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Bloggers as the Fifth Estate

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Watching the Watchdog

Bloggers as the Fifth Estate

Stephen D. Cooper

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all of you out there in pajamas, banging away on your keyboards in the living room. Whatever the merits or deficiencies of your individual contributions, we're all better off with the blogosphere in the mix.

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Foreword

W*atching the Watchdog: Bloggers as the Fifth Estate* is a small book that packs a punch far larger than its size would suggest. The blogosphere — that murky universe in which blogs exist — is a relatively new phenomenon, and unfortunately it is also a poorly understood one. Within this universe, however, exist blogs and bloggers. Both of these terms are bantered about, but often with little consensus on their meanings. I paraphrase here, but a blog is a single Web site, focused on self-publishing documents written by one individual or perhaps a small group. Those who write blogs are called bloggers. Cooper's book recognizes both the nature of blogs and the general lack of knowledge about how they work; he does a remarkable job of making sense of the writings of bloggers, focusing on those acting as critics of the mainstream media in America.

This later point is the focus of this book. Cooper examines that group of bloggers which arose specifically to monitor the actions of the mainstream media. As an example of their powerful public presence, consider the controversy surrounding Dan Rather's use of certain documents describing President Bush's National Guard service. Their exposure as forgeries came not through the mainstream media, but through the insightful critique of bloggers. The power of bloggers is great, according to Cooper, and thus compels us to take a closer look at who they are and how they operate.

The main contribution of this book is that it helps the reader to better understand the value of blog content as that content specifically relates to the public discussion of various events and issues. Thus Cooper's book helps us to better understand the very real contribution of bloggers to the process of democratic deliberation. This is a distinct and major contribution.

What I particularly appreciate about this book is how Cooper examines blogging as a phenomenon, instead of examining it from a specific political point of view. Bloggers come in all political persuasions, are a diversified group, and offer alternative points of view for consideration. Cooper allows this important truth into his examination. He illuminates the working of the blogosphere in all its heterogenous glory, focusing on bloggers as they exist, not on how he wishes them to be. The concern is with the grass roots actions the media criticism of bloggers represents, not on whether or not their criticism fits into a particular political niche.

I feel that this book makes a solid contribution to the literature about new communication technology in several ways. As an overarching consideration, look for how Cooper makes sense of this complex, rapidly evolving, almost anarchical area of the Internet: the blogosphere. Within this sphere, he illuminates those bloggers acting as media critics and demonstrates their influence in the public sphere. Specifically, he helps to better flesh out our understanding of the actions of media bloggers by demonstrating how their writings have grown into four distinct genres: critiques of news accuracy, critiques of news framing, critiques of news agenda-setting, and critiques of journalistic practices.

Cooper's knowledge is impressive, but shared in a way that invites, rather than puts off, participation. His central thesis is provocative, and one that will undoubtedly generate further discussion: that blogs, taken collectively, are evolving into a legitimate social institution.

Jim A. Kuypers

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And thanks to **God**, from whom all blessings flow — including the opportunity to write this book.

Stephen D. Cooper
Marshall University
Spring 2006

Introduction

A mixed metaphor seemed appropriate for the title of this book on weblogs. Perhaps this is because the blogosphere, as an emergent social object, is genuinely new — and one of the time-honored ways of making sense of something new is to liken it to something familiar.

The metaphor of watchdog has long been popular as short hand for the structural role of the free press in a representative democracy. Should government officers fail in their responsibility to exercise power on behalf of the general public, that watchdog would alert the citizens at large to their malfeasance. In itself, the metaphor draws on the canine traits humans seem to enjoy the most: loyalty, courage, and strength. So, as a check on the power of the legislative and executive branches of government, the press has for some time enjoyed — if not always merited — a privileged place among our social institutions, and a warm fuzzy metaphor to symbolize it.

But what of that watchdog's leash? If the people need a watchdog to make sure the institution of government does not abuse the power they have granted it, would there not be a need for a comparable check on the press, as a social institution with power in its own right? A number of works have pointed, directly (e.g., Goldberg, 2003) or indirectly (e.g., Lichter, Rothman, Lichter, 1990), at problems with the press's influence on public discourse, or at indications that the mainstream press sometimes acts more in self-interest than in the public interest.

The mainstream press exercises no direct regulatory control over the socio-political system, yet is thought to act as a watchdog for the public because of its surveillance of other institutions and exposure of their operations to public scrutiny. So, too, do blogs lack direct control over the activities of the mainstream press, yet many of them monitor

the mainstream press in the same way. In both cases the watchdog function is performed in the open marketplace of ideas. In both cases the watchdog's bite is the threat of diminished credibility, manifest as lost votes for politicians and as reduced consumption of their media products for the mainstream press.

While the editorial staff of mainstream news outlets have the power to spike stories (i.e., cancel their publication) or to generate headline coverage, bloggers do not. But bloggers do have the power to identify factual inaccuracies in mainstream reporting, second-guess the news judgment of mainstream editors, argue for different interpretations of facts than those offered in mainstream stories, or draw attention to stories they feel have been insufficiently covered.

As has been the case with talk radio, some observers have objected to what they see as an ideological tilt in the blogosphere. It is important to note, at the outset, that this particular question is irrelevant to this work. This book is not intended as either an endorsement or a criticism of the ideological or political views of any bloggers. Moreover, it is obvious upon only a casual observation that bloggers, as a cohort, are extraordinarily heterogeneous with regard to their ideology and politics. Instead, this work is intended as an exploration of the distinct types of media criticism which have evolved in the blogosphere, and it does make the argument that the blogosphere, as an emergent social object in itself, is a constructive addition to the media mix.

So if Edmund Burke was onto a fundamental insight when he said the press was, in a practical sense, the Fourth Estate of the legislature (Carlyle, 1993, p. 141), we might now be seeing the emergence of a Fifth Estate in our social system, a watcher of the watchdog. In one sentence, the thesis of this little book is that the blogosphere is in the process of maturing into a full-fledged social institution, albeit a non-traditional one: emergent, self-organizing, and self-regulating.

Some degree of imprecision has crept into the term blog lately, as one might expect in a living language such as English. Definitions and usage reciprocally influence each other, in the sense that the pre-existing meaning of a term conditions its use in giving expression to a thought, but simultaneously the meaning is defined by its use in the expression. It is not hard to see from that how a term's meaning

might drift over time. Moreover, it is to be expected that the terminology for an emerging social object will evolve as our understanding of that object — hopefully — is refined.

For our purposes here, we will take the term blog to denote a Web site with the primary purpose of self-publishing documents, which are made individually accessible by hyperlink and displayed in reverse chronological order (Blog, n.d.). We will exclude group discussion sites such as *Free Republic* or *Democratic Underground*, since the content of these sites consist primarily of running commentary and interaction by a large number of individuals. Blogs, for our purposes, are sites on which the primary content is authored by no more than a small group of individuals. While there may or may not be comments threads on a blog, the format is a collection of time-sequenced documents produced by a particular blogger or, in the case of a group blog, a small number of bloggers.

The universe of blogs — named the blogosphere by fiction writer Bill Quick (*I Propose a Name*, 2001) — includes a great number of sites devoted to personal stories, journaling, hobbies, or other topics not normally thought to be of widespread public interest. No doubt these personal blogs are quite rewarding for both their authors and readers, and would be a worthy subject for study as a form of computer-mediated interpersonal communication on a global scale. Other blogs are devoted to the author's ruminations about the events and public issues of the day, along the lines of opinion magazines. Some amount of this content consists of free-form, bare-knuckle commentary on politics and political actors. In all fairness, much of it strikes this author as either emotional venting or some sort of group bonding ritual; on the other hand, some of it can offer genuine insights into the political machinations or policy issues of the time. These blogs are also of interest and frequently offer a great deal to the reader, but they are not the central focus of this work, either.

As well as the distinction can be drawn, this little book will restrict itself to critical blogging about news products created by what many now refer to as the mainstream media (MSM). As it turns out, there is a great deal to cover in that corner of the blogosphere alone.

Bloggers as Media Critics

Distinct genres of news media criticism have already emerged in the blogosphere. There are also good indications that collaboratively-authored or highly interactive genres will develop, since web pages use HTML and hypertext is built into that language. There are suggestions of this interactivity already in individual blog posts which use hyperlinks to other bloggers, and in the incorporation of readers' e-mails into the posts to which they are responding. Moreover, the diaries pages on *Red State* (<http://www.redstate.com>) and *Daily Kos* (<http://www.dailykos.com>) appear to be early forms of collaborative and interactive generation of media criticism in blogs.

In addition to criticism of the mainstream media *per se*, some blogs have begun to offer alternative reporting or news analyses of their own. At the time of this writing, there are a number of online news portals with roots in the blogosphere. They include *memeorandum* (<http://www.memeorandum.com>), *The Huffington Post* (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com>), *Pajamas Media* (<http://pajamasmedia.com>), and *Power Line News* (<http://www.powerlineblognews.com>).

Often a single blog post will be a self-contained critique of a news story in the traditional media or of a trend or pattern across several pieces of reporting. Sometimes, though, the critique takes the form of a series of posts, over a time period ranging from a few days to a month or longer. The individual entries may be relatively short, but when pieced together contain a comprehensive exploration of some question or topic. It is common practice, in this kind of serialized critique, to indicate the running theme in the header of the post. This form of criticism is analogous to the mainstream journalism practice of a reporter "following" a story.

As young as the blogosphere is, we can start to perceive a typology of media criticism found in it. In the broadest terms, some is criticism of particular news stories, and some is criticism of news coverage in general. Four major types of media criticism have already become staples of the blogosphere, and we can distinguish variants of each of the four types.

While placing real-world phenomena into some sort of typology is a time-honored scholarly routine, tradition alone is not the reason for doing so here. If blogs are evolving into a legitimate social institution — the essential thesis of this book — then it will be helpful to have an analytical framework with which to weigh the value of the media criticism available in the blogosphere. In other words, our purpose here is not just to describe the emergence of a new variety of computer-mediated communication, as a historical curiosity, but to thoughtfully consider how that material relates to earlier forms of mass communication and earlier scholarly analysis of mass communication effects, with an eye toward its impact on the public sphere. Moreover, that a workable typology can be constructed from the large quantity of media criticism blogging is, in itself, an indicator of the blogosphere's maturation into a social institution.

Along that line, we can identify accuracy, framing, agenda-setting/gatekeeping, and journalistic practices as distinct genres of media criticism in the blogosphere, each with their own variants. Blog criticism of accuracy concerns factual evidence mentioned in reporting. Framing concerns the interpretations or meanings of facts and events. Agenda-setting/gatekeeping concerns the newsworthiness or importance of particular events and issues. Criticism of journalistic practices concerns the working methods of professional journalists and news outlets.

In tabular form, the typology would look like this:

Accuracy

Fact-checking Descriptions

Fidelity of Quotations

Authenticity of Documents

Interpretation of Statistics or Scientific Studies

Trustworthiness of Memes

Framing

- Disputing the Frame
- Reframing a Set of Facts
- Contextualizing

Agenda-Setting/Gatekeeping

- Questioning the News Judgment
- Setting an Alternative Agenda

Journalistic Practices

- Newsgathering
- Writing and Editing
- Error Correction

While blog posts sometimes are pure examples of one of these types of criticism, there is often a mixture of several in the same post. Again, the intent here is to begin to develop an analytical framework within which to consider the value of the blog content to the public discussion of issues and events. The informal and highly personal writing style of many bloggers might obscure the quality of their insights to readers more accustomed to the third person voice standard in the mainstream media; so, too, might a reader be put off by the occasional bluntness of the language or the facetious, sometimes self-deprecating, names given to the sites. This typology will hopefully make the substance more accessible, and a reasoned assessment of its quality more convenient. Implicit here is the notion that different criteria apply to different varieties of media criticism; for instance, one's expectations for quality in a critique of framing — primarily a matter of interpretation of facts — ought not be identical to the expectations for quality in a critique of accuracy — primarily a matter of verification of facts.

That we can discern distinct genres of blog criticism is a good indicator of the blogosphere's maturation into a social object of consequence. Critical blog posts have accumulated and gradually delineated various types of criticism, while those emerging types have provided a pre-existing form in which critical bloggers can create new content. This is to say that each critical blog post utilizes its respective genre (as a cultural resource upon which to draw) while it simultaneously recreates the genre (maintains, modifies, or develops

it). The name structuration (Giddens, 1984, p. xxxi) has been given to this sort of process by which social system features emerge, evolve and persist.

The following chapters describe the genres and their variants, and give examples. The examples are not in any way intended to take a position on the issues they concern. They are intended to illustrate the distinct types of criticism, and to provide insights into the interactions among bloggers, their readers, and mainstream journalists. The merit of particular examples of media criticism is left to the reader, as is the substance of the controversies to which they relate; to that end, the examples include lists of URLs in the endnotes. The key point here is that the blogosphere, as an emergent social object, is clearly a vehicle for legitimate media criticism; the examples are provided to demonstrate that point.

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