Political Blogging and Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to provide longitudinal primary research regarding how the most popular political blogs utilize social media and how revenue is generated by the blog. This study begins with a literature review and then is followed by discussion the research method of content analysis which was employed to examine the top political blogs as defined by content and by the number of readers each blog possesses. This research is the first major study in the marketing discipline to analyze the actual contents of the most popular political blogs, thus providing results that would be of interest to the academic, business, and political communities.

INTRODUCTION

A great deal of research has been conducted by marketing researchers and business and computer trade publications concerning the reasons as to why someone would decide to start and maintain a blog. Blogs are essentially online publications, designed to be read by someone, whether it be a large global audience or only an audience of a few people who are interested in the blogger's topic (Editors *et al*, 2002). Recent studies by Technorati and AOL's Digital Marketing Services shed light on some of the main reasons why people write blogs: to establish themselves as authorities or experts in a field, to create a public record of one's thoughts and opinions, to keep in touch with other people online, especially friends and family, and to use writing as kind of a tool for therapy or self-help (Ingram, 2007).

Blogging has also had a major impact in the media and news business as well. Many bloggers see it as part of their jobs to "fact-check" mainstream media (or MSM as it is abbreviated in the blogging world) and to push certain news stories that the bloggers feel that the MSM has either ignored or not given enough attention to (Hewitt, 2005). Blogging is "confronting journalism, with the rise of current-events blogs that deconstruct news coverage, spew opinion and even scoop the big media from time to time" (Palser, 2002). Blogs are also allowing ordinary people's voices to have an impact in a way that was only possible in the past for those who had access to large media outlets, such as newspapers or televised news shows (Hewitt, 2005; Pierro, 2007).

Currently, businesses are using blogs to communicate with consumers and as a marketing tactic. Some of the possible benefits to a business blogging are that blogging can help to increase profit, increase website traffic and improve search engine rankings, recruit new employees, and communicate with coworkers (Ellsworth, 2007). Blogging can be used in public relations as a crisis communication tactic, since online postings can be put out on the Internet quicker than a traditional press release or news conference (Morgan, 2007). As businesses such as Boeing (Holmes, 2006), GM (Baker and Green, 2005) and Google (2009) run their own official blogs, issues of openness, trust, and source credibility will become more important to blog readers and consumers.

THE ONLINE BLOGGING WORLD

In June 2003, over four million Americans went online and accessed blogs to find out breaking news and information about the war in Iraq (Rainie *et al*, 2003). In November 2004, Pew Internet studies reported that 8 million Americans (or 7% of the 120 million US adults who use the Internet) said that they had created a blog; however, at that time 62% of US adult Internet population did not know what a blog was (Rainie, 2005). By February 2005, over 32 million Internet users were also blog readers (Rainie, 2005) with the blogging world almost doubling in size about every 6 months (Sifry, 2006). So, what is a blog and where did it come from? In 1998, Jesse James Garrett, the editor of Infosift website, began to compile a list of other Internet sites that were similar to his own site. He then sent that list to

another website owner who sent it to another website owner and so forth, forming a communication network (http://rebeccablood.net, 2003). As of early 2006, there were at least 27 million active blogs online, with more blogs in inactive status (Sifry, 2006). Technorati's State of the Blogosphere Report showed

there to be approximately 72 million blogs in 2007. While the growth rate of blogging in the US is slowing, the growth of blogs outside the US is rising at a much faster rate than in the US. Since most of the main business trade publications are blogging (e.g., Wall Street Journal, Business Week, Advertising Age, to name a few.), it is ironic that there is such a severe lack of research in the academic world of business disciplines.

While there have been a number of news articles and online discussions concerning blogs (especially among bloggers, the people who run the blogs), there has been little academic research on this topic, with most of the research being done in the management information systems, communication, and political science areas, rather than in the marketing arena (Lee *et al*, 2006; Wagner, 2006). One of the few marketing studies is Holzwarth, Janiszewski, and Neumann (2006) who discussed avatars (graphic representations of users or other people online) and their impact on shopping and browsing habits on websites, including blogs. Singh and Singh (2008) also analyzed how entrepreneurs could use blogs as part of their marketing effort while Pan *et al* (2007) covered how blogs were being used as marketing tools in the travel industry. In the last few years, there have been multiple academic papers published concerning blogs and politics. Current major academic studies include Wallsten's (2007a) analysis of the relationship between the blogging world and mainstream media and Hayes *et al.'s* (2007) study on the impact of blogging and the credibility of journalists. From a public relations perspective, Trammell (2006) outlined the integration of blogs into presidential candidate websites, Davis (2009) discussed how political journalists use blogs to inform their readers, and Schoroeder (2006) discussed the dilemma of whether an employee should or should not blog about work. Herring and Paolillo (2006) also examined content on blogs in terms of gender stylized writings of the blog authors. However, no marketing academic studies have examined the actual make-up or components of the blog itself.

THE POLITICAL BLOGOSPHERE

While there has not been a tremendous amount of research conducted in the business disciplines on blogging, the same can not be said of the political science arena. Kevin Wallsten (2007a) analyzed the direction of the relationship between the political blogosphere and mainstream media in regard to thirty-five major topics of the 2004 U.S. Presidential campaign and found that there existed a bi-directional relationship between the two entities, rather than a one-sided channel of communication. He followed with further research (Wallsten, 2007b) reporting the major actions associated with the political bloggers: mobilize some form of political action, request feedback about political events, and to pass along important information concerning political topics. Leccese (2009) found that more than half of the hypertext links on political blogs connected to mainstream media sites and sources although the study is limited by the sample size of six blogs during a seven day period. However, Dailey *et al* (2008) found that there was little to no interaction between readers of local newspaper blogs and the blog writers during the 2006 election. Sweetser *et al* (2008) concentrated their research on the results of candidates' blogs and how an agenda from the media drove the content of political advertising, including the blogs. Both McQuaid (2008) and Kennedy (2008) discussed the conversations shared across the political blogging world and how those conversations were generated by the media and the future implications for the online political blogging community. Hargrove *et al* (2009) studied how the media, blogs included, can be used to educate voters on the different agendas of political candidates while Siapera (2008) reported on how much subjectivity blogging brings to the political discussion.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this study is to provide primary research regarding how political blogs utilize social media and generate revenue. The study utilizes content analysis to address and answer this research objective. The next section of the paper will discuss the data collection method used for the research and provide the results of the study, along with the limitations and applications of this research. While content analysis is a standard data collection tool used in

advertising, it is only recently that this technique has been applied to websites (Macias and Lewis, 2003-4). Content analysis was also used by Bichard (2006) to investigate communication framing dimensions of time, space, tone, and topic on the official blogs of presidential political candidates in 2004 election. Macias and Lewis (2003-4) studied what information was presented on prescription drug websites. This research will extend the use of content analysis further into the world of the Internet, specifically targeting political blogs.

Content analysis (sometimes called textual analysis in the social sciences) is a standard methodology for studying communication, especially in print and visual media. Holsti (1969) offers a broad definition of content analysis as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages." Content analysis has been used to study advertisements, interviews, brochures, and websites, to name a few. Topics that can be addressed can vary from an analysis by gender and race of spokespersons in print and television advertisements during a set time period to whether prices are given in numeric or general terms in newspapers ads. Content analysis is a very flexible form of data collection, which is why is has expanded to the Internet and why it was used as the data collection method for this study.

CONTENT ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

First, a sample list of the top 260 blogs was generated based on Internet volume rankings. From that list of 260 blogs, six were excluded due to inactivity or inappropriate adult content. Then, a screen capture of each blog was saved for coding purposes. The screen capture contained the blog's complete postings along with advertisements and any other data for a 24-hour day. A printed copy of the screen capture was made as well for back-up purposes. While most blogs contain archives of previous posts, these archives cannot be used for this data collection, since they usually contain only the postings for the day and not the advertisements nor the links, which are some of the important variables that data will be collected about in this study. Four to five blogs a week were randomly sampled (from the list of 254 blogs) during the year. A longitudinal sample design was utilized to mitigate the impact of a single current event on data collection. Then, each blog was analyzed for content. Out of the 254 blogs sampled for the data collection, fifty nine of them predominantly featured political content. It is this extracted sample of fifty nine political blogs that was used for data analysis.

A coding guide was created to analyze the data on each of the blogs. A coding guide is similar to a survey used in research except that the researcher will fill in the coding guide with information pulled from the blog instead of information given to the researcher over the phone or in person. The coding guide contained places to record the following information: major blogging topic, revenue information (donations asked for, form of donation, onsite store, allow advertisements, how many advertisements, sponsorship by a media group, and membership in a blogging network), use of social media (post sharing, use of various social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and twitter, posting of video or audio, photo sharing, RSS feeds, and games), and audit information (name of blog and web address, blog ranking, date blog sampled, and coder).

REVENUE GENERATION BY POLITICAL BLOGS

This study looked at four major means by which a blog could generate revenue: donations, selling, advertising, and network support. Thirty nine percent, or twenty three, of the political blogs did not accept donations of any kind to support the blog or a political candidate. For those political blogs that accepted donations, a little over half (or thirty of the blogs) took donations through PayPal, while a little over ten percent accepted donations through Amazon. A little over thirty percent (or eighteen) of the political blogs accepted money that was sent in through the postal mail. Fourteen of the political blogs had a section of the blog that could only be accessed by paying subscribers. Twenty-five of the blogs had an online store set-up that sold everything from t-shirts and bumper stickers with the blog logo to autographed books. Forty seven of the political blogs used advertising to help support the blog with a majority of the blogs (52.5%) having four or less advertisements embedded in the site. However, nine of the blogs contained ten or more advertisements during the twenty four hour period in which sampling was conducted. Only thirteen of the blogs

were connected to one of the traditional mainstream media sites (ex. Washington Post, CBS) while over half (thirty of the blogs) were part of a blogging network (ex. Pajamas Media); however many of the blogging sites that were affiliated with the traditional media sites did not predominately feature that association on the blog site.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL BLOGS

While blogging itself is a social media, the study was also interested in how much the political blogosphere employed the other social media within their blogging sites. Seventy three percent of the blogs used some form of social media with their posts to share those posts with other blogs or readers. The most popular means to share posts were through email (52.5%), digg (50.8%), Facebook (47.5%), del.icio.us (44.1%), tumblr (37.3%), Reddit (35.6%),

twitter (35%), Yahoo (30.5%), Google (27.1%), MSM (20.3%), MySpace (20.3%), Technorati (16.9%), and Newsvine (11.9%).   Other social bookmarking sites such as Furlit (5.1%) and Pluck (3.4%) were rarely used by political blogging sites. A majority (52.5%) of the blogs used at least five of the social bookmarking services to share posts with other websites.

Table 1: technology and social media terms

Type of Social Media	Explanation	Examples
Social Networking	Share and communicate personal and business information	Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn
Microblogging	Blogging that is text based (around 140 characters or less)	Twitter, friendfeed, tumblr, microblogr
Media Sites	Sharing various types of media, especially videos and photographs	YouTube, flickr
RSS	Really simple syndication	Updates from websites that are sent to your computer
Social Bookmarking or News	Rating of news stories as either "like" or 'dislike"	del.icio.us ,StumbleUpon, digg
Permalink	Permanent link that points to a specific entry on a blog	Will be noted on the website as a permalink
Trackback	System used to notify when another website has linked to the author's entry on a website	This allows authors to keep track of who is linking or commenting on their writing

Nearly eighty percent (79.7%) of the blogs used RSS feeds with thirteen percent of the blogs having at least one podcast posted on the site. Forty (or 67.8%) of the political blogs contained a video either shot and posted by the blogger or embedded in the blog from another site like YouTube.   The social networking sites of Facebook (18.6%), MySpace (1.7%) and LinkedIn (1.7%) were not overly popular with political bloggers, but thirty-nine percent of the bloggers had a link on the blog to either their twitter account or an actual feed of their twitter "tweets" shown on the blog. Five of the political blogs were linked with photo-sharing sites while ten of the blogs were running some type of political poll on the site.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The longitudinal sampling procedure was implemented in order to remove the biases that a short term sample would cause; however it does not mean that there are no limitations to the research conducted. Due the fast changing nature of technology and blogging in general, a similar study conducted even a year later could receive much different results in regard to the social media used, the networks linked to, and the sampling frame. For example, Twitter was extremely popular among the blogs sampled; however, the popularity of Twitter could decline or it could be replaced by any number of new social media sites. Many of the blogging networks sampled in the survey were quite new to the table (ex. Pajamas Media); they could certainly be supplanted by upcoming networks or linked to existing networks run by traditional media companies. Given the fact that over time many bloggers (those writing the blogs) retire from

blogging and that new blogs are formed daily, there is a normal turnover in the blogging population which would alter the sample. If this research had been conducted in a year where there were major political events, the number of blogs that were political in nature would probably be more highly represented in the research as well. Also, those political blogs could possibly be more active, not only in fundraising for the blog or for a candidate, but in the amount of social media they use to communicate among the online community. It would be expected that a sample gathered during 2010 (U.S. midterm elections) or during 2012 (U.S. Presidential Election) would be much different since almost all of the political blogs sampled were based in the United States.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This research study illustrates the characteristics that currently compose the most popular political blogs in the Internet realm. This is useful information for anyone, or any company, who wishes to enter the blogosphere to know the tools that the currently successful blogs are utilizing. For those blogs that currently exist, it gives a snapshot as to what tools competing blogs are utilizing. Overall, the blogging world is a highly networked place with a majority of the tools geared to either linking other sites to the blog or to reaching new markets (readers) to pull into the blog readership. This blog readership will increase circulation figures for the blog making the blog more valuable to advertisers and to other related blogs and blogging networks. The social media will continue to play an important role in the blogosphere helping to either add a multimedia flavor through video or audio and to

add another communication channel, like twitter or tumblr, into the mix to draw blog traffic and interest. Overall, like its varied political views, the political blogosphere is a very diverse place of opinion and tools with each blog having its own unique flavor of technology and communication to offer its audience.

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