Bloggers Rely on Sources Outside Traditional Media

by Brendan R. Watson

This analysis of 100 blogs finds that local public affairs bloggers do not rely on newspapers for the majority of their sources. They are more likely to use originial sources and original reporting, particularly when writing about local topics commonly ignored by the news media.

T he tension between bloggers and the mainstream media over blogs' reliance on traditional media sources is threatening to come to a head. Mainstream media executives are angry that the pajama-clad bloggers rest at home, pointing out the slightest media gaffe, while simultaneously relying—the media executives claim—on the heavy lifting of professional journalists' reporting for sources of information for blog posts.[1] For their part, bloggers' claim that reposting part, or even all, of a news story is so fundamental to today's online discourse that aggressively suing bloggers for copyright infringement, "could have a chilling effect on individuals' attempts to engage their communities in free and open discussion."[2] But stepping back for a second, this debate begs an important question: How dependent is the blogosphere on the traditional news media for sources of information?

This study uses a quantitative content analysis to examine where authors of 100 local public affairs place blogs—blogs primarily about the public affairs of a specific city where the author lives—get the information they write about in their blog posts. Sources in this study include direct and non-direct quotes of media content, secondary online sources, original documents and bloggers' original reporting.

For example, the author of a blog in Buffalo, N.Y., wrote a post about the University of Buffalo buying and not maintaining a house in her neighborhood.[3]

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The post paraphrased a story from the *Buffalo News*, a traditional media source, and quoted a paragraph from the university's community development plan, an original document. Another blogger in Peoria, Ill., wrote about that city's library throwing out books,[4] quoting an email interview the author conducted with the library's assistant director, an example of original reporting. A hyperlink to a website explaining general standards for library collections is an example of an online source.

A handful of studies have examined bloggers' use of different types of sources,[5] suggesting that bloggers rely on the traditional media—primarily newspapers—for up to 99 percent of all their sources.[6] This high estimate, however, may be biased toward large media because it is based on categorizing only blogs' most linked-to URLs. This list is dominated by large media as a function of their size, overlooking the Internet's "long tail" of much smaller niche-audience blogs and other websites.[7] In a long-tail distribution, the highest frequency values comprise a minority of the overall population, the majority of which is distributed among low-frequency occurrences in the tail. As a whole, the low-frequency proportion of the distribution may account for a significant proportion, even a majority, of the total distribution. Thus, studies that rely on a list of only the most-linked-to URLs—those in the high-frequency portion of the distribution—will likely overestimate bloggers' reliance on the traditional media.

Previous studies have also overlooked potential variation in bloggers' use of different types of sources based on the subject and proximity of a given blog post's topic. There are obvious logistical hurdles to bloggers' ability to report on national topics (e.g., the financial costs of traveling with a political campaign). National topics such as politics are also frequently covered by the mainstream news media. Thus, when bloggers write about national issues, one might expect bloggers to rely heavily on the traditional news media as sources. However, this study considers that bloggers may be more likely to use original sources when covering local topics, particularly those covered infrequently by traditional news media (e.g., historic preservation).

This study fills another gap in the literature. Previous studies have almost exclusively focused on "A-List" blogs and the national prestige press.[8] This study, however, focuses on local public affairs blogs, those sites most likely to overlap with and potentially compete with local media.

Literature Review

Beyond concerns from publishers about protecting their intellectual property rights, bloggers' reliance on traditional media sources should interest scholars because of the implications for the mainstream media's agenda-setting and gatekeeping roles in the new online space.[9] The dominant question is whether the blogosphere represents a new alternative public sphere and alternative medium, as its boosters might claim, or rather, as Leccese concluded:

> *The 'geography' political bloggers inhabit in the United States' public policy discussions is not, so to speak, a New World but rather new settlements built upon land long occupied by venerable and familiar institutions that have been influenced by advertising and public relations for two centuries.*[10]

Leccese gave the impression that the question of whether bloggers overwhelmingly rely on traditional media sources has been settled. Yet studies continue to produce wildly different estimations of bloggers' reliance on the mainstream media, suggesting that blogs rely on the traditional media for 12 percent to 99 percent of their sources.[11]

At the high end, these estimates are perhaps the product of research designs that over count traditional media sources. For example, Pew's 2010 report, "New Media, Old Media," which suggested bloggers rely on the traditional media for 99 percent of their sources, used a list of the most popular linked-to outgoing URLs on blogs from blog-tracking service Technorati.[12] As a function of their sheer size, large publications such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* frequently appear in the high-frequency portion of the distribution of bloggers' sources.[13] However, if taken as a whole, another category of source in the long tail of the distribution (e.g., other local blogs) may comprise a larger overall proportion of bloggers' sources. Pew's study, however, did not code sources that fall in the long-tail portion of the distribution.

Bloggers relied most heavily on the traditional media when writing about state and national economic issues, local crime and local education. At least these first two topics receive saturated coverage in the news media.

Meraz coded all hyperlinked sources by hand, which produced a more modest estimate of bloggers' reliance on the traditional news media as sources. She studied hyperlinked sources on 18 of the most popular U.S. political blogs and found that the traditional media—*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* being the most prominent—comprise 50 percent of these sites' sources.[14] However, a sizable proportion (33 percent) of these sites' sources also came from other citizen media. Additionally, she found that, although *The New York*

Times and *The Washington Post* were by far the two most popular hyperlinked sources among the 30 most linked-to sites, 10 of these sites were citizen media, although individually these citizen media sites were linked to less frequently than were the traditional media sites.

Meraz concluded that *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* still have the potential to exert a strong and often singular agenda-setting effect; however, citizen media sites also play an influential role by way an accumulative effect of many such sites. This accumulative effect is what was overlooked by Pew's "New Media, Old Media" study.[15] Studies that followed similar designs as Meraz's produced more modest estimates of bloggers' reliance on traditional media sources, ranging from 38.6 percent to 50 percent.[16]

How Sources are Coded

Different methods used to code bloggers' sources may partially account for the variation in these studies' estimates. Not all sources are going to be hyperlinked; thus, those studies that analyze only hyperlinks[17] will not produce an accurate count of bloggers' sources nor properly categorize sources. Coding only hyperlinks overlooks certain types of sources, especially bloggers' original reporting. Take, for example, bloggers who attend and blog about a city council meeting. To add context to their post, they link to an agenda of that meeting on the city's website. In this instance, if only the hyperlink were coded as a source, the bloggers' original reporting would be misattributed to another source (a government website), although the agenda just provides contextual information and is not the source of information being discussed in the post. The bloggers' original reporting is.

There are also potential problems with analyzing only sources within quotation marks or indented block text[18] or only sources indicated by verb of attribution (e.g., the mayor said).[19] These methods will also fail to count bloggers' original reporting that is not in quotation marks, as well as produce an undercount of the hyperlinked sources that are common online. There has also been an inclination to generalize findings based on the national political blogosphere to blogs as a whole.[20] Nielson's BlogPulse estimates that there are now more than 149 million blogs worldwide,[21] which cover every topic imaginable. And Pew's "New Media, Old Media" study found that bloggers' use of specific traditional media sources varied by subject.[22] For example, bloggers relied more heavily on *The Washington Post* for politics and government blog posts, *The New York Times* for posts about the economy and the BBC for posts on international subjects. One may also expect that bloggers' overall reliance on traditional media sources would vary by subject, as well as geographic focus of the story.

National politics may be the subject on which to expect the blogosphere to rely most heavily on traditional media as sources: First, according to Pew data, politics takes up the single largest proportion of the traditional media news hole.[23] Second, bloggers have limited resources to cover national news. Reese et al. contend that the blogosphere "overrides" geography.[24] This may be

true in terms of distributing information online, although it is certainly not the case in terms of the reporting resources necessary to produce original content.

One might think of political bloggers' use of traditional media sources as being analogous to a local newspaper's use of a news wire, such as the Associated Press. For example, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* is most likely to use AP stories to cover national and international news. It will also use the wire occasionally for state stories, rarely for important regional stories, and almost never for important local stories. This pattern is at least partially a function of the resources needed to cover stories further from the newspaper's home base.

Bloggers' use of traditional media sources may also vary based on the geographic proximity of the subject they are writing about, relying more on secondary sources, including the news media, to cover topics farther from their home base, while relying more on primary sources—including their own original reporting—closer to home. This could help explain why Carpenter found that local citizen journalism websites relied on the traditional news media for only 12.4 percent of their sources, although sources were indicated only by verbs of attribution, thus undercounting hyperlinked sources.[25]

That said, Pew has estimated that bloggers rely on the traditional news media for as much as 90 percent of their sources in an analysis of Baltimore blogs.[26] However, Pew did not study randomly selected posts. Rather, Pew's study examined blog posts about a select group of major news stories in Baltimore. By definition, stories do not become "major news" without saturated attention from the traditional media. Furthermore, it is not surprising that the local blogosphere relies on the media for coverage of these major headlines.

Pew's report, however, also noted the precipitous decline (32 percent in a decade) in the amount of local news coverage in *The Baltimore Sun*.[27] It is possible that local blogs' primary focus is not on what is covered by the media, as suggested by Pew's method of selecting blog posts, but rather on what is not covered by the news media. One might expect those blog posts on topics saturated by traditional media coverage to rely more heavily on traditional media sources, while relying on other types of sources—including bloggers' own original reporting—when discussing topics more often ignored by the local press.

Research Questions

At stake is whether blogs contribute original content to the media landscape or whether they simply parrot content taken from the traditional news media, primarily newspapers.[28] Previous studies of bloggers' sources primarily suggest the latter.[29] These studies' methods of coding sources, however, have overlooked the long tail of sources, which when taken as a whole, may represent a greater proportion of total sources than the traditional news media. Thus, the first question the study tackles is:

RQ1:
    To what extent do local public affairs place bloggers rely on the traditional news media as news sources?

    This study also raises the possibility that, similar to newspapers' use of wire services, bloggers' reliance on traditional media may be negatively related to the proximity of the subject they are writing about. The closer the subject of the blog post, the greater the ease with which a blogger can report on that story and the less likely they are to have to rely on the traditional news media's reporting. Thus, the second research question is:

RQ2:
    Will bloggers use more traditional media sources when discussing non-local subjects versus local subjects?

    Especially given the decline in the traditional media's local news reporting, bloggers may also be more likely to use non-media sources, including original reporting, when writing about subjects least likely to be covered by the mainstream press. Thus, the final research question is:

RQ3:
    Will bloggers' use of traditional media sources differ by subject? (i.e., will bloggers use more media sources to discuss issues that typically receive substantial media coverage, versus issues that typically receive little media attention?)

Methods

    This study reports on the findings of a quantitative content analysis of local public affairs place blogs. The study started with a list of public affairs place blogs in medium-sized U.S. cities (i.e., cities with populations between 100,000 and 400,000).[30] The researchers who compiled the original list defined public affairs place blogs as blogs primarily about the public affairs of a particular city, written by an author, or authors, within that city. A blog was counted only if posts on the site provided at least minimal original commentary and the site was independent from commercial entities, traditional media organizations, chambers of commerce, politicians and political candidates. Their study initially identified 330 public affairs place blogs in 96 cities.
    For the purposes of this current study, this list of blogs was randomly ordered using a random-number generator, and the content of the first 100 codable websites was analyzed. Blogs were deemed uncodable if they were no longer online, had not been updated for all of 2009 or did not have a blog archive coders could use to locate posts beyond the site's front page.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the individual blog post. Ten posts, consisting of the first post on 10 randomly selected days in 2009, were coded. According to data from the blog search engine Technorati on the average frequency of blog updates, 10 posts represent a month of content on the average blog.[31] If there was not a post on a selected day, coders counted forward to the next day when there was a post and recorded the elapsed number of days as a measure of the frequency of a blog's posts. The average "freshness" score was 5.17, which suggests that, on average, the blogs in the sample were updated once every five days.

Coding Procedures and Variables

Blogs were coded by three trained graduate students, with the sites divided evenly among the coders. A comprehensive coding protocol was developed, the coders were trained and the protocol edited for clarity. A reliability test was conducted on 20 percent of the sample.

Sources

The coding protocol defined sources as any named individuals, organizations, documents, etc. attached to sentences by verbs of attribution or hyperlink. Verbs of attribution included "said," "charged," "added," etc. Attribution could also be made by verbs denoting state of mind such as "believes," "feels," etc., as well as by "source hyperlink."[32] Hyperlinks were only coded as a source if they linked to the source of a given piece of information being discussed in the blog post. Contextual links—links leading to information not discussed in the blog post, such as a Google map showing a physical location or a link to a definition of a word in an online dictionary—were not counted as sources. Additionally, sources were only counted if they were explicitly identified (includes hyperlinks) in the text of a blog post. Anonymous sources, such as "officials" or "sources," were not coded as sources.

In addition to media sources—newspapers and television—four types of non-media categories were included in the protocol: non-media secondary sources, press releases, original documents and original reporting. Original documents were defined as any primary source material that was the basis for the information discussed in the blog post. As examples of use of original documents, bloggers may link to city council minutes, local statutes or government databases. Original reporting was defined as old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting engaged in by the blogger him/herself. This could include attending and writing about a community meeting, conducting interviews with other residents by phone or email or being an eyewitness to an event.

There were nine media sources, differentiated based on whether they were local (i.e., in the same city as the blog) or non-local: Daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, alternative newspapers, magazines, television stations, radio stations, specialty publications (business journals, lawyers' weeklies, etc.), blogs and other websites. Social media sources were also coded, although not

according to whether they were local. Some of these sources were used very infrequently; thus, this paper's analysis is based on four primary types of sources: Traditional media sources, which includes newspapers and television stations, online sources, which includes blogs, non-media websites; original documents and original reporting. [See Table 1]

Blog post subjects were also coded based on 13 topic categories. Nine of these subjects referred to local topics. Four referred to non-local topics: State and national government and politics, state or national economy, other state or local topic and other international topic.

Blog and Blogger Demographics

In addition to the primary variables of interest, blogs were coded for several other variables, which may reflect the amount of blogging experience a site's author has and his/her involvement in the local blogger community, which may influence the bloggers' use of primary and secondary sources. These variables included the lifespan of the blog in months, the number of links to other local blogs, the number of those links that were reciprocated and the number of ways the blogger could be contacted by a reader. Contact methods included email, telephone (or voice chat, such as Google Voice), postal address, instant chat or a link to a social networking profile. These contact methods were summed as an index of the interactivity of the blog. In addition, the number and gender of bloggers were coded based on blogs "about" pages.

Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability was tested using a randomly-drawn sample of 20 blogs (including 200 posts), which is twice the 10 percent sample size suggested by Riffe et al. for checking inter-coder reliability.[33] Intercoder reliability for the ratio variables was calculated using Cronbach's alpha; reliability for non-ratio variables was calculated using Hayes and Krippendorff's SPSS macro to calculate Krippendorff's alpha.[34] For both sets of variables, an alpha of .70 or greater was considered an acceptable level of reliability.

To enhance intercoder reliability, the number of subject categories was reduced from 22 to 13. Local entertainment, religious and healthcare topics were combined into "other local topic." Local history and historic preservation were also collapsed into a single topic, "historic preservation." Finally, state and national topics were collapsed in part because of ambiguity over how to code state representatives serving in the U.S. Congress.

With these adjustments, intercoder reliability ranged from an alpha of .728 for original reporting to one for several variables.

Findings

The average blog in the sample had existed for 31.19 months. Sixty-two of these sites were written by individual bloggers and 28 were written by more

than one blogger (M=2.51) (the number of bloggers on 10 sites could not be determined). Forty-nine of the blogs were written by men, 14 by women and 18 by groups of men and women (bloggers' gender on 12 sites could not be determined). Bloggers provided an average of 1.48 ways for their readers to contact them, the most frequent being email (N=82) and links to local networking profiles (N=42). On average, these sites had a total of 12.38 outgoing links in their blogrolls; an average of 9.17 of the linked-to sites linked back to the original blog.

Bivariate correlations were used to explore the relationship between the lifespan of the blog, the number of outgoing and reciprocal links, the number of contacts the blogger provided and their use of traditional media sources. The only significant relationship was between contact methods and use of traditional media. As the number of contact methods increased, bloggers' use of traditional media sources decreased (r=-.132, p<.01).

Reliance on Media Sources

RQ1 asked, to what extent do local public affairs place bloggers rely on the traditional news media as news sources? Table 1 shows the frequency with which bloggers used a traditional media source compared to other types of sources. In 1,000 posts, bloggers used a total of 2,246 sources, of which only 517 (23.02 percent) were traditional media sources, including newspapers (N=448) and television stations (N=69). Furthermore, 661 posts (66.1 percent) did not use traditional media sources, and only 119 posts (11.9 percent) relied only on traditional media sources. Combined, bloggers were more likely to use original sources (N=248) or original reporting (N=299) and were more likely to rely on original sources as only sources (N=171).

Some may argue that bloggers often do not cite their sources and these numbers underrepresent bloggers' reliance on traditional media sources. However, it should be noted that posts cited an average of 2.25 sources (SD=2.309), and only 107 posts cited zero sources. This number, however, is not necessarily indicative of a failure to cite sources. Those posts that did not cite a source could have simply reflected bloggers' personal opinions and thus not relied on any sources.

Differences Based on Geographic Focus

RQ2 asked if local public affairs place bloggers would use more traditional media sources to discuss non-local versus local subjects. A t-test was used to compare the group means for local subjects compared to state and national subjects. As shown in Table 2, bloggers did use a significantly greater number of traditional media sources when discussing non-local subjects (M=.704, SD=1.088) compared to local subjects (M=.491, SD=.999) (t(1,998)=2.042, p<.01), while they were significantly more likely to use original sources (M=.603, SD=1.065), including original reporting (M=.316, SD=.618) when discussing local subjects.

Table 1
Percent of Sources[a] in Each Category by Subject

Subject	Media	Traditional N'papers	TV	Online[b]	Original Sources[c]	Original Reporting[d]	Other	Total N
City/county gov./politics	25.26%	22.96%	2.30%	33.67%	12.50%	20.41%[a]	8.16%	392
State/national politics	31.09%	26.42%	4.66%	41.45%	6.22%	8.29%	12.95%	193
Schools/Education	32.43%[a]	27.03%[a]	5.41%[a]	29.73%	17.57%[a]	10.81%	9.46%	74
Crime/trials/police	37.27%[a]	29.09%[a]	8.18%[a]	29.09%	10.91%	7.27%	15.45%[a]	110
Environment	17.81%	15.07%	2.74%	39.73%	9.59%	12.33%[a]	20.55%[a]	73
Transportation/alt. trans.	17.19%	15.63%	1.56%	59.90%[a]	2.08%	9.90%	10.94%	192
Economy/economic dev.	24.73%	22.97%	1.77%	35.34%	14.84%	9.19%	15.90%[a]	283
Historic Preservation	19.02%	18.48%	0.54%	33.15%	11.41%	25.00%[a]	11.41%	184
Public infrastructure	25.81%	23.66%	2.15%	40.86%	15.05%[a]	9.68%	8.60%	93
Other	11.34%	9.57%	1.76%	43.58%	24.94%[a]	4.79%	15.37%	397
State/national economy	48.94%[a]	31.91%[a]	17.02%[a]	40.43%	2.13%	2.13%	6.38%	47
Other state/national topic	24.61%	19.37%	5.24%	48.17%[a]	12.57%	3.66%	10.99%	191
International topic	17.65%	17.65%	0.00%	70.59%[a]	5.88%	0.00%	5.88%	17
Total %	23.02%	19.95%	3.07%	40.29%	13.31%	11.04%	12.33%	
Total N	517	448	69	905	299	248	277	2246

[a] Number of sources in category/Total Sources; top-three highest percentage in each category of source.
[b] Includes blogs, non-MSM websites and social media websites.
[c] Includes primary documents, databases, etc.
[d] Includes other blogs, websites and social media.

Differences Based on Subject

RQ3 asked if bloggers would rely more heavily on traditional media sources when writing about subjects that typically receive substantial media coverage, versus subjects that may receive little media attention. To answer this question, the proportion of each category of sources (e.g., newspapers) to all sources was calculated for each of the different topic categories (e.g., city or country politics and government). Within city or county politics and government, blog-

Table 2
Use of Sources for Non-Local versus Local Subjects

Source Type	Local Mean	Non-Local Mean	t	df
Total Sources	2.236	2.286	-.268	998
Traditional Media	.4913	.7041	-2.645*	998
Original Sources	.603	.316	4.952*	514.368+
Original Reporting	.32	.19	3.614*	352.245+

Local (N=804), Non-Local (N=196)
*p<.01
+equal variance not assumed because of significant Leven's

gers relied on the traditional media for 25.26 percent of their sources, online for 33.67 percent, original sources for 12.50 percent and original reporting for 20.41 percent of their sources.

Spearman's rank order coefficients were used to determine if the rankings of the different types of sources within each topic category were related to one another. In addition to those sources that are subsets of one another (i.e., newspaper sources are a subset of traditional media sources (rho=.978, p<.001)), there was a significant negative correlation (rho=-.552, p<.05) between online sources and original reporting. This may suggest that bloggers use online sources as a substitute for original reporting, and vice versa. There was not a significant correlation between the ranks of sources within the other topic categories, which suggests that there was variation in bloggers' relative use of the different types of sources based on the subject of the blog post.

Within each column of Table 1, the highest percentage value corresponds to that subject on which bloggers relied most heavily on each category of sources. The top three subjects within each source category in Table 1 are starred. Bloggers relied most heavily on the traditional media when writing about state and national economic issues, local crime and local education. At least these first two topics receive saturated coverage in the news media. On the other hand, bloggers relied most heavily on their own original reporting when writing about historic preservation, local government and the environment. Historic preservation and the environment likely rise to the top because these are issues the mainstream press cover infrequently, whereas city and county government rises to the top because of the ease of attending and reporting on local governmental meetings. The differences in the rankings of source categories by blog post subject illustrate differences in bloggers' use of sources based on both geography (state and national economy versus local government) and subject (crime versus historic preservation).

Discussion

This study found that local public affairs place bloggers rely on the traditional media to a much lesser degree than previous studies have suggested.[35] The debate over bloggers' use of media sources may only be a tempest in a teapot. Bloggers in this study were actually more likely to use original sources—including primary documents and original reporting—than traditional media sources. Additionally, the majority of the local public affairs place bloggers' posts did not cite any traditional media sources, and in the majority of instances where these public affairs place bloggers did cite traditional media sources, they also used an additional type of source. It is important to note, however, that the traditional news media—newspapers in particular—still comprised a sizable proportion of the bloggers' sources, which reflects the continued influence of the traditional media in the online space and signals that although concerns over copyright infringement by bloggers may be exaggerated, these concerns are not likely to disappear.

When bloggers did and did not use traditional news media sources reveals important information about these local bloggers' routines. Bloggers used more traditional media sources when writing about non-local issues, which is analogous to local newspapers' use of the news wire to report non-local stories. Like local papers that use the wire service to cover non-local news stories, local public affairs place bloggers rely on other media for sources because they lack the resources to produce original reporting on subjects farther from their home bases. Locally, however, these bloggers are more likely to use original sources, including old-fashioned shoe leather reporting. When writing about local issues not frequently covered by the traditional news media, that local public affairs bloggers are most likely to complement traditional news sources with original reporting. More research, however, has to be done on these blogs' content to understand the extent to which they are making substantial contributions to the availability of local public affairs reporting and the relationship between these relatively new sites and more established news media. Future studies might also examine these bloggers' individual characteristics, what motivates them to blog about local public affairs and how this activity affects their broader engagement with civic affairs where they live.

This study has been careful to refer specifically to local public affairs place bloggers, not the blogosphere more generally. This study suggests research questions that could be applied to studies of other types of blogs and social media, but given the diversity of the blogosphere and this study's specific focus, these findings cannot be generalized beyond local public affairs place blogs. However, despite this limitation, this study sheds light on those blogs most likely to overlap with the mission of the traditional news media—covering public affairs—and those media will no doubt continue to be front and center in the debate over bloggers' use—some might still argue overuse—of traditional media sources.

Notes

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10. Leccese, "Online Information Sources," 588-589.

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