

**Of Blogs and Broadcasters:  
The Influence of Web Logs in Electoral Campaigns**

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## **Abstract**

In October of 2006, the federal Conservative Party banished outspoken member Garth Turner in part because of writings on his web log (blog). Seeming to appear out of ether just a few years ago, the emergence of blogs in the political realm presents a new and intriguing focus of study in party politics. Given the increasing stratification of the Canadian political party structure in modern political campaigns, where party elites maintain exclusive control of how campaigns are run, this paper argues that new information and communication technologies like blogs have the ability to reverse this power imbalance. By exploiting the inherent social networking properties of blogs, non-elite party partisans have the ability to shape the political agenda by influencing how the media frames political events, independent of the communication strategies employed by party elites. Employing a combination of interviews with political journalists and content analysis of blogs and newspapers during the 2006 Canadian Federal Election and the 2006 Liberal Party Leadership Race, it will be shown that there does exist a limited “blog effect.” By transforming the traditional hierarchical party-media-voter relationship inherent in the modern and postmodern campaign into something much more discursive and interactive, grassroots partisans can empower themselves by bypassing traditional party structures and interacting with the media on a more direct level.

## **Of Blogs and Broadcasters: The Influence of Web Logs in Electoral Campaigns**

*Wayne Chu*

Late in October 2006, Garth Turner, a Conservative party Member of Parliament, was ousted from caucus, according to some media reports, because of critical comments about the party he made on his personal blog (Ditchburn, 2006). Seeming to appear out of ether just a few years ago, the emergence of blogs in the political realm presents a new and intriguing focus of study in party politics and electoral campaigns.

Although blogs—web-based, self-published diaries where individuals can express their thoughts and opinions on any topic they wish—have existed in one form or another for at least a decade, it is only recently that in-depth analysis of their role in electoral politics has been examined. Once a phenomenon limited in scope and influence in the online world, blogs arguably can now be seen influencing political events in the physical world. This is especially true in the United States. Recent high profile examples such as the ‘Rathergate’ affair, where documents questioning American President Bush’s service in the National Guard were shown to be fraudulent, and the resignation of Republican Senator Trent Lott over his nostalgic comments regarding segregation, demonstrate that blogs can and do play a role in political events. Whether these and other examples of blog efficacy in influencing the political sphere are aberrations or are indicative of a sea change in the functioning of political communications is a key question that must be addressed. For if blogs do appear to have the ability to shape public discourse in the political processes, then this has implications for the use of technology in encouraging more participatory forms of political discourse.

This concern over participation in the political process, as it relates to political communications, is especially relevant to members of political parties. Donald Savoie’s (1999) work on party discipline and the centralization of party control in the office of the Prime Minister’s Office, in large part due to the need to provide consistent messaging, is but one example of a larger literature on the deepening divide between party elites and members. Stephen Clarkson’s account of Liberal party success and failure, for example, highlights how the media’s role as enemy or ally can turn the tide of an election itself (Clarkson, 2005). Pippa Norris (2000) observes the implications of this political environment at a general level, theorizing that as electoral campaigns become more media intensive, the professionalization of the electoral campaign requires parties to centralize control and replace volunteer labour with “hired guns”. In this “modern” political campaign, party members have little say in how the party is run in general, and in how electoral campaigns are conducted, specifically. Always cognisant of the need to “control the message”, the transformation of the news industry and professional political marketing has appeared to encourage Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy” (Michels, 1978).

Norris, however, argues that the emergence of the “postmodern campaign” and the development of information communication technologies (ICT), such as the Internet, may herald a return of elements from older style campaigns where party activists mattered significantly. As a key tool available today in the ICT toolbox, blogs offer a promising venue for the empowerment of the party grassroots.

But more than being a tool for grassroots empowerment, contemporary Canadian examples have shown the ease with which any politically motivated individual, such as party partisans, can publish public comments on the Internet. The immediacy of the medium such that whatever is written reaches the press very quickly, can also be a source of grief for the political party leadership. The turfing of Garth Turner over his blog has already been mentioned. But other examples in Canadian politics exist, such as the embarrassments of the Ontario Progressive Conservatives in 2003 when a staffer sent out an e-mail press release describing Dalton McGuinty as a “reptilian kitten-eater”, and of the federal Liberal Party during the 2006 Federal Election when party executive Mike Klander compared New Democratic party candidate Olivia Chow to a certain species of canine.

Clearly these examples are not indicative of cogent online political discourse, and it would furthermore be highly inaccurate to contend that this is all that exists in the way of political discourse on the Internet. But these examples, which are some of the most visible and well-known ones, do illustrate the most promising avenue of analysis regarding the influential power of ICTs. It is already well known that media coverage can influence public perceptions of politics, as is the role that the media has in influencing the agenda of politicians themselves (Lippmann, 1922; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Seib 1987; Charron, 1991; Gidengil et al., 2000). Thus, it is the blogosphere’s potential to influence the media itself that presents a most interesting avenue of research regarding new communications technologies.

There is burgeoning support for the argument that blogs are an influential medium of communication. Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell (2004) argue that despite the relatively low number of blog readers in the American population, blogs can have real political consequences due to their unique networked structure and the proclivities of professional journalists to seek out alternative opinions and specialized knowledge of issues they know little about. J.D. Lasica describes a “new media ecosystem” where,

...bloggers discuss, dissect and extend the stories created by mainstream media. These communities also produce participatory journalism, grassroots reporting, annotative reporting, commentary and fact-checking, which the mainstream media feed upon, developing them as a pool of tips, sources and story ideas. The relationship is symbiotic. (Lasica, 2003: 71)

In short, it is argued that blogs have the ability to transform the business of news gathering into a ‘conversation’ (Stepp, 2004) ultimately making the media much more grassroots, and democratic. The incorporation of many newspapers’ online presence of blog-like features such as instant comment and feedback mechanisms gives credence to this idea of the relationship between professional journalists and bloggers giving rise to an emerging singular “comment-sphere”.<sup>1</sup> Therefore by acting as citizen-journalists, bloggers, so it is argued, can become agenda-setters in a way individuals just writing letters to the editor could not before.

This is the framework under which we evaluate the efficacy of online political participation, using blogs as the most salient example of such activity. If the act of blogging is to have the potential to enable party partisans to bypass normal political

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to acknowledge Dr. Liss Jeffrey for contributing this concept.

communication channels within political parties, then it will do so by allowing partisans to convey their messages directly to the media. We posit in this paper that blogs can and do influence media coverage of elections, albeit it in a somewhat limited capacity. To demonstrate this, we will employ a content analysis of newspaper and blog content from both the 2006 Canadian Federal Election, and the Liberal Party Leadership Race from August to December of 2006, in addition to elite interviews with political journalists.

The paper will be organized into three sections. The first section will discuss the blogosphere as a new forum for non-traditional political participation. This forum has the potential for providing appealing alternative avenues of participation by introducing elements of deliberative democracy into the political process. Early Internet optimists such as Rash (1997) predicted that the Internet would significantly change the functioning of politics forever, while others argue that the increasing interconnectedness provided by communications technology would at least give citizens the power to have their “interests represented without behaving as a traditional citizenry” (Howard, 2006). In short, the Internet has the potential to reduce the distance between political elites and the public by altering the channel in which those elites traditionally communicated. Recent research on blogs has also shown *prima facie* evidence of an ability for blogging to influence the behaviour of public figures. Using recent examples of blogs influencing campaign coverage, as well as interviews with several prominent Canadian political journalists, we show that a “blogger effect” potentially exists in which the news media and bloggers play off of each other when generating content.

The second section tests the theoretical claims of this paper by conducting a content analysis of newspaper and blog content during both the 2006 Canadian Federal Election and the 2006 Liberal Leadership Race. With regards to the first case, the analysis will focus on the “income trust scandal”, which was cited in multiple media sources as an issue greatly influenced by blogger involvement. To confirm our findings, we also examine blog and newspaper coverage of the Liberal Leadership candidates. We hypothesize, that if blogs do affect newspaper coverage of a campaign, then we should observe that an increasing emphasis in blogs on an issue will relate to an increasing emphasis on the issue in newspapers. The findings suggest that, to some extent, this is true.

The final section will then relate our findings back to the issue of empowering political party partisans by allowing them to bypass traditional party structures, engaging the media on a more direct, interactive level. The conclusion that will be made is that although Internet-based citizen political participation is effective in influencing the media, and thus political discourse, on a limited basis, the need for political parties to adapt to the increasing power of their partisans is very real.

### **Non-Traditional Political Participation in the Digital Age**

The development of new ICTs has long been touted as a means to empower those who feel disaffected from the political process. In his treatise on the need for participatory democratic institutions, Barber (1984) argues that “what strong democracy requires is a form of town meeting in which participation is direct yet communication is regional or even national. Because scale is in part a function of communication, the electronic enhancement of communication offers possible solutions to the dilemmas of scale.” The Internet is a prime example of this type of technology due to its ubiquitous, intercon-

nected nature, its relatively low cost, and ease of use. According to Statistics Canada (2005), access to the Internet in Canada has grown from 42 percent in 1999 to 68 percent in 2005. As a point of comparison, the United States shows a similar upward trend with 52 percent of adult Americans accessing the Internet in 2000 compared to 70 percent in 2004. (Rainie and Horrigan, 2005) Although there still remain segments of the population without access, usage of the Internet is increasingly something that is ingrained in daily life.

Because of the broad access the public has to it, and the decreasing cost of access, the Internet has the potential to “subsidize the costs of participation.” (Weber et al., 2003) Internet optimists have long touted cyberspace to be a powerful tool enabling citizens to interact on direct level with other citizens, as well as political elites. Rash writes:

As the nets become a necessity, political communications will change dramatically. The voters will have a voice that reaches directly to the highest levels of both parties and the government. Voters will be in a better position to hold their representatives accountable. If the nets can bring accountability directly to bear on elected officials, that in turn will significantly change politics forever. (Rash 1997: 181)

In the same way that it is posited that the Internet will enable improved political participation from individuals in general, ICTs will enable disempowered activists of political parties a forum for participation separate from the hierarchical structures of the political party.

Turning to blogging in particular, it is noteworthy that the number of blogs worldwide has grown at an exponential rate numbering around 35.3 million globally in 2006 (Sifry, 2006). Of particular interest, a large subset of blogs is political in nature, discussing topics such as political strategy, policy issues, and providing critiques of their political elites. These blogs, located in what is called the ‘blogosphere’, enable individuals to not only communicate their political opinions with the outside world at minimal cost, but to interact with other bloggers by using the inherent interconnectedness of the Internet. Through the capacity to ‘hyperlink’, bloggers are able to build community structure such that individual bloggers are not simply a lone voice attempting to shout over a sea of other voices. Blogs are able to maintain ‘blogrolls’, a list of like-minded blogs that the blogger wishes to be affiliated with. The Canadian blogosphere has shown an affinity towards these communities as most political blogs in Canada are a member of at least one blogroll (Koop and Jansen, 2006). Thus, the Canadian blogosphere has begun to orient itself around several different blogging communities, clustered around both partisan lines as well as ideological lines. Table 1 lists the major blogging communities as well as their membership numbers. Rather than being characterized by an anarchic structure usually attributed to the Internet, the blogosphere contains elements of social cohesion and interaction inherent in a strong social network.

With a coherent structure created by the network of blogs in cyberspace, and separate from the communications strategies of political parties, blogs have the potential to act as an independent, alternative source of political information and opinion, possibly rivalling traditional media. The opportunity to exert influence on the political process would not be possible without this forum for communication.

**Table 1. Blogging Community Membership in Canada**

| <b>Community</b>  | <b>Number of Member Blogs<br/>(as of Feb. 2, 2006)</b> | <b>Constituency</b>                       |
|---|--|---|
| Blogging Tories<br>( <a href="http://www.bloggingtories.ca">http://www.bloggingtories.ca</a> )  | 282  | Supporters of the<br>Conservative Party   |
| Liblogs<br>( <a href="http://liblogs.freethought.ca">http://liblogs.freethought.ca</a> )  | 105  | Supporters of the Liberal<br>Party        |
| Blogging Dippers<br>( <a href="http://dippers.myblahg.com">http://dippers.myblahg.com</a> )   | 45   | Supporters of the New<br>Democratic Party |
| Green Bloggers<br>( <a href="http://www.green-bloggers.com">http://www.green-bloggers.com</a> )   | 41   | Supporters of the Green<br>Party          |
| Progressive Bloggers<br>( <a href="http://www.progressivebloggers.ca">http://www.progressivebloggers.ca</a> )                               | 219  | Centrist/Left-Wing<br>bloggers            |
| Blogging Alliance of Non-Partisan<br>Canadians<br>( <a href="http://www.nonpartisancanadians.org">http://www.nonpartisancanadians.org</a> ) | 89   | Non-partisan bloggers                     |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>781</b>   |   |

Two case examples outside of Canada provide *prima facie* evidence of the power of blogs. The first example is the resignation of Republic Senate Majority Leader, Trent Lott, after making comments at Strom Thurmond's one-hundredth birthday party in which he seemingly came out in support of the segregationist policies of 1960s America. The comments, made on December 5, 2002, had occurred on a busy news day, so despite the inflammatory nature of the comments, they were mostly ignored by the media. Indeed, the only place the story appeared on was a blog by an ABC News journalist who was at the event. (Rosen, 2004) Bloggers, however, noticed the story and immediately began posting entries about it. As each blogger posted, other bloggers noticed and posted about the story as well. Because of the interconnected nature of the blogosphere, the story spread and gained a prominence that the traditional media outlets had not given. As the days passed and the bloggers kept mentioning the comments, the 'mainstream' media took notice of this, finally featuring the story prominently on network television news on December 10. (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, 2002) Suddenly, with an onslaught of reporters questioning Lott's motives, he succumbed to the public pressure generated and resigned as House Majority Leader.

What the bloggers allegedly accomplished in this case was to elevate a story to the status of a major controversy, where normally it would have died a quick death after being ignored by the press in the 24-hour news cycle. Acting as both journalists and critics of the press, bloggers argue that they took the lead in effecting a change in government; the press seemed to agree, giving blogs credit in giving the story prominence. (Sachtman, 2002; Rosen, 2004) Bloggers, essentially, set the political agenda in this case.

The second example of a blogger-effect is the so-called “Rathergate” episode in which bloggers were said to have exposed documents questioning President George W. Bush’s service in the National Guard as fraudulent. These documents were initially made public by a CBS television news report, but their authenticity was soon disputed by the blogosphere resulting in a retraction from CBS.

On September 8, 2004, the CBS News program, *60 Minutes* ran a story alleging that Bush received “preferential treatment in the [National] guard after not fulfilling his commitments.” The story was based on a series of memos apparently written by Colonel Jerry Killian, Bush’s squadron commander, which stated that the young Bush never underwent a required physical examination, nor was able to meet his military commitments – a situation in which Bush was suspended over. In later memos, evidence was provided stating that Bush was receiving preferential treatment since, despite the suspension and the inability to carry out his duties, Killian was being pressured to write favourable reviews for Bush. Initially, the White House dismissed the documents, but notably did not challenge their authenticity.

Immediately, bloggers began to scrutinize the documents, challenging their authenticity. (Memmott, 2004) Many posted that the documents appeared to have been produced on equipment far more modern than what was available in 1972, the date the memos were purportedly to have been written. A blogger, writing under the pseudonym “Buckhead” on the Free Republic blog, noted that the CBS documents “contained proportionally spaced fonts, superscripts and other typesetting features that were not widely available on typewriters in the early 1970s. Their conclusion: The documents were forgeries, intended to make Bush look bad.” (Witt, 2004) As digital copies of the documents, made publicly available on CBS’ own website, spread out through the blogosphere, more and more bloggers began to post their own findings. Much like the Trent Lott example, within a few days the pressure blogs were seemingly creating caused mainstream media outlets to question the CBS story, forcing CBS News to concede that further investigation regarding the authenticity of the documents needed to be pursued. Indeed, many news organizations attributed the CBS withdrawal to the blog effect, such as Howard Kurtz in the *Washington Post* on September 20, 2004, stating that “previously obscure bloggers managed to put the network of Murrow and Cronkite firmly on the defensive.”

These examples indicate that blog influence, if it exists, is characterized by bloggers influencing the discourse and agenda of the media, rather than as a direct effect on political leaders themselves. Both the Trent Lott and Rathergate examples emerged from bloggers criticizing the media for, in the former, inadequate attention paid to a controversial statement, and in the latter, incomplete and even fraudulent reporting. However, one could easily argue that the two previous cases are an exception, rather than the rule.

Although research on the relationship between blogs and journalists is in its infancy and data on the phenomenon is sparse, there is emerging anecdotal evidence that a relationship does exist. Using both data from the existing literature as well as interviews with newspaper journalists who covered the 2006 Canadian Federal Election,<sup>2</sup> we notice,

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<sup>2</sup> Journalists from the *National Post*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Calgary Herald*, and the *Ottawa Citizen* who had written at least two newspaper articles about the 2006 Canadian Federal Election were asked to participate. A total of five open-ended interviews were conducted: Tamara



firstly, that usage of ICTs such as the Internet is prevalent amongst those in the news-gathering business. Moreover, we note that usage of blogs in particular is growing with Canadian journalists in particular stating that reading blogs is an integral part of their newsgathering routine. Although most journalists stop well short of stating that blogs are a *primary* source, our data does support the supposition that journalists are using blogs to get a sense of popular opinion amongst the public and tailoring their coverage accordingly.

Pavlik (2000) argues that technology has exerted “a fundamental influence on how journalists do their jobs”; the Internet is no exception. Beginning simply as a communications tool with e-mail, but then expanding to encompass an information resource via the World Wide Web, the Internet has helped to shorten the length of the news cycle, speed up the pace of news stories themselves, and even change the culture of news. (Barnhurst and Mutz, 1997). Speaking on her use of the Internet in her work, Susan Delacourt<sup>3</sup>, Ottawa Bureau Chief for the *Toronto Star*, explains that,

Those of us in political journalism are not even sure how we did this [reporting] before the Internet...for research there is so much available on the Internet now. If the Internet is down for half an hour, that’s coffee break time. It is that integral to our jobs.

Tamara Gignac<sup>4</sup>, a business reporter for the *Calgary Herald* who covered local issues during the election agreed, stating,

I think journalists are so lucky in this day and age to have access to the Internet. It is a world of difference where you can look back on previous things that have been written, look up files of who the candidates are, and you into [the election] with a wealth of knowledge that I think journalists twenty years ago were not able access.

Journalists, therefore, are predisposed to using the Internet as a resource in newsgathering. The implication, in terms of whether or not a blog effect exists, is that journalists are likely not to dismiss blogs out of hand, and in fact, may be paying attention.

If the growing number of news articles talking about blogs in recent years is any indication, then journalists are certainly paying attention. Figure 1 shows the growing awareness of blogs in Canadian media with only eight articles mentioning the term “blog” in 2002, growing exponentially to 3,218 mentions in 2006. Rosenberg (2002) observes that “time-strapped reporters and editors in downsized, resource-hungry newsrooms are increasingly turning to blogs for story tips and pointers. No one has enough time to read everything on the Web; blogs offer a smart reader the chance to piggyback on someone else’s reading time. Good journalists would be fools *not* to feed off blogs.”

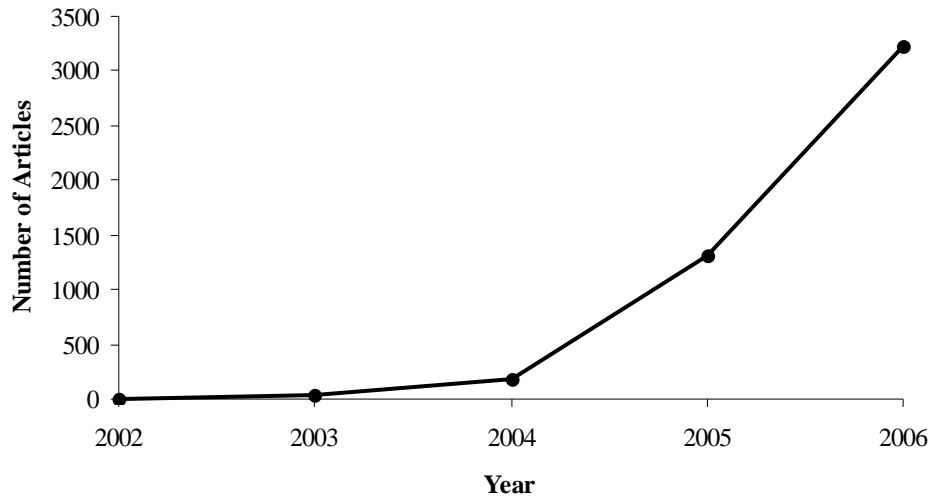
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Gignac from the *Calgary Herald*, Susan Delacourt from the *Toronto Star*, and Campbell Clark, Gloria Galloway, and Bill Curry from the *Globe and Mail*.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Delacourt interview conducted over the phone on May 23, 2006 by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Tamara Gignac interview conducted over the phone on May 25, 2006 by the author.

**Figure 1. Blog Mentions in Canadian Media**



*Note:* Results based on a keyword search for the phrase “blog” limited to Canadian media sources from January 1 to December 31 for the years 2002 to 2006 respectively.  
*Source:* Factiva Media Archive.

To varying degrees, journalists covering the 2006 Canadian Federal Election did in fact turn to blogs to get a sense of what was happening in other campaigns and what public (especially partisan) opinion was in general. Campbell Clark<sup>5</sup>, reporting on the Liberal Party campaign, described blogs as a “scuttlebutt service during an election campaign,” whereas Bill Curry<sup>6</sup> of the *Globe and Mail* described his usage of blogs as simply to get a sense of any story ideas that had “passed under the radar.” In turn, Gloria Galloway<sup>7</sup> noted that one of the reasons she reads blogs is the possibility of a blog offering a ‘tip’. Delacourt even recalled that during the election she had used blogs to find interview subjects. Clearly, journalists are paying attention to blogs, and recognize them as a source for political opinion.

Journalists, however, are reticent about declaring any sort of direct influence from blogs. Rather, journalists act as a filter, using blogs as an adjunct to their traditional sources of information. Clark compares the influence of blogs to that of local media, stating that the influence of blogs “is like the influence of a local newspaper. You may learn something very interesting that we would consider of national significance that appeared in a local paper. We may learn a trend occurring from ten local papers.” Gignac remarked in a similar fashion that the influence of blogs was to get,

...a sense of what people cared about. Is it health care? Is it the military? What were people talking about and how should that maybe translate into something that I should be researching and writing about? It was more of a litmus test of

<sup>5</sup> Campbell Clark interview conducted over the phone on May 24, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Bill Curry interview conducted via e-mail on May 25, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Gloria Galloway interview conducted via e-mail on May 30, 2006.

what the average Joe, that is not a journalist, what they find compelling and interesting about this election.

From this anecdotal evidence, we can construct a model of the blog effect. Journalists, already primed to take Internet resources seriously due to the evolution in newsgathering, are reading and absorbing blog content. Moreover, journalists recognize that, although not reliable as alternative sources, blogs represent an unfiltered account of what politically engaged readers are interested in. Therefore, we can posit that if a blog effect exists, content found in mainstream media should reflect, to an extent, content found in the blogosphere. If the Trent Lott and Rathergate examples are indicative of how the blog effect manifests itself, then we should be able to observe evidence of news stories being pushed onto the public agenda due to the blogosphere initiating and sustaining issues that would have normally escaped the attention of journalists.

### **The Income Trust Scandal and the Liberal Leadership Race**

#### *Hypothesis*

To test our proposition of the existence of a blog effect towards the media, we will look at two different electoral campaigns. The first case we will examine is the so-called ‘Income Trust Scandal’<sup>8</sup> (commonly referred to among blogs as ITScam) that occurred in the middle and latter stages of the 2006 Canadian Federal Election. This issue was cited in various newspaper articles during the campaign and by interview respondents as an issue that potentially was pushed into the public agenda by bloggers. It is argued that the elevation of ITScam into a significant “turning point” in the campaign was due to the efforts of bloggers. Particularly, some bloggers argue that their efforts in continually writing about the developing issue caused the mainstream media to bombard politicians with questions about it, which led to a Liberal-devastating public announcement by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police that they had begun a criminal investigation into the matter.

The affair shares key parallels with the two previous case examples we have discussed. Like the Trent Lott example, bloggers argue that without their influence the income trust story would have been lost amongst other campaign related news. Like the Rathergate example, some bloggers argue that they provided mainstream media with valuable leads in investigating whether or not the Liberal party did in fact illegally leak information. Therefore, testing to see if ITScam was actually made prominent by blogs will allow us to test the presence of a general blog effect. Although discovering a blog effect in ITScam does not necessarily imply the existence of the effect in general, it does allow us to confirm that blog influence is indeed possible. Conversely, if we find no effect at all, then the likelihood that blogs can influence mainstream media is doubtful.

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<sup>8</sup> The Income Trust Scandal was a collection of events surrounding the aftermath of Finance Minister Ralph Goodale’s decision to tax income trust and dividends equally, a development seen to be favourable to income trusts. Just prior to the announcements, several Canadian income trust funds saw higher-than-average trading on the stock market, which some characterized as “unusual”. Critics accused the Liberal Government of leaking the contents of Goodale’s decision prior to the actual announcement, in contravention of insider trading laws. On December 28, in response to a request from the New Democratic Party, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police announced that they had begun a criminal investigation into the matter.

To confirm the results from the 2006 Federal Election, we will then examine the 2006 Liberal Leadership Race. Following the defeat of the Liberal government after the 2006 Federal Election, Liberal Leader Paul Martin resigned from his titular position, kicking off a 12-month campaign for his job. The analytically interesting point with this campaign was that of the eight candidates to reach the convention stage, most had either official or unofficial “blog campaigns” in which Liberal-allied bloggers worked to promote their respective candidates by blogging as much as possible about him or her, both in the hopes of convincing members to vote a certain way, but also to influence media coverage. Leadership candidates, in what could be a first in Canadian politics, even took time out of their schedules to conduct interviews with prominent bloggers, hoping to curry favour with the community. Using this electoral race as a confirmatory case, we will test if the blog effect holds here as well.

In short, using the model of influence outlined in the previous section, we hypothesize that if blogs did influence the mainstream media in making ITScam more prominent, and particular candidates more visible, then increased coverage of an issue/candidate in the blogosphere should correspond to increased coverage in newspapers.

### *Methodology*

To test our hypothesis, we will perform a content analysis of content from both Canadian political blogs and mainstream media sources. Given that blogging is a text-based activity, we use newspapers as a proxy for the mainstream media in general. Doing so will enable simplicity in the analysis and will allow for direct comparison of content using the same analytical and statistical methods.

The data for this analysis originates from two different sources. For the Federal Election, a dataset was constructed by counting the number of newspaper articles and blog posts that addressed the income trust scandal directly. Because the actual amount of articles and posts was not important, but rather the change in the number of articles and posts from day to day, articles and posts were drawn from a subsample of available newspapers and blogs.

The newspaper articles used originated from the following newspapers: the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Calgary Herald*, the *Toronto Star*, the *Ottawa Citizen*, the *Montreal Gazette*, the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*. This provided a representative cross-section of the media content that Canadians were receiving during the campaign. Articles from these newspapers, written between November 28, 2005 (the date the election was called), and January 23, 2006 (voting day) and that contained the phrase “income trust” were gathered and used in our analysis.<sup>9</sup>

Although the number of Canadian political blogs number in the hundreds, coding content from either all of the blogs or a random sample of blogs is inappropriate. Obviously in the case of the former, there is a prohibitive cost in coding every single Canadian political blog. Moreover, doing so would have the effect of raising lesser-read blogs to a level of significance that is not necessarily deserved. In the case of the latter option, a random sample is not reflective of how the blogosphere is actually structured. Rather

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<sup>9</sup> Because several of the newspapers used in the analysis are owned by a single company, CanWest Global, and often use the same wire copy, articles appearing on several different newspapers were counted only once and the rest excluded from analysis.

than being organized in a predominantly flat hierarchy like newspapers in Canada, blogs tend to cluster around a select few “A-list” blogs. (Adamic and Glance, 2005) That is, if we observe the linkages between blogs, the content of postings made on the A-list tend to percolate down into blogs on the periphery of the blogosphere resulting in a level of homogeneity in content amongst each A-list blog’s respective blogging community. In turn, Drezner and Farrell (2004) argue that the skewed distribution of blog linkages also affects the salience blogs with the top, highly-linked blogs being much more influential.

We used the same principle to form our Canadian political blog dataset. Using the BlogPulse directory from Nielson Media Research<sup>10</sup> we compiled a ranked list of Canadian Political blogs. The BlogPulse service allowed us to obtain a global ranking of a blog relative to all other blogs on the Internet based on the number and strength of citations the blog has received. For blogs with few or no citations, they were not ranked. The ranking for each blog was obtained using the list of member blogs for the six identified Canadian political blog communities. Blogs with no rank were given a ranking of zero and were excluded. In total, the BlogPulse directory identified 53 blogs which were cited significantly, and thus ranked.<sup>11</sup> Content from these blogs were used in the content analysis.

For the second case, the 2006 Liberal Leadership Race, we were fortunate to have an existing dataset already available, provided by the Infoscape Research Lab at Ryerson University.<sup>12</sup> The *Code Politics: Liberal Leadership Race* dataset utilized the Google News and Google Blog search engines to track the number of newspaper articles and blog posts published discussing each of eight leadership candidates. There are, however, some differences between the Federal Election and the Leadership Race data. First, the tracking for the Leadership Race was done on a weekly basis, rather than a daily basis like the Federal Election dataset, but nevertheless, the construction of the *Code Politics* dataset is similar enough for the two cases to be compared. The second difference is that rather than tracking the number of articles and posts for each candidate, the *share* of all posts or articles made in a particular week is tracked. The reason for this is due to the reliance of the dataset on the Google search engine. Because the blog search engine continuously adds new blogs to its index every day, there is no guarantee that the set of blogs examined in one week is the same size as the set in another week. By tracking the percentage of posts made, rather than the total number of posts, we can correct for this.

### *Findings*

Our hypothesis posits that increased coverage of ITScam in newspapers should be preceded by increased coverage from blogs. Figure 2a graphically summarizes the findings from our temporal analysis. Although not conclusive, we do note that up to day 40 of the campaign, levels of coverage from blogs and newspapers to closely mirror each other. Notably, we observe that the sudden increase in newspaper coverage on days 12 and 33 of the campaign were preceded by an increase in blog coverage by one or two

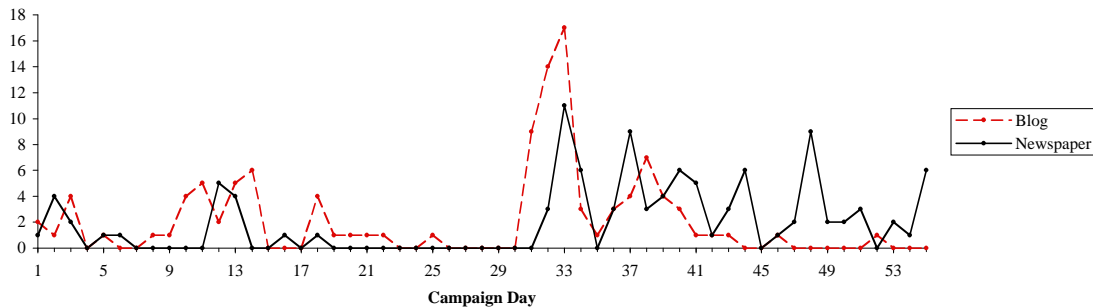
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<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.blogpulse.com>.

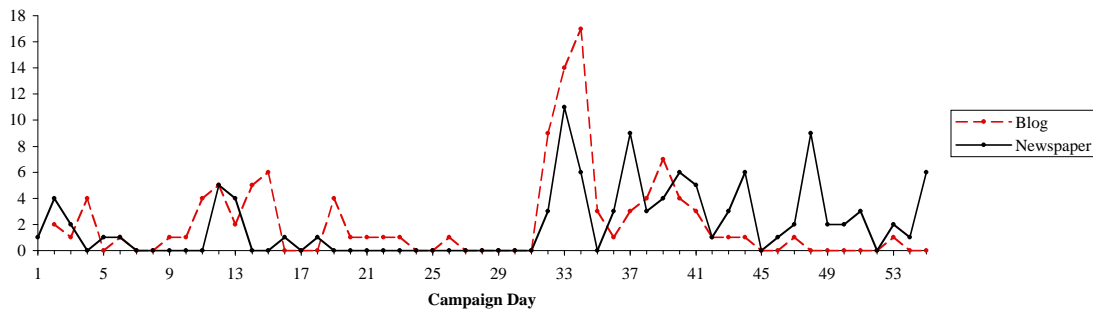
<sup>11</sup> The full list of blogs utilized is available from the author upon request.

<sup>12</sup> The author would like to thank Infoscape Research Lab Director, Greg Elmer, and Fenwick Mckelvey for their assistance in obtaining the dataset.

**Figure 2a. Number of ITScam-Related Articles by Campaign Day**



**Figure 2b. Number of ITScam-Related Articles by Time-Adjusted Campaign Day**



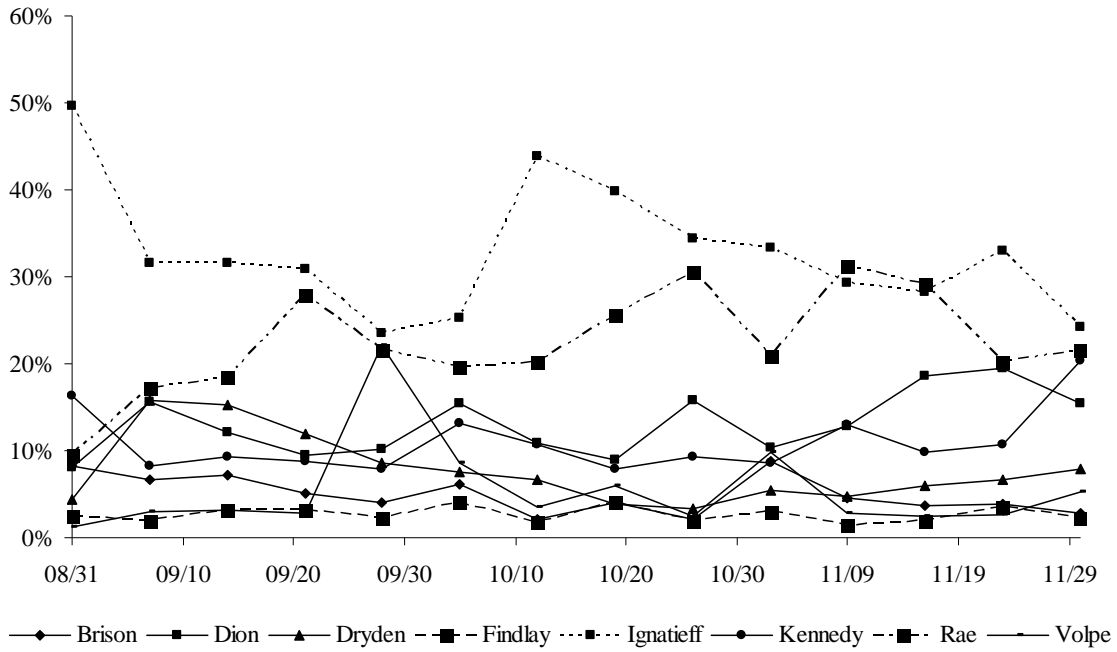
days. We notice a similar occurrence on day 40 of the campaign, however, the increase in blog coverage on day 38 is itself preceded by an increase in newspaper coverage on day 37 implying a reinforcing effect. If we assume that, due to the newsgathering cycle, it requires one day for the occurrence of an event to appear in a newspaper, then we should be able to observe an even tighter correlation between blog and newspaper article counts if we adjust the blog counts forward by one day. Figure 2b shows this time-adjusted analysis in which the spike in coverage on both blogs and newspapers essentially overlap, supporting the hypothesis.

At a general level, the correlation between the amount of newspaper coverage and blog coverage is statistically significant. The Pearson coefficient for the non-adjusted sample is .389 ( $p < .01$ ), and .478 ( $p < .01$ ) for the time-adjusted sample.

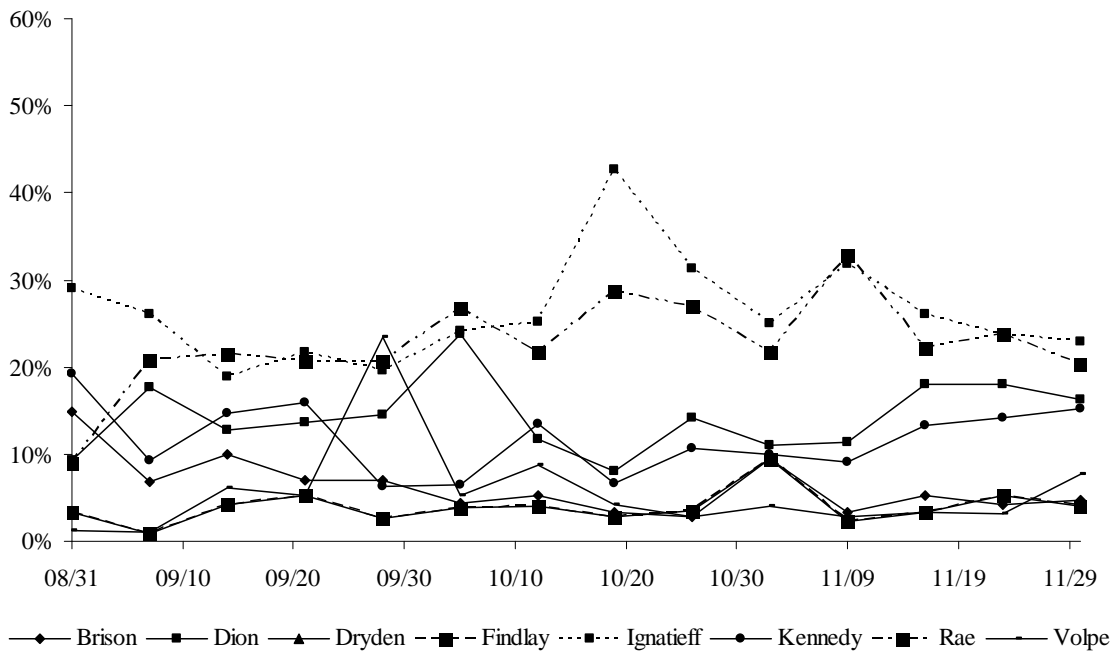
However, at a qualitative level, there are elements of the findings that make us question this support. For example, an increase in blog coverage on day 18 did not appear to have caused an increase in newspaper coverage. As well, from day 40 until the end of the campaign, blogs appear to have dropped the ITScam coverage from their content completely, while newspapers continued to report on the issue.

There are several explanations that may account for these contrary findings. The first is the claim from some bloggers that their biggest influence was not in encouraging more coverage *per se*, but rather in maintaining the issue in journalists' minds during the

**Figure 3a. Share of Total Blog Posts**



**Figure 3b. Share of News Articles**



Source: Code Politics: Liberal Leadership Race Dataset

**Table 2. Pearson Correlation between Blog Posts and Newspaper Articles**

| <b>Candidate</b>    | <b><i>r</i></b> | <b><i>p</i></b> |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Scott Brison        | <b>.770*</b>    | .001            |
| Stephane Dion       | <b>.755*</b>    | .002            |
| Ken Dryden          | -.188           | .519            |
| Martha Hall-Findlay | .342            | .232            |
| Michael Ignatieff   | .452            | .105            |
| Gerard Kennedy      | .447            | .109            |
| Bob Rae             | <b>.748*</b>    | .002            |
| Joe Volpe           | <b>.872*</b>    | .000            |

\* significant at .01 level; n=14

Christmas holiday and before, ensuring that the story was not forgotten. Because coverage of the election was at a decreased level overall during this period, there would not necessarily be a spike in coverage as journalists were still on holiday. From day 40 and later, an argument can be made that by that time, the income trust story had become self sustaining and no longer required blogs to “push” the story, thus the lack of correlation in coverage. Nevertheless, while the data are not entirely conclusive, neither do they imply a rejection of our null hypothesis.

Turning to our second case, the Liberal Leadership Race data confirms the relationship found with the Federal Election. Figures 3a and 3b illustrate the share of blog posts and newspaper articles that each candidate received for each week that was tracked (August 31 to November 30). On the surface, there appears to be similarity between blogs and newspapers. Statistically, Table 2 confirms this, with statistical significance ( $p < .01$ ) for blog coverage of Scott Brison, Stephane Dion, Bob Rae, and Joe Volpe. Although not found to be statistically significant, blog and newspaper content discussing Michael Ignatieff and Gerard Kennedy appears to be at least trending towards significant correlation at the  $p < .1$  level. Only content regarding Ken Dryden and Martha Hall-Findlay showed no substantial correlation. Like our first case, the data do not definitively support our hypothesis, but, with neither do they suggest that the null hypothesis must be accepted. We therefore would argue that given the exploratory nature of this research, we can accept our hypothesis, with some reservations.

### **Conclusion**

Did bloggers influence newspaper coverage regarding the income trust affair? Did blog coverage of the Liberal Leadership Race cause the media to focus on certain candidates over others? The data suggest that bloggers did have a limited effect and supports the notion that increased coverage in the blogosphere helps to make certain stories



and figures more prominent in a campaign. Our temporal analyses with the Federal Election and Liberal Leadership Race demonstrate that bloggers were not simply following newspapers' lead; at best, blogs were leading the coverage, and at worst, keeping pace with the newspapers. Hence, while it cannot be definitively said that blogs played a role in the reporting of ITScam and the Liberal Leadership Race, one cannot discount their role entirely either.

Returning to the broader question of blog influence on mainstream media, we are left with mixed results. Our data show that there is evidence of a 'blog effect' in which traditional journalists, already primed to use Internet-based sources, do read blogs and do consider them of value in their work. Content analysis, in turn, shows that there is a correlation between intensity of coverage between the blogosphere and the "mediasphere" (Drezner and Farrell, 2004). However, as the interview and content analysis results demonstrate, the effect is limited.

But, we note, this should be the case: journalists are professionals who are trained to use a multiplicity of sources, and scrutinize each appropriately. One should not expect to see a perfect one-to-one correspondence between blog and newspaper content, as that would imply that blogs are the journalist's sole source of inspiration and information (or that bloggers have no agency whatsoever, which we similarly find implausible). What the findings do suggest is that blogs and newspapers display a clear relationship, with blogs potentially becoming an important part of the newsgathering process in addition to other sources, both virtual and physical. The conflicting findings from our analysis can easily be interpreted as the result of a multitude of influences acting on journalists, including other political parties, interest groups, and even other journalists. Nevertheless blogs do have a role and can no longer be dismissed as a passing fad.

This is not surprising. The media are often early adopters of new communications technologies, and these technologies, in turn, shape the way news is created and presented. McNair notes that,

News content is (at least in part) the outcome of the technical conditions of journalistic production. Many of these conditions are reflected in the day-to-day organization of the newsroom, but also have relevance on the grander sociological scale, shaping the social role and function of journalism as new information and communication technologies (NICTS) create the possibility of new relationships between journalist and audience. (McNair, 1998: 125)

As the process of newsgathering becomes more heavily reliant on the Internet, those applications which enable the public to become citizen-journalists will form yet another resource that traditional journalists may utilize. The egalitarian nature of the Internet in which "all packets are created equal" can have the effect of democratising newsgathering by substantially decreasing the distance between writers and readers of political information.

But what are the implications of the new ICT environment regarding centralized party structures? If anything, we would argue that it will be party partisans, some of the most politically active within society, who will leverage the power of blogs first, hence the paper's focus on blogs written by partisans. And the fact remains that political parties, as much as they would wish to deny this, are not homogenous organizations. Parties consist of many different factions, with different goals and desired strategies (for exam-

ple Kitschelt, 1989). Intraparty conflict is an inevitable consequence, and blogs, therefore provide an outlet for those who disagree with their leaders.

Our evidence indicates that there is potential for the Internet, and blogs specifically, to empower party partisans in a political process that is dominated by party elites. If the modern campaign has led to centralization of control of political parties, then the ease of access to communication channels provided by new ICTs in the postmodern campaign means that political party leadership has to not only be cognisant of the “party line”, but also the potential that ignoring the grassroots can lead to revolt. Though this has always been a concern to some extent, the difference is that ICTs provide a very visible outlet that did not exist before. While the Garth Turner incident illustrates one response that political parties have used to counter the challenge blogs provide, as the number of party activists using blogs grows, expulsion of members for making critical comments in the blogosphere will become a less palatable option.

Of course, there are criticisms that can be made. There is a certain lack of sophisticated modelling in this paper and in the field of blog research in general, which highlights a key issue for this field of research. Indeed, much of the research in this area tends to be qualitative and anecdotal. Because of the relatively recent nature of blogging, the amount of data researchers are able to draw from is limited. Moreover, explaining how journalists are influenced is difficult even in the most optimal conditions. What has been observed in this analysis, however, is that quantitative content analysis can uncover a promising relationship that begs further study.

But the more pressing criticism that should be addressed is whether what we have observed is really just the tail wagging the dog. That is, are blogs actually affecting the media, or are blogs simply following the cue of their professional brethren? Acknowledging that the causal arrow may indeed run in the opposite direction than proposed here, the qualitative evidence presented gives weight to the argument that blogs are not simply subservient. By journalists’ own admissions, they do read and consider blogs a source of information, even if biased in many instances. It would therefore be simplistic to argue for a deterministic relationship in either direction. Likely, the relationship is reciprocal.

On balance, the evidence presented in this paper bodes well for the future of political participation in cyberspace. As the non-hierarchical nature of Internet-based communication begins to come into conflict with the extremely hierarchical structures of the political party, parties will need to adapt to this new reality and include the newly empowered grassroots. Whether this ultimately is a positive development of the political system remains to be seen.

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