New media democracy or pain in the RSS[1]? An examination of political bloggers and media agenda-setting in the UK

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CONTENTS

[1] RSS is a web-based publishing tool widely used by bloggers

INTRODUCTION

The world of mass media and communication has been turned on its head in the past decade following the explosion of online, self-publishing platforms known as weblogs or 'blogs' that have enabled millions of individuals to share their personal opinions with the rest of the world. In 1999 there were less than 50 blogs estimated to be in existence (Mead, 2000). Blog tracking website Technorati currently has a database of over 112 million blogs with a further 120,000 blogs started every day (Sifry, 2007).

The exponential rise in blogs has arisen from the rapid expansion of broadband internet access, the growth of free or extremely cheap blogging software[2] such and the very human need for people to connect with other like-minded individuals, tell stories and share experiences (Drezner and Farrell, 2004).

The mass adoption of blogs and self-publishing tools has had a profound affect on the dominance of global mass media. Traditionally, a limited number of national newspapers and broadcasters controlled the communication of important issues. Now, however, the public have the power to publish their own content, answer back to media institutions or raise issues otherwise ignored by the mass media.

This sea-change has caused the 'mainstream media' (MSM) to take notice of – and respond to - the impact bloggers are having on the contemporary media landscape. Research shows that the number of newspaper articles including the word 'blog' increased from six in 2004 to 246 in 2006. (*Analysis of blog coverage in major media and public affairs publications*, 2006)

One of the first groups of people to recognise the communications potential of blogs was political activists who used them to campaign on key issues that the MSM did not cover. This is reinforced by research showing 44% of UK bloggers writing about politics (*ibid.*) and Stanyer (2006) who found every mainstream UK political party using a blog to campaign in the 2005 general election. The growing

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[2] Blogger (http://www.blogger.com); Typepad (http://www.typepad.com) and Wordpress (http://www.wordpress.com) are three of the most popular platforms

importance of political blogs to democracy is also evidenced by the UK government's Media Monitoring Unit's decision to monitor blogs alongside the MSM. (Grande, 2007)

More significantly, in the US where political blogging is further advanced, (Stanyer, 2006) bloggers from across the political spectrum have on several spectacular occasions uncovered issues of major importance to the US public overlooked by the MSM, broken stories ignored by the MSM and as a result become a powerful force for setting the US media agenda. (Stanyer, 2006; Drezner and Farrell, 2004, Glaser 2004)

As the number of political bloggers in the UK grow and learn from the experiences of their US counterparts their ability to further challenge the traditional dominance of the UK's MSM and help set the UK's political media agenda must be questioned.

Although recent research has investigated the use of blogs by the UK's main political parties (Jackson, 2006) and more broadly the use of blogs as online campaign communication tools at the last general election (Stanyer, 2006), no study has critically examined the media-agenda setting effect of UK political blogs. This study aims to investigate the phenomenon from the critical perspective of agenda-setting theory.

RESEARCH AIM

The aim of this study is to evaluate whether UK political bloggers exert a media-agenda setting effect on the UK's broadsheet print media.

Terms of Reference

- To define blogging as a self-publishing platform and communications tool
- To define the origins of and current critical perspectives in agenda-setting research
- To identify and define key political bloggers operating in the UK
- To identify and analyse any media agenda-setting effects of political blogs in the UK
- To conclude whether UK political blogs have a media agenda-setting effect on UK broadsheet media

LITERATURE REVIEW

Blogs and blogging: background

Definitions of weblogs - or 'blogs' - vary, but Drezner and Farrell (2004) offer a comprehensive explanation:

> A web page with minimal to no external editing, providing online commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources
>
> <div align="right">Drezner and Farrell, 2004, p.5</div>

Expanding on this definition, Jackson (2006) and Ferguson and Howell (2004) assert that blogs are different from traditional websites as they allow users to leave comments and interact with the site's author. Blogs also differ as they exist in a highly networked environment – known as the 'blogosphere' – and constantly link to and aggregate other online sources (Drezner and Farrell, 2004).

The first blog was started in 1993, (Wikipedia, 2007) although uptake grew at a glacial pace with only an estimated 50 blogs in existence by 1999. By 2000, however, blog growth was exponential, largely due to the effects of three key factors. The first was the rapid, global roll out of high-speed broadband connections allowing millions of people access to 'always on' internet (Friedman,

2006). Secondly, in 1999 the first free blogging software was launched allowing anyone to start blogging quickly and cheaply (Drezner and Farrell, 2004). The third factor that lead to the huge rise in blogging was the basic human desire to be social, connect with others and share stories, opinions and information (Dyrud and Worley, 2005).

Political blogging

The open, unedited communication process afforded by blogs has lead to an emphasis on the rise of online democracy. This has been exploited by political organisations and campaigners who see the potential to communicate news and issues on their terms, outside the constraining agenda of the mass media.

Jackson asserts that business, media and politics are three sectors "particularly interested in the possibilities weblogs might offer them" while further arguing blogs can be used to: "shape the political agenda, generate resources and mobilise support" (2006, p.294)

Evidence to support this view comes predominantly from the US where political blogging is more advanced than the UK. There exists a number of high-profile examples (Jackson, 2006, p.295) where political bloggers have helped break major stories[3] and set the news agenda.[4] As Drezner and Farrell observe: "Blogs have had a particularly pronounced effect on the media." (2004, p.6)

Jackson (2006) and Stanyer (2006) have looked at the role of UK political blogs in political campaigning both from an individual and political party perspective in the 2005 general election. Their findings indicate that while UK political organisations and activists recognised the potential of blogs in setting the political and media agenda, "blogging in the UK is in its infancy" (Stanyer, 2006. p.404). Both authors highlight the success of US bloggers but conclude that UK political blogs during the 2005 general election were not effective campaigning or

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[3] See **Appendix A** for an overview of what became known as 'Rathergate'
[4] See **Appendix B** for an overview of the US episode where racist remarks made by Senator Trent Lott were caught on video and published by a US political blogger

promotional tools (Jackson, 2006, p.292); nor were they effective in setting the media agenda during the election campaign (Stanyer, 2006, p.404).

Media agenda-setting: origins

The agenda-setting paradigm was conceptualised by McCombs and Shaw's seminal study, *The agenda-setting function of mass-media* (1972), although earlier work on media influence of public opinion by Walter Lippman (1922) and Bernard Cohen (1963) was integral to the conceptualisation of McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting work (Dearing and Rogers, 1996).

McCombs and Shaw's study examined the mass media effects on residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina during the 1968 presidential election. The authors selected 100 respondents to take part in the study who were screened to identify a cohort "who had not yet definitely decided how to vote – presumably those most open or susceptible to campaign information." (1972, p178).

This cohort was interviewed between September and October 1968 to determine what they believed were the key issues "as they saw them" (*ibid.*). McCombs and Shaw then conducted an analysis of election issues covered by the national and local mass media content over the same period and sought to correlate the two.

The results of the Chapel Hill study were resounding:

> the data suggest a very strong relationship between the
> emphasis placed on different campaign issues by the media …
> and the judgements of voters as to the salience of and importance
> of different campaign topics.
>
> McCombs and Shaw, 1972, p181

Although the McCombs and Shaw study demonstrates a definite link between the public agenda and the media agenda the authors apply a caveat to their findings.

They state that while their work shows "voters learn from the immense quantity of [mass media] information available during each campaign" (McCombs and Shaw,

1972, p.176) the fact remains that while "the press may not be successful in telling people what to think … it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about". (Cohen, 1963, in Tomaszeski, 2006, p.18)

Media agenda-setting: current critical perspectives

Building on the Chapel Hill study, agenda-setting researchers approached the theory from several different directions. Dearing and Rogers (1996) provide a useful definition of agenda-setting studies and an overview into the trends that emerged subsequent to McCombs and Shaw's pioneering research.

"*The agenda-setting process,*" Dearing and Rogers tell us: "is an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites … and the interrelationships among these three elements." (1996, pp.1-5)

The authors map a brief history of major trends in agenda-setting research such as the development of a model for policy agenda-setting, the emergence of macro agenda-setting studies that examine single issues, over-time on the public agenda and single issue, over-time studies on individuals.

Of relevance to this study is their assertion that media agenda-setting research has only emerged since the 1980s through studies that examined how single issues made it onto the media agenda.

From these studies Dearing and Rogers suggest that the US media agenda can be set through so-called "trigger events" (*ibid.*, p.40). These include attention afforded an issue by celebrities, such as Reverend Jesse Jackson who put drug abuse by black youths onto the media agenda when statistics showed deaths from drug use were decreasing in reality (*ibid.*, p.29).

It also includes major events or disasters such as the 1989 Exxon *Valdez* oil spill which put the issue of environmental protection on the agenda despite activists

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having campaigned for greater environmental awareness since the late 1960s (*ibid.*, pp.37-39). Dearing and Rogers use both these examples to show that 'Real-World Indicators' are not necessarily relevant in setting the media's agenda.

One explanation offered by Dearing and Rogers for the late arrival of media agenda-setting studies is that the paradigm "accepted the media agenda as a given without the considering the process by which the agenda is constructed" (Carragee *et al*, 1987, in Dearing Rogers, 1996, p.17).

With this in mind, Gerald Kosicki (1993) revisited the agenda-setting paradigm arguing that the over-arching theory of agenda-setting research (including public, policy and media agenda-setting) is better described as a "model of media effects" (p.102).

Kosicki's model combines the three existing areas of agenda-setting research because:

> each part of the process is incomplete and somewhat
> unsatisfying by itself, but that combining all three
> perspectives, the field can come closer to what a solid
> model of contemporary model of media influence can be.
>
> Kosicki,1993, p.101

Kosicki views the role of the media as a central, unifying element of agenda-setting research, rather than the poor, under-studied relation of McCombs and Shaw's original public agenda-setting work.

Kosicki argues that a "key failing" of agenda-setting research has been "the absence of any specific tie to a clear and specific theory of news work." (p.110) This has created a situation where much agenda-setting research carries implicit presumptions about the function of the media which leads to a tension between scholars.

While some believe "journalists should merely report the news", others "believe that journalists have an affirmative obligation to make news" (*ibid.*).

Kosicki's idea of media effects influencing the agenda-setting process is also examined by James Watson (2003). Watson interprets the agenda-setting process from a specifically socio-cultural perspective that sees the media agenda as a 'discourse'. That is:

> a set of possible statements about a given area, that organises
> and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic,
> object process is to be talked about.
>
> Kress in Watson, 2003, p.131

Echoing Kosicki's earlier assertion that there is a tension in agenda-setting theory between the media 'reporting' the news and 'making' it, Watson takes this a step further by arguing the media agenda is a "product of the cultural contexts in which it operates; and rather than mirroring reality, constructs ritual formations of it" (2003, p.120).

This 'ritual formation' is 'framing' and best described as the socio-cultural process that shapes the media-agenda during news production once a media 'trigger' has raised awareness of the issue in question (Dearing and Rogers, 1996).

Political blogs and media agenda-setting: a US perspective

While there is little research that directly addresses blogs and media agenda-setting theory, Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell's study, *The Power and Politics of Blogs*, (2004) offers strong evidence of the potential for blogs to set the media agenda.

Using mathematical network analysis techniques, Drezner and Farrell examined the distribution of internet links between US political blogs. They discovered that political blogs have a skewed distribution. That is to say, popular blogs gain more links from other blogs and websites and thus more attention than less popular blogs.

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This creates what the authors call political "focal points" where individual bloggers can coordinate information sharing. Drezner and Farrell argue this has important repercussions for the salience of blogs (pp.12-13) with popular sites generating issue 'salience' and filtering "'interesting' blog posts from 'uninteresting' ones" (*ibid.*). This has parallels with Watson's idea of issue 'framing'.

Drezner and Farrell suggest bloggers begin to possess explicit media agenda-setting capabilities when you combine the above points:

> if the mainstream media constructs focal points through which political actors must operate, the blogosphere has the capacity to construct focal points through which the media operates … as media outlets frame breaking and ongoing stories, they will rely on salient weblogs as sources for opinion and information.
>
> 2004, p.18

This argument mirrors both Kosicki and Watson's belief that media effects and issue framing are central to the agenda-setting debate, building on Dearing and Rogers's more basic trigger event approach.

It is also worth examining Tomaszeski (2006) who has studied political blogging and media agenda-setting through Brosius and Weimann's Four Models of Two-Step Flow (1996) (**Fig 1**).

MODEL	NAME	INFORMATION FLOW
Model 1	The Classical Two-Step Flow	Media Agenda → Early Recognisers → Public Agenda
Model 2	The Reverse Two-Step Flow	Public Agenda → Early Recognisers → Media Agenda
Model 3	Initiating the Classical Agenda-Setting Process	Early Recognisers → Media Agenda → Public Agenda
Model 4	Initiating the Reverse Classical Agenda-Setting Process	Early Recognisers → Public Agenda → Media Agenda

Fig. 1 Brosius and Weimann's Four Models of Two-Step Flow

Two-Step Flow theory (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1944, in Tomasezski, 2006) argues 'that the flow of mass communications is mediated by opinion leaders' (Tomaszeski, 2006, p. 21) which are pivotal in the agenda setting process because they "facilitate the interaction between the mass media and the public" (*ibid.*).

Tomaszeski suggests that the model's 'Early Recognisers' (or 'opinion leaders') represent political bloggers - an argument that fits with Drezner and Farrell's evidence of the internet's skewed distribution and popularity of political blogs.

In particular, Brosius and Weimann's models clearly demonstrate how information can flow from 'Early Recognisers' (ie. bloggers) directly to the media agenda via the third model (*Initiating the Classical Agenda-Setting Process)* and indirectly to the media agenda via the fourth model (*Initiating the Reverse Classical Agenda-Setting Process*).

Tomaszeski is clear is expressing his belief that political blogs which 'investigate ... stories that the mainstream media have not discussed … would fall in models three and four." (*ibid.*, p.24)

Political blogs and media agenda-setting: a UK perspective
The overwhelming majority of research into political blogs, agenda-setting and the media focuses on US politics, in turn demonstrating a clear space within the research canon for a study into UK experiences. One exception to this is Stanyer's analysis of political blogs during the 2005 British general election (2006).

Stanyer research aim was broad and sought to evaluate "how popular blogging was, the extent of bloggers' partisanship" and "what if any impact blogs had beyond the immediate community of users". (2006, p.404). Stanyer's resounding conclusion in the study was that during the British 2005 general election, "blogs had no impact on the campaign news agenda" (*ibid.*).

However, Stanyer also acknowledged that his research demonstrated that political blogging in the UK was in its "infancy". Another good reason for the current study to investigate whether the UK political blogosphere has matured enough to make an impact on the national media-agenda.

RESEARCH METHODLOGY
The study will use primary and secondary research to examine the media agenda-setting effects of UK political bloggers.

Primary research will include a survey of bloggers to identify possible case studies where UK political blogs have possibly demonstrated a media agenda-setting effect. These effects will be evaluated by looking at their impact on UK broadsheet newspaper stories over-time. To further examine the role of these bloggers within the media agenda a series of semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the journalists involved in the case studies.

Secondary research will comprise relevant articles from academic textbooks and journals, industry reports, newspapers and online material, including blogs.

Before undertaking the research activities a list of tasks has been created to help shape the parameters of the study.

List of Tasks
- The study will only examine UK political bogs – politics is major theme of UK blogosphere (*Analysis of blog coverage in major media and public affairs publications*, 2006) and political blogs have yielded good case studies in the US.
- The study will only evaluate agenda-setting effects in national broadsheet newspapers. This is to keep media evaluation to a minimum during this small-scale study.

- The research will only cover case studies identified after April 2006 when media commentators claim political bloggers started to have an impact on the UK media (Barkham, 2006).

- The study will discount blogs written by politicians or journalists (such as BBC political editor, Nick Robinson) because these may exert 'celebrity' agenda-setting status (Dearing and Rogers, 1996) which can act as media triggers.

- All case studies will involve blogs written by bloggers featured on Iain Dale/Politico's *Top 500 Political Bloggers* list[5]

- A maximum of three case studies will be identified for the media evaluation analysis. More will yield too much data to collate and require too many interviews for study of this size.

Primary research

Primary research will involve a three-stage process to identify and test a series of case studies for evidence of media agenda-setting by political bloggers. It will then investigate this evidence from the perspective of journalists who researched and published stories within the case studies.

1. Identification of case studies

Applying a sampling strategy is important even for identifying case studies as

> While most people would associate the words 'sampling' and 'selection' with survey approaches … whatever your approach, you should … give some consideration to the related issues of sampling and selection
>
> <div align="right">Blaxter et al, 2006, p.163</div>

Specifically, case study identification will be undertaken using a purposive sampling *s*trategy (2006, p.163) which requires "handpicking supposedly typical or interesting cases" (*ibid.*).

A series of bloggers with a known interest in media and politics were asked to suggest likely cases where they believed UK political bloggers had influenced the media agenda. This was done by email and in person.[6] A request for information was also made via two blogs written by the study's author.[7]

This research identified several cases that suggested media agenda-setting by political bloggers:

1. Labour Party fundraising auction of a copy of the Hutton Report signed by Cherie Blair - hereafter referenced as '*Cherie Blair/Hutton Report*'
2. The charitable status of The Smith Institute political think-tank - hereafter referenced as '*Smith Institute*'
3. The campaign to entitle Iraqi translators used by the British military to asylum in the UK[8] - hereafter referenced as '*Iraqi Translators*'

Case studies are a good way to identify potentially complex media agenda-setting effects as they allows researchers to "probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalization about the wider population to which that unit belongs. (Cohen *et al*, 2000 in Blaxter *et al*, 2006)

Conversely, it must also be appreciated that a drawback associated with case studies is that they are unique to specific conditions and situations and do not have high levels of 'generalizability'. However, Mikkelsen, (2005, in Blaxter *et al,* 2006) argues that to improve 'generalizability' case study research "should be related to a theoretical framework which in turn may be adjusted as case study results provide new evidence". In this case it can be argued that by applying a media agenda-setting 'theoretical framework' to the case studies, we can enhance the 'generalizability' of the evidence.

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[6] See **Appendix C** for a list of bloggers questioned
[7] http://simoncollister.typepad.com/simonsays/2007/07/your-help-neede.html and
http://simoncollister.typepad.com/edemocracyupdate/2007/07/your-help-neede.html
[8] For ease of reference, the three case studies will be referred to in discussion as the 'Cherie Blair/Hutton Report'; 'Smith Institute' and 'Iraqi Translators' case studies

2. Case study testing

The case studies were tested for evidence of media agenda-setting using a media evaluation analysis over-time. This was a longitudinal, single issue analysis (Dearing and Rogers, 1996) in which the earliest coverage of the issue by a political blogger was cross-referenced with the earliest mainstream media coverage. Blog coverage was identified using the search engine, Google's, blog search tool.[9] Mainstream media coverage was analysed using the *Lexis Nexis* news database and restricted to broadsheet newspaper content.

One limitation with this self-devised framework is while there may evidence of a blog breaking a story before the mainstream media it is possible that the journalist may have leaked the story to the blogger in the first place in order to get an unpublishable story into the open. This will be tested further where possible in the interview stage of the research.

3. Investigating the role of journalists in media agenda-setting by blogs

Building on the quantitative evidence from the media evaluation analysis it is necessary to cross-examine the case study evidence subjectively to get to the heart of the complex media agenda-setting process (Kosicki, 1993; Watson, 2003).

This will be achieved using qualitative research which offers a "discovery oriented, exploratory and inductive" way of investigating the evidence, "concerned with understanding behaviour from actors' own frame of reference" (Blaxter *et al*, 2006, p.65).

Using a purposive sampling strategy, semi-structured interviews will be undertaken with journalists who reported on the case studies. In keeping with the size of the study, at least one journalist will be interviewed from each case study.

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[9] http://blogsearch.google.com

Interviews are an effective research tool to investigate the complexity of media agenda-setting as they allow the interviewer a level of flexibility to "follow-up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings" unafforded by questionnaires (Bell, 2005, p.157). Another benefit of the semi-structured interview is that it allows more effective data collection and analysis (Bell, 2005, p.159).

One limitation for this research method is that the small scale of the study makes interviewing all the journalists involved in the case studies, collating and analysing their responses not practicable. The semi-structured interview format will be used to facilitate email interviews where respondents are unable to take part face-to-face helping increase response rates (Blaxter *et al*, 2006, p.173).

Although the design of interview questions need not be as stringent as questionnaires (Bell, 2005, p.158) it is still vital to follow best practice guidelines. These include: placing questions in the correct order to ensure the smooth flow of the interview and recording of data; preparing for the interview beforehand and ensuring familiarity with the case study in question; avoiding leading or presumptive questions to prevent bias (although this is easy to eradicate in a questionnaire) and maintaining an ethical approach devoid of sensitive or offensive questions. (*ibid.*, p.158). Time permitting, a pilot will be carried out of the interview questions to allow for refinement of the format.

Secondary Research

As well as the media evaluation analysis and interviews, secondary research will be used to provide documentary and survey-based data.

This data will be sourced from:

- academic textbooks and journal articles
- online and hard-copy written resources – including, white papers, surveys and non-academic articles
- newspapers

- PR, political and technology industry periodical articles

There is significant academic material examining media-agenda setting theories and a much smaller amount of academic material covering political blogging. This will be used to provide an academic insight into previous and current critical theory around media-agenda setting.

There also exists a larger body of PR and marketing industry white papers, trend surveys and non-academic articles published on the topic of blogging, communications and the media. This will be used to provide background into current political communications practices and emerging trends. It will be particularly useful for comparative insight into US data.

Academic material will be sourced primarily from Leeds Metropolitan University Library, online journal databases and other online resources – e.g., PRWeek.com, FT.com, etc.

RESULTS

Key findings: Media evaluation analysis

The results of the longitudinal media evaluation analyses suggest that political blogs were responsible for drawing attention to the key issue or issues central to all three case studies examined in the research. The issue(s) in question did not feature at all on the broadsheets' media agenda in the month preceding the date when the case study story was broken by a blogger.

This suggests political blogs were responsible for 'breaking' the issue before the print broadsheet media, as well as ensuring this issue became an agenda-setting trigger event for wider media coverage (Dearing and Rogers, 1996).

The one exception to this is the 'Cherie Blair/Hutton Report' case study where the blogger responsible for breaking the story had written about an article published in the *Mail on Sunday* newspaper on the following Monday.

This 're-posting' on a blog of an existing story is useful as it flags up the current complexity of the UK's news-making processes. Although the story appeared in a UK tabloid newspaper (and thus not included in this study), it was not covered by broadsheets. However it was picked up and reported by a political blog sympathetic to the political ideology of the *Mail on Sunday*.

This action seems to have re-kindled the story and eventually caused it to act as a trigger event for the broadsheet media. This complexity and sharing of stories/issues across traditional formats is discussed below.

The initial analysis of the number of blogs involved in each case study suggests the media agenda-setting effects of political blogs in the UK mirrors that of the US, as identified by Drezner and Farrell's 'focal point blogs/blogs as focal point' typology (2004, p.17-18).

Drezner and Farrell hypothesised that the media-agenda setting effects of political blogs operate as either 'focal point blogs' – explained as "blogs which are salient, so that … readers recognise them as providing a coordination solution to the game that they play". Alternatively a series of blogs can act focal points where they "create focal points in wider public debates by providing interpretative frames, and limiting the dimension of particular issues." (*ibid.)*

All three case studies appear to fall within this typology further suggesting a media agenda-setting capability. Two case studies (Cherie Blair/Hutton Report; Smith Institute) seemingly act as focal points for each specific story. Conversely the Iraqi Translators case study suggests that a number of blogs created an online "interpretative frame" around the British government's treatment of Iraqi translators.

Key findings: Journalist interviews

Full insight into the relationship between bloggers and the newsroom was sought through a series of interviews with the journalists involved in reporting the case study stories featured in the mainstream broadsheet media. [10]

Emails were sent to 12 journalists involved with the MSM coverage of the case study stories. Responses – either telephone or email interview – were received from six journalists, including at least one per case study.

In total, 50% of respondents said 50% said they did not read blogs at all and 50% said they did read blogs, also confirming this included reading them in a professional capacity. All respondents said they did not use material from blogs for stories.

The specific reasons given for this were largely due to the tendency for journalists to rely on traditional sources for stories, such as: foreign newspapers; other reporters and reliable, trusted sources.

However, the results suggest there may be a subtle difference in attitude towards blogs between the more senior and junior journalists questioned. All respondents that held the post of 'Editor' or 'Deputy Editor' (n=4) said they relied on traditional sources for stories while the two respondents (n=2) holding the post of 'Correspondent' were more likely to look to blogs for comment around an issue. Similarly, the two correspondents also acknowledged they knew bloggers personally compared to the Editors/Deputy Editors who did not know any.

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[10] See **Appendix D** for a complete list of journalists that took part in interviews

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

i. Analysis of case studies over-time

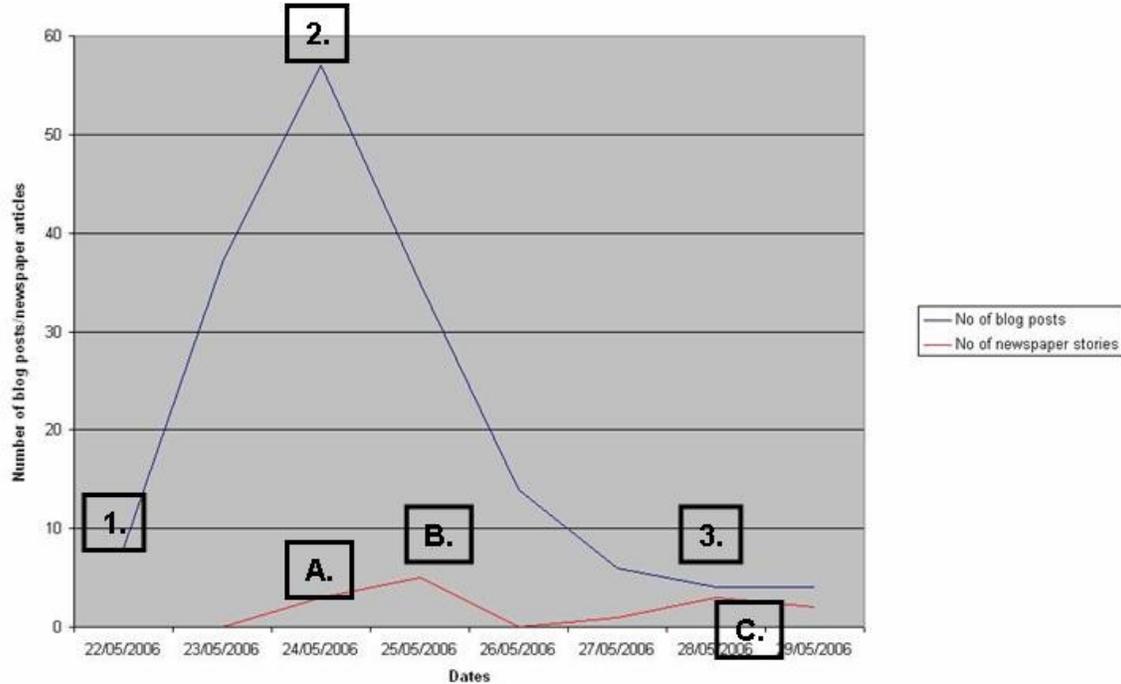**Case study one: "Cherie Blair/Hutton Report"**

Fig 2. – Comparison of Cherie Blair/Hutton Report blog and broadsheet newspaper coverage over-time

The story of the Labour Party auctioning a copy of the Hutton Report signed by the then Prime Minister's wife, Cherie Blair, first appeared in the *Mail on Sunday* (MoS) on Sunday 21 May 2006. This coverage does not fall into the parameters of this study, which focuses on political blogs and broadsheet print media.

Reference[11]	Date	Activity
1	22/05/06	Influential right-wing blogger, Iain Dale, writes blog post re-capping the Mail on Sunday story
2	23/05/06	36 other blogs link to Dale's original blog post that he follows up with two more blog posts. These include a reference to the text of an Early Day Motion (EDM) tabled by Conservative MP, Stewart Jackson also demanding an apology from Cherie Blair and the Labour Party. Both of these posts caused a further spike of blog coverage
A	24/05/06	First broadsheet media coverage of the story appears. *The Times, Independent* and *Daily Telegraph* all print articles about Stewart Jackson's EDM

[11] All references to specific features of **Fig. 2** on the chart will subsequently be made using a square bracket in the following format: numerical references for blog posts and alphabetical references for newspapers articles.

|		
B	25/05/06	Broadsheet coverage continues. *The Independent*, *Financial Times and Daily Telegraph* all report on Tony Blair's attempt to diffuse the political row during Prime Minister's Questions. *The Independent* and *Telegraph* also carried opinion pieces about the story.
3	24/05/06 – 26/05/06	During this mainstream media coverage, Dale continued to write blog posts as the story developed. These called on Cherie Blair to apologise and included spoof images of newspaper front pages and television news bulletins alleging Cherie Blair had apologised for her actions.[12]
C	26/05/06 – 29/05/07	Broadsheet coverage continues on smaller scale mainly reporting further Conservative calls for an official apology. The story also features in review by Sunday broadsheets, including *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Telegraph* and *Independent on Sunday*

Case study two: "Smith Institute"
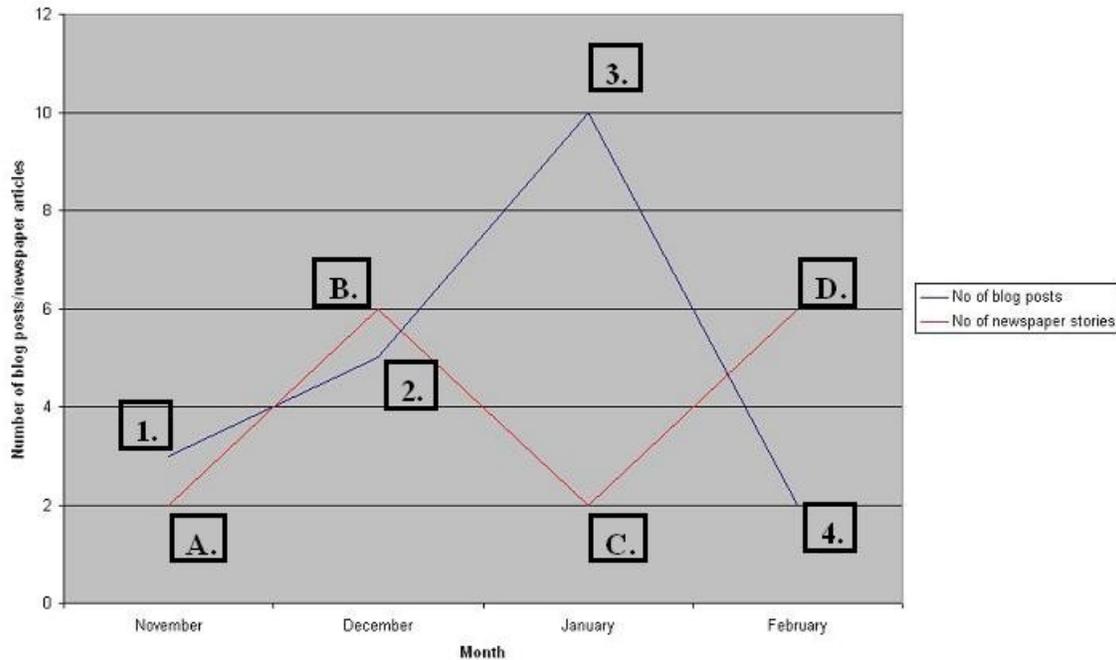
Fig 3. – Comparison of Smith Institute blog and broadsheet newspaper coverage over-time

Reference	Date	Activity
1	08/11/06	Anonymous right-wing blogger, Guido Fawkes, suggests the Metropolitan Police's inquiry team investigating the Labour Party

[12] http://iaindale.blogspot.com/2006/05/tomorrows-headline.html;
http://iaindale.blogspot.com/2006/05/labour-mp-calls-on-labour-party-to.html;
http://iaindale.blogspot.com/2006/05/did-cherie-pay-for-hutton-report-she.html;
http://iaindale.blogspot.com/2006/05/blair-on-cherie-no-offence-intended.html;
http://iaindale.blogspot.com/2006/05/this-should-be-todays-sun-front-page.html

		over 'Cash for Peerages' should also investigate the left-wing think-tank, The Smith Institute and its connections to Chancellor Gordon Brown.[13]
A	25/11/06	The *Daily Telegraph* prints article about Gordon Brown's preparations for becoming Prime Minister. It includes a Conservative call for an investigation into the Smith Institute and repeats claims (made by Fawkes) that the Institute was being used to raise money illegally. It also makes overt link between the Institute and New Statesman magazine – owned by a close friend of Brown's, Geoffrey Robinson.
B	30/11/06	*Daily Telegraph* announces UK charity regulator, the Charity Commission, is planning investigation of the Smith Institute. The paper publishes an editorial on the subject. The *Financial Times* also covers the Charity Commission story on 1 December.
2	01/12/06 – 31/12/06	Throughout December Guido Fawkes continued to blog about the Institute and its connections with Gordon Brown and the New Statesman magazine.
B	16/12/06 – 18/12/06	*The Times*, *Independent*, *Guardian*, *Financial Times* and *Daily Telegraph* publish articles claiming the Charity Commission investigation into the Smith Institute was brought about by pro-Blair supporters as a smear attempt against Gordon Brown.
3 & C	01/01/07 – 31/01/07	Little official development of the story. Mainstream media coverage decreases but Fawkes continues to publish 10 articles about the story – keeping the story alive in the blogosphere.
D	12/02/07 – 14/02/07	Mainstream media coverage increases. *Daily Telegraph*, *Times*, *Guardian* and *Financial Times* all carry coverage of the Smith Institute's links to the Treasury and the opening of a formal investigation into the Institute by the Charity Commission.
4	01/02/07 – 28/02/07	Fawkes continues to blog about the Smith Institute but turns his attention towards links between the Smith Institute and market research firm, Opinion Leader Research.

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[13] http://www.order-order.com/2006/11/what-yates-should-ask-gordon.html

Case study three: "Iraqi Translators"
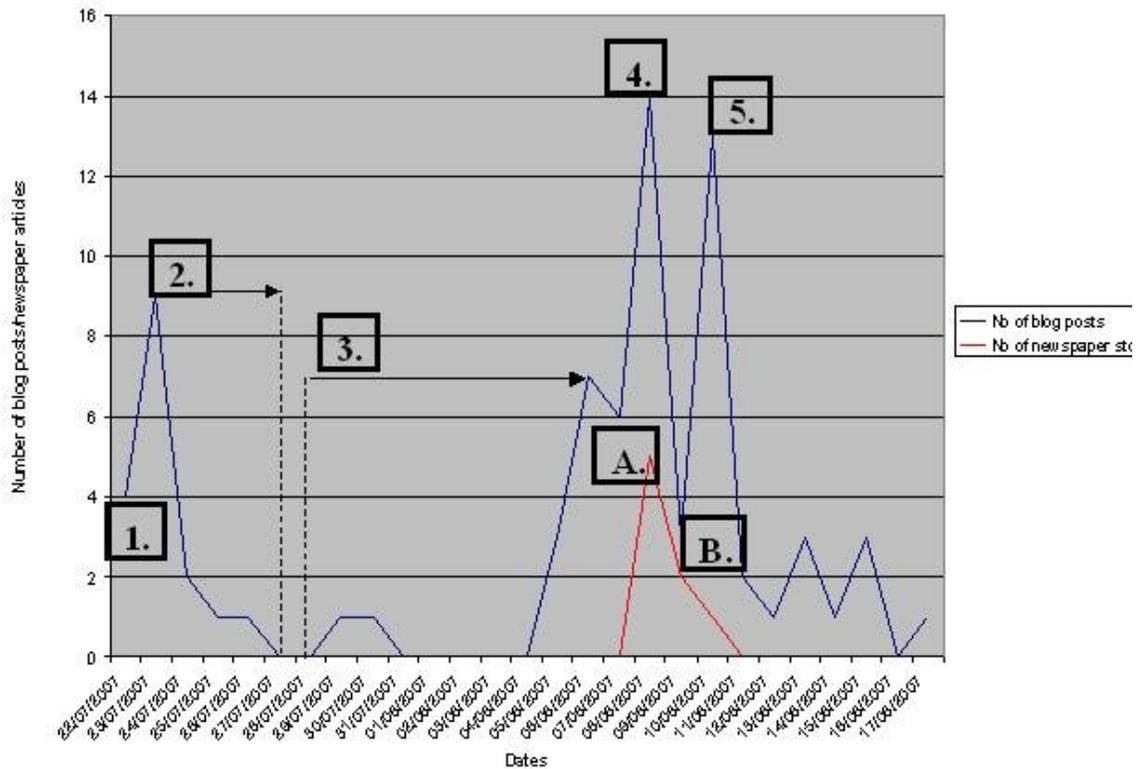
Fig 4. – Comparison of Iraqi Translators blog and broadsheet newspaper coverage over-time

Reference	Date	Activity
1	22/07/07	Left-wing blogger, Dan Hardie, was the first UK political blogger to raise the plight of Iraqi translators employed by the British government and subsequently refused asylum. He calls on other political bloggers to write about the issue and lobby their MP for a change in the policy.[14] Hardie's call to action is picked up and written about by three other political bloggers on the same day.[15]
2	23/07/07 – 26/07/07	The issue is written about by 13 bloggers all of whom continue to urge readers and fellow bloggers to write to their MPs calling for a change in government policy giving translators asylum.
3	28/07/07 – 06/08/07	MPs' responses on the issue are published and shared by bloggers.
A	07/08/07	*The Times* publishes a front-page feature revealing the plight of Iraqi Translators refused asylum.
4	07/08/07	Spike of 14 blog posts flagging up *Times* feature
B	09/08/07	The *Guardian* reports an Iraqi Translator wins asylum during an immigration tribunal and that it could become a test case for other translators employed by the British government. It also reports that Gordon Brown had promised to review the government's current asylum policy towards Iraqi translators.
B	09/08/07	Letter supporting the Translators' plight appears in *The Times*
5	10/08/07 –	Spike of blog activity visible following an article in the *Guardian's*

[14] http://danhardie.wordpress.com/2007/07/22/we-cant-turn-them-away/

[15] http://hurryupharry.bloghouse.net/archives/2007/07/22/we_cant_turn_them_away.php;
http://thatsmeontheleft.blogspot.com/2007/07/you-should-be-outraged.html;
http://crookedtimber.org/2007/07/22/important-time-to-do-the-right-thing-by-our-iraqi-friends

	11/08/07	*Comment is Free* blog that criticises the campaign to give Iraqi translators British asylum.

ii. Discussion of findings

By interpreting the results through key critical approaches to media agenda-setting there is strong evidence to suggest UK political blogs possess media agenda-setting capabilities for the broadsheet press.

For example, it can be argued that bloggers in all three case studies created media 'trigger events' by drawing attention to unreported issues that were subsequently reported by the broadsheet media. Longitudinal analysis clearly shows the case study issues were broken by blogs before the mainstream media. Similarly, content analysis shows how blogs created trigger events: in the Cherie Blair/Hutton Report and Iraqi Translator cases bloggers ran online campaigns to ensure wider public as well as Government and MP awareness of the issues involved.[16]

Also, there is evidence to suggest that the case studies made issues salient through the identification and framing of key information. This fits Drezner and Farrell's typology (2004, pp.17-18) of 'focal point blogs' and 'focal points created by blogs'.

It can be argued both the Cherie Blair/Hutton Report and Smith Institute cases were initiated and driven by high-traffic and therefore salient blogs. Conversely the Iraqi translator case study is an example of lower traffic, less influential bloggers joining together online to create a focal point around an issue. Drezner and Farrell argue that both these focal point blogs and the focal points created by blogs provide "interpretative frames … limiting the dimension of particular issues." (*ibid.*).

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[16] In both these cases additional online campaign tools including online petitions and awareness groups on the popular social networking site, Facebook were also used.

This hypothesis is reinforced by comments made by one of the journalists interviewed. Asked about their use of political blogs in the news-making process they explained:

> blogs are not to me a source of raw news but of comment – for example, an insight into the views of grassroots members of political parties.
>
> Hurst, 2007. Interview with the author on 26 October 2007. London. [Electronic notes in possession of author]

This could be seen to reinforce the notion that blogs provided a framing effect offering journalists a ready and informed reference source for salient issues. At the very least it appears to show bloggers being used in the media agenda-setting process described by Watson (2003) as constructed by "ritual formations" of the cultural context in which stories emerge.

Despite this evidence suggesting political blogs had influenced the media agenda by acting as trigger events for and acting as focal points/frames around which media stories were built, interviews with journalists responsible for reporting the case studies showed none of them used blogs' content for their stories.

The telephone and email interviews also revealed 50% of respondents did not read blogs at all. However, of the remaining 50% that did admit to reading blogs, two journalists revealed they found blogs useful for providing "comment" and "insight into the views of grassroots members of political parties" (Hurst,G., Op. Cit.) as well as for "cross-fertilisation" of stories between blogs and traditional media Hope, 2007. Interview with the author on 21 December 2007. [Electronic notes in possession of author]. This is contrasted with other respondents' views that they used only traditional sources when writing stories, such as trusted personal contacts and other reporters.

It is perhaps significant journalists that admitted using blogs hold the title 'Correspondent' while all other respondents hold the position of 'Editor' or 'Deputy Editor'. While it is impossible to conclude Correspondents are more

junior or younger journalists than Editors/Deputy Editors without knowing their organisational hierarchy, it is possible to speculate that younger journalists are more likely to be familiar with the role of blogs in the modern multimedia environment.

The conflicting evidence of bloggers' agenda-setting abilities is highlighted in two specific examples.

The first involves the Cherie Blair/Hutton Report case study, in which the blogger, Iain Dale, made open claims of setting the media agenda through his blog. One blog post was sub-titled: "*It's Up to the Blogs to Make it Hit the Fan"* and urged readers to "encourage any journalists they know to write about it [Cherie Blair's signing of the Hutton Report]."[17] While other posts and readers' comments tracked media outlets covering the story following Dale's initial blog post.[18]

However, analysis of the broadsheet coverage of the issue shows the story reporting traditional trigger events, including the tabling of a parliamentary Early Day Motion, coverage of the issue during Prime Ministers Questions and official calls from the Conservative Party for a formal apology from Cherie Blair.

Equally interesting is the apparent media agenda-setting by bloggers in the Iraqi Translators case study. Although the longitudinal chart appears to show evidence of a strong, orchestrated blogging campaign that triggered media stories, *The Times*' Diplomatic Editor - responsible for the breaking the story in the UK - confirmed he was tipped off about the plight of Iraqi Translators by the paper's Baghdad correspondent. It was not until later when contacted by one of the bloggers did he become aware of their campaign indicating that the bloggers had no - or at least an indirect effect - on the media agenda.

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[17] See: *Cherie & the Hutton Report: It's Up to the Blogs to Make it Hit the Fan* - http://iaindale.blogspot.com/2006/05/cherie-hutton-report-its-up-to-blogs.html
[18] See: http://iaindale.blogspot.com/2006/05/tomorrows-headline.html & http://iaindale.blogspot.com/2006/05/cherie-story-hits-headlines-at-last.html

Both examples show a disconnect between the apparent influence bloggers have on the media agenda and the apparent reality of the situation from within the news-making process.

It is also possible that bloggers in all three case studies did influence the media-broadsheet agenda to a greater extent admitted by the journalists interviewed or alternatively that the agenda-setting process at work is more complex than recognised using existing theories.

Specifically, Iain Dale, the blogger in the Cherie Blair/Hutton Report case study has close links to the Conservative Party and may have helped generate the traditional trigger events that were subsequently reported via his blog as well as through traditional sources used the broadsheet press.

Similarly, while the Diplomatic Editor responsible for breaking the Iraqi Translators story denied reading blogs, the paper's Political Correspondent, Greg Hurst, also worked on the story. Hurst admitted during interview that he read political blogs and used them as "sources … of comment" and "insight into the views of grassroots members of political parties" (Hurst, 2007. Interview with the author on 26 October 2007. London. [Electronic notes in possession of author]). This evidence indicates it is possible that information from the bloggers' campaign could have helped inform the story at some level.

Perhaps the strongest example of the complex relationship between political bloggers and the broadsheet media is demonstrated by the Smith Institute case study.

Evidence from the longitudinal chart shows that blogger Guido Fawkes published allegations about the probity of the Smith Institute before the *Daily Telegraph*, when it published the first story reporting the allegations[19] many of these had already been raised by Fawkes' blog.[20]

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[19] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/11/25/nlabour25.xml
[20] http://5thnovember.blogspot.com/2006/11/what-yates-should-ask-gordon.html

The newspaper article also asked questions about the Institute's connections with the *New Statesman* magazine and its owner Geoffrey Robinson. These questions were followed up in a number of subsequent blog posts by Fawkes.[21]

It is possible to consider the inter-relationship of both Fawkes' blog and the *Daily Telegraph* throughout the development of the story as an indicator of blog media agenda–setting. This is likely through blogs' focal point construction and framing of the story as well as the in the predicted flow of information between 'Opinion Leaders' and the public/media described by Brosius and Weimann's Two-Step Flow theory (Brosius and Weimann, 1996, in Tomaszeski, 2006).

Indeed, this possible inter-relationship is made stronger by comments made by the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent responsible for breaking and driving broadsheet coverage of the story.

Asked about his use of blogs the journalist, Christopher Hope, refused to name his source(s) but admitted he "followed the story as it developed [in the blogosphere]" and that "there was a cross-fertilisation – they [bloggers] broke bits and we broke bits." (Hope, C. Interview with the author on 21 December 2007. London. [Electronic notes in possession of author]).

Adding further weight to this is a remark made by Guido Fawkes who claimed he is often given information for new stories by journalists unable to use it in the mainstream media.[22]

Although more research is needed before firm conclusions can be made about he exact nature of the media agenda-setting effects of political blogs in the UK, results from this study clearly allude to a more complex relationship between the traditional, mainstream media and bloggers than previously thought.

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[21] See: http://www.order-order.com/2006/11/what-kind-of-charity-is-smith-insitute.html; http://www.order-order.com/2006/11/charity-commissioners-to-re.html & http://www.order-order.com/2006/12/sarah-who.html

[22] Staines, P. (Guido Fawkes), 2007. [Personal communication]. 2 November 2007.

CONCLUSIONS

Results from the media evaluation analysis of the three case studies and interviews with journalists responsible for reporting those stories show a clear disconnect between the perceived and actual media agenda-setting effects of UK political blogs.

Where UK political bloggers have appeared to influence the mainstream media agenda through triggering unreported stories to appear in print and framing issues for wider media coverage, evidence from within the media agenda-setting process has revealed a low awareness and almost non-existent use of blogs by journalists.

Taken at face value the results of this study offer insufficient evidence to fully confirm the media agenda-setting ability of political bloggers in the UK. However, this study has been a small-scale inquiry into a highly specific – although highly active - section of the UK's blogging community and its relation with the wider mainstream media. It is therefore unable to offer anything more than limited insight while arguably providing enough quantitative and qualitative evidence to justify - and indeed call for - further research into the function of the media agenda-setting process in the UK in a networked, "always on" internet age.

For instance it is possible the study's findings are not more conclusive due to a reluctance – conscious or unconscious - of journalists to admit the full extent of their use of blogs or bloggers as sources, concerned that in recognising their influence could put traditional journalists out of a job.

Similarly, it possible that the rapid emergence of radical new technologies, unthinkable to even McCombs and Shaw 35 years ago is making earlier critical perspectives of the media agenda-setting process entirely redundant. This is a trope so significant that it that may require the original agenda-setting paradigm to undergo further development and refinement.

Further Research

One conclusion that can be reached from this study is the potentially transitory nature of traditional actors (bloggers, journalists, editors etc) and processes (newsgathering, editing etc) within the agenda-setting paradigm.

The UK political blogosphere is at an early stage of development (Stanyer, 2006), as is its relationship with the traditional media. This is relationship is liable to change as younger, more technologically literate journalists enter the profession[23] and once amateur bloggers develop a much greater influence as has been seen in the US.

It can be argued that Dearing and Rogers' 'trigger events' (1996, p.40) and Drezner and Farrell's view of blogs as framing devices (2004, p.18) are part of wider critical theory that rely on dichotomous relationships between traditional and new media. Furthermore these theories seek to advance a theory of primacy of one medium or channel over the other, suggesting a direct cause and effect is at work within the media agenda-setting process.

However, the results of this study suggest that the relationship between the traditional and new media is either more complex than previously thought or actors (e.g. journalists) within the agenda-setting process are not revealing the full extent to which blogs are playing a part in the media agenda-setting process.

One agenda-setting theory that may offer us a more appropriate model for exploring how the UK news-making process is evolving and adapting to the role of bloggers is Brosius and Weimann's interpretation of the Two-Step Flow model (1996, in Tomaszeski, 2006).

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[23] More and more traditional UK media outlets are delivering 'unofficial' online news and comment through journalist blogs, conflating traditional and 'new' sources of media. The BBC's political correspondent, Nick Robinson, was one of the earliest reporters to start a blog. See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/nickrobinson

In particular, Tomaszeski's use of Brosius and Weimann's Four Models of Two-Step Flow (1996) places bloggers (as Opinion Leaders/Early Recognisers) at the centre of a flow of information from media to public and vice versa.

While this model still relies on a linear news-making process and perhaps still not perfect, it is arguably moving us towards a normative model of media agenda-setting in the internet age through being more representative of the networked world of communications in which the media now operates.

By recognising the social function of Opinion Leaders/Early Recognisers and their role in the news and information flow, Brosius and Weimann's models may allow us to recognise the fluid nature of media agenda-setting and the inevitable "cross-fertilisation" (Hope, C. Interview with the author on 21 December 2007. London. [Electronic notes in possession of author]) between blogs and traditional media that the evidence in this study shows is starting to take place.

Such a transition is highlighted by Lasica (2003) who asserts "weblogs should not be considered in isolation but as part of an emerging new media ecosystem – a network of ideas." (Lasica, 2003, p.71)

It is strongly recommended that further research into traditional media and blogs – especially political blogs as the most dominant type in the UK - is conducted to examine their symbiotic relationship (Lasica, 2003).

This will provide us perhaps with a fresh starting point from which we can start to develop new critical perspectives for media agenda-setting. Perspectives that build on agenda-setting's rich critical tradition while recognising the ever more complex information flow in today's rapidly changing networked information age in which the media – at all levels and in all its forms – operate.

APPENDIX A – List of bloggers used in purposive sampling to identify agenda-setting case studies

Name	Blog	Method of survey

Stuart Bruce	http://www.stuartbruce.biz	Personal conversation
Drew Benvie	http://theblogconsultancy.typepad.com	Personal conversation
Ellee Seymour	http://www.elleeseymour.com	Email
Richard Bailey	http://prstudies.typepad.com	Email
Sam Coates	http://www.conservativehome.com	Email
Stephen Tall	http://www.libdemvoice.org	Email
Alex Hilton	http://labourhome.org	Email

APPENDIX B - Overview of 'Rathergate'

On 8 September 2004, in the run up to the 2004 US presidential election, CBS ran a package on its *60 Minutes Wednesday* programme which included documents purporting to show criticisms of President Bush's service record when he served with the Texas Army National Guard.

Within hours of the broadcast bloggers were questioning the authenticity of the documents, which - alleged many bloggers - contained typological flaws suggesting the documents were forgeries.

CBS and the show's presenter, Dan Rather, insisted the documents were genuine in the face of online and mainstream media coverage about their authenticity. After two weeks of public debate – started by bloggers – an independent analysis of other copies of the documents obtained by USA Today indicated that they were likely to be forgeries.

This caused CBS to officially retract its allegations about the President's service record. Following an internal inquiry into the programme's editorial team 60 Minutes Wednesday's producer Mary Mapes and a number of senior news executives were asked to resign. CBS also apologised to viewers.

The show's presenter, Dan Rather, subsequently retired a year earlier than expected. A decision many people claim was due to the scandal leading to it being nick-named Rathergate.

APPENDIX C - Overview of Trent Lott scandal

The Republican Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott was witnessed by political bloggers praising outgoing Senator Strom Thurmond at his 100th birthday celebration. Lott said "we wouldn't of had all these problems" if Thurmond had won the presidency in 1948 - apparently a reference to earlier Thurmond's pro-

segregationist stance (Glaser, 2002). The majority of mainstream US media outlets ignored the remark, however bloggers including Josh Marshall, Andrew Sullivan, and David Frum strongly criticised Lott by publishing blog posts about the remarks.

Mainstream media did cover the remark but did not devote significant coverage to it until a week later when the public furore online and offline had increased to the point where they could no longer leave the story unreported.

After a further week of mainstream media coverage Lott resigned as Senate Majority leader. According to Drezner and Farrell "[m]ost political analysts credited "bloggers" with converting Lott's gaffe into a full-blown scandal." (2004, p.3)

APPENDIX D – Full list of journalists interviewed

Journalist	Position	Newspaper	Case Study
Jonathan Isaby	Deputy Diary Editor	Daily Telegraph	Cherie Blair/Hutton Report
Greg Hurst	Political Correspondent	The Times	Iraqi Translators
Richard Beeston	Diplomatic Editor	The Times	Iraqi Translators
Richard Norton-Taylor	Security Affairs Editor	Guardian	Iraqi Translators
Christopher Hope	Home and Legal Affairs Correspondent	Daily Telegraph	Smith Institute
Larry Elliott	Economics Editor	Guardian	Smith Institute/ Iraqi Translators

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