

**Bloggers Breathe Life
into Libertarian Theory of the Press**

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Abstract

In a relatively short time, bloggers have achieved an unprecedented position at the forefront of a vast marketplace of ideas that heretofore had only been an ideal in the libertarian theory of the press. Through digital technology, bloggers are taking freedom of expression to a new level. Although few are doing original reporting for news stories, the bloggers are strong on the opinion part of journalism and offer a robust diversity of points of view. The bloggers and their readers serve each other, the public and the news media in the self-righting process of libertarian theory--helping to determine the best obtainable version of the truth among conflicting views.

Key Words

Bloggers, Libertarian Theory of the Press, Freedom of Expression, Journalism

Introduction

In the early days of the news media, the press was more interested in views than news. Today, due to technological advances, we may be returning to this earlier era and the resuscitation of the marketplace of ideas idealized in the libertarian theory of the press.

The theory, first published in 1956, was developed by Fred S. Siebert of Michigan State University. The theory provides a philosophical basis for the on-going, three-way relationship between the news media, government and society in the United States. The theory seeks to maximize freedom of the press both for the news media and the public.

"Basically," Siebert (1) wrote, "The underlying purpose of the media is to discover the truth, to assist in the process of solving political and social problems by presenting all manner of evidence and opinion as the basis for decisions."

"All manner of evidence and opinion" was standard fare in the newspapers of much of the 1700's and 1800's in the United States. Beginning in the 1700's, broadsheets, pamphlets and the first few newspapers constituted the media. From the late 1700's to the early 1800's, newspapers were more viewspapers--more interested in philosophy, politics, literary works, social history. News was a political weapon--often biased and distorted. (It was not until the latter part of the 19th century that news began to be treated more objectively, with less opinion by the writer and with other sides provided in news accounts. Opinion began to be treated separately; an editorial page was set aside for opinions) (2,3)

Fast forwarding to today, bloggers may be pulling us back to the "all manner of evidence and opinion" era--to a version of libertarian theory on speed. Truth and falsehood now grapple before hundreds of thousands or millions rather than the small audiences of yesteryear.

Writing on MotherJones.com, George Packer (4) refers to blogging as "...the latest, somewhat debased, manifestation of the old art of political pamphleteering, a lost form in this country..." A self-confessed super-reader of blogs, Packer adds that bloggers open a "vast marketplace of competitors reminiscent of earlier ages of pamphleteering."

Tom Kunkel, the journalism dean at the University of Maryland, refers to bloggers as the "great democratizers" noting it is "basically how journalism started..." hundreds of years ago. (5).

The rebirth of a robust diffusion of wide-ranging views--a communication ideal forged in the libertarian theory of the press--began with the dawn of the digital age. At its start, the promiseland was desktop publishing. Everyone could be a publisher, it was promised. Unfortunately, everyone could not be a distributor. One's political essay or

short story, once printed, had to be distributed the old-fashioned way. Now, an era of personal publishing is blossoming with bloggers leading the way.

Then, with the advent of the Internet and the web, bulletin boards, chat lines, e-mail, etc., individual views and responses could be "broadcast." Yet, it pales now in the burgeoning blogosphere, the vast, on-line community of bloggers and their readers.

Evolution of Bloggers

In the pre-digital era, ham radio had its logs, or personal diaries. In the digital era that followed, you had the development of the aforementioned bulletin boards, e-mail, etc. By the late 1990's (1997 by most accounts), weblogs were born. Mostly run by individuals (as opposed to organizations), they vary greatly, but typically--if there is such a thing in this area--weblogs resemble an on-line journal or diary or columns with hypertext links to topics the weblog owner is interested. Many also encourage responses/reader comments. Some weblogs or blogs are devoted to a particular topic, from pets to politics. Many are devoted to personal opinions and musings. Articles are generally short, 50-300 words. Feedback is often central.

There are at least two accounts of how weblogs began to be called blogs. One is that the term derived from combining the last letter of the word "web" with the word "log." (6). The other is that weblog was broken into "we blog" in the sidebar of a weblog and then "to blog," meaning to edit or post on one's weblog (7).

Although blogs are increasingly popular, estimates of the number of blogs range widely--from thousands (8), to hundreds of thousands (9), to 2 million (10), to 3 million (10).

The size of the blogosphere, the on-line community of bloggers and their readers, is also elusive. The Pew Research Center estimates that 11 percent of Internet users visit

blogs and between 2 and 7 percent of net users write a blog. (12) They are becoming respectable; both the Republican and Democrat conventions in 2004 set room aside for bloggers, and one magazine reported the GOP bloggers had more readers than The Philadelphia Enquirer (13).

Bloggers and Journalism

As the rise of bloggers comes concurrently with the rise of digital journalism, questions ensue about the relationship of bloggers and journalism. For example, since bloggers provide a diverse marketplace of information and opinion as journalists do, are bloggers journalists?

Digital journalism describes more of a powerful delivery system than proscribing content. The technological development provides hypertextuality, interactivity, non-linearity, multimedia presentation, convergence as well as personalization. Bloggers are part of this development; however, the question remains: are bloggers journalists and is what they say, journalism?

According to Steve Outing, senior editor of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, "Blogs are blurring the line between who is a 'journalist' and who's not." (14)

If one defines journalism as both news and opinion (which should be independent of one another), bloggers are strong on opinion but short on news. Most bloggers are doing little original reporting of timely matters. As Steve Luxenberg of *The Washington Post* noted at a forum on "Blending News and Commentary," bloggers get away from "first principles"--reporting (15). In the few cases of original reporting, there are also issues of objectivity. Links to news organizations on weblogs make the blogger more of an editor-of-sorts but not a professional reporter whose news stories go through a "peer review"--a check by seasoned editors.

Blogger Alo Konsen says, "We bloggers are very opinionated, but we're honest about it--we don't claim to be objective (16).

Blogger Markos Moulitas Zuniga says, "There's no pretension of being fair and balanced or impartial. We all wear our ideology on our sleeves." (17)

"Bloggers tend to specialize in putting a deft touch on pre-existing information rather than in generating completely new findings," blogger Chris Mooney (18) says. "There is no such thing as a blogging investigative report or feature story."

The director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia, Larry Sabato notes, "I have learned things from blogs that I haven't heard anywhere else, but the bad news is that half of what I read is either wrong or very biased." (19)

A senior editor at the *Online Journalism Review*, J.D. Lasica (20) says, "...Blogs tend to be impressionistic, telegraphic, raw, honest, individualistic, highly opinionated and passionate, often striking an emotional chord. Sometimes they veer towards immediacy and conjecture at the expense of accuracy and thoughtful reflection...."

What do the readers' of blogs think? A survey of 3,747 blog users probed how they viewed the credibility of blogs. In the process, a credibility index was used, comprising four elements: accuracy, fairness, depth and believability. Since journalism relies on reporting news accurately and without a point of view, accuracy and fairness are essentials. Yet 5 in 10 blog readers, the survey found, questioned the accuracy of blogs and 6 in 10 expressed concern on fairness. (The other two elements of the perception of credibility, depth and believability, scored much better and, overall, more than 7 in 10 blog readers judged blogs as highly credible--and more so than the credibility of traditional media). (21)

Bloggers, nonetheless, are having a significant influence on news gathering, presentation and journalism overall. They can alert the mainstream news media to potential stories, like a tipster. Prof. Joe Luis Orihueda notes, "...blogs are becoming a very valuable service for the media, a sort of early alert system to detect news, trends, and opinion...." (22)

Writer and blogger Chris Mooney (23) believes bloggers are influencing journalism. He states, "...It is clear that the practice is best understood as a modest but helpful complement to mainstream journalism."

Bloggers work, however, has led to major news stories in the mainstream media. They include:

--First raising questions about the validity of alleged National Guard memos concerning President Bush's service, aired by Dan Rather (who has since announced his departure as CBS anchor).

--Disclosing an affair between White House intern Monica Lewinski and President Clinton.

--Helping to bring attention to the outing of a CIA operative in a Novak column as well as Sen. Trent Lott's alleged racist remarks in honoring a long-serving Senate colleague. (Both by the same blogger)

--Posting videos and still photos of Vice President Cheney and Sen. Edwards meeting, after Cheney, in the '04 debates, contended he had not met Edwards before, even though both serve in the Senate.

Cornerstones

Cornerstones of the libertarian theory of the press include that the news media acts as a watchdog of the government, to safeguard the rights of the individual.

Yet critics of the media have long maintained that the news media needed its own watchdog. Bloggers are taking on that role; in fact, there is a group of blogs called watchblogs. These hunt for systematic error and bias in the mainstream media.

"The mainstream media are being watched more closely because of bloggers--and kept more honest," according to Mooney (24).

Dave Neiwert, a veteran of newsrooms and blogger, feels bloggers are also watchdogs on themselves. "Somebody puts false information out there, some other blogger is going to jump all over him." (25).

Another cornerstone of libertarian theory is the emphasis on distributing all shades of opinion and in determining the truth from that universe.

For the believers, the main purpose of journalism--based on the philosophies of Milton and Mill--is to discover the truth. The best way, as put forth by Siebert (26) in laying out the libertarian theory of the press, is by an unencumbered, robust encounter of different opinions, through which "the true and sound will survive and the false and unsound will be vanquished."

Due to the networks that allow large readership and interactivity, bloggers are providing this robust debate. On one of the more popular blogs, dailykos.com, for example, on Dec. 4, 2004, the owner wrote a short piece recounting the news of former New York City police commissioner Bernard Kerik being nominated as the new director of the Department of Homeland Security and then made a brief comment. He received and published 137 comments from readers of his item. (Although Kerik subsequently withdrew his nomination, it has not been linked to revelations by bloggers. Kerik appears to have gotten out ahead on the news by disclosing much himself).

James Glen Stovall (27), in his book "*Web Journalism*," notes, "Weblogs offer the possibilities of presenting a much wider range of points of view about information that would be possible in the traditional media."

Rebecca Blood (28), author of "*Weblogs: A History and Perspective*," says that "freestyle blogs are nothing less than an outbreak of free expression" and it is "an unprecedented opportunity for individual expression of a worldwide scale."

Matthew Klam (29), writing in *The New York Times Magazine*, refers to blogs as a "clearinghouse for activism," adding that blogs have "corrected a power imbalance" that has given more options to people with grievances.

"The beauty of the blogosphere is that it is self-igniting, self-propelling and self-selecting, a sort of intellectual ecosystem...." according to Kathleen Parker (30), a columnist in *The Buffalo News*.

A former *New York Times* staffer-now-blogger sees what's happening as a sweeping "fundamental reordering of democratic energy and political influences." (31)

These contemporary beliefs reflect the philosophy of poet John Milton nearly 400 years ago. In advocating freedom of expression in 1644, Milton published his *Areopagitica*. Milton asserted:

"...And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously, by licensing and prohibiting, to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter." (32)

Siebert sees the victory of truth over falsehood as the two grapple as a self-righting process. Siebert (1974) describes the process in two phases. In the first phase, Siebert suggests, "The public at large be subjected to a barrage of information and

opinion, some of it possibly true, some of it possibly false, and some of it containing elements of both." In the second phase, he contends, "The public could be trusted to digest the whole, to discard that not in the public interest and to accept that which served the needs of the individual and of the society of which he is a part." (33)

Bloggers seem to sense the process. Doc Searles, a blogger and veteran journalist, notes, "...weblogs have a self-informing and self-correcting system built into it."(34) As Prof. Glen Stovall (35) explains, "A weblog is a self-correcting entity; inaccurate information can be corrected or at least challenged."

The future

Bloggers are having a significant impact, and blogging is increasingly popular. Blog was "word of the year" in 2004, according to Merriam Webster, the dictionary publishers. The term was the most searched word on its Internet sites. (36). The numbers of both those starting blogs and those reading blogs jumped by the start of 2005 (37). Bloggers are also serious and committed, as are their readers, who find blog content highly credible (38).

The bloggers and their readers influence can be expected to continue in at least five main areas: 1) Freedom of expression; 2) Advertising; 3) Politics; 4) Journalism and 5) Mass communication.

Bloggers and their users have taken a communication ideal--the value of robust debate--to new heights, and there are no indications that it will subside. The role of bloggers should expand if they can develop advertising for their sites and continue to be a viable political tool.

Although the percentage of blog advertising is still low, it is likely to increase since the potential audience is there (39). Blog users are older and have sufficient

disposable income. Blogads, a web ad network, surveyed 17,159 blog readers and found 6 of 10 are over 30 and over 7 in 10 earn more than \$45,000. (40) In addition, technological developments (e.g., using Google) can make it easier for the audience and advertisers to link up.

The value of bloggers and the Internet in politics was dramatically demonstrated in Gov. Dean's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. Bloggers since have become the "unofficial arms of the candidates' campaign," according to J.D. Lasicas, senior editor of the *Online Journalism Review*. (41) "It's definitely the next best thing (for campaigns)," according to an Ohio state GOP spokesman, Jason Maruk. (42)

Bloggers will continue to provide the mainstream news media with tips to be investigated for news stories, and blogs might be institutionalized in some way (be co-opted into the mainstream media, perhaps star columnists or commentators would offer their views on blogs as well as in their newspaper or on their television network).

Blogs are changing the nature of mass communication. A new channel--computer networks--has been added to the traditional channels (newspapers, television, radio, etc.) as distribution systems. With interactivity, what had been a one-way message has shifted to an interaction among sources and receivers. Also, the reach, which had been a limited geographical area, is now global. These changes may require a name change for mass communication, and at least one has already been offered by a professor in Spain--ecommunication. (43).

Although this enhanced expression is central to the libertarian theory, the self-righting process is key as well. The interactivity that most blogs feature--with near-instant feedback from readers--tremendously enhances the self-righting process.

The process is well demonstrated in the blogger debate following the horror of the South Asian tsunami. According to a *New York Times* article on Jan. 3, 2005, one blogger contended the bombing in Iraq caused the earthquake. The reaction--ridicule--was swift, the newspaper account noted. A sub-headline in the story stated, "While chaotic, Web log discussion can be self-correcting." Xenia Jardin, a blogger, commented that this "self-healing" quality of debate in blogs was very important. "When information that is provable untrue surfaces...people want to be right--they want to know the truth," she said. (44).

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