

**Why Blog?
Community and Citizen Journalism in the North American Blogosphere**

by
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Abstract

At this moment there are over 70 million blogs in the blogosphere. This thesis looks at the two types of blogs that currently dominate the North American blogosphere – personal and political blogs – and asks why these bloggers, who are not professional journalists, feel the need to self-publish. This thesis proposes one of the reasons personal bloggers take up the practice is because they've found a community through their blogs that provides either access to information or emotional support that isn't found in their offline lives. Political bloggers are primarily blogging in order to become citizen journalists; they are challenging the dominance of the mainstream media and attempting to become media players.

A combination of qualitative analysis and interviews is used in this study. As a theoretical basis the discussion of community uses Ferdinand Tonnies' theory of *Gemeinschaft* (Community) and *Gesellschaft* (Association) as well as more recent network theory.

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Prologue

I was a journalist for ten years. I started out in private radio and television, covering local news in northern British Columbia. After a few years, still in Northern BC, I moved to CBC news. A couple years later I switched gears, still with CBC, but this time with arts and entertainment. No matter what the job, almost every workday began the same – with a story meeting. As we discussed what stories we were going to chase we would talk a lot about how to get what we called “real” people on the air. I didn’t question our use of language until I mentioned the hunt for real people to friends outside the business. Every journalist I knew used the term, but to a person who wasn’t a journalist, what was I talking about? Who were these real people?

What we meant were people who didn’t speak to the media as part of their job, people who weren’t politicians or in public relations. For instance, if the federal budget was coming down we would want to book the finance minister and the finance critic, but we would also want to find people who weren’t involved with the decision-making process. We’d try to find people who would talk to us about how the government’s spending decisions on things like healthcare and daycare were going to affect their lives. Even though they were often hard to find, there was a feeling that sometimes the best stories came from these real people. If it’s your business to talk to the media, if you’re in public relations for instance, you’re an easy phone call away. (Unless of course, you don’t want to be found, which is another story entirely.) Real people, however, are busy with their real lives. They don’t always have the time or the inclination to speak to a nosy journalist with a microphone.

But it was more than the challenge of getting these stories that had us searching for these so-called real people. As journalists we often felt that we would get more compelling stories and interesting opinions from them. These would be valuable perspectives: the stories of struggle and success that would resonate with our audience and provide inspiration and comfort. These were the stories that would illustrate how our society was functioning, giving people the chance to congratulate each other or propel them into action to remedy a situation.

I often felt we weren't telling these stories enough, and when we did, we weren't casting a wide enough net. Not because we didn't want to, but because they were hard to find and took a lot of work. When I was coming up against a deadline I would often find myself picking up the phone and making the easiest call to the closest official in order to get something, anything on the air. I would settle for my second choice. And when I did have time to search for these stories, I quickly tapped out my circle of friends, and my friends' friends. A lot of my time was spent trying to figure out how to get a wider, more diverse range of perspectives on the air.

As the Internet became more prevalent, I started spending a lot of time online looking for information, sources and potential guests. That's when I first came across blogs. Blog is short for weblog. Rachel Smolkin (2004), a senior writer with *American Journalism Review*, describes them as "online journals of thought and commentary" that "feature a personal, distinctive voice, links to other sources and regular postings displayed in reverse chronological order with the newest entry first" (p. 1). Readers are encouraged to have input and post their comments on whatever the blogger is writing about that day. Most blogs have a theme and there are blogs on just about every topic

imaginable. Some blogs look like diaries where people write about the minutiae of their daily lives. Others use them to talk about politics, or celebrities, or technology, or sports... The list is seemingly endless.

When I started reading the blogs that were out there, I remember thinking – here were the stories and opinions we strove so hard to find as journalists. As I looked at the blogosphere, that borderless nation in cyberspace, what I saw were millions of stories from real people. Millions of people with different experiences, different lives. Here they were, a simple mouse click away, ready for anybody to read. And they didn't need a journalist to act as an intermediary. They could tell their stories themselves.

I began to wonder why so many people were turning to this medium as a means of self-expression and what this said about how they felt about journalism and the world more generally. Were bloggers unhappy with the media they were consuming? Did they feel their stories weren't being told? Or did their online forays reveal something more profound? Were they finding something online that they felt was missing in their offline life?

With this in mind, when I decided to go back to school I wanted to look specifically at blogs written by people who do not claim to be professional journalists and ask *why* they do what they do. I was interested in why they feel the need to self publish, what they think they are contributing to the media landscape and what they are getting out of this experience.

Another reason I was interested in looking at blogging and its relationship to journalism is because of the debates that exist over what exactly journalism is and what distinguishes a professional journalist. For instance, does one have to have a degree in

journalism to practice journalism? Is it better to learn on the job, working your way up the rungs of an organization, learning as you go, or are the intricacies of journalism best passed on in within an educational institution? To take it further, do you even need to be associated with a news organization to be a journalist? The proliferation of bloggers and the subsequent debate over how they relate to journalism bring these tensions to the forefront. The term citizen journalist is used often when referring to bloggers. It seems to imply that they are in some way journalists. But can people with no formal training in journalism be journalists?

How bloggers fit into the realm of professional journalism has been a contested issue. It begins with this: should bloggers even be compared to journalists, or are they a different beast entirely? Should the writing that bloggers produce be considered as credible as journalists? Are bloggers actually doing original reporting, or are they simply regurgitating what has been reported in other media?

Many bloggers do not consider what they do to be journalism (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). However there are some bloggers who *do* claim they are producing original journalism – reporting on issues that haven’t been covered elsewhere – and as such, other media should see them as competition (Taylor, 2006a). In terms of what the *public* considers a news source, many people say they are turning to blogs as legitimate places to find out what is going on in the world (Coleman, 2005).

If the law is the litmus test, from a legal standpoint their place alongside journalism is also being contested. For example, in the United States, the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee has recently approved the amendment of the “Free Flow of Information Act”. Essentially this act protects journalists and bloggers who gain

revenue from their blogs from having to reveal their sources. In this act the practice of journalism is defined as the “gathering, preparing, collecting, photographing, recording, writing, editing, reporting or publishing of news or information that concerns local, national or international events or other matters of public interest for dissemination to the public” (Broache, 2007). Bloggers who fit into this definition, however loosely, are included. What is interesting, and the subject of current debate, is that this bill restricts these protections to people who derive “financial gain or livelihood” from their journalism (Broache, 2007). Some politicians are concerned that because it’s so easy for bloggers to get Google ads and make a few dollars off their blogs that this act might be interpreted more broadly in the eyes of the law than it should be. It may end up protecting *any* blogger who makes a few dollars off her blog from having to reveal her sources (Broache, 2007).

When looking for a definition of professional journalism, I’ve turned to G. Stuart Adam’s essay, “Notes Towards a Definition of Journalism” (Adam, 2006). Adam is Professor Emeritus of Journalism at Carleton University, as well as the Journalism Scholarship Fellow at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. In this essay he identifies several ways we can decipher journalism from other forms of storytelling. First among them is that the idea of something new is at the core of journalism – and this is very different from a story’s subject. “The Everglades can be thought of as a subject; that it is in trouble is news. Similarly, [actor] Michael Landon is a subject; his sickness and then his death were news” (Adam, 2006, p. 355). Also key to journalism is the notion of reporting facts. “Journalists are concerned with facts and information...[t]hey construct a picture of fact and information” (Adam, 2006, p. 355).

For the purpose of this thesis, when *I* refer to professional journalists I am talking about people who are employed by media organizations or who freelance for these organizations. These journalists work in a variety of media – television, radio, print and their online embodiments. They have been trained as journalists, either formally through academic institutions, or have other formal education and have learned to be journalists on the job, learning from their mentors or by receiving specialized training from the organizations that employ them. As I write about professional journalists I keep in mind Adam’s (2006) ideas that journalists are concerned with events or issues that are in some way “new” and that there is in all journalism an emphasis on either reporting verifiable facts, or commenting on these reported facts.

I began by looking at the blogs I read most often – personal blogs and political blogs. The personal bloggers write, for the most part, about their daily lives: their family, friends and whatever they happen to be dealing with at that particular moment. Many people might consider these blogs online diaries. Political bloggers write, as their name suggests, mostly about politics. They also deal with how the mainstream media¹ covers politics as well as news and current events more generally. As I read, two themes appeared: community and citizen journalism. The personal bloggers appeared to be using their blogs primarily as a way to build vast networks of connections that were useful to them in two ways. First, to gather practical information that would help make their lives easier – everything from where to find health insurance to tips on convincing toddlers to

¹ When I use the term mainstream media or traditional media in this thesis I am referring to magazines, newspapers, radio and television and their online embodiments. I use this term to distinguish between media that has a strong foundation in our culture and the type of media that bloggers (and podcasters, MySpace users, You Tubers., etc...) are in the process of creating and defining.

eat something other than plain noodles. Second, they were using them as a way to engage emotionally with like-minded people. The political bloggers were using their blogs to become citizen journalists. They were tracking the work of professional journalists, adding their own opinions to the media landscape and, in some cases, attempting to produce original journalism.

In this thesis I will be looking at how these two themes, community and citizen journalism, manifest in these two types of blogs and how they may relate to why bloggers engage in the practice. I will also look at how these themes interconnect in both types of blogs. Although I have identified community as being a primary force in the personal blogs and citizen journalism as being a primary force for the political bloggers, there are strands of community and citizen journalism that run through both.

As I've mentioned, my academic interest in these bloggers stems from my work as a journalist. The programs I was involved with tried to incorporate stories from real people. But as we molded peoples' stories to fit our own format I didn't think it always worked. Sometimes, no matter how hard I tried, I felt some stories ended up sounding overdramatic or superficial, because I was trying to make them fit into a particular format. For a documentary I had five minutes to tell a story. If the report was for a newscast, I had a minute and ten seconds. I'd worry about what I cut out of a story, that my words weren't doing justice to the essence of their experience. As I read blogs what I saw were stories that, in a way, seemed to be much more authentic than what was coming out of much of the mainstream media. People were telling their stories, or voicing their opinions, in a way that seemed unfiltered and unrestrained. I began to wonder about the value of this kind of public storytelling and where it fit alongside mainstream media.

There were many questions. Were bloggers really as uncensored as they appeared? Or were they carefully constructing their public persona? Were bloggers adding much needed commentary and opinion into the public sphere? Or were they mostly producing uninhibited, biased ranting that should be ignored? It became apparent to me that bloggers are part of a media landscape in which people are questioning what exactly journalism is and what exactly a fact is. Are we more likely to get the truth about world events from large, established media organizations or from the mouths of satirists and self proclaimed non-journalists such as Jon Stewart? Along this vein, some insist that the mainstream media is biased and often offers up erroneous reporting. Perhaps it's better to turn to the bloggers, with their biting reviews and scathing critiques, to get a more accurate account of what is really going on in the world (Coleman, 2005; Hewitt, 2005; McMillan, 2006a).

On that note, by looking at *why* bloggers blog, I hope to shed some light on what they feel is missing from the mainstream media and draw some conclusions about how they perceive traditional media; what they try to emulate and what they think needs to change. Perhaps this might provide some insight that would be helpful to media organizations that are trying to change their practices and accommodate the wants and needs of media consumers who are immersed in the age of participatory media; consumers who don't want to placidly consume, but actively participate.

Further to this, by looking at why bloggers blog – and in particular how the theme of community has emerged – my purpose is to shed some light on what they feel is lacking in society more generally, not just in the media. This interest also stems from my experience reading blogs. Personally, I've found I feel an affinity for the bloggers I read.

I find them funny, intelligent, insightful people I might like to know. If you read the comments sections of these blogs it's apparent that lots of people feel the same way I do – some of them even feel as if they *are* friends with the blogger and vice versa. I've wondered if what I am seeing in blogs is a partial remedy to what Robert Putnam suggests in his book *Bowling Alone* (2000). We are living in a society that increasingly revolves around individuality. Are blogs a way for people to find friends, or likeminded people, so they don't feel as alone in the world? I'm not suggesting that bloggers are by definition lonely people, or that blogging is a symptom of loneliness. But if we are living in a society that is to a large degree constructed around individual success, perhaps bloggers are simply being resourceful, using the technology at their hands to reach out to other people. Further to this, if bloggers are finding friends, acquaintances and associates through this medium, how do they deal with the paradox of intimacy with distance that seems to be inherent in online relationships?

My interest in community and blogging also stems from my professional experience. As a journalist I was involved with programs that were always trying to come up with ways to connect with the audience. We wanted people to feel like we were part of their family, or a trusted friend that was an essential part of their day. We wanted them to feel a connection with us so that they would tune in. As I started reading blogs and saw the connections that were being formed between bloggers and readers, as someone who thought a lot about forming an affinity with an audience, I became interested in how easily these networks were sprouting up. Further to this, I became interested in what *sorts* of relationships were being built by these bloggers and if the search for these relationships could be the reason people begin blogging in the first place.

This thesis will begin by looking at what has been written to date about why people blog. It will concentrate on the literature that deals with the sorts of communities that are forming on blogs, as well as what has been written so far about online community more generally. This first chapter will also explore the concepts of citizen journalism and participatory media, in particular the controversy over whether blogging should even be compared to journalism. The second chapter will detail the methodology used in this study as well as the sociological theory that will be used in the discussion about community – a term that can have many different meanings to different people. The next two chapters will focus on the two types of bloggers that feature most prominently in the North American blogosphere: the third chapter will concentrate on personal bloggers, or diary-type bloggers as they're sometimes called, while the fourth chapter will focus on political bloggers. In the final chapter I will draw links between the two different kinds of bloggers and offer suggestions as to what sort of communication and community building is happening on both sorts of blogs, as well as how these bloggers are acting as citizen journalists. My aim is to offer for consideration that there may be several reasons why bloggers engage in the practice and that blogging is fulfilling several roles. These findings may be useful for media organizations interested in incorporating the needs of the media consumers immersed in a blogging world and for those interested in how blogging is filling a larger societal roles, as people move online to find something missing in their offline lives.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Although blogs have existed since the mid 1990s, the blogosphere really started to expand with the introduction of simple publishing programs, such as Blogger, in the late 1990s. Thanks to these programs, a person no longer needed to know how to code HTML or other complicated computer programs to publish on the Internet. Anyone with Internet access and a small amount of computer savvy could become a pundit (Blood, 2000). Today the blogosphere is a crowded place.² At this moment, according to the web-tracking site *Technorati*, there are over 70 million blogs competing for attention (www.technorati.com).³ By this time tomorrow, unless blogging has suddenly reached its saturation point, it is likely thousands more will join the throngs. There are estimates a new blog is created every second (“One blog created,” 2005). It’s questionable how many of these millions are still active⁴, but even if they’re left to stagnate they don’t always disappear; many remain, silent and patient, waiting for visitors (Claussen, 2006).

This chapter will examine some of the literature that has been written to date about how the blogosphere got to this point. I will look at research that examines why

² When talking about the potential influence of blogging, it must be noted that this influence is restricted to a certain section of society. The ‘digital divide’ is the term used to distinguish between people who are connected and people who aren’t. There are many parts of Sub Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Southeast Asia that are not connected, but even in countries that are fairly well connected, such as Canada, a digital divide still exists that reflects existing socio-economic inequalities (Barney, 2005; Norris, 2001).

³ *Technorati* is one of the most respected blog tracking sites worldwide. It is often cited as a source by established media organizations such as the BBC and *The New York Times*, as well as by academics and bloggers themselves. (As examples see: “One blog created,” 2005; Claussen, 2006.)

⁴ Some estimate that 45 per cent of blogs are discontinued within three months (Claussen, 2006).

bloggers take up the practice, as well as what has been written about blogging, community and citizen journalism. Further on this thesis will address how different notions, such as fame and commercialism, play into the relationships that are built through blogs and the kind of citizen journalism that is attempted. There is, of course, much that has been written about online fame and commercialism. However this body of work will not be detailed in this literature review because the primary focus of this thesis will be on community and citizen journalism.

Before I begin, in order to put my findings in context, I would like to go into more detail about what is known about the state of the blogosphere at this moment. Since the blogosphere is ever changing it's important that this information be put in the forefront so that any conclusions reached can be seen as reflecting this present situation.

There are blogs on just about everything from celebrities, to politics to parenting. In the last few years the blogosphere has become less U.S.-centric, with blogs seeing significant growth in places such as Japan, Korea, China, France and Brazil ("One blog created," 2005). Japanese is the number one blogging language, occupying 37 per cent of the blogosphere, English is second at 33 percent, followed by Chinese at eight per cent (Sifry, 2006). However, since this thesis will deal with blogs originating from North America, I will focus on the demographics of this particular section of the blogosphere. In the last couple years some statistics have started to emerge from North America that paint a picture of who is writing these blogs and who is reading them. In the United States most bloggers are generally described as young (under 40) and from fairly affluent households. Fifty-two per cent of bloggers are women. Their readers are also young, "well-educated, tech-savvy, and noticeably upscale" (Claussen, 2006, p. 5). About 39 per

cent of the adult online population in the U.S. reads blogs. That translates into about 57 million American adults, or about 19 per cent of the population. About eight per cent of the adult online population write blogs. That's about 12 million Americans, or about four per cent of the total population (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). The data available from Canada is sparse, but what is known is that 32 per cent of the online population reads blogs and about seven per cent of this population has written a blog. The data needed to define *who* these Canadian bloggers are is also less complete, but we do know that in Canada "the incidence and frequency of blog activity is considerably higher among Canadian youth between the ages of 18 and 24" (Environics, 2006).

A recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that two types of blogs dominate the American blogosphere: personal blogs and political blogs. Thirty-seven per cent of bloggers say they write primarily about their "life and experiences" in blogs that many people might say resemble a diary. Political blogs are written by 11 per cent of bloggers (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). Similar data couldn't be found on the Canadian blogosphere, but it appears that these two types of bloggers are also very popular. A survey of the categories in the Canadian blog awards, as well as the finalists in the Canadian category of various international blog awards, shows that these sorts of blogs are the most widely recognized. For example, at the 2006 Weblog Awards (<http://2006.weblogawards.org/2006>), the largest international blog competition, most of the blogs in the Canadian category were either political blogs or personal blogs. The winner was *Small Dead Animals* (www.smalldeadanimals.com), a conservative-leaning political blog. *Milk Money Or Not, Here I Come* (www.schmutzie.com), a personal blog, came in second.

Why Blog?

While these sorts of statistics begin to paint a picture of who is populating the blogosphere, what they don't tell us is *why* people are blogging. Blogging is a time-consuming activity. It takes dedication to come up with a new post on a regular basis and publish it. Even if one is a gifted writer who can confidently whip off a post in a few minutes, it's evident from looking at these blogs that people often spend a great deal of energy designing and shaping them. In short, this is generally not an endeavour that is taken lightly. As mentioned earlier, in an effort to look more closely at why bloggers might be blogging, I will be looking at how themes of community and relationships are reflected in these types of blogs. I will be looking at what bloggers say about the people they meet through blogging, how they solicit their audience's help or advice and how the audience responds to these bloggers. What sorts of relationships are bloggers developing online? What sort of community do they feel they are part of, if any? In addition, I will also be looking at how bloggers take on and are affected by citizen journalism. How much does the desire to challenge mainstream media factor into what they do on their blogs? Are they using their blogs much like a newspaper columnist might use her space, as places to analyze current events or to express their point of view on public issues?

By looking at what sort of community appears to be forming on blogs and how bloggers are acting as citizen journalists, my aim is to put forward possible reasons for blogging. There hasn't been much research that asks specifically why bloggers blog, but what research does exist suggests the desire for personal expression is pushing some people to self-publish. One study found that "blogs shared a common purpose: to express the author's subjective, often intimate perspective on matters of interest to him or her (in

the case of most blogs, the matters of interest concern the authors and their daily lives)” (Trammel & Keshelashvili, 2005, p. 972). While I agree that personal expression certainly is a reason why people blog, I wish to break this idea down a little more and look at what people may be gaining out of this ability to self publish. Another study, based on content analysis of a random sample of blogs, found that “personal expression and social utility” were primary motivators for bloggers (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005, p. 972). It’s this idea of social utility that I wish to pick up on, in particular when looking at how community plays into blogging and how people may be using their blogs to connect with other people for their own personal gain.

There has also been some research that looks at what sorts of communities are built on blogs as well as research that looks at how bloggers are acting as citizen journalists. While most of this research doesn’t specifically ask – why are bloggers blogging? – it does suggest that community and citizen journalism are either the reasons people take up the practice, or benefits they derive from the practice. I will begin by reviewing what has been written about blogging and community and then look at the idea of citizen journalism and issues surrounding it. It is my hope that this thesis will add to the academic research in these areas.

Blogging and Community

In his book *Blogosphere: The New Political Arena* (2006), Michael Keren suggests that bloggers are melancholic, lonely people, frustrated by political forces in the world over which they have no real control. He also suggests these are some of the reasons they engage in the practice. To be clear, he doesn’t believe that bloggers are the

only lonely people. Many people in the world feel a sense of solitude or hopelessness, however, “[i]f they have access to a computer and free time they may belong to the community of bloggers telling life stories, commenting on public affairs, expressing opinions on anything under the sun and producing billions of words on their keyboards” (p. 152). Keren uses the term community to describe how bloggers group together online, as does some of the other research that looks at blogging (Wei, 2004). Others look more closely at whether community truly exists in this sort of setting and for whom. In one case study, the researcher found that community *did* exist “for a vocal and active minority of the respondents” for whom “social connections were made and emotional attachments were established” (Blanchard, 2004, p. 10). But this research suggests that in order to feel like there is a community in a blog, one must actively participate. The people who read the blog but who *did not* read the comments or make comments themselves did not feel like they were part of a community (Blanchard, 2004). What this research seems to suggest is that there may be many people reading blogs who do not feel part of a community, or who even think in those terms. Perhaps for the non-participants the blog is more of a performance piece, or a piece of literature than anything else – something that is there to be absorbed as entertainment.

Graham Lampa is a graduate student from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minn., who agrees that there are people who are creating community in the blogosphere by actively commenting and posting, but he also argues there may be another way to describe the community that forms that would include people who read blogs but never participate in the comments section. He uses Benedict Anderson’s work *Imagined Communities* (1983) as a basis for this idea. Lampa (2004) compares Anderson’s

description of thousands of people reading the same newspaper and imagining some sense of common identity, although they have never met, to what bloggers are doing. “Bloggers consume information in a similarly ritualistic manner – albeit via computer monitor rather than newsprint” (Lampa, 2004, p. 2). Lampa goes on to propose that “[t]he blogosphere forms an imagined community based on a new form of amateurized and personalized journalism practiced by persons who may never meet one another yet can engage in conversation and share a common identity” (p. 2). By allowing people who are not professional journalists to join an online discussion “regarding national and international events, issues and ideas, the process of blogging has a democratizing effect that can evoke feelings of shared experience” (p. 3).

Doctoral student E. Johanna Hartelius (2005), from the University of Texas, proposes that instead of simply looking at blogs and asking whether a virtual community exists there should be a taxonomy of blogs based on content. Essentially she’s saying that not all blogs are equal and should not be lumped together for research purposes. She suggests that blogs should be divided into two categories – group blogs written by many people collectively and personal blogs written by one individual. Further to this, individual blogs can be further broken down into two categories. The first is supplementary blogs that are “an extension of something that the blogger does in real-time, either for business or pleasure” (p. 84). As an example she points to artists or musicians who might use a blog to promote their art. The second type she calls “individualizing personal blogs” that she describes as “little more than online diaries” full of personal, daily reflections that “seldom raise the ‘big questions’” (p. 86). Hartelius

believes that group blogs promote a sense of community since they are based around a shared topic, however individual blogs may not foster this same sense of collectivity.

The topic-oriented content of group blogs appears to facilitate a sense of community based on shared interest in the topic and on the invitation for interaction. The same is true, though perhaps to a lesser extent, on supplementary personal blogs. In contrast, the individual-oriented content on personal blogs seems less likely to achieve the same results. (p. 88)

While I agree that blogs shouldn't be analyzed as a homogenous group, I disagree with her characterization of personal blogs. As will be illustrated in later chapters, I will argue that blogs that focus on the personal and the day-to-day *do* evoke a sense of community.

Although the writing about community and blogging isn't extensive, writing about community online in general, is. Since the mid 1990s there has been much debate about how people relate online. In the beginning, the academic debate was polarized. On one hand, the Internet was championed as a way to revive community that was seen to be failing people in many ways, on the other, there were dire warnings that the Internet would destroy community, and pull people into private, individual lives where they would ignore the real people around them (Bell, 2001, Barney, 2004a; Fernback, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Wellman & Gulia 1999). Much of this first round of theorizing about online interaction has been severely criticized. Many of these early positions in the discussion have been accused of being one-sided, parochial, unscholarly and "presentist" – they didn't take into account that people have been worrying about the effects of technology on community for many years (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 333-334).

However, these ideas still form the basis for much of the research that has followed, and the hopes and fears resonate through current research. For this reason I will go into these findings in more detail.

First of all, early enthusiasts pointed out that online communities overcome obstacles such as time and space. But they also said that virtual communities could be more meaningful than a community one was born into because people chose their virtual communities (Barney, 2004a; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). It should be noted that this idea of overcoming geography and forming meaningful relationships with people outside one's immediate surroundings is not new, it's not a product of late 20th, early 21st century thought. It evokes philosopher John Dewey's (1916) observation that a person can be more intimately acquainted with someone miles away than with the people with whom she's surrounded.

Persons do not become a society by living in physical proximity, any more than a man ceases to be socially influenced by being so many feet or miles removed from others. A book or a letter may institute a more intimate association between human beings separated thousands of miles from each other than exists between dwellers under the same roof. (p. 4-5)

In addition, online communities were also seen as more secure than offline public spaces, less hierarchical and more egalitarian. They provided a stress-free venue for people who suffer from shyness to meet. They were a place for people to try on different personalities, free from the restrictions of their physical bodies. Of course, anonymity also means that one can hide their true identity online, something that is potentially

harmful to forming solid relationships (Barney, 2004a; McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Turkle, 1995).

The ease with which people can go in and out of online communities was seen by some as a plus; a way for people to keep their individuality and autonomy, but also participate in community (Wilbur, 1997). But it's precisely this ease of entry and exit that has worried skeptics (Barney, 2004a). For Robert Putman (2000), who's concerned with what he sees as the increasing individualism in society (American society in particular), an open door policy, coupled with the anonymity the Internet affords, run counter to what is needed to build solid relationships.

Anonymity and fluidity in the virtual world encourages "easy in, easy out", "drive by" relationships. That very casualness is the appeal of computer-mediated communication for some denizens of cyberspace, but it discourages the creation of social capital. If entry and exit are too easy, commitment, trustworthiness, and reciprocity will not develop. (p. 177)

All these arguments centre on the idea that in order to have a real sense of commitment to a community a person needs to be rooted in a place and in a body (Willson, 2000). Further to this, the physical cues people pick up from face-to-face contact add an important dimension to communication. Some have argued that online anonymity means people will be more inclined to throw aside social niceties, and engage in rude, destructive behaviour (Putnam, 2000). There is also the fear that people could become too involved with life online and become completely disinterested in so-called "real life", disengaging from any social responsibilities they might have (Doheny-Farina, 1996; Lockhard, 1997). Concern has also been expressed that the Internet will lead to

narrow communities of interest that people customize to suit their preferences, isolating themselves from others. Places where everyone looks the same and acts the same. As Stephen Doheny-Farina (1996) points out:

In physical communities we are forced to live with people who may differ from us in many ways. But virtual communities offer us the opportunity to construct utopian collectivities - communities of interest, education, tastes, beliefs, and skills. In cyberspace we can remake the world out of an unsettled landscape. (p. 16)

While much of the writing about online communities has been based largely on personal and anecdotal evidence, the last few years has seen a growing body of research, principally out of the University of Toronto's NetLab, that is attempting to gather empirical data about how the Internet is being used, and how it meshes with people's offline life. The research findings take a more moderate position; computer-mediated communication is not a replacement for face-to-face interaction, but can complement real-life relationships (Barney, 2004a; Barney, 2004b; Boase & Wellman, 2006). "[T]he Internet is neither destroying nor radically enhancing society. Rather, the Internet is adding to the overall volume of communication, helping to maintain the kinds of relationships that have existed for decades" (Boase & Wellman, 2006, p. 13). But what the research has shown is that community in the 21st century is changing. Instead of community based around a certain geographic place, such as the town you're born in, people are becoming "networked individuals" who create their own social webs that centre around themselves. They're able to build these vast networks thanks to things like

the Internet, social networking sites, email and the telephone (Boase & Wellman, 2006; Boase, Horrigan, Wellman & Rainie, 2006).

Citizen Journalism

While I will be looking at how themes of community appear in blogging, I will also be looking at how citizen journalism may factor into the reasons why bloggers take up the practice. As such, I'd like to turn my attention to what has been written so far about why people feel compelled to become citizen journalists and why they are motivated to take up blogging as a way to express themselves. However, just before I do, I want to emphasize that while the concept of community and the research surrounding online community has already been addressed in this literature review, it's important to note that ideas of community are not divorced from citizen journalism. As Lampa (2004) points out, by allowing people to participate in an online discussion that deals with news and current events, community is formed. Much of the literature about citizen journalism also rests on the idea of connections and relationship building by emphasizing how citizen journalists rely on and try to foster conversation and dialogue with their readers. It's true that mainstream media has tried to foster conversations with audiences for years, by encouraging letters to the editor or through talkback lines. But while audience feedback is important, it isn't necessarily the "raison d'etre" of the mainstream media. It is however, one of the primary features of blogging. It is something that is encouraged and something that most bloggers who consider themselves citizen journalists strive for (Gillmor, 2004).

Before looking at what the literature says about *why* people are becoming citizen journalists I'd like to begin by defining the term. Those who believe we are witnessing the beginning of a new type of journalism, one in which the media consumer can become a media participant, say we are seeing the rise of what's been dubbed citizen journalism or, as some call it, "participatory media" or "participatory journalism" (Blood, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Lampa, 2004; Lasica, 2003b; Rosen, 2005). (To be clear, citizen journalism could include people who shoot their own video and upload it onto their own websites, or podcasters who create their own podcasts, but as this thesis is dealing with blogging, the literature review will concentrate on what has been written about blogging and citizen journalism.) Some believe these bloggers are challenging what was once the sovereign territory of journalists and reshaping the face of news.⁵ Millions of people now have a chance to freely express their views on a public platform; they don't have to pass by gatekeepers of journalists and producers to get their message out to a wider public. In this context, blogs are seen as the online answer to the op-ed page, or the radio talkback line. They are a place for analysis, opinion and debate. They encourage conversation and dialogue between writer and reader (Andrews, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; O'Brien, 2004; Strangelove, 2005). The influx of new voices into the media landscape has been credited by some with causing a shift that is fundamentally changing the process of news and the definition of news. News is becoming less of a lecture and more of a conversation; you

⁵ As there is the possibility for confusion when I use the term blogger, since some professional journalists do blog as part of their job, I would like to make it clear that when I use the term in this thesis, unless I specify otherwise, I am referring to bloggers who are not professional journalists. These are people who do not call themselves professional journalists, who blog outside the confines of an established news organization.

don't have to be hired by a news organization to be part of the news process.⁶

Turning now to *why* people are deciding to become citizen journalists, the literature suggests people are picking up the practice for several reasons. (Much of the literature I will be reviewing also addresses *how* people are acting as citizen journalists. This literature will be reviewed, for two reasons. 1) This literature that explores *how* also implies the *why*. 2) It adds important context, which forms the foundation on which my research rests.) First of all, many bloggers are turning to the blog because they don't feel their voices are being heard in the mainstream media and the blog gives them the chance to express their opinions freely on a public platform (Allan, 2006; Gillmor, 2004). Instead of trying to convince mainstream media to publish stories or opinion pieces they'd like to consume, they are bypassing mainstream media and doing it themselves. In this way they are attempting to add to the diversity of what is normally available in the mainstream media (Gillmor, 2004). Michael Strangelove (2005), a lecturer in the Department of Communications at Ottawa University, writes: "[t]he motivating force behind the explosion in discourse as seen in news blogs is found in commercial media itself. A homogeneous news market has created a demand for the diversity of line opinions" (p.175). Stuart Allan (2006), Professor of Media and Journalism Studies at the University

⁶ I am also aware of the following critique: many people do not think that bloggers and journalists should be compared and consider the term citizen journalism to be a misnomer. Bloggers are not journalists because they do not put weight on reporting verifiable fact; they're not critiqued by other journalists or held up to the same standards as professional journalists. Paul Andrews (2003), a technology columnist for the *Seattle Times*, believes that "calling a typical blogger a journalist is like calling anyone who takes a snapshot a photographer – blogging "does not lend itself to factual documentation as much as to observation, analysis, background – the kind of amplitude that lends greater interpretation and understanding to raw information" (p. 64). These issues will be discussed further in the literature review.

of the West of England, Bristol, concurs that this desire for diversity has been the motivation behind many news-oriented blogs from the beginning.

Many were informed by a shared ethos, namely that news-gathering and commentary needed to be democratized. By acting as ‘unofficial’ news sources on the web, these blogs were linking together information and opinion which supplemented – or, in the eyes of some advocates, supplanted – the coverage provided by ‘official’ news outlets. (p. 49)

Allan (2006) goes on to say the rapid rise of blogging came after September 11, 2001 when many people were feeling a sense of “dissatisfaction with older, more traditional types of reporting. Voices challenging the preoccupations of mainstream media...were being heard from across the political spectrum and from within every corner of the emergent blogosphere” (p. 73). When he goes on to ask more specifically “[w]herein lies the motivation of the blogging movement?”, he turns to Scott Rosenberg, the editor of *Salon.com* (Allan, 2006, p. 75). What Rosenberg sees is that bloggers are responding to “free-floating anger at the professional media’s penchant for making mistakes and not owning up to them” (Rosenberg, 2002). He believes bloggers are using the medium to talk about issues in which they feel they are experts, areas in which the people writing in the mainstream media are not as well versed. They write in what he believes is a “righteous, frustrated tone that says, *I know this subject better than the reporters – and they’re wrong! And I can say so on my Web site and no one can stop me!*” Rosenberg goes on to say that, of course, bloggers makes mistakes as well, but he believes they are not as “sanctimonious about their own accuracy to begin with, and they typically admit mistakes and move on” (Rosenberg, 2002).

But this idea that the blogosphere is more diverse and inclusive than most mainstream or traditional media, has been challenged with the following argument: what's actually happening is a few A-list bloggers end up setting the agenda for the rest of the blogging world, recreating a pattern found in the mainstream media where a few major news organizations set the news agenda for everyone else (Haas, 2005).⁷ The agenda of these A-list bloggers then trickles down and becomes the conversation of millions of other blogs. The utopian ideal of many voices participating in a large conversation becomes muted as the voices of a few take control (Haas, 2005; O'Brien, 2004). As an example, a study of Canadian political blogs found that a few bloggers tended to dominate the conversation in the partisan blogosphere.

The partisan blogging community as a whole...tends to be dominated by a relatively small number of bloggers. Although these bloggers are people who presumably would not have a voice on their own and in that sense blogging can be seen as equalizing the expression of political views, clearly a small number of bloggers tend to dominate the conversation.

(Koop & Jansen, 2006, p.15)

Further to this, there are many people in the world who can't participate in the blogosphere at all because they don't live in areas that are connected to the Internet, or

⁷ It is not entirely clear how an A-lister becomes an A-lister. There isn't a magic formula. Some believe that to be a good blogger there are certain guidelines to follow, such as keep posts short, make them opinionated and make them diverse (Hull, 2006/2007), but why some bloggers rise to stardom and others dwell in obscurity is not clear. For some reason, perhaps a combination of publicity in the form of links to other blogs, by being featured in mainstream media or perhaps simply because the content of the blog is captivating, some bloggers capture the public's interest and rise to more prominence than others.

they can't afford to be connected (Barney, 2005; Norris, 2001). But even among those who are connected, even if they are expressing a variety of opinions, it doesn't mean they're necessarily reading each other. Some believe blogs preach to the converted instead of fostering debate. They are places for likeminded people (Israel, 2005).

Fact Checking: Watchblogs

Some claim that bloggers are self-appointed watchdogs and fact checkers who track the work of journalists, looking for inaccuracies and bias. They are acting as citizen journalists by challenging the work of professional journalists and acting as the Internet police (Andrews, 2003; Cooper, 2006; Palser, 2005). As an example, after CNN apologized to Illinois Senator Barack Obama for advertising a story about the search for al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden using the headline "Where's Obama?", Obama's press secretary Tommy Vietor said "he appreciated the bloggers and activists who brought the error to light so quickly and helped make sure it was corrected" ("Confusing Obama," 2007). CNN said later that the mistake was just a typo ("Confusing Obama," 2007).

Pointing out typos is one thing, but watchdog bloggers, or "watchblogs" as they're sometimes called, have been credited with having an even greater influence. In 2004 Dan Rather stepped down from the anchor chair at CBS after 23 years in the seat. Although his resignation is said to have been imminent anyway, some claim he was forced to step down early in part because bloggers discovered that a *60 Minutes* report, critical of George W. Bush's time with the National Guard, was based on false documents (Glaser, 2004, Greve, 2005; Hewitt, 2005; Kurtz, 2004).

This self-appointed role of watchdog is at times a strange one. Many bloggers rely heavily on media for content for their blogs, but while they rely on it, they also resent it. As Jane Singer (2006), an Associate Professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Iowa whose research encompasses digital journalism, puts it:

[T]hey are quite fond of biting the hands that feed them...Many of the most widely read bloggers carefully and continuously monitor what journalists report and how they report it – and call attention to perceived problems. These cover a broad spectrum but commonly include hypocrisy, bias, inaccuracy, and inattention to potentially big stories. (p. 23)

Of course, media watchdogs are not new, but what is different about these watchdogs is their growing numbers and audience. There is an irony in this role as well; even though bloggers often take journalists to task on their fact checking, it is a practice that can be unevenly applied in the blogosphere. Although the majority of bloggers in the American blogosphere say that they *sometimes* verify facts before posting them (Lenhart & Fox, 2006), the idea of truth in the blogosphere is often approached differently. Singer (2006) sums it up this way:

[T]heir overall approach is to offer a space for all comers to post what they know or think; to receive a hearing; and to have their ideas publicly debated, modified, and expanded or refuted. So truth for the blogger is created collectively rather than hierarchically. Information is not necessarily vetted before its dissemination but instead through the process

of disseminating multiple views; truth, in the bloggers' view, is the result of discourse. (p. 16)

Of course, there's no guarantee that a collective will uncover the truth and it is possible, given the echo-chamber effect of the Internet (where one link can be re-linked over and over again) that slander, misinformation and lies can reverberate ad infinitum. If the truth ever does come out, that's no certainty that any initial damage done by erroneous reporting, be it to a person's reputation, or well being, will ever be repaired (Singer, 2006).

However, many believe that bloggers *are* open and transparent about what they do, in a way that professional journalists haven't been in the past (Singer, 2006). Many bloggers have developed publishing practices, whereby they generally disclose their principles, their processes and who they are offline. They don't hide their biases, the reasons why they blog, or how they've found the information they're blogging about and because of this they gain a certain degree of credibility (Mitchell & Steele, 2005; Singer, 2006; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005).

When the issue of transparency comes up some make the point that bloggers, and the idea of the blog, have pushed mainstream media organizations to be more transparent about their practices; because of the blogosphere's demands for fast, open communication, people's expectations about news have changed. Alex S. Jones, the director of Harvard University's Joan Shorenstein Center of the Press, Politics and Public Policy believes "[a] lot of media criticism essentially is a demand for transparency and trying to get at not just the 'who, what, when, where' but the why of journalism decision making" (Smolkin, 2006, p. 2). But there is debate over whether blogs are forcing too

much transparency. While some believe it is necessary and relevant for a journalist to reveal their sources and their biases, others question whether too much disclosure can go overboard and take away from actual reporting, reveling instead in the reporter's bias and personality rather than focusing on actual events (Smolkin, 2006).

Influencing the News Agenda

Advocates of citizen journalism also believe that bloggers have had an influence over the mainstream media by forcing stories into the news agenda that otherwise would have remained off the radar (Lessig, 2004; O'Brien, 2004; Regan, 2003). Unlike journalists who are often assigned new stories on a daily basis, bloggers have the time and the will to obsess over stories, and stick with them until the mainstream media takes notice again. Sheila Lennon (2003), a producer who blogs for the website maintained by *The Providence Journal* in Rhode Island (www.projo.com) says bloggers are broadening the news agenda. "If the news media's power is in setting the nation's agenda, bloggers enlarge that agenda by finding and flogging ideas and events until traditional media covers them in more depth" (p.77). Mark Federman is a blogger (<http://whatisthemessage.blogspot.com>) and past head of McLuhan Management Studies at the University of Toronto. He believes the same holds true for the media in Canada.

Let's face it: for traditional mass media, a story must capture interest within one or two news cycles or it's dead: a story kept alive for more than a few days risks losing attention and becoming irrelevant. But in the blogosphere, if a story is sufficiently important or interesting, it can stay

alive for days or weeks, or come back months or even years later. (Federman, 2006)

Further to this, some bloggers are also taking on the role of news editors. In a way, these bloggers are like scavengers. They scour the mainstream media's online sites and other blogs for news stories and link to them. They screen out the superfluous, and keep what they think is of interest. By collecting information and perspectives from many sources, they provide their readers with what's been called "a meta-view of current events" (O'Brien, 2005, p. 3). Essentially, they create their own newscasts, or news roundups out of the news available on the web. (Again, there seems to be an irony here; bloggers end up imitating that which they often criticize.)

Original Journalism?

The news roundup blogs are the most common news-oriented blogs. Some bloggers, however, *are*, in part, propelled by a desire to act as journalists and produce original reporting (Taylor, 2006a). However, there has been debate over whether most actually do actual "reporting". Many believe blogs are not contributing anything unique to the field of journalism simply because they rely on the reportage done by the mainstream media. Linking to news stories produced by professional journalists and adding your own commentary is not the same as being a reporter (Blood, 2003).

A study of political bloggers during the 2004 American Presidential election found that instead of acting as journalists who go out and report on events first hand, most blogs focused on "mediated reporting". In other words "[t]hey performed surveillance and correlation primarily upon stories and information published by various

news outlets, blogs, businesses and other sources” (Scott, 2004, p. 50). They were more like media pundits than journalists.

In the United States, most bloggers do not consider what they do to be journalism (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). They are bloggers – and a blogger is an entity all its own. How they define what a blogger is however, depends on who they are: most publish their own opinions, others openly acknowledge they publish rumour and others publish what they call research. Rebecca Blood, a blogger (www.rebeccablood.net) and the author of the influential how-to book, *The Weblog Handbook* (2002), also evokes the image of the watercooler when she sums up what she is doing:

I’m not practicing journalism when I link to a news article reported by someone else and state what I think – I’ve been doing something similar around the water cooler for years. I’m engaged in research, not journalism, when I search the Web for supplementary information in order to make a point. Reporters might do identical research while writing, but research alone does not qualify as journalism...Credible journalists make a point of speaking directly to witnesses and experts, an activity so rare among bloggers as to be, for all practical purposes, non-existent. (p. 3)

Regardless of how bloggers see themselves, many people do consider them to be journalists of a sort, or at least credible sources of information. A study of blogging credibility found that people who use blogs consider them “a new and better form of journalism than the mainstream media, one that is opinionated, analytical, independent and personal” (Johnson & Kay, 2004, p. 633-634). Some bloggers have even been capturing enough daily readers to rival many media outlets, becoming a valued resource

to media consumers and journalists themselves. Singer (2006), describes it like this:

“[S]ome of the “A-list” bloggers have become a key resource for both citizens and journalists seeking cues about what matters in the world” (p. 4).

Credibility: Gatekeepers, Anonymity and Ethics

The question of whether bloggers should be considered credible sources of information isn't one that is easily answered. Some argue that the mainstream media is not necessarily credible, and that bloggers may help remedy this. Federman believes that more voices participating in the news process will mean a more complete account of the news. Although it may be impossible to ever produce a true account of any event or process, he argues that more voices mean a more accurate picture will emerge.

The blogosphere – that is, the collection of people who participate in writing and reading blogs – enables many more conversations, examinations and connections of tidbits of information than are available through the traditional mass media. This not only enhances credibility, but puts many more eyes and ears on the job of ferreting out what may be the truth. (Federman, 2006)

The idea of many voices working together to uncover some sort of truth runs the risk of sounding potentially naive. After all, why should one trust the opinion of a blogger over the words of a journalist? One argument often put forward in response to this is you're more likely to get an honest opinion from a blogger than from a journalist because bloggers don't have to answer to as many gatekeepers as professional journalists. They have fewer constraints than journalists because they don't *have* to make their stories

fit a certain time limit or space limit. (Although short posts seem to be an unwritten rule for blogging success.) They are not encumbered by ratings and don't have the same sort of pressure to attract huge audiences. Most don't have to worry about attracting advertising dollars, like private media does. As such, bloggers are freer than professional journalists to write what they want, how they want. They can get away with writing in a provocative manner – one that wouldn't be acceptable for journalists working under the auspices of an established news organization. They are free to show their bias, unlike most conventional journalists who still strive to uphold the ideal of objectivity, or at least endeavour to consult a wide range of sources (Lampa, 2004; Singer, 2006). As Jane Kirtley, a professor of media ethics and law at the University of Minnesota puts it: “Blogs are not intended to be objective. They are supposed to be opinionated, snarky and in your face – and that's not the way the mainstream media usually goes about reporting” (Hull, 2006/2007, p. 2).

But while a dearth of gatekeepers could be seen as liberating, it could also be seen as leading to a lack of accountability; a blogger only has herself to answer to, whereas the journalist is at risk of losing her job if she reports inaccuracies or engages in libel or slander. While there are some cases of bloggers being sued, or threatened with litigation, there is no immediate threat of being fired. However, while there may be few *official* gatekeepers in the blogosphere, bloggers are still, in a way, constantly in front of a jury of their peers. If someone writes something that another blogger considers out of line that blogger can start spreading her critique through the blogosphere. But it must be said that this sort of scrutiny doesn't hold the same weight as the scrutiny of an employer might hold, or a set of professional standards or code of ethics. Even if other bloggers disagree

with the stance a blogger takes, it is difficult, if not impossible, to force the blogger to stop publishing, short of taking legal action. It is possible, however, as more blogs become commercial entities that they will be beholden to their advertisers, compelled to write in a certain fashion in order to retain their advertisers or attract new advertising dollars.

There are other issues of credibility that can arise out of blogging. Perhaps most prominently, blogs can be written using pseudonyms, which means untruths can be spread under the veil of anonymity. Even if a blogger does use her real name she doesn't have to divulge any other identifying information about herself, information that would lead to personal accountability (Wolcott, 2004). It is also a medium that is not regulated by official codes of conduct or professional standards. As Singer (2006) writes:

“Bloggers’ ethics are almost wholly personal. They can choose to commit to the creation of a vehicle that engages in the collective pursuit of truth. Or, they can publish whatever outrageous nonsense strikes their fancy” (p. 16). As the blogosphere expands blog readers who are interested in exactly where their information is coming from and from who it's coming from have to become discernable readers. How much do they really know about the person who is writing the blog? What sort of trust can they put in this person? Should the information they're receiving be considered credible or is it just rumour?

At Harvard University's January 2005 conference on blogging and credibility, David Sifry, the founder of *Technorati*, raised this question: can a blogger be credible if he or she remains anonymous? The answer in the discussion that followed seemed to rest on whether a blogger would be in danger if they were to reveal who they were. The case of the Iraqi blogger, who blogged under the pseudonym Salam Pax, was used as an

example where anonymity and credibility could exist side by side. However, the consensus was generally that the more a blogger discloses about who they are, the position they are taking and why they're taking this stance, the more credible they are (MacKinnon, 2005). Of course, this still begs the question – can an online audience trust the information a blogger has disclosed? The onus remains on the reader to corroborate a blogger's identity with other sources.

Some believe that disclosure is not enough and that bloggers are undermining their credibility by publishing rumour and not taking the idea of accuracy seriously enough (Regan, 2003). J.D. Lasica, a blogger (www.jdlasica.com), co-founder of OurMedia.org, a site for grassroots media, and a past senior editor of *Online Journalism Review*, thinks bloggers could stand to learn a thing or two from journalists. They would “do well to study the ethics rules and conflict of interest policies of news organizations that have formulated a set of guidelines derived from decades of trial and error” (Lasica, 2003a, p. 73). Blood (2002) believes that bloggers shouldn't be held to the same standards of fairness and accuracy as journalists. She thinks it's unrealistic to expect these standards from people who may not necessarily have the time or resources to devote to this sort of endeavor, but she does advocate for transparency and ethical blogging. By this she means that bloggers should try to publish only what they believe to be true, link to other sources when possible, correct mistakes when they're discovered and be upfront about any conflict of interest. David Weinberger is a blogger (<http://www.hyperorg.com/blogger/>) with an eclectic list of accomplishments. He holds a PhD in philosophy, was the Senior Internet Advisor on Howard Dean's presidential campaign and is one of the authors of the best-selling books on Internet marketing, *The*

Cluetrain Manifesto (1999).⁸ He is currently a Fellow at Harvard's Berkman Centre for Internet and Society. He also attended Harvard's 2005 conference on blogging and credibility. During one of the sessions, he said that blogging is different from journalism precisely because it doesn't adhere to the same standards of journalistic rigour. He admitted that he publishes rumour, but said he always tells people when he's posting something that is just a rumour, and he sees nothing wrong with this. He believes that what he's doing is akin to having a conversation around a water cooler. He's not trying to be a journalist. However, Ethan Zuckerman, a blogger (www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog) who's also associated with the Berkman Centre at Harvard Law School, responded to Weinberg's comments by noting that Weinberg's blog has been linked over 2,000 times from 1,500 sources and with this linking comes responsibility. His water cooler doesn't attract a few colleagues looking for a few moments reprieve before getting back to their desks – it's a gathering place for thousands.

You have an extremely effective water cooler and it's a water cooler with permanence as well. So these are two things that water coolers don't normally have. One is that you've got an audience far larger than the four or five people who listen to me over the water cooler and anything you say around the water cooler shows up as part of the permanent record and it's indexed. And in some cases, because of how effective a water cooler speaker you are, it is indexed more prominently than by what journalists say. So I guess I just want to challenge this

⁸ This book is now available for free on the Internet. <http://www.cluetrain.com/book/index.html>

notion that just because we haven't found ourselves as journalists on the continuum, that somehow there isn't an enormous amount of power to what's going on here and with that power is certain amount of responsibility.

(MacKinnon, 2005)

There have been some attempts in the blogosphere to develop a code of ethics, but there isn't anything that has been universally accepted. For example, the year after the Harvard conference, Weinberger developed something he calls "Fact-Based Ethics for Bloggers", which advocates correcting errors when you find them, providing information about who you are and being "transparent about relationships that may influence you, perhaps by providing a persistent link to a disclosure statement of some sort" (Weinberger, 2006). As mentioned, Blood (2002) also has developed a blogging code that she tries to follow. But although these bloggers may try to adhere to these sorts of rules, they are by no means the standard.

Symbiotic Relationship

No matter where one stands on the issue of how bloggers should or shouldn't imitate the standards of professional journalists, it is clear that blogging and journalism are connected in many ways. Yet the question remains, what exactly is their relationship? Even though some may consider bloggers and journalists to be "occupational rivals" (Schudson & Doukoupil, 2007, p. 2). I believe their relationship is best described as symbiotic. As Thomas Kunkel (2006/2007), the editor of *American Journalism Review* and Dean of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, puts it:

Without the reporting of mainstream journalists, what would bloggers blog about? After all, most of what we know about the public sphere is still unearthed by journalists. Then again, an emerging nation of citizen journalists is covering ignored communities, reimagining what news is, keeping a skeptical eye on the accuracy and judgment of the pros. Think not? Ask Dan Rather. (p. 2)

Although the debate as to how journalism and blogging intersect has been polarized, and in some ways is still evolving, there is some consensus that they are distinct practices that are nonetheless inexorably connected (Lampa, 2004; Lasica, 2003a; Rosen, 2005; Singer, 2006). Singer (2006) describes their relationship, in a manner that I agree with, by evoking the idea of symbiosis:

[T]heir relationship is inherently symbiotic. Interconnected blogs and their readers – including journalists – form a community that discusses, dissects and extends the stories created by mainstream media, as well as producing their own commentary, fact-checking and grassroots reports. Professional journalists in turn feed upon this material, developing it as a pool of tips, sources, and story ideas – not to mention bringing blogs and the issues raised by bloggers to the public’s attention by covering them as newsworthy. (p. 26)

In this context, bloggers play a role in what Lasica (2003a) calls the “media ecosystem”. “Call it participatory journalism, or journalism from the edges. Simply put, it refers to individuals playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, sorting,

analyzing and disseminating news and information – a task once reserved almost exclusively to the news media” (p. 71).

In this thesis, I will look at this media ecosystem and examine how bloggers are attempting to be citizen journalists as well as how community is being formed and expressed through blogs. My aim is to add to the literature written on this subject. Although there is research about blogging and community, I hope by examining more closely what *sorts* of relationships are built to add something new to existing research. In particular, I hope to articulate the nature of these relationships and define their relevance to the blogger and her readers. I also hope to add a new layer to the academic research that is being built in the field of citizen journalism, a field that is still fairly new. While there has been some literature that deals with how bloggers are acting as citizen journalists, it is my aim to examine in particular how Canadian political bloggers are acting as citizen journalists and how this relates to why they are blogging, a field that has yet to be thoroughly researched. As mentioned, my goal is to offer possible reasons as to why some bloggers engage in the practice, which again, is a field of research that has just begun to be mined. This thesis will focus on two different types of blogs: personal blogs and political blogs. But before I begin this analysis, the next chapter will delineate the methodology used in this study as well as the sociological theory on which the analysis of community building will rest.

Chapter Two: Methodology and Theory

The blogosphere is huge, ever growing and as a result, ever changing. I will be looking at a small part of it. Even if the Internet does overcome obstacles of time and space, I am limited by both. Since I will be looking at a relatively small sample of blogs I like to think of this study as a snapshot of what I've observed during a limited period of time, in one particular area of the blogosphere. I've chosen the snapshot as a metaphor because the Internet is a very busy, noisy place; information is constantly being added and changed. It is difficult to get a clear picture of who is blogging and what they are blogging about (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). By freezing time for a moment, one is able to gain insight that may otherwise be obscured underneath the constant buzz of change. In this way the snapshot provides a powerful way to stop and look closely at a particular moment in time.⁹

I don't believe that people who blog immerse themselves completely in their online blogging lives. But while I recognize that bloggers and their visitors all have unique offline lives that they bring to their online life and acknowledge that this is a reason some believe online communities shouldn't be looked at in isolation (Wellman & Gulia, 1999), I still believe that much can be gained by observing what is happening on

⁹ At the same time that I use this metaphor, I am aware of the following critique of the photograph: by stopping time, one is robbed of a past and a future and any analysis stemming from photographs lacks this context and can therefore be misleading (Sontag, 2001). I would like to make it clear I am not denying bloggers have lives outside of their blogs that affect what they produce, and these lives are steeped in a past and look toward the future. However, I believe there is much to be gained by looking at what they are doing on their blogs at one particular moment and how they are using the blog to mold a picture of themselves. As well, in this analysis, I am not completely discounting the context in which they produce the blog and how their past experiences may have led them to blogging. I am also taking into consideration their outside lives by asking questions about what they decide to portray in their blogs and what they keep out.

blogs and looking at how people are negotiating relationships in this environment. Because many bloggers discuss openly how they negotiate boundaries between their online life and offline life and how the two overlap, the blog is not an entity that is entirely divorced from so-called real life.

My research is limited to English-language blogs originating in Canada and the United States. The personal blogs I am examining come from both these countries, while the political blogs originate in Canada only. First of all, I have chosen to look at personal bloggers from both countries because of certain commonalities. Personal bloggers in Canada and the United States share, to a certain degree, a common media background. While Americans may not be familiar with Canadian media organizations, Canadians are certainly well versed (and immersed) in American media. Because of this, it could be argued that the two countries share, to a certain degree, common cultural references. I could have chosen to focus on one country or the other, but as I began reading these personal blogs, first out of my own interest and later more closely in the interest of academic research, I noticed that bloggers in these two countries overlap in a way that would make sense to look at them in conjunction. They read each other's blogs and attend the same conferences, forming friendships that cross borders. As well, since the blogosphere theoretically is a borderless place, it is my intention to emphasize this fluidity by choosing personal blogs that originate from within different geographical and national physical boundaries.

The political blogs however, are a different story. Canadian political blogs focus, for the most part, on Canadian politics and news media in particular. American political blogs focus on American politics and the American news media. Although there is some

cross-border connections that are formed (some of the bloggers do read each other) for the most part national borders are much more distinctly drawn in these blogs. As an example, Canadian political bloggers form group affiliations with each other based on the Canadian political party they support and this is a strong part of their identity. They are very aware that they are living under a different political system than the Americans and it is this Canadian political system that they focus on (as well as the Canadian media that reports on this system).

I have chosen to focus on English language blogs because this is my first language and one in which I am well situated to understand the nuances.

As I mentioned earlier I will focus on two types of blogs that currently dominate the North American blogosphere – the diary-type blogs where people talk about their daily lives and political blogs (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). As I've also mentioned in the previous chapter, I haven't found any data or research that categorizes the types of blogs in the Canadian blogosphere. What research exists that tries to quantify and categorize the Canadian blogosphere only details how many people read blogs and that most blog activity is conducted by young people (Environics, 2006). But, by analyzing blog awards over the last three years (both Canadian blog awards and the Canadian section of international awards) it appears that these types of blogs are two of the most widely recognized in the Canadian blogosphere.

All the blogs I am looking at are written by individuals. The diary-type blogs fall under the category that Hartelius (2005) would categorize as individual personalized blogs – these are bloggers who write about their day-to-day lives. They are not professional journalists.

I will only be looking at blogs written by adults (18 and older).¹⁰ I've chosen to focus on adults because I am interested in how adults in particular are taking on the blog as a means of expression. Although how young people use the Internet is an interesting and increasingly significant phenomenon, the study of blogs written by young people is beyond the scope of this study for a couple of reasons. First of all, part of this thesis will be looking at blogs in relation to mainstream media, a field that is, for the most part, dominated by adults. As such, I want to compare the journalism created by adults with blogs created by adults. (Although studying blogs created by young people and comparing them to journalism might be interesting research for another study.) As well, in terms of questions about what sort of communities are formed through blogs, adults may be technically freer to choose their communities than youth who are, for the most part, under the guidance of their parents. Again, for this reason I want to compare the types of relationships formed by autonomous adults, both online and offline.

The MySpace and Facebook Factor

Of course, blogs aren't the only way people are communicating and forming online communities. MySpace and Facebook are two examples of online interfacing that have taken off in the last couple years. However, I believe that the blog, in its pure form, is more akin to journalism, than either of these two interfacing forums. On a blog, the

¹⁰ I have taken reasonable steps to ensure the blogs I have looked in this study are written by adults. Some of the bloggers have been featured in other media, and clearly identified as adults. For those who haven't, I've taken pains to read their blogs in detail and over time, to ensure that the content is in all likelihood written and created by adults. (For instance, most of the personal-type blogs analyzed are written by parents who blog about their children. It is obvious through photographs and what they write about that these are older parents, not teen parents.)

blogger initiates the conversation by posting her thoughts or opinions, much like a journalist will write a story or column and then wait for feedback. On MySpace or Facebook the owner of the page posts some biographical information, lists her likes and dislikes, and after that any of her invited friends can start a conversation. It isn't based around a particular topic or subject chosen by the page's owner. Further to this, a blog's main purpose is not necessarily to meet friends, whereas MySpace and Facebook are all about friends – chatting with friends, making new friends and reconnecting with old friends. Blogs are places where a person writes their thoughts and opinions, something they've been reflecting on, and waits for feedback. Through this feedback, friendships and relationships are formed. MySpace and Facebook don't focus as much on this type of reflection, be it about current events or one's day-to-day world, in the same way that blogs do.

Facebook is a social networking forum where people can write messages to each other, write on each other's "walls", show their photographs and post personal profiles. MySpace, although the page design is different, is essentially set up the same way. In *The New York Times*, MySpace pages were compared to the equivalent of a teenager's bedroom. They are "a place where the walls are papered with posters and photographs, the music is loud, and grownups are an alien species" (Williams, 2005). Of course, they're not completely alien. Many adults are on MySpace, but to a great degree it is seen as a young person's forum, as is Facebook. When adults are using MySpace it's often to promote their new book or their new music. It could even be argued that music is what really defines MySpace. From the beginning it's been a place for independent or unsigned bands to promote their music and it has evolved to become a place where bigger

acts, like Weezer or Nine Inch Nails, have started introducing their new albums. But even for the non-musicians, it's evident from visiting MySpace that it is a place for users to self-identify with a certain artist or style of music (Williams, 2005). However, at its core MySpace is primarily a place geared toward talking to people, meeting people and making friends. There is a section for a blog in the MySpace page, but the main feature of MySpace is chatting with friends, just as the main feature of Facebook, and its predecessor Friendster, is chatting with friends.

In essence, the difference between the blog, in its pure form, and something like MySpace or Facebook is that on a blog a person writes something they have reflected on *and then* people respond to her post and conversation ensues. Many bloggers write their posts offline, and carefully choose what they will or will not say. MySpace or Facebook, for the most part, are places for instantaneous back-and-forth that's more akin to a group telephone conversation or a chat room than a blog. In fact, some young people are questioning whether they need a telephone anymore, now that they have MySpace. Instead of calling each other up after school, they can talk back and forth through their MySpace pages (Williams, 2005). For the purpose of this study I'm interested in looking at the people who put something they're thinking "out there" first, something they've reflected on, and then invite comment. In this way bloggers have more in common with other media, than with MySpace or Facebook users.

Sources

This study will combine primary and secondary resources. The primary research consists of the analysis of the blogs themselves, supplemented with interviews with

bloggers. For the analysis I have looked at ten blogs – five personal blogs and five political blogs – from November 2005 to March 2007. I have also looked at twenty additional blogs, ten personal and ten political, over a shorter time period, from January to March, 2006. While it is difficult to measure the influence of blogs without having access to their individual site meters, those that were chosen are linked to at least 50 other blogs. This has been measured using the website *Technorati* (technorati.com), a website that tracks the growth of the blogosphere and the popularity of blogs by counting how often they are linked to other sites. Many have also achieved some measure of fame in the blogosphere: they've been nominated or placed in various blog award competitions and many have been recognized in the mainstream media as bloggers of note. As part of my online data I have also used interviews on Leah Peterson's website, a website dedicated, among other things, to profiling bloggers (<http://leahpeah.com>).

I have also conducted my own interviews with four select bloggers in the interest of expanding on what they have written in their blogs. These were a series of semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were aware of the aim of the interview; that I was talking to them in order to better understand why they blog and how ideas such as community, journalism, fame and commercialism factor into their practice. (These questions will be detailed in the next section.) Yet, I was not glued to asking questions in a certain order. I attempted to be an active listener, and pick up on themes the interviewees brought up. (However, the ethics process restricted me to some degree. The questions I was asking had been cleared by Carleton University's ethics committee and as such I couldn't veer very far from these themes.) During the course of the interviews I aimed to ask open-ended questions. At the CBC I was trained in the John Sawatsky

method of interviewing. This method espouses active listening and asking questions that begin with “what”, “how” and “why”, that allow the interviewee to expand on an issue, rather than questions that usually elicit yes and no answers, such as questions that begin with “do”. (As an example: the question “do you like blogs?” might elicit a yes or no answer, unlike the question “what do you think about blogs?”) As well, every attempt was made not to ask leading questions: questions that might make the interviewer think I was looking for a particular answer (Paterno, 2000; Scanlan, 2001).

My goal was to elucidate possible reasons *why* bloggers feel the impetus to self-publish in the first place and what keeps them going. The following subjects were all areas that I had identified after preliminary research as possibly being of interest. The main focus was on how community building and citizen journalism may factor into why they take up the practice. But, in order to answer these questions, a series of subsidiary questions were asked that address notions about the difference between their online and offline lives, fame and commercialism. The questions for the interviews were grouped in the following way: (You’ll note that I have added information about each of the categories to further explain their relevance.)

Question Set 1: Why Blog?

I decided to ask this general question first in the interviews in order to hear from the interviewee what she thought she was doing. In terms of the analysis of the content of the blogs, I started with this general question in mind to see what sort of themes would emerge.

1. What made them want to start blogging?

- a) What keeps them going?

Question Set 2: Journalism

One theme that did emerge after preliminary analysis was that some bloggers were tracking the work of professional journalists, or attempting to be journalists themselves. In particular, I had observed this to be true of the political bloggers. Since the idea for this thesis began in my days as a journalist, I wanted to address how bloggers saw themselves in relation to this profession. Were they trying to be journalists? Or part of the media landscape?

2. How do they see themselves in relationship to other media?

- a) What do they define as media?
- b) How do they see themselves compared to journalists?
- c) What sort of interest do they have in being journalists?
- d) What other kinds of media do they consume?

Question Set 3: Community

Many bloggers, in particular the personal bloggers, appeared to express a desire to reach out and find a community, or at least like-minded people they could relate to. It also appeared that their readers, through the comments section, were forming a connection with bloggers, either by simply showing up every day to comment, or outright expressing their attachment to the blog and the blogger. However, there are many questions, as evidenced through the literature review in the preceding chapter, about how

strong online relationships are. Are they even relationships in the first place, or something else that's unique to the online world?

3. What sort of community have they found through blogging, if any?

a) How would they characterize their online relationships?

b) How do they see their online relationships versus their offline relationships?

Question Set 4: Online/Offline Divide

Questions about what bloggers will or won't talk about online speak to a couple issues. It sets parameters around what sorts of relationships they are trying to forge online (if any at all). The main critique of online relationships is that they aren't true relationships, or strong relationships, because people can hide who they really are or at least conceal part of who they are. By asking what are they hiding and what they feel comfortable revealing, I am able to come to some conclusions about the depth of the relationships they are forming through blogs. What they hide or do not hide also defines what sort of blog they are trying to produce. For example, are they trying to be an aloof objective, political observer, or are they revealing a lot about their personal life and biases?

4. How much of themselves do they reveal online?

a) What do they keep hidden? Why?

b) Is it important to keep their online/offline lives separate? Why?

c) How do they keep their online and offline life separate?

- d) If they keep things secret online, do they think their online relationships are as 'real' as their offline ones?
- e) What sort of things will they not talk write about online?
- f) What sort of things will they talk about online?

Question Set 5: Fame and Notoriety

Over the past few years some bloggers are becoming very well known. They are sometimes described as "A-listers". I am interested in how bloggers talk about the idea of fame and negotiate the fame or notoriety they've found.

- 5. How do they deal with fame or notoriety?
 - a) How important is it to be well known?
 - b) As they become well known, how does this change their blogging?

Question Set 6: Commercialism

The more famous a blogger is, the more money she is capable of making. By asking questions about advertising I hope to discover whether blogging has become a career goal for some people, or whether it's simply a matter of bringing in some income. As well, as bloggers started hosting ads, I've noticed that some have expressed concern that people will think they are selling out. I've wondered how much of an issue this is for bloggers, or if it is the natural progression of their growing popularity.

- 6. What sort of decisions have they made about running advertisements?
 - a) If they chose to run ads, why did they make this decision?

- b) What sort of reaction have they had to running ads?
- c) How do they make a living?

Question Set 7: The Future

By asking about the future of their blog, I will be trying to gauge how they think their blog is going to evolve and how dedicated they are to continuing it.

7. Where do they see their blogging going?

Although these are the questions addressed through interviews, they are also the questions used for the hermeneutic analysis of the content of the blogs. This sort of qualitative analysis is well suited to blogs, since bloggers often discuss what they do and *why* they do it on their blogs. Even when bloggers aren't explicit about their reasons on their blogs, because the blog is a text-heavy medium I was able to look for themes that addressed these questions. In particular I looked for the following key words dealing with the following subjects:

1. Why Blog: I often went to the first post bloggers put up, or in some cases they had specific sections where they wrote "about this blog". I was looking for any posts dealing with "beginning", "reasons", "purpose", "goals", "objectives" or simply "reasons why".
2. Journalism: I was looking for any posts that had anything to do with "citizen journalism", "media", "politics" or "current events".
3. Community: I searched for posts that dealt with "friends", "friendship", "community", "advice" or "relationships". However, even if bloggers didn't specifically use words like

“advice”, I looked for posts where they were obviously seeking the counsel of their readers.

4. Online/Offline Divide: I was looking for any posts where the blogger wrote about decisions *not* to write about something online. As such, I was looking for posts that dealt with the following: “privacy”, “off limits” or “self censorship”.

5. Fame: I looked for any posts dealing with “publicity”, “fans” or “celebrity”. I also looked for posts that may have dealt with these themes, but not used these words explicitly, such as bloggers who wrote about going to a public venue to meet their readers or who wrote about the amount of readers they had.

6. Commercialism: I searched for posts that dealt with “advertising”, “money” or “careers”.

7. Future: I searched for posts that dealt with ideas about the “future” or “future plans”. If they didn’t use those exact words exactly, I also looked for posts that dealt with whether they said they were continuing to enjoy blogging or whether they were thinking about stopping.

Theoretical Framework: Community, Association and Networked Individualism

Since community is a subject that will be dealt with at some length in this thesis I would like to expand on what exactly I mean when I use the word. When trying to pin down a definition of community it becomes clear very quickly that it is a word that can mean different things to different people (Cohen, 1985; Wilbur, 1997). Are you part of a community because you live near someone? What about if you share similar interests with someone? What if you share similar physical characteristics? As Robert Bellah

(1985) and his colleagues observe in their book *Habits of the Heart*, a study of community and individuality in America, “the term ‘community’ is widely and loosely used” (p. 72). If we think for instance about neighbourhood communities versus business communities versus the gay community it becomes obvious that it’s a term that’s used in a common-sense way to denote the inclusion or exclusion of people based on things they have in common such as values, a way of life, certain traits...etc... (Barney, 2004a; Bell, 2001; Fernback, 1999).

Even though the word is used with a great degree of flexibility, many of our popular conceptualizations can be traced back to early sociologists, such as Ferdinand Tonnies. In the discussion about online community I will draw on several theorists from the field of sociology who have thought and written about community, but in particular I will be using Tonnies’ (1887/1957) dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft* (Community) and *Gesellschaft* (Association) as a framework to develop a deeper understanding of what sort of relationships seem to be forming in blogs. I have chosen Tonnies’ theories as a base because the way he speaks about community still resonates today (Bell, 2001; Fernback, 1999) and is particularly useful to describe how people speak about community on blogs.¹¹

¹¹ Tonnies was not the only sociologist at the time to conceive a similar social dichotomy. Emile Durkheim also envisioned society as operating in two forms (mechanical and organic) that in many ways seem similar to Tonnies’ dichotomy. I have chosen to focus on Tonnies’ theory in part because Durkheim was influenced by Tonnies. (For more on this see Aldous, Durkheim, & Tonnies, 1972). However I think it would be interesting to look at blogs within Durkheim’s framework. (Some work in this area has already been done that looks at electronic gatherings from a Durkheimian perspective. For more see Hornsby, 2001).

I have decided to couple Tonnies' theories with Barry Wellman's (2006) more recent theory of networked individualism that deals with how relationships are formed between people who don't necessarily live in the same geographical location. When Tonnies was developing his theories, communities were based in a particular physical environment. Since online communities are, in a sense, placeless, they need to be thought of in terms of theory that encompasses this important attribute. As well, I believe Wellman's networked individuals mesh well with Tonnies' dichotomy of community and association.

When Tonnies was developing his theories in the late 19th century, he was noticing how people's relationships changed as they moved from a rural environment to a more urban environment – a shift that was happening with more and more frequency during his lifetime. He was worried about these changes. He believed what he was seeing was the demise of the close, stable relationships that people formed in the country and in small villages. These relationships have been described as “stable and long-lasting” (Bell, 2001, p. 94). The roots of this sort of community were strong familial ties, or close relationships such as those found in small towns. Cyberspace theorist David Bell (2001) interprets *Gemeinschaft* as “the ‘traditional’ community, where everyone knows everyone, everyone helps everyone, and the bonds between people are tight and multiple” (p. 94). As people moved to cities they formed more casual, distant relationships with the people around them. Tonnies described this sort of social bonding using the word *Gesellschaft* (association). These relationships were more “shallow and instrumental” (Bell, 2001, p. 94). Tonnies saw the two types of societies as opposites (Tonnies, 1887).

I think his concern, that society was morphing into an entity that is linked by more distant relationships rather than close relationships, is still felt today. The effects of urbanization and suburban developments are still thought to be alienating people. Some architects, sociologists and philosophers are concerned with designing cities that foster close relationships rather than distant relationships (Jacobs, 1961; Putnam, 2000).

I have questioned whether some people are turning to online communication because it's giving them another chance to connect with like-minded people and develop close-knit relationships, connections they feel they don't have in their offline lives. I have also wondered if at the turn of this century we are seeing a change that mirrors in some way the changes Tonnies saw at the turn of his century. Instead of moving from the country to the city, we are moving some aspects of our lives from the offline world to the online world. I'm interested in how his theories hold up in the 21st century as this shift takes place. Are we still expressing a desire for community in the way that Tonnies described? Perhaps in some ways we are and his definitions of community and association are still as relevant today as they were over a hundred years ago.

I have also found that some bloggers and their readers speak of the community they've found through blogs in a way that resonates with Tonnies' description of Gemeinschaft-like communities. However, even if they talk this way, closer inspection shows that there are actually a variety of relationships fostered on blogs; these relationships range from close, strong ties, to more casual acquaintances. Most of the relationships on blogs occupy a space somewhere on a continuum between Tonnies' description of Gemeinschaft's familial bonds, and Gesellschaft's more informal ties, rather than one of the two extremes.

Of course, as I've mentioned, when Tonnies was developing his ideas about community, community meant being in some physical place (Fernback, 1999). Virtual communities are in a sense, placeless and for this reason when thinking about virtual communities they need to be put in context with more contemporary thinking about the ecology of communities that are not necessarily place based. I will look at how virtual communities are "communities of meaning" (Fernback, 1999, p. 210) rather than communities defined by geography. Building on Anthony Cohen (1985) who looks at how community is structured symbolically, Fernback (1999) contends that "[t]his avenue of inquiry allows us to conceive of community as existing in cyberspace, beyond the limits of physical locale" (p. 210). In other words, the community on blogs is a community, because the people involved *believe* and *imagine* that they are, to varying degrees, part of one. They are communities of meaning and, to that end, bloggers and their visitors develop protocol and ritual that governs how these communities operate. Looking at community online in this fashion does not mean having to part ways with Tonnies. I believe Tonnies' ideas can be incorporated into examinations of placeless communities. Fernback (1999) notes: "participants in virtual communities may derive a range of experiences and meanings from the same cybercommunities, from a romanticized *Gemeinschaft* to a destructive *Gesellschaft*" (p. 210-211).

However, I will go further with the idea of community without geography and look at relationships on blogs in terms of a more recent theory that Wellman (2006) has identified as "networked individualism" – a theory that I believe incorporates ideas of communities of meaning. As Wellman (2006) describes it, "[t]he Internet and other new communication technologies are facilitating a basic change in the nature of community

from physically fixed and bounded groups to social networks” (p. 6). In other words, thanks to the Internet and other communication technology like cell phones, people cultivate the relationships they need and create their own personal networks that have nothing to do with where they are physically situated. The result of all this is that any notion of belonging to a ready-made community begins to fade and communities morph into networks “of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity” (Wellman, 2001, p. 227). In describing modern relationships that exist within the framework of networked individualism Boase and Wellman (2006) talk about how people form “weak ties”. I will illustrate how the relationships formed on blogs fit this description and how these ties become valuable to them. The value placed on these relationships may explain in part why some people blog.

Using this theoretical foundation, in the chapters that follow I will look more closely at personal and political bloggers. As mentioned, the theme of community will be at the forefront, as well as ideas of citizen journalism. I will also be looking at how ideas such as fame and money affect the sorts of relationships that are forming and the type of citizen journalism that is attempted. The goal is to offer reasons why bloggers may be engaging in the practice. As more people turn to blogs as a means of expression and a source of information, I hope this research will offer some insight as to why blogging continues to flourish, as well as offer insight into what this phenomenon says about the wants and needs of a media audience and society more generally that is immersed in a culture of online communication.

Chapter Three: Personal Bloggers

I first heard about Heather Armstrong when I was flipping through the pages of *Redbook*, a magazine that can be found in the women's section of the magazine rack. Buried in the middle of the magazine was a picture of a woman standing in her driveway, in what looked like a suburban neighbourhood, clutching a computer, with her dog at her feet. She, according to the article, was the infamous Dooce. *Dooce* (www.dooce.com) is the name of the blog Armstrong started in 2001, in Los Angeles, where she had been working as a graphic designer. A year later she was fired from her job for writing about her boss and her workplace in an unflattering way on the blog. Now she was living in Utah, with her husband and her child, chronicling their lives. She had become so popular that millions of people were logging on each day to see what was up in the life of the Armstrongs. The article was short, light and breezy, without any thought as to why she and the blog were so popular.

I've found that much of the attention given to personal-type blogs in the mainstream media has been similar. In magazines aimed at women, or the features sections of newspapers, they're written about as interesting slices of life that don't need to be taken too seriously. While it's true that many of these blogs could be characterized as parochial naval gazing that could only be of interest to the person writing them and maybe a few close friends, some of these blogs, like *Dooce*, are capturing the imagination of many, many people. Some diary-type blogs garner thousands, if not millions of hits a day. They've become so popular that some bloggers are making a living off them. In the last few years advertisers have realized that these blogs are attracting audiences they want

to reach and many blogs now host advertisements for various products and services. In some cases the money that comes in is equivalent to a part-time job, but in the case of Armstrong, she's now supporting her family this way.

In this chapter I will examine the types of relationships formed on these blogs and how they are forming communities. I will also look at how these bloggers are interacting with other media and whether they consider themselves citizen journalists. However, the focus of this chapter will be, in large part, about the idea of community, since this idea appears to feature most prominently in most personal blogs. Some personal bloggers say they began because they were looking for community, a community they couldn't find in their offline lives. They began their search because they didn't feel solidarity with the community that surrounds them physically. While some say they didn't start for this particular reason, it's the reason they keep going. For instance, Armstrong says blogging is a way for her to feel more connected to the world outside her house. "I derive immense pleasure from designing it, writing it, and reading the feedback. As a stay-at-home mom I also feel more connected to the world through it – as this (motherhood) can be a very lonely and isolating job" (Blood, 2005). I will also look at how factors such as money and fame appear to be affecting the sorts of relationships that are formed. Money and fame are two ideas that are connected – as a blogger becomes more famous she can attract more advertisers. But, as some bloggers become more well known they also start to censor the content of their blogs, leaving out personal details of their lives that they decide need to be private now that they're reaching a wider audience that they'd first anticipated. Hiding parts of who you are could be seen as being counter-productive to building relationships. There is also the question of how advertising will affect the

content of blogs and whether or not bloggers will censor content that might be deemed offensive to advertisers.

Before I continue with the idea of community I want to address something that is often mentioned when talking about diary-type bloggers. That is the notion these blogs are *just diaries*. I'm guilty of making the diary-association myself, having used the words diary-type to help distinguish these bloggers from other bloggers, but I have also identified them as personal bloggers, and perhaps this is a better way to describe who they are and what they do. A blog is very different from a diary because it is written expressly as a public document. Bloggers "write with an awareness of and a desire for a reading public" (McNeil, 2003, p. 44). It's not something they've written for their own private reflection that they'll lock up or hide under the bed so no one sees it. They want someone to read what they have to say. Further to this, a blog is an *interactive* public document through which readers are encouraged to enter into a dialogue with the author. This changes, to a certain extent, the blogger's focus; she isn't concerned so much with personal, private reflection, but with communication and creating community (McNeil, 2003; Sorapure, 2003). It's true that in some ways these personal blogs do resemble diaries: entries are dated, there's a concern with the day-to-day and they are written in a personal, almost confiding tone (McNeil, 2003). But the computer and the Internet change certain features of the traditional diary and morph it into something else. The computer offers a more fragile sense of permanence, for one thing. It's very easy to press delete and remove an entry forever. The computer also offers more choices of presentation (graphics, images, layout) and the text can be interpreted differently depending on which links a reader chooses as she navigates through (Sorapure, 2003).

However, the biggest difference is that bloggers are creating an interactive, public document. I'll now turn my attention to what *sort* of community is being built through blogs, and later, how fame and money affect these relationships.

In the Beginning: Search for Community

“Morphing Into Momma” (<http://morphingintomama.typepad.com>) started her blog after her son was born. She couldn't find other new mothers she could relate to. Everyone she met seemed happy and content with their new babies and their new lives. But she wasn't.

I thought there was something wrong with me. I felt horrible. Even as Tod-lar [her son] got older, I'd still meet women who were completely sleep deprived and yet claimed to be completely happy and content. I knew I couldn't be the only woman in the entire...world who had difficulty transitioning into motherhood. So when a friend of mine told me about blogs, I decided to start one to see if there were other women out there who had experiences similar to mine. Turns out there are. (Peterson, 2006c)

Morphing into Mamma isn't alone in her reasons for starting her blog. Her reasons are echoed in various fashions by many bloggers; they found themselves in a new stage in their lives, such as motherhood, and needed to find other people they could connect with, or reach out and talk to about their experiences. But even if bloggers didn't set out to expressly find community, the people they've met online have become important to them. Community is something they found along the way. For instance,

Rebecca Bollwitt says she started her blog (<http://www.miss604.com/>) about life in Vancouver because she wanted to express her point of view publicly, not because she was looking for friends. When we sat down for an interview in her home town, she told me she'd noticed that a lot of the blogs about life in Vancouver were written by people who had just moved there and she felt her story wasn't being told. "Being a born and raised Vancouver girl, I thought, my perspective isn't really out there." But even though finding friends wasn't the reason she began, she has formed friendships through blogging.

For some bloggers, the dependence on their online community happens incrementally; they start first by enjoying the relationships they build with their visitors, but then end up relying on the feedback they get from their Internet friends. Pierre Kim writes the blog *Metro Dad* (<http://metrodad.typepad.com>) from New York City. He says he started because he was looking for a creative outlet, a place where he could practice his writing. However, he says he found that the best experience has actually been "making personal connections with people with whom I never would have met if not for the blog. It's been incredibly gratifying to find people who share your sense of humor, your values and a similar perspective on life" (Peterson, 2006d). Jen B, in Edmonton, Alberta, who writes the blog *Jen and Tonic* (<http://www.jenandtonic.ca>), started because she says she felt invisible in her offline life. What she found was a "fabulous community of people who also blog" and that community has become her inspiration to keep going. (Mommybloggers, 2006).

In many ways, the type of community that bloggers describe searching for and finding resonates with a *Gemeinschaft*-like tone. They are looking for close ties with

people and they are looking for validation. But even if this is what they are looking for, most relationships on blogs can be described as “weak ties” (Boase & Wellman 2006) that exist somewhere on a continuum between the Gemeinschaft-ideal and its more impersonal opposite, Gesellschaft. I must stress that a weak tie does not mean an insignificant tie (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Mark Granovetter (1973) describes weak ties as being very valuable, sometimes more valuable than strong ties. Strong ties are relationships with family and close friends and weak ties are more casual acquaintances. Casual acquaintances however may have access to information that a person’s own inner circle doesn’t. These acquaintances will also have their own unique network of friends, who in turn have their own networks and so on. The more casual acquaintances a person has, the more she will be plugged into a vast network and have access to information outside her own little bubble – information that may help them find things like jobs for instance.

It follows, then, that individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends. This deprivation will not only insulate them from the latest ideas and fashions but may put them in a disadvantaged position in the labor market, where advancement can

depend...on knowing about appropriate job openings at just the right time.

(p. 202)¹²

Bloggers are using their networks of weak ties to gather information they wouldn't otherwise have access to. Many use these weak ties to get advice from people outside their own little circle. For instance, Alice Bradely, who writes the blog *Finslippy* (<http://finslippy.typepad.com>), turned to the Internet to ask whether she and her family should leave their small, but hip, apartment in Brooklyn, for a bigger, and in her opinion decidedly less-hip, house in the suburbs. More than 200 people responded, chiming in on the pros and cons of living in the city versus the suburbs. Bradely says she really values the feedback she gets from her readers. It helps her make decisions and it helps her feel better about the decisions she has made. She counts on the reaction from her audience, looking to them for encouragement.

It's amazing whenever I write something and get a strong reaction. My post on Henry's [her son's] food issues, when I received so much amazing feedback—it felt life changing. With every comment I could let go a little more of trying to make my kid the perfect eater. All the commenters said I couldn't possibly read every comment, but I did. I was hanging on every word. (Peterson, 2006a)

¹² Robert Putnam (2000) invokes the idea of weak ties, building on Mark Granovetter (1973), when he talks about “bridging social capital” as opposed to “bonding social capital”. Putnam uses the example of a fraternal group or church group to explain bonding social capital – organizations or groups that form strong, homogeneous bonds. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, is “better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion” (Putnam, 2000, p. 22).

These sorts of question-answer blog posts are not unusual. Many bloggers seek the advice of their readers in the same manner they would seek the advice of their casual acquaintances or circle of friends, except, of course, it's happening on a much larger scale.

But even when bloggers are not asking specifically for advice, they encourage their audience to respond to their posts because they use this feedback to gauge how well they're entertaining their readers. They also use the feedback as a springboard for new entries and often base future writing on what the audience has responded to and what it hasn't. However, for some it is a fine line between feedback they'll respond to, and feedback they'll ignore. Bloggers are aware they may be boring their readers if they dwell on one topic too much, however they are also quick to tell people to go elsewhere if they don't like what they're getting.

To get back to how bloggers are using their weak ties, aside from advice most of the relationships built through blogs seem to be based in a need for emotional support. It is the most common and perhaps most valued aspect of the entire experience. Sometimes knowing there are people out there paying attention acts as a sort of therapy for the bloggers and helps them work through difficult times. Melissa Summers (www.suburbanbliss.net) says blogging has helped her in this way. "Last year was really hard for us [her family] financially and people were so kind while I talked my way through it and figured my way out of it" (Peterson, 2006b).

The weight people give their relationships on blogs comes out most strongly when the blogger is dealing with some sort of crisis or emotional event. To illustrate this I'll use a couple examples. First, when Bradely wrote about the shock she was going through

when she found out her babysitter had hit her son, hundreds of people responded.

Conversations took place in the comments section about how Bradely should react and respond. Lawyers offered practical advice. Others offered their babysitting services, like Anne in New Jersey.

Hey Alice, I babysit. Seriously. I'm a grad student and am looking for part time work for the summer and through the coming academic year. This is weird, I guess, but I'm a nice, normal, married grad student and I've never hit a child. Feel free to drop me a line at my email address. (Bradely, 2006)

But most wrote only to express their horror that such a thing could happen; they wrote to console and to commiserate.

Similarly, when Armstrong posted that she had skin cancer, hundreds of people wrote to offer encouragement and express their worry, writing things like: "Heather, I'm with you. We all are" (Armstrong, 2006b). Many people also added their own stories of overcoming cancer, to offer hope. Like Bradely, Armstrong also got her share of practical advice. For example, people who'd been following the blog and knew she'd had trouble finding health insurance had ideas about where she could find adequate coverage. But emotional support was the crux of most of the comments.

However, it must be said that many of the people who comment on blogs express an awareness that they are not extremely close with the blogger. For instance, with Armstrong's cancer scare, even though people were expressing concern and even panic, as one would if a friend gave them some bad news, others were conscious that they're not *really* friends, at least not in a come-over-for-coffee-way.

Goooder said at 01:07PM, 07.13.2006:

When I read your post, I felt panicky. Cancer? Dooce? Is this a joke? I wrote a friend an email and asked if they had read it and thought about writing you, asking for more information. But decided you'd probably post about it soon enough and since you don't know me, it'd probably be kind of weird.

Velma said at 06:03PM, 07.13.2006:

My Husband the Oncologist says to tell you that "Basal cell cancers don't even count." There. Doesn't the word of an absolute stranger's unknown husband make you feel better? (Armstrong, 2006b)

It did make her feel better. A few days later, she posted this message:

"Thank you, majority of my readers, for letting me have my moment of freak-out last week" (Armstrong, 2006c). Armstrong often acknowledges, as she did in this case, that the response she gets from most of her readers is valued and that she feels a connection with people who respond to what she's written and genuinely seem to care about her well being. Other bloggers also express this same sort of sentiment.

What I believe these experiences illustrate is that relationships on blogs can be emotionally intense, yet still distant. On one hand there is a strong emotional attachment where visitors develop a sense of closeness with the blogger and a sense of belonging to the blog. On the other, people also realize that they are, in a way, strangers, who only communicate online. Some readers express more attachment than others, while others openly acknowledge that their relationship is one that exists only in the blogosphere and as such they are closer to strangers than to friends. But even if they recognize some

distance between each other, the emotional attachment between many bloggers and readers, and the importance of this attachment, should not be underplayed. Nancy Baym, in her study of online fan clubs, argues “an online community is a community if participants imagine themselves as a community” (Bell, 2001, p. 102). And certainly, it is evident that many people on blogs *feel* like they have a relationship with the blogger, one that causes them concern when the blogger is unwell or going through a difficult time and motivates them to offer advice, commiserate and express support and solidarity.

In many ways these types of relationships are consistent with the relationships Boase and Wellman (2006) describe as being typical of networked individualism. Weak ties form the basis of networked individualism; the networked individual fosters a range of these weak ties to form her community. Through the blog, the blogger can maintain links with a series of people with whom she may not be extremely close, but who nonetheless have access to a variety of valuable information and experience. Through the blog, a network of weak ties is formed, giving the blogger and the visitor a sense of collective strength.

Anonymity, Exaggeration, Filtering

Although I have just made the case that bloggers have been looking for and have found community and relationships online, there are several features of the blog that influence and may cast doubt on the strength of these relationships. I’ve already alluded to them when exploring the transitory nature of blogging, but in this section I want to address these ideas more thoroughly.

Josh Meyrowitz (2005), a Professor of Communications at the University of New Hampshire, points out that the world is too big to experience the entire thing as a neighbourhood or village because “there is a limit to the number of people with whom one can feel truly connected. Electronic media, therefore, foster a broader, but also a shallower, sense of ‘us’ ” (p. 40). Although Meyrowitz is referring primarily to the influence of television in his thinking about the electronic society, I think the same caution applies to the blog. A person can potentially surf through millions of blogs and get quick glimpses of people’s lives. So in a sense it may feel as though you’re connected to millions of people, but how many of them do you really *know*? Although people may feel very close and emotionally attached in a blog environment, there is always the possibility that one person in the relationship is not as she seems. There’s always a potential for distance online that really can’t be overcome unless people meet face to face. To look at this potential in more detail, I’d like to explore three ideas affecting the kinds of relationships that form. Bloggers (and their visitors) can be *anonymous* if they choose. Bloggers often *filter* their content and they sometimes *exaggerate* for dramatic effect.

First of all, the fact that bloggers and the people reading blogs can remain *anonymous* raises some obvious questions about how well the blogger and readers actually know each other. Many bloggers use pseudonyms. If they don’t, they disguise details about where exactly they live and work. This same anonymity is also afforded to the people who visit blogs. Visitors don’t have to leave their real names, or any name at all. They can drop in, and drop out, depending on how they feel, and how interested they are in the blogger’s life. They can leave a comment or leave without saying a thing,

registering only as a number on a hit-counter. Some theorists make the argument that it's difficult, if not impossible to foster meaningful community in this sort of atmosphere. Because it's easy to move in and out of the online world without consequence, only superficial relationships can be formed (Putnam, 2000).

However, I believe that even the lurkers – those people who read blogs but never leave a comment - still feel like they have a relationship with the blogger and are emotionally involved with them. They care about the blogger enough that in times of trouble they will emerge and engage in the blog, or de-lurk to use the vocabulary of the blogosphere, to offer advice and emotional support. (Of course, once one makes the transition from lurker to participant it denotes another step toward full disclosure. So, any insight on lurkers is only coming from ex-lurkers and should be seen in this light.) But I have observed that the more serious an issue seems, the more likely it is that lurkers will reveal themselves. For instance, when Armstrong wrote about her cancer scare many people said they were de-lurking because they felt they had to wish her well. They had been reading her blog for years and had never commented, however this issue was important enough that they had to say something (Armstrong, 2006b). Similarly, when Bradely wrote about her babysitter hitting her child, many lurkers also decided that this issue was serious enough to warrant de-lurking (Bradely, 2006).

Filtering can also cast doubt on how well bloggers and readers know each other. Because they don't know who will be reading and there is the potential that anybody could be out there, bloggers leave certain aspects of their life out of their blogs. They filter. Some don't use their full name in order to protect their privacy. Those who do use their real names refrain from talking specifically about where they live, or don't give the

full names of their friends and family. Many bloggers have learned from experience what they can talk about and what they can't. Family is one subject area that often needs to be treaded lightly. Schmutzie (<http://www.schmutzie.com>) goes only by her nickname on her blog. She will only say that she lives "somewhere" on the Prairies in Canada. She doesn't write about her relationship on her blog and she stays away from her family. Even though she uses a pseudonym, she's aware that some people who read her blog do know her real name and her family.

There are a lot of things I don't discuss on my website. Before I had a really good sense of boundaries and issues with privacy on the Internet, I wrote more about the family I was born into, but now I write very little about that, because they deserve more than my issue-driven, one-sided interpretations might sometimes afford them. (Peterson, 2006e)

Schmutzie chooses to write using a pseudonym, which does offer her a certain amount of privacy, but for those who don't use pseudonyms issues of privacy take on a new level of meaning. Bradely says if she were using a pseudonym what she wrote about would change drastically.

If I were using pseudonymous I would have a great time mocking the various relatives who drive me up a wall, but I chose to put my name out there, and they read the blog, and as much as they drive me crazy I also love them. So I'm stuck making fun of only me. I feel like I can make fun of my mom, though. I'm not sure why I think that. (Peterson, 2006a)

In the beginning, Armstrong also wrote about her family and how she had turned her back on her Mormon upbringing, something her family knew nothing about. When

they found the blog and read about themselves online Armstrong publicly apologized to her family and told her readers that although she would keep writing frankly about her life and the problems she has with the Mormon faith she would, from that point on, keep her family out of it. She says it took her too long to realize what she should leave out of her blog.

I started out thinking that I could say anything in my space and that everyone else needed to get over it, including my family and friends. Of course, I ended up alienating my family and losing my job and pissing off my friends, and it took WAY TOO LONG for me to figure out that while there is great power in personal publishing, there is also great danger. My supposed right to say anything I wanted got me into hot water in so many facets of my life that I finally realized that it wasn't worth it. (Blood, 2005)

Her advice to new bloggers is to ask themselves who is the one person they would not want to read their blog, and then imagine they have found it and have just read it. If you are not comfortable with this, perhaps your blog should not be a blog, but a private journal.

Writing about work is the other subject that is generally off limits. This seems to have evolved after several high profile bloggers were fired for writing about work on their blogs (Twist, 2005). One of these bloggers, as I've mentioned, was Armstrong:

I started this website in February 2001. A year later I was fired from my job for this website because I had written stories that included people in my workplace. My advice to you is BE YE NOT SO STUPID. Never write about work on the Internet unless your boss knows and sanctions the

fact that YOU ARE WRITING ABOUT WORK ON THE INTERNET.

(Armstrong, 2006a)

Armstrong's story is so well known that people in the blogosphere now refer to being fired for writing about work on your blog as getting "dooiced". For instance, when Summers was writing about her husband's job, this is how she explained why she wouldn't go into details:

Let's try to keep in mind that this is a *public* website and I can't exactly vent about my husband's job and share his vents about his job because as neat as it would be for me to get my husband Dooiced, it's certainly not worth it. (Summers, 2005a)

However, despite self-imposed restrictions about what they will and will not talk about, bloggers appear to be very open about certain aspects of their lives. This could potentially be confusing or disarming for some readers. For instance, even though many bloggers are cautious about what they'll reveal about their family, many bloggers appear to write in an intimate way about their immediate family and friends. The *way* they write sounds like the way in which one would talk to a close friend. As an example, Summers has been very open about talking about her battle with depression and body image. When she wrote about wanting to go off her medication, she spoke very openly about her reasons:

I've been afraid I'll end up depressed again. I've been afraid of the withdrawal. But there are side effects I'm not willing to live with anymore. The biggest being the weight. The God Damned weight. The weight has led me to being so much more depressed than the depression. I can't bear

to look at myself anymore. I can barely stand to put clothes on in the morning because I hate how they look on me.

For many years I had an eating disorder and one of the weirdest parts about being fat is how when I was thin as a rail I felt fat. Now that I really am fat, I find myself trying to use the old self talk I had to use to keep myself from starving myself.

"You're fine. You are not fat, you just see yourself fat. If you don't eat it will only get worse. You'll look fatter and fatter in your head."

So now I find myself loathing my body and pretty much everything about myself and I try to calm that hateful voice by telling myself it isn't that bad. You just see yourself as fat.

But you know what? I really am fat. Maybe not by your standards but I keep gaining and gaining at an incredibly rapid pace. It makes no sense.

So I need to try to go off the drugs. I need to take better care of my body.

(Summers, 2005b)

When bloggers write in such a personal tone, revealing what might be thought of as private details of their lives, it seems as if they're being very intimate. And in a way they are. Yet, if one tries to get any information about where exactly the blogger lives, or in many cases their real names, it's impossible. So, on the one hand while they appear to be very open, in reality they have constructed careful, protective walls around themselves in the interest of self-protection. As well, there's always the question – what are bloggers *not* talking about? What are they leaving out. Of course, people ask these questions of their real life friends all the time, but the possibility for deception is heightened in an

online environment. These protective walls could be seen to be at odds with relationship and community building, and in many cases they are. But for some, the ability to be anonymous or filter also allows bloggers to be open about themselves in a way that they might not be in their offline life. Jen B. says while people in her offline life have expected her to get over something traumatic such as loss, on a blog she can be more honest about her feelings. Sharing stories on her blog about her grief and sadness has helped her.

Sure, you can talk with your friends or family about such losses, but the dialogue on a blog can be more honest, caring and even more brutal, which is sometimes a good thing. I find that loss in particular is something that people in your non-blog life sort of expect you to be “over” after a certain period of time. It feels more acceptable, at least to me, to revisit this pain or a memory or guilt, etc., with the blog world.

(Mommybloggers, 2006)

When it comes to assessing the quality of relationships on blogs there’s also the question of how honest blog entries are and how much is *exaggeration*. Filtering and leaving things out is one thing, but how many details are tweaked, even just a little bit, to make a better story? Some bloggers have admitted openly to stretching the truth. Armstrong used fiction as a defence when she was fired for writing about work on her blog. She said that most of her writing “was grossly exaggerated for comedic effect” and the people she wrote about “were combinations of several people I have worked with over the last five years” (Armstrong, 2002).

While some bloggers don't call what they do exaggeration, they do admit to using the blog to present another side of themselves, or another version of themselves. Is this exaggeration? Perhaps it's not any different from what people do in real life – presenting different versions of themselves in different situations. Exaggeration could also be seen as a natural, benign part of storytelling. We often emphasize or inflate certain details and leave out others, all in an effort to make a story more interesting or compelling. However, online invisibility adds another dimension to the ability to recreate your persona, or present a different version of yourself, and this possibility for deceit could be seen as something that is counter-productive to community. Or it could be seen, as some bloggers do, as a freeing experience. It allows them to express different sides of themselves in a safe environment, which they control.

To sum up, anonymity, filtering and exaggeration may raise doubts as to the quality and sincerity of relationships formed on blogs, and could lead one to think that they must, as a consequence, be more casual, veering toward what Tonnies (1887) might describe as *Gesellschaft*-like connections. However many visitors to blogs certainly don't act as though they have a casual relationship with the blogger. In the same way, many bloggers don't act as though their relationship with their visitors is casual. This tips the scale towards more *Gemeinschaft*-like bonds. But the scale wavers in a balancing act because for the most part there is still awareness that any relationship on a blog is an online relationship and there is distance inherent in this bond.

Exclusion: Like-minded Communities

Another question about the type of community that forms online is whether blogs are truly communities wherein diverse individuals mingle, or are they better described as *like-minded* communities, where people with similar interests gather? Many bloggers and their readers talk about the community they've found online in a way that resembles a *Gemeinschaft*-like ideal. However, despite the nostalgic, heterogeneous rhetoric that often seems to accompany the idea of a *Gemeinschaft* community, these communities aren't always inclusive. In fact, they can be extremely unwelcoming toward people who don't fit the community's norm (Bell, 2001). Online communities that are searching for a *Gemeinschaft* ideal can be places where people withdraw and bunker in, isolating themselves from anyone who is other (Kroker & Kroker, 2000; Robins, 2000). As Bell (2001) puts it, "tight-knit communities are fine if you fit in, but are incredibly exclusive and uncomfortable places if you don't" (p. 106).

This critique rings true with what I've observed on blogs. On the one hand, bloggers and their readers talk about wanting to foster feelings of inclusiveness and familial support. But I've noticed if a reader disagrees with the blogger, the wrath of the blogger and the rest of the audience can rain down. At this point I'm not talking about visitors who are abusive (hurling insults and expletives that would not be acceptable in most social circles), but if a visitor disagrees with the stance that the blogger takes (in particular around hot button items such as religion or child-rearing) the blogger and other audience members are quick to shout down that person. Sometimes the blogger, usually an extremely articulate person who's often more articulate than the blog's visitors, will berate the person in the main part of the blog. It becomes evident very quickly that some

blogs are places for like-minded people, and if you don't fit you're not welcome. I'm not saying that the blogger should, or has to, acknowledge points of view that are contrary to her own, but I would argue that it's not entirely accurate to say they are searching simply for community in its purest form, made up of diverse individuals. What they are actually searching for is a like-minded community, one in which their opinions are validated. For the most part the blogger is creating her own world. It is a place where she gathers people of similar ideologies. The more famous a blogger becomes, the more readers she has, the more this sort of phenomenon appears to be reinforced.

There are always exceptions and some bloggers have decided that dealing with negative feedback is part of blogging and something they should be open to. However, this is in most cases the exception and most blogs do end up seeming like mutual admiration societies or fan clubs. Most of the comments congratulate the blogger and extol her virtues or read like encouraging notes. Those who post negative comments can be banned from posting, or as I've mentioned are quickly shouted down by other visitors or the blogger herself and end up leaving the blog.

Just Entertainment?

It is also important to acknowledge that some people visit blogs purely for entertainment. They're not interested in friendship and wouldn't express what they do in those terms. As well, some blogs are places where the blogger doesn't appear to be soliciting any sort of relationship with her readers. Instead, they're simply places for the blogger to relate her experience and her take on the world. Some bloggers shut their comments section off from time to time, widening the distance between the blogger and

the reader. In these cases the blog becomes more like a public performance than any sort of community activity. The blogger is not someone the visitor has a close relationship with; she is the performer on stage and her visitors, safely in their seats, make up the audience. Yet I believe that *even in these cases*, when the blog looks more like a performance than anything else, the blogger still has to strike the visitor as someone that she would like to know, someone she would like to be friends or acquaintances with, or even someone she'd like to be at the same party with, even if it's just to see what she'll do next. So in a sense the blogger must still cultivate some sort of feeling of community.

Virtual Meets Real

I must address for a moment that not all the relationships built through blogs, stay on blogs. For the most part they do, but there are relationships that migrate offline. When bloggers write about meeting each other offline the difference between online relationships and offline relationships becomes glaringly apparent. Even when they're excited about their real life meeting, there is anxiety about what it will be like. All of a sudden a blogger has to deal with the physical reality of her body, not just the image of herself she has projected. Jen B. writes, before going to the BlogHer conference (an annual North American conference of – as the title suggests – mostly female bloggers), that she is feeling anxious. Even though she couches her anxiety in a joke, she is stressing about what to wear, what to bring and whether people who are friends online will like her when they meet her offline.

People. BlogHer is going to be so big this year. I know more people, both

online and in “real live life”. I am scared, anxious. What if those online friends think they like me now, but see my capri pants and run off screaming?

(Jen B., 2006)

But even though bloggers may experience anxiety when they physically meet their online friends for the first time they’re still drawn toward these encounters, organizing meetings or conferences. Inherent in this is the implication that this is the natural progression of friendship; a strong affinity for each other online, will naturally lead to forming a strong bond offline, if logistics allow it. However, it is bloggers who usually meet each other offline, not blogger and visitor. This pattern of who meets whom in real life seems to signify a hierarchy in the blogosphere; the blogger is the person worthy of meeting offline, and the visitor is relegated to spectator. So while bloggers might develop strong friendships with each other by visiting each other’s blogs, the relationships with their other non-blogging visitors remain more distant and weak – and they remain mostly online.

Fame and Fortune

While the search for community is prevalent on personal blogs, some bloggers are making money off their blogs and this is a reason they keep blogging. The amount of money a blogger makes off her blog is directly related to her level of fame. To explain the process, in the last couple of years advertisers have begun to realize that bloggers have an audience they want to reach. Small ads started appearing on the sidebars of some of the more popular blogs, usually powered by Google. The bloggers who were part of this first wave would make jokes that they weren’t making any money off these ads. But

as time went on the ads began getting bigger and flashier, causing some bloggers to wonder if ads would help or hinder their blogging.

Rebecca Bollwitt told me that she has struggled with whether or not to host ads, because she doesn't want them to interfere with the look of her blog.

I've often contemplated putting Google ads on the site, for the purpose of making money, but I'm not sure how annoying that would be. I'd want them to be non-intrusive, but then again, if people don't notice them how are they supposed to click on them? It's a vicious circle isn't it?

But advertising also poses another dilemma for some bloggers, one that deals with more than just aesthetics. On the one hand, they want the money they can make and they realize the reason advertisers are courting them is precisely because they have such a large audience. But on the other hand, one of the reasons they have this audience is because people see them as independent entities, free from the constraints of commercialism, able to say every outrageous and/or courageous thing that comes to mind. They are aware they could be seen as sell-outs who are going commercial instead of honouring the independent spirit of blogging. Armstrong responded to her readers' criticism this way:

Right now my website is supporting my family. It is feeding us, paying our mortgage and our insurance premiums. I happen to think that this is pretty cool, and I can't help but believe that this is a good thing for personal websites in general, for people who want to make a living by publishing themselves. This means that you don't have to be a gadget-freak or political junkie to turn your online writing into a livelihood.

Maybe your website about Monarch Butterfly migration patterns will one day pay for your kid's college education. COULD HAPPEN.

One thing you should understand, though, is that I have never and will never write anything on my website to appease an advertiser. I have never and will never censor myself to make an advertiser happy. I'd take down my website before I'd let an advertiser have any say in my content.

(Armstrong, 2005)

Armstrong is able to make a living off her blog because she has become extremely popular. Millions of people visit her blog each day. Fame, however, has an effect on what sorts of relationships are formed. Any sort of community building that occurs on these blogs is tempered by the level of fame the blogger achieves, because as some bloggers become more well known they start to censor what they write about, which could be seen as not being conducive to strong relationships. For instance, Armstrong won't write about her extended family members in the way that she had before she realized how large her audience was, because her family was hurt by what she was revealing to the public (Blood, 2005).

While bloggers don't say that they want to become famous and that is not the reason they are blogging, I find it hard to believe that any measure of fame in the blogosphere is accidental. First of all, the blogger wouldn't be online in the first place if she didn't want some measure of public recognition. But further to this, for a blog to catch on it has to come to people's attention and many bloggers actively promote themselves by agreeing to be featured in other media. As well, there is a kind of reciprocal promotion that happens through blogs. Most bloggers link to their friends and

favorite blogs, suggesting that people visit them and, in return, these bloggers usually link back to them, creating a linking loops that serve as promotion.

Personal Bloggers and the Media: A Complicated Relationship

I'm going to turn my attention now to the personal bloggers' relationship with the media community. Many have jumped at the opportunity to be featured in more traditional media. In the last few years some bloggers have become mainstream media stories, especially when they're seen to be influential or when their blog has caused them personal turmoil (Twist, 2005). For some, this attention has caused them to become *more* famous. For instance, Armstrong says she first saw a jump in visitors after major news stations ran stories about her firing (Blood, 2005). However, some bloggers say it wasn't the mainstream media that boosted their numbers, but other bloggers. For example, Bollwitt says she saw a small jump in her numbers when she was mentioned in a major Vancouver newspaper, but she saw a huge surge when she was linked by the popular blogger Tony Pierce (www.tonypierce.com).

While some bloggers appear to enjoy the attention they get from mainstream media, others aren't finding media exposure to be a positive experience, even though at first they were extremely excited about the idea. Summers felt that she was deliberately misrepresented after she appeared on ABC's morning show to talk about the mothers' group she was part of. Summers' group is part of what's been dubbed a growing trend by the mainstream media; stay-at-home mothers get together to have a cocktail while their kids play. The genesis of these groups is that many stay-at-home mothers don't have a chance to socialize and that having a drink with friends is a chance to feel like they are

grownups, while still taking care of their children. Summers had no previous media experience. She was put on the program alongside a psychologist who was the program's resident expert. The psychologist had been on television many times and was brought on the program to be the counterbalance to Summer's position. Summers came out of the television experience feeling like she was portrayed by the psychologist and the program in general as a drunk, inadequate mother. Summers felt she didn't have a chance to express herself clearly because she was forced to speak in sound bites (she was told before going on stage to keep her comments short), and that instead of fostering discussion, the interview was all about reiterating one point over and over again – that Summers was an inadequate mother for even considering having a drink around her children. My point is not to argue whether or not having a drink around children is acceptable or not, but rather to talk about what happened after the interview. She went home feeling terrible about the situation, she then blogged about it. The ensuing conversation on her blog turned into an intense session of what was essentially media criticism, talking about what it was like to be on television and cautioning media consumers to be aware of the format of talk show television, and to be wary about what is being presented to them on mainstream media. It also turned into a discussion about feminism and the roles women and men play in parenting. Summers, and others who watched the program, came away feeling as if the message being portrayed was that it is all alright for men to drink around children, at a backyard barbeque for example, but for women it was equated with bad parenting. Again, my purpose is not to get into a discussion about parenting, but to give an example of how a very personal story on a personal blog became a discussion about gender politics and gave people an avenue to

discuss these sorts of issues. One of her readers left this response, which was typical of many of the comments: “Your appearance there was a perfect example of why blogs exist. Because the mainstream media always gets it wrong” (Summers, 2007).

Aside from appearing in the media, I believe these personal bloggers are also creating something that should be considered part of the media ecosystem. None of the personal bloggers in this study talk about what they do in terms of citizen journalism. However, I would like to put forward that these bloggers *are*, in a sense, citizen journalists, even if they don’t use those words. By chronicling what they consider to be the poignant details of their daily lives, I believe they are doing something similar to what is written about on the features pages of newspapers or the human-interest stories shown on the evening news. All of them write about issues that are close to their lives, such as depression, raising children and illness. These are the types of issues that mainstream media also tries to deal with, but these bloggers are bypassing journalists and editors and telling their stories themselves. Many times mainstream media, when dealing with an issue such as illness for example, will try to put a personal face on the story by finding someone who is going through that particular illness. What these bloggers are doing is telling these stories themselves. They are not attempting to give a big picture view of an issue, as many mainstream news outlets try to do, but what they are doing very well is telling personal stories in a serialized manner. Some are also branching out further than their own blogs and starting collectives with other bloggers. They are creating websites, or what are essentially online magazines, where they write weekly or monthly columns. These are perhaps best described as a cross between a magazine and a group blog.

However, no matter what sort of relationship they have with (or contribution they make to) mainstream media, as I've mentioned, none of the bloggers say they are blogging out of a desire to take on or challenge the mainstream media. Some, like Summers and Armstrong, have blogged about their experience in the media, but they do not say they are compelled to blog because of a particular desire to challenge professional journalists. Yet, I would argue that this is, in effect, what they do, simply by blogging about their lives and issues that are important to them, and by doing so create content for mainstream consumption.

Conclusion

In conclusion, some personal bloggers say they started because they were looking for something they didn't have in their everyday life, a community in which they could feel less isolated, and/or the community they found is the reason they continue. The types of relationships that form on blogs vary. They span from strong ties that eventually migrate offline to lurkers who never communicate directly with the blogger but whose unseen presence influences the dynamic, especially in terms of numbers of hits, which attracts advertisers. Although many visits may be fleeting, with visitors popping in and out, deciding quickly if they like what they see and if not moving on, some intense online relationships are formed. These relationships fall in the middle of the continuum between what Tonnies (1887/1957) has described as *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. They are weak ties, the types of relationships most networked individuals form, keeping in mind that weak does not necessarily mean insignificant. It must be emphasized that, in the end, most blogs turn into places for like-minded people. People become regular visitors to a

blog because they feel an emotional connection and sense of solidarity with the blogger, and with each other. The entire social grouping depends in large part on the blogger. If not for her guidance, her direction and her charisma, the relationship would fall apart. The blogger is ultimately in charge of how the people visiting her blog relate to each other. She steers the conversation. She also monitors the conversation and can delete comments or ban visitors if she chooses. As well, she can shut the comments down completely, further exemplifying how the blogger is ultimately in charge of this community, to the point of deciding whether or not it exists. Some blogs do end up looking more like performances than anything else. But even in these cases the blogger must foster some sort of affinity with the people who visit. As well, it seems that on the same blog there can be relationships that run the whole spectrum – from audience member to trusted friend.

I like to think of the personal blog as a virtual calling card, one through which the blogger expresses who she is, what she wants, and fosters a network of friends and acquaintances. While some might question the validity and depth of some of the relationships in this network, it is apparent that these relationships are meaningful to both the blogger and her visitors. They feel as though they have a relationship from which they derive a sense of satisfaction, a sense that they are not alone and that there are people out there with whom they share solidarity and community

Chapter Four: Political Bloggers

I first came across Bart Ramson during the Canadian federal election campaign of 2005/2006. As I was surfing around the blogosphere looking for people who were talking about the election, Ramson's blog, *Calgary Grit* (<http://calgarygrit.blogspot.com>) kept being referenced. I followed the links to his blog and it didn't take long before I was hooked, checking every day to see what he thought about the day's election promises and who he thought had scored political points. I wasn't alone. A quick Google check told me that he had been named one of the best political blogs in Canada, according to the Canadian Blog Awards¹³. On the front page of his blog, in the top right hand corner, Ramson described what his blog was about: "Canadian Politics, Canadian Politics, Canadian Politics and more Canadian Politics. From the mind of one of the few Liberals in Calgary who haven't been hunted down and driven out of town yet" (Arnold, 2006). His blog was interesting for a couple reasons. First of all, he was articulating a position that isn't often heard. As he acknowledges, Liberals aren't as common in Alberta as they are in other parts of the country. But it was more than this. His posts were funny, articulate and seemed to be fairly balanced. Although he was obviously a Liberal, he wrote about the other parties and not necessarily in a disparaging way. He gave credit where he thought credit was due. I remember thinking at first that Bart Ramson was an unusual name – I was reminded of the cartoon character Bart Simpson – and wondering if

¹³ Anyone living in Canada who writes a blog, or Canadian citizens living abroad writing blogs, are eligible for the Canadian Blog Awards. There is an open nomination process. Nominees are screened to make sure they fit the criteria of the category in which they've been nominated and the top five in each category move through to the next round. There are then two rounds of voting, in which anyone with Internet access can take part. (The limit is one vote a day during the voting period.)

that was really his name. So late last year, when he decided to dispense with the pseudonym and reveal his true name I wasn't terribly surprised. By that time most people in political circles had figured out who he was and the pseudonym wasn't hiding anything. Bart Ramson is really Dan Arnold. Arnold is in his mid twenties. He's finishing a master's degree in statistics from the University of Alberta. He's not sure what he will do after he graduates. Perhaps one day he'll work for Statistics Canada. But one thing he is sure about is, for the time being, he will keep blogging.

Arnold started writing his blog a few years ago, right before the 2004 Canadian election. When we met for an interview in December 2006, he told me he'd been reading blogs for about a year before he started blogging himself. He liked what he had been reading and he was also working a job that afforded him lots of spare time. Starting a blog seemed like it would be a fun thing to do with his extra hours. He did have a personal blog for a while that was meant for his friends, but he let it slide after a couple months. It didn't capture his interest. His political blog did. Every so often he will write about a topic other than politics, but for the most part politics is his passion.

This chapter will focus on bloggers, like Arnold, who use their blogs to write primarily about politics and current events. It should be noted that just as the blog has insinuated itself into journalism and become the tool of many journalists, it has also become a tool in politics. Political parties have used blogs to connect with the party faithful and attract new supporters. Political candidates have used them during election time to connect with the electorate. However, the bloggers I am going to focus on in this chapter are not on the payroll of any political party. They are not running for office, although some have in the past. All these political bloggers are upfront about their

political leanings; they either support a party outright, or at least make it very clear whether they lean toward the left or the right. They use their blogs to comment on politics and add their opinion on political movements. They also focus on the way mainstream media is reporting current events, whether it be about how they cover politics or other issues that have to do with public policy. I will argue that most of these bloggers are attempting to be citizen journalists and that, unlike the personal bloggers, this appears to be the major reason why they blog. Even if they don't use the term citizen journalism, they take on this role by challenging mainstream media and trying to hone in on their territory.

However, they do share some similarities with the personal bloggers. Even though community isn't stated as the reason why they started blogging or even why they continue to blog, the idea of community is not completely divorced from these blogs. They still strive to attract an audience and appear to relish connecting with likeminded people. I have also found evidence that when political bloggers talk about personal problems, it becomes clear that their readers feel a significant connection with them. In this chapter I will also look at how the prospect of money and fame play into how these bloggers are using the medium. In particular, like the personal bloggers, some political bloggers are making money off their blogs and have used it as a stepping-stone to a new career. They've also had to wrestle with the decision of whether or not to run advertising.

Citizen Journalists: A Public Voice

I will begin by examining how political bloggers are acting as citizen journalists. In order to illustrate this, I will focus in part on the role they played in the Canadian

federal election campaign that ran from the end of November 2005 until election night, January 23, 2006. Bloggers played a role during the previous federal election, but it was really during this particular election campaign that bloggers came to many people's attention. Mainstream media followed what they were writing about. Bloggers and their activities became news stories. Some mainstream media outlets even hired bloggers to blog for them during the campaign. It became very clear during this time that bloggers were aiming to give Canadians and anyone else interested in Canadian politics, new places to turn for opinion, analysis and news (Bowman, 2006). For this reason, this thesis will focus in part on what bloggers did during this period, as it is an event bloggers of all political stripes were focused on. But to be clear, they have continued playing this role long after the election ended. For these bloggers, the media is no longer something that has to be at arms length, but something in which they can participate. These bloggers are, as Dan Gillmor, the author of the book *We Media* (2004), expresses it, changing the nature of news so that it is shifting into less of a lecture and more of a conversation.

The political bloggers in this study blog, in part, because of a desire to express their opinions about current events and politics in a public venue and/or challenge the mainstream media, either by questioning their reporting methods and choice of story material or attempting to be reporters themselves. To begin, some political bloggers say they started to blog because they weren't happy with what they were getting from mainstream media – it didn't reflect their voice or their point of view. The blog gives them the opportunity to express their opinions on a public platform. For instance, conservative-leaning blogger Kate McMillan (www.smalldeadanimals.com) has this credo written on the front page of her blog:

Until this moment I have been forced to listen while media and politicians alike have told me ‘what Canadians think’. In all that time they never once asked. This is just the voice of an ordinary Canadian yelling back at the radio – You don’t speak for me. (McMillan, 2006a)

On the other side of the political spectrum, Marcie Abramovitch (2006) bills her blog, *From A Different Viewpoint* (<http://politicagrll.blogspot.com>), as “[p]olitics, commentary and news from a left wing queer Canadian feminist”. As the title of her blog proclaims, she believes that what she is writing about will also be different from what is widely available in the mainstream media. Her aim is to reach people whom she has dubbed as “progressive”. Whether or not the mainstream media does represent the point of view of these two bloggers is debatable. It could be argued that there are publications and broadcasts that do cater to their political leanings. It could also be argued that Kate McMillan is wrong, the mainstream media *does* ask for people’s opinions through things like talk-back lines and letters to the editor. However, what is very clear is that some bloggers don’t *feel* as if they are being represented in the mainstream media or that their opinions are valued and they are turning to the blog to remedy the situation. For Greg Staples, starting his blog (www.politicalstaples.com) was a way to express his political perspective on a public platform.

Why does one get started in blogoverse. For me it was a combination of things, the fallout out of the War in Iraq, the fallout of the Canadian Election and the situation in Sudan. The common threads for me are the blatant inconsistencies of left-wing ideology and my desire to speak out against it. (Staples, 2004)

Stephen Taylor was also motivated by politics when he started blogging. He began his blog (www.stephentaylor.ca) to help with his political campaign. He ran to represent the Conservative Party in Kingston and the Islands in 2004, but lost the nomination. Since then, he says his blog “has been witness to the events that have shaped our world and our country. During the 2005-2006 election this blog broke many election-related stories which got significant play in the mainstream media” (Taylor, 2006a).

For others, their feelings about the mainstream media are less acrimonious, however they are happy to have the chance to comment on what the media is reporting and give their point of view on what is happening in politics. They attempt to use their research skills to uncover more information about a story. Steve Janke, who writes the conservative-leaning blog *Angry in the Great White North* (<http://stevejanke.com>), says he enjoys looking for information on the Internet, going through political policy, political speeches, or other databases to dig up information that may be new or useful for mainstream media, or any of his readers. In an interview from his home in Cambridge, Ontario, he explained his particular fascination this way:

I got a taste for it at some point. I like spending time online. I like googling and going through old material and databases and stuff. I have a mind for that kind of level of detail and patience. I can spend two hours looking for one little tiny nugget of information, find it and think that was time well spent.

Arnold sees the relationship between mainstream media and political bloggers as one that is fairly symbiotic. He believes a lot of media people read blogs and follow the stories bloggers are writing about. If something gets a lot of play in the blogs, it will

sometimes make its way into the mainstream media. But while the mainstream media may rely on the bloggers for stories, so do the bloggers rely on the media; many political bloggers link to stories in newspapers and then add their own commentary. When we sat down for an interview in his hometown of Calgary, he had this to say about the journalism/blogging relationship:

There's definitely a symbiotic relationship between them. They complement each other well. The media focuses more on what actually happened. Blogs sometimes go into more of a different background. What this guy said before, what the politician said isn't consistent with what they said in the past or more of an in-depth analysis of what's actually gone on and what it means in the long run as opposed to just reporting on what happened.

I'll now turn my attention to an analysis of what these bloggers are doing and how they are acting as citizen journalists. Bloggers are acting primarily as opinion makers; commenting on what is being reported in the news. They are all also acting as news editors, guiding people to what they feel is important within mainstream media coverage (O'Brien, 2004). In some cases, bloggers are acting as the Internet police, tracking the work of journalists, looking for mistakes and bias (Cooper, 2006). But are they actually producing original journalism, as some claim, and are influencing the mainstream news agenda? By looking at what sort of issues they are taking on in their blogs, and what their blogs are being used for, it is my hope to be able to draw some conclusions about why they have taken up the practice: what they feel is missing from the mainstream media, what could be changed and what they try to emulate.

Opinion and Commentary

The first thing one notices when reading political blogs is that they are primarily places for commentary, analysis and debate. All the bloggers spend a great deal of time tracking the movements of political parties. For the most part this is done through following what the mainstream media reports, although some do go to the source and deal with policy and press releases that have been issued by political parties. They discuss everything from what they think about public policy to the image of party leaders. In the case of the 2005/2006 election campaign, in addition to posting their opinions about who they felt was winning the race, bloggers also spent a great deal of time dissecting election promises. The tone of their posts is varied, depending on the blogger and how close they feel to an issue. Sometimes bloggers sound angry, sometimes very serious, others try to be funny. While some bloggers go on at length dissecting an issue, most, like Arnold, tried to keep their commentary short, punchy and to the point. As an example, during the election Arnold wrapped up every week with his “week in review”, in which he gave the main parties a grade. As I’ve mentioned, even though he identifies as a Liberal, he was open to criticizing his party when he thought it was warranted. In his entry on December 31st he gave a failing grade to his party and was more generous with the rest:

Liberal Weeks in Review: F

It's hard to imagine a worse possible week for the natural governing party.

Several blog gaffes and the Income Trust leak-riddle-thingie could mark the turning point of this campaign.

Conservative Weeks in Review: B+

Harper gets marks for campaigning through the holidays while the other leaders enjoy the eggnog. The policy keeps coming, including a tax break for transit users which I think a lot of people will like.

NDP Weeks in Review: B+

Layton and Olivia may have been mercilessly smeared by Liberals this week, but that certainly bodes well for them as they try to convince fickle NDP voters to *not* vote Liberal on E-day.

Bloc Quebecois Weeks in Review: B

Duceppe has been MIA over the holidays, but that's likely a good strategy for him. He seemed to turn the tables on Paul post-debate with the debate offer and most concede he'll likely be cruising to the finish line in Quebec.

(Arnold, 2005)

However, Arnold was in many ways the exception, most bloggers usually defended the policy of the party with which they were most closely aligned and ridiculed policy from parties with whom they disagreed.

The political blogosphere was also a place for satire and jokes during the election campaign. A favorite was spoofing the Liberal election attack ads. The ads were released on Tuesday, January 10, 2006. One ad suggested Conservative leader Stephen Harper would put "soldiers with guns" on Canadian city streets if he were elected prime minister. The ad faced harsh criticism and was quickly pulled from the Liberal's website and from television ("Liberals launch series," 2006; "Tories lash out," 2006). But it was too late. The blogosphere, and other media outlets were flexing their satirical muscles. Damian Brooks blogs under the name *Babbling Brooks* (<http://babblingbrooks.blogspot.com>). His

mantra, “[w]here left is never right” sits prominently on his blog’s masthead. He took it upon himself to compile all the spoofs he could find in Canada’s corner of cyberspace – spoofs that were coming primarily from conservative-leaning bloggers.

I’ve been wandering around the Canadian blogosphere reading Liberal ad spoofs and have come to the conclusion that this much mockery requires a permanent index. I’m hoping to eventually make a coffee-table book and get fabulously rich on it and retire with my family to a private island in the South Pacific. (Brooks, 2006)

While Brooks was obviously having fun with his idea, it’s interesting how the Internet gave people a public platform to express their creativity – something that normally is restricted to political satirists such as Rick Mercer. He didn’t *have* to make a coffee book. He had his blog. Brooks also asked his readers to help, encouraging them to post any spoofs they found in his comments section. The first one Brooks posted came from a blogger who is a professional journalist. Paul Wells is a columnist and a blogger for *Maclean’s* magazine.

This is the original text of the ad:

Stephen Harper actually announced he wants to increase military presence in our cities. Canadian cities. Soldiers with guns. In our cities. In Canada.

We did not make this up. Choose your Canada. (Akin, 2006)

Wells turned it into this:

Just now at the Subway on Bank St. I was buying my lunch and there... in line... standing in front of me... was a soldier. In our cities. In Canada. A soldier. He seemed to be ordering the six-inch ham and turkey. With

chipotle sauce. In Canada. We're not making this stuff up. (Wells, 2006)

While the spoofs may not have been worthy of stand-up comedy, they gave bloggers a chance to have some fun with something that was being covered in the mainstream media and, in this case, a chance to critique the Liberal party.

What I have determined is that all of the political bloggers used their blogs as places to add their point of view to what was being reported in the mainstream media, be it about politics, policy and/or current affairs. This is the one thread that united all bloggers and appears to be a primary reason for starting to blog in the first place. They all had something they wanted to say, or point out, about what was being reported in mainstream media. The sort of commentary that they were adding was the sort of opinion one might find in the letters to the editor section, or perhaps in a political column.

News Guides and Internet Police

While the blogosphere is a place where political parties are under scrutiny from anyone with an Internet connection, it is also a place where the mainstream media is under scrutiny. As I've mentioned, all of the bloggers spent a great deal of time following the mainstream media. They linked to stories from the major news outlets, posted excerpts from these stories, and in most cases did both. They all acted as guides, of a sort, surfing the mainstream media for stories of interest, giving their readers a one-stop-shopping site for news and opinion that they deemed worthy of reading. All bloggers commented on what was being reported in mainstream media. There were cases where bloggers acted as fact-checkers, pointing out errors, but they did not state that this was

their primary purpose.¹⁴ The errors that were pointed out were, for the most part, either typos that were quickly corrected by the news organization or accusations of bias and not interpreting data correctly – accusations and assumptions that could not be substantiated. These critiques were matters of opinion rather than errors. For the most part these critiques came from conservative-leaning bloggers accusing some media, in particular the CBC, of being left-wing. For instance, McMillan has made it very clear that she perceives the CBC of having a left-wing bias. When she announced to her readers that she would be blogging on CBC's site during the election she titled her post "Sleeping with the Enemy" (McMillan, 2005). Even though she was blogging for CBC, it didn't stop her from making it known when she thought the CBC was throwing soft lobs at the New Democrat leader Jack Layton. In a post which she titled "Do You Like Puppies, Mr. Layton?", she wrote:

I've been subjecting myself to the CBC National this evening, and as I type, Jack Layton is before a studio audience in their "Your Turn" segment. So far, 5 questions have been "selected" by the CBC producers, and each one is no more than a preamble to allow Layton to fill in the gaps with NDP campaign ads. I fully expect question number 6 to be "*Do you like puppies, Mr. Layton, and how much?*" How pathetic. I'm turning it back to Drew Carey. (McMillan, 2006b)

McMillan's comments are typical of much of the accusations of bias. None of the bloggers offered what could be considered proof of bias. What they wrote about were

¹⁴ In Canada there is one blog devoted completely to tracking media errors, www.regrettheerror.com. However, this blog was not looked at in this study, as it is not technically a political blog, but rather a blog devoted to this one subject.

their impressions that news organizations were leaning toward one side of the political spectrum or the other. However, sometimes bloggers also suggested that reporters were biased because they were not being thorough in their reporting. For example, Daveberta, who writes a liberal-leaning blog out of Edmonton (<http://daveberta.blogspot.com>), posted this entry, with a link to the CBC story, on December 13, 2005: “Albertans are angry! According to the CBC reporter who only interviewed one angry Albertan... that's totally proportional, one angry Calgarian equals 3 million angry Albertans... sure...” (Daveberta, 2005). The story he linked to was titled “Albertans frustrated by lack of attention”. The story describes how two weeks into the election campaign only one party leader, Green Party leader Jim Harris, had campaigned in the province. Other leaders were either expected or hoping to stop in Alberta, but hadn't yet (“Albertans frustrated,” 2005). It's true the article quotes only one Albertan, a Calgarian, and at first glance it could seem as if this is sloppy reporting. However, it could be argued that the reporter, assignment editor and newsroom knew that this sentiment was widespread in Alberta, believed this to be general knowledge, and were simply using one person's quote as an example of this. So, while Daveberta's point is a good one, perhaps the news organization did know that it was reporting on a more general feeling. In this case, it would perhaps have been better for the news organization to more clearly state why it had come to this conclusion. The way it is written at the moment does make it seem as if one person is the litmus test for an entire province's anger.

Original Journalism?

Those skeptical of the influence of blogs say they do not add anything new to the media landscape, first and foremost because they don't produce original journalism and are simply places for opinion and rumour. They may be a great vat of public opinion, but they are not the leaders of this discussion. Instead, some say they merely follow on the coattails of professional journalists (Haas, 2005; O'Brien, 2004). During the election campaign some bloggers did claim that they were doing the work of journalists by breaking stories and doing their own investigative work (Taylor, 2006a). But, despite their claims, I wasn't able to find proof they were actually first on any stories. For instance, one of the stories they claim as their own involved income trusts and allegations of insider trading. In November of 2005 it was known that there was going to be an announcement on income trusts coming from the finance minister at the time, Ralph Goodale. Those in the financial sector who are interested in such things, were concerned that income trusts were going to be taxed. The announcement came on November 23rd. Income trusts remained tax-free. But in the hours before the announcement there was a spike in trading of the trusts, which made it appear as if someone knew about the content of the announcement beforehand and used the information to their advantage.

Conservative bloggers claim *they* broke the story with their investigative work. Others disagree, although they do give bloggers some credit for keeping the story in the mainstream media. Antonia Zerbisias, who writes and blogs for the *Toronto Star*, doesn't believe that bloggers were first on this story, but she does concede that they may have had something to do with keeping it alive.

Oh sure, the Canadian blogosphere can probably take credit for keeping the income trust scandal alive while the mainstream media, which broke the story, were waiting for new developments. But the blogs didn't really advance the story, they mostly just railed about how the media weren't ranting enough about it. (Zerbasias, 2006)

While it is debatable whether bloggers broke stories or produced original journalism during the federal election campaign and otherwise, some people, as Zerbasias points out, credit bloggers with keeping stories alive in the mainstream media that otherwise would have been dropped. People who have written about bloggers' influence over mainstream media often point out that bloggers have the time and the will to stick with stories that the mainstream media has dropped in the interest of moving on to more current news. Sometimes the tenacity of these bloggers results in stories reappearing in the mainstream media's news schedule (Lennon, 2003; Lessig, 2004). I've already mentioned the case of the income trust scandal, but I'd like to illustrate this phenomenon with another example. During the election campaign, bloggers are credited with forcing the resignation of a Liberal organizer by keeping another story on the news agenda, ironically, a story that was generated by a blog. On his personal blog, the executive vice-president of the Ontario wing of the Liberal party, Mike Klander, compared Olivia Chow, an NDP candidate running in the Toronto area, to a chow chow dog. On December 22nd he posted this apology: "It would appear that more people viewed my blog than the small circle of friends it was intended [sic] for. I apologize if anyone was offended by my comments...they were meant to be in jest" (Bowman, 2006). The next day the *Toronto Star* ran a piece about Klander's blog in its Election Notebook. Then bloggers picked up

the story and wouldn't let it drop. Some of them found the post. Even though it had been deleted its' cache could be viewed through Google's search engine. While it could be argued that Klander's gaff was enough on its own to force his resignation, John Bowman, who wrote the blog report for CBC.ca during the election, believes that it was the bloggers' interest in the story that in the end forced Klander's resignation. If not for them the Liberal party would have let Klander slide with an apology:

[A]fter a five-column-inch story about "Separated at Birth" appeared on page 6 of the Star, the deletion of the blog and an apology from Klander were enough for senior Liberals. After bloggers became aware of Klander's blog and wrote about it, posted earlier excerpts from Klander's blog, showed pictures, and spread the word to other blogs – publishing more information on the topic than any newspaper ever could – only then did Klander have no choice but to quit. (Bowman, 2006)

Although bloggers have been given credit for keeping the income trust story alive and for Mike Klander's resignation, it's hard to measure whether bloggers have kept other stories on the mainstream news agenda that otherwise would have disappeared. What cannot be disputed however is that the mainstream media was certainly paying attention to what was happening in the blogosphere during the election campaign. Both CBC.ca and CTV.ca hired bloggers to write on their sites. They also used bloggers to help them find sources (McMillan, 2006c).

Since the election, political parties have treated the political bloggers in a similar fashion to journalists, at least when it comes to informing bloggers about their events, policy announcements or reactions to policy announcements. Arnold says politicians are

now sending press releases to bloggers and treating them the same as they would any other media. During the 2007 Liberal leadership race, bloggers were dealt with like any other media: they were given credentials and offered the same sort of amenities as journalists. But even if they're treated like journalists, Arnold says he doesn't want to be one. As far as he's concerned, a journalist has a different kind of style, one that emphasizes balance and objectivity. He doesn't want to worry about this. He wouldn't mind writing an article or two in the future, but for now he likes the idea of being able to give his two cents on an issue, or making a joke about a news story, without having to worry about giving "both sides of the story". But even if Arnold is not acting as a journalist – going out and hunting down original reporting – he believes blogs, the good blogs, are doing something that is original. When I asked him what made a good blog he said, while every blog has a different style, a good post provides an insight you won't find somewhere else. What Arnold articulates is primarily what most political bloggers appear to be doing – attempting to add something new and different to the media landscape. They are attempting to add something that expands on what mainstream media is producing, by adding their opinion and their analysis. (There is, as pointed out earlier, an irony inherent in the relationship between bloggers and mainstream media. On the one hand, the media is something they all spend a great deal of time critiquing and criticizing. On the other, they rely on this media for their own content: to guide what they will write about or to provide fodder for their posts. Without the mainstream media they wouldn't exist in their present form.) There are however, as I've mentioned, bloggers who do consider some of what they are doing is original journalism. For instance, Janke, who writes *Angry in the Great White North*, considers himself one of the bloggers who has

uncovered original story lines and he says he is happy that mainstream media has used him, or his story ideas, in their reporting. He will continue to be happy if they use him in this way, as long as they give him credit. Most recently, he is credited in CBC stories as the consumer who noticed that a tube of toothpaste he bought in a Guelph dollar store appeared to be counterfeit (“Toothpaste doesn’t match,” 2007).

Community

Even though citizen journalism is the primary reason political bloggers appear to be taking up the practice, the idea of community does feature prominently for these bloggers as well. Political bloggers are writing for an audience and they encourage back and forth with their readers. They’re not necessarily writing simply to get something off their chest. Through the comments function they want other people to respond. Out of these conversations about politics and current events, a sort of community, politicized in nature, evolves. For instance, Arnold believes he does form a connection with other bloggers whom he reads and who read his blog. When he meets bloggers in person at a political convention, people he’s argued back and forth with online, he says, “you sort of feel like you do know them”. John Klein (www.abandonedstuff.com) writes the blog *Saskboy* out of Yorkton, Saskatchewan¹⁵. In an interview, from his home in Yorkton, he told me he has found a community through blogging that is significant to him and he’s excited by the idea that he can have friends all over the world. Even if they never meet face-to-face he still considers people he meets on his blog to be friends with whom he has

¹⁵ Since my interview with John Klein he has moved from Yorkton to Regina, where he still writes his blog.

similar interests. “Because it’s global you don’t have to be limited by geography. You can pick your friends by whoever interests you. So, likeminded groups can work together on something or argue on something from anywhere on the planet.” Like Klein, Janke says he has also met people through his blog whom he considers friends. He started blogging because he thought it would be a good way to “reach out” to people. He is trained as an engineer and he was working in a job as a project manager when he started his blog. Project management, he says, is a job that involves mainly things like juggling people’s timetables. It wasn’t a job that made him happy, principally because he felt he wasn’t connecting to anyone. His blog helped remedy this. He has met a network of people through his blog, some he considers friends, others acquaintances – all of them valued.

However, although Klein thinks blogging is a wonderful way to meet new people, he is also aware that this sort of friendship is limited by geography. These are not friends he can call up on a whim and go out with. But for those people who have trouble getting out of the house to visit people in real life, he says this sort of virtual connection allows them to communicate with people – something they may not otherwise have a chance to do.

Sure there’s the limiting factors of geography. So they’re not like a friend you can go out for beers with all the time, you have to plan ahead to do that kind of thing. But a lot of people are content just sitting around in their homes in the evening.... watching TV, or reading, or spending time with the kids anyway... this lets them do a few of those things, plus talk

with other people at the same time without having to drive down to the Lion's club or wherever.

Klein has made the effort to meet fellow bloggers in person. He's started organizing a yearly picnic for the Saskatchewan political bloggers that has been attended by bloggers of all political stripes. This proves, he believes, that you can move incidental online acquaintances with people into more substantial relationships. Klein brought up Michael Keren's book *Blogosphere: The New Political Arena* (2006) and expressed his vehement disagreement with the premise that bloggers are lonely people. Instead, he believes bloggers are just like everyone else, only they have harnessed technology to work for them. "Every person gets lonely and likes to have a whole bunch of people to interact with. And bloggers are just enlightened in that they've discovered yet another way to use technology to communicate with people."

Bloggers are also creating a sort of community by linking to each other extensively and creating blogrolls. (Blogroll is simply the word used in the blogosphere to describe lists of links to other bloggers that are posted in the margins of blogs.) All the bloggers I looked at have links to other bloggers. Arnold gets between 2000 and 3000 unique visitors a day. In times of election or other political events, those numbers can jump to 7000 or 8000 thousand a day. He says it's hard to say how his readership built up. He only got a stat counter after he had what he considered a decent readership, but his guess is that linking from other bloggers was the key. He's been linked by a couple of high profile Canadian bloggers, Paul Wells and Warren Kinsella, and these links, he believes, directed many readers his way. He also thinks the Liberal blogroll has helped him by enabling more people to easily find him.

Unlike the personal bloggers, political bloggers don't seem to develop relationships with their readers wherein they depend on their readers for information or emotional support. They are looking instead for conversation and debate. There are of course, exceptions. When Red Tory (<http://redtory.blogspot.com>) had a heart attack and told the blogosphere that he was going to have to quit smoking, he was inundated with responses from people giving him tips and advice or simply encouragement. But further to this, it was evident that his readers had developed some sort of bond with him. Before his heart attack he had stopped blogging for about a month – his readers noticed his absence and said they were worried about him. Some commented that they had noticed he seemed depressed and were concerned about his well being (Red Tory, 2007). But Red Tory's situation is a rarity. Most political bloggers stay away from personal talk altogether, preferring to keep their conversations centered around political debate.

Still, by creating links with each other, connections they value even if these connections are rooted in political discussions and don't venture into the personal, political bloggers are creating relationships that I believe Boase and Wellman (2006) would consider being typical of the networked individual. They are forming weak ties with a range of people who do not necessarily live in their same geographical surrounding. These are people with whom they come to enjoy for their opinions and their political debate. Of the fifteen political blogs, only one broached personal issues during the time frame I looked at. In this case, it became apparent that the blogger had formed ties with his readers, ties which offered him emotional support and informational support on how to beat his illness and addiction to cigarettes. However, all fifteen bloggers were

forming ties with their readers and using these weak ties to engage with other people interested in discussing politics and media.

The Nature of Community on Political Blogs

The question I have then turns to the nature of the community that is being created by and among political bloggers. Are these diverse communities or communities of likeminded people? If there is a diversity of opinion being expressed in these blogs it could promote a varied discussion, which could lead to understanding of different points of view. Conversely, a discussion of likeminded people would only serve to entrench already held opinions. Most political bloggers appear to foster and enjoy a range debate and opinion on their blogs. For instance, Klein says about half his comments are from people who disagree with him and he likes it this way because it generates more discussion. However, this is not the case on all political blogs and I have observed that most, during the election campaign in particular, turned into echo chambers where likeminded people bounced similar views off each other. For the most part the readers who engaged with the bloggers agreed with or shared similar political views with the bloggers. If a reader left a comment that disagreed with the blogger's post, or other people who were part of the comments thread, they were sometimes treated rudely and told in unsavory language that their opinions were either wrong or worthless. Occasionally the blogger would intervene and ask to keep the discussion civilized. Outside of the election campaign, although there is still a great deal of like meets like on these blogs, I have observed that there is at least some modicum of acceptance and even in some cases encouragement of different points of view, which, in turn, fosters more of a

sense of diversity. All of the bloggers studied have links on their sites to bloggers of different political stripes, encouraging their readers to read different points of view. As Janke writes: “[T]here are a lot of quality blogs covering all points of the political spectrum in Canada, and you would do well to take the time and read what they have to offer. The best voter is the well-informed voter” (Janke, 2007b). I believe this sort of diversity, the encouraging of discussion and debate, is good for democracy. It gives people who might not turn up in other venues, such as town hall meetings for instance, a chance to engage in political debate. As well, for those who might feel too shy or inhibited to engage their politicians, or others, face to face, the online environment gives them a chance to express their point of view. It’s true that what they have to say may not reach the people they’d like (their Member of Parliament for instance), but at least it is a place for them to engage in political discussions with others who have a similar interest in politics.

Like the personal bloggers, political bloggers can also remain anonymous, which raises questions as to the strength of any sort of community that is being formed. However, many of the political bloggers do have their real names attached to their blogs and it is very easy to find out more about them. But even if they don’t have their real names attached, most of the political bloggers are affiliated with political blogrolls, they talk among themselves and seem to have formed strong links between each other based on years of communicating back and forth. These sorts of links don’t necessarily seem to rest on whether a reader knows the blogger’s last name, or not. As well, as will be further explained in the next section, Arnold says for political bloggers in Canada it’s hard to

remain anonymous. It's a fairly small group and sooner or later, someone will figure out who you are.

Money and Fame

As I've established in earlier chapters, money and fame go hand in hand. The more popular the blog, the more money one can make from the blog. Some political bloggers are making a small amount of money per month off Google ads (between \$50 and \$100), while others have used their blogs to catapult them into another line of work. For instance, Janke was working as an engineer when he started his blog, but the popularity of his blog led to a new career as a blogmaster. A blogmaster is someone who owns, writes or manages blogs. In Janke's case, he is in charge of managing several blogs and other online forums for the company he now works with (Janke, 2007a).

For Janke, blogging led him to a new career that he enjoys much more than his old job, but even though his blog led him down this path, he doesn't make much money off his original political blog. For Arnold it is the same. He says he only makes about \$60 a month through Google ads. He says he would post more ads, as long as they weren't too obtrusive or annoying like pop-up ads. Klein also has ads on his site, but he purposely keeps them at the bottom of his blog so that they're not the first thing someone sees. He gets a little money every time someone loads a page, but it's also not much. He wants to keep the number of ads he hosts low because he's concerned about his readers who still connect to the Internet through dial up, as many people do in the rural areas around where he lives. A site takes longer to load if there are a lot of ads and he's worried that if his site takes too long to load people will go elsewhere. He says it's more important to him to

have more readers than ads. But although he doesn't have many ads, he has started doing something he calls product reviews. They haven't brought him money, but they have brought him goods. He mentioned on his blog at one point something about an old-fashioned razor. A company in the United States that manufactures these razors found the post and sent him a sample to review. A brush, soap, pan and razor arrived in the mail. The deal is that as he uses them he is going to write about the experience. He says he is telling his readers that this was a free product, so they should take what he has to say with a grain of salt. Perhaps if he were to get better known, he would make more money from his blog instead of free samples, but for Klein, although it is "moderately" important to be well known, fame is not the be-all-end-all. He describes it this way:

It's not the ultimate goal. But I figured a while ago, the more people who read me the more influence I'll have and the more money I can make from it. Although I don't make next to anything on it right now. It's just more to get my ideas out.

Money is one thing that can result from a higher readership, but how does an audience affect other aspects of these blogs? Some bloggers are very aware that their audience is out there and it affects how they write. For instance, Arnold is very sensitive to the fact that what he is writing is public. If he makes a joke, he reads it twice to make sure that it isn't offensive, or could be misconstrued as being offensive. He says he chooses his words carefully under all circumstances. He is very conscious that he is his own editor and he has no one else to scrutinize his writing. Unlike many journalists who have producers and editors vetting and editing their work, Arnold has only himself. His friends sometime suggest topics and he says occasionally he'll steal one of their jokes but

when it comes down to it he relies on his own judgment when deciding what he will or will not post. When he first started blogging he felt a lot freer about what he could talk about, but he has become much more cautious since his blog has become more well known, and especially since he no longer uses a pseudonym. He still criticizes the Liberal party when he feels it's warranted, but because his name is now attached to the blog, he exercises more restraint. If he hears something he believes is confidential it stays out of the blog. As an example, at the Liberal leadership convention he heard lots of rumours that he felt were confidential that he kept out of the blog. It's apparent that over the years he's developed more of a sense that he is a public person and he is writing a public blog. The pseudonym he used is something he and his friends came up with when they were writing letters to the editor. But he says after a while most people had figured out who he was. As he puts it, "it's hard to keep a secret in politics." He dropped the pseudonym because it wasn't doing its' job and everyone knew who he was anyways. However, there was another reason: "To be perfectly honest, it's nice to go to a convention and have someone say I like your blog. Why not get some of the credit if people are reading it and enjoying it?"

As far as recognition, bloggers express mixed opinions as to what sort of recognition is most valued. It is clear that some bloggers would like to be hired by mainstream media, putting out pleas in their blogs for instance that if the media is going to follow what they do they should actually put them on the payroll. Others like Janke, have been happy to be guests in the mainstream media, or to have contributed to a reporter's story. Arnold blogged for CTV during the election campaign, but although he says it was nice to be recognized by this sort of media, he's not sure if it raised his profile

much; perhaps to people in the mainstream media, but he's not sure if it had any real impact on his blogging audience. As far as what it did for his own personal feeling of self-worth, links from other bloggers mean much more to him than links from mainstream media. When high profile bloggers link to him he feels much more validated than when other media profile him or link to him. Being recognized by his peers is a higher form of praise. It means that those who blog recognize him as someone worthy of reading. "It's nice to be taken a bit more seriously by other mainstream media. But I mean honestly as a blog person I got a much bigger kick out of like Paul Wells or Andrew Coyne linking to my blog."

Conclusion

Most political bloggers take up the practice of blogging in part to become citizen journalists. They are using their blogs to add their voice to the media landscape. To sum up the role they played in the 2005/2006 Canadian federal election campaign, they were primarily a source of commentary and analysis. They gave people, who otherwise wouldn't have access to a public platform, a chance to speak up in an arena that had the potential of reaching a large audience, even if some blogs, in reality, were only read by a few. They also acted as news guides for their readers, surfing the Internet and linking to stories of interest in the mainstream media. Although there were some attempts to be journalists in the traditional sense, most political bloggers were not engaged in investigating and breaking stories. They were not producing original journalism. Although some conservative bloggers claimed they did break original stories and were ahead of the mainstream media these claims cannot be backed up substantially. It seems

bloggers did influence the mainstream media by virtue of the fact that the media paid attention to them during the election: they were used as sources for stories, they were used as contacts to find sources and they were hired to blog by major media outlets. In at least one case, the income trust story, they are credited with keeping a news story on the mainstream agenda that might otherwise have disappeared. They are also credited with forcing the resignation of a political organizer who posted disparaging comments about a candidate on his personal blog, an affair that was a big story both in the blogosphere and the mainstream media.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine what effect bloggers had on the election, but they are being credited with organizing an online campaign against one Toronto area MP that may have had something to do with her loss (Bowman, 2006). But, as Mark Federman, a blogger and past head of the McLuhan Management Studies at the University of Toronto, says, “the issue of whether blogs affected this election is not the right question” (Federman, 2006). The right question is to ask is – what did the election do to the blogosphere? For him, the answer is that the election energized the blogosphere and he thinks we can expect more from bloggers in the future. Blogs will end up changing politics as politicians are forced to pay more attention to bloggers who are engaged in transferring information in a way that is markedly different from television, radio or newspapers.

The interesting thing about blogs – and we will begin to see this, I think, beginning with the next parliament – is that they will be shedding a new light on the government through a phenomenon called “emergent transparency.” This is the process whereby one person has a few bits of

information and so does another person (and so on), and they all connect to one another through the blogosphere, enabling a mosaic picture to emerge that reveals what's really going on. This is a new mechanism whereby the people who typically aren't getting the message through conventional media, namely the politicians themselves, will unavoidably be forced to listen to ordinary Canadians in a new way. The next occupant of 24 Sussex Drive, whoever he may be, will have his feet held to the proverbial fire by many more sets of hands than ever before. (Federman, 2006)

In the year and a half following the election it is difficult to say whether politicians are feeling any sort of threat from bloggers. Some are certainly treating bloggers as a form of media they need to acknowledge – sending bloggers press releases for example. What I have observed in this study is that bloggers continue to take on the role they did during the election campaign – acting as citizen journalists primarily by using their blogs as a way to add their opinion and their point of view to the media landscape. Often they are overtly and proudly biased. A reader should not expect to find any sort of balanced reporting on a blog. Sheila Lennon (2003), the editor of *Projo.com*, says this is precisely what makes a blog appealing. “To be interesting, the blog must have a discernible human voice. A blog with just links is a portal” (p. 77). And certainly, the political bloggers focus a great deal on cultivating their own voice. They have also continued to monitor the work of journalists and politicians alike, using their blogs to create news roundups and to critique journalists on their work, as well as politicians on their policy. For the most part this is what these blogs are used for; bloggers are diligent researchers who revel in being able to compare what a politician has said before with

what he has said today. They compare mainstream media coverage. They compare political promises. They compare political policies.

Although none of the bloggers state that community, friendship or relationships are the reasons why they blog, nonetheless, a sense of community has developed and become important for some political bloggers. Even for those bloggers who don't mention community or relationships at all, it is clear that they actively foster discussion and conversation on their sites and this indirectly encourages a form of community. Unlike the personal bloggers, who form vast networks of weak ties on which they come to depend for information and emotional support, political bloggers seem to foster connections in order to engage in political discussion and media critiques.

It could be argued that political bloggers are more open to discussion and debate than the personal bloggers. Some personal bloggers have turned their comments off, shutting down any sort of discussion, while none of the political bloggers have. In the concluding chapter I will turn my attention more thoroughly to comparing how the personal bloggers and political bloggers negotiate both ideas of community and citizen journalism. I will also look at what this might mean for the future of journalism and society more generally, in particular how we negotiate and form relationships.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The idea of community on the Internet is, as cyberspace theorist David Bell (2001) puts it, “one of the most prominent and controversial aspects of emerging cybercultures” (p. 92). Critics say to have community you need to be rooted in a physical space and online communities actually discourage civic engagement. Online communities offer the possibility of anonymity, something that can destroy notions of social trust that form the foundation of community. As well, the fact that you can enter or leave them quickly “undermines the sort of binding social and moral obligations that convert relationships from market contracts into communities” (Barney, 2004a, p. 161). While these things may apply to blogs – you can be anonymous, you can come and go as you please and as such it’s questionable how strong the blogger/reader bond is – it appears many people (both bloggers and readers) who take part in blogs *feel* like they are part of a community, even if they aren’t in the same geographical place or have ever met face-to-face. They are in effect, forming “communities of meaning” (Fernback, 1999).

During the course of this study it became evident that many of the personal bloggers either started blogging because they were looking for some sort of community, or the community they found is a reason they keep going. Even if a search and/or desire for community wasn’t expressed in a direct way it became apparent that they all formed relationships with the readers who responded to their posts in the comments section. I have described these ties as weak ties. They are valuable, because of the information they provided and/or the emotional support. The political bloggers also formed relationships

with their readers, but these relationships seem to be much less of a focus. Their focus and purpose was primarily to become citizen journalists.

In this concluding chapter I will be looking at how the themes of community and citizen journalism interconnect on personal and political blogs. Although I have identified that community building appears to be a primary reason why personal bloggers take up the practice and citizen journalism features most prominently with the political bloggers, there are threads of both these themes running through the personal and the political blogs. I will be looking at what the themes of community and citizen journalism might say about society more generally and the future of journalism. I hope to offer some thoughts about how journalists should respond to the presence of these bloggers.

Community

Although there are arguably many people who visit blogs just to read, look and move on, many readers do develop some sort of connection with the blogger. This is especially evident in the personal blogs. I have described most of these relationships as existing somewhere on a continuum between the two extremes that Ferdinand Tonnies (1887/1957) outlined as community and association. Most are not extremely close, tight-knit, interdependent relationships, but neither are they cold, contractual relationships. They are somewhere in the middle.

I've also argued that the relationships on blogs also fit into the framework of community expressed in the theory of networked individualism. This theory rests on the idea that, in the 21st century, community is no longer bound by geography, instead each individual develops their own personal network of ties (Boase & Wellman, 2006).

Although the networked individual has some strong, deep relationships, she builds herself a network of mostly *weak ties*. Weak doesn't mean insignificant (Granovetter, 1973). These ties are important for the blogger and the visitor, mainly for the emotional support they provide, the information they provide or the opportunity for political dialogue. While the personal bloggers are finding access to information they wouldn't otherwise have and emotional support through their ties, the political bloggers are, for the most part, finding people with whom they can engage in political debate. In cases where political bloggers do deal with personal issues they act and are treated like personal bloggers. They offer and receive emotional support and information, which makes it clear that they feel as if they have relationship with each other, a relationship that is important to them. But even if they never address personal issues, political bloggers are still forming relationships with their readers and other political bloggers by actively promoting discussion in their blogs. They are looking for debate. They are looking to be engaged with other people. They are also looking to be engaged with the journalists who produce the mainstream media they consume and critique. They are in this sense forming communities. I would describe these communities in the same way I would describe the communities formed on personal blogs. They are in the middle of the continuum between Tonnie's (1887) description of community and association, best described, within the context of networked individualism, as weak ties (Boase & Wellman, 2006).

The trend on many personal blogs is toward communities of interest. While blogs certainly offer the *possibility* for social diversity, the reality is that many personal blogs turn into places for like-minded people only. On the political blogs, however, there appears to be much more diversity of opinion, with bloggers encouraging debate from

different sides of the political spectrum. (It should also be noted that blogs are also the domain of people who meet a certain socio-economic standard that allows them to afford Internet access.) “Cyberbalkanization” (Putnam, 2000, p. 177) is the word that’s been coined to describe online environments in which people only communicate with those with whom they have an affinity. Robert Putnam’s (2000) concern about cyberbalkanization is that this sort of environment doesn’t allow for what he calls “bridging social capital” (p. 22). In other words, the benefits people gain from having social contact with people outside of their immediate close family. “Real-world interactions often force us to deal with diversity, whereas the virtual world may be more homogeneous, not in demographic terms, but in terms of interest and outlook” (Putnam, 2000, p. 178). Robert Bellah (1985) and his colleagues in *Habits of the Heart* use the term “lifestyle enclaves” to describe groups that are together because of shared interests. I have found that to a certain extent this is what happens on blogs, especially with the personal bloggers. Most are looking for people who will support them and share their point of view. When a visitor disagrees with the blogger, or other readers, she will often be taken to task, shouted down, or in some cases removed from the blog. It is also true to some extent with political bloggers. Similarly minded people often read each other. However, I have also found that on these blogs a more varied discussion is what’s valued. It is not always a polite discussion, but it is more diverse than what is found in the personal blogs. It should be noted that political bloggers rarely deal with personal issues. I would argue it is easier for a blogger to accept a range of opinions on something like politics, something that is not *necessarily* intensely personal, than it is to be faced with a range of opinions on something that is extremely personal. For example, it might be

easier to hear that someone disagrees with your take on the present government's environmental policy, than it would be to hear someone disagree with you on how you discipline your child, something which would bring into question your ability as a parent and your personal morals.

I must emphasize, as well, that any community that ensues, on both personal and political blogs, is very much under the control of the blogger. She can ban people from commenting, she can shut down the comments section completely and she decides the direction of the conversation by what she blogs about. She also builds up protective walls around herself (in a virtual sense of course), keeping certain details about her life from her readers. For instance, the political bloggers hardly reveal any personal details about their lives. With the personal bloggers, even though it seems as if these bloggers are being very open about themselves, in reality it is very hard, if not impossible, to find out information such as where exactly they live. This, of course, makes sense. It would be foolish to publicize your home address or work address on a public blog. However, the point I am making is that readers have limited knowledge of bloggers, even if they feel as if they know certain aspects of their lives very well. For instance, Armstrong posts pictures of her house, her family, her street, her friends and her dog. But although readers know she lives in Salt Lake City and may feel as if they are intimately acquainted with the inside of her home, they actually have no idea exactly where it is. To use other examples: Summers regularly posts intimate details of her life, yet a reader knows almost nothing about her extended family. Jen B. also posts details of her life, yet we don't know her last name. Laid Off Dad (www.laidoffdad.typepad.com) also talks about the intimate details of child-rearing, yet we don't know his name or one of his children's names. Of

course, in real life all of us hide things about ourselves from our friends. We all have a public face that we present to those with whom we aren't extremely close. But this is precisely my point. The relationships that form on blogs, for the most part, *are not* relationships that can be described as extremely close. However, it is apparent that many people do *feel* like they have a connection with the blogger, one that they find valuable and this value should not be underplayed.

I have noticed that some people who read personal blogs end up lecturing the blogger or giving her advice that is unsolicited and undesired (especially when it comes to issues of child-rearing or health issues such as mental illness). Sometimes readers can be very harsh with their critique of the blogger's life choices. It is often evident some readers feel as if they have a more intense relationship with bloggers than they actually do, or have the right to insinuate themselves into the lives of bloggers in a way the blogger may not want. This is not a phenomenon restricted to blogging, but it also applies to the online environment more generally. The ability to be anonymous online means some people are more inclined to throw aside social niceties, and engage in rude, potentially destructive behaviour (Putnam, 2000). In the blogging world, when bloggers receive too much negative feedback, some end up turning off their comments, shutting down any sort of two-way communication with their readers.

Something Missing in Real Life?

This desire for engagement with others, for both the personal bloggers and the political bloggers, raises questions about our society. Are they turning to an online forum to address a need that isn't being fulfilled offline? For some of the personal bloggers,

they state they did go online because they were looking for something they couldn't find offline; they were looking for people they could relate to. For those who weren't expressly looking for this, some say the community they've found online has become valuable to them. In much the same way, some of the political bloggers say the community they have found online has also become valuable. It would be presumptuous to say all bloggers are missing something in their real lives and have turned to an online forum to remedy this. (With the exception, of course, of those bloggers who do explicitly say they were missing something in their offline life that they found online.) What the online world *does* give all bloggers however, is an easy way to connect with people with whom they often grow to feel they have meaningful relationships. It is a way to overcome geography and meet people whom they might never get the chance to talk to otherwise. It's a way for people who feel shy when they meet people in person to express who they are, without having to deal with the painful reality of face-to-face encounters. It's a way for people to present their likes and dislikes to the world, attract people into their orbit who, over time, may grow to be friends. As Klein says, bloggers aren't necessarily lonely people, they are simply using the technology at hand to improve their quality of life. Reaching out to people online is a way for bloggers to enlarge their circle of friends and acquaintances. It is a way to access information they wouldn't otherwise be able to. It is a way to feel connected to other people.

There are at least two ways to look at the move to online social interactions. The first, as Klein sees it, is more benign – bloggers are simply using the tools at their disposal to reach out to people they normally couldn't because of geographical restrictions. The second is more troubling – we are leading lives that tend to pull people

into private, separate spheres, rather than bringing people together. Bloggers are turning to an online forum as a remedy *or*, once they are online, they find connections that they find valuable and *then* realize that they're improving their quality of life. Although I agree with Klein, that bloggers are resourceful and not necessarily lonely, I cannot help but wonder if there are greater influences at work here. Perhaps we are living in a society, as Robert Putnam (2000) describes, built around the idea of individual success – and this environment, while it may have its benefits, has also had the effect of isolating people. I would like to emphasize that I am not nostalgic for a time gone by. As I write this I am very aware of the critique of small, tight-knit communities – online or offline. They're great if you fit in – terrible if you don't (Bell, 2001). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer ways in which more meaningful social interactions can be fostered in the offline world, however, I would like to put forward that it is possible the search for community online or the happiness people experience when they find community online is an indication that people are feeling unsatisfied with the social interactions available to them offline or are realizing once they are online that something was missing offline. I don't think there is any fear that people's lives may move entirely online. The blog is not an all-or-nothing endeavour. It is something people use to add to their range of social relationships, not replace them.

Citizen Journalism

At the same time personal and political bloggers are finding different types of community online, they are also becoming citizen journalists. This is particularly true of the political bloggers who blog in order to challenge mainstream media, but also, to some

extent, the personal bloggers. Before I continue, I would like to emphasize that citizen journalism is not divorced from ideas of community. First, by becoming citizen journalists some bloggers are attempting to join the media community. Second, by blogging about particular subjects, they are attracting people to their blogs, with whom they grow to have relationships. Citizen journalism and community are intertwined; one follows another.

Turning now to citizen journalism, I'll begin with the political bloggers. These bloggers are attempting to become a source of information and opinion that people can turn to instead of relying on more traditional media. They are also critiquing the work of journalists by acting as fact checkers, looking for what they perceive as bias or sloppy reporting. They also challenge what should be reported as news and how news is being reported. In some cases they are claiming to do a better job at uncovering the news than professional journalists. However, although some are claiming to be doing the work of journalists and producing original journalism, I find it questionable whether this is exactly what they're doing. Bloggers are very good at digging up information, comparing and critiquing news stories, but for the most part, bloggers rely on what is being produced by mainstream media and use this reporting as a jumping off point for their blogging. They post their critiques and their thoughts about what has been reported, but don't necessarily post original material. By original material I mean they don't usually interview sources and report on what they've found out. Most blogs are best described as the equivalent of a daily column, or letter to the editor. They are presenting a unique point of view or interpretation of events, but what they are not doing is *reporting*. However, what some bloggers *are* very good at is digging up past news reports,

transcriptions of speeches or policy and comparing it with what is being reported in the present day. This also can add interesting and valuable context to a news story.

The Blog Effect: Suggestions for Change for the Mainstream Media

I think traditional media has a lot to learn from bloggers, namely that some of their audience is feeling left out, and what they learn could be used to change their news practices. Media organizations, I think, are realizing this as well, and have been quick to try to adopt some of the citizen journalist's methods. Many news organizations are incorporating blogging into a journalist's job, for instance, or hiring bloggers who become popular in the blogosphere. As I watch this happen, I worry they're missing the point. Blogging is a way for people to tell their stories outside of the confines of the mainstream media. Part of the beauty of blogging is that it started out as an organic, unregulated process, free from the clutches of hefty media organizations with substantial pedigrees and the codes of conduct that follow. (Not to mention any sort of commercial obligation or debt to advertisers.) So, although mainstream media can learn from bloggers, I don't think it's necessarily wise for a media organization to adopt the same methods as bloggers, or try to hire bloggers and bring them into the fold.

What the political bloggers' interest in critiquing and challenging mainstream media does is clarify what they feel is missing from the mainstream media and the role they feel they could play in correcting this. First of all, it is obvious after analyzing blogs and conducting interviews that many bloggers either feel like they don't have a say in what is being reported as news, or they are happy to have a say when the opportunity presents itself. They are very happy to have a public platform from which to offer their opinion. As well, some complain that mainstream media doesn't spend enough time

researching stories, or enough time following stories. Many feel that reporters aren't necessarily focusing on what they believe the story actually is. They question journalists' story choice or the treatment of stories. For instance, after the 2006 election, Stephen Taylor wondered why reporters seemed to still be focusing on the Liberals instead of reporting on the new Conservative government. In his opinion, reporters were either showing their Liberal bias or just being lazy and not searching out the real story.

[W]hy the attention to the Liberal Party without the real substance of governance underneath? Is it time to update the old contact list to include members of the new Conservative government? Are reporters falling back on their well-groomed and now less valuable contacts to push out that one last easy story about the old gang? (Taylor, 2006b)

Robert McClelland, on his blog (www.myblahg.com), regularly posts a "media watch" where he questions the media's coverage of stories. This media watch continues to this day. For instance, recently he commented on the coverage of two teenage boys who were not allowed to fly because their names had been put on Canada's "no fly" list. Neither of these teenagers were the person who was actually banned from flying, but because they shared the name they experienced problems at the airport. McClelland wondered why the media focused on the teenagers and not on the person who was really banned from flying.

The real question our incurious media should be probing is not why two kids named Alistair Butt had problems because their name was on a no fly list, it's who is the original Alistair Butt and why is he on the no fly list to begin with. (McClelland, 2007)

I believe that the mainstream media can learn several things from these sorts of reactions to their work. First, that many people are feeling their opinions and views aren't being represented, but further to this, I would add that some bloggers are feeling as if reporters aren't doing a good enough job at being journalists. In addition, many people are questioning the choices journalists make in framing stories. As I mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, I believe bloggers are part of a media landscape in which people are questioning how journalism actually works. Perhaps we don't always get the full story from large media organizations and bloggers offer a remedy to this situation (Hewitt, 2005; McMillan, 2006). "Blogs have become a key source of information and analysis for people who prefer to trust their own judgment (sic) rather than depend upon the spin, censorship, and narrow agenda of the usual sources" (Coleman, 2005, p. 276). The question then becomes – what can journalists do to respond to these sorts of critiques? I'll offer two suggestions that deal with journalistic rigour. (Journalistic rigour is a term used to describe the efforts journalists employ to report to the best of their abilities: asking tough questions, endeavouring to uncover many points of view and not falling for spin.) First, there needs to be renewed emphasis on reinforcing the core elements of journalism – asking tough questions, searching for stories even if sources are unwilling or difficult. And second, journalists need to be given the resources to actually accomplish this. I'm not saying such a renewal would be easy, even *if* journalists have the time and resources to devote to this type of reporting. During a speech at the 2007 Congress of the Humanities, Canada's largest gathering of social sciences academics, the CBC's Anna Maria Tremonti spoke about the rise of citizen journalists and how it is partly related to the difficulties mainstream media, and she included her national radio

current affairs program in this, has been having securing interviews with government officials, either elected or appointed. She talked about how it is becoming increasingly difficult for her and other reporters to seriously question many government officials and politicians. If reporters ask questions that are deemed to be too controversial, some government officials will simply refuse to come on the program again. The result, she said, is that sometimes reporters just don't ask the hard questions, preferring to have an interview with less controversy than no interview at all. She equated the rise of citizen journalists as being, in part, a response to this current journalistic atmosphere. An army of citizen journalists, sensitive to the spin that is being produced, has risen up and is pointing out that these tough questions aren't being asked and/or aren't being answered.

Perhaps what bloggers can teach journalists and those who run news organizations is this: there is a desire for more vigilant reporting and a desire for higher standards of journalistic rigour, including an increased openness to a wide range of perspectives. What Tremonti suggested during her speech, and I agree with, is that it is important for journalists to continue to concentrate on doing their jobs well and ask hard questions *even though* it might be difficult. Further to this, I would add it is important for news organizations to provide an atmosphere in which reporters are free to do their jobs to the best of their ability. This means hiring enough journalists so that no one feels stretched for time and forced to cut corners. This means ensuring that journalists on the payroll are given adequate resources and editorial support to pursue the interviews and the tough questions they think need to be on the air. During her speech, Tremonti also suggested that if government officials won't give interviews, there are other ways to uncover stories, such as going to source documents. Going through documents, however,

is time consuming. If this is the current political atmosphere, journalists need to be given the time and resources to go to the documents and hunt down stories that need to be told.

Absorbing the Blog?

I don't think it is in mainstream media's best interest to simply absorb the format of the blog or bloggers themselves, as has happened. Bloggers were hired during the 2005/2006 Canadian election campaign by both CTV and CBC. It was an interesting idea, but part of the appeal of bloggers is that they are independent entities who cultivate a persona all their own, separate from the mainstream media. Bloggers who are hired by mainstream media may run the risk of being accused of selling out or being co-opted. To be clear, I don't think it's necessarily a bad idea to hire bloggers who are talented writers. Everyone should be able to make a living, and if blogs enable mainstream media organizations to discover a talented writer they want to pay for their work, this should happen. But hiring a few bloggers is not a way to address the tidal wave of bloggers who have taken up the practice in order to critique the work of mainstream media. The best response to these bloggers is to concentrate on doing the job of journalism to the best of their ability and to realize that their presence could be seen as a compliment. To recognize that by demanding accuracy and accountability from journalists, bloggers are not a threat, but rather a confirmation that the profession of journalism is valued, important and needs to be protected.

The blog format can be an interesting medium for professional journalists if they use it as a place to explain their reporting process. Some journalists are using blogs to

appear more transparent in their work and build a sense of trust with the audience. For instance, some use them to show where they find sources and how they put the story together (Lasica, 2003a). Kevin Ann Willey, the editorial page editor at *The Dallas Morning News*, says her paper launched an editorial board blog in order to connect more with readers but also to “demystify” their work (Willey, 2003, p. 89). In Canada, CTV’s David Akin uses his blog to talk about the reporting he does and add extra information that didn’t make it into his stories.

Other journalists claim that the blog enhances their work by allowing them more freedom of expression. Bill Mitchell, editor of *Poynter Online* and a former reporter and editor at *The Detroit Free Press*, believes that “weblogs are providing journalists with more edge – helping them show more personality, style and immediacy than they might have ever displayed in their regular reports” (Mitchell, 2004, p. 65). J.D. Lasica, the editor of *Online Journalism Review*, concurs that blogs could work to personalize journalism, by letting journalists express thoughts and opinion that don’t fit into the regular format of reporting (Lasica, 2003a). Perhaps this is something more mainstream media outlets should consider, allow reporters to acknowledge that they are people with particular points of view. I could see the blog being a valuable asset in this regard if a journalist is able to be honest and personal in her blog, without being constrained by the regulations of her employer and some of the current journalistic norms around objectivity. I am not suggesting that this sort of format would work in all cases, but it would be interesting to allow more reporters to talk about who they are and where they come from. There is already a perception in the blogosphere that it is impossible for journalists to be objective. There is a perception that bias exists. If reporters were given

more chances to talk about their reporting process and how they endeavour to report in a balanced fashion, despite the fact that they are individuals who, by virtue of the fact they are human, possess a particular point of view, it might foster a greater understanding of the work they do.

I would argue that what mainstream media should take from the blogging phenomenon is not that blogging itself or bloggers need to be incorporated into their work, but that the process of journalism can and needs to be opened up. Journalists should be more transparent about how they do their work, the processes they use to find sources and report stories, whether or not they use a blog to do this.

They also should take the proliferation of blogs as a sign that people genuinely want to give their opinion on news stories and the news process. They don't simply want to absorb the news; they want to be part of a conversation. The mainstream media already encourages feedback from their audience, through talkback lines and letters to the editor, the blog is just another way for people to give their opinions.

The best response, I believe, is not to feel threatened by bloggers, but see them as a valuable resource – another way to gauge public opinion and the public's interest. It is impossible for a journalist to catch every story, so why not use bloggers to find out what people are talking about, where bloggers feel there are holes in a politician's story and, if it's warranted, investigate further?

Personal Blogger: Citizen Journalist

For the most part, I have focused on political bloggers in the context of citizen journalism and bloggers' engagement with the community of professional journalists.

However, personal bloggers should not be lost from this equation. They are producing what I consider to be human-interest stories, the types of stories that mainstream media regularly covers, although they do not express what they do in terms of citizen journalism. They talk about their lives in a way that I don't think the mainstream media could ever really capture. It is intensely personal and fairly uninhibited by time constraints – by this I mean they publish when they feel like publishing. I believe this adds a level of raw honesty to their work that couldn't be replicated in mainstream media where every story has to go through the filter of the journalist, editor or producer before it gets told. (Again, I must emphasize that I don't think blogging is a substitute for mainstream media, but a valuable addition.) Despite this, I believe all blogs, regardless of their impetus or focus, are a form of citizen journalism. I agree with Andrew Sullivan, blogger and columnist, that most bloggers are engaged in creating something that is “somewhere between writing a column and talk radio” (Clausen, 2006, p. 1). In this sense, whether they're one of the mommy bloggers writing about their kids or political junkies blogging the ins and outs of the recent Liberal leadership race, they are part of the media. They are the opinion columnists. They are the features sections. They are the human-interest stories that journalists look for to fill magazine pages, radio airwaves and television documentaries. But instead of letting a professional journalist tell their stories, they are doing it themselves. I must acknowledge that there is a difference between what these bloggers do, and how the mainstream media covers human-interest stories. When mainstream media does cover these stories, often a person's particular story is used to exemplify a bigger societal issue. Although personal bloggers do not usually put their own stories into a larger context, it is evident from the responses to their posts that many

people feel similarly; their experience is not unique. So, although these may not be telling stories in the same way as the mainstream media would frame them, they are valuable stories nonetheless and should be seen as part of the media ecosystem.

Performance: The Influence of Fame and Money

At the 2007 Congress of the Humanities, Jeremy Morris, a PhD student from McGill University, presented a paper on the political economy of MySpace. During his presentation, he mentioned that it was possible, by the time he was actually done writing about MySpace, the whole phenomenon would be over. What he was referring to was how quickly things change on the Internet. His words struck a chord with me, because I have felt the same way over the past two years as I have studied and written about blogging. I have noticed changes over this time that make me wonder how long the community I'm talking about will still exist in the blogosphere. Although I have made the case that there is community on these blogs, at the same time I do have doubts as to how much is truly community, free from any ulterior motive, and how much the blog is becoming more of a performance for entertainment purposes than anything else, fueled by two influences: fame and money.

None of the bloggers in this study said they were blogging because they wanted to be famous. However, it is obvious they do want to be heard, otherwise they wouldn't be writing blogs, they would be writing private journals. Likewise, although none of them say they're doing it for the money, most of them host ads and at least one is making a living from her blog. Money and fame go hand in hand. The more famous the blogger, the more money she makes from her blog. But both of these things, fame and money,

have an affect on the content and form of the blog. As some bloggers become more famous, their practice has changed. Some of them turn off comments from time to time, or completely. In recent months, two of the personal bloggers I studied have disabled their comments sections and only turn it on for certain entries. This effectively shuts down any attempt at fostering relationships, turning what was once participatory media into what's better described as one-way narrow-casting. They say they are turning them off, or restricting them to only certain entries, because they can't deal with the backlash they are getting. People are being too hurtful in their comments. While I can sympathize with this and don't think they should turn their comments on if the negative feedback they're getting is personally detrimental, it also changes the blog into something more akin to television or radio broadcasting than any sort of participatory media. It is generally the personal bloggers who shut off their comments, not the political bloggers. (Perhaps this is not surprising, since the personal bloggers are writing about their families and issues that are very intensely personal and political bloggers are largely focused on provoking discussion and debate.)

I have also noticed that the more well known bloggers become, the more they will hold back on what they will write about. Many of the stories about insulting family members and being fired for writing about work stem from a few years ago when blogging was first coming into the public eye through other media. Before this media attention, bloggers were operating in a smaller world. Because of the current spotlight, bloggers have had to go through a trial-and-error growth period in the face of all this attention. There they were, armed with this easy-to-use tool that gave them the power to bypass traditional gates installed by big media and big publishers, able to say whatever

they wanted. This blog appealed to people who wanted to talk about themselves and talk they did, profusely and uninhibitedly. But at the same time as they were celebrating how they could bypass the gates of traditional media, they also let go of the reservation one might show if they were in front of a TV camera, a microphone or a reporter scribbling down quotes. I don't think they (or anyone for that matter) were fully aware of the reach blogs would have and the resulting wave of recognition and scrutiny this reach would bring. It was a shock to many bloggers when something they thought they were writing, or taking pictures of, for their own amusement and that of a few of their friends, found its way onto their boss' laptop or their mother's home computer. But, as more stories have come out about firings and hurt feelings, and these stories are picked up by the mainstream media, bloggers have become much more savvy and selective about what they can and can't write about. They're now making more informed decisions about what they'll publish and what they won't. Now that blogging has become more established, the credo seems to be: be careful with family, be careful with work.

As I've watched these changes occur – the shutting down of comments sections, the censoring of certain topics – I'm left with the question of whether this will continue to be the trend in blogging? If it is, I believe the blog will turn into more of a public performance, than anything else. The question then becomes, are they writing because they want to reach out to people or from an altruistic need to be citizen journalists, or are they simply trying to capture and sustain an audience so they can make money from their blogs? Is the blogger courting a relationship with her audience because she truly *wants* a *relationship* with that audience or whether she simply wants to *keep* an audience and forming relationships with people is one way to do this. One study that looked at A-list

bloggers suggests that these bloggers would be smart to adopt such a strategy if they want to keep their status:

The very definition of A-list blogs implies a relatively large audience for a blog, and, therefore, the A-list blogger is reliant on that audience to maintain position on the A-list. As such, direct communication with the audience, asking for opinion, and attempting other favour-winning strategies such as ingratiation are advantageous for the continued success of the blog. (Trammel & Keshelashvili, 2005, p. 977)

While this may be a cynical way to look at things, perhaps there is some truth to it. I don't believe performance is ever completely detached from the process of blogging. As mentioned in earlier chapters, bloggers wouldn't be blogging if they didn't want some sort of an audience. By virtue of this fact, there is always a sense of self-consciousness to the process, by which I mean the blogger is always aware that she is presenting a public face. Although personal bloggers do cultivate a feeling of intimacy with their readers, it is still questionable how much this view into the personal details of their life is honest disclosure, and how much is crafted. As Trammel and Keshelashvili (2005) describe, an intimate tone used in a public space creates confusion about whether what we are reading is true intimacy, or a carefully constructed performance.

The intimacy and personalized tone that create the impression of an uncontrolled, spontaneous flow of feelings and thoughts allow readers to look far beyond the stage into a person's "back stage". On the other hand, blogging is a deliberate process and allows bloggers to convey the qualities of themselves, creating the impression that what the reader sees it

the author's "real self" or "back stage" – all the while performing in public.

(p. 978)

So the question becomes, are we only seeing what the blogger wants us to see? Bloggers do talk about spending time crafting their posts before publishing them. What they write is not spontaneous, the implication being that they are consciously creating a public image. It could be argued that we do the same thing in real life, showing a certain side of ourselves in public or to our friends. However, real life situations are fraught with the possibility of unforeseen circumstances, which can force people to react quickly, with their guard down. On a blog, everything can be preplanned.

Still, despite the detracting factors that may raise doubt as to the depth of community that forms on blogs, it is obvious that many bloggers are looking for some sort of community and have found it online, or if they weren't looking for community in the first place, what they found online has become valuable to them. While this move from the offline world to the online world doesn't mirror exactly the move that Tonnies (1887) was observing over a century ago as people moved from rural to urban lives, I believe that parallels can be made. He worried that people's relationships were becoming more distant and contractual as they made the move. Similarly, people have worried that as people's relationships move from the offline to the online world, they will become somehow less meaningful. It's true that issues of anonymity, exaggeration, filtering and the sheer distance inherent in online relationships does present the possibility for deceit and, undoubtedly, people still need the closeness of real-life relationships. However, I believe people are finding valuable relationships online that provide very important additions to their lives – whether it be solidarity with other mothers in the same

predicament, or someone with whom they can discuss the political machinations of our country's leaders.

Conclusion

In a speech to Columbia journalism students, the late Professor James W. Carey, defined journalism as our “daybook, our collective diary, which records our common life. That which goes unrecorded goes unpreserved except in the vanishing moment of our individual lives... To make experience memorable so it won't be lost and forgotten is the task of journalism” (Gill, 2005, p. 2). I believe this is what bloggers are doing by recording their thoughts, opinions, and day-to-day lives – whether they be personal bloggers, or political bloggers. They are involved in recording particular histories that, taken together, provide a record of our “common life”, even if they don't consider themselves journalists or even media players. As Thomas Kunkel, the editor of *American Journalism Review*, points out “ironically, from a news standpoint, the rise of all-comers journalism is really just a circling back to our roots. We often forget that the very term stems from “journal” and what are blogs and MySpace pages but contemporary journals” (Kunkel 2006/2007)?

As I have stated, there is a place and a *need* for professional journalism. It is imperative for democracy that there are journalists who strive to report and investigate stories across a wide spectrum of media. It is my hope that these journalists are given more support to continue their work and that future journalists are given the opportunity to enter the profession in a climate that supports their endeavours. However, what bloggers add to this sort of journalism is an invaluable variety of context, analysis and

opinion. As Dan Gillmor (2004) puts it, these bloggers are people who in the past have “felt voiceless – and whose words we need to hear” (p. xviii). What these bloggers can also do is push journalists to be better at their jobs – to recognize that there are people out there paying close attention to their work. If I was to propose that there is anything mainstream media can learn from bloggers it is precisely that there is a demand for rigorous journalism and that media organizations should devote their resources to cultivating an environment in which journalists can thoughtfully engage in the difficult work of investigative journalism.

I would also argue that what mainstream media can take from the blogging phenomenon is not that blogging itself or bloggers need to be incorporated into their work, but that the process of journalism can and needs to be opened up. Journalists should strive to be more transparent about how they do their work, when possible. It would be interesting, and I believe valuable, to hear about the processes journalists use to find sources and report stories – whether they use a blog to do this or some other way. (For instance, if a source is particularly difficult to track down, why not add that into the news story. Or if a journalist went to many different sources before deciding on a particular one, why not add that to the storytelling. This is sometimes done, but might be something to be considered more often.)

They also should take the proliferation of blogs as a sign that more people want chances to give their opinion on news stories and the news process. I am hard pressed to think of more ways that mainstream media could encourage this. There is already ample opportunity for audience feedback through talkback lines, letters to the editor, etc... However, perhaps more of an effort needs to be made to respond to these suggestions and

critiques. As a journalist, I know that it is difficult to respond to everyone who writes or calls and impossible to satisfy every person. First of all, it is rare that a program or news outfit has the resources to respond. Second, it is difficult to gauge what are legitimate complaints or suggestions and what aren't. Third, I would argue that journalists and media people do take many of the suggestions of their audience seriously and make attempts to respond to their audience when possible.

However, that said, as I have already suggested, I still believe mainstream media should respond to the challenge bloggers have thrown down by honing in on journalistic territory, rise to the occasion and take a hard look at their level of journalistic rigour. Start asking harder questions of sources and strive to report a wider range of stories. Do not feel threatened by bloggers, but see them as a valuable resource – a way to gauge public opinion and the public's interest. It is impossible for a journalist to catch every story, so why not use bloggers to find out what people are talking about, where bloggers feel there are holes in a politician's story and, if it's warranted, investigate further? In this way, journalists would be fostering and encouraging community in the media ecosystem.

Although bloggers are not the same as journalists, they are part of the media community and this is something journalists need to recognize. Bloggers can be a valuable resource as well as a source of inspiration. They add to the diversity of the media ecosystem. As Tony Burman, the outgoing editor in chief of the CBC's English Service, puts it:

More power to the audiences is a good thing, in my view. 'Citizen journalism' provides a range of perspectives – and genuine diversity – that would otherwise be missing. Over time, readers are becoming

discriminating between what is meaningful and what is not. And let's never forget there is already much in the so-called mainstream media that is absolute nonsense. (Maffin, 2007)

Bloggers are using the medium to turn news into more of a conversation than a lecture (Gillmor, 2004). It is not the perfect conversation, but it is a beginning. For people like Melissa Summers, the personal blogger who writes *Suburban Bliss*, it is a way to talk back about her unsatisfactory experience with the media. For people like Kate McMillan, the political blogger who writes *Small Dead Animals*, it is a way for her to talk back to the radio that she doesn't feel, at this point, speaks to her.

Further Research/Thoughts for the Future

As I said at the beginning of this thesis, this study is merely a snapshot of a small area of the blogosphere at this particular moment. There are several avenues for future research that would be beneficial:

- 1) There is not a lot of data in Canada that details the demographics of who is blogging and what they are blogging about. This information was readily available in the United States from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, but scarce and difficult to find in Canada. This sort of data would be invaluable to future researchers trying to get a picture of who is participating in the online environment.
- 2) This study dealt with bloggers who are not professional journalists, but there is much room for research that looks at how journalists incorporate blogging into their own work and how they use the blog to tell stories or develop stories. As well, it would be

interesting to research how the influx of bloggers has affected their work, or perception of their professions.

3) As advertising becomes more prevalent on blogs it would be valuable to look at how commercialism changes blogs over the coming years.

4) This study dealt with a very small area of the blogosphere. The possibilities are endless to look at different types of blogs (sports blogs, technology blogs...etc...) and examine what the purpose is of these blogs and what people are getting out of them.

5) Very recently one of the political bloggers I interviewed for this study has been sued by one of the political players he has written about. He is raising funds for his court defence. This would be an interesting story to follow because it could have wider implications.

6) Celebrity bloggers are, at the moment, challenging the sovereignty of entertainment magazines. Some are also taking on issues of copyright on the Internet, fighting court battles to win the right to re-use pictures taken by media outlets.

7) As I write the networking site Facebook is taking off and changing how people communicate and connect online. There is much research to be done in regards to how people are forming social networks through this avenue.

I'm not sure how long blogging will remain a phenomenon, or how it will change in the coming months and years. (For instance, as video becomes easier and cheaper to produce, I have noticed a trend toward more video blogging over the past while.) As with all technology, the original reason for which it was designed can turn out to be quite different from the way people actually use it. The blog was designed as a way for people to chronicle their thoughts and post links to other interesting things on the Internet. It has

evolved into something that people are using to reach out to others and to challenge the media system in which they are immersed.

In the meantime, I would urge those concerned with social planning to see the blog as a symptom of a world in which *some* people are either feeling lonely and isolated *or* of a world where people are finding something online that fulfills a need to connect with others. I would urge mainstream media organizations to see the blog as an indication that some people are losing faith in the current media system, or are at least questioning this system. But I don't think the blog is something that should be associated with hopelessness. On the contrary, people are empowered by this technology. They are reaching out to find others to connect to. They are reaching out and attempting to become part of a media conversation. Finally, I would urge anyone with the capability, to start a blog. You never know who you might reach. You may get the attention of a politician in a position of power who is moved by your point of view. You may get the attention of a person in the middle of nowhere who feels powerless, but who nonetheless feels consoled or inspired by your story. It is impossible for a journalist to tell everyone's story. The blog is a way for more "real" people to join the conversation and tell their stories themselves.

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Interviews

Interviews were conducted with the following bloggers:

Dan Arnold, *Calgary Grit* (<http://calgarygrit.blogspot.com>)
December, 2006, Calgary, AB (in person)

Rebecca Bollwitt, *Miss 604* (<http://www.miss604.com>)
February, 2007, Vancouver, BC (in person)

Steve Janke, *Angry in the Great White North* (<http://stevejanke.com>)
April 2007, Cambridge, ON (phone)

John Klein, *Abandoned Stuff by Saskboy* (<http://www.abandonedstuff.com>)
April 2007, Yorkton, SK (phone)

Appendix

Blogs used in this study:

Personal Bloggers:

1. Dooce	www.dooce.com
2. Finslippy	http://finslippy.typepad.com
3. Suburban Bliss	www.suburbanbliss.net/
4. Laid off Dad	http://laidoffdad.typepad.com/
5. Fussy	www.fussy.org
6. Milkmoney Or Not Here I Come	www.schmutzie.com
7. Metro Dad	http://metrodad.typepad.com
8. Jen and Tonic	www.jenandtonic.ca/
9. Nothing But Bonfires	www.nothingbutbonfires.com
10. Que Sera Sera	www.queserasera.org
11. Morphing Into Mamma	www.morphingintomama.typepad.com
12. Very Zen	www.amanda.veryzen.com
13. Miss 604	www.miss604.com
14. Julia (here be hippogriffs)	http://julia.typepad.com/julia
15. Mr. Nice Guy	http://bonnehomme.blogspot.com

Political Bloggers:

1. Calgary Grit	http://calgarygrit.blogspot.com
2. Stephen Taylor	http://www.stephentaylor.ca
3. Red Tory	http://redtory.blogspot.com
4. Angry in the Great White North	http://stevejanke.com
5. Abandoned Stuff by Saskboy	http://www.abandonedstuff.com
6. Small Dead Animals	www.smalldeadanimals.com
7. From A Different Viewpoint	http://www.politicagrll.blogspot.com
8. Daveberta	http://daveberta.blogspot.com
9. Babbling Brooks	http://babblingbrooks.blogspot.com
10. Toronto Tory	http://torontotory.blogspot.com
11. Zaphod's Heads	http://torontotory.blogspot.com
12. My Blahg	http://myblahg.com
13. Political Staples	http://politicalstaples.com
14. Dawg's Blawg	http://drdawgsblawg.blogspot.com
15. A View from the Right	http://cosmostein.blogspot.com