4 Transparency and accountability in the age of cyberpolitics

The role of blogs in framing conflict

Maria Touri

Introduction

For more than a decade, the democratic potential of new media has been discussed extensively in relation to their capacity to empower citizens. They have been credited with enabling an information explosion and the creation of a more transparent political environment, the importance of which is heightened during conflict and war, as theories of International Relations have also underscored.

The impact of transparency and publicity on human behaviour is hardly new with Kant being amongst the first to argue that the principles of human action could be ethical only if they were public (Kant 1963 in Brown 2005: 58). In the case of conflict and war and based on Kant's observation that even if state leaders do not suffer personally, they suffer through the loss of office (Schultz 1999), an open political environment facilitates the unseating of a government that undertakes costly strategies (de Mesquita and Lalman 1992). According to Fearon (1994) and Schultz (2001) domestic political institutions in democratic states enable the disclosure of information about governmental incentives and preferences in a given crisis; and as governments become less likely to engage in bluffing behaviour, bargaining processes are more likely to result in peaceful solutions.

In light of the notion of political transparency, this chapter seeks to offer insight into the role of new media in situations of conflict, examining the dissemination of news through the blogosphere and drawing upon the unique quality of blogs to enable citizens 'to emerge from the spectating audience as a player and maker of meanings' (Coleman 2005: 274). More specifically, this chapter demonstrates how the contribution of the news *framing* theory can provide a conceptual tool to unpick the subtle and unseen process through which blogs can form a more open political environment and create a news media system capable of facilitating conflict prevention

A brief description of blogs

The emergence of blogs (short for 'weblog') has marked the arrival of a 'new form of mainstream communication' (Rosenbloom 2004: 31), one that allows

millions of people to publish and exchange knowledge and information. The phrase 'weblog' is said to have been introduced in 1997 by Jorn Barger in reference to his own site, *robotwisdom*, which comprised a list (or log) of the web pages he found interesting (Du and Wagner 2006). Since then, a number of definitions have been formed to describe this recent phenomenon. Drezner and Farrell define blogs as web pages 'with minimal to no external editing, providing on-line commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources' (Drezner and Farrell 2004a: 5) while Allan describes them as 'diaries or journals written by individuals seeking to establish an online presence' (2006: 44). Along similar lines, Herring *et al.* see blogs as 'frequently modified web pages containing dated entries listed in reverse chronological sequence' (Herring *et al.* 2007: 3). The effort to define blogs has led to some consensus with regard to their distinctive quality as a citizen-based form of journalism, which enables the audience of mainstream media to become actively engaged in the dissemination and interpretation of news, setting blogs apart from traditional media. The connectivity they allow through the provision and posting of links is one of the key components of their function. Links can be provided by a blogger to inform readers of an item they consider interesting, they can connect blogs with one another as a way to respond to a point another has made or they may direct readers to a story the blogger found useful. The network of blogs connected through links comprises the blogosphere (Tremayne 2007).

The so-called 'news blogs' that focus on politics and current affairs and whose profile was raised significantly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, are perhaps the category of blogs fitting the concept of citizen-based journalism most. So far, studies of the quality of blogs as original news sources or platforms for citizen journalism have offered different and, at times, contradictory evidence of their position in the production and reporting of news. The present work does not intend to offer conclusive answers to these questions. Although the core argument lies in the power of blogs to offer greater transparency, which sprouts from the notion of citizen journalism, it is the implications of the blogging phenomenon in its deeper and broader sense that this chapter addresses. A somewhat narrow focus is taken in relation to blogs that offer information on politics and current affairs, which are thought to have the greatest impact on mainstream media (Tremayne 2007). Such blogs include those maintained by news organisations, by professional journalists outside news organisations and by individuals with an interest in politics and policy issues, often referred to as 'citizen journalist' blogs. A systematic way to evaluate the role of blogs in creating a more transparent news media environment, that would place government decisions under greater public glare, is by locating the blogging phenomenon within the wider context of news construction. Theories of *framing* can be particularly informative in this case, addressing key underpinnings and unpicking certain aspects of the news construction process, through which greater political transparency can be achieved.

News framing and the challenge of blogs

In general terms, the concept of framing embodies the social construction of reality approach to the news media (Adoni and Mane 1984; Berger and Luckman 1966; Gamson 1992, in Wolfsfeld 1997). Often, it is associated with the principles of selection, salience and exclusion that 'enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely [and to] package information for efficient relay to their audiences' (Gitlin 1980: 7). In what Carragee and Roefs (2004) describe as the most significant contribution to framing research, Gitlin (1980) and Tuchman (1978) linked the production of meaning through frames to structural and ideological processes that involve journalists, news organisations and their sources (Carragee and Roefs 2004: 216). Since news frames are not shaped in a vacuum but through the frames sponsored by multiple social actors, news stories become a platform for framing contests, where political actors compete by sponsoring their preferred meanings. In essence, as framing sponsorship is determined by the distribution of economic, political and cultural resources across the various actors, examining the media construction of reality through framing, necessitates that focus be placed on the role of power in the production of meaning (Carragee and Roefs 2004). The issue of power forms the basis on which the contribution of blogs is located, especially since they are seen by users as conduits to raw information, less corrupted by power than mainstream news media.

Given that journalists and opinion leaders consume blogs too, blogs offer an effective combination of expertise, real-time collective response to breaking news, and public-opinion barometer. Those few blogs that function as aggregators of information enable journalists to obtain meaningful analysis predictions of political developments, while they have also given shape to a hierarchical structure to the chaos of cyberspace (Drezner and Farrell 2004b). As Tremayne (2007) suggests, mainstream media can learn from bloggers how to take advantage of active citizen writers to generate better products. Blogs can give journalists and other bloggers free access to first-hand newsworthy information (Thompson 2003) from multiple areas, offering voice to a wider range of progressive groups and access to alternative interpretations. They can also challenge news media frame production through the extensive use of hyperlinks, which becomes an integral process of meaning construction. The dependence upon hyperlinks to various kinds of text, places stories in a broader cultural and political context (Pavlik 2001), offering information abundance and scope for diverse interpretations of events.

The distinctive content found in blogs that relates to, comments on, interrogates and analyses information already on mainstream media news (Kivikuru 2006; Thelwall and Stuart 2007) allows blog authors to re-access and re-frame current news material and produce frames that divert from the official meanings traditionally sponsored by political elites. This is especially the case for blogs maintained by professional journalists, who use the blogosphere as a conduit to a writing that is free from journalistic constraints. Robinson's (2006) study of

130 blogs published within mainstream news media outlets in the US showed that blogs could supply various interpretations of the day's news. Reporters were able to let loose in some creative and interrogating writing, and build stories using feedback and contribution from readers (Robinson 2006: 79).

The plethora of information sources, made available through blogs, allows for a greater number of actors to enter the framing contest and gradually dilute the issue of power over news frames. At the same time, given the space to use their knowledge and expertise to comment on and analyse current media coverage, bloggers could nudge journalists to provide more inclusive and evenly balanced framing of events, generating greater political transparency. The centrality of this development is most visible in the reporting of conflict where the power relations between political leaders and news organisations are the primary determinants of frames.

Reporting conflict: an unequal framing process

Dictated by issues of power, the framing of conflict situations favours the promotion of meanings that serve primarily the interests of authorities and of media organisations raising questions with regard to the democratic role of the news media as an agent that constrains politicians from waging war. In the study of frame production during conflict and war operations, the compelling work of Wolfsfeld (1997) and Entman (2004) can offer a solid basis for the evaluation of the influential power of blogs.

A central premise of Wolfsfeld's work is that political power offers important advantages in influencing the news media frames during conflict. He asserts that the inherent importance of those with political power, can lead to dignified frames, while progressive groups that divert from the official line can only compete with their more powerful adversaries if they produce frames that resonate with the media's culture (Wolfsfeld 1997: 42–5). Wolfsfeld makes clear how the power of political actors to shape news framing is embodied in their ability to interpret events, in a way that resonates with the media's political and professional culture. To this, Entman has added the importance of promoting frames that resonate with the wider culture of a given political environment. In his cascading activation model, Entman (2004) introduces the concept of cultural congruence as the ease with which a news frame will fit the schemas habitually used by most members of a society and will be more likely to induce similar responses among the majority of these members. Consequently, a great deal of an actor's power to ensure their preferred interpretations are successfully adapted by the media and public alike, lies in their ability to promote frames that are congruent with the schemas that dominate the respective political culture. Culturally congruent frames tend to stimulate similar reactions by elites and the public, minimising the possibility for domestic opposition and rendering news framing easier for governments to control. They can prove professionally useful for the news media too, enabling journalists to process large amounts of information and fit it in a culturally familiar narrative. Wolfsfeld cites the

example of the conflict between the Catholics in Northern Ireland and the British government and its coverage by the American press. He explains how the frame of *terrorism* was established as culturally congruent and professionally useful, making it virtually impossible to find alternative explanations such as the struggles by an oppressed people against British occupation (Wolfsfeld 1997: 34).

According to Entman, the more culturally ambiguous a frame sponsored by a political leader is, the less sense it will make with the media and the public, paving the way for more alternative perspectives to enter the news framing process (Entman 2004). The implications of ambiguous frames lie in rendering the anticipated reactions of the public less predictable, reinforcing the media's role in representation (*ibid.*: 21) and, consequently, in holding governments accountable. Especially in situations of instability and conflict, when control over news tends to heighten, the production of less congruent news frames and more alternative justifications might eventually signify a more transparent media environment. A representative example can be traced in the Iraq War 2003. Mainstream media coverage in the US may not have been very efficient in elevating sources outside official Washington power circles and posing a serious challenge to the administration stories. However, as Bennett *et al.* (2007) and Entman (2004) explain, the frame promoted by the Bush administration – to build a case for the US invasion of Iraq – remained ambiguous enough to create some space for a few opposition voices and enable a framing of the war that, overall, was less tightly controlled than in past operations. It is beyond doubt that, to say categorically whether and to what extent blogs could have influenced the news framing of the Iraq War 2003, an in-depth and systematic empirical investigation is required. Nevertheless, existing theoretical and empirical evidence of the performance of the blogosphere during situations of conflict and tension can serve as an indicator of the future potential role that blogs in the reporting and framing of conflict.

Framing conflict on the blogosphere

The popularity of blogs in reporting conflict was boosted during the recent Iraq war, with the blogosphere functioning not just as a news source, but also as a means for soldiers to remain connected to their families (Palser 2002; Seipp 2002; Smolkin 2004). Not content with the one-sided news reporting of the conflict offered mainly by the US media, significant numbers of the public turned to the Internet for information. As Allan (2006) remarks, from the moment news of the first attacks was reported on 19 March 2003, Internet traffic increased dramatically. The demand for more comprehensive coverage of the war led audiences to the search of information through news websites and blogs.

Although, according to Pew Research, only 4 per cent of the Internet users would turn to blogs during the Iraq War, Johnson and Kaye (2007) underline the fact that their influential power exceeds their readership. Their increased popularity during the war was due to featuring writers with varied political perspectives that offered insights different from those of the American traditional media

(Hamilton 2003; Hastings 2003; Reynolds 2004). They also provided links to other sites and allowed readers to respond to the postings, enabling a healthy debate about the war (Hastings 2003). Their influential power becomes even more apparent when one considers the efforts of the military to censor or shut down several blogs posted by soldiers in Iraq for fear they would contradict the Pentagon's official version of events (Schulman 2005, in Johnson and Kaye 2007: 165).

The Iraq War is not the only example where mainstream media and blogs offered contradicting coverage. As Murilo (2006) points out, with reference to the East Timor crisis, the Anglophone media would report a different story from Portuguese language blogs. The latter expanded awareness of the many sides of the conflict, bringing the gaps in interpretation within the different language spheres into high visibility. Considering the reported dependency of journalists on blogs for news and analysis they did not see elsewhere (Reynolds 2004), blogs cannot but reinforce the anticipated impact of their challenging voices and views on the framing of the war by mainstream media.

Based on current theoretical and empirical evidence from the blogosphere, the following paragraphs attempt to build a theoretical case of the *why* and *how* blogs can enable the diffusion of control over news frames during conflict and create scope for a more transparent and democratic political environment. The core argument lies in the ability of blogs to make a wide range of sources accessible to mainstream media, representing voices that are distanced from political power and able to provide intelligent commentary without sponsorship of a corporate news company. This does not only enhance their credibility (Kaye and Johnson 2004; Wall 2004: 165), but also gives them the potential to erode the barrier of political power that blocks alternative voices from entering the framing contests. Considering that political power translates into one's ability to sponsor news frames that resonate with the wider political context and the media's professional culture, challenging the issue of power could consequently enable a frame diversity that is central to the creation of a transparent media and political environment.

The contest over procedural framing: alternative voices, alternative frames

Empirical evidence of the multiplication of the sources cited and quoted in blogs during the Iraq War in 2003 offers some first indication of the diversity of frames that could decentre the process of news media coverage. In a content analysis of newspapers and blogs covering the operation, Vaina (2007) examined five major newspapers and six popular political blogs and counted the number of sources they cited over seven days in late March 2007. Overall, he found that blogs included a higher number of total sources and a slightly wider range of sources. Even if the gap between newspapers and blogs was considerably narrower when evaluating the types of sources, Vaina underlines the fact that blogs were still more diverse in their sourcing. Hyperlinks offered another

route for voices and perspectives to proliferate and dispute the trustworthiness of mainstream media during the Iraq War. Matheson's (2004) investigation of the *Guardian* blog demonstrates how linking to other newspapers and sources from the Middle East, indicated the end of the monopoly of the media's professional logic (Matheson 2004: 459).

Among the most prominent sources that offered independent investigation and in-depth commentary and analysis, were those knowledgeable and passionate professional and citizen journalists that participated actively in the coverage of the Iraq war. Allan (2006) remarks on the number of front line bloggers, that were not even associated with a news organisation, but worked as 'solo journalists', writing their own copy for online print and broadcast media during the war. Being always on the move and equipped with mobile technologies, these bloggers became popular among blog users due to their ability to divert from official lines and the mainstream media's editing scrutiny and pursue stories that mattered most to them (Allan 2006: 109).

The case of the so-called 'solo journalists' resembles the self-styled 'unilaterals' in the Gulf War 1991: a number of journalists that decided to break away from the pool systems organised by the military and get stories that were at variance with the official line, offering alternative perspectives originally unavailable in the coverage of mainstream news organisations. Taylor (1998) underlines the contradictory views offered by the unilateralist version of events in comparison to the unanimity of the official line; but at the same time, he questions the effectiveness of this activity and its contribution to a wider public understanding of the war. In fact, unilateral journalists were only a small minority and their interpretations created more confusion than the clarity they had intended. With this in mind, the reporting of bloggers emerges as a unique opportunity for independent sources to provide more clarity to a conflict operation by multiplying the already existing alternative voices in its reporting and challenging mainstream media frames in a more forceful manner.

The anticipated influence of this amplification of voices is embodied in the 'procedural' framing of an operation such as a conflict, once these voices get noticed by mainstream media. Procedural framing is described as the framing that focuses on the process and politics of decision-making, in which case, some aspects of a given process are selected and highlighted to promote the desired interpretation. This could include mentions of the president's leadership, attributions regarding consultations with other leaders and comments concerning the manner that policy was formulated and carried out and it could also relate to the likelihood of military success or failure (Althaus 2003; Entman 2004). Procedural framing is distinguished from 'substantive' framing. The latter addresses policy decisions, such as unilateral military action, conducting weapons inspections, opposing the option of war and other proposals, and the logic used to support and justify them (Althaus 2003; Entman and Page 1994; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Mermin 1999).

The so-called 'milblogs' – blogs posted by soldiers in Iraq – represent a useful example of a potential source of procedural framing of events. Schulman

(2005) describes the case of a milblog written by an Army infantryman named Colby Buzzell, who posted his account of a vicious firefight with insurgents on his blog, *My War*, describing the horror of the battle. Interestingly, the Pentagon ensured the operation received scant media coverage by playing down the extent to which Buzzell's brigade had been involved in the fighting. When a report in the Tacoma, Washington, *News Tribune* noted the discrepancy between Buzzell's version and the Pentagon's, Buzzell's officers ensured his and other blogs were either censored or ordered to shut down. The specific incident draws attention to the potential silencing of such blogs by officials fearing the exposure of information that would contradict the government's line. But at the same time it illustrates the power of the alternative versions of the unfolding events, featured in blogs, to attract the attention of mainstream media and disrupt their procedural framing line.

Cooper (2006) cites another example of a blogger offering a dissenting interpretation that could have potentially influenced later media coverage. He describes the framing of an Iraqi insurgent attack on an American military convoy, with twenty-four Iraqi insurgents left dead, by the *New York Times* in March 2005; and how it was disputed by communication professor Cori Dauber on her blog, *Rantingprofs*. Cooper explains that Dauber's critique was triggered by the way the, otherwise factually accurate story, misled the audience by framing the Iraqi assault as an unusually large and bold battle and glossing how they were eventually routed badly by the Americans (Cooper 2006: 106). Another misleading aspect of the story, according to Dauber, was the way the *New York Times* reporter stated that morale was deteriorating among the Iraqi civilian population as a result of insurgent attacks. As Dauber noted in her blog, the story explicitly concealed the optimism that prevailed among Iraqi people as well as the existing polling data confirming this optimism (Cooper 2006: 107).

Dauber's disputing of the *New York Times* frame offers a clear example of the different procedural framing and interpretation that individual sources can provide, especially when they are not limited by professional standards and/or nationalistic incentives. Constructing a news story necessarily involves a choice of which facts to highlight and which to play down. Since the frame is a central idea that organises the salient facts in the story, disputing the story frame may take the form of highlighting different facts that provide an alternative perspective of a key event. If critiques like Dauber's create enough 'buzz' to attract the attention of the mainstream media, they can prompt more comprehensive and transparent media coverage of the actual procedures and outcomes in a conflict. This will be a crucial step towards hindering government efforts to control the substantive news framing and public justification of the legitimacy of the conflict in question.

The contest over substantive framing: justifying policies

Through the multiplication of sources, blogs can give access to those dissenting voices that divert from the culturally resonant beliefs and, using their expertise

and knowledge, are able to recognise the existence of alternative justifications of the government decisions made during an operation. Dissenting voices could entail a more subtle criticism and disputing of mainstream media frames, challenging the production of substantive framing. Such challenge could comprise the promotion of culturally incongruent interpretations and justifications, and frames that do not fit the media's professional standards. Especially in situations of conflict and war, where national interest could be under risk, the blogosphere can provide citizens with a platform where they can publicly question the government's justifications of a decision that might jeopardise the country's interest and dispute the framing of a conflict by mainstream media.

Drezner and Farrell (2004b) cite the example of Juan Cole, a Professor of History at the University of Michigan, who channelled his expertise on the Muslim world and the war in Iraq into his blog *Informed Comment*. Cole's scepticism about the US invasion and occupation of Iraq diverted from the optimistic mainstream media coverage. In the summer of 2003, he wrote,

The Sunni Arabs north, east and west of Baghdad from all accounts hate the U.S. and hate U.S. troops being there. This hatred is the key recruiting tool for the resistance, and it is not lessened by U.S. troops storming towns. I wish [the counterinsurgency operation] well; maybe it will work, militarily. Politically, I don't think it addresses the real problems, of winning hearts and minds.

(cited in Drezner and Farrell 2004b)

His comments and analysis attracted wide attention from bloggers and journalists and Cole began appearing on media outlets such as National Public Radio (NPR) and CNN to provide expert commentary. As Drezner and Farrell remark,

Cole's transformation into a public intellectual embodies many of the dynamics that have heightened the impact of the blogosphere. He wanted to publicize his expertise, and he did so by attracting attention from elite members of the blogosphere. As Cole made waves within the virtual world, others in the real world began to take notice.

(Drezner and Farrell 2004b)

Cole's example is noteworthy, as the attention he received by bloggers and news media was the resultant of his expertise, an implicit challenge of the official interpretations of the decision to wage the war in Iraq, and of the cultural congruence of mainstream news framing.

The case of Jeff Jarvis, director of the new-media programme of the Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York, offers another similar illustration (Cooper 2006). Jarvis attempted a substantial reframing in response to a *New York Times* story on the suicide bombers in the 7/7 London attack. Although the story concerned a crisis event, rather than a conflict, the framing included elements, such as a problem definition and cause identification, which

are typical of the coverage and framing of conflict. Jarvis's critique of the *New York Times* story addressed the explanation advanced by the newspaper for the specific terrorist activity, which presented the atrocity as the resultant of the despair of angry young men in Arab nations who have no hope of economic prosperity and freedom. Jarvis's objection to the frame stemmed from observing that the London bombers did not fit that explanation. In contrast, they were young men living in a land of freedom and opportunity, which in reality made them just murderers. Cooper cites the following text from Jarvis's blog:

The problem with the analysis is that though it does not justify their actions – it tries to understand them – it gives a tacit logic, even a justification to the horribly illogical, unjustifiable, uncivilised crime. What they did is a crime. That's all it is, nothing more. A crime.

(Cooper 2006: 112)

To support his reframing, Jarvis offered several cases of criminal acts and made a distinction between understanding criminal motives and disregarding criminal behaviours. These cases included manslaughter under the influence of alcohol, if alcoholism is treated as a disease and corporate fraud, with the excuse that the perpetrator was raised in a culture of competition (Cooper 2006: 113). The example demonstrates how different media can offer conflicting frames of the same incident including different justifications of a given problem and the causes of this problem. In the case of blogs, this could entail applying a form of implicit pressure on journalists to re-consider their own interpretations. By questioning the frame of the 'angry young man', Jarvis draws attention to what is perhaps the strongest asset of blogs: the capacity to engage in a more thorough evaluation of the causes of problems, such as terrorism, that could shed light on the deeper failures of a given political culture and attribute responsibility to those who are accountable. In situations of conflict, this capacity could eventually place the political realm under greater public scrutiny, facilitating peaceful resolutions.

Conclusion

In the era of cyber politics, the diffusion of communications technologies and the availability of multiple sources of information have generated a certain degree of openness and publicity, reducing the ability of political leaders to have complete control over the definition and framing of events in conflict and war. However, these developments have not succeeded to cease the propensity of traditional news media to defer to the best-packaged official political story and to frame conflict situations in accordance to a given political and professional culture. The endurance of a media environment, which is not conceptually distinct from governance, leaves little scope for the media to provide the degree of transparency that can hold governments accountable and help the prevention of conflict. As other areas of research have also demonstrated, the news media can

even provide opportunities for political leaders to obtain benefits from war (Van Belle 1997: 406).

Within this context, the pervasiveness of blogs could prove pivotal. As this chapter has argued and as current theoretical and empirical evidence from the blogosphere indicates, the blogging phenomenon has not only amplified the sources of public information creating a more open communications landscape. It has also signified an extension of media freedom that is paramount for peaceful alternatives to conflict. To put it in Coleman's terms, 'blogs provide a channel for authentic expression that is free from the repressive controls of traditional media' and have become a source of information and analysis for people who no longer trust the spin and narrow agenda of the usual sources (Coleman 2005: 276). Added to this, is the impressive volume of knowledge and expertise available through blogs contesting official frames and interpretations.

It is beyond doubt that more in-depth and systematic research is needed to obtain robust evidence of this dimension of news coverage in cyberspace and its actual power to change the conventional media framing of conflict. Moreover, concerns about news blogs, especially those integrated in the structure of established news organisations, representing another attempt to strengthen the hegemony of market-orientated journalism and the existing power relations, should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, while blogs are beginning to shift the power over framing away from the usual sources in conflict and war, the media system is growing into a greater constraining factor for governments than even before.