

# The power and politics of blogs

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**Abstract** The rise of bloggers raises the vexing question of why blogs have any influence at all, given their relatively low readership and lack of central organization. We argue that to answer this question we need to focus on two key factors—the unequal distribution of readers across weblogs, and the relatively high readership of blogs among journalists and other political elites. The unequal distribution of readership, combined with internal norms and linking practices allows interesting news and opinions to rise to the “top” of the blogosphere, and thus to the attention of elite actors, whose understanding of politics may be changed by frames adopted from the blogosphere.

**Keywords** Blogs · Bloggers · US politics · Internet · WWW

## 1 Introduction

The rise of blogs raises some vexing issues for the study of politics. Why do bloggers and their blogs have any influence at all? Despite its recent surge in growth, the blogosphere has far less reach than other new media outlets for political information and analysis—talk radio, cable news channels, or other online political websites. Blogs attract a small fraction of attention compared to the mainstream media. As Table 1 demonstrates, the web presence of major media outlets overshadows the most popular weblogs. Rainie, Fox and Fallows (2003) reported that only 4% of online Americans reported going to blogs for information and opinions, and concluded that: “The overall number of blog users is so small that it is not possible to draw statistically meaningful conclusions about who uses blogs.” The growth in blog readership since then is impressive, but the awareness of blogs vis-à-vis other media forms remains sharply constrained. Rainie (2005) revealed that 62% of online Americans had no idea what a blog is. In the three months after the 2004 election, traffic to major political blogs fell by roughly 50%.

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**Table 1** Web presence of media and blog outlets

Web site	Alexa ranking	Reach per million users (3 month average)	Google PageRank (out of 10)
CNN	26	20,030	8
New York Times	97	6,250	7
USA Today	281	3,260	7
Washington Post	292	2,840	8
Wall Street Journal	435	2,150	6
MSNBC	783	1,600	8
Time	1918	587	8
Daily Kos	4066	254	7
Instapundit	8242	205	7
Little Green Footballs	10015	135	6
Power Line	10514	153	6
Talking Points Memo	10808	156	7
Andrew Sullivan	10858	155	7
Wonkette	10285	146	6
Blog average	9255.4	172.0	6.57
Media average	547.4	5248.3	7.43

Sources: alexa.com; Google Toolbar (accessed 20 January 2005)

Compared to other actors in domestic politics—specialized interest groups, political action committees, government bureaucrats, or elected officials—bloggers do not appear to be very powerful. There is no central organization to the blogosphere. There is no ideological consensus among its participants. Blogging as an activity is almost exclusively a part-time enterprise undertaken for love rather than money. An October 2003 survey of the blogosphere (Henning 2003) concluded:

Blogging is many things, yet the typical blog is written by a teenage girl who uses it twice a month to update her friends and classmates on happenings in her life. It will be written very informally (often in “unicase”: long stretches of lowercase with ALL CAPS used for emphasis) with slang spellings, yet will not be as informal as instant messaging conversations (which are riddled with typos and abbreviations).

Despite these constraints, the common consensus is that blogs play an increasingly important role as a forum of public debate, with knock-on consequences for the media, politics, and policy. Given the disparity in resources and organization vis-à-vis other actors, how and when can bloggers exercise influence over political and policy outcomes?

This article addresses this puzzle by concentrating on two interrelated aspects of the blogosphere: the unequal distribution of readers across the array of weblogs, and the ever-increasing interactions between blogs and mainstream media outlets. Even though there are over ten million bloggers, posting hundreds of thousands of new items daily, the median blogger has almost no political influence as measured by traffic or hyperlinks. This is because the distribution of weblinks and traffic is heavily skewed, with a few bloggers commanding most of the attention. This distribution parallels the one observed for political websites in general (Hindman et al. 2003). Because of this distribution, a few “elite”

blogs can operate as both an information aggregator and as a “summary statistic” for the blogosphere.

The skewed distribution of weblog influence makes it easy for observers to extract information or analysis from blogs—but a key reason they are important is that journalists and opinion leaders are readers of blogs. Why? Personal network ties between media outlets and blogs help; so does the local knowledge or policy expertise that some bloggers possess. Finally, blogs possess the comparative advantage of speedy publication—they have a first-mover advantage in socially constructing frames for understanding current events. As a result, political commentators will rely on blogs as sources of interpretive frames for political developments. Under a specific set of circumstances—when elite blogs concentrate their attention on a breaking story or an underreported story—the agenda-setting power of blogs may create focal points for general interest intermediaries (Schelling 1960).

This article is divided into six sections. The next section reviews the structure of the blogosphere, demonstrating that incoming links to political weblogs follow a lognormal distribution. Section 3 discusses the political implications of this skewed distribution in the blogosphere. Section 4 examines how weblogs and more mainstream media interact in symbiotic ways to enhance the influence of blogs. Section 5 discusses the myriad constraints on the influence of blogs. The final section summarizes and concludes.

## 2 The networked structure of the blogosphere

Perhaps the most important difference between blogs and more traditional media is that blogs are networked phenomena that rely on hyperlinks. Links between blogs take two forms. First, many bloggers maintain a “blogroll” on their website; a list of blogs that they frequently read or especially admire, with clickable links to the general URLs (web addresses) of those blogs. Blogrolls occupy a permanent position on the blog’s home page, and are used to link to other blogs that have shared interests. Second, bloggers may write specific posts that contain hyperlinks to other blogs. Unlike links in the blogroll, links within posts will move off the front page and be archived as new posts replace old ones over time. Typically, such posts themselves link directly to a specific post on the other blog (rather than the blog’s general URL address), perhaps also providing some commentary on that post.

Links and page views are the currency of the blogosphere. Many bloggers desire a wide readership. Blood (2002, p. 98) suggests that “[t]he most reliable way to gain traffic [readership] is through a link on another weblog.” This stems from the nature of hypertext. *Ceteris paribus*, when one blog links to another, the readers of the former blog are more likely to read the latter after having clicked on a hyperlink than they would have been otherwise. If they like what they read, they may even become regular readers of the second blog.

Thus, bloggers are keenly interested in discovering other blogs that link to them, and are able to discover such blogs through a variety of means. These include analysis of traffic data, general search engines such as Google (<http://www.google.com>), searchable databases of bloglinks such as Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com>) and the Blogosphere Ecosystem (<http://www.truthlaidbear/ecosystem.php>).

Thus, the blogosphere is a networked phenomenon, a fact which has important consequences both for how it works and how it may be studied. That blogs are linked together in a network provides much of their specific character—blogs interact with each other continuously, linking back and forth, disseminating interesting stories, arguments and points of view. Furthermore, blogs and the hyperlinks between them are amenable to network analysis; the individual blogs may be treated as the “nodes” or “vertices” of the network and

the links connecting them as “ties” or “edges.” The number of links to a particular blog (in network analysis terminology, the number of ties to a particular node) is its “degree.” By studying the network of blogs, we may come to important conclusions about how they work, and about how political blogs in particular may have important consequences for the wider practice of politics.

The existing literature provides two partially overlapping approaches to the study of networks. First, economic sociologists have developed a variety of tools to study the social and economic consequences of actors’ embeddedness within networks over the last fifty years (Gould 2003; Wellman and Berkowitz 1988; Burt 1980; Padgett and Ansell 1993). This literature has concentrated on relatively small scale networks, or networks where simplifying assumptions can be employed to render the data tractable without losing too much analytical bite. The mathematical techniques that have been developed by sociologists become exponentially more demanding as the size of the network increases, and soon require inordinate levels of computing resources. Nevertheless, where applicable, these techniques provide highly useful tools both for describing certain aspects of the network as a whole (as, for example, the relative degree of centralization of the network), and specific relations among sub-groups of actors within the network.

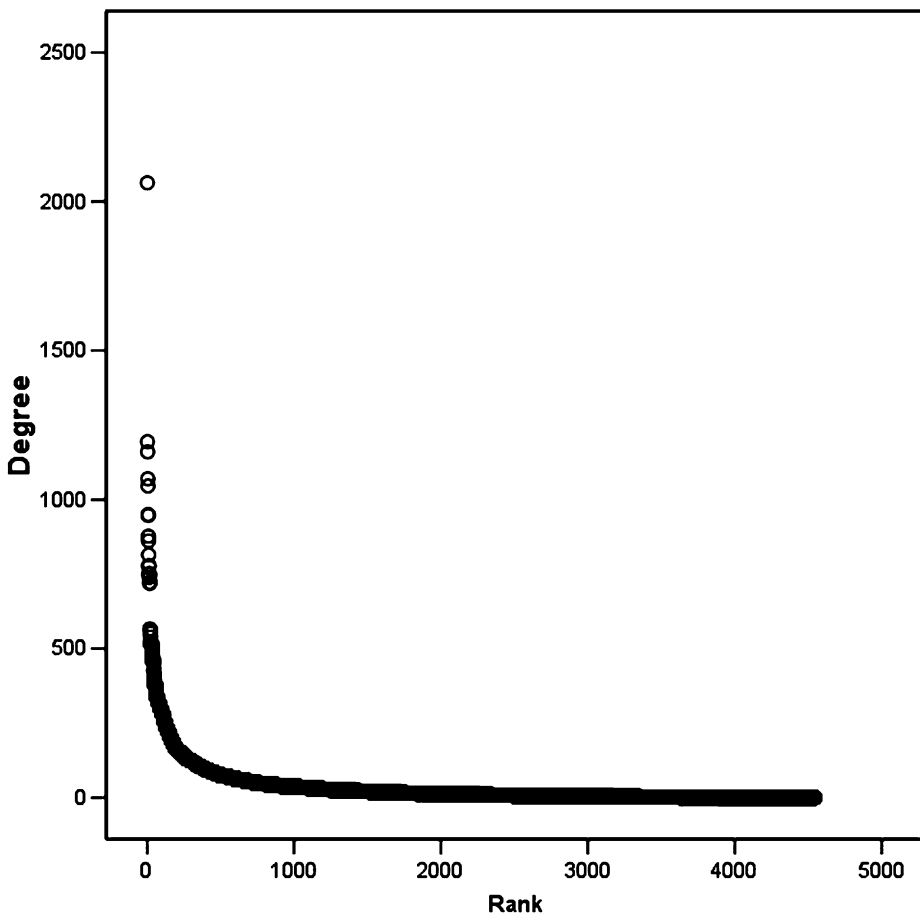
This kind of network analysis is relatively well known among political scientists. The same is not true of a second, more recent body of work exploring the broader effects of network topology, which borrows heavily from recent work in physics (Newman 2003; Albert and Barabási 2002; Watts 1999, 2003), as well as from earlier traditions in the social sciences (Simon 1955; de Solla Price 1976). This body of work eschews a detailed focus on relationships among nodes within a network in favor of what Newman (2003, p. 168) characterizes as the “consideration of large-scale statistical properties of graphs.” Traditionally, scholars have concentrated on the study of random graphs, in which undirected ties between nodes are created through a random process, so that the number of ties connected to each node is distributed according to a binomial distribution (or Poisson distribution for very large networks). However, many networks are not well represented by random graphs, and appear to have very different distributions of ties.

This has important consequences for the political effects of the blogosphere. Different distributions of ties among nodes will be associated with different forms and levels of political effectiveness. In particular, as we seek to argue, the extent to which the distribution of links is skewed will have key consequences for how the blogosphere affects politics.

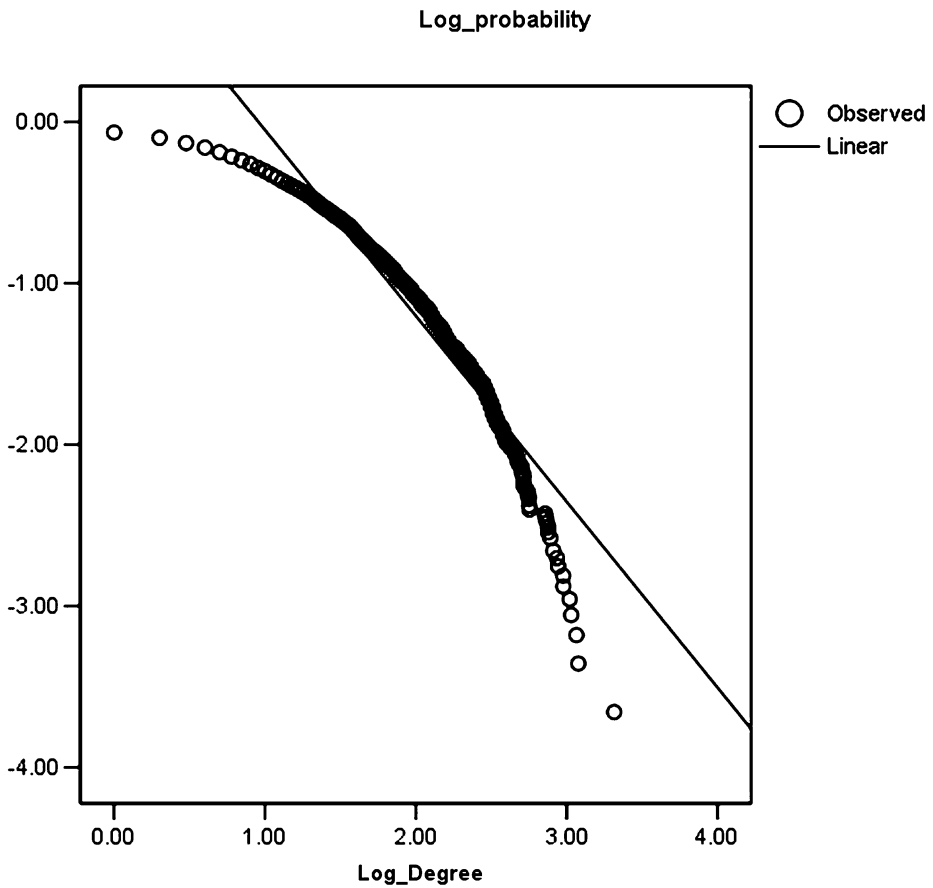
More specifically, many networks appear to have skewed distribution in which most nodes have a relatively small number of ties, but a small number of nodes have a disproportionately large number of ties. In such networks, the best-connected nodes will have a much greater number of ties than the less well connected. These skewed distributions have become an important subject of investigation in recent years; they have been observed across a variety of phenomena in the physical and social sciences, including word frequency in the English language, movie star collaboration, scientific collaboration on papers, protein folding, and, most relevantly, web page links. For example, in power law distributions, the probability that a particular node has degree  $k$  is a function of  $k^{-\gamma}$ , where  $\gamma$  is a positive constant. Power law distributions are especially likely to be found in growing networks where nodes that already have a large number of ties are more likely to receive incoming ties from new nodes than nodes that have few such ties. In such networks, initial advantages are self-reinforcing; nodes that are rich in ties are likely to become even richer over time, generating a power law distribution of ties across nodes. Web pages are more likely to link to other web pages that already have a relatively high number of links (Barabási 2000; Adamic and Huberman 1999; Hindman et al. 2003) The lognormal distribution is also very

substantially skewed (Huberman 2002); while it is more often associated with multiplicative processes than with models of network growth, Pennock et al. (2002) provide a modified model of network growth, and report that the distribution of incoming links among subsets of webpages of the same type is roughly similar to a lognormal distribution, suggesting that the micro-structures of subject-specific segments of the WWW deviate in important ways from its macro-structure. While “rich” sites are still likely to get “richer,” as in Barabási and Albert’s model, “poor” sites too stand some chance of getting rich, if they are lucky.

Given the existing literature, we hypothesized that incoming links between political blogs, like links between web pages more generally, would have a markedly skewed distribution. The blogosphere, like the WWW, evolves through an evolutionary process that has some important features in common with Barabási and Albert’s model. New bloggers are likely to add themselves to the network when they create links to other, existing blogs, as a means of announcing their existence to the blogosphere (Blood 2002); one may reasonably predict that they are more likely to create links to well established bloggers who already have many inbound links, than to other unknowns. Previous research supports this prediction. A power law distribution of blog-links was first hypothesized by Shirky (2003),



**Fig. 1** Skewedness of links in the blogosphere. Snapshot of the relationships between 4,543 blogs on October 18, 2003. *Vertical axis*: degree (number of incoming links); *horizontal access*, rank of blog in ecosystem



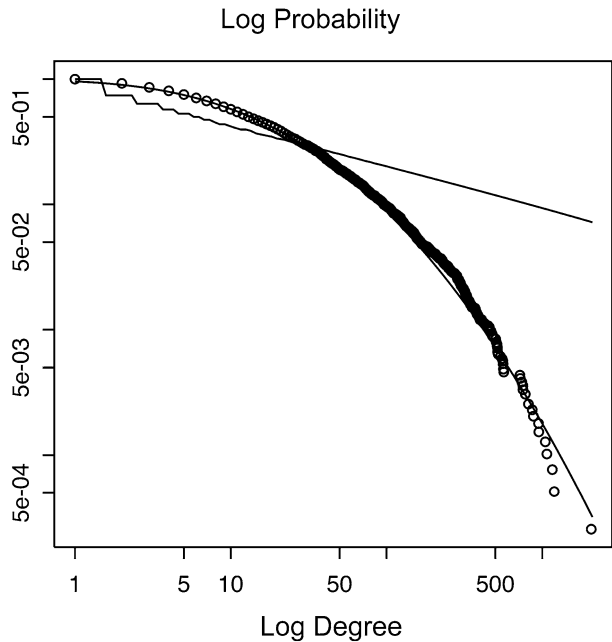
**Fig. 2** Log-log relationship between  $P[K \geq k]$  (vertical axis) and degree (horizontal axis)

who used data from the Blogosphere Ecosystem to examine whether there was a power-law distribution of links among 433 blogs. Shirky found that the top dozen bloggers (less than 3% of the total examined) accounted for approximately 20% of the incoming links. A second study by Jason Kottke, of the top 100 blogs on Technorati, found a power-law relationship, with an R-squared of 0.99.

We conducted our own initial study, using data on incoming links from the Blogosphere Ecosystem. Figure 1 ranks blogs in terms of their number of incoming links (the blog with most incoming links being ranked first, the blog with the second most being ranked second and so on), and graphs this against the absolute number of incoming links for that blog. This provides a quick and easy way to visualize the structure of the underlying network of links among blogs. As can easily be seen, the graph supports the hypothesis that there is a very substantial degree of skewedness in the distribution of incoming links among political bloggers. There are a very few highly ranked blogs with many incoming links, followed by a steep fall-off, and a very long “tail” of medium-to-low ranked bloggers with few or zero incoming links.

Unlike Shirky and Kottke’s findings about the blogosphere in general, an inspection of Figs. 2 and 3 and of the Maximum Likelihood Estimates for a Pareto and a lognormal dis-

**Fig. 3** Fits to Pareto and lognormal distributions



tribution, suggest that the distribution of political blogs is lognormal in nature. This result may suggest that the political blogosphere is not driven by a pure “rich get richer” model of network growth. However, Adamic and Glance (2005), drawing from a different data set, suggest a closer fit to a power-law model. This is an important avenue for future research. In any event, the hypothesis that the distribution of links among blogs is substantially and systematically skewed finds strong support in the data. This has important consequences for the relationship between blogs and readers.

	Total Log-likelihood
Lognormal distribution	−17218.22
Pareto distribution	−18481.51

### 3 How skewedness affects politics

How does a skewed distribution of links affect the relationship between blogs and politics? With a few exceptions (Hindman et al. 2003; Cederman 2003), there has been remarkably little study of the relationship between skewed distributions and politics. Building on a suggestion first made by Sugden (1995), we suggest that the existence of a skewed distribution has important consequences for the respective *salience* of different blogs. Sugden argues that actors in both mixed motive and pure coordination games may employ a collectively rational decision rule to coordinate on mutually beneficial equilibria. If players share common knowledge regarding the underlying distribution of a random variable,  $z$  and a labeling procedure that attaches an ordered set of labels to each value of  $z$ , they may find it easier to coordinate in a matching game (where they need to coordinate on some value of  $z$ ) if the distribution of  $z$  is significantly skewed. As Sugden observes, certain distributions provide

precisely the sort of skewedness that is likely to help actors resolve coordination problems. Under such distributions, the decision rule of “choose the most frequently mentioned element of  $z$ ” will be “collectively rational,” so that players may easily come to coordinate on the most frequently mentioned value of  $z$ . Thus, power law or lognormal distributions may create especially “attractive” focal points that will allow individuals to coordinate more easily. Where actors must coordinate by choosing a particular value of a variable  $z$ , and  $z$  is subject to a power law or lognormal distribution, then the most frequent value of  $z$  is likely to be a focal point; it will be substantially more numerous than the second most frequent value, and will consequently stand out from the distribution for all players. The second most frequent value will similarly be more salient than the third.

Sugden’s arguments have clear implications for the relative salience of blogs. The skewed distribution of links among blogs mean that only a few blogs are likely to become focal points; those with very high numbers of links, or with some other characteristic that makes them especially salient. Blogs that are focal points are likely to “stand out” in a very important way for actors who wish to solve coordination games. Here, we suggest that focal point blogs offer both a means of filtering ‘interesting’ blog posts out from “uninteresting” ones, and furthermore provide an important coordination point that allows bloggers and blog readers to coordinate on a mutually beneficial equilibrium.

We argue that bloggers and readers face an important coordination problem, which may be analyzed as a pure coordination game. The problem is as follows. Most bloggers wish to maximize their readership, but face very substantial difficulties in gaining new readers. Given the vast number of blogs even in the political subsection of the blogosphere, it is extraordinarily hard for them to attract readers, even when they have something interesting and unique to offer. Blog readers, for their part, want to find interesting blog posts—in terms of either new information or a compelling interpretation of old information. However, given search costs and limited time, it is nearly impossible for readers to sift through the vast amounts of available material in order to find the interesting posts.

Blogs with large numbers of incoming links offer both a means of filtering interesting blog posts from less interesting ones, and a focal point at which bloggers with interesting posts, and potential readers of these posts can coordinate. When less prominent bloggers have an interesting piece of information or point of view that is relevant to a political controversy, they will usually post this on their own blogs. However, they will also often have an incentive to contact one of the large “focal point” blogs, to publicize their post. The latter may post on the issue with a hyperlink back to the original blog, if the story or point of view is interesting enough, so that the originator of the piece of information receives more readers. In this manner, bloggers with fewer links function as “fire alarms” for focal point blogs, providing new information and links. This reduces the need for bloggers at the top of the link structure to engage in “police patrols” to gather information on their own (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984). The skewed network structure of the blogosphere makes it less costly for outside observers to acquire information from blogs. The networked structure of the blogosphere allows interesting arguments to make their way to the top of the blogosphere. Because of the lognormal distribution of weblogs, the media only needs to look at the top blogs to obtain a “summary statistic” about the distribution of opinions on a given political issue. The mainstream political media—which some bloggers refer to as the “mediasphere”—can therefore act as a transmission belt between the blogosphere and politically powerful actors. Blogs therefore affect political debate by affecting the content of media reportage and commentary about politics. Just as the media can provide a collective interpretive frame for politicians, blogs can create a menu of interpretive frames for the media to appropriate.



This leads to another puzzle—*why* do members of the media read blogs? The next section addresses this issue.

#### 4 The mediasphere and the blogosphere

There is strong evidence that media elites—editors, publishers, reporters, and columnists—consume political blogs. In Dautrich and Barnes (2005a, 2005b), a survey of 300 television and media journalists, 83% reported having used blogs—in contrast to only 7% of the general public—and 41% report that they use them at least once a week. Of those who used blogs, 55% reported that they use them to support the work that they do in writing news. These figures are supported by qualitative evidence provided by media elites. *New York Times* Managing Editor Bill Keller said in a November 2003 interview (Kurtz 2003), “I look at the blogs . . . . Sometimes I read something on a blog that makes me feel we screwed up.” Howard Kurtz regularly quotes elite bloggers in his Media Notes Extra feature for the *Washington Post*. Opinion columnists, including Michael Barone, Walter Shapiro, Paul Krugman, David Brooks and Fareed Zakaria, have indicated that blogs form a part of their information-gathering activities. Prominent political reporters and editors at the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, ABC News, *New Yorker*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* have made similar statements (Smolkin 2004; Packer 2004).

Another indication of the connection between the political part of the blogosphere and mediasphere has been the extent to which individuals operating in one setting have crossed over into the other activity. The fact that many newspapers, networks, and magazines have set up their own blogs is clear evidence that media institutions are conscious of the form. Prominent commentators—such as Bruce Bartlett, Noam Chomsky, Gregg Easterbrook, and Amitai Etzioni—have tried their hand at weblogs. As previously noted, bloggers have been hired to provide content for mainstream media publications. In March 2004, *The Washington Monthly* hired Kevin Drum—whose CalPundit blog was attracting over 1.2 million unique visits per month by February 2004—and transferred his blog to their web site. *Slate* magazine transferred Mickey Kaus’ blog to its online site more than a year before that. As discussed in the introductory article to this special issue, other political content providers also publish blogs.

Why has the political media devoted so much attention to the blogosphere? The survey evidence reported above suggests that it is not because blogs themselves provide a superior source of news. Only 11% of those surveyed believed that blogs were an “excellent” or “good” source of news, while 41% rated them as fair, and 31% as poor. Based on our own experience as bloggers, our interactions with other bloggers and journalists, and the extant literature on weblogs, we offer four reasons for the links between the mediasphere and the blogosphere: material incentives, personal network ties, expertise, and speed.

Part of the growth in interest can be explained by material incentives. As media publications have divided their online content between free and paid material in an effort to boost subscription revenues, they have simultaneously expanded their free content to maintain web traffic. This free content has often taken the form of weblogs. For example, in early 2003 *The New Republic* decided to convert much of the online content that also appeared in the print version of the magazine to subscription access only. Over the course of the ensuing year, they simultaneously expanded their web content to include regular columns by scholar-bloggers, as well as multiple weblogs from *New Republic* staffers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews with Noam Scheiber and Richard Just (online editors of *The New Republic*), 9 April 2004.

Pre-existing social and professional ties between early bloggers and journalists also helps to explain the attention paid to the blogosphere. The first wave of political commentators to enter the blogosphere consisted of journalists with close ties to mainstream media outlets. Mickey Kaus wrote for *The New Republic* and *Newsweek* before starting *kausfiles.com*. Andrew Sullivan edited *The New Republic* and was a regular columnist for *The New York Times Magazine* prior to launching *AndrewSullivan.com*. Joshua Micah Marshall worked at *The American Prospect* and freelanced for several other political magazines prior to starting *TalkingPointsMemo.com*. From their beginning of their blogs, all three writers commanded an impressive amount of links, traffic, and media mentions.

These network ties between journalist-bloggers and those in the media were crucial to establishing trust in the new medium. In encountering the blogosphere, journalists were confronted with imperfect information regarding the accuracy of its participants. Markets with imperfect information about producer quality often fail to emerge, due to consumer wariness (Akerlof 1970). Social ties of kin or friendship can function to overcome fears of opportunism (Granovetter 1985; Greif 1993). Because many of the early political bloggers had personal and professional ties to prominent journalists, columnists and editors, mainstream media outlets deemed them as reliable sources for both information and opinion (Smolkin 2004). As Kaus, Sullivan, and Marshall linked to other bloggers, they signaled their belief in the quality of other blogs—and that trust spread to key parts of the mediasphere.

Another reason for the increase in dynamic density between the blogosphere and the mediasphere has been the expertise that bloggers can provide on substantive issues. It is true that blogs do not provide a good *general* source for news, and may suffer from important biases (Ashlin and Ladle 2006). They may, however, offer *specific* informational resources that are valuable to journalists. By definition, general interest intermediaries in the media suffer a deficit of specialized, detailed knowledge. Blogs can serve as repositories of what Hayek (1945) labeled “local knowledge” for relevant policy issues or current event histories. Over time, reporters can rely on these blogs when the issue in question emerges as a news topic again. Specialist blogs greatly reduce the search costs for journalists in acquiring information on a developing story. Specialty bloggers that promote their posts on salient topics have the potential to convert the information-gathering activities of “general interest” bloggers and journalists from high-cost police patrols to low-cost fire alarms (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984).

Even specialized or trade publications rely on bloggers that specialize in the same topic. For example, numerous staffers at legal trade journals stated that they relied on Howard Bashman’s blog on appellate jurisdiction, “How Appealing” as a source for both breaking legal news and for in-depth commentary on law and politics. A senior reporter from American Lawyer Media said that Bashman’s blog was her home page and that she checks out the site “five or six times a day,” and that through Bashman’s blog, she was able to file one story a day earlier than she otherwise would have.<sup>2</sup> An editor at the American Bar Association’s journal also relied on Bashman’s blog as a source for story ideas.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, bloggers possess first-mover advantages in formulating opinions. The comparative advantage of blogs in political discourse is their low cost of real-time publication. Immediately following an event of political consequence—a presidential debate, a terrorist attack—bloggers have the ability to post their immediate reactions

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<sup>2</sup>E-mail correspondence with Shannon P. Duffy, American Lawyer Media, 24 September 2003.

<sup>3</sup>Confidential e-mail correspondence, 24 September 2003.

before other forms of media can respond. Beyond initial reactions, bloggers can also respond to other blog reactions before the mainstream media has time to react. As Mickey Kaus (2003) points out:

[T]he virtue of speed isn't simply, or even primarily, that you can scoop the competition. It's that you can post something and provoke a quick response and counter-response, as well as research by readers. The collective brain works faster, firing with more synapses. In theory, "faster" can mean "fast enough to have real-world consequences" that print journalism or even edited Web journalism can't have.

Another journalist (Rosenberg 2002) concurred, "The editorial process of the blogs takes place *between and among* bloggers, in public, in real time, with fully annotated cross-links."

The rapidity of blogger interactions affects political communication in the mainstream media through agenda setting and framing effects. The agenda-setting role is clear—if a critical number of elite blogs raise a particular story, it can pique the interest of mainstream media outlets.

Corporate actors have also noted the blogosphere's collective ability to act as a leading indicator of future news coverage. The Ford Motor Company's director of public affairs observed (Hargrave 2004), "The real value of searching the net, including blogs, is that you get a live picture of what people are thinking about certain issues. It means that you can predict if there is going to be an issue that's going to grow and become something you need to respond to before it gets to the mainstream press."

These four factors, taken together, explain why journalists read blogs. They also provide the beginnings of an explanation as to how blogs may *influence* journalists, and thus have a wider impact on the public debate—through framing. Scholars of political communication (Nelson et al. 1997; Fan et al. 1998) argue that the media can elevate issues and devise interpretive frames for them that shape the boundaries and content of political discourse and public opinion. For complex issue areas, there are a plethora of possible debates and cleavages that can take place. The media—consciously or unconsciously—can socially construct focal points that frame the issue in a particular way. This frame serves to eliminate dimensions from an issue, making the topic easier to comprehend for the mass public.

If the mainstream media constructs focal points through which political actors must operate, the blogosphere has the capacity to construct focal points through which the media operates. As former *Washington Post* journalist Thomas Edsall described it (Rosen 2004), "We in journalism, there is an orthodoxy to our thinking. Blogs can . . . break the ice and make it clear that there is something pretty strange or pretty unique or pretty interesting or pretty awful about something . . . . They . . . open up a lot of doors." The media will be affected by that consensus in the same way that the mass public is affected by the media. Even if the blogosphere fails to generate a substantive consensus on what an issue means, they may still generate a consensus on whether an issue is interesting.

The skewed distribution of the blogosphere described in the previous section makes it much easier for the media to pick up the collective beliefs of the blogosphere. Like general readers, journalists who are interested in blogs have a clear interest in minimizing their search costs. Because an overwhelming fraction of web traffic and web links cluster around the most popular political blogs, media representatives have a clear incentive to concentrate on those sites if they wish to garner evidence about the general state of opinion in the blogosphere opinion. Thus, the top five or ten blogs can function as a summary statistic for journalists. As described by Edsall, "if you just do a few of these [blogs], one advantage is they link to each other so much, often if something is good, you're going to find out about it."

**Table 2** Blogs read by the media

Blog author (blog title)	Number of media readers	Number of media mentions
Andrew Sullivan (Daily Dish)	59	78
Glenn Reynolds (InstaPundit)	43	11
Mickey Kaus (Kausfiles)	23	16
National Review's Corner	20	n/a
Joshua Micah Marshall (Talking Point Memo)	18	12
James Romenesko (Media News)	14	13
Atrios (Eschaton)	10	3
Daniel W. Drezner (danieldrezner.com)	9	3
Eugene Volokh (The Volokh Conspiracy)	7	8
Cory Doctorow (Boing Boing)	6	4
James Lileks (The Bleat)	6	1

**Table 3** Blogs read by the elite media

Blogger (blog title)	Number of elite media readers	Number of media mentions
Andrew Sullivan (Daily Dish)	22	78
Glenn Reynolds (InstaPundit)	11	11
Mickey Kaus (Kausfiles)	7	16
Joshua Micah Marshall (Talking Point Memo)	5	12
National Review's Corner	4	n/a
Daniel W. Drezner (danieldrezner.com)	4	3
James Romenesko (Media News)	4	13
J. Bradford DeLong (Semi-Daily Journal)	3	4
Eugene Volokh (The Volokh Conspiracy)	3	8
Atrios (Eschaton)	2	3
Markos Moulitsas Zúniga (Daily Kos)	2	4
Howard Bashman (How Appealing)	2	1

Respondents were coded as “elite” based on their employer. They included prominent newspapers (*The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*), news networks (ABC, CBS, CNN), wire services (Associated Press, Bloomberg, Reuters), and prominent opinion magazines (*The New Republic*, *Weekly Standard*, *National Review*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Foreign Affairs*). Of the 140 respondents, 33 were from elite outlets

These hypotheses receive tentative support from an online survey conducted by the authors between September 2003 and January 2004, in which media employees were asked to provide information about the blogs that they read. 140 editors, reporters, columnists and publishers responded, ranging from “elite” media outlets like the *New York Times* and ABC News to rural publications with less than 10,000 readers. Respondents were asked to name up to three blogs that they read frequently. Collectively, over 125 blogs were cited by these respondents as among the blogs that they read. However, the top ten blogs were responsible for more than 54% of all the citations. Among “elite” media respondents, the skewness was

even more pronounced. The top ten blogs were responsible for over 74% of the citations; the top five alone were responsible for more than 56% of the mentions. Consistent with the argument made previously about network ties, Sullivan, Kaus, and Marshall were among the top five blogs for both categories.

We caution that these findings are only indicative—our sample was very likely unrepresentative. Journalists were solicited to respond through announcements on a variety of political blogsites leading to an obvious risk of sample bias. We have tried to minimize this bias by publicizing the survey on both highly linked and less highly linked blogs, that were situated on both the left and right of the political spectrum, but do not claim by any means to have eliminated it. The number of respondents was too small to allow us to gather statistically significant results for most interesting potential empirical relationships. Nonetheless, they do at least provide an initial mapping of the relevant empirical relationships that may serve to generate hypotheses to be tested in future research. Furthermore, a Nexis search was conducted of mainstream media mentions of top blogs/bloggers during the same time period as the survey was conducted (see Tables 2 and 3). The data provides an external validity check of the survey results; the number of media mentions is strongly correlated with the number of media readers of a particular blog (for the top ten bloggers, the correlation coefficient is 0.84 for the general media survey, and 0.94 in the elite media survey).

## 5 The constraints on blog influence

The previous section delineated some important causal mechanisms through which the blogosphere can influence American politics. However, even if the blogosphere *can* influence the body politic, the *extent* of that influence remains open to question. Although the blogosphere possesses the twin comparative advantages of speed and expertise, it lacks many other assets useful in politics.

There are two important constraints on the blogosphere influence. The first is the fact that all bloggers—even those at the top of the hierarchy—have limited resources and time at their disposal. Indeed, some bloggers complain of “burnout” and have given up blogging altogether. Although some elite bloggers can earn a living wage through advertising and other revenue streams, by and large blogging remains a largely voluntary activity. The monetary compensation involved provides only limited resources for wide-ranging investigative journalism. Because of these resource constraints, it is simply impossible for top bloggers to be able to comment on or link to news stories about every issue up for political debate.

For example, one of the most prominent bloggers in terms of links and traffic is Glenn Reynolds’ InstaPundit. One reason for his high ranking is his prolific output; in his first three years, he published more than 16,000 blog posts on a welter of topics. However, Reynolds’ is also a full-time law professor at the University of Tennessee. He wrote repeatedly that readers should not assume that he will be either able or willing to blog about all topics under the sun. In October 2003, Reynolds (2003) wrote:

I don’t have much trouble resisting people’s efforts to bully me into advancing their agendas. What worries me more, in a way, are the *friendly* emails from people saying that they get all their news from InstaPundit.

Don’t do that! It’s “InstaPundit,” not “InstaNews Service.” And this is . . . an *amateur* activity. I don’t even get to blog all the stuff that interests me . . . much less stuff that’s important, but that doesn’t interest me.

What you get here—as with any blog—is my idiosyncratic selection of things that interest me, as I have time to note them, with my own idiosyncratic comments. What’s more, to the (large) extent that it’s shaped by my effort to play up stories that Big Media are ignoring, it’s even more idiosyncratic. I hope you like it, but making it your sole source of news is probably not a good idea.

The second constraint is that powerful actors in politics and political communications have already moved down the learning curve in response to weblogs. Astute political actors can read blogs as easily as media professionals, and use that information to predict the direction of future news cycles. This also gives them the ability to develop strategies to counter or blunt the influence of blogs before media groundswells develop.

For example, consider the 2003 episode involving Rick Santorum, who was chairman of the GOP conference in the Senate and third in his party’s leadership structure. Less than six months after Trent Lott resigned, Santorum gave an interview to an Associated Press reporter in which he explicitly equated homosexuality with bestiality. This prompted condemnation from across the political spectrum of the blogosphere, including repeated mentions by top-tier bloggers such as Glenn Reynolds, Andrew Sullivan, and Joshua Micah Marshall. However, Santorum was not asked to resign his leadership position. President Bush intervened at an early stage of the news cycle to issue a statement expressing support for Santorum. The statement simultaneously made it clear that this was because his interpretation of Santorum’s statement was more benign than other interpretations. By creating an alternative framing of the issues at an early stage, political elites were able to blunt criticism from bloggers far more successfully than in the Trent Lott case.

We predict that as blogs become a more established feature on the political landscape, politicians and other interested parties will become more adept at responding to them, and, where they believe it necessary, co-opting them. To the extent that blogs become more politically influential, we may expect them to become more directly integrated into “politics as usual,” losing some of their flavor of novelty and immediacy in the process. During the 2004 Presidential elections, both major parties chose to credential some bloggers as journalists for their nominating conventions. During the 2004 electoral cycle, left-wing blogger Markos Zuniga provided consultancy services for the Democratic campaign, while another prominent pro-Democrat blogger, Duncan Black, became a senior fellow at Media Matters, a left wing non profit organization. Both of these bloggers disclosed their affiliations at the time; the same was not true of two South Dakotan bloggers who received substantial payments from John Thune’s campaign to unseat Tom Daschle. Thune’s success in using blogs and websites to support his campaign has generated considerable interest from other politicians. During the 2006 electoral cycle, prominent individual bloggers and campaigns were even more enmeshed. If the FEC continues to be reluctant to regulate blogs and bloggers we may possibly see a proliferation of “Astroturf” blogs in future political campaigns.

## 6 Conclusions

In this paper, we have sought to provide an answer to a perplexing question for political scientists—why do blogs sometimes have real political consequences, given the relatively low number of blog readers in the overall population? Our proposed answer to this question is that blogs may frame political debates and create focal points for the media as a whole. While blog exposure was limited to only 7% of the general population, over 83% of journalists had used blogs, and 43% of journalists used them at least every week. Because opinion-makers within the media take blogs seriously, the latter can have a much wider impact on

politics. In setting out this answer, we have advanced arguments about why the media takes account of blogs, as well as some tentative arguments regarding the wider consequences of blogs for the broad contours of debate over U.S. politics. Finally, we have provided some important empirical evidence regarding the structure of the political blogosphere, and how this structure makes certain blogs much more salient than others.

Our findings are a beginning, not an end. The political consequences of blogs are unlikely to be limited to the particular mechanisms that we have explored. Fortunately for political scientists, blogs provide a uniquely rich set of data that can be exploited in order to explore a variety of research questions. Important research remains to be done, for example, on the consequences of blogs for political mobilization, and for fund raising. Political debates within the blogosphere provide important evidence that is relevant to current debates about democratic deliberation.

As we have suggested in the penultimate section of this article, there are important limits to the political influence of blogs. They are important less because of their direct effects on politics than their indirect ones—they influence important actors within mainstream media who in turn frame issues for a wider public. We see no reasons to expect that this will change in the immediate future. We also expect blogs to lose some of their disruptive impact as politicians and others learn to take better account of them. However, by the same token we predict political blogs will become an increasingly pervasive tool through which politicians and others will seek to influence political debate.

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