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Mainstream Media and Weblogs
Competing or complementary publics?

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Discussing the connections between Blogs and Mainstream Media (MSM) for an international audience poses some problems:

- Different levels of *internet penetration* and *blog diffusion*
- Different *media systems* (centralization, commercialization, state control, freedom of speech, ...)
- Different *cultural values, expectations and norms* regarding self-presentation, public discussion and social networking

This presentation will outline and discuss two general ideas:

1. MSM and blogosphere do compete for attention, but are based on different practices for publishing and referencing information
2. Mass-mediated publics and personal publics of the blogosphere do complement each other in terms of mutual referencing and providing different kinds of information about current events
Filtering attention

- Basic problem of information management: How to find relevant information within a seemingly boundless sea of events and sources?
- MSM: journalists acting as gatekeepers
- Blogosphere: introducing additional filtering mechanisms
  1. *Wisdom of Google*: Search engines favor sources that are constantly updated and heavily linked (=blogs)
  2. *Wisdom of the crowd*: making aggregated selections of all other users visible: digg, technorati, ...
  3. *Wisdom of your own network*: customizing individual news repertoire through RSS feeds
- MSM and Blogosphere are both contributing to publics of varying size/audience
Contrasting MSM and Blogs

- Both in MSM and blogosphere, publics emerge as result of individual publishing/posting & referencing/linking practices
- However, elements of practices differ:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Traditional journalism</th>
<th>Blogs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selection criteria</td>
<td>▪ News factors</td>
<td>▪ Personal relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach to audience</td>
<td>▪ Audience as passive recipient</td>
<td>▪ Audience as co-creator, „distributed conversations“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation style</td>
<td>▪ Detached, Neutral, ’both’ sides</td>
<td>▪ Personal, Opinionated, One-sided</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story form</td>
<td>▪ Structured format (e.g. inverted pyramid)</td>
<td>▪ Fragments, Incomplete, Open text, Hyperlinks for credibility</td>
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<td>▪ Answers basic questions (who, what, etc.)</td>
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<td>▪ Closed text</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Sources and datelines for credibility</td>
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Source: adapted from Wall (2005)
Ranking publics

Attention / Audience size

Mass-mediated publics (e.g. global or national events)

Topical / partial publics (e.g. scientific discourse, local events)

„Personal publics“ (e.g. holiday pictures; experiences from daily life)
Overlapping publics

- Rather than being exclusive, MSM publics and personal publics overlap and complement each other

1. Blogs are increasingly used by MSM as additional communication channel
   - e.g. Jerusalem post: currently 27 blogs
     - some high-ranked authors (Likud chairman Netanyahu; former NY mayor Ed Koch)
     - few postings get comments though
   - e.g. Tagesspiegel [Berlin]: currently 8 blogs
     - „Flatworld“-Blog by editor Clemens Wergin (focussing on international affairs) has some heated debates on neo-conservative positions
   - e.g. taz [Berlin]: currently 33 blogs
     - „Hitler-Blog“ by freelance journalist Daniel Erk deconstructs the ways Hitler / Nazi symbolics appears in various popular cultures
2. Mutual Agenda Setting
   - MSM increasingly watch and cite Blogs as additional or alternative sources for news and commentary
   - Blogs refer to, comment on and further diffuse MSM stories

Where do German blogs link to?

Source: deutscheblogcharts.de; 3rd Jan 2007. Shown are the numbers of blogs that link to particular sites (based on technorati.com)

Blue: MSM
Red: Blogs
While there are a few blogs that reach wide audiences, most are part of the "long tail", meaning they have relatively small audiences ("personal publics")

But judging the impact of blogs by audience size alone is not sufficient

Personal publics provide the bloggers opportunities for identity management (presenting oneself, one’s experiences and opinions to others) and relationship management:

- Through links and comments, social networks are articulated and expanded
- These networks provide 'social capital' of various kinds
  1. Information dissemination
  2. Strengthening group solidarity
  3. Providing socio-emotional assistance

Different functions can be exemplified through War Blogs
Blogs in the Israel-Lebanon War

“A live blog from an Israeli bunker via laptop and wifi. Provides a unique and unprecedented insight into the rapidly escalating situation in the middle east. Experience the events thru the eyes of the people who live them, and perhaps get an idea of how it's really like over here. This is much more human and accurate then the major news channels.” (http://israelibunker.blogspot.com/)

This blog was created to honor the memory of Lebanese heroes of all sects who were assassinated for their patriotic stands. May God bless their souls and bless Lebanon.” (http://lebanesebloggers.blogspot.com/)
"Hello Lebanon, hello Israel. I don’t know what will come next, but I was thinking to my self—maybe we could take advantage of the Blog power and open a channel to...all"  
(http://www.notes.co.il/benbasat/20968.asp)

"beirut update. war diaries of a 30 year old woman... with love from beirut."  
(http://www.beirutupdate.blogspot.com/)
Warblogs and free speech

- Warblogs focus on subjective impressions and eyewitness accounts, thus lending "personal face" to military events.
- While some of them might be subject to control and censorship (e.g. blogs of military personnel 📌 Milblogs), most provide an unfiltered perspective on daily life in conflict regions.
- Blogs are aimed at conversation and dialogue, but this can include partisan viewpoints as well as attempts for intercultural understanding.
Conclusion

- MSM and Blogosphere both contribute to publics, but apply different criteria for filtering, publishing and linking information
  - MSM provide general and (most often) objective information to a wide audience
  - Blogosphere provides specific, i.e. personalized information to (most often) small audiences
- Blogs not only increase opportunities for information management, but also allow for identity management and relationship management
- Both spheres of communication are interconnected through processes of mutual agenda setting, thus complementing (rather than replacing) each other
Thank You for listening.

...FonK
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Selected references


Wall, Melissa (2005): 'Blogs of War'. Weblogs as news. In: Journalism, Jg. 6, Nr. 2, S. 153-172.