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The role of a political blog: the case of *www.commentary.co.za*

ABSTRACT

With the inception of new technologies and the Internet, media users can consult a variety of diverse sources for their daily news. The latest innovations to have an impact on the traditional news landscape are weblogs, commonly referred to as blogs. Blogs have become a significant new way to publish information and engage in conversation about social and political issues. This paper explores the role of the political blog, www.commentary.co.za, as a news medium as perceived by selected Johannesburg bloggers. Through qualitative research, the respondents concurred that while a news blog will probably never replace traditional media, it can be used effectively to promote the exchange of information and offer new perspectives on issues. In addition to this, they believe that blogs can be a form of participatory journalism and complement journalism.

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INTRODUCTION

New media and especially the Internet have permeated every aspect of our lives, especially the way in which we source our information. Members of society are now able to access a multitude of information and obtain their news from a variety of sources. These include online newspapers and e-zines, and now personal websites that provide specific information to niche audiences. One such website is a weblog, commonly referred to as a blog.

Originally regarded as an online diary, a blog is now considered a source of news in many parts of the world (Handley, 2002). According to O'Grady (2005), blogs first gained prominence as sources of news after 9/11 and have since gathered momentum. As a source of information blogs have certain benefits: speed, location and freedom from control and institutional limitations. Welch, Jensen and Reeves (2003) praise blogs for four things: "personality, eyewitness testimony, editorial filtering, and uncounted gigabytes of new knowledge". The medium can allow more voices to be heard and provide extra information to society. In addition to this, blogs afford audiences the opportunity to read tailor-made content that appeals to their interests and needs. A weakness of the medium is the lack of quality control. Another disadvantage of the medium, especially in the African context, is the lack of equal access to technology. This implies the negation of the democratic nature of blogs.

Against this background, questions arise about the role of news blogs. A Nexus search revealed that no studies have been conducted on weblogs or blogs and their role in the South African context. Related international studies focus on the nature of the relationship between journalism and blogging. Melissa Wall (2005) investigated blogs that were active during the second US war with Iraq. Through genre analysis, she argues that blogs are a new genre of news in terms of their narrative style, their relationship with their audience and story forms. Jane B Singer (2005) of the University of Iowa used content analysis of 20 blogs to investigate how mainstream journalists adopt the blog format and bring traditional journalistic norms and practices to the medium. Singer emphasises that "the question of 'who is the journalist" online will only become more, not less, provocative as roles, norms and practices become increasingly fluid".

This paper explores the role of a collaborative political blog called *www.commentary.co.za*. The blog has two contributors and combines political news with links to other websites. Libertarian and conservative-minded political philosophy is the focus of *www.commentary.co.za*, but other news, personal articles and commentary are included on the blog (Wides, 2005). This blog was chosen as it has a noticeable readership and covers political and news-related issues. The blog is updated frequently, thus making it appropriate for the study.

1. THE AIM OF THE STUDY

Exploratory research was undertaken in order to determine the role of the political blog, *www.commentary.co.za* as perceived by selected bloggers.

The following questions were posed:
1. Do selected Johannesburg bloggers perceive *www.commentary.co.za* as a source of news?
2. Do selected Johannesburg bloggers perceive *www.commentary.co.za* as participatory by promoting the exchange of information?
3. Do selected Johannesburg bloggers perceive *www.commentary.co.za* as democratic and thus free and independent from political or bureaucratic control?
4. Do selected South African bloggers perceive *www.commentary.co.za* as complementing or replacing journalism as we know it?

2. KEY CONCEPTS

A **blog** is "a periodically (often continuously) updated website that posts the thoughts and observations of a single writer and often the responses to those observations" (Stovall, 2005:116). Important aspects include links to relevant information (Grabowicz, 2003), a comment sections and a conversational tone, showing original sources, building communities of interest.

A **political blog** may include links to articles from official websites with personal comments posted with it (Wikipedia, 2005). Political blogs can cover what interests the author or be more specialised.

A **blogger** is an author of a blog (Webopedia, 2005) who creates the content and maintains the webpage.

The intercast of blogs has been dubbed the **blogosphere**, which is essentially a distributed discussion where blogs link to and discuss what others have written or linked to (Bowman & Willis, 2003).

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

In order to focus the research, theoretical statements were formulated:

1. According to the Media Centre at the American Press Institute (Bowman & Willis, 2003), a blog is a form of participatory journalism, and effectively complements traditional journalism as opposed to replacing it.
2. According to the assumptions of the democratic-participant theory, *www.commentary.co.za* is a democratic medium that encourages the exchange of information and is free from political or bureaucratic control.
3. According to the identified news values of timeliness, proximity and impact, *www.commentary.co.za* is considered a news source.

4. NEWS ON THE NET

While only a certain amount of time or space is allotted to a story in the mainstream media, the Internet has no limitations and thus has a greater capacity for information. The Internet allows for creativity and flexibility, and can combine various forms to present information. In addition to this, the web is powerful due to its ability to deliver information immediately or as an event is happening. News on the net does not lose the qualities that should be included in the news and thus includes a variety of information, the expansion of the information and quality information through depth and context. A very useful function of online news is that you can archive it.

The most prominent qualities of the web are interactivity. Through interactivity, a new relationship between journalists and their audiences is established. Some might even argue that this could lead to a new form of journalism (Stovall, 2005:117-123).

4.1 Blogs as a source of news

Due to the fact that the elements of news are constantly changing, there is no single definition for the concept (Leiter, Harriss & Johnson, 2000:30). The social, economic, political and technological changes present in the world continue to impact on what is considered to be news (Leiter *et al.*, 2000:39). The Internet thus also impacts on what is considered news. Oosthuizen (2001:447) defines news as "knowledge about new, topical and contingent events that differ in the relevance and meaning they have for people".

In order to define or explain news, media practitioners usually make use of agreed upon news values. These values are professional codes used in the selection and construction of news (De Beer, 2004:169). Timeliness, proximity and impact are used to determine whether *www.commentary.co.za* is a source of news.

The news event should fit the time schedule of the news medium. Thus, whether the medium delivers the news twice daily, continuously throughout the day or even once a week, the news should be updated accordingly. In addition to this, news must always be new (De Beer, 2004:170; Greer, 1999:32). The closer the event is to home, the more newsworthy it is (De Beer, 2004:170). Finally, the event or story should exhibit impact, meaning it should be relevant to the audience (Fourie, 2001:454).

4.1.1 Credibility
In order for a blog to function as a source of news, it needs to establish credibility. Even though blogs lack the professional codes of the established media, credibility is established by a transparency of sources and reporting methods (Strupp, 2005). In addition to this, the blogging community is

attempting to get bloggers to adhere to a professional journalistic ethical code that has been revised to suit the medium (Cyberjournalist.net, 2003).

The Internet acts as an editing mechanism in the blogosphere, where mistakes are fixed only after the fact (Lasica, 2003). The online community does not tolerate inaccuracies, and holds high standards when it comes to the dissemination of credible information (Lasica, 2003). Blogs that ignore critics will lose credibility and readers (Sullivan, 2004).

Links provide a transparency in a blog that allows the writer to reference any online resource directly (Blood, 2003). This enables the readers to determine for themselves "whether the writer has accurately represented or even understood" the original piece (Blood, 2003; Rundle, 2004).

4.1.2   Objectivity vs. subjectivity
Credibility can be established by a specific blog, but most blogs are not objective, and don't pretend to be (Grossman, 2004). They are personal actualisations of the web (Van der Linden, 2004) and can be equated with personal diaries that offer readers one's personal view of the world. While the personal connection may be appealing to many readers, it negates the objectivity of the blog as a source of news. Even if a blog states its bias, it can still do harm. Dube (in Smolkin, 2004) warns that "it's hard for people to weed through and know what is opinion, what is fact. It may contribute to the spreading of misinformation and to misconceptions and to spin". Bloggers will however argue that certain measures are in place to curb this.

5.   BLOGS AND JOURNALISM

Citizens are increasingly performing random acts of journalism, having witnessed an event and writing about it on a blog for anyone to read. Lasica (2003) views blogging as a revolution, claiming that "in a world of micro-content delivered to niche audiences, more and more of the small titbits of news that we encounter each day are being conveyed through personal media – chiefly weblogs". Blogs ultimately allow citizens to become stakeholders in the news process. They allow a person to be a publisher, commentator, moderator and writer simultaneously. According to Ruggiero and Winch (2004), computer-mediated communication channels such as weblogs provide opportunity for conversation "and negotiation of journalistic norms". Due to the increasing significance of these channels, "journalists struggle to retain their cultural authority over a dramatically changing news process" (Ruggiero & Winch, 2004).

Authors (Lasica, 2003; Bowman & Willis, 2003) agree that blogs can be viewed as complementing journalism, as opposed to competing with it. The blogging community discuss the stories created by mainstream media as well as producing participatory journalism, commentary and fact checking (Lasica, 2003). In turn, the mainstream media feeds on this, turning to blogs for story ideas and sources, thus creating a symbiotic relationship between the two (Lasica, 2003). Good bloggers can be likened to good journalists, as they like to gather interesting information and share it with

others (Lennon, 2003). Writers of both mediums serve their readers (Lennon, 2003). The interactive nature of blogs can be very helpful to journalists, because by listening and collaborating with their audiences, they can develop a broad base of sources who are experts in a wide range of subjects (Gillmor, 2003).

It is however important to note that the goals of mainstream media and blogs are different. With blogs, the goal is to update detailed political information faster than traditional and even other online sources. Reynolds (in Smolkin, 2004) hints at the alternative role of blogs in that "they have the ability to get ideas noticed that would otherwise be ignored and to shame people into doing their jobs better". While professional journalism has standards for sourcing and reporting, with blogs, the whole point is that the standards are lower. The authors disagree by reaffirming that the goals are different. Table 1 highlights the differences between traditional media and blogs as a news source. The table also draws attention to the different applications and goals of these mediums.

Table 1: Traditional media versus blogs

Traditional media	Blogs
Large, heterogeneous and anonymous audience that is bound by geographical, cultural and political boundaries.	Fragmented, homogenous, known and accessible audience. Geographical, cultural and political boundaries are removed.
Audience passively consumes media.	Audience is increasingly active in the consumption, creation and participation of media.
Few mechanisms for audience feedback and those in place are slow.	Instant and extensive feedback through email, discussion forums and comments sections.
Schedule is one-way and dominated by centralised content providers.	On-demand schedule from a large array of voices. Often content is audience created and many-to-many.
Stories are designed for mass audiences and are linear and static.	Stories are more personal and are non-linear and interactive.
Difficult to start up, operate and maintain.	Easier to start up, operate and maintain, but require higher level of commitment and time from the creator.
Basic coverage of events in given time or space.	Deeper coverage of events as time and space allow.
Can only present certain news and are bound by the media organisation constraints.	Act as thin media publishers by inexpensively providing news not normally found in mainstream media.
Cannot provide commentary especially of a controversial nature.	Can provide commentary that is too controversial for mainstream media.
Stories discarded quickly.	Stories kept alive for longer periods and circulated among many blogs adding new angles and insights constantly.
Various gatekeeping mechanisms, time constraints and the nature of the format delay the delivery of breaking news.	Disseminate breaking news faster.
Sometimes look to blogs to obtain footage or information about an event.	Sometimes look to mainstream media for main stories and comments on them.
Readers have access only to the one specific story provided.	Readers can sift through comments and links of an article, forming their own opinions on the original information.

Adopted from: Bowman and Willis, 2003; Palser, 2002; Lennon, 2003; Lasica, 2003; Rundle, 2004; Pavlik and McIntosh, 2004.

5.1 Participatory journalism

The Media Centre at the American Press Institute (Bowman & Willis, 2003) defines participatory journalism as:

> The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.

Elements of participatory journalism (Bowman & Willis, 2003) include:
- Little editorial oversight or formal journalistic workflow dictating the decisions of writers
- Conversations that are distributed simultaneously
- Conversation is egalitarian
- Trust is gained through collaboration
- Audience feedback
- A sense of ownership of the news

In the rise of participatory journalism, traditional journalism's hegemony as a gatekeeper of the news is threatened not only by technology, but also by the audience it serves (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Audiences that participate in the journalistic process will be more demanding than the traditional passive consumers of news (Lasica, 2003). The audience may feel empowered and the need to make a difference in the news received in their societies, resulting in the feeling that they have a shared stake in the end result (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Such audiences and effective participatory journalism inform a democracy appropriately.

5.2 Democratic-participant journalism

The functionalist approach from a media perspective provides us with a basic idea about the role of media in society (Fourie, 2001:269), thus the normative theories were used to explore the role of the blog. It is possible to link the role of blogs to the libertarian theory due to the fact that they are a platform for the expression of divergent opinions as they are free from government control.

A blog also appears to exhibit many of the assumptions of the democratic-participant theory. Participation and interaction as distinctive qualities of the Internet support the application of the democratic-participant theory to explore the role of blogs. Democratic-participant media encourages media that links senders and receivers, and favours horizontal patterns of interaction (McQuail, 1994:122). The right to relevant information is supported as is the right to answer back (Fourie, 2001:275). Participatory media are closely involved with the lives of the communities they serve and allow their users to have an influence over editorial policies (Kamalipour, 2002:24).

Blogs can further be seen as democratic as they are free from political control. The Internet is a connectivity platform and has assimilated all the known boundaries of geography and time. This makes it extremely difficult if not impossible for governments to completely control the medium and the information dispersed by it (Alberts, 2004).

The South African news media exercise their right to freedom of expression, but can be dealt with legally if contravening the law. The traditional media adhere to professional codes of conduct when publishing information and they obey the law. The Internet is governed in a similar fashion and is not censored by the government.

The Internet and blogosphere in South Africa do not appear to be censored and controlled by the government. With reference to monitoring, the content on the Internet can be read by all who are interested. In this sense, it can be assumed that content is always being monitored by the common individual.

Blogs are praised for their easy access, easy set-up and minimal or no costs, making them seem like a truly democratic medium where anyone can join in the national conversation. Many American authors, like Taylor (2004), emphasises that blogs would not be such a democratic medium if they were not so easy to set up. This may be true for first world countries. However, third world countries suffer from what is known as the technology gap. A large disparity between the technology haves and technology have-nots is evident, ultimately turning the Internet into an exclusive medium that can be accessed only by those with money (Berger, 1996).

The free flow of information and lack of governmental censorship and control may make the Internet a more democratic news source, but as long as access is restricted due to costs, it is not a truly democratic medium in Africa. Making blogs and blog-related technology available to all and easier for the mass audience is essential to making it a more accepted communication medium (Rundle, 2004).

South Africa is the most developed country in Africa when it comes to the Internet, and the government is attempting to stimulate net use (Wright, 2002). This is done by establishing Multi-Purpose Community Centres (MPPCs) and Public Internet Terminals (PITs). Highly sophisticated systems have been implemented to develop a sustainable democracy through the Internet in South Africa (Wright, 2002). While it has been argued that these efforts have not been successful and South Africa lags behind in Internet access (Stones, 2004), the government maintains it is committed to providing these services and increasing access (South African Government Information, 2005).

6. METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Qualitative research, which focuses on interpreting and constructing the qualitative aspects of communication experiences (Du Plooy, 2002:83), was the method used in this research. Qualitative research was selected as it allows insights into communication to be derived from the subject's perspective (Du Plooy, 2002:34).

7. SAMPLING DESIGN

The sample was purposive as it is a known group sample, defined as selected news bloggers in Johannesburg, South Africa. The sample was homogenous as it shares several common characteristics, namely they all read www.commentary.co.za, live in the Johannesburg area and write political news blogs. Due to the relatively small number of dedicated bloggers living in Johannesburg, and the use of face-to-face interviews to collect the data, five respondents were selected in a purposive convenient sample. The selection of five respondents is supported, as a homogenous population requires a smaller sample size than a heterogeneous population (Du Plooy, 2002:101).

Table 2 provides an overview of relevant demographic information of the respondents.

Table 2: Demographic information of the respondents

	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education	Political orientation
Respondent 1	Female	27	Senior Producer Summit TV	Hons Journalism	Philanthropist/ Humanitarian
Respondent 2	Female	Unknown	Producer 702	Unknown	Unknown
Respondent 3	Male	27	IT Analyst	BCom Honours	Liberalist
Respondent 4	Male	28	Lecturer/ consultant	MA (Accounting)	Moderate libertarian
Respondent 5	Male	Unknown	Programmer	Unknown	Libertarian

8. DATA COLLECTION

The data was collected by making use of a qualitative semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted in September and were approximately thirty minutes long. The transitory and conversational exchange was guided by a pre-determined interview schedule and recorded by means of a tape recorder.

A pilot was conducted in order to determine whether the measurement instrument (the interview) was appropriate and reliable (Du Plooy, 2002:93). The instrument's internal value was evaluated by checking whether the questions were clear, while its external value was evaluated by determining how widely the instrument could be applied elsewhere. The pilot study was conducted with respondents who met the requirements of the intended sample. The pilot study indicated that some questions in the interview required altering.

9. DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative data was analysed according to the Miles and Huberman approach in order to break the data down into manageable information (Miles & Huberman, 1986). This approach involves three concurrent flows of activity, namely data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing.

10. VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Validity is the accuracy and trustworthiness of the instruments, data and findings of a research exercise (Bernard, 2000:46). In order to ensure validity, research has to achieve theoretical and methodological triangulation. Due to the fact that only qualitative research was used, methodological triangulation was not achieved. Theoretical validity is achieved if the necessary dimensions of the meaning of a concept have been identified and these dimensions are as mutually exclusive as possible (Mouton, 2002:118). All the concepts defined in the literature review were concise in order to achieve theoretical validity. This was done by consulting various sources in order to define each concept as accurately as possible.

The measuring instrument used, namely the interview, is required to be valid in order to achieve methodological validity. Face validity involves checking whether the operational indicators of the concept make sense (Bernard, 2000:49). The operational indicators were the questions in the interview. The questions related to the function of blogs were acceptable as they made sense to the interviewees and allowed them to answer them as efficiently as possible. Content validity was achieved as the instrument, namely the interview, had appropriate content for measuring the complex concept of blogs (Bernard, 2000:49). Construct validity is achieved if there is a close fit between the construct that the instrument (interview) is measuring and the actual observations made with that instrument (Bernard, 2000:50). The instrument allowed the researcher to infer that the units of analysis had complex traits and supported predictions made from the theory (Bernard, 2000:50). The interview questions related to the phenomenon being explored and generated answers from the interviewees that were in accordance with the theoretical statements, construct validity was thus achieved.

Reliability is the validity criterion for data collection (Mouton, 2002:144). Reliability refers to whether or not the same answers are received by using the instrument to measure the phenomenon more than once (Bernard, 2000:47). Reliability is achieved if the interview can be applied to various groups under different circumstances and consistently produce the same results (Mouton, 2002:144).

Reliability was achieved as the questions in the interview were clear and relevant to the common concepts of the research and random errors relating to the individuals interviewed were kept to a minimum (Du Plooy, 2002:121). Reliability may have been threatened by the researcher's bias, the individuals who participated in the research process, the measuring instrument (interview) and the research context (Du Plooy, 2002:121).

The external validity deals with the "extent to which conclusions can be generalised to the real world" (Du Plooy, 2002:105). The external validity of the research design was compromised due to the convenience sample, meaning that the findings could not be generalised to the population. By conducting the research in a real-world setting and avoiding multiple measurements of a single subject, external validity was promoted.

11. FINDINGS

11.1 The role of blogs

The respondents summarised the role of a blog in society as follows:
•   It serves as an aggregator of information.
•   It provides an analysis of, or reflection on the world.
•   It allows minority voices to be heard, especially through feedback.
•   It creates communities of like-minded people.

11.1.1   A source and aggregator of information
Respondent three feels that a blog "allows someone to keep up to date with a topic they are interested in without having to do the research themselves. The blogger finds all the links and comments and takes the audience on a walkthrough of that topic everyday. They are supposed to keep a person more informed, just like the press are". The information is in a conversational tone, and talks "to people" as opposed to "at them". Respondent one sums up their tone by calling it "informal, chatty and colloquial".

These views are consistent when examining the role of a political blog. However, it could be added that the role of a political news blog is to "provide supplementary information that may mould the audience's interpretations of political situations" as noted by respondent one. Bloggers provide their own view and commenting on the news. The bias of the blogger is usually stated upfront, whereas this does not occur in the mainstream press.

Links also provide supplementary information. Links point back to original sources, and allow readers to view the information in its original context. Links are also useful as "if you are really interested in what you're reading, you can go and find out more about it" according to respondent two. Respondent one elaborates on this concept and says that "it provides the readers with the choice of looking elsewhere for the content and making their own decisions about it by weighing them up".

11.1.2   Opportunity for participation through feedback
Feedback is the means by which a conversation is initiated, which in turn leads to the exchange of information. Feedback on a blog is usually received through the comments section or email. It is a fast process and can often lead to a discussion as the blogger has the power to reply. Interestingly, respondent five adds a third means for feedback, indicating that "anyone can blog on their own and critique entries".

The comments section is used for feedback. It can also "supplement and add to the discussion or news item as well as provide fresh insight" as noted by respondent one. The comments section is important as it assists in creating an atmosphere for debate and discussion, emphasising the participatory and interactive nature of a blog. Comments have sometimes resulted in respondent four changing his mind on an issue. With more perspectives being added, people can decide what version they want to believe. In a sense, comments can allow all sides of the story to be told, which is an important aspect of journalism. One could argue that minorities do not have to be bloggers to be given a voice, but are afforded that opportunity through the comments section as well. Ultimately, the comments section ensures participation in a community.

11.1.3   Community creation
A participatory community that is bound by similar interests and outlooks on events is created. Respondent five states that the creation of a community is definitely achieved by successful blogs, but does not believe that it has had great success in terms of local South African blogs. "Bloggers interact with each other because they are similar, and because they are different" as respondent four notes. Thus, even if they do not agree with someone in the blogosphere, bloggers may still view that person as an ally and a member of the community. While respondent two acknowledges this point, she emphasises that on blogs you tend to find more people who agree with you as opposed to disagreeing. This is due to the idea that people will read those things that interest them and provide them with deeper insight. Respondent three stresses the importance of the community that is created as he claims "people want a more interactive type of media than the typical letters pages of a newspaper allow".

Blogs perform an informational function, and include commentary and opinion on issues. The conversational tone and participatory nature thus make blogs a form of participatory journalism. The relationship between the two practices was thus explored.

11.2   Blogs as participatory journalism

All the respondents do not think that blogs could ever replace traditional media. Some feel that blogs have not built up the trust or loyalty that traditional media has and there is a perception that the authority lies with established traditional media. Respondent two says that "traditional media offers things that a blogger in Johannesburg can't do on her own". By this she implies that bloggers lack the necessary skills and resources to deliver content that is on a par with traditional media.

Blogs complement journalism, however, and have a role to play in the media world. According to respondent one, blogs complement journalism by "providing food for thought, fleshing out ideas brought up by journalists, and making them more accessible". Respondent three adds that "the mainstream media comes up with all these various news articles and topics, and the blogs serve as this automatic aggregator which takes things and groups it all into relevant and connected focus areas". It is clear that blogs are subservient to the mainstream media as they depend on them for information. Respondent two feels that blogs definitely complement journalism, but "you need a critical mass for it to work, and unfortunately there isn't one in South Africa".

11.3   Blogs and democracy

All the respondents regard the Internet, or the concept of it, as democratic. This is due to the fact that it allows ordinary citizens, like many bloggers, to have a voice and freedom of expression is easier. All the respondents subsequently add that the Internet as a medium is not actually entirely democratic. The lack of access for most people in South Africa hinders the democratic nature of the Internet, effectively turning it into an elite medium. Respondent two expresses concern over this as "the social and economic conditions of the country don't allow people who probably need a voice most to utilise the medium because they don't have access to the education or the technology". Respondent five adds that the Internet is democratic as "anyone can participate and the barriers of entry are very low, but telecommunications costs do have an impact". Respondent four agrees, stating that Telkom, the South African telecommunications provider, restricts the readership. This results in the lack of diversity in the audience.

Respondent three adds a different perspective on democracy relating to the Internet, claiming that it involves limits on people's actions:

> My behaviour and speech is limited in a democracy to protect the interest of other people. I don't think that South Africa has developed channels through which people can limit the online actions of others that may harm the interests of people. Perhaps the Internet is better compared to an anarchist or socialist environment where people share content and can download anything for free without any consequences. No one really owns anything when it is online.

With reference to lack of access, he states that "if less people can play, then the rules of the game will be biased against those people who are not represented".

The Internet is thus not a truly democratic medium in South Africa yet, due to the limitations in access. With improvements in social and economic conditions in the future, this may change. Information is dispersed and received continuously on the Internet. Whether the information delivered by *www.commentary.co.za* can be considered news was examined so as to determine the role that the blog plays in society.

11.4   Blogs as a source of news

In examining news, the definition of the concept was explored, followed by news in terms of blogs. In addition to this, what makes a piece of writing a source of news was discussed. The identified news values of timeliness, impact and proximity in the content of *www.commentary.co.za* as well as the perceived credibility of the blog were examined.

11.4.1 Defining news
As stated, news is a difficult concept to define. For this reason, all five definitions offered by the respondents will be provided:

- "News is the reporting or bringing to light anything that is new or that is in conflict with the status quo" (respondent one).

- "News is whatever is going on in the world around us. The closer the news is to people I think the more interested in it they're going to be" (respondent two).

- "News is commentary or reporting about events that have occurred which is not biased and does not contain the opinion of the person giving the news. News in essence should be telling you what happened" (respondent three).

- "News is an event that draws public attention" (respondent four).

- "News is an article describing a particular recent event that may interest the audience" (respondent five).

Taking these various definitions into account, one can conclude that *www.commentary.co.za* provides news as the blog provides information about new events that are generally close to home (proxemic) and are of interest to the readers. News in terms of blogs differs, however, as it tends to reflect the blogger's personal interest and is more editorial. Respondent five points out that

"there are a few genuine journalistic news blogs, but blogs depend on the mainstream media for news feed". One could argue then that if the information is regarded as news in the mainstream media, it can be regarded as news on the blog. The difference lies in the slant and tone used, making the news more accessible with less jargon. This is reiterated by respondent one who states that "blog news is characterised by subjective analysis of substantiated news reports".

A piece of writing can be regarded as a source of news "when it is new information, the origins of which can be traced and authenticated" according to respondent one. Respondent four says that a piece of writing is news if it is "something interesting and something that gets people's minds going". This view is shared by respondent two.

Respondent three argues that blogs may not actually be supplying news, but rather opinions. He claims that it would only be news if the blogger was witness to an event and then reported on it. Respondent two shares this notion, stating that news is "unique first person reporting that is not linked to any third party news articles". Some bloggers provide first-hand reporting. However, South African blogs, including *www.commentary.co.za* do not appear to introduce new news. The authors rather introduce new slants and new ideas on news that has already appeared elsewhere. All the respondents agree that *www.commentary.co.za* does not supply new news or first-hand accounts of events. Respondent four states that *www.commentary.co.za* has tried to introduce new articles on the blog, but it is quite rare. This could be due to time constraints and the lack of access, as bloggers have other jobs and do not have the opportunity to source stories as journalists do.

The news delivered by *www.commentary.co.za* is perceived to be easy to read and easy to access. Respondent five views their news as opinions and editorials with links to original news sources within the article. The blog presents news "in a fairly unstructured way, typified by subjective analysis and accompanied by links to relevant sources". Respondent four calls the news on *www.commentary.co.za* "structured creativity".

The blog can provide deeper coverage of events than the traditional media, as the bloggers are afforded more time and space. Respondent four adds that *www.commentary.co.za* focuses on being analytical. It may also draw attention to any inaccuracies in the established press.

Whether the news is first-hand reporting or sourced from the mainstream media, one can also look to news values in order to determine whether the blog is a source of news.

11.4.2 News values
The news values of timeliness, impact and proximity were examined in *www.commentary.co.za*. While the blog discusses some foreign issues, *www.commentary.co.za* is a South African blog and discusses politics that are close to home. This indicates proximity.

As a political news blog, *www.commentary.co.za* draws readers that are interested in certain politics and issues. Readers may or may not share the political ideology of the authors, but the content remains relevant and topical to the audience, thus fulfilling the news value of impact.

The news that appears on the blog has usually already appeared in the traditional media. It relates to current issues in politics. However, it cannot be considered new. Thus, the news value of timeliness is not present in the content on *www.commentary.co.za*. The authors provide a new angle on the news, however, thus keeping it fresh.

While the blog exhibits certain news values, it needs to be considered as credible in order for the readers to use it as a source of news.

11.4.3 Credibility of the news source
Blogs can establish credibility by offering transparency and accuracy as well as a respect for ethics. Blog credibility is necessary in order to maintain readership and be considered as reputable sources of news.

All five respondents agree that the blog *www.commentary.co.za* offers transparency in their posts. This is done by providing links to sources used and the contact information of the authors in order for one to question them. In addition to this, respondents two and five note that the bloggers state their bias and tell you about themselves, thus ensuring transparency. Reporting on issues that are opposed to their political ideology also assists in making the blog transparent. This is due to the perception that it is fair to show all sides to a story. Providing an opposing viewpoint also indicates that the blogger is not hiding anything and does not have ulterior motives when delivering content.

There are no obligations to adhere to blog ethics, and there is no one ethical code as such. However, all the respondents have ideas on what ethical conduct entails. Respondent two states that blog ethics are "about being honest, being truthful, quoting sources and not stealing ideas from other people". This includes the practice of linking to any other blogs or articles from the mainstream media used.

Respondent five feels that as a new medium, blog ethics are still being developed. However, in order to maintain an audience, a blog has to maintain a good reputation, and thus act ethically. Enforcing rules would negate the freedom of the medium. The onus is thus on the bloggers to behave ethically and act responsibly towards their readers.

In terms of editing and publishing, all the respondents state that entries are edited before being posted. Editing is performed by the bloggers themselves. Changes can be made once they have been posted. However, but these are usually spelling errors. It is a general rule that one cannot

remove a post or change the actual content. Adding more information afterwards is acceptable. Readers may also point out mistakes, thus assisting in a post-editing situation.

All the respondents agree that the two bloggers of *www.commentary.co.za* are the gatekeepers who will decide what is appropriate to post on the site, and what to filter out. Gatekeeping mechanisms are thus in place. However, they are not as formal as in the mainstream media and do not include any neutral parties.

One can also measure the blog's credibility and democratic nature in terms of political or bureaucratic control.

11.5   External political control

The political news blog, *www.commentary.co.za*, does not charge a fee for access and does not include any advertising. Respondent one believes this is because the blog "aims to be accessible to everyone within the Internet community. It sees itself as a publication for the people, by the people and limiting access would create alienation". This idea is repeated by respondent five who believes "anyone should be able to view it, and operating costs are relatively low so to speak".

On a more superficial note, a subscription is not charged as the bloggers do not believe anyone will pay and the readership would drop drastically. This is due to a perception that the blog is not good enough, or the medium is not yet established. Respondent four emphasises, however, that if the medium did become more established and *www.commentary.co.za* were turned into a commercial entity, the bloggers would use advertising as opposed to charging for access as "it would restrict the readership and kill the quality of the medium".

In terms of political control, the potential for censorship and monitoring was explored. As previously stated, this is a relatively grey area, where most people are unsure of the extent of control applicable to the Internet. All the respondents agree that it does not appear as if the content on the blog and the Internet as a whole is censored by the government. The content can be monitored "by any reader picking up on anything that goes against our constitution and reporting them to a complaints authority" according to respondent one. This view is shared by all the respondents, with respondent two adding that "I don't think our country is that repressive, and that the ten or so blogs are a threat to President Mbeki".

According to respondent four, while it is doubtful that the South African government would censor content on the Internet, it is possible, but difficult. He illustrates this by saying the government "could put in word filters or pressurise companies such as the *Mail & Guardian* to censor the blog site. If they wanted to, they could go to our domain authority and do the same. If they try block the

site though, one can open up at a new site, where the server is in another country". The government would not have the jurisdiction to enforce their laws on an overseas Internet host. The political news blog *www.commentary.co.za* is thus free from any external control.

CONCLUSION

Blogs are still a rather new phenomenon, and not very well known in South Africa. They are therefore not very established, which makes it difficult to describe their role. This research is only a starting point for a topic that needs to be explored in more depth. While the research has been conducted on a small scale with a limited sample, the significance of the practice of blogging already becomes apparent.

Selected bloggers agree that the function of a blog in South Africa is to provide citizens with an alternative source of news, add more perspectives to the events and issues of the day, and initiate conversation. A blog reports on day to day events and provides an account of what is going on in the world. It functions as an aggregator of information that encourages dialogue and participation in a society that is flooded with information dispersed by authoritative voices. It is a media platform and has the potential to give minorities a voice.

In the freedom of expression allowed by blogs, misinformation can easily be spread. It is thus crucial to view all sites with a critical eye and learn how to evaluate credibility. Bloggers may have a good reputation at present. However, it is still necessary to maintain a certain degree of scepticism when viewing content on the web.

Selected bloggers also agree that blogs will not replace journalism but have a distinctive role to play in the media world. Within the South African context, bloggers believe that blogs are subservient to the mainstream media as they depend on them for information.

Blogs have the potential to contribute positively to South African's information needs. Unfortunately, most South Africans are not aware of blogging and the potential it has. The majority of the population does not have access to the Internet, and thus cannot participate in the sharing of information and ideas in a blogging community. A blog should not only be a medium for those with money and education, but for all members of South African society. In talking and debating about specific issues, and exchanging information for all to see, members of society could become better informed and self-governing. Until all members of society have access to the medium, blogs cannot be viewed as entirely democratic.

In addition to this, many web users are not aware of the extensive opportunities that the Internet offers. Additional research is therefore required in order to learn more about the interactive medium, and its function as participatory journalism. Insight can also be provided on how they ought to function, in order to ensure that they live up to their full informative and democratic potential.

Recommendations for future research include replicating the current study on a national scale including a representative sample of active political bloggers in South Africa. In this study quantitative data can be collected through a national survey, while qualitative data can be collected through face-to-face interviews or focus groups. Currently, a large gap in South African research regarding all aspects of this phenomena is identifiable. Research emphasis should be placed on perceptions of blogs, their uses and gratification, and their ever-changing relationship with journalism. The perceptions of the blog audience, journalists and media professionals should thus be explored, compared and analysed.

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