answer to both quandaries is not profound. From the time both nominating conventions ended until the end of October, 53 percent of all election news — the largest share — focused on campaign strategy and politicking.[26] An equally sizable portion of news consisted of "echo chamber" commentaries - those pieces that seek to explain why reporters were wrong (as in the case of the New Hampshire primary) or, even more arrogantly, why reporters were right (post-election coverage).

But it is in those instances that the blogosphere traditionally flourishes, according *Columbia Journaism Review* writer Matt Welch, because blogging is as close to "peer-review, in all its brutality" that mainstream journalism can come:[27]

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[24] Dickerson, John, "If Obama Loses, Who Gets Blamed?," 2 Nov. 2008, <u>Slate.com</u>, 2 Nov. 2008
        <http://www.slate.com/id/2203420/>.
[25] "How the Press Reported the 2008 General Election," 22 Oct. 2008, <u>Project for Excellence in Journalism</u>, 11
        Nov. 2008 <http://www.journalism.org/node/13307>.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Matt Welch, "Blogworld and its Gravity," <u>Columbia Journalism Review</u> (2003): 26.

"For lazy columnists and defensive gatekeepers, it can seem as if the hounds from a mediocre hell have been unleashed. But for curious professionals, it is a marvelous opportunity and entertaining spectacle; they discover what the audience finds important and encounter specialists who can rip apart the work of many a generalist." [28]

And that second role, as the press's "fifth estate," is what creates media-pundits, the "personalities," as Palser posits, who command the blogosphere and help popularize some of its more "scurrilous" rumors. "It's been common practice," she writes, "for mainstream media – particularly cable, talk radio and columnists – to interview bloggers or excerpt blogs whenever a news organization flubs, even if the flub didn't involve blogs" – and sometimes, even when the blogosphere is the cause.[29] This further exacerbates the "echo chamber," as previously described, and endows bloggers with more credibility. Better put, the failures of mainstream journalists (some of which are the result of the blogosphere) inherently validate and sustain the blogging community.

At the same time, the failures of blogs have the exact opposite effect. Although "scurrilous" reporting affected mainstream journalism, to some degree shaping traditional reporters' coverage of the election, those same techniques also affected bloggers, albeit in a more negative fashion. Bloggers' perceived low editorial standards, which resulted in their focus on ludicrous rumors and uncorroborated ruminations, contrasted greatly with the more regimented ethical and editorial standards that journalists applied to the election, as Schieffer explained. Whether this noticeable difference has affected Americans' trust in blogs is still unclear, but it is perhaps safe to posit that the future effects will not be positive. As Tom Fiedler wrote in Nieman Reports this summer, "What seems certain about all of this is that rumors and lies will travel farther and penetrate further into credulous corners of the electorate, despite the protestations of those who champion the self-correcting mechanisms they say are inherent to this new model of communicating news and information."[30]

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Palser, Journalism's Backseat Drivers, 46.
[30] Fiedler, Tom, "Bloggers Push Past the Old Media's Gatekeepers," Nieman Reports (2008): 42.

In that sense, the 2008 election illuminated a metaphorical tug-of-war between mainstream journalists and blogs. When network newscasters and print pundits cover the news in an accurate, credible and appealing way, bloggers appear to be the enemies of journalism, focusing too much on fringe ideas or perspectives to be useful to the political conversation. But when those same mainstream journalists err (and especially when the blogosphere first notices those mistakes), blogs, as Welch posits, regain their authority and subsequently occupy more of the mainstream media's time.

Consequences: Citizen journalism and campaigns.

This evolving relationship between blogs and journalists, however, also affects the process of citizen journalism itself, the consequences of which are best illustrated by the previous *Huffington Post* example.

Fowler, a self-identified "citizen journalist," never mentioned at the Obama rally she attended that she possessed a voice recorder. Once her tape revealing Obama's comments leaked, both campaigns became hesitant to allow citizen journalists to join their rallies as press – the exact opposite of what most citizen journalists hoped to accomplish. As, again, best summarized by Fiedler: "Up for grabs, in fact, is the very definition of journalist. In campaigns as recent as a dozen years ago, Fowler—as an unpaid and admittedly partisan participant—couldn't find herself in the same sentence with that word, even with the adjective "citizen" in front of it. [31] Today, however, Fowler is as much a part of campaign coverage as her mainstream counterparts, and how campaign organizers plan to deal with citizen journalists like her – what kind of access they receive, among other questions – remains to be seen.

Indeed, this election does not invalidate campaign citizen journalism wholesale, nor does it indicate that citizen journalists have usurped considerable credibility from their mainstream predecessors. In reality, these relationships are circular because media and politicians depend on each other for access to information. Traditional reporters need bloggers to gauge public opinion, bloggers need journalists for information (especially when they lack access to important events) and politicians need both mediums to disseminate information about their campaigns. Although the 2008 election may change

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[31] Ibid., 38.

these relationships some – politicians, for instance, may take the Fowler situation to heart, and further limit citizen journalist access to campaign events – no one single election or botched news story can change a formula that persists despite technological innovation.

Conclusions

Online journalism, in addition to growing as a medium, has become a bottomless, miasmic ocean of verbosity; a spectrum of ideas that spans the gamut of brilliant to mundane. My politics blog was but a drop in that vast depth – though where on the spectrum, I will never be totally sure -- a set of Web pages, among presumably millions like it, purporting to offer readers something unique. It existed because of the Web's quintessential "egalitarianism" – the notion that everyone can publish, regardless of intention or experience. It struggled to stay afloat and make a splash in a pool of equally deserving voices for that very same reason.

Recently, one of those growing Internet voices is none other than the campaigns themselves: The Obama administration, already, has demonstrated a keen interest in using new media to its advantage. From its text-message vice president announcement to Change.gov, its transition communications hub, Obama has reached out to voters directly, using a medium that more voters are espousing as their primary information source.

But much as the Internet has revolutionized desktop publishing - now, everyone is a journalist, and communication is less hierarchical - it has also changed the relationship between the president and the press. The White House has access to the same tools everyone else has, and administrations are just as able to network and report news as journalists. Of course, voters are cynical, and they tend to believe politicians far less than they believe journalists. But new media allow new presidents the ability to assert themselves more forcefully during the framing process.

In the context of the new Obama administration, these "post-news media" techniques are doubly powerful. Remember, Obama has a sizable digital following – what many have called "the world's largest special-interest group." If he uses his vast databases to spread information about his reforms, circumventing the "fourth estate," journalists may find themselves in direct competition with the White House's enhanced line.

Indeed, the presidency and the press have a historically adversarial relationship, one that is contingent upon coexistence: the president depends on media to articulate

policy and reporters depend on presidents for information. But there is an equally obvious correlation between the Obama campaign's embrace of new media and journalists' inability to get close to the former candidate. The more opportunity Obama has to contact his supporters directly, as the campaign trail proved, the more distant he keeps journalists. In other words, White House reporters should prepare for an information deficit this January.

That said, the press is far from irrelevant under Obama. It is quite the contrary: All the talk about a "post-media" presidency means is that reporters have to work harder for their stories. Journalists are - and always will be - the gatekeepers for truth; while information production and dissemination is a process available to all, presidents included, there is no other social institution more equipped financially or structurally to distinguish fact from fiction. Blogs factor into that equation rather easily, considering their historically adversarial relationship with the news media; the "peer review" sentiment Welch describes. The 2008 election may have revealed the inherent shortcomings of current campaign journalism, but it has also clarified how, exactly, journalists can overcome hurdles made more obstructing by technology; the tools that helped carve and sustain politics@theEAGLE's niche.

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