

***Blogs as Information Sources: The Impact of Source Credibility and Partisan Affiliation**

Geoffrey Sheagley
University of Minnesota, Morris
shea0105@morris.umn.edu

*This project was supported by the University of Minnesota's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program. To be presented at the 2007 Midwest Political Science Association. I am grateful to Angela Bos and Paula O'Loughlin for their assistance with this project. I would also like to thank Jamie Druckman for allowing me to use his research design and some of his stimulus materials.

This is a draft copy. Please consult the author before citing the paper.

“... the people ought to be enlightened, to be awakened, to be united, that after establishing a government, they should watch over it ... it is universally admitted that a well-instructed people alone can be permanently free.”¹

~James Madison

In the sixth edition of Lance Bennett’s classic *News, The Politics of Illusion*, he writes that one of the best ways news can serve democracy would be to develop more, “Diverse voices and viewpoints aimed at reducing the gap that ordinary people often feel separating them from the politicians and political insiders who dominate news content (Bennett 2005, p.31).” Popular wisdom suggests that with the proliferation of the Internet this goal has never been so close to being achieved. Unfortunately, to date research suggests that much of the news on the Internet is more of the same – concentrated among a few, elite news organizations and that citizens, much more often than not, choose to get their online news from these same select few websites. (Chadwick 2006). In short, current research suggests that even with the apparent bevy of sources of political information available online, most people migrate to only a few websites, which, in turn, gather most of their news from the Associated Press and Reuters (Chadwick 2006). This suggests that, at least to the degree hoped for, the Internet has not significantly expanded the marketplace of ideas. Political blogs have the potential to break out of this reality.²

For the most part blogs operate outside of the realm of the traditional mass media and provide the public with information traditional media outlets do not (Drezner and Farrell 2004; Gillmor 2006).³ Normatively, blogs appear to be beneficial to the polity for a number of reasons. At their most basic level blogs should benefit John Stuart Mill’s marketplace of ideas as they provide citizens with low cost information from a wide array of sources. Combining these benefits with their ease of access and use, it becomes readily apparent why interest in and use of

¹ http://www.learn-usa.com/of_relevance/q-ff.htm

² The Pew Internet and the American Life Project reports that, “blog readership jumped 58% in 2004 and now stands at 27% of Internet users.” However, in absolute terms political blogs are rarely used. The same study reports that only nine percent of Internet users reports reading political blogs often or sometimes.

³ Although as Chadwick (2006) points out traditional mass media outlets are increasingly creating their own political blogs.

political blogs has grown so rapidly. For better or for worse blogs are truly by the people and for the people. They have the power to provide citizens with new information from a plethora of sources.

Yet relying too heavily on blogs for political information may also have drawbacks. Chief among these problems is the highly partisan nature of blogs (Drezner and Farrell 2004). Sunstein (2001) highlights the potential for the Internet to facilitate political polarization by allowing for the personalization of political information. He points out that there is already technology available to “filter out” political information, which allows people to easily avoid exposure to opposing viewpoints (Sunstein 2001). What results is potentially an environment that aids in self-selection and drives wedges between people, not that aids deliberative democracy. Since blogs also operate within the structure of the Internet, they too may facilitate these potential problems. The highly partisan nature of blogs has the potential to make it easier for people to practice self-selection, a far cry from the ideals set forth in Mill’s marketplace.

Unfortunately, given how rapidly blogs have come to prominence, scholars have been forced to play a proverbial game of catch up. While there is already research on the interactions between blogs and the traditional mass media, effectively showing blogs to be agenda-setters, there is no research studying the potential individual-level impact blogs may have on citizens (Drezner and Farrell 2004). Given that most previous research examines the impact of political blogs on the media and other elites and the potential of blogs to positively or negatively impact individuals it is important to study the direct interactions that occur between people and political blogs.

Blogs⁴

⁴ The traditional audience of political blogs tends to be well-educated, young white males. Because of the digital divide it is virtually impossible for large segments of the population to access political blogs. While according to the Pew Center, “there has been a greater-than-average growth in blog readership among women, minorities, and those between the ages of 30 and 49 (Pew Center).” While this does not explicitly address *political* blog readership, it creates hope that readers of political blogs are becoming more diverse. That said, to date only 5 percent of people report using blogs often or sometimes for political information. Thus, it is important to temper findings in this area

An examination of the political blogosphere (which is the entirety of political blogs) shows that most readers localize around a relatively few elite blogs for their information (Drezner and Farrell 2004; Graf 2006; Chadwick 2006). Drezner and Farrell write that, “even though there are over a million bloggers, posting approximately 275,000 new items daily, the median blogger has almost no political influence as measured by traffic or hyperlinks” (Drezner and Farrell 2004, pg. 4). Still, even if only a few elite blogs are visited previous research already demonstrates that the information those blogs contain differs, at least at times, from what is covered by the traditional mass media (Chadwick 2006). These unique attributes require new explanations for questions about how this new form of information is accessed by citizens and how people internalize the information they obtain from these new sources.

There are two important aspects of blogs that require study: their perceived source credibility, which is especially important given that their content is created by “everyday” people, and the potential impact of their highly partisan nature. Given their apparent dissimilarity to other mediums of political communication, due to their user-created content and high levels of partisanship, multiple theories must be combined before predicting how political blogs may impact citizens. This paper strives to develop these theories by combining research on the Internet, political blogs, and political psychology. The following section highlights research on information processing, specifically recent work on motivation and framing effects to create a theory of the psychological mechanisms at work when/if people search for and read political blogs.

Information Processing and Motivation

As Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk (1997) point out, “the human mind...is severely limited in how much information can be kept in short-term or active memory at any

with the knowledge that currently only a very select group of people read political blogs. All information obtained from http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP_blogging_data.pdf

given time.” As such, individuals can keep only a finite amount of information stored in their memory. The Stony Brook model of on-line information processing allows for citizens to make political decisions consistent with their predispositions without having to be fully informed. Instead of recalling the specific details of all processed information, weighing one piece against the other, and translating the final weights into a decision, the on-line model suggests that when individuals receive information they automatically update their running tally (Taber 2003).

Taber, Lodge, and Glathar (2001) build on this simple model of information processing by accounting for peoples’ underlying motivations when searching for information. They show that peoples’ motivations influence the type(s) of information they look for and how that information is retained. They break down motivations into accuracy goals, the desire to find objective information, and directional goals, which are aimed at reinforcing predispositions (Taber et al. 2001). They emphasize that, “the stronger ones’ prior beliefs the weaker the struggle [between directional and accuracy goals](Taber et al. 2001).” This implies that directional goals “win out” among those with strong beliefs.

Taber (2003) elaborates on directional goals by showing their impact to be self-selection. He writes that, “Self-interest, political values, and especially group identifications create a power field of motivational forces, which orients citizens within their information environments” (Taber 2003). Of particular interest are people with the highest levels of political knowledge and people with the strongest beliefs, (such as in a candidate or an issue) who Taber finds are the most likely to practice self-selection. Similarly, Mutz (1998) finds that people with moderate levels of information who are exposed to information from a different perspective seek out more information about that perspective. In short, the goals a person uses when seeking information impacts what kinds of information he or she will seek.

Applying this research to blogs suggests that their current audience, at least demographically speaking, will be more likely to use directional goals when searching for political blogs to read. However, because blog readers are becoming more diverse there is some evidence that blog readers may use accuracy goals. Fried (1997) argues that people who expose themselves to non-mainstream media also tend to partake in information self-selection.⁵ As such, perhaps all readers of political blogs, whether they are of elite or average demographic status, are highly *politically* motivated and, as such, more inclined to use directional goals.

Media Effects

Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) argue that new media, a group which includes the Internet, and as such may also include blogs, is making it increasingly difficult for the traditional mass media, network television, newspapers, etc., to gatekeep, to control the agenda, and frame issues (Delli Carpini and Williams, in Bennett and Entman 2001). In short, traditional media is no longer a homogenous monolith of political information. As such, many non-traditional sources of information are gaining at least some degree of power. Therefore, it is important to determine what, if any, traditional media effects translate to the digital realm. One way to measure this impact is to study the extent to which political blogs can frame political issues.

Framing is the power of the media to create the lens, or context, through which issues are analyzed (Iyengar 1991). More specifically, framing effects occur when “two logically equivalent (but not *transparently* equivalent) statements of a problem lead decision makers to choose different options (Druckman 2001). For example, when the topic of a news story is framed as a potential gain as opposed to a potential loss citizens are more inclined support it and vice-versa, even though the actual potential result of the topic in question does not change (Tversky and Kahneman 1981). This effect can be created in a number of ways. Dominic

⁵ I acknowledge that Fried is not writing about the Internet, let alone blogs, so her findings cannot be directly applied to research on blogs. However given that blogs are non-mainstream sources of information her research is likely speaking about them as well.

Lasorsa and Stephen Reese (1990) find that using different sources in articles can change how the story is framed. James Druckman (2001) suggests that the extent to which people believe the source of the information they are receiving is credible influences how much impact it has. Information from non-credible sources showed no evidence of framing effects (Druckman 2001). Applying this research to blogs suggest that different partisan blogs, a conservative versus a liberal blog for instance, may choose to highlight different aspects of the same story. Highlighting different aspects of a story could frame the story differently, possibly resulting in opinions about the topic differing because of which blog was read. For instance, Druckman and Parkin (2005) show that ideological bias in news coverage influences people in the same direction as the coverage (Druckman and Parkin 2004). However, as Druckman also suggest, this power to frame is not without its limitations.

Because reading political blogs requires, to varying degrees, searching for them on the Internet, then research on motivation must be combined with work on framing to formulate hypotheses about the impact of blogs on the electorate. Different types of motivation impact what types of political information people will seek. Further, different sources of information may frame the material differently. It is clear that motivation and framing are intrinsically linked. Put simply, even if they are looking for information on the same topic, a person using directional goals may come to a conclusion entirely different from someone using accuracy goals.

Applying previous research to political blogs suggests that the characteristics of blogs should impact how they influence people. The motivation people use when seeking political information from blogs is also important. Based on what types of goals they employ, one should expect to see a difference in what types of political blogs people choose to read. If, for instance, people use directional goals when seeking information from blogs then we would expect to see

them selecting blogs they believe will conform to their predispositions. If this occurs then we should expect to find bias similar to what is outlined by Druckman and Parkin. However, the perceived credibility of political blogs plays a key role in determining whether or not they have the power to influence citizens. Specifically, blogs that are not credible should have little to no power to frame political issues.

Hypotheses

Given this previous research, three questions about blogs are raised. First, what role does source credibility play in both the choice to read a blog and the impact it has on the reader? In short, do credible blogs have the same power to influence citizens as traditional media does? Second, what influence does the partisan affiliation of a blog have on people seeking information -- does it act as a cue for readers seeking information consistent with their predispositions? Alternatively, do citizens ignore the partisanship of a blog in favor of another, yet-to-be determined reason? Third, what is the nature of the interplay between partisanship and source credibility; do readers seek blogs that align with their partisan affiliation despite the presence of blogs with higher levels of credibility? Conversely, do readers seek credibility even when given the opportunity to read partisan blogs? These questions are structured in the following four hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: When presented with a choice between credible and non-credible blogs participants will choose information from the credible blog.

Hypothesis 2: Participants exposed to information from a credible blog will be more greatly influenced than people exposed to information from a non-credible blog.

Hypothesis 3: Participants will select blogs that align to their own partisan affiliation when given the option between blogs of similar and opposite political affiliation.

Hypothesis 4: Highly partisan participants will practice self-selection in order to avoid being exposed to information inconsistent with their beliefs. When given the option they will choose partisan blogs over credible blogs.

Methods and Measures⁶

A total of 185 participants from a Midwest college participated in some part of this study.⁷ All participants were recruited from classes and were compensated extra-credit for their participation. The entire study was administered online, using the online survey collection website surveymonkey.com and a separate website for the stimulus materials. Before conducting the actual study I administered a pre-survey to a random sample of participants in my study. The pre-survey was utilized to determine what types of political blogs people find credible and non-credible.⁸ Based on the results of the pre-survey the stimulus materials for the study were created and participants were randomly assigned to treatments.

The first part of the study, the experiment, is aimed at testing of hypothesis two. It is similar to the experiment administered by Druckman (2001) but is adapted for use in my study. The experiment has two factors and a control.⁹ After being randomly assigned to treatments, participants were instructed to open a link to a blog post about a Ku Klux Klan rally at a Midwest school. This particular article was selected so that the results from this study could, as accurately as possible, be compared to those from Druckman's study. There are two versions of the article, one framing the rally as an expression of freedom of speech and the other as a danger to public safety. Each of the two articles has two versions: one presented from a highly credible source and the other from a non-credible source. The highly credible source is a blog that receives a large number (250,000) of visitors per day and the non-credible blog is labeled as

⁶ For a copy of the pre-survey see Appendix A. For the text from the framing experiment see Appendix B.

⁷ A total of 64% of participants were male, 33% were female. The participants' average party identification (seven point scale) was 3.14 (where 1 = strong Democrat and 7 = strong Republican). 64% of participants were in their first two years of college and 34% were in their junior and senior years.

⁸ The pre-survey measures credibility of blogs based on the number of visitors it receives, the number of other blogs that link to it, and the authors, real, fictitious, and anonymous, sources.

⁹ Control (n = 15), Factor One: public safety low credibility (n = 26), public safety high credibility (n = 39), Factor Two: free speech low credibility (n = 35), free speech high credibility (n = 38).

receiving very few (250). After reading the article participants were asked to rank, on a scale from one to seven, their support, or lack of support, for the rally.¹⁰

After the experiment participants completed a short distraction task designed to break up the two blog-related aspects of my study. They were asked to read an article and then write down three items they remember reading. After completing the distraction task, participants began the observational study. In this portion of the study participants were instructed to click a link which opened a mock blog directory.¹¹ They were then asked which blog they would choose to read for political information. In total they opened three such directories, each corresponding to a hypothesis. Participants first chose between a credible and non-credible blog, next between a liberal and a conservative blog, and finally between a credible blog, and two partisan blogs (one conservative and one liberal). It is important to note that selecting the blogs did not result in participants actually reading blogs. Finally, participants ended by answering questions about blog use, their opinion about the credibility of blogs, demographics, and level of political information.

Results

Hypothesis One

When presented with a choice between credible and non-credible blogs participants will choose information from the credible blog. The dependent variable in hypothesis one (the first observational study) is blog choice and the independent variable is blog type. Blog type has two levels, credible and non-credible. I predict that significantly more participants will select the credible blog over the non-credible blog. There is ample evidence from the study to support this.

¹⁰ The question wording is as follows: *On a scale from one to seven, with one being not allow and seven being allow, please state if you think the Ku Klux Klan should be allowed to hold a demonstration at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.* 1 – Should Not Allow, 4 – Neutral, 7 – Should Allow.

¹¹ Specifically participants were told the following: Please copy and paste the following link into a new browser. **[insert link to blog]**. This is a popular directory for political blogs. Please read the description for each blog carefully before answering the questions. They were then asked which blog they would choose to read for political information.

Evidence suggests that significantly more participants chose to read the credible blog over the non-credible blog ($t_{161} = 36.275, p < .000$). In fact, over seventy percent of participants chose the credible blog. There is no evidence that a participant's party identification, political blog use, or political knowledge had any relationship to blog choice.¹² The lack of an effect from political blog use and political knowledge is quite surprising, as one would expect those who use political blogs and/or are have high levels of political knowledge would be more inclined to select the credible blog.

Hypothesis Two

Participants exposed to information from a credible blog will be more greatly influenced than people exposed to information from a non-credible blog. The dependent variable in hypothesis two (the experiment) is tolerance/support of the rally. If my hypothesis is correct, the two high credibility articles should be significant predictors of the dependent variable. This significance may come in three ways: evidence of a difference in support for the rally between those that read any versions of the article and those assigned to the control group, between either or both of the groups that received the high credibility frame and the groups that received the low credibility frame, and finally between the two groups that each received the high credibility frames.

There is no evidence of framing effects from the experiment. There is no evidence of a difference in support for the rally between the control group and any of groups that received one of the four stimuli.¹³ There are also no results to suggest a difference in rally support between participants who read the two different types of highly credible blogs, as compared to those who

¹² *Party Identification* is measured on a 7-point scale, with 1 = strong Democrat to 7 = strong Republican, *Political Blog Use* is a 7-point scale, with 1 = every day, 2 = 3-5 times per week, 3 = once per week, 4 = once every two weeks, 5 = once each month, 6 = once a year, and 7 = never (average = 6.2, std. deviation = 1.532), and *Political Knowledge* is a composite measure of five individual political knowledge questions. If a participant answered none of the five questions correctly they received a composite score of 1, if they answered one question correctly they received a two, etc.

¹³ High credibility free speech frame ($p = .912$), low credibility free speech frame ($p = .554$), high credibility public safety frame ($p = .963$), low credibility public safety frame ($p = .172$).

read a low credibility blogs (free speech frame high vs. low, $t_{71} = .320, p = .750$; public safety frame high vs. low, $t_{63} = -.450, p = .687$). Finally, there is no evidence of a difference in rally support between the high credibility free speech blog and the high credibility public safety blog ($t_{75} = -.189, p = .850$). These findings are supported with one-way and two-way ANOVAs. Some of the variables analyzed in the ANOVAs include party identification, political blog use, political knowledge, and year in school. Two-way ANOVAs analyzed, among other variables, whether political blog use or party ID by treatment had any impact on the findings.¹⁴

In sum, there is no evidence of a relationship between treatment, and a number of other variables, and rally support. The results do not suggest a relationship between credibility, no matter what level, and support for the rally. The lack of evidence of framing effects suggests that blogs, at least in this context, do not have the power to frame issues.

Hypothesis Three

Participants will select blogs that align to their own partisan affiliation when given the option between blogs of similar and opposite political affiliation. The dependent variable in hypothesis three (the second observational study) is blog choice. It has one independent variable, political ideology (seven levels). I expect liberals to select the liberal blog and conservatives to select the conservative blog. I have no expectations about political moderates. The results suggest that there is a relationship between a participant's political ideology and the partisan blog he or she selected. A Chi-square test between ideology and the partisan blog variable reveals evidence of a relationship ($X^2 = 84.97, p < .000$). All three levels of liberal political ideology, strong, moderate, and weak, chose the liberal blog at a greater-than-predicted

¹⁴ Some of the two-way ANOVAs may not be reliable due to small number of participant sub-populations, particularly political blog use by treatment.

rate. The same is true for conservatives. The proportion of moderates who selected either the liberal or conservative blog conformed to expected values.¹⁵

The direction of the relationship is illustrated using logistic regression.¹⁶ The political ideology variable is recoded for the regression to eliminate political moderates.¹⁷ *Ceteris paribus*, liberals were 3.677 times more likely to select the liberal political blog than the conservative blog.¹⁸ Conservatives were 1.85 times less likely to select the liberal political blog. This specific regression excludes independents, however including them does not significantly change the final outcome. Not surprisingly there is ample evidence supporting the second hypothesis. When given an explicit choice between a blog of a similar partisan affiliation and the opposite partisan affiliation, all else remaining equal, participants select a blog of similar political persuasion. The results from this test suggest that participants used the political affiliation of the political blog when choosing between blogs.

Hypothesis Four

Highly partisan participants will practice self-selection in order to avoid being exposed to information inconsistent with their beliefs. When given the option they will choose partisan blogs over credible blogs. The dependent variable in hypothesis four (observational study three) is blog choice. It has one independent variable, blog type, with three levels, highly credible, liberal, and conservative. I expect to see strong partisans select the blogs similar to their own partisan affiliation and given the lack of alternatives I expect to see moderates select the credible

¹⁵ The Chi-square analysis predicted that 13 moderates would select the liberal blog, 14 did. It predicted that Six moderates would select the conservative blog, five did.

¹⁶ Model Fit Statistics :Hosmer and Lemeshot Test Chi-square 5.569, $df = 8$, $p = .695$; -2 log likelihood = 113.895; Nagelkerke R Square = .547.

¹⁷ Political ideology 1 = liberal, 2 = conservative.

¹⁸ The regression controlled for political blog use, political knowledge, gender, and year in school. *Political knowledge*: a composite of five separate political knowledge questions. If a participant answered none of the five questions correctly they received a composite score of 1, if they answered one question correctly they received a two, etc. *Political blog use*: this is a composite measure, not to be confused with the political blog use variable used in analysis for hypothesis one. Participants who reported using political blogs at least once every two weeks (or more) were labeled as using political blogs while those who reported using them less than that were categorized as not using political blogs

blog. The results support for the fourth hypothesis. The analysis of a relationship between partisanship, as measured by political ideology reveals relationship between political ideology and blog choice ($X^2 = 44.834$, $p < .000$). Specifically, results show that participants identifying as liberal selected the liberal blog and conservatives selected the conservative blog at a higher than expected rate.¹⁹ The relationship between ideology and blog choice is shown through a number of additional Chi-square analyses.²⁰

Logistic regression sheds light on the relationship between political ideology and blog choice. The dependent variable in this regression is blog choice (two levels – partisan vs. credible) and the main independent variable is political ideology (two levels – strong political ideology and weak political ideology).²¹ The variables included in the regression are composite political knowledge, composite political ideology, political blog use, party identification (three levels), and year in college.²²

Table One – Logistic Regression of Political Ideology and Blog Choice²³

Variable	B	S.E.	Significance	Degrees of Freedom
Constant	1.803	.993	.069	1
Political Ideology2	-1.061	.453	.019	1

¹⁹ Liberal blog, predicted 18 percent would select, 28 percent actually selected; conservative blog, predicted 8.3 percent would select, 44 percent actually selected.

²⁰ Specifically, changing partisan ideology to, for instance, “liberals and non-liberals (conservatives + moderates)” and the political blog types to “liberal and non-liberal (conservative + credible)” still shows a significant relationship ($X^2 = 11.886$, $p < .001$). This is true of conservatives as well ($X^2 = 30.043$, $p < .000$). It remains true if participants’ political ideologies are re-categorized into “strong (extremely liberal/liberal and conservative/extremely conservative) and weak (slightly liberal/moderate/slightly conservative)” and the blogs are categorized into partisan (liberal and conservative) and not partisan (credible) ($X^2 = 4.469$, $p = .026$).

²¹ *Political ideology2*: since previous findings in this paper suggest that participants on the edges of the political spectrum, both liberals and conservatives, may act differently than moderates when choosing political blogs this composite measure re-categorizes participants into strong (extremely liberal/liberal and conservative/extremely conservative) political ideology and weak (slightly liberal/moderate/slightly conservative) political ideology.

²² *Political knowledge*: a composite of five separate political knowledge questions. If a participant answered none of the five questions correctly they received a composite score of 1, if they answered one question correctly they received a two, etc. *Political blog use2*: this is a composite measure, not to be confused with the political blog use variable used in analysis for hypothesis one. Participants who reported using political blogs at least once every two weeks (or more) were labeled as using political blogs while those who reported using them less than that were categorized as not using political blogs. *Party ID* – 1 = Democrat, 2 = Moderate, 3 = Conservative. *Year in College* – 1 = freshman, 2 = sophomore, 3 = junior, 4 = senior and above.

²³ Model Fit Statistics :Hosmer and Lemeshow Test Chi-square 8.516, $df = 8$, $p = .385$; -2 log likelihood = 156.680; Nagelkerke R Square = .127.

Political Blog Use2	-1.215	.564	.031	1
Political Knowledge	.263	.155	.090	1
Party ID	-.057	.236	.808	1
Year in College	.181	.203	.374	1

Results from the regression reveal that political ideology plays a role when participants are given a choice between a credible and partisan blogs. Specifically, the odds ratio shows that, *ceteris paribus*, going from weak ideology to strong ideology decrease the likelihood of selecting the credible blog 1.061 times (significant at $p < .05$ level). Additionally, people who report using political blogs at least once every two weeks were 1.215 times less likely to select the credible blog (significant at $p < .05$ level). Also, as levels of political information increased participants became more likely to select the credible political blog. There is no evidence that a participant’s year in college or the participant’s party identification, which is presumably controlled for by political ideology, have any impact on their likelihood to select one type of political blog over the other.²⁴

Conclusion

The results suggest that in different situations citizens use different criteria when deciding what type of political blog to frequent. Specifically, consistent with earlier work by Druckman (2001), participants sought information from sources they perceived as credible. Further, people with strong political ideologies sought information from sources they assumedly perceived as aligning with their partisan affiliation. In short, political psychological theories of credibility and motivation are applicable to political blogs and to a degree correctly predict the interaction between political blogs and individuals.

The final two groups of findings are the most interesting. Supporting the fourth hypothesis, there is evidence that some people may be inclined to choose partisan blogs over

²⁴ Included in the model to control for potential effects from younger, potentially more “wired” college students

those that are credible. There is reason to believe that people with strong political ideologies, both conservatives and liberals alike, are more likely to seek information from a partisan political blog and less likely to seek information from a credible blog than those with moderate ideologies. This is consistent with work on motivation, which predicts people with strong political ideologies are more likely to use direction goals when seeking information (Taber et al. 2001). This is doubly important given the finding that suggests a positive relationship between political blog use and selection of partisan blogs. This last finding is also consistent with research showing that people who frequent blogs tend to be on the edges of the political spectrum (Chadwick 2006). It is also interesting to take note of what political moderates did. The results suggest that they used accuracy goals when searching for information. However, given the lack of alternatives, specifically that there was no moderate political blog option, more research is required before trumpeting this finding. In sum there is evidence that political ideology, political blog use, and political knowledge each play a role when selecting political blogs. People with strong ideologies and who frequent political blogs at least once every two weeks tend to choose highly partisan blogs. Conversely, high levels of political knowledge are associated with selecting the credible blog.

The importance of these findings is based, in large part, on how effective blogs are at impacting people on the individual level. Given that there were no significant differences between the various treatments and the control group, results suggest that political blogs, no matter their level of credibility, may have little to no power to frame political issues. It appears that conventional wisdom regarding the power of blogs to impact individuals may be correct. It seems that even if blogs offer new information they have little power to impact people directly. Unfortunately, the reason for this lack of power is not clear, but it may be that because of the relative newness of political blogs. It is somewhat surprising that even among the young, those

who are generally regarded as early adopters of new technology, political blogs still seemed to lack an *inherent* credibility. Unfortunately there were far too few participants (twenty percent) who reported using political blogs enough to test whether blog use mitigates political blogs' apparent lack of credibility.

While there is no evidence that political blogs impact people directly there are findings consistent with theory that the Internet may aid in people's self-selection of information. Further, political psychological theory that people practice self-selection when seeking information is correctly applied to the world of blogs. If later studies reveal that political blogs are, among other influences, able to directly impact citizens then these findings suggest potential problems, especially given the findings that those who actually use political blogs may forgo credibility in favor of partisanship. In a liberal democracy, founded on principles of open political discourse and the marketplace of ideas, serious problems may result if citizens choose to ignore credible information and information from different political points of view in favor of information that conforms to what they already believe. Given the importance that political blogs may play in future there are a number of areas concerning blogs that must still be researched.

There are numerous ways to expand on this research. It seems the most important first step is to content analyze political blogs. This would allow the use of issues that correspond more closely to what is actually covered in the blogosphere. Additionally, it is important to conduct more analysis on people who report reading political blogs. Unfortunately, given the relatively small pool of potential participants at this author's current location this is not currently feasible. Changing the measures of credibility, such as comparing blogs created by major media outlets and those created by "everyday" people or using a measure of credibility similar to what was used in the observational study, may suggest findings different than those in this study.

Perhaps number of visitors per day a political blog receives is not the best measure of a blog's credibility. Also, substituting actual, highly frequented political blogs for the mock ones used in the study could also be revealing. Finally, if in the future blogs are shown to frame information then it would also be interesting to study competing frames presented in blogs. Recently, Druckman and Chong presented research that studies the impact on people of stories that contain competing frames.²⁵ Continued study of the interactions between credibility and partisanship in political blogs may be revealing.

Appendix A

Credibility Pre Survey

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study on people and political information. Your answers are completely confidential and your name will never be connected to your responses. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. Thank you for participating.

Please read the following statement. You can feel free to refer back to it if need be.

A blog, short for weblog, is, “an online diary; a personal chronological log of thoughts published on a Web page.” Blogs come in many forms, ranging from a personal journal to an ongoing political publication. Political blogs are one type of blog and are quickly gaining popularity. I would now like to ask you a some questions. First I am going to ask you about your thoughts on blogs.

Section 1 -- Blogs

1. How often do you use blogs as a source of political information?
 - a. 5 or more times a week
 - b. 2-3 times a week
 - c. Once every two weeks
 - d. Once a month
 - e. Once a year
 - f. Never

2. One way people decide if a blog is credible or not is by the number of visitors per day the blog receives.
 - A. How many visitors per day would you require before considering a blog to be credible?
 - a. 100
 - b. 1,000
 - c. 10,000

²⁵ Presented at the 2006 APSA meeting in Philadelphia

- d. 100,000
- e. 500,000
- f. 1 Million or greater
- g. Political blogs are not credible

B. What about an anonymous blog?

- a. 100
- b. 1,000
- c. 10,000
- d. 100,000
- e. 500,000
- f. 1 Million or greater
- g. Political blogs are not credible

3. Another way people decide if a specific blog is credible is by the number of other blogs that provide a link to that specific blog.

A. How many links would you require before considering a blog to be credible?

- a. 10
- b. 100
- c. 500
- d. 1,000
- e. 5,000
- f. Political blogs are not credible

B. What about an anonymous blog?

- a. 10
- b. 100
- c. 500
- d. 1,000
- e. 5,000
- f. Political blogs are not credible

4. I am now going to list a number of sources of political blogs, both hypothetical and real. On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate how much you trust the individual as a source of political information.

	Do not Trust		Neutral		Trust
Colin Powell	1	2	3	4	5
Jerry Springer	1	2	3	4	5
A National Enquirer	1	2	3	4	5

Correspondent					
A New York Times Correspondent	1	2	3	4	5

5. On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate how the level of knowledge of political information each source has.

	Low level of Knowledge		Medium Level of Knowledge		High Level of Knowledge
Colin Powell	1	2	3	4	5
Jerry Springer	1	2	3	4	5
A National Enquirer Correspondent	1	2	3	4	5
A New York Times Correspondent	1	2	3	4	5

Section II – Demographic questions

1. Generally speaking, how would you describe your political party preference?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strong Democrat	Weak Democrat	Independent Who Leans Democrat	Pure Independent	Independent Who Leans Republican	Weak Republican	Strong Republican

2. Please circle the number that best corresponds to your political views.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate: Middle of the Road	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative

3. If you voted in the last Presidential election, who did you vote for? If you did not vote, who would you have voted for?

- John Kerry
- George W. Bush
- Ralph Nader
- Other: _____
- Did not vote

4. What is your gender?

Male

Female

5. What is your age? _____ years

6. Which best describes your year in college?

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior (4th year or beyond)

7. How would you describe the place where you grew up?

Urban

Rural

Suburban

Other: _____

8. Please indicate which race best describes you

White

Hispanic / Latino

African American / Black

Asian or Pacific Islander

American Indian / Native American

Other (please specify): _____

9. Are you a US citizen?

Yes

No

Political Knowledge

Now, I would like to ask you a few questions about public figures and the political system in general. Please respond to each of the following questions as thoroughly as possible.

10. What job or political office does **Dick Cheney** currently hold?

11. What job or political office does **Antonin Scalia** currently hold?

12. What job or political office does **Tony Blair** currently hold?

13. What job or political office does **Dennis Hastert** currently hold?

14. Which political party currently has the most members in the Senate in Washington?

15. Which political party currently has the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington?

16. How long is the term of office for a U.S. senator?

17. Whose responsibility is it to nominate judges to the Federal Courts — the President, the Congress, or the Supreme Court?

Appendix B

Public Safety Frame

Possible Klan Rally Raises Safety Concerns

Can University of Wisconsin, Madison police prevent a riot if the KKK rally? The Ku Klux Klan has requested a permit to conduct a speech and rally on the University of Wisconsin campus during the summer of 2007. Officials and administrators will decide whether to approve or deny the request in April.

Numerous courts have ruled that the U.S. Constitution ensures that the Klan has the right to speak and hold rallies on public grounds and that individuals have the rights to hear the Klan's message if they are interested. Many of the Klan's appearances have been marked by violent clashes between Klan supporters and counter demonstrators who show up to protest the Klan's racist activities. In a recent confrontation in Ann Arbor, Michigan, several bystanders were injured by rocks thrown by Klan supporters and protestors. Usually, a large police force is needed to control the crowds.

Opinion about the speech and rally is mixed. Many University of Wisconsin, Madison students, faculty, and staff have expressed great concern about campus safety and security during a Klan rally. One observer remarked: "Freedom of speech is important, but so is the safety of the Wisconsin, Madison community and the security of our campus. Considering the violence at past KKK rallies, I don't think the University has an obligation to all this to go on. Safety must be our top priority."

Free Speech Frame

Klan Tests University's Commitment to Free Speech

How far is the University of Wisconsin, Madison prepared to go to protect freedom of speech? The Ku Klux Klan has requested a permit to conduct a speech and rally on the University of Wisconsin, Madison campus during the Summer of 2007. Officials and administrators will decide whether to approve or deny the request in April.

Numerous courts have ruled that the U.S. Constitution ensures that the Klan has the right to speak and hold rallies on public grounds and that individuals have the rights to hear the Klan's message if they are interested. Many of the Klan's appearances have been marked by violent

clashes between Klan supporters and counter demonstrators who show up to protest the Klan's racist activities. In a recent confrontation in Ann Arbor, Michigan, several bystanders were injured by rocks thrown by Klan supporters and protestors. Usually, a large police force is needed to control the crowds.

Opinion about the speech and rally is mixed. Many University of Wisconsin, Madison students, faculty, and staff worry about the rally but support group's right to speak. One observer remarked: "The Klan has the right to speak and people have the right to hear them if they want to. We may have some concerns about the rally, but the right to speak and hear what you want takes precedence over our fears about what could happen."

Sources

Bennet, W. Lance (2005). *News, The Politics of Illusion*. Sixth Edition. Pearson Education Inc.

Chadwick, Andrew (2006). *Internet Politics*. New York, Oxford University Press Inc.

Delli Carpini, Michael X and Bruce A. Williams "Let Us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Age," in *Mediated Politics*, eds. W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 160-181.

Drezner, Daniel W. and Henry Farrell. (2004). *The Power and Politics of Blogs*. Presented at the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois.

Druckman, James N. (2001). *On the Limits of Framing Effects: Who Can Frame?* *The Journal of Politics* 63 Number 4. Blackwell Publishers. Malden MA.

Druckman, James N. and Michael Parkin. (2005). *Media Bias and Its Effect on Voters*. *The Journal of Politics* 67: 1030-1049.

Fried, Amy. (1997). *Muffled Echoes, Oliver North and the Politics of Public Opinion*. Chichester, West Sussex, New York, Columbia University Press

Gillmor, Dan. (2004). *Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. Sebastopol, California, O'Reilly Media Inc.

Iyengar, Shanto (1991). *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

Lasorsa, Dominic L. and Stephen D. Reese. (1990). *News Source Use in the Crash of 1987: A Study of Four National Media*. In Graber, Doris A (Eds.) (2000) *Media Power in Politics*. CQ Press, A division of Congressional Quarterly Inc. Washington, DC.

Lau, Richard R. and David P. Redlawsk. (1997). *Voting Correctly*. In Niemi, Richard G. and Weisberg, Herbert F. (Eds.) (2001). *Controversies in Voting Behavior*. Washington DC, CQ Press.

Mutz, Diana C. (1998). *Impersonal Influence How Perceptions of Mass Collections Affect Political Attitudes*. New York, New York, Cambridge University Press

Sunstein, Cass. (2001). *Republic.com* Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press

Taber, Charles S. (2003). *Information Processing and Public Opinion*. In Sears, Huddy, and Jervis (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Taber, Charles, Milton Lodge, and Jill Glathar. (2001). *The Motivated Construction of Political Judgments*. In James H. Kuklinski. (Ed). *Citizens and Politics: Perspectives from Political Psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tversky, Amos and Daniel Kahneman (1981). *The Framing of Decisions and Psychology of Choice*. *Science* 211: 453-458.