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**Pedersen, S. and Chivers, A. (2007). Readers' use of news blogs. *The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society*, 3 (1)**

Appearing at the end of the 1990s, the phenomenon of 'blogging' or weblogging is now attracting serious academic research. However, the majority of this research has so far focussed on the 'bloggers' themselves – who they are; their motivations for blogging and their relationship with the mainstream media. Limited research has been undertaken on the readers of blogs. Why are readers drawn to accessing the opinions and thoughts of mostly non-professional writers, many of whom are happy to admit to a lack of objectivity and having an axe to grind? In particular, why do people read blogs which focus on current affairs and news, and is their reading of such news blogs in addition to the electronic offerings of the mainstream media, or a substitute? This paper reports on the results of an investigation undertaken in spring 2006 into the readers of 'news' blogs. The survey aimed to gather demographic and attitudinal information about news blog readers and to determine how far they relied on blogs to provide news and opinion about current world events. Surveying nearly 300 news blog readers, the study asked why respondents read blogs, how many they read and how frequently; whether they interacted with the blogger by posting comments; and whether they used news blogs as a substitute for or as an addition to more mainstream news media. In particular, this paper focuses on the dissatisfaction with the mainstream media reported by many blog-readers and their use of blogs to learn about areas not covered in detail by such mainstream media. However, it must be noted that the majority of respondents used both blogs *and* mainstream media to deliver their news and considered that this was a necessary and complementary relationship.

## What is a blog?

A 'weblog' or 'blog' is a website comprised of brief, dated posts collected on one webpage which appear in chronological order and are self-archived by date. Postings may contain hypertext links and may also be discussed with readers in a comments section. Most blogs also display what is called a 'blogroll': a list of weblogs the blogger (author) recommends. The term weblog was first used in 1997 by Jorn Barger and the first attempt to document the phenomenon was in 1999 when Jesse James Garrett, editor of Infosift, created the 'page of only weblogs' listing the 23 which were known to be in existence at this time. (For more on the history of weblogs, or 'blogs', as they became known, see Rebecca Blood's 'Weblogs: A History and Perspective'.<sup>1</sup>) Early blogs tended to be link-driven sites which aimed to filter the Internet for their readership, directing readers towards interesting material the blogger had found on the Web, and possibly commenting on it at the same time. The expansion of the 'blogosphere' that we see today, when the blog-tracking website Technorati claims to be tracking over 70 million blogs, occurred after the introduction of cheap and easy-to-use build-your-own-blog software such as Blogger, Pitas and Groksoup in 1999. Unlike early bloggers, who needed advanced programming skills to construct their blogs, it is now possible for anyone with access to the Internet to set up their own blog. The ability to simply publish a blog online is ever increasing with the likes of MSN and community websites such as Myspace adding blogging functions to their services.

It has been suggested by blog commentators such as Blood that there are two main types of blog: the links-driven filter blog and the personal journal blog. The newer journal blogs have a commentary-concentrated style, which may also include links and reader responses, depending on

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Blood (2000). [Weblogs: a history and perspective](http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html). Rebecca's Pocket [weblog], 7 September 2000. [http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog\\_history.html](http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html) (accessed November 2006).

the theme and purpose of the weblog. Links-driven blogs tend to be focused on external events, while journal bloggers write about events in their own lives. However, it is important not to impose this filter/journal division too strictly when investigating the blogosphere since most bloggers use a mixture of styles, with links bloggers discussing their personal responses to external events such as wars or elections and personal journal bloggers recording and commenting on external events as well as their own interests.

Our study focused on the readers of journalistic or 'news' blogs, which we defined as blogs which focused on reporting and commenting on news events, whether local, national or subject-specific (ie environmental news) and which were not affiliated to a mainstream media organisation. Blogging as journalism or as a form of reporting has been a much-debated topic. Commentators such as Dan Gillmor see bloggers at the forefront of a revolution whereby a new breed of grassroots journalists is taking the news into their own hands.<sup>2</sup> Gillmor's Centre for Citizen Media (<http://citmedia.org>) supports what is described as 'citizen or grassroots journalism' as a way of encouraging participation in current events by an educated populace. 'Citizen Journalism' describes a form of media that involves moderated reader participation and is a response to what is seen as the 'one-way journalism' of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Citizen journalism sites seek out people in the local community to write contributions and are happy to interweave opinion with fact. Such sites tend to be multi-authored but may involve editorial guidance and moderation. Not all blogs can be described as citizen journalism, particularly because few single-authored

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Gillmor, *We The Media: Grassroots Journalism By The People, For The People*, Sebastol CA: O'Reilly Media, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Clyde Bentley, Brian Hamman, Jeremy Littau, Hans Meyer, Brendan Watson and Beth Welsh (2007), 'Citizen Journalism: A Case Study', *Blogging, Citizenship and the Future of Media*, ed Mark Tremayne, New York and London: Routledge.

blogs are editorially moderated, but the two forms of online writing do share some characteristics, such as the personal, opinionated, nature of some of the writing, and the ability to focus on a particular aspect of a news story.

However, claims that blogging is a form of journalism, or perhaps a 'fifth estate', monitoring the output of the mainstream media, have irritated others in the field of professional journalism. For example, Jeff Jarvis, editor of Buzzmachine.com, has published email exchanges between himself and Bill Keller, Executive Editor for *The New York Times*, regarding the issue. In one of his responses, Keller likened the ability for constant debate on blogs to 'Groundhog Day' where an argument persists, being 'recycled endlessly'.<sup>4</sup>

Gillmor however, argues that using an 'open source philosophy' furthers journalistic quality:

If my readers know more than I do (which I know they do), I can include them in the process of making my journalism better... the first article may be only the beginning of the conversation in which we all enlighten each other. We can correct our mistakes. We can add new facts and context.<sup>5</sup>

### **Mainstream media's response to blogs**

One way in which the mainstream media has responded to the possible threat posed by alternative news sources such as blogs has been to increase audience participation in the journalism process, particularly online. Using a 'if you can't beat them, join them' approach, many mainstream media newsrooms now employ staff to edit, manage and write their own interactive online content. Such participation is described by Lowrey and Anderson in 'The journalist behind the curtain' and includes chat rooms and forums; the provision of journalists' email addresses so

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<sup>4</sup> Jeff Jarvis and Bill Keller (2005), email correspondence to be found at [http://www.buzzmachine.com/archives/cat\\_times.html](http://www.buzzmachine.com/archives/cat_times.html) (accessed November 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Gillmor (2004), p. 18.

that readers can 'talk back'; links to sources; and personalised news selection on the Web.<sup>6</sup> Many mainstream news sites on the Internet have also set up blogs where journalists can write in a more personal way, albeit still as employers of the company, about their take on a particular news story. *The Guardian*, BBC News and *The Washington Post* are just a few examples of this. For example, during the 2006 mid-term elections in the US, the BBC set up a 'reporters' blog' so that radio and television reporters who were in various American states could blog about their everyday encounters and add more information than they were able to give in their short bulletins in the scheduled news programmes. Jane B. Singer suggests that such activity shows how journalists are striving to stay as gatekeepers, 'normalising' the blog as 'a component, and in some ways an enhancement' of traditional journalism.<sup>7</sup>

Matheson describes how, for some journalists, blogs are a chance to say what cannot be said on the news page or to be creative beyond the newsroom and emphasises how such blogs also represent 'an assertion of the value of the personal in the public sphere'.<sup>8</sup> However, Lowrey and Anderson suggest that the consequence of such audience participation in the journalism process may be a further weakening of the mainstream media's exclusive authority in the eyes of the public, and that the more audiences use the Internet in participatory ways to obtain news, the more likely they are to think that they could master the journalism knowledge base. In particular, with a broadening of the definition of journalism to include commentary and opinion rather than straight fact reporting, the

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<sup>6</sup> Wilson Lowrey and William Anderson, 'The Journalist Behind the Curtain: Participatory Functions on the Internet and their Impact on Perceptions of the Work of Journalism', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(3), article 13.

<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue3/lowrey.html> (accessed 14 November 2006)

<sup>7</sup> Jane B. Singer (2005), 'The Political J-Blogger: Normalising a new media form to fit old norms and practices', *Journalism*, 6(2), 173-198.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Matheson, 'Weblogs and the epistemology of the news: some trends in online journalism', *New Media and Society*, 6(4), 443-468.

traditional concept of news is being blurred and redefined to include the use of alternative sources such as blogs.

Jay Rosen has now declared that 'Bloggers Vs. Journalist is over'<sup>9</sup> and it does seem that the debate has moved on to a discussion of the fertile zone of overlap between journalism and blogging. Kahn and Kellner argue that the commentary on and contribution to news stories by blogs has revolutionised journalism, giving non-journalists 'the realm of freedom, community and empowerment'.<sup>10</sup> In her discussion of the use of blogs during the second US war with Iraq in 2003, Melissa Wall suggests that blogs are a new genre of journalism which 'emphasizes personalization, audience participation in content creation and story forms'. She also suggests that such characteristics suggest a move away from the modern approaches of journalism, and that this new form can be seen as post-modern.<sup>11</sup>

## **Methodology**

Despite the provision of blogs by some national newspapers and broadcasters such as the BBC, the majority of news-related blogs in the blogosphere are not part of the mainstream media and are written from and as an alternative point of view. Our investigation aimed to discover who read such blogs, whether they saw them as an alternative or complementary to the mainstream media, and why they read them, particularly in view of the wide range of provision of online news from mainstream channels.

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<sup>9</sup> Jay Rosen (2005), 'Bloggers vs. Journalists is over', at [http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2005/01/21/berk\\_essay.html](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2005/01/21/berk_essay.html) (accessed November 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner (2004). 'New media and Internet activism: from the 'Battle of Seattle' to blogging', *New Media & Society* 6(1), 87-95.

<sup>11</sup> Melissa Wall (2005), 'Blogs of War', *Journalism*, 6(2), 153-172.



As a starting-point, and to validate the research amongst the blogging community, a blog about the research was set up in spring 2006. The blog was hosted by Blogger.com, where sign up and use is completely free. Posts were made on an on-going weekly basis discussing the project's aim, offering links to secondary literature on the subject of blogging, and allowing readers the opportunity to comment on the findings of the survey. The blog also hosted a short survey about blog-readers' motivations for reading news blogs. Establishing a blog about the project offered readers further information about the progress of the project and links to the weblogs supporting the research and also gave the researchers personal insight into the demands and benefits of blogging.

One hundred news bloggers were contacted and asked to post about the research and to include a link to the survey. Previous research into blogging and the interactive nature of the blogosphere suggested that there would be a positive response to such an approach. News bloggers were identified through the use of the blog directory Technorati (<http://technorati.com/>). The criteria used to identify the journalistic blogs to be contacted were as follow:

- 1) The site followed the blog design of posts appearing in reverse chronological order, etc.
- 2) The last post had been within four days of when it was viewed
- 3) The text was in English
- 4) The content was of a reporting nature, covering local or national news, current affairs, politics and foreign policy, in the vein of serious journalism. This excluded weblogs of the 'personal journal' type.

Using such criteria, 100 bloggers from the UK, US, Canada, the Philippines, Iraq, Australia and Ireland were identified and contacted. The bloggers were asked to complete a questionnaire about their own blog-reading habits and to blog about our research. By blogging about the

research project and offering a link to our blog where the survey was hosted, the bloggers encouraged their readers to visit our blog and complete the survey. Of the 100 bloggers contacted, 42 responded positively by completing the questionnaire and blogging about the research, urging their own readers to participate in our project. Through such links to our blog, our survey was completed by 295 blog-reading respondents within a month. This study therefore relied on a convenience sample, an appropriate method for targeting a very specific group of Internet users – news blog readers, and one which was also used by Johnson and Kaye in their survey of readers of war blogs.<sup>12</sup>

The survey established the age and sex of respondents and then collected data on the number of online news sites they visited, and how frequently, and the number of journalistic blogs visited, and how frequently. Blog readers were then asked why they chose to read blogs. Anonymity was assured throughout.

## **Results**

### **The demography of the sample**

Out of 295 responses to the survey, 207 (70.4%) were male and 87 (29.6%) were female. Table 1 shows the age distribution of the sample. Nearly 66.4% of the respondents were aged between of 30 and 59 while another 24.1% were between 16 and 29.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Johnson and Barbara K. Kaye (2007), 'Blog Readers: Predictors of Reliance on War Blogs', in *Blogging, Citizenship and the Future of Media*.

Age Group	Responses	Percentage
Younger than 15	1	0.3
16-24	33	11.2
25-29	38	12.9
30-39	64	21.7
40-49	73	24.7
50-59	59	20.0
60-69	23	7.8
70 or above	4	1.4

Total responses: 295

The findings concerning age are interesting when compared with data on general Internet use. For example, the Pew Internet and American Life Project, which regularly conducts surveys relating to Internet use, suggests that, as of February to April 2006, 88% of all 18-29 year-olds in the US use the Internet and 84% of all 30-49 year-olds.<sup>13</sup> Usage decreases with age, with only 71% of all 50-69 year-olds and 32% of those aged over 65 being Internet users. In comparison, our findings suggest that it is those over 30, and in particular those between the age of 40 and 49, who make most use of news blogs. A similar survey of US blog readers undertaken by Blogads in May 2004 found that 61% of respondents to the survey were over 30,<sup>14</sup> while Johnson and Kaye's

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<sup>13</sup> Demographics of Internet Users, Pew Internet and American Life Project, [http://www.pewInternet.org/trends/User\\_Demo\\_4.26.06.htm](http://www.pewInternet.org/trends/User_Demo_4.26.06.htm), accessed 1 November 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Copeland, 'Blogads: Blog reader survey, May 2004', [http://www.blogads.com/survey/blog\\_reader\\_survey.html](http://www.blogads.com/survey/blog_reader_survey.html) (accessed 20 November 2006).

survey of war blog readers found that the average age was closer to 40.<sup>15</sup> In July 2006, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that its latest survey of users of the blogosphere showed that 39% of US Internet users read blogs (an increase from the 17% who claimed to read them in February 2005).<sup>16</sup> An earlier bulletin from the Pew Internet Project in November 2005 suggested that this increase in blog readers had been greatest amongst women, minorities and those between the ages of 30 and 49, thus confirming our findings.<sup>17</sup>

Our findings are, however, in contrast to those of Lowrey and Anderson, whose 2001 survey of users of online news websites (although not including blogs at this time) suggested that respondents who were younger were 'more likely to think they could develop news opinions without using information from traditional news organisations'<sup>18</sup>

The difference in numbers between male and female readers of journalistic blogs is interesting, particularly when compared to readership of other news sources, such as newspapers. According to the Newspaper Association of America, 53% of all US men and 48% of all US women read a daily newspaper.<sup>19</sup> In the UK, a National Readership Survey for July 1999 to June 2000 suggested that 59% of all men read a national

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<sup>15</sup> Johnson and Kaye (2007), 'Blog Readers: Predictors of reliance on war blogs', 172.

<sup>16</sup> Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox, 'Bloggers: A portrait of the Internet's new storytellers', Pew Internet and American Life Project, July 2006, <http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP%20Bloggers%20Report%20July%2019%202006.pdf> (accessed 20 November 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Lee Rainie, 'Data Memo re the state of blogging', The Pew Internet and American Life Project, January 2005, [http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_blogging\\_data.pdf](http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP_blogging_data.pdf) (accessed 20 November 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Wilson Lowrey and William Anderson, 'The Journalist Behind the Curtain: Participatory Functions on the Internet and their Impact on Perceptions of the Work of Journalism', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. 10(3), article 13. <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue3/lowrey.html> (accessed 14 November 2006)

<sup>19</sup> Daily newspaper readership trend – total adults 1998-2006, Newspaper Association of America, [http://www.naa.org/marketscope/pdfs/Daily\\_National\\_Top50\\_1998-2006.pdf](http://www.naa.org/marketscope/pdfs/Daily_National_Top50_1998-2006.pdf), (accessed 20 April 2007)

newspaper in comparison to 50% of women.<sup>20</sup> Thus, although men are more likely than women to read newspapers, there is not the same difference between the sexes as found in blog readership. Our findings are confirmed by the findings of the Blogads survey of May 2004 which found that 79% of its respondents were male, in comparison with the 56% of NYTimes.com's readers who were male, and Johnson and Kaye's survey of war blog readers where 76.5% of survey respondents were male<sup>21</sup> – suggesting that it is news blogs rather than online media as a whole which are not as attractive to women.<sup>22</sup> The Pew Internet Survey also agreed that blog readers were more likely to be male.

Such findings agree with research into the demographics of bloggers themselves. Studies suggest that, while around 50% of all bloggers are female, such bloggers are more likely to write personal, journal blogs rather than news-oriented filter blogs. Blogs about technology and politics, which are popular subjects throughout the Internet, are more likely to be authored by men. The apparent lack of women bloggers on political issues prompted Taylor to ask, 'Is Blog a Masculine Noun?'<sup>23</sup> It has also been suggested that, since men are more likely to blog about external events, they are more likely to be found by prospective readers when using a search engine. Pollard suggests that men are more likely to aggressively market their blogs to other bloggers and thus get them incorporated into a blogroll (lists of other recommended blogs, a feature which most blogs

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<sup>20</sup> Reading of national daily newspapers: by gender, 1999-00: Social Trends 31, Office of National Statistics  
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=3706&Pos=1&ColRank=2&Rank=1000>  
(accessed 20 April 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Johnson and Kaye (2007), 'Blog Readers: Predictors of reliance on war blogs', 172.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Copeland, 'Blogads: Blog reader survey, May 2004',  
[http://www.blogads.com/survey/blog\\_reader\\_survey.html](http://www.blogads.com/survey/blog_reader_survey.html) (accessed 20 November 2006).

<sup>23</sup> TAYLOR, R. (2004), Is Blog A Masculine Noun? *The Guardian*, 11 May 2004,  
<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,9115,1214393,00.html> (accessed on 15 September 2006).

have).<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, women's blogs make up only 15% of all blogrolls.<sup>25</sup> Thus the majority of news blogs are written by male bloggers for an audience of male readers.

### **Blog-readers' access to Internet journalism**

Respondents to the survey were first asked to indicate how many online news sites provided by the mainstream media they visited, and how frequently. Such online news sites might be associated with print media such as *The Guardian* newspaper or *The Washington Post* or might be linked to other forms of media such as the BBC or CNN. Included here were weblogs officially associated with the mainstream media, such as the blogs that have been established by the BBC or *The Guardian* for comments on particular news stories or columns. Respondents were then asked how many journalistic weblogs they visited and how frequently.

Our respondents, who had of course been sourced through blogs, were heavy users of all types of online news provision. Table 2 shows a comparison of respondents' use of online news sites provided by the mainstream media and journalistic weblogs.

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<sup>24</sup> POLLARD, Dave (2003). Is the blogosphere sexist? How to save the world [blog], 30 October 2003. [WWW] <http://blogs.salon.com/0002007/2003/10/30.html> (accessed on 9th March 2006).

<sup>25</sup> HENNING, Jeffrey (2003). The blogging iceberg. Perseus, 4 October 2003. [WWW] <http://www.perseus.com/blogsurvey/iceberg.html> (accessed on 5 October 2005).

Table 2. Number of online news sites and journalistic weblogs visited

Number of websites visited	Online news sites	% of respondents	Journalistic weblogs	% of respondents
Never	8	2.7	0	0
1	19	6.4	32	11
2-5	156	52.9	113	38.8
6-10	70	23.7	78	26.8
11-15	22	7.5	28	9.6
16 or more	20	6.8	40	13.7

Respondents were also asked to indicate how frequently they visited such websites and the results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. How frequently online news sites and journalistic weblogs are visited

Frequency	Visits to mainstream news sites	% of respondents	Visits to journalistic weblogs	% of respondents
Daily	204	70.3	237	80.3
Every 2 or 3 days	60	20.7	42	14.2
Every 4 or 5 days	8	2.8	7	2.4
Weekly	14	4.8	6	2.0
Monthly	4	1.4	3	1.0

Although eight respondents stated that they never visited mainstream news sites, the vast majority visited both mainstream news sites and

journalistic weblogs on a very frequent basis. There is no evidence here for any sort of rejection of professional journalism in favour of blogs. Instead, respondents made use of both types of news source to access a plentiful supply of news and opinion. This finding echoes the conclusions of Johnson and Kaye's survey of war blog readers, which found a correlation between heavy use of blogs and heavy use of other online journalism sites.<sup>26</sup>

### **What attracts readers to journalistic weblogs?**

Having established that readers are not choosing journalistic weblogs in preference to mainstream online news sources, but rather to augment them, we now have to ask why this is happening. What do journalistic weblogs offer that attracts readers to access them as frequently – if not more frequently – than they access the websites of the mainstream media? We asked our respondents the following questions:

#### **Alternative news sources**

Many of the responses to the question 'Why do you read news blogs?' had an anti-mainstream media theme, typified by users who indicated that they liked the independence or originality of weblogs. For example, an Australian respondent commented:

In Australia the print and standard audio-visual are controlled by four, right-wing to loony right-wing families and organisations. Only the independent journalistic blogs provide an alternative, informed centrist/left view of the news and subject it to informed analysis AND make their sources accessible.

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<sup>26</sup> Johnson and Kaye (2007), 'Blog Readers: Predictors of reliance on war blogs'.



Another commented: 'In my opinion, the "mainstream media", especially network TV and major newspapers, have an agenda; and watching and reading them every day is like ingesting a little bit of "poison."'

Dissatisfaction with the mainstream media was not restricted to one side of the political spectrum and many respondents were at pains to assure us that they tried to read a comprehensive variety of blogs from all sides of an argument: 'I'm a conservative so I read about 20 or so right-wing bloggers everyday. But I like to have my views challenged so I regularly read three popular left-wing sites.'

Again and again respondents emphasised that their reading of blogs from a variety of viewpoints gave them a better understanding of the news. A British respondent felt that such an approach gave an 'independent' view of the news: 'I feel that because several sites I visit have a very clear bias (to either support or criticise the UK government) I gain a balanced perspective on the news by reading them.'

Respondents also appreciated the way in which blogs represented the personal opinion, even emotions, of the blogger rather than a corporate line. 'Blogs are often ahead of the mainstream media in regards to feelings and emotions of regular people.' The personal content, tone and language of a blog kept readers returning to the site and again was favourably compared to mainstream news sites.

They are more personal and down-to-earth rather than oracular, effectively saying "this is what I've got so far" rather than "we're the professionals, the story is filed and settled, just trust us".

Whilst acknowledging that blogs were subjective sources of news and commentary, respondents did not see this as a failing. One respondent

commented approvingly that bloggers had 'transparent agendas'. In comparison to the mainstream media, which was seen as subjective but pretending to be objective, the obvious bias of blogs could be acknowledged and then compensated for. As one respondent commented, 'I read ... blogs from all over the political spectrum, it's just that I prefer the presentation when someone's not pretending to be impartial.' Another stated: 'Bloggers can dispense with the pose of objectivity that mainstream media pretend to. I do believe it's a pretence on the part of the media, whose attitudes are more uniform than any other professional group of which I can think.'

Criticisms of the mainstream media tended to focus on the perception that it was controlled by corporations and therefore reported news in a subjective manner, filtered through marketing personnel and legal teams. In contrast, bloggers were seen as free spirits who admitted, even gloried in, their bias. Audience mistrust of the mainstream news media is not new, but the growing provision of alternative news sources through the Internet, including but not exclusively restricted to blogs, means that it is a problem which the mainstream media needs to tackle if its authority is not to be further weakened.

Of course, as has already been noted above, respondents' disdain for the mainstream media did not prevent them from reading its products just as frequently as they read blogs. In his commentary on the results from the Blogads survey, Henry Copeland described blog readers as 'media mavens', with his US respondents admitting to reading mainstream publications such as the *New Yorker* magazine, *The Economist*, *Newsweek* and *The Atlantic Monthly*.<sup>27</sup> Johnson and Kaye's survey of war blog readers also reflected what they described as a 'paradoxical

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<sup>27</sup> Henry Copeland, 'Blogads: Blog reader survey, May 2004', [http://www.blogads.com/survey/blog\\_reader\\_survey.html](http://www.blogads.com/survey/blog_reader_survey.html) (accessed 20 November 2006).

relationship': 'the more people rely on online newspapers, the more they rely on blogs'.<sup>28</sup>

### **Updating and frequency of posting**

Frequency of posting was also a factor in maintaining a blog's readership, with respondents applauding bloggers who might post several times a day when a big story breaks. However users also indicated that the speed with which bloggers report stories was important as well:

Blogs are quicker to print and the reputable ones are quick to correct if new information becomes available. In a newspaper, the correction is somewhere on a back page and typically happens a day or so later – often as the furore has died down.

Again, the ease with which a story could be corrected by a blogger was compared favourably to the mainstream media, with one respondent commenting: 'Although content on blogs is occasionally spurious, other bloggers quickly identify and discredit false information, which often will not happen (or will be surreptitiously corrected) on mainstream news sites.'

Of course, a critic might point out that 'less haste' and more checking of facts might lead to less need to correct stories already published. However, according to the Pew Internet Survey of bloggers, 57% of the bloggers surveyed stated that they included links to original sources either 'sometimes' or 'often' and 56% spent extra time trying to verify facts they want to include in a post either 'sometimes' or 'often'. This is despite the

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<sup>28</sup> Johnson and Kaye (2007), 'Blog Readers: Predictors of reliance on war blogs', 179.

fact that 65% of these respondents stated that they did not consider blogging to be a form of journalism.<sup>29</sup>

Blogs were also praised for their links to sources, and again contrasted to the mainstream media, which was perceived as less open in its acknowledgement of source material.

Referencing is a case in point, blogs are so easily open to challenge and therefore sites such as Scott Burgess' The Daily Ablution, to pick an example at random, reference their articles extensively enabling the reader to do their own research and establish the validity of any article. The mainstream media rarely does this as well and too often makes statements such as 'It is known that...' without establishing to whom, or how, it is known.

## **Interactivity**

Blogs not only offer readers the opportunity to read the opinions of others but also to make a contribution to the discussion of a news event themselves through the posting of comments. Survey respondents frequently emphasised the importance of such interactivity in encouraging their readership of blogs.

The ability to comment, talkback, and link to similar stories makes it seem more interactive and can provide multiple angles that standard news outlets do not.

The overall debate via comments allows for a better understanding of issues. The ability to add my comments to the debate is also a plus.

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<sup>29</sup> Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox, 'Bloggers: A portrait of the Internet's new storytellers', Pew Internet and American Life Project, July 2006, <http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP%20Bloggers%20Report%20July%2019%202006.pdf> (accessed 20 November 2006).

Hermes refers to such interactivity in her discussion of citizenship in the age of the Internet, suggesting that, while new information and communication technologies such as blogging are not necessarily producing 'new' citizens they do provide for new citizen practices.<sup>30</sup> Such practices may be incidental rather than citizen structural practices, meaning that the transition from being an audience member – in this case the reader of a blog – to belonging to a public – for example by commenting on a posting – is not a permanent elevation but a temporary one.

### **The detailed approach**

One of the most frequently mentioned reasons given by survey respondents for reading blogs was the ability of bloggers to focus on a particular area of interest, in a way that was not possible for more mainstream media. Such an interest could be in very local events or a particular subject area. Respondents also read news blogs based in countries other than their own in order to get both an insiders' view of events there (for example in Iraq) and an outsiders' view of their own country's affairs. For example, one respondent, with an interest in the military, gave details of several bloggers that he preferred to read because of their knowledge in this area, including:

Winds of Change (<http://windsofchange.net/>), which is probably my favourite blog because of its unique combination of spirituality, in-depth exploration of cutting-edge military technology and social comment, something I could never get from the mainstream media, which is typically very superficial on the revolution in military affairs.

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<sup>30</sup> Joke Hermes, 'Citizenship in the Age of the Internet', *European Journal of Communication*, 21(3), 295-309.

Bloggers could also be seen as more expert in certain fields than professional journalists. One respondent referred to journalists as 'jacks of all trades and masters of none' in comparison with the 'more detailed and accurate' bloggers. Another explained:

The sites I visit are typically operated by experts in their field. A reporter can do a fine job writing about a particular subject, but someone truly knowledgeable in the field adds a completely different perspective. As an example, in a typical story about some controversy, the reporter might have one expert give a one sentence opinion and another expert give a different one sentence opinion. However, if you go to a blog dedicated to the same subject, you are likely to get a detailed opinion. Perhaps even by the same expert(s).

Bloggers were perceived as filtering the news for their readers, taking the time which readers could not afford to sift the wheat from the chaff, and then presenting it in an attractive and useful format: 'They lead me to items of interest which I may not have otherwise discovered for myself. Often they save me heaps of time by distilling stuff of interest. They do the hard work for me.' Such filtering was not just perceived as being Web-based. Several respondents made comments about the amount of space newspapers devoted to 'celebrity culture' news such as marriages, divorces and scandals and thus used bloggers to 'get more important news, faster'.

Respondents also commented positively on the way in which blogs had more space than other news sites to give fuller detail about a story, filling in the back story in a way which, for example, print newspapers were not able to do: 'Because of the linking you know that you can get the whole story. Many newspapers write stories as if you had read yesterday's paper and knew the context.'

## Conclusions

The growth of news blogs and the frequency with which they are used is on the increase, coinciding with the dramatic escalation in blog figures in general. 66% of our respondents visited between 2 and 10 news blogs. 80% visited such sites on a daily basis. Reasons for such growth can be ascribed to a number of issues, most notably a growing awareness of the blog phenomenon, and in particular media attention to some of the most popular news bloggers. Bloggers such as Dan Gillmor now publish books, appear on television news and attend conventions. Not only do they report and comment on the news, they are beginning to make it.

However, it is not enough that such blogs exist, there must be other reasons for their growing popularity. The readers that we surveyed were attracted to blogs for three main reasons: disillusionment with the mainstream media; a desire to interact more with the news through commentary and discussion; and a perceived need to become better informed in order to be a better member of society. As one respondent commented: 'What draws me to blogs is how they empower citizens to join the debate and compete with old media.'

What was startling was the amount of anti-mainstream feeling, or at least a distant dissatisfaction that became apparent in most of the user responses. Statements that respondents visited news weblogs for 'truth', 'honesty' and a honestly subjective viewpoint were numerous. As one respondent put it:

I used to believe in Thomas Jefferson's dictum that, had he to choose between having government and having newspapers, he would choose newspapers. I'm less confident of that perspective now. Not that I'm that fond of the government, either. Government is at least a necessary evil. With the advent of blogs, the mainstream media may not be necessary.

This respondent was not alone in seeing blogs as the end of the line for the mainstream media. However, our survey shows that blogs are very rarely used as the sole source for news and information. Our respondents, who showed a large appetite for news, read mainstream online news sources just as frequently as blogs. They chose to use both news sources, ensuring that they read widely and from different perspectives in order to satisfy themselves that they had reached a balanced and informed opinion on a particular news story. Whilst listing inadequacies and problems with the mainstream media, they still found it of use and few respondents reported using only blogs as a news source. Respondents who accused the mainstream media of bias were much more accepting of the stated subjectivities of bloggers, and were indeed drawn to certain blogs because of their political or other sympathies.

What blogs offer their readers is an ability to interact with and discuss the news, to follow sources and to have world and local events filtered to remove material which is not of interest. Blogs also offer readers expertise in areas which may not be of interest to, or are not covered widely in, the mainstream media. The back story of a particular event can be explored in more detail, and opinions from a number of viewpoints given. With the growing use of blogs within the online provision of mainstream media, such as the BBC and *The Guardian* websites, it may be that readers will become more satisfied with these media. However, at the present time at any rate, blogs appear to offer their readership a much more fulfilling and active role in the coverage of the news than the mainstream media, and this is appreciated and celebrated by the respondents to our survey. Whether, as Hermes suggests, blog-readers are becoming temporary participants in the public sphere, or, as Gillmor prefers, becoming more active citizens through education in public affairs, it seems that blogs attract their readers by offering them an alternative to the mainstream media which both criticises and complements it.