

**Biting the Hand that Feeds:  
Blogs and second-level agenda setting**

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## **Biting the Hand that Feeds: Blogs and second-level agenda setting**

### **Introduction**

Traditional media outlets have faced a new phenomenon over the past few years - weblogs.

Political Scientists Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell define weblogs as

a web page with minimal to no external editing, providing on-line commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources. Blogs can function as personal diaries, technical advice columns, sports chat, celebrity gossip, political commentary, or all of the above. (2004)

Proponents of this new publishing phenomenon see it as a “fifth estate” that provides context, commentary and a check on the “fourth estate” media system that bloggers call the “MSM,” the mainstream media of traditional print or broadcast organizations. Weblog-driven stories prior to the 2004 U.S. presidential election seemed to hint at the power of the “blogosphere” to set an agenda separate from traditional media outlets.

More than 30 years of research shows that mass media clearly set an agenda in society. It is just as clear that the media’s original agenda often is superseded and reinterpreted through factors that include an audience member’s political orientation, educational level, and level of media consumption. Rogers and Dearing (1988) note that media agenda-setting is not a one-way path from media to consumer but rather a dynamic, continuing process among media, the public, and politicians. Today, one more can be added to the list: weblogs, which increasingly have influenced the agendas of mass media organizations but more often – as this study will show – reframe, reinterpret and/or add a second level of agenda-setting to items originally produced by the mainstream media. Bloggers sometimes trumpet this agenda-setting role as superseding the MSM of the past. “The old information monopoly had an enormous ability to decide where and when news would be ‘news.’ That gatekeeping function is gone, and blogs have rushed in to decide for themselves what matters” (Hewitt, 2005).

The current study is useful for media scholars, weblog authors and interested journalists because it provides a glimpse into the symbiotic relationship between weblogs and traditional media. The study is distinctive in that it focuses on a content analysis of top weblogs. Weblogs that focus on politics are included, as are gossip weblogs and weblogs that focus on technology. This is also the first study that explicitly looks at weblogs and media in light of agenda setting theory. Others have claimed that weblogs have an agenda-setting function, but have not examined this role in light of the blogging community's reliance upon traditional media sources.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Agenda Setting***

Reflections are reality. In Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato argued that we cannot see the “real” world but merely a reflection of it through our dull senses, as though chained in an underground cave. Walter Lippmann brought Plato's “shadows of the images” into the 20th century world of mass communication in *Public Opinion* (1922), stating that the public relies on mass media to gather its view of the world – and that view is distorted because of the habits, limitations, and peccadilloes of the media.

Seeking to understand how publics are affected by mass media messages, early mass communication researchers proffered a theory of gatekeeping to explain how mass communicators choose the messages delivered to consumers. Lewin (1947), although not a mass communications researcher, studied how Iowa women decided (or decided not) to include sweetmeats in their wartime diet. He noted that the women served as “gatekeepers” in the process of bringing food to the dining-room table. In one short passage in the study, he noted that his theory of gatekeeping could be applied to mass communicators as they choose what news items to bring into a channel, what items to leave out, and how to prepare those items for media

consumers. White (1950), a contemporary of Lewin at the University of Iowa, advanced the gatekeeping theory with a study of how one wire editor selected stories for his newspaper. It was the first of many studies that used the gatekeeping perspective to study journalism.

As media practitioners make individual choices of what to provide media consumers, each little tree of information contributes to a larger forest of meaning and each individual's *weltanschauung*. Lippmann understood this, as suggested by the title of *Public Opinion's* first chapter – “The world outside and the pictures in our heads.” A question remains: If we are looking at the same outside world as described by the same media, do we all have the same pictures in our heads? Of course not. Mass communication scholars quickly knocked down a “hypodermic needle” theory of media effect – if it were ever more than just a straw man designed to be knocked down – that said media had immediate and direct impact on its audience. Generally accepted today are limited-effect theories of mass communication. Cohen (1963) encapsulated the limited effect theory of mass communication when noting that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13).

That quote was reprinted early in the seminal article by McCombs and Shaw (1972) on “agenda-setting,” the term they introduced to the long-assumed theory that mass media help determine what issues will draw the public's attention. They also were among the first to add quantitative research to support the theory, through a 1968 research project that included content analysis of political stories reported by national and North Carolina media as well as interviews with residents of Chapel Hill, N.C. Their results of the study of topic salience during the presidential election: The media's agenda and the public's agenda fairly well mirrored each other, with positive correlations of more than 90 percent. McCombs and Reynolds (2002) called

it a “near-perfect match.” A year after the McCombs and Shaw article, Funkhouser (1973) showed that while it is true to a degree that the media and public agenda is set “by the world outside,” the patterns of media coverage “did not have a one-to-one relationship to the realities of any of the issues.”

The last sentence of the McCombs and Shaw article says “agenda-setting seems useful for study of the process of political consensus” (p. 187). Plenty of researchers agree; McCombs (2004) counted more than 400 agenda-setting studies published since the original McCombs and Shaw article. McCombs has noted four variations of agenda-setting research. His Acapulco typology of designs, named for the site of the 1981 International Communication Association convention where they originally were presented, listed:

Type 1: Comparing news coverage of major issues and the aggregate public agenda. The Chapel Hill study is an example.

Type 2: An approach similar to Type 1, but instead determining a rank-ordered agenda for each individual participant.

Type 3: Studying how a single agenda item’s salience to public opinion changes in relation to media coverage.

Type 4: Matching media coverage of a single item to “the corresponding salience of that issue on an individual agenda” (McCombs and Bell, 1996).

Those typologies may require updating in order to study Weblogs. Blogs did not exist in multitude in 1996, when McCombs and Bell noted that agenda-setting and its cousin, the study of how topics are “framed” by the media, can be studied in “an emerging line of research” into “New Criticism” that moves beyond traditional news criticism:

Traditional news criticism has centered on the content of the media’s message, asking if it is accurate and balanced. The New Criticism

examines the form and tone of media messages, the central characteristics of the media agenda as a genre, and the consequences of these characteristics for the public. Many critics contend that contemporary American journalism, particularly national television, places a particularly aggressive and negative spin on certain types of news stories (p. 107).

Scholars understand that the “original” agenda set by the mass media is not the only or last agenda. Dearing and Rogers (1996) also note that competing media do not agree about the salience of news items. McCombs (2004) notes that the first level of agenda-setting is the transfer of salience of objects, which are defined as “the thing about which we have an attitude or opinion” (p. 70). The second level is the transfer of salience of attitudes, which are a generic term for the “entire range of properties and traits that characterize an object” (p. 70). By considering second-level agenda-setting, McCombs asks if Cohen’s 1963 quote should be updated to note that the media not only tell its public what to think about but sometimes “how to think about some objects” (p. 71).

McComb’s latest book (2004) on agenda-setting theory considers the Internet. He says there is “little evidence to sustain” assumptions that the media’s agenda-setting powers will be greatly reduced because there “is already evidence of a de facto oligopoly of news and information where a small number of sites command the largest proportion of the internet users” (p 149). The major news agenda of the day will remain largely homogeneous, he says, until

...someone invents a new kind of news that eclipses the traditional news audience. If that happens, it will be the result of journalistic creativity, not technology, and it will shift the agenda-setting influence of the news media to a new source (p. 149).

Some proponents say that invention exists now on the Internet, in the form of Weblogs that often tell their publics how to think about items that the mainstream media say we should think about.

## ***Blogging***

*Personal journalism is also not a new invention. People have been stirring the pot since before the nation's founding. (Gillmor, 2004)*

The Internet is not the first medium to foster “outside the establishment” commentary and opinion, and so the phenomenon of Weblogs falls within a historical understanding of mass communication. From the invention of the alphabet, mankind has set down his opinions and thoughts on the universe. Religious and philosophical texts, especially, expressed opinions upon the nature of life (e.g., the Bible and Plato’s aforementioned *The Republic*). Such “opinion” was for the most part limited to the elites of societies, until the 1400s, when Johann Gutenberg helped introduce the movable type printing press to Europe. This invention is credited with helping change the fabric of cultural, social, and religious life in Europe. Undoubtedly, it aided the spread of the Protestant Reformation, beginning with the rapid printing and distribution of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses (Emery, 1992).

The 18th Century saw an explosion in the power and prominence of the press as an agent for change within society. Nowhere was this more evident than in the American colonies of Britain. Printers and journalists of the colonial era like James and Ben Franklin, Thomas Paine, and William Bradford used their presses to print pamphlets and broadsheets with a mixture of news, gossip, and propaganda critical of authority figures. (Emery, 1992)

The greatest stimulus to the development of the American press of this period was the rising political tension that was to culminate in the War of Independence. The press had an essential role in the drama about to unfold. The newspaper thrives on controversy, provided it is able to take part in the discussions with any degree of freedom.” (p. 33)

The spirit of the 18th century pamphleteers lived on through the 20th century but barely, being mostly swallowed by the institutionalization of journalism into media corporations and the

professional development of journalism. Flames of the “do-it-yourself” opinionated attitude of these rebels began to burn again in the 1980s and 1990s as desktop publishing and the rapid spread of the personal computer put the physical layout and design of printed materials within reach of middle class Americans. What was needed, however, was a means of mass distribution of opinion at little or no cost. That’s where the Internet sparked the weblog. Weblog authors have been quick to claim an intellectual heritage in the footsteps of Luther’s protestant reformation and the pamphleteers of the 18th century (e.g., Gillmor, 2004 and Hewitt, 2005), arguing that they return journalism to a form that is more opinionated and less driven by the standards of the profession and concerns of corporate media owners (Gillmor, 2004)

Although weblogs have existed since the late 1990s, these web pages did not begin to have popular influence until a series of events in the 21st century. Blogger and tech journalist Dan Gillmor pegs the rise of blogs to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. Since then, bloggers have participated in the shaping of news coverage related to at least four major news events in the United States: the fall of Sen. Trent Lott, the Iraq War, the 2004 presidential election, and the downfall of CBS News anchor Dan Rather.

In late 2002, new Senate majority leader Lott made controversial remarks at the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party for Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C. The remarks<sup>1</sup> hardly merited a mention in mainstream media outlets in the days following the event (Kurtz, 2002). However, several bloggers picked up on the remarks and commented on what Lott said. The blogospheric reaction helped convince traditional media outlets to reexamine Lott’s remarks and his personal history. At the end of the controversy, Lott stepped down as Senate majority leader. Wright’s study of the timeline of this controversy (2003) showed that blogs contributed to the eventual mainstream

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<sup>1</sup> Said Lott: “I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We’re proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn’t have had all these problems over all these years, either.”

media return to this story.

As the Iraq War began in 2003, bloggers again found a place in the media spotlight. During the Iraq conflict, Webloggers used the format to sound off on contemporary news reports. Sometimes, the Weblog reports conflicted with news reports. Other times, the Weblog reports confirmed and expanded on news media information. “Salam Pax” is the pseudonym of a blog publisher who lived in Baghdad, Iraq and posted his comments in the weeks leading up to the invasion of Baghdad ([http://dear\\_raed.blogspot.com](http://dear_raed.blogspot.com)). “L.T. Smash” was a soldier who published a Weblog from his post in the Middle East (<http://www.lt-smash.us>). These were examples of “public” weblogs. Soon, journalists reporting on the war began to publish weblogs. At least two embedded reporters, one from *CNN* and one from *Time Magazine* began to use blogs, which were promptly shut down (Sites, 2003; also Dube, 2003). As the weblog phenomenon grew in mainstream consciousness, several journalists who had weblogs were told to shut them down. Other journalists who had weblogs maintained an anonymous presence by posting under a pseudonym. Other news organizations embraced this new technology and hosted blogs on their news sites. In August, Daniel Weintraub, a political reporter for the *Sacramento Bee*, posted an item on his Weblog that led to controversy during the California gubernatorial recall election. The incident led *Sacramento Bee* management to bring Weintraub’s weblog under the editing umbrella of the newspaper, a decision which did not sit well with some bloggers (Glaser, 2003).

The 2004 presidential election focused a great deal of attention on weblogs as, for the first time ever, bloggers were credentialed at both major political conventions (Walton, 2004).

However, the “perfect storm” for blogs as an agenda-setting medium arrived on Sept. 8 2004. CBS News anchor Dan Rather reported on President George Bush’s Texas Air National

Guard service for *60 Minutes Wednesday*. Within an hour of the broadcast, bloggers had raised questions about the authenticity of one of the memos used in the *60 Minutes Wednesday* report. The bloggers were right: The memos were fake. The controversy led to an independent panel investigation into the newsgathering processes used in the story (Thornburgh, 2005). Eventually, four CBS staffers were fired, and Dan Rather stepped down as *CBS Evening News* anchor in March, 2005 (Associated Press, 2005).

Drezner and Farrell noted the ability of blogs to operate in an agenda-setting role: “The rapidity of blogger interactions affects political communication in the mainstream media through agenda setting and framing effects. The agenda-setting role is clear – if a critical number of elite blogs raise a particular story, it can pique the interest of mainstream media outlets” (2004). This agenda-setting capability is enhanced when considered in light of research that shows blog readers consider blogs more credible than traditional media (Johnson, 2004).

Research has shown that bloggers tend to link to traditional media sites frequently, although linking patterns differ according to political orientation (Adamic, 2005). Within the blogosphere, a number of bloggers have risen to the top in terms of links and traffic, which hints that these top blogs have a greater agenda-setting ability than lesser known bloggers (Shirky, 2003). But is this agenda-setting ability dependent upon traditional media sources?

### **Research Questions**

Based on the literature review and understanding of blogs and mainstream media, researchers considered these five questions:

RQ 1. Do bloggers act as another level of gatekeepers by linking to material from traditional news media?

RQ 2. How much original reporting do bloggers provide?

RQ 3. How often do bloggers link to media stories to critique content?

RQ 4. How often do bloggers link to media stories to critique the media source?

RQ 5. Do bloggers follow agenda-setting priorities of traditional media outlets?

### **Methodology**

Researchers analyzed the content of the 20 weblogs with the highest traffic ratings as of April 8, 2005, as determined by *Truthlaidbear.com*. There are several different ways of assessing the most popular weblogs. Blogs can be ranked according to the number of incoming links – links from other weblogs that reference that particular blog. However, link rankings show a blog’s popularity among other weblog authors but not necessarily weblog readers. Also, there is no discrimination in link rankings between links to current material (trackback links) and links to the weblog itself (blogroll links). Adamic and Glance (2005) found that different metrics of ranking blog popularity overlapped significantly. Like Adamic, this study also omitted drudgereport.com “because of its unusual format” (p. 5). Also omitted from the study were blogsforterri.com, a weblog that focused on the Terri Schiavo case, and the *Washington Post’s* daily White House briefing weblog, as it was run by a traditional media outlet. Table 1 lists and describes the blogs included in the study.

**Table 1**  
*Blogs included in the study*

<b>Blog name</b>	<b>Description</b>
Blog for America	Liberal political site
Captain's Quarters	Conservative political site
Crooks and Liars	Liberal political site
Daily Kos	Conservative political site
Defamer	Celebrity news
Gawker	Celebrity, entertainment and (N.Y.-centered) media news
Gizmodo	Technology
Go Fug Yourself	Celebrity news and fashion commentary
HughHewitt.com	Conservative political site
Instapundit.com	Conservative political site
Little Green Footballs (LGF)	Conservative political site

Lifehacker	Technology
Michelle Malkin	Conservative political site
MyDD	Liberal political site
PoliPundit.com	Conservative political site
Power Line	Conservative political site
Roger L. Simon	Conservative political site
The Smirking Chimp	Liberal political site
The Volokh Conspiracy	Legal news
The Washington Monthly	Political news
Wonkette	Political news and gossip
www.AndrewSullivan.com	Conservative political site

Content for each blog on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday during the week of April 11, 2005, was analyzed. This methodology was chosen because a three-day sample of weblog content would show patterns of linking and types of content from the blogs in question. The week of April 11 had no single story that dominated comment during the week, which allowed a better sample of general weblog content.

Each weblog post was entered into a database. Blog posts ultimately were coded into six categories::

1. Commentary with link: A blog post that contained a link to a second web source, but contained no material from the cited URL;
2. Commentary with extended excerpt: A blog post that contained a link to a second web source and any quoted material from the cited URL;
3. Excerpt from media: A blog post that contained a link to a second web source with or without quoted material from the cited URL but with no additional commentary by the weblog author;
4. Original reporting: A weblog post that contained textual material and/or visual information not obtained from other media sources or weblogs A fact-based blog entry that provide information not found in other news sources or blogs and generally not commentary.

This would include "news tips" from blog readers, such as celebrity sightings.

5. Original reporting with commentary: A weblog post that contained elements not obtained from other media sources or weblogs and additional editorial comment;

6. Personal item: A weblog post with no "news value." These entries did not reference a news item of the day and usually were related strictly to the personal life of the weblog author or "housekeeping" of the blog.

Links for each blog post were coded to note the original source, with particular attention focused on "mainstream media" sources that include the Associated Press and Reuters wire services, print sources including *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and broadcast outlets. Other sources included other blogs, government sites, political sites, and commercial sites such as *Amazon.com* or a corporate web site. Wire service materials were coded according to the wire service if they contained a byline referencing the wire service even if the URL led to another media outlet (e.g., *Yahoo! News* or *MSNBC*). For each link to a news site, it was noted whether the linked article was "opinion" or "news."

Coders also followed each link to other blogs. If the link was to another weblog, the coder noted if any of the links in the second weblog were to mainstream media content.

Information for each of the 706 entries was entered into a Web-based database, and imported into Excel for cleanup and analysis.

## **Findings**

Analysis of the data suggest that blogs – particularly ones devoted to politics – set second-level agendas and reinterpret mainstream media. Table 2 includes the total entries coded of each blog, along with links to mainstream media and criticism of mainstream media. Nearly half (n=344, 49 percent) of the 706 posts included at least one link to a mainstream media

source, which replicates Adamic and Glance's findings that “about once every other post” (p. 10) includes interaction with a mainstream media source. When entries from non-political blogs are eliminated<sup>2</sup>, 56 percent of the 495 blog entries include a link to a mainstream media source. This would suggest that bloggers rely more on mainstream media for much of the fodder that makes up their Web sites.

Furthermore, many of the continuous topics of the week on the blogs match topics previously or concurrently discussed in mainstream media – ranging from the pros and cons of the pending nomination of John Bolton as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, to questions about real or imagined ethical missteps by Rep. Tom DeLay, majority leader in the U.S. House of Representatives. The salience of these topics remained fairly constant across the blogs, but the salience of attitudes about the topics varied by the political leanings of the bloggers.

**Table 2**

*Entries for each blog, links to mainstream media, criticism of mainstream media*

Name of Weblog	Total entries	With MSM links		Critical of MSM	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Blog for America	11	4	36%		
Captain's Quarters	4	4	100%		
Crooks and Liars	31	17	55%	3	10%
Daily Kos	36	23	64%	4	11%
Defamer	38	22	58%		
Gawker	55	35	64%	13	24%
Gizmodo	74	7	9%		
Go Fug Yourself	7	0	0%		
HughHewitt.com	8	5	63%	3	38%
Instapundit.com	65	33	51%	6	9%
LGF	47	34	72%	11	23%
Lifehacker	37	1	3%		
Michelle Malkin	17	11	65%	2	12%
MyDD	27	14	52%	1	4%
PoliPundit.com	46	28	61%	10	22%
Power Line	24	16	67%	7	29%
Roger L. Simon	12	9	75%	2	17%
The Smirking Chimp	45	24	53%	5	11%

<sup>2</sup> The non-political blogs in this analysis are Defamer, Gawker, Gizmodo, Go Fug Yourself, and Lifehacker.

The Volokh Conspiracy	35	17	49%	5	14%
The Washington Monthly	33	14	42%	3	9%
Wonkette	38	17	45%	2	5%
www.AndrewSullivan.com	16	9	56%	1	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>706</b>	<b>344</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>11%</b>

In other examples, mainstream media set the agenda. Elisabeth Bumiller’s (2005) story in *The New York Times* about tunes on President Bush’s iPod, for example, drew comment from eight of the blogs. While Bush political strategist Mark McKinnon said the music was selected to help Bush while exercising to “get over the next hill” and that “[n]o one should psychoanalyze the song selection,” many blogs<sup>3</sup> did just that. In this instance – and there are others – blogs followed a mainstream media story.

In other instances, blogs fulfill a role of criticizing the mainstream media. Criticism of mainstream media played a role in 13 percent of bloggers’ posts, which suggests that bloggers continue to see “New Criticism” as a foundation of blogging. This is particularly true of conservative bloggers, many of whom created their sites as a way to comment upon or circumvent what they see as a liberal media bias. As Table 2 shows, at least 20 percent of the posts at conservative sites *Little Green Footballs*, *PoliPundit*, *HughHewitt*, and *Power Line* included a statement critical of the mainstream media – ranging from a general criticism to a specific critique of the story in question.

Despite the criticism, most of the blogs in this study would have little to say if it were not for topics they choose that originate with mainstream media. As Table 3 shows, blogs rely on mainstream media far more for news stories than for commentary. Among all blogs, 72 percent (n=280) of mainstream media links were to news stories, not opinions or commentaries. The rate for non-political blogs was slightly lower, at 68 percent. Given that blogs are generally created to

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<sup>3</sup> It also should be noted that many in the mainstream media did just that, too. A Nexis search showed dozens of editorials and commentaries on Bush’s iPod selections from mainstream media.

offer opinion and commentary, it would make sense that bloggers would rely more on mainstream media for their news and not their opinion. Particularly noteworthy was a lack of links to newspaper editorials. Researchers did not differentiate between a signed opinion and an unsigned editorial in their coding of print media, which could be a topic for further research into the effectiveness of newspaper editorials in the age of the Internet.

**Table 3**  
*News and opinion from mainstream media*

	Total entries	MSM content	
		News	Opinion
Blog for America	11	4	1
Captain's Quarters	4	4	
Crooks and Liars	31	9	10
Daily Kos	36	20	2
Defamer	38	21	
Gawker	55	29	5
Gizmodo	74	7	
Go Fug Yourself	7		
HughHewitt.com	8	5	1
Instapundit.com	65	21	10
LGF	47	32	6
Lifehacker	37	1	
Michelle Malkin	17	10	5
MyDD	27	12	1
PoliPundit.com	46	21	6
Power Line	24	11	11
Roger L. Simon	12	6	4
The Smirking Chimp	45	13	29
The Volokh Conspiracy	35	12	7
The Washington Monthly	33	18	5
Wonkette	38	19	1
www.AndrewSullivan.com	16	5	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>706</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>108</b>

As for the source of content linked to by blogs, content intended for dead trees remains important. Researchers counted 297 (41 percent) links to print news organizations, led by *The New York Times* (n=41, 13 percent), *Washington Post* (n=23, 7 percent), and *L.A. Times* (n=17, 5

percent). Blogs cast a net for news in domestic and foreign newspapers, as well as opinion publications such as *The New Republic* and *The Wall Street Journal's* “Opinion Journal.” The *Associated Press* was a source for news on 39 occasions and *Reuters* 14 times; many were links to wire stories via *Yahoo*.

Bloggers also rely on other bloggers, as interconnectedness is paramount to their functionality. Researchers counted 218 blog entries (30.8 percent) that commented on linked to other blogs – a figure that does not include links without comments or links that acknowledge the source but nothing else.

Blogs also linked to “original sources” of material, particularly to government Web sites such as ones with copies of legislative bills under consideration. The links to 25 government Web sites in this study suggests some transparency of information in blogs, since readers can easily link to source material and decide for themselves.

Table 4 further reveals why blogs are so dependent upon mainstream media for topics: Most blogs do very little reporting. During the coding process, blogs were credited for “original reporting” for everything from printing a reader’s e-mail of “celebrity sightings” to reports from meetings that a blogger attended. Just 6 percent of all entries (n=40) included any original reporting; it fell to 5 percent for politically oriented blogs.

**Table 4**  
*Types of blog entries*

	Commentary w/ extended quote from link	Commentary with link	Link w/ no comm entary	Original reporting	Original reporting w/ commentary	Personal item	Total
Blog for America	3	1			7		11
Captain's Quarters	4						4
Crooks and Liars	11	16	1		1	2	31
Daily Kos	16	13	2	1	1	3	36
Defamer	8	24		1	4	1	38
Gawker	6	39		4	3	3	55
Gizmodo	4	67			1	2	74

Go Fug Yourself		7					7
HughHewitt.com	3	3			2		8
Instapundit.com	11	46	4		1	3	65
LGF	34	12			1		47
Lifehacker	6	26		4		1	37
Michelle Malkin	10	6	1				17
MyDD	20	6			1		27
PoliPundit.com	11	33	2				46
Power Line	9	14				1	24
Roger L. Simon		12					12
The Smirking Chimp			45				45
The Volokh Conspiracy	18	13		2		2	35
The Washington Monthly	18	13				2	33
Wonkette	6	25		1	5	1	38
AndrewSullivan	11	5					16
<b>Total entries</b>	209	381	55	13	27	21	706

### Discussion

While bloggers like to see themselves as beyond the agenda-setting priorities of the mainstream media, they follow closely on the stories dug up by mainstream media reporters. If blogs have an agenda setting role, it is usually a secondary role, playing off the stories proffered by traditional media outlets. Bloggers relied on mainstream media for “fodder” for their commentary in a majority of the blog posts examined. The lack of original reporting and reliance on commentary contributes to the second-level agenda setting of blogs, which generally tell us what to think about topics that others have told us to think about. This was especially true of political bloggers. The one area where bloggers likely have a primary agenda-setting role is in stories that are critical of the actions of mainstream media outlets. This may be due to a reluctance of mainstream media to criticize other media outlets. The coverage from top weblogs may allow mainstream outlets an entre to cover stories critical of fellow MSM outlets.

This study does have limitations. The sample used was not a random sample, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Also, the source for our top 20 listing is a limiting factor. The TTLB traffic rankings are an “opt-in” system, which means that some blogs may not be

included, even though they have high traffic rankings. A future method of tracking blog traffic may allow for a better listing of blogs.

Future research in this area might focus on one of the four types of agenda-setting studies outlined in the literature review, comparing the agenda of blog authors with the agenda of blog readers, and the general public.

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