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Journalism 2011 12: 107

DOI: 10.1177/1464884910385193

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Journalism
12(1) 107–127
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DOI: 10.1177/1464884910385193
<http://jou.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

This study tested social influence theories against traditional media attribute agenda setting theory within 18 ideologically diverse political blogs, two elite traditional media entities, and the latter's 11 political newsroom blogs across three issues in 2007. Results reveal significant correlations in left-leaning network agendas ranging from 0.64 to 0.91 through all issue periods. Social influence did not homogenize interpretative agendas within the right-leaning network through two of the three issue periods. As predicted, partisan blog networks showed insignificant correlations in attribute agendas, and unlike the left-leaning and moderate blog networks, the right-leaning blog network bore little similarity to traditional media's issue interpretation across two of the three issues. These findings point to two significant trends: the growing power of social influence among partisan blog networks and the weakening influence of elite, traditional media as a singular power in influencing issue interpretation within networked political environments.

Keywords

agenda setting, attribute agenda setting, citizen media, networked politics, political blogosphere, political blogs, social influence, social media, social networks, two-step flow

Introduction

Agenda setting theory, formulated before the widespread diffusion of free web publishing tools in the 1990s (Lippmann, 1997; McCombs, 2004; McCombs and Shaw, 1972), accorded traditional media the power to influence both what the public thinks about (issue agenda setting) and how the public thinks about it (attribute agenda setting). This theory was predicated on traditional media's monopoly ownership of news production

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and distribution tools. However, traditional media's singular, one-way power over news creation and dissemination is a past phenomenon (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Rosen, 2006; Shirky, 2008). Since 1999, the media landscape has been altered considerably, allowing individuals to post, share, and republish content to the web through easy-to-use web publishing tools. This more responsive Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2004) has facilitated an enhanced degree of connectivity, collaboration, and conversation among decentralized web publics.

Web 2.0 technologies have accelerated the push towards a network society (Castells, 2000) as individuals take advantage of ubiquitous web technologies to connect with others of like minds and of similar interests across time and space (Bruns, 2008). Unlike the centralized, hierarchical production mode within firms and organizations, citizens can freely pursue their niche-based interests using tools to create content as individuals and as community members (Anderson, 2006; Shirky, 2008). This social form of production, occurring largely outside market-based and price-based production models, has been dubbed 'the networked information economy' and 'commons-based peer production' because individuals are not primarily motivated by financial compensation but by more social forms of compensation (Benkler, 2006). Authors suggest that such diverse reasons as altruism and gift-giving, reputation-seeking, hobbyism, and innate human sociality propel individuals to give of their time and energy without the solid promise of financial profit (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2005, 2008; Shirky, 2008). Unlike the prior age of media, in this age of networked media, amateurs as opposed to professionals power the new information economy, which is founded on creating, sharing, and republishing media on the web (Bruns, 2005, 2008; Leadbeater and Miller, 2004).

The poster child for the web's movement to a more networked, participatory medium is blogging. Blogging continues to draw increasing numbers of readers and writers (eMarketer, 2008; Sifry, 2008; Universal McCann, 2008). Among the many blog genres, political blogs or blogs that comment on day-to-day politics and news are attracting increasing amounts of attention from web publics who see them as credible news sources (Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Smith and Rainie, 2008). Political bloggers now write in group-based teams and engage in first-hand reporting and investigative journalism (Bowers, 2007; Stoller, 2007). This enhanced ability to break news in no way dilutes the political blogger's original strength as an opinion writer. Lacking a press pass and professional connections to high-level bureaucratic sources, independent political bloggers relentlessly fact check traditional media for biases, oversights, and inconsistencies in their news reports (Calderone, 2008; Chaudhry, 2006; Kennedy School of Government, 2004; Meraz, 2008; Winship, 2006).

In light of the growth of these networked forms of content production, media scholars must reexamine how pre-existing media theories operate in environments where social influence among and within networks of connected citizens may be high (McCombs, 2005). The majority of media theories assume that traditional media has singular power to disseminate information and thus, impact public opinion; however, in this age of networked media, citizens can bypass traditional media to engage with other, like-minded citizens. As the supply of media shifts away from the limited content offerings of traditional media monopoly ownership towards a long tail of niche-based, personalized media forms (Anderson, 2006), it is important to examine how the impact of social influence within networks of like-minded communities impacts traditional media power.

This study explores how second-level, attribute agenda setting functions within the networked US political blogosphere. Second level or attribute agenda setting accords traditional media the ability to influence how the public interprets issues (McCombs, 2004). Through correlating the attribute issue agendas among 18, popular independent political blogs, two elite traditional media entities and the latter's 11 political newsroom blogs across three diverse issues in 2007, this study probes how social influence within partisan, networked political blog environments impacts blog attribute agendas, and hence, traditional media's singular attribute agenda setting power. Evidence of strong correlations in attribute agendas within partisan blog social networks could underscore a shift in the balance of power between traditional media and citizens in setting interpretative agendas within networked political contexts.

Literature review

Attribute agenda setting

Theoretically introduced as the second phase of issue agenda setting, McCombs (2004) explicated the definition of attribute agenda setting as the framing of public issues, people, and other objects in the news. Weaver et al. (1981) informally introduced attribute agenda setting through a nine-wave panel study, which revealed a high degree of correlation between traditional media's agenda of attributes for the 1976 presidential candidates and the public's agenda of attributes for those candidates. Many subsequent studies have found strong evidence of traditional media's ability to transfer the salience of issue attributes and issue characteristics to the audience (Benton and Frazier, 1976; Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998; Takeshita and Mikami, 1995), especially within political environments (Craft and Wanta, 2004; Golan and Wanta, 2001).

The question can be posed: how effective is traditional media's attribute agenda setting function within networked political contexts? At the issue level, some authors find either a positive impact or no impact of interpersonal communication on media's agenda setting power (Lasorsa and Wanta, 1990; Yang and Stone, 2003). Others find that quality and/or quantity of interpersonal communication predicted the public's issue saliency and media's agenda setting effect (Robinson and Levy, 1986; Wanta and Wu, 1992). In one case, interpersonal communication weakened media's agenda setting power (Mendelsohn, 1996).

The majority of traditional media attribute agenda setting studies that explore online environments examine non-US media contexts. Using framing as the theoretical foundation, Zhou and Moy (2007) found that media coverage did not limit the frames utilized in the online discourse of 206 online posts culled from an online forum in China. Lee et al. (2005) found that bulletin boards had a second-level agenda setting effect on newspaper content in South Korea. Xenos (2008) found that US partisan bloggers were not limited by traditional media when selecting attributes to discuss surrounding Samuel Alito's nomination and confirmation to the Supreme Court.

Agenda setting theorists continue to struggle with the impact of social influence on traditional media's singular power. Shaw et al. (1999) recognized that an individual's attachment to social groups could significantly impact media's agenda setting influence, a term they referred to as 'agenda melding'. Shaw and McCombs (2008) speculated

that individuals attach themselves to vertical [traditional] and horizontal [social or interpersonal] media based on their interests. Vertical media is more influential when first learning about an issue, while horizontal media enables individuals to seek a more personalized form of media. This fluid media attachment, dubbed 'civic osmosis', accommodates for social influence among citizens as a determinant of an individual's media agenda.

This study searches for evidence of social influence among bloggers at the level of issue interpretation. Political blogs, building their news agendas off the appeal of 'buzz' (Cornfield et al., 2005), struggle to reframe the news of the day for their news-reading web publics. Though traditional media's important function of providing the talking points of the day remains largely intact due to their strong professional and bureaucratic ties, political bloggers may be more resistant at the issue interpretative stage as they focus on selectively spinning the issues at hand for their largely partisan audiences.

Theories of social influence

Social network theory

Negating the idea that the public is atomized and disconnected (Freidson, 1953), traditional communication theory conceptualized social influence among citizens as a two-step flow process, with news flowing from opinion leaders to followers (Berelson et al., 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Merton, 1949). Among the theory's many revisions, some scholars have found strong evidence of opinion sharing among opinion leaders as opposed to opinion giving between opinion leaders and followers (Robinson, 1976; Troidahl and Van Dam, 1965–6). This latter finding is highly pertinent to this current study, which searches for evidence of social influence between and among elite political bloggers.

Social network theory models more complex interrelations and connections beyond a two-step flow, focusing on the impact of diverse relationships and linkages among interdependent individuals (Freeman, 2000; Nooy et al., 2005; Scott, 2000; Wasserman and Faust, 1994). This study focuses on the social network theory subfacets of homophily or 'birds of a feather flock together' theory, and the strength of weak ties theory in order to explicate how network composition can affect social influence and network agendas within and among social networks.

Homophily and group polarization

The homophily principle posits that people naturally self select into homogeneous groupings (Bishop, 2008; Fisher, 1982) along such natural structural indicators as shared geography, values, and status (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954; McPherson et al., 2001). In offline contexts, several studies have documented the tendency of individuals to cohere in groups of shared partisan affiliation (Huckfeldt, 2001; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1987, 1988, 1991; Huckfeldt et al., 1998; Kenny, 1994; Scheufele et al., 2004). On the web, studies examining political blog hyperlinking practices have found a tendency for partisan segmentation (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Hargittai et al., 2008; Meraz, 2005, 2008; Tremayne et al., 2006).

Scholars believe that homophily can negatively impact information diffusion, online deliberation, and democratic civic engagement. Sunstein (2000, 2001, 2007a, 2007b, 2008) warns that this group polarization can limit 'cross-cutting' argument pools within homogeneous social networks, leading to 'enclave extremism', and 'informational cascades', a scenario where more extreme, uniform viewpoints arise after in-group deliberation. Though other scholars argue against the cementation of these hardened, homogeneous perspectives within blog environments (Balkin, 2004), aforementioned URL citation studies provide little support for diverse information sharing.

Strength of ties: weak and strong

In the language of network theory, ties connect nodes in a network. Stronger ties are cemented by connections that are longer in duration, deeper in emotional intensity and tighter in reciprocal bonds. In terms of information diversity, Granovetter (1973, 1983) noted that weaker ties are more capable than stronger ties of introducing diverse information into a social system because weak ties reflect membership in heterogeneous groups. Unlike strong ties which spread similar, homogeneous perspectives, weak ties are more diverse and thus more capable of spreading new ideas and information through the bridging of disparate intergroups (Sunstein, 2008).

Web 2.0 technologies have made it easier for those of like minds to congregate on partisan blogs and online communities. According to Granovetter's theory (1973, 1983), strongly tied communities like partisan blog networks should display more homogeneous agendas and more skewed interpretative agendas than weakly tied, heterogeneous networks such as traditional media and the moderate blogosphere.

Hypotheses and research questions

Attribute agenda setting theory credits traditional media with the power to influence the salience of issue attributes or issue characteristics within the public's agenda (McCombs, 2004; McCombs and Reynolds, 2002). This theory has yet to take account of networked environments such as the political blogosphere, where social influence among networks of bloggers can rival that of traditional media-to-blogger influence.

In examining how networks cohere within the political blogosphere, prior studies have found little overlap in URL citations between left-leaning and right-leaning bloggers (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Meraz, 2005, 2008; Tremayne et al., 2006). In light of this finding and in relation to such social influence theories as homophily and strength of weak ties, it is reasonable to hypothesize that this citation bias would transfer to interpretation bias. This study advanced the following hypothesis:

H1: Blogs that share partisan ideologies are significantly less likely to have correlated attribute agendas with partisan blogs outside their ideological perspective.

Social network theory supports a more homogenized agenda for individuals that cohere within like-minded communities due to the principle of homophily and the strength of weak ties theory (Granovetter, 1973, 1983; McPherson, et al., 2001). Similarly, as modified two-step flow indicates, it is often common for elite opinion leaders to share

information amongst themselves (Robinson, 1976; Troidahl and Van Dam, 1965–6). In an effort to examine the relationship between social network influence and traditional media influence at the issue interpretative level, this study advanced the following research question:

RQ1: To what extent do partisan blogs share a more strongly correlated attribute agenda within their social network when compared with the attribute agendas of traditional media entities?

Social systems that allow the entrance of weakly tied, heterogeneous individuals should display a greater diversity of information than social systems that cohere around strong ties (Granovetter, 1973, 1983). Little work has been conducted on moderate blog networks; however, it is reasonable to conclude that their attribute agendas should display more two-sided, objective agendas than polarized, partisan agendas. Such an objective agenda should have more in common with the attribute agendas of traditional media than partisan blog networks. As such, this study advanced the following hypothesis:

H2: Moderate blog networks are significantly more likely to have strongly correlated attribute agendas with traditional media entities than with partisan blog networks.

These two hypotheses and one research question were tested against a blog sample of 18 independent political blogs (six left-leaning, six moderate-leaning, and six right-leaning), two elite traditional media entities (the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*), and their 11 newsroom blogs that center on politics across three separate issues and time periods in 2007.

Methodology

This study involved a series of logical macro-steps. First, it was important to select a relevant sample of 18 top, popular blogs across the ideological spectrum. Second, it was important to locate those issues that were sufficiently conflict laden to support significant issue interpretation in both traditional media outlets and independent blogs. Third, it was necessary to locate the relevant content on traditional media and blogs for each issue within the period identified as the most ‘bursty’ or prolific. Finally, issue-centered attributes and frames were built from a randomly generated sample of content culled from each of the five separate media networks (left-leaning blog network, right-leaning blog network, moderate-leaning blog network, traditional media, and traditional media blog network).

Due to their inherent popularity among audiences, the top 12 most popular partisan blogs were easily identified from noted blog aggregators *Technorati*, *the Truth Laid Bear*, and *BlogPulse*. Correlating the top or popular blog lists on these three blog aggregators yielded the following list of the 12 most popular partisan blogs: *The Daily Kos* (left-leaning), *Crooks and Liars* (left-leaning), *Think Progress* (left-leaning), *Talking Points Memo* (left-leaning), *The Huffington Post* (left-leaning), *FireDogLake* (left-leaning), *Instapundit* (right-leaning), *Michelle Malkin* (right-leaning), *Hot Air*

(right-leaning), *Little Green Footballs* (right-leaning), *Powerline* (right-leaning) and *Captain's Quarters* (right-leaning).

Selecting the top six most popular moderate blogs proved more difficult due to their lack of visibility in popular blogs lists. This study used a series of triangulation techniques for identifying top moderate blogs, which included presence in the three aforementioned aggregators, popularity in the moderate blogs' advertising network, presence in blogroll listings, and nominations in the Weblog Awards contest, which has been running since 2003. Using all of these techniques yielded the following six, top moderate blogs: *Donklephant*, *The Moderate Voice*, *The Daily Dish*, *The Gun Toting Liberal*, *Central Sanity*, and *The Van Der Galien Gazette*.

In addition to independent political blog content, this study examined articles from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and their relevant newsroom blog content. The political newsroom blogs selected for this study were *The Caucas*, *The Lede*, and the *Opinionator* from the *New York Times*, and the political blogs *White House Watch*, *Bench Conference*, *Achenblog*, *Early Warning*, *Think Tank Town*, *The Fix*, *On Balance*, and *OFF/Beat* from the *Washington Post*.

The period 20 July 2007 to 30 September 2007 was identified as an issue-rich period. To identify the issues that spurred the most significant dialogue among all five networks, two criteria were employed: first, each issue needed a start and end period in order to assess agenda setting effects; and, second, issues needed to generate significant blog and article postings across all five media networks. Using this methodology, only three issues provided notable discussion across all media networks: the Alberto Gonzales hearings on the NSA wiretapping; the Larry Craig sex scandal; and Iraq, the latter focusing on the Petraeus Report and the MoveOn 'Betray us' ad.

To locate the 'bursty' or most prolific time period for each issue, frequency counts of unique blog posts and articles dedicated to each of the three issues were tracked on a daily basis and graphed to determine the high point of content activity. Using this technique, spikes in content 'burstiness' for the Gonzales NSA wiretapping testimony, the Larry Craig scandal, and the Iraq issue were 24 July to 2 August, 27 August to 7 September, and 15 August to 24 September respectively. On determining these time periods, relevant content for this study was downloaded from the websites of these five networks via keyword searches.

A brief description of each issue follows.

Alberto Gonzales NSA wiretapping hearings: This issue examines debate over US Attorney Alberto Gonzales' 24 July 2007 testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Gonzales was questioned intensely, most notably by Senators Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Arlen Specter (R-PA), and Russ Feingold (D-WI), who suspected deception in his accounts of both the dismissal of US attorneys in 2006 and the continuation of the NSA domestic eavesdropping program.

Larry Craig scandal: News broke on the magazine *Roll Call* on 27 August 2007 that Republican senator for Idaho, Larry Craig, was arrested in an airport bathroom in Minneapolis on 11 June 2007 by an undercover officer who said that Craig was sending signals that he wanted to have sex with him. Craig had pleaded guilty to the charge on 8 August 2007 and resigned from his position as US Senate co-chairman for Republican Mitt Romney's presidential campaign.

Iraq – Petraeus Report and MoveOn ‘Betray Us’ ad: General David Petraeus, general of the US Army and commander of Multi-National Force – Iraq, delivered his update on the state of the surge of US forces on 10 September 2007 before Congress. The report was called the Iraq Study Report. It was rumored in mid August 2007 that the White House was the real author of his report, a detail that led to it being dubbed the ‘White House report’. Petraeus discounted such claims, but was greeted on the same day of his testimony with an ad in the *New York Times* that likened him to a betrayer. This ad, run by democratic partisan organization MoveOn, was bought at a lower ad rate, sparking partisan bickering in blog circles.

Unlike prior studies that utilize broad, generic frames to examine issue characterization (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000), this study adopted an issue-centered approach, building ad hoc, emergent issue attributes on an issue-by-issue basis. Generic framing would have conferred the advantage of generalizability and replication (McCombs and Ghanem, 2003); however, this high-level abstraction would have erased subtle differences in issue interpretation among these ideologically diverse blog networks. To illustrate this point, blog networks thrive on conflict (Cornfield et al., 2005); hence using the generic ‘conflict frame’ would have distorted frequency counts.

To create issue-specific, emergent frames with broad generalizability for each issue, frames were built from a random sample of 10 percent of content across all five networks. Posts could be coded in more than one frame, and counts were generated based on frequency of frame appearance within the unit of analysis (blog post or article). This method enabled frames to be tested, revised, and extended on an issue-by-issue basis. At the data analysis stage, frames were then collapsed into larger macro-categories, with care taken to prevent the double counting of posts that overlapped the merged frames. This data formed the basis for conducting correlations among the five networks.

Based on a random selection of 10 percent of content, intercoder reliability using Krippendorff’s alpha yielded reliability estimates ranging from 0.73 to 0.85 across the three different issues.

Results

General

Table 1 presents a summary of the blog posting volume through the three different issue periods among the four blog networks examined in this study (left-leaning blog network, moderate blog network, right-leaning blog network, and traditional media blog network). There were 1422 unique blog posts across the three issue periods for all four blog networks, with 1262 culled from the three ideologically diverse independent blog networks and 160 culled from the traditional media blog network. There were 302 traditional media articles across the three issue periods for the two, elite traditional media entities.

A one-way ANOVA revealed that post frequency varied significantly as a function of partisan orientation for the three, independent, political blog networks in this study ($f(2, 15) = 25.58, p < 0.05$) when equal variances were assumed. Tukey post-hoc tests revealed that left-leaning blogs chosen for this study were significantly more likely to

Table 1. Blog post summary across the four blog networks

Media network	Posts on issues		
	Craig	Gonzales	Iraq
Left-leaning	207	123	463
Moderate	73	24	136
Right-leaning	49	20	167
Traditional media	39	19	102
Total	368	186	868

post across all issues ($M = 133$, $SD = 28.86$) when compared to the right-leaning blogs ($M = 39.3$, $SD = 19.46$) and moderate-leaning blogs ($M = 38.83$, $SD = 12.06$). This aggregate finding was supported on an issue-by-issue basis across the three individual issues in this study.

Matching agendas on issue attributes: traditional media to social network influence

Tables 2 through 4 present the raw data on the frequency of mention of issue attributes through the Gonzales, Craig, and Iraq issues respectively. Data were transformed through logarithmic transformations to correct for a positive skew, and Pearson's correlations were run to determine agreement among network attribute agendas.

Table 2. Frames and frequency of occurrence across media agendas for the Gonzales issue

Frame	Left	Right	Moderate	Media	Media blog
Constitutional crisis – test of the constitution	1	14	4	2	3
Critique of media coverage of the Gonzales incident	6	9	0	0	1
Democratic political motivation (fishing expedition)	11	2	1	5	3
Gonzales as an unethical/lacking credibility as an Attorney General	8	41	10	19	12
Gonzales as innocent	10	0	1	0	3
Gonzales following White House leadership	0	33	4	10	10
Gonzales gives flawed testimony, tantamount to perjury	2	74	12	20	14
Gonzales needs to be impeached	0	30	3	1	3
Gonzales needs to be removed/resign	4	13	6	6	6
Gonzales NSA testimony is carefully worded but truthful	0	7	0	9	5
Political crisis for the Bush administration	3	17	7	6	6

Table 3. Frames and frequency of occurrence across media agendas for the Craig issue

Frame	Left	Right	Moderate	Media	Media blog
Comparing Craig's plight to prior scandals	1	0	0	6	1
Political reasons for outing Craig	30	85	19	30	26
Craig hypocritical and arrogant	14	48	21	9	9
Craig mishandles situation/lies	18	70	19	12	19
Criticism of media coverage	1	14	6	2	0
Culture of police entrapment	9	6	9	4	3
Homophobia in society	1	25	15	9	3
Humor at Craig's expense	13	60	13	4	7
Hypocrisy of Republican party's stance on gay rights	11	81	16	10	10
Improves Democrats political prospects	5	14	1	0	1
Scandal scarred GOP/another example of GOP failure	6	35	10	11	9
Sincere compassion for Craig	2	15	15	5	2

Hypothesis one predicted that left-leaning and right-leaning blog networks are significantly less likely to have correlated attribute media agendas outside their partisan social networks. This hypothesis was supported through two of the three issues. Table 5 presents the Pearson's correlations for the Gonzales issue. As the results show, left-leaning blogs ($M = 21.82$, $SD = 21.68$) and right-leaning blogs ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 4.08$) are not significantly correlated ($r = -.353$, $p > 0.05$) in their issue attribute agendas.

Table 6 presents the Pearson's correlations for the Craig issue. On this issue, the partisan blog spheres of the left-leaning blogs ($M = 37.75$, $SD = 30.14$) and the right-leaning blogs ($M = 9.25$, $SD = 8.7$) were significantly correlated ($r = 0.820$, $p < 0.05$) on their issue attribute agendas, a finding not predicted by hypothesis one.

Support was found for hypothesis one on both subframes of the Iraq issue. On the Petraeus Report subframe of the Iraq issue (Table 7), left-leaning blogs ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.48$) and right-leaning blogs ($M = 1.49$, $SD = 1.16$) were significantly less likely ($r = 0.206$, $p > 0.05$) to have correlated issue attribute agendas. Similarly on the MoveOn subframe of the Iraq issue (see Table 8), the left-leaning blogs ($M = 13.3$, $SD = 14.26$) and the right-leaning blogs ($M = 8.0$, $SD = 7.2$) were also significantly less likely ($r = -.571$, $p > 0.05$) to agree on the issue attribute agendas.

Research question one questioned the extent to which partisan blogs shared more of a correlated attribute agenda within their partisan social network when compared with traditional media. Tables 6 through 8 provide preliminary data to answer this research question. As these tables highlight, there is marked difference in the issue attribute correlations between traditional media and left-leaning blogs and traditional media and right-leaning blogs. The left-leaning network bore strong correlations with traditional media's attribute agenda through most of the main issues. On the Gonzales issue, the left-leaning network had a highly correlated attribute agenda with both traditional media ($r = 0.789$, $p < 0.05$) and their media blogs ($r = 0.853$, $p < 0.05$) networks.

Table 4. Frames and frequency of occurrence across media agendas for the Iraq issue

Frame	Left	Right	Moderate	Media	Media blog
MoveOn – votes by Democrats for resolution a disappointment	1	20	0	0	0
MoveOn – and its supporters – unpatriotic/ not supportive of troops	10	2	2	0	1
MoveOn – bait and switch politics, deliberate distraction from war in Iraq	1	45	4	5	5
MoveOn – content as accurate depiction	0	4	1	0	0
MoveOn – content as inaccurate depiction/smear tactic against Petraeus	19	3	12	1	1
MoveOn – critique of the <i>NY Times</i>	11	0	3	1	0
MoveOn – is entitled to freedom of speech	0	24	0	2	3
MoveOn – political isolation/pressure to distance	13	3	5	2	8
MoveOn – politicians trying to gain political advantage through condemning ad	8	21	4	9	23
MoveOn – uneasy alliance with Democratic party	17	11	3	8	12
Petraeus Report – critique of media coverage	5	54	3	5	0
Petraeus Report – democratic protest orchestrated for months before (framed)	32	2	14	1	1
Petraeus Report – Democrats failing at changing course of the war	21	43	7	34	13
Petraeus Report – evidence in question, i.e. success in Anbar	3	87	13	33	7
Petraeus Report – Petraeus – has honor and integrity	19	4	9	8	1
Petraeus Report – Petraeus – partisan / credibility issues	1	76	10	4	2
Petraeus Report – plunging public support for Petraeus report/ war in Iraq	20	91	21	36	19
Petraeus Report – public support strong for Petraeus	10	1	2	2	0
Petraeus Report – furthering political agendas	6	5	8	23	16
Petraeus Report – Surge – draw down as handout to anti-war crowd (token gesture)	7	5	0	4	1
Petraeus Report – Surge – drawdown sham	0	28	2	11	5
Petraeus Report – Surge – drawn down as operational necessity	4	18	5	9	3
Petraeus Report – Surge – is a failure/not produced any success (inflated claims)	1	82	18	21	15
Petraeus Report – Surge – needs more time to be successful	0	0	0	7	2
Petraeus Report – Surge – providing signs of progress	41	10	23	14	1
Petraeus Report – Surge – sacrifice of innocent soldier lives	0	3	0	0	0
Petraeus Report – Surge – success metrics keep changing/hard to define	0	1	3	22	5
Petraeus Report – warning Republican support for staying the course	5	4	4	11	5
Petraeus Report – White House – pressure/influence on report (dog and pony show)	10	202	38	78	26
Petraeus Report – White House – to rally Republican support	3	23	5	32	10

Table 5. Pearson's correlations across attribute agendas for the Gonzales issue

	Right-leaning	Left-leaning	Moderate	Media	Media blog
Right-leaning					
Left-leaning	-.353				
Moderate	-.136	.833*			
Media	-.098	.789*	.792*		
Media blog	-.186	.853*	.852*	.951*	

Note: * $p < .05$

Table 6. Pearson's correlations across attribute agendas for the Craig issue

	Right-leaning	Left-leaning	Moderate	Media	Media blog
Right-leaning					
Left-leaning	.820*				
Moderate	.628*	.738*			
Media	.797*	.686*	.582*		
Media Blog	.933*	.855*	.673*	.896*	

Note: * $p < .05$

Table 7. Pearson's correlations across attribute agendas for the Petraeus report subframe of the Iraq issue

	Right-leaning	Left-leaning	Moderate	Media	Media blog
Right-leaning					
Left-leaning	.206				
Moderate	.556*	.668*			
Media	.303	.680*	.687*		
Media blog	.335	.708*	.679*	.889*	

Note: * $p < .05$

Table 8. Pearson's correlations across attribute agendas for the MoveOn 'Betray Us' ad subframe of the Iraq issue

	Right-leaning	Left-leaning	Moderate	Media	Media blog
Right-leaning					
Left-leaning	-.571				
Moderate	.716*	-.216			
Media	.207	.433	.093		
Media blog	.213	.249	.094	.906*	

Note: * $p < .05$

On the Craig issue, the left-leaning network of blogs also had a moderate to highly correlated attribute agenda with both traditional media ($r = 0.686, p < 0.05$) and their media blogs ($r = 0.855, p < 0.05$). This scenario followed through to the Petraeus Report subframe of the Iraq issue. Here, the left-leaning blog network had a significant attribute

agenda correlation with both traditional media ($r = 0.680, p < 0.05$) and their media blogs ($r = 0.708, p < 0.05$).

Unlike the left-leaning blog network, the right-leaning blog network revealed less of a relationship with traditional media agendas at the attribute level (see Tables 5 to 8). The Craig issue was the only issue in which the right-leaning blog network shared a significantly correlated agenda with traditional media ($r = 0.797, p < 0.05$) and their media blogs ($r = 0.933, p < 0.07$).

Research question one also required an examination of social influence through correlating attribute agendas within a blog's ideological social network. Once again, the findings differed among left-leaning and right-leaning blog networks. Among all issues, left-leaning blogs revealed a moderate to strongly correlated attribute agenda within their partisan social network. All 15 correlations among the six blogs that comprised the left-leaning blog network on the Petraeus Report subframe of the Iraq issue were highly significant, with correlations ranging from 0.737 to 0.907. On the MoveOn subframe of the Iraq issue, 10 of the 15 correlations among these six left-leaning blogs were significant, with correlations ranging from 0.641 to 0.886. On the Craig issue, nine of the 15 correlations were significant, with correlations ranging from 0.646 to 0.892. On the Gonzales issue, 11 of the 15 correlations were significant, ranging from 0.641 to 0.871.

Gauging social influence through unified issue attribute agendas revealed few significant correlations in the right-leaning blog network. For this network, only the Petraeus Report subframe of the Iraq issue showed strongly correlated, partisan network agendas: all 15 unique correlations among the six blogs in the right-leaning blog network were significant, with correlations ranged from 0.526 to 0.829. All other issues yielded little network agreement on issue interpretation. On the Gonzales issue, none of the 15 unique correlations among right-leaning blogs were significant. On the Craig issue, five of the 15 correlations were significant, with correlations ranging from 0.579 to 0.902. On the MoveOn subframe, only four of the 15 unique correlations among these six right-leaning blogs were significant.

Is there a bridging effect of weak ties?

Hypothesis two predicted that, because of the bridging effect of weak ties and their ideological positioning, moderate blog networks would be significantly more likely to have correlated attribute agendas with traditional media than with independent blog networks. Tables 5 to 8 present data on the moderate blog network's correlation with the other four networks, which provide only partial support for this hypothesis.

The moderate blog network was significantly correlated in their attribute agendas with the traditional media network for all issues save the MoveOn subframe of the Iraq issue. As Tables 5 to 8 highlight, the moderate blog network was significantly correlated with the attribute agendas of both traditional media and their media blogs on the Gonzales issue, the Craig issue, and the Petraeus Report subframe of the Iraq issue. For these three issues, correlations between the moderate blog network and the media network ranged from 0.582 to 0.792, while the correlations between the moderate blog network and the media blog network ranged from 0.673 to 0.852. However, the moderate blogosphere bore an insignificant correlation with traditional media's attribute agenda on the MoveOn subframe of the Iraq issue.

Though not predicted, the moderate blog network bore significant correlations with the left-leaning blogosphere's issue attribute agenda. For the Craig issue, the moderate blog network ($M = 12.0$, $SD = 6.93$) and the left-leaning blog network ($M = 37.75$, $SD = 30.14$) had a significantly correlated issue attribute agenda ($r = 0.738$, $p < .05$). The moderate blog network ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 4.03$) and the left-leaning blog network ($M = 21.82$, $SD = 21.68$) also revealed a significantly correlated attribute agenda for the Gonzales issue ($r = 0.833$, $p < 0.05$). On the Petraeus Report subframe of the Iraq issue, the moderate blog network ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 1.11$) and the left-leaning blog network ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.49$) also shared a significantly correlated attribute agenda ($r = 0.668$, $p < 0.05$). In sharp contrast, the moderate blogosphere shared less of a correlated issue attribute agenda with the right-leaning blogosphere. On the Craig issue, the moderate blog network ($M = 12.0$, $SD = 6.93$) and the right-leaning blog network ($M = 9.25$, $SD = 8.7$) had a significantly correlated attribute agenda ($r = 0.628$, $p < 0.05$). The moderate blogosphere ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 3.47$) also shared a significant correlation with the right-leaning blogosphere ($M = 8.0$, $SD = 7.19$) on the MoveOn subframe of the Iraq issue.

Conclusion

In light of the growth of networked politics (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2005, 2008; Castells, 2000; Shirky, 2008), this study sought to examine whether traditional media still possess singular power to set the salience of issue characteristics and attributes within the US political blogosphere. Prior studies revealed lack of cross-linkages between partisan blog networks (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Hargittai et al., 2008; Meraz, 2008; Tremayne et al., 2006), suggesting that social influence operates at the partisan network level within the US political blogosphere. This study questioned whether this social network coherence, demonstrable through hyperlinked connections, would translate into more homogeneous attribute agendas at the network level among ideologically similar political blogs. This study also probed whether such unified network agendas could interrupt or weaken traditional media's singular attribute agenda setting power within the different ideological spheres of the US political blogosphere.

As this study highlights, elite traditional media's attribute agenda setting power is no longer guaranteed within socially cohered political groups. Though both the moderate blog network and the left-leaning networks shared strongly correlated attribute agendas with traditional media, the conservative blog network clearly resisted elite, traditional media's issue interpretation through two of the three issues examined in this study. Traditional media's loss of singular influence at the issue interpretative level is a clear signal of the growing power of partisan social influence within networked political environments. Conservative bloggers charge these elite traditional media entities with a liberal bias (Hewitt, 2006). Their avoidance of these elite traditional entities' influence is now facilitated by easy web accessibility to a plethora of 'long tail' media options (Anderson, 2006). Prior studies have found evidence for different media choices between left-leaning and right-leaning bloggers (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Meraz, 2005). As this study highlights, it can no longer be assumed that the agenda of elite traditional media entities is a viable surrogate for the general media agenda, the foundation of many earlier agenda setting studies (Comstock and Scharrer, 1999; McCombs, 2004; Yu and Aikat,

2006). The media universe has radically changed, and partisan blog platforms, driven by their ideological agendas, now handpick the media (traditional or citizen) that best serves their larger political goals.

Within agenda setting theory, the need for orientation and the nature of the issue are two mediating variables that could help explain the conservative blogosphere's clear avoidance of traditional media's interpretative agenda. Prior studies have found that the media have more success setting the agenda on non-obtrusive issues (Weaver et al., 1981; Winter et al., 1982; Zucker, 1978), dramatic and conflict-laden issues (MacKuen and Coombs, 1981; Wanta and Hu, 1993), concrete issues (Yagade and Dozier, 1990), and shorter time frame issues (Downs, 1972; Zucker, 1978). Need for orientation, comprised of an individual's relevance and uncertainty (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McCombs and Weaver, 1973; Takeshita, 1993; Weaver et al., 1981), also impacts traditional media's agenda setting ability.

In this study, many of the selected issues bore a negative import to right-leaning politics, which could have contributed to low issue relevance and the low blog posting volume among conservative bloggers. While the longer time frame and partisan bent of the Iraq issue lent itself to traditional media avoidance, conservative bloggers cohered with traditional media on the dramatic, conflict-filled Craig issue, primarily due to their shared condemnation of his actions. Such an adopted, social network position by right-leaning bloggers suggests that issue characteristics can mediate whether traditional media have the power to set attribute agendas within partisan social networks.

Strong evidence for social influence as a driver of partisan network agendas is present at many levels of this study. As predicted by this study's hypotheses, social influence can manifest itself in a unified attribute agenda. Among the three blog networks, the left-leaning blogosphere showed strong unification in its blog network agenda through all three issues selected for this study. This hypothesized finding was not manifested in the right-leaning blog network, a result which may appear on the surface to weaken the argument for social influence as a driver of network agendas.

However, deeper analysis into these findings suggests other potential explanations for the right blogosphere's lack of cohesion. One practical explanation is based on the new mechanics of relevance on the web. Relevance is no longer determined by the singular, gatekeeping actions of elite traditional media entities but by the wealth of networked activity on the web (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008). Through links and volume of output, stories rise in popularity and rank within news portals, web search engines, and social media news aggregators. The conservative blogosphere, keen to the mechanics of buzz on the internet, adopted a network strategy of limiting discussion of these negative issues, posting less in an effort to thwart algorithms that use output and hyperlinks to determine visibility, popularity, and relevance on the web.

The power of social influence, manifested by a lack of attribute agenda correlations between the two partisan blog networks, is a growing area of concern. Advancing prior work on the disjuncture in URL citations between left-leaning and right-leaning blog networks (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Hargittai et al., 2008; Meraz, 2005; Tremayne et al., 2006), this study found strong evidence for partisan issue interpretation across two of the three issues. Emerging research has found that these partisan blog communities enable an enhanced degree of political participation among their web publics (Farrell et al.,

2008); however, such segmentation suggests a level of cocooning that could endanger diverse, heterogeneous democratic deliberation. Among web publics, traditional media's objective agenda can now be easily circumvented. As this study highlights, right-leaning bloggers largely avoid these elite, traditional media entities when they interpret issues that bode negatively for the politics of their partisan platform.

This study's advanced hypothesis failed to capture the true strength of the moderate blogosphere's weakly tied connections to traditional and citizen media networks. Though hypothesized that this network would show the strongest correlations with traditional media's more objective attribute agenda, this network's weak ties led it to bridge all media networks in its search for diverse viewpoints. Such a finding suggests that the moderate blogosphere is a vehicle for cross-cutting, heterogeneous political conversation (Mutz, 2006), less driven by the mechanics of social influence when determining its network agendas.

This study made no claims for causation, but sought to examine the first layer of influence: correlated agendas. Future studies are challenged to introduce time order in an effort to decipher whether traditional media or social networks are more influential in setting blog attribute agendas. This study was also limited by a small sample size and sampling from solely elite media entities. Future studies are encouraged to expand the sample size down the 'long tail' of media options. Selecting more diverse media takes into account the openness of the web, the fragmentation of this new media age, and the autonomy that bloggers possess in assembling sources for their largely partisan news stories.

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Fonte: Journalism, v. 12, n. 1, p. 107-127, 2011. [Base de Dados]. Disponível em: <www.sagepub.com>. Acesso em: 18 mar. 2011.