VIRTUAL OPINION LEADERS AND OPINION CHANGE: AN EXAMINATION

OF BLOGGING THROUGH THE FRAMEWORK OF THE TWO-STEP

FLOW OF COMMUNICATION

THESIS

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The introduction of a new medium provides an opportunity for scholars to revisit existing theories of mass communication. Blogging is a medium that has grown tremendously in recent years, from just a few dozen blogs in 1999 to more than 42 million blogs today. One function of blogging is providing opinion and commentary on news from the mainstream media. In this way bloggers act as intermediaries, much in the same way Lazarsfeld described opinion leaders in his two-step flow of information theory. This research examined blogging from the framework of the two-step flow to see if readers looked to bloggers as opinion leaders. Results showed that bloggers were not opinion leaders and blogs were perceived as less credible than mainstream media sources, but that blogs do play a role in opinion consideration and opinion reinforcement.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

With the growth of the Internet comes the introduction of new technologies, such a Weblogs, or blogs. A blog is an online journal where authors can write their own thoughts about anything from their daily lives, to politics, to why they hate their spouse. Unlike a traditional diary, blogs are public, allowing anyone to read them; they are also interactive in that readers can post their own comments to the blog. The entire process of writing, reading, and posting comments to blogs is known as blogging.

In 1999 only a dozen blogs existed (Jensen, 2003). By 2004 the number of blogs increased to 8 million (Pew Internet & American Life, 2005), and "blog" was the most searched word in Merriam-Webster's online dictionary (Tynan, 2004). In 2005 *Fortune* named blogging as the top technology trend to watch for that year (Kirkpatrick, Roth, & Ryan, 2005). Today it is estimated that there are more than 42 million blogs (Technorati, 2006). In spite of all the buzz surrounding blogging, 62 percent of online Americans say they do not know what a blog is (Pew Internet & American Life, 2005).

While the first blogs began in 1999, it wasn't until 2004 that blogging came to the attention of the mainstream media (MSM). One of the reasons for this was the hotly contended U.S. presidential race. "Blogs clearly had an impact on the way the mainstream media covered the election, even making the media the news story in some

cases" (Miller, 2004, p. 8). Political campaigns, like the one of Democratic hopeful Howard Dean, utilized blogs in a grassroots effort to reach constituents without the media filtering the candidate's message. For the first time bloggers were given press credentials to cover the political parties' conventions (Memmott, 2004).

Although blogs have a relatively small audience, the impact of blogs has been far reaching. In 2004 a group of bloggers refuted a story that aired on CBS's *60 Minutes II* newsmagazine regarding President Bush's service in the Texas National Guard. The bloggers argued that the documents shown to be authentic service records were actually forged. Articles from these blogs led to other mainstream media outlets questioning the authenticity of the documents. Eventually the producer of this segment was let go, and Dan Rather, who reported the story, retired as CBS evening news anchor. Despite this, the *Columbia Journalism Review* stated that it was impossible to conclusively tell whether these documents were authentic or forgeries (Pein, 2005).

Rather is not the only news executive to face the wrath of bloggers. In February 2005 Eason Jordan resigned as head of CNN news. He made off-the-record comments during a conference in Switzerland, alleging the U.S. military had deliberately killed dozens of journalists in Iraq (Potter, 2005). An audience member reported Jordan's comments in a blog, which was picked up by hundreds of other blogs. Because Jordan refused to apologize for his comments, the story continued to grow and complaints were sent by the thousands to CNN. In the end, this 23-year veteran of CNN resigned his position.

While it may seem to some that bloggers are out to topple the MSM, they simply want to have their voice heard. In a column on *Wall Street Journal*'s OpinionJournal.com, Noonan (2005) writes:

> "Blogging changes how business is done in American journalism. The MSM isn't over. It just can no longer pose as if it is The Guardian of Established Truth. The MSM is just another player now. A big one, but a player" (para. 7).

Some agree with Noonan and see blogs as a journalism revolution. New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen sees blogs as an Internet-driven, digital revolution that is changing journalism, giving the public an opportunity to participate in mass media. He asserts that traditional ways of thinking about journalism are falling by the wayside and the balance of power is changing (as quoted by Anderson, 2005, Media for the masses section, para. 3).

Others, however, see blogging as a lynch-mob out to get journalists. According to MSNBC commentator Bill Press, bloggers are people "with no credentials, no sources, no rules, no editors and no accountability" (as quoted by Anderson, 2005, Bloggers and MSM trade blows section, para. 2).

It's difficult to open a business publication or a marketing journal without reading about blogs as a way to promote companies. On CNN/Money.com, Crawford (2005) writes:

> "For companies, the growing popularity of blogs is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, corporate managers recognize the power of word-of-mouth as a sales tool. On the other hand, they're acutely aware of the dangers inherent in the rapid and widespread dissemination of company information" (para. 3).

Companies that have their own blogs often do so to interact with customers, highlight the company's products, and update readers on the latest corporate news (Albrycht, 2004). Advertising in and sponsoring third-party blogs is also becoming increasingly popular, due in part to the strength of online advertising and the jump in blog readership. Companies see this potential and want to advertise in blogs before the space becomes too cluttered (Hughlett, 2005).

Blogs may be attractive to corporate advertisers because bloggers might serve as opinion influencers to their readers (Haas, 2005). Opinion leadership, and the two-step flow of information, is one of the most commonly used mass communication theories in the field of persuasion and public relations (Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2003). This theory states that information flows in a two-step process, first to group, community, and opinion leaders and then out to the general public. Companies, such as Microsoft, target key industry leaders, providing them with information regarding products, services, industry trends, or the company. These industry influencers are often able to provide both the media and potential customers a third-party view of the product, adding credibility and excitement to such activities as a launch of a new product (Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2003).

Edward Bernays is known as the "Father of Public Relations" and developed many of the most influential public relations campaigns of the 20th century (Buday & Flynn, 2000). One of the strategies that served him best was the use of opinion leaders to influence the general public (Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2003). Even before the two-step flow theory was developed, Bernays was utilizing the concept.

One of Bernays most notable use of opinion leaders was the "Torches of Freedom" campaign conducted for the American Tobacco Company in 1929. The American Tobacco Company wanted to increase the sales of its Lucky Strikes cigarettes and realized that females were an untapped market. Bernays had a group of opinion leaders, young socialites, march in the New York City Easter parade while smoking cigarettes, demonstrating that cigarette smoking was both ladylike and a sign of women's liberation (Buday & Flynn, 2000). Because of Bernay's use of opinion leaders, women began smoking in large numbers and the revenue of the American Tobacco Company increased by $32 million in one year (Buday & Flynn, 2000).

Why do so many persuasion campaigns rely on the use of opinion leaders? Campaigns aimed to change a behavior or an attitude are more likely to be successful by targeting opinion leaders. Due to limited time and resources, it's more economical to target opinion leaders than it is to target the general public (Rogers, 2003).

According to Chura (2004), despite the difficulty of creating buzz, "word-of-mouth may be the world's oldest, and perhaps most effective, form of marketing" (p. 4). In addition, personal influence is still one of the biggest sources of information (Chaney, 2001). Ketchum, one of the world's largest public relations agencies, estimated that there are just 200 people who shape the purchasing habits of all Americans (Chura, 2004).

The purpose of this thesis is to examine bloggers as opinion leaders and to see what impact, if any, blogging might have on opinion change. Following this introduction chapter, Chapter 2 is a Review of Literature, discussing previous research on blogs, online activities, and media credibility. This chapter also outlines the two-step flow of information theory, providing background on this theory, opinion leader research, and

criticisms of the theory. Most of the data gathered for this chapter were from journals and databases in the Alkek library at Texas State University-San Marcos. The chapter ends by detailing the four research questions being examined in this thesis.

Chapter 3 summarizes the methodology utilized in this research while Chapter 4 details the research and statistical findings and analyzes the results. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the results, providing meaning and context for the data. It also discusses criticisms and weaknesses of the current research and outlines direction for future research on blogs and opinion leadership. An Appendix, with a copy of the survey questionnaire, References, and a copy of the author's Vita are included at the end of this paper.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to examine previous research on blogs, online

activities, and media credibility. This chapter also outlines the two-step flow of

information theory, providing background on this theory, opinion leader research, and

criticisms of the theory. Most of the data gathered for this chapter were from journals and

databases in the Alkek library at Texas State University-San Marcos. The chapter ends by

detailing the four research questions being examined in this thesis.

The Internet as an Information Source

The Internet is an important part of American life; more than 70 percent of

Americans now say they go online one or more times a month, spending an average of 12

hours a week online (USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future, 2004).

According to *USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future* (2004), 55.2 percent

of online Americans see the Internet as a "very important" or "extremely important"

source of information. For very experienced users, those who have seven or more years

of online experience, the Internet is a more important source of information than all other

forms of media (USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future, 2004). However,

Johnson and Kaye (2004) state that the number of years one is online is less a factor in

relying on the Internet for information. They report that the number of activities one

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engages in online – such as emailing, trading stocks, using Internet search engines – is a

better indicator of whether one relies on the Internet for information. For users who are

politically interested, the most important source of political information is the Internet

(Johnson & Kaye, 2004). The importance of the Internet as an information source seems

to increase as individual's home connection bandwidth increases. Those who have

broadband connections at home are more likely to see the Internet as an important source

of information (70.7 percent) compared to users with dial-up connections (52.6 percent)

(USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future, 2004).

Credibility of Online Information

The importance of the Internet as an information source raises a concern

regarding the credibility of the content. Because information may not undergo the same

scrutiny when it is published on the Web as it does with traditional media sources, do

users see the information as less credible? According to USC Annenberg School Center

for the Digital Future (2004), 50.1 percent of Internet users view "most" or "all" online

information as reliable. Some research suggests that compared with other media sources,

the Internet is second only to traditional print newspapers in regards to credibility

(Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). Users who are more experienced with the Internet tend to

rate its credibility higher than less experienced users (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000) or non-

users (USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future, 2004). However, just

because one has more experience with the Internet does not mean that he/she rates the

information on the Internet more credible than information derived from traditional

sources (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). What seems to be a factor

in determining credibility is Internet expertise; the more Internet literate one is, the more

credible he/she rates online information compared to traditional media sources (Johnson & Kaye, 2004).

Internet users give low credibility ratings to commercial information, such as product or candidate literature (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). This may relate more to the source than to the type of information. Information from highly regarded sources, such as *The New York Times*, is rated as more credible than information from less regarded sources (USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future, 2004; Greer, 2003). News tends to be the type of information users find most credible (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). Online news sources from established media, such as www.newyorktimes.com, are regarded as the most reliable and accurate sources for information (USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future, 2000).

This may have to do with the brand and reputation of the media; in seeking other types of information, such as financial information, users tend to frequent more heavily branded sites and rate these sites more credible (Sillence & Briggs, 2004). However, *Consumer Reports WebWatch* (Fogg et al., 2002) reports that only one out of seven participants in its research commented on the name recognition or company reputation when assessing Web site credibility. These participants seemed to pay more attention to a site's visual appeal when rating credibility. In regards to personal Web sites, which tend to be unbranded and are not as graphically appealing, men tend to rate these types of sites higher in credibility than women rate them (Flanagin & Metzger, 2003).

Creating Informational Communities

In addition to news, Internet users also go online to get information about products they are considering purchasing. One type of site users might visit is a review

site, such as www.eopinion.com, where users publish opinions of products and services for other users to read. Readers can then respond to the reviewer by posting comments and messages to the review. Visitors to these types of sites find the posted information, both the original review and the additional comments, important as it allows them to make better purchasing decisions (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). However, negative reviews of products seem to have a greater impact on purchasing behavior than positive product reviews; people are more likely not to buy a product if they read a negative review than they are to purchase a product if they read a positive review (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Although gathering information and opinions regarding products is the primary reason Internet users visit review sites, another important reason is social orientation (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). By actively posting reviews and comments, users begin to form communities on that Web site.

Weblogs, or blogs, are a type of Internet site that combines information with modulated interactivity, similar to what is found on a review site (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swarts, 2004). Blogs are public, Internet-based diaries where blog writers, known as bloggers, can post their thoughts and opinions on a variety of topics. Readers can visit the blog at their leisure, read what the blogger posts, and leave a comment regarding a particular post. Bloggers develop communities by becoming "friends" with other bloggers, reading and responding to the friends' blogs on a consistent basis. Friendships are usually formed based on similar interests, geographic location, and the age of the blogger (Kumar, Novak, Raghavan, & Tomkins, 2004). Research by Kumar, Novak, Raghavan, and Tomkins (2004) show that bloggers list an average of 14 other bloggers as friends; 80 percent of these friendships are reciprocal, with friends listing that

blogger as their friend as well. Bloggers within the same community often cross-reference and link to each others' postings (Kumar, Novak, Raghavan, & Tomkins, 2004). However, it is not the blogs themselves that create the community (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swarts, 2004). Communities tend to be built around individual bloggers with common interests who join together as friends interacting with each other; these groups of friends then combine, forming greater interaction, eventually forming a community (Kumar, Novak, Raghavan, & Tomkins, 2004).

The Growth of Blogging

Blogging, that is reading and writing blogs, has grown tremendously in the last few years (see Figure 2.1). According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2005), there was a 58 percent increase in blog readership in 2004. Pew estimated that in 2004 seven percent of the 120 million adults in the United States who were online had created a blog; this equated to about 8 million people and was a two percent increase from 2003. Twenty-seven percent of Internet users, or 32 million people, said they read blogs, with nine percent of Internet users saying they read blogs frequently; 12 percent of Internet users have posted a comment to a blog (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005). However, despite the growth of blogging, Pew (2005) estimates 62 percent of online Americans say they do not know what a blog is. According to Technorati (2006), the number of blogs has increased dramatically (42 million blogs) since the Pew research; while no formal research has been conducted, it one might conclude that the number of blog readers and the frequency of reading blogs has also increased.

Figure 2.1
Growth of blogs.
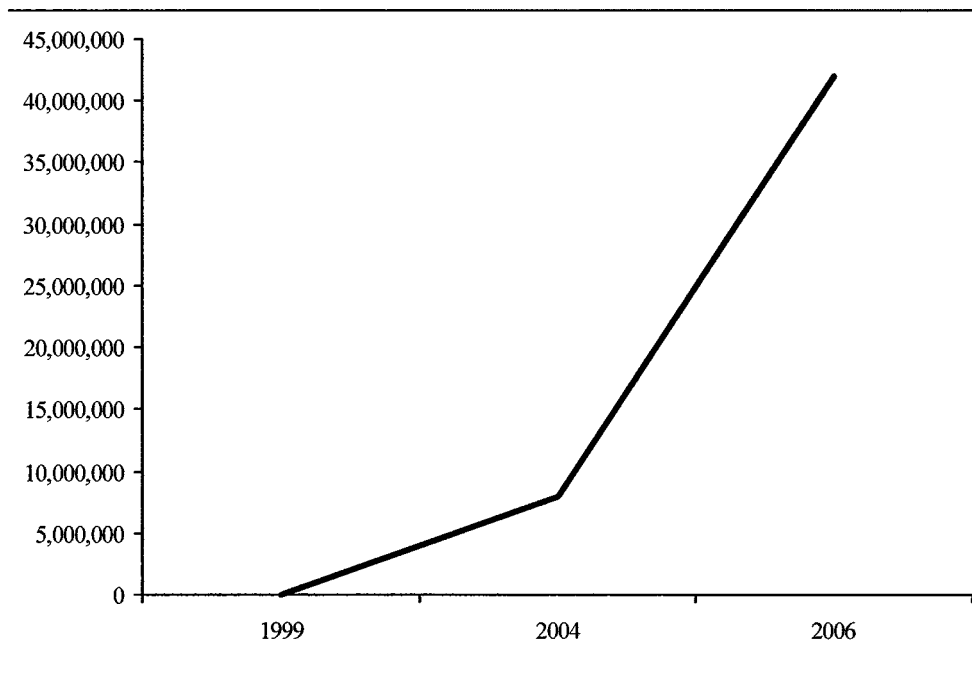
There seem to be several reasons why one might blog, including: providing

updates on one's life, commenting on issues and news, expressing one's emotions,

expressing one's self through writing, and establishing and maintaining communities

(Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swarts, 2004). Blood (2000) states that blogs help fulfill

the promise of the World Wide Web by providing an easy, non-technical method for

people to communicate and create content. Blog entries can range from the academic to

the whimsical; bloggers can post several times a day or can post less than once a month.

Bloggers tend to be young men who are well-educated, relatively well-off financially,

have broadband connections to the Internet and have been online for six or more years

(Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005). Blogs are not limited to just the United

States; blogs have been published on all seven continents, including Antarctica. However,

the majority of blogging seems to be more widely represented in technology centers, such

as California and New York (Kumar, Novak, Raghavan, & Tomkins, 2004).

Bloggers and the Media

Research has found that bloggers don't influence what the MSM covers; instead,

the MSM influences what bloggers cover (Haas, 2005; Wall, 2005). Blogs act as filters of

the MSM, providing highlights and links to the stories the writers think are the most

important for their busy readers (Blood, 2000). Most mainstream media reporters tend to

read the same few influential blogs. It is these influential blogs, which utilize gate-

keeping techniques that are similar to the MSM, that seem to set the agenda for what

other bloggers cover and (Haas, 2005; Singer, 2005). While utilizing just a few main

blogs and MSM sites might be common, Clark (2002) argues, "This practice, however,

defeats the original purpose of link-based weblogging – to find fresh new items online"

(pg. 59).

Many bloggers, particularly those covering political news, tend to be biased in the

use of news sources and cover stories from a one-sided point of view (Haas, 2005; Kerbel

& Bloom, 2005; Wall, 2005; Blood, 2000). However, most readers tend to read blogs

from their own ideology (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005). Blood (2000) states that bias in

blogging can be helpful as it "further enables us to turn a critical eye to both the

information and comments she provides" (p.12).

A Theoretical Look at Blogging

The introduction of a new medium provides an opportunity for scholars to revisit

existing theories of mass communication, providing both a framework by which to

understand the medium and a chance update tested theories. While blogging is a

relatively new area of study, researchers are beginning to look at this medium through

frameworks of various theories, including uses and gratifications and agenda setting.

Uses and gratification theory looks at how people interact with the media (Severin

& Tankard, 2001). In examining blogging through the framework of this theory, Scott

(2004) finds that people tend to seek out blogs for belief reinforcement, news and

information, or organizational and motivational purposes. Kaye (2005) states that there

are actually six motivations for blog reading: personal fulfillment, social observation,

information seeking, political observation, convenience, and self-expression and

affiliation, and that all six can be predicted by looking at a person's political involvement.

There seem to be seven motivations for writing blogs: self-expression, documenting

one's life, socialization, the appeal of the technology, information, practicing writing

skills, and passing time (Li, 2005).

Agenda setting is another theory by which blogs are studied. This theory states

that is the media that decides what should be important to the public by the stories they

run (Severin & Tankard, 2001). Harper (2005) argues that there is not an agenda setting

function to blogs, most often it is the mainstream media which sets the agenda and the

blogs follow. However, blogs play an important part in framing the news, or putting it in

a context for the readers. There are some scholar who agree with this assessment (Haas,

2005), while others disagree (Delwiche, 2005), saying that often top stories in the

blogosphere are not necessarily the top stories being covered by the mainstream media.

Delwiche (2005) states that blogging allows people to tell the media what they want to

think about, not the other way around.

Bloggers as Opinion Intermediaries

According to Technorati (2006), a search engine that tracks blogs, today there are more than 42 million blogs. When it comes to news and current events, however, there are just a small number of blogs which set the agenda on what issues will be written about in the blogosphere (Haas, 2005). Most bloggers use stories from the mainstream media as their source, adding their own commentaries to the news. Haas (2005) states that these influential bloggers funnel information from the MSM to other bloggers. "...they serve as intermediaries or, in the language of Katz and Lazarsfeld's two-step flow of informational model, 'opinion leaders," channeling information from the mainstream news media to the blogsphere at large" (p. 391). In addition, many readers of blogs, specifically blogs that serve a specific niche, are leaders and opinion influencers for that niche market (Raphael, 2001).

History and Background of the Two-Step Flow Theory

The two-step flow theory, that information flows in a two-step process, first to group, community, and opinion leaders and then out to the general public, is one of the most commonly used mass communication theories in the field of persuasion and public relations (Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2003). This theory was developed in the 1940s by a group of Columbia University researchers led by Paul Lazarsfeld (Severin & Tankard, 1992).

During the 1940 presidential campaign, Lazarsfeld conducted a study examining how media impacted voters' decisions in presidential elections. In looking at voters in Erie County, Ohio, Lazarsfeld found something unexpected – personal influence and interpersonal communication had a greater impact on which candidate a voter selected

than did mass media (Severin & Tankard, 2001). Lazarsfeld discovered that 10 percent more people participated in political discussions with friends, family members, and colleagues, than listened to political discussions on the radio or read political articles in the newspaper (Lazarsfeld, 1944). Some of the reasons Lazarsfeld gave for why interpersonal messages were more influential than mass media was that face-to-face conversations could be more flexible and be tailored to fit the message receiver, and that messages could be altered depending on the receiver's reactions (Lazarsfeld, 1944).

The findings from the Erie County research led to the Decatur Study conducted by Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz in 1945 (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). In order to understand interpersonal influence, Lazarsfeld and Katz interviewed 800 female residents of Decatur, IL, looking at the characteristics of opinion leaders in four separate categories: marketing (consumer goods and household products), fashion, public affairs, and movies.

One of the first issues that Lazarsfeld and Katz had to resolve in this study was how to define opinion leaders and how to locate them (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). The researchers first wondered if opinion leaders were general influentials, or the same people one would go to for advice on multiple topics. In most cases the women said they turned to their fathers or husbands for advice; Lazarsfeld and Katz decided this was not helpful. The researchers then looked at specific influentials, or people one turned to for opinions on a particular topic. Again, this was not too helpful as respondents said they relied on husbands and fathers. The researchers then tried to look at everyday contacts but found that respondents could not recall people with whom they discussed things. The best way to define opinion leaders, Lazarsfeld and Katz found, was by self-designation, or asking the respondents if they had influenced anyone (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Through this

method Lazarsfeld and Katz were able to define opinion leaders and verify opinion change on the influencees. Once opinion leaders were defined, Lazarsfeld and Katz were able to identify three primary characteristics of opinion leaders: position in lifecycle (single or married, number of children), socioeconomic status, and number of social contacts (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995).

In looking at marketing opinion leaders, Lazarsfeld and Katz found that more than half of the respondents were influenced by opinion leaders and that information seemed to flow horizontally within a socioeconomic status level instead of from the top status down. Large-family wives with a large number of social contacts were most likely to be opinion leaders (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Fashion opinion leaders, on the other hand, tended to be single, more affluent, young women, with a number of social contacts. While class status and social contacts played a role in public affairs opinion leaders, generally husbands and fathers tended to play a stronger role in opinion change for this category; women did not tend to be opinion leaders. As for movies, single females were more likely to be opinion leaders, but socioeconomic status and number of social contacts had little impact (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995).

Both the Erie County Election and the Decatur Study led to the development of the two-step flow theory of communication (Severin & Tankard, 2001). With the Decatur Study, Lazarsfeld and Katz found that there were indeed opinion leaders who influenced other consumers. As for the three primary characteristics of opinion leaders identified by Lazarsfeld and Katz, later scholars defined these three characteristics as who one is, whom one knows, and what one knows (Severin & Tankard, 2001).

Characteristics of Opinion Leaders

According to Rogers (2003), "Opinion leadership is the degree to which an individual is able to influence other individuals' attitudes or overt behavior informally in a desired way with relative frequency" (p. 27). Compared to followers, opinion leaders are exposed to more media, have a higher socioeconomic status, are more innovative, and are at the center of an interpersonal network (Rogers, 2003). Opinion leadership is not a formal designation, nor is it a result of a position within a social group. Instead it is earned and kept by "the individual's technical competence, social accessibility, and conformity to the system's norms" (Rogers, 2003, p. 27). Social context is also important in determining opinion leadership. Opinion leaders tend to span boundaries, being members of several different social groups (Roch, 2005). This may have a greater impact on whether someone is an opinion leader than that person's media consumption.

However, scholars have found that opinion leaders do differ from the general public in their media consumption habits. In his research Lazarsfeld concludes that opinion leaders pay more attention to the media, keeping abreast of news and issues, than do the general public (Severin & Tankard, 2001). Roch (2005) disagrees somewhat, stating that opinion leaders keep up with the media only slightly more the general public, but that opinion leaders do read more targeted and quality news sources, such as organizational newsletters, to keep abreast of what is important to them. As such, information from opinion leaders tends to be more accurate than information from other interpersonal sources (Roch, 2005). Chaney (2001) suggests that opinion leaders "search more widely than other consumers" for information (p. 307). It may be that opinion leaders monitor the mass media more closely because their belief systems are more

highly developed (Robinson, 1976). While there is disagreement whether opinion leaders are more informed than the average consumer, scholars do believe that opinion leaders are more informed than the other members of their social group (Roch, 2005).

Some scholars think that opinion leaders are more likely to be early adopters of new innovations and that they seek information from outside of their geographic location (Severin & Tankard, 2001). When looking at who purchases products via the Internet, Kwak, Fox, and Zinkhan (2002) find that opinion leadership is the personality trait most likely to determine whether one purchases online. Rogers (2003), however, disagrees with the idea that opinion leaders and innovators are the same. Opinion leaders, he argues, have followers, while innovators are simply the first people to adopt a new product or technology.

Opinion leaders do seem to be from similar groups as their followers, as followers tend to rely on information from people most like themselves (Severin & Tankard, 2001). The Decatur Study showed that opinion influence for categories such as consumer goods flowed horizontally across socioeconomic classes, instead of from higher socioeconomic classes down to lower classes (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Within social groups, however, information tends to flow vertically, from the opinion leader down to other members of the social group (Weimann, 1982; Robinson, 1976). Even though opinion leaders come from the same social class, because their opinions are weighted more heavily, they are not seen as peers of the other members of their group (Dearing, 2004). Some scholars argue that the act of sharing their opinions differentiates opinion leaders from the rest of their social group (Chan & Misra, 1990).

There is not one particular demographic from which opinion leaders emerge –
they are from various socioeconomic groups (Chaney, 2001). This means that white,
male, *Fortune* 500 executives have opinion leaders just as black, female, welfare mothers
do, but that the opinion leaders for these two groups will be different. However, it may be
difficult to recognize an opinion leader; opinion leadership traits do not seem to be
generalized but instead are dependent on the product type or category (Chan & Misra,
1990).

While some scholars, such as Roch (2005) argue that "Opinion leaders do possess
attributes that distinguish them from nonleaders" (p. 126), others argue that there is not
that much of a difference. Robinson (1976) states that there is a strong correlation ($r =$
.40) between opinion givers and opinion receivers and that 68 percent of the participants
in his study who gave opinions also received them. One thing that must be kept in mind,
however, is that opinion leaders vary among product categories and social groups;
someone who might be an opinion leader in one social group, may not be an opinion
leader in another social group (Roch, 2005).

Why Utilize Opinion Leaders

The two-step flow theory was developed more than 60 years ago by looking at
how the public made voting decisions, but the idea of opinion leaders is still important in
many fields, particularly in politics and marketing (Roch, 2005). Opinion leaders can
bring about change by encouraging followers to adopt an idea, product, or service, or
they can oppose change, encouraging followers not to adopt a particular innovation
(Rogers, 2003).

Often major news events, such as the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt or the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, are spread via interpersonal communication, from opinion leaders to followers. With both of the aforementioned events, the news spread rapidly, primarily through interpersonal channels (Ostlund, 1973). News events which aren't as important, such as President Dwight Eisenhower deciding to seek reelection, or President Lyndon B. Johnson deciding not to seek reelection, are not spread through interpersonal channels (Ostlund, 1973). It is important to understand that interpersonal communication follows interests (Ostlund, 1973). For example, an opinion leader in the world of bicycle racing might discuss the latest in training techniques with other racers, but would probably not discuss U.S. involvement in Iraq. Additionally, Ostlund (1973) argues that although interpersonal communication is persuasive in content, it does little to actually sway opinion.

Quite often interpersonal communication does not serve as the initial source of information (Ostlund, 1973). However, one reason why the use of opinion leaders might be successful is what is known as the "Exposure Explanation" (Eveland, 2004). This states that people get information from interpersonal interactions much the same way they would get the information from the news. The information from the opinion leader is exposure to information the receiver initially missed in the mass media, or it is repeat exposure to information they already received from the mass media (Eveland, 2004). Simply stated, interpersonal communication by opinion leaders is another communication channel, much in the same way television, newspapers, and radio are communication channels.

Message senders (i.e. companies, political candidates) find that utilizing opinion leaders is an efficient way to spread their message (Dearing, 2004). If opinion leaders are favorable to the idea and other members of the social group identify the idea with the opinion leader, then the message will be spread. The message can be spread from one member to other members within the same social group, but only if the message has the approval of the opinion leader (Dearing, 2004). If opinion leaders are unfavorable to the idea and avoid it, the idea does not spread (Leonard-Barton, 1985). Messages can also be spread between groups from members who belong to both groups; however, the messages are still spread within groups through the opinion leaders (Weimann, 1982).

While most of the research on opinion leaders has focused on elections and political choice, research suggests that opinion leaders may also influence purchasing decisions. Consumers are more likely to seek information and advice on product purchases from opinion leaders (Kwak, Fox, & Zinkhan, 2002). In fact, traditional marketing sources may be less important than interpersonal sources.

Arndt (1967) states that consumers are more likely to purchase a product if they have heard favorable comments or reviews about that product. Conversely, consumers are less likely to purchase a product if they have heard unfavorable comments or reviews. People are more likely to hear and respond to product references if they come from other members of their social groups – people they know and interact with on a regular basis, such as friends, neighbors, or family members. When people perceive a purchase to be high risk, such as an automobile, they are more likely to pay attention to the information they receive about that product than if they perceive the product to be a low risk, such as quart of milk. However, positive reviews from members of social groups may not be a

deciding factor in purchasing decisions. Arndt (1967) concludes that as many as 46 percent of respondents still do not purchase products after hearing favorable reviews of those products from people they know.

One reason that consumers might rely on opinion leaders and interpersonal relationships to influence purchasing decisions may be the large number of persuasive messages they are exposed to every day. Consumers need the help of people they trust to sort through these messages (Budd, 1994). Consumers form opinions by listening to people they already know and trust. Because most people only attend to and remember media messages that reinforce their own beliefs, ideally a public relations practitioner should target opinion leaders first, before targeting the media (Budd, 1994).

Although many public relations and persuasion campaigns have utilized opinion leaders since before the two-step flow theory was hypothesized, there are criticisms of this theory. The next section will review these criticisms.

Criticisms of the Two-Step Flow Theory

There has been a lot of criticism of the two-step flow theory since it was first introduced in the 1950s. According to Rogers (2003):

> Mass communication channels are primarily knowledge creators, whereas interpersonal networks are more important in persuading individuals to adopt or reject. This notion was masked in the original statement of the two-step model because the time sequence involved in an individual's innovation decision-making process was ignored. Such source/channel differences at the knowledge versus the persuasion stages usually exist for *both* opinion leaders and followers.

Thus, opinion leaders are not the only individuals to use mass communication channels, as the original statement of the two-step flow model suggested (p. 305).

Opinion leaders may only play a small part when it comes to opinion change. Some scholars believe that, while there is some truth in the two-step flow theory, it is too simplistic (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth, & Van Leuven, 2004). These scholars argue that the two-step flow theory allows for only two levels of communication – the opinion leader and the follower – and that the theory presumes a linear flow. They propose that communication is not so simplistic and that a multi-step flow of communication, targeting several different levels of opinion leaders, might work better in regards to opinion change (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth, & Van Leuven, 2004; Robinson, 1976).

Scholars such as Westley (1971) argue that interpersonal communication has little impact on the dissemination of major news stories; these stories tend to be spread more quickly through mass media outlets. Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) argue persuasion most often comes from interpersonal channels while information comes from mass media channels. Although previous research found that opinion leaders paid more attention to the media (Severin & Tankard, 2001), Chan and Misra (1990) find that opinion leaders are not more heavily exposed to print media compared with other members of their social group.

Another criticism to the two-step flow theory is that opinion leaders tend to be difficult to identify (Evans & Fill, 2000). In fact there has been criticism regarding the validity of how Lazarsfeld and Katz identified opinion leaders in their Decatur Study, saying that the pair did not accurately identify opinion leaders (Roch, 2005). Through

trial-and error, Lazarsfeld and Katz used self-designation, or asking the respondents if they had influenced anyone, to identify opinion leaders (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995).

One way to identify opinion leaders might be familiarity and personal involvement with specific products. Chan and Misra (1990) find that opinion leaders tend to be more familiar with and more personally involved with products for which they are opinion leaders. Another possible identification might be public individuation, or the state in which people feel differentiated from others (Chan & Misra, 1990). Opinion leaders report a greater feeling of public individuation compared with non-leaders (Chan & Misra, 1990). However, even if one can identify an opinion leader, it is often difficult to measure the impact the opinion leader might have in influencing other members of the social group (Evans & Fill, 2000). Finally, it must be remembered that targeting opinion leaders can also have a negative effect; opinion leaders can just as easily spread negative opinions about products or companies that they don't like as they can spread positive opinions about products and companies that they do like (Evans & Fill, 2000).

Justification for Current Research

For the last several years one has been unable to open a marketing or public relations trade publication without reading how blogs are changing the way practitioners are conducting business. Although magazines offer advice on how to integrate blogging into opinion change campaigns, little scientific research has been conducted on whether utilizing bloggers is actually effective and how to gain the biggest impact from blogs.

One way blogs might be beneficial in public opinion campaigns is through the use of opinion leaders. Utilizing opinion leaders to promote a company, product, brand, or candidate is still one of the most used strategies in public relations and persuasion

campaigns. Many scholars, however, feel this is a dated theory and little current research is being conducted within the framework of this theory. Yet as new technologies emerge, it gives scholars a chance to revisit established theories to see how they can be applied to new mediums. It may be that blogging works well within the framework of the two-step flow theory.

This thesis will make a contribution to the area of public relations and new media technology use. It will help differentiate between the hype and the reality of the use of blogs in opinion change and will have both theoretical and practical value.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research is to examine blogging using the two-step flow of communication theory as a framework. Similar to Lazarsfeld's opinion leaders, bloggers gather information from various media sources and provide commentary on the news to followers of their blogs. Specific questions that will be asked in this research include:

RQ 1: Do readers look to bloggers as virtual opinion leaders? If so, what is it about bloggers that makes them opinion leaders?

RQ 2: What is the perceived credibility of blogs as compared to print and online news sources?

RQ 3: What, if any, impact do blogs have on opinion change?

RQ 4: If blogs can be used as conduits of opinion change, what specifically is it about blogs that facilitates opinion change (i.e. is the simple posting of opinion or is it the interaction between bloggers and blog readers)?

The research methodology utilized to answer these four questions is outlined in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter details the research methodology utilized in this study. Participant demographics and study results are examined in Chapter 4.

In examining bloggers as virtual opinion leaders, the unit of analysis was the individual blog reader. Three hundred and thirty five people took the survey. To ensure that respondents were knowledgeable in the subject of blogs, three filter questions were asked to qualify the respondents for the survey. If the respondents answered "no" to any of the qualifying questions, the survey skipped the respondents forward to the demographic questions. After qualifying respondents based on the filter questions, and participants opting out of the survey, a total of 191 people completed the remaining survey questions regarding blogging.

The first filter question asked respondents if they accessed the Internet one or more times a week; all but one respondent answered yes. The second filter question asked respondents if they had a good understanding of what the term blog meant. Only 18.7 percent of respondents did not know what a blog was. The final filter question asked respondents if they had ever read a blog – 86.4 percent had.

As this research focused on the individual blog reader, a survey methodology was utilized. Surveys are a versatile, efficient way to collect information from individuals

(Chambliss & Schutt, 2003). Because this research examined online activity, particularly those of Weblog readers, an online survey was conducted to target Internet readers. Since there is neither a centralized directory of email addresses nor a way to randomly generate emails (Kaye & Johnson, 1999), a convenience sample of participants was recruited by posting participation requests on various blogs, Internet discussion groups and forums, and email lists. Similar to other surveys regarding Internet usage (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003), a snowball technique was utilized, asking people who received the survey request to forward the request to others in their email contacts. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

The online survey, consisting of 35 closed-ended questions (see Appendix), was active between October 27, 2005 and April 23, 2006. Survey questions regarding credibility were modeled after questions in Internet information credibility studies conducted by Johnson and Kaye (2004) and Flanagin and Metzger (2000). Questions regarding blogging were based on the survey conducted by Pew (2005), as well as a survey the author conducted as part of a graduate-level research class. Because the nature of the current research was exploratory by nature, the survey questionnaire was not pre-tested, but the survey questions were reviewed for clarity prior to being posted online.

Internet and Blog Usage

Respondents were asked about their Internet usage, if they accessed the Internet and how many hours a day they were online. As in the research by Pew (2005) blog usage was operationalized by asking respondents if they had a good understanding of what the term blog meant, if they had ever read a blog, and how frequently they read

blogs. Respondents were also asked what categories of blogs they read and their reasons for reading the blog they frequented most.

The list of blog categories were based on previous research the author conducted for a graduate level research class, as well as blog subject listings on Technorati, a blog search engine. The survey contained 19 categories of blogs, including: personal (defined as updates from friends and family), news/current events, political, humor, entertainment, celebrity gossip, business/industry, job-related, financial/investing/money, medical/health-related, travel/leisure, sports/recreation, shopping/consumer-related products, food/cooking/restaurants, gaming, books/literature, photography, hobbies, and other. In looking at the survey results several blog categories had minimal responses. To better analyze the most frequently read blogs several of the categories were combined, creating six blog categories: personal, news/current events, political, entertainment, personal/leisure, and other (see Table 4.2).

Credibility

In this survey, credibility was defined as being believable, reliable and worthy of confidence. Respondents were asked to rate the credibility of blogs they read most often, on a scale of 1-7, with 1=no credibility and 7=most credible. Using the same 7-point scale, respondents were also asked to judge the credibility of other news sources, including print, online, and television.

Opinion Change

Opinion change was examined two different ways in this survey. First, respondents were asked if they had changed their opinion on a subject or topic in the last 12 months. If they had, respondents were given a list of sources and were asked to select

all of the sources that influenced their opinion change. Sources included: weblogs/blogs, online/internet news web sites, internet discussion/message boards, general web sites, print news (newspapers, magazines), television, radio, friends/personal acquaintances, family members, don't recall, and other. Respondents were then asked to select the one source that was most influential in their opinion change.

Opinion change was also examined in terms of blog readership. Respondents were asked a series of questions on whether a blog caused them to ever give more thought/consideration to a subject or topic, and if a blog posting had ever caused them to change or reinforce their opinion on a subject or topic. If respondents answered yes to any of those questions, they were asked what it was about the blog that caused the opinion consideration, change, or reinforcement. Respondents were provided the following 17 choices and were asked to select all that applied:

- The general writing style of the Weblog/blog

- The use of logic and facts

- The use of emotional appeals

- The use of humor

- A unique/interesting viewpoint on the subject/topic

- The credibility of the Weblog/blog

- My ability to post my own comments about the subject/topic

- My ability to read comments from other readers regarding that subject/topic

- The number of readers/popularity of the Weblog/blog

- The writer of the Weblog/blog is an expert in the area he/she is commenting on

- I trust the writer of the Weblog/blog

- I personally know the writer of the Weblog/blog

- I can relate to the writer of the Weblog/blog; he/she seems like me

- The opinions expressed in the Weblog/blog are similar to mine

- The opinions expressed in the Weblog/blog are different from mine

- The Weblog/blog provides commentary on news/current events

- The Weblog/blog links to other news/current events sources

- Other

Once all the survey data was gathered, it was uploaded to the Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS), a statistical software package, to run tests on the data and analyze the results. The results from these tests are detailed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter details and analyzes the results of the survey on blogging and opinion leadership. The chapter will start by summarizing the demographic data of the respondents. It will then review the data for the four research questions and seek to answer each question. Discussion of the results will follow in Chapter 5.

Respondents

Respondents to this survey were heavily skewed female – 66.5 percent female compared with 33.5 percent male. As is typical with Internet users, respondents tended to be young and white. Forty-three percent of the respondents were under the age of 35 and 84.5 percent were Caucasian. Although the professions of the respondents varied, the greatest percentage of the participants was students (9.7%), and education/teaching (9.7%). This should be expected as the survey was conducted at part of a graduate-level project. More than one-third of the respondents (36.4 percent) had annual household incomes greater than $75,000 and almost half (48.4 percent) were married. More than half of the respondents (57 percent) had an educational level of a bachelor's degree or higher.

RQ 1

The first research question examined whether respondents view bloggers as virtual opinion leaders. This was operationalized by first gathering data on blog reading habits of the respondents, including what types of blogs they read, how often they read them, and the reason for reading their favorite blog. Opinion leadership was then operationalized by looking at opinion change and the sources of information which lead to that opinion change.

The research showed that respondents did not view bloggers as virtual opinion leaders. Respondents tended to read personal blogs, defined as updates from friends and family, and read them because they are written by friends and family members. While personal acquaintances are the most common source of information when it comes to opinion change, respondents did not seem to equate this source of information to personal blogs and ranked blogs a low source of information when it comes to opinion change.

In looking at what types of blogs respondents read, the research showed that personal blogs were read by the highest number of respondents (74.2 percent), followed by news/current events blogs (69.5 percent), and political blogs (59.5 percent) (see Table 4.1). Although personal blogs were read by a greater number of respondents, news/current events blogs were read slightly more frequently than personal blogs. The frequency rating of reading news/current events blogs was 3.7227 (slightly less than 2-3 times a month), compared with 3.7143 for personal blogs. Political blogs were the third most frequently read blog with a rating of 3.1000 (slightly more than once a month). Gaming, photography, and financial/investing/money were both the least read and the least frequently read types of blogs.

Table 4.1
Types of blogs read

Types of blogs	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents	Frequency in reading
Personal – updates from friends & family	161	74.2%	3.7143
News/current events	153	69.5%	3.7227
Political	131	59 5%	3.1000
Humor	127	59.1%	2.8884
Entertainment – music, television, movies	126	58.6%	2.8140
Hobbies	102	47.9%	2.3897
Business/industry	96	44.4%	2.1852
Medical/health-related	96	44.4%	2.0046
Job-related	92	43.2%	2.2958
Celebrity gossip	91	42.3%	2.1814
Books/literature	91	42.3%	2.0651
Shopping/consumer-related products	90	41.9%	2.0791
Sports/recreation	89	41.0%	2.1567
Food/cooking/restaurants	87	40.5%	2.0186
Travel/leisure	80	37.2%	1.8698
Financial/investing/money	67	31.0%	1.7454
Photography	61	28.2%	1.6944
Gaming	45	20.9%	1.4884
Other	0	0.0%	

Respondents were then asked to consider their favorite blog, operationalized as the blog they read most frequently. Overwhelmingly, respondents favored personal blogs, with 32.1 percent of the respondents indicating their most frequently read blog was a personal blog (see Table 4.2). In fact, more respondents read personal blogs than the number two (political blogs, with 15.5 percent of respondents) and number three (personal interest/leisure blogs, with 13.4 percent of respondents) most popular blogs

combined. The majority of respondents (50.8 percent) viewed their favorite blog three or

more times a week, with 30.3 percent reading the blog daily (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.2
Most frequently read blog

Type of blog	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Personal – updates from friends & family	60	32.1%
Political	28	15.5%
Personal interest/leisure	25	13.4%
News/current events	24	12.8%
Entertainment	20	10.7%
Other	30	16.0%

Table 4.3
How often reads favorite blog

Frequency	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
1 or more times a day	56	30.3%
3-6 times a week	38	20.5%
1-2 times a week	30	16.2%
2-3 times a month	27	14.6%
1 time a month	13	7.0%
Less than 1 time a month	21	11.4%

With the high percentage of female respondents (66.5 percent of respondents), the

researcher examined whether gender impacted the type of blogs respondents read. A chi-

square test of independence was calculated comparing gender to the type of blog read. A

significant interaction was found ($\chi^2(5)=12.809, p < .05$). Women were much more likely

to read personal blogs (39.8 percent of female respondents) compared to men (18.8

percent of male respondents). Women were also more likely to read entertainment blogs,

while men were more likely to read news and political blogs (see Table 4.4). Although

men were less likely to read personal blog when compared to women, personal blogs

were still one of the most read types of blogs for men.

Table 4.4
Most frequently read blog by gender

Sources of information	Men		Women	
	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Personal – updates from friends & family	13	18.8%	47	39.8%
Political	13	18.8%	15	12.7%
News/current events	12	17.4%	12	10.2%
Personal interest/leisure	11	15.9%	14	11.9%
Entertainment	5	7.2%	15	12.7%
Other	15	21.7%	15	12.7%

Interest in the topic of the blog was the primary reason respondents read their

favorite blog, with 33.5 percent of the respondents giving this reason (see Table 4.5). The

second highest reason, with 24.5 percent of the respondents, was because the blog writer

was a friend or family member. This is not surprising given that personal blogs were the

favorite type of blog. Trusting the blog writer to provide accurate information was the

third most important reason for viewing the blog (10.6 percent of the respondents),

followed closely by the use of humor (10.1 percent of the respondents). It should be

noted that more than three-fourths of the respondents (78.7 percent) selected one of these

four reasons for reading the blog they viewed most often.

Table 4.5
Reason for reading favorite blog

Reason for reading	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
I am interested in the topic	63	33.5%
The writer is a friend or family member	46	24.5%
I trust the writer to provide accurate information	20	10.6%
I think the writer's stories are humorous	19	10.1%
I like reading a different point of view	9	4.8%
I like the writing style	7	3.7%
I like peeking in on people who I don't know	6	3.2%
I agree with the opinion of the writer and want to know what they write	4	2.1%
I disagree with the opinion of the writer and want to know what they write	2	1.1%
Other	12	6.4%

After looking at the blog reading habits of respondents, opinion leadership was

ined by asking respondents if they had changed their position on a subject or topic

g the last 12 months after learning more information about that subject or topic.

ist all of the respondents (81.5 percent) had. Respondents were asked to select the

es of information which were instrumental in their opinion change and choose the

ource which was most influential (see Table 4.6).

For the majority of respondents, friends and personal acquaintances was the top

e of information (57.9 percent), followed by print news (57.2 percent), and online

sources (55.3 percent). These three sources also seemed to be the most influential

es of information for participants; 49.1 percent of the participants looked to one of

three sources as their primary source of information when it came to opinion

ge.

Table 4.6
Information sources influencing opinion change

Sources of information	All sources that influenced opinion change		Primary source that influenced opinion change	
	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Friends/personal acquaintances	92	57.9%	35	22.3%
Print news (newspapers, magazines)	91	57.2%	21	13.4%
Online/Internet news Web sites	88	55.3%	21	13.4%
Television	59	37.1%	19	12.1%
Family members	50	31.4%	3	1.9%
Internet discussion/message boards	46	28.9%	9	5.7%
Radio	44	27.7%	14	8.9%
Weblogs/blogs	42	26.4%	11	7.0%
General Web sites	32	20.1%	6	3.8%
Don't recall	9	5.7%	18	11.5%
Other	8	5.0%	NA	NA

Blogs, however, did not seem to be an important source of information when it

› to opinion change. Only 26.4 percent of respondents said that blogs were a source

formation when it came to opinion change, with 7.0 percent of respondents saying

ɔlogs were their primary source of information. Given that respondents rank blogs

n regards to information sources, and that one of the primary reason to read a blog is

t is written by a friend or family member, this seems to show that the answer to RQ

ɪo, readers do not view bloggers as virtual opinion leaders.

RQ 2

The second research question examined in this thesis regarded perceived

bility of blogs, as compared to print news sources, online news sources, and

television news sources. Credibility was operationalized by asking respondents to rate the perceived credibility of their most frequently read blogs, print news, online news, and television news sources. Respondents used a scale of 1-7, with 7 = the most credible and 1 = no credibility.

The data showed that compared to mainstream media sources, blogs had the lowest perceived credibility. To examine perceived credibility, the mean score for credibility was calculated for each of the four sources of information. Online news had the highest credibility with a mean score of 5.22 out of 7.00. Print news was next, with a mean score of 4.98, followed by television with a mean score of 4.79. Blogs had the lowest credibility, with a mean score of 4.58 out of 7.00.

To further compare the credibility of the various information sources, a one-way repeated measures ANOVA was calculated comparing the credibility of blogs, print, online, and television news sources. A significant effect was found (F(3, 1.94) = 13.440, p < .000). t tests showed that there were significant differences in the perceived credibility of the various information sources, with online sources having the highest level of credibility, followed by print sources, television, and lastly, blogs.

The next area examined was whether the frequency of reading an information source had any impact on the perceived credibility for that source. Of the four information sources examined, blogs were the least frequently read source (see Table 4.7) and the source with the lowest perceived credibility rating. Online news, on the other hand, was the most frequently read information source and had the highest perceived credibility rating.

Table 4.7
Utilization of information sources

Frequency of utilizing source	Print		Online		Television		Most frequently read blog	
	# of respondents	% of respondents	# of respondents	% of respondents	# of respondents	% of respondents	# of respondents	% of respondents
Has utilized source	180	96.0%	180	94.4%	163	86.2%	191*	100%
1 or more times a day	66	36.7%	102	56.7%	70	42.9%	57	29.8%
3-6 times a week	42	23.3%	37	20.6%	39	23.9%	41	21.5%
1-2 times a week	39	21.7%	19	10.6%	31	19.0%	30	15.7%
2-3 times a month	22	12.2%	13	7.2%	19	11.7%	27	14.1%
1 time a month	5	2 8%	6	3.3%	3	1.8%	14	7.3%
Less than 1 time a month	6	3.3%	3	1.7%	1	0.6%	22	11.5%
Does not utilize	11	5.8%	11	5 8%	28	14.7%	0	0%

* *Reading blogs was a filter question for the survey. If respondents did not read blogs they did not participate in the remainder of the survey.*

The data did show that the more frequently a respondent reads blogs, the greater the level of perceived credibility was for blogs. A Spearman *rho* correlation coefficient was calculated comparing frequency of blog reading to perceived credibility; a strong positive correlation indicating a significant relationship was found ($rho(191) = .187, p < .001$). There was also a strong positive correlation between frequency and perceived credibility for television news ($rho(163) = .312, p < .001$), but there were no correlations between frequency and perceived credibility for print sources ($rho(180) = .072, p > .05$) or online sources ($rho(180) = .092, p > .05$).

RQ 2 examined the perceived credibility of blogs as compared to print, online, and television news sources. The research showed blogs were seen as less credible than the other three information sources. Additionally, blogs are read less frequently than the other information sources, but as blog reading increases, so does the perceived credibility of blogs.

RQ 3

The third research question examined the impact blogs have on opinion change. Opinion change was operationalized by asking respondents if they had ever given more thought or consideration towards a particular subject or topic after reading a blog article on that subject or topic. Respondents were then asked if they had ever changed an opinion after reading a blog article, and finally if they had ever reinforced an opinion after reading a blog article.

Blogs do seem to influence further consideration of a subject or topic. Most respondents (71.6 percent) said that they have given more thought or consideration to a subject or topic after reading a blog article on that subject or topic. However, blogs seem more likely to reinforce currently held positions (62.1 percent of the respondents) than to change opinions (42.4 percent of the respondents). The answer to RQ 3 is that blogs have limited impact on opinion change, but they do influence what people think about and serve to reinforce existing opinions.

RQ 4

The final research question examined what it is about blogs that might facilitate opinion change. This was operationalized by asking respondents if they had ever given further consideration to a topic, changed an opinion, or reinforced an opinion after

reading a blog article on that topic (RQ 3). If respondents answered affirmatively to any of these questions, they were then asked what features of the blog caused the further consideration, opinion change, or opinion reinforcement. Respondents were given a list of 18 items and were asked to select all that applied (see Table 4.8).

The use of logic and facts and having a unique/interesting viewpoint on the topic seem to be the factors in blogs which have the most impact on opinion change. These were the top two factors for all three categories: opinion consideration, opinion change, and opinion reinforcement. Linking to other blogs and news/current event sources were also important to respondents when it came to opinion consideration, opinion reinforcement, and opinion change.

Blog credibility seemed to be a more important factor in opinion change than it was for opinion consideration or reinforcement. Respondents ranked the credibility of the blog as the third most important attribute in opinion change, while it was ranked sixth for both opinion consideration and reinforcement. The factors with the least amount of impact on opinion change were the use of emotional appeals and the ability to post one's own comments to the blog entry. The answer to RQ 4 is the use of logic and presenting an interesting or unique perspective on a subject will cause blogs to have a bigger impact on opinion consideration, change or reinforcement. Allowing readers to post comments has little impact on opinion change.

Table 4.8
Blog attributes that influence opinion change

Attribute	Further consideration		Opinion change		Opinion reinforcement	
	# of respon-dents	% of respon-dents	# of respon-dents	% of respon-dents	# of respon-dents	% of respon-dents
The use of logic and facts	85	62.5%	49	62.0%	71	62.3%
A unique/ interesting viewpoint on the subject/topic	75	55.1%	30	38.0%	47	41.2%
The Weblog/blog links to other news/current events sources	51	37.5%	23	29.1%	45	39.5%
The Weblog/blog provides commentary on news/current events	45	33.1%	21	26.6%	42	36.8%
My ability to read comments from other readers regarding that subject/topic	40	29.4%	23	29.1%	30	26.3%
The credibility of the Weblog/blog	39	28.7%	24	30.4%	39	34.2%
The writer of the Weblog/blog is an expert in the area he/she is commenting on	28	20.6%	21	26.6%	39	34.2%
The general writing style of the Weblog/blog	27	19.9%	14	17.7%	29	25.4%
The use of humor	27	19.9%	7	8.9%	18	15.8%
The opinions expressed in the Weblog/blog are different from mine	26	19.1%	15	19.0%	3	2.6%
I trust the writer of the Weblog/blog	25	18.4%	17	21.5%	24	21.1%
The opinions expressed in the Weblog/blog are similar to mine	24	17.6%	8	10.1%	32	28.1%
I personally know the writer of the Weblog/blog	21	15.4%	4	5.1%	16	14.0%

Table 4.8 (cont.)
Blog attributes that influence opinion change

Attribute	Further consideration		Opinion change		Opinion reinforcement	
	# of respon-dents	% of respon-dents	# of respon-dents	% of respon-dents	# of respon-dents	% of respon-dents
I can relate to the writer of the Weblog/blog; he/she seems like me	18	13.2%	5	6.3%	17	14.9%
My ability to post my own comments about the subject/topic	11	8.1%	3	3.8%	10	8.8%
The number of readers/popularity of the Weblog/blog	9	6.6%	6	7.6%	10	8.8%
The use of emotional appeals	8	5.9%	5	6.3%	6	5.3%
Other	2	1.5%	2	2.5%	4	3.5%

Results summary

This chapter summarized the survey data regarding blogging and opinion leadership and sought to answer each of the four research questions of this thesis. The research showed that respondents did not view bloggers as opinion leaders. Although the most widely read blogs were personal blogs written by friends and family members, and friends and acquaintances were the most influential source when it came to opinion change, respondents did not see blogs as an important source of information when it came to opinion change. Additionally, blogs had the lowest perceived credibility compared with print, online, and television news sources. However, perceived credibility of blogs did increase as frequency of blog reading increased. Blogs seem to influence further consideration of a specific subject or topic and serve as opinion reinforcement, but blogs do not seem to have a strong impact opinion change. The use of logic and facts and

having a unique/interesting viewpoint on the topic seem to be the factors in blogs that

have the most impact on opinion consideration, change, and reinforcement. Discussion of

these results will follow in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this thesis was to examine bloggers as opinion leaders, using the two-step flow of communication theory as a framework, to see what impact bloggers might have on opinion change. Similar to Lazarsfeld's opinion leaders, bloggers gather information from various media sources and provide commentary on the news to followers of their blogs. The research found that respondents tended to read personal blogs and as such, did not perceive blogs high in terms of credibility nor did they view bloggers as opinion leaders. Blogs do not impact opinion change, but they do impact opinion consideration and reinforcement. This chapter discusses the results of the research study, outlines limitations of the research, and provides direction for future research.

A Promise Unfulfilled

Despite the hype surrounding blogging (discussed in Chapter 1), it is unlikely that blogs will dramatically change the way media operates or how the public receives and processes information. It is true that the number of blogs have increased dramatically, from 8 million in 2004 (Pew Internet & American Life, 2005) to 42 million today (Technorati, 2006). Additionally, blogs have become easier to use and have increased functionality, now allowing bloggers to post photos and videos. People who have never

been computer savvy now have blogs in an effort to keep in touch with their friends and family. However, this research suggests that blogs are more likely to be utilized as an interpersonal communication channel rather than a mass communication medium.

As a mass communication channel, blogs do not have the level of credibility of other MSM sources. Respondents tended to view other mainstream media more frequently than blogs and did not see blogs as an important source of information. It was much more likely that blogs would serve as reinforcement of currently held beliefs, than to motivate opinion change.

Opinion Leadership

Respondents did not view bloggers as opinion leaders or as important sources of information when it came to opinion change. Just over one-quarter of respondents said that blogs influenced their opinion change, with 7 percent saying that it was the primary source of information for opinion change. Similar to Lazarsfeld's Erie County study, this research found that friends and personal acquaintances had the greatest influence on opinion change. What is interesting about this, however, is that personal blogs, defined as those written by family and friends, were the most read, and one of the most frequently read, type of blog. More than one-quarter of the respondents said the reason they read their most frequently read blog is because the writer is a friend or family member. Since friends and personal acquaintances have the greatest impact on opinion change, and blogs written by friends and family members are the most read blogs, one might wonder why bloggers didn't have greater impact on opinion change. One reason for this difference could be that respondents tended to classify all types of blogs together when answering the question, not distinguishing the difference between blogs written by friends and blogs

written by an unknown author. Another reason for this difference might be that most personal blogs are diaries of daily activities and seldom serve the purpose of persuasion. A blogger chronicling his or her vacation to Hawaii is not necessarily trying to convince readers to board the next plane to Waikiki, although some readers might decide to plan a trip to the islands after reading the postings.

A final reason that respondents may have rated friends, but not blogs, as important sources of information might be that respondents do not differentiate between a friend and a friend's blog. For example, if Sally reads a commentary on bicycle helmet laws in Joe's blog and changes her mind on bicycle helmets, she might say the source of the information was her friend Joe, not a blog. In fact, it may not matter if Sally has ever met Joe in real life, as bloggers often develop virtual friendships with other bloggers (Kumar, Novak, Raghavan, & Tomkins, 2004). One could argue that blog postings are no different than sending an email out to friends, and thus, blogs are simply an interpersonal communication channel.

Even though respondents did not view bloggers as opinion leaders when it came to opinion change, it might be that respondents look to bloggers when it comes to opinion consideration and opinion reinforcement. People often go online to read reviews of products they are considering purchasing, and are more likely not to buy a product if they read a negative review (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Thus, opinion leadership could be situational when reading blogs. For example, if one were planning a trip Napa Valley, he/she might find a blog detailing the experience an unknown person had at various Napa Valley wineries. The reader might then choose which vineyards to visit based in part on

what the blogger said. Even if the reader never reads this particular blog again, one could

argue that in the instance of the wine trip, the blogger was indeed an opinion influencer.

One must remember that much of the research on opinion leaders was conducted

more than 30 years ago and may be dated. Ostlund's (1973) research, which said major

news events are spread via interpersonal communication, was conducted before the

advent of the 24-hour news cycle and more importantly, before the Internet. With online

news being the source of information that is both the most frequently read source by

respondents and the source with the highest perceived credibility, it may be that

interpersonal sources are no longer sources of major news, but instead provide for a more

detailed discussion of news and current events by allowing each participant to discuss his

or her views in a conversation. One of the features of blogs that differentiates them from

websites is the ability of readers to post comments, creating a virtual conversation. It

could be that readers who actively participate in blogging by posting comments and

joining the discussion are more likely to experience opinion change than people who just

passively read a blog and are not engaged in the discussion.

Credibility

In looking at blog credibility it is important to note that blogs did not rank low in

credibility (scoring 4.58 out of 7.00), they simply scored lower in credibility than

mainstream media sources. One reason for this could be that, as discussed in the previous

section, blogs are seen more as a channel for interpersonal communication rather than a

mass communication medium. Some mainstream media channels, such at print and

online news, seem to have a built-in credibility factor and were ranked high in regards to

perceived credibility (online news, 5.22 out of 7.00; print news, 4.98). The credibility of

online and print sources did not increase as reading frequency increased. Unlike blogs, respondents just seemed to perceive online and print sources as credible.

Still, it is interesting that blogs did not rank higher in average credibility given that respondents said they tend to read personal blogs from friends and family members. One reason that blogs scored lower than more mainstream media sources might be that blog readers understand that blogs are opinions and commentaries, not facts. Also, blogs are still a relatively new technology. This research showed that as blog reading increased, blog credibility increased as well. It may be that as blogging continues to grow, the credibility of the medium will also increase.

It may not be surprising, however, that blog credibility ranked lower than other sources of information. This research had the respondents rate the credibility of their most frequently read blog, which tended to be blogs from friends and family members. These personal blogs seem to be relatively basic and focus on the daily happenings of the blog writer. Additionally, these sites tend to be unbranded. Research has shown that branded websites rank higher in credibility than unbranded sites (Sillence & Briggs, 2004). If the participants had ranked better branded blogs it might be that blog credibility would have been higher.

Opinion Change

The fact that blogs ranked lower in credibility than other information sources might explain why blogs did not have a greater impact on opinion change and opinion leadership. Respondents ranked credibility as the third highest blog attribute when it came to opinion change. Because perceived credibility of blogs increases as the frequency of reading blogs increases, it might be that as more people begin to rely on

blogs for information that blogs will become more important when it comes to opinion change and leadership.

For now blogs seem to have a greater impact on opinion reinforcement than on opinion change. One reason for this could be that respondents tend to read ideologies that are similar to their own (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005). More than one-third of respondents in this research said the reason they read their most frequented blog was because they were interested in the topic. Few respondents (4.8 percent) said they read their favorite blog because they enjoy reading a different point of view. However, for 19.0 percent of respondents, reading opinions different than their own was what led to an opinion change.

The idea that people consume media which reflect their own ideology is not limited to blogs. Demographic profiles show that listeners of Rush Limbaugh are conservative, while listeners of Air America are liberal. The idea of a partisan press is not new. Some scholars argue that blogs, particularly political blogs, are "a throwback to the partisan press of the nineteenth century" (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005, p. 22). The fact that blogs serve as opinion reinforcement might be beneficial, particularly when it comes to blogs that focus on particular political campaigns or issues. Howard Dean, 2004 Democratic presidential candidate, was one of the first people to utilize a blog in a national political campaign. It provided a means to rally supporters and organize local-level grassroots outreach (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005). Even after he withdrew from the race, supporters continued to visit the blog. It could be that as a media channel, blogs serve best as a tool to communicate with supporters and persuade them into action.

It should be noted that in persuasion campaigns, opinion change is often difficult to produce. Persuaders have more success in eliciting opinion consideration or reinforcement (Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2003). People gather information from a variety of sources (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth, & Van Leuven, 2004; Robinson, 1976) and often it is difficult to pinpoint the exact impetus of the opinion change if it does occur. While respondents did not view blogs as an important information source when it came to opinion change, blogs still might be a useful tool in public relations and persuasion campaigns as it could allow the persuader to communicate directly its publics without the filter of journalists. Blogs should not be the primary communication vehicle utilized in a persuasion campaign, but they might be effective as part of the overall communication mix when combined with other media channels.

One thing that blogs may do is help set the agenda of what is being discussed in society. The majority of respondents (71.6 percent) said that they have given more thought or consideration to a subject or topic after reading a blog article on that subject or topic. It may be that blogs play a part in the function of agenda setting, or "the media's capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public's mind" (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 219). Blogs were the initial agenda-setters in the Dan Rather and Trent Lott stories. However, some may argue that blogs don't set agendas, they simply help reinforce agendas (Haas, 2005; Harper, 2005). Haas (2005) states that there are just a few blogs that set the agenda for the rest of the blogosphere. Because these blogs provide commentary on news from the mainstream media, that it is the MSM which sets the agenda and blogs act more as intermediaries. Even if bloggers don't set the agenda for the general public, one could argue that bloggers do help to

reinforce the agenda set by the mainstream media, simply by covering and commenting on stories that are prominent in the MSM. It could be that blogs play a role in what Eveland (2004) calls the "Exposure Explanation," which states that opinion leaders either provide information the receiver initially missed in the mass media, or repeat information the receiver has already been exposed to from the mass media.

In examining which attributes of blogs help facilitate opinion change, respondents said that the use of facts and logic in blog postings was the factor which most helped to bring about opinion consideration, change, or reinforcement. This should be expected since evidence or logic (logos) has been an important component in persuasion since the time of Aristotle. Researchers, such as Reynolds and Reynolds (2002) have found:

> ...when an advocate 'quotes' information in support of an argument and
>
> the recipients of the message process the information as legitimate
>
> evidence, the advocate will be more persuasive than if the information was
>
> not presented or was not processed by receivers (p. 427).

Another way bloggers quote material is by providing hyperlinks to other websites and information sources. More than a quarter of respondents said that it is a blog's ability to link to other news/current event sources that helps facilitate opinion consideration, change, or reinforcement.

One of the least effective blog attributes facilitating opinion change is the use of emotional appeals; this attribute ranked the lowest among the respondents. Like logic, emotion (pathos) has also been an important component in persuasion since Aristotle. Because research has found that persuasive messages with emotional appeals are more readily recalled than messages with rational appeals (Zinn & Manfredo, 2000), it is

surprising that emotional appeals would rank so low on the blog attribute list when it comes to opinion change. The reason for this might be that although emotional messages are more readily recalled, they tend to be no more persuasive than rational messages (Zinn & Manfredo, 2000).

The Future of Blogging

It might be that blogs were the first foray into the realm of user-created content. The idea of user-created content is that individuals, or groups of individuals, develop media for other individuals to consume. This is similar to young children writing and producing a play in their basement for their parents to see. The only difference is that with the Internet, these children can now digitally record the video and upload it to various websites for aunts, uncles, grandparents, and even unknown viewers to watch.

Websites, such as Flickr, which allows one to post and share photos, and YouTube, a video upload site, have grown tremendously in popularity during the last six months. Social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, allow users to communicate with each other, post comments, photos, videos, and music clips. Even amateur deejays can now create their own radio shows with podcasting. When it comes to entertainment, it may be that in the future the major studios, networks, and publishers won't be creating what we watch, read, and listen to; instead, our media will be created by individuals like ourselves. At the very least, as we are already starting to see with television networks making episodes of popular series available online, consumers will be able to tell the media what it is that we want to watch, listen to, read, and think about (Delwiche, 2005).

Respondents

In analyzing the respondents of this survey, there were several differences between the respondents of this study and previous research studies which should be mentioned. First, respondents to this survey were heavily skewed female – 66.5 percent female compared with 33.5 percent male. This is unusual as previous research has shown that men use the Internet slightly more than females (USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future, 2004). A possible reason for more female respondents might be that this survey was conducted utilizing a snowball technique, asking people who received the survey request to forward the request to others in their email contacts. This technique has been utilized in other surveys regarding Internet usage (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003).

The second difference in respondents is the number who indicated they had a good understanding of what the term blog meant. When the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2005) conducted their survey in January 2005, 62 percent of online Americans did not know what a blog was. In this survey only 18.7 percent of respondents did not know what a blog was. One reason for this difference might be the continued growth of blogging since the Pew research was conducted. In 2005, Pew estimated that there were 8 million blogs. Today, Technorati (2006), a blog search engine, tracks more than 42 million blogs. Additionally, there were differences in research methodologies. The Pew (2005) research was conducted via telephone, asking respondents if they were online one of more times a week. The current research was conducted via an online survey, meaning that respondents had to be somewhat Internet savvy to participate in the research.

In looking at blogging habits of respondents, it is interesting that there is a gender difference regarding the types of blogs respondents read. While personal blogs were the top of the list for both males and females, more than double the amount of females read personal blogs as compared to males (39.8 percent of female respondents, compared to 18.8 percent of male respondents). One reason for this might be that traditionally females are more likely to keep in touch with friends and family members and that one of the top reasons respondents gave for reading their favorite blog was that it was written by a friend or family member. It is also interesting that a larger percentage of males read news and political blogs (17.4 percent read news blogs and 18.8 percent read political blogs), compared to females (10.2 percent read news blogs and 12.7 percent read political blogs). Conversely, a greater percentage of females (12.7 percent) read entertainment blogs – which included humor, music, television, movies, and celebrity gossip – compared to males (7.2 percent). This could suggest that stereotypical portrayals of men reading hard news and women reading soft news is alive and well in the blogosphere.

Limitations

As with any research, there were limitations to this study. One of the biggest limitations with this research was how to operationalize opinion leaders. One criticism of the two-step flow theory is that opinion leaders tend to be difficult to identify (Evans & Fill, 2000). This has been an issue since Decatur Study conducted by Lazarsfeld and Katz in 1945 (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Lazarsfeld and Katz resolved this by asking participants whether they influenced someone else, but even the validity of this methodology has been called into question (Roch, 2005).

Because the unit of measurement for this research was individual blog readers, and not blog writers, establishing opinion leaders by asking respondents if they had influenced anyone would not have worked. Instead, the researcher chose to look at sources of information. While blogs did not rate high on informational sources, they did rank high in regards to causing opinion consideration. Future research might examine alternative ways to operationalize opinion leadership when it comes to blogs.

Another limitation to the current research is the ability to run accurate statistical tests given the low frequency of some answers to certain questions. Even after blog categories were combined, it was impossible to calculate an accurate Chi-square of independence when comparing types of blog to perceived credibility as there were too few responses in several categories. The calculations might have been more successful if there had been more survey respondents or if respondents were asked to use a 5-point Likert scale instead of a 7-point scale. Future research should review the measurement instrument and increase the number of respondents in order to ensure more accurate statistical calculations.

A final limitation of this research is that the data was collected in a convenience, nonrandom sample. Given the lack of a centralized directory of email, other previous studies regarding Internet usage have been conducted using this method (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Future research might consider other research methodologies to ensure a more random sample.

Direction for Future Research

One of the findings of this research showed that respondents give additional thought to a subject or topic after reading a blog article on that subject or topic. This

suggests that blogs might have an agenda-setting function. While some research has been conducted examining blogs within the framework of the agenda-setting theory, more should be done.

When measuring credibility of blogs, respondents were asked to rate the credibility of the blog they read most often. For most respondents, this was a blog written by friends or family members, making it more difficult to compare credibility to mainstream media sources. Future research should limit credibility comparisons to blogs that cover similar content, i.e. news, current events, and politics, as the mainstream media. Future research should also focus on blogs that are well-branded, such as DailyKOS and Wonkette, as research has shown that heavily-branded sites rank higher in credibility (Sillence & Briggs, 2004).

This research examined blogs and opinion leadership utilizing a survey methodology, asking respondents to consider their most frequently read blog or to remember an occurrence of opinion change. Future research might examine blogging in a controlled, experimental setting, measuring opinion leadership and opinion change after reading a series of blog entries. Given that the most commonly read blogs are written by friends and family members, another area future research might consider is how to utilize personal blogs as part of a grassroots persuasion campaign. In addition, future research should look at blogs as part of an integrated communications campaign and see how blogs might be utilized as part of a persuasion campaign. Finally, research should be conducted on the rise of user-created content and how this might impact both and traditional media.

APPENDIX

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey looks at the reliance of the Internet as a source of news and information. It is being conducted as part of a graduate research project at Texas State University. If you are interested in participating, you can access the survey at (*insert URL of the survey page here*). The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete, and you are not required to answer all the questions. Your confidentiality is assured, as you will not be asked to submit your name or e-mail address.

Knowing that this survey is completely anonymous, do you agree to participate in this survey?
>   Yes
>   No (if no, leave survey)

1. Do you access the Internet one or more times a week?
>   Yes
>   No (if no, go to Question 28)

2. In general, do you have a good idea of what the term Internet Weblog or 'blog' means, or are you not really sure what the term means?"
>   In general I have a good idea of what the term Internet Weblog or 'blog' means.
>   I am not really sure what the term means (go to Question 28)

3. Have you ever read Weblogs/blogs?
>   Yes
>   No (if no, go to Question 28)

4. We are interested in learning more about the Weblogs/blogs that you read most frequently. For each of the types of types of Weblogs/blogs below, please rate on a scale of 1-7 how frequently you read them. A 1 means that you never read these types of Weblogs/blogs while a 7 means that you read them every day.

Personal – updates from friends & family
News/current events
Political
Humor
Entertainment – music, tv, movies
Celebrity gossip
Business/industry
Job-related
Financial/investing/money
Medical/health-related
Travel/leisure
Sports/recreation
Shopping/consumer-related products
Food/cooking/restaurants
Gaming
Books/literature
Photography
Hobbies
Other _____

The following questions are related to the Weblog/blog that you read most often.

5. What is the name/title of the Weblog/blog that you read most often?

_____

6. For the Weblog/blog that you read most often, which of the following categories best describes that Weblog/blog?

 Personal – updates from friends & family
 News/current events
 Political
 Humor
 Entertainment – music, tv, movies
 Celebrity gossip
 Business/industry
 Job-related
 Financial/investing/money
 Medical/health-related
 Travel/leisure
 Sports/recreation
 Shopping/consumer-related products
 Food/cooking/restaurants
 Gaming
 Books/literature
 Photography
 Hobbies
 Other _____

7. For the Weblog/blog that you read most often, how often do you visit it?

 1 or more times a day
 3-6 times a week
 1-2 times a week
 2-3 times a month
 1 time a month
 Less than 1 time a month

8. For the Weblog/blog that you read most often, what is the **primary** reason that you read this Weblog/blog?

 The writer is a friend or family member
 I agree with the opinion of the writer and want to know what they write
 I disagree with the opinion of the writer and want to know what they write
 I like the writing style
 I think the writer's stories are humorous
 I trust the writer to provide accurate information
 I am interested in the topic
 I like reading a different point of view
 I like peeking in on people who I don't know

9. In this survey, we are defining credibility as being believable, reliable and worthy of confidence. With this definition in mind, for the Weblog/blog that you read most often, how credible/believable do you find the writer(s) to be? Please rate the credibility/believability on a scale of 1-7, with 7 being the most credible/believable and 1 being no credibility.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

10. Do you ever read news/current events from traditional, print media sources, such as newspapers and magazines?

Yes

No (if no, go to question 13)

11. How often do you read news/current events from traditional, print media sources, such as newspapers and magazines?

1 or more times a day

3-6 times a week

1-2 times a week

2-3 times a month

1 time a month

Less than 1 time a month

12. In this survey, we are defining credibility as being believable, reliable and worthy of confidence. With this definition in mind, how credible/believable do you find traditional, print media sources, such as newspapers and magazines to be? Please rate the credibility/believability on a scale of 1-7, with 7 being the most credible/believable and 1 being no credibility.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

13. Do you ever read news/current events from online media sources, such as CNN.com, NewYorkTimes.com, or Yahoo News?

Yes

No (if no, skip to question 16)

14. How often do you read news/current events from online media sources, such as CNN.com, NewYorkTimes.com, or Yahoo News?

    1 or more times a day

    3-6 times a week

    1-2 times a week

    2-3 times a month

    1 time a month

    Less than 1 time a month

15. In this survey, we are defining credibility as being believable, reliable and worthy of confidence. With this definition in mind, how credible/believable do you find online media sources, such as CNN.com, NewYorkTimes.com, or Yahoo News to be? Please rate the credibility/believability on a scale of 1-7, with 7 being the most credible/believable and 1 being no credibility.

    1

    2

    3

    4

    5

    6

    7

16. Do you ever watch news/current events from television media sources, such as ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, Fox News, or local network affiliates?

    Yes

    No (if no, skip to question 19)

17. How often do you watch news/current events from television media sources, such as ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, Fox News, or local network affiliates?

    1 or more times a day

    3-6 times a week

    1-2 times a week

    2-3 times a month

    1 time a month

    Less than 1 time a month

18. In this survey, we are defining credibility as being believable, reliable and worthy of confidence. With this definition in mind, how credible/believable do you find television media sources, such as ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, Fox News, or local network affiliates to be? Please rate the credibility/believability on a scale of 1-7, with 7 being the most credible/believable and 1 being no credibility.

     1
     2
     3
     4
     5
     6
     7

19. Please think back over the last 12 months. Has there been a time when you have changed your position/opinion on a particular subject or topic after learning more information regarding that subject/topic?

     Yes
     No (go to question 22)

20. If you have changed your position/opinion during the last 12 months on a particular subject or topic, what sources of information helped influence your change of opinion? Please check all that apply.

     Weblogs/blogs
     Online/Internet news Web sites
     Internet discussion/message boards
     General Web sites
     Print news (newspapers, magazines)
     Television
     Radio
     Friends/personal acquaintances
     Family members
     Don't recall
     Other _____

21. If you have changed your position/opinion during the last 12 months on a particular subject or topic, what one source of information do you think was most influential in your opinion change?

        Weblogs/blogs
        Online/Internet news Web sites
        Internet discussion/message boards
        General Web sites
        Print news (newspapers, magazines)
        Television
        Radio
        Friends/personal acquaintances
        Family members
        Don't recall
        Other _____

22. Have you ever given more thought or consideration towards a particular subject or topic after reading a Weblog/blog article on that subject/topic?

        Yes
        No (if no, go to question 24)

23. If you have ever given more thought or consideration towards a particular subject or topic after reading a Weblog/blog article on that subject/topic, what was it about that Weblog/blog that caused you to give more thought or consideration to that subject/topic? Select all that apply.

        The general writing style of the Weblog/blog
        The use of logic and facts
        The use of emotional appeals
        The use of humor
        A unique/interesting viewpoint on the subject/topic
        The credibility of the Weblog/blog
        My ability to post my own comments about the subject/topic
        My ability to read comments from other readers regarding that subject/topic
        The number of readers/popularity of the Weblog/blog
        The writer of the Weblog/blog is an expert in the area he/she is commenting on
        I trust the writer of the Weblog/blog
        I personally know the writer of the Weblog/blog
        I can relate to the writer of the Weblog/blog; he/she seems like me
        The opinions expressed in the Weblog/blog are similar to mine
        The opinions expressed in the Weblog/blog are different from mine
        The Weblog/blog provides commentary on news/current events
        The Weblog/blog links to other news/current events sources
        Other _____

24. Have you ever changed your opinion regarding a particular subject or topic after reading a Weblog/blog article on that subject/topic?

       Yes

       No (if no, go to question 26)

25. If you have ever changed your opinion regarding a particular subject or topic after reading a Weblog/blog article on that subject/topic, what was it about that Weblog/blog that caused you to change your opinion on that subject/topic? Select all that apply.

       The general writing style of the Weblog/blog

       The use of logic and facts

       The use of emotional appeals

       The use of humor

       A unique/interesting viewpoint on the subject/topic

       The credibility of the Weblog/blog

       My ability to post my own comments about the subject/topic

       My ability to read comments from other readers regarding that subject/topic

       The number of readers/popularity of the Weblog/blog

       The writer of the Weblog/blog is an expert in the area he/she is commenting on

       I trust the writer of the Weblog/blog

       I personally know the writer of the Weblog/blog

       I can relate to the writer of the Weblog/blog; he/she seems like me

       The opinions expressed in the Weblog/blog are similar to mine

       The opinions expressed in the Weblog/blog are different from mine

       The Weblog/blog provides commentary on news/current events

       The Weblog/blog links to other news/current events sources

       Other _____

26. Have your opinions ever been reinforced/made stronger regarding a particular subject or topic after reading a Weblog/blog article on that subject/topic?

       Yes

       No (if no, go to question 28)

27. If your opinions have ever been reinforced/made stronger regarding a particular subject or topic after reading a Weblog/blog article on that subject/topic, what was it about that Weblog/blog that caused you to reinforce your opinion on that subject/topic? Select all that apply.

        The general writing style of the Weblog/blog
        The use of logic and facts
        The use of emotional appeals
        The use of humor
        A unique/interesting viewpoint on the subject/topic
        The credibility of the Weblog/blog
        My ability to post my own comments about the subject/topic
        My ability to read comments from other readers regarding that subject/topic
        The number of readers/popularity of the Weblog/blog
        The writer of the Weblog/blog is an expert in the area he/she is commenting on
        I trust the writer of the Weblog/blog
        I personally know the writer of the Weblog/blog
        I can relate to the writer of the Weblog/blog; he/she seems like me
        The opinions expressed in the Weblog/blog are similar to mine
        The opinions expressed in the Weblog/blog are different from mine
        The Weblog/blog provides commentary on news/current events
        The Weblog/blog links to other news/current events sources
        Other _____

We have a few demographic questions and then we are done. Again, all answers will remain confidential. Your participation is appreciated.

28. On average, how many hours a day do you spend on the Internet? Please include both business and personal use.

        20-24 hours
        15-19 hours
        10-14 hours
        6-9 hours
        2-5 hours
        30 minutes-1 hour
        Less than 30 minutes

29. What is your gender?

        Male
        Female

30. What is your age?
      17 or under
      18-24
      25-34
      35-44
      45-54
      55-64
      65 or older

31. What is your ethnicity?
      White/Caucasian
      African-American/Black
      Native American
      Hispanic/Latino
      East Indian
      Asian
      Pacific Islander
      Mixed heritage
      Other

32. What is your marital status?
      Single, never married
      Married
      Living with someone but not married
      Separated/divorced
      Widowed

33. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
      Less than high school diploma
      High school diploma or GED
      Some college
      Associate's degree
      Bachelor's degree
      Graduate/post-graduate degree
      Technical school/other

34. What is your profession?
        Artistic/music/writer
        Banking/financial services/real estate
        Clerical/administrative
        Computer-related/hardware/software
        Construction/craftsman
        Education/academia/teacher
        Entertainment/media
        Executive/management
        Hospitality/travel
        Legal services
        Manufacturing/distribution
        Medical/health services
        Politics/government/military
        Sales
        Marketing/advertising/public relations
        Technical/science/engineering
        Transportation
        Food service
        Retail
        Student
        Stay-at-home parent
        Other _____

35. What is your annual household income?
        $0-10,000
        $10,001-$25,000
        $25,001-$40,000
        $40,001-$60,000
        $60,001-$75,000
        $75,001-$100,000
        $100,001-$150,000
        $150,001 or greater
        Don't know
        Will not disclose

Thank you for your participation in this survey!

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- College of Fine Arts & Communication Graduate Scholarship, 2005-2006
- Journalism & Mass Comm Week Graduate Paper Presentation, 2005, *The Growth and Influence of Blogging*

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- VisionEdge Marketing, Inc.; Austin, Texas, Senior Strategist, 2001 to 2003
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