

Abstract: A Model of Credibility Development and Agenda Setting in Political Blogs

In Cohen's classic formulation, the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." (Cohen, 1963) Top political blogs have turned the tables lately, becoming quite successful themselves in telling the media what to think. Elite political blogs are now helping shape debate on cable and radio talk shows; driving money and resources toward campaigns; reinvigorating public debate; and amplifying voters' voices in local, state and national elections.

How does a blog generate the required credibility among its readers and the mainstream media to exercise this kind of influence? The processes of agenda setting and credibility development are intricately linked, first internally, within the blog itself, and then externally, upon a larger media playing field. Credibility is a complex, multi-dimensional concept. As Erik Bucy writes, "In a time of rapid technological change and format experimentation, credibility remains central to understanding public perceptions of network news as well as encouraging acceptance of the Internet as a trusted source of news and information." (Bucy, 2003) As such, it is essential to understand the processes by which new media organize themselves and develop the capacity to interact effectively with mainstream media and the public.

Social capital is required to initiate and guide agenda-setting activities. A blog first establishes internal *cultural credibility* through the primary blogger's *iconic perspective* and through the development of a *contextual community*. A blog can then apply external *functional credibility* through the *meta-critique* of media and the power of *distributed impact*. This paper explores the relationship between these elements and describes the structural forms and information flow that transform an individual with a blog into a credible force in mainstream media agenda setting.

Political bloggers represent an innovative type of editorial voice: they construct an identity that becomes the basis for an online community. That community engages in critical internal discourse about the media and democracy on both practical and idealistic levels. Information is parsed, analyzed, deconstructed and contextualized. On the basis of this discourse, the primary blogger can direct the community to exert its influence in the political, social, business or media spheres. Institutions are becoming attuned to this substantial political and media clout: political bloggers are now regular guests on cable news and talk radio programs, for example, due to the depth and organization of their communities and the credibility these communities confer.

Traditional media are structured for unidirectional information flow and an abstract, non-participatory audience. The distributed nature of an active, organized political blog allows the primary blogger and the community to influence the media in unprecedented ways. This completes a cycle of credibility that began with an isolated blogger filtering and analyzing the media and culminates in a group of citizens directly influencing which stories are covered and how. Traditional media producers who understand this process will more ably navigate the emerging interactive dynamic in journalism. Blogging, at its best, represents the audience talking back to the media in a language the media finally understand.

References

- Cohen, Bernard, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1963
- Bucy, Erik P., "Media Credibility Reconsidered: Synergy Effects Between On-Air and Online News," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 80(2), Summer 2003