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Citation: Singer, J. (2005). The political j-blogger: 'Normalizing' a new media form to fit old norms and practices. Journalism, 6(2), pp. 173-198. doi: 10.1177/1464884905051009

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Permanent repository link: https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/3463/

Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884905051009

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Abstract available at: http://jou.sagepub.com/content/6/2/173.short
DOI: 10.1177/1464884905051009

Please cite as:
Singer, J. B. (2005). The Political J-Blogger: 'Normalizing' a new media form to fit old norms and practices. *Journalism* 6 (2), 273-198.

The Political J-Blogger: `Normalizing' a New Media Form To Fit Old Norms and Practices

Jane B. Singer

Abstract: This study explores how the increasingly popular blog format, as adopted by journalists affiliated with mainstream media outlets, affects long-standing journalistic norms and practice. It focuses on nonpartisanship, transparency and the gatekeeping role, using a content analysis of twenty Weblogs dealing with politics or civic affairs. Although expressions of opinion are common, most journalists are seeking to remain gatekeepers even in this highly interactive and participatory format. Political j-bloggers use links extensively – but mostly to other mainstream media sites. At least in their early use, journalists are `normalizing' the blog as a component, and in some ways an enhancement, of traditional journalistic norms and practices.

Key words: blogs, gatekeepers, Internet, journalists, objectivity, politics, transparency, Web

THE POLITICAL J-BLOGGER:
`Normalizing' a New Media Form To Fit Old Norms and Practices

From Howard Dean's fiery ascent from obscurity, fueled by Web-organized `meet-ups' and online campaign contributions, to electronic voting in November, use of digital technology moved from the periphery toward the center of US politics in the 2004 election cycle. As research in previous elections has suggested, however, most such uses indicate a `normalization' of technology in the political process rather than the dawning of a new electronic democracy (Davis, 1999; Margolis and Resnick, 2000). They are novel ways of performing traditional political functions, such as mobilizing supporters or generating revenue, rather than fundamentally new activities.

At the same time, a new hybrid form of online communication gained popularity. Web logs, or blogs, are frequently updated opinion journals, `quick-moving, multilinked, interactive venues of choice for millions of people wanting to share information and opinions, commentary and news' (*Nieman Reports*, 2003: 59). Though distinct from professional journalism, blogs are seen as a complementary form of `participatory media' (Blood, 2003: 62) that, if done well, can enhance connections between journalists and the communities they serve (Mitchell, 2003).

The political journalist who becomes a `j-blogger' confronts challenges to professional norms as a nonpartisan gatekeeper of information important to the public. But the format also offers journalists the potential for expanded transparency and accountability. This study explores how journalists are incorporating blogs in their coverage of politics and civic affairs. It analyzes ten national and ten local or regional `j-blogs' produced and maintained by journalists affiliated with mainstream news outlets, using a conceptual framework of normative professional constructs related to serving the needs of a democratic society. The results suggest that, especially among national media outlets, journalists are molding this distinctive online format to fit – and in some

ways augment -- traditional professional norms and practices. Blogs, in other words, are being `normalized' by journalists much as other aspects of the Internet have been.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section begins by summarizing literature to date on the role of the Internet in political communication, particularly the evidence for normalization of the medium by political actors. It provides a brief background on blogs from the professionals' perspective, then outlines the study's conceptual framework of journalistic norms and practices related to information delivery and accountability, incorporating suggestions about how blogs fit into this professional worldview.

The Internet and political communication

As the Internet has evolved from a small, close-knit community of technophiles to a global phenomenon used by millions of ordinary people, it consistently has been accompanied by hopes for its potential to reinvigorate participatory democracy. Drawing on Dewey (1927), Habermas (1989) and others, some contemporary political theorists have heralded the network's inherently communal nature as the foundation for a new `electronic republic'. They have seen the medium as enabling citizens to `gain admission to the political realm' and retrieve the power stripped from them by the flawed structures and strictures of representative democracy (Grossman, 1995: 6).

Others have been considerably more cautious, pointing out that the technology is merely an instrument. Any effect on democratic processes and goals depends `not on the quality and character of our technology but on the quality of our political institutions and the character of our citizens' (Barber, 1998-99: 588-89). True, the Internet enables messages to be sent farther, faster and with fewer intermediaries than traditional media forms, but transformation of a political system requires changes in the substance of the communication underlying it, not merely changes of volume and vehicle (Bimber, 1998). The Internet's potential to enrich democracy by enhancing public discourse requires support across social institutions – including the media (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001).

Studies of online political communication conducted as the Internet came of age as a mass medium in the late 1990s suggested that its main effect was not to engage more people but rather to provide new venues for existing political actors. Long-standing patterns of interaction among those already interested in politics were evident in politically oriented Usenet groups populated by like-minded individuals who rarely engaged in sustained discourse (Hill and Hughes, 1997; Wilhelm, 1998). For politicians, the Internet served mainly as a convenient tool for traditional activities that furthered their own goals, such as targeting persuasive, unmediated messages to voters -- a cost-effective update to `whistle-stop' railroad campaigns (Selnow, 1998). Candidates avoided voter interaction online, fearing lost message control (Stromer-Galley, 2000); they did, however, discover that the medium was great for attacking opponents (Wicks and Souley, 2003) and touting endorsements (Cornfield, Rainie and Horrigan, 2003). In short, cyberspace quickly became normalized as a political site, a new place to do old things (Margolis and Resnick, 2000).

In their first decade online, journalists' political roles also became normalized. Journalists did much what they had always done to fulfill what they perceive as their central role: informing the electorate well enough to lead to wise self-government (Gans, 2003). Studies of online newspaper coverage of the 2000 campaign suggested that editors' primary concern was using the medium to provide more extensive and timely information than they could in print (Singer, 2003; Singer and Gonzalez-Velez, 2003). There were novel ideas, such as inviting users to provide alerts about questionable campaign tactics (Foot and Schneider, 2002) and offering candidate match features that let users identify views closest to their own (Singer, 2003). But overall, political journalists remained primarily in the information business as they migrated online, bolstered by research showing that users turn to major news organizations' sites for campaign news (Pew Internet, 2003) and see online versions of print media, in particular, as highly credible (Johnson and Kaye, 2002).

In 2004, the Internet gained prominence in the information mix for the politically engaged; by the primaries, 54 percent of Americans were getting political news online (Pew Research Center, 2004). Candidate sites became vast, bi-lingual, multimedia amalgams of information, persuasion, and attempts to elicit voter and volunteer engagement with (and contributions to) the campaign. Media sites provided extensive and often engaging coverage, with interactive graphics, multimedia presentations and sophisticated matching features. And then there were the Web logs.

Blogs and Journalism: The Professionals' Perspective

Blogs are an increasingly popular form of online communication. An early 2004 Pew study reported that about 11 percent of Internet users had read others' blogs, and as many as 7 percent had created their own (Pew Internet, 2004). In the 2004 primary season that provided the timeframe for this study, blogs served as tools for politicians – all major presidential candidates offered at least one – and journalists, as well as innumerable unaffiliated bloggers. Most of the television networks offered a blog, as did other national news outlets. A Slate.com reporter blogged the Iowa caucuses; a reporter from Spokane, WA, crossed the country to blog the New Hampshire primary. *The New York Times* blogged a Democratic debate, with live analysis supplemented by streaming video.

The first known use of the format for a breaking news story was the *Charlotte Observer*'s report of Hurricane Bonnie in 1998 (Dube, 2004); by mid-2004, the American Press Institute listed more than 400 blogs published by journalists (and a handful of journalism professors). Yet blogging and journalism clearly differ. The former `implies that a disinterested third party is reporting facts fairly' (Andrews, 2003: 64). Blogs are `unedited, unabashedly opinionated, sporadic and personal' (Palser, 2002) – in many ways, the antithesis of traditional US journalism. Some say that is the best thing about them. `Journalism is done a certain way, by a certain kind of people', but bloggers are:

> … oblivious to such traditions, so reading the best of them is like receiving a bracing slap in the face. It's a reminder that America is far more diverse and iconoclastic than its newsrooms. … Thousands of amateurs are learning how we do our work, becoming in the process more sophisticated readers and sharper critics. 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 (Welch, 2003).

Many journalists who blog believe the format enhances their work, providing a way to share valuable information found `under the radar of traditional media outlets' (Lennon, 2003: 77). Others see blogs as an antidote to the corporatization that is silencing independent media voices. `When presenting "fair and balanced" news can be just another way to limit voices and disguise a corporate or political agenda, bloggers are the dam-busters of the media world', writes *Christian Science Monitor* j-blogger Tom Regan (2003: 70). `Long may they blow open holes in the gatekeepers' firewalls so that all the voices that are being ignored or silenced can find ways to be heard'.

Open participation is central to blogs, which enable individuals to play `an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, sorting, analyzing and disseminating news and information – a task once reserved almost exclusively to the news media' (Lasica, 2003: 71). Bloggers can and do influence the news agenda by `finding and flogging ideas and events until traditional media covers them in more depth' (Lennon, 2003: 77), as well as by serving as free-lance fact-checkers (Welch, 2003). Ideally, then, the blog represents a newly collaborative news product:

> The venerable profession of journalism finds itself at a rare moment in history where, for the first time, its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but, potentially, the audience it serves. Armed with easy-to-use Web publishing tools, always-on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information (Bowman and Willis, 2003).

Journalistic norms, practices and goals: Nonpartisanship, gatekeeping and accountability

From a more scholarly perspective, the blog represents at least two significant challenges to long-standing, and related, professional norms and practices. One norm involves nonpartisanship, a disinclination to take sides on issues of public controversy, including politics. The other involves a claim on the journalists' traditional gatekeeper role, the professional niche as society's primary determiner and provider of information deemed important or interesting enough to convey.

Over its 300-year history in America, journalism has moved away from loyalty to political faction and toward a professed loyalty to `public interest', with a paramount obligation to citizens contingent on journalistic independence (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). The profession has come to see its niche as connected to the often-misunderstood concept of objectivity, which refers not to the absence of personal bias but rather to journalistic method, a fact-based process of newsgathering. The objective approach to reporting and conveying information has been described as the central professional norm (Soloski, 1989), elevated to the status of a commandment (Stephens, 1988) that is worshipped by "the high priests of journalism" (Mindich, 1998: 1), an emblem of an American journalism grounded in autonomy (Schudson, 1978).

More realistically, nonpartisanship has been widely acknowledged as a better term and more achievable goal (Mindich, 1998), particularly in the political realm, where the journalist's task of bringing clarity to events of the day rests on the ability to restrain personal prejudices (Stephens, 1988). Although some observers have documented a shift toward a more "journalist-centered" approach to news delivery that increasingly includes some expression of opinion (Steele and Barnhurst, 1996), nonpartisanship remains a normative standard for journalists. Professional ethics codes have backed away from the problematic term `objectivity' but continue to emphasize the need to distinguish between advocacy and news reporting (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996). In short, journalists maintain that the public benefits most from `trained observers' (themselves) who understand `virtues of restraint, of confirmation, of accuracy, balance and fairness' (Gup, 1999: 35).

But a blog is an ongoing conversation. It explicitly privileges rather than sublimates individual perspectives and opinions on subjects presented by contributors. For journalists, the potential conflict of roles – nonpartisan fact collectors or commentators on those facts – can create problems; at least one newspaper reporter turned blogger has been fired for what his editors perceived as a compromised ability to maintain impartiality (Olafson, 2003). However, proponents

within the profession argue that blogs can be a tremendous vehicle for reporting big stories – from the war in Iraq to a state high school basketball tournament -- in novel ways, allowing more input into what constitutes a story and the incorporation of more voices in telling that story. Indeed, there are ample indications that a more `dialogic' form of online journalism (Deuze, 2003) is evolving.

But therein lies the second major challenge to traditional journalists: their role of gatekeeper. The sociological term was tied to journalists in 1950, when newspaper wire editor `Mr. Gates' was shown to select a relatively limited number of stories for publication and reject the rest, effectively determining what his community would `hear as a fact' (White, 1950: 390). The gatekeeping theory of journalism provides a framework for assessing how and whether a particular item is included in the available news space – and the implication is that proper operation of the gates will yield unbiased news (Reese and Ballinger, 2001: 647). Just as objectivity has been described as a core professional norm, gatekeeping has been seen as a core professional role, one closely linked to separating fact from opinion and reporting from advocacy. The gatekeeper's central concern is with `the inherent search for objectivity that is linked to the scientific method' (Janowitz, 1975: 626).

The Internet has challenged virtually all aspects of this journalistic gatekeeping concept. Online, almost anyone can send news and views around the world, and sometimes it seems as if almost everyone does. In a media environment with unlimited sources of information, the concept of discrete gates through which such information passes is obliterated; if there are no gates, there is no need for anyone to tend them (Williams and Carpini, 2000). The diminished authority of any one outlet to play a gatekeeper role over published information derives not only from the medium's openness but also from the speed of instant publication in a continuous news cycle.

In response, journalists are shifting the definition of gatekeeping away from story selection and toward news judgment, values and practices such as verification to determine the merit of what is disseminated (Singer, 1997). They argue that the ability to publish does not make the publisher a

journalist. That role goes beyond access to a digital `printing press' to include professional norms such as commitment to truth and to rational methods of ascertaining it (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). Although the public remains critical of how well the press meets its own standards, news consumption both online and off is dominated by mainstream outlets, which retain their role as gatekeepers of what is credible and worthwhile rather than merely available. The most heavily used news sites are those of the media giants, including CNN, MSNBC, *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and *USA Today* (Project for Excellence, 2004). The elite media long ago identified by Breed (1955) as the profession's opinion leaders, outlets such as the *Times* and *Post* that still serve as models for the domestic press today (Hertog, 2000), thus remain dominant news sources and professional gatekeepers even in a media world characterized by millions of options.

Blogs offer at least one other challenge for journalists, one related to the closely related ideas of accountability and transparency. Traditionally, journalism has been among the most opaque of industries; professionals fiercely oppose any hint of oversight that might abridge their autonomy or First Amendment protections, and the question of who can or should define media responsibility remains volatile (Plaisance, 2000). Although the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics offers accountability as one of just four core principles, reminding journalists that they `can and should be called to judgment by the public', impact of the guideline on an industry `more committed to independence than to accountability' is questionable (Black, Steele and Barney, 1999: 49). Despite calls for the press to recognize itself as a public institution bound by the same standards of accountability as those it covers (Glasser and Craft, 1996), the media have effectively remained a black box. Nor have journalists historically been eager to let the public in on how the sausage is made. Yet transparency is `the same principle as governs the scientific method: explain how you learned something and why you believe it – so the audience can do the same' (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 81). The principle extends to information about sources, including who they are,

how they were in a position to know what they claim to know, and what special interest they may have (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001).

For professional proponents, the blog ideally suits this twin normative goal of accountability and transparency. The blogging community is far from shy about going after journalists for offenses real and imagined, shocking thin-skinned journalists unused to being scrutinized the way they scrutinize others (Gillmor, 2004). Everything the journalist writes is now subject to public analysis, comparison and fact-checking (Wendland, 2003). Moreover, the blog format also encourages journalists to link to the raw material behind their stories (Lasica, 2003; Lennon, 2003), providing at least the groundwork for a move toward more transparency. For example, the *Dallas Morning News* editorial board uses a blog to explain newsroom decisions, to `demystify what we do and how we do it' and to involve readers in `how we think' (Willey, 2003). Bloggers also can nudge journalists toward sources outside traditional halls of government and business, and they serve as a `corrective mechanism' for sloppy reporting (Andrews, 2003: 63), factual errors or bias (Glaser, 2004).

In summary, blogs directly affect several interconnected aspects of normative journalistic roles and practices. They suggest that different answers to journalistic problems are emerging in the online environment, allowing journalists to produce texts outside of dominant traditions that include a one-way flow of information and professional claims on authority and knowledge (Matheson, 2004). The traditional role as a non-partisan gatekeeper of information, already undermined in the new media environment, is further challenged by the participatory blog format. At the same time, those attributes potentially facilitate the professional norm of accountability. Combined with ongoing changes in political communication spurred by the Internet and related technologies, blogs raise a number of substantive issues for political journalists who have become j-blog pioneers. To begin to address those issues, this study poses the following research questions:

> RQ1: Do political j-bloggers express personal opinions, deviating from their role as nonpartisan information providers, through their blog postings?

RQ2: Do political j-bloggers share their gatekeeping role by including postings from users in their blogs?

RQ3: Do political j-bloggers use hyperlinks as a partial means of providing accountability and transparency for their postings? If so, what is the nature of this linked material?

METHOD

This study is based on a high-level content analysis of ten national and ten regional or local blogs, updated at least five days a week, for which the blogger was a journalist (or group of journalists) associated with a print, television or online media outlet; Appendix A lists the j-blogs included here. The blogs were selected in early February 2004 from a list of j-blogs maintained by the American Press Institute (Dube, 2004), the most comprehensive and up-to-date list available. Content analysis was chosen as an appropriate method for providing an overview of how journalists are using this novel online format. Content analysis is a systematic method that permits valid inferences to be drawn from text, including inferences about the message (Weber, 1990). Its most common use is to describe or identify something that exists, which is the purpose here (Wimmer and Dominick, 2002). In particular, the method is used here to generate evidence on which future exploration of journalists' motivations and conceptualizations of their changing roles might be built.

The blogs were purposively chosen because their subject matter primarily (for the national j-blogs) or regularly (for regional and local ones) involved issues related to politics or civic affairs. The national blogs deliberately encompass various types of parent media -- newspaper, magazine, television and online – with an emphasis on including `elite' media outlets such as television networks and influential newspapers. The ten local and regional j-bloggers all are affiliated with newspapers; no civic-oriented j-bloggers from other local media could be identified from the API list. Most are metros whose j-bloggers have `day jobs' as columnists, but a few smaller newspapers, including those in Billings, MT, Spokane, WA, and Washington, PA, offered their own blogs.

A constructed week, using dates between February 15 and March 15, 2004, constituted the timeframe for this study. All items available on the blogs during the selected dates were included. While some blogs provided a new slate daily, others built up archives; the oldest blog items in this study actually dated to January 29. All items available on the main j-blog page were counted, without duplicating already-counted items. Although seven days were included in the constructed week, most of the media blogs did not update on weekends; one site, CBS News' Roadblog, was abandoned without warning after Super Tuesday, March 2. The period was selected because it was the heart of the 2004 presidential primary season and encompassed Super Tuesday, in which ten states, including delegate-rich California and New York, held primaries; population giants Texas and Florida also held primaries during the study period. March 2 and 3 were deliberately included in the sample to maximize likelihood of blog conversations being political in nature; the other five days were randomly drawn from within the designated period.

The individual blog item was the unit of analysis. On a given day, political j-blogs might contain anywhere from one item to several dozen. Separators such as a headline or a time stamp identified the parameters of each item. The researcher copied the text of each j-blog on each chosen day into Word to capture the dynamic online contents and create a file for each blog for each day of the sample period. She then checked each online link and entered information about link destinations in the Word file. Only the contents of the blog itself were considered; although most of the sites provided sidebar links to related content, that material was not included in this study.

The researcher also captured and copied all user comments specifically related to the blog. In fact, only two local blogs linked user comments to specific postings; a third displayed comments of blog users but did not link those comments to specific postings. A few others incorporated user comments in the j-bloggers' post, as described below. All invited e-mail to the j-blogger, but e-mail

was not coded here. A handful provided links to message boards, but since these encompassed an enormous range of user comments, relatively few related to the blogs, they were not included.

This approach yielded 1,559 blog items, of which 1,136 were determined to be political or civic in nature. `Politics' was operationalized as any topic related to governing or campaigning for public office. `Civic affairs' was operationalized as issues of significance to civic or community life. For example, an item about wedding plans was not included, but those concerning the gay marriage controversy were. An intercoder reliability test, involving a day's worth of items for one local and one national blog, was conducted and results analyzed using Holsti's formula, appropriate for determining reliability for the presence or absence of nominal data, as here (Wimmer and Dominick, 2002). The test yielded intercoder agreement of .83 on the political or civic nature of the items coded. (The second coder skipped three items.)

Other variables of importance in this study were operationalized as follows:

* Opinion: Items were coded as containing the j-blogger's opinion if a viewpoint was expressed in a way that clearly went beyond statements commonly contained in a news story or news analysis. For instance, a cute headline did not constitute an opinion; a statement such as `What could he have been thinking?' did. Intercoder agreement was .84.

* User-generated content: Two sorts of items were coded as being generated by a user. One was a contribution visually and/or technically connected with a user name or pseudonym; for example, each *Billings Gazette* City Lights blog item ended with a link labeled `comments' that, when clicked, opens a window listing each comment and the `screen name' of its contributor. The other was explicit acknowledgement from the j-blogger of a user contribution that included the user's name or screen name. The total number of user comments related to each item, as well as the presence of links provided by users (if any), also was recorded. Intercoder agreement was 1.00.

* Link: Items were coded as links if a user could click on them and navigate away from the blog to another Web site. E-mail links were not included. Intercoder agreement was .90.

Following the data gathering and coding, results were grouped into dichotomous categories: political/non-political, opinion/no opinion, user-generated content/no user-generated content, links/no links. Voluminous information about link destinations was collapsed into broad categories by domain name (.com, .org, .edu) or content type (other media, parent medium, other blog, local/state/national government). This study reports simple percentages and arithmetic totals – the numbers of items coded in a particular way.

FINDINGS

Of the total 1,559 items included in this study, 1,136 (72.9 percent) related to political or civic affairs. The findings presented here concern only this subset. Tables 1 and 2 indicate the number of political items from each blog during the coding period, as well as the number that contain personal opinions (RQ1, Table 1) and include content provided by users (RQ2, Table 2).

[Tables 1and 2 about here.]

In response to the first research question, this study found that about 61 percent of the political j-blog items contained expressions of personal opinion. However, there was considerable variation in how often the j-bloggers strayed from a non-partisan presentation of information. Blogs provided by columnists were more likely to contain opinions regularly than those provided by reporters. Particularly among national blogs created by teams of journalists, blogs commonly served more as a news digest than as a place for commentary. NBC News' First Read blog, for example, included 156 separate items in the study period, of which nearly two-thirds simply summarized what other media were reporting (and, usually, linked to the appropriate story, as described below).

In the 15 blogs produced primarily by an individual journalist, the inclusion of personal opinion varied. The blog associated with online-only Slate.com, from columnist Mickey Kaus,

contained the most opinion, with 94.3 percent of the items indicating his views. Some local columnists' blogs also commonly offered opinions, including those from Billings and Austin; other columnists, such as the one in Sacramento, tended to post short newsy items without comment. Among individual j-bloggers who were not columnists, reporters were among the least likely to incorporate opinions; 22.6 and 27.3 percent of items in the *Washington Post* and *Spokane Spokesman-Review* j-blogs, respectively, included personal views. Table 1 provides more details.

The second research question addressed the extent to which political j-bloggers share their role as gatekeepers with users of this highly interactive format, as measured by the extent to which they shared their blog space with unedited input from users. Results suggest that particularly among national blogs associated with traditional mainstream media, the journalists are remaining steadfastly at the gate, offering blogs containing no evidence of user input. The only non-local blog in this study that regularly incorporated user material was msnbc.com's Altercation, produced by liberal commentator and author Eric Alterman. His blog included a `Correspondent's Corner' feature among the daily posts, typically with half a dozen user items, along with an embedded form for user comments. The only other national political blog to make even a passing reference to user-generated items was the one associated with the other online-only outlet, Slate.com. (Both are owned or co-owned by Microsoft, but their editorial operations are separate.) Although Slate's Kaus Files postings all came from blogger Kaus, he did occasionally credit an `alert reader' or other correspondent for calling his attention to something of interest. Among the eight other national j-blogs associated with traditional print or broadcast outlets, none included user-generated content though, as mentioned above, users were encouraged to send e-mail and/or visit a forum.

Among the local blogs, the amount of user-generated material varied. Two of the blogs, from the columnists in Billings and San Jose, provided an opportunity for users to contribute comments on every item posted by the j-blogger. Comments then were permanently associated with

the item and formed an online conversation about it. And there were many comments. Those two blogs alone accounted for 874 user-generated items, about three-fourths of the total of 1,161 items provided by j-blog users in this study. Conversations often were wide-ranging and went on for days, remaining accessible both for reading and for contributions. Most of the items posted in these two blogs generated at least some user response – sometimes just one or two posts but dozens for hot topics such as a Bush ad connected with the 9/11 attacks (on the Billings City Lights blog) or the treatment of Guantanamo Bay captives (on the San Jose e-journal blog).

Other local bloggers also incorporated user items, though they did so in different ways. J-bloggers in Austin, Providence and Washington, PA, retained control over the actual posting but credited the users who contributed or suggested an item. At the *Chicago Tribune*, user comments were specific to the blog (rather than in a generic message board or forum) but were not attached to any particular item; instead, they were accessible in a chronological list from a side menu. At the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, the editor sometimes used his blog to respond to reader inquiries, often about the paper's editorial policy or procedure, but did not include items posted by users. Local bloggers in Sacramento, Seattle and Spokane offered no content directly connected with users in even a referential way during this study period.

Overall, then the major national news outlets included in this study did not typically share their gatekeeping role with users of their political blogs. In contrast, some local bloggers were amenable to sharing control over the content of their blogs, though only two offered blogs that were structured as a truly participatory experience. Table 2 provides additional details.

The third research question considered the use of the medium's hyperlinking capabilities as a form of accountability or transparency for the journalist turned political blogger. Although the use of links is an imperfect measure of the desire to open up the journalistic decision-making process, it does suggest an increasing emphasis on the use of supporting evidence for statements of either fact

or opinion. The findings clearly indicate that j-bloggers use links extensively. Of the 1,136 political blog items included in this study, 970 (85.4 percent) provided links to source materials, background information or related content. Both national and local j-bloggers made prolific use of links, allowing users to see where the blogger had obtained his or her information or ideas, as well as to read more about a topic. In all, these 1,136 items contained a total of 2,614 links, an average of 2.3 links per blog item. Tables 3 and 4 provide additional details.

[Tables 3 and 4 about here.]

However, the findings also indicate a clear pattern. Among blogs associated with traditional media, in particular, the overwhelming majority of links led to other mainstream media sites (Table 4): The 1,136 political blog items contained 2,015 links to media sites (of which 360 were to the blogger's own parent medium). Moreover, hundreds of these links led primarily to the same elite media long identified as opinion leaders for all the rest (Breed, 1955), notably the *Washington Post* (246 links, not including those from its own j-blogger) and *The New York Times* (227 links from other j-blogs). Rounding out the top five were the Associated Press (198 links, coded as AP articles regardless of the actual site where the story ran), the *Boston Globe* (115 links, perhaps partly because of its extensive coverage of favorite son John Kerry) and the *Los Angeles Times* (113 links). This study indicates that the long-standing influence of these major outlets, already documented among online news users as described above, is being further strengthened in the new medium through the blog format -- at least as it is being used by other journalists.

J-bloggers in this study also were prone to link to the sites of their own parent medium. For instance, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* blog, maintained by the paper's editor, linked to other media sites six times and to other pages on its own site fourteen times. And while most j-bloggers linked to *The New York Times*, by far the greatest percentage of links to the *Times* in comparison with links to other media were from – the *Times*. Nearly every New York Times on the Trail blog item that

referred to a candidate linked to the *Times'* archive of materials about that candidate; many also included links to other *Times* content. In all, the *Times* linked to itself 107 times, compared with sixteen links to other media and an overall total of 158 links.

Political j-bloggers did occasionally range further afield, with links to a variety of English-language media sites from other nations, primarily Britain, as well as alternative media sites in the United States. The latter ranged from *The Hill*, a newspaper `for and about the US Congress' (ten links) to a handful of urban weeklies. However, a total of twenty-one non-mainstream voices together accounted for only sixty-five links (of which seventeen were to online stalwart salon.com) out of a total of, again, 2,015 media links overall.

Government sources might be expected to be widely used because of the political and civic nature of these blogs, but few j-bloggers sent users directly to government sites. One exception was the *Washington Post*'s White House Briefing, which linked to whitehouse.gov, the official site of the president, primarily for transcripts and news releases. Another was the *Sacramento Bee*'s California Insider, which contained numerous links to state offices and agencies. For the most part, however, links to local, state or national government information appeared only sporadically in this study. There also were relatively few links to candidate sites; only thirteen links led to such sites despite extensive postings about their campaigns, particularly on national j-blogs.

Bloggers do link to other bloggers, however – a total of 197 times in this study period, more than their links to all other non-media .com sites combined. Indeed, users looking for a range of commentary across the political spectrum were unlikely to find it on the j-blogs themselves, particularly from the national media; the links to other j-blogs were in some cases the only clue to the extensive and intensive political debate raging in cyberspace. Local j-bloggers, along with those associated with online-savvy Slate.com and msnbc.com, were the most likely to link to other blogs.

In summary, these findings suggest that most (but not all) political j-bloggers are retaining their traditional journalistic gatekeeping role by incorporating limited or no material from users, despite the inherently conversational and participatory nature of the format. The degree to which they are venturing away from their nonpartisan stance in doing so varies though a majority of the items included in this study did include an expression of the bloggers' opinion. Finally, the study suggests that some journalists are using the format as a step toward enhancing their accountability and transparency through provision of extensive links to sources and related materials. However, some blogs amount to little more than news digests. Even among those that seek to be more engaging, the bulk of their links are to other media sites, notably those of traditional elite opinion leaders, rather than to original online documentation or other primary source materials.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS

This study indicates that at least so far, most journalists are `normalizing' blogs in at least one key way: They are maintaining control over the information provided under their names, sticking to their traditional gatekeeper function even with a format that is explicitly about participatory communication. As for the related concept of nonpartisan presentation of information, these blogs indicate a move away from the neutral stance of the traditional journalist. However, that finding should be interpreted with caution; the majority of j-bloggers here, particularly the local ones, are columnists already comfortable with incorporating opinion in what they write.

This study does indicate that journalists are taking advantage of the format to strengthen and expand the normative goal of transparency through the extensive use of hyperlinks to source materials. That said, their version of accountability is predominantly a second-hand form: It consists mostly of pointing to other (or to parent) media outlets that said the same thing as the j-blogger but with more details, creating a sort of online echo chamber of mass-mediated political views. And although there is some use of hyperlinks to encourage users to see original materials, many of those

materials are unenlightening, such as White House press releases. Moreover, the elite media voices, notably those from the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, remain far more likely to be heard than others do. Relatively few new voices, aside from those of other bloggers, are evident.

In broader terms, this study supports earlier research indicating that journalists continue to think in terms of their professional role as information providers as they migrate to the interactive online medium. Providing links to additional materials is admirable and does take advantage of a key attribute of the Internet – but it is still about vertical communication, from journalist to user, rather than horizontal communication that positions the journalist as a participant in a conversation. It is, in other words, about providing information, much of it from traditional sources dominated by the media themselves. The fact that only three (in Billings, Chicago and San Jose) of these twenty j-blogs provide any space for posting verbatim comments from users – one of the attributes of the blog format as others have interpreted and applied it – indicates the degree to which journalists and media organizations remain unwilling to relinquish or even share their gatekeeping role.

The fact that j-bloggers who are columnists for their `offline' medium are more likely to include opinion in their blogs than those who are reporters is not surprising. But it may suggest something about the way that journalists are rationalizing the blog form: as a high-tech outgrowth of an existing commentary format rather than seen as an opportunity to change the way news itself is `made' by professional journalists. In fact, several blogs in this study that are not produced by columnists are basically news digests or summaries – short, snappy items calling attention to some aspect of politics or civic affairs, often with links to other media content for more details. Should the blog format continue to grow in popularity and become more acceptable to news organizations, as preliminary information about 2004 fall campaign coverage suggests, more reporters may become part-time bloggers, and it will be interesting to monitor the effects of that evolution.

For the moment, though, it does not appear that the blog format is revolutionizing the journalistic notion of democracy, in which journalists see themselves as central to the task of creating an informed electorate (Gans, 1998). On the contrary, the blog is being normalized as a component, and in some ways an enhancement, of traditional journalistic norms and practices – albeit norms and practices that accommodate journalists who are not news reporters. Of course, journalists comprise only a tiny segment of the ever-widening blogosphere, and not the most prominent segment at that. The effects of blogs in general on the political process, as well as on the converging processes of mass and interpersonal communication in general, remain to be seen.

Those effects would make an excellent subject for additional research. Indeed, the present study may raise more questions than it answers. Of particular urgency is the need to talk with j-bloggers about their decisions and experiences in order to understand the processes and the rationales at which a content analysis can only hint. The method used here can yield evidence on which to build, but the larger questions involving conceptions of accountability and of shifting journalistic roles can be answered only through methods that incorporate the voices of journalists themselves. Comparison of political blogs provided by journalists with those from non-journalists also would be valuable, as would comparison of j-blogs with what the same journalists write as `offline' columnists or reporters. Such studies could further our knowledge of the extent to which journalistic norms and practices are being applied to j-blogs, the extent to which j-bloggers are adapting non-traditional approaches and the extent to which journalistic practices are used by bloggers who have never set foot in a newsroom. The question of `who is a journalist' online will only become more, not less, provocative as roles, norms and practices become increasingly fluid.

TABLE 1: Opinions

(n) indicates number of unique items

J-BLOG	BLOG ITEMS, TOTAL	POLITICAL Or CIVIC BLOG ITEMS	POLITICAL/CIVIC BLOG ITEMS With J-BLOGGER

	(n)	from j-blogger (n, % of total)	OPINIONS (n, % of political/civic items)
National j-blogs:			
ABC News (The Note)	115	115 (100%)	56 (48.7%)
CBS News (Roadblog)	11	11 (100%)	10 (90.9%)
Knight-Ridder Newspapers (Hot Off the Trail)	52	52 (100%)	27 (51.9%)
MSNBC.com (Altercation)	249	88 (35.3%)	73 (83%)
NBC News (First Read)	156	156 (100%)	54 (34.6%)
The New Republic (Campaign Journal)	21	21 (100%)	17 (81%)
The New York Times (Times on the Trail)	38	38 (100%)	27 (71.1%)
Slate.com (Kaus Files)	113	105 (92.9%)	99 (94.3%)
Wall Street Journal (Opinion Journal)	92	72 (78.3%)	54 (75%)
Washington Post (White House Briefing)	62	62 (100%)	14 (22.6%)
Local/regional j-blogs:			
Austin, TX, *American-Statesman* (Lasso)	64	58 (90.6%)	51 (87.9%)
Billings, MT, *Gazette* (City Lights)	41	26 (63.4%)	24 (92.3%)
Chicago Tribune (Breaking Views)	125	85 (68%)	56 (65.9%)
Cleveland Plain-Dealer (Doug Clifton)	18	12 (66.7%)	11 (91.7%)
Providence Journal (Subterranean Homepage News)	118	52 (44.1%)	23 (44.2%)
Sacramento Bee (California Insider)	57	57 (100%)	20 (35.1%)
San Jose Mercury News (e-journal)	100	41 (41%)	33 (80.5%)
Seattle Times (Between the Lines)	33	33 (100%)	28 (84.8%)
Spokane, WA, *Spokesman Review* (Eye on Olympia)	44	44 (100%)	12 (27.3%)
Washington, PA, *Observer-Reporter* (Off the Record)	50	8 (16%)	2 (25%)
TOTALS	**1,559**	**1,136 (72.9%)**	**691 (60.8%)**

TABLE 2: User-generated content

(n) indicates number of unique items

J-BLOG	POLITICAL/ CIVIC items provided by J-BLOGGER (n)	POLITICAL/CIVIC BLOG ITEMS provided by USER (n)	USER ITEMS containing LINKS, with total number of links provided (n, n)
National j-blogs:			
ABC News (The Note)	115	None	--
CBS News (Roadblog)	11	None	--
Knight-Ridder (Hot Off the Trail)	52	None	--
MSNBC.com (Altercation)	88	97	23 items, 39 links
NBC News (First Read)	156	None	--
The New Republic (Campaign Journal)	21	None	--
The New York Times (Times on the Trail)	38	None	--
Slate.com (Kaus Files)	105	8	None
Wall Street Journal (Opinion Journal)	72	None	--
Washington Post (White House Briefing)	62	None	--
Local/regional j-blogs:			
Austin, TX, *American-Statesman* (Lasso)	58	5	2 items, 3 links
Billings, MT, *Gazette* (City Lights)	26	350	6 items, 10 links
Chicago Tribune (Breaking Views)	85	163	None
Cleveland Plain-Dealer (Doug Clifton)	12	None	--
Providence Journal (Subterranean Homepage News)	52	6	3 items, 7 links
Sacramento Bee (California Insider)	57	None	--
San Jose Mercury News (e-journal)	41	524	48 items, 50 links
Seattle Times (Between the Lines)	33	None	--
Spokane, WA, *Spokesman Review* (Eye on Olympia)	44	None	--
Washington, PA, *Observer-Reporter* (Off the Record)	8	8	8 items, 13 links
TOTALS	**1,136**	**1,161**	**90 items, 122 links**

TABLE 3: Links

(n) indicates number of unique items

J-BLOG	POLITICAL Or CIVIC BLOG ITEMS provided by J-BLOGGER (n)	POLITICAL/CIVIC BLOG ITEMS provided by J-Blogger with at least one LINK (n, % of political/civic items)
National j-blogs:		
ABC News (The Note)	115	98 (85.2%)
CBS News (Roadblog)	11	1 (9.1%)
Knight-Ridder (Hot Off the Trail)	52	44 (84.6%)
MSNBC.com (Altercation)	88	84 (95.5%))
NBC News (First Read)	156	150 (96.2%)
The New Republic (Campaign Journal)	21	12 (57.1%)
The New York Times (Times on the Trail)	38	36 (94.7%)
Slate.com (Kaus Files)	105	97 (92.4%)
Wall Street Journal (Opinion Journal)	72	72 (100%)
Washington Post (White House Briefing)	62	61 (98.4%)
Local/regional j-blogs:		
Austin, TX, *American-Statesman* (Lasso)	58	51 (87.9%)
Billings, MT, *Gazette* (City Lights)	26	22 (84.6%)
Chicago Tribune (Breaking Views)	85	56 (65.9%)
Cleveland Plain-Dealer (Doug Clifton)	12	11 (91.7%)
Providence Journal (Subterranean Homepage News)	52	51 (98.1%)
Sacramento Bee (California Insider)	57	37 (64.9%)
San Jose Mercury News (e-journal)	41	41 (100%)
Seattle Times (Between the Lines)	33	33 (100%)
Spokane, WA, *Spokesman Review* (Eye on Olympia)	44	5 (11.4%)
Washington, PA, *Observer-Reporter* (Off the Record)	8	8 (100%)
TOTALS	**1,136**	**970 (85.4%)**

TABLE 4: WHAT J-BLOGGERS LINKED TO

Numbers indicate total links from all political j-blog items, categorized by domain name (.com, .org., edu) or content (other media, parent medium, other blog, government). `Gov't' includes state and local government entities as well as national ones. For Knight-Ridder, local Knight-Ridder papers were coded as `parent media'.

J-BLOG	OTHER MEDIA	PARENT MEDIUM	OTHER BLOG	OTHER .COM (non-blog)	.ORG (non-blog)	.GOV'T (non-blog)	.EDU (non-blog)	OTHER (.info, .net, .tv, .us…)
National j-blogs:								
ABC News (The Note)	368	8	1	10	--	1	2	
CBS News (Roadblog)	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	--
Knight-Ridder (Hot Off the Trail)	15	34	1	13	7	--	2	--
MSNBC.com (Altercation)	85	5	19	16	19	4	--	1
NBC News (First Read)	519	1	1	--	--	--	--	--
The New Republic (Campaign Journal)	10	1	4	4	3	--	--	--
The New York Times (Times on the Trail)	16	107	--	15	12	3	3	2
Slate.com (Kaus Files)	125	23	62	21	6	--	--	1
Wall Street Journal (Opinion Journal)	119	21	14	14	4	7	2	5
Washington Post (White House Briefing)	89	31	5	2	2	16	--	2
Local/regional j-blogs:								
Austin, TX, *American-Statesman* (Lasso)	56	21	1	1	--	--	--	--
Billings, MT, *Gazette* (City Lights)	11	18	8		--	--	1	--
Chicago Tribune (Breaking Views)	29	36	30	13	7	4	2	1
Cleveland Plain-Dealer (Doug Clifton)	6	14	--	3	2	3	3	--
Providence Journal (Subterranean Homepage News)	72	11	18	49	27	6	2	5
Sacramento Bee (California Insider)	16	10	--	6	2	9	--	--
*San Jose Mercury News (*e-journal)	26	18	18	5	5	13	--	2
Seattle Times (Between the Lines)	87	--	15	10	5	3	1	1
Spokane, WA, *Spokesman Review* (Eye on Olympia)	--	--	--	--	1	4	--	--
Washington, PA, *Observer-Reporter* (Off the Record)	6	--	--	5	2	--	--	--
TOTALS	**1,655**	**360**	**197**	**187**	**104**	**73**	**18**	**20**

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APPENDIX A: J-blogs list

AFFILIATION	J-BLOG	GROUP or INDIVIDUAL	NAME(s) and POSITION of J-BLOGGER(s)
National j-blogs:			
ABC News	The Note	Group	ABC News political unit (reporters and producers)
CBS News	Roadblog	Group	CBS News political reporters
Knight-Ridder	Hot off the Trail	Group	Political reporters at affiliated newspapers
MSNBC.com	Altercation	Individual	Eric Alterman, columnist
NBC News	First Read	Group	NBC News political unit
The New Republic	Campaign Journal [(a)]	Individual	Ryan Lizza, associate editor
The New York Times	Times on the Trail	Group	*New York Times* Washington bureau staffers
Slate.com	Kaus Files	Individual	Mickey Kaus, columnist
Wall Street Journal	Opinion Journal	Individual	James Taranto, online editor and columnist
Washington Post	White House Briefing	Individual	Dan Froomkin, reporter
Local/regional j-blogs:			
Austin, TX, *American-Statesman*	Lasso	Individual	Bill Bishop, columnist
Billings, MT, *Gazette*	City Lights	Individual	Ed Kemmick, columnist
Chicago Tribune	Breaking Views	Individual	Eric Zorn, columnist
Cleveland Plain-Dealer	Doug Clifton	Individual	Doug Clifton, editor
Providence Journal	Subterranean Homepage News	Individual	Sheila Lennon, features and interactive producer
Sacramento Bee	California Insider	Individual	Daniel Weintraub, columnist
San Jose Mercury News	e-journal [(b)]	Individual	Dan Gillmor, columnist
Seattle Times	Between the Lines	Individual	Tom Brown, columnist
Spokane, WA, *Spokesman Review*	Eye on Olympia	Individual	Richard Roesler, reporter
Washington, PA, *Observer-Reporter*	Off the Record	Individual	Jessica Smith, columnist and online editor

(a) *The New Republic's* best-known blogger is Andrew Sullivan (andrewsullivan.com). However, Sullivan covers a wide range of topics on his blog, while Lizza's Campaign Journal is devoted exclusively to politics.

(b) Although Gillmor's popular e-journal is primarily a blog about technology, he often covers political issues, as well. He has both a local and a national following but is included with the local/regional blogs here because the *San Jose Mercury News* is not nationally distributed.