

**WEBLOGS AND THE TRADITIONAL NEWS MEDIA IN THE U.S.A: A
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CHANGING ROLES OF WEBLOGS IN THE
NEWS COVERAGE OF 9/11 AND HURRICANE KATRINA**

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Abstract

This report is a preliminary exploration of the issues concerning traditional media and weblogs at two points in time. It examines the difference between the American mainstream media's utilisation of weblogs during the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, and the utilisation of weblogs in the hurricane Katrina disaster in 2005. The mainstream media's response to the weblog form during the attacks in September 2001 and the hurricane Katrina disaster in 2005 are examined, together with an exploration of the traditional coverage. It reveals how weblogs have become a more significant part of disaster coverage by mainstream media in the United States. These processes and the implications of these changes are explored for an understanding of how the weblog is altering our understanding of the construction and dissemination of news for the traditional media institution in the United States.

Keywords

Weblog	Blogosphere
Blogger	Agenda Setting
Gate Keeping	9/11
Katrina	Mainstream
History	News

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

_____ day of _____, 2007.

To my family
with sincere thanks
for their love and encouragement
during the writing of this report.

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 Introduction

Weblogs and the traditional news media in the USA: a comparative study of the changing roles of weblogs in the news coverage of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina.

This report is predominantly a preliminary exploration of the ways in which the development of online publication systems are altering some facets of the way the mainstream media¹ deal with news and information. ‘Information’ refers to any data that the public uses, that they would consider interesting and any information that they would consider newsworthy. The term ‘News’ will refer to any information about current events that the public would consider interesting. This report will argue that the development of online publication systems has altered aspects of how information is created, how it is accessed and how the information is used. It appears that the part of the public that utilises news information, has new ways of creating and accessing it through the online publication system of weblogs. I intend to examine these issues by focusing on how the news institutions are making use of weblogs, what the technology of weblogs allow, and how the process of using weblogs is different to the more traditional methods. These issues will be looked at by exploring the issues concerning traditional media and weblogs at two points in time; during the September the 11th terrorist attacks in 2001 and the

¹ The term ‘Mainstream media’ (MSM) or ‘traditional media’ refers to the news institutions of the mass media whose primary objective is distributing news and information to the public. The mainstream media utilizes broadcast media such as television and radio, as well as print media such as newspapers. The use of the Web to distribute information with traditional news websites is also included in this definition.

hurricane Katrina disaster in 2005. The aim is to understand the debates around weblogs in relation to the two aforementioned cases where they were featured.

Over the four year period, from the terrorist attacks in September 2001 to the hurricane Katrina in 2005, weblogs have appeared to become a more significant part of disaster coverage by the mainstream media in the United States. This study will examine the processes involved in this, and the implications will be explored to understand how the weblog might be changing the construction and dissemination of news for the traditional media institution in the U. S.A. The emergence of weblogs as a news medium will be contextualised in this report within the broader crisis currently occurring within the traditional media. This issue will be examined briefly in chapter 3.

Weblogs are a newer form of online publication system, and the 'blogosphere' (the term used to define the online world of weblogs) is growing at a rapid rate. Rebecca Blood informs us that in 1998 there were just a few to be found on the Internet (7), while a more recent online article on the Blog Herald website, estimates the total number of weblogs created to be around 100 million as of October 2005 (Riley). The basic definition of a weblog would be a periodically updated Web page that contains entries or posts that are arranged reverse chronologically, from the most recent post at the top of the page, to the oldest ones at the bottom. The fundamental mode of these entries or posts would be text. The information contained within the entries varies greatly from one weblog to another across the blogosphere, and covers every imaginable topic of interest, and may also include multimedia content such as pictures and audio (Bowman and Willis 8). The posts

may also include links to other websites, which allows the ‘blogger’ (the owner of the weblog) to call on information from throughout the Web. The weblog may also include the bloggers’ commentary and thoughts on the links posted. Weblogs also allow other Web users to comment on the posts or entries, thus facilitating discussion on particular topics of interest. This feature makes it possible to discuss issues with the visitors to the weblog and the owners of the weblog. This communication feature will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3 of this report, together with some of the other technologies that make the blogosphere possible.



Figure 1

Figure 1 above is a screenshot of a typical text based weblog.² It demonstrates some of the features of the blog including dated entries with the newest post at the top of the page. This weblog allows commenting by the visitors to the site for the purpose of discussing issues raised in the entries.

I am interested in why the medium of the weblog has become such a phenomenon in recent times. I intend to address this issue by examining the development of the weblog from a historical perspective (which will be examined in chapter 3). Chapter 4 will highlight how the social disaster situation in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre contributed to the rise in popularity of weblogs for the traditional media institution in the United States. Chapter 5 will examine how the traditional media

² Screenshot taken on 17 July 2006 of Robert Scoble's weblog- Scobleizer. At <http://scobleizer.wordpress.com> Robert Scoble is an employee of Microsoft and blogs on technology issues, and what Microsoft and the competitors are currently working on. See Scoble (124-135).

institutions of the United States utilised weblogs during the hurricane Katrina disaster.

The final chapter will sum up with the conclusions and findings of this report.

Blood's essay "Weblogs: a History and Perspective" briefly describes the historical development of the form known as the weblog and how it has developed into what it is today (17-24). Blood describes the first bloggers as people that explored the Web for interesting sites and posted links to these sites on their personal websites, together with commentary on these links. These first weblogs were literally logs of the Web created by people who knew how to code a Web page. Recent services such as Blogger and LiveJournal³ have made it possible for almost anyone with Internet access to create a weblog. This is achievable without knowledge of Web design code such as HTML⁴ and without a service for website hosting. The weblogging services make both of these obstacles outdated by providing an easy to use interface that allows for an individual to publish information quickly and easily through the use of built in templates and by providing the service for the hosting of the weblog. The easy to use interfaces available on contemporary weblogging services have assisted in today's weblogs containing a variety of information and not just interesting links and commentary. This is a key factor of today's weblog- it allows for any person with Web access to publish any information they wish and potentially reach millions of people worldwide, quickly and easily.

³ URL's Blogger at www.blogger.com & LiveJournal at www.livejournal.com.

⁴ HTML: Hyper Text Markup Language- the coding language that makes up Web pages on the Internet.

When weblogs are used by the traditional media institution for news information, there is allowance for more democratic information exchange as the weblog is more interactive and personal in nature. Weblogs can also be used by the public to discuss news topics or even provide breaking news in the case of disaster situations.

The value of this research for the local South African context is that the majority of the major newspapers do not currently incorporate weblogs into their websites. This report will attempt to provide valuable information on the benefits and disadvantages of incorporating weblogs by the mainstream media. None of the 14 major national and regional newspapers owned by Independent News & Media in South Africa currently run any weblogs on their websites.⁵ The Mail and Guardian is the only South African media institution that has experimented with the weblog as a form, although not entirely for news alone. It currently offers a weblog service to its readers similar to the services such as Blogger and LiveJournal, where readers can create personal weblogs and post information that interests them or comment on the news. The Mail and Guardian also created weblogs for well known politicians during the 2006 local South African elections, to create debate and communicate with voters.⁶ The Mail and Guardian invited South Africa's politicians to write to their own blogs, providing them with a different means of communicating information towards the voters thereby encouraging discussion and debate.

⁵ Includes The Star, Cape Argus, Cape Times, Sunday Independent and The Mercury. For complete list see www.iol.co.za

⁶ This was accessible at <http://electionblogs.mg.co.za>.

I have chosen to examine weblogs as there has been much debate around what they signify for the traditional media institution.⁷ These relatively new forms of online publication systems have the potential to alter the practices of the traditional media institution. The United States of America is the place where the majority of the traditional media institutions have experimented with incorporating weblogs in some way on their sites.⁸ Therefore this study focuses on the experiences of the media institutions in the United States of America.

Tim Berners-Lee is credited as the original inventor of the World Wide Web and he is the head of the W3C (the World Wide Web Consortium) (Johnston). The weblog, in some aspects represents the vision of Tim Berners-Lee, who originally envisaged the Internet and the Web as a place where people would be able to write, socialize and communicate with one another. Berners-Lee writes in his “The World Wide Web: A very short personal history”:

The dream behind the web is of a common information space in which we communicate by sharing information. Its universality is essential: the fact that a hypertext link can point to anything, be it personal, local or global, be it draft or highly polished. There was a second part of the dream, too, dependent on the Web being so generally used that it became a realistic mirror (or in fact the primary embodiment) of the ways in which we work and play and socialize. That was that, once the state of our interactions was on line, we could then use computers to help

⁷ For broad debates see Bowman and Willis 2003; Gillmor 2004; Blood 2000, Kline and Burstein 2005.

⁸ Chang, Ocampo, Jessing-Butz, Krase, Galanis and Williams, 2006. Blue Plate Special. <http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/blueplate/issue1/top100.html>

us analyze it, make sense of what we are doing, where we individually fit in, and how we can better work together (Berners-Lee).

According to Berners-Lee, the Web should be a place where anyone who enjoys access can publish information and communicate with others. In the beginning the only people who could make themselves heard on the Web were those who knew how to code a webpage and those who had a way to host the website. Participatory publishing tools such as those used in today's weblog have given people the ability to publish their personal thoughts, ideas and information on the Web. This has allowed people to have a voice within contemporary information society.⁹ The most significant fact about the weblog is that one does not need to be a computer programmer nor does one need to know how the Internet functions to create one as any individual with an Internet connection is able to publish and receive information from weblogs.

In 1998, Matt Drudge's weblog at www.drugereport.com was possibly the first site to draw the public's attention to the potential significance of the weblog form. He posted unconfirmed information on the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky affair, which later proved to be true (Beard 1).

⁹ Since the advent of electronic communications such as the Internet, many writers make reference to the 'information society' or the 'network society'. This is a broad term that incorporates many arguments and themes about how contemporary society is taking on a different shape and changing due to the increased importance of digital information and the use of information and communications technology in the developed parts of the world. The term will be briefly examined in the next chapter. See: Webster 2002; Castells 1996; Mackay, Reynolds & Maples 2001; Williams 2003.

The phenomenon of the public publishing information to the Web has been particularly prominent with respect to the 9th September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, when many people wished to have a say and join in the debates around the attacks. Jeff Jarvis's personal weblog at www.buzzmachine.com is an example of a weblog that was started as a direct result of the attacks on the Twin Towers, and has grown in popularity since. He posted the following on the 10th June 2002, explaining why he started blogging:

...Personally, I did not start blogging until September 11 -- because I didn't have something to say until that day and after that day, I had so much to say and needed a place to say it. Blogger provided the incredibly easy tools to make it easy for me to join...¹⁰

Jarvis was personally affected by the terrorist attacks of 9/11, when he was trapped in the dust cloud in New York during the aftermath. For this reason he started his own weblog (Welch 376). People who were close to the Twin Towers posted to their personal weblogs, provided eyewitness accounts of what they had seen, and created 'news'. The mainstream media, on the contrary, did not appear to have an interest in weblogs at that time, and continued their usual coverage through traditional mediums and their online counterparts.

However, this appeared to change over the next few years. When the hurricane Katrina disaster occurred in 2005, the media, who had already been exploring weblogs, took more

¹⁰ From Buzzmachine Archives.
<http://www.buzzmachine.com/archives/2002_06_10.html>

interest in the blogosphere and weblogs were adopted by the traditional media institutions. Professional journalists now write their own weblogs, and sometimes the traditional institutions now employ bloggers to write for them. The public are also creating news type weblogs from which the traditional media draw information and ideas.

Prior to the terrorist attacks on September the 11th 2001, the mainstream media appeared to be wary and suspicious of weblogs as a form. Dan Gillmor, a columnist for the San Jose Mercury News, was one of the first journalists to make use of the form of the weblog. He writes in his book We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People, that the main reason for this belief is the instinctive conservatism and caution of the traditional media (114). He also believes that another of the reasons for this outlook is that the traditional journalists and editors are cautious of a form that appears to be a threat to the traditional institution's values of editorial control and guaranteeing of trustworthy information and objectivity when reporting news. These are plausible concerns, and the next chapter will examine how the form of the weblog is capable of producing trustworthy information in a different manner to the traditional institution. Chapter two of this report will also discuss the theories of the news media's functioning as a result of gate-keeping and agenda setting.

The form of the weblog is increasing in popularity with the traditional institution. Gillmor informs us in an article published in the Media Emerging e-journal that blogging has gradually crossed over into the news business, and that weblogs are read more by journalists now than the general public (26). He states that the reason for this is that the

blogosphere provides a valuable source of material for the traditional institution. This has been demonstrated many times and these issues will be discussed in the following chapter together with the theoretical approach taken by this study.

CHAPTER 2

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

Several titles in my 'works consulted' discuss the new media forms. These include Terry Flew's New Media: an Introduction and Dennis McQuail's Mass Communication Theory: an Introduction. These authors give a broad outline of the ideas, main issues and history of the new media forms. Flew defines 'new media' as those forms that integrate computing and information technology, communication networks and information content (10). He believes that the new media can also be termed digital media, and that the Internet is the most noteworthy form of new media. Hoynes and Croteau also define the new media forms as forms that are based on computer technologies and that they can be referred to as digital media (321). Flew questions what exactly is new for society in new media, as the new media have become a more fixed and normal part of contemporary society including social, cultural, economic and political aspects. He focuses on what the perceived effects of the new media forms on the public are. He argues that the new media's effects on society are not completely a technologically deterministic one way influence, but that the effects are due to the embedding of the technology in all aspects of society. The authors point out some of the properties of these new technologies that are expanding our understandings of democracy and democratic information exchange. They also discuss some of the defining features of the new media forms of which many believe to be the notion of interactivity (Truetzschler 81, Hoynes and Croteau 321). The idea of interactivity is also discussed in much of the literature on

new media forms, and the case of the weblog as a news medium is an excellent example of the levels of interactivity that can be achieved when using the new media.

The introduction of electronic communications technologies such as the Internet has caused much discussion amongst many writers about the 'information society' (Webster 2002, Castells 1996, Mackay et al 2001, Williams 2003). This term incorporates many arguments and themes about how contemporary society is changing due to the influence of new media technologies. These changes includes the growth in the use and importance of cultural and media technologies, the shifting economy (which is reflected in the changing nature of work and changing patterns of inequality), and the final theme in debates about the information society relates to the reorganisation of time and space, where time and space become less important in social organisation and interaction due to the new technologies (Mackay et al 1-5). Castells (1996) argues that in his 'network society' time is not important, and that information and communication technologies eliminate the concept of space. He further argues that information is at the centre of the contemporary era, and thus our mode of development is informational. Webster does not fully accept as true, the term 'information society', as he does not think that we are heralding a new form of society as information was important in all previous societal forms as well (263-264). This may be true, however the weblog allows the ordinary person to create their own information and potentially publish it to a mass audience and this is something that was not easily possible before. Weblogs are easily accessible anywhere and at anytime thus making space and time less important. They allow for

more communication and feedback on any topic, thus facilitating a different form of social participation.

Weblog users are no longer simply passive recipients of information, as weblogs allow two-way communication among the involved parties, unlike the more traditional forms of media communication. This however, is only true for those individuals who have access to basic facilities such as a computer and a connection to the Web. There is still a global digital divide between those who have access in the more developed parts of the world and those who do not. Castells' The Internet Galaxy informs us that the reason for this digital divide is the crucial role that the Internet plays in many parts of contemporary society, including economic and political activities (247). Much is being done to attempt to bridge this digital divide including the World Summit on the Information Society. The main goals of the Summit are towards raising political awareness and improving the use of information and communications technology in developing parts of society (Pyati 1).

The Internet: A new mass medium? by Wolfgang Truetzschler and Dennis McQuail's Mass Communication Theory: an Introduction both discuss the communication aspects of the Internet, and how it differs from the traditional methods of mass media communication. They argue that the Internet has allowed for a level of communication and feedback not seen before in the traditional systems. The form of the weblog encompasses this (74-93; 118-120).

The ability for everyone to be a publisher, and have a voice on the Internet has caused intense debate around what the future holds for news and media information relative to the traditional news institution. Colin Sparks' article in Mass Media and Society discusses how the attempt to adopt the Internet has created challenges and opportunities for the traditional media institution (269-289). Much of the literature reviewed examines how the traditional media institution will have to respond to the use of weblogs as a news form. This includes Kline and Burstein's Blog! How the newest media revolution is changing politics business and culture (237-343) and We've got blog, a compilation of writings on weblogs (161-188).

The above debates are also examined in Dan Gillmor's book on grassroots journalism We the Media. He started his own weblog in 1999. Since then many online news sites have created blogs for their journalists, an example being <http://onthescene.msnbc.com> where journalists from Newsweek took weekly trips to New Orleans to blog on the hurricane Katrina disaster, thus creating discussion with readers. Dan Gillmor discusses blogs as a new form of journalistic practice and the blogs' implications for traditional journalism. He argues that the arrival of new voices in the news world through the medium of the blog will bring about more perceptive and critical reports. He argues that the readers of news coverage often collectively know more than the single journalist and that the contemporary journalist must accept this fact (111). He believes that the traditional lines of power, control and authority are being blurred by this new medium, but he also believes that the new forms will not overrun the traditional ones. This topic is also covered in Bowman and Willis's book We Media: How Audiences are shaping the future

of news and information. In this book the authors examine the weblog phenomenon and the implications for traditional journalistic practices using case studies and other examples from around the world (47-51). They believe that this new form of participatory publication is here to stay, so the traditional media institution must see the weblog as an opportunity to create better journalism rather than a challenge to the conventional practices. They believe that there are many potential benefits from this new participatory form, including an increased trust in the traditional media. This is apparent when we consider the example of a journalist writing a weblog where the readers can communicate with him and discuss news stories. They also believe that the traditional media institution needs to rethink some of their basic ideas about their role if they want to remain as primary resources to the readers.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study will be informed by theories of news media functioning and the Internet that include:

- The fundamental, opposing views of the Internet that include the belief that the Internet is a force of freedom and good versus the belief that it is a place for disorder.
- Theories of the news media's power due to 'gate-keeping' and 'agenda setting'.
- How the traditional structures of the news media might be changing due to the rise of the popularity of the weblog as a medium for creating and distributing news and information and,
- the theoretical debate around the collaborative, open source approach to creating

knowledge as used with the weblog vs. the hierarchical approach that is used in the traditional media institution.

The main differences between the traditional media forms and what weblogs allow can be seen when we take into account the main roles and practices that are found within the traditional media institution. McQuail argues that the traditional practices of authorship, publication, production/distribution, and audience roles have changed with the introduction of new media technologies (119-120). This is especially evident when we consider the example of weblogs, and what they have allowed for within the creation and distribution of news. The traditional media institution's power due to gate-keeping and agenda setting appears to have changed, when the weblog is used as a medium for the creation and distribution of news information by both the public and the professional journalists.

Since the introduction of the Internet, one of the main debates has been around the basic opposing views of it. These include the libertarian/utopian aspects versus the hostile and threatening qualities. Since the introduction of the Web, there have been claims that the Web is a force for freedom and that individuals will benefit from its use, while the opposing belief is that the Web is a place for disorder. Gordon discusses these different theorizations of the Internet relative to the terms the 'neo-luddites' (people who resist technological progress) and the 'technophiles' (people who welcome technology) (7-20). These different views of the Internet and the people that use it will be useful in providing a general basic theoretical backdrop for the study, as many of the debates around online

publication systems are based on contrasting views of them. Differing views are also evident when weblogs are used by the public to report news e.g. during times of social disaster.

One role that the traditional media institution is seen as playing is the gate-keeper role. This is a role that arises when the institution uses a hierarchical structure when deciding what information can pass through to the public. In this structure the journalists report to the editors who have the final decision on what information can pass through into the news and what information will not. Kurt Lewin was the first to use the term 'gate-keeper' in the field of sociology in 1947. He used it to describe the process where the mother decided what food the family would eat, and what would stay off the table (145). David Manning White then applied the term to describe what the media institution does through the use of journalists and editors in the 1950's. He suggests that the process of the journalist selecting a few stories and rejecting the rest causes the public to know only what the media institution thinks to be true (390). When the traditional media act in the gate-keeper role they are in effect the ones that select, organize and package the news and information for the masses (Singer 1). This theoretical approach is of importance, as it is the gate-keepers that decide what information the public should know. With the introduction of the Web and especially with regard to the news type weblog, the mainstream media (the traditional gate-keepers of information) are now frequently being bypassed. Any person who wishes to publish information may do so. They can also find any information online without relying on others to do this for them.

During the 1970's Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw took a different approach to understand the media institute acting in the gate-keeper role. They looked at what the effects of the gate-keepers decisions were, and as a result formed the agenda setting model. The agenda setting model is believed to arise as a result of the media institution acting in the gate-keeper role. What the public are aware of, is directly related to the media acting as gate-keepers, as it is the media institution that decides what information will pass through to the public and what will not. Agenda setting refers to the ability of the mainstream media to influence what the public thinks of as important. This theoretical approach suggests that when the media focus more on particular issues, it leads to the public placing more importance on those issues. In so doing, the media are not reflecting the entire picture, but rather filtering and shaping it.

These approaches are not without fault. Many questions arise from these theories including who, and what determines what people should know. It is also questionable whether one can categorize the audience into a target and simply package one type of information for them. When the media institution acts as a gate-keeper and filters the information it is selecting information for the larger public. Knowing that the audience is made up of a diverse range of people, a hierarchical minority deciding what the majority wants to know is not truly democratic.

However, since the introduction of participatory publication tools, and the rise in the number of people who use weblogs, the blogosphere has shown considerable agenda setting power from the side of the public, particularly in the United States. The

blogosphere has shown that it can focus the traditional media's attention onto certain topics and issues mainly regarding politics in America. An example of this includes the situation where the blogosphere was credited with creating the state of affairs that caused the resignation of Mr Trent Lott, the U.S. Senate Majority Leader. Lott resigned in December 2002, after he had made certain racially insensitive comments at Senator Strom Thurmond's one hundredth birthday party. The mainstream media are suggested to having paid little attention to the comments after they were made at the party, but the comments were picked up on in the blogosphere and after much intense discussion and debate, the mainstream media interest in the issue was reignited. This eventually culminated in the resignation of Lott (Grossman and Hamilton 363-364). This example is one of many that reveal the considerable agenda setting power that the blogosphere has demonstrated¹¹. The blogosphere has in many instances acted as the initial spark that guided the traditional media in the United States to focus on specific issues, especially when certain important weblogs concentrate on them. This demonstrates that in some cases the traditional gate-keepers of information are being bypassed entirely, and the

¹¹ An interesting example of this includes the Kryptonite bicycle lock company which cost its parent company Ingersoll-Rand an estimated ten million dollars due to locks that were easily picked. The matter started on September 12 2005 when a user posted to a discussion board on the Web for cycling enthusiasts that they had easily picked the Kryptonite lock with a Bic ballpoint pen. This issue was then picked up on by the blogosphere and a few days later the blog Endgadget posted a video clip to the site showing how the lock was easily picked. On September the 16th the Kryptonite company distributed a statement that the lock remained a deterrent to bicycle theft and that the new line of products would be much stronger. The blogosphere continued discussing the problem with the locks and this is suggested to have caused the New York Times to take interest, and on September the 17th they published a story about the problem. The issue was finally resolved when the Kryptonite lock company finally agreed to exchange any of the locks that could be easily picked on September the 22nd (Kirkpatrick and Roth 214). The Bush National Guard paper forgeries are another example. A show aired by CBS called 60 Minutes presented documents that were significant in relation to President George Bush's service in the United States National Guard. The documents were presented as authentic on the show, but were later found to be forgeries after debate on the Web. See Hewitt (37-42).

audience is actively seeking out information that interests them, thus setting their own agendas.

McQuail informs us that when the traditional media institution originally appeared, the belief was widely held that the mass media was beneficial and important to democratic practice (134). This was perceived to be a benefit for the citizens as they were receiving important information. The disadvantages included the one-way flow of communication, the commercialization of the traditional media and the limited participation and dialogue from citizens (McQuail 135). These were the basic structures on which the media operated. The issues of gate-keeping and agenda setting would also be included here when considering the disadvantages of the traditional media's approach to distributing important information to the citizens. When the new media forms were introduced they were seen as a possible fix for these disadvantages. The Web potentially allowed for more access to critical information, more potential feedback between citizens and other important people and a new space for the formation of interest groups. Weblogs are more efficient in these characteristics than the traditional forms. The interactive two-way features that the weblog characterises allows for a different form of communication compared to the mass communication of the media, where the information flow is largely one-way, from the institution towards the public. McQuail informs us that this mass delivery of information was depersonalising and that it worked against diverse individuals (132). Even the case of communication from the public in the form of a letter to the editor that is published in the paper is not truly an interactive model where the public is having its own say, as the letters published are still chosen by the institution.

The commenting features of weblogs allow anyone to have a voice and importantly anyone else that has a connection to the Web can see these opinions and thoughts. This technological feature and others will be examined in more detail in chapter 3.

With the introduction of the weblog, and specifically the news-type weblog (where people are using the weblog as a medium to publish their own news) there has been much debate and discussion around what this means for the traditional news institution, and what can be considered authoritative and trustworthy information. Bowman and Willis inform us that the theoretical model of the traditional media's delivery of information vs. the weblogs form is broadcast or top-down news vs. intercast or bottom-up news (10). In the broadcast model, the gatekeeper is the media organisation and the editor, and all news is filtered before reaching the readers. In the intercast model the information is unfiltered before getting to readers, and the roles between producer and consumer change all the time (Gillmor 5). This raises questions about authority of information and what information the public can consider trustworthy. The traditional media institution is seen as trustworthy because of careful fact checking and filtering of information. The weblog approach is different and proposes to publish the information without much filtering, and then come to an agreement on the information published through discussion and debate. This is accomplished using the technological features of the weblog, such as hyperlinks to other sources and commenting for communication and feedback (Bowman and Willis 9). As Peskin and Nachison inform us, the Web acts as the editing mechanism after the information is posted and not before, as is the case with the traditional media institution. When using weblogs the participants in a story rely on the other people involved to

correct the story as it develops, and the importance is no longer placed on the filtering of the information, but rather the publishing of it (6). In the collaborative approach to creating news, the debate and discussion around the information is transparent and clear for all to see. This is not the case with the traditional media institution, where all that the public see is the final product and not the way the news information came about. Gillmor believes that this transparency is one of the most positive consequences of using the weblog as a medium for news information. He states that the industry with the least transparency has traditionally been journalism (61). However the adoption of weblogs as a news form looks set to challenge this tradition.

The following chapter will examine the development of a weblog from a historical perspective, as well as some of the technological features that make the blogosphere possible. Arguments around the weblog as a news form will also be discussed.

CHAPTER 3

3 Historical development of the weblog. Weblog technology & weblogs as news

3.1 History

The weblog form has become quite noticeable in recent times and I intend to address this by examining how the weblog has developed from a historical perspective. The development of the Internet and Web are well studied topics and much material exists about them, however they will not be the focus of this discussion¹². Hewitt believes that the Internet is so successful because it is simple to utilise, virtually cost free and has no control or restrictions on entry and giving out of information. This makes it the most revolutionary of all communications technologies (67). This is mostly true however there are some restrictions particularly in the developing parts of the world where the cost of computers is prohibitive and use of the Web is not widespread.

The first weblogs were introduced approximately fifteen years after the introduction of the Internet in the early 80's. They consisted of frequently updated webpages of interesting links and commentary on news and information. At this time most of the sites on the Web were static. Many authors are of the opinion that the development of the form of the weblog is part of a continuous progression of advances that started with the early adoption of text and alphabets as a means to communicate information and ideas¹³. The

¹² See Leiner, M. Barry; Cerf, G. Vinton; Clark, D. David; Kahn, E. Robert; Kleinrock, Leonard; Lynch, C. Daniel; Postel, Jon; Roberts, G. Larry. Wolff, Stephen. "A Brief History of the Internet." Version 3.32 at the Internet Society Website: <http://www.isoc.org/internet/history/brief.shtml> or Tim Berners-Lee "The World Wide Web: Past, Present and Future" at <http://www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/1996/ppf.html> for descriptions on the development of the Web.

¹³ See Hewitt 63; Kline and Burstein xiv-xvi; Welch 374.

major advances in society have paralleled the evolution in the technology of transmitting information as text. Weblogs have revolutionised the technology of transmitting text and information (Hewitt 63-67). This is important, because the introduction of new and innovative technologies in the communication of information is believed to bring about changes in the "...existing hierarchies of power" in society. (Hewitt 63). The weblog now allows the common person to create and distribute information. This in turn, has arguably led to a shift in the hierarchy of power within society. In previous times power in society was held by those who had access to the creation, and more importantly the distribution of information. From the first development of alphabets to the Gutenberg printing press which led to the mass media; then onto the electronic transmission of information through the telegraph and the Internet; the people who could create and distribute text had a place of power in society (Hewitt 63-67). The democratising potential of the weblog form as a medium for the distribution and creation of news has been leading to a shift of power, away from the traditional media. This is especially applicable to social disaster situations such as hurricane Katrina and the 9/11 disaster, which will be examined later in this report.

The first service that allowed individuals with access to the Internet to publish information to the World Wide Web was the GeoCities service in 1996 (Denton). This service allowed people to create a website without setting up or paying for a dedicated Web server. This was initially of interest to the users of the Web, but after creating their sites, most of the Web site designers abandoned them. Denton suggests that this left the Internet strewn with poor content pages that were roughly designed. The reason for this

was that the GeoCities service required users to know basic programming skills in how to write a webpage using HTML coding, which was difficult and tedious to use for most of the public. The recently introduced weblogging tools available on the Internet alleviate this problem as these are easy to use and require no programming knowledge from the user. As such they have been more readily adopted by Web users at large.

The creator of the first weblog is not a universally accepted fact, but Dave Winner is commonly credited as the first person to make use of the form of the weblog (Fleishman 109; Lasica 171). He is the head of Userland Software and started a weblog in 1997. The term 'weblog' was first used by Jorn Barger of Robotwisdom.com at the end of 1997 (Hewitt 67; Blood 7). Hewitt informs us that three of the first bloggers- Jesse James Garret, Cameron Barret and Peter Merholz started taking into account the number of weblogs in existence at the beginning of 1999. This was when the name 'weblog' was shortened to 'blog' with the owner/editor of the weblog becoming the 'weblogger' or 'blogger'. At the beginning of 1999 there were around twenty four known blogs in existence (Hewitt 70). These early weblogs were listed at Jesse James Garret's site- 'pages of only weblogs' available at www.jjg.net/portal/tpoowl.html (Blood 7). The form that these early weblogs took was that of a link driven site, where the blogger/editor published interesting hyperlinks they had found and commentary on these links (Blood 8). These early weblogs could only be created by people who knew how to code a website. Recent services such as Blogger and Livejournal are easier for the public at large to use. The early weblog pioneers were World Wide Web enthusiasts, who for the most part would work all day creating commercial websites, then spend more time at night

surfing the Web for interesting links and posting these to their personal sites. The early adopters of the weblog were instrumental in shaping the form weblogs would take in the future. Blood informs us that what drew the early webbloggers together was not the format that the weblog used, but rather the webbloggers wish to share what they had found on the Web and a shared passion for the World Wide Web itself (ix).

For the first three years after weblogs were introduced (1998 to about 2001) the early weblog community was largely made up of people who had their own weblogs (Shirky 287). These early blog owners would present links to interesting articles and offer their own thoughts for the rest of the weblog community to see (Blood 8). The Web had been pre-surfed by the bloggers, revealing parts of the Web that the visitor to the blog may never have found on their own (Blood 9-12). Barrett informs us that most of the early webbloggers were working full time with the Internet, and had experience of Web surfing over many years, and they were thus experienced with the Web (26). The blog owner filtered through the large collection of information out on the Web and picked out what he or she considered the most interesting and thought provoking. This information was then filtered down onto the weblog for the rest of the users of the Web to view. When this was done together with differing ideas, opinions and viewpoints, the weblog owners were taking part in the distribution and analysis of information and news to others. By doing this each day, and writing a bit of commentary on articles that interested them, the early webbloggers were creating a definition of the media that was more public and more participatory in form (Blood 9-16). This is important as the medium of the weblog allowed the transformation of connected people from consumers to creators of

information. The creation of discussion around information resulted in a shift from a passive audience to a more active one.

Early in 1999, Bridgette Eaton, the owner of the Eatonweb portal at www.portal.eatonweb.com began creating a list of every weblog she was familiar with, with one simple condition, that every site (weblog) that made it onto the list had to have reverse chronological, dated entries on its pages, from the most recent posting at the top of the page to the oldest entries as the bottom (Blood 8). What defined a weblog was debated amongst many webloggers at this point, but as the Eatonweb portal was the most comprehensive list of weblogs available, the definition that Bridgette Eaton created stayed on as the most significant. It appears that this is still the most widely prevailing definition of what the weblog is, regardless of what use it is being put to. The number of weblogs appearing on the Web continued to rise steadily until July of 1999, when Pitas was launched. Pitas was the first free weblog creation tool at www.pitas.com. In August of 1999 Pyra Labs released its version of the free weblog creation tool called Blogger. It was at this point in its history that there was a rapid rise in the number of weblogs being created. People who did not need to be website developers started creating their own weblogs with these free and easy to use tools.

The development of the weblog form then appears to have gone in two different directions. One was the original link style filter weblog, where the blogger mostly posted interesting links and commentary, and the other was a completely new style, like an online journal or diary where the blogger posted any information they desired from daily

happenings in their lives to opinions on topics of interest. The news type weblog would possibly fit into both categories as one could offer links to traditional media stories together with personal thoughts and commentary, or offer completely original news as in the case of a disaster that an individual has first-hand experience with. Blood reveals that many weblogs created after 2000 followed the style of the original link driven website but she also believes that after Blogger was launched by Pyra Labs, many of the blogs on the Web avoided this style and took the form of a personal journal (8). These blogs included anything, from personal thoughts and reflections on any subject to anything that the weblog owner wished to publish. Blood believes that the reason for this explosion in the number of weblogs and the change in the form of blog was the fact that Blogger placed no form of control on the subject matter that could be posted by people (11). This meant that one was not required to post a link and comment on the information contained within that link to have a weblog. People creating weblogs were no longer Web enthusiasts but rather anyone with a connection to the Web. The format and interface that the free blogging services provide are so easy to use, that people can publish anything they wish quickly and easily. Blood states this as the reason that individuals are unlikely to look for an interesting link and post this up together with commentary. She believes that the form of the weblog has shifted from the link driven to the short-form personal journal style because of the "...free-form interface" and usability that online publication tools like Blogger and Live Journal allow (11).

A recent, significant development that created more interest in weblogs and the blogosphere was the buyout of Blogger from Pyra labs by Google in 2003. This made

people much more aware of weblogs; Google being one of the most popular search engines for worldwide Web users and the most popular search engine in the United States. Research completed by comScore, shows that during March 2006 Google was the most popular search engine with 42.7 percent of Web searches, as compared to the second most popular search engine: Yahoo, with a total of 28 percent¹⁴. The takeover of Pyra by Google thus created more publicity around the blogging phenomenon by making people more aware of what blogging is and what it offers to the users of the Web. This buyout also brought benefits to the users of Blogger and to the users of the web at large (McIntosh). It brought much needed resources to the Pyra team, and they could keep up with the competition by offering more features to the users of Blogger at no additional cost.

The current forms of weblog, both the link style blog and the journal style blog are evidence of a shift from the age of information flow that is carefully controlled by official establishments, to an opportunity for anyone worldwide to have a say. The tools used in the creation of weblogs have made everyone who has access to the Web a potential publisher of information. Contemporary weblogs are being used for a variety of things, far different from the first link style weblogs, and may change again in the future, as the public learns and adapts to the medium. This report will now focus on some of the technologies that make the blogosphere possible.

¹⁴ The comScore Media Metrix service measures search traffic on the Internet. The data is gathered by monitoring the Web activities of 1.5 million English-speakers worldwide, with 1million of these coming from the United States. See Sullivan, Danny “comScore Media Metrix Search Engine Ratings” at <<http://searchenginewatch.com/reports/article.php/2156461>> published April 20th 2006.

3.2 Weblog Technology

The following section will briefly examine the various technologies and functions that have allowed weblogs and the blogosphere to exist and then examine some of the debates around weblogs and the news.

The blogosphere is made possible due to many functions of the Internet that work together. These include the easy to use online publication tools such as Blogger and Live Journal, TrackBack technology, XML or RSS syndication, meta-sites and permalinks. Scoble refers to these technologies and what they allow as the '5 pillars of conversational software'; he believes that these are the technologies that made weblogging popular (130). TrackBack is a technology that finds comments on a post or entry on a weblog, and automatically adds little excerpts from the comments and links to them alongside the post. Bowman and Willis suggest that the TrackBack function is similar to having an editorial page that is automatically generated to appear alongside the post or weblog entry (23).

A XML specification called Rich Site Summary or RSS is also easily incorporated into weblogs (25). This technology allows the list of headlines, links and summaries that have been posted onto a site or weblog to be read through automatically by an application that a user has downloaded onto a computer. RSS allows users to subscribe to weblogs and to gather and view the information on their own application (Kirkpatrick and Roth 218). Using this application the user can browse through large amounts of information very

quickly, and upon finding a topic of interest simply click on the link to access that weblog post or information on a website. This is suggested to create a peer-to-peer content distribution model for information creators on the Internet. As content is automatically updated it is easily visualised (Bowman and Willis 31-32). This technology is very useful to the users of the Web, as it allows for users to get information automatically, simply by subscribing to the RSS feed, without having to search for information on an individual basis.

Permalinks allow for every post on a weblog to have a unique URL (universal resource locator) (Scoble 130). This technology is useful as it allows other blogs to link directly to certain posts on other blogs, rather than having to link to the entire weblog of another user, where new posts may have been added. This eases the manner of creating discussion across the blogosphere.

Meta-sites are another technology that makes the blogosphere popular. These are websites that measure which are the most popular blogs by using specific formulas. They automatically track what items weblogs within the blogosphere are linking to and discussing. Whatever subject is being discussed by the blogosphere at any moment is ranked by the meta-site thus providing popularity ratings. The meta-sites also index and archive all the links to the specific items. Examples of meta-sites include Technorati, Daypop and others. Kline and Burstein inform us that most people believe Technorati is the most popular meta-site (387). The authors inform us that Technorati has found the best formula to measure the most popular blogs. The obvious answer as to which weblogs

are most popular is to measure which ones are visited most often, but the authors inform us that this is impossible to measure. Technorati uses a formula that measures the influence of each blog by measuring links and sources (Kline and Burstein 387-391). These sites would be useful to Web users for viewing what topics are currently being discussed within the blogosphere and which weblogs are popular at a specific time.

These varied functions make the blogosphere possible, and together allow for tremendous freedoms for anyone wishing to publish information (Shirky 288). A recent online article by Landon Howell lists the numerous varieties of blogs available today. The blogs available today include photo blogs, video and audio blogs, which include multimedia content; political and law blogs, expert advice blogs on numerous topics, religious blogs and many others, such as news blogs. News blogs will be the main focus of this report. These blogs are set up or used by journalists in a traditional media institution to provide more information and communication with the readers or by individuals who report and comment on any news information. The following section of this chapter will examine arguments around news type weblogs.

3.3 Weblogs as News

The adoption of the Web by the established media institution has resulted in new and restructured methods of delivering news information. Since the mid 1990's, the traditional media have used the Web as a place to supplement the news information that would have customarily appeared in a magazine, newspaper or other traditional medium (Cohen 532). Sparks supports this view when he informs us that it was in late 1994 that

the traditional media quickly began establishing an existence on the Web. The Web has offered many opportunities, but also presented challenges to the mass media's traditional methods of creating and distributing news information. The challenges to the established institution include different styles of writing for online presentation, altered ethical considerations and a differing commercial model (Sparks 268). The coming together of the Web and the media was originally seen as mostly positive with the advantages of the media being able to deliver information more rapidly, together with larger quantities of data that allow for more supporting information, and thus adding valuable context to the main stories. This information could also have included multimedia content such as video and audio, which are not possible with the traditional newspaper.

In an online article entitled "A Scorecard for Net News Ethics", Lasica informs us that when the traditional media first went online, many in the industry were unsettled by the medium and speculated about what this would mean for the traditional institution. When traditional media started going online some believed that the online counterpart of the traditional medium was not a match for the original form. When Lasica wrote the article in 2002 he stated that only some of the traditional media that were online were using the advantages of the Web as a medium. He believes that the essential characteristics of Web journalism are interactivity, immediacy and community. The information on the Web is timelier, as users can gain access to breaking news from anywhere there is Internet access. The information could also be more valid and trustworthy than its traditional counterpart as online journalists could provide hyperlinks to source information. He further states that another of the advantages of the traditional media going online is interactivity and that this was the feature that was still mostly underused. The form of the

weblog allows for these advantages to be met with greater ease than a traditional website. It would allow for easier and timelier publishing, as the journalist would not have to know how to code a webpage, and could simply publish information themselves. The weblog also allows for a far greater level of interactivity, as we are now witnessing far more discussion occurring between the traditional journalists and the public due to the adoption of the weblog medium.

In an article entitled “The Evolution of the Newspaper of the Future”, Meyer has been cited as suggesting 4925 newspapers worldwide had a Web presence in the year 2000, with 3362 of these coming from the United States (Kenney, Gorelik and Mwangi, 1). The authors inform us that on many of these sites articles were copied from the print edition and simply placed onto the Web, with only some of the sites offering more features, such as hyperlinks to different sources and multimedia and interactive features. The information flow then was still mainly one way with the media institution deciding what information would be distributed. The authors also inform us that while the online market of the newspapers appeared to be thriving, the profits were very low.

The emergence of weblogs however, allow for ordinary people to deliver news and information. Gillmor implies that weblogs are one of the main building blocks of ‘grassroots journalism’ (18), where the publication, distribution and analysis of news information are not limited to the professional journalists only. It is this ability for more people to publish of information that has once again caused intense debate around what the future holds for the traditional media institutions. Some forms of news-type weblogs have been suggested to be a viable alternative to the established media (Hellweg 2 and

Broache 1). It is thus safe to conclude that with the introduction of weblogs, the possibility has opened up for important change in the role of traditional mainstream media and its power. Presently there appears to be a broad crisis within the traditional media. The established institution faces many obstacles and challenges, such as the decline in new and young readers, and a decline in newspaper circulation. Reports also state that there may also be a decline in the public confidence in the traditional mainstream media. This crisis will be briefly examined in more detail in the next section of this report.

A story by David Lieberman of the USA Today published online in May of 2006 reports that the American newspapers are suffering an industry wide decline in circulation rates, which began in the 80's. He states that the reasons for this decline are that young people were turning to cable television in the 80's, and are now using the Web for their news coverage. The story cites the NAA (Newspaper Association of America) study which reports that the average weekday circulation figures were down 2.5 percent as compared to the same period last year. This also corresponds with Kline who states that the numbers show that newspaper circulation has dropped off at a steady rate since the early 90's and continues to drop at an average rate of 2 percent every year (239). Kline also reports that in 1968, 80 percent of American households read newspapers while that figure is down to 54 percent today. He further states that although many people have predicted the end of conventional print and television media (due to the rise of the weblog as a news form) many professionals still believe that the mainstream media is here to stay. He makes the important point that the traditional mainstream media will not

be disappearing anytime in the near future as they possess most of the resources and professionalism that many news type bloggers still lack (237-239).

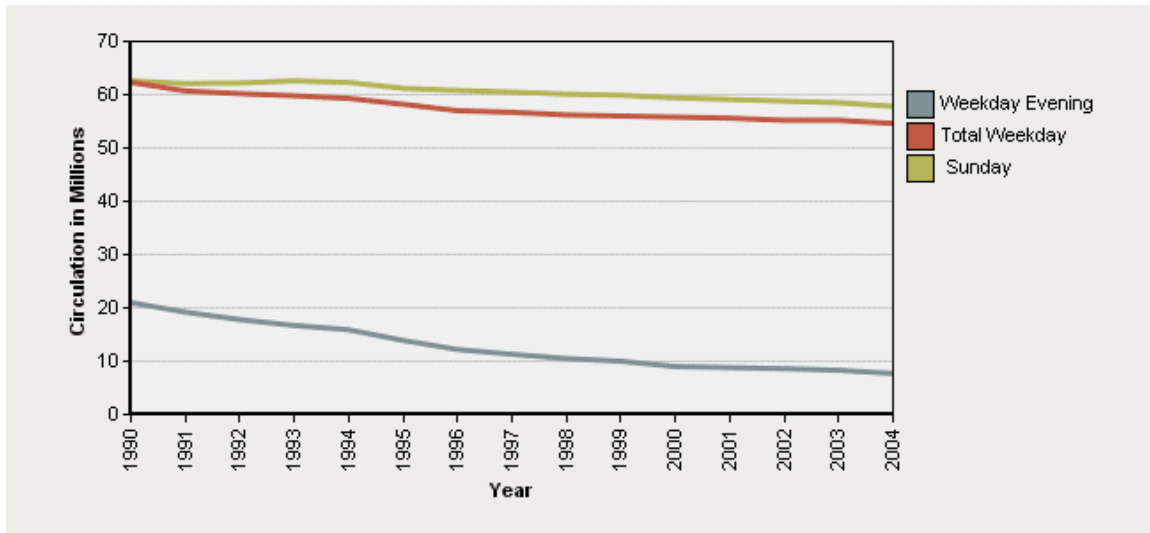


Figure 2

Figure 2 above illustrates the U.S. Daily Newspaper Circulation in millions for the weekday and Sunday editions from 1990 to 2004¹⁵. The graph shows the steady decline in newspaper circulation rates since 1990. The total weekday circulation rates averaged 62.3 million in 1990, compared to 56.2 million in 1998, while the 2004 numbers stood at an average of 54.6 million.

Kline informs us of research conducted within the traditional news industry in the United States regarding the opinions of the public towards bias occurring within the traditional institution. He cites a Pew Internet survey which demonstrates that in 1988, 42 percent of the research sample believed the mainstream media as biased when reporting political

¹⁵ From the 2006 U.S. State of the News Media Report at <<http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com>> Citing Editor and Publisher yearbook data.

news, while a more recent survey shows that the number has increased, passed the half-way mark to 62 percent. He also cites a recent Gallup poll, which reported that 64 percent do not trust the established media to report the news precisely, which is 10 percent higher than the corresponding number of people who said the same only a year ago. Another recent Gallup survey showed that newspaper reading is decreasing amongst the younger of the population, with more of the research sample (33 percent) reporting that they had read a book the previous day rather than a newspaper (Kline 239-242).

These statistics demonstrate that there is currently a broad crisis within the established media, and while the numbers do not bode well for the traditional media institution, the online divisions of the traditional institution should increase in significance because World Wide Web use is increasing amongst the general population. A report by the Computer Industry Almanac states that the number of Internet users worldwide has grown from 420 million in 2000 to over 1 billion users in 2005, and reports that the United States has the most users, around 200 million, which is almost 20% of the worldwide figure. Kline states that the majority of the American population make use of the Web with 75 percent of them making use of it in their daily lives (239). He also points out the Web is quickly becoming the primary news source for the American people, as well as the fastest growing part of the American advertising industry. This shows us that the online sector of the traditional media institution is likely to increase in importance with time.

The following part of this report will examine the arguments around weblogs as a news form. Gillmor regards news type weblogs as a new form of journalistic practice. He argues that the arrival of new voices in the news world through the medium of the weblog will bring about more perceptive and critical reports. He believes that the readers of news coverage often collectively know more than the single journalist and that the contemporary journalist must accept this fact (Gillmor 18). He also believes that the rise of the blogosphere has caused the traditional lines of power, control and authority within the traditional media to be blurred by this new media form, and many professionals agree with this. However they are also of the opinion that the new forms will not overrun the traditional ones, but rather be used as an alternative to supplement what the traditional media offers¹⁶. A reason for this is that many of the news type weblogs created by the audience are not totally independent providers of news. They are reliant on the mainstream media for much of their material. Kline informs us that only a few non-journalist news bloggers actually gather and report news information by themselves (241). What these people do accomplish is enhanced debate and discussion, as well as offering different ideas and points of view together with more links on the information. This is important as it offers more context to the information that is obtained from the traditional institution. The traditional media is as yet the leading source of acquiring information for the majority of Americans. Kline informs us that this is the case even on the Web (241). A survey conducted by the PSRA (Princeton Survey Research Associates) shows that traditional media sources dominate the online news segment with 46 percent of all Web users in the United States visiting websites such as CNN and

¹⁶See Kline 243; Hewitt 71; Bowman and Willis 12-13; Lasica 171.

MSNBC¹⁷, compared with just 9 percent of Web users visiting weblogs from the public for news information. Traditional sites utilising the weblog form could only benefit from them.

The debates around the use of the weblog as a news form feature arguments around the two main uses of the blog as a news medium:

- The use of weblogs by the public to create news and
- The use of weblogs by the traditional institution. This includes the traditional media journalists who write weblogs and utilise public blogs for story ideas; and the media employing bloggers to write for them.

The audience may use weblogs to comment on or provide opinions on the mainstream news, or even to provide unique news in the instance of breaking news such as disaster coverage, where the mainstream media may not have journalists at hand. The journalists are using weblogs as a medium for many functions including to quickly provide news and information to the audience as well as to promote more interactive news creation by using the weblog to increase discussion and debate with the audience.

The main criticism against the weblog being used by the public to report news is the lack of credibility in the information provided. When the audience report news information it is provided without the credibility that the mainstream media provide. This is the case as

¹⁷See www.pewinternet.org "Online News" March 2006. CNN's website attracts 22 million visitors a month while MSNBC attracts 20 million, while the most popular weblogs attract less than half of those numbers (Kline 241).

the information is not filtered like the traditional institution. This may be true; however a recent poll by the public relations firm Edelman showed that in the United States the majority of Americans trusted the opinions of the average person more than the traditional media (Farrell and Drezner 96). One of the main reasons for this could be that the majority of people writing to weblogs do so without any monetary gain, and openly declare their biases for everyone to see, while the traditional media are shown to be influenced by advertisers and are bound by corporate and political interests (Hope 2; Bowman and Willis 12). Hiler reports in an online article published on the American Journalism Review website that more than fifty percent of the world's media are owned by only six large corporations. Therefore weblogs become necessary to access other perspectives and opinions on news coverage and events in addition to what the traditional media might provide. Blood believes that corporate interests are going to become ever more controlling over the free flow of information, and that critical evaluation of what information is available (as is happening now within the blogosphere) will become more important with time (15-16).

Another concern when weblogs are used by the audience for reporting news is that the information contained within weblogs lacks objectivity. This may be true but one should remember that the traditional news is also produced by people with opinions and ideas about what the audience should know. Weblogs can allow for the view of a wider range of ideas and thoughts, from many more sources than just the traditional media might provide. Weblogs also tend to represent the extreme positions of the political spectrum as they expose more extremist views than in the past. Kline, in his article "Towards a More

Participatory Democracy”, believes that weblogs are transforming the political process in America into something more “...representative and participatory...” (5). When people have an opinion and they publish these on weblogs, what they are effectively doing is challenging the traditional media’s ability to set the agenda (Kline 11). In fact it appears that the large part of the appeal of the blog as a news medium is that they have a directness about them that is missing in the traditional media. Lasica believes that weblogs are more personal, honest, raw and one-sided, and these are exactly the characteristics that the mainstream media try to iron out in their editorial process (172). Kline believes that some of these characteristics are the reason why weblogs are becoming increasingly popular (240).

Another of the major criticisms directed against news type weblogs created by the non-journalist public is that they would not exist without the mainstream media. The public’s access to resources is limited when compared to the traditional media. These news type weblogs rely heavily on the mainstream media for the bulk of their information and reporting as discussed earlier in this chapter. An advantage of the blogosphere as a news medium is that the bloggers appear to be very adept at critiquing and keeping a watch on the mainstream media. They have often caused the mainstream media to correct errors in reporting, after they have been picked up by the blogosphere. An example of this was discussed in the previous chapter about the CBS news used documents about President Bush’s National Guard Service in early September of 2004. The blogosphere identified these documents as forgeries and CBS was forced to acknowledge this fact (Farrell and Drezner 90). This and numerous other examples have made people believe that

journalistic standards are on the decline. However, these errors may have frequently occurred, but only now are we recognising this, due to parts of the blogosphere acting as media watchdog. This in turn may help, as the traditional media will now be more aware that they are being watched thereby improving their standards by verifying what they are reporting.

There has also been much debate around what can be considered authoritative and trustworthy information when the public uses the news type weblog for reporting, as the information that they deliver is editor free, unlike that of the traditional institution. The traditional media institution is seen as trustworthy because of the filtering of information and careful fact checking for reliable information. The weblog approach is to publish the information without editing it, and after the publishing come to an agreement through discussion (Bowman & Willis 9). This is similar to the open-source process of creating knowledge as compared to the hierarchical way that is used in the traditional media institution. In an article entitled “Transparency Begets Trust in the Ever-Expanding Blogosphere”, Lasica cites Mary Hodder, who is the product manager for the Technorati meta-site, on why news type weblogs are sometimes more trustworthy than traditional media. In the article Hodder states four reasons for this including niche expertise, transparency in motive and process and being upfront about mistakes. Niche expertise refers to the idea that webloggers are passionate about a few topics of interest only, while the traditional media try to focus on a wide variety of topics. Webloggers are also upfront about biases which relate to the transparency in motive point. They can talk about a topic subjectively unlike the traditional journalist who is trained to be objective. Transparency

in process refers to the fact that webloggers link to sources to support their personal views and claims, unlike the traditional media who use a top-down approach to report information and one does not often see how the information originated.

Together these factors show that weblogs are arguably a more democratic medium for publishing information, and there is an advantage in both the audience using weblogs to create and comment on news information as well as the traditional institution incorporating the weblog form. Electronic publishing as with the news type weblog also allows for a deeper understanding of events, as it makes possible access to different points of view and perspectives. These are believed to be a viable supplement for news and information for the traditional media. The use of a weblog allows for transparency in the process of getting information and a person can always see how the information came about. The weblog also allows readers to connect with a journalist and interact rather than be a passive audience. This is a change from the minimum interactivity possible within traditional media forms.

CHAPTER 4

4 Case Study: 9/11

4.1 Weblogs, news and 9/11

The 2001 September the 11th terrorist attacks in the United States revolutionised many traditional media approaches. They started experimenting with the weblog as a form for creating and distributing news information. This is particularly apparent with respect to the coverage of social disaster situations such as the hurricane Katrina disaster, as will be examined later in this report.

The report by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, states that on Tuesday September 11, 2001, beginning in the morning at around 8:45, a sequence of planned terrorist attacks was carried out on the United States¹⁸. A commercial passenger plane was hijacked and flown into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre in lower Manhattan, New York. A second hijacked plane was then directed at the South Tower approximately 15 minutes later at 9:00. The planes that were carrying close to 40 000 litres of jet fuel each and exploded into the Twin Towers, collapsing both approximately 90 minutes later. The Pentagon was also crashed into by a 3rd hijacked commercial airliner at 9:37 of that morning. A 4th plane that was underway to crash into the White House was forced to crash into a field in Pennsylvania, after the passengers found out that the United States was under attack. The commission report informs us that

¹⁸ See National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (also known as the 9-11 Commission). Report was created towards the end of 2002 with the task of preparing a full account on the September the 11th attacks on America. See 9-11 commission website for executive summary of report at http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report_Exec.htm

the attacks were carried out by 19 young Arabs who were under orders from Islamist extremists in Afghanistan. The total number of deaths at the various locations is stated to be 2600 people at the World Trade Centre, 125 at the Pentagon and 256 people in the four hijacked planes (9-11 Commission Report).

The attacks and the resultant aftermath caused many repercussions and implications for the United States. This report will now focus on the mainstream media's coverage of the attacks. Welch informs us that during the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, many people were unsatisfied with the traditional media coverage. He writes:

Like just about everything else, blogging changed forever on September 11, 2001. The destruction of the World Trade Center and the attack on the Pentagon created a huge appetite on the part of the public to be part of The Conversation, to vent and analyze and publicly ponder or mourn. Many, too, were unsatisfied with what they read and saw in the mainstream media. Glenn Reynolds, proprietor of the wildly popular InstaPundit.com blog, thought the mainstream analysis was terrible. "All the talking heads ... kept saying that 'we're gonna have to grow up, we're gonna have to give up a lot of our freedoms,'" he says. "Or it was the 'Why do they hate us' sort of teeth-gnashing. And I think there was a deep dissatisfaction with that.

(Welch 375-376).

This underscores the fact that many people were unhappy with the traditional media coverage of the events and wanted more information than what was offered. As Gillmor

suggests, our recollections of the disaster today come mainly from the mainstream media coverage of the airliners as they flew into the Twin Towers, and of the resultant explosions and collapse of the buildings (49). These images were shown repeatedly on television and in newspapers in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. A study conducted by Christine Rodrigue demonstrates the repetitive themes of some of the media coverage of the attacks¹⁹. She states that there was too much repetitive coverage of the planes hitting the towers on the front pages of newspapers and on television in the aftermath of the attacks. The study further found that the dominant themes of the coverage in the 12 weeks after the attacks were

- The war on terror (majority),
- stories focusing on the disaster itself and
- the crime theme, which had the least stories during the twelve week period.

The study concludes that there was much sensationalist reporting during the aftermath of the disaster and that there was no background context to the attacks in the information that was distributed. This is possibly why some people turned to alternative information sources during the weeks that followed. Michael Blakemore and Roger Longhorn in a study entitled “Communicating Information about the World Trade Center Disaster: Ripples, Reverberations, and Repercussions” inform us that in the direct aftermath of the attacks many found it difficult to remain calm and objective, with concerns and fears about global war dominating as a consequence of the attacks. This is surely one of the

¹⁹ See Rodrigue, C. “Media Coverage of the Events of 9/11.” In this study Rodrigue examines the front page of the LA Times online edition for 12 weeks after the events of 9/11.

<<http://www.colorado.EDU/hazards/qr/qr146/qr146.html>>

main reasons for people wanting and needing to join in the conversation around the events that were dominating the media. They were possibly seeking more contextual information as well.

The attacks and the resulting public need for information during the aftermath caused a deep and passionate reaction amongst the people. Gillmor informs us that the attacks caused a situation where, for the first time, the public was creating news because they had something to say (x). He believes that this was predictable because of the enormity of the attacks, as well as the easy to use publishing tools available on the Web at the time.

Research done by the Pew Internet and American Life Project²⁰ into the use of the Web after the September 11 2001 disaster suggests that the terror attacks on the United States are the main reason for the rise of the phenomenon of grassroots reporting. The study informs us that one of the most noticeable features in the aftermath of the disaster were the eyewitness accounts that were put up on weblogs. This grassroots reporting was noticeable because websites that did not usually publish news events started doing so.

The study also suggests that many of these accounts do not follow the traditions of mainstream journalism such as fact-checking and attempted objectivity. This criticism of the news type weblog follows the discussion in chapter 3.

Welch informs us that these news type weblogs from the public have contributed many things to the traditional journalistic practice. These include personality, eyewitness accounts, and lots of new knowledge (377). In the September 11th disaster, the bloggers offered personality on their sites, as they were not restricted by the traditional

²⁰ See “How Americans Used the Internet after the Terror Attack” www.pewinternet.org September 2001

institution's editorial filtering process in which personal opinions and thoughts are not acceptable. They also offered eyewitness accounts and new knowledge as many of the people who posted information were close to the scene, and not every reporter or journalist who wrote on the events was close at hand to do first-hand reports about the events. Some of these weblogs were the link-driven weblogs which focused on finding links on the disasters and posting these to their weblogs together with commentary; while the other journal-style of weblog were also in evidence, as people posted their own first-hand experience or thoughts and opinions on the disaster.

The attacks on the United States also caused online traffic to pick up dramatically, especially at many websites that distributed news information (with the largest traffic to traditional news sites in the history of the web). A study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project²¹ states that a large number of ordinary people created personal websites and used the Web as a means of checking up on family members and friends (by creating weblogs and using e-mail and chat applications). This particular study also informs us that although the television was better at providing breaking news in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, the Web provided more in depth information with a greater number of perspectives as compared to the more one-way focus of the traditional media. This was crucial to information seekers on the Web as they could seek more international opinions and more visual information in the form of pictures and first person accounts published on personal weblogs. The study cites writer Reid Goldsborough who informs us that one of the most valuable features of the Web is during

²¹ See "One year later: September the 11th and the Internet" www.pewinternet.org September 2002

a disaster, when human beings feel a need to reach out to one another. Blogging provides a means that has no equivalent when it comes to connecting people over great distances.

This study also found that almost a quarter of all the users surveyed, visited a traditional news site as a direct result of the terrorist attack, as compared to only ten percent that visited a non press site for information on the disaster. Although the Web allows anyone to be a content creator and distributor (through the use of weblogs), most people would still turn to the traditional online media. The report also found that the most noticeable phenomenon was the number of personal accounts from those who had seen the collapse of the Twin Towers. The practice of grassroots journalism was given a new status due to the attacks, as many people started searching for information and presenting this together with their own analysis of what was taking place on websites such as weblogs and forums.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September the 11th, most of the Web users in the United States went online for the specific purpose of obtaining news. The reason for this was the enormity of the attacks, where people were interested and wanted to know everything they could about what was going on. The Web allowed more varied perspectives and views than the traditional media provided. The CNN website received over nine million requests for the home page every hour. This is suggested to be more than a thousand times the usual number of requests per hour²². The online traffic was in fact so numerous that many of the traditional news sites crashed, or operated very slowly.

²² See "One Year Later: September the 11th and the Internet" www.pewinternet.org September 2001

The traditional media responded by removing graphics and unnecessary information from the home pages, to make access to the information easier. CNN removed all photos and graphics from the site and posted new headline updates in the form of links as the information became available (Copeland). The New York Times also removed pictures and advertisements from its site to improve performance due to the large demand for news information.



Figure 3

Figure 3 above is a screenshot of CNN.com on September 11 2001²³. It shows how CNN removed all extraneous information from its website in an effort to meet the demand for information. It somewhat resembles a weblog with reverse chronological posts.

The attacks created what appears to be a desire amongst the public to be part of the discussion and debate around the events. Matt Welch also informs us that many people

²³ See Copeland. For more images of the CNN homepage on the morning of September the 11th 2001 see: <<http://www.interactivepublishing.net/september/browse.php?co=CNN>>

were not satisfied with the traditional media coverage of the attacks, and so turned to the Internet and specifically weblogs and forums (376). This created another interesting effect. Even non-news sites started publishing news as a result of the enormity of the disaster. Examples of these websites include the collaborative weblog www.Slashdot.org and the similar website www.kuro5hin.com. Slashdot usually contains information related to technology and associated issues. Over more than half a million registered users contribute to news items and many more users simply read the postings. On the day of the attacks the Slashdot creator Rob Malda posted:

The World Trade Towers in new york (sic) were crashed into by 2 planes, one on a tower, 18 minutes apart. Nobody really knows who did it, but the planes were big ones. Normally I wouldn't consider posting this on Slashdot, but I'm making an exception this time because I can't get news through any of the conventional websites, and I assume I'm not alone. Update: We're having server problems. Sorry. Updated info, both towers have collapsed, pentagon hit by 3rd plane. Part of it has collapsed.

Websites like Slashdot are examples of websites that are not interested in becoming authentic news sites. The disaster situation changed that. The excessive demand for information made the traditional media sites inaccessible in the aftermath of the attacks. However bloggers who were near the Twin Towers on the day of the attacks were updating their own sites with first-hand descriptions of what they saw and at the same time were linking to other resources. This combined with the fact that many of the traditional news sites were not running effectively meant that many people turned to

weblogs and forums as alternatives to the main news sites. Dan Gillmor informs us that this was the defining moment for the shifting nature of the news. News was not just being created by the traditional institution, but also by the many people who had access to the Web and had something to offer. This was only possible due to the potential of the weblog as a news medium (x). A large variety of information was posted and an increasing number of people connected to the Internet, retrieved information from weblogs and forums and not from the mainstream media.

It is evident that in the year following the attacks on the Twin Towers the number of weblogs increased dramatically. Many weblogs which encouraged the “war on terror” (president Bush’s phrase) garnered support as people continued searching for information and an understanding of the events. Hiler informs us that so many weblogs were created just after the 9/11 attacks that the blogs even got their own label: ‘Warblogs’.

Immediately after the attacks the Warblogs provided a great way to get information on the latest developments making the headlines. Recently Warblogs have been analyzing the news on America’s war on terrorism. These Warblogs have also gathered a large amount of mainstream media attention from all over the world²⁴. Many sources suggest that these various responses to the attacks were the reason the weblog form was noticed by the mainstream media²⁵. The mainstream media responded by experimenting with weblogs and altered their traditional way of operating.

An advantage of the weblog for disaster coverage is that people who are present at the event can provide information for journalists who cannot. During the 9/11 disaster it was

²⁴ See Farrell and Drezner 84 and Kline and Burstein 264-269.

²⁵ Bowman and Willis 7. Dan Gillmor x.

next to impossible for journalists to get close to the Twin Towers, unless they were already close at hand (Moffet). People who are close by posted information to weblogs, for others to obtain first-hand eyewitness accounts and information.

A weblog that grew popular during to the September the 11th attacks is Glenn Reynolds' weblog. Glenn Reynolds is a university of Tennessee law professor and his weblog is available at www.instupundit.com. Before the attacks his website was averaging about 1600 visitors a day. On September 11th the traffic to his weblog increased to about 4200 visitors, more than doubling the traffic to his site. As of 2003 the website was averaging approximately 100,000 visitors per day (Welch 376 & Steyn 1). Another example is the weblog DrudgeReport.com mentioned in the introduction. In the week after the attack this site's traffic escalated by almost 40 percent (Beard 1).

Following the attacks, the Web provided a place for people to express themselves far better than the traditional media would have allowed. People used weblogs, forums and chat rooms to express their ideas and feelings. A Pew Internet report informs us that during the aftermath of the attacks the American people turned to the Web in record numbers for the purpose of voicing their opinions²⁶, and the study suggests that due to the attacks a growing number of Americans are now using the Web in addition to the information they get from the mainstream media. The news type weblog allows for this supplementation to the traditional media.

²⁶ See "One year later: September 11th and the Internet." www.pewinternet.org September 2002.

This report will now focus on the hurricane Katrina disaster which occurred four years after the terrorist attacks on September the 11th 2001, and the way that the traditional media and the audience used the form of the weblog for many purposes including reporting news and information.

CHAPTER 5

5 Case Study: Hurricane Katrina

5.1 Weblogs, news and Katrina

Many of the major news organisations (which were already online with traditional news websites) started making use of the weblog form, in addition to their normal websites in the years following the terrorist attacks. Examples include traditional journalists writing a weblog to create discussion amongst the readers regarding topics of interest, or the mainstream media employing popular bloggers to write for them. Research conducted at the beginning of 2006 by the New York University Journalism faculty has shown that of the top 100 newspapers in America, 86 of their sites have incorporated weblogs in some way, while 18 of the newspapers are not using weblogs at all²⁷. This is in contrast to the South African context where none of the major traditional newspaper websites currently incorporate weblogs except the Mail and Guardian. Where the weblog has been used, one can be sure that a personal and interactive element has been added, provided all the weblog features have been utilised. Instead of using the top-down or broadcast model of news delivery, where the journalist and media institution acts as the sole provider of information, the use of a weblog in journalism allows the journalist to act as a mediator and use a more interactive approach. The journalist can write a story and then respond to queries from the readers and even lead a discussion amongst them. This adaptation of the mainstream media to the new media form of the weblog can also be seen where the news

²⁷ The use of weblogs amongst these news organisations varies, from the blog as a news medium to information on new technology, sports, politics etc. See: Chang, Ocampo, Jessing-Butz, Krase, Galanis and Williams, 2006. Blue Plate Special.
<<http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/blueplate/issue1/top100.html>>

channels are running frequent shows to update people about what topics are getting coverage and what issues are being discussed within the blogosphere²⁸ (Kline 243).

Hurricane Katrina was a powerful storm that hit the American coast in August 2005. It lasted 7 days, from the 23rd to the 30th of August. The National Hurricane Centre's report on Katrina states that it was one of the worst disasters in American history due to the large range of its impact (Knabb; Rhome; Brown 1). The report states that it was one of the five largest hurricanes ever recorded, as well as the one that inflicted the most damage. The hurricane, which started at a Category 5 level, reached a Category 3 intensity on reaching the land over the northern Gulf coast. The hurricane damaged a large area including Louisiana, Georgia and Alabama. The report also states that the number of deaths caused by the hurricane is approximately 1336, with Louisiana and Mississippi the areas with the most fatalities (10). Katrina destroyed a large number of homes and businesses throughout the New Orleans area, and most estimates predict that the areas damaged would take many years to rebuild. The report also states that the hurricane caused the costliest damage of any measured hurricane in American history, with total estimated damages of 75 billion dollars (12).

During the aftermath of the hurricane Katrina disaster there was much criticism of the mainstream media coverage. Immediately after the disaster the traditional media reported violence, rape and estimates of the number of people dead in the affected areas without verifying them as fact. This caused much public outcry. In an online article, Thevenot and Russell inform us that the image that emerged from this reporting was that of African

²⁸ CNN's television show: "Inside the Blog" Started February 2005 see: Johnson, Peter. "It's prime time for blogs on CNN's 'Inside Politics'." http://www.usatoday.com/life/columnist/mediamix/2005-03-20-media-mix_x.htm

American flood victims resorting to random attacks on police, rescue workers and each other. This was not the case as later revealed.

Rosenblatt and Rainey suggest that the inaccurate reporting was largely as a result of the breakdown of telephone services within the immediate area struck by the hurricane, and that racism may have played a part. The majority of the affected people were poor African Americans (1). The reason given was that there was a breakdown of the traditional communications which prevented the verification and distribution of accurate and precise information. Hewitt gives two examples of the traditional media confessing to its mistakes in a piece written for the Weekly Standard online. He informs us that the newspaper The New Orleans Times-Picayune reported on its mistakes on September 26, in an article entitled “Reports of anarchy at Superdome overstated”. The article states that the traditional media, New Orleans inhabitants and the mayor and police chief treated many myths as fact. The erroneous article in the Los Angeles Times was entitled “Katrina Takes a Toll on Truth, News Accuracy” and was published on the 27 September. This article is more direct and states that the traditional media “...recycled and amplified many of the unverified reports” (Hewitt 1). This demonstrates that mainstream media can make mistakes despite having structures such as gate-keeping and objectivity in place. This is more apparent when the regular channels of communication have broken down.

During the hurricane Katrina disaster and its aftermath, the weblog form was again used by the audience to report news, as with the 9/11 attacks. The significant difference was that during hurricane Katrina the use of the weblog by the traditional media institutions

increased. Many of the major news groups set up their own websites, where journalists from the paper ran their own weblogs to provide news on hurricane Katrina and create discussion amongst the readers²⁹. An example is MSNBC's weblog at <http://onthescene.msnbc.com> where eight journalists from Newsweek took weekly trips to New Orleans, to blog on the hurricane Katrina disaster, from September the 2nd to 27th 2005, thus creating a more interactive hurricane news distribution process. During this time they posted almost 100 posts on the disaster and received a large number of comments and thoughts from the readers³⁰. It is important to note that without the audience's participation with the journalists, this would have been more like traditional journalism that offered news in a top-down fashion as was the case during the September the 11th disaster. In the hurricane Katrina example, when the weblog was used, the journalist would be acting in more of a mediator role within a discussion, as well as the teacher type role that he or she would be within the traditional media (Bowman and Willis 9). The use of the weblog in the hurricane Katrina example allowed the journalist to act more as mediator and use a more interactive approach, where they could respond to queries from the readers and even lead a discussion among them.

²⁹ For more see the Weather Channel weblog at <http://www.weather.com/blog/weather/> and CNN's Hurricane Weblog: <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/WEATHER/08/28/hurricane.blog/index.html> and USA Today's Katrina weblog at http://www.usatoday.com/weather/stormcenter/2005-08-29-katrina-blog_x.htm

³⁰ Mike Brunker, one of the journalists who made the trip to New Orleans says it well when he writes in the last post on the weblog "...The blog has been a tremendous success, not just because our reporters have gone to places and conveyed stories that weren't otherwise being told, but because it provided a direct connection with our readers and created a spirited discussion about the news that added depth to our coverage." He also writes that "...Finally, all of us who participated in the hurricanes blog would like to thank you for reading and responding to the posts. Without you, we would have had nothing more than dispatches from the storm front." See: Brunker, Mike <http://onthescene.msnbc.com/hurricanes>

An online New York Times article entitled “Flooding Stops Presses and Broadcasts, So Journalists Turn to the Web” describes how Katrina affected the traditional media in the immediate disaster area:

The Internet, as a decentralized communications network, can be more resilient than traditional media when natural disasters occur. "Owning broadcast towers and printing presses were useless," said Jeff Jarvis, a consultant to online media companies. "The Web proved to be a better media in a case like this." (Lohr and Lee)

In the case of the Katrina disaster the Web was useful to traditional journalists in the area for reporting information as their usual offices and equipment had to be abandoned. Here the Web provided an effective alternative means of communicating to the public. An example of this in the Katrina disaster was the New Orleans Times-Picayune. Gillmor informs us in an article in the Media Emerging e-journal that the Times-Picayune was forced to evacuate its workers from the building, when the hurricane hit. As a result the newspaper started a weblog to keep its readers informed (26). In an online article entitled “Katrina Sends Times-Picayune to Online Only Format”, Utter informs us that the Times-Picayune posted breaking stories in a weblog style on the main NOLA website, after moving offices to safer areas, with remote servers in New Jersey hosting the main NOLA website. This online news service was therefore accessible to people evacuated from New Orleans to other areas, and not subject to disruptions due to the breakdown of the telephone service in the worst hit parts of New Orleans. The news was published electronically on the newspaper’s traditional website at www.nola.com for 3 days, after

which a 16-page regular paper was produced with help from other newspapers (Deutsch). The weblog created was useful to the readers as many of them had evacuated the disaster area and the traditional newspaper that they would have turned to for information would have been inaccessible.

Hellweg believes that during the hurricane Katrina disaster the blogosphere was for the first time acknowledged as a viable alternative to the mainstream , rather than being downgraded to an oddity (1-2). This is evident when we consider that during the Katrina disaster and its aftermath another example of the agenda setting power of the blogosphere was shown. During the aftermath, President Bush stated that no one could have predicted the flood levees in New Orleans would not stop the overflow water caused by the hurricane. These statements were then discussed by writers in the blogosphere, and the webbloggers produced much information that contradicted what the president said. Hellweg claims that this resulted in the mainstream media focusing on these issues as well (1). In fact research conducted by the Pew Internet Life Project³¹ shows that more than 54 percent of Web users who wanted hurricane related news in the United States visited a website that was not affiliated with major U.S. news organisations. This demonstrates that sources other than the major news organisations are becoming important with the American public, particularly with respect to disaster coverage in the United States.

³¹ www.pewinternet.org. “ Relief donations after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and use of the internet to get disaster news” November 2005

The next section of this report will examine an example of a weblog that the public used to provide first hand news on hurricane Katrina. This weblog was also drawn on for information by the traditional media in the United States, thereby demonstrating the advantages of using blogs during disaster situations.

An example of a weblog being used by the public to provide reports during the Katrina disaster was Michael Barnett's weblog entitled Survival of New Orleans Blog (accessible at www.mgno.com or <http://www.livejournal.com/users/interdictor>). This particular example demonstrates many of the defining features of the weblog and what it potentially offers during a disaster. Michael Barnett was an employee of DirectNIC, a web hosting company that is situated in New Orleans (Hellweg 1-2). He is said to have ridden out the storm in New Orleans by living in his place of work together with a few colleagues. With a diesel generator for power and a camera, he posted frequent, first-hand updates about the disaster to his weblog (Broache). The company managed to keep a connection to the Internet up and running throughout the disaster and the aftermath, thus providing a reliable communication link to the rest of the world, this despite other telecommunication links failing. The mainstream media outlets such as CNN also drew on this weblog for information for its reports. CNN read directly from the weblog on a television program called 'Situation Room' which aired on August 31 2005³².

³² For full transcript of this particular show see: "Situation Room Transcripts".
<<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0508/31/sitroom.02.html>>

Before the disaster Michael Barnett's weblog had been a private weblog which he used to keep in touch with friends. After the storm hit he started blogging on it, and giving first-hand updates. He writes in his blog on August 31 2005 at 21:19pm:

I need to get a counter going on this site. This is unbelievable! This was just a private little journal 3 days ago that I was using to share my hurricane experience with some friends -- like 30 people. Now it feels like the whole world is watching.

After Barnett started blogging about his first-hand experience and providing updates, the daily visits to the weblog went up into the thousands (Hellweg 1). The posts and entries within weblogs are automatically placed into archives by the software, and each post has its own link (See chapter 3: Weblog Technology- Permalinks). These features mean that any information that was posted in a weblog entry remains in the archives and is accessible at anytime. In fact Fleishman informs us that the post archives in weblogs are better accessible by search engines on the Web than the databases that the mainstream media utilise. These mainstream media databases are often inaccessible, as they require a user to subscribe to them. Fleishman also informs us that in some cases the older posts and entries on weblogs are more popular than recent postings (110). Barnett's weblog follows this example, when measuring the post's popularity based on the number of comments. The posts during, and just after, the hurricane hit are noticeably higher in the number of comments than the more recent posts. Another possible reason for the popularity of weblogs as a medium is that its structure allows readers and other Internet users to have a more direct relationship to the writer of the weblog (Fleishman 110). This is in contrast to the traditional information sources, where one does not always have as

direct and easy a link of communication with the author. The basic structure of the weblog allows for a comments feature, so readers of the blog have an easy channel of communication and feedback to the author of the weblog.

The computers in the company where Barnett was located were kept running using a diesel generator which was normally used for backup power. When the remaining employees of DirectNIC realized that they would need to conserve diesel, and therefore consume it at a lower rate, they needed information on how to decrease the load on the generator. This led Barnett to post a global request for help on his weblog. This was posted on the 30th August 2005 at 9.48am entitled “Need Some Help: Engineer Types.”

...We are running on a diesel (sic) generator, specifically: Cummins Onan

750dfha 844

serial 800065069

It's a 750 Kw generator

Current draw is 210 volts. 20% load, down from 30%. We're gonna try to get it to 10%

What I need to know is what should we do to make it consume diesel at the lowest rate...? (sic).

This particular post received 69 comments from people wanting to help the employees of the company with information on how to reduce the load on the diesel generator. This demonstrates one of the powerful features of the weblog form; it draws on the Internet's

ability to keep running even in a disaster and thereby allowing communication amongst connected people. The design of the Internet is such that it allows for information to flow between computers even if there is a loss of one or many computers within the network. Bowman and Willis inform us that the Internet was originally developed to be a computer network, which allowed communication even after a nuclear attack. The result is a network that has no master computer, but a decentralised network that connects all computers to every other computer within the network in a web pattern (7). This is applicable to the case study. When hurricane Katrina hit the city of New Orleans, many of the telephones did not operate and there was no electricity. Michael Barnett and his fellow workers at DirectNIC communicated to the rest of the world through the use of the Internet using a diesel powered generator. The company managed to keep one line to the Internet active throughout the disaster, even though the standard phone lines were down. For this reason most of the communication occurred through e-mail and Barnett's weblog, in which some posts were receiving upwards of 1000 replies and comments. In an interview conducted with Sigmund Solares, the owner of DirectNIC who also stayed at the workplace when hurricane Katrina hit, Solares informs us that all communications occurred through the use of the Web as the phone lines were down and there was no electricity. The modes of communication were instant messaging, e-mail and through the weblog itself.

Gillmor informs us that for the first time in 150 years, the Web and weblogs in particular have allowed anyone with Internet access a one-to-many or many-to-many communications model (26). This is in contrast with previous times where one-to-many

model of communication was only possible with mass media such as the television and radio, or books and newspapers; and one-to-one was possible with direct communication such as telephone and letters. Bowman and Willis also believe that this is one of the more significant features of the weblog (8). When Michael Barnett posted a request for help on the weblog, he was in effect asking millions of people all over the world who had access to the Web, and at the same time, anyone with knowledge or information could help.

Kline and Burstein observe that blogging appears to be the key metaphor for interactivity, discussion and community building. Blogs allow for one-to-one conversation, as well as one-to-many, many-to-one and many-to-many conversation. They believe that blogging is the peak of the current technological generation, and that it is particularly important with respect to making the news more participatory and interactive (xxi). This model also allows for the news making process to be more transparent as the open communication model of the weblog allows for people to see where differing information and ideas are coming from.

CHAPTER 6

6.1 Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated some of the changes that have occurred in the traditional media with respect to weblog coverage at two particular points in time. The mainstream media have been refreshed by the adoption of weblogs in the United States, especially with respect to disaster coverage. The changes that were observed over the 4 year period from the 9/11 disaster in 2001, to the Katrina disaster in 2005, show that weblogs now offer an alternative to how disasters are covered in the United States by the traditional media, as well as the wider public. At the time of the terrorist attacks in New York the mainstream media did not have an interest in the form of the weblog as a medium for reporting news. However, this changed when the Katrina hurricane disaster occurred in 2005. Weblogs were used by the mainstream media in a variety of ways. This included the traditional institution setting up their own weblogs to report on the disaster, and even sending reporters out to New Orleans to blog first-hand about happenings during the aftermath. The mainstream media also used weblogs by the public as an information source to provide additional information to the coverage (an example of which is Barnett's weblog).

An important point to note is that, even with the rise of the blogosphere, the past has shown that the mainstream media can deal with the rise of new media technologies (Kline 242). The traditional media forms have demonstrated that they can adapt to new media technology and incorporate the new media forms. When television and radio were introduced as new media forms, many believed that it was the end of the traditional

media of the time, but the traditional media adapted and in the end actually benefited from the introduction of these technologies. Bowman and Willis inform us that the traditional newspaper men in Victorian times feared the introduction of the telegraph and forecast the end of the newspaper (15). However, after the introduction of the telegraph, the traditional newspaper was able to adapt to the new media technology and use it as a benefit. The telegraph allowed faster transmission of information; as a result the news was published quicker. Another example is when radio was introduced and became a commercial product in the early nineteen hundreds. Many newspapers of the time chose to stop publishing fictional stories as it was apparent that the fiction available on the radio was superior to the product in the papers. The newspapers instead ran information on broadcast shows and published reviews of what was available on the radio. This resulted in a useful benefit to the public, who would then have had additional information on the new shows of the time. The traditional media thus benefited overall (Kline 243).

Although blogs represent a slightly different model of news and information acquisition and distribution, present media are incorporating the emerging weblog phenomenon and using it to its advantage. This followed the public response to the terrorist attacks in 2001, which promoted the blogosphere.

6.2 Findings

The theoretical issues raised in the second chapter include how theories of the news media's structures and power due to 'gate-keeping' and 'agenda setting' might be changing due to the adoption of the weblog as a news medium. The theoretical debates around creating trustworthy news information for the public were also discussed. With

the use of weblogs, the American public now have the ability to set their own agenda (as witnessed in numerous examples in chapter 2). The use of the weblog has also brought about a shifting in the gate-keeper role of the traditional media, as it has traditionally been the gate-keepers (the traditional media) who decide what information the public is to know. When the media institution acts as a gate-keeper and decides what information will be distributed to the much larger public, it is effectively only a few select people that decide what the majority wants to know. This is not representative. The audience is made up of a varied range of people with differing opinions. With the incorporation of the news type weblog, the mainstream media (the traditional gate-keepers of information) are now being bypassed in some situations. Many people who have access to the Internet now have a chance to publish information and find any information they may require online, without relying on someone to pre-package selected information for them.

The debate around what constitutes trustworthy and reliable information also emerges when examining the weblog as a news medium. The traditional institution is seen as trustworthy because of its careful verification of information before publishing. The top-down model is used in the traditional method of reporting news, and all information is filtered before reaching the audience. With the use of the news type weblog, information is published and the public comes to a conclusion after discussion and debate. This may be considered an improvement of the traditional method as it is much more transparent and representative. The public can participate in the news-making process by contributing ideas and thoughts to the information and not just see the final product of the traditional institutions editing process.

This report has also found that the use of weblogs contributes to the verification of information provided by the mainstream media. Welch believes that news blogs are useful because they validate the information that is coming out of the traditional media and in the process create 'decentralized journalism' (374). There have been many cases of bloggers uncovering more information than the traditional journalist. He suggests that the blogosphere has created a situation where journalists are now in a situation that comes near real 'peer-review', as blogs can bring a form of cooperation to sort out any issues or information provided by the traditional media forms (379). Andrew Sullivan agrees with this view when he suggests that the blogosphere has made the professional media institutions improve their standards by being positive and confident in what they report (370). The blogosphere is proving to be one of the best ways to critique the traditional media. This is advantageous for all concerned as the public now have a means to question the information they receive through the traditional institution. This has in turn caused the traditional media to watch themselves and be careful of what they are reporting. The blogosphere now acts in the 'watchdog' role.

6.3 The Advance of the Weblog

When comparing the use of weblogs during 9/11 and Katrina, one notices an increased use of blogs in the latter by the mainstream media. In contrast, the public readily utilised the weblog during both instances. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks one observes that the blogosphere and media were not partisan, in fact there was a sense of unity among the people against the terrorists. This is in contrast to the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, where views within the blogosphere and the traditional media were either for, or against the Bush administration's handling of the natural disaster.

Due to the widespread use and acceptance of weblogs during the hurricane Katrina disaster, weblogs are now playing an important role in supplementing the information that is available in the traditional media (newspapers as well as television and radio). Weblogs can possibly provide additional context and meaning when viewed in conjunction with the traditional media. This is evident in the hurricane Katrina example. Numerous weblogs reported on the events in the affected areas and commented on the information provided by the traditional media. Hellweg informs us that blogs now provide a viable alternative to the traditional media as a result of the thousands of weblogs that reported on hurricane Katrina (1-2).

This report has been examined in the context of the industry wide crisis that is currently occurring in the traditional media in the United States (as discussed in chapter 3). This includes a decline in new readers and a decline in newspaper circulation rates. Research conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life project informs us that the number of Americans who use the Web for news is increasing³³. The report states that over the last four years Internet use has increased from 58 percent of all adults to 70 percent of all adults in the United States. The number of Americans who now turn to the Web for news information equates to approximately 50 million. Kline also informs us that the Web is quickly becoming the primary news source for the American people, as well as the fastest growing part of the American advertising industry (239). This shows us that the online sector of the traditional media institution is likely to increase in importance as time goes on, and that the use of weblogs can only help the traditional institution to provide a more

³³ See "Online News" <http://www.pewinternet.org> March 2006

democratic news distribution model. The traditional media were initially cautious of the weblog form as there appeared to be a danger in adopting a medium where editorial control was threatened. The traditional institution is now incorporating the weblog as a medium, with weblogs appearing at some of the largest news institutions especially in the United States. Gillmor believes that the traditional institution is still trying to operate in the top-down model of news distribution (237). This is opposed to the very structure of the weblog which allows for more equality when creating information. Gillmor suggests that the traditional media needs to listen more to the audience for a more democratic news creation model. This could be achieved by using the features of the weblog to the fullest.

The introduction of the weblog and its adoption as a news form has also caused the mainstream media to re-examine many of the standard conventions within the field. Many express the opinion that these conventions have often confused the truth and prevented journalists from expressing personal opinions and ideas within their stories. Lasica informs us that these established principles are designed to filter out errors and be objective in the editorial process, but in the process they are leaving the stories "...limp, lifeless and homogenized." (Lasica 171). It seems that a large part of the interest around the blog as a news medium is in the fact that they have directness about them, which is currently lacking in much of the traditional media. It is safe to conclude that with the increase in the use of the weblog as a medium for reporting news by the professional journalist and the audience, news reporting in the future will be more interactive and more like a conversation rather than the audience playing a passive role. In the past,

forms of interaction between the reader and journalist were non real-time and limited e.g. the traditional 'letters to the editor', where the traditional institution would still decide what letters would be published for the wider audience to view.

Traditional methods of reporting are time-consuming and arduous whereas weblogs work immediately, especially during disaster situations. The important news and developments relative to the disaster are likely to take more time with the traditional methods as compared to the Weblog being used for the same purpose. The weblog is arguably even quicker and more useful than the usual news websites that the traditional media have created, as there is no need for the journalist to know how to code a webpage or to update entire pages of the website when new developments occur. The journalist can simply add a new entry to the weblog quickly and easily.

Weblogging does not appear to be as popular within the traditional media in the South African context. This could be as a result of cultural differences between South Africa and the U.S.A. and also as a result of the majority of people still not access to the Web in South Africa.

The American mainstream media's reaction and use of the form of the weblog during the Katrina hurricane when compared to the response to the weblog during the terrorist attacks has shown that the form of the weblog is now becoming a normal part of disaster coverage by the mainstream media in the United States. The weblog is now being used for news reporting not only in disaster situations but in normal day-to-day reporting as

many of the leading newspapers in America have incorporated weblogs onto their sites in some manner and we can be sure that the adoption of weblogs as a news medium will only increase in the future.

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