Public
Relations
Review

Critical analysis of blogging in public relations

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Abstract

This essay conducts an analysis of blogs as public relations tools. Following an overview of blogs, attention is given to how blogs can be used more effectively by public relations professionals, and how blogs are favored by communication firms and consultants as essential public relations tools. The essay concludes that while blogs have incredible potential as research, framing, and persuasion tools, their utility as a public relations tool is currently limited.
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Keywords: Blog; Blogging; Public relations; News technology; RSS; Critical

Keeping up with the latest technology and understanding the consequences for everyday life and professional practices is difficult for practitioners and academicians. At what point does an innovation become an everyday business practice, such as the Internet or wireless telephones? How do professionals know when understanding a new technology will be a prerequisite for success? One of the latest innovations currently having an impact on public relations is the blog. Both practitioners and academics are struggling to understand the value and consequences of blogs. This article tries to clarify the current strengths and weaknesses of the blog in both professional and academic contexts, analyzes current claims about blogging in public relations, and provides suggestions for understanding and studying blogs.

Blogs are being used by organizations for everything from guerrilla marketing and attacking the competition (Barbaro, 2006; Lyons, 2005), to creating identification with publics, sharing scientific breakthroughs, and knowledge management (Dearstyne, 2005; Saulny, 2006; Secko, 2005). Blogging is rapidly becoming as pervasive as the Internet itself but almost no critical analysis of blogging has been conducted.

Pundits, editorialists, and child safety experts regularly complain about sites like MySpace, and YouTube but little critical attention has been given to blogging (cf., Bahney, 2006; Barbaro, 2006; Lyons, 2005). Many discussions of blogging have been of the "Are bloggers journalists?," "Do people find blogs credible?," "Are bloggers more powerful?," "Should bloggers be fired for blogging about organizational secrets?," or, "Are bloggers the journalists of the future?" variety (cf., Dearstyne, 2005; Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Messner, 2005; Porter, Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007). But little discussion in public relations has *examined* the many claims made by practitioners and pundits about blogs being powerful public relations tools. Indeed, the few public relations sources that have discussed blogs have talked about them in the same uncritical fashion that the Internet was initially talked about, assuming a monolithic phenomenon that was already well understood.[1]

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[1] Currently, fewer than a dozen articles even mention the word blog in *Public Relations Review* and no articles mention blogs in *Journal* of *Public Relations Research*.

In part, the lack of critical focus on blogs is understandable. Blogs are still fairly new, and during the heyday of any technological revolution, seeing how the world will be changed is difficult (Kuhn, 1970; Levinson, 1997; McLuhan, 1999/1964). Change is an incremental process and often difficult to notice. Nevertheless, technological advances must be contextualized and understood by public relations professionals in order for technology to be used effectively. This essay will examine blogging and review the limited scholarly research that currently exists in communication and public relations. The essay is divided into two sections: *the first section* will define blogs and review some of the features of blogs. *The second section* will cover the strengths and weakness of blogs as public relations tools, describe their value as research and framing tools, and provide some data about how they are used. Section two will also critique some of the claims made about blogs and their potential value to public relations professionals and organizations.

1. Understanding blogs

If you are an academic, you probably already know what blogs are, however, for clarification sake, the word blog refers to a "Web Log," or an online diary of posts that are sorted in reverse chronological order (May, 2003, p. 4; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005, p. 968). As many readers probably know, a blog will have the most recent entry at the top followed by older entries, the reverse of a traditional diary or log. Some blogs also sort the content by subject or title so that particular entries may be more easily located. The essential feature of an online log (blog), as opposed to an actual diary, is that blogs are public documents. Because blogs are public, they are self-consciously written to be entertaining, or informative.

Blogs have been around since the late 1990s and, depending upon the interests of the author (blogger), typically focus on a single area (politics, technology, health, etc.). A number of bloggers have received substantial media attention after being fired for posting comments critical of their employers, revealing organizational secrets, discussing their work environments, or for breaking stories about organizational events that they were party to as employees (cf., Edelman & Nielsen BuzzMetrics, 2005, p. 9; Rainie, 2006, p. 21; The Papal Bull, 2005). Several blogs have also received media attention for timely and biting coverage of social and political issues. Finally, many blogs are weeks ahead of the mainstream media when reporting stories in their own industry/profession (computers, data storage, music, politics, telecommunications, etc.). To fully understand blogs, one also must understand that there are different types of blogs.

1.1. Types of blogs

There are several types of blogs. The traditional or historic blog is written like a diary entry, or an op–ed page. Bloggers rant about whatever injustice draws their attention on a particular day (Finneran, 2006; Lenhart, 2006, p. 12). Entries tend toward narcissism. By contrast, another type of blog, the "news-blog," has emerged. News blogs are essentially clearinghouses of news headlines or abstracts that usually link readers to an actual news story as a means of establishing ethos and credibility.[2] The classic news blog is the *Drudge Retort* (www.drudge.com/). Most blogs (90%) also contain threaded dialogue[3] allowing readers to comment on news items and posts (Lenhart, 2006, p. 20). Consequently, many blogs are filled with rants, flames, and irrelevant comments. As Trammell and Keshelashvili explain.

Blog genres range from personal, diary-like pages to in-depth public affairs analysis.. . . Some provide description of. . . selected links, others tell about details of a writer's day, and some offer personal opinions and commentaries on the news of a day. Opinionated people, called bloggers, post their thoughts, experiences, and politics on blogs (p. 968).

There is no official distinction between a traditional-blog and a news-blog. For our purposes, traditional-blogs are the diary variety where the blogger argues, carps, praises, rails, rambles, etc., about whatever injustice or situation strikes him/her on that particular day.

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[2] Many bloggers do not report their sources and pass off information as if they had gathered the information themselves (Barbaro, 2006). Dealing with bloggers who are not upfront about their sources raises ethical issues. The Public Relations Society of America's code of ethics, for example, calls for "accuracy and truth in communications" (article 4), forbids the use of "front groups" (article 8), and advises against "corrupting the channels of information" (article 6).

[3] "Threaded dialogue" is what most blogs are based on. "Threads" of dialogue (or conversation) are created when people post-messages and then build on conversations.

Traditional-blogs are much less widely read than many of the news-blogs because they tend to have a very narrow audience (people who want to hear what one person has to say). By contrast, news-blogs like the *Drudge Retort* draw a wider audiences because they report "news" items and report on stories that focus on particular areas: the chemical industry, pharmaceuticals, politics, software, science/technology, GLBTQ issues, space/astronomy, international news, etc.

News-blogs, on the other hand, include postings from other online news and information sites and then visitors or "subscribers" comment on the posting. The technology blog *Slashdot* (Slashdot.org) is a good example of a news-blog. Once a story is posted to the site, thousands of readers immediately begin posting comments to the site with each comment typically building on a previous post or the original post. Each story on the blog becomes a dialogue of comments, explanations, corrections, elaborations, retorts, and occasionally, insults.

There are no "typical" blogs. Blogs run the gamut of Web commentary posted by citizens about their everyday lives (true online diaries) to blogs that are nearly identical to the major online media organizations' news sites.[4] Other forms of blogs have been identified and include: advertising, commentary by CEOs, professionals, and employees, customer service, business/professional issue commentary, internal information sharing, knowledge management applications, marketing, and promotion of organizations, products, etc. (Dearstyne, 2005, p. 41).

At some point, all blogs start out being little known and read, however, news-blogs always have the potential to be of interest to more people. News blogs often focus on specialized areas, which make them excellent places for professionals and experts to keep abreast of trends, relevant legislation, and general issues of importance. Learning about new legislation, trends, discoveries, and potential crises weeks ahead of the mainstream media is common on blogs. Having access to "insider" information and sentiment weeks ahead of the competition obviously is attractive to managers and public relations professionals. The next section will examine some of the claims/issues related to blogging.

2. Discussion and critique

Blogs have received little critical attention. Although there are a lot of articles about blogs and blogging, there is very little scholarly research in communication or public relations about blogging and almost no way of distinguishing the hype from substantive claims in the many practitioner, consultant, and mainstream sources. To examine whether the claims made about blogs are true, this section of the article will discuss the strengths and weakness of blogs, make some suggestions about how to use blogs more effectively, and provide suggestions on where to focus future research. The first issue to take up is what blogs offer to public relations professionals.

2.1. Strengths of blogs

Blogs have several major strengths including their usefulness as research tools, and their usefulness as message framing and persuasion tools. Given the centrality of research in public relations and the great potential of blogs as information gathering and environmental scanning tools, the research aspects of blogs seem to be the best place to start.

2.1.1. Using blogs for research, environmental scanning, and issue management

In order to create effective messages, public relations professionals often need to better understand particular issues and publics. Indeed, much of the research on issue management has emphasized the importance of issue identification and analysis (Jones & Chase, 1979, pp. 11–12; Coombs, 1999), understanding the status or state of issues (Crable & Vibbert, 1985, pp. 5–7), understanding the language associated with issues (Bostdorff, 1992; Boulding, 1977), managing issues and crises (Coombs, 1999, pp. 12f), and the importance of being proactive (Bridges, 2000, pp. 96–98).

Blogs are useful for research, issue monitoring, and environmental scanning. When unanticipated issues, legislation, or events emerge, organizations can search through the archives of blogs for information, reader sentiment, links to other useful information, etc., just as an organization might examine relevant scholarly information, conduct interviews,

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[4] News-blogs that have received media attention include: BoingBoing: A Directory of Wonderful Things (boingboing.net), Drudge Retort: Red Meat for Yellow Dogs (www.drudge.com), and Slashdot: News for Nerds: Stuff That Matters (slashdot.org).

or search other archives and databases for information (cf., Kent, 2005). Blogs also present themselves as excellent data gathering sites when organizations begin dealing with unfamiliar ethnic, cultural, and social groups or publics for the first time as part of campaigns or programs, activist activities, or international communication efforts.

On a more regular basis, blogs are also excellent monitoring and environmental scanning tools. Monitoring blogs can be one way of coming to understand the world-view of diverse individuals and publics. Additionally, blogs usually track events as they unfold in real time (and often weeks or months ahead of the mainstream media). By knowing how individuals and publics are interpreting and responding to organizational events, messages, and activities *before* such information reaches the mainstream media and news outlets, public relations professionals can formulate better, more compelling, more effective, responses.

For organizations wishing to keep up on what the "experts" (if we want to call bloggers that) are saying, there are software applications called "aggregators" (or "compilers") that will automatically gather data from blogs and other Web sites. Aggregators are very easy to use. Anyone who can use e-mail can figure out how to use an aggregator.[5]

Many blogs are produced using "Really Simple Syndication" (or RSS) feeds. RSS uses a programming language called XML (similar to HTML) to convert Web content into an easily viewed text-based format. Aggregators collect RSS feeds for easy perusal. Everyone who has used the Internet has probably visited hundreds of Web sites that have RSS feeds and never knew it. For example, next time you are using the Internet, take a look at the address bar, or sometimes the top or bottom of the Web page you are visiting, and you will see a small blue or red box with "RSS" inside it. How obvious the RSS link is depends on whether you are using the latest browser and what version of the browser you are using. Browsers interpret RSS pages slightly differently just as browsers render HTML slightly differently.

The default choices on many aggregators allow users to select from among several dozen to several thousand popular feeds: Baltimore Sun, BBC, BoingBoing, Chicago Sun-Times, Christian Science Monitor, CNN, Forbes, Motley Fool, NASA, New York Times, Salon, Slashdot, Space, Techdirt, Wall Street Journal, Wired, etc. Additional feeds may be manually added and then are checked by clicking on them just like one might with e-mail messages. Content can also be sorted by key words with many aggregators allowing users to receive only the content that interests them. The principle of RSS is a lot like a personalized newspaper that only provides content that an individual wants to read.

Using an RSS aggregator allows public relations professionals to very quickly sort through information from many media sites, organizations, and bloggers. Aggregators give professionals the ability to monitor what is being said by dozens (or hundreds) of sources, individuals, and publics on a minute-by-minute basis.

Blogs provide access to individuals and groups that probably never existed before outside of the world of blogs (called the "blogosphere") or the Internet, and blogs provide access to information that has typically only been available to experts working in obscure professional and academic disciplines.

A second strength of blogs has to do with the direct access to publics that blogs provide. Blogs have great strength as issue framing and persuasion tools.

2.1.2. Issue framing

Using blogs as a way to influence individuals and publics is one of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of blogs by public relations professionals (cf., Edelman & Intelliseek, 2005; Neilson BuzzMetrics, 2006). Allowing or encouraging visitors to an organization's Web site to participate in how online news and information is framed is possibly the greatest strength of blogs and the feature of the most importance to public relations practitioners. Research on framing and agenda setting has shown that the ability to control what individuals *see*, is the first step to controlling what people *think* (Baran & Davis, 2000; Cohen, 1963; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1976).

The best framing efforts structure messages in ways that audiences will accept and identify with. Blogs foster identification (Burke, 1969, 1973), a powerful persuasive technique. Readers of the many Mac blogs, for example, already *know* that their computers are *better* than Windows based computers; they have an enemy and they know whom they can trust. Organizations also already know that by identifying with individuals and publics (via membership, sponsorship, etc.) an organization or group can foster trust and empathy. Blogs can provide an entree for organizations into previously "private" realms.

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[5] Free aggregators that can be set up in 5–10 minutes include: Editaste (editaste.com), NewsGator (www.newsgator.com), and NewsLife (www.thinkmac.co.uk/newslife/).

Blogs are also enthymematic (Aristotle, 1991). Blog readers already come to blogs with information and views of their own. Self-persuasion and influence are more easily accomplished when individuals and publics already have knowledge of issues and important events. Blogs bring homogenous groups of individuals and publics together, allowing the power of the enthymeme and self-persuasion to be used.

Since the proliferation of media in 1980s, and 1990s, targeting individuals and publics has been difficult for organizations that do not have the resources to gather or purchase direct marketing, segmentation, or other individualized data. Media changes and innovations such as special interest magazines, cable television, 24-hour news networks, the Internet, podcasts, time shifting devices-like Tevo, and television and music programming on cellular telephones complicate organizational efforts to inform and persuade publics. Individuals and publics get their information from a variety of sources and heterogeneous publics are difficult to target and less subject to enthymematic persuasion.

One of blogs defining features is their enthymatic character. Blog readers help to construct their own reality through dialogue, rather than simply participating in the symbolic representation of the online poll where visitors "vote" on issues but never discuss them (cf., Kent, Harrison, & Taylor, 2006), as is the case with the mainstream news sites (CNN.com, MSNBC.com, etc.). That blog readers actually have an interest in issues, read what others have to say about issues, and have the ability to comment on issues, make blogs genuinely participative.

Moreover, since homogenous publics read blogs in their own particular areas of interest, the comments often fall along a predictable continuum of responses from the skeptics to the "hallelujah!" choir. Occasionally, however, dissenters question mainstream positions and raise important issues. Learning what minority members of groups/publics believe (the dissenters) can be very useful for understanding subtle issues and the complexity of public sentiment.

Finally, blogs are dialogic. Ninety percent of blogs are interactive (Lenhart, 2006, p. 20). Blogs employ threaded dialogue, creating an environment where individuals, groups, and organizations can interact. Of course, there is no guarantee of candor, honesty, etc. (features of genuine dialogue), but messages posted to blogs are usually accompanied by threaded dialogue that many readers find more compelling than the blog postings themselves. Additionally, what everyone knows who has read a blog is that no voice is completely privileged, even the bloggers. Complaints about the value of posts are common on blogs, as are corrections, elaborations, clarifications, and contradictions. Blogs are also frequented by experts, professionals, geeks, and opinion leaders who have an interest in the specialized topic covered in the blog and have an interest in discussing the topic. Thus, from a public relations standpoint, blogs represent the ultimate in public segmentation: coherent groups of individuals/professionals who share a common interest.

What the blog offers is the power to reach the choir. Because blogs are currently something that users seek out (they have not reached mainstream status yet), those who read them are often already members of the "choir." Reaching the choir is useful when an organization is trying to influence opinion leaders, innovators, and early adopters (cf., Rogers, 1995). Blogs afford organizations another route for sharing their positions in a somewhat controlled fashion and many mainstream organizations like Cisco, Dell, Ford, HP, Kodak, Nokia, Quixtar, and others (cf., <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corporate_blog>; <brand.blogs.com/mantra/2004/05/corporate_blog_.html>) have taken advantage of the medium.

By now the strengths of blogs as research and environmental scanning tools as well as issue framing and rhetorical tools should be apparent. What has been missing in many of the recent treatments of blogs, however, has been a critical focus on the weakness of blogs, which individuals or organizations might want to create blogs, and what the risks involved in blogging might be. The next section takes up these issues by discussing some of the weakness of blogs.

2.2. Weaknesses of blogs

All forms of professional communication involve risks. Controlled messages run the risk of being ignored or seen as propagandistic. Uncontrolled messages run the risk of being altered, poorly placed, or not given adequate attention. By now, many of the strengths and weaknesses of the Internet have become more widely known: inexpensive, wide dissemination, pull rather than push, etc. Blogs however, have not received as much attention as the Internet. The question that many public relations professionals are currently asking is "what do I need to understand about blogs and do I need to have a blog?" Every organization will need to answer this question individually based on organizational needs, reputation, industry, budget, practitioner experience, etc. To be able to answer this question effectively, however, requires an understanding of the risks involved in blogging.

2.2.1. Communicative risks involved in blogging

Most of the professional articles that have talked about blogs have ignored the risks involved in participating in forums that are populated by experts and partisans (cf., Edelman & Intelliseek, 2005; Edelman & Nielsen BuzzMetrics, 2005). Indeed, I could not find a single source that provided more than a few sentences of "warning." Most discussions of blogs implicitly assume that organizations will host a blog and that interested parties will simply come there and read it. Little or no discussion of organizations positioning blogs, marketing or advertising blogs, monitoring blogs, trying to correct inaccuracies, conducting research with them, etc. seems to exist.

Blogs (newsgroups, and lists) can be useful for "taking the temperature" of regular people with a strong enough interest in a subject to want to talk about it with other people. But in many cases, blogs are often populated by fanatics-like the people who spend their time discussing the latest episode of *CSI* (for which there are a several dozen newsgroups). Obviously, professionals should not place too much stock in what a few dozen fanatics have to say. However, public relations professionals should also be aware that for each "fanatic" there are hundreds, perhaps thousands of people who feel similarly (albeit less passionately). A professional can never be sure whether a comment represents a majority or minority view, and bloggers are not even representative of the general population (cf., Lenhart, 2006).

Just as there are potential rewards involved in blogging such as issue framing, relationship building, fostering trust and identification, there are also risks such as organizational bloggers who are not adequately trained in public communication and dialogue, or independently decide whether or not to go public on an issue rather than consulting with organizational leaders. Indeed, many managers and communication professionals still think that anonymous postings to blogs and discussion groups cannot be tracked back to their source. They can, and anonymous posters are regularly outed by blog moderators. Such exposure always makes the organization that posted the message look desperate or stupid. Public relations professionals are organizational representatives and they should never attempt to lie about who they represent, disguise their identity, or try to "subvert the channels of communication" by pretending to be someone else (a violation of the Public Relations Society of America's Code of Professional Ethics). Thus, the question is not *what* to say, but *whether* the organization is ready to take a public stance on an issue.

2.2.2. Exaggerated significance attached to blogging

Another issue worth noting is the exaggerated significance that has been attributed to blogs as an organization—public communication tool. Edelman public relations, for example, claims that "blogs represent a paradigm shift that presents new challenges and opportunities for the advertising, public relations and marketing communities—challenges and opportunities that require quick responses, protocols and policies" (Edelman & Intelliseek, 2005, p. 7). However, since Edelman bases nearly all of its conclusions on a single "memo"[6] by one researcher with the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Rainie, 2005), professionals need to take Edelman's conclusion with a grain of salt.

Whether or not a paradigm change is taking place remains to be seen. At present, only about one in nine Americans report having read a blog (Rainie, 2005) (but the data is a bit dated already considering the speed at which the online world moves). According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 27% of 120 million Americans have read a blog (32.4 million Americans) (Rainie, 2005). When we factor in how many of those blogs are written, and read, by someone's "Cousin Vinnie," rather than being a substantive news-blog, we are really looking at a smaller number of citizens (probably less than one in 10) who have the potential to be influenced by a blog. When we factor in how poorly written many blogs are, the fact that almost no one except those already interested in the subject actually reads to the bottom of many blog posts, and the demographics of bloggers, blogs probably have the potential to influence fewer than 1 in 20 U.S. citizens. Even fewer is we consider "likely voters" or "educated consumers with a lot of expendable income." Until more direct, public relations oriented, research is conducted on blogs, their actual value as public relations tools will be unclear.

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[6] Edelman also cites its *previous* blog report (which is no better supported than the 2005 report), and several research partners' (subsidiaries) reports. In general, the only credible, unbiased, source that Edelman cites is Pew. Edelman is one of the largest public relations firms in the world and could certainly have spared one researcher for *one day* to actually consult some of the abundant scholarly/anecdotal literature on blogs. In only a few hours I was able to track down, download, and examine, more than 50 articles, reports, studies, and commentaries just in the area of communication.

2.2.3. Blogger credibility and status

A third issue of note in terms of the weaknesses of blogs has to do with their status as media outlets. The experience of visiting the average mainstream media news site (MSNBC.com, CNN.com, NYTimes.com, etc.) is not very different from a news blog like the *Drudge Retort* or *Slashdot.* However, most bloggers (65%) do not consider themselves "journalists," most bloggers (84%) post infrequently, only about half of all bloggers (56%) make any effort to check their facts, most bloggers (60%) do not publish corrections, and most bloggers (95%) get their news content exclusively from the Internet (Lenhart, 2006).

From a public relations standpoint, many blogs blur the distinction between independent organizations and the media. The long-standing tradition of the information subsidy becomes irrelevant when individuals and organizations are able to participate in the production of "news" content. By the same token, the features that made the media desirable as content sources: reach and credibility, become blurred. Blogs allow direct access to publics (reach), but most bloggers lack the credibility, training, and objectivity that the mainstream media possess.

Most people who read a news-blog probably cannot tell the difference between a news-blog and a mainstream media news site. Consider the similarities:

(1) Most mainstream news Web sites gather no original news content but get their content primarily from a small number of wire services (cf., Bagdikian, 2000). Bloggers also get their stories from other sources.
(2) The mainstream news Web sites post headlines and abstracts and visitors select the content that interests them. Bloggers post-headlines and abstracts and readers select the content that interests them.
(3) Mainstream news Web sites are free or require "subscriptions." blogs are also free, or sometimes require "subscriptions."
(4) Both mainstream news Web sites and (some) blogs have advertisements. However, news Web sites exist to sell readers to advertisers (Bagdikian, 2000, p. 195) rather than for egalitarian purposes like free speech. In principle, many blogs exist for different philosophical reasons; in practice, however, many blogs also have advertisements and try to make a profit.

In terms of the experience of visiting blogs or online news sites, there is little content difference. The mainstream media's news sites tend to have *more* advertising and *lower* interactivity while blogs tend to be *more* interactive, and have *fewer* advertisements.

The only real difference is perhaps aesthetic. The mainstream news Web sites obtain their content from wire services and have access to abundant photographs. The mainstream news Web sites are typically formatted to resemble magazine or newspaper pages. Since bloggers do not have access to the images and copyrighted photographs that the corporate sites do, blogs are usually leaner and more text based.

The question that really needs to be asked is "from a public relations standpoint, what really separates CNN's Web site from Slashdot's Web site?" Is the difference simply a matter of numbers? CNN.com probably has more visitors come through its Web portal each day than most blogs (exposing readers to more advertising which benefits CNN), but the average news-blog probably has more people who are part of the same "public" come through its front door each day than CNN does. For public relations professionals, the tradeoff is national coverage (and wider reach) verses focused, public-specific, coverage, and more modest reach.

A good analogy can be found with cable television. Blogs gives public relations professionals access to very homogenous publics. Blogs provide access to individuals who not only *watch* the food, golf, sewing, billiards, etc., channel, but who also *subscribe* to the niche channel. Although a television viewer not interested in sports might occasionally stop on a sports channel because a celebrity like Lance Armstrong or Tiger Woods is competing, blogs need to be sought out and require interest and concentration. Very little "accidental" blog readership takes place so public relations professionals can be fairly certain that they are reaching interested parties when they post to or read blogs.

Ultimately the most important issue has to do with what an organization's communicative goals are, rather than whether blogs are better, more credible, or more "objective" than the mainstream news sites. The threaded dialogue feature of blogs where everyone is free to express his/her view and no one's voice is privileged is about as close as one can get to "objectivity" on the Web and belies the faux "objectivity" of the mainstream media which is driven by economic imperatives, marketing imperatives, and corporate goals. Where exactly is the objectivity and editorial

oversight when Katie Couric or "60 Minutes" (both CBS) report on a pseudo event like the latest Showtime movie or Simon and Schuster book (companies which are owned by CBS Corporation), rather than one of the many wars or national conflicts that constitute genuine news?

As noted above, there are more than 12-million Americans blogging, and about 57 million Americans report reading blogs (Lenhart, 2006, p. 22). If we do the math, that equals about 4.75 readers per blog. There *are* blogs that have global reach, but, as with any mass media source, as the audience increases the specificity and uniqueness of the content decreases. To appeal to tens of thousands (or millions) of readers, requires more generic, less "bloggy" content. The specialized blogs (science, technology, etc.) do not appeal to as many readers as generic news-blogs. Similarly, a news-blog will attract a lot more readers than a traditional-blog.

Blogs are a lot like news groups and Listservs in many ways and each has its own character, norms, and profile of members. Practitioners, who attempt to opportunistically exploit blogs as places to post-organizational messages, will likely suffer a backlash from angry readers. Similarly, organizations that start blogs of their own must recognize that they will primarily reach self-selected visitors who already share (or oppose) the organization's views.

3. Conclusion

Currently, many professionals are suggesting that blogs have tremendous potential as tools for online communication and for reaching diverse publics (cf., Albrycht, 2004; Edelman & Intelliseek, 2005; May, 2003). They do. Interestingly, however, scholars have been saying the same thing about the Internet for almost 10 years (cf., Esrock & Leichty, 1999; Kent, 2001; Kent et al., 2006) and most organizations have not figured out how to use their Web sites well except to sell things.

Ultimately I believe that the jury is still out on blogging. A lot more scholarly research needs to be conducted before most organizations start blogging. Public relations professionals should not get trampled by the blogging stampede until scholars, researchers, and especially professionals actually understand them better. A blog will only be useful to an organization if it has someone to maintain it, someone trained in effective dialogic communication, and someone who has the trust of individuals and publics. Posting anonymously to blogs is not a viable option for any organization nor are attempts to manipulate blog audience members with self-serving propaganda or thinly disguised news releases. Blogs are currently great research tools, but scholars need to critically examine blogs and understand a lot more about how blogs function as persuasive/informative tools and how they fit in with organizational initiatives before jumping on the blog bandwagon.

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