

## *Blogs and the Alito Nomination*

*By Taylor Ansley*

As the Supreme Court confirmation hearings for Samuel Alito raged on, the Republican National Committee convened exclusive meetings for a “handful” of individuals highlighted by addresses from “a stream of senators and top officials, including White House advisor Karl Rove” (Glover 2006). Their audience was not a group of major donors, policymakers, or even political correspondents for newspapers or news networks; the meetings sought to coalesce and anchor support from bloggers—authors of online “blogs” —for President Bush’s nominee (Glover 2006). This meeting was only one example of the growing influence of online political journalism, a trend that began less than a decade ago. Is the role of blogs in political messaging overestimated, or should more politicians be courting bloggers as potential message outlets? How successfully will politicians influence the new media, and how will new journalism models affect the quality and breadth of the information available to the electorate? How will the introduction of new media affect how journalists report the news and how politicians present their message?

Blogs represent a potentially dramatic change in how the public receives political information, how politicians attempt to shape coverage of their issue positions, and how traditional media outlets choose stories and present information. Is the emergence of internet blogs truly a ‘revolution’ in political communications and journalism? Will the rise of blogs lead to drastically different behavior by politicians and journalists? What impact do blogs have on the information we, the people, receive? This paper examines the triangular relationship between politicians, traditional media, and blogs

## ***I. Literature Review***

### ***Journalism***

We tend to think of journalism as something like “our modern cartography” in that “[i]t creates a map for citizens to navigate society” (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001, 164). What stories journalists cover, and how the “facts” of an issue are presented, can have a tremendous impact on the public perception of--and support for--political debates. If information gleaned from media outlets truly guides our perceptions and understanding of events and issues, it naturally follows that we should scrutinize and examine the factors that go into the information we read, hear, and watch. The responsibility we place in journalists “to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing” assumes journalism is largely committed to facts and objectivity above partisan emphasis on particular issues (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001, 17). Regardless of any real or perceived bias in journalists, the fact remains that there is simply not enough room on the front page of the newspaper or thirty minutes of the network news to cover every event and debate happening in a given moment. The limits of time, space, and attention span of the audience produce a necessary selection process for news stories that impact in large part the public discourse of the electorate. As Christopher Harper writes, “the media emphasize specific events, ideas, and social values . . . provid[ing] the issues about which one should think. The media also frame stories in certain ways that affect the way individual readers or listeners may interpret the news” (2003, 271). With news selection so important to public discourse, pure objectivity seems impossible; therefore, the question remains: how is the selection of issues

covered by journalists, and the way those issues are covered, influenced by political actors or other factors?

### *Politicians' Influence on Journalists*

The necessary selectivity of journalists in choosing which stories or issues to cover represents an ideal opportunity for politicians to both encourage coverage of issues they care about and discourage coverage of other issues. The “emphasis on a subset of politically relevant considerations” involved in a given issue “causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions” (Druckman 2001). Politicians promote consideration favoring their side in political debates, in hopes that these considerations reach a broader audience via the media and thereby sway public opinion. Politicians often successfully promote their message; one analysis of press coverage during the Clinton presidency, for example, concludes that statements by politicians on health care reform impacted the media’s coverage of issues (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). What determines whether politicians’ successfully influence news coverage?

Herbert Gans wrote of the journalist-source relationship: “although it takes two to tango . . . more often than not, sources do the leading” (qtd. in Cook 1989, 30). Journalistic routines and reliance on official sources (specifically politicians) help political actors to influence media coverage. In a 1959 book still relevant today, Journalist Douglass Cater, wrote of reporters in Washington:

“[Their] business . . . has become specialized, compartmentalized, channelized, even routinized to a degree that would shock [journalists of the past] . . . News production for the hungry American public has become an instantaneous, continuous, many-faceted and layered operation” (1959, 2-3).

Sigal, supporting the argument that routinized journalism enables indexing, describes what he sees as potential pitfalls in the reporter-politician relationship:

“Reporters pay a price for access: they become dependent on their official sources.

Dependence combines three elements: some reluctance to offend news sources in the stories they write, considerable willingness to print whatever their sources tell them, and little or no insistence that officials take responsibility for the information they pass along” (1973, 54).

The dependency is actually a co-dependency, affecting politicians as well. Reporters depend on politicians for access while politicians depend on reporters to increase their visibility and prospects for reelection.<sup>1</sup> Official sources may overwhelmingly drive news coverage; however, that tendency creates even further competition amongst potential sources. Do politicians have the upper hand in crafting news coverage, or does their dependency on journalists hinder politicians’ efforts to plant favorable messages in the media?

### ***Indexing and Manipulation***

Two ideas—the indexing hypothesis and issue manipulation—drive the bulk of existing research on the media-government relationship. Indexing by journalists describes a reliance on official sources for what stories are covered and an acceptance of input beyond official sources only “when those voices express opinions already emerging in official circles” (Bennett 1990, 106). Indexing is rational: newsmakers inherently select policymakers and powerful interests in reporting political news because those sources have the most influence on the issue at hand. Indexing as a pattern of media coverage creates an opportunity for politicians to manipulate journalists: under this theory, assertions by officials are rarely checked beyond other political

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Fenno has written extensively on the habits of politicians, notably *Homestyle: House Members in Their Districts*, Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc: 1978.

insiders, and politicians have the opportunity to focus media attention on issues that may differ from issues most important to voters. As Cook writes, “political actors in the three branches who wish to use the media’s power for their own goals must accommodate themselves to the institutional needs of the news media” (Cook 1998, 2). Once politicians “accommodate” journalists, the rewards for politicians can be huge.

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff describes manipulation as the construction of “mental structures that shape the way we see the world” (2004, xv).<sup>2</sup> Issue manipulation refers to efforts by political actors to focus the terms of debate or public attention on an issue within a given “mental structure” that favorably represents one side’s view. Politicians’ “press maneuvers seek[] to influence the outcome of a decision by changing the information on which it is predicated,” defining the terms of debate by issue manipulation. As citizens, we trust media actors to inform us, while “[w]ith the growth of . . . modern mass techniques for communicating the news about government, there has been a parallel growth in the subtle art of manipulating the flow of information” (Cater 1959, 21). Most people expect manipulation from politicians—it is, after all, a very effective and persuasive debating technique—but not from journalists. Lakoff writes: “it is the *special duty* of reporters to study [manipulation] and to learn to see through politically motivated frames, even if they have come to be accepted as everyday and commonplace” (2004, 51). While normatively this ideal might be true, in reality we must accept that if journalists overwhelmingly rely on official sources, they will be hard-pressed to see beyond issue manipulation of all sides of issues. What impact does issue manipulation have on traditional media, and is that impact the same in the blogosphere?

### ***The Digital Revolution***

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<sup>2</sup> Lakoff describes this manipulation as “framing.” Given the existing literature on framing (which differs from Lakoff’s definition), we will refer to Lakoff’s idea as issue manipulation rather than issue framing.

Scholars have long affirmed the role of “new technologies, from radio and television to sophisticated telecommunications,” in “expand[ing] the ability of politicians to circulate political messages widely and visibly” (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, 45). The newest of these technologies is the internet. The internet’s role in politics is already significant and continues to grow. A Pew study that found that in the 2000 election, “Fifty percent of Internet users under the age of thirty said the Net had affected their vote, a finding that suggests a generational shift in political culture” (Jenkins and Thorburn 2003, 2). Other statistics further emphasize this point: 31 million Americans--23% of internet users--read at least a single blog regularly, and the number of blogs more than doubles every five months (Bowers and Stoller 2005). What does the changing media landscape mean for journalists, politicians, and their interaction?

First, new media such as blogs may collaborate with traditional media sources, thus reinforcing patterns of indexing or issue manipulation. Alternatively, the blogs might produce a competing agenda of stories. The latter appears more likely. The indexing “hypothesis is an attempt to explain the behavior of ‘leading’ press organizations” while “news outlets in the sway of ideological missions or local tastes would deviate from this norm” of indexing (Bennett 1990, 106). Blogs, largely partisan and attracting niche groups of readers, fit the mold of the smaller news organizations Bennet describes—detached from beltway journalism both physically (bloggers publish from across the country and globe) and in how blogs operate. This detachment suggests that blogs might not be as susceptible to indexing. We hope to demonstrate that, while internet media sources may not engage in indexing as readily as traditional media outlets, they routinely engage in what we will term “secondary indexing:” bloggers without close relationships to official sources or major outlets promoting those sources’ messages by citing “‘leading’ press organizations” (Bennett 1990, 106).

In examining how politicians might succeed with efforts to set the agenda of new media, we must understand what differentiates blogs from traditional media. Jenkins and Thorburn argue that the internet “operates according to principles fundamentally different from those of [traditional] media: access, participation, reciprocity, and many-to-many rather than one-to-many communication” (2003, 2). Access is important in that blogs are free to read to anyone with an internet connection, unlike a subscription-based newspaper or cable news. Participation defines internet journalism, placing an emphasis on direct and immediate reader action in the form of comments, discussion forums, and online communities. Reciprocity and many-to-many communication are linked in that blog readers are drawn to the ability to participate and hear a variety of viewpoints, while blogs benefit (in terms of advertising revenue) from pleased readers who return regularly. While journalism is “a political institution,” (Cook 1998, 3) we believe that blogs operate in a manner that eschews convention, presenting new challenges for politicians hoping to spread their messages as widely as possible.

“[O]nline journalism stands to alter dramatically the traditional role of the reporter and editor” and thereby impact traditional media routines and systems (Harper 2003, 272). Perhaps the most innovative and illuminating study on this subject examines readers’ reactions to the same news story presented in traditional, newspaper format and in hypertext—an internet format that allows the reader to craft their own narrative from information presented (Huesca and Dervin 2003). The authors of this study found that the interactive, personalized online format appealed strongly to readers, observing:

“The repeated comments regarding reader agency and qualities of hypertext as a guide or outline suggest that readers want a dynamic mode of communication that allows them to

move through information in ways they find helpful, useful, or otherwise valuable”  
(Huesca and Dervin 2003, 302).

I will argue that these qualities of internet journalism represent a changing paradigm in media influence on public opinion and responsiveness to official actors. By enabling citizens to seek more control over the narrative of information they receive, the internet could represent a strong rejection by readers of politicians’ indexing efforts. A typical blog post (if such exists) might link to a congressional report directly as opposed to a politician’s statement on the same report. By eliminating the filter of politician spin or journalist interpretation, blogs create the opportunity for readers to craft their own narrative and frames of issues. Innovation such as this requires politicians to find new ways to spread their message effectively. What are these new methods and strategies, and are they successful in the online world?

While the internet’s role in electoral politics begs additional study, the same participatory and diversifying factors that make the internet increasingly more important in elections also point toward an emerging presence and importance of online journalism. “Both the left and right distrust monopoly broadcasting and embrace the promise of a more dispersed and participatory media,” Jenkins and Thorburn encourage, “although they would surely disagree, in the end, about the society they hope will emerge from the ‘digital revolution’” (2003, 10). How will the ‘digital revolution’ in journalism affect the relationship between politicians and journalists? How will new media respond to the indexing and framing that follows from official sources? I hope to shed light on these questions by demonstrating the complex triangular relationship between politicians, conventional media, and new media in the context of President George W. Bush’s three Supreme Court Nominees.

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