Blog Activity in the 2012 Election Cycle: How has the Blogform Grown?

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Blog Activity in the 2012 Election Cycle: How has the Blogform Grown?

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Chapter One: Blogs and the Landscape of Media and Politics – An Introduction

This thesis centers on the role of American political blogs in connection to the broader spheres of both media and politics. First created in 1999, blogs are an innovation of the digital age. The blogosphere comprises an expanding universe of regularly updated “online diaries” where bloggers share information and commentary and elicit reader feedback. Generally, blog posts are displayed in reverse chronological order on blogsites, where they are easily accessible (Lawson-Borders and Kirk 2005, 548). In this chapter, I provide an overview of the context in which blogs first arose, reviewing the relevant existing literature surrounding media politics. I first discuss the changing media environment, in terms of political polarization and media fragmentation, and the patterns of mounting public dissatisfaction with traditional media. I then explore interpretations about the potential of blogging, both in relation to the media and the wider world of politics. Finally, I discuss the significance of blogs and the media, in light of the effects media can have on elections and on the Americans political system at large. Media and politics are closely intertwined, and the blogform has grown at their nexus.

1. Evolving Media Politics: Polarization and Media Fragmentation

a) Political Sorting and Polarization

Political polarization, the phenomenon in which Americans have become extreme and hardened in their ideological views, has been an oft-cited phenomenon from the early 1990s on (Pew Research Center For the People and the Press 2012a, 18; Fiorina and Abrams 2008, 564). It has become intertwined with the process of sorting, in which political parties have realigned to become more politically or ideologically consistent (Levendusky 2009, 5). Polarization is especially clear among elites, particularly in terms of Congress, where levels of polarization first began to rise during the mid-1970s, before culminating in the gridlocked sessions of recent years.
During the late 1990s, when the first blogs were created, Congressional polarization had reached their highest levels since the 1890s, a full century earlier (Poole and Rosenthal 1997, 232). Similarly, there is evidence of mass polarization as well. In recent decades, party membership has sorted along ideological lines: for the most part, conservative voters now identify as Republicans and liberals as Democrats – the political spectrum has become bimodal (McCarty 2015, 5). However, while it is clear that polarization is occurring, there is disagreement within the political science community about the precise nature and causes of polarization (Barber and McCarty 2013, 23).

One common argument asserts that elite polarization is a reflection of mass polarization, as elected officials are responsive to the changing whims of their constituents. Candidates frequently take more extreme political postures in order to increase their chances of winning elections (Levendusky 2009, 23). Candidates who seek office must first prevail in primary elections, which are often closed, with only registered members of a political party eligible to vote. Closed primaries in particular are likelier to produce ideologically extreme nominees, even in otherwise moderate regions (Kaufmann et al. 2003, 465). Even in non-closed events, though, primaries tend to be low-turnout affairs, with higher concentrations of staunchly ideological, polarized voters participating. The disproportionate influence of activists in primaries has been further exacerbated by two other factors. First, legislative districts are increasingly gerrymandered, drawn for one party’s advantage, making the primary election the most significant one (Tucker 2004, 14). Second, outside groups such as MoveOn.org and the Club for Growth now exist to encourage and fund ideologically ‘pure’ candidates, including those who launch intraparty challenges to incumbents (Boatright 2011, 13-17). These changes involve

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1 Polarization scores are primarily calculated using DW-NOMINATE, an algorithm that evaluates where different members of Congress fall within the liberal-conservative ideological scale, based upon the votes members cast in each Congress.
effects of self-selection, as more ideologically partisan voters tend to feel more strongly about their beliefs and thus are more willing to invest their time and money in the political process (Barber and McCarty 2013, 26).

Geographic sorting is one outgrowth of such changes in political partisanship. There are substantive differences in what liberals and conservatives now desire from their communities, which affects their choices of residence. Surveys from the Pew Research Center have found that liberals prefer to live in walkable, ethnically diverse areas, while conservatives seek larger homes in less walkable but more religiously homogenous areas (DeSilver 2014b). Voters often act upon their residential preferences, with Democrats likely to move into urban areas and Republicans likely to move out of them. In the aggregate, after controlling for non-political motivations, Republicans remain likelier to move from less Republican to more Republican areas and Democrats from less Democratic to more Democratic areas (Tam Cho et al. 2012, 5-6, 11).

However, other research casts doubt on this narrative; the case for voter-driven polarization may be overstated. Research findings about the effects of primaries, gerrymandering, and geographic sorting on polarization are mixed. In recent decades, as polarization has increased, states have increasingly shifted toward open primaries, which allow crossover votes from independents. Despite the expectation that open primaries counterbalance the risk of polarization, there is little indication of this effect occurring in practice (Barber and McCarty 2013, 29). Moreover, polarization has also grown in statewide races, which cannot be gerrymandered (27). McCarty et al. (2009) found through data simulations that levels of polarization in gerrymandered districts are relatively similar to likely levels of polarization in non-gerrymandered districts, as there are stylistic differences in how Republican and Democratic officeholders represent their districts (678-679). Moreover, geographic sorting may actually
reflect a return to historical norms, with the twentieth century becoming the aberration, in terms of Americans’ preference for religious and cultural homogeneity, and in any case, politically-driven geographical choices are a secondary consideration constrained by residents’ variations in income and regional variations in economic opportunity (Fiorina and Abrams, 576).

Indeed, other scholars have found evidence for an alternative theory, which states that elite polarization drives rather than reacts to mass polarization. Many voters have broad partisan attitudes, but they lack the time or interest to fully immerse themselves in the minutiae of substantive policy studies. Instead, they often take cues from political leaders, in order to adapt their frames of mind into positions on specific issues; the process has grown easier as voters have sorted and the parties have realigned (Zaller 1994, 187; Levendusky 2009, 7, 13). The positions of presidential candidates or other major partisan figures are easily, and often unintentionally, accessed, such as through repeated political advertisements or interactions with local activists (Levendusky 2009, 16-17). When this cue-taking occurs, voters move toward the ends of the ideological spectrum and they develop a fiercer sense of party loyalty, increasing the size of each party’s base. As the bases grow larger relative to the proportion of undecided, swing voters, politicians have greater incentives to mobilize the base, instead of taking them for granted (Levendusky 2009, 8-9). This process is iterative, forming a “mass-elite feedback loop” that allows polarization to grow and compound (Levendusky 2009, 9).

The “elites” who participate in the feedback loop are often political figures, but some researchers have also included the media within this category. After all, the media represents voters’ primary source for political information and a major conduit for political actors to

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2 Other research addresses initial causes of sorting, which began during the 1960s. Civil rights, for instance, was a major fault line, alienating many Southerners from the Democratic Party. More generally, candidates such as Barry Goldwater and George McGovern gave a platform to more extreme, ideological views. Later Republicans, such as Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, explicitly courted conservative groups to realign with the Republican Party, through the Southern Strategy and appeals to the burgeoning Religious Right (Levendusky 2009, 23-26).
publicize ideological cues (Zaller 1994, 187). The next section discusses changes in the media landscape and the role media can play in polarization.

b) Media Fragmentation

In addition to polarization itself, the second major development in the sphere of media politics has been the fragmentation of the news media. Before the later years of the twentieth century, Americans could choose among a fairly small pool of national and regional news outlets, but over the past two decades, their options have dramatically multiplied, both in number and type. In contrast to long-standing publications such as the New York Times, newly created media outlets have adopted increasingly narrow niches, “narrowcasting” to their intended audiences (Levendusky 2009, 20). Voters can now self-select their news consumption habits, depending on their issue or ideological interests. This shift precedes the rise of the blogform specifically, and includes a wide array of mediums. Recent decades have seen the formation of cable news networks, such as MSNBC and FOX News; talk radio programs, such as The Rush Limbaugh Show; and many programs that blur the lines between information and entertainment, such as The Daily Show and Last Week Tonight (Hollander 2008, 23). As a result, the mass media of old has been replaced by a newer, more segmented media (Mancini 2013, 45).

This may be a product of new possibilities: in prior generations, the available infrastructure could not sustain the current degree of diversity in media outlets or mediums, but advancements in technology and law have made this possible. Beyond broadcast television, newer technologies such as cable, broadcast satellites, and DVRs have allowed Americans to access greater, more varied types of content (Webster 2005, 367). Moreover, regulatory changes during the 1980s and 1990s led to important shifts in the media landscape. The 1987 repeal of the Federal Communications Commission’s Fairness Doctrine allowed broadcasters to
ideologically segment, as they no longer needed to provide equal time to competing perspectives, and the Telecommunications Act of 1996 enabled the corporate consolidation of radio, exchanging “mom and pop” stations for behemoths such as Clear Channel, which broadcast political talk radio nationwide (Berry and Sobieraj 2011, 763-764).

Researchers have identified several effects of media fragmentation. First, the multiplicity of newer media platforms has paradoxically increased the number of opportunities for outside groups to leverage media for political influence, while decreasing the influence of any one media outlet. In the past, when a national news outlet adopted a view or identified a salient issue, the government was compelled to respond or take notice (Mancini 2013, 54). Famously, after hearing CBS Evening News Anchor Walter Cronkite editorialize against the Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson supposedly declared, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America” (Carlson and Berkowitz 2011, 8). Such a statement would be unthinkable today.

Second, media fragmentation and segmentation have been linked to political polarization; as with polarization more broadly, fragmentation and polarization likely operate in a feedback loop. Diana C. Mutz (2006) explains this dilemma: “more choice also means that people can more easily limit their exposure based on their own predispositions” (224). Media outlets ease the path to selective exposure, using terms with partisan connotations, such as “progressive” or “traditional” to indicate their leanings (Mutz 2006, 227). Voters in turn respond to these cues when choosing media to consume, as analyses of the 2004 election demonstrated. Stroud (2008) writes:

“Across all of the equations, ideology/partisanship is significantly related to consuming each media type. Conservative Republicans are more likely to read newspapers endorsing Bush, listen to conservative talk radio, watch FOX, and access conservative websites. Liberal Democrats are more likely to read newspapers

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3 Some types of newer media, such as talk radio, have a distinct ideological tilt. Conservative talk radio is far more prevalent than liberal talk radio is, possibly because liberals tend to be more satisfied with non-talk radio media alternatives, such as NPR and other traditional news outlets.
Over time, selective exposure leads to polarization: partisan news sources reinforce their audiences’ views, leading them to believe that the body of evidence aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, which causes audience members to harden in their views or to shift towards more extreme postures. The rise of partisan, segmented news also adds a dimension of solidarity within audiences, which further contributes to polarization (Arceneaux and Johnson 2010, 7). Armed with increasingly polarized views, news consumers then continue to seek out ideologically aligned views, restarting the fragmentation-polarization cycle.

c) An Opening for Blogs

Born in the current era of media fragmentation and political polarization, blogs have both been shaped by these contexts and reinforced them. Opportunely, these trends have also been accompanied by a dramatic rise in the public’s distrust of other media forms, creating an opening for blogs and other new media. Previously, during the mid-twentieth century, the media was the object of widespread, bipartisan trust, and leading journalists such as Cronkite topped lists of most respected public figures. Today, nearly half of Americans profess “hardly any” confidence in the media, while the 10% with “a great deal” of confidence in the media is roughly similar to the 9% of Americans who harbor confidence in lawyers, another often disdained vocation (Ladd 2012, 1). Broadly, faced with challenges of economic stagnation and prolonged conflicts at home and abroad, Americans’ faith in most institutions has declined in recent years, decreasing the credibility of institutions such as the media, but also government, police, organized religion, and more (Jones 2015). Rising distrust of traditional media forms has helped to provide an opening for newer, upstart mediums, particularly that of the blogform.

2. The Potential of Blogs: Early Conceptions
Accordingly, early discussions about blogging often centered on the potential blogs held, in the breadth of their possibilities. Much of this promise is rooted in the accessibility of blogs and the internet. Online, communications and interactions take place in real time, and anyone can create a blog – millions exist, and in 2005, for instance, the number of blogs grew at a rate of 80,000 per day (McKenna and Pole 2008, 97). In blogging, the barriers to participation are low: unlike traditional journalists or commentators, for whom reporting is a full-time profession, early bloggers were almost entirely part-time citizen bloggers, who earned a median blog-related income of precisely zero dollars (Drezner and Farrell 2004, 4). It now takes only a few minutes for an individual to create a blog (Drezner and Farrell 2004, 6). As Kerbel (2015) explains, “This characterization of decentralization permits all manner of interaction” (4). Indeed, many groups have taken advantage of these opportunities, including both independent upstarts, who pursue blogs’ alternative paths to influence, and traditional elites, who have also been drawn into blogging. In this section, I discuss the possibilities envisioned for blogs in their early iterations, in terms of their roles in both the media and political sectors.

a) Blogs and Media

Given mounting public dissatisfaction with traditional media, many saw blogs as a logical alternative. As the blogosphere grew, blogs could be used to sidestep traditional media’s shortcomings and to nudge news coverage in a better direction. Dick Morris, a onetime strategist for President Bill Clinton, described the emerging sphere of digital politics as a potential “fifth estate”, alongside the well-recognized fourth estate of the news media (Davis et al. 2009, 13). Broadly, the blog alternative involved two major capacities – one of power, in terms of agenda-setting, and one of perspective, particularly in terms of partisanship.
First, blogs could have agenda-setting capabilities, like traditional media organizations do. Issue agendas refer to the limited number of salient topics at any one time, as, realistically, public attention is finite and often responsive to elite influence (Wallsten 2007, 568). Both blogs and traditional media outlets have their own agendas, which can be gleaned online from the topics they feature on their homepages, for instance. Early research and anecdotal examples have indicated that blog agendas intertwine with both media agendas and the larger public agenda (Wallsten 2007, 568-569). Many political bloggers embraced this role: attentive to the work of traditional media, they sought to reshape the national conversation, tackling issues that traditional media outlets had either not yet covered or – in the view of bloggers – had not covered well.

For breaking events, independent blogs benefitted from their comparatively greater degree of flexibility, as bloggers could often post stories without first seeking various institutional approvals, creating a “first-mover advantage” (Drezner and Farrell 2004, 4). As the frontline reporters in these instances, blogs not only chronicled events, but they were also are the first to frame them, coloring happenings with their own normative reactions (Drezner and Farrell 2004, 16). For other events, blogs still shaped the direction of news coverage, but in these instances, blog and traditional media interactions formed a complex and bidirectional relationship. Wallsten (2007) finds that in some instances, blog and media reporting were not related, but in the majority of instances, there was some relationship between the two. Occasionally, heavy blog coverage led to lower levels of press coverage, perhaps because journalists felt those issues received too much attention in the blogosphere. In most cases, though, increased media coverage of an issue led to increased blog coverage of that issue, and increased blog coverage likewise led to increased media coverage. Both groups were attentive to
each other’s behavior – bloggers continued to depend upon traditional media coverage for news information but simultaneously sought to act in a watchdog role, while journalists saw blogs as a “barometer for the public’s interest in a story” (Wallsten 2007, 568-569, 579-580).

The controversy over then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott in 2002 was the first major example of the new blog-media agenda-setting process. At the 100th birthday party from Strom Thurmond, a longtime Senator from Mississippi and onetime segregationist presidential candidate, Lott remarked:

“I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president we voted for him. We’re proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead we wouldn’t have had all these problems over all of these years either.”

While numerous members of the press were present at the event, Lott’s comments went mostly unreported, save for an item in ABC News’ online feature, The Note. Bloggers, however, seized upon the quote and featured it prominently in stories, often in relation to previous race-related issues related to Thurmond and Lott. After days of heated blog coverage, the traditional media reversed course and began to raise the story as well, at times explicitly citing the importance of blogs for highlighting the story (Wallsten 2007, 569). Soon after, Lott was forced to resign. His was an example of the increasingly common “mediated scandal”, in which stories did not arise organically, but instead were the product of influence made possible through new communications technologies (Campbell 2009, 142). During this period, blogs rose to the forefront of this group of technologies, as Wallsten (2007) outlines.

“There is growing evidence that journalists take their cues for what to cover from blogs. Most notably, a December 2004 survey of mainstream media journalists found that 84 percent of journalists had visited a political blog in the past 12 months and approximately 30 percent of those reported visiting a political blog at least once a day on a regular basis. Moreover, many influential journalists, including Paul Krugman, Howard Fineman, and Fareed Zakaria, have said that blogs form a critical part of their information-gathering activities. When coupled with the fact that bloggers are being frequently cited as sources in the media’s coverage of major political events, this evidence suggests that journalists are increasingly attuned to the discussions taking place in the blogosphere.”
In this vein, blogs acted as watchdogs, scrutinizing both the press and public figures. In a survey of prominent bloggers, Ekdale et al. (2010) found that oversight had not been an explicit initial motivator for many bloggers, but it became an increasingly salient motivator as they continued to blog—their self-envisioned roles evolved over the course of their blogging careers (224, 227). Prominent bloggers were assisted in this role by hordes of readers, who they enlisted to discover and share findings, including previously privately held information (Woodly 2008, 121).

Second, unlike many traditional media outlets, independent blogs tended to express pronounced, often partisan, worldviews, including in their reporting. In contrast, traditional media maintained a sharp distinction between fact-based reporting and opinion-based commentary, with “walls” separating the two (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001, 161). Newspapers, for instance, have clearly delineated news and editorial sections, and for commentary-based periodicals, original, investigative reporting is the exception rather than the norm (Coscarelli 2013). Independent blogs, on the other hand, emerged freed from traditional media’s strict norms, allowing their bloggers’ points of view to permeate the entire blogging operation, and past research has shown that ideology influenced bloggers’ decisions (McKenna and Pole 2008, 98). They challenged the supposed objectivity of their traditional media counterparts, preferring explicit slant over what they saw as simmering biases. Liberal bloggers, for instance, charged that the media often “undercut progressive objectives” and “reinforce[d] conservative principles”, while conservative bloggers saw the reverse (Kerbel 2015, 92). Thus, most blogs developed clear ideological and stylistic profiles, planting themselves along specific points of the ideological spectrum (Ekdale et al. 2010, 219). They self-segregated, interacting with and primarily linking to ideologically allied blogs (Farrell et al. 2008, 4-5).
Blog audiences, too, were receptive to blogs’ overt editorializing, self-segregating accordingly. These audiences were comprised of people who were disillusioned with traditional media, due to its perceived biases (Tsfati 2003, 160). Most blog readers sought out, rather than stumbled upon, the blogs they visited, and they tended to seek out websites that reinforced their preexisting beliefs (Farrell et al. 2008, 6-7). Moreover, because blog readers tended to be more politically engaged than the average American, their views also tended to be more fully and firmly developed. This steadfastness, in turn, exacerbated the readers’ natural tendency to seek out blogsites that would confirm their intuitions (Farrell et al. 2008, 7-8). Thus, blog audiences, like society at large, were characterized by patterns of homophily and polarization. Readers preferred political networks and contexts in which their own views were dominant, aligning themselves with likeminded bloggers, and blogs’ confirmations of shared views caused readers to shift further towards ideological extremes. In total, 94% of blog readers only read blogs of one ideological persuasion (Farrell et al. 2008, 8-9, 14). Paralleling fragmentations in the wider media landscape, blogs’ narrowcast perspectives were effective, meeting and encouraging a corresponding desire among readers for narrowcast news.

However, even as independent bloggers used the blogform to react to perceived journalistic shortcomings, the wide accessibility of the platform meant that journalists could easily create their own blogs, selectively leveraging the blogform’s features. For journalist bloggers, the medium was seen as advantageous, allowing for more voices to be heard and more stories to be shared, while sidestepping some of the corporatization and excesses of traditional media gatekeeping (Singer 2005, 176-177). Journalist blogging increased transparency, since it allowed the bloggers to more frequently update readers, posting multiple – and sometimes less heavily edited – stories as events arose, rather than in conjunction with the timing demands of a
print newspaper or magazine (Davis 2009, 125). Journalist bloggers also gained more flexibility in terms of choosing their content. For example, some created niches to specialize in or developed recurring features for their blogs, while traditional journalism remained more stringently tied to straight reports of current events (Davis 2009, 124). In practice, though, there was still significant overlap between the content appearing on journalist-run blogs and the content appearing in the corresponding print media, with the blog posts being on average shorter and more insider-focused (Davis 2009, 125). There also remained significant divergences between journalist and non-journalist bloggers: when journalist-run blogs emerged, they did not follow the independent blogs’ model; instead, they hewed more closely to the norms of journalism – journalist bloggers often attempted to maintain a more constrained, nonpartisan posture, as is expected of mainstream journalists, while still providing some commentary and analysis (Singer 2005, 178).

b) Blogs and Political Actors

Beyond their role in disseminating news, the early blogform contained a strong, activist political dimension; independent political bloggers often had staunch beliefs, and they sought to affect elections in service of those beliefs (McKenna and Pole 2008, 98). Within the blogform, major independent bloggers were able to support favored candidates and causes by reproducing capacities normally associated with political campaigns, such as “collecting money, disseminating information, organizing events, and even publishing campaign literature”; the DailyKos has been the most significant, longest running example of this activist breed (McKenna and Pole 2008, 98-99). Through these functions, blogs complemented the activities of traditional political groups, but they also served as an alternative: group political mobilization became no longer tied to established institutions, such as political parties (de Zuniga et al. 2007, 6). Indeed,
blogs often mobilized at cross-purposes with the party establishments’ stated interests.

Conservative bloggers supported stridently conservative candidates and liberal bloggers supported equally liberal ones, even at times backing intraparty primary challenges against incumbents (Boatright 2009, 1). Kerbel (2015) describes this pattern among left-wing bloggers.

“Many in the online progressive movement are savvy and sophisticated. What unites them is a common interest in altering the way politics is done in this country by challenging the Democratic Party elite – officials, consultants, and monied patrons – for the purpose of establishing a progressive majority that would deviate in its philosophical principles from the dominant conservative philosophy of the past two generations and Democratic Party regulars who acquiesce to and benefit from that status quo.” (2)

However, while independent blogs used the blogform to push back politically, political elites, such as parties and candidates, could also utilize the blogform for their own ends. Howard Dean was the first major example of such a candidate; he was favored by the progressive bloggers discussed above, but he also had compiled a relatively moderate record as Governor of Vermont (Symonds 2003). Dean lagged behind other Democratic contenders during the election cycle’s early stages, and he turned to the Internet to make up the difference, with an “open source campaign” that heavily featured blogs. Dean’s staff created its own “Blog for America”, and Dean campaign manager Joe Trippi became a frequent reader of and contributor to prominent Democratic--leaning blogs (Campbell 2009, 144-145). As Campbell explains, blogs were integral to the Dean campaign’s growing potential.

“The use of new media did make a measurable difference in terms of turning Dean supporters into Dean volunteers, activists and donors. By the start of the primaries, over 300,000 people had contributed money to Dean, with some 61% of his funds coming from people donating $200 or less. This was such a reversal of the conventions of candidate fundraising…Giving ‘money became a cathartic experience for bloggers who felt attached to the Dean campaign through their membership in the virtual community.’ Much of the blog contents were about the blog and the blog participants, a self-reflexive (and self-important) discussion, reinforcing participants’ feelings of value in their activities, leading Kerbel and Bloom to claim that ‘Blog for America turned tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of people into political activists and united them in collective action that extended beyond cyberspace to interpersonal activities.’” (145)

The Dean campaign was ultimately unsuccessful in capturing the Democratic presidential nomination, but their use of new media helped to catapult their candidate from relative obscurity and he soon after served a term as Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, elected with
the support and organizational savvy of blogger-activists, over the objections of many national Democratic figures (Karpf 2008, 373-374).

Other, more institutionally-backed campaigns and political organizations have leveraged blogs for similar purposes. Blogs offered a method for direct communication between organizations and voters, allowing established political groups to also circulate messaging and mobilize support independently of the mediating role of traditional media (Davis et al. 2008, 13). In the 2004 general election, both the Kerry and Bush campaigns maintained official blogs, and many of the 2008 presidential campaigns created blogs soon after launching (Davis et al. 2008, 17). These blogs had a major advantage over truly independent blogs, because they were affiliated with organizations that had an existing infrastructure and base of support (Karpf 2008, 374). In addition to their own blogs, institutions could also work within the independent blogosphere, such as by allowing selected bloggers entry into otherwise closed events (Davis et al. 2008, 20). Blogs have clearly been useful to established groups, but they remained one tool in a larger, growing toolkit, alongside newer innovations, such as social media and other internet applications.

3. Why This Matters: Effects of the Media

The literature reviewed in this chapter serves as a baseline for this thesis: blogs emerged in an era of political polarization, media fragmentation, and decreasing media credibility, trends the blogform has both reinforced and capitalized upon. In their formative years, blogs presented opportunities in terms of both news media and politics, for both upstart bloggers and traditional elites. The remaining chapters of the thesis expand upon these themes, drawing comparisons between the early days of blogging and blogs’ evolution since, in order to evaluate the current nature of blogging and its larger relevance. As the context of technology, media, and politics
continues to develop, so too do the mediums operating in this context. Because blogs are embedded within the media landscape, the significance of blogging is embedded within the broader significance of media. Bloggers’ activities and influence has been and is important, given the impact media, of any medium, can have on politics and society at large.

The media plays a major role in shaping the public agenda, and as discussed above, blogs appear to have developed a similar capacity, both in relation to and independent of traditional media outlets. Past research has identified the media’s capacity to “elevate issues and devise interpretive frames for them that shape the boundaries and content of political discourse and public opinion…the blogosphere has the capacity to construct focal points through which the media operates” (Drezner and Farrell 2004, 17-18). In doing so, blogs and other media outlets activate “nodes” in readers’ minds – media consumption is tied to individuals’ cognitive processes (Tsfati 2003, 159). This shapes which issues readers consider to be salient and what associations they make with different candidates and policymakers (Iyengar et al. 1982, 855). For instance, in one study, an increase in defense-related news coverage both made the issue of national defense more salient for the audience and caused them to emphasize defense policy as a consideration when assessing the president’s job performance (McCombs and Shaw 1993, 63).

However, the effectiveness of media outlets’ agenda-setting rests upon the credibility they retain: organizations must be seen as respectable and believable (Bucy 2003, 248). When media credibility declines, so does the ability to set agendas, because resistance to media nudges increases (Tsfati 2003, 171-172). The power to influence agendas – to shape what policymakers and the public think about – is significant, and blogs may benefit from the decline in favor among traditional media.
Agenda-setting, combined with blogs’ overt mobilization role, in turn affects how American elections unfold. Most voters’ knowledge of and involvement in the political process is indirect, mediated by the media and other institutions. In elections, few voters have meaningful firsthand interactions with candidates; instead, most rely upon news reports and commentary about the candidates’ beliefs, personalities, and priorities, before making decisions about whom to support (Dalton et al. 1998, 111). Even as it adopts a neutral stance, the mainstream press still is able to “provide…political cues that may significantly influence the opinions of readers” (Dalton et al. 1998, 124). These cues were most apparent in newspapers’ editorial sections, which “had a significant positive effect on candidate image while controlling for [readers’] partisanship” (Dalton et al. 1998, 122). Blogs, whose ideological spurs are much more overt, likely feature similar, if not stronger, cues in their information dissemination and editorializing. In close elections, even modest pressures are significant.

The nature of blogs and the media lends itself to political influence and a role in American democracy, particularly in terms of voter behavior, but the media sphere remains a dynamic one, as communications technologies are updated and contexts shift. The observed behaviors of early blogs, as discussed in this chapter, may no longer hold. Current blog behavior, whatever it may entail, inevitably affects readers and politics writ large, in ways that should be better understood. The remainder of this thesis explores this in greater depth, offering an updated assessment of blogs’ functions and effects.
Chapter Two: Methodology and Initial Findings

This thesis examines the implications of the traditional media’s cooption of the blogform by comparing media-affiliated and independent blogs, and more generally, the evolution of political blog coverage of American elections. To do this, I have synthetized the existing academic literature with my own study of blogs. I have compiled and coded a sample of 602 blog posts from the 2012 election cycle. In particular, the thesis focuses on two major questions. First, as the blogform has aged, to what extent does it continue to fulfill key original aims, which distinguished it from older media? Second, what types of links do blogs today use, as linking has become ubiquitous in the blogosphere? Does the rise of traditional media-affiliated blogs, alongside other independent blogs, alter the answers to these questions? In this chapter, I first outline the methodology underlying the study. I then describe several initial findings of the study, with emphasis on the breadth of variations among blogs in terms of frequency and source of posts, tone of coverage, and levels of sensationalism. While there are distinct patterns within the blogosphere, as later chapters explore, it is today a thriving but diverse sector.

1. Methodology

In its totality, the blogosphere is enormous, numbering 133 million blogs in 2008 and only growing in the intervening years (Garrett et al. 2013, 118). Many of these blogs are updated regularly, with their front pages changing from hour to hour and day to day. The data used for this thesis represents a small but intriguing cross-section of the blogosphere. The thesis evaluates a sample of blog posts from ten prominent blogs covering nine major events during the 2012 American presidential elections. Unlike other news stories, which can receive highly variable levels of blog coverage, presidential campaigns uniformly attract high levels of attention from political blogs, which makes them a good source for data analysis. Moreover, the 2012
timeframe is simultaneously past, allowing for meaningful analysis over the course of the full
general election cycle, and recent, in that its implications remain relevant for the current state of
American politics, although the unpredictability of the 2016 election cycle may limit this
relevancy.

In particular, the dataset centers on blog coverage of nine major formal events in 2012:
Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney’s announcement of Congressman Paul Ryan (R-WI) as his running mate, the Republican and Democratic National Conventions, the four
presidential and vice-presidential debates, Election Day itself, and the post-mortem following
Election Day. These events span the entirety of the general election stage, and they are formal in
the sense of their predictability – each of these events was an expected, pre-determined ‘step’ in
the election process. By contrast, most other news stories from the 2012 election cycle arose
organically in the commotion of campaigning, such as Romney’s controversial “47 percent”
comments or President Barack Obama’s “You didn’t build that” remarks. By focusing on formal
events rather than unforeseeable ones, the study is able to track how blogs shift coverage over
the course of the election cycle, rather than capturing only individual or idiosyncratic pivots.

The specific data points of the study are drawn from ten “elite” blogs, which maintain
large audiences but vary widely in their strategies of execution, reflecting the range of functions
blogging can entail. Of the ten blogsites, four are traditional media affiliates: the New York
Times’ The Caucus, the New York Times’ FiveThirtyEight, TIME’s Swampland, and Washington
Post’s The Fix. Three are independent, right-leaning blogs – Breitbart, Hot Air, and RedState –
and three are independent, left leaning blogs – Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo, and
ThinkProgress. Although there are some nonpartisan independent blogs, independent blogs

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4 Independent blogs are independent in that they are not affiliated with traditional media-affiliated outlets, but they
are not necessarily independent from all outlets or entities. Of the blogsites coded in this study, ThinkProgress is
generally and identifiably reflect the ideologies of their bloggers, a quality that this thesis takes into account (Lawrence et al., 2010, 142).

Though the blogs selected share one primary characteristic – they are each among the most widely read political blogs – they have distinctive styles and areas of focus. For instance, FiveThirtyEight primarily covers polling, while ThinkProgress centers on public policy. Talking Points Memo maintains a journalistic framework, while Breitbart has been described by its critics as “inflammatory” and “extremist” (“Frank Gaffney Jr.”; Blue 2010). Here, it is worth noting that the dataset coded for this thesis represents only a selection of snapshots from a blogosphere that is constantly in motion. This is particularly true for the traditional media-affiliated blogs in the sample. Since 2012, FiveThirtyEight and its lead blogger, Nate Silver, left the auspices of the New York Times to move under the umbrella of ESPN, where the relaunched blog covers not only politics, but also sports and other topics (Stelter 2013). Meanwhile, TIME’s Swampland was folded into the magazine’s broader Politics vertical and the New York Times’ The Caucus was rebranded as First Draft. Only Washington Post’s The Fix remains as an active traditional media-affiliated blog in the same incarnation.

The data from these blogs was collected using Qualtrics’ software platform; I completed a coding form for each blog post sampled. The blog posts were collected via two methods, depending on the blog. For RedState and the Daily Kos, I located blog posts through their front page archives, which receive the bulk of the blogs’ web traffic and user comments. For the remaining eight blogs, I used website-restricted Google searches. In both cases, only blog posts

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5 For the full form and key, see Appendix A.

6 RedState and the Daily Kos distinguish between “front page” blog posts, which are posted to the homepage of the blogsite and are often written by staff bloggers, and “community” posts, which are written by rank-and-file readers. The front page blog posts consistently receive high levels of attention, while the focus and readership of community posts can fluctuate wildly. This thesis reviewed only front page blog posts.
centering on the nine formal events described above and written on the day of or in the days following the events were identified. If the number of blog posts from a sampled website for a given event did not exceed ten or eleven, then all blog posts for that blog and event were coded. When blogs produced a greater number of posts, each relevant blog post was assigned a number and ten posts were selected for coding, using a random number generator. The Daily Kos, for example, maintained an unfailingly prodigious output, with a record 52 relevant front page blog posts after the first presidential debate.

Many of the questions on the form could be objectively answered, while others were more subjective. For questions with definitive answers, such as those identifying the name of the blog or which websites it linked to, the process of searching for and compiling the appropriate information is straightforward. In the following paragraphs, I clarify my approach to coding questions that can be subjectively interpreted. The latter group of questions can be divided into three categories: questions addressing the foci of the blog posts, the tone and ideological slant of the blog posts, and their levels of sensationalism, respectively.

First, three questions addressed the blog posts’ foci, in terms of the primary candidate focus, the non-candidate focus, and the dominant frame of the story. The candidate focus was either a candidate, the candidate’s campaign, or, in cases where no candidate or campaign was predominantly mentioned, the event itself. Non-candidate foci highlighted dimensions of politics rather than individuals, such as the topics of social media and surrogate reactions. Finally, dominant frames refer to overarching constructs bloggers use to organize their stories, such as the horse race or intraparty conflict. Generally, blog posts contained multiple areas of focus and multiple frames. Blog posts centered on President Barack Obama also discussed Governor Mitt Romney, stories built around polling also discussed policy, and so on. In order to identify the
primary focus of the story and the dominant frame, I reviewed each blog post in order to identify which candidate, non-candidate topic, and framing topic was most heavily featured in the post.

Second, two questions referred to the tone of the blog post—whether it was positive, negative, neutral, or balanced towards the candidate or non-candidate focus—and one question referred to the story’s ideological slant—whether it favored the right, the left, or was neutral. To answer these questions, I reviewed the bloggers’ word choices and the framing devices used. In many instances, the degree of slant was fairly large and explicit. The tonal or slant differences of the blog posts could generally be ascertained through the text, where some candidates or topics were linked to positive descriptors, while others were tied to negative descriptors, in ways that depended substantially on the ideology of the candidate and that of the blog. In some instances, however, these contrasts were also visual: ideologically-driven independent blogs often featured unflattering pictures of opposing candidates, and several Daily Kos blog posts featured the image of a Republican dinosaur juxtaposed with the traditional elephant symbol, in which the dinosaur’s head grew out of the elephant’s backside. Daily Kos founder Markos Moulitsas bemusedly described this creation, which he dubbed the Goposaur (2009).

“We call it the Goposaur. It's looking back, to the past, refusing to evolve with the times as it longingly dreams of the days when only good, white, god-fearing dinosaurs roamed the earth and those multi-hued and highly evolved mammals weren't taking over the place and turning it into a socialist same-sex utopia with reeducation camps and 100% taxes. It's also ready to ‘go Galt’, which apparently is a euphemism for quitting work and starving to death, thus negating the need for the giant asteroid. Their brains are the size of peanuts, after all.”

Finally, one question asked about the blog post’s level of sensationalism, on a scale of one to five. This was arguably the most subjective question in the coding form, although I attempted to answer it using as consistent a framework as possible. Using the scale, I reserved a rating of “one” for blog posts with no or very little sensationalism, in which numbers or events were described straightforwardly, such as a story by Washington Post’s The Fix entitled “Ryan
would appear on ballot twice in Wisconsin.” “Twos” were given to posts with some but low levels of sensationalism, “threes” for posts with moderate levels of sensationalism, and “fours” for posts with large levels of sensationalism. “Fives” were given only to posts with extremely high levels of sensationalism, such as a Breitbart article with the headline “Obama Dems: Republicans Want 1950s, 1812, Jim Crow, Slavery.”

In the remainder of this chapter, as well as the two following chapters, I analyze and highlight key findings of the dataset. In doing so, I have relied primarily on tables and charts, rather than traditional statistical tests, which assume independence of the cases, under the guidance of Professor Cassandra Pattanayak, the Director of the Quantitative Analysis Institute at Wellesley College. Because the individual blogs were not randomly selected, but rather chosen for their content and readership size, and because the series of posts created by each blog are inherently interrelated, with overlapping authors and stylistic and content preferences, independence is not present within this data set. Nevertheless, the findings do shed light on the nature and evolution of American political blogs.

2. Ranges of Blog Posts and Bloggers

When considering the overall dataset, the diversity of the blogosphere quickly became apparent. While each of the blogs sampled is an “elite” blog, there were nevertheless major variations in the frequency of posts and number of bloggers for each blog. In total, the ten blogs sampled published 1,043 blog posts centered on the nine events this thesis studied. As Table 1 shows, the total number of relevant blog posts fluctuated widely depending on the blog.
Table 1: Number of Relevant Blog Posts, by Blog

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Blog</th>
<th>Total Number of Relevant Blog Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily Kos</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking Points Memo</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think Progress</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RedState</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breitbart</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot Air</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FiveThirtyEight</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Caucus</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fix</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swampland</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, there were significant fluctuations in the number of bloggers’ names that appeared, as Chart 1 makes clear.³ Many of the variations can be attributed to the number of staff bloggers for a given blog; some blogs maintained relatively small mastheads, while others were sprawling operations. This was particularly true for traditional media-affiliated blogs: the bloggers behind FiveThirtyEight and The Fix were dedicated to maintaining their blogs specifically, while The Caucus and Swampland featured numerous contributions from journalists who concurrently and, in some cases, predominantly, wrote for other projects of their blogs’ parent organizations. The blogs also maintained different norms for bloggers. In most cases, bloggers wrote under their real names, but some used pseudonyms, whether out of habit, such as

³ In a few instances, figures who are counted as one blogger are not individuals per se, such as when blog posts failed to list an author or in posts where the author was not a person, such as ThinkProgress’ “!Public Lands Team” or Breitbart’s “Breitbart News.”
in the case of Markos Moulitsas’ use of the nickname “Kos”, or to protect their anonymity, in the case of Hot Air’s Allahpundit. A few of the bloggers are publically and prominently associated with their blogs, such as Nate Silver and FiveThirtyEight or Erick Erickson and RedState, but most individual bloggers are comparatively obscure figures.⁸

Chart 1: Number of Sampled Bloggers, by Blog

Amidst these variations, patterns also coalesced, such as in terms of the proportions of coverage different events received. Chart 2 shows the distribution of blog posts for different events in the dataset, broken down by blog type.

⁸ In 2015, Erick Erickson announced his departure from RedState; he is no longer formally affiliated with the blog.
Most of the differences between blog types are concentrated in the early events. Among the partisan blogs sampled, both liberal and conservative blogs dedicated a greater proportion of posts to covering the events of the opposition, with left-leaning blogs writing more frequently about the Republican convention and the Paul Ryan announcement, and right-leaning blogs about the Democratic convention. Although the literature is mixed regarding whether or not the average voter would be alienated by negative messaging, many bloggers prefer oppositional blog posts. This is unsurprising, because independent bloggers and blog readers are generally committed partisans, for whom negative blog posts are “informative” and “influential”, offering reinforcement for previously held views and potential talking points as the election season progresses (Trammell 2006, 404). Comparatively, while the breakdown of blog posts between events is not precisely even among the traditional media-affiliated outlets, the division is less lopsided than it is among independent blogs.

By contrast, in later events, a pattern emerged across all blog types. While the first presidential debate produced a significant proportion of resulting blog posts, the frequency of
event-centered blog posts gradually declined for later events, before spiking again in the post-mortem. There are a few potential reasons that help explain this trend. First, as Election Day neared, fewer days separated each event. There were sixteen days between the first and second events, the naming of Paul Ryan to the Republican ticket and the Republican National Convention, but only five days between the vice-presidential debate and the next presidential debate, for instance. Thus, bloggers likely moved on from each event more quickly, thereby devoting fewer blog posts to any individual event. Second, as Election Day approached, there were likely more events occurring concurrently, preventing bloggers from honing in on individual events for a prolonged period of time. The party conventions, for example, captured the vast majority of political attention when they occurred, but by the later debates, other topics, such as early voting, also warranted meaningful coverage.

3. Tonal and Topic Differences Across Blogs

In addition to changing frequencies of blog posts over the course of the election cycle, there were also major differences among blogs and blog types in terms of their candidate foci and tones used. In all, 67.44% of the blog posts sampled focused primarily on one candidate or campaign above all others – either President Barack Obama, Vice-President Joe Biden, Governor Mitt Romney, Congressman Paul Ryan, the Obama for America (OFA) campaign, or Romney for President (RFP). As Chart 3 shows, the distribution of blog posts for each candidate and campaign was unequal across the various blog types. Liberal blogs were more likely than conservative or traditional media-affiliated blogs to write about the Republican candidates and campaign, while conservative blogs were more likely than non-conservative ones to write about their Democratic counterparts.
Unsurprisingly, among independent blogs, blog posts focused on the opposition’s candidates and campaigns were predominantly negative in tone, while blog posts focused on ideological compatriots were generally neutral, balanced, or positive.\(^9\) Conversely, traditional media-affiliated blogs tended to maintain consistently neutral or balanced coverage, only occasionally including entries with asymmetrically positive or negative slants. Chart 4 details these patterns, which recurred for each 2012 presidential candidate and campaign.

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\(^9\) Conservative blogs’ treatment of the Romney for President campaign was the only exception to this pattern. However, this likely reflects strategic disagreements during the campaign season and a need to assign blame after a loss on Election Day. This manifested itself in unusually negative blog coverage, such as the Romney campaign’s failed ORCA application for its Election Day operations.
Chart 4: Breakdown of Proportions by Tone, by Blog Type

a) President Barack Obama (D)

b) Vice-President Joe Biden (D)
c) Obama for America (D)

![Bar chart](chart1.png)

1. Traditional media-affiliated
2. Conservative
3. Liberal

Proportion of Blog Posts

Type of Blog

Negative
Neutral/Balanced
Positive

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Proportion of Blog Posts

d) Governor Mitt Romney (R)

![Bar chart](chart2.png)

1. Traditional media-affiliated
2. Conservative
3. Liberal

Proportion of Blog Posts

Type of Blog

Negative
Neutral/Balanced
Positive

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%
e) Congressman Paul Ryan (R)

Although the fact that different types of blogs apply differing frequencies in positive and negative treatment to candidates of disparate political stripes is unsurprising, independent blogs’ frequent use of neutral or balanced coverage for ideologically aligned candidates is interesting. For instance, 45.45% of conservative-written blog posts about Mitt Romney were neutral or balanced, as were 46.15% of liberal-written posts about Barack Obama. In many instances, the
bloggers’ criticisms or concerns were couched with conciliatory language and balanced by restatements of support for their candidates of choice, serving as a soft nudge for their ideological allies.

4. Variations in Sensationalism Levels

Beyond general fluctuations in the frequency and nature of blog postings and blogger activity, there were also disparities in the style of content and framing within blog posts, particularly in terms of levels of sensationalism. In some blog posts, information was presented in a detached, understated manner, while in sensationalized articles, bloggers magnified the importance of the events they discussed far beyond their actual gravity. Using a scale ranging between “one”, where blog posts were not sensational, and “five”, where blog posts were extremely sensational, there are notable differences between blog types and among individual blogs. Within the sample, posts from liberal blogs contained a mean sensationalism score of 2.851 and posts from conservative blogs a mean score of 3.098, while posts on traditional media-affiliated blogs maintained a lower mean score of 2.393. The lower scores from traditional media-affiliated blogs may be a function of their preference for traditional journalistic norms, which emphasize objectivity and fact-finding, rather than the more partisan, analytical lenses independent bloggers often use.

Accordingly, the underlying distribution of scores for individual blog posts varies, depending upon the type of blog in question, as Chart 5 shows. Independent blogs contain higher proportions of blog posts ranked with fours or fives, which involve high or very high levels of sensationalism. For instance, one Daily Kos blog post, titled “Debate advice for President Obama: Mitt Romney will tell a lot of lies, and you must refute them”, described Mitt Romney as “a politician who lives to lie, and who couldn't stop lying even if he tried.” In total, the piece
repeated variations of the word “lie”, in conjunction with Romney’s name, nearly forty times. On the other hand, traditional media-affiliated blogs’ posts contained no five-ranked posts and instead mostly fell under the “two” and “three” categories, which have low or moderate levels of sensationalism. While not free of sensationalism, these blog posts remained grounded primarily in facts rather than exaggeration or rhetoric.

Chart 5: Distribution of Sensationalism Scores, by Type of Blog

Of the blog types, conservative-leaning blogs maintained the highest mean sensationalism score and a skewed distribution, with greater proportions of very sensational blog posts and fewer sensationalism-free posts. To some extent, these differences may be a product of the blogs selected and sampled, which are only small subsets of the wider blogosphere, but there are also more systematic explanations. First, during the 2012 election cycle, the Tea Party movement remained a significant force in American – and specifically conservative – electoral politics. As Parker and Barreto (2013) explain, the Tea Party movement was fundamentally a reactionary one, “driven by the inability of some people to accept the reality of social change.” Reactionaryism in this context, with its rejection of change and amplification of its perceived
costs, is a fundamentally sensational frame. Second, commentators on the right are more likely to engage in so-called outrage discourse, particularly through “misrepresentative exaggeration” and “ideologically extremizing language” (Sobieraj and Berry 2011, 28-30). Sensationalism in this vein is intentional, designed to galvanize polarized audiences, a pattern that has resurfaced more recently with the rise of Donald Trump in the 2016 election cycle (19).

Within the blog types, there are also variations among individual blogs, given blogs’ idiosyncrasies, as seen in Chart 6. Although an independent blog, Talking Points Memo’s sensationalism distribution more closely resembled those of traditional media-affiliated blogs, given its concentration on the lower end of the sensationalism spectrum. Unlike many independent blogs, Talking Points Memo was founded by individuals with a background in traditional journalism, and its bloggers continue to produce journalistic content, rather than merely commentary. Conversely, TIME’s Swampland was a traditional media-affiliated blog, but it contained a comparable number of posts with high levels of sensationalism to independent outlets. While the Swampland blog included traditional journalists among its contributors, it also featured opinion columnists such as Joe Klein and Joel Stein. Thus, there was a wider range of mean sensationalism scores across the individual blogs, from the data-centric FiveThirtyEight’s average of 1.681 to the more excitable Daily Kos’ score of 3.303.
5. Conclusions

Through a sample of posts from widely read blogs in the 2012 presidential election cycle, this thesis explores differences and patterns in blog coverage among liberal, conservative, and traditional media-affiliated blogs. Some differences are dependent on the whims and resources of individual bloggers, such as the frequency of posting and the number of authors per blog. However, in the aggregate, more systematic cleavages become apparent. Independent, partisan blogs devote disproportionate, and predominantly negative, coverage to the events and candidacies of their ideological opponents. Independent, and especially conservative, blogs also contain more sensationalized content. Traditional media-affiliated blogs, on the other hand, maintain more neutral or balanced and even-keeled coverage. These insights help to clarify the diverse nature of blogs. In the following chapters, I expand upon these initial findings and explore blogs’ divides and diversity in greater depth, connecting the content of blog posts with bloggers’ ambitions and backgrounds and the potential the blogform holds.
Chapter Three: Revisiting the Roles of the Blogform

Although often categorized as a subset of new media, the blogform is no longer new in absolute terms: its format was created in 1996, and it has proliferated widely since 1999 (Herring et al. 2004, 1). The rapidity of the blogform has been striking – there were fewer than fifty blogs in existence in 1999, but that number had mushroomed to an estimated 2.4 to 4.1 million blogs by only 2003 (Drezner and Farrell 2004, 5). Since then, blogs have continued to gained steam, becoming a ubiquitous part of the American political and media landscapes. The blogform first arose in part to fill a void; it was a medium that addressed the perceived shortcomings of traditional media outlets, emphasizing the importance of the blogger’s point of view and reader mobilization. Two decades on, this chapter reviews the extent to which blogs continue to fulfill these purposes. The chapter first provides an overview of relevant literature, documenting the past characteristics of political blogs. It then evaluates blogs’ more recent activity, using data from the 2012 election cycle to study patterns in ideological slant, critiques of media coverage, and overt mobilization. As the digital age progresses, how have blogs evolved, and how have they remained constant?

1. Background and Previous Findings

Past surveys of top bloggers have identified a range of motivations for blogging, but these motivations are generally rooted in bloggers’ formulations of their political ideologies. Bloggers variously seek to offer points of view not found in traditional media, critique traditional media and political actors, promote political causes, and sway political outcomes (Ekdale et al. 2010, 226). The themes of these self-descriptions – in which blogs operate at the intersection of news and activism – parallel the themes of the academic research analyzing political blogs. Nahon et al. (2011) divide this scholarship into three waves: studies of blogs’ role in encouraging
formal political involvement, in terms of electoral participation; studies of the dynamics of interaction between blogs and traditional media; and studies of the influence of specific blogs within the blogosphere, respectively (3-5). The content of this chapter addresses the first two phases in particular.  

First, political mobilization has traditionally been considered a major function of independent political blogs: given that these blogs generally have well-defined ideological convictions, it follows that they have similarly pointed electoral interests and that bloggers would want to leverage the blogform to pursue their electoral aims. For instance, as a liberal blog, the Daily Kos is firmly committed to supporting Democratic candidates, and it has in the past regularly urged its readers to volunteer, vote for, or contribute funds toward favored candidates. In previous election cycles, this phenomenon has been much more pronounced on the left; in 2008, almost one-half of left-leaning blogs engaged in this kind of mobilizing activity, while only one-fifth of right leaning ones did (Lawrence et al. 2010, 150). Compared to the general population, regular blog readers are more likely to be politically involved and to consider themselves “very interested” in politics, which makes them ripe for appeals to activism (Graf 2006, 7-8).

Previous usage of blogs as a tool for mobilization has shown some success. Blogs played a major role in fundraising and volunteer recruitment for Paul Hackett, a 2005 Democratic congressional candidate who nearly won a special election in an otherwise solidly Republican

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10 Other research has addressed the unequal power distribution of blogs in the blogosphere. As Drezner and Farrell (2004) explain, “the median blogger has almost no political influence” (4). Instead, there are a small group of ‘elite’ blogs that receive outsized traffic and wield disproportionate influence. The blogs studied in this thesis’ dataset all fall into the category of elite blogs.
11 Notably, Daily Kos founder Markos Moulitsas in 2004 described his site as, “A partisan blog…a Democratic blog with one goal in mind: electoral victory.”
Ohio district (Schneider 2005). Similarly, in the aftermath of the 2006 election, blogs were credited with helping challenger Ned Lamont defeat incumbent U.S. Senator Joe Lieberman in Connecticut’s Democratic Senate primary (Pirch 2008, 275). As a novice candidate challenging a three-term Senator of the same party, Lamont lacked access to the organizational infrastructure of the Democratic Party or any of the advantages of incumbency; instead, the liberal blogosphere became a “virtual political party” for Lamont after his entry into the race (Pirch 2008, 279). As anti-Lieberman sentiment coalesced in the blogosphere, major liberal bloggers worked to secure endorsements on his behalf from organizations such as MoveOn.org and Democracy for America, and connected him to grassroots donors through online fundraising drives, which gave Lamont’s campaign a measure of credibility among both the media and Connecticut primary voters (Pirch 2008, 283-284).

Second, blogs have been defined in part by their distinctions from traditional media. Independent bloggers have often aimed to introduce alternative perspectives or stories overlooked by traditional media outlets, operating in a cycle where the “external rewards” of accumulated influence and readership reinforce the bloggers’ internal motivations (Ekdale et al. 2010, 227). For these bloggers, the “vertical” nature of traditional journalism, in which reporters alone gather news and disseminate it to the public, has been replaced by a better, “horizontal” model, in which there are many more sources and commentators participating at once (Allan 2009, 215). Unlike traditional media, the blog form arose as a fundamentally interactive medium, where the dialogue was ongoing and the blog post formed the “starting point for the focused yet dynamic participation of commentators” (Woodly 2008, 117). Indeed, bloggers’ efforts complement their readership’s pronounced disdain for traditional media. Although the media is

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12 Bloggers at websites such as the Swing State Project raised over $500,000 on Hackett’s behalf, more than either the National Republican Congressional Committee or the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the two major party committees responsible for helping to elect Congressional candidates, spent on the race.
often unpopular even with the general public, the sentiments of daily blog readers have been much more unfavorable – the difference totals between 30 and 40 percentage points (Graf 2006, 6). When surveyed, 92% of daily blog readers cited “they provide news the mass media ignores” and “they give a different perspective on news” as being among their reasons for following blogs, while 67% also saw blogs as a method to express their political beliefs (8).

The oppositional framing of independent blogs in contrast to their traditional media counterparts has manifested itself in several forms, with explicit critiques of traditional media coverage the most direct example. Blogs have often highlighted news articles they believe to be factually incorrect, politically slanted, or missing relevant context. From bloggers’ perspectives, the stated neutrality of traditional media has sheared traditional news of the necessary “thoughtful analysis” and context (Johnson and Kaye 2004, 625). This type of coverage has similarly reinforced blog readers’ preconceptions about the traditional media’s shortcomings. In some instances, concerted blog coverage has compelled traditional media to modify their actions. In 2004, for instance, bloggers claimed the scalp of Dan Rather, then the longtime anchor of CBS Evening News. Blogs such as Powerline and Little Green Footballs focused attention on the flaws, real and perceived, of a 60 Minutes II story about alleged preferential treatment President George W. Bush had received during his service in the Texas Air National Guard. The bloggers charged that several of the documents underlying the story were in fact forgeries, and they variously accused Rather and the CBS News team of “undue haste, carelessness, excessive credulity, and…[liberal] partisanship” (Pein 2005). As conservative blogs continued to push this narrative, mainstream journalists also began to report on it, and these “talking points became conventional wisdom”, ultimately leading to Rather’s ignominious resignation (Pein 2005).
According to Andrew Chadwick (2013), interactions such as these have caused the political communications environment in the United States to evolve into a “hybrid media system” (3). Older and newer media, including blogs and traditional news, have grown increasingly intertwined; today, they are different, but not fully dichotomous (4). Despite some resistance from traditional journalists, older and newer media are now deeply interconnected, each affecting and shaping the other (Chadwick 2013, 177). It is in this context of increasing interplay between blogs and traditional media that this chapter operates: while the bloggers’ tenets of ideological slant, critiques of traditional media, and mobilization may have prevailed in the early days of blogging, what role do they have in the more developed hybrid media system?

2. Ideological Slant in Blogs

When blogs first arose, the explicitness of their ideologies served as a key differentiator between the blogform and traditional media. In contrast to traditional journalists, who strive for balance and neutrality, early independent bloggers were often political activists, with overt allegiances (McKenna and Pole 2008, 106). A decade on, is this still the case? Do right- and left-leaning blogs still maintain clear ideological outlooks? What about traditional media-affiliated blogs – have they been affected by the ideological norms of blogging? Using the collected data, this section explores the role of ideological slanting in both explicit and implicit blogging decisions.

First, there remain cleavages among blog types in terms of overarching motivations. Unlike most traditional media outlets, independent blogs continue to be driven by explicitly stated, partisan convictions. Four of the six independent blogsites sampled for this thesis have “About” pages on their websites, which outline the origins and intentions of their enterprises. RedState, for instance, describes itself as the “singular hub of conservative grassroots
collaboration on the right”, while the Daily Kos sees itself as “at once a news organization, community, and activist hub” (“About Us” 2010; “About Daily Kos”). By contrast, the traditional media-affiliated blogs’ mission statements, when present, are comparatively nonpartisan. The New York Times’ FiveThirtyEight blog was “devoted to rigorous, data-driven analysis of politics, polling, public affairs, sports, economics, science, and culture”, while The Caucus was a purveyor of “political news and analysis, eye-catching photos, insightful graphics and live coverage of major events in Washington and from the campaign trail (“FiveThirtyEight”; “The Caucus Ends Its Campaign” 2014). Unsurprisingly, traditional blogs’ aims often reflect those of their parent organizations’ mediums.

Second, the dataset sampled for this thesis reveals major differences in explicit ideological slant between independent and traditional media-affiliated blogs in terms of blog content. As Chart 1 shows, slants pervade independent bloggers’ activities – 86.63% of liberal blog posts contained a leftward slant, while 93.14% of conservative blog posts maintained a rightward one. In these blog posts, the tone and content included overtly reflected the author’s ideology. For instance, during the Republican convention, typical headlines on liberal blogs included “The biggest of all Paul Ryan’s lies” and “9 Important Omissions from Romney’s Convention Speech”, while conservative blogs favored comparatively gauzier headlines, such as “Why Eastwood Matters: Old School Star Reflects American Grit, Greatness” and “Mitt Romney Delivers THE Best Speech of his Political Career.” By contrast, 98.47% of traditional media-affiliated blog posts had a neutral or balanced tone. This was reflected in the muted nature of their headlines, such as “As Convention Opens, Debt Clock Ticks” and “The Ticket: Romney and Ryan Go to Tampa.” This is an encouraging finding, since it contradicts the expectation of bias in traditional media.
Within the broad categories of liberal, conservative, and traditional media-affiliated blogs, there are some variations for individual blogs, as Chart 2 demonstrates. In particular, Talking Points Memo (TPM), a liberal blog, included liberal slants in only 47.06% of its blog posts, a figure that is at once much lower than the other independent blogs’ proportions of partisan slanting and much higher than traditional media-affiliated blogs’ proportions of such slanting. This may be due in part to TPM’s unique idiosyncrasies – unlike many other independent bloggers, its founder, Josh Marshall, has a background in traditional media: prior to launching TPM, he was an editor at the magazine The American Prospect (Glenn 2007). Moreover, many of TPM’s elections-related blog posts were filed under its Livewire section, which reports on breaking news, but offers little or no additional commentary. By hewing closely to facts, the Livewire posts are generally free of ideological bias.
However, while most independent blogs have higher levels and traditional media-affiliated blogs lower levels of explicit ideological slants, there remains a separate question of implicit bias. Like traditional news outlets, blogs regularly make decisions about which stories to cover, how much attention to devote to them, and which covered stories should be most heavily broadcast (Baum and Groeling 2008, 345). When these choices are made, ideology is not the only consideration. Besides potential ideological slants, there are four major types of bias in news: personalization, which elevates human interest stories above empirically major issues; dramatization, through a constant “crisis cycle”; fragmentation, which strips the necessary context away from stories; and authority-disorder bias, which focuses disproportionate attention on security threats and authority figures (Bennett 2003, 41-50). However, alongside these factors, there is a place for ideology. While some topics were covered across blog types, others were not, in a way that aligned with liberal and conservative bloggers’ issue preferences. Liberal blogs highlighted stories that portrayed conservatives in a negative light, and vice versa. During
the Republican convention, for instance, liberal blogs published posts such as “RNC attendee throws nuts at African American CNN cameraperson: ‘This is how we feed animals’”, while during the Democratic convention, conservative blogs blared headlines such as “Democrats Proudly Declare We All Belong to the Government. Ditch God From Their Platform.” Other instances of differing topic selection reflect variations in policy preferences. On Election Day, for example, conservative blogs reported on potential instances of election misconduct, with one headline declaring that “GOP fights for a fair election in Pennsylvania”, while liberal blogs instead debunked conservative accusations of fraud and raised concerns about misuse of conservative-affiliated corporate resources instead, in blog posts such as “Ohio Viewers Hit By Anti-Obama TV ‘Special’ On Election Eve.” Meanwhile, traditional media-affiliated blogs largely steered clear of subjects such as these. Although the full intent of blogging decisions such as these cannot be ascertained, the correlation between topic selection and ideological slant is worth noting.

3. Blog Coverage of Traditional Media

While interactions between blogs and traditional media can take a number of different forms, critiques of traditional media coverage are arguably the most direct category of interaction. This type of blog activity began in the earliest days of blogging, and in the 2012 dataset sample, it continues to persist. For instance, one Breitbart blog post was entitled “Politico’s Alexander Burns Reports Pro-Obama Narrative over the Truth”: the article skewered Burns for writing a headline claiming that Obama was again leading Romney after the Democratic National Convention, when the poll featured in the article showed the pair effectively tied among likely voters. Writing about the media, the blogger said, “You didn’t think the media could get any worse, did you? You ain’t seen nothing yet. Liars and shills and shills
and liars who lie and shill and shill and lie.” In the larger dataset, this type of blog post recurred frequently. In total, it was the fifth most common type of post, as Table 1 shows; blog entries centered on commenting about traditional media comprised 10.30% of all entries.

Table 1: Top Topical Foci of Blog Posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topical Focus of Blog Post</th>
<th>Proportion of Total Blog Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Events</td>
<td>37.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Policy</td>
<td>18.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Surrogate Reactions</td>
<td>12.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Polling</td>
<td>11.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Media Coverage</td>
<td>10.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Social Media Reactions</td>
<td>2.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Biography</td>
<td>1.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Other (Various)</td>
<td>5.98%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The blog posts centered on media coverage were common, but they were not spread evenly throughout the dataset: first, they were concentrated primarily among independent blogs, and conservative blogs specifically. 25.81% of the media-oriented blog posts were written by liberal blogs and 69.35% were produced by conservative blogs, while only 4.84% came from traditional media-affiliated blogs. Accordingly, blog posts primarily dealing with media coverage constituted 7.92% of all sampled liberal blog posts and 21.08% of conservative blog posts, but only 1.53% of traditional media-affiliated blog posts, as Chart 3 shows.
The disparity between conservative and non-conservative blogs is not new: it reflects right-leaning bloggers’ self-appointed roles as watchdogs and critics of the traditional media. Breitbart, for example, maintains a project called “Big Journalism”, which its founder, the late Andrew Breitbart, described as pursuing the goal of “hold[ing] the mainstream media’s feet to the fire” (Hall 2009). In conjunction with conservative media monitoring groups such as the Media Research Center, Breitbart and other blogs have long complained of a liberal-leaning media, dissecting its articles for evidence of liberal bias (Massing 2005, 5). Accordingly, conservative bloggers have broadcasted their findings loudly, leading to headlines such as “CBS’ Schieffer Redacts Vital Ryan Interview Clip” and “Chuck Todd Race-Baits GOP as NBC institutes ‘Whites Only’ Speech Policy.” However, these findings, particularly framed in partisan terms, have gained limited traction outside of the conservative blogosphere, since perceptions of

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13 The Media Research Center, for example, maintains a subsidiary blog called NewsBusters, which tracks instances it considers to be liberal bias in the media; the NewsBusters platform operates under the tagline “Exposing & Combating Liberal Media Bias.”
widespread liberal bias are generally not shared by liberal bloggers or the media itself, which in
turn devote far less time to analyzing media coverage.\textsuperscript{14}

Second, the differing frequencies in media-centered blog posts were compounded by
variations in tone: among independent but not traditional media-affiliated blogs, coverage of the
media generally skewed negative. Of the posts centered on media coverage, 75\% of liberal
blogs’ stories contained a predominantly negative tone, as did 88.37\% of conservative blogs’
stories, but none of the traditional media-affiliated blog posts had a similarly negative approach,
as Chart 4 shows. Instead, all of the traditional media-affiliated stories maintained either positive,
neutral, or balanced tones. Thus, while bloggers on the left and right tended to pillory the press,
penning headlines such as “[Debate Moderator] Crowley Saves Obama With False Check” and
“Crowley Interrupts Romney 28 Times, Obama Just 9”, traditional media-affiliated bloggers
offered friendlier coverage, such as the article “Mission Impossible: Moderating a presidential
debate”, which outlined five reasons why the difficulties of debate moderation should be
acknowledged rather than disparaged.

\textsuperscript{14} There is, however, a liberal counterpart to the Media Research Center called Media Matters, which identifies cases of conservative bias in the media, although it appears to be less closely tied to the blogosphere, at least in the blogs sampled for this thesis’ dataset.
Chart 4: Breakdown of Tone Usage in Media-Centered Blog Posts, by Blog Type

Broad differences between blog types may be due to a combination of differences in blogger backgrounds and motivations. Many of the staff bloggers from traditional media-affiliated blogs have backgrounds rooted in traditional journalism. They are more familiar with the conventions of traditional media, and they have pre-existing relationships with many traditional media journalists. For instance, Chris Cillizza, the lead blogger for the Washington Post’s The Fix blog, formerly worked as a reporter for Roll Call and the Cook Political Report, while some, such as TIME’s Joe Klein, now contribute concurrently to their traditional media-affiliated political blog and its parent outlet (Cillizza 2005; TIME 2015). One blog post on The Fix stated outright, “We know – and like – [CNN journalist Candy] Crowley personally. Do with that information what you will.” This mindset, in addition to journalist bloggers’ continued affiliation through traditional media outlets, may lead them to avoid stories centered on critiques of the media form that employs them. Independent bloggers, on the other hand, tend to have much more diverse backgrounds and are not professionally beholden to any traditional news
organizations. Some, such as Daily Kos founder Markos Moulitsas, began their blogs with the intention of covering politics, while others, such as Charles Johnson of the blog Little Green Footballs, gradually shifted from non-political topics to political ones, due to their changing interests (Ekdale et al. 2010, 218). Independent bloggers, especially those on the right, often view the traditional media as an amalgamation of implicit but ever-present biases; they circumvent the problem of bias by being open about their own – most independent bloggers eschew impartiality in favor of openly ideological writing, (Davis 2009, 109). In turn, they do not hesitate to criticize cases of media bias or otherwise flawed journalism that they perceive.

4. Mobilization: Calls to Action

As this chapter earlier discussed, in previous election cycles, independent blogs have served as a tool to mobilize voters. However, since the heyday of races such as Paul Hackett’s and Ned Lamont’s, when blogs played an instrumental role, the universe of new media has grown much more diverse. In addition to political blogs, candidates and voters can now also turn to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter for mobilization-related activities (Hong and Nadler 2012, 455). Thus, given this change in the online landscape, it is useful to revisit the role of the blogosphere and whether blogs continue to serve as vehicles to encourage mobilization. As this section details, in many cases, blogs no longer do.

Among the blog posts sampled, 10.26% contained calls to action, in which the blogger urged that something be done. While this is comparable to the proportion of media coverage-centered blog posts discussed in the previous section, the implications are different: the 1 in 10 figure for media-centric blog posts does not include a greater number of posts that mentioned

\[15\] Johnson was primarily a technology blogger before the events of 9/11, which was the catalyst for his turn toward politics. By 2009, though, Johnson had abruptly shifted his blog from a conservative-leaning site, most prominent for its role in the Rathergate scandal that precipitated former CBS News anchor Dan Rather’s resignation, to a left-leaning site that was critical of conservatives, including parts of his former audience.
discussed media coverage at points. By contrast, calls to actions were *mentioned* in only 1 in 10 posts. As Chart 5 shows, for each blog, calls to action were the exception rather than the norm: they were consistently included in only a minority of blog posts.

**Chart 5: Breakdown of Proportions for Calls to Action, by Blog**

![Chart 5: Breakdown of Proportions for Calls to Action, by Blog](image)

However, the extent to which calls to action were used varied by blog. They appeared in 13.73% of liberal blog posts and 12.75% of conservative blog posts, but in only 4.08% of traditional media-affiliated posts. Much of this differential can be attributed to two partisan blogs that contained comparatively high rates of blog posts with calls to action in them. Calls to action appeared in 22.05% of RedState entries and in 24.18% of Daily Kos entries. When RedState and Daily Kos are excluded, the varying frequencies of calls to action among independent and traditional media-affiliated blogs decrease significantly, with calls to action rare in each case, as Chart 6 demonstrates. Overall, the proportion of blog posts in the eight remaining blogs that include calls to action falls by nearly half, to only 5.62%.
Cluster 1 represents the original dataset, including RedState and Daily Kos, while Cluster 2 represents the modified dataset, excluding posts from RedState and Daily Kos.

The relative scarcity of calls to action, as detailed above, is magnified by the content of the calls themselves. Only half of the calls to action could be considered mobilizing, in that they were directed at the reader specifically, while the other half were functionally rhetorical. The rhetorical calls varied widely, and they were often tied to the narrow topic of a specific blog post. In all cases, however, they were unlikely to yield tangible effects, since the actor being called upon was not a likely member of the blog’s actual readership. Mitt Romney, for example, would be unlikely to refine his policy positions in response to the complaints of a liberal blog. Instead, the rhetorical calls to action mostly served as a flourish of the blogger, used to convey a point when information was disseminated. Of the remaining mobilizing calls to action, 70.97% guided readers toward activities traditionally associated with campaigns, such as fundraising, petition signing, and get out the vote activities. The remaining 29.03% included broader exhortations to
sign up for online newsletters, watch videos, and keep choice facts in mind.\textsuperscript{16} This division may seem lopsided, but in absolute terms, the number of blog posts affected is small: 70.97\% of mobilizing calls to action – the category of blog posts in which electoral mobilization occurred – constitutes only 3.64\% of the total array of blog posts sampled.

In relative terms, however, the frequency of calls to action was correlated with the event the blog post centered upon, as Chart 7 shows. Entries posted closer to but before Election Day were more likely to contain calls to action, while earlier posts and blog posts on or after Election Day were less likely to do so. This may reflect the increasing urgency political observers feel as the election season progresses. While political staffers have labored for months beforehand, traditionally, public attention does not coalesce around the election until after Labor Day of the election year (Panagopolous 2009, 122). Only then does interest substantially build, culminating in the November election. Thus, bloggers are more likely to make calls to action when their readers are more attuned to the upcoming election. However, the frequency of calls to action decreases on and after Election Day itself. The relative sparsity of post-Election Day calls to action is unsurprising, since blog entries in the post-mortem period were mostly reflective, but the decrease on Election Day may reflect an understanding that the window for mobilization has passed – donations and other activities are of limited utility by that point.

\textsuperscript{16} When traditional media-affiliated blogs incorporated mobilizing calls to action, they consistently fell into this category of non-campaign calls.
Similarly, as Election Day nears and on Election Day itself, the proportion of mobilizing calls to action, rather than rhetorical ones, is also higher, as Chart 8 outlines. This may also reflect the previously mentioned Labor Day marker in election cycles, when mobilization becomes more relevant. There was one exception to this pattern – the vice-presidential debate, between Vice President Joe Biden and Congressman Paul Ryan. This may be due to two factors: lower interest in the vice-presidential debate and the muddled outcome of the debate itself. Unlike the preceding presidential debate, which captured 67.2 million views on television, the Biden-Ryan debate garnered a comparatively small 51.4 million views (Stelter 2012). Unlike debates between the presidential candidates, there was also not a clear winner; polls conducted afterwards found that 48% of voters considered Ryan the winner, while 44% named Biden as victorious, a difference within the margin of error (CNN 2012). In any case, however, the overall appearances of campaign-centered mobilization were confined to three blogs in the data set –
Daily Kos, RedState, and Breitbart – with the majority of instances originating from the Daily Kos.

Chart 8: Breakdown of Rhetorical and Mobilizing Calls to Action, by Event

The Daily Kos represents a case study of the continued potential blogs hold as tools of mobilization, even if that potential is not currently being used. 17 of the 31 total instances of mobilizing calls to action in the dataset were facilitated by the Daily Kos, including 77.27% of all campaign-related calls. These statements recurred most frequently after the second and third presidential debates, held on October 16 and October 22, respectively. They can largely be divided into two categories: calls for donations and for get out the vote efforts. Daily Kos partners with ActBlue, an online fundraising platform, to direct donations, and it also encourages its readers to contribute money to the campaigns it has endorsed; one appeal generated $3.3 million in donations from 109,000 individuals (Sifry 2012). Similarly, 10 of the mobilizing calls to action involved a message appended to the conclusion of blog posts, asking readers to “Sign up to help Democratic voters to the polls in swing states with our partners at Workers’ Voice.”
The appeal contained a link in which readers could provide their contact information and locations in order to get involved.

These exhortations can be impactful, as past research has shown. Political blog readers are more politically active than non-blog readers, and left-leaning blog readers more involved in activism than their right-leaning counterparts (Lawrence et al. 2009, 14-15). This may partly reflect a difference in investment: blogs such as the Daily Kos have made concerted, sustained efforts to galvanize readers, while conservative activists have traditionally maintained offline hubs of grassroots connection, such as through talk radio or the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). Online-driven activism, however, has been demonstrably successful. For fundraising in particular, there is a documented, statistically significant causal relationship between Daily Kos fundraising appeals and increased donations to candidates mentioned in the appeal. As Sides and Farrell (2010) explain, “If you are a candidate who has been mentioned on the Daily Kos, our models suggest that you will raise more money in weeks where you are mentioned than in weeks where you are not mentioned, and that you will raise more money the more times you are mentioned in that week” (11). For donations listed with the Federal Elections Commission (FEC), a 10% increase in frequency of Daily Kos mentions leads to a 5% increase in a candidate’s fundraising, a figure that jumps to 16% if Markos Moulitsas, the founder and publisher of the Daily Kos, is the one doing the mentioning (Sides and Farrell 2010, 10). This effect would likely be magnified by jumps in small-dollar donations, which are an important aspect of the Daily Kos model, but which are not publically reported under FEC disclosures (12).

5. Conclusions
In the two decades since the blog format was created, the environment in which blogs operate has changed, creating a more diverse hybrid media dynamic. The sample of data from 2012 demonstrates that within the hybrid media system, independent blogs continue to be largely partisan in mission, content, and decision-making. Moreover, they – and especially conservative blogs – continue to devote significant energies towards critiquing and challenging traditional media. However, independent blogs are now less likely to harness their ideological aims towards reader mobilization, although blogs such as the Daily Kos demonstrate how blogs can continue to be an effective, if less imperative, tool for activists. Traditional media-affiliated blogs, meanwhile, continue to hue more closely to the norms of traditional journalism: they rarely engage in calls to action and maintain generally neutral stances and tones. As the hybridization of media continues, these patterns will continue to grow and evolve, sustaining the interactions of blogging, bloggers, and traditional media.
Chapter Four: The Role of News Links in the Blogform

The blogosphere, marked by its potential for interactivity, has long allowed blogs to transcend the “opaque” norms of traditional political media (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2009, 555; Singer 2005, 179). One hallmark of this interactivity has been the rise of the hyperlink: almost all blogs frequently include links that, when clicked on, will send readers to selected external webpages. Hyperlinking to other websites is a major method blogs use to communicate information; these links provide sources for the bloggers’ assertions and references, and give readers an opportunity to further explore the topic of the blog post. This chapter first reviews previous research about the blogosphere’s practice of hyperlinking, in the context of the differing functions of independent and traditional media-affiliated blogs. It then examines the typology of blogs’ web links; it uses data from the study sample to explore key patterns in how blogs’ citations, namely in terms of the range, frequency, and origins of sources.

1. Background and Previous Findings

The different characteristics and ambitions separating blogs from traditional media outlets have been well-documented. Notably, traditional media outlets strive for neutrality, while independent blogs are likelier to be openly ideological, both in terms of which news stories they promote and in how they cover stories (Garrett et al. 2013, 117). In light of their explicit partisanship, blogs and other non-traditional political websites were originally viewed with skepticism by the traditional media, but the growing audience of blogs has helped to legitimize the blogform. In 2012, 1 in 3 Americans “regularly” or “sometimes” visited political or current events-focused blogs (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2012, 71). As blogs have

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17 There are also instances of blogs linking to other websites critically, bringing in content from another blog or news outlet in order to demonstrate the post’s flaws. Differentiating this subset may warrant further study moving forward.
gained readership, they have challenged traditional media’s role as the primary source of news for most Americans (Meraz 2008, 682-683).

Currently, American distrust of traditional media sources is climbing, particularly among partisans; a recent poll found that 62% of self-identified liberal Democrats and 82% of conservative Republicans believed that national news media organizations had a negative impact on the country’s direction (Pew 2015, 127). This distrust leaves an opening for alternative forms of news to gain influence, such as, notably, blogs, and later social media.\(^{18}\) Indeed, previous research has shown that the blogosphere’s reader base considers blogs, which often align with their readers’ biases, to be a credible source of news (Johnson and Kaye 2009, 180). In fact, the preponderance of readers consider the blogform to be a “new and better” alternative to traditional media, preferring the “opinionated, analytical, independent, and personal” nature of blogs over the more neutral stylings of traditional media outlets (Johnson and Kaye 2004, 633-634). Both traditional media outlets and blogs seek to disseminate information to their readers, but to varying extents, independent blogs also serve a watchdog role and encourage political activism and philanthropic efforts (McKenna and Pole 2008, 97).

In response to the rise of the blogform specifically and technological advancements more broadly, traditional media outlets have created blogs of their own.\(^{19}\) However, as traditional media-affiliated blogs have proliferated, they have generally not followed the independent blogs’ model; instead, they hew more closely to the norms of journalism – journalist bloggers often attempt to maintain a more constrained, nonpartisan posture, as is expected of mainstream journalists, while still providing some commentary and analysis (Singer 2005, 178). One would

\(^{18}\) This thesis centers primarily on the blogform, but there is no dearth of research on the effects of social media in politics. Section four of this chapter also addresses the role of social media links on blogs.

\(^{19}\) Occasionally, there is some mobility between the two spheres. In a few cases, traditional media outlets have annexed previously independent blogs, such as when the Washington Post brought the popular political blogs the Volokh Conspiracy and the Monkey Cage under its auspices.
expect these differences to extend to independent and traditional media-affiliated blogs’ usage of web links, because the use of hyperlinks as references often implies that the blogger considers the website or post in question to be credible. Although both journalist-run and independent blogs would likely link to traditional media websites, the same may not be true for the frequency of links to non-traditional media websites.

Indeed, past research reflects this gap. Jane B. Singer (2005) found that the “overwhelming majority” of links in blog posts written by traditional media journalists are to other traditional media sites, and often to the parent media outlet of the blog, although they did occasionally link to non-traditional news sites (187). On the other hand, the hyperlinking preferences of independent blogs have been more diverse: in one study, almost half of links directed traffic to traditional media sites, while the other half of links were split between other blogs, other blog posts within the same site, and primary source materials such as government or academic websites (Leccese 2009, 584-585). However, as the blogform has become an increasingly established format within the world of media and politics, it is worth asking if this pattern still holds true. Anecdotally, independent blogs have affected traditional journalism and political events; in 2002, for instance, despite an initial dearth of media interest, dedicated blog coverage played a large role in turning a gaffe by then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott into a major scandal that necessitated his resignation from his leadership post (Drezner and Farrell 2004, 3). Has the influence of independent blogs and web-based news sites migrated into the public view as well, in terms of the linking habits of traditional media-affiliated blogs?

Broadly, the links included in blog posts of any sort can be divided into four categories: links to traditional media websites, blogs, web-native news sites such as the Huffington Post or Buzzfeed, and numerous other “primary source” websites – government agencies, social media
Using a sample of blog posts from the 2012 presidential election, this chapter centers on the first three groups, which share a focus on current events. Within this sample, there was a high rate of linking: 85.5% of the blog posts studied contained links to other webpages, and 80.6% of the blog posts contained links to news-oriented websites specifically, creating a wealth of data to mine.

2. Media Fragmentation and the Diffusion of Sources

Gone are the days when a newsman such as Walter Cronkite could be dubbed the “most trusted man in America”: even before the advent of the internet, the media landscape had already begun to fragment, but the rise of the World Wide Web greatly accelerated this fragmentation (PBS NewsHour 2009). Freed of the norms and infrastructure requirements associated with traditional news, the internet has enabled the rise of upstart ‘citizen journalists’, who populate forums such as the blogosphere and web-native news platforms (Kaufhold et al. 2010, 515). Online, news outlets can be centered in their own specialized niches, established through combinations of parameters such as ideology, personality, and regionalism. As a result, the numbers of blogs and other political websites have diversified to the point of being “literally countless” (Wallsten 2007, 571).

The range of linked websites captured by this thesis’ dataset reflects this diversification, a trend that recurred across blogs and blog types. In total, the ten blogs sampled linked to 272 news-oriented websites during 1,319 instances of linking, including to 137 traditional media websites, 94 blogs, and 41 web-native sources. The outlets cited varied widely in focus, readership, and frequency of citation. NPR.org, for instance, attracts 28.9 million monthly visitors nationwide, while the Janesville Gazette services a far smaller audience largely confined
to the Wisconsin suburb identified in its name (“NPR Fact Sheet” 2015). Chart 1 demonstrates the large number of linked websites for each blog.

Chart 1: Number of Sites Linked To, by Blog

In each case, the number of distinct traditional media websites linked to outpaced the number of linked blogs and web native sources, although the magnitude of this disparity varied widely. While RedState came closest to parity between the number of linked traditional news websites and blogs, the balance of citation types was most lopsided for ThinkProgress. Blogs linked to as many as 64 distinct traditional media websites, in the case of ThinkProgress; as many as 32 blogsites, in the case of Hot Air; and as many as 18 web native sources, in the case of ThinkProgress. While the proliferation of sites in the blogosphere has been well-documented, traditional media shares a similar breadth of outlets, including differing geographical foci; ideological stripes; topic areas; and methods of distribution. The diversity of traditional media outlets in turn leads to a range of traditional media links filtering into the blogosphere. As Chart 2 shows, American political bloggers link to varying foreign, national, and regional or local traditional news websites. The distribution of citations is similar among liberal, conservative, and
traditional-media blogs, each of which primarily links to domestic news outlets. This range of traditional media sources predates the internet era, but links and other interactions represent its increased interconnectivity, bridging previously separate spheres of readership.

Chart 2: Breakdown of Linked Traditional News Outlet Foci, by Blog Type

In contrast with traditional news outlets and blogsites, the blogs sampled tended to link to fewer distinct web native sites, with a few such websites recurring repeatedly. Table 1 shows the top linked web native platforms, highlighting the extent of the overlap in linkage: the order varies slightly, but conservative and traditional-media affiliated blogs share the same four most commonly linked web native websites, and there are three web native sources that recur across all blog types. Links to Politico, the most commonly cited of the web natives, appeared in 54 of the sampled blog posts, or 8.97% of all blog posts. Indeed, Politico is representative of the relative newness and fuzziness of “web native” as a category. News outlets that arose online, with the web as their medium, are inherently recent inventions; in some respects, the distinction between a blog and a web native site is a shifting one. The web natives may have once been

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20 The disparity between the number of linked blogs and the number of linked web native sources is less pronounced among traditional media-affiliated blogs, which simply linked to fewer of both source types.
considered blogs or may still occasionally be criticized for their blog-like nature.\textsuperscript{21} Politico, which was founded in 2007, for instance, has previously been classified in media research as a blogsite, as its blog overshadowed the limited circulation of its print edition, but the blog descriptor no longer fits: Politico today has several hundred employees and has expanded into multiple news platforms (Meraz 2009, 694-696; “Staff” 2015; Uberti 2015).\textsuperscript{22} In its rise, it has developed an unusual profile, compared to other Washington-based media organizations. To the consternation of some, Politico interprets neutrality as centrism and cultivates access to the professional political class, on both sides of the aisle, converting often anonymous leaks into news stories (Pareene 2012). However, Politico’s model has been successful, leading other web native outlets, such as Buzzfeed, to poach top Politico staffers (Quenqua 2013).\textsuperscript{23}

Table 1: Most Common Web Native Sites, by Blog Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Traditional media-affiliated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Politico</td>
<td>1. Politico</td>
<td>1. Politico</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Web native news sources like Politico are often managed by journalists with traditional media experience and have acquired a measure of institutional legitimacy: Buzzfeed, Politico, and Yahoo! News, for instance, are now members of the White House Press Corps, and other web-native sites, such as the investigative journalism project ProPublica have broken key news stories, such as major political endorsements, and won major journalism awards, such as the Peabody Award and the Pulitzer Prize (Quenqua 2013; Korte 2015; ProPublica 2015). Despite

\textsuperscript{21} Most recently, in 2015, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump declared the Huffington Post a “glorified blog” after it decided to file its coverage of his campaign in the category of entertainment news.\textsuperscript{22} Beyond the flagship of Politico.com, Politico now includes Politico Magazine, Politico Europe, the policy-centered Politico Pro subscription news service, and a variety of statehouse-centered editions, among other formats.\textsuperscript{23} Ben Smith, the Editor-in-Chief of Buzzfeed, was previously a top Politico blogger.
these accomplishments, however, web-native news sites still lack the longevity, and the stature tied to such longevity, that traditional news sources retain. Both web native and traditional media sources are generally seen as reputable, but there remains some variance in the frequency in which they are cited by different blogs, with the variance higher among traditional media-affiliated blogs.\textsuperscript{24}

Chart 3: Proportion of Posts Linking to Traditional and Web Native Sources, by Blog

3. Frequency of Source Recurrences

Despite the wide array of linked websites, there were also decided differences in the frequency of links directed at any one website. For instance, across all blogs sampled, there were 95 total blog posts containing links to \textit{Washington Post} articles, while 82 other traditional news

\textsuperscript{24} Residual skepticism of web native outlets may relate to the web natives’ tendency to include both substantive journalism and less substantive online content, such as viral videos, on one platform.
outlets were linked to only once. For each blog, the most common blog links were to other posts within the same blogsite, and for each traditional media-affiliated blog, the most common traditional media links were to posts by the blog’s parent media outlet. This represents a continuation of a previously observed tendency to direct links internally, and it may reflect a blog preference for their own or their parent outlet’s reporting, when it is available (Singer 2005, 187; Leccese 2009, 584-585). However, the extent to which this occurs varies by blog, and the phenomenon is more prevalent in liberal than in conservative-leaning blogs, as Chart 4 and Chart 5 show.

Chart 4: Internal Blog Links, as a Proportion of Total Blog Links

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25 One reason for the abundance of links to the Washington Post and its affiliated blogs may be its focus on Washington D.C. and politics inside the Beltway, thus leading to more coverage of the presidential election and its ramifications.
In contrast to the high proportion of links directed internally, either within one blog or parent website, the remainder of the links was more dispersed. As Table 2 outlines, when internal blog links are excluded, the average number of times a website was linked to, within each blog, was very small. Two blogs – ThinkProgress and Hot Air – had unusually high frequencies of recurrence for traditional media websites, at 2.36 times and 2.67 times, respectively. Hot Air also had the highest frequency for external blogs, with the average non-Hot Air blogsite appearing 1.94 times. While these outcomes are high compared to the remaining blogs, they are still low in absolute terms, reflecting the diffusion of sources cited.
Table 2: Frequency of Blog Links to External Websites, Excluding Own or Parent Site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the blog</th>
<th>Average Number of Links/Website (Trad. Media)</th>
<th>Average Number of Links/Website (Blogs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily Kos</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking Points Memo</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ThinkProgress</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RedState</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breitbart</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot Air</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FiveThirtyEight (New York Times)</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Caucus (New York Times)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fix (Washington Post)</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swampland (TIME)</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indeed, a comparison of the average number of blog links to all websites with the average number of blog links, when internal links are excluded, reflects the extent to which recurring website links are primarily directed internally, as Charts 6 and 7 show. The degree of this disparity varies, but in some cases, it is quite large.

Chart 6: Frequency of Blog Links to Blogs

![Chart 6: Frequency of Blog Links to Blogs](chart.png)
4. Blogs and Their Top Linked News Sites

In addition to the wide range and low frequency of recurrences for websites that the blogs linked to, another relevant finding is which websites appeared in blog posts. Table 3 lists the top traditional cited websites for each blog type, and Table 4 lists the top cited blogsites for each blog type.

Table 3: Most Commonly Cited Traditional Media Sources, by Blog Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Traditional Media-Affiliated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Business Week (tie)</td>
<td>5. CNN</td>
<td>5. ABC News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. NPR (tie)</td>
<td>8. The Hill (tie)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Most Commonly Cited Blog Sources, by Blog Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Traditional Media-Affiliated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. Grist (tie)</td>
<td>5. Townhall</td>
<td>5. The Monkey Cage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Politifact (tie)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For both traditional media links and blog links, more overlap exists between liberal blogs and traditional media-affiliated blogs than with conservative blogs. To be sure, the conservative blogs sampled also linked to similar websites, but compared to the other blog types, right-leaning blogs were more likely to link to ideologically similar websites. As demonstrated in Table 3, the conservative blogs – RedState, Breitbart, and Hot Air – linked more frequently to both the National Review, which is explicitly conservative, and FOX News, which is widely considered to be conservative, than they did to The New York Times (Buckley 1955; DellaVigna and Kaplan 2006, 15). Similarly, eight of conservative blogs’ top ten most commonly cited other blogs are overtly conservative in orientation, while only four of liberal blogs’ top nine blogsites were comparatively liberal.26 Meanwhile, traditional media-affiliated blogs generally linked to

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26 A ninth, Mediaite, has been referred to as conservative and a “Fox News fan site” by some observers, but other commentators have decried it as being on the “far left” (Abrams 2015).
relatively neutral blogsites, with six out of the top eight blogsites being traditional media-affiliated blogs themselves.

Conservative blogs’ disproportionate reliance on conservative media may be a reflection of conservatives’ distrust of mainstream journalism, which they claim shows a liberal bias (Watts et al. 1999, 168). The actual evidence concerning media bias is mixed. Some researchers have found that the so-called liberal media slant is either overstated or virtually nonexistent, particularly in contrast with other media framing and decision-making biases (D’Alessio and Allen 2000, 133; Entman 2010, 403). Conversely, others have argued that liberal media bias is demonstrably prevalent and dangerous, with eighteen of the top twenty national news sources operating to the left of the median American voter (Groseclose 2011; Groseclose and Milyo 2005, 1220). Regardless of the actual extent of media bias, the perception of bias is likely enough to shape blogs’ linking patterns. For instance, one of the blogs most commonly cited by the sampled conservative blogs was NewsBusters, which describes itself as “a project of…America’s leading media watchdog in documenting, exposing, and neutralizing liberal media bias”, which aims to “provide immediate exposure of national media bias, unfairness, inaccuracy, and occasional idiocy” (“About NewsBusters.org” 2014).

However, the linking patterns of traditional media-affiliated blogs did not evince any similar skepticism of the so-called mainstream media; instead, traditional media-affiliated blogs remained firmly ensconced within a traditional media-centric framework. As Chart 8 shows, while all blog types – liberal, conservative, and traditional media-affiliated – are more likely to link to traditional media news websites than to blogs or web native outlets, this differential is much more pronounced among the traditional media-affiliated blogs. While slightly less than
half of links on liberal and conservative blogs are directed toward traditional media outlets, this figure rises to more than six in ten for traditional media-affiliated blogs.

Chart 8: Breakdown of Total Links, by Type of Link

While the differences in Chart 8 may appear visually insignificant, they are more clearly magnified when looking at the breakdown of websites linked to by each individual blog post. As Chart 9 outlines, there is a clear and consistent divide between independent and traditional media-affiliated blogs in terms of linking patterns. In the mean independent blog post, 40.59% of news-related websites linked to were traditional media websites, while in the mean traditional media-affiliated blog post, 65.23% of websites linked to were. Under a one-way ANOVA test, this difference is strikingly significant, with a value of 0.000000000018537.
Moreover, the blogs that traditional media-affiliated blogs did link to are much narrower in their categorization. While conservative blogs linked to 54 distinct blogsites and liberal blogs 37 blogsites, traditional media-affiliated blogs linked to only 22 distinct blogsites, nine of which were affiliated with traditional media themselves. It is the latter group – the nine traditional media-affiliated blogsites – that received the most linkage in traditional media-affiliated blogs. As Chart 10 shows, more than 83% of traditional media-affiliated blog links were directed at traditional media-affiliated blogs, compared to 10% for liberal blogs and 9% for conservative blogs. In fact, for three of the four traditional media-affiliated blogs sampled, the only blogsite that received links across multiple posts was their own site.
Within these findings, there were two exceptions to the patterns discussed: Talking Points Memo and the *New York Times’* FiveThirtyEight. Compared to other independent blogs, Talking Points Memo was less frequently included links to news websites of any kind, particularly to external sites, while FiveThirtyEight more frequently included links to blogs and web native outlets and less frequently included links to traditional media websites than did other traditional media-affiliated blogs. Chart 11 and Chart 12 display these differences. These discrepancies may originate from characteristics of Talking Points Memo and FiveThirtyEight more commonly associated with the other’s blog type. Talking Points Memo, like the sampled traditional media-affiliated blogs such as The Caucus and Swampland, was founded and is staffed by journalists shaped by their work experience in traditional media. TPM produces its own news articles, rather than merely commentating on already existing news (“About TPM” 2015). Conversely, FiveThirtyEight, like many independent blogs, compiles and analyzes data and news from other sources, focusing on polls in particular. Unlike TPM, FiveThirtyEight produces new analysis but not new news, and it is dependent on other organizations for the data it cites; consequently, many
of its links direct readers to the sources of this data. For blogs such as TPM and FiveThirtyEight, developmental idiosyncrasies such as these help to explain the differences in their linking patterns.

Chart 11: Comparison of Talking Points Memo and non-TPM Independent Blogs, by Link Frequency

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27 In 2013, FiveThirtyEight also left the auspices of the New York Times entirely, becoming a quasi-independent blog owned by ESPN.
5. Non-News Website Links

While the previous sections of this chapter have centered on the characteristics of blog links to news-related websites, it is worth noting that blogs also often link to non-news websites, such as government webpages and campaign websites. As with news links, non-news links are frequent but dispersed. In this data sample, 43% of the blog posts contained non-news links, compiling a total of 461 links to 192 distinct websites. These websites generally fell into one of nine broad categories: corporate; educational; government; nonprofit; political; polling; reference, such as search engines or informational databases; social media; and think tanks. Chart 13 shows the proportion of links that fell into each category.
Chart 13: Breakdown of Non-News Links, by Type

**Liberal**
- Conservative: Corporate (4%), Educational (3%), Government (21%), Nonprofit (6%), Political (24%), Social Media (17%), Think Tank (21%), Polling (2%), Reference (2%)

**Conservative**
- Liberal: Corporate (10%), Educational (3%), Government (5%), Nonprofit (2%), Political (5%), Social Media (22%), Think Tank (4%), Polling (37%), Reference (12%)

**Traditional Media-Affiliated**
- Conservative: Corporate (10%), Educational (3%), Government (5%), Nonprofit (2%), Political (5%), Social Media (22%), Reference (12%), Polling (37%)
As the chart shows, there is some overlap across the blog types. In all cases, links to social media websites recur frequently; indeed, for each blog type, Twitter was the most frequently linked non-news website. With a total of 54 links, Twitter was more frequently cited than even major news platforms such as TIME or CNN. This is fitting: while Twitter is not a formal news organization in its own right, many tweets relate to news or current events, with one study finding that over 85% of trending topics on Twitter were news-related (Kwak et al. 2010, 1). Thus, given the speed and brevity of tweets, links to Twitter may effectively be news citations still, allowing bloggers to link to events in real time, before journalists have filed their stories. The same pattern – quasi-news citations from websites that are not technically news outlets – repeats for the second major social media website linked to, YouTube. Many news outlets, particularly television stations, post videos of their content onto YouTube, rather than hosting them internally, and relevant campaign events, such as political rallies or convention speeches, can also be uploaded or livestreamed.

However, there were significant differences, particularly between independent and traditional media-affiliated blogs. As the chart shows, both left and right-leaning independent blogs were more likely to link to government and political websites than were traditional media-affiliated blogs, while traditional media-affiliated blogs were more likely to link to reference and especially polling websites than their independent counterparts. These differences may reflect the contrast between independent blogs’ expressed ideological stakes and traditional media-affiliated blogs’ efforts at neutrality. Political websites, which are operated by groups such as campaigns, political party committees, and advocacy groups, are explicitly partisan, but many government websites can also be considered partisan. At the Congressional level, committees maintain separate websites for their Republican and Democratic members and the House and Senate are
divided into Republican Conferences and Democratic Caucuses. Outside of Congress, too, many
government websites refer to agencies or offices helmed by partisan elected officials. By
contrast, reference and polling websites present only facts and findings, generally shorn of
ideological bias. Traditional media-affiliated blogs’ preference for polling-related links is
magnified by the inclusion of the New York Times’ FiveThirtyEight blog, but even excluding
FiveThirtyEight, over 28% of the remaining traditional media-affiliated blogs’ non-news links
were directed at polling websites, far higher than conservative blogs’ 8% or liberal blogs’ 2%.

Other differences between the blog types can be attributed to the idiosyncrasies of
individual blogs or bloggers. Liberal blogs were more likely than conservative or traditional
media-affiliated blogs to link to think tanks, but one of the liberal blogs sampled – ThinkProgress
– is affiliated with a think tank, the Center for American Progress (“About Us” 2005). Over 44%
of ThinkProgress’ think tank-directed links sent web traffic to the Center for American Progress,
and this group of links constituted over 35% of total think tank links among liberal blogs.
Similarly, traditional media-affiliated blogs contained a higher proportion of corporate links, at
10%, than did conservative or liberal blogs, each at 4%. This differential can almost entirely be
attributed to one blogger. Roughly half of the corporate website links on traditional media-
affiliated blog posts originated on TIME’s Swampland blog, due to the contributor Michael
Grunwald’s propensity to link to the Amazon webpage for his book, The New New Deal, a habit
that recurred in 71% of his blog posts. If Grunwald’s links to Amazon were excluded from the
traditional media count, then the proportion of corporate links would fall to 5%, which more
closely parallels the frequency in independent blogs.

6. Conclusions
This chapter outlined the sampled blogs’ linking patterns, as hyperlinks are a major method bloggers use to communicate with their readers. Each of the blogs linked to a diverse array of news and non-news websites, with many of the cited websites recurring infrequently. However, some websites did recur frequently: most commonly, each blog linked heavily to its own website, and, when applicable, its parent outlet’s website. When differences between blog types were present, some occurred due to differences of the overall types, while others are attributable to the particularities of individual blogs. Independent blogs more frequently linked to sources outside of traditional news, and conservative blogs especially were more overtly ideological in their linking choices, while traditional media-affiliated blogs’ dedication to objectivity manifested itself in a tendency to link to other traditional media-affiliated websites or factual, non-news websites. Ultimately, links of all types are only one element of blogs; they function in a broader context of text and content, as the previous chapter highlighted. Within this context, however, links have grown into an important form of currency.
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Future Implications

The findings outlined in the preceding chapters of this thesis both shed light on how the events of the 2012 election cycle unfolded and carry implications for the current election cycle and beyond. Blogs are numerous and diverse, symbolic of the increasingly fragmented and polarized media sphere, but they are also united by overarching patterns. Blogs remain embedded in a broader social and political context of polarization and fragmentation, which both shapes and is shaped by the norms of blogging. As new blogs proliferate, this context is dynamic, and its specific attributes continue to evolve, shifting towards a more varied hybrid media system. Collectively, blogs continue to be significant players in the media and political landscapes, with many similar characteristics, but parts of the blogosphere have dramatically evolved. In particular, independent, ideological blogs generally operate in a similar vein as they did previously, but newer traditional media-affiliated blogs are qualitatively different. There is a clear bifurcation between the two blog types. In this chapter, I first summarize the most salient findings for each blog type, which have been reviewed in greater detail in the preceding chapters. I then discuss limitations of the dataset and opportunities for continued further research. Finally, I highlight the significance of these findings in the broader context of contemporary American politics: blogs matter, and their idiosyncratic styles and content patterns shape their political influence.

1. Key Findings and Differences

First, similar to the broader world of media politics in recent years, independent blogs remain firmly ideological and polarized. In the sample, 86.63% of liberal blog posts included an overt leftward slant, and 93.14% of conservative blog posts a rightward one, with most blog posts incorporating degrees of sensationalism in the process. Beyond slant alone, the ideologies

28 As the previous chapters have discussed, there are also “outlier” findings only applicable to single blogs.
of independent blogs manifested themselves in several ways. Ideologically-aligned blogs wrote more frequently – and usually negatively – about their political opponents’ campaigns and events, embracing an oppositional role. During the 2012 election cycle, liberal blogs, for instance, were more likely than conservative ones to write about Mitt Romney and Romney for President, while conservative blogs were more likely to write about Barack Obama and the Obama for America campaign. Conversely, independent blog posts centered on ideological allies were mostly positive, neutral, or balanced; partisan bloggers were naturally supportive of their own side, but still willing to be constructively critical.

Second, just as blog readership largely self-segregates along partisan lines, so too does blogger activity. In particular, some areas of focus were much more prevalent among conservative blogs, while other areas recurred more frequently among liberal blogs. Compared to non-conservative blogs, conservative blogs tended to assume a “watchdog” role, frequently critiquing mainstream news and other perceived exemplars of the liberal establishment. More than one in five conservative blog posts sampled primarily addressed issues of media coverage, with Breitbart in particular operating the “Big Journalism” project to “hold the mainstream media’s feet to the fire” (Hall 2009). Unsurprisingly, given their perceptions of traditional news bias, conservative blogs were much more likely to cite explicitly ideological news sources, such as the National Review, The Daily Caller, and Townhall. In contrast, liberal blogs more frequently engaged in mobilization activities than conservative blogs did, calling on their readers to take action. While these calls to action appeared in only a minority of posts, they generally appeared in liberal blog posts, especially in those written by the Daily Kos. Past research has provided evidence of the effectiveness of reader mobilization, particularly for fundraising, and
liberal blog readers are more involved in political activism than non-liberal ones (Sides and Farrell 2010, 11-12; Lawrence et al. 2009, 14-15).

Traditional media-affiliated blogs, meanwhile, were an altogether different beast, integrating norms of traditional media into the blogform. This co-optation can be jarring, as blogs were created to address shortcomings of the traditional media, a disconnect traditional-media affiliated blogs ignore. Traditional media-affiliated blogs are categorically different from independent blogs in other ways as well. Traditional media-affiliated bloggers often have backgrounds or experience working in traditional media, which likely influences the writing they produce. Compared to independent blogs, traditional media-affiliated blogs are also much more likely to link to a traditional media or traditional media-affiliated source rather than an independent blog or web-native news platform, often linking internally, to their own traditional news outlet. In these blog posts, links are important, as they are generally used to signal credibility or relevance, and in this case, indicating traditional media-affiliated bloggers’ continued traditional media-centric perspective. Similarly, their blog posts remain generally neutral in terms of ideology and tone, and they are much less likely to include highly sensational language or calls for mobilization. In this regard, the blogform has essentially bifurcated – while independent blogs challenge norms of mainstream journalism, traditional media-affiliated blogs reproduce them, creating highly differentiated types of content for increasingly fragmented audiences.

2. Limitations of this Study and Potential Future Research

As interesting as these findings are, they are by no means comprehensive. A few limitations are worth noting. First, the blogosphere is massive and constantly in motion, while this thesis studies samples only ten blogs and nine events of the 2012 election cycle – it is a
sample of a snapshot in time. More expansive studies of the blogosphere would offer more thorough evidence about trends in blogging, such as through incorporation of a higher number of blogs or through longitudinal analysis over multiple election cycles. A more extensive study would also be better able to include meaningful statistical analysis, such as significance tests, to more definitively assess whether differences among blogs are potentially random occurrences. Second, the findings of this thesis represent correlations rather than instances of confirmable causality. The previous chapters have identified important patterns in the blogosphere, and I have drawn upon the body of political science literature to highlight potential explanations, but these analyses are ultimately speculative. Some past research has addressed the motivations of bloggers; for instance, Ekdale et al. (2010) directly questioned bloggers about their reasons for blogging (223). Similar surveys of bloggers may help to clarify the findings of the thesis, such as the extent to which they are the product of conscious decision-making, as well as bloggers’ views of their own topic and writing choices. Finally, given the constant dynamism of the blogosphere and of media more generally, the findings detailed in this thesis should be periodically reviewed and updated. Over time, new blogs or types of blogs will inevitably be created or develop niches, such as the subgenre of academic-written political blogs (Walker 2007, 134).

3. Discussion and Final Conclusions

Ultimately, while the patterns identified by this thesis are limited in scope, they are still relevant in a broader sense: in the 21st century, blogs are a growing, increasingly influential force in American media and politics. As discussed in Chapter One, traditional media is no longer the behemoth it once was, creating an opening in the media landscape (Meraz 2008, 682-683). While television remains a steady source of news for 71% of Americans, regular
newspaper readership declined from 74% in 1994 to 49% in 2012, and the average time spent reading newspapers declined from 58 to 29 minutes over the same period (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2012, 49-50). Americans also increasingly distrust traditional news, with one recent poll finding that 62% of self-identified liberal Democrats and 82% of conservative Republicans believed that national news media organizations had a negative impact on the country’s direction (Pew 2015, 127). Blogs, along with other forms of new media, both fill this void and potentially exacerbate it. In 2012, 1 in 3 Americans “regularly” or “sometimes” visited political or current events-focused blogs, up from 23% in 2008, and these proportions are likely higher among the younger, digital native generation specifically (Pew 2012, 71). Blog readers generally view blogs as credible sources of news, and a preponderance of readers consider blogs to be a “new and better” alternative to traditional media, due to blogs’ “opinionated, analytical, independent, and personal” framing (Johnson and Kaye 2009, 180; Johnson and Kaye 2004, 633-634).

Past research has shown that voters are affected and influenced by the types of news they read. Notably, a field experiment conducted during the 2005 Virginia gubernatorial race showed that, in that race, voters who received local newspapers became somewhat more likely to vote and to vote for the Democratic candidate specifically (Gerber et al. 2005, 35-36). In some cases, media influence is overt: newspapers, for instance, often issue candidate endorsements, although the impact of these endorsements varies, depending on how credible readers consider them to be (Chiang and Knight 2011, 817). More often, media influence is subconscious, as the media continuously engages in agenda-setting, where different outlets select which events are worthy of attention, and priming, a process where “activated mental constructs can influence

29 The impact of media may be greater in state and local races, because, on average, voters know less information about the races or the candidates running in them.
how individuals evaluate…concepts and ideas” (McCombs 2001, 2; Domke et al. 1998, 51). In this vein, news coverage shapes both the issues other media outlets and the public consider to be important and how they conceptualize these issues. Within the context of elections, coverage affects how voters perceive candidates, and indirectly, their decision-making processes before they cast their ballots (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, 17).

In the hybrid media system of the present, where blogs, traditional news, and other entities have increasingly “complex and ever-evolving relationships”, blogs play a similarly relevant role in agenda-setting and priming (Chadwick 2013, 4). The new hybrid system is characterized by increased interactivity in the interplay of relationships, breaking down barriers for entry into the media sphere (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001, 166). Like traditional media, however, blogs still selectively choose which stories to run, tones to take, and frames to emphasize. Through its analyses of blogs’ content and stylistic differences, this thesis clarifies the precise mechanisms through which blogs set agendas and prime readers. The most salient findings, which are discussed above, shed light on two key elements of media and electoral processes.

First, independent blogs primarily exert influence within the independent blogosphere and upon readers, from whom they have amassed significant credibility, whereas traditional media outlets and affiliated blogs remain largely separate enterprises. Independent blogs frequently linked to other independent blogs, and within the clusters of conservative and liberal blogs, certain stories recurred for each side. Comment sections, when available and populated, reinforced the audience’s concurrence with the bloggers they had read. Traditional media outlets were originally skeptical of the blogform, and vestiges of this skepticism appear to linger (Meraz 2008, 682-683). As this thesis found, traditional media affiliated-blogs continue to stress
balanced, neutral tones and generally minimize sensationalism, eschewing the ideological slants and “outrage discourse” that independent blogs embrace. They also largely steer clear of classes of news stories independent blogs highlight, such as discussions of media bias, voter fraud, and vote suppression. Most tellingly, compared to independent blogs, traditional media-affiliated blogs are substantially less likely to link to non-traditional news websites, and when they do include such links, they primarily link to other traditional media-affiliated blogs. Past research has identified a few instances when blogs have reshaped the traditional media’s coverage agenda, such as controversies about Trent Lott in 2002 and 60 Minutes II in 2004, but there are many instances when this influence does not permeate (Drezner and Farrell 2004, 3; Pein 2005).

Second, to the extent that independent blogs successfully engage in agenda-setting and priming, the effect appears to be a polarizing one. Most independent blogs, including the ones studied by this thesis, have distinct ideological biases, aligning either with the left or the right, and in nearly nine of every ten blog posts, these biases were expressed in overt ideological slants. Blogs consistently cast ideological allies in positive or neutral lights and ideological opponents in a negative one, using harsh, sensational language to describe the latter group, using terms such as “liar”, “hypocrite”, and “incompetent.” Repeatedly, news stories were highlighted among only conservative blogs, such as instances of liberal media bias or of Hollywood ‘limousine liberalism’, or only liberal blogs, such as discussions of climate change within electoral politics. Conservative blogs in particular often cited news stories from other conservative media. Thus, within the dataset, there are distinct agendas and frames separating conservative and liberal blogs, which in turn percolate among their respective readerships, influencing partisan voters’ behavior and mindset before elections.
Thus, as the 2012 election cycle showed, as blogs have evolved, their influence has grown, in a manner linked to larger, interrelated discussions in political science. The growth of but continued divide between independent and traditional media-affiliated blogs reflects the unevenness of ongoing media fragmentation. Polarization within independent blogs reflects trends of polarization, gridlock, and distrust in electoral politics more broadly. Given turnover among bloggers since 2012 and the divisive nature of the current election cycle, the patterns discussed in this thesis should be more closely studied and revisited. As blogs continue to expand in number and in readership, an understanding of how the blog form works and the influence it has contributes to a wider understanding of the important topic of voter behavior in American electoral politics.
### Appendix A: List of Coding Questions and Key

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of the blog</td>
<td>BlogName</td>
<td>1 = DailyKos 2 = TPM 3 = ThinkProgress 4 = RedState 5 = Breitbart 6 = Hot Air 7 = NYT 538 8 = NYT The Caucus 9 = WaPo The Fix 10 = TIME Swampland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title of the blog post</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of the blog post</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author’s name</td>
<td>Author</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article centered on ___ event</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td>1 = PDR announced as GOP nominee 2 = GOP convention 3 = Dem convention 4 = 1st Pres. Debate 5 = VP Debate 6 = 2nd Pres. Debate 7 = 3rd Pres. Debate 8 = Election Day 9 = Post-Mortem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the tone of the blog post toward the main focus?</td>
<td>CandTone</td>
<td>1 = Negative 2 = Neutral/balanced 3 = Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the primary non-candidate focus of the story?</td>
<td>NonCandFocus</td>
<td>1 = Polling 2 = Fundraising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| What is the tone of the blog post toward the primary non-candidate focus?| NonCandTone | 1 = Positive  
                          |          | 2 = Neutral/balanced  
                          |          | 3 = Negative      |
| Visual use                                                              | Visual   | 1 = Yes  
                          |          | 2 = No              |
| Who/what is in the visual?                                              | VisualContains | 1 = Yes  
                          |          | 2 = No              |
| Audio/video use                                                         | AVUse    | 1 = Yes  
                          |          | 2 = No              |
| Who/what is in the audio/video?                                         | AVContains | 1 = Yes  
                          |          | 2 = No              |
| How sensational is the article?                                         | Star     | 1 = one star  
                          |          | 2 = two stars  
                          |          | 3 = three stars  
                          |          | 4 = four stars  
                          |          | 5 = five stars  |
| What is the dominant frame used in the article?                         | DomFrame | 1 = Horse race  
                          |          | 2 = Social Issues  
                          |          | 3 = Economic  
                          |          | 4 = Foreign policy/national security  
                          |          | 5 = Intraparty conflict  
                          |          | 6 = Pop culture  
                          |          | 7 = Campaign  
                          |          | 8 = Ideology  
                          |          | 9 = Media coverage  
                          |          | 10 = Personal  
                          |          | 11 = Religion  
                          |          | 12 = Other (fill in) |
| Was there any HISTORICAL background info provided in the article?       | Bckgrd1  | 1 = Yes  
                          |          | 2 = No              |
| Was there any BIOGRAPHICAL background info - candidate-specific - provided? | Bckgrd2  | 1 = Yes  
                          |          | 2 = No              |
| Was there any POLICY-oriented background                                | Bckgrd3  | 1 = Yes  
<pre><code>                      |          | 2 = No              |
</code></pre>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was there any POLLING-related background provided?</td>
<td>Bckgrd4</td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 = No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there any IDEOLOGICAL background info provided?</td>
<td>Bckgrd5</td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 = No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there any non-candidate related BIOGRAPHICAL background info provided?</td>
<td>Bckgrd6</td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 = No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were there other types of background info provided?</td>
<td>Bckgrd7</td>
<td>1 = Yes (fill in)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 = No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there any info provided on ramifications of the topic for POLLING?</td>
<td>PollRam</td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>2 = No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Was there any info provided for ramifications of the topic for POLICY?</td>
<td>PolicyRam</td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Was there any info provided for OTHER ramifications of the topic?</td>
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<td>Did the post LINK to any traditional media articles? If yes, which?</td>
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<td>Did the article LINK to any non-traditional media articles? If yes, which?</td>
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<td>Was there an ideological slant to the article?</td>
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<td>Does the article make a call to action? If yes, what?</td>
<td>CallAction</td>
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References


