BLOGGING IN THE MAINSTREAM:
AUSTRALIAN JOURNALIST-BLOGS
AND PUBLIC DELIBERATION

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All journeys do come to an end. Including this one.
List of publications

Journal articles published during candidature, which are relevant to the thesis but do not form part of it


Garden, M 2010b, ‘Predictions of newspapers’ impending demise: are they greatly exaggerated?’, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 20:37–51.

Keywords

Deliberation

Political blogs

Journalist blogs

Gatewatching

Blogosphere

Twittersphere

Mainstream media

Alternative media

Social media

Network journalism

Participatory journalism

Process journalism

User-generated content (UGC)
Abstract

There is widespread disagreement about the extent to which discussions in online spaces such as blogs (sometimes referred to as ‘weblogs’) can reinvigorate the public sphere – pessimists regard them as online lynch mobs and optimists believe they could become Habermasian digital cafés. In this debate, the blogs are often assumed to be independent blogs, whereas mainstream media blogs have received much less attention. This is surprising, given the centrality of journalists to political communication and the fact that blogs are now an integral feature of mainstream news sites. These draw readership numbers unparalleled by citizen-bloggers or alternative news sites.

Even though scholars have begun to investigate the interactive opportunities provided by newspaper websites and the deliberative potential of online discussion, the focus has been on comments on articles, the most popular form of user-generated content (UGC). These are typically moderated by in-house teams, or even outsourced, and quite a different space to blogs. The question that seems to have been considered less often – which this thesis addresses – is the value of journalist-blogs and the extent to which they facilitate deliberative dialogue.

This project examines the work of 13 Australian journalists whose blogs focus predominantly on political issues. It adapts concepts from media and communication theories, including gatekeeping and Habermas’ public sphere, and uses an emergent design with a mixed-methods approach. The traditional method of content analysis was adapted to analyse comment-threads – arguably the most important part of political blogs, although these have been overlooked even in studies of independent blogs. This analysis was followed by interviews with select journalists and editors in order to obtain their views on blogging and the impact of social media platforms such as Twitter on blogging practices.

The study found that although a very small group of users dominated conversations on most blogs, there was a high level of interactivity between them. A significant number challenged others’ viewpoints and while this suggests considerable heterogeneity in the views expressed, this positive indicator of deliberation is cancelled out on those blogs with high levels of flaming and unreasonable opinions. Such blogs are a long way from the deliberative ideal. There emerged clear distinctions between blogs on tabloid and quality broadsheet newspaper
sites, with discussions on the latter the most reasonable and civil and clearly towards the ‘good enough’ end of the deliberation continuum. Although these sites attract different audiences and tabloids inevitably a more raucous crowd, the differences are also due to moderation. The quality broadsheet sites are more stringently moderated and while it could be argued this simply means the journalists are maintaining control over information and are reinforcing their traditional gatekeeping role, the choice of moderation style – as this study shows – does play a part in shaping the quality and usefulness of blog discussions.

In addition, there was high participation by some of the bloggers, which contrasts with the results of overseas studies – although most of these were conducted in the early years of mainstream media’s adoption of this format, a time when journalists were still adjusting to the concept of interactivity. All the journalist-bloggers interviewed regard engagement with readers as an essential and valuable part of their blogging practice. Most are also on Twitter which they use in part to amplify their blog posts. Even though they chat with readers on Twitter, these journalists use their blogs to have reflective, in-depth conversation. While not historically part of journalism’s normative framework, the concept of journalism as participation (participatory journalism) is emerging, with scholars suggesting audience involvement has become a normative goal of digital journalism. At least in this respect, for most Australian journalist-bloggers the normative has become an actuality.

Political blogs on newspaper sites form only a small part of the Australian political blogosphere and are often dismissed as not genuine or real, based mostly on anecdotal evidence. There is also the view that they are dying or becoming irrelevant because political conversation is migrating to social media platforms. The results from this study show they still have a valuable role, and journalists’ use of Twitter is helping to integrate their blogs into societal news streams, rather than sounding a death knell.
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# Abbreviations and acronyms

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<td>ABC</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>APC</td>
<td>Australian Press Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>British Broadcasting Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>BIDS</td>
<td>Bern Interdisciplinary Centre for Deliberation Studies</td>
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<td>DQI</td>
<td>Discourse Quality Index</td>
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<tr>
<td>HTML</td>
<td>Hypertext Markup Language – the main markup language used to create web pages and other information that can be displayed in a web browser</td>
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<td>MSM</td>
<td>Mainstream media</td>
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<td>NYT</td>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>RSS</td>
<td>Really Simple Syndication – automated feeds that display updates to websites</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMH</td>
<td><em>Sydney Morning Herald</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>TPV</td>
<td>Temporary protection visa</td>
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<tr>
<td>UGC</td>
<td>User-generated content</td>
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<td>U.K.</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td>Uniform Resource Locator – the address of a web page</td>
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<td>U.S.</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
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Introduction

Purpose of study

The main objective of this research was to determine the value of journalist-blogs on Australia’s mainstream newspaper sites and the extent to which they may be a new deliberative or political information space. While the word ‘value’ is used in this thesis in a broad sense of benefit (Singer 2010a:135), the particular value of interest here is the ‘democratic value’ of blogs and the extent to which they facilitate democratic discourse? In other words, the ‘quality’ of political discourse (Robertson & McLaughlin 2011) and this was measured by using an array of indicators drawn from Habermas’ ideas and deliberative theory.

The greatest challenge presented by new media1 has been to one of traditional journalism’s weakest points – its lack of personal contact with readers (Regan 2003). However, the use of blogs2 (and the micro-blog Twitter) is providing an opportunity for journalists to interact with audiences. This signifies a profound shift from decades of ‘traditional journalism as a lecture’ – in which the journalist decides what is news and where citizens are passive bystanders – to ‘journalism-as-a-conversation’ in which citizens can be active participants (Marchionni 2013:131). And yet scholars argue that traditional media have failed to take advantage of the blog format in that they are normalising blogs by maintaining a traditional gatekeeper function (Hermida 2010a) and because most journalists fail to interact with readers (Hermida 2009; Manosevitch & Walker 2009; Domingo 2008). Some of the criticisms are based on early studies of blogs when journalists were still adjusting to the concept of interactivity with readers. The findings of my pilot study (Garden 2010a) paint a more positive picture, with several of The Australian’s blogs outshining their alternative counterparts in terms of popularity and blogger-audience interactivity. The current research builds upon this study to include in-depth analysis of comment-threads along with interviews of journalist-bloggers and online editors of Australian mainstream newspaper sites.

1 Although this term often refers to Twitter, Facebook and other social networking sites, in this thesis blogs are also regarded as social media since readers are able to leave comments and 'interact in an asynchronous manner' (Lee, Kim & Kim 2011:1820).

2 In this thesis, unless otherwise noted, when referring to blogs, bloggers, blogging or the blogosphere I am referring to political blogs, political bloggers, political blogging and the political blogosphere.
Research problem

While the vast majority of blogs are of marginal interest to anyone apart from the blogger and their friends since they ‘comprise individual reflections on personal lives, interests and obsessions’ (McNair 2006:126), those that focus on politics have been of particular interest to scholars, although their potential to reinvigorate the public sphere remains contested. According to Drezner and Farrell (2008:7-8), this debate is not helped by a ‘plethora of arguments on the basis of anecdotes, but little substantive data’ with the lack of systematic empirical analysis leading to an ‘emphasis on poorly informed speculation and a dearth of grounded argument’. The debate is also not helped by the fact that the blogs in question are often assumed to be citizen-blogs, with blogs on mainstream media sites ignored or dismissed. This is a curious gap considering blogs are now an integral feature of such sites, which draw readership numbers unparalleled by citizen-bloggers or alternative news sites (Kline 2005). The dominant public sphere remains the mass media and while traditional media are far from perfect – Entman (2005) points out there is considerable literature documenting the gap between journalistic ideals and traditional media’s contribution to democratic citizenship – journalists have a central role in political communication. No political system can function effectively without professional journalists (Habermas 2006). James Massola (2010), a journalist for The Australian, argues that their organisations have the ‘resources, contacts, and expertise, and offer a level of transparency and accountability’ that citizen-bloggers cannot match.

The question that has not been considered, which this thesis addresses, is the value of journalist-blogs that focus on politics and the extent to which they facilitate ‘cyber-democratic discourse’ (Rosenberry 2010:152). Or are journalists wasting precious time maintaining blogs, especially reading and moderating comments? Is blogging by mainstream media merely an attempt ‘to take emergent forms of alternative journalism and rework them in order to add a contemporary sheen to dominant practices’ (Atton & Hamilton 2008:141)? Or is there an opportunity for journalists to facilitate democratic and deliberative dialogue in a way in which citizen-blogs have perhaps failed due to inefficient gatekeeping (Barlow 2010)?
The premise underlying a democratic form of government is that it rests on a public well-informed about matters of civic importance and able to talk about such matters with other citizens (Singer et al. 2011), although what is important is not whether citizens are talking, but the quality of their conversations and the extent to which they are deliberative. Deliberation is a particular form of political communication or debate considered crucial for a well-functioning democracy and research shows that when citizens engage with issues, share information and consider alternative viewpoints, this makes for an informed public opinion that affects public policy (Ackerman & Fishkin 2003; Gastil 2008). As well as providing accurate information, a crucial role of journalists is to be a representative or mediator between citizens and politicians, and according to McNair (2009) this function can be enhanced by journalist-blogs as they provide ways for citizens to participate in public debate and communicate with political elites. In recent years, blogs have been supplemented by social media, with the microblog Twitter becoming a platform of choice for journalists for instant reactions to news stories as well as another opportunity to interact with readers (Highfield & Bruns 2012). Consequently, there has been an increasing scholarly interest in journalists’ use of Twitter (Hermida 2010b; Holton & Lewis 2011; Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton 2012) including Australian journalists (Bruns 2012a, 2012b; Jericho 2012a; Posetti 2009).

Traditionally, journalists’ engagement with users has been very limited (via readers’ letters and talkback radio, for example) and their role was predominantly that of a gatekeeper: to gather, filter, edit and publish the news (Hermida 2011). Blogs, however, expand the possibilities for dialogue and present journalists with an ‘antidote’ to some of the constraints of conventional journalism (Carlson 2007:274). Some scholars have argued that efforts by mainstream news organisations to co-opt blogging could change the nature of journalism as well as reinvigorate civic engagement (Lowrey 2006; Robinson 2006; Coleman & Wright 2008). The blog format, by its inherently participatory nature, offers a chance for journalists to achieve greater accountability and transparency (a normative goal of professionalism), and ‘democratise’ news production processes (Matheson 2004a). Rosenberry and Burton St. John III (2010b) suggest that professional journalists working for mainstream news organisations are in a unique position to engage citizens as they are the source to which the public usually turn for information about politics and public affairs. Their use of blogs may create a space ‘where issues of common concern are addressed to the benefit of some greater public’
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(Rosenberry & Burton St. John III 2010a:6) and help journalists reclaim their ‘eroded role in ways that are not possible under traditional source-message-channel-receiver models of mass communication’ (Rosenberry 2010:152).

While participation on blogs remains largely framed as the users’ ability to debate what journalists have produced (the interpretation stage) rather than as input into how news is produced in the first place, the significance of user-comments should not be underestimated. As Singer et al. (2011:180) point out, they are more open and unfettered than letters to the editor, and provide an ‘accessible, instant means for citizens to share their thoughts on a story, creating an immediate feedback loop’. This ability to gauge virtually instant reaction is a novel experience for journalists. Although one of the motives of media organisations in their adoption of blogs may be commercial, and to contain and direct the phenomenon of blogging (Lowrey 2006:493), Singer (2008:70) suggests journalists are ‘using the genre to explain their actions and to invite dialogue about those actions’. Williams (2007:3) argues traditional news organisations are recognising that ‘audiences are more than empty receptacles waiting to be filled with information selected by an editorial priesthood’ and there are valid journalistic reasons (as well as financial) for involving the audience, especially if forums for civic conversation can be created.

Yet there seems to be a general consensus that in many respects traditional media have failed to take advantage of the blog format in that they are normalising blogs by maintaining a traditional gatekeeper function (Hermida 2010a) and because most journalists fail to interact with readers (Hermida 2009; Manosevitch & Walker 2009; Domingo 2008). However, most studies have not only been largely quantitative in that they have analysed links and number of comments from readers or responses from bloggers (Wall 2005; Singer 2005; Dailey, Demo & Spillman 2008), but were conducted in the early years3 of adoption of this format by journalists. The comment feature has enabled blogs to become interactive and dialogical, transforming them into an online space where discussion and debate can take place (Domingo & Heinonen 2008). Yet, surprisingly, the vast majority of studies of even independent blogs have analysed posts of bloggers or the interlinking between blogs (Kelly 2008; Herring et al.

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3 Note the data in Wall’s study was collected between late March and early April 2003, for Singer’s study between 15 February and 15 March 2004, and for Dailey et al. in November 2006.
Blogging in the Mainstream  Mary Garden 2005; Kenix 2009; Habegger 2011) and overlooked this important dimension of a blog. Although there have been a few studies of deliberation on other online political forums such as UseNet⁴ newsgroups (Wilhelm 1999), scholars have largely ignored the online spaces where the vast majority of political talk between ordinary citizens occurs. A number of studies have looked at deliberation on specially constructed virtual public spaces where citizens were invited to participate in forums on selected topics (see, Wales, Cotterill & Smith 2010; Stromer-Galley 2007; Monnoyer-Smith & Wojcik 2011; Smith, John & Sturgis 2013), although such experiments and pilot projects have been criticised. Coleman and Moss (2012:6) claim the spaces were ‘constructed with a view to promoting the very norms that they were looking for’, which means the findings cannot be generalised as in effect the ‘online deliberation was a creature of the laboratory’. In recent years, scholars have investigated deliberation on newspaper sites, but rather than blogs per se have focused instead on readers’ comments to online articles – the most popular form of UGC in quantitative terms (Diakopoulos & Naaman 2011; Manosevitch & Walker 2009; Ruiz et al. 2011; Blom, Carpenter & Bowe 2011). The question that does not seem to have been considered is whether journalist-blogs can facilitate deliberation or ‘cyber-democratic discourse’ (Rosenberry 2010:152). The main reason for this research was to investigate whether Australian journalists are taking advantage of this opportunity.

Summary of research approach

This thesis addresses this gap in the literature and examines Australia’s mainstream media blogosphere⁵, and in particular political blogs authored by professional journalists. A mixed methods approach was used, with traditional content analysis adapted in order to evaluate conversations on comment-threads. Interviews with journalists were also undertaken to gauge their views on blogging, their motives in authoring blogs and to gain insights ‘into the impact of digital technologies on journalistic practices’ (Hermida 2009:12).

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⁴ UseNet is a largely ungoverned bulletin board-based system.
⁵ The blogosphere is a term coined by blogger William Quick (2002) to refer to all blogs and their interconnections.
In order to analyse the quality of discussion occurring on comment-threads, a coding scheme was developed, drawing upon the coding schemes of Stromer-Galley (2003, 2005, 2007) and the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) (Steenbergen et al. 2003) developed by the Bern Interdisciplinary Centre for Deliberation Studies (BIDS) at Bern University in Switzerland. This means the quality of conversation could be analysed as ranging along a continuum of ‘excellent’, ‘bad’, ‘better’ or ‘good enough’ deliberation (Bächtiger et al. 2010:37). Did any resemble ‘bear-pits of abuse and polarized repetitive ranting’ as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) (2008) has described their alternative counterparts? Or did any demonstrate civil public debate?

Because a significant factor in ‘shaping the quality and usefulness of online debates’ seems to be the type of facilitation and moderation style (Wright & Street 2007:856), journalists were interviewed regarding their views on moderation and their respective approaches. Their views on anonymity in regard to user-names were obtained, as well as the reasons they maintain blogs, their expectations of audience engagement and their perceptions of their blog as a space of deliberation. It was also important to determine whether blogging had had any impact on journalistic practices, whether it is a worthwhile use of time, does it give them a chance to gather new information, get ideas for new stories? Or is it primarily a way to drive traffic? Before the content analysis and interviews took place, it was necessary to determine where journalist-blogs occur on newspaper sites and to establish which of these can be called political blogs.

**Research questions**

The main research question that underlies the approach summarised above is:

**Main research question:** What is the contribution of journalist-blogs to the Australian public sphere?

Three sub-questions arising from this over-arching question guide the analysis.

**Sub-questions:**

a) Where do journalist political-blogs occur?
b) To what extent are Australian political journalist-blogs a space of deliberation?

c) What are political journalist-bloggers’ perceptions of blogs as a space of deliberation?

**Significance of this research**

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study which has attempted to determine the value of journalist-blogs on newspaper sites and the extent to which they may be a new deliberative or political information space. It is different from other studies in the field as it focuses just on blogs as distinct from other forms of UGC on online news sites such as comments to articles which are the most widespread and the most popular in quantitative terms (Ruiz et al. 2011). Surprisingly, the vast majority of studies of even independent blogs have analysed posts of bloggers or the interlinking between blogs (Kelly 2008; Herring et al. 2005; Kenix 2009; Habegger 2011) and overlooked the comment-thread, an important component of a blog. This means the study adds to the body of research not only in the wider field of blogs, but specifically journalist-blogs and their value in the rapidly changing media landscape. Although mainstream media have the ‘status of a folk devil’ amongst some citizen-bloggers (Flew & Wilson 2010:142), such media – especially newspapers – remain the most credible source of news, even on the internet where websites of established news organisations draw readership numbers unparalleled by citizen-bloggers or alternative news sites (Kline 2005). My research builds upon my pilot study (Garden 2010a) and uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This is different from overseas studies of journalist-blogs, which have predominantly used either quantitative content analysis or surveys (see, Singer 2005; Dailey et al. 2008; Bradshaw 2008a).

This study includes blogs from both Fairfax Media and News Limited, which is a departure from other studies of online journalism in Australia, where there has been an

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6 World Wide Web and the internet: The internet and the World Wide Web (hereafter, ‘the web’) are often used to mean the same thing. However, the web is the ‘system of interlinked, hypertext documents’ which has become ‘the primary multi-modal content delivery system on the internet’ (Herring 2010:233). The web is a part of the internet which is the underlying structure or communications network and accessed via browsers.

7 News Limited changed its name to News Corp Australia as of 1 July 2013; see http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-06-27/news-corp-rebrands-local-subsidiaries/4784510
over-emphasis on Fairfax Media sites and News Limited sites were seldom included. A study of newspaper blogs only included *Ask Sam*\(^8\) (a relationship and dating blog) on the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) (Dyson, Sixsmith & Than 2008). Other studies have looked at Fairfax Media sites such as *Brisbane Times* (Flew 2009) and *The Age* (Morieson 2010). A comparative analysis of the future of news in a digital world compared *The New York Times* (NYT) with Fairfax Media, rather than News Limited or the only national newspaper *The Australian* (Morieson & Usher 2011). My study is a significant contribution to media and journalism research in Australia as it included blogs from both Fairfax Media and New Limited sites, and is therefore more representative of the Australian mainstream media blogosphere. It also focused on political blogs which are central to that sphere in terms of influence.

**Newspaper blogs**

I chose to focus on the blogs of websites affiliated with newspaper companies for a number of interrelated reasons. First is the historical longevity of newspapers and their adaptation to enormous changes in communications technology in the last two centuries (Singer et al. 2011). In the brief history of online news, newspapers have been the first to innovate – with a few exceptions such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) – and have done so more extensively than their magazine or broadcast counterparts. According to Singer et al. (2011:3) the culture of newspaper journalism is ‘the most deeply rooted and the most flexible of all newsroom cultures’. Second, many years ago Habermas (1989 [1962]:181) described the newspaper as the ‘public sphere’s pre-eminent institution’. They remain the most credible source of news in spite of the proliferation of alternative online news sources and the decline in circulation of print newspapers in many Western countries (Kline 2005; O’Donnell, McKnight & Este 2012). O’Donnell et al. (2012:4) argue that newspapers still ‘form the living heart of the news cycle’ and set the agenda for news in radio, television and the online world. There is in effect a spillover of political news and commentaries from quality newspapers into other media. Newspapers, especially quality newspapers, still play a vital authoritative role. Although not all readers demand quality, the ‘educated, opinion-leading, news-junkie core of the audience always will’ (Meyer 2008:324). So it is important to assess

\(^8\) Note that all names of blogs in this thesis are in italics.
the value of blogs on newspaper sites, and the extent to which they are a space of deliberation, ‘the digital cafes’ of the virtual public sphere (Ruiz et al. 2011).

Note that the Australian newspaper industry is one of the most highly concentrated in the world. There are four significant owners: Fairfax Media, News Limited, Seven West Media Limited and APN News & Media Limited. The metropolitan and national daily press consists of 12 titles, of which News Limited owns seven and Fairfax Media owns four. Seven West Media Limited owns one paper The West Australian. Ownership of the provincial press is largely held by News Limited, Fairfax Media and APN News & Media Limited (Papandrea 2013). For this study it was decided to concentrate on the political blogs (if any) associated with the websites of the metropolitan and national daily press – News Limited, Fairfax Media and The West Australian – as a cursory inspection of the websites of regional papers indicated there were no political blogs, and indeed Jericho (2013) found none in his recent mapping of the Australian political blogosphere.

It is generally accepted that the business models of newspapers have been hit by declines in print circulation and a concomitant shift towards accessing news online, as well as the migration of advertising to the internet (Flew 2009; O’Donnell et al. 2012). Although the spread of the internet coincided with the decline of newspaper circulation in some countries, Nielsen (2012a:43) argues that the two phenomena are not necessarily related because cyclical changes have had ‘a much more dramatic and immediate impact on the overall revenues of legacy media companies than the rise of the internet’, with recessions hitting harder than the digital transition. Regardless, it is significant to note that, until recently, Australian newspapers were faring better than many in the developed countries. Between 2007 and 2009 there was a dramatic decline in Europe and the U.S. (there was a drop of 30 per cent in the U.S. and 21 per cent in the U.K.), whereas the decline in Australia was only 3 per cent – the second smallest in the world (OECD 2010:18). Although data from World Press Trends (Loechner 2013) show newspaper circulation in Australasia in 2011 to be stable, more recent figures show declines in Australia’s major metropolitan newspapers. Mumbrella reports that some posted double digit declines for the last quarter of 2013 (Christensen 2014). More readers, however, are accessing news online. Websites of metropolitan and some regional and rural newspapers showed ‘spectacular traffic growth’ between 2006 and
2008 and the number of unique browsers accessing the sites of metropolitan daily newspapers doubled (Australian Press Council (APC) 2008). In 2013, Australian newspapers digital audience jumped 7 per cent (Jackson 2014). News is typically sought within the pre-existing media eco-system, with the sites of established media organisations being the most popular for news and current affairs. With the exception of ninemsn.com.au eight of the top 12 news sites are owned by Fairfax Media and News Limited (Harding-Smith 2011). This online domination contrasts with major U.S. newspaper companies where the leading news websites are CNN, CNBC and Yahoo, and the U.K. whose leading site is the BBC (Garden 2010b).

Changes in the Australian media landscape in 2012

As elsewhere, the media landscape of Australia has been subject to rapid change in recent years, although significant changes occurred in 2012, mid-way during this study. One change was the introduction of paywalls on some sites. Veteran journalist Mark Day (2012) describes the digital revolution as ‘a wrecking ball to the old publishing model’, although paywalls were a way for Fairfax Media and News Limited to reinvent how they charge for their journalism. On 24 October 2011, The Australian was the first broadsheet newspaper to introduce paid content. On 12 March 2012 the Herald Sun became the first tabloid to turn on a paywall (Christensen 2012; Burrowes 2012). As these were likely to have impacted on the work of some of the journalists (including their blogging practices) I was able to obtain their views and perspectives regarding this significant change.

Then, in mid-June 2012, Fairfax Media and News Limited were hit with what O’Donnell et al. (2012) described as ‘a perfect storm’ arising from the effect of digital media coupled with the effects of the global financial crisis. Bruns (2012b) called it ‘momentous’ for the Australian media industry. Both companies announced internal restructuring, centralisation and major job cuts. Fairfax Media announced 1900 jobs would be cut (one in four of these were journalists). News Limited revealed plans to follow suit, although did not confirm the number as many would be through natural attrition (Kitney 2012). Fairfax Media also announced plans to turn the SMH and The Age newspapers into compact size, erect paywalls around its websites and close two printing plants as they foresaw a new focus on digital delivery (Kitney 2012). In
October, *The West Australian* also announced 23 redundancies (*The Australian* 2012). The question arose as to whether this would impact on journalist-blogs. Would any close? Would any of the journalist-bloggers lose their jobs? Would any of the help and support that some get, such as assistance with moderation, be curtailed?

During the year there was also the closing of several important blogs, which rocked the Australian blogosphere. On 10 April 2012, one of Australia’s leading political blogs closed down, with Ken Parish (2012) on *Club Troppo* noting: ‘It’s a sad day in the AUS [sic] blogosphere. Leading left-leaning group blog Larvatus Prodeo has folded its capacious tent.’ *Lavratus Prodeo* was started by Mark Bahnisch on 17 March 2005 and it later became a group blog. In the final post, Bahnisch (2012) argued there was no longer the same need for political discussion on blogs as ‘lively debate has migrated to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter’. Although these shorter forms allow for easy and less time-consuming communication than the often-lengthy postings prevalent in blogs (Lomborg 2011), Parish (2012) challenged Bahnisch’s reasons for closing: ‘You can’t develop a meaningful political, social or economic analysis or opinion in 140 characters, and I can’t say I’ve noticed much of it on Facebook either.’ A week later John Quiggin (2012) announced significant changes on his blog and said he would put most of his effort into work at larger sites, although would continue to cross post at his blog. Quiggin said the last 10 years had seen the rise and decline of blogging, and no new blogs ‘successful enough to attract sustained attention’ have emerged. He echoed Bahnisch in that the rise of Facebook and Twitter ‘supply a lot of what attracted people to blogging in the first place’ and Twitter, in particular, can be quite close to the original form of blogging based on short links to material found on the web. A few weeks later (5 June 2012), *Pure Poison*, a blog on the independent news site *Crikey*, announced it was also closing (Gaukroger 2012).

With all these changes occurring within a single year the question emerged: is there a future of blogs on mainstream media sites? I decided it was important to obtain journalist-bloggers’ views of the closing of these blogs and what they saw as the future of blogs in both the independent and mainstream media spheres. I also decided to get their views of the micro-blog Twitter – its impact on Australian political debate, whether they use it, how they use this tool in relationship to their blogs and its effect on their blogging practices. In recent years, Twitter has become an increasingly important
journalistic tool and is much more important now than it was when I was planning my thesis. While Facebook is a more popular social media platform, Twitter is emerging as more influential and useful for journalists in terms of engagement with their audience, sharing information, and disseminating and discussing the latest breaking news (Bruns 2012a). When most of the interviews had been completed, I decided to obtain some, albeit limited, quantitative data on their use of Twitter. In this study, new and unexpected questions were formulated and data collected that were not envisioned at the outset. The emergent design (Creswell 2013) adopted in this thesis is ideal for researchers studying the fast-changing media landscape and platforms that are increasingly converging.
Outline of chapters

Chapter 1 looks at the theoretical framework underlying this thesis. These include the theory of the public sphere developed and revised by Jürgen Habermas (1989 [1962], 2006) and Kurt Lewin’s (1947) gatekeeping theory first applied to a journalism context by David Manning White (1997 [1950]). Habermas’ discourse ethics and deliberation are also examined. Though developed for use in the evaluation of spoken, face-to-face debate, these are a useful basis for measuring the quality of political discourse and deliberation. They are a benchmark to develop the evaluative criteria and coding scheme used in this study to analyse the comment-threads of blogs. The application of these theories to new media environments are examined in this chapter along with studies that have looked at whether internet-mediated communication such as blogs can enhance the public sphere and serve as a deliberative space.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the history of blogging before addressing the thorny issue of defining ‘blog’. This includes the debate over whether blogs should be regarded as a genre or a medium. Because making sense of the present in terms of the past is a common strategy among media and technology analysts (Bolter & Grusin 1999), this chapter begins with an examination of the early communities of bloggers. Historicity is important here as it provides a backdrop for current usages of blogs and helps explain the popularisation of blogs and their significance in contemporary digital culture. In addition, the genres applicable to this study such as political-blog, citizen-blog and journalist-blog are defined. With an ongoing debate about how to conceptualise blogs, this inquiry should contribute towards theory development in the study of information and communication technologies.

Chapter 3 provides a review of the literature, of not only political blogging in general, but in particular those studies which have looked at blogs on mainstream media sites, as well as comments to online articles on these sites. It examines the changes in the media landscape brought about by the internet – the provision of news online and the engagement of citizens in the news process – and argues that there is little evidence of a new counter-public sphere or an alternative source of journalistic practice emerging. Even though the dominant public sphere remains the mass media, scholars have
predominantly looked at independent blogs. Even then the focus has been on analyses of blog posts and linking activity, overlooking the conversation in comment-threads. There has been a paucity of studies of mainstream media blogs, and most were conducted in the early years of adoption of this format. To my knowledge, there have been no in-depth studies of Australian mainstream media blogs (although they have still attracted widespread criticism and denigration based mainly on anecdotal evidence). In recent years, scholars of participatory journalism have examined comments on articles, the most popular form of UGC in quantitative terms. They are a quite different space to blogs and I argue that – at least in terms of discussion of political issues – there is much less likelihood of deliberative discussion occurring or a sense of community emerging. In such spaces, journalists rarely, if ever, participate in the discussion and moderation is usually done by in-house moderators or out-sourced to moderation firms. Given the centrality of media in everyday life, and the importance of journalists to political communication, it becomes all the more salient to examine blogs on mainstream news sites, which draw readership numbers unparalleled by citizen-bloggers or alternative news sites. The affordance of participation via the comment-thread is an opportunity to analyse the interactivity and quality of discussion occurring in these spaces.

Chapter 4 provides the results from mapping the Australian mainstream media blogosphere. Such a mapping was necessary in order to identify which blogs could be classified as political, and which were authored by journalists. In addition, it was necessary to determine which blogs could be considered active as opposed to those blogs which had ceased or become inactive. The chapter also details the unexpected challenges that emerged. These have important implications for future researchers of not only blogs on mainstream media sites, but also blogs on independent sites. In particular, there is a need to not rely on website data alone, as in the fast-changing space of online media this can be inaccurate and not up-to-date. It also emphasises the need, as argued in Chapter 2, for a clear conceptual definition of blog, no matter how diverse the literature might be and to operationalise it to suit the research questions (Chaffee 1991).

The methodology used in this study is explained in Chapter 5. Following previous studies, the traditional method of content analysis was adapted to researching the online phenomenon of blogs. This analysis used a coding scheme based on indicators used in the DQI developed by Steenbergen et al. (2003), as well as the coding schemes of
Stromer-Galley (2005, 2007). This chapter also lists the comment-threads selected for analysis, and provides examples of statements in sampled comments that were coded for each of these indicators. In addition, there is an explanation of the modes of interviews employed and a list of the interviews undertaken.

**Chapter 6** examines the work of the 13 journalist-bloggers selected for this study. First, brief profiles of their blogging background are provided, followed by an analysis of their blogging practices. Based mostly on data obtained from in-depth interviews, this includes the type of moderation they use, their perception of their blogging practice in light of some of the criticism they have attracted, and, most importantly, why they blog? Also examined is their engagement (if any), in order to determine the extent to which their blogging can be described as participatory journalism. The next two chapters look at the results of the content analysis of the comment-threads, and provide a discussion and analysis of these results. **Chapter 7** discusses the equality and interactivity, which required purely quantitative analysis of comments, while **Chapter 8** focuses on the quality of conversation, and the results from the qualitative analysis of each comment according to the various indicators selected, such as disagreement, respect and flaming.

**Chapter 9** looks at Twitter and the future of blogging. Twitter has become much more important than when I was planning this thesis and it became apparent that questions about its value and impact on journalists who blog were relevant to this study. This was prompted, in part, by the death of two popular Australian independent blogs, with a number of scholars arguing at the time that the closure was the result of political debate migrating from blogs to social media platforms. I decided to question journalists and editors, including social media editors, on their views of Twitter and its effect on blogging. I also decided to obtain some – albeit limited – quantitative data on the journalists’ use of Twitter. In addition, in order to determine whether there is a trend of blogs declining, I decided to do a second mapping of the Australian mainstream media blogosphere as of June 2012, and a final update of just political blogs as of June 2013. **Chapter 10** is the conclusion which returns to the research questions introduced at the start of this thesis, and evaluates the value and contribution of journalist-blogs. The limitations of the study are outlined, along with suggestions for future research of online media such as blogs and Twitter within the context of the rapidly changing field of online journalism.
Chapter 1  New media: theoretical implications

Introduction

Much of the enthusiasm for new media\(^9\) such as blogs derives from the perceived benefit to deliberative democracy due to the interactivity made possible by the internet. The emergence of internet-mediated communication has led to widespread scholarly interest and a growing body of research, although a review of studies in the fields of communication and media found very few were theory-driven and most were exploratory in nature (Cho & Khang 2006). While a distinct theoretical basis has not been developed to examine online phenomena or behaviour, scholars utilise existing theories such as technological determinism, gatekeeping and the public sphere, all of which are drawn upon in my study. These theories have been used in communication and journalism research to examine the effects of media and their deficiencies, especially mass media. Before these are discussed, it is useful to first look at the different paradigms of communication they have emerged from.

Two main paradigms of communication research

Research into media and communication overlaps the social sciences and humanities, so it is not surprising that having two camps of quantitative and qualitative research has divided the field with sometimes ‘intense conflict’ (Jensen 2002b:254). There have been two dominant paradigms or epistemological frameworks: the positivist or interpretative which is concerned with understanding the media, and the critical approach which leads to value judgements about media (McQuail 2010). The first emerged from the social sciences and presumes a democratic, pluralistic, consensual and informed society, with the potential of good or harm from mass media judged according to this model. This ‘mass communication’ research has been mostly concerned with the measurement of the effects of mass media, whether intended or unintended, and quantitative methods such

\(^9\) In one sense most of the media (or sub-media) that the internet supports (blogs, Twitter, wikis and so forth) can no longer be considered ‘new’. A few scholars have suggested abandoning the term, and McNamara (2008) has suggested the term ‘emergent media’. Although difficult to define because they are ever-evolving, one useful definition is ‘any digital media production that is interactive and digitally distributed’ (Russo & Watkins 2005:3).
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as surveys and content analyses are often used (McQuail 2010). The objective of much of this research is encapsulated in the maxim ‘who (says) what (to) whom (in) what channel (with) what effect?’ coined more than sixty years ago by Harold Lasswell (1948), a leading American political scientist and communications theorist. This became known as the ‘transmission model’ which assumes a linear communication process with the power and influence residing in the ‘who’ and less authority with the ‘whom’ (the audience); scholarly focus is often on the ways messages (the ‘what’) could be modified (Holt & Perren 2009). Gatekeeping as a positivist theory is concerned with understanding news selection.

The second main paradigm called ‘critical theory’ emerged mainly as a result of the Frankfurt School, a group of post-1933 scholars influenced by the dialectical philosophy of Hegelian-Marxism (McQuail 2010). Their critique of mass culture and media was ‘sharp and pessimistic’, with this culture criticised for its reduction of individuals to customers (McQuail 2010:116). Critical theorists regarded mass media as ‘agents of a dominant, controlling class of power agents’ who seek to impose their values and to marginalise opposition, to maintain a dominant ideology or hegemony (McQuail 2010:215). They shaped the minds of the masses and the ideology they perpetuated contributing to a ‘depoliticised populace’ willing to accept the social and political status quo (Holt & Perren 2009:3). Theories of the public sphere and political economy emerged from the paradigm of critical theory.

The optimism regarding blogs draws on John Dewey, an early-twentieth-century theorist of participatory democracy which was further advanced by Jürgen Habermas, a German sociologist and philosopher, and a second generation of Frankfurt School theorists. His theory of the public sphere forms the major part of the theoretical framework of this thesis. In addition, gatekeeping theory is drawn upon. This theory was developed in the late 1940s by social-psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947), with the first application to a journalism context conducted by White (1997 [1950]). Before these two theories are discussed, the theories of technological and social determinism need a brief mention considering that much of the discourse on blogs tends to be either characterised by optimistic hype or pessimistic counter-hype about new technology.
Technological and social determinism

Röhle (2005:404) suggests the lack of theoretical foundation that has plagued studies of new media is attributable to ‘the enthusiasm in the face of the experimental possibilities of the new technologies themselves’. (Cammaerts 2008:372) described this often-celebratory enthusiasm as a ‘kind of wide-eyed civic utopianism’. According to Domingo (2006:54), early analysts were partly paralysed by ‘utopias of online journalism’ in that they regarded affordances such as hypertext and interactivity as revolutionising journalism. To claim that productive discourse and engagement can emerge easily or automatically because the internet allows interactive communication is an example of resorting to technological determinism. This is a theory in which technology is regarded as an independent factor shaping or changing society (Rosenberry 2010). Marshall McLuhan, who died before the internet became ubiquitous, is perhaps the best-known technological determinist; he believed the medium is the message and that media fundamentally changed the way we do things.

Media is [sic] enforcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action and every institution formerly taken for granted. [...] They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered (McLuhan 1967:26).

In contrast, the theory of social-determinism is more sceptical about the democratic potential of the internet. It views technology, action and social context as inseparable phenomena, each influencing each other. Instead of being separate from social life, the technological is a ‘part of what makes society possible, in other words, it is constitutive of society’ (MacKenzie & Wajcman 1999:23). Chandler (1995) views it as one of a number of mediating factors in human behaviour and social change which influence and are influenced by other phenomena.

Both theories – social determinism and technological determinism – over-generalise the effects of new information communication, leading to either pessimistic or optimistic views (Jenkins 2012). Instead, new media need to be understood in terms of use and knowledge, and reflect an awareness of human agency. Technology should be viewed as the dependent variable in that society is responsible for the adoption and implementation of new technologies. In other words, ‘technologies express the priorities
of those who champion them’ (Green 2001:6). While technology seems to drive the adoption and practice of citizen journalism and blogs, it is by no means all-determining. People have ‘choices about how technologies are created, understood and used’ and furthermore the potential applications of technologies may not be realised (Lievrouw & Livingstone 2006:4). The notion of ‘affordances’ is useful here, defined by Graves (2007) as the possibilities that a technology suggests for use, but does not require. Thus individuals use technology to serve different needs and through cultural feedback its use becomes more refined and specific in practice. This stance is useful in understanding how technology shapes, and becomes shaped by, human motivations and actions.

Boczkowski (2004) coined the idea of the ‘mutual shaping’ of technological and social developments, in that social, cultural and economic contextual factors influence how and to what extent journalists use new technologies. In recent years, the adoption of online journalism practices in newsrooms is no longer viewed as resulting from a technology-driven process, but rather the outcome of a complex interaction between professional, organisational, economic and social factors (Paulussen & Ugille (2008). Domingo (2008:681) suggests examining any development in online journalism as ‘the consequence of decisions taken in specific newsrooms in particular circumstances by journalists that have a professional culture, knowledge and expectations about the internet as a news medium’.

**Participatory democracy and the public sphere**

The optimism regarding blogs and participatory journalism can be a reliance on technological determinism, but there is also an ethos underlying much of the rhetoric that draws on the democratic ideas of John Dewey (1991) who believed the press played a crucial role in a democracy. According to Whipple (2005:175), the assumption behind the shift from passive consumption to active engagement is an embrace of a ‘Deweyan participatory approach to the information environment’. Dewey (1991) argued that newspapers needed to move beyond just reporting events and become vehicles for public education and debate. He believed that the active participation of citizens was vital and journalism ought to be a collaborative system for conversation, dialogue and debate (Hermida et al. 2011). Participatory democracy theory was further advanced by
Habermas whose theory of the public sphere is relevant as the focus of my research is the quality of debate on political journalist-blogs and the extent to which deliberation is evident. As Robertson and McLaughlin (2011:4) state, ‘perhaps the best known and most influential basis for measuring the quality of political discourse is that of Habermas and his conceptualisation of the public sphere’.

Public sphere

The idea of a public sphere was developed most prominently by Habermas (1974:49) who described it as a ‘realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed’. Habermas’ theory has occupied a central position in journalism scholarship in recent decades, underpinning many discussions and critiques of the quality of debate in the media. Journalism has been seen as essential to this sphere in that it should encourage and amplify public conversation (Reese et al. 2007).

Habermas’ seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989 [1962]) in which he analyses the emergence, development and disintegration of the public sphere has been described as ‘an immensely rich and influential book that has had a major impact in a variety of disciplines’ (Kellner 2000:259). Habermas links the emergence of the public sphere in Britain, France and Germany in the late 18th and 19th centuries to the development of capitalism and rise of bourgeois society. The bourgeois public sphere consisted of newspapers and literary journals, as well as parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs, coffee houses, meeting halls and other public spaces where people could come together to freely discuss as equals matters of common concern. Habermas claimed that for the first time in history, individuals and groups could debate and discuss public affairs, and shape public opinion and influence political practice. Hence his concept of the public sphere derives its meaning from a specific historical situation, a specific phase of bourgeois society.

Habermas (1996:360) later revised this concept so that rather than comprising private individuals gathering in public space, it became ‘a network for communicating information and points of view’ that link the public to the political system, with the mass media the major components. According to Habermas (1989 [1962]), the newspaper was the public sphere’s ‘pre- eminent institution’, thus placing the press...
within a broad framework of social theory (Schudson 2003). However, this public sphere became eroded in the 20th century due to the commercialisation of the media, which mixed opinion with advertising, public relations and entertainment so the public ‘consumes’ its culture rather than critically reflects on it (Habermas 1989 [1962]:185). The public sphere was transformed from a forum for rational-critical debate to a ‘platform for advertising’ (Habermas 1989 [1962]:181).

**Deliberation**

Central to the conceptualisation of the public sphere is deliberation which Habermas (1996) defined as the exchange and critical evaluation of rational arguments regarding a problem, and the working towards a solution that can be acceptable to all. Such discourse ideally should follow certain rules: there should be open participation, justification of assertions, authenticity, participants should consider the common good, treat each other with respect, and reach consensus. It involves recognising, incorporating and rebutting the arguments of others as well as justifying one’s own (Ferree et al. 2002).

Although developed for use in the evaluation of spoken, face-to-face debate, the deliberative model provides a benchmark to evaluate discourses online. Szabo (2009:8) suggests that deliberation in the context of blogs is conversation that ‘exhibits heterogeneity of views’ about the topic, is reciprocal and based on valid arguments, and where participants reflect on the proposed arguments modifying their views accordingly. It has been suggested that readers’ comments on blogs may promote deliberation by offering other perspectives, perhaps from personal experiences, on aspects of the issue not considered by the journalist, with such diversity of opinion a critical part of deliberation (Gastil 2008).

**Criticisms of the Habermasian public sphere**

Critics argue that Habermas idealised a participatory bourgeois public sphere of the late 18th and 19th centuries, because in actuality it was elitist and restrictive, dominated by white property-owning males, and groups such as women, working class and plebeian were excluded (McKee 2004; Stevenson 2002). Interestingly, Habermas (1992:430)
later acknowledged he underestimated the significance of oppositional and non-bourgeois public spheres and from the beginning a ‘dominant bourgeois public’ had collided with a ‘plebeian one’. While most scholars have deserted Habermas’ empirical claims and instead use the public sphere as a normative ideal to judge the ‘existing communication structures of contemporary societies’ (Chadwick 2009:13), Dahlberg (2004:13) points out that Habermas was referring to the idealised form of public reasoning, which is useful ‘for the critical evaluation of the democratic value of everyday informal deliberations, and only able to be approximated in practice’. And the public sphere does not mean a public space as such:

When talking of the public sphere, Habermas is not talking about a specific, bounded public, but the whole array of complex networks of multiple and overlapping publics constituted through the critical discourse of individuals, community groups, civic associations, social movements, and media organisations (original emphasis, Dahlberg 2004:6).

Another criticism is the bias towards rationality and consensus highlighted in Habermas’ conceptual framework. The requirement of rationality, which Young (2000:49) calls ‘a polite, orderly, dispassionate, gentlemanly argument’, discounts a wide range of other forms of communication that may be helpful to democracy such as ‘the affective, the poetic, the humorous, the ironic’ (Dahlgren 2005:156) or even statements or reports given without argumentative support (Moe 2009). In addition, Shalin (1992:263) argues that the need for consensus leaves little room for the constructive properties of dissent and is critical of the notion that an ‘honest difference of opinion’ or a persistent disagreement is seen as ‘a failure’. In contrast to Habermas, Dewey consistently placed the ‘dynamic, open-ended elements of conflict, dissent’ at the centre of his democratic theory (Whipple 2005:169). Habermas (2005), however, came to draw a clear explicit distinction between everyday political talk (as would occur in blogs) and that which occurs in formal decision-making spheres.

Some scholars argue that there is a danger of ‘stretching’ the concept of deliberation. Steiner (2008) states that the concept has become so faddish it is in danger of being a synonym for talk of any kind, and would include ‘communicative distortions’ such as coercion and manipulation (Bächtiger et al. 2010:32), whereas for fruitful and rigorous research its very specific meaning must be kept. While Habermas (1996:323) believes at
least some amount of deliberation is possible in the real world of politics, he also
regards his model as an ideal as deliberative situations ‘have an improbable character
and are like islands in the ocean of everyday praxis’. This ‘improbability’ does not
mean researchers cannot use ideal deliberation as an evaluative benchmark and judge
the quality of conversation as ranging along a continuum of ‘excellent’, ‘bad’, ‘better’
or ‘good enough’ deliberation for some purpose (Bächtiger et al. 2010:37).

A third criticism focuses on the structure of the public sphere. Rather than the singular
form in which it is most often used, the public sphere needs to be conceptualised as a
multiplicity of public spheres that can sometimes overlap and also conflict, and include
mainstream and excluded groups. Fraser (1990) first pointed out that there are
countercultural spheres with distinct kinds of discourse, and scholars who have applied
Fraser’s ideas to the internet agree that ‘the virtual sphere consists of culturally
fragmented cyberspheres that occupy a common virtual space’ (Papacharissi 2002:22).
These spheres have also been described as sphericules or spherules (Bruns 2008a; Gitlin
1998).

Despite the problems, ambiguities and limitations of the key text of Habermas (1989
[1962]), the concept of the public sphere is compelling both empirically and
normatively and can be applied to contemporary media environments where multiple
public spheres are at work ‘constituting many different spaces’ (Dahlgren 2005:148).
As Dahlgren (2005) points out, over the years the notion of the public sphere has left the
strict Frankfurt School theory realm and is used generically to refer to democratic goals
and responsibilities of media and civic life. In addition, the discourse ethics suggested
by Habermas provide ‘a useful outline of the procedures and standards required for
‘rational communal democratic deliberation’ (Mummery & Rodan 2013:23).

**Blogs and the public sphere**

The enthusiasm regarding blogs can be attributed to the theoretical connection made
between the ‘blogosphere’ and the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere (Reese et al.
2007), yet, there is widespread disagreement about the extent to which they can enhance
participatory democracy (Brundidge 2010). On the one hand, Bruns (2008a) argues that
the fragmentation brought about by new media is creating a ‘networked public sphere’
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(Original emphasis), which will be an effective substitute for the public sphere of mass media. On the other hand, pessimists claim polarisation and fragmentation (Sunstein 2008) are occurring online. Rather than a ‘virtual town hall’ (Wall 2005), Daniel Lyons (2005), senior editor of Forbes, described blogs as ‘the prized platform of an online lynch mob spouting liberty but spewing lies, libel and invective’.

Fragmentation and polarisation

A well-functioning public sphere requires not only dissenting voices, but an exposure to expressions, opinions and perspectives that people would not have chosen in advance. Critics, including Habermas, claim that fragmentation and polarisation are occurring online, contributing to a further decline – rather than a reinvigoration – of the public sphere:

[…] the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics. Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication, when news groups crystallize around the focal points of the quality press, for example, national newspapers and political magazines (Habermas 2006:423).

This argument has been explored at length by Sunstein (2008) who contends that the ease of filtering unwanted information online contributes to a fragmentation of the public sphere into enclaves which serve as personal echo chambers or information cocoons. Sunstein (2008) argues that in the blogosphere group polarisation is undoubtedly happening. Group polarisation occurs when members of a like-minded group that debate with one another without hearing contrary views usually move towards a more extreme position than they were previously inclined. Different groups (each consisting of like-minded people) are driven increasingly far apart, because most of their discussions are with one another.

Such polarisation is a well-established phenomenon confirmed by hundreds of studies of off-line groups in over a dozen countries, and Sunstein (2008:95) claims that in the blogosphere ‘there is a significant divide between politically identifiable communities’ and liberals and conservatives seldom link to each other or even discuss the same topics. Some studies support this. Adamic and Glance (2005) found 91 per cent of links on
1,400 political blogs were to like-minded sites (politically conservative or liberal). Hargittai, Gallo and Kane (2008) looked at cross-ideological discussions in 40 blogs and found bloggers mostly link to those who share their ideological stance, with links to opposing points-of-view mostly for straw-man arguments.

Kelly (2008:6) used social network analysis of the most highly cited (linked to) 8,000 blogs in the English language blogosphere, and found bloggers on both sides of the political axis have ‘a strong tendency to link to their ideological friends’. In the map below the size of the dot is the number of other blogs which link to it, regarded as a measure of its prominence in the blogosphere. The colour of a dot represents its assignment to a particular attentive cluster based on its dynamic link history. Clearly shown is the prominence of U.S. political discourse: the large groups of reddish (conservative) and bluish (liberal) blogs are the most visible. Kelly (2008:8) points out that although most English-language blogs are not political, ‘political discourse organizes more bloggers into densely linked network neighbourhoods than any other topic of online discourse.

Figure 1 Social network diagram of 8,000 weblogs
Note that results of such link analyses must be treated with caution since there can be sampling problems. Some blogs (such as those embedded in mainstream news outlets) may not be indexed by search engines or web tracking sites (Li & Walejko 2008; Moe 2009). Perhaps most problematic is the labelling of blogs as conservative or liberal. Usually, it is the scholar who identifies such blogs this way, but what about blogs where the author takes a moderate or centrist position?

Scholars who take an optimistic stance see the internet as strengthening democracy and invigorating the public sphere because of the relative equality and unrestricted means of access, the information it makes available from a diverse array of sources articulating a range of points of view, and the production and distribution of media to a greater reach of the population. Democratic debate and civic culture can be facilitated through two-way communication of a wide range of geographically dispersed citizens who cannot avoid addressing and linking to opposing points of views (Kellner 2004; Price 2006; Gimmler 2001; McNair 2006). Political discussion online differs from that carried out face-to-face and in some respects may help rather than hinder deliberation as the lack of physical presence and reduction in social cues can be a useful rather than a limiting factor. Studies have found that compared to face-to-face encounters, computer-mediated discussions produced greater self-disclosure, more intimate and direct questions, and people felt more comfortable and less threatening in discussing political disagreements (Tidwell & Walther 2002; Stromer-Galley 2003). Wall (2005:167) argues that even if blogs cater to partisan audiences they may encourage ordinary people to feel free to participate and discover their own political voices, and ‘ultimately pull more people into public conversations’. Whereas Habermas perceived a decline in informed citizenry due to the commercialisation of media, there may have also been the broadening of the public to include groups previously disempowered (Kellner 2009; Boyd 2008). Benkler (2006:271) challenges the echo chamber conceptualisation and argues that although there is a clustering of communities of ‘interest and association and highlighting of certain sites’, there is also provision of ‘tremendous redundancy of paths for expression and accreditation’. Benkler (2006) believes we are seeing a fundamental change in how individuals experience their role as citizens because in the networked information environment people are free to observe, report, question and debate, and are not limited to reading the opinions of opinion makers.
Sunstein’s hypothesis about fragmentation and polarisation is not supported by studies conducted for the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Horrigan, Garrett & Resnick 2004; Rainie, Cornfield & Horrigan 2005). Two nationally representative U.S. surveys looked at the newsgathering patterns of both internet-users and non-users. The findings from the first survey suggest that compared to those who do not access news online, internet users are more likely to expose themselves to political opinions not in agreement with their own opinions. The researchers concluded that fears that getting news and information about politics online from blogs or websites might ‘channel people into informational warrens of one-sided arguments’ are not borne out by their data (Horrigan et al. 2004:44). A second survey five months later found 31 per cent of internet users preferred neutral sources for political information; the remainder were divided evenly between preferences for sites that agreed with their political views and sites that challenged their views. This provides further support that internet-users are more likely to encounter contrary information and political views which do not accord with their beliefs, and ‘selective exposure’ did not appear to be a typical pattern (Rainie et al. 2005:25).

A more recent study found ‘ideological segregation of online news consumption’ was ‘low in absolute terms’ (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2011:1799) and homogeneous news diets are rare since not only do a significant portion of consumers get news from multiple outlets, but most online news consumption is concentrated in a small number of ‘large and relatively moderate sites’ (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2011:1831). A specific study of group polarisation on the microblog Twitter – which analysed 30,000 tweets about abortion and the shooting of George Tiller (an American late-term abortion physician killed in 2009) – found people were exposed to multiple, diverse points of view (Yardi & Boyd 2010).

**A new counter-public sphere?**

Some scholars have posited a new counter-public sphere which will undermine, destabilise or even replace the traditional public sphere of the mass media (Bruns 2008a; Downey & Fenton 2003). This is epitomised in a popular quote, ‘The future of blogs will have arrived when you check your favourite blog for sports news in the
morning, instead of your local paper’ (MacManus in Winn 2008). According to Haigh (2012), the advent of social media\textsuperscript{10} platforms such as blogs and Twitter is threatening ‘a whole culture and sense of journalistic primacy’ and is ‘a significant challenge for established news brands’. Adam Curry, the founder of podcasting, believes that blogging represents ‘the liberation of the news and information we read, watch or hear from the constraints of Big Media Control’ (Kline & Burstein 2005:271). According to Bruns (2008a), the fragmentation brought about by new media has led to a patchwork of multiple public spherules, creating a ‘networked public sphere’ (original emphasis) which will be an effective substitute for the public sphere of mass media. Friedland, Hove and Rojas (2006:19) argue that for the first time in history the informal public sphere has a medium such as political blogs that can allow for ‘large-scale expression of mass opinion’ which can systematically surround and affect the traditional media system. Haas (2010) has even envisaged the emergence of two media spheres where there is no collaboration – citizen-blogs at the periphery with the mainstream media at the centre of the political public sphere although the former would become so powerful they would influence the latter.

Such speculations, however, are misguided, if not an illustration of technological determinism. Although many citizen-bloggers express contempt for the mainstream press, they often depend on such media for stories they discuss and to gain credibility (Stepp 2009; Pew Research Centre 2010a). Anderson (2007:269–270) argues that there is ‘little hard evidence that any version of it will be the “mass” future of journalism and radically change the nature of the profession’. Friedland (2010:61) goes so far as to say that the notion that we will rely more on citizen-journalism to report on stories that daily metros now do is ‘delusional’. However, very few citizen-blogs and independent sites are viewed by a mass audience and what has occurred instead is that mass media, notably newspapers, have extended their reach online. Their websites draw readership numbers unparalleled by citizen-bloggers or alternative news sites, with a widespread adoption of audience participation. When searches are conducted by the search engine Google the returns are mostly to mainstream sites, which means the potential of the internet to open up the news media sphere to alternative sites is limited (Redden &

\textsuperscript{10} Sometimes blogs are contrasted with ‘social media’ such as Twitter and Facebook. In this thesis they are also described as social media, a term which has come to ‘encompass a wide variety of applications’ and in a sense are social since readers are able to leave comments and interact in an asynchronous manner (Lee et al. 2011:1820).
Two-thirds of the 25 most popular U.S. news sites are run by traditional news organisations such as USA Today, NYT and Washington Post. Most of the traffic comes to these sites through their homepages, not via search engines or social media, which indicates that ‘reputation remains paramount’ (Olmstead et al. 2012).

A study by Pew Research Centre (2010) found more than 99 per cent of links on blogs were to mainstream media sites – NYT and Washington Post accounted for 73 per cent of all links – with citizen-sites not even making up 1 per cent of links. The network analysis shown below in Figure 2 clearly shows the role of mainstream media in the blogosphere. Kelly (2008:6) mapped the ‘co-citation network’ of links in blog posts of the 10,000 most highly interlinked English-language blogs and found the most popular links were to the NYT, BBC and Washington Post. The large yellow dot in the map represents the NYT, with websites of niche interest to smaller numbers of bloggers located farther from the centre.

Figure 2  
Network of links in posts of 10,000 bloggers

(Kelly 2008:6)
Kelly (2008:16) concludes: ‘While the internet, vivified by blogs, fractures the landscape of public discourse, a core activity of bloggers is to focus attention back to the mainstream media’ providing a secondary market. Rather than a new counter-public sphere or a networked public sphere that will substitute the public sphere of mass media (Bruns 2008a). As mentioned, there are sampling problems with link analyses as blogs embedded in mainstream news outlets may not be indexed by search engines or web tracking sites. Regardless, the difficulty with such studies as Kelly’s (2008) is the assumption that blogs are independent: there is no mention of blogs hosted by mainstream media sites. And yet the blogosphere by definition encompasses mainstream media blogs and so any discussion of the democratic potential of this medium surely must include such blogs. Flew and Wilson (2010:144) point out that the relationship between mainstream news media and independent citizen journalism and blogs is far more porous and permeable than either evangelists or debunkers assume, and what is emerging is a globalised network sphere which envelops mainstream journalistic outlets and independently operating citizen-journalists.

The optimistic and pessimistic opposing stances regarding the extent to which blogs can enhance participatory democracy (Brundidge 2010) is essentially a false dichotomy. Not only do they exaggerate the impact of new information technologies – a resorting to technological determinism (Lievrouw & Livingstone 2006) – but they also over-generalise in that they fail to recognise the particular characteristics of different online environments (Wright & Street 2007). Wright and Street (2007) cogently point out that it is no more plausible to conclude blogs destroy deliberation than to suggest they make it possible. Blogs are the product of technical, political and other choices, and whether or not the result of online discussion is deliberation or cacophony depends on how the discussion is organised. Different discourse architectures can be constructed on-line that encourage more or less deliberative behaviours, with ‘the form of technology, rather than the fact of it’ that matters (Wright & Street 2007:854). In particular, the choice of moderation style is highly significant in ‘shaping the quality and usefulness of online debates’ (Wright & Street 2007:856). Questions of moderation are related to gatekeeping decisions such as which comments to allow through the ‘gates’ of blogs.
Gatekeeping and blogs

Gatekeeping is one of the oldest and most enduring theories in journalism studies and has been described as ‘the process by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media’ (Shoemaker et al. 2001:233). Gatekeeping includes decisions regarding the shaping and timing of news events, the number of stories about an event, and the use of graphics and follow-ups; in other words, the ‘framing’ of a story (Shoemaker et al. 2009; Cassidy 2006). According to Shoemaker (in Roberts 2005), the emergence of blogs has returned gatekeeping to the forefront of research considerations.

The theory of how items are selected or rejected was developed in the late 1940s by social-psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) to explain how food items moved through certain ‘channels’ and passed through different ‘gates’ before ending up on the dinner table. The first application of gatekeeping theory to a journalism context was conducted by White (1997 [1950]) who examined the reasons why a newspaper wire-editor (pseudonymously called ‘Mr Gates’) selected or rejected items when faced with so many news items and so little space. White found ‘Mr Gates’ used only a tenth of the available stories: of those rejected, one third were for subjective reasons regarding content; the other two-thirds were discarded because of insufficient space or because a similar story had run recently. White’s adaptation of Lewin’s theory was highly individualistic with an emphasis on ‘one section of that process’ – the gatekeeper rather than the channel (Shoemaker et al. 2009:76). As well as gatekeepers, Lewin (1947:145) posited that items have a constellation of forces which facilitate or constrain their passage and this also holds for ‘the travelling of a news item through certain communication channels in a group’. In the context of journalism, such forces can be positive or negative and would include newsworthiness, and trustworthiness (Shoemaker et al. 2001).

Subsequent studies looked at gatekeeping in a variety of media and examined decision-making by different gatekeepers (such as editors and reporters) who operate at different levels in the process. While in early studies the gate was regarded as an in/out decision point, later analysis revealed gatekeeping to be a complex process involving a range of psychological, social and professional factors with biases of individual gatekeepers.
moderated by other forces including organisational, extramedia and ideological (Shoemaker et al. 2001). For example, Gans (1979) identified organisational forces such as competition and journalists’ dependency on the NYT as an arbiter. This hierarchy of influences explains ‘how news gets constructed – by individuals – within a social and occupational setting’ (Reese & Ballinger 2001:641).

**Gatekeeping in the new networked environment**

A journalist’s self-perception as the community’s gatekeeper is deeply ingrained, as the selection and dissemination of information – what information to admit through the gates of the media – has been central in the definition of what a journalist does (Singer 2010b). In the past, journalists have gathered, written and edited the news with no contribution from the public, other than as sources or letters to the editor (Nip 2006). Under this traditional gatekeeping model, news organisations set the news agenda, with political influence largely determined by the interaction between political elites and journalists (Castells 2010). But the internet has opened the floodgates to unlimited sources of information and created a media environment where information is networked and distributed, news sent and received both rapidly and widely around the clock. Some scholars suggest there are no gates in this new networked environment, which means gatekeeping in traditional journalistic settings is redundant or ‘passé’ (Williams & Delli Carpini 2000). According to Bruns (2003), a paradigm shift is occurring where gatekeeping is being replaced with ‘gatewatching’, a term encapsulating the citizens’ role in refiltering news. Gatewatchers watch the gates and point out to other readers those gates most likely to open to useful sources. Ironically, the independent blogosphere – rather than being ordinary citizens pitted against the gatekeeping elites of old media gatekeepers – is dominated by their own elite influential bloggers who are predominantly highly-educated, white, male, professionals (Hindman 2008; Young 2011).

On the other hand, some scholars consider that rather than the death of gatekeeping, the changes brought about by the internet have meant gatekeeping has increased in relevance. Hayles (1999:19) points out that information is useless if it simply becomes ‘free-floating, unaffected by changes in context’ and Rosenberry (2010:154) warns that a lack of gatekeeping can lead to information that is unverified and unreliable from
questionable sources. There is a view that inefficient and ineffective gatekeeping on citizen-sites such as blogs has led to disorganisation and cacophony, in that publication comes first, filtering later (Barlow 2010; Hayles 1999). As McNair (2006) contends, the need for gatekeeping and quality control is a consequence of those characteristics which make the (independent) blogosphere so appealing – independence, interactivity and accessibility. Traditional journalistic gatekeepers sift through information, reject most of it, and attempt to identify and correct errors of fact before publication. Waldman (2005:78) points out, without the order they impose ‘it’s much, much harder to make sense of what’s happening in the world’.

Shoemaker (in Roberts 2005) points out that gatekeeping is a fundamental psychological process of every human, and continues to exist in traditional media (only much faster), with new gatekeepers needed online. Journalists now have an additional source to contend with because online there are no restrictions of, say, print for space, so more news can be admitted through the gates. There are also more gates: information posted on a journalist-blog, for example, has travelled through many gates. Apart from deciding what information to share in their posts, decisions are needed as to which links to include on a blog, and how to moderate – whether to post-moderate or vet comments prior to publication. Such decisions are an extension of a news organisation’s gatekeeping authority (Storm 2006; Dimitrova et al. 2003).

Singer (2006a) contends that in the splintering media environment, journalists need to distinguish themselves from citizen-bloggers, spin-doctors or PR practitioners. As journalists can no longer control the information people read, their decisions regarding news should be based on a regard for the public as citizens of a democracy, ‘not consumers in a giant content-candy store’ (Singer 2006a:12). Journalists need to reconceptualise the nature of their gatekeeping role and differentiate themselves from other online providers of information by drawing on normative stances (Singer 2011); a role foreseen a decade earlier by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001):

As citizens encounter an ever-greater flow of data they have more need – not less – for identifiable sources dedicated to verifying that information, highlighting what is important to know and filtering out what is not. […] The role of the press in this new age becomes working to answer the question ‘where is the good stuff?’ Verification and synthesis become the backbone of the new
gatekeeper role of the journalist, that of the ‘sensemaker’ (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001:48).

According to Temple (2013:239), professional journalists have to a large extent maintained their gatekeeping role in the new environment and have become ‘the arbiters, ethical guides and role models’ for many amateurs. Similarly, in her study which used in-depth interviews with 35 U.S. journalists, Robinson (2007:313) found that gatekeeping – defined as ‘the art of deciding what is newsworthy’ – has remained a central component of their routines. Editors once concerned only with news value are now considering technology, and there is less content editing and more digital troubleshooting. However, Robinson (2007) argues that journalistic authority cannot help but become diluted in the new online environment, although in an attempt to reinforce such authority, journalists are aiming to build credibility and increase transparency.

The contentious issue of moderation

There have been various studies of gatekeeping as it applies to the online environment with the majority either examining gatekeeping on blogs or analysing how newsrooms decide what and when to post online. A number of studies show that professional journalists try to make sure they keep their gatekeeper role when dealing with UGC (Hermida & Thurman 2008; Singer 2009; Singer et al. 2011). In a content analysis of 20 U.S. journalist-blogs, Singer (2005) found the majority of links were to a journalists’ own news organisation or to other mainstream sites. Singer (2005) argues that even in this new participatory format journalists are ‘normalising’ their blogs to fit old norms and practices, keeping to their traditional gatekeeper function in maintaining control over information. In a survey of major U.S. newspapers, Singer (2006b:275) found that while journalists are still focusing on their central gatekeeping role of ‘delivering credible information’ arguably a role more ‘vital than ever in today’s rowdy unbounded information environment’ – they are having to reconceptualize this role in order to accommodate participatory blogs. The implementing of restrictive commenting policies is regarded by Robinson (2010:141) as one way of ‘maintaining journalistic authority’. Hermida (2013) notes that the area of most tension in participatory journalism is gatekeeping; although there has been some opening up to the audience, journalists and
editors seek to retain a gatekeeping role. In other words, the mainstream journalist retains substantial control as gatekeeper of the conversation.

However, much of the criticism of blogs (both independent and those hosted by mainstream media), has been due to the lack of gatekeeping (moderating) of comments. Rasmussen (2008:78) argues that what is missing in online forums such as blogs is ‘a culture for civil, public communication’ due in part to the ‘absence of editing functions’. A study of the French forums Le Monde and Wanadoo found they were dominated by a few readers, with some comments ‘incoherent, displaying the effects of some form of intoxication or mental illness, or at least an aggressively disruptive nature’ (Adams 2007:193). Another study of four popular U.S. blogs found the majority of comments were made up of ‘scorn, cynicism, mockery and generally obnoxious statements’ (Kenix 2009:809). Indeed, as ethicist Clive Hamilton (2009) wrote in Crikey, citizen-bloggers sometimes resort to banning abusive commenters – the ‘flames’, ‘trolls’, ‘snarks’ and ‘sock puppets’. Australian blogger and politician Andrew Bartlett confesses he sometimes finds comment-threads ‘so full of incoherent or just plain juvenile and nasty dribble’ that it makes him want to switch off comments all together (in Parish 2008).

The tradition in the blogosphere has been to delete problematic comments afterwards and initially many mainstream media sites tried to follow suit. When The Guardian launched Comment is Free they decided against pre-moderation as they wanted to keep the conversation as free-flowing as possible. Georgina Henry (2006) describes the result of this experiment as a ‘rude shock’ and asked in an end-of-the-week post whether it was necessary for commenters to personally abuse those with whom they disagreed and to resort to swearing to make their point:

> When I have spent hours removing the anti-Semitism and Islamophobia that dances round any piece about Israel/Palestine, and the incoherent abuse, swearing, the false statements, the ill-disguised misogyny, the intimidation and the downright nastiness that fuels so many comments, I wonder whether Guardian values – free comment, but fair comment too – are in danger of being drowned out in an anarchic, unmoderated medium (Henry 2006).

Unmoderated reader forums on nytimes.com became such ‘sewers of profanity’ that in 2006 the newspaper was forced to close them down (Robinson 2007:310). Rosenberry
argues that when blogs and forums on mainstream news sites become full of personal attacks and unverifiable observations they contribute nothing meaningful to discourse:

Taking such a laissez-faire approach to incorporating interactive technology on the news sites – ‘We post reader-submitted stories; we’ve got blogs; we Twitter; isn’t that enough?’ – has the same shortcomings as the cyber-utopian view that the network will automatically and inevitably lead to a dynamic, engaged public. The lesson of public journalism is that building a public and fostering effective deliberation required thoughtful, guided informational exchanges (Rosenberry 2010:158).

As Australian freelance journalist Andrew Stafford (2012) writes, the key question and the dilemma for mastheads – who base part of their online business models on advertising page views – is how much ‘immediate, non-considered, anonymous commentary’ actually enhances public debate, especially when they spend valuable resources weeding out ‘the spammers, trolls, and astroturfers that deliberately seek to distort and/or poison it’. If they contain personal attacks and unverifiable observations they risk damage to the reputation of the news organisations (Reich 2011). However, to attract users, sites need to make it easy for people to participate and anonymity allows users to feel less inhibited when commenting and less threatened in political disagreements (Stromer-Galley 2003). As Gsell (2009) points out:

At its best, the removal of inhibitions can lead to a lively but civil exchange of ideas. At its worst, it can mean profanity, and sites are loath to alienate potential community members, tarnishing their brands in the process (Gsell 2009:16).

The trend in recent years has been towards increased moderation. Hermida and Thurman’s (2008) comprehensive study of 118 blogs on U.K. newspaper websites identified a shift towards moderation due to concerns regarding reputation, trust and legal liabilities. Simpson (2008) found blogs on the sites of Fairfax Media and News Limited are becoming stringently moderated as the legal implications of publisher liability become apparent. While scholars have criticised this trend, arguing that editors and journalists are simply maintaining control over information, reinforcing their traditional gatekeeping role (Singer 2005; Wall 2005), the same trend has been occurring in the independent blogosphere. Bora Zivkovic (2013), blog editor at Scientific American, notes that while the ‘spirit of free speech’ permeated early online
discussions and blogs were largely unmoderated as bloggers felt they should let everyone have their say, most veteran bloggers have ‘severely tightened their commenting rules over the years’:

The concept of free speech does not mean everyone has the right to say everything everywhere. It does not mean you have the right to say your stuff on my blog. Every host of every site has the right to delete, edit, or modify any comment in any way, to ban users, and to implement whatever moderation norms and techniques one wants. Commenting is a privilege, not a right. You have to earn it (Zivkovic 2013).

*AusVotes* (2013), which won the Best Australian Blogs 2013 award for political commentary (Australian Writers’ Centre 2013), has a strict moderation policy and unacceptable comments include not only those that are vexatious or abusive, but also those that are off-topic, excessively frequent or lengthy.

What critics overlook is that the choice of moderation style may be a significant factor in shaping the quality and usefulness of online blog discussions. Wilhelm (2000:140) claims that the ‘moderation of online political forums is critical to their success’ and a skilled and trusted facilitator is often necessary to ‘create order out of potential chaos’. A number of studies support this. Coleman et al. (2002:17) found on the U.K’s Home Office forum, a policy of silent moderation – in which moderators did not participate in debates and did not explain why messages were deleted – was counterproductive because it created a ‘conspiratorial image of the moderator, with a number of threads dedicated to fighting against Big Brother-like, invisible moderators’. Reykowski (2006:344) found the presence and behaviour of the facilitator was an ‘important factor in shaping the groups’ deliberative functioning’ and the deliberative scores were the highest in those groups where the facilitator was most active. Wright and Street (2007:863) repeated the methodology Wilhelm (2000) used with UseNet which was post-moderated, to Futurum which was pre-moderated, and concluded that the type of moderation has a significant effect on ‘interactivity and deliberation’. However, there may be other factors at play beyond design issues or moderation. Wright and Street (2007:864) point out that the participants they studied may have been more educated or were ‘otherwise more disposed to partake in deliberative exchanges’ or the topics under discussion may influence the deliberative nature of the discussion. In contrast, Ruiz et al.’s (2011) cross-cultural study of online newspapers found that differences in
moderation strategies (pre-/post-moderation, in-house/outsourced) had no direct impact on the dynamics of online news comments. These strategies were effective in eradicating insults, but otherwise did seem to ‘direct the quality of the debate in a clear direction’ (Ruiz et al. 2011:482).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has looked at the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis. The optimism regarding blogs and participatory journalism can be a reliance on technological determinism, but much of the rhetoric draws on the ideas of John Dewey (1991) who believed the active participation of citizens was vital for democracy and journalism ought to be a collaborative system for dialogue and debate. Participatory democracy theory was further advanced by Jürgen Habermas whose theory of the public sphere and discourse ethics can be applied to contemporary media environments such as blogs. While there have been criticisms of this theory, it is important to note that Habermas (1996:323) regarded his model as a normative ideal, believing at least some amount of deliberation is possible in the real world of politics. His model is useful and relevant for critical evaluation of the quality of political discourse, and relevant for this study in that conversation on blogs can be evaluated according to a continuum from ‘excellent’, ‘good enough’ or ‘bad’ deliberation (Bächtiger et al. 2010:37). There is conflicting evidence from limited studies regarding the democratising potential of blogs and their impact on the public sphere. Although some scholars have posited a new counter-public sphere will undermine or even replace the traditional public sphere of the mass media (Bruns 2008a; Downey & Fenton 2003), this overlooks the fact that mass media have extended their reach online, with a widespread adoption of audience participation through blogs and other platforms.

This chapter also looked at the theory of gatekeeping as it applies to journalism and new media. While journalists were once considered gatekeepers of the public sphere – in that decisions as to what information to admit through the gates of the media has been their central role – alternative news sites and new media have broken that hold. Singer (2011) suggests that journalists need to reconceptualise the nature of their gatekeeping role and differentiate themselves from other online providers of information by drawing on normative stances. According to Pamela Shoemaker, one of the foremost scholars of
this theory, the emergence of blogs has returned gatekeeping to the forefront of research considerations. It is useful and relevant to the ongoing debate over the democratic value of blogs, because the optimistic and pessimistic division is a false dichotomy. It is no more plausible to conclude blogs destroy deliberation than to suggest they make it possible. Different discourse architectures encourage more or less deliberative behaviours, and in particular, the choice of moderation style – or gatekeeping decisions may play a part in ‘shaping the quality and usefulness of online debates’ (Wright & Street 2007:856). While libertarians may view moderation as censorship and restricting expression, journalists who moderate their own blogs can not only maintain civility, but also facilitate rather than filter. Interestingly, in recent years, there has been a trend on both independent blogs as well as mainstream news sites towards more stringent moderation.

The next chapter looks at the concept at the heart of this thesis: blogs. As Steiner (2008) emphasises, good research begins with clear conceptualisations. Concepts are both elements of a theoretical system and tools for the gathering of facts and data, and if ‘discriminating and taxonomic conceptual containers’ are not provided it is inevitable data will be misgathered (Sartori 1970:1052). With an ongoing debate amongst scholars about how to conceptualise blogs, historicity is important here as it provides a backdrop for current usages of blogs and justifies the view of the blog as a ‘content agnostic “format”, a medium that can integrate other genres and new types of content and thus be used for various purposes’ (Siles 2011:754). In addition, the various genres applicable to this study such as political-blog, citizen-blog and journalist-blog are defined.
Chapter 2 Conceptualising blogs

There are amateurs and pros and semi-pros and group blogs and pure blogs and media blogs and bloglike-journals-that-aren’t-really-blogs-or-kindarelying-on-your-point-of-view (Smolkin 2004).

Introduction

With the growing body of scholarship on blogs there is an underlying assumption of consensus among scholars about the definition of the word and the related terms ‘blogger’ and ‘blogging’. Rather than consensus, however, the literature reveals ambiguity and a lack of clarity in the way these terms are being used (Garden 2012) with a tendency for scholars to resort to ‘vague amorphous conceptualisations’ or ‘conceptual stretching’ that leads to ‘indefiniteness and elusiveness’ (Sartori 1970:1034-35).

Does this matter? Is a concise and definitive definition even necessary? Surprisingly, a survey conducted by the Pew Institute (Rainie 2005) found 62 per cent of U.S. internet users did not know what a blog was, with project director Lee Rainie declaring, ‘we’re dealing with a term that is not particularly well defined because blogging is a platform. Blogs can be so many different things to so many different people’ (Conniff 2005). Even the blog tracking service Technorati does not have an official definition, with a spokesperson saying, ‘It’s something that’s created with blog software. I don’t know how to answer that question. We don’t get that question’ (Conniff 2005). And prominent blogger and journalism professor Jeff Jarvis believes there is no need to define blog:

A blog is merely a tool that lets you do anything from change the world to share your shopping list. […] I resist even calling it a medium; it is a means of sharing information and also of interacting. […] Blogs are whatever they want to be. Blogs are whatever we make them (Conniff 2005).

Dismissing the need for clear and consistent definitions makes critical analysis of blogs impossible, for how can scholars know they are discussing the same thing? They could be using the term to refer to different phenomena. Disturbingly, in their review of the methodology used in 24 studies of blogs, Li and Walejko (2008:283) identify problems...
of sampling procedures due to ‘vaguely-defined eligible and ineligible units, resulting in coverage error’ and they urge scholars to develop rigorous definitions of eligible blogs that accurately address their research goals. Surely if blogs are the unit of analysis, decisions are needed as to what web content constitutes a blog as distinct from comment-enabled articles or other forms of communication such as message boards.

A short history

Origin of word ‘blog’

The origin of the word itself is less problematic, as it is derived from ‘weblog’, a term commonly attributed to Jorn Barger (1997) who used it in December 1997 to describe Robot Wisdom as a ‘daily running log of the best web pages I visit’. The contraction ‘blog’ was a result of word play by Peter Merholz who decided to shift the syllabic break of weblog one letter to the left. On 28 May 1999 he wrote on his website: ‘For What It’s Worth: I’ve decided to pronounce the word ‘weblog’ as wee’-blog. Or “blog” for short’ (Merholz 1999). Merholz (2002) notes that blog is roughly onomatopoeic of vomiting so the word is apt as their sites were ‘a kind of information upchucking’.

Early blogs

These early blogs were easy to identify and define. Blogging pioneer Rebecca Blood explains they were chronologically organised and contained lists of links to ‘wacky’ websites, with usually some short commentary regarding these links: ‘everyone did their site in their own way, mutating the form to suit their own personalities’ (Blood, pers. Comm., 22 November 2012). Essentially, blogs provided a valuable filtering function for readers:

The web has been, in effect, pre-surfed for them. Out of the myriad web pages slung through cyberspace, weblog editors pick out the most mind-boggling, the most stupid, the most compelling (Blood 2000)

As well as filter blogs, however, were the online diaries or journals started in the mid-1990s, the content of which was predominantly descriptions of daily life and introspective reflections (Siles 2011). Web users at the time saw a clear difference between what were later called filter blogs and these diaries (Siles 2012) although there was one site that could be considered a hybrid – the ground-breaking *Justin’s Home Page* begun by Justin Hall in January 1994 while at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania. Blood (pers. Comm., 22 November 2012) describes Hall as the ‘father of personal publishing on the web’ and considers him to be a ‘proto-blogger’. The first entry was:

[... ] links to HTML information, some stuff about my college, a photo of me and Oliver North, a sound clip of Jane’s Addiction’s lead singer saying “Well I’m on acid too, and I ain’t throwin’ shoes at you”, and a list of my favourite web sites (Hall n.d.).

**Post-Blogger explosion**

The introduction of the blogging tool Blogger in August 1999 led to not only the popularisation of the term ‘blog’ and its now ubiquitous use (Hourihan in Baker 2008), but an influx of diaries and journals which instead of using links ‘churned out entry after entry of blurts and personal observations’ (Blood 2002:149). The post-Blogger explosion was an ‘outbreak of personal experience’ (Blood 2000) with journals often updated several times a day. This meant the original conception of blog as a ‘list of links with commentary and personal asides’ (Blood 2000), where content and form were tied together, was no longer tenable. Since then, supplementary technologies have emerged such as Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds which allow readers to subscribe to a blog and pingbacks which ‘ping’ or notify a blogger when another blogger has linked to their post. The most radical change occurred in 2002 when blog software developed the comment facility (Quiggin 2006; Miller & Shepherd 2004). Blogs utilising this option took on the characteristics of bulletin boards and forums in that they could be interactive and dialogical (Domingo & Heinonen 2008). In addition, micro-blogs have emerged. These enable users to ‘share brief bursts of information from multiple digital devices’ (Hermida 2010b:3), with Twitter, launched in July 2006, becoming a popular platform for disseminating and discussing news (Bruns 2012a).
Contemporary approaches to the definitional problem

There is now general consensus that a contemporary blog is a type of website or web page which uses blog software such as Word Press and Blogger to simplify the creation and maintenance of content. Previously, knowledge of technologies such as HTML was needed to publish content on the web. However, many mainstream news sites use software such as Expression Engine to manage content not only of blogs but other material such as comments to articles. This means it is not sufficient to simply define a blog or blogger according to the use of software, as Bora Zivkovic (2012), blog editor at Scientific American, attempts, with ‘if you use blogging software, you are a blogger’.

Blogger Rebecca Blood (pers. Comm., 22 November 2012) says ‘defining a blog by the software it uses is quite frankly, idiotic’ and points out that when she started Rebecca’s Pocket in 1999 there was no software designed specifically to create blogs. She hand-coded her site until she moved to blogging software in 2002. Blogs are also authored by an individual or groups, which in part distinguish them from message boards or other public platforms which are conversations between members of the public. The amalgamation of multiple posts on a single page, and (ideally) frequent updates, distinguishes the blog from the home page, which tends to be much more static (Juettemeyer 2008; Hourihan 2002; Matheson 2004a). Aside from these features, current definitions of blog tend to fall within two broad categories based on either technical or normative-functional perspectives.

Technical definitions characterise blogs in terms of the website’s design and affordances, as in Herring et al.’s (2005:142) ‘frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence’. Some definitions include comments or links as defining features of blogs. Bradshaw (2008b) argues that blogging above all else is ‘conversational, social and networked’ and failure to include the two key features of links and comments and ‘you’re talking to yourself’. Many scholars view links as the central defining characteristic (Matheson 2004b; Thompson 2003) or ‘common ingredients’ (Domingo & Heinonen 2008:6). This view is flawed, as it harks back to early filter blogs, a time when Blood (2002) argued that if bloggers did not link to their primary material when they referred to it, then they were not keeping a blog. Many diary blogs do not contain links (Herring et al. 2005), and they feature more in political blogs so as to link readers to primary or supporting material. Kevin Anderson
Blogging in the Mainstream

Mary Garden

says when he was the blog editor for *The Guardian* he encouraged journalists to use links as often as possible and not just to other news sources as ‘you can’t be part of the conversation if you don’t link’ (The Bivings Group 2007).

Domingo and Heinonen (2008:5) state that the comment facility is ‘one of the most crucial attributes of weblogs’, although there is a view that ‘a blog need not contain comments at all’ (Jericho 2012a:36). In his listing of Australian blogs, Jericho (2012a) included *Breakfast Politics* which calls itself a blog but does not allow space for comments. Regardless, the view is widely held that without comments a site is ‘not really, or not fully, a blog’ (Quiggin 2006:483). Green (2012) points out that much of a blog’s appeal comes from the community discussion following it, and if there are no comments or engagement, is a blog still a blog? And if not, what is it? Journalist-blogger John Birmingham (in McMillan 2010) says ‘the work is all at the backend’, and he is compelled to read every comment and reply to as many as he can, which can ‘chew up a lot of fucking time [but] I think blogs suck if you don’t get in there and engage’. Similarly, blogger James Bradley sees blogs as a new type of conversation:

> The writer’s contribution is only a starting point, designed to stimulate debate. Indeed in a very real sense a blog is only as good as the community it creates, because it’s their contribution, their willingness to be engaged and participate, that allows the form to realise its true potential (Bradley 2010:24).

The limitation of affordance-based definitions is they include web sites not typically called blogs such as news sites (Rettberg 2008). And as Perlmutter (2008:xxii) notes ‘the word blog has become so hip that every web page is calling itself a blog’.

The second approach to definition attempts to describe blogs according to social and communicative functions – representing genres of communication which have various themes and purpose (Treem & Thomas 2010; Scheidt 2009). Blood (2002) was one of the first to identify types of blogs and suggested three – filter, personal journal and k-log (which collects the author’s notes about a specific topic). In a random sample of 203 blogs, Herring et al. (2005) found the k-log was a rare occurrence although Lomborg (2009) suggests this is because the distinction between a k-blog and journal is unclear. Herring et al. (2005:160) found many blogs were a ‘hybrid of public and private, personal and professional’ and called these ‘mixed blogs’. However, the classifications
suggested by Blood (2002) and Herring et al. (2005) provide no qualitative descriptions of the content of a blog. While the online diary is the most common type of blog (Herring et al. 2005), other blogs are often characterised by content, for example, science blogs, travel blogs, ‘journalistic’ blogs (Lomborg 2009). Note that due to the preponderance of the diary genre, many scholars simply use a definition like ‘weblogs can be characterised as online diaries’ (Matheson 2004b:33) which is inaccurate as it overlooks other types of blogs, including filter or link blogs.

One solution to the problem of definition is to use a blended definition that reflects both technical and functional perspectives, such as this one:

A blog is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first. […] Examples of genre exist on a continuum from confessional, online diaries to logs tracking specific topics or activities through links and commentary. […] Most weblogs use links generously… [and] allow readers to enter their own comments to individual posts (Walker 2003).

A recent definition of Wikipedia’s (2013) is also useful because as Rettberg (2008) notes, Wikipedia’s entry began in 2001 and since then has been edited by hundreds of users, perhaps representing a consensus, albeit in flux:

[A blog] is a discussion or informational site published on the World Wide Web and consisting of discrete entries (‘posts’) typically displayed in reverse chronological order (the most recent post appears first). A majority are interactive, allowing visitors to leave comments and […] it is this interactivity that distinguishes them from other static websites.

The real problem is not that blog is difficult to define (it is) but most scholars use the term in contradictory, ambiguous and imprecise ways, conflating an empirical description with a normative prescription or simply avoiding definitions altogether. With the blogosphere constantly changing, definitions need to reflect current usages and technological affordances. Blood (pers. Comm., 22 November 2012) now defines a blog as ‘any standalone page on a site that is in reverse chronological order’ and says it is deliberately broad because she ‘fought the battle for strict definition [link blogs] and lost’. She says definitions based on affordances exclude too many sites and ignore the
fact that the earliest bloggers had no blog software, comments, track backs: ‘It’s akin to defining furniture as an object produced by a factory, effectively excluding the hand-crafted table because of the method by which it was produced.’ The affordance of reverse chronological order, however, has been central to the creation of various types of content on blogs over the years, although bloggers have produced and combined various kinds of text such as reflections on daily life and linking to material on other sites which has led the blog to ‘gain a new identity as a format or medium that could be used for multiple purposes’ (Siles & Boczkowski 2012:236, original emphasis).

Medium or genre

While the web is regarded as a medium (a system supporting communication) there are divergent views as to whether a blog is a medium (or sub-medium of the web) or a web genre. Genre simply means ‘type’ and while it can be applied to ‘any distinctive category of cultural product’ the term is useful in relation to most media content (McQuail 2010:370). It appears that defining blog as a genre has good grounding in the literature. Wall (2005), Herring et al. (2005), Bradshaw (2008b) and Lomborg (2009) and other scholars have all defined blog as a genre. Herring et al. (2005) argue that a blog is a genre because certain content creation practices and conventions have shaped the ways the blog is used, and similarly Lomborg (2009) draws upon ‘socio-pragmatic genre theory’ to conceptualise the blog as a genre due to its ‘communicative functionalities and social uses’.

Other scholars argue that a blog is not a genre, but a medium. Merriam-Webster (2013) defines medium\(^{12}\) as a ‘channel or system of communication, information, or entertainment’, as reflected in this description: ‘blogs provide a channel to share links, personal stories, news, photographs, etc.’ (Meyer 2009). Boyd (2006) argues that while content produced by blogging can be categorised in terms of genre, defining blog as such obscures its role in distributing and representing expression. Instead, it needs to be considered a medium due to its capacity to open up multiple channels of communication and encompass different genres and sub genres. A strong case for conceptualising blog as a medium is made by Miller and Shepherd (2009) who once viewed blog as a genre.

\(^{12}\) http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/medium
but then changed their stance. In an earlier study Miller and Shepherd (2004) concluded that the blog was a genre due to ‘the generic exigence of the blog as some widely shared, recurrent need for cultivation and validation of the self’ resulting from a combination of technological potentialities and a set of cultural patterns and rhetorical conventions available in antecedent genres. Upon re-evaluation a few years later and due to the emergence in particular of news blogs, they now regard blogs as a medium:

The blog, it seems clear now, is a technology, a medium, a constellation of affordances – and not a genre. When blogging technology first became widely available […] it was perceived to fit a particular exigence arising out of the late 1990s, even helping to crystallize that exigence, and the personal blog multiplied its way into cultural consciousness. The genre and the medium, the social action and its instrumentality, fit so well that they seemed coterminous, and it was thus easy to mistake the one for the other – as we did. […] but adoption and experimentation led to differentiation and the multiplication of genres anchored in the same medium (Miller & Shepherd 2009:283–284).

Lüders, Prøitz and Rasmussen (2010:952) also argue that based on their technical features blogs should be conceptualised as a medium, but there needs to be a differentiation ‘between kinds – genres – of blogs that are in use in various social contexts’. The authors provide a very useful diagram of the relationship between platforms, media, genres and texts, and the roles of conventions and expectations.

Figure 3  Diagram showing relationship between media, genres and texts

![Diagram showing relationship between media, genres and texts](Lüders et al. 2010:955)
Political journalist-blogs

Of interest in this study is the genre of political blogs, and these are defined here as blogs that predominantly feature commentary or discussion on political issues although other issues may be discussed. Hargittai et al. (2008:72) called a blog a ‘political blog’ if a significant amount of content posted by the blogger relates to politics and political issues. Although the term political can merely refer to ‘governing or campaigning for public office’ (Singer 2005:182), it is used in this thesis in its broader sense to also include pertaining to civic affairs – those ‘issues of significance to civic or community life’ (Singer 2005:182). Mummery and Rodan (2013:14) describe political issues or topics as those which are of ‘public interest’ or of ‘public concern’. For example, a post discussing the controversy of gay marriage would be considered political, but a post describing a wedding would not be political (Singer 2005). Note, however, that there are no clear and precise benchmarks as to the proportion of content relating to political issues needed in order for a blog to be considered a political blog. This means that categorising blogs as political relies heavily on judgement calls. As the focus of this study is on political blogs authored by journalists, questions arise as to what is a journalist and journalism. What is citizen journalism? Should distinctions be made between journalist-blogs and citizen-blogs?

Journalist-blogs and citizen-blogs

Journalism has been described as the: ‘business or practice of producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance (Schudson 2003:11) and is often used to refer to ‘the product or work of professional “news people”’ (McQuail 2010:561) who ‘draw their institutional authority and value’ from casting their work within professional norms (Reese et al. 2007:238). In a similar vein, Shoemaker et al. (2009:77) locate the definition of a journalist ‘squarely with the professionals working within news organisations’. The term ‘journalist’ has been stretched or broadened to include not only news professionals, but commentators, hosts and correspondents, the latter who blogger Glenn Reynolds (2003:82) describes as ‘well-paid microphone-holder with good hair’. It has been stretched further by some scholars to include those working independently of news organisations. Hartley (2010) believes the globalisation of digital content means ‘everyone is a journalist’ as they can
express opinions or circulate information via mediums such as blogs and websites, a view echoed by Lasica (2002):

A journalist is anyone who is an eyewitness to events or an interpreter of events and who reports it as honestly and accurately as possible. You don’t need to have the resources of The New York Times behind you. You can be a lone-wolf blogger out there in the field [...] and when you blog an event you’re reporting. We forget the derivation of the word journalism: someone who keeps a journal (Lasica 2002).

The ‘lone-wolf’ blogger Lasica refers is typically called ‘citizen journalist’, a term coined to refer to the average citizen participating in the act of journalism (Bowman & Willis 2003). Nip (2006) describes citizen journalism as journalism in which people gather content and publish news but where there is no involvement of professional journalists unless in the capacity of citizens, not paid employees. This focus on remuneration overlooks the fact that some independent news sites such as Crikey and Huffington Post provide payment for staff bloggers, and there are even blogs on mainstream media platforms authored by outside contributors some of whom are paid. In recent years, Australia’s News Limited and Fairfax Media have launched the online opinion sites The Punch and National Times which have both staff and outside paid contributors. Flew (2011) calls outside contributors to mainstream sites ‘pro-am contributors’, with such monetisation of UGC blurring the distinction between professionals and citizen journalists, and journalist-bloggers and citizen bloggers. However, these ‘pro-am contributors’ could also be called freelance journalists as distinct from professional staff journalists. Although the term ‘participatory journalism’ has been coined to encompass ‘the processes through which journalists and audiences are taking part in the gathering, selecting, publishing, disseminating and interpretation of the news featured within an institutionalised product such as a newspaper website’ (Hermida et al. 2011:6), a distinction remains between professional staff journalists and audience-contributors.

In the main, citizen journalists are associated with non-mainstream outlets where they ‘need not adhere to a professional journalistic code’ and ‘command less commercial viability’ (Reese et al. 2007:239). Singer (2011) argues that since journalists see themselves as providing a public service, normative stances – particularly in regard to ethics – are useful in setting boundaries around journalism. Singer challenges the
widespread criticism of mainstream media and journalists exemplified in the ‘they just don’t get it’ tag, and says this derives from the erroneous view that in the networked, information-rich and technologically savvy society there is no longer any need for professional journalists:

> When everyone can be a publisher, anyone can be a spin doctor; we need the watchdog. When everyone can (and, it seems, does) publicly express an opinion about the latest bits of information trending on Twitter, someone needs to gather those bits, scrutinise them and create a coherent narrative from the ones that pass muster; that someone is called a reporter. When any event anywhere reverberates around the globe in a matter of seconds, we need the trustworthy analyst, the interpreter, the sensemaker – the journalist (Singer 2011:226).

**Alternative media**

Citizen-blogs are often described as examples of alternative media, but here again there are difficulties in defining what these media are, although they are often assumed to be in opposition to ‘mainstream’ media (Meikle 2010:369). There have been various attempts to define alternative media although Forde (2009) argues most are too broad to be meaningful. For example, Atkinson (2006:151-2) describes them as ‘any media that are produced by non-commercial sources’. This would exclude non-mainstream commercial enterprises such as *Crikey* which claims to ‘tackle the stories […] other media can’t or won’t’ (*Crikey* 2009) but also shares similarities with mainstream newspapers since it comes out daily, employs journalists and earns revenue from ads and subscriptions (Gerrand 2007).

Atton (2009) suggests alternative media are characterised by their potential for citizen participation as they offer an independent platform for groups and individuals marginalised by mainstream media. Atton (2004:ix) also describes them as networks and projects ‘that seek to develop different forms of the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of “doing” media’. Although independent blogs are often considered to be alternative media, a study of four U.S. political blogs found that in spite of the ample use of personalised language they served as ‘an insular echo chamber’ which becomes ‘an extension of corporate news rather than an example of alternative communication’ (Kenix 2009:812). On the basis of content these blogs are more similar to talkback radio than alternative media, and Kenix (2009) suggests that
perhaps the medium itself and not the content attracts the moniker ‘alternative’. It may be useful, then, to view citizen-blogs as overlapping rather than existing within the sphere of alternative media. Interestingly, Highfield and Bruns (2012) note that describing Australian blogs as ‘alternative’ media is misleading as blogging in Australia was never completely new or separate from the traditional media sphere, as a number of independent bloggers have been recruited by the mainstream media.

**Bloggers versus journalists**

Of interest in this study are news and political blogs authored by journalists working for mainstream media organisations. Although these have mushroomed in recent years, comparisons are still made between bloggers and journalists as if they are two different if not opposing roles. For example, ‘bloggers and journalists tussle over the media’s agenda’ (Davis 2009:132) and Schiffer (2007) claims bloggers hold mainstream media in contempt and criticise mainstream journalists for ‘letting in too much junk and keeping out the good stuff’. Even the Chair of the U.K. Leveson Inquiry, Lord Justice Brian Leveson (2012:6–7), in a recent speech, resorted to the same error when he said ‘bloggers and tweeters have become competitors of the press’. Leveson (2012:23) later referred to ‘the mainstream media and bloggers, tweeters and other amateur online journalists’. Such usages are misleading as blogs are integral to mainstream media sites and many are authored by professional journalists. In addition, Twitter is increasingly used by both mainstream media and its journalists. Mainstream media are not distinct or separate from new media; while blogs and Twitter may have emerged as alternative media, they have been adopted by main news organisations.

In an attempt to clarify the various usages, Domingo and Heinonen (2008) propose a typology of four broad categories arranged on a continuum from the least to the most institutionalised in terms of mainstream media. The least institutionalised are citizen-blogs (produced independently of mainstream media), the next are audience-blogs (on mainstream media platforms but authored by outside contributors), the third are journalist-blogs (blogs professional journalists maintain outside their companies), and media-blogs for blogs produced by staff journalists on mainstream platforms. While the distinction between audience and citizen-blogs is useful, Domingo and Heinonen’s usage of the term ‘journalist-blog’ is problematic because the word is commonly used to
describe blogs authored by professional journalists within their organisations (see, Singer 2008; Robinson 2006). Due to this widespread usage, it is unlikely the term ‘media blogs’ will replace it. It makes more sense to include blogs which Domingo and Heinonen have labelled journalist-blogs in the broad category of citizen-blogs, with blogs authored by freelance journalists, academics and politicians also included in this broad category.

In this thesis, the term ‘journalist-blog’ is used to refer to blogs on mainstream news sites authored by journalists employed by a mainstream news organisation where all or part of their work in that organisation is to maintain a blog. The journalist may be a freelancer or a professional journalist who blogs as part of their journalism practice. The term ‘citizen-blog’ will refer to blogs produced independently of such organisations, whether authored by professional journalists, freelance journalists, academics, politicians or other members of the public.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to bring clarity to the confusion and lack of consensus in the literature regarding the definition of blog. This required an examination of the history and evolution of what were once filter weblogs, which mostly contained links to ‘cool’ stuff found on the web (Hookway 2008). Historicity is important as it provides an understanding of persistent misuses of the term and gives a backdrop for the way the term is defined for the purposes of this thesis. No matter how diverse the literature is, Chaffee (1991) offers straightforward guidelines for concept explication: develop a clear conceptual definition which can be operationalised to suit the research question. As the focus of this study is on the quality of conversation rather than blogger-posts, it is important to include the requirement of comment-threads. In order to distinguish between comments on articles and blogs, I decided to include the requirement that the site is labelled a blog, by either the news organisation hosting it or the author. Although no definition can be watertight in the sense it will enable the classification of a website as a blog, for the purpose of this study ‘blog’ will be defined as:

A frequently updated website that uses blog software (such as WordPress.com) or is called a blog by the author(s) or the news site. It has dated entries of commentary – or other material such as graphics –
displayed in reverse chronological sequence, and there is a facility for readers to add comments to each entry or post.

This chapter also looked at the debate over whether blogs should be regarded as a genre or a medium. Recent trends in blogging, especially the emergence of news blogs, present a strong case for conceptualising blog as a medium, which is how it is viewed in this thesis. Importantly, if viewed as a medium a blog has the capacity to encompass different genres and sub-genres (Boyd 2006). The genre of interest here is political blogs, which predominantly feature commentary or discussion on political issues – those of public concern or public interest – although other issues may be discussed. The sub-genre of political blogs studied here are those authored by journalists.

Although the boundaries between professional/amateur and journalist/non-journalist are becoming blurred, for the purposes of this thesis a journalist is someone employed by a news organisation, a definition used in a number of other studies (Weaver et al. 2006; Hanitzsch et al. 2010). A journalist-blogger may be a freelancer where all or a significant part of their work is to maintain a blog or a professional journalist who has embraced blogging as part of their journalism practice. This excludes politicians and other outside contributors who may author blogs on mainstream news sites. A distinction was also made between a political-blog authored by a journalist and a political blog by a so-called political journalist (or columnist). My interest here is the former group, of which the latter is a part. Clear and precise definitions and delineations for the purposes of this thesis were considered crucial – ‘discriminating and taxonomic conceptual containers’ (Sartori 1970:1052) – in order to prevent data being misgathered.

The next chapter reviews the literature on blogs, both independent blogs and those hosted on mainstream media sites. It looks at the emergence of online news and networked journalism and in particular the engagement of citizens in the news process. A brief overview of political blogs in general is provided as these emerged in the late 1990s as platforms independent of mainstream media. With the latter adopting the format some years later, they were accused of co-opting the potential reach of independent blogs and occupying and dominating their space (Bahnisch 2008; Young 2011), their blogs dismissed as lacking the ‘engaged community’ of regular commenters that blogs by non-journalists attract (Bunch 2008:41).
Chapter 3  Literature Review

The new networked society

The use of the internet in the 21st century has ushered in a new realm of horizontal networks of interactive communication ‘whose backbone is computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive’ (Castells 2007:248). This has been called various terms including ‘the networked information economy’ (Benkler 2006) and ‘the network society’ (Castells 2010), and it has been described as ‘the biggest revolution since the printing press’ (Morieson & Usher 2011:77). The communication of the 20th century, ‘the first age of mass media’, was characterised by mass distribution of a one-way message from one-to-many where audiences were merely the receivers of news (McQuail 2010). In contrast, digital media ‘reverse the trajectory of a handful of messages to a legion of passive users that has typified all technological media since the printing press’ (Levinson 1999:38). The new realm is characterised by a radical shift in the way communication is achieved with the multi-modal exchange of messages from many-to-many via blogs, Twitter, podcasts, wikis and a range of social networking spaces (McQuail 2010). It has led to the emergence of a participatory culture that ‘contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorships’ (Jenkins 2006:3). This does not mean the end of mass media but the ‘demassification’ of old media in which the proliferation of channels and platforms is fragmenting the mass audience and replacing it with small and specialised audiences (McQuail 2010:158).

Drawing upon Castells’ model of the network society, Heinrich (2012a) uses the term ‘network journalism’ to reconceptualise journalistic practice in an increasingly globalised sphere of newsgathering, production and distribution. This term has been used by other scholars in a broader sense to refer to civic participation and its impact on journalistic production, where the public participates through crowd-sourcing, interactivity, hyper-linking, blogs and forums (Beckett 2010; Jarvis 2006). In contrast, Heinrich (2012a) suggests using the term as a paradigm for a dynamic structure of the global news sphere. Within this sphere, the more or less ‘static’ flows of a controlled, ‘closed’ system of journalism are being replaced by a shared information sphere in
which traditional journalistic outlets operate side by side with other providers from citizen journalists to independent news organisations.

**Newspapers’ expansion online**

The internet has thus taken its place as the fourth mass medium alongside print, television and radio, with online news sites and blogs emerging as major sources of news and information. There are two trends in news consumption: the first is growing numbers of people getting news via mobile devices and the second is the increasing use of social networks. According to the Pew Research Centre (2012), more than half of Americans use the internet as their primary news source, with one third getting more of their news from social networks than any other outlet. Obtaining news on a social network site has doubled since 2010 (from 9 to 19 per cent) with nearly half of these people getting news from Facebook and 11 per cent from Twitter.

Australia has one of the highest percentages of online news visitors in the world (Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance 2008). A recent survey of the use of online media for news and information found 89 per cent used Google; 67 per cent Facebook; 55 per cent news sites, both newspaper websites and other sites; 21 per cent blogs; 18 per cent social and political campaign websites, and only 15 per cent used Twitter (Essential Media Communications 2012). Importantly, newspaper websites were distinguished from other news websites (with the former the more popular), because as well as leading to a proliferation of alternative sites and news sources, the internet has impacted upon and opened up new avenues for mainstream media. While in some respects traditional media such as newspapers are in decline, they are also expanding and being transformed as part of the process of convergence made possible by digitalisation (McQuail 2010). This began in the mid-1990s when newspapers, more than any other medium, ‘raced to go online’ (Garrison 2009:6). The year 1996 has been described as one of ‘wild change, surprising developments, and often-raucous debate about the meaning and direction of a digital revolution’, with online newspapers doubling from about 750 to 1,600 worldwide (Levins 1997:58). By 2003 that number had grown to over 5,000 and today most newspapers have an online site. Australia’s newspaper organisations have been adapting to digital technologies, although it was not until the 2004 Athens Olympics that the first – Fairfax Media’s theage.com.au and smh.com.au –
began to experiment with ‘serious multimedia coverage’ (Nguyen 2008:96). In recent years, standalone sites have been introduced. In March 2007, Fairfax Media launched brisbanetimes.com.au, followed by WAtoday.com.au in June 2008. These gave readers in Brisbane and Perth an alternative to News Limited’s *Courier-Mail* and Seven West Media’s *The West Australian*. In June 2009, News Limited began *The Punch* – an ‘opinion-driven news and current affairs site’ (News Digital Media 2009). A few months later Fairfax Media launched the *National Times*, which has a team of contributors and bloggers writing on a range of issues from arts, politics, religion, sport, cinema and philosophy (Steffens 2009).

**Engagement of citizens**

As well as providing news online, the internet has been the facilitator in newspapers’ engagement of citizens in the news process. Traditionally, letters to the editor were the only avenue for citizens to communicate with newspapers, and justified as simultaneously a democratic forum and a revenue booster for the newspaper (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002). They were one of the few means by which journalists could learn ‘what is on the minds of audience members’ (Pritchard & Berkowitz 1991:390) with research showing such connection with readers can affect coverage priorities. A study of 10 newspapers over a 30-year period found letters about crime led to commensurate levels of crime coverage on the front pages and in editorials, and the authors concluded that these findings are ‘consistent with the notion that, in the absence of a more valid indicator, newspaper journalists may tend to take cues about reader concerns from letters to the editor’ (Pritchard & Berkowitz 1991:394).

With the emergence of the internet, citizens can now send in contributions to online newspapers such as digital photos, video clips or other information, as well as provide comments on forums, Twitter, blogs and opinion articles. These contributions are often referred to as UGC, and their use by mainstream news organisations is leading to a mixing of vertical and horizontal communication modes – for example, conversing with others on blogs allows for both horizontal communication between citizens and also vertical communication between citizens and elites such as politicians and journalists (McQuail 2010).
The ability to access news online and comment on stories has disrupted traditional patterns of reading and engaged citizens, thus altering the relationship between audiences and journalists (Reese et al. 2007; Stromer-Galley & Wichowski 2011). Audience participation has been called journalism as a conversation (Gillmor 2006), which stands in contrast to decades where ‘traditional journalism has been a lecture’ and citizens have been passive bystanders (Marchionni 2013). Not only do journalists now have a richer, and more critical, range of information and commentary (Corner 2007) but they can publish new developments in a story instantaneously and encourage audience members to return for more ((Balnaves, Donald & Shoesmith 2009). With blogs in particular there is a break from content ‘passively received or ignored’ to a situation where journalists can interact with audiences and at the very least involve ‘a niche market segment of the audience’ (Balnaves et al. 2009:135-136). The concept of journalism as participation, while not historically part of journalism’s normative framework, is emerging as an integral feature of news organisations in the digital age (Singer et al. 2011). Lewis argues that audience involvement has become an ‘ethic of participation’ (2012:851) and a ‘normative goal of a truly digital journalism’ (2012:852). In other words, such journalism should be participatory.

**Journalists’ role in a democracy**

Journalism serves democracy in a variety of ways such as providing citizens with political information and offering political analysis. However, Schudson (2013) argues their role in serving democracy extends beyond providing information and analysis, and they should make available forums for public discussion. This echoes Dewey (1991) who believed that newspapers needed to become vehicles for public education and debate, and that the active participation of citizens was vital. Journalism ought to be a collaborative system for conversation, dialogue and debate. McNair (2009) notes that a crucial role of journalists is to be a representative or mediator between citizens and politicians, and this function can be enhanced by journalist-blogs as they provide ways for citizens to participate in public debate and communicate with political elites.

What is often overlooked is that already before the internet and digital media there was a trend in news organisations towards more engagement of citizens. This was the phenomenon of public journalism which sociologist Michael Schudson (1999:118)
described as the ‘the best organized social movement inside journalism in the history of the American press’; it began in the U.S. in the late 1980s and lasted about 10 years.

News organisations began experimenting with town-hall-style meetings and other initiatives that brought journalists and citizens together. Proponents believed that the problem of declining news readership could be addressed if there was more direct dialogue between journalists and citizens, and people were re-engaged in public life. Their aim was to create ‘a vibrant, participatory democracy’ or a public deliberative conversation (Ryfe & Mensing 2010:39). It was not enough for journalists to simply inform the public, but journalists ‘ought to interact with their communities [...] and prompt public discourse and deliberation that lead to improvements in civic life’ (Ryfe & Mensing 2010:40). By 2002 there had been about 600 journalistic experiments where journalists interacted with citizens (in televised deliberations or newspapers organising citizen roundtables). Although some of these efforts failed, research showed that civic life benefited in those communities where a news organisation practised public journalism (Haas 2007). If defined simply as a movement propelled by local U.S. newspapers then public journalism no longer exists, but a number of scholars believe that modern journalism appears ‘ripe’ for the re-application of some of its principles, namely the involvement and engagement of citizens (Rosenberry & St. John III 2010a). Indeed, Nip (2006) described the attempts of mainstream news organisations to involve the audience or to engage individuals as citizens (on blogs, for example) as the second phase of public journalism.

**Journalists’ views and attitudes**

With the emergence of digitally networked media, there have been a number of studies of participatory journalism and UGC on mainstream news sites in the U.K., U.S. and Europe (Weaver 1998; Weaver et al. 2006; Hanitzsch et al. 2010; Singer 2006b; Quandt et al. 2006). These reveal that professional journalists regard user-participation with suspicion and view their ‘filtering, editing and moderating as essential to preserve their traditional ethics and news values’ (Temple 2013:242). One comprehensive cross-cultural study was conducted by Singer et al. (2011) and although views towards comments to articles were sought, the value of journalist-blogs was overlooked. Interviews were conducted with editors and journalists of 25 leading online newspapers across 10 countries and the results indicate a journalistic culture across borders with a
sharing of common ideals and concerns. Journalists still regard themselves as an elite group mediating the flow of information to the public, although greater opportunities are being provided for people to engage in public discourse. Amongst editors, there was ambivalence towards audience-involvement; one editor regarded users who comment as ‘a group of obsessives’ and another thought comments were ‘not terribly well-thought through or just vitriolic’ (Hermida et al. 2011:14–15). Journalists viewed comments more favourably and some were ‘intrigued by the possibilities of participatory journalism to enable more voices to be heard, and perhaps even fulfil deliberative ideals in a democratic society’ (Hermida et al. 2011:18). The researchers concluded that journalists regard audiences as ‘active recipients’ of news and information, between passive receivers and active creators. They view the audience as idea-generators and observers of newsworthy events at the start of the journalistic process, with an interpretative role as commentators after the news has been produced by professionals.

In contrast, most of the journalists in Santana’s study (2010) were ambivalent towards online readers’ comments. Santana (2010) surveyed 435 journalists working for the largest U.S. daily newspapers and found only 13 per cent believed such forums promoted ‘civil, thoughtful discussion’. Most journalists tolerated them for their occasional insights while ‘despising them for harbouring anonymous bullies and bigots’ (Santana 2010:1). Surprisingly, nearly 70 per cent said as the results of comments they had changed their thinking on the newsworthiness of a topic at some level. Another comprehensive investigation focused on a single news organisation, The Capital Time in Madison, Wisconsin (U.S.). Robinson (2011) undertook a year-long ethnography in which journalists, editors and members of the public were interviewed. Although journalists were encouraged to interact with citizens and maintain their blogs so they could ‘develop their personality’, Robinson (2011:198) found that most – ‘steeped in the institutional norms of newspapering’ – resisted this, resenting the added work-load as well as the changed relationships with audiences.

**Deliberation on newspaper sites**

To my knowledge, there are no studies to date which have looked specifically at deliberation on journalist-blogs. Rather, the focus has been on readers’ comments to articles on news sites from a range of different political and journalistic contexts such as
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U.S., U.K., China, France and Spain. One of the first intensive examinations of an online political community on a newspaper website was by Singer (2009) who analysed nearly 4,800 comments in response to articles published over a two-month period (1 April to 1 June 2007) on the joint website (scotsman.com) of three Scottish newspapers *The Scotsman*, *Scotland on Sunday*, and the *Edinburgh Evening News*. Singer (2009:490) found that although the political conversation was ‘robust’, it was characterised by ‘intense interaction only among a vocal few’. In general, journalists did not engage with readers, except to remove abusive comments.

A more recent study by Richardson and Stanyer (2011) compared 15 U.K. broadsheet and tabloid sites and found more interaction between readers on broadsheet sites. However, commenting overall seemed to be the ‘preserve of the blindly opinionated’ who gave little indication they were open to ‘having their opinion changed by the standpoint and reasoning of other participants’ (Richardson & Stanyer 2011:1000–1001). Comments were often ad hominem attacks on other discussants, although interestingly, online readers were clearly drawn to comment on articles on substantive issues rather than those on lifestyle, celebrity, sport and human interest.

Robertson and McLaughlin (2011) were more optimistic about the results of their study which was purportedly a comparative analysis of 12 popular U.K. political ‘blogs’ in which various indicators for measuring quality of discussion were used including the use of evidence, interactivity, respect and humour. According to the researchers, six of the blogs were independent blogs and the other six were by newspaper journalists. An inspection of the latter, however, revealed they were not blogs, but comment-enabled articles, even though the sites had political blogs. The six sites by newspaper journalists were also included in the aforementioned study by Richardson and Stanyer (2011:985), although there they were called ‘journalists’ comment-enabled columns or articles’. Robertson and McLaughlin’s (2011:107) definition of political blogger included a journalist who has a ‘particular interest in politics, whose reports are posted on newspaper websites and where reader comment is invited’; this is clearly a stretching of the term. Regardless, in contrast to the findings of Richardson and Stanyer (2011:1000), Robertson and McLaughlin (2011:125) found the conversations on these

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13 For example, *Politics Blog* on *The Guardian* and *Steamie* on *The Scotsman*.  
same six sites were commendable in terms of civilised behaviour and the use of reason and evidence, and concluded it is ‘difficult to think of any earlier format for political engagement of a comparable quality’. The site with the most offensive language was the independent blog *Guido Fawkes* and the researchers were surprised many of the comments survived moderation, with 63 per cent of the comments containing insults. It must be noted that Richardson and Stanyer (2011) limited their analysis to comments written in response to articles published in February 2008 on the subjects of immigration and racial or religious difference, which are likely to attract more heated discussion than the subject of the analysis by Robertson and McLaughlin (2011) who looked at responses to articles on the economy published in October 2008.

Several studies have examined deliberation on comments on U.S. newspapers. A study of 16 dailies found the overwhelming number of responses were from a small group who dominated the discussion, with the deliberative model frequently ‘violated with an array of rude and insulting comments’ (Blom et al. 2011). A more in-depth study of two online U.S. newspapers – Iowa’s *Des Moines Register* and Florida’s *Scripps Treasure Coast* – examined the extent readers’ comments to online journalistic opinion content embody a space of public deliberation (Manosevitch & Walker 2009). The study found a substantial amount of factual information was offered by readers who did not just ‘parachute in’, comment and leave, but engaged with one another at several points in the thread regarding the issue under discussion, as well as weighed alternative positions and rationales. The journalists never engaged with their audience although Manosevitch and Walker (2009:23) suggest that this is an opportunity for them to connect by joining in the conversation and become ‘instigators of constructive public deliberation’.

McCluskey and Hmielowski (2012) used content analysis to compare online reader comments and letters to the editor of 32 daily newspapers in Louisiana and Mississippi and found more balance in both the range and tone of opinions from online reader comments than readers’ letters. The authors conclude that the nature of the technology allows for nearly instantaneous opinion expression and response, providing a space for citizens to freely debate and deliberate (McCluskey & Hmielowski 2012). Only two indicators (positive or negative) were used to measure tone towards the topic of social conflict during 2007 and 2008 in Jena, Louisiana. Any comments consisting of remarks about another reader (e.g. ‘I think you’re stupid’) were excluded, although such personal attacks surely affect the tone of the online conversation.
Zhou, Yuen-Ying & Zhen-Mei’s (2008) content analysis of the Guangzhou Daily website over a five-year period examined quantity of comments, diversity of ideas, the critical-rational dimensions of comments and mutual responsiveness between participants. Even though during that time citizens became more active in discussions, the researchers concluded the discussions were not very deliberative due to the lack of response to others’ viewpoints. In an interesting comparative study, Ruiz et al. (2011) looked at the websites of five national newspapers – The Guardian (U.K.), NYT (U.S.), Le Monde (France), El País (Spain) and La Repubblica (Italy) – and assessed 15,000 comments according to their adherence to various rules of democratic debate. The results suggest a rather ‘bleak overall picture of comments in online news as a space for the reproduction of hegemonic points of view’, although some users engaged in thoughtful discussions (Ruiz et al. 2011:484). The U.S. and U.K. websites showed more argumentation, respect among participants and diversity of ideas than the other three where very few users contributed more than one comment and which Ruiz et al. (2011:484) described as a ‘dialogue of the deaf’ – there was less pluralism, disagreement and respect between participants. The findings suggest that cultural context is relevant to the democratic quality of the debates that were analysed. The authors suggest that the two online newspapers from the U.K. and U.S. are closer to the Habermasian ideal model of discursive ethics than the three from Western Europe.

However, comments to online articles are seldom if ever moderated by the journalists, and journalists rarely engage in the discussion. In a sample of 3349 stories on five online newspapers, only one journalist participated with comments in one of his stories (Ruiz et al. 2011). Moderation is usually done by in-house moderators or out-sourced to moderation firms. For example, moderation at The Guardian is carried out by an in-house team who get appropriate legal training (Trygg 2012:16). Since 2005, most national newspapers in Sweden use an external company, Interaktiv Säkerhet, where employees get a ‘two-day education in press laws and media ethics’ (Trygg 2012:16). Fairfax Media and News Limited use various editorial staff to moderate comments with some staff appointed as specialist moderators (Martin & Dwyer 2012). Other Australian media companies with high participatory input such as the ABC outsource moderation to freelance staff or moderation firms, with such services ‘a growing sector of the digital economy’ (Martin & Dwyer 2012:23).
Increased information and accessibility to the internet is not sufficient to expand the public sphere. Rosenberry (2010:151) believes people need to be ‘drawn into discourse’ to promote a deliberative culture and suggests this could be a new role for professional journalists since they are central to the political communication system. Similarly, Haas (2010:129) says journalists need to encourage participants to listen to others’ views, as well as stating their own clearly and providing reasons for them because ‘without extensive and reciprocal reason giving, citizens could not be said to engage in rational-critical deliberation’. As blogger Ken Parish notes (2008), all this requires skilled moderation and facilitation to encourage ‘commenters engaging with and being responsive to each other’ rather than ‘abusive trolls or obsessive barrow pushers shouting past each other in the dark’. Such facilitation is clearly not happening on readers’ comments on newspaper sites. Based on conversations with journalists, Singer (2009:491) suggests that some of the reasons for this lack of participation are time and resource constraints and a ‘level of discomfort about engaging in political discourse’. However, it would seem more likely to occur on journalist-blogs, especially if the journalist is provided extra resources, or indeed if they are paid to blog. It is quite odd that researchers are focusing their attention on readers’ comments on newspaper sites (which are seldom if ever moderated or responded to by journalists) and have paid little attention to blogs that also feature on such sites. Before mainstream media blogs are discussed, a brief overview of independent political blogs and their influence will be provided.

**Political blogs**

As mentioned, blogs emerged as a grassroots phenomenon when a handful of computer enthusiasts began sharing links to ‘cool’ websites (Hookway 2008). In 1998 there were only about 23 blogs (Blood 2004), but since then their growth has been staggering. Although there are widely disparate estimates of numbers, according to Nielsen Newswire (2012) by the end of 2011 there were more than 181 million blogs. Although only a small portion of these blogs focus on current affairs and politics, the scope, reach and popularity of some independent blogs is considerable. For example, website tracker Site Meter shows *Daily Kos* drew 16,789,661 visits in January 2011. These A-list blogs – whose traffic and in-bound links are far in excess of other blogs – appear to have
agenda-setting power in that they can frame political debates, create focal points for media and are read by journalists (Haas 2005; Woodly 2008; Trammell & Keshelashvili 2005). *Guido Fawkes*, a controversial U.K. blog that aims to uncover parliamentary ‘plots, rumours and conspiracies’, which has been described as acerbic and gossip-laden (Rayner 2009), has broken political stories and ‘become essential reading for political correspondents and editors’ (Harcup 2009:66). Gil de Zúñiga (2009:110) suggests such blogs provide ‘a space that enriches and supplements what traditional media provide’ and there is also evidence that opinion columnists use blogs as ‘part of their information-gathering activities’ (Drezner & Farrell 2008:23).

Ideally, citizen-blogs should report news and commentary without pressures of advertising or constraints of censure and offer a deeper analysis than is available through mainstream outlets. And yet there is little evidence of an alternative source of journalistic practice emerging. A study of four A-list U.S. blogs found a ‘one-way linear form of communication with a parallel, and sarcastic, sphere of communication occurring within the commentary’ with little evidence of independent information or unique analysis (Kenix 2009:813). As part of a large-scale study into new media and journalism in the U.K., Couldry (2009:145) interviewed bloggers independent of mainstream media organisations and found that even though they saw themselves as ‘new’ news sources, they are ‘inflecting already well-established spheres of political and entertainment media, rather than an expansion of the news landscape into a new domain’. Occasionally under favourable circumstances they may feature in the agendas of mainstream news, but otherwise they have a limited chance of influence. Instead, they draw on information and the agenda set by traditional media so that such items are ‘amplified far beyond their original publication site, as they are seemingly endlessly reproduced’ (Singer 2005:166). For all of their supposed egalitarian potential, it has been found that blogs are used by a small, elite group, with the bloggers themselves predominantly white, middle-class male adults with a high degree of education and who are politically interested (Hopkins 2008; Bakker, Schoenbach & De Vreese 2010).

**Political blogging in Australia**

In Australia, blogging has not emerged as an important vehicle for political debate and lags behind the U.S. and U.K. in terms of influence. According to Ward and Cahill
(2007:1), blogging has not even ‘taken firm root’ and Highfield and Bruns (2012:90) point out it was ‘never completely new or separate from the traditional mediasphere’. Although Quiggin (2006:486) estimated there to be 20 Australian political bloggers ‘who maintain an average standard comparable to that of the opinion pages in the quality dailies’, the number of such bloggers in the U.S. was much larger ‘both absolutely and in relation to the population’ even though the number of U.S. papers that could be considered ‘quality press’ was not much greater than Australia. Australia certainly has no equivalent of Guido Fawkes or Daily Kos, although Bruns (2008b) claimed the 2007 federal election a milestone with newspapers using blogs such as The Poll Bludger and Pollytics. Ward and Cahill (2007:17-18) draw attention to the significant differences in the ‘logic and cultures of political systems’ which means that political blogging may flourish in some institutional settings: the ‘more fragmented American political system may be more welcoming than “Anglo” parliamentary systems’.

At the forefront of research on blogs in Australia is Axel Bruns whose blogs is Snurblog. Bruns and his colleagues use automated large-scale content analysis tools such as IssueCrawler or Leximancer to investigate networks of interlinkage between blogs to identify concepts and themes of posts and comments (Bruns 2007, 2008b; Bruns & Adams 2009; Highfield 2011). His focus, however, has been on independent blogs, with the results of some of his studies (for example, Bruns 2007; Bruns & Adams 2009; Saunders, Wilson & Bruns 2008) suggesting that participation in the Australian blogosphere strongly favours the ‘left-wing’ of politics and ‘left-leaning’ blogs are better at community forming. These findings were challenged and the subject of an online stoush between The Daily Telegraph’s Tim Blair (2008) and Bruns and colleagues Jason Wilson and Barry Saunders. The trio were also criticised by Club Troppo’s Ken Parish (2008), who said there are ‘lots of fascinating phenomena in the blogosphere needing careful research, but fuelling the left-right divide isn’t among them’ (in Wilson 2008). Wilson refutes this, but admits: ‘The only people we really consistently have a go at is [sic] probably The Australian!’ (in Parish 2008).

Much of the research on political blogs has focused on posts and hyperlinks, and overlooked the comments. Tim Highfield (2011:337) acknowledges this was a limitation of his study of the Australian and French blogospheres, but suggests ‘further
research would benefit from tracking comments in addition to blog posts where possible’. Parish (2008) also criticises the focus on mapping hyperlinks, arguing that such research leaves out a critical dimension of a blog, namely conversation and community developed through the interaction in the comments, between the commenters as well as the blogger. One recent study, however, by Kimber (2012) looked (in part) at the comments some of the posts of Pineapple Party Time – an Australian group blog that Crikey used to cover the 2009 Queensland state election. Kimber (2012) found that overall there was a robust discussion with an acceptance of diverse views, although views became highly partisan when posts related to a particular party or politician. Because the ability to comment was accessible only to those with a Crikey subscription, Kimber (2012:82) concluded it is unlikely that ‘deliberative democracy extended far’ beyond the site.

**Mainstream media political blogs**

Although the first known blog on a news site was in August 1998 when Jonathan Dube chronicled Hurricane Bonnie for the *Charlotte Observer* (Heyboer 2004), traditional media were slow to adopt the format. Heyboer (2004) suggests they were ‘reluctant to experiment with an anti-establishment format that defines itself by undiluted immediacy’. They regarded blogs as ‘amateurish, filled with errors and not credible’ (Tremayne 2007:262). It was not until the 2004 U.S. election that U.S. newspapers began to seriously experiment with the form (Carroll 2004) and by 2008 nearly every U.S. newspaper, radio and television channel had blogs, updating them ‘faster than any individual [independent] blogger ever could’ (Kluth 2008). As Filloux (2009) points out, blogs grew from being little more than populist rants, into a ‘fresh new journalistic genre, one that is likely to become the main engine of modern news sites’.

Australian newspapers lagged behind, with the exception of Margo Kingston’s *Webdiary* launched in 2000 on the *SMH* site. Kingston (2005a:81) believed there was a vacuum of ‘original, genuine, passionate and accessible debate on the great political, economic and social issues’ and wanted to provide those whose voices are generally not heard in mainstream media with the opportunity to contribute. *Webdiary* became an independent group blog when Kingston (2005b) left *SMH* in August 2005. It was not until mid-2006 that *The Daily Telegraph* began to incorporate blogs, with the *Herald*
Sun and The Australian following later that year. Within a few years, blogs had become intrinsic to Australian newspaper sites, perhaps because the industry realised their commercial potential to attract new audiences as well as their ability to entice readers to stay longer on newspaper sites (Simpson 2008).

The micro-blog Twitter

In addition, micro-blogs have emerged, with Twitter – where users communicate via short messages no longer than 140 characters – being the most popular. Launched in July 2006, Twitter enables users to ‘hook up with others in virtually any connected spot on earth’ (Heinrich 2012b:766). It was originally designed as a messaging system for cell phones, not a tool for conversation (Hermida 2013). However, users started to have conversations and spread the tweets of others (Lomborg 2011) and it became a platform for ‘networked flows of information, facilitating the collaborative creation and curation of news content’ (Hermida 2013). Twitter was rapidly adopted in newsrooms, and journalists use it to track ‘the latest buzz on their beats’ (Lasorsa et al. 2012:20) – to break news, share information, engage with audiences and sources, and comment on the work of others as well as promote their own (Hermida 2010b; Holton & Lewis 2011). Although questions are sometimes raised about its credibility, Twitter is beginning to assume a central role in a fast-changing media landscape. However, as Hahn (2013:28) points out, while new technology and the internet is clearly changing journalism, social networks like Twitter still require ‘traditional journalistic values, like fact checking, accuracy, objectivity and communicating what is relevant and interesting’.

Australian media organisations went on Twitter well before their journalists, although they usually use their Twitter feed as an RSS feed to alert readers to recently posted articles. Most of News Limited’s dailies joined Twitter in October 2007, although Fairfax Media papers waited until early 2009. While the first political journalist to use Twitter was News Limited’s Paul Colgan who joined in April 2007, the first large wave of journalists joined in early 2009 and a second wave just before and after the 2010 election (Jericho 2012a). Posetti (2009) notes that many Australian media outlets regard Twitter as an ‘essential tool’ as journalists use it to break news, source stories and contacts, make contact with other professional journalists globally, as well as a device for ‘live audience interaction’ where ‘meaningful, reciprocal relationships with
audiences’ can be developed. Note that journalists hold individual Twitter accounts, not organisational ones; this means they can to an extent ‘divorce themselves’ from their organisation (Jericho 2012a). A study by Bruns (2012a:106) found they are more able to generate ‘significant visibility’ on Twitter than their news organisations themselves, driven by individual personality, not institutional imprint.

**Live Blogging**

Another new variation of the blogging format is Live Blogging which is used increasingly on mainstream media news sites to cover breaking news or elections, or parliamentary sittings as in the case of The Pulse on Fairfax Media’s National Times. Live Blogging combines conventional reporting curation, where simple text updates, audience comments, video, photographs and material from other platforms such as Twitter are presented to the audience by a professional journalist (or team) in close to real time (Beckett 2010; Thurman & Walters 2013). Beckett (2010:3) describes it as ‘the networked front page’ which contains a ‘concentrated dose of participatory, interactive and connected news media’. Beckett (2010) believes the use of this format by mainstream news organisations indicates that news consumers have an appetite for more complex coverage, especially during fast-moving, multidimensional news events. A study of Live Blogging on the Guardian website found that they have become a popular component of the site, and with their timeliness and ‘bite-sized content units’ provide journalists with a format to manage their ‘elite and mass publics’ (Thurman & Walters 2013:82). Matt Wells (2011), blog editor of the Guardian, reported that Live Blogging had rapidly become the dominant form for breaking news online, in spite of its drawbacks such as the potential for confusion, and if not managed well it can ‘descend into a mishmash of tweets and comments without context’. Wells sees its main advantages as being the transparency about sources, the dispensing of ‘false journalistic fripperies’, the embrace of the audience and the reward of ‘huge traffic spikes’.

**Social media policies**

Platforms such as blogs, Twitter and Facebook provide opportunities for media organisations and journalists to engage with audiences and to gather news. Journalists use these sites for professional or personal purposes or both, and the lines between the
two are becoming blurred. In recent years, many news organizations have started to
develop social media policies for their journalists, covering both branded accounts and
the personal social media activities of journalists. Calman (2012) found that some news
organizations have short social media policies, essentially to remind journalists to
follow existing professional and ethical standards and to exercise good judgment. Other
media organizations have lengthy policies containing specific rules on what employees
should and should not do. Some policies require journalists to identify themselves as
journalists when using social media and may instruct journalists not to use a false name
or anonymous identity online. However, as Pearson (2012) notes, the ‘huge grey area’ is
the question of personal liability:

If a journalist (or any other employee, for that matter) claims in their Twitter
profile that the views expressed are private not those of their employer (a standard
disclaimer) where does that place them if someone sues them personally over
their tweets? (Pearson 2012)

The reaction: they just don’t get ‘it’

Mainstream news organisations have been accused of co-opting or ‘hijacking’ the blog
form (Meraz 2009:702) in an attempt to recapture journalistic authority (Robinson
2006), with Lowrey (2006) suggesting their real motive is to contain and direct the
phenomenon rather than foster real democratic participation. The blogs are seen as mere
‘token gestures’ because journalists are not willing to give up their power over the flow
of information (Hutchins 2007:210). They have been criticised because an ‘interactive,
dialogical or participatory style […] is currently very much “under construction”’
(Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger 2007). In other words, they simply ‘don’t get blogging’
(Charman-Anderson 2005). Attempts to include blogging as part of the content offered
by traditional media online underscore the tension between maintaining the one-way
orientation of journalism and experimenting with novel dialogical forms of
communication (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski 2009:574). While some argue that
the main motivations of mainstream media in developing audience participation are
business-driven rather than to foster democracy (Vujnovic et al. 2010), there is more
likely to be a normative-economic justification, as there is with traditional letters to the
editors and managers of British newspaper websites, who revealed the increase of UGC was partly the result of their fear of being marginalised, a desire for control of journalists who may have gone and created their own blogs, and an area newspapers had to get into otherwise ‘they’d get left behind’.

The most significant study to date of journalist-bloggers was conducted by Bradshaw (2008a) who used an online survey to gauge the views of 200 journalist-bloggers and to see how they felt their work had been affected by the new technology. Responses were obtained from journalists from 30 countries representing newspapers, magazines, radio, television industries as well as freelancers; about half worked in the U.S. or Canada, and almost half worked in the newspaper industry. While some of these blogs were political, others focused on a range of areas including business, culture, lifestyle, sport, education, health, travel and the environment. Bradshaw (2008b) found the networked, conversational nature of the blog format is fundamentally changing how they work, mostly in their relationship with the audience. Whereas traditionally journalists have had to be objective and removed from their stories, the personal and informal nature of blogging can bring them closer to their audience. This may bring more transparency about the news production process and generate ideas and leads. Although Bradshaw (2008a) derides the practice of republishing print articles (also called ‘shovelware’) as it is not using the medium in any meaningful way, my pilot study (Garden 2010a) found that two Australian journalist-blogs in which shovelware occurred attracted more comments from readers and responses from bloggers than citizen-blogs.

There have been relatively few studies of mainstream media blogs, although in contrast there has been increasing scholarly interest regarding comments on mainstream news sites and the use of Twitter by journalists. As with studies of independent blogs, there is a tendency in the literature to generalise about blogs, although they encompass diverse genres and they may be individual or group blogs. Furthermore most studies have looked at U.S. blogs, which ignores cross-national differences and the peculiarity of the media system of each country (Quandt et al. 2006). Such U.S. dominance is reflected in media and communication studies in general (Thussu 2009) even though the American media ecology is exceptional. Nielsen (2012b) points out that most Western European countries have not had the ‘overwhelmingly commercially-dominated news industry found in the U.S.’; in Southern Europe large parts of the newspaper industry are owned
by wealthy individuals, interest groups or diversified business conglomerates, whose concern is to exercise influence rather than make money. The other difficulty with generalising about blogs is the failure to distinguish between blogs of different types of news organisations, such as broadcasting and print media, or public and commercial media. There have been studies that have specifically focused on blogs offered by public service broadcasting outlets such as the BBC (Hermida 2009), or blogs of newspaper organisations (Dailey et al. 2008; Besselink 2011), as well as comparative studies of blogs from independent and newspaper sites (Garden 2010a; Wall 2005).

Some of the pessimism in the literature regarding mainstream media blogs is due to the fact that many scholars continue to cite studies that took place before 2006, a time of early adoption of blogs when journalists were still adjusting to the concept of interactivity. For example, in Domingo’s often-cited (2008) study of Spanish mainstream online news, the interviews were conducted between 2003 and 2004. Domingo (2008:698) concluded that interactivity is ‘counterintuitive with the principles of traditional journalistic culture’ as this culture makes them ‘perceive audience participation as a problem to manage rather than a benefit for the news product’. Wall’s (2005) analysis of 30 ‘blogs of war’ (blogs that focused on the U.S. intervention in Iraq) examined posts published between late March and early April 2003. And in what has been described as a ‘foundational study’ in this line of research (Lasorsa et. al 2012), Jane Singer (2005) examined 20 U.S. journalist-blogs on print, television or online media outlets, analysing posts, comments and links published between 15 February and 15 March 2004. Singer found most were not participatory, only three had a comment-facility and links were mostly to their own news organisation. She concluded the journalists generally ‘normalised’ their blogs to fit old norms and practices, and even in this interactive and participatory format most journalists seek to remain gatekeepers.

However, these three oft-cited studies took place during a time when U.S. mainstream media sites were only beginning to experiment with the blog format (Heyboer 2004; Carroll 2004). Not surprisingly some of these early attempts failed ‘to conform to some of the social conventions of the blog’ (Thurman & Jones 2005:254). A study of 65 journalist-blogs on 42 daily U.S. newspapers during the week before the 2006 election, found that although the blogs had comment sections, they were largely inactive (Dailey et al. 2008:54). The authors question whether a blog ‘sent out into the vast internet
Blogging in the Mainstream  Mary Garden

forest’ that attracts no comments has made any ‘sound’ in the greater public discourse. More bluntly, what is the point of having a blog that attracts no or few comments?

It is important to note newsrooms are rapidly changing environments and the results from recent studies have been more favourable. Hermida (2009:12) used a case study approach to examine the ways journalists have integrated this new format at the BBC, and found that while blogs were initially peripheral to the main newsgathering function of the organisation, they have ‘rapidly transformed into key mechanisms for communicating analysis and commentary to the public’ and found a steadily growing audience. At the time of inspection there were 46 blogs on the BBC, although none is strictly a political blog although like many blogs some would cover politics at times.

Most studies have focused on blog-post data, such as analysing links the blogger uses or their style of writing. In a textual analysis of the posts of 130 U.S. journalist-blogs Robinson (2006:81) found journalists are using ‘traditional no-nos: superlatives, first-person, contractions, questions with no answers, answers with no questions’. According to Robinson (2006:79) the blog allows them to ‘let loose’ in creative writing, or ‘embrace post-modern writing’, although it could be argued that this style of discourse can also be found in feature journalism or the personal column genre. A number of studies have found mainstream media blogs use fewer links than citizen-blogs (Singer 2005; Pew Research Centre 2010; Garden 2010a; Bruns & Adams 2009) and it has been suggested that this is to discourage visitors from leaving their sites (Wall 2005). Bruns (2007) even suggests that because News Limited bloggers (for example) seldom use links they are not ‘genuine bloggers participating in the distributed exchange of views’.

Another feature of mainstream media blogs is the apparent lack of interactivity. At the BBC, the greatest challenge has been to get bloggers to respond to comments, as blogs remain a one-way process (Hermida 2009). This absence or token online interaction of journalists with audiences is a major finding of other studies (Manosevitch & Walker 2009; Dailey et al. 2008; Domingo 2008; Besselink 2011). Witschge (2011) claims there is a ‘minimalist’ view of participation that dominates in journalistic organisations in the U.K., the U.S. and Europe. An exception seems to be Australia. My pilot study conducted in May 2009 (Garden 2010a) compared 12 political blogs (across mainstream and alternative fields) and interestingly, two mainstream bloggers Jack the Insider (aka Peter Hoysted) and George Megalogenis responded more to readers than any other
bloggers in the sample. As mentioned, one of the crucial features of political blogs is their comments and yet there has been scant scholarly attention towards the nature of these conversations and their implications for democracy. In order to understand political blogs as a new form of deliberation or participation it is not enough to just look at the authors of blogs and their posts. Rather it is critical to analyse the comments of those who engage in a discussion and post their own responses and determine whether such UGC improves the overall quality of news sites and the public sphere.

### Australian mainstream media blogs

There has been a paucity of research of Australian mainstream media blogs, which is a curious gap considering that blogs are now integral to their online platforms and there is anecdotal evidence as to their value. For example, George Megalogenis (in Jamieson 2011) has said that comments on his blog Meganomics give him ‘a good level of feedback and news tips’. Peter Hoysted (henceforth referred to as Jack the Insider\(^\text{14}\) points out that on certain topics the debate on his blog Jack the Insider continues for several days and this ‘heightens peoples’ ability to think through issues’ (Chowns n.d.).

As mentioned in the introduction, in studies of Australian online news media there is an over-emphasis on Fairfax Media sites, with News Limited sites seldom included (see, for example, Flew 2009; Morieson 2010; Morieson & Usher 2011). Morieson and Usher (2011:85) justified their selection by arguing that Fairfax Media provides an ‘alternative political perspective [and an] opposing political stance’ to the ‘predominantly right-leaning and conservative News Corporation papers’. They claim that The Age and the SMH are the two most successful broadsheets in the country and have always been seen as the home of ‘quality’ journalism. Note, however that the two national newspapers – News Limited’s The Australian and Fairfax Media’s The Australian Financial Review – are also regarded as quality newspapers (Conley & Lamble 2006). Burchell (2009:15) describes The Australian as contrarian, noting that even Eric Beecher (publisher of the independent online site Crikey) acknowledged its salience in contemporary public debate.

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\(^\text{14}\) Jack the Insider is the nom de plume for Peter Hoysted, and this is the usage Hoysted requested I use.
Furthermore, a study of Australian newspaper blogs (Dyson et al. 2008) only looked at the *SMH* site and included an interview with one blogger, Samantha Brett, the author of *Ask Sam* – a relationship and dating blog, which folded in March 2012 (Brett 2012). In addition to this study, Simpson (2006, 2007, 2008) provided three overviews of newspaper blogging for the APC’s *State of the News Print Media in Australia*. These included interviews with several editors to determine their approaches to the blogging phenomenon and obtain their views on blogging. Simpson (2008) found that newspapers have become wary of litigation after successful legal action against News Limited in May 2007, and since then one of the functions of online sub-editors has been to combat the likelihood of litigation, with pre-moderation of comments becoming an accepted practice.

And yet, in spite of the dearth of scholarly studies of Australian mainstream media blogs, they are widely criticised and dismissed. According to Simons (2006), blogophiles regard the approach of mainstream media organisations to blogging as ‘lame at best’ with usually ‘one ponderous post a day followed by comments’ rather than the ‘lively, faster paced dialogue on the best blogs in the wild’. Bahnisch (2007) says that with a few exceptions, such as Andrew Bolt’s blog, ‘what is being practiced [sic] in that place [News Limited] is not really blogging’ because of editorial control and influence; the difference in language, tone and style; a lack of engagement between blogger and commenters, and the filtering of comments before posting which make comment-threads not ‘a genuine blog thread, but one step ahead of letters to the editor’. Bahnisch (2008:9) claims they have merely rebadged their own columnists as bloggers and the blogs are ‘little more than re-publications of newspaper columns’.

More recently, Highfield and Bruns (2012:93) claim that Australian mainstream media fail to take advantage of the affordances of the blog format, such as providing further links and responding to readers’ comments. Jericho (2012a:8) argues that the blog of the late Matt Price on *The Australian* was the only kind of writing that ‘deserved the name of a “blog” on a mainstream media website by a journalist’. Strangely, journalist Gideon Haigh (2012) states that Australian journalists have ‘held aloof from blogs’ and been mainly ‘bystanders to the growth and maturation of the blogosphere’, with *The Australian* assembling ‘its convocation of bloggers only quite recently’. August 2006 (when blogs began on that site) is hardly recent. Haigh (2012) also describes *The Age*’s
‘Blog Central’ as an ‘untended graveyard of dormant blogs’, overlooking the fact that ‘Blog Central’\(^{15}\) is an old site. When the *National Times* was launched in 2009 some blogs on Fairfax Media sites migrated there, while others relocated to revamped sites of *The Age*, *SMH* and so forth. For example, Zwartz (2009) posted this announcement:

Dear friends, my blog [*The Religious Write*] has moved. The new site is part of the *National Times*, the splendid new Fairfax opinion centre. But it uses a different operating system […]. If you continue to want to be part of the debate, and I sincerely hope you do, you will have to transfer to the new system via the second web address (Zwartz 2009).

The only study to my knowledge which has analysed Australian newspaper blogs in a systematic way is my study (Garden 2010a). This compared 12 political blogs (both mainstream and independent) in terms of popularity, interactivity and links. Two journalist-blogs, *Jack the Insider* and *Meganomics*, attracted the most comments and the bloggers responded more often than any of the others. The limitation of this study was the small number of blogs analysed and the focus on quantitative factors. A variable not considered was moderation policy. The current study builds on this pilot study, with a more in-depth analysis of the conversations occurring on journalist-blogs on the sites of major Australian newspapers, combined with qualitative interviews with the bloggers themselves in order to gain a unique insight into this new form of journalism.

**Conclusion**

Although the scope, reach and popularity of some independent blogs are considerable, there is little evidence of a new counter-public sphere or an alternative source of journalistic practice emerging. The dominant public sphere remains the mass media. If we consider the preceding review of the literature, several criticisms can be made. Scholars have focused on independent blogs, and their mainstream counterparts have received scant attention. This lack of research is all the more surprising given the centrality of journalists to the political communication system. Blogs by journalists would seem to have the potential to usher in a more collaborative journalistic culture and even create a deliberative space – ‘the digital cafes’ of the virtual public sphere.

\(^{15}\) The original site of *The Age*’s Blog Central: http://www.theage.com.au/blogcentral/
Second, much of the research on blogs has focused on post data such as link analysis. For example, at the forefront of research on Australian blogs are Axel Bruns and his colleagues who use automated large-scale content analysis tools to investigate networks of interlinkage posts. What has been overlooked is qualitative analysis of comments, even though comments are one of the defining characteristics of political blogs (Mishne & Glance 2006; Walker 2006). Third, most of the studies of mainstream media blogs (for example, Singer 2005; Wall 2005; Domingo 2008; Dailey et al. 2008) are now outmoded because these were conducted in the early years of adoption of this format – a time when journalists were still adjusting to the notion of engaging with readers. Fourth, in recent years the focus of research on participatory journalism has been on comments on articles, the most popular form of UGC on mainstream news sites (Ruiz et al. 2011). However, comments to online articles are a quite different space to blogs. I would argue that there is much less likelihood of deliberative discussion occurring or a sense of community emerging because they are seldom if ever moderated by the journalists, nor do journalists engage in the discussion. Moderation is usually done by in-house moderators or out-sourced to moderation firms.

This review of the literature suggests that renewed focus must be placed on mainstream media blogs and in particular the political discussion that occurs on comment-threads. The extent to which such media improve journalism is a key question. It is not just enough for news organisations to merely provide the conditions or opportunities for interactive civic engagement online, as these are not sufficient for such engagement to take place. To my knowledge, there have been no in-depth studies to date of Australian mainstream media blogs, although they have attracted widespread criticism and denigration based mainly on anecdotal evidence. Considering that the press remains the most influential medium, this is a major gap in the literature which the current study addressed. Its aim was to determine whether the uptake of blogs is mere window dressing – to attract audiences and boost revenue – or if it really matters, and if it reflects a second and more promising phase of public journalism.

The main research question emerging from this literature review is:

16 Note that the interviews for Domingo’s study were conducted between 2003 and 2004 and Dailey et al. analysed blog posts published in November 2006.
What is the contribution of journalist-blogs to the Australian public sphere?

The three sub-questions that arise from this over-arching question are:

1. Where do journalist political-blogs occur?
2. To what extent are Australian political journalist-blogs a space of deliberation?
3. What are political journalist-bloggers’ perceptions of blogs as a space of deliberation?
Chapter 4  Identification of blogs

Introduction

Prior to carrying out the content analysis of comment-threads, it was necessary to provide an overview of Australia’s mainstream media blogosphere, identify journalist-blogs and decide which of these could be classified as political blogs. This identification process addresses the first of the three sub-questions of this thesis: Where do political journalist-blogs occur? This chapter details this process, which entailed differentiating between blogs which were active and inactive, classifying blogs according to genre and selecting those which were political blogs. With the latter it was necessary to not only determine which were authored by professional journalists as opposed to outside contributors, but also those that focused on national political issues rather than state or local issues. For the purposes of this study only those which focused predominantly on national political issues and were authored by professional journalists were selected for analysis. Unexpected challenges emerged, which have important implications for future researchers of not only blogs on mainstream media sites, but also independent sites.

Locating blogs

Identification of blogs took place in December 2011, although the lists were subsequently modified for reasons given below. The first step involved looking at the websites of News Limited, Fairfax Media and The West Australian to locate blogs and determine which could be categorised as political. While the focus was on blogs hosted by newspaper publishers, it is important to note that aside from Anthony Green’s Election Blog\(^\text{17}\), ABC’s only political blog is Annabel Crabb’s\(^\text{18}\) whose last post was in late 2011. A total of 19 sites were examined, including those of national and metropolitan newspapers as well as stand-alone sites The Punch, National Times and Brisbane Times (see Appendix 1 for their URLs). A blog had to follow the definition given previously:

A frequently updated website that uses blog software (such as WordPress.com) or is called a blog by the author(s) or the news site. It has dated entries of

\(^\text{17}\) Anthony Green’s Election Blog: http://blogs.abc.net.au/antonygreen/

\(^\text{18}\) Annabel Crabb: http://blogs.abc.net.au/annabelcrabb/
commentary – or other material such as graphics – displayed in reverse chronological sequence, and there is a facility for readers to add comments to each entry or post.

Dailey et al. (2008:57) used a similar definition, but with a condition that blogs had to be listed on the home page, based on the idea that readers should not have to hunt for them: ‘Infrequent visitors, the ones newspapers are trying to attract, could not be expected to spend time looking for a feature they did not know was on the site.’ However, since there seemed to be a relatively small number of Australian political-blogs, it was important to identify all of them, no matter how difficult to locate. On most sites it was not evident from the home page there were any blogs at all. On *The Age* and *SMH* they were hidden under pages such as Entertainment, Technology and Life & Style. Since September 2009, Fairfax Media sites have linked to the *National Times* where some blogs migrated. Others moved to re-vamped sites of their original masthead, although were shared across Fairfax sites, as Ben Groundwater\(^\text{19}\) announces: ‘The Backpacker blog, at the ripe old age of three-and-a-half years, is leaving its old home and moving in to a share house with all the other Fairfax blogs. Sniff... They grow up so fast.’ The *National Times* was the easiest to navigate as there was a tab for blogs:

**Figure 4** Screen shot of blog page on *National Times*

Inactive or ceased blogs

Some National Times’ blogs appeared to be inactive (for example, the last post on Econogirl was in September 2010) and blogs on other sites had no postings for months, even years. This necessitated the need to distinguish between active blogs and those that had ceased or were inactive. The distinction is important as it can be difficult to determine if a blog has been permanently or temporarily abandoned. It could be assumed some have ceased due to a sign off by the blogger. Elaine George (2011) noted on Pillow Talk, ‘For any readers unaware, last Sat was my last article for The Daily Telegraph/ Inside Edition, so I will investigate doing a blog with my website’. However, Marcus Kuczynski (2011) posted, ‘I didn’t think when I last posted a few weeks ago that it would be the end of the world for this blog’, but then it re-appeared on 18 January 2012\(^\text{20}\).

As a general rule, I decided to label blogs inactive if there were no posts for three months, although some researchers nominate shorter time periods (Bar-Ilan (2007) excluded blogs that were not updated for the two months prior to the date of inspection). While two or three months may seem a lengthy time between posts, especially when one of the distinctions often made between websites and blogs is that the latter have regular updates (Hourihan 2002), some researchers nominate longer periods. Jericho (2012a) decided on six months for his listing of Australian political blogs, and in an earlier listing in 2010, Highfield (2013) decided that inactive was ‘a year and a half for inactivity […] in case the blogger did come back’. Andrew Clennell’s and Sarrah Le Marquand’s blogs on The Daily Telegraph were presumed inactive, but both resumed posting in January 2012, although Clennell’s previous post was 2 May 2011, Le Marquand’s 8 August 2011. A second inspection in June 2012 revealed all other blogs I had labelled inactive remained so.

Inactive or ceased blogs were tabled according to genre and dates of first and last posts (see Appendix 2 for a full list). Note that websites are regularly updated and some blogs may no longer appear on current sites. In total, 18 News Limited and 63 Fairfax Media

were identified, with the vast majority of the latter being lifestyle blogs. There were six inactive political blogs, all on Fairfax Media sites. Australian news sites were relatively late in their adoption of blogs and in order to get an overview of the history of political blogs, it seemed important to table all known inactive political blogs\(^{21}\), including the six Fairfax Media blogs mentioned above and those whose archives were still accessible. Although some may have been missed, 17 inactive political blogs were located as shown in Table 1. (Their URLs are listed in Appendix 3.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blogger</th>
<th>BLOG</th>
<th>News Site</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>Finish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Margo Kingston</td>
<td>Webdiary</td>
<td>SMH</td>
<td>4/06/2000</td>
<td>22/08/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Kelly</td>
<td>Paul Kelly</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>1/09/2006</td>
<td>26/07/2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet Albrechtsen</td>
<td>Janet Albrechtsen</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>20/02/2007</td>
<td>10/03/2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip Adams</td>
<td>Phillip Adams</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>12/03/2007</td>
<td>4/08/2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Hartcher</td>
<td>Peter Hartcher</td>
<td>SMH</td>
<td>15/05/2007</td>
<td>6/05/2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm Farr</td>
<td>Malcolm Farr</td>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>28/05/2007</td>
<td>29/11/2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annabel Crabb</td>
<td>Annabel Crabb</td>
<td>SMH</td>
<td>28/06/2007</td>
<td>1/06/2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caroline Overington</td>
<td>Caroline Overington</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>15/08/2007</td>
<td>18/02/2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha Maiden</td>
<td>Despatch Box</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>23/10/2007</td>
<td>9/12/2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Kerr</td>
<td>Christian Kerr</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>12/05/2008</td>
<td>26/07/2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Fitton</td>
<td>WorldView</td>
<td>The Age/National Times</td>
<td>19/06/2009</td>
<td>2/09/2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard Sattler</td>
<td>Mad as Hell</td>
<td>WAtoday/National Times</td>
<td>20/06/2009</td>
<td>7/04/2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Oddly, Jericho included *The Punch* and *The Drum* in his analysis of blogs (2012a:67), although later writes they ‘straddle the line between a news site and a blog’ (2012a:70). *The Drum* has a separate tab\(^{22}\) for blogs, although Jericho is referring to the analysis and opinion site\(^{23}\). Highfield (2011:31) also argues that the formatting and comment options of *The Punch* suggest it could be categorised as a group blog. More importantly, *The Punch* does not describe itself as a group blog or any of its columns as a blog.

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\(^{21}\) Tim Highfield, Curtin University, gave me invaluable help with this.

\(^{22}\) ABC’s blogs: http://www.abc.net.au/news/thedrum/blogs/

\(^{23}\) *The Drum*: http://www.abc.net.au/news/thedrum/
Active blogs

After inactive blogs were filtered out, active blogs were classified according to genres such as political, media, food, travel, sports and general interest. General ‘your say’ blogs were excluded (for example, *The Australian*’s Letters\textsuperscript{24}) as it is debatable whether these can be called blogs, for who is the blogger? Initially, 129 active blogs were identified – including 16 on *The West Australian*. Of these 129, 14 were considered to be political blogs focusing mostly on national issues and authored by journalists. On *The West Australian*, two were identified as political blogs and the comment-threads on two ‘posts’ (columns) by Andrew Probyn and Paul Murray were downloaded\textsuperscript{25} and included in the content analysis. At the time of inspection the columns were labelled blogs and the journalists called ‘opinion bloggers’.

\textbf{Figure 5}  Screen shots of *The West Australian*

\textsuperscript{24} ‘Letters’ no longer appears in *The Australian*’s blog stable as the site was updated in early 2012.

\textsuperscript{25} Paul Murray, ‘Gillard’s refugee mess is all her own work’, 21 September, http://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/opinion/post/-/blog/paulmurray/post/2546/comment/1/

Anomalies and omissions

The so-called ‘blogs’ on The West Australian were subsequently found to be mislabelled. The anomaly was discovered when I contacted Andrew Probyn in May 2012 for an interview. Probyn was surprised to hear he was described on their website as a blogger and emphatically stated he was not. This was confirmed by the social media editor Louise Burke who said they did not have blogs, intimating the misinformation was probably something to do with their Yahoo platform. Surprisingly, when I contacted Susanna Carter, the editor-in-chief at Yahoo!7 (pers. Comm., 27 June 2012) for clarification, she replied, ‘Can I ask what you understand the definition of a blog to be? I am not entirely clear of the question you are asking.’ As mentioned, this confusion as to what online content should be called a blog is evident in the study of blogs by Robertson and McLaughlin (2011:107) who included reports posted on newspaper websites ‘where reader comment is invited’. Chris Manly, online editor of The West Australian, told me the website needed to be changed as they are ‘definitely not blogs but opinion pieces with comments’. An inspection of the site on 11 August 2012 revealed the words blog or blogger no longer appeared. It does not make sense to call a site a blog when the author does not consider it to be one.

Clearly, my definition was inadequate, as may have been those used by other researchers such as Dailey et al. (2008), and perhaps needed to include something to the effect that the journalist identifies as a blogger and considers their site to be a blog. I decided to remove the data from the analysis of the comment-threads of Probyn and Murray and also removed The West Australian ‘blogs’ from the inactive and active lists. This meant the list of 129 active blogs was revised down to 113, with only 12 political blogs. To make matters more complicated, in May 2012 I was made aware of two new political-blogs on The Australian although they were not on the Blog List on the website up to that time. (N.B. the site was updated a few days later.) Because Goodly Fabric commenced on 15 November 2011, it fell within the time frame for the content analysis and a comment-thread was analysed. The Henry Ergas Blog began on 19 February 2012 and was excluded. This meant a total of 13 political journalist-blogs were included in the final sample and the list of active blogs as of December 2011 was updated to 114.
Australia’s mainstream media blogosphere

Table 2 shows the 114 blogs classified according to genre (the full list of blogs is in Appendix 4). A total of 41 blogs was found on News Limited sites and 73 on Fairfax Media sites; 26 or 23 per cent were identified as political. Five of these were labelled ‘political not j-blog’ as they were authored by outside contributors such as politicians; for example, *The Bishop’s Gambit* on *National Times* authored by Julie Bishop (the then Deputy Leader of the Opposition). Eight were labelled ‘political other’ and these dealt predominantly with local or state issues; for example, *Pineapple Politics* is described as a guide ‘through the political jungle and pineapple field that is Queensland’. Thirteen dealt predominantly with national political issues: there were 12 on News Limited sites and one Fairfax Media blog – *Blunt Instrument*. Two new Fairfax Media political blogs – *Question Time* and *The Pulse* – commenced in February 2012 so fell out of the time frame for the content analysis.

Table 2  Australian MSM Blogosphere (1 December 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>political</th>
<th>political</th>
<th>political</th>
<th>media</th>
<th>culture</th>
<th>food</th>
<th>travel</th>
<th>sports</th>
<th>edn</th>
<th>money</th>
<th>tech.</th>
<th>general</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>j-blog</td>
<td>other*</td>
<td>not j-blog</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News: 41</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairfax: 73</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>114</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: j-blog = journalist-blog; tech. = technology; edn = education
*political other = state/local/overseas issues

Although Fairfax Media has almost twice the number of blogs as News Limited, many are niche blogs written by freelancers, including lifestyle blogs. This reflects what Simpson (2008:40) describes as Fairfax Media’s aim to ‘push boundaries’, a deliberate attempt to go outside the traditional newspaper subject material; conversations such as a one-night-stand may seem provocative but are considered relevant as readers deal with these things in real life. According to Simons (2011), Mike van Niekerk, former online editor-in-chief for Fairfax Media, defended the fact their websites took on ‘a tabloid air, more celebrity-news-oriented than readers of the hard copy broadsheets might expect’ because if the serious news of the day gets a fair coverage, the inclusion of more

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populist content is to the good; the unlimited space of online media makes it possible to be all things to all people. Van Niekerk told me the main reason for the lack of political blogs is that it is too time-consuming to moderate.

Categorising a blog as political requires a degree of subjectivity because not can ‘political’ blogs cover non-political subjects, but also other blogs (literary, parenting, health or sport) can cover political issues (Bruns 2008b). Although Sarrah Le Marquand’s blog frequently covers political areas I categorised it as generalist. Le Marquand (pers. Comm., 28 August 2012) told me she views it as ‘far from exclusively political and often touches upon pop culture topics as well as religion, education and parenting issues’. Wendy Tuohy’s (2012) also said she would categorise her blog The Perch (begun at the request of her editor in order to provide another female voice) as ‘general interest’. At the same time I decided to label Susie O’Brien’s blog as political, although Jericho decided by ‘choice’ (2012b) not to list it as such. Aside from blogs that focused on state and local issues, it is surprising that only one political journalist-blog (Blunt Instrument) could be located on Fairfax Media sites and yet there were 12 on News Limited sites (see Table 3). Clearly, News Limited and Fairfax Media have approached blogging differently, with the many of the latter’s lifestyle blogs authored by outside contributors; in contrast, the blogs on the former are predominantly authored by professional journalists and most focus on politics and current affairs.

Table 3  Political blogs on MSM sites (1 December 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of journalist</th>
<th>Name of blog</th>
<th>Newspaper/site</th>
<th>Date started</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Bolt</td>
<td>Andrew Bolt</td>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td>29/07/06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie O’Brien</td>
<td>Susie O’Brien</td>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td>25/10/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Megalogenis</td>
<td>Meganomics</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>2/08/07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Brent</td>
<td>Mumble</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>15/05/07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>3/10/07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Kenny</td>
<td>Goody Fabric</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>15/11/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>14/07/06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>14/07/06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Penberthy</td>
<td>David Penberthy</td>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>14/07/06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>22/08/07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Blair</td>
<td>Tim Blair</td>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>12/05/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>7/10/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Birmingham</td>
<td>Blunt Instrument</td>
<td>National Times</td>
<td>14/09/09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interestingly, with the exception of The Australian, the two other News Limited sites tend to use the journalist’s own name for their blogs. Hence, the blog of Tim Blair is simply Tim Blair. Shoba Rao, former social media editor of The Daily Telegraph, said they ‘stick’ with the journalist’s own name as it is a branding or search engine optimisation issue. According to Rao, in the context of political reporters their own name is the strongest one to be recognised in Google; if there is a ‘funny name’ that has no attachment to the brand then it is less likely people are going to find it. For some, however, their blog name has become a brand name with Peter Brent often called Mumble or Mumbles on his blog and Twitter. For example, a commenter with username ‘JP’ writes ‘what nonsense mumbles’27. In addition, some bloggers have more than one blog and different names are essential: as well as Blunt Instrument, John Birmingham also has his own independent blog Cheeseburger Gothic28.

In summary, 26 political-blogs were identified, with 13 of these focusing on national issues. However, this is at odds with the findings of another study conducted during a similar period. The Rise of the Fifth Estate: social media and blogging in Australian politics by Greg Jericho (2012a) is the first substantial treatise on the Australian political blogosphere. Jericho (2012a:49) identifies 324 Australian political blogs, but only includes eight blogs from mainstream news sites. This leaves out Mumble (although it is included in the list in the appendix), John Birmingham’s Blunt Instrument, the blogs of Simon Benson, Susie O’Brien, David Penberthy, not to mention the other 13 I identified but excluded because they were not written by a professional journalist or dealt predominantly with state issues. When I queried Jericho, he replied, ‘Some are errors of omission […]. The list of blogs was not the main point of the book’ (2012b), although ‘Birmingham’s was a definite miss on the list’ (2012c). He said that his focus was ‘non-mainstream media’ and some blogs seemed ‘more like articles with comments’ (Jericho 2012d). This criticism is unfounded – with perhaps the exception of David Penberthy – and the reasons for this are explored in more depth in Chapter 6, The Journalist-bloggers. Furthermore, if a study is of Australian political blogs it is difficult to justify the lack of focus on mainstream blogs.

28 John Birmingham’s independent blog Cheeseburger Gothic: http://www.cheeseburgergothic.com/
Regardless, there is a relative dearth of journalist-blogs on Australian mainstream news sites that focus on politics; the 13 identified in this study represent only about 4 per cent of the total Australian political blogosphere. Even amongst the independent blogs, there are only a small number which could be considered important (Quiggin 2006; Simons 2007). As discussed in the previous chapter, blogging has not emerged in Australia as an important and influential vehicle for political debate compared to the U.S. and U.K.

Regarding the so-called blogs on The West Australian had been mislabelled and were merely columns with comments, it is clear that other news sites have made the same mistake. Jericho (2012a:105) describes the ‘now-defunct blog’ of The Australian’s Dennis Shanahan (this so-called ‘Dennis Shanahan Blog’ with articles between 11 September 2006 and 4 August 2008 can be located here29). As I had not identified this blog for my listing of ‘inactive blogs’, I contacted Shanahan as it appeared that aside from Margo Kingston’s Webdiary this may have been the first political blog on a mainstream media site. However, Shanahan (pers. Comm., 29 August 2012) told me there is confusion about himself and blogging. He insists he never had a blog in a form he would consider a blog in which he would ‘go online and debate and interact with other bloggers’, although pointed out that his columns appeared on the website where they received comments. Shanahan (pers. Comm., 30 August 2012) also stated that he never moderated comments although he occasionally ‘recommended corrections or deletions on the basis of offensive or defamatory language’. Regardless, there are numerous references to his ‘blog’ in the literature. Young (2011) and Flew (2008) make references to David Shanahan’s blog and a ‘sarcastic’ post on 11 July 2007 where the number of comments shut down at 16 and people reported an inability to comment. However, Shanahan (pers. Comm., 30 August 2012) told me this piece was originally written for the newspaper but deemed best to put online and claims he has no idea ‘why they would have cut off the comments, if they did at all’. It may also be that (like Shanahan’s) the so-called blogs of The Australian’s Paul Kelly and Greg Sheridan (on the inactive blog list) may not have been blogs either.

Conclusion

The identification process revealed unexpected challenges which have implications for future researchers. In particular it shows the need for clear and unambiguous definitions of ‘blog’, as stretching the definition to include online news sites such as *The Punch* or comment-enabled articles can only lead to confusion. The process also highlights the need to not rely solely on website data. As well as incorrect labelling, they can be out-of-date as I found with *The Australian* where initially I missed *Goodly Fabric*. Or sites which are not blogs may be erroneously described as such, as I found on *The West Australian*. Deciding which blogs could be categorised as political was perhaps easier than in the independent blogosphere as most of those selected are authored by journalists widely regarded as ‘political’ journalists or columnists. There were only a few where I had to make a judgement call as to whether to call a blog generalist or political. For future researchers, it may be useful to contact the journalist themselves and obtain their perception of how their blog should be categorised. In order to determine the extent to which deliberation is evident in the comment-threads of the 13 blogs identified as political blogs, a mixed-methods research approach was used. This utilised both content analysis of selected comment-threads (which required the development of a coding scheme to analyse deliberation), followed by interviews with journalists. This approach is discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 5  Analysing deliberation

Introduction

This chapter discusses in detail the mixed methods research approach used in this study and the justification for such an approach. Following previous studies, the traditional method of content analysis was adapted to researching the online phenomenon of blogs. For this analysis, a coding scheme was drawn up based on indicators used in previous studies of deliberation (Steenbergen et al. 2003; Stromer-Galley 2005, 2007). This chapter also lists the comment-threads selected for analysis, and provides examples of statements in various comments that were coded for each of these indicators. In addition, there is an explanation of the modes of interviews employed and a list of the interviews undertaken.

Research approach

A mixed-methods research approach was used in order to answer the second and third research questions:

b) To what extent are Australian political journalist-blogs a space of deliberation?

c) What are political journalist-bloggers’ perceptions of blogs as a space of deliberation?

A mixed-methods research approach is a ‘design for collecting, analysing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a study in order to understand a research problem’ (Clark et al. 2008:363). In the literature, the terms ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ are often used in two different ways – one relating to the research paradigm and the second referring to research methods (Mackenzie & Knipe 2006). In this thesis these terms are used to describe the data collection methods and analysis, and not the theoretical approach to research. The pragmatic paradigm underlies my research as it focuses on the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the research problem and provides an opportunity for multiple methods, or different forms of data collection and analysis (Creswell 2009). Pragmatism is typically associated with mixed methods research because it values both subjective and objective knowledge, and looks at ‘what works’,
using diverse approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007:26). Although quantitative and qualitative methods are often considered ‘antithetic or divergent’ they are not mutually exclusive; their combination can be beneficial as they focus on the ‘different dimensions of the same phenomenon’ (Das 1983:311) and result in a better understanding of the research problem as the complementary strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches offset the weaknesses of each approach (Clark et al. 2008).

Two research techniques were used. The first was content analysis of comment-threads to provide data on the conversations occurring. This addressed RQ2: To what extent are Australian political journalist-blogs a space of deliberation? The second technique was interviews to gauge journalists’ views and perspectives on blogging in order to answer RQ3: What are political journalist-bloggers’ perceptions of blogs as a space of deliberation? The content analysis of the blog (both data collection and analysis) preceded interviews, followed by an interpretation of the entire analysis. This combination of approaches, one to collect quantitative data and the other to collect qualitative data, can ‘achieve triangulation, and provide greater validity of findings’ (Jankowski & van Selm 2008:8). In this study, the initial results of content analysis informed the secondary qualitative data collection, a design known as a ‘sequential explanatory design’ (Creswell 2009:209) – while the two forms of data are separate, they are connected with one form building on the other. At the same time the design is also emergent, which means ‘the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and that all phases of the process may change or shift’ after the field is entered and data collected (Creswell 2013:47).

For the content analysis, in order to determine the reliability of the indicators selected, two coders – the researcher and an assistant – coded a sample of comments. Intercoder reliability is defined as ‘the extent to which independent coders evaluate a characteristic of a message […] and reach the same conclusion’ (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken 2002:589) and is essential for ‘validating subjectively-coded data’ (Freelon 2010a:20). In communication research it is often used as a component of content analysis and in this context it assesses the degree to which two or more coders agree on their coding of a group of messages (Freelon 2010a).
During the research process, new unexpected questions were formulated for the interviews and extra data collected that were not envisioned at the outset. In addition, while originally only journalist-bloggers were going to be interviewed, it became apparent that it was necessary to also interview online editors, and in particular social media editors – a relatively new role on news organisations. Increasingly the platform of blogging is converging with the micro-blog Twitter in what Highfield (2011:341) calls the ‘intermedia news environment’. And so while my primary focus was on political blogs, because of significant changes that occurred in the Australian blogosphere in 2012 it also made sense during the interviews to interrogate journalist-bloggers regarding their views on Twitter – whether they used it, what they regarded as its advantages and disadvantages, and if they believed political debate is migrating from blogs to such social media platforms. At the same time I decided to obtain some – albeit limited – quantitative data on their use of this medium. This included:

   a) Which journalists had Twitter accounts;
   b) For those journalists who used Twitter, the date they joined;
   c) Number of followers and tweets as at 6 June 2012 and 6 June 2013;
   d) Average number of tweets per week.

Because of the increasing popularity of Twitter as a platform of choice by many journalists, with some social media editors questioning the value of blogs, even the future of blogs, addressing these issues also addresses the overall research question: What is the contribution of journalist-blogs to Australian political debate?

Data was obtained from two sources: online and offline: online data refers to materials obtained using virtual methodologies: ‘methods implemented by and through the internet’ (Orgad 2009:35). These include text from blog-posts, blog-comments, tweets, emails and articles on websites, as well as the email transcripts from online interviews. Even though this study is of the internet-related phenomenon of blogs, methods to obtain offline data were employed such as transcripts from phone interviews.

**Content analysis**

Although content analysis is an established social science methodology, its ‘natural domain is communication, media and cultural studies’ (Deacon et al. 2007:119).
Kolmer (2008:128) claims the method ‘offers new insights into the nature of journalism in a changing world’. The term ‘content analysis’, however, is used inconsistently in the literature. On the one hand, it is used in a very general sense to describe any method that involves analysing content including discourse and textual analysis (Weerakkody 2009; Fürsich 2009). On the other hand, it is used to describe a specific analytic approach such as in Berelson’s (1952:18) classic definition, ‘a research technique for objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication’. This definition has been criticised as being too restrictive, notably by Krippendorff (2004:18) who defines content analysis as ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use’. Krippendorff (2004) argues that inferential processes occur in all stages of the research process, and the researcher is an interpreter in the establishment of categories and ascribing textual units to these categories.

There is a view that internet research is somehow ‘different’ from other forms of investigation and consequently requires new methods of analysis. This has been contested as much is to be gained from the application or adaptation of established research methods such as interviews, surveys and content analysis (Jankowski & van Selm 2005). For example, Dailey et al. (2008), Besselink (2011) and Singer (2005) have adapted traditional content analysis to study blogs. Herring (2010) believes established methods of content analysis are adequate to analyse web content, although as with offline content analysis there are narrow and broad interpretations with a blurring of boundaries between content analysis and other methods such as discourse analysis and social network analysis. Interestingly, following Krippendorff, Herring (2010:234) advocates ‘the utility of a broad interpretation that subsumes the narrow one’ particularly when conducting web content analysis; for example with research on blogs the content may include links and exchanges. Internet-mediated communication such as websites lend themselves to content analysis and not surprisingly it was one of the first methodologies adapted to analyse online content and has been used increasingly since. In particular, blog conversations as naturally occurring, non-reactive online reactions or responses are rich sources of data for such analysis (Herring 2010).

One of the primary advantages of content analysis is that it is unobtrusive and therefore a non-reactive technique of data collection because ‘neither the sender nor the receiver
of the message is aware that it is being analysed’ (Weber 1990:10). Content analysis is also transparent because categories, coding systems and sampling material can be scrutinised, the study can be replicated and follow-up studies conducted (Bryman 2001; Burnham et al. 2008). In the case of blogs, participants are unaware they are being studied and so their comments are not influenced by the presence of a researcher or a measurement instrument. Overall, it is an inexpensive, easy method, which can deal with large volumes of data; the content of blogs is readily available, quickly editable and conversations on comment-threads need no transcribing. In addition, the provision of publicly available archives means analysis of data can be conducted after material is posted on the web (Hookway 2008).

However, Deacon et al. (2007:280) caution against assuming ‘this bottomless goldmine of data is too good to ignore’ as what is being analysed is indirect evidence. The researcher is dependent on using the content available and is unable to control when, what or by whom comments are made. Hewson (2008) notes that online interactions typically lack extra-linguistic cues available in face-to-face settings and cannot capture nonverbal communication or tone of the voice. Knowledge about participants depends on what they reveal – or what the researcher can deduce – from their comments, which raises issues of anonymity and trustworthiness. With some commenters using pseudonymous screen names, how trustworthy are their expressions? However, Hookway (2008) points out that the same question can be asked of off-line expressions or statements: how can you know if someone is being truthful in an interview or a survey questionnaire?

It must be noted that content analysis of blog comments cannot capture lurkers or ‘invisible participants’ (Soroka & Rafaeli 2006) who read a blog out of interest but as journalist-blogger George Megalogenis (in ABC 2008) notes may refrain from active participation because of ‘flame wars’ or lack of civility. As Hine (2000:25) says the ‘silent’ are difficult to incorporate into an analysis as they leave no observable traces. If one’s aim is to capture the multi-faceted nature of internet use, then the participation and practices of lurkers are significant (Orgad 2009) and it is possible to reach this group of invisible participants through surveys or interviews (Janssen & Kies 2005). For example, Orgad (2009:43-44) recruited interviewees who were lurkers by ‘snowballing’
– by using initial contacts with women the researcher met online in order to recruit their acquaintances who participated online but not actively or visibly.

**Coding scheme**

The most important element for content analysis is the development of a categorisation scheme by which messages can be reliably classified. For this study a coding scheme to measure the quality of conversations was drawn up based on indicators used in the DQI developed by BIDS (Steenbergen et al. 2003) and recent revisions (Black et al. 2011; Bächtiger et al. 2009), as well as the coding schemes of Stromer-Galley (2005, 2007). There is considerable overlap between the DQI and Stromer-Galley’s coding schemes as acknowledged by Bächtiger et al. (2009), and several studies have used indicators adapted from both (for example, Wales et al. 2010; Monnoyer-Smith & Wojcik 2011).

The index is theoretically grounded in political theory and Habermasian discourse ethics. In order for discourse to be free from distortion, Habermas (1996) believes it must be open to participation by all; participants must justify their assertions and validity claims; they must consider the common good and show respect for other participants; claims must be authentic or sincere, and discourse should also arrive at a rationally motivated consensus. Although Habermas (1996) regards his model of discourse ethics as an ideal, he also believes that at least some amount of deliberation is possible in the real world of politics.

The DQI was developed through a comparative study of parliamentary debates in Germany, Switzerland, U.K. and U.S. Its objective was to tap ‘an underlying continuum of deliberation that ranges from the complete violation of Habermas’ discourse ethics to ideal speech acts’ (Bächtiger et al. 2010:38). This means researchers can use ideal deliberation as an evaluative benchmark and judge the quality of conversation as ranging along a continuum ‘excellent’, ‘bad’, ‘better’ or ‘good enough’ deliberation for some purpose (Bächtiger et al. 2010:37). Following Habermas, Steenbergen et al. (2003) argue that high-quality deliberative discourse should include open participation, reason-giving, considerations around the common good, mutual respect and willingness to yield to the force of the better argument, with the goal to reach understanding or consensus building. The DQI has seven coding categories:
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- participation
- level of justification (of arguments)
- content of justification (e.g. appeal to the common good)
- respect towards groups
- respect towards demands of other speakers
- respect towards counterarguments
- constructive politics (the extent to which speakers change positions or stances)

The DQI does not include a measure of authenticity because judging a speech act as authentic was considered ‘exceedingly difficult’ and ‘speculative’ (Steenbergen et al. 2003). While O’Brien (2009) criticises this omission, arguing that even if discourse meets all other criteria of deliberation it is ‘completely devalued’ without authenticity, Monnoyer-Smith and Wojcik (2011) suggest that authenticity should be regarded as a ‘normative horizon’ rather than a criterion. The DQI has also been criticised for privileging rational communication, although Habermas (1996) admits that other forms of expression have a place within deliberation if they include justifications and are not abusive. Thompson (2008:505) notes that most theorists regard ‘affective appeals, informal arguments, rhetorical speeches, personal testimony and the like’ as important ingredients in the deliberative process. Recently, some of the researchers who developed the DQI suggest successful deliberation can involve ‘story-telling, personal experiences, humour or rhetoric’ and should be reflected in an empirical measurement (Bächtiger et al. 2010:54). For example, story-telling could be deliberative if it provides ‘relevant information, perspectives, or implicit arguments […] and engenders trust, inclusion and respect’ (Bächtiger et al. 2010:56). Despite its limitations, the DQI is a general measurement instrument that allows empirical researchers to peer into the real world of deliberation (Steenbergen et al. 2003:44). Although no index can provide a complete analysis of discussion, nor can contextual conditions be taken into account, Habermas (2005:385) claims the DQI captures ‘the essential features of proper deliberation’ and even describes the study in which the index was developed as ‘splendid’ because it reaches to the ‘centre of the whole approach to deliberative politics’ (2005:389).
Stromer-Galley’s (2007) coding scheme has fewer demands for political sophistication than the DQI and attempts to measure six elements essential for political deliberation:

- reasoned opinion expression or opinion claims supported by evidence
- sourcing (references to mass media and personal narratives are included)
- disagreement
- equality (levels of participation)
- topicality
- engagement

In an earlier pilot study of Yahoo! Chat, Stromer-Galley (2005:10) did not code for personal narrative because direct observation of the forum revealed ‘virtually no personal stories’. Although flaming (messages that attack the speaker) was coded, such messages were not a ‘pervasive facet’ of the online forum and this code was not used in a subsequent study (Stromer-Galley 2007). Oddly, Stromer-Galley did not code for respect although Macedo (1999:10) regards the recognition of the ‘merit in their opponents’ claims’ as being one of the principal purposes of deliberation.

Following Steenbergen et al. (2003), I included the indicators of flaming and respect. In addition, due to the personalised nature of blogs, it seemed important to include indicators such as humour and personal experience, which were included in recent studies (Robertson & McLaughlin 2011; Monnoyer & Wojcik 2011; Habegger 2011). I made no attempt to come up with an overall index of deliberation as in the DQI which was developed through an analysis of parliamentary debates. The latter is a quite different space from the open discussions held on blogs where participants are not debating with some kind of consensus or agreed outcome in mind. There is less relevance for the indicator of consensus when applied to online forums such as blogs which are purely discursive and not tied to any decision making (Janssen & Kies 2005). Note that Habermas (2005) came to draw a clear explicit distinction between everyday political talk (as would occur in blogs) and that which occurs in formal decision-making spheres. Following Stromer-Galley (2007), the focus here is on analysing various indicators of deliberation, and even to determine whether some of these are even relevant for analysing blog discussions. For example, if it is found that there is little recourse to the use of personal experience to justify opinions, then the question arises whether this indicator is even relevant for future studies, or if it needs to be explored.
further across a range of different blog-genres. Or is its relative absence due to some other factor?

Following Krippendorff (1980), three different units of analysis – the sampling unit, the recording unit and the context unit – were used. Because message meanings are contextual, the context unit identifies the ‘immediate environment in which the message is received’ (Weare & Wan-Ying 2000:274) which in this study was a website of Australia’s main newspaper publishers. The sampling unit, or ‘the whole independent message used for the basis of sampling’ (Weare & Wan-Ying 2000:274) was a journalist-blog. Recording units are the components of the message that can be independently attached to content categories. With the exception of the analyses of interactivity and inclusiveness, the recording units of analysis which were coded were each a message or ‘unit of meaning’ (Robertson & McLaughlin 2011) within each comment – each ‘analytically separable component of the message that can be independently attached to content categories’ (Weare & Wan-Ying 2000:274).

Because I wanted to focus on the relative contribution of each commenter, a comment could be coded only once for a particular category; for example, it could be coded off-topic only once, even if there were several off-topic statements within that comment. At the same time that comment could also be coded for flaming if it contained a statement which attacked another participant or the blogger. A comment, therefore, could be coded for different categories, but a statement within a comment could only be coded once for a single category – a statement could not be coded as both flaming and disagreement.

While the primary recording unit of analysis was the comment, I also took into account the context of those comments and in particular the series of comments grouped together (called the thread). As mentioned, this meant that interactivity and equality were measured separately from the other indicators. Here the number of participants (per thread), their total number of comments and the word counts of each were counted. The recording units of analysis included responses to the original post and responses to another person who had already provided a comment or to a response provided by the blogger. The blogger’s responses were also counted. It was apparent that were differences in the software being used on the various sites, and that the version of
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Expression Engine used on *The Australian* does not enable commenters to reply directly to each other. On the other sites, the software used enables commenters to reply either direct to the blogger or respond directly to another commenter by hitting ‘Reply’ underneath a particular comment, which creates sub-threads, as shown in Fig. 6 below, which is a screen shot of part of the comment-thread on Miranda Devine’s blog used in this study.

**Figure 6** Screen shot of sub-thread on *Miranda Devine Blog*

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Note that the original journalist-blogger posts were not coded as the focus of this study was on the conversation occurring on the comment-threads. As mentioned previously, most of the research on blogs has looked at only the blog posts, analysing the content of such posts or examining hyperlinking activity.
The categories which were coded are listed below, and a fuller discussion of each follows. A sample of a blank coding sheet for part of the comment-thread on *Meganomics* is provided in Appendix 5.

**Categories which were coded**

1. Equality or inclusiveness

2. Interactivity
   a. of commenters
      i. towards other commenters
      ii. towards blogger
   b. of blogger

3. Disagreement
   a. with blogger
   b. with commenter

4. Agreement
   a. with blogger
   b. with commenter

5. Flaming
   a. towards blogger
   b. towards other commenter

6. Respect
   a. towards blogger
   b. towards other commenter

7. Use of questions

8. Reason-giving
   a. supported by reason
   b. no justification
   c. unreasonable – e.g. hyperboles or generalisations

9. Personal experience

10. Sources

11. Use of humour

12. Off-topic
a) **Equality or inclusiveness:** In deliberation, ideally each person should be able to participate on an equal footing with every other participant and no-one should dominate the conversation or silence others (Koop & Jansen 2009; Blom et al. 2011). Following Bächtiger et al. (2009), equality was measured by counting the number of unique people who participated in a conversation, their frequency of participation, as well as the total number of words in their comments. Each thread was put in a database with user-name, date and time of comment, and word count of comment recorded. In addition, the number of dominators was identified.

b) **Interactivity:** Interactivity means that participants engage with one another. Before a process can be judged deliberative, there must be ‘uptake and engagement – other people must hear or read, internalise and respond’ (Goodin 2000:91). Interactivity was measured by noting if a comment was an explicit response to a prior comment or whether a comment was aimed solely at the blogger. This necessitated that comments were studied in ascending order from the oldest to the newest. Tracking who is responding to who is important as high interactivity builds up a dialogue of increasing engagement and exploration of issues.

c) **Disagreement and Agreement:** Disagreement is an important indicator of deliberation as it suggests heterogeneity of perspectives and diversity of points of view (Stromer-Galley 2007). On the other hand, agreement suggests homogeneity of perspectives. Note that I attempted to track only *explicit* agreement and disagreement. Stromer-Galley (2005:9) attempted to code for implicit agreement and disagreement but found it was too difficult to discern and reach agreement on with coders, especially in an ‘organic, non-topic specific area of Yahoo! Political chat’, although she acknowledged it could be possible in an experimental setting. Different codes were used to distinguish between statements which showed disagreement or agreement with a comment from another commenter and those which showed disagreement or agreement to a statement by the blogger in the original post or in the comment-thread. Agreement statements included ‘I agree with your thoughts Andy and Nora’ or ‘couldn’t agree more Toiling’. A disagreement statement was ‘I have to disagree with you there’.
d) **Flaming**: Flaming, was measured by coding any comment that contained a personal attack on other participants or the blogger, such as insults, sarcasm, ridicule or hostility; for example, ‘You’re an incompetent jouno who can’t face facts.’

e) **Respect**: Respect shows a regard of the purpose of the discussion to deepen knowledge and understand the issue, as opposed to a space for merely ranting or critiquing (Manosevitch & Walker 2009). This was measured by coding comments which showed respect or gratitude to another commenter or the blogger, such as ‘Jack, if you keep writing articles like this you are in danger of giving the press a good name on this issue!’

f) **Questions**: The asking of questions for clarification or additional information is considered important for deliberation as it shows an acknowledgement of the presence of others in the given (virtual) space and indicates an attempt to understand the statements of others (Manosevitch & Walker 2009). Any comment that contained a relevant question or request for more information or clarification about the topic being discussed was coded; for example, ‘Given the human rights angle shouldn’t this be a conscience vote? Both sides would give some votes away.’

g) **Reason-giving**: At the core of all theories of deliberative democracy is what may be called a reason-giving requirement, the giving of reasons for political claims (Thompson 2008), or what Stromer-Galley (2007) calls reasoned opinion expression. The codes selected were:

1. Expressions of opinion supported by reasons. For example, ‘If those projections are even close to accurate, then onshore processing becomes the most expensive of all options available.’

2. Statements or assertions where no justification or reasons are given, and include remarks that paraphrase previous material but do not substantiate or add new information or ideas. For example, ‘Sounds like a good argument for TPVs [temporary protection visas].’

3. Statements which are irrational or unreasonable and include hyperboles, generalisations or ‘fallacious symptomatic arguments’ (Richardson & Stanyer 2011:996). For example, ‘Stop the coming tsunami of unwanted boat people’ or ‘I am so sick of this Parliament, I could vomit.’
h) **Personal experience:** Although many scholars tend to understand deliberation in terms of purely rational discourse, Black (2008:95) suggests that personal storytelling has the potential to invite ‘dialogic moments’ in the context of group deliberation. The use of relevant personal experience was coded. For example, ‘I dimly remember as a young kiddie about absolute shedloads of boats of refugees arriving from Vietnam at the end of their war.’

i) **Sources:** References to external sources when articulating opinions are considered to be essential for deliberation (Stromer-Galley 2007). I included the provision of links or references to empirically verifiable sources of information such as books, articles, reports, speeches, newspapers and broadcast news relevant to the topic under discussion.

j) **Humour:** While there is a view that humour is antithetical to good deliberation – Habermas (in Crossley & Roberts 2004) has called it ‘parasitical’ and ‘compromising of openness’ – other scholars disagree. Robertson and McLaughlin (2011:112) argue that humour can make a positive contribution to the quality of discourse by ‘reducing tension and conflict’ and encouraging a more empathetic exchange. Humour was measured by coding any comment which uses relevant personal humour. For example, ‘Send them to Melbourne. We have a dire shortage of Afghan restaurants.’

k) **Off-topic:** If the discussion is off-topic, then according to Stromer-Galley (2007) the deliberation cannot meet its objective of ‘deep consideration of an issue’. Comments which contained statements unrelated to the specific matter under discussion were coded as off-topic. For example, ‘Sorry to be off topic but I think Gillard has raced home for quite a different reason. Craig has been at it again.’

**Selection of comment-threads**

I decided to focus on the asylum seeker issue because this was a ‘hot’ political topic in Australia in 2011 and it appeared to be the only issue which all the journalist-bloggers had recently posted about. Furthermore, as Richardson and Stanyer (2011:986) argue, ‘immigration and racial or religious difference’ can produce the ‘richest argumentative
data’. While about 13,500 refugees are admitted each year under Australia’s Humanitarian Programme, an increasing number of asylum seekers arrive in Australian territory by often unseaworthy boats and are detained in a detention facility until their case can be processed, which can take months or sometimes years. In the past decade a number of asylum seekers have died at sea, which has ignited and polarised public opinion about the issue (McKay, Thomas & Kneebone 2012). Making the study even more focused was the fact that all the posts selected addressed the Malaysian Solution proposed by the Labor government and ruled unlawful by the Australian High Court on 31 August 2011. Under the terms of this proposal, in return for Malaysia taking 800 asylum seekers who had arrived by boat on Australian shores, Australia would accept from Malaysia 4,000 people who had been certified as refugees (O’Sullivan 2011).

Most of the posts and threads selected were published in September 2011 except for four. The post selected from Susie O’Brien was published in October 2011 and the one from Simon Benson was published in June 2011. The latter attracted 16 comments in contrast to a column by Benson titled ‘Detainee deluge – thousands of boat people to invade’30 (26 November 2011) which attracted 338 comments but unfortunately was not posted on his blog. The other two were posts on Tim Blair and Goodly Fabric – both published in December 2011. Interestingly, Megalogenis initially put up a post titled ‘On refugee policy’31 (19 September 2011) in which he said ‘I’ll use the feedback here as the basis for a column in the weekend paper either this weekend or next’. This column (used in this study) was published five days later, and also posted on his blog. Andrew Bolt had two posts in September: one had 37 comments, the second attracted 108 comments. The latter was selected for analysis.

In total, 15 comment-threads were initially downloaded, copied into word documents, and data extracted into Excel spread sheets. In the early stage of the coding, it became apparent that occasionally a comment was replicated – for example, on Goodly Fabric comment 15 at 9:49am is the same as comment 19 at 10:10am. Such duplications were

31 George Megalogenis put this post up in order to get readers’ views on the asylum seeker policy so he could use the feedback as the basis for a column which was also posted on his blog: http://blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/meganomics/index.php/theaustralian/comments/on_refugee_policy
removed from the analysis. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the two from *The West Australian* were later withdrawn – although they were called ‘blogs’ on the website at the time, it was later discovered that they were not blogs at all, but columns with comments. The 13 posts used in the final analysis are listed below (see Appendix 6 for their URLs):

**NEWS LIMITED**

*The Australian*

2. *Jack the Insider*: 14 September 2011, ‘Diplomacy is lost amid our leaders’ backyard squabbling’;

*The Herald Sun*


*The Daily Telegraph*


**FAIRFAX MEDIA**

*National Times*

Description of coding procedure

The content analysis took place in February 2012, except for Goodly Fabric which was conducted in May 2012. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this blog (which began in November 2011) did not appear on the homepage or the list of blogs on The Australian at the time the identification of blogs took place (December 2011) and I was only alerted to its presence by one of the journalists during an interview.

The indicators of equality and interactivity were measured separately from the other indicators as they only needed a simple quantitative analysis of audience-comments and blogger-responses without any analysis of the content of each comment. In order to determine the reliability of the other indicators, two coders – the researcher and an assistant – coded a sample of comments. The assistant was trained to code the comments according to the categorisation scheme developed, and several trial codings were conducted. The categories that the assistant initially had difficulties with were questions, off-topic, humour, disagreement, flaming and sources. The assistant was instructed to only code genuine questions about a previous comment or the original post as a question, and not questions unrelated to the topic, rhetorical questions (which should be coded as opinion) or sarcastic remarks (which should be coded as flaming). He was also instructed that general comments about Muslims or Islam are not off-topic as these comments are related to the asylum seeker debate in Australia, whereas to make a comment about climate change or visiting Perth in the weekend would be off-topic. Clarification was also needed about disagreement and flaming: while ‘you’re an idiot’ indicates disagreement and is also an opinion it needs to be coded as flaming as it is a statement that denigrates another commenter (or the blogger). Furthermore, for a comment to be coded as containing a source this needed to be specific and not merely ‘I heard on the radio’. However, ‘on Radio National this morning Tony Abbott said…’ or ‘in today’s Australian there is an article by…’ should be coded as sources.

Subsequently, 165 comments representing 10 per cent of the total comments were coded, with intercoder reliability assessed using Krippendorff’s alpha (Krippendorff 2004). Of the various measures used to estimate reliability, alpha ‘generalises across scales of measurement’ and can be used with any number of observers ‘with or without missing data’ (Hayes & Krippendorff 2007:78). In this study, inter-coder reliability
estimates were calculated using a ‘reliability calculator’ called ReCal, an intercoder online calculator service developed by Freelon (2010b). Although there are no established standards for determining what constitutes an acceptable level of reliability, Lombard et al. (2002:600) suggest that for nominal data from content analysis coefficients of .90 or greater are nearly always acceptable, .80 or greater is acceptable in most situations and .70 is appropriate for exploratory research, especially for indices known to be more conservative such as Krippendorff’s alpha. It was decided for this study that any alpha over .70 would be acceptable. With the exception of humour (0.55) and personal experience (0.71), all indicators obtained alpha levels 0.81 and above, with the highest being off-topic which scored 0.94.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Off-topic</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement with commenter</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement with blogger</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement with blogger</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flaming</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement with commenter</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreasonable</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonable</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experience</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A second coding of humour only scored 0.56 and so it was dropped from the content analysis. Humour is subjective and what is humorous for one person may not be so for another; while overt messages of humour might be easy to pick up, different coders may not pick up on subtle use of humour. Potter and Levine-Donnerstein (1999) explain that while inter-rater reliability for some types of categories can be improved through the refinement of categories, coder training and practice, this is challenging for latent content such as humour where coders must provide subjective interpretations based on
their own mental schema. In a study which attempted to assess social presence in asynchronous text-based computer conferencing, Rourke et al. (1999) found that coding of the ‘use of humour’ did not achieve acceptable levels of reliability. With coders from different cultural backgrounds, ages, and personality types having difficulty in reliably identifying humour and other latent variables, Rourke et al. (1999) suggest that subsequent researchers may decide to exclude such categories from analysis because ‘they may be more trouble than they are worth’. Significantly, in a recent study on the use of humour on Twitter, Holton and Lewis (2011) found humour difficult to code as a variable, although they decided a relatively low Cohen’s kappa score of .63 was still acceptable for intercoder reliability. They included any attempt by the journalist to be funny (‘is the journalist trying to be funny?’), regardless of the purpose of the tweet (for instance, seeking information, stating an opinion, or conveying information). Perhaps if humour had been used in this way in my study a more acceptable level of reliability could have been achieved; for example, instead of coding a statement as being humorous, code as humour if the commenter is funny or trying to be funny.

**Interviews**

As one of the research questions was to find out political journalist-bloggers’ perceptions of blogs as a space of deliberation, it makes sense to talk with the bloggers themselves. Interviewing is a widely used method for collecting qualitative data, because the ‘best way to find out what the people think about something is to ask them’ (Bower in Jensen 2002a:240). They are a useful and valuable form of data collection as they are flexible and allow for the development of an ‘understanding of the perspectives of the interviewees’ (Daymon & Holloway 2002:221). Kvale (1983:174) defines the qualitative research interview as ‘an interview whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena’. In other words, the responses are the subjective views of the interviewees: their interpretation of their experiences which are expressed using their own jargon and speech styles (Daymon & Holloway 2002). Collecting such descriptions can be done face-to-face, by phone or online, with the latter becoming more popular. There are various forms of online interviews including that are done in ‘real time’ using ‘chat room’ technology or Skype which allows more spontaneity, or interviews via email (O’Connor et al. 2008).
A continuum of interview styles exists ranging from the structured and standardised interview, which tends to be used in quantitative research, to highly flexible unstructured interviews (Bryman 2001). Except for shorter interviews with online editors – mostly to obtain clarification of their organisations’ moderation policies – this study used one-on-one, in-depth semi-structured interviews. This means that while questions were formulated as a guide with a focus on the issues or topics to be discussed, the exact questions and sequence were different for each interviewee depending on how the interview unfolded and the responses obtained, as well as the particular background of each journalist. For the in-depth interviews, the journalist-bloggers were given a choice of face-to-face interviews, or interview by phone or by email. This mix is described as a ‘multiple-mode design in which the different methods are equally important’ (de Leeuw 2005:248). While using different modes can produce different results or mode error, a range of approaches also leads to the ‘reduction of non-response error’ and provides for extended access to participants (de Leeuw 2005:236). With the small number of journalist-bloggers identified it was important to attempt to get as many interviews as possible, and so given this restriction multiple-mode was essential and an optimal data collection method.

I had hoped to do some interviews face-to-face (in Sydney, Melbourne or Canberra) as they are more personal and afford more flexibility and spontaneity than other types of interviews, and it is difficult for the interviewee in such an interview to avoid answering a question (Bampton & Cowton 2002). However, none of the journalists chose this option. Although the face-to-face interview has become ‘the gold standard by which the performance of computer-mediated interaction is judged’ (Hine 2005:4), interviews can still be done effectively by the two modes used in this study: telephone or email. All interviewees needed further contact by email or Twitter to answer follow-up questions or to clarify ambiguities.

There are advantages and disadvantages of both telephone and email interviews. Synchronous communication of time by telephone means that interviewer and interviewee can directly react to what the other says; the interviewee is more spontaneous in their response compared to email interviews where they have more time to reflect on the question (Bampton & Cowton 2002; Opdenakker 2006). While a
disadvantage of communication by telephone is the reduction of social cues because the interviewer does not see the interviewee, voice and intonation are still available. In contrast, in email interviews there is a complete lack of nonverbal cues due to the inability to hear the voice tones of each other (Meho 2006). Interviews by email also require constant negotiation between establishing and maintaining an interpersonal conversation and simultaneously ‘creating a delineated research interview situation’ (Kivits 2005:35). One advantage, however, is that the interviewer can formulate the questions, and respondents can answer in their own time, which may encourage more detailed and carefully considered answers. Data collected from email interviews are ‘self-transcribing’ in that responses can be printed or imported into word processor files, which also means significant savings in terms of time as there is no need to transcribe tapes (Gilbert 2001; Bampton & Cowton 2002). A disadvantage of this mode of interviewing, however, is that unlike face-to-face or phone interviews it does not allow for direct probing, and questions need to be carefully worded and more self-explanatory to avoid miscommunication and misinterpretation.

Recording of data was done through content of emails and tweets, and with phone interviews both recording and note-taking. With the email interviews, although a list of introductory questions were sent initially, the process became more interactive as the journalists’ replies were responded to with further questions. One of the problems with interviews in general is that interviewees do not ‘always say what they think or mean what they say’ (Jensen 2002a:240). I attempted to counter this with an assurance of anonymity if desired, made clear in an information sheet provided to the journalist. Surprisingly, all journalists chose to be interviewed on-the-record although most indicated that if and when they made a statement or comment they wanted off-the-record they would tell me. Any comment which a journalist did not wish to be attributed to them was confirmed when the transcripts were sent for verification. Overall, such comments were rare.

The content analysis of the comment-threads took place before the interviews as the results of this analysis were used to inform the nature of the interview questions. If there is little respect for other people shown by a large number of derogatory remarks, then the journalist was asked for their view regarding the value of such comments. On the other hand, for a blog that showed high levels of respect amongst commenters, the
A journalist was asked about the reasons why they thought this was the case and whether they thought their approach to moderation played a part and what strategies they may have put in place (or directives given) to encourage civil debate. Also, general questions were asked to obtain background material, for example, the number of years they have worked as a journalist (either with the present employer or other news organisations), and the number of years they have been blogging (with current and/or previous employers, or as an independent blogger).

**Analysing interviews**

For each interview, different questions were composed, although a guideline of general questions and areas to explore was used (see Appendix 7). With the results of the interviews, rather than a case study for each person interviewed, cross-case analysis was used. The interview transcripts were read through several times in order to textually analyze the journalists’ words, and to examine the text for important themes and concepts. These were cut and pasted into a separate document so all statements regarding a theme were included under separate headings, such as:

- **Personal information** – included any information of how long they had been blogging, what motivated them to start a blog etc.;
- **Purpose of blog** – included statements on what they liked and disliked about blogging, what they regarded as advantages and disadvantages;
- **Generation of leads or changing their mind** – whether any leads had been generated from comments or whether they had changed their minds on any issue as a consequence of discussion of their blogs;
- **Anonymity** – their views on commenters being anonymous;
- **Moderation** – included any statement related to how they moderate, whether their approach has changed over the years, etc.;
- **Criticisms** – their reaction to criticisms by scholars and bloggers on mainstream media blogging;
- **Twitter** – all data regarding their views and use of Twitter;
• Future of blogs – their views on the closing of Larvatus Prodeo and the statement of the migration of political debate from blogs to social media; platforms by Bahnisch (2013) future of blogs on mainstream news sites
• Extra bits and pieces – any other statements that did not fit into any of the above.

This meant that such feedback could be interwoven into the discussion and analysis of the results from the content analysis. Note that during the course of this study some of those interviewed got new positions, resigned or were made redundant. For example, Mike van Niekerk, editor of The Age and former online editor-in-chief for Fairfax Media, resigned in early September 2012 (van Niekerk 2012) and Katherine Murphy, journalist and blogger at The Age, became deputy political editor for the digital edition of The Guardian (Australia) in February 2013 (Bodey 2013). To avoid confusion, their job description at the time they were interviewed is retained throughout this thesis.

**Interviews conducted**

Of the 13 journalists, nine agreed to be interviewed, and these interviews took place between 24 March 2012 and 27 May 2012. Seven were interviewed by telephone and two – Joe Hildebrand and Miranda Devine – chose to be interviewed via email:

- John Birmingham (*National Times*)
- Andrew Bolt (*Herald Sun*)
- Susie O’Brien (*Herald Sun*)
- Peter Brent (*The Australian*)
- George Megalogenis (*The Australian*)
- Jack the Insider (*The Australian*)
- Piers Akerman (*The Daily Telegraph*)
- Joe Hildebrand (*The Daily Telegraph*)
- Miranda Devine (*The Daily Telegraph*)

While random sampling provides data that is representative of all groups in a target population, the sampling used in this project was to gather data on a specific group of people (journalist-bloggers) for the purposes of gauging their views and perspectives. My results reflect the views of the journalists interviewed and not the views of all 13 journalist-bloggers identified. However, some information on the other four journalists
was gained indirectly from interviews with their editors, relevant information contained in their blog posts, responses to commenters or even their tweets, as well as articles published elsewhere.

Three more interviews took place between June 2012 and July 2012. Andrew Probyn, one of the two political journalists erroneously labelled as bloggers on *The West Australian* site, was interviewed by telephone in early June 2012. Bernie Slattery, one of the moderators of Andrew Bolt’s blog, and a journalist who blogs at *Slattsnews*, agreed to be interviewed by email. Because only one political blog by a journalist was located on any of the Fairfax Media sites, it seemed important to interview Mike van Niekerk, editor of *The Age*, to try to find the reasons for this lack of political blogging by journalists. Since 1996, van Niekerk has been involved in Fairfax Media newspapers’ use of technology and adoption of new media. For some years he was the online editor of *The Age* and the *SMH*, and between May 2006 and April 2012 he was Fairfax Media’s editor-in-chief Digital/Online.

- Andrew Probyn, national political reporter for *The West Australian*
- Bernie Slattery, one of the moderators of *Andrew Bolt*
- Mike van Niekerk, weekday editor of *The Age*

During the course of the study I also decided to do some in-depth interviews with select social media editors, a relatively new role at some media organisations. Although social media has become a core component of any digital strategy for newspapers, the role of a social media editor is a relatively recent one, and there are now such editors working in all manner of news organisations (Bergin 2012). I found these editors were invaluable to obtain information on the impact of social media (such as Twitter and Facebook) on blogs in their organisations, the moderation of certain blogs and also to get their views of blogging on their sites. In addition, an interview with the social media reporter at *The Australian* was conducted. Three interviews were conducted by telephone, and Isabelle Oderberg – touted as Australia’s first social media editor (Bergin 2012) – was interviewed via email.

- Isabelle Oderberg, social media editor, *Herald Sun*
- Louise Burke, social media editor, *The West Australian*
• Shoba Rao, Content Producer for National Newsdesk at News Ltd, but former social media editor of *The Daily Telegraph*
• Nic Christensen, social media reporter, *The Australian*

For a list of interviewees and dates they were interviewed see Appendix 8.

While it was hoped to make *initial* contact with all the journalist-bloggers by email (see Appendix 9 for copy of solicitation email) this was not possible as not all email addresses could be located. Attempts to contact two journalists by posting a comment on their blog with a request not to publish it but to contact me via my email address was ignored by one journalist but responded to by another. I also mentioned to a journalist during an interview of the difficulties I was having contacting a certain journalist, and he said he would jump on Twitter and tell this colleague I wanted to contact him.

Although I was not on Twitter at the outset of the study, eventually I discovered this to be one of the easiest ways to contact journalists (if they had Twitter accounts). I subsequently used Twitter to make initial contact with several of the social media editors and the online editor of *The Daily Telegraph*. All journalists who agreed to be interviewed were sent a project information sheet (see Appendix 10) which explained the nature of the study and a consent form to be signed (see Appendix 11). In accordance with university-approved ethics protocols they were given a guarantee of anonymity if desired.
Chapter 6  The journalist-bloggers

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the journalist-bloggers, the 13 journalists who authored the political-blogs selected for this study. Based mostly on data from interviews, an overview of their blogging practices is provided. This includes how they came to be bloggers, the moderation they use, their perception of their blogging practice in light of some of the criticism they have attracted, and, most importantly, why they blog? What are the benefits? Also examined is the extent to which they may be simply normalising alternative media formats to meet their needs (Singer 2005) and seeking to maintain control (Robinson 2011; Lewis 2012; Singer et al. 2011; O’Sullivan & Heinonen 2008). Can their blogging be described as participatory journalism (Lewis 2013) or journalism as process (Robinson 2011)? This chapter provides a backdrop to the chapters that follow in which the results of the content analysis of comment-threads are presented and discussed. First, their profiles as they appeared on their respective blog sites are listed below (note, the term ‘politics’ appears in most), with the dates at which they started blogging at their respective news organisations inserted in brackets.

Profiles

- **[29/7/2006] Andrew Bolt**: Andrew Bolt’s columns appear in Melbourne’s *Herald Sun*, Sydney’s *The Daily Telegraph* and Adelaide’s *Advertiser*. He runs the most-read political blog in Australia and hosts Channel 10’s The Bolt Report each Sunday at 10am and 4.30pm. His book ‘Still Not Sorry’ was released in 2006.
- **[15/5/2007] Mumble [Peter Brent]**: Peter Brent started *Mumble* in 2001. He mainly goes on about electoral behaviour. You can follow him on Twitter @mumblewits
- **[3/10/2007] Jack the Insider [Jack the Insider]**: Jack the Insider is a highly placed, dedicated servant of the nation with close ties to leading figures in politics, business and the union movement.
• [15/11/2011] **Goodly Fabric** [Chris Kenny]: Commentator, author and former political adviser, Chris Kenny emphasises the good and the free in an unashamedly rationalist approach to national affairs. Follow on Twitter @chriskkenny

• [14/07/2006] **Joe Hildebrand**: Whether it’s our politicians, celebrities or sports stars, no one can escape Joe Hildebrand and his satirical take on life. Joe Hildebrand spent his formative years in the outer suburbs trying to work up the courage to ask Leanne Hrubos to go out with him. He never did.

• [14/07/2006] **Piers Akerman**: Piers has been one of *The Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*’s best-read columnists since 1993. One of the nation’s most respected journalists he has worked in New York, London, Washington and Los Angeles.

• [14/07/2006] **David Penberthy**: N.B. no profile on blog, but this is an extract from bio on *The Punch*: Editor-in-chief of news.com.au and *The Punch*. When not writing about stuff or reading stuff other people have written, he can be found at home in the kitchen cooking traditional dishes from Mexico, where he lived for a year in 1986, and which after a few tequilas he will wrongly cite as his place of birth.

• [22/08/2007] **Simon Benson**: Simon Benson is *The Daily Telegraph*’s Chief Political Reporter. As our Chief Political Reporter in Canberra, author and journalist Simon Benson tackles the political issues affecting the nation.

• [12/05/2008] **Tim Blair**: Join Tim Blair in Australia’s most controversial blog, as he muses on life and its absurdities, politics and just about anything that takes his fancy.

• [7/10/2010] **Miranda Devine**: Miranda Devine is one of *The Daily Telegraph*’s leading columnists. Join her blog as she analyses political debates and social issues.

• [14/09/2009] **Blunt Instrument** [John Birmingham]: In this fast-paced go-go world of ours some issues are too important to be left to the ham-fisted, half-arshed witless hysterics of so-called web journalism. But that’s too bad. Because that’s all John Birmingham has. He’s unfair, unreasonable and often unbalanced – but in a good way. Words are weapons, and this weapon is a Blunt Instrument.

Only two are women, which mirrors what Jericho (2012a:51) describes as the ‘blokey’ nature of the blogosphere in general. Of the 324 Australian political blogs identified by Jericho (2012a), only 18 per cent were by women, 73 per cent were by men and the remaining 9 per cent had contributions by both men and women.

**How they became bloggers**

Of the 13 journalist-bloggers, nine were already employed as journalists before they took up blogging. The other four were freelance journalists, three of whom – John Birmingham, Peter Brent and Tim Blair – were independent bloggers before they were recruited as bloggers.
1. Blair was one of Australia’s first bloggers and was once described as the ‘top dog among the new Australian digerati’ (Delaney 2004). His blog *Tim Blair* began in May 2001, moving to a new site on 24 May 2003 and renamed *Spleenville*. In December 2004 it was revamped and re-named *Tim Blair*. On 11 May 2008 the blog moved over to *The Daily Telegraph*, where in June 2011 Blair became associate opinion editor (Overington 2011).

2. Brent was one of the first psepho-bloggers in Australia, and initially started *Mumble* in 2001 as a website. This morphed into a blog at the end of June 2009, with Brent (2009) announcing: ‘I am now a blogger. Am blundering in, giving it a go. Please ignore most of the links, for example “feeds”. Still working it all out.’ In July 2010, *Mumble* moved to *The Australian* with Brent (2010a) telling readers: ‘I’m doing the kind of stuff I’ve done here but more frantically and often. I love youse all, thanks for indulging me at this place and I invite you to continue at the new one. If only to judge if/how the piper-payer calls the tune.’

3. Birmingham has more than one blog. He began *Blunt Instrument* in September 2009, although he already had his own independent blog *Cheeseburger Gothic* which began in May 2005. Birmingham also authored another blog *The Geek* on Fairfax Media’s *Brisbane Times* from 15 March 2008 to 14 May 2010.

4. The fourth freelance journalist who uses the nom de plume of Jack the Insider had no experience of blogging until he began *Jack the Insider* in late 2007 as part of the promotion of his book *The Insiders’ Guide to Power in Australia*.

Of the nine journalists already employed by their news organisations, most had been journalists for many years before trying blogging. For example, Piers Akerman was employed as a news cadet at *The West Australian* in 1968 (Knott 2011) and Andrew Bolt took up a cadetship at *The Age* in 1979 (Summers 2011). For most, a colleague or editor suggested they might like to try the new format, ‘give it a go’. Andrew Bolt said the blog was entirely his own initiative and something ‘I just did off my own bat’.

While the archives on his blog go back to columns published in 1986, it was not until 29

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July 2006 that the site became a conventional blog with frequent posts and a facility for comments. Those journalists already employed by their news organisations all said they were not paid extra to blog, and saw it as ‘part of the job’.

The first Australian news site to embrace political blogs was *The Daily Telegraph* who introduced them in mid-2006. *The Australian* followed a year later. According to Joe Hildebrand, it was ‘under the very enlightened and forward-thinking editorship’ of David Penberthy (who joined *The Daily Telegraph* in 1999, becoming editor in 2005) that their blogging system was created: ‘Penbo [Penberthy] promoted the blogs very heavily and was integral to shifting the paper’s focus to online.’ Hildebrand claims they are the ‘most reader-driven newspaper in Australia’ and several years ago made a concerted effort to allow as many journalists as possible blogs. This is reflected in the number of blogs in this study: six were from *The Daily Telegraph*. As this screen shot (26 April 2013) shows, seven of the 11 blogs are political, although Andrew Clennell’s focuses on state issues. (Andrew Bolt’s blog is replicated from the *Herald Sun*.)

**Figure 7  Screen shot of blog page of The Daily Telegraph**
Are they columnists or bloggers? Are their blogs really blogs?

Australian mainstream media blogs have been criticised as not genuine due to editorial (and proprietary) control and influence (Bahnisch 2007) and because they are merely a re-branding of print opinion columns, a republication of newspaper columns (Highfield 2011; Bahnisch 2008). When Jericho (2011) was compiling a list of Australian political blogs he posted:

> I have also for the most part left ‘journalist bloggers’ off the list. The Daily Telegraph, for example, on its blog page gives just about all of its journalists a blog. They are not really blogs (Jericho 2011).

Are such criticisms justified? Admittedly, in the early days of blogging there was some confusion as to what a blog is and some news sites such as The Australian did tag comment-enabled columns as blogs. And, as mentioned, this confusion was seen more recently on The West Australian whose site is managed by Yahoo!7. However, these are exceptions. I asked some journalists for their views, including Sarrah Le Marquand (pers. Comm., 28 August 2012) who has a generalist blog on The Daily Telegraph. Le Marquand said she fails to see how by anyone’s measure their blogs are not ‘real’ and pointed out some of the bloggers do updates several times a day. She was not surprised by Jericho’s comments:

> He does often fall victim to the knee-jerk and simplistic perceptions of News Limited that are fashionable in certain circles. It’s a shame some of the company’s more strident critics are so ignorant of the range of content produced by News Limited journalists. I think I am living proof that it’s a far more diverse landscape than some of the critics would have the general public believe! (Le Marquand, pers. Comm., 28 August 2012).

The criticisms drew a strong reaction from other journalist-bloggers; one said he never had the ‘slightest amount of editorial influence’ exerted on his blog and does not filter comments except where they are ‘highly obscene or defamatory’. Joe Hildebrand said such comments are ‘complete rubbish’ and those who make them are ‘idiotic and wrong’. Another said ‘no one has ever ever told me what to blog, what position to take on anything’. John Birmingham said such talk makes him bristle: ‘They are talking shit. Just because media blogs don’t cover the same topics in the same way as outsider blogs doesn’t make them any less real. It just makes them different.’ Another journalist-
blogger said that when he started he was letting everyone through and queried his editor ‘do you really want all of this?’ and he was told ‘No. Do whatever you want.’

There is one ‘blog’, however, where the criticisms are justified. David Penberthy’s columns are published in The Daily Telegraph twice a week (and replicated as posts on his blog), and also published on The Punch as columns. (His ‘post’ on asylum seekers used in this current study attracted 28 comments, yet the same piece published on The Punch got 247 comments.) The only difference is on one site it is called a ‘blog’ and Penberthy moderates it, and on the other (The Punch) it is not called a blog. Punch Editor Tory Maguire (pers. Comm., 30 July 2012) said moderation of comments is a collaborative effort done by staffers and ‘shared around between whoever is available’.

There is very little to distinguish Penberthy’s blog from a column with comments. The latter has been described as ‘half a blog’ (Jericho 2012a:82) as it lacks the sense of ‘community (and ownership) provided by a blog’ (Jericho 2012a:35).

Most of the journalists interviewed regarded their blogs as quite distinct from columns with comments and regarded the key difference being the ‘conversational component’ of blogs that involves the author. John Birmingham said:

If there’s not that two-way traffic, it’s not a blog. For a blog to be a blog you actually have to get in there and engage with the people who are commenting. The blog and columnist are two very different animals.

Similarly, Megalogenis said a column opened for comments that does not involve the engagement of a journalist is ‘obviously’ not a blog. He questions their value, and believes it would be better to just open up a thread for readers and say ‘today’s topic is “blah” and let them go for it’, rather than jumping on the back of a column. Jack the Insider regards his blog as an opportunity to have a conversation about a particular issue and allow a bit of interactivity on all sides. These statements are in stark contrast to the notion that interactivity is ‘counterintuitive with the principles of traditional journalistic

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37 Note, Penberthy’s blog now appears to be inactive. The last post was on 17 December 2012 http://blogs.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/davidpenberthy/index.php/
cultures’ as this culture makes them ‘perceive audience participation as a problem to manage rather than a benefit for the news product’ (Domingo 2008:698).

**Why they blog**

Miranda Devine sees her blog as a good place for people to browse her columns and add comments, and for her to add posts on things that take her interest in between columns. From both her blog and email she gets feedback that can offer her fresh perspectives and new information that helps inform her opinion. According to Susie O’Brien, people now want to get more out of the media and expect it to be a two-way process, with part of the problem with newspapers being that they are a ‘static once a day thing, one-way format, we provide the news’. She finds the immediate feedback that blogs provide similar to live radio, and she welcomes people’s comments, whether they disagree or agree:

> I love it, I think it’s fantastic. It gives you a really unique insight into what people are thinking. At times they pick me up on stuff, like they’ve said ‘oh you’re basing your whole article on one journal article, that’s not good enough’. In the past there was really only the letters to editor page. More recently there are comments on the website and you’d have a bit of a look at the comments and see what people thought, judge the popularity of what you wrote according to the comments, how many comments there were, but now the blogging is much more immediate as it is ongoing. People are not just interacting with you but interacting with each other. I think it value-adds to the *Herald Sun*, it makes our readers feel more part of the news cycle. They become part of the news because they are commenting on what I write and they are commenting on what others write – they’ve got a stake in the process, they enjoy the debate.

Before the introduction of the paywall on 24 October 2012, George Megalogenis’ posts were mostly columns replicated online, but now he has begun to write unique content for the blog. When his columns went behind the paywall, he began to use the blog in a similar way to which he uses Twitter in that he links to the article but invites the discussion on the blog. He said readers prompted him ‘to look where I didn’t look before’ or tell him when he got things wrong. One of the reasons he enjoys blogging is because the response and the correction cycle is accelerated. Megalogenis pointed out that blogging is not just about post and comment-thread, as there is a third party involved – the casual reader or lurker – noting that if his blogging was just himself and a couple of hundred commenters that would be totally a waste of his time. In spite of the
increased workload of blogging, Megalogenis said journalists can now get information from contacts from readers whereas in the past they would have had to make contact by telephone or vox popping people in the street.

I think it makes me a better journalist. The readers tick me off, and there are occasions now through the week on the blog where I will start teasing out an argument for the weekend column. It may take three days over the course of a blog to come to a conclusion on something.

Piers Akerman said that some of the comments give him ideas and leads for stories, which he points out is like the old days of receiving letters from his readers. Joe Hildebrand said that although reader-comments can generate leads, he is more likely to get these on Twitter and Facebook. In his last post for 2007, Bolt (2007) wrote that the blog had ‘turned into the most interesting and compelling part’ of his job and ‘easily the most fun’. When I reminded him of this comment and whether he still felt the same four years later, he said blogging was probably the most compulsive things he does and it would be the hardest to give up of everything he is doing, including his weekly TV show (The Bolt Report). The blog for him is an ‘outlet’ for stuff that interests him and things he wants to communicate ‘in lieu of throwing an outraged pillow at the TV set’: ‘I can vent on the blog or I can pass on stuff that I’ve loved – songs, movies, stuff like that.’

He sees the real difference with journalist-bloggers is that they are also in the mainstream media, and in the [independent] blogosphere a lot can happen that is not acknowledged until its transition to mainstream media. Another benefit of blogging for some of these journalists is the sense of community that can develop. Jack the Insider believes bloggers can underestimate the ‘sort of impact’ they can have:

I’ve had people come in and talk about their illnesses, and the illnesses of spouses and things like that, and you do get a sense that it’s a forum for people to basically tell you a little bit about their lives, when they are not travelling all that well sometimes. I guess it’s a microcosm of life.

**Participation by journalists**

The extent to which the journalists engage with readers on the thread analysed is discussed in the next chapter, although it is clear that some of them regard such participation as useful, if not essential. However, Miranda Devine seldom responds to
readers and her view is that comments on the blog are public and generally do not need a response, and if people want a reply they communicate with her via email. Shoba Rao, former social media editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, said some of the journalists have already said what they wanted to say and so are content to just let the conversation flow with the blog a space or forum for readers to interact and debate the issue. If the columnist wants to get a viewpoint over they will ‘definitely jump in there and reply’. There is a difference, however, between the blog of Miranda Devine where she occasionally responds and often posts material exclusively for her blog, and that of David Penberthy whose posts are merely his opinion columns replicated online and where he now never responds. (From an inspection of the archives, in the first few years Penberthy engaged with readers, but ceased in December 2009.)

In contrast, Susie O’Brien believes that people are there because they want to engage with the journalists and with each other: ‘If you are placing your name to the opinion people are responding to, you’ve got to own that space’. Joe Hildebrand said the blog gives him a chance to engage with his readers. Piers Akerman said he responds to his readers because he considers himself an ‘old-fashioned person’ and it is ‘part of the obligation and responsibility’ he has to his readership. Whereas in the old days Akerman would get 50-60 letters a day, now he gets only about five to 15 letters a day but 300 to 400 comments a day on his blog. Jack the Insider (2011) has said that his overall experience blogging has been positive and enlightening, and the ‘trick is to engage with people and take the time to converse with them’. This attitude towards interactivity differs from that found in other countries. Witschge (2011) claims there is a ‘minimalist’ view of participation that dominates in journalistic organisations in the U.K., the U.S. and Europe, and indeed Robinson (2011) found that journalists at *The Capital Time* in Madison, Wisconsin (U.S.) resisted interacting with citizens.

It could be said that journalists such as Andrew Bolt, Susie O’Brien, Joe Hildebrand, John Birmingham, George Megalogenis and Jack the Insider traverse print and digital media with seamless ease. Based on what they revealed (all could speak off-the-record if they chose to), they are practising to varying degrees what has been called ‘process journalism’ (Robinson 2011). This is when a journalist writes an article or blog post which comprises not only their work but draws on comments and feedback from their aud. Journalism becomes a fluid process where conversations become news content.
Blogging in the Mainstream  Mary Garden

(Robinson 2011:141). Megalogenis is a good example of this, using his audience as collaborators rather than consumers. He once commented on his blog that his readers are not readers in the old ‘letter to the editor’ sense of the term, but more like contacts, critics and colleagues (2012a, 16 April, 2:47pm), adding that ‘any journalist would kill for the people I have here’ (2012a, 17 April, 4:19pm). As mentioned, for the post on the asylum seeker issue used in this study, he earlier asked readers for their views on refugee policy38 so as he could use their feedback for his column. Other journalists also said they valued feedback from readers; readers send stories and information they might not have otherwise picked up, angles they might have overlooked, and correct them when they make mistakes. Susie O’Brien said she ‘will take on board some of the things people have said […] you’re just not an island unto yourself’.

Significantly, two journalists said that they had changed their minds on important issues due to conversations on their blogs. For Andrew Bolt the issue was euthanasia: ‘I used to be very vehemently for, but now I’m vehemently dubious.’ Jack the Insider said ‘the weight of comments can sort of change my mind’, and mentioned an old post on David Hicks (Jack the Insider 2007) where he compared Hicks to the rather obscure case of four Australian soldiers who ended up in the SS in World War II. Jack the Insider said he stuck to ‘his guns for a while’, but by the end of the heated discussion he had changed his mind:

It’s been a great debate and truth be told, son I’m not as sure of my position as I was at the outset […]. I’m off for a large drink now. Feel free to post and I will return in the wee hours to comment drunkenly. HAPPY NEW YEAR ONE AND ALL (posted by Jack the Insider, Jack the Insider Blog, 31 December 2007, 04:14pm).

So to revise, I wrote my original piece because I thought there were many parallels between Hicks and the four Australians who signed on with the SS. […] and I’ll be buggered if I’ll endorse anyone who holds or has held a view that Islamo-fascism is an answer to the problems of the world. My abiding view is that Hicks be allowed to return to anonymity and begin a relatively normal life. […] I’m prepared to accept now that we should hear David Hicks’ story. I do not accept that he should profit from its telling. It has been an interesting and at times, painful debate. I trust you have been enlightened in some way by it, as I

38 George Megalogenis put this post up in order to get readers’ views on the asylum seeker policy: http://blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/meganomics/index.php/theaustralian/comments/on_refugee_policy
have. But it is time to move on (posted by Jack the Insider, *Jack the Insider Blog*, 3 January 2008, 02:17pm).

Jack the Insider said that while his aim in blogging is to ‘elucidate or throw a light on an issue from my perspective, my opinion’, sometimes it works the other way where the weight of argument can change the way he thinks about things.

The practices of these Australian journalists who blog contradict the criticisms by scholars (including Australian scholars) that mainstream media’s real motive is to contain and direct the phenomenon rather than foster real democratic participation (Lowrey 2006), and that their blogs are mere ‘token gestures’ because journalists are not willing to give up their power over the flow of information (Hutchins 2007:210). Deuze et al. (2007) claimed that for blogs on mainstream media sites an ‘interactive, dialogical or participatory style’ is still ‘under construction’. There is no evidence this was ever the case for most of the blogs in this study. These results are in stark contrast to journalists at *The Capital Time* in Madison, Wisconsin (U.S.) who Robinson (2011) found resisted interacting with citizens and resented the added work-load. None of the journalists I interviewed expressed resentment towards their workload or blogging practice. Andrew Bolt said his blog is the most interesting and compelling part of his job. George Megalogenis regards his readers as contacts, critics and colleagues. And Susie O’Brien not only welcomes people’s comments, she ‘loves it’ and finds reader feedback fantastic. This signifies a profound shift in journalism practice. Several journalists even claimed that blogging is making them better journalists.

It has been found that the structural and cultural characteristics of newsrooms influence the work of journalists. For example, Domingo (2008: 698) argues that the professional culture does not ‘exist in a vacuum’ but is ‘recreated and renegotiated in every production task, in the design of the content management software or in the staffing decisions’. However, it must be remembered that some of the journalists in this study have never worked in news rooms. One told me he rarely visits the news room of the organisation he works for. Even the journalists who took on blogging as part of their professional practice work increasingly from home. This means the extent of such influence is becoming less clear – at least for this group of journalists.
How they moderate

Perhaps the feature that distinguishes blogs from columns with comments on news sites is that journalist-bloggers usually do their own moderation. In that way they not only engage with readers but also facilitate and control the conversation. Traditionally, independent blogs used post-moderation, which means problematic comments are deleted afterwards, usually when readers alert the blogger that an obscene or defamatory comment has been posted. Initially, some mainstream media sites followed suit. Mike van Niekerk, former editor-in-chief of online at Fairfax Media, said in the early days they used post-moderation and were very lucky they were not sued. Now all Fairfax Media and News Limited sites use pre-moderation. This means comments are filtered before posting: no comments are published until they are screened and approved by a moderator. All the blogs selected for analysis in this study were moderated – at least in part – by the journalists themselves. Andrew Bolt said he had moderators helping him at that time. With his popular posts that attract hundreds of comments John Birmingham receives help from Fairfax Media moderators. According to Shoba Rao, former social media editor at The Daily Telegraph, it was the responsibility of all their journalists to do their own moderation: ‘There is the expectation that they should be moderating their blog, looking at it, approving it, checking whether or not it’s got flare words in it, legal issues.’

Nevertheless, the journalists have quite different approaches, and some are more stringent than others. Not surprisingly, the number of comments deleted often depends on the issue, and Peter Brent said at times he even closes comments altogether. Most of the journalists interviewed changed their attitudes and approach to moderation after they began. They started out like Andrew Bolt who said when he began in mid-2006 he had the ‘noblest of intentions and tried to not censor too much’. He became more censorious when ‘things slipped through’ and because he did not want to be judged by some of the comments:

After a while you feel a bit unclean, living in the sewer that’s the internet. Because we were one of the first I was held up as representing a particular vicious demographic, but as you know if you go on the Crikey thing and some of the ones on The Drum you’d probably find a far more vicious discourse than what you’d find on mine.
After a year of blogging, George Megalogenis (2008) decided to introduce strict rules on Meganomics, even if this meant publishing only 10 per cent of comments. He told his readers:

I try to direct the participants on this blog to observe some common rules of engagement. Talk to your fellow blogger as an equal, not as someone to belittle.

[…] I am seriously considering raising the bar on this blog to eliminate all those who don’t take my subtle calls to respect the reader seriously. On a good day, this new rule may mean I run 60% of what is offered as comment on this site; on a grumpy day I may decide to let just 10% through.

[…] You wouldn’t walk up to someone in the street whom you suspect disagrees with you and yell at them. So why do think it is okay to behave differently here in cyberspace? (Megalogenis 2008).

In an interview (ABC 2008) a few months later he explained that he had always tried to avoid the ‘flame wars’ but the response to some posts had degenerated into ‘the same old dispute between the usual suspects, a bit of bullying from the left, a bit of bullying from the right’. Megalogenis claimed that the response to the post – not only in comment volume but quality of discussion – vindicated his stand. When I interviewed him, Megalogenis said his challenge was to try to reduce the number of comments so they do not overwhelm him, but he also tries to invite certain kind of comments – those that ‘tell me something I don’t know’ and also leads to discussion. There is also evident a clear difference in the moderating approaches of journalists who blog on the sites of tabloid newspapers and those on The Australian. The latter were much stricter. Along with Megalogenis mentioned above, the other three have ‘rules’ they enforce and of which they regularly remind their readers. For example, Jack the Insider posted:

The rules are there for all to see […]. If a commenter breaches them in this blog, they normally get a warning. If they continue to breach the rules, they’re asked to sit it out for a period of time I determine. That’s it. It’s my blog and I apply the rules (Jack the Insider 2009).

Already a seasoned blogger when he was recruited by The Australian, Peter Brent set up guidelines early on for civil debate. On one of his first posts ‘Rules of Engagement’, Brent (2010b) warned, ‘please don’t mistake this blog for a democratic clearing house
where people can talk about whatever they want and 100 flowers will bloom. It ain’t that’. Some of his ground rules included:

1. Please relate comments to the post.
2. Please keep them short. I need to read them before approving them and others will want to read them. Sometimes less can be more.
3. You have a perfect right to loathe any politician you want. But express those feelings elsewhere.
4. Don’t abuse other commenters. In particular, don’t call people stupid. (More tolerance is shown towards abuse directed at me, especially if amusing.) (Brent 2010b)

Brent told me that people now know there is no point in just ranting or saying something silly, although in the early days many were just ‘garbage’ and ‘absolute rubbish’ with the person ‘doing the equivalent of vomiting on the newspaper’. When I mentioned I had analysed comments in response to posts on the asylum seeker issue he said he would have cut as many as he had let through (which presumably would have been about 100). It is not only journalists who prefer more stringent moderation. Brent said he was a bit surprised to see that some people mentioned (in the comments) that that they read his comment-threads because his policy makes them readable.

Although Chris Kenny of The Australian was not interviewed, a few weeks after he began blogging he posted a warning to readers that he would not post abusive comments:

> Just an update to those readers who don’t see their comments go up on this blog. As you can see, we welcome any reasonable viewpoint. But we will not post comments that are simply abusive or are crude – no matter who the crudity or abuse is directed towards. The idea is to swap ideas, information, perspectives, and opinions – not invective. Cheers CK (Kenny 2011a).

A week later Kenny (2011b) reminded readers that while he welcomed them disagreeing with each other and with him, and he tried to show a bit of latitude, he would not post comments that include ‘personal abuse and name calling’ as he did not want to ‘lower the tone of the blog’. And yet Kenny was involved in an online Twitter stoush39 some months later with colleague Peter Brent who he accused of censorship for not allowing comments backing an early election. Brent (2012a) retorted that his blog

39 Note that this sparring has continued on and off since; see Fig. 8 on page 184.
was not a ‘town hall or a wishing well’ but a space to discusses politics, and that he censored ‘rubbish or policy discussion’.

That a distinction should be made between public speech and free speech was pointed out by Jack the Insider, who believes that on a mainstream media blog the same standards that applied on the masthead should work their way into comments. A person wanting to comment is effectively saying ‘I want to be published in The Australian’ and therefore should meet certain requirements. Jack the Insider said the problem with those who believe in ‘letting the conversation take place’ is that ‘ugly comments, those that are racists and incite violence, find their way into the mainstream’. Also, ‘things can degenerate very quickly’:

If someone throws in something that is deeply racist, a comment about Islamic people, and you allow that through […] it will quickly escalate into an online brawl. If you let it go for more than two or three comments it just starts getting really nasty towards one another […] then all of a sudden you have a public bar brawl. I find it’s better if you nip it in the bud. I won’t tolerate that sort of stuff anyway.

It is Jack the Insider’s belief that if people see their comments are not published they may go away and reflect, even come back later and offer a more sensible argument. He deletes any comment he considers inflammatory and would not allow attacks on himself such as ‘you’ve got your head up your arse’ [on David Penberthy]. He says there has been some ‘really deeply unpleasant stuff’ that has not seen the light of day, although admitted that when he began blogging he was a bit ‘feisty’. This is evident in this early post (Jack the Insider 2007):

I’ve had a gutful of you, Marilyn. You won’t engage in a civil debate. You’ve been abusing any and everyone who disagrees with you in the slightest way. So, guess what? You are OUTTA here (posted by Jack the Insider, Jack the Insider, 2 January 2008, 10:16pm).

A few years later Jack the Insider (2011) posted that he now has a ‘PhD in troll deflection’ and can spot a troublemaker a mile away. He regards his blog as a ‘vast public bar’ and as the publican he reserves the right to refuse service.

In contrast, the bloggers on The Daily Telegraph and Herald Sun showed a more lenient approach, with an inclination towards ‘free speech’ and letting as many comments
through as possible. When he was *The Daily Telegraph*’s editor, David Penberthy responded to the ABC’s Media Watch questions on cyber racism:

> [...] while some comments may be hostile and abusive, and framed around generalisations, the level-headed middle voices are the ones that generally prevail. We publish a lot of rugged comments on our site attacking our opinion columnists, attacking our sports writers, attacking me. We believe in free speech (Penberthy 2007).

Two other journalist-boggers from *The Daily Telegraph* had a similar perspective. Joe Hildebrand said he ‘pretty much lets everything through’ as long as it is not too obscene or defamatory about anyone other than himself. According to Piers Akerman the ones that do get through are among the least offensive and reflect ‘a percentage of the variety and tone’. He sees this as important in order to avoid ‘creating a totally artificial arena’ or ‘a total anodyne saccharin – with everyone agreeing with everyone else’ which does not reflect what is occurring in the market:

> Because there are so many comments I scan them for sentiments that are clearly going to be offensive, whether they be things of a religious nature or a sexist nature, comments that I’d prefer not to be aired. Some of them (a surprisingly small proportion) are just totally beyond the pale; they are of a scatological or obscene nature.

Likewise, the *Herald Sun*’s Susie O’Brien said she tries to put up as many comments as possible; she said because she gets her say, she wants people to have their say. She feels that if you are going to blog ‘you have to do everything you can to reflect the integrity of that process and to put up as many comments as possible’. She will only not put up a comment for legal reasons or if it was ‘really nasty’ about another commenter. Often she will just edit the comment, putting ‘edit’ in brackets:

> loc - good God you truly are mad, wanting to ‘lock out’ the elder generation as their views don’t coincide with yours. You know, many years ago a little man with a funny moustache and funny salute held similar views to yours in ‘locking out’ (EXTERMINATING) those with which he had irrational unbalanced personal dislikes with as well – his name was Hitler (edited by Susie) (posted by ‘universal’, Susie O’Brien, 18 October 2011, 03:29pm)

O’Brien claims it is only ‘very rarely’ that she does not put up a comment and it would have to be really nasty about someone else or for a serious legal issue. She believes:
If you put it out there you have to accept what comes your way. It really really does not bother me at all. We have to cop it, as a journalist. We have such a privileged space to occupy in the media – you get a page a week in Australia’s highest selling newspaper – you have to respect that and I think you have to respect what the punters say, and sometimes what they say will not be nice towards you.

When I interviewed him, John Birmingham said he rarely if ever deletes a comment, perhaps once every few weeks he would ‘delete one that is so abusive’. However, a few months later, on 10 August 2013, he announced on his blog things were going to change: ‘I’ve had it. I can’t face it anymore. A sickness of the soul descends on me when I think about having to moderate some of the filth some of you write in’ (original emphasis, Birmingham 2012).

We do loves us some good traffic stats […] but at what cost? If people like turning up just to watch a shitfight, in the end the only people who will turn up are those who come for the shitfight. Everybody else will be driven away in disgust. Some of the finest, funniest contributors to Blunt Instrument have gradually drifted away over the years because of the increasingly stupid and ugly tone that has come to characterise the comment thread (Birmingham 2012).

He noted that while blogs work best when ‘enlivened’ by disagreement and contention, the discussion needs to be civilised rather than ‘pouring a boiling cauldron of pus over someone just because your sad little life is drowning in hot pus and you’re looking to get rid of some’. He warned readers he would now be swinging the ‘mighty Ban Hammer’ and would reject all comments that were ill-mannered and abusive.

After years of being involved in moderation, in November 2011 Andrew Bolt announced that all comments were to now go through their moderating team because his blog ‘has become the target of lawfare’. This, he said, would mean delays and a ‘touchiness about publishing anything remotely dangerous’. He described it an ‘erosion of the right to free speech’ which is a dangerous state of affairs in a democracy’ (Bolt 2011). Six months later, in July 2012, staff cuts at the Herald Sun also meant that fewer comments could be moderated:

I am not sure if any moderators are on duty today […]. Do not post comments unless you see some have been posted. I am very sorry about this. It is beyond my control. Increasing threats, restrictions and lawfare from Leftists make it
safer for us to print nothing rather than anything. On this blog, it will be the Left who suffer most, and I am as angry about it as they will be (Bolt 2012).

Journalists and moderators obviously endeavour to reject comments that put the news organisation at risk of legal liability. For example, Bernie Slattery, who has helped moderate Andrew Bolt’s blog, told me he would cut about 10 per cent of comments, and in particular those that are ‘defamatory, obscene, racist and overly offensive to minorities’. However, there are marked differences in the attitudes of the journalists towards comments which are flaming or abusive, with most of the tabloid journalists allowing comments that abused them. This was seldom tolerated by The Australian’s journalists. On the one hand is a view of free speech where as many comments as possible are allowed and they are only deleted if they risk legal liability, whereas on the other hand is the view that civilised discussion should be encouraged regardless of how many comments are cut. Interestingly, most of the journalists did not see any value in introducing the rule of commenters using their real names instead of anonymous screen names. As O’Brien points out there is no way of knowing whether the ‘real names’ are actually real. As they have email addresses, if there is anything of real concern they can be tracked down.

While the ideal is a free and open discussion that does not require moderation, the reality is this is not feasible. Although moderation is determined partly by legal concerns, it is also influenced by the standard of the masthead and the journalists’ desire to control the discussion. It could be argued that the stricter moderators are not fostering real democratic participation, but attempting to maintain journalistic authority and control the conversation (Singer 2005; Wall 2005). However, the trend towards stricter moderation has also been occurring in the independent blogosphere. As Bora Zivkovic (2013), blog editor at Scientific American, points out, although the spirit of free speech was a hallmark of early blogs and blogs were largely unmoderated, there has been a tightening of commenting rules over the years.

Scholars theorise that blogging challenges journalism’s normative foundations and journalists are faced with tensions and difficulties negotiating the new participatory digital environment (Carlson 2007; Singer 2005; Hermida & Thurman 2008; Lasorsa et
Carlson (2007:275) argues that mainstream journalists who blog need to reinterpret their professional norms and practices in a new media format because they would have been used to ‘centralized, routinized, conventionalized reportage’. Of course such challenges would not apply to veteran bloggers Peter Brent, Tim Blair and John Birmingham who were independent bloggers before being recruited by their respective news organisations. Brent even told me that when he was an independent blogger he never saw himself as part of ‘this great movement that’s democratising the world […] Hey, we are not part of the mainstream media, they have no idea’. And it would not apply to Jack the Insider who was also recruited as a blogger (to try it out) although he had no prior experience using this format. He told me he was surprised how popular his blog became within a few months.

This perhaps would apply to the nine journalists who were already employed by their news organisations before they took on blogging as part of their journalistic work. Or have they resolved (or simply by-passed) the difficulties and tension that scholars claim is evidently occurring in news organisations in other countries? For instance, Joe Hildebrand claims that the journalists who blog at *The Daily Telegraph* have embraced blogging enthusiastically and want to engage with readers. Another reason may be that all the journalists in this study – with the exception of Chris Kenny – have been blogging for many years, with most beginning in 2005 or 2006. Other journalists have tried blogging, but stopped; perhaps they found the format challenging and the moderating of comments tiresome. These would include some of the 17 bloggers listed in Table 1. For example, Jason Koutsoukis and Tony Wright blogged for less than two months; Howard Sattler and Peter Hartcher for less than a year. Three journalists who blogged for several years – Malcolm Farr, Caroline Overington and Samantha Maiden – have gone on to become very active on Twitter. And Janet Albrechtsen (2009) admitted that when ‘REAMS of incessant personal abuse arrive’ she sometimes wonders why she blogs. Albrechtsen had a blog for just over three years on *The Australian* but saw it as a place where only readers interact. Almost all her posts were print columns replicated online, although in one post ‘Blog Therapy Will Return’ she wrote that although some contributors were ‘offended’ because she never responds, ‘I figure I’ve had my say. It’s up to others to keep the conversation going’ (Albrechtsen 2009). Before she ceased blogging, I argued that since Albrechtsen is not interested in conversing with her
audience, and taking advantage of the interactivity blogging provides, her columns might be better left in their original format (Garden 2010a:28).

Conclusion

While not historically part of journalism’s normative framework, the concept of journalism as participation is emerging as an integral feature of news organisations in the digital age, with scholars suggesting that audience involvement has become a normative goal of digital journalism (Lewis 2012). Although there seems to be a consensus in the scholarly literature that traditional media have failed to take advantage of the affordances of the blog format, this study shows that for most Australian journalist-bloggers, participation is an integral part of their blogging practice. The normative has become an actuality. All the journalists interviewed enjoy blogging and some see it as an opportunity to have a conversation with readers, others see its value in obtaining stories, tips and information or to get new angles, while a few regarded their blog space as a supportive community. Nip (2006) argues that merely offering citizens an opportunity to engage is insufficient: people need to feel that their words and opinions matter. Conversation entails citizens responding and journalists doing something with those responses for the common good, otherwise, ‘conversation becomes a phantom construct on this crucial dimension’ (Marchionni 2013:141).

The journalists differ in their moderation styles. Those on the tabloid sites were less concerned with civility, and even though they deleted offensive or obscene comments towards other commenters they did not object to comments that abused them as journalists. For the journalists on The Australian there is a view that civilised discussion is paramount – regardless of how many comments are cut. While stricter moderation of mainstream journalists has been criticised, what critics overlook is that the choice of moderation style is a factor in shaping the quality and usefulness of blog discussions.

If you don’t delete or disembowel inappropriate comments, people will think you are not even reading the comment threads. If you don’t show up in person, nobody will know you are even interested in their thoughts. If you don’t delete the trolls, the trolls will take over and the nice people will go somewhere else (Zivkovic 2013).
Chapter 7  Equality and interactivity

Introduction

The next two chapters give the results of the content analysis of the 13 comment-threads, and provide a discussion and analysis of these results. At the same time, some of the views of the journalists and editors obtained from the interviews are provided. This chapter focuses on equality and interactivity, which required purely quantitative analysis of comments, while Chapter 8 looks at the results from the qualitative analysis of comments according to the various indicators chosen. These chapters thus address the main research question ‘What is the contribution of journalist-blogs to Australian political debate?’ and in particular the second and third sub-questions:

b) To what extent are Australian political journalist-blogs a space of deliberation?

c) What are political journalist-bloggers’ perceptions of blogs as a space of deliberation?

Following Bächtiger et al. (2009), equality was measured by counting the frequency of participation as well as by counting the volume – measured by the number of words of each participant’s comments. Dominators on each blog were also determined. While there is not a standard definition in the literature for designating certain commenters as dominators, following Blom et al. (2001) and Ruiz et al. (2011) who defined dominators as those who contributed respectively more than six or seven comments, I decided to use this term to describe any user who contributed six or more comments on a single thread. As well as determining the participation of users, the relative participation of each of the 13 bloggers was counted by noting the number of their responses (if any) and the word volume of each. High interactivity is also important as this builds up a dialogue of increasing engagement and exploration of issues. Interactivity was measured by tracking which comments were explicit responses to the blogger or to another commenter. In addition, I attempted to track cross-posters: users who participated on different blogs within this sample.
Audience comments and blogger responses

As can be seen from Table 5, across the 13 blogs there were a total of 1,464 audience comments. This total does not include blogger responses which totalled 210. The average number of comments (112.6) was skewed by the two outliers – Jack the Insider and Piers Akerman – that attracted a large number of comments. There was a wide variation across the 13 threads ranging from 17 comments and blogger-responses on Simon Benson to 500 on Jack the Insider – more than double that of any other of the sampled threads and not atypical for this popular blog. In order to gauge the diversity of commenters and determine whether comments are from a small group of loyal regular followers or from a larger audience, the number of unique users (excluding the blogger) on each thread was also counted. Unique users were determined by counting each username. Rarely are people using their real names, and usually they create a pseudonym that keeps them anonymous; however, there is no way of knowing whether the same person is using different user-names.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog</th>
<th>comments</th>
<th>blogger responses</th>
<th>total</th>
<th>unique users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blunt Instrument</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Blair</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Penberthy</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Bolt</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie O’Brien</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mumble</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meganomics</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goody Fabric</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1464</strong></td>
<td><strong>210</strong></td>
<td><strong>1674</strong></td>
<td><strong>785</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 shows the number of unique users compared to total number of comments. The total of 785 represents 53.6 per cent of the total number of comments (1,464), which
indicates many users do not simply parachute in to leave a single comment. The exceptions are Simon Benson and David Penberthy where each unique user left a single comment, although the sampled comment-threads are short. On three blogs, the average number of comments by unique users was more than two: Jack the Insider was 3.17; Meganomics was 2.32 and Piers Akerman was 2.26.

Table 6  Unique users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLOG</th>
<th>No. of comments</th>
<th>Unique users</th>
<th>Average no. comments per user</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>2.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie O'Brien</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Bolt</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meganomics</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Blair</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mumble</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodly Fabric</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt Instrument</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Penberthy</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1464</strong></td>
<td><strong>785</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding multiple user-names, it is difficult to know how a researcher can control for this as the person most likely able to detect such a phenomenon would be the blogger themselves or astute and regular readers. Jack the Insider sees some humour in nicknames and believes, ‘You can’t police that sort of thing. And nor should you. People are entitled to use any identity they want to use.’ However, he is uncomfortable with people using multiple user-names to make ‘partisan political comments’ and has no qualms to ‘flick’ these. He finds them easy to identify, as he says they use a different ID but the same IP so ‘are not clever about it’. They can also be picked from the type of comment, for example, ‘I’ve been a Labor voter all my life, but I’ll never vote for them again.’ Indeed, from the content of their comments on the thread of Jack the Insider, ‘Richard the Cad’, ‘Richard the Reasonable' and ‘Richard the hard of hearing’ all
appeared to me to be one and the same person. Bernie Slattery, a moderator of _Andrew Bolt_, told me he allowed multiple user-names as long as the name was not offensive; in fact he was impressed when astute readers were able to recognise a commenter under a different name because of their style.

**Participation**

After the number of unique users was determined, for each comment-thread the number of responses of each user was recorded and tabled according to frequency of responses using the following categories: one comment, two comments, three to five comments, six to 10 comments, 11 to 20 comments and over 20 comments. The total volume or word count of each user (including the blogger) was also calculated. Table 7 shows that of a total of 1,464 comments, 558 or 71.08 per cent of the 785 unique users contributed only one comment. There were 227 users who posted more than once and of these 14.5 per cent made two comments and 9.04 per cent made three to five comments. Very few made over six comments, although one contributed more than 20 comments. (These percentages are somewhat skewed on two outliers, _David Penberthy_ and _Simon Benson_, which attracted amongst the least comments. In these 100 per cent of users contributed one comment, compared to a few blogs which had only about 50 per cent. This is discussed in the next section which looks at the frequency of comments on each blog.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Comments</th>
<th>1 comment</th>
<th>2 comments</th>
<th>3-5 comments</th>
<th>6-10 comments</th>
<th>11-20 comments</th>
<th>Over 20 comments</th>
<th>Total unique users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>558</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a percentage</td>
<td>71.08%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>9.04%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>0.13%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is apparent a very small group of users is responsible for a large majority of all comments. Most users – 71 per cent – left only one comment; they simply parachuted in to make their point and then left the site or remained as lurkers monitoring the discussion. This level of participation is similar to studies of comments on news sites.
Blom et al. (2011) found that on 16 U.S. dailies, almost 60 per cent of users made only one comment; likewise Ruiz et al. (2011) found that on five newspapers of five different countries 60 per cent of users commented once. Almost 15 per cent of users posted twice which is similar to the findings of Ruiz et al. (2011) of comments on five newspapers sites where 11 per cent participated twice. In addition, the frequency of comments on each blog was tabled (see Table 8).

Table 8  Frequency of comments on each blog

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>JTI</th>
<th>PA</th>
<th>AB</th>
<th>TB</th>
<th>MUM</th>
<th>SOB</th>
<th>BI</th>
<th>MEG</th>
<th>MD</th>
<th>GF</th>
<th>DP</th>
<th>SB</th>
<th>JH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over 20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Unique Users | 129 | 96 | 92 | 78 | 72 | 70 | 54 | 44 | 51 | 42 | 28 | 16 | 13 |

JTI = Jack the Insider  MUM = Mumble  MD = Miranda Devine  JH = Joe Hildebrand
PA = Piers Akerman  SOB = Susie O’Brien  GF = Goodly Fabric
AB = Andrew Bolt  BL = Blunt Instrument  DP = David Penberthy
TB = Tim Blair  MEG = Meganomics  SB = Simon Benson

This shows significant variation between blogs, although not surprisingly the blogs which attracted the least comments had less users returning. The most frequent participator was ‘Balanced’ on Jack the Insider with 42 comments, although this blog attracted the most comments. If there is a sense of community developing on some blogs, then this would only be occurring within a small-subsection of a blog’s contributors. Interestingly, Jack the Insider said his blog attracted a body of about 70 or 80 regulars and ‘a hard-core of about 10–30 in there all the time’, and he liked to think ‘a good slice of them are very intelligent people’ including a lot of people from overseas who give a different perspective. In the study of comments on five newspapers sites Ruiz et al. (2011) found 11 per cent participated twice. On only two of these sites – The Guardian (U.K.) and El País (Spain) – did users contribute more than six comments and this represented a core group of between 2 and 3 per cent of users. In my study 42 users (on seven of the 13 blogs) contributed six or more comments. On the three most popular blogs more than 10 per cent of users on each blog contributed six or more
comments: Jack the Insider (15.5%), Piers Akerman (10.4%) and Meganomics (11.4%) indicating there may be a high degree of engagement amongst a core group of users.

**Dominators**

As mentioned, dominators were determined to be any user who contributed six or more comments on a single thread. This meant that of 785 unique users, 42 participants (5.35 per cent) could be classed as dominators. However, dominators were only found on seven of the 13 blogs, with 35 appearing on three blogs: Jack the Insider, Piers Akerman and Meganomics on which 20, 10 and five users respectively contributed six or more comments (see Table 9). As well as the number of comments, it is important to measure volume or word count of each comment as voluminous comments can signify domination of the discussion. There is an enormous difference between comments which have less than five words (even one word) and, say, a comment of 1,113 words by ‘truth’ posted on Piers Akerman. The dominators on Jack the Insider represented only 14.72 per cent of that blog’s total unique users, yet they contributed 53.57 per cent of the total word count on the thread. This means 19 users dominated over 50 per cent of the discussion in terms of volume and word count. Similarly, the dominators on Piers Akerman who represented 10.41 per cent of unique users contributed 46.54 per cent of the total word count. And even the single dominator on Goodly Fabric contributed 12.52 per cent of the total volume of comments on that thread.

**Table 9 Dominators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Jack the Insider</th>
<th>Piers Akerman</th>
<th>Meganomics</th>
<th>Susie O’Brien</th>
<th>Miranda Devine</th>
<th>Goodly Fabric</th>
<th>Mumble</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over 20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of unique users</td>
<td>15.50%</td>
<td>10.41%</td>
<td>11.36%</td>
<td>4.28%</td>
<td>4.28%</td>
<td>3.92%</td>
<td>2.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of word count</td>
<td>53.57%</td>
<td>46.54%</td>
<td>35.83%</td>
<td>26.55%</td>
<td>24.00%</td>
<td>12.52%</td>
<td>6.72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

40 Comment by ‘truth’ at 3:23 am, 11 September 2011 (Re the time 3:23am this comment was made, see footnote 37 for changes of times due to daylight savings)
For their study of online comments on 16 U.S. dailies Blom et al. (2011) designated dominators as those with seven or more comments and found they represented 10 per cent of total users. Dominators were less frequent on the newspaper sites in the study by Ruiz et al. (2011) as users who contributed more than six times were found on only two of the five newspapers sites and they represented a core of between 2 and 3 per cent of users on those sites. However, neither of these studies considered volume or word-count of comments. In my study, there was one stand-out commenter: ‘Balanced’ on Jack the Insider posted 41 times, dominating the conversation in both number of appearances and volume. Interestingly, the study by Blom et al. (2011) also had a stand-out dominator using the name ‘angry’ to post 46 times in one week. The total word count of comments by ‘Balanced’ was 5,702, which was by far the highest of any contributor on all blogs. ‘Fair & Balanced’ on Miranda Devine had a total of 1,845 words (is this perhaps the same person as ‘Balanced’?) and ‘loc’ on Susie O’Brien had 2,151. It must be noted journalists have different moderation policies. Peter Brent (2010b) discourages long comments and his rules of engagement include: ‘Please keep them short. I need to read them before approving them and others will want to read them. Sometimes less can be more’. And a comment of 333 words by ‘billygee of 0200’ on Andrew Bolt was snipped with a note from the moderator [MOD: length snip]41.

The question that needs to be asked is: does this domination matter? In deliberation, ideally each person should be able to participate on an equal footing with every other participant and no-one should dominate the conversation (Koop & Jansen 2009). According to deliberative theorists, dominators are particularly problematic. Thompson (2008:501) argues that a discussion does not count as deliberation at all if one person completely dominates, and the discussion is ‘better deliberation to the extent that the participation is equally distributed’. Domination, according to Blom et al. (2011), shows that ‘the debates are not broad-based and therefore likely lack diversity of opinion’. While there is a tendency to assume the impact of dominant minorities is negative, what is important is the content of their comments – the extent to which they contain personal attacks or whether they are enriching discussions. A study of online

forums found that dominators in the vast majority of cases performed a positive role such as facilitating talk and summarising debates (Graham & Wright 2011).

**Blogger engagement**

In addition to reader participation, the participation of each blogger was measured both in terms of the number and word count of their responses, and these scores were contrasted with audience comments as shown in Table 10. Tim Blair, Andrew Bolt, Miranda Devine and David Penberthy did not engage at all with their audience; three made less than five comments, although the length of the comment-threads on the blogs of Joe Hildebrand and Simon Benson were short; and five were very interactive: Jack the Insider, George Megalogenis, Susie O’Brien, Chris Kenny and Peter Brent. However, for four of these, their blogs are on *The Australian* where crucially the comment affordance does not enable commenters to reply directly to each other but makes it easier to reply directly to the blogger, who in turn can reply to them. In addition, the total word count of the more engaged bloggers is astonishing, considering that they had already written substantial posts on the asylum seeker issue, with Jack the Insider writing 2,753 words, and Chris Kenny 1,485.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blogger</th>
<th>blogger responses</th>
<th>% overall</th>
<th>word count</th>
<th>audience comments</th>
<th>% overall</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>2753</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Megalogenis</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27.60%</td>
<td>1284</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>73.40%</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie O’Brien</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18.80%</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>81.20%</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Kenny</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21.40%</td>
<td>1485</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>78.60%</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Brent</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14.90%</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>86.10%</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.10%</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>76.90%</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Birmingham</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.80%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>97.20%</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.80%</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>94.20%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Blair</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Penberthy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Bolt</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>210</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>7151</strong></td>
<td><strong>1464</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>1673</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The findings contrast to overseas studies which have found a distinct lack of interactivity between journalist-bloggers and commenters (Dailey et al. 2008; Robertson & McLaughlin 2011; Besselink 2011). In their study Dailey et al. (2008) found 80 per cent of the journalists did not respond to readers, and the number of responses of the 13 journalists who engaged ranged from one to 12, with an average of 1.6 (N. B. some had more than one post and comment-thread). In contrast, in my study which looked at only one post, the average response was 12.76 – although this is skewed because of the five journalists who responded a lot. A significant factor which was not analysed quantitatively is frequency of posting. However, a perusal of the sites shows that with the exception of Tim Blair, Andrew Bolt and Joe Hildebrand who are frequent posters, the other 10 journalists usually post several times a week. Note that unlike Blair or Bolt, Hildebrand is also very active on Twitter.

Although Jericho (2012a:190) argues that Twitter has made ‘journalists available to their readers in a manner that never happened before’, these results show most journalist-bloggers are engaging with readers and making themselves available. Jericho (2012a:190) also claims that before Twitter journalists were ‘essentially divorced from their readers’ except for letters to the editor and that even on blogs most journalists were ‘absent’ from discussions. However, an inspection of archives reveals some have been engaging with readers since July 2006 – well before the first wave of Australian journalists joined Twitter, which was in early 2009.

Note that six bloggers contributed six or more comments. Jack the Insider responded 90 times which is more than ‘Balanced’, who made 41 comments. The question arises as to the real value of such high engagement as this may simply represent journalists dominating and controlling the conversation. Several studies of online seminars have found that peer-led debate where there is low or zero participation by a tutor or instructor is more productive of higher level discussion than tutor-led debate (Robertson & Lee 2007; Schrire 2006). Yet there is also a strong case for the journalist to be present. Merely offering citizens an opportunity to engage and chat amongst themselves on blogs is insufficient as it is important that people feel that their words and opinions matter (Nip 2006). Citizens need to feel journalists are actually listening and doing something with their responses, otherwise, ‘conversation becomes a phantom construct on this crucial dimension’ (Marchionni 2013:141). As Susie O’Brien pointed out,
people come and comment on blogs because they want to engage with the journalists and with each other. Jack the Insider (2011) has said that you need to take the time to converse with readers and that although agreements over arguments are rare, ‘mutual respect is invariably developed’. Clearly – as mentioned in the previous chapter – some of the journalists see their role not just as moderators but also facilitators, and according to Rosenberry (2010:158) in order for journalists to foster effective deliberation this requires ‘thoughtful, guided informational exchanges’. According to Bora Zivkovic (2013), blog editor at *Scientific American*, the most important element of comment moderation is the presence of the author in the commenting thread.

Responding to readers’ comments, thus showing that they are being read, observed and appreciated, is the most effective way to make sure that the discussions stay on topic and do not veer over the line of appropriateness (Zivkovic original emphasis 2013).

**Cross-posters**

To my knowledge no study has looked at the crossover between blogs and commenting audiences, although Highfield (2011:338) suggests such research would be beneficial. As it has been argued that broadsheet and tabloid sites attract different readers and ‘different journalistic values and styles’ (Richardson & Stanyer 2011:985), it seemed useful to determine whether any commenters were actually moving between the different sites and commenting, or staying on the one news site and moving across blogs there. It was also important to see whether they might dominate discussions across blogs, making the number of distinct commenters even smaller. I decided to call commenters who comment on other blogs ‘cross-posters’ and attempted to identify these on the 13 blogs by searching for duplicate user-names and tabling these (see Appendix 12). Of a total of 785 users, 79 duplicates – almost 10 per cent – were found, which seems highly significant but these results must be treated with caution for two reasons. There may actually be more cross-posters if the same person is adopting different user-names on different blogs, or there may be less if people are adopting the same user-names, especially common names such as ‘Andy’ or ‘William’. The ‘William’ on *Susie O’Brien* may not be the same person as ‘William’ posting on *Miranda Devine* – although it is more likely that ‘Ian’ appearing on three blogs on *The
Australian is the same person as the ‘Ian’ commenting on Andrew Bolt on a different news site. So 15 of these 79 cross-posters were listed as ‘maybes’ due to their common names. The remaining 64 probable cross-posters still represent 12 per cent of total users and it highly likely that with user-names such as ‘anath of anathema’, ‘Ozzie Voter’, ‘While Nero Fiddled’, Filthy Phil’, ‘Mud Crab’, ‘BASSMAN’, ‘yerself is steam’ and ‘Spin baby, spin’ they are unique users, the same person moving over to other blogs on the same site or even over to another news site. For example, ‘mh’ appears not only on Susie O’Brien (Herald Sun) but also Joe Hildebrand (The Daily Telegraph) and Jack the Insider (The Australian). And ‘Tassie Rooster’ appears on Miranda Devine (The Daily Telegraph) and also on Mumble (The Australian).

On the threads sampled, cross-posters mostly go over to only one other blog, although three appeared on four threads and 16 appeared on three. There were between three and 24 cross-posters on each thread, with seven blogs attracting more than 15 cross-posters. The threads attracting the most cross-posters were the two with the most comments: Piers Akerman and Jack the Insider with 20 and 24 respectively. Jack the Insider did remark that he notices a ‘lot of familiar names pop up’ when he reads through comments on the other blogs on The Australian. The most cross-posting per news site was on The Australian with commenters, although 27 moved between a tabloid and a broadsheet site. Only three cross-posters could be detected on Fairfax Media’s Blunt Instrument: two of these (‘Mark’ and ‘Anthony’) were of the 12 ‘maybes’, although ‘Old and Improved Dave’ wandered over to Goodly Fabric. This cross-posting means that there is a scattered community across blogs, especially those on the same news site. Interestingly, nine of the 42 dominators were also cross-posters including ‘Fair & Balanced’, ‘BASSMAN’, ‘Rhys Needham’ and ‘Marilyn Shepherd’, although most preferred to stay within their blog community. It is evident that those who are cross-posters, and especially those who are also dominators, represent a particular subculture of people who are heavy internet users and likely to be what Coleman (2003) describes as ‘political junkies’ – very interested in and knowledgeable about politics.

Interestingly, although they did not look at blogs but comments to articles, in their study of 16 U.S. online newspapers, Blom et al. (2011) noticed that of 776 unique users, there were no identical user names. They also found that 10 per cent of users were highly involved on the newspaper of their choice, often commenting on multiple stories. My
study, however, was limited to one thread on each of 13 blogs, and future research would benefit from the identification of communities not only within a blog but between blogs, across mainstream media sites and even independent blogs. This may require co-operation from the blogger to assist in the identification of those users who use multiple user-names.

**Interactivity**

As well as the number of responses, it was important to also determine which showed interactivity. Tracking who is responding to who gives an indication of the level of engagement and the extent to which commenters engage in the discussion throughout its lifecycle, as opposed to those who express themselves mainly by monologues. This was measured by determining which comments were ‘explicit’ responses to another participant and which were directed to the blogger. A factor not measured due to the sheer volume of coding material was whether participants refer to other participants’ arguments. It is important to note that The Daily Telegraph and the Herald Sun use a version of Expression Engine which enables commenters to reply either direct to the blogger or respond directly to another commenter by hitting ‘Reply’ underneath a particular comment, which creates sub-threads (see Fig. 6, pg. 101). Here are the first three comments as they appear on Tim Blair:

Now bring back TPV’s [Temporary Protection Visas] and greatly limit the lavish facilities in the camps, and then watch the number of back door immigrants decline. Oh wait. That was the old policy!!! AndyG55 (Reply) Thu 22 Dec 11 (05:22pm)

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42 Hence comments were studied in ascending order from the oldest to the newest responses.
43 Where comments (or statements within those comments) are cited, they are replicated exactly as they appear in the threads without corrections to spelling or grammar: [sic] is not used as errors are innumerable, as is characteristic of tweets and blog-comments. The Daily Telegraph permits the use of emoticons in comments and these are retained.
44 On some news sites, times of comments are automatically adjusted an hour due to daylight saving (in NSW and Victoria between 7 October and 1 April). The comments from the blogs of Tim Blair, Susie O’Brien and Chris Kenny used here were made during the daylight saving period; the remaining 10 were outside of it. This needs to be taken into consideration for any comment referenced. E.G. a comment coded as being made at 2:40pm prior to 7 October is adjusted to 1:40pm on 7 October, and re-adjusted back to the original on 1 April.
Blogging in the Mainstream

NoraC replied to AndyG55 Thu 22 Dec 11 (07:15pm) Good point Andy. It’s not just Nauru it was the TPV that made the Pacific Solution work.

TT replied to AndyG55 Thu 22 Dec 11 (09:16pm) Massive ideological back down from the collective. Hee, hee.

In contrast, commenters on *The Australian* often insert within the user-name, date and time of the comment they want to reply to. For example, on *Meganomics*, ‘AJP’ (27 September 2011, 08:44am) writes: ‘in response George to your reply to Kate @ 1:12am’. This comment by ‘AJP’, as well as the replies of ‘NoraC’ and ‘TT’ above, was coded for interactivity. As Table 11 shows, of a total of 1,464 comments, 519 or 35.3 per cent were explicit responses to another commenter and 383 or 26.16 per cent were an explicit response to the blogger. Overall, 902 or 61 per cent of the comments were an explicit response to others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog Name</th>
<th>Commenters (no. of comments)</th>
<th>Response to another COM %</th>
<th>Response to BLOGGER %</th>
<th>Total %</th>
<th>no. of comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>67.8%</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie O’Brien</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>73.4%</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Bolt</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>57.3%</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meganomics</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
<td>152.0%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Blair</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
<td>89.8%</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mumble</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>51.5%</td>
<td>51.5%</td>
<td>103.0%</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodly Fabric</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
<td>122.4%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt Instrument</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Penberthy</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>85.8%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>125.0%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1464</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>122.0%</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly on six blogs – *Goodly Fabric, Meganomics, Mumble, Susie O’Brien, David Penberthy* and *Andrew Bolt* – the commenters engaged more frequently with the blogger than other commenters. This is not surprising for the first three: as mentioned,
the version of Expression Engine used on *The Australian* does not enable commenters to reply directly to each other. This in effect discourages interaction between commenters and seems to be designed so they respond direct to the blogger or the post. However, it is surprising for the last three, as the software on those sites encourages interaction between readers as it allows for the formation of sub-threads. It is particularly surprising on the last two, because David Penberthy and Andrew Bolt no longer interact with readers. This means commenters are in effect talking to a journalist who never replies, although Bolt claims to read many of the comments. (These two blogs began in July 2006, and for some years the journalists did engage with readers.)

With 61 per cent of comments being an explicit response to others, this indicates a reasonable level of engagement bearing in mind that most of the other comments were addressing the issue under discussion and thus were interacting with the content of the post or another comment. In this respect they were indirect responses, although this kind of interactivity was not measured. The highest interactivity was on *Susie O'Brien*, *Miranda Devine*, *Piers Akerman* and *Jack the Insider*. As Jack the Insider said, his blog attracts a group of regulars with a ‘hard-core’ in there ‘all the time’. Shoba Rao, the former Social Media Editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, said for those people who want to engage in a more deeper discussion they go religiously every day to *Piers Akerman* and ‘see all the people who are regulars there’; there is a ‘community of them that has been established and they talk about the stuff that he [Piers] is talking about’. Although Miranda Devine suggested that the high interactivity on her blog may have something to do with the Expression Engine facility, over 50 per cent of comments on the four blogs on *The Australian* (which does not use the version of Expression Engine which allows for interactivity between readers) were a direct response to another commenter.

Although their study was of online comments, Richardson and Stanyer (2011) found significant differences between tabloid and broadsheet readers. There was no sense of tabloid readers interacting or debating with each other; rather they responded to the journalist’s argument or expressed their own views and very few commented on messages left by other readers. In contrast, broadsheet readers interacted with each other far more frequently. Such differences were not found in this study, where the most interactivity occurred on two blogs on the sites of the tabloid newspapers *The Daily Telegraph* and *Herald Sun*. 
Conclusion

Regarding equality, the norms of deliberation do not require absolute equality in participation, but as Thompson (2008:507) explains, ‘equal participation requires that no one person or advantaged group completely dominate the reason-giving process, even if the deliberators are not strictly equal in power and prestige’. The fact that most users parachuted in to leave a single comment and dominators were evident on most blogs – in other words, a very small group was responsible for the majority of the comments – shows that the discussions are not broad-based and may lack diversity of opinion. Haas (2010) argues that in order to facilitate online discussion resembling Habermasian deliberation, journalists need to curtail contributions of those dominating discussions and encourage the less active to contribute more. While domination would be problematic in a face-to-face discussion, it seems less so on a blog where discussions can spread over several days, and dependent on the blogger moderating and posting comments at times of their own choosing. And perhaps some who contributed a single comment remained as lurkers who may engage in private deliberation (Goodin 2003).

Regarding dominators, what is important is what they contribute: do they engage in personal attacks, for example, or do they offer relevant information and substantive argumentation? Aside from the three blogs with short comment-threads, on most blogs there is evidence of genuine interaction with commenters engaging with each other and responding to others’ comments, rather than engaging in monologues with themselves. This is an indication that a community is emerging on these blogs.

While equality and interactivity are important factors of deliberation and contribute to the overall quality of a discussion, they only point to quantitative indicators such as the number of comments and tell us nothing about the type of comment or its content, which requires an interpretative analysis of each comment. In addition to coding for equality and interactivity, the content of each comment was coded according to the various indicators of deliberation chosen. The next chapter analyses and discusses these results and provides an overall picture of the quality of discussion on the 13 blog-threads, and the degree to which indicators of deliberation occurs on each.
Chapter 8  Quality of conversation

Introduction

This chapter provides the results from coding for agreement and disagreement; disrespect (flaming), respect and the asking of questions; and reasoned expression opinion. Three codes were used for the latter: statements that were opinions that were justified rationally, mere opinions with no justification, and those that were justified with recourse to exaggeration, hyperbole and the like. In addition, the results of the use of sources and personal narrative, as well as the extent to which comments are off-topic, are given. Where relevant, feedback from interviews with journalists regarding various indicators is also included. Unless specified, all the results pertain to coding of audience comments and not responses from the bloggers.

Agreement and disagreement

Comments were coded for explicit agreement and disagreement to either the blogger’s original post or subsequent responses, as well as to comments by other users. Although a great deal of implicit agreement and disagreement was apparent, it was out of the scope of this study to interpret the content of comments and code for these as well. The following was coded for agreement with blogger (addressed as GM) as well as with another commenter:

Bassman @ 2:11pm 27 Sept I agree completely with you. When/if Abbott gets in he will do whatever he likes, as he will have an absolute majority. I also agree with the sentiments of many of the posters (including GM) that the current focus on this issue […] is consuming far too much time (posted by AJP, Meganomics, 27 September 2011, 09:31pm).

The following are examples of disagreement, with another commenter and a blogger:

Marilyn you claimed it would be unlawful to issue visas to asylum seekers in Malaysia. I am pointing out that it is in fact perfectly lawful (posted by daisy mae, Meganomics, 27 September 2011, 09:01am).

George there is no such thing as a frigging deterrent for asylum seekers so why use the stupid word. Kenya could rightly claim deterrent with 11,000 refugees a
week but we have 50 a week and we don’t get to deter them from their legal rights. Jesus wept, you learn the law too (posted by Marilyn Shepherd, Meganomics 27 September 2011, 05:11pm).

Table 12 shows disagreement was present in 24.5 per cent of overall comments with varied results across the blogs. The highest was Susie O’Brien with 64.5 per cent of comments coded for disagreement and Miranda Devine with 53.0 per cent. In contrast, agreement was present in 8.5 per cent of comments. The highest were the outlier Simon Benson with 43.8 per cent, Miranda Devine with 15.0 per cent and Tim Blair with 14.3 per cent. The overall score for agreement is about one third of that obtained for disagreement and would have been lower if it were not for the high score on Simon Benson. (Note that comments were also coded depending on whether they showed disagreement with the blogger or whether they showed disagreement with another commenter but these are not tabled. Overall, 10.2 per cent of comments showed disagreement with the blogger and 14.8 per cent showed disagreement with another commenter; 3.2 per cent showed agreement with the blogger, while 5.3 per cent showed agreement with another commenter.)

Table 12 Disagreement and agreement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLOG</th>
<th>no. of comments</th>
<th>disagreement</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>agreement</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie O’Brien</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>64.5%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Bolt</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meganomics</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53.0%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Blair</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mumble</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt Instrument</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodly Fabric</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Penberthy</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>1464</td>
<td>358</td>
<td></td>
<td>120</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results show high disagreement in most of the threads. Disagreement in a conversation, the articulation of different positions, is considered to be vital for deliberation (Wales et al. 2010). It is a sign there are participants who have distinct and differing views on a particular issue and ‘suggests heterogeneity of perspectives’ (Stromer-Galley 2007:5). However, Stromer-Galley (2005:18) speculates that discussion of a ‘specific policy’ rather than general issues such as war or homosexuality might generate more explicit agreement and disagreement. Note that the asylum seekers issue is a specific policy issue, and perhaps discussion on such topics generates a lot of disagreement. Regardless, these results contrast with other studies of blogs or online political forums where little explicit disagreement has been found, for example, Stromer-Galley (2007), Wales et al. (2010) and Habegger (2011). Stromer-Galley (2005:18) found very low scores for disagreement on Yahoo! chat, except for one thread which scored 10 per cent, although this conversation focused on a ‘highly specific policy’. A more recent study by Habegger (2011) analysed the deliberative capacity of A-list blogs Daily Kos and Red State and found little disagreement with other perspectives. Habegger (2011:127) concluded that participants were merely ‘shouting their opinion into the space, with vague reference to things others have said’.

The question of whether there is disagreement is important because of the pervasive view that political blogs are echo chambers where like-minded people echo each other in agreement and where opposition views are silenced (Sunstein 2008). Participants with alternative perspectives can mitigate the polarisation effect (Sunstein 2003) and may lead participants to strengthen their arguments (Stromer-Galley 2007). In order to determine which blogs were echo chambers, a ratio of 3.5 to 1, agreement to disagreement, was used. This was the ratio used by Gilbert, Bergstrom and Karahalios (2009) in an analysis of 1,000 comments on 33 top blogs of different genres. They only coded comments which showed disagreement with the blogger’s post whereas I also included comments which disagreed with other commenters. None of the 13 blogs in my study could be called an echo chamber using this ratio, with only three blogs scoring higher for agreement than disagreement, and even then the ratio was less than 2 to 1. These results contrast with that of Gilbert et al. (2009) who found that in the five political blogs 47 per cent of comments showed agreement and only 13 per cent showed disagreement. Interestingly, George Megalogenis said he could see the traps in that a blogger may want to ‘collect like minds who slap you on the back each time’, but
claims he tends not to pay much attention to compliments but is very interested in someone who disagrees. The results for *Andrew Bolt* contrast with the discourse analysis of three blogs by Mummery and Rodan (2013:26) who observed that it was the one closest to an echo chamber: commenters on the blog are ‘typically either considered “like-minded” or disagreeable “scum” as a consequence of dividing bloggers [commenters] into opposing camps there is less deliberation about political issues’.

**Flaming**

While disagreement is an important indicator of deliberation, a high level of flaming simply mitigates the benefits of a discussion which may have high disagreement. Flaming has been defined as ‘hostile intentions characterized by words of profanity, obscenity, and insults that inflict harm to a person or an organization resulting from uninhibited behaviour’ (Alonzo & Aiken 2004:205). The ‘flaming’ code included any statement that attacked the person rather than the argument. For example, these comments were coded as flaming:

> Wow loc, best you can come up with and still no argument. I’m tipping the ‘L’ stands for loser (posted by Jenno, *Susie O’Brien*, 18 October 2011, 12:34pm).

> You are a moron DoH … you are a slimy Liebor voter … I’ll type slowly so that you can read it - TPV’s and Offshore Processing STOPPED THE BOATS. AND if, as you state, the disruption program stopped the boats - WHY THE F**K AREN’T LIEBOR DOING THAT NOW?????? Blind fool! 😛 (posted by Fence sitter, *Piers Akerman*, 10 September 2011, 09:27pm).

Although there is a pervasive assumption that blog discussions involve a high level of flaming, the results in Table 13 reveal little personal attack except for the blogs of David Penberthy, Susie O’Brien and Miranda Devine, with the latter the highest at 43.0 per cent.
Four of the six blogs on The Daily Telegraph had over 10 per cent of comments that contained statements that were coded as flaming, with Miranda Devine having the highest score. Interestingly, Devine said she ‘tries to keep the conversation civil’ and claims that about ‘10 per cent of comments never see the light of day’ and that swearing and abuse ‘don’t cut it’. And yet such offensive remarks as these were allowed:

I wouldn’t lower myself to address the insane ravings of a scumbag like you [...] you are such a racist and bigot (posted by Jack Richards, Miranda Devine, 8 September 2011, 04:39pm).

Jawohl!! Heil Hitler, Jack Richards!! … You’ve … missed the 3rd Reich by 70yrs but never mind there is a replacement. It’s called the Loony Bin!! (posted by Tim007, Miranda Devine, 9 September 2011, 05:39pm).

Your hatred of Howard has become laughable and how you can support this inept Government makes me think your mental health is not to good. Relax take your meds and you will be ok (posted by gordo, Miranda Devine, 8 September 2011, 07:25pm).

Much of the flaming was directed at the bloggers themselves. For example:

Susie O no Brains, I have read all your replies, and I still think that you are not only an idiot, but actually proud of your stupidity. Heaven help our Australia with dunder clunkins like you in it (posted by MC, Susie O’Brien, 19 October 2011, 02:25am).
And you’re an incompetent journo who can’t face facts. What sort of twit writes stories about climate change and complains about cost of power? No don’t publish this comment and show how even more inept you are (posted by PaulC, David Penberthy, 6 September 2011, 01:28am)

Although to my knowledge there are no other studies which have systematically analysed flaming on blogs, Mummery and Rodan’s (2013:32) study of three Australian political blogs in August 2010 found ‘ad hominen attacks were commonplace’ on Andrew Bolt’s blog, and these were aimed at other commenters as well as Australians holding different views. (Note, in my study I only coded for attacks on blog participants or the blogger.) However, all the examples they provide are of attacks on non-participants except for a comment by ‘Scott’ who calls ‘Trolly’ a ‘grub’. Although Robertson and McLaughlin (2011:112) did not code specifically for flaming in their analysis of six independent U.K. blogs, the one with the most offensive language was Guido Fawkes and the researchers were surprised so many of the comments survived moderation, with 63 per cent containing insults. One study which looked at comments on 16 U.S. newspaper sites, looked (in part) at the ‘flames’, although three different types of attack were coded: attacks towards the journalist, character attacks towards the news media and attacks towards other commenters. Blom et al.’s (2011) analysis of 2,237 comments found that five per cent of comments contained attacks on the journalist and 11 per cent attacking another commenter.

The level of flaming is highly dependent on the moderation of the blogger. One of the highest for flaming is Susie O’Brien at the Herald Sun, which is not surprising as O’Brien is passionate about allowing as many comments as possible through the gates in order to reflect ‘the integrity’ of the process of blogging. Comments such as ‘you’re an idiot’ or ‘you don’t know anything’ do not bother her as long as they are directed towards her, and it is only ‘very rarely’ that she does not put up a comment. While Wright (2012a:15) questions whether at least some of what is ‘characterised negatively as flaming is actually performing a positive role’ and that people get personal about issues that are ‘increasingly close to home’, it is difficult to see what positive role such comments as these can contribute. However, Wright’s question does raise broader issues about how to theorise and analyse the nature of political communication online. Wall’s (2005:163) early study of political blogs – rather than likening them to
Habermas’ public sphere – described the postings as a ‘neighbourhood bar’, where tavern-based discussions can be ‘spontaneous, featuring occasional insights but also arguments and occasionally obnoxious comments’.

**Disagreement and flaming**

I also noticed the two blogs which scored the highest for disagreement – *Miranda Devine* and *Susie O’Brien* – had high scores for flaming. Clearly, disagreement as it stands alone is not a good indicator of deliberation, as a blog conversation with a high score for disagreement may also have a high score for flaming. I decided to re-examine the comments coded for disagreement to see how many of these were also coded as flaming. (Note, the same statement would not be coded for both, but some comments include a range of statements.) Table 14 shows the percentage of those comments coded for disagreement which had no flaming statements (see green) and those with flaming statements (see red). The total number of comments on each thread is in brackets after the blog name. Note the outlier *Joe Hildebrand* which not only had a short thread (16 comments) but also had only a single score for both disagreement and for flaming and these were from the same comment.

**Table 14 Disagreement with and without flaming**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog Name</th>
<th>Disagreement + fl</th>
<th>Disagreement - fl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand (1)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Penberthy (9)</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine (53)</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie O’Brien (69)</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman (17)</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Bolt (37)</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson (4)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megagonomics (18)</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider (66)</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodly Fabric (12)</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Blair (9)</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt Instrument (10)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mumble (33)</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Numbers in brackets = total number of comments coded for disagreement)
What is surprising is the large number of comments coded for disagreement and which at the same time had no flaming (the exceptions being Miranda Devine and David Penberthy). The highest was Mumble where 91 per cent of comments coded for disagreement contained no flaming statements. Note that its author, Peter Brent, has a strict moderation policy as discussed in Chapter 6 and when I told him I had analysed his thread on the asylum seeker issue, he said he would have probably cut half the comments. And on Andrew Bolt’s blog only 27 per cent of the comments coded for disagreement contained flaming, although he told me that some of his most published readers are ones that disagree:

It’s a bit freaky, it’s like they are sitting up there paid to watch for every post and be the first to comment, to knock it down; you feel a bit stalked, but you have a look at the one I did the other day on the Bible there were probably more against than for, and if they are supposed to be my acolytes how come they are so angry with me? There is room for a debate and that’s fine, but the intemperate nature of some of it, well what do you do?

Respect

In contrast to flaming, the showing of respect towards other participants (and their arguments) is a prerequisite for ‘serious listening’ and essential for deliberation (Steenbergen et al. 2003:26). These two comments were coded for respect, to a commenter and a blogger respectively:

There’s a lot of misinformation out there about the High Court’s decision. Thanks Piers 😊 (posted by ‘Laura’, Piers Akerman, 09 September 2011, 08:30am).

Thank you Laura, appreciate the links. Recommended listening. You are a special lady, Laura (posted by ‘proud aussie’, Piers Akerman, 10 September 2011, 09:18pm).

As can be seen in Table 15, 9.9 per cent of comments showed explicit respect to either the blogger or another commenter. Note the high percentage of respect towards George Megalogenis, yet oddly on this thread there were no comments which showed explicit respect towards another commenter. Although this could be attributed to the version of the Expression Engine used on that site which does not allow for a commenter to post a
direct reply to another commenter, but does allow for direct responses to the blogger, the results for Jack the Insider contradict this. This blog revealed the highest score for respect towards both commenters and the blogger.

Table 15 Respect by commenters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>No. of comments</th>
<th>Respect to blogger</th>
<th>Respect to commenter</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meganomics</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Blair</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Penberthy</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodly Fabric</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mumble</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie O’Brien</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Bolt</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt Instrument</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1464</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that only explicit respect was coded, and the score of 10 per cent is relatively high. Robertson and McLaughlin (2011) used an indicator which they called ‘Positive Framing’, which includes not only comments that show respect but also those which seek to clarify by restating or quoting another’s key points. Even then, the score was only 4 per cent average across the 12 sites (these included 6 independent blogs and 6 newspaper sites). The top site was The Glasgow Herald with 11.8 per cent of comments showing not only respect, but seeking clarification.

In addition, the responses of the bloggers were also coded for respect. As can be seen in Table 16, 27 (12.8 per cent) of the blogger responses showed respect towards commenters.
Table 16 Respect by blogger

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blogger</th>
<th>total</th>
<th>respect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Susie O’Brien</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Megalogenis</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Brent</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Kenny</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Birmingham</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although all the four bloggers at *The Australian* showed respect, the stand-out overall was the *Herald-Sun*’s Susie O’Brien, with respect apparent in 40.6 per cent of her 32 responses. Some of these include: ‘Thanks Sherro. I know we don’t agree, but thanks for your considered, thoughtful post’; ‘Well I don’t agree but thanks for your thoughtful comments, as always. People are forgetting this is a very multicultural society already, regardless of gov policies’; ‘Thanks agreed, nice to hear from you’; and ‘Thanks for that, much appreciated at this time of night!’ However, such a high level of respect was not reciprocated by her commenters, who showed little explicit respect, especially towards each other. This blog also had one of the highest scores for flaming and half of the comments coded for disagreement had flaming statements within them.

George Megalogenis also scored high for civility, with 17.9 per cent of his responses showing respect. For example, ‘Thanks for posting, Susan’ and ‘Marilyn, note the edits. Normally I’d delete you outright for breaking the rule, but the substance of your post is correct so I make an exception this time’. In contrast to Susie O’Brien, his blog also scored one of the highest for the level of respect shown by commenters, as well as a low level of flaming. Although one would hope that if the blogger sets an example of civil discussion – and shows respect towards the audience – this then will encourage others to be respectful as well, this has not happened here. A more important factor seems to be the role of moderation, as Megalogenis is much more stringent in his approach to moderation than O’Brien.
Use of questions

The showing of respect and the asking of questions both fall under what Gastil (2008) describes as ‘obligation to consider’. The asking of questions for clarification or information is considered important for deliberation as it indicates that an individual sees themselves as part of a discussion and they value other participants (Manosevitch & Walker 2009). Comments were coded for this indicator if the questions were related to the issue of asylum seekers. For example:

Why can’t asylum seekers be processed in Australia, in humane conditions? It’s absurd how much media coverage boat people get when they have no material impact on people’s lives (posted by Richard of London, Piers Akerman, 08 September 2011, 11:01pm).

As well, responses from bloggers were also coded. For example:

Then why is it that 70 to 97% of cases, boat arrivals are genuine refugees but only 20% of plane arrivals are? (posted by Susie O’Brien, Susie O’Brien, 18 October 2011, 10:04am)

Table 17 shows that, overall, questions were fairly frequent with 14.7 per cent of comments containing questions relevant to the topic at hand. Nine blogs had over 10 per cent of comments containing questions – the highest was Blunt Instrument which had 28.4 per cent. Four of the nine journalists also posed questions, and these were in 10 per cent or more of their responses. Susie O’Brien asked the most, and not surprisingly she scored the highest for the previous indicator of showing respect. These results contrast with other studies such as the one by Milioni, Vadratsikas and Papa (2012) which looked at 3,513 comments on nine Greek news sites. In only two per cent of comments did users ask questions or make factual statements. Online there is a danger that participants will merely talk past each other, without regard for the contributions of others.

Not surprisingly, the four bloggers above who responded to a reader’s comment with a question were amongst the five who showed explicit respect (the other was Chris Kenny). These five bloggers also scored the highest of the nine bloggers who engaged
with their audience, as mentioned in the previous chapter. With the exception of O’Brien, all bloggers who posed questions and showed respect were from *The Australian*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLOG</th>
<th>no. of comments</th>
<th>no. of questions</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blunt Instrument</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Bolt</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie O’Brien</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meganomics</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mumble</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goody Fabric</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Blair</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Penberthy</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1464</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>14.75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLOGGER</th>
<th>no. of responses</th>
<th>no. of questions</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Susie O’Brien</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Megalogenis (Meganomics)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Brent (Mumble)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Argumentation**

Rational argument is one of the cornerstones of deliberative and political theory. In studies of deliberation, reasoned argument is considered to be opinions which are supported by reasons and evidence (Stromer-Galley 2005). These are usually contrasted with statements or opinions that give no justification or argumentation that is unreasonable, even offensive and include ‘fallacious symptomatic argumentation’ (Richardson & Stanyer 2011:996). Examples of these three levels of argumentation are given below:
A comment coded for reasoned opinion:

Overseas processing in Malaysia, PNG or Nauru is a humane solution. Encouraging people to attempt a long sea voyage in leaky unseaworthy boats will only create more drowning deaths such as when that boat broke up in front of the TV cameras off Xmas Island last December (posted by Lobes, Blunt Instrument, 1 September 2011, 10:43am)

A comment where there was no justification:

If she doesn’t take Abbott’s, offer...she is toast. Irrespective of your Labor bias, Peter (posted by Monque, Mumble, 5 September 2011, 01:30pm)

Two comments which show unreasonable justification:

Once you allow cockroaches into your home it becomes nigh impossible to remove them (posted by Denis, Susie O’Brien, 18 October 2011, 01:51pm)

Bring back the white Australian policy, we dont need any of those filthy arabs in this country (posted by Lorpat, Susie O’Brien, 18 October, 08:03pm).

The results of three codings are shown in Tables 18, 19 and 20.
Table 18 Reasoned justified opinion

Table 19 Opinion unjustified

Table 20 Unreasonable statements
As Tables 18 and 19 both show there are clear differences between those blogs on the quality broadsheet sites and those on tabloid sites. On seven of the blogs, 25 per cent or more of total comments resorted to reasoned opinion. The top five blogs were the four on *The Australian* as well as *Blunt Instrument*, the only Fairfax Media blog. Three of *The Australian*’s blogs had over 50 per cent of comments containing statements that were reasoned opinion. The blogs that scored the lowest were the eight blogs on the two sites of the tabloid newspapers *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Herald Sun*.

A similar pattern appears with unreasonable opinions as shown on Table 20. Over 40 per cent of comments on six blogs contained statements that were unreasonable, and these were all on the *Herald Sun* and *The Daily Telegraph*. Aside from the outlier *Joe Hildebrand* which contained none (albeit it was a short thread of 16 comments), the blogs which contained the least unreasonable statements – less than 20 per cent – were the four blogs on the site of the quality broadsheet *The Australian*. This pattern is not apparent with opinions that were unjustified. These were less frequent than the other two indicators, although eight blogs had these present in more than 20 per cent of comments. As Table 19 shows, while *Tim Blair* and *Joe Hildebrand* scored over 40 per cent, the rest were between 7.5 per cent and 35.1 per cent.

The results are not surprising considering the journalists’ different attitudes to moderation as discussed in Chapter 6. With the exception of Andrew Bolt (at the time he was receiving help from a moderating team), all the journalists from the *Herald Sun* and *The Daily Telegraph* who were interviewed were clearly more lenient in their attitudes than their counterparts on *The Australian*. For example, Susie O’Brien said that if you are going to blog ‘you have to do everything you can to reflect the integrity of that process and to put up as many comments as possible’. It is somewhat surprising for *Blunt Instrument* because at the time of the analysis John Birmingham told me he was allowing almost all comments through. It was only in August 2012 that Birmingham (2012) warned readers he had had enough and from then on would be swinging the ‘mighty Ban Hammer’ and all comments that were ill-mannered and abusive would be rejected.
In a study of comments on articles discussing Islam and immigration on online tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, Richardson and Stanyer (2011) found frequent use of fallacious symptomatic arguments. Rather than debating the issue – comments on Sharia law that had been made by the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams – commenters used that as a spring board to make generalisations such as ‘Britain’s terminal decline’. Richardson and Stanyer (2011) suggest that the subject of multiculturalism is especially prone to attracting ‘vituperative comments’ and the vast majority of comments failed ‘even basic standards of reasonableness’ and were a ‘paradigm example of how not to engage in critical discussion’ (Richardson & Stanyer 2011:995). Indeed, Jack the Insider said that he found with some topics – especially the issue of asylum seekers – people do become a bit irrational:

I didn’t really understand the fury that this issue creates and I find it most disturbing actually. I guess it comes down to a lack of political leadership on this issue, and the dog whistling that has occurred over the years tends to really hit home. There is something that rattles the Australian psyche a bit from boats, it’s not people arriving by planes but boats, there’s something quite deeply xenophobic about all of that. There are times when you get a sense of what people are thinking and it can be a bit disturbing.

And so it is surprising that few comments on the blogs on The Australian resorted to fallacious arguments or generalisations, even though the topic was the emotive issue of asylum seekers. In addition to looking at whether opinions were justified, it is also useful to determine how opinions have been justified. Two different sources of justification which can be offered are recourse to personal experience or information from external sources or authorities.

**Personal experience**

While many scholars tend to understand deliberation in terms of purely rational discourse, some theorists of deliberative democracy argue that alternative forms of communication such as personal testimony are valid forms of justification (Bächtiger et al. 2010). Comments were coded as personal experience if they used personal experience as justification:
GM, family on my wife’s side dug ditches when they arrived from Europe in the 1950s. It worked for them and I reckon it could work now (posted by Backyard Accountant, Meganomics, 27 September 2011, 05:20pm)

I don’t know where you live Peter but I live in Western Sydney and when you see your entire suburb change into an ethnic enclave (with all that entails), within the space of two years, immigration and boat people is an enormous issue for the remaining residents (posted by Augur, Mumble, 5 September 2011, 11:26am)

The results in Table 21 show that users seldom drew on personal experience as justification. Only 5.5 per cent of comments overall contained references to personal experiences, and three blogs had none. However, the results are skewed somewhat by the outlier of Simon Benson which scored the highest but had only 16 comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog Name</th>
<th>No. of Comments</th>
<th>Personal Experience</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie O'Brien</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mumble</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meganomics</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Bolt</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Penberthy</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt Instrument</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Blair</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodly Fabric</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1464</strong></td>
<td><strong>81</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.5%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is surprising, given the divide that has existed within theories of deliberative democracy, where feminists in particular have argued that personal experience is a valid and necessary form of justification (Young 2000). The emphasis on rationality – ‘a polite, orderly, dispassionate, gentlemanly argument’ (Young 2000:49) – can overlook
other forms of communication such as ‘the affective, the poetic, the humorous, the ironic’ (Dahlgren 2005:156). Interestingly, the blogs of the two female journalists, Susie O’Brien and Miranda Devine, scored amongst the highest. With such little recourse to the use of personal experience to justify opinions, the question arises as to its relevance as an indicator of deliberation on blogs. Or perhaps it needs further exploration across a range of different blog-genres, particularly the generalist blogs which can often have posts on political issues.

The results from other studies are mixed. In the study of Wales et al. (2010:21), which looked at deliberation on a specially constructed online forum where citizens were invited to participate, in the few cases where justification was offered, participants tended to ‘appeal to their own personal experience rather than any other source of legitimation’. Yet a study of online comments on two U.S. regional newspapers found only 10 per cent of comments incorporated personal experience. These were in three discussion threads; the remaining six had none (Manosevitch & Walker 2009). And in an early pilot study of Yahoo! Chat, Stromer-Galley (2005:10) did not even code for personal narrative because direct observation of the forum revealed ‘virtually no personal stories’.

**Use of sources**

Habegger (2011) argues that for there to be a high quality of deliberation, contributors need to reference other sources wherever possible in order to justify their claims and opinions. A comment was coded for sourcing if a commenter supported their claim or opinion regarding the asylum seeker issue with mention of sources such as websites, books, television and radio. For example:


Table 22 shows that only 5.9 per cent of comments had references to sources. Although three blogs had about 10 per cent of comments containing sources, on six blogs there is
little or no such sourcing. Susie O’Brien had only one out of 138 comments that referenced a source.

**Table 22 Use of sources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commenter</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Reference to Source</th>
<th>Reference %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tim Blair</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meganomics</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodly Fabric</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Bolt</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mumble</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt Instrument</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie O’Brien</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Penberthy</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1464</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of sources were links: 57 of the 86 comments coded for sources had links and these were to both mainstream and alternative news sites – including overseas sites. This contradicts Wall’s (2005) claim that journalist-blogs seldom have links as this discourages visitors to leave their sites. What was not investigated was if any of the journalists actively discouraged commenters from using links, although several years ago Jack the Insider (2009) replied to one of his readers ‘we do have a sort of, kind of ban on links, so many do cut and paste. I wish the excising and posting was a little briefer however’45. Ironically, in the current analysis, his blog had the most comments coded for sourcing and all of these were links to a range of sites; in addition, there were a further 20 links, which were not coded as they were off-topic.

Although not included in the above table, three journalists used links in their posts: Tim Blair linked twice to News Limited sites and once to The Age; Chris Kenny linked to

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45 Jack the Insider’s response to ‘Richard Young’ on 25 May 2009 at 10:02am.
News Limited sites including two of his previous posts, and George Megalogenis linked to *The Age* and the ABC.

**Off-topic**

This chapter ends with the results of coding for off-topic. Off-topic refers to contributions which are not related to the specific matter under discussion. Deliberation theory posits that if a discussion goes off-topic, then deliberation cannot meet its objective of ‘deep consideration of an issue’ (Stromer-Galley 2007). Habegger (2011:40) also points out that if a discussion on a blog goes off-topic then it is difficult for new participants to identify what the participants are deliberating about, and argues that ‘political blogging communities are structured in such a way as to reinforce the value of staying on topic’. Comments coded for this indicator include:

Looking forward to a couple of days at Floriade. Yah! (posted by Hermine, *Joe Hildebrand*, 21 September 2011, 12:52pm)

What’s with the weather tho’, it’s colder than a mother-in-laws kiss- sleet, hail and wind (posted by IQ, *Jack the Insider*, 15 September 2011, 10:22am)

And a blogger-response coded as off-topic is this reply by Piers Akerman:

The evidence only indicates that as a union official he was entitled to put hookers on his credit card (*Piers Akerman*, 9 September 2011, 01:18am).

Because seven blogs had no off-topic comments, only the results for those with off-topic comments are provided in Table 23. Of the total of 1,464 comments, 211 or 14.4 per cent were off-topic. Although three had small percentages, these contrast with those with comparatively high percentages: Meganomics, *Jack the Insider* and *Piers Akerman*. These blogs were also the only ones where journalists themselves posted off-topic responses. Almost half of Piers Akerman’s responses to readers were off-topic, while 15 of the 18 responses made by George Megalogenis were off-topic. While a few of these were on football, many were on the Tax Forum[^46] to take place the following week (4-5 October 2011).

Table 23 Off-topic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>commenter</th>
<th>user comments</th>
<th>off-topic statements</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Piers Akerman</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meganomics</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt Instrument</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, the extent to which a blog discussion goes off-topic is dependent on moderation. At the end of each post, Peter Brent (2010b) instructs his readers to keep ‘comments short and on topic please. No partisan sloganeering’. It is not surprising no off-topic comments were found on the Mumble thread.

It would seem that with off-topic comments being absent from most comment-threads this would contribute to the deliberativeness of the discussions. Interestingly, feedback from Megalogenis and Jack the Insider suggests there may indeed be some value in blog conversations going off-topic. For Jack the Insider, letting comments go off-topic is a convenient way to moderate a blog:

I’ll have people come in with footy tips, and I’ll allow it. It doesn’t bother me at all. It’s a sort of ongoing community of commenters, ongoing exchange of comments about football and racing and god knows what, whatever sports things are going on at the moment. [...] I often refer to the blog as a sort of public bar conversation, and so in that context it’s quite reasonable (if you extend that metaphor) for people to come along while you are having a conversation with perhaps two or three people over a beer, someone will come along and talk to you about the football or racing or some other thing.
Megalogenis said while his preference would be to keep everyone on-topic this was difficult to maintain, and it becomes a time management question:

Sometimes you just let the comments go, the conversation goes in a completely different direction. Some of those threads stay open for a long time, sometimes a week, or a week and a half. Usually what drives this [going off-topic] are the regulars, the dozen or so regulars who make three, four, five or six comments on a thread. I’m becoming much more familiar with some of my regulars: you can trust them in some areas, whereas in others you’ve just got to snip them.

While many of the off-topic comments were on other political issues, some were on topics such as football. For example, Megalogenis wrote: ‘no sledging of Collingwood supporters allowed on this thread just yet; give them a week and then we let rip’ (Meganomics, 3 October, 01:54pm). The number of off-topic comments in this study is similar to that found by Ruiz et al. (2011) who looked at comments on five news sites of which 13.6 per cent of comments were off-topic. Pre-moderated sites had more focus, with the NYT scoring 5.5 per cent and La Repubblica (France) only .3 per cent. The Guardian, which uses post-moderation, had the highest with 28.5 per cent. Unlike the blogs in my study, which were all pre-moderated by the journalists, comments to an article on these newspaper sites were not moderated by the journalist who wrote them, but either by a team of staff journalists or outsourced to a company that follows the criteria set by the newsroom, although The Guardian hires readers that apply for the job and telework for a salary (Ruiz et al. 2011:472). What is important here is that – as Jack the Insider pointed out – blogs have been likened to public bar discussions. Blog discussions are not parliamentary debates where it is critical that debate stays on topic. In blogs other factors are at play, such as building community. This again raises the question of how to theorise and analyse the nature of political communication online, and particularly on blogs (Wright 2012a).

Conclusion

This study analysed a very limited sample of comments to assess the quality of discussion on 13 blogs from the normative perspective of Habermas’ discursive ethics. The results of the coding of various indicators of deliberation are mixed. While some of the comments feature ad hominen arguments and ranting, there are moments of rich political discussion. A few of the indicators do not seem relevant to analysing blogs – or
at least the comment-threads sampled here – and in particular off-topic. Ten of the 13 blogs had either no or few comments off-topic. Strangely, the blogs which scored the highest for disagreement and reasoned opinion – also had the highest proportion of comments off-topic. On six blogs, commenters rarely, if at all, mentioned or gave links to sources to back up arguments; similarly, only 5.54 per cent of comments used personal experiences to justify their opinions. That personal experiences were rarely drawn upon to justify arguments and opinions may perhaps be due to what Jericho (2012a:51) calls ‘the blokey’ nature of the blogosphere. Only two out of the 13 blogs are authored by women, and although it was not possible from user-names to determine the proportion of male to female contributors one presumes the audience too is male-dominated. A few years ago Crikey blogger Possum Comitatus (2009) bemoaned not only the lack of Australian female bloggers but also the lack of female participation with the ratio of male to female comments on Crikey ranging ‘between about 4 to 1 on a good day, through to 10 to 1 depending on the topic’.

The relatively low levels of agreement and the presence of disagreement on all blogs suggests considerable heterogeneity in the views expressed and in this respect none of the blogs could be described as echo chambers. However, in some – for example, Miranda Devine and David Penberthy – this positive indicator of deliberation is cancelled out with the high levels of flaming. One could hardly say there was much deliberation occurring on those blogs where there was little respect which is a significant element of deliberation. With deliberation an ideal benchmark, it could be argued that the quality of conversation on the various blogs ranged along a continuum from cacophony to deliberation, or ‘excellent’, ‘bad’, ‘better’ or ‘good enough’ deliberation (Bächtiger et al. 2010:37). The discussions on The Australian’s four blogs and Fairfax Media’s solitary political blog were the most argumentatively reasonable and civil whereas in contrast those on the two tabloid sites were dominated by statements that offered no reasons to back their claims and statements that attacked others (with Tim Blair an exception as it had a low score for flaming). Blunt Instrument, Mumble, Meganomics, Goodly Fabric and Jack the Insider were clearly towards the ‘good enough’ end of the deliberation continuum. Broadsheet and tabloid newspapers often have different readers and ‘different journalistic values and styles’ (Richardson & Stanyer 2011:985). As Susie O’Brien noted, The Herald Sun accesses the mass market; with its broad readership it tries to reach the ‘ordinary person’ whereas other papers
may want to reach lawyers and doctors. However, the differences between blogs on tabloid sites and those on broadsheet sites are due in part to their moderation. As Wright and Street (2007:856) found, the choice of moderation style is a factor in ‘shaping the quality and usefulness of online debates’. This thesis concludes with an examination of Twitter and its use by journalist-bloggers and the future of blogs in light of newer social media platforms (such as Twitter) that are assuming a central role in a fast-changing media landscape.
Chapter 9  Twitter and the future of blogs

Introduction

In recent years, Twitter has become an increasingly important tool for journalists and is emerging as more influential and useful than Facebook in terms of engagement with their audience (including politicians), sharing information and disseminating the latest breaking news (Bruns 2012a; Jericho 2012a). Some media commentators have claimed the death of the blog, overtaken by the short form of Twitter which allows for easy and less time-consuming communication than the often-lengthy postings prevalent in blogs (Lomborg 2011). During the course of the study two popular independent blogs – Larvatus Prodeo and Pure Poison – closed down. At the time Bahnisch (2012) and Quiggin (2012) argued that political debate has migrated from blogs to social media platforms. Zivkovic (2013) notes that the quantity of commenting, especially on blogs, has sharply decreased in recent years, because discussion of the article or post is occurring elsewhere on social media. Twitter is much more important now than when I was planning my thesis. The question of whether there is a future for blogs in light of the increasingly popularity of Twitter became apparent and so I decided to question journalists about their views and to obtain some – albeit limited – quantitative data on their use of Twitter if applicable. I also interviewed the social media editors of the various mastheads except for The Australian because at the time such a position had yet to be created. Instead, I interviewed their social media reporter. The creation of positions of social media editors is a recent phenomenon and news organisations are increasingly using such editors as a core component of their digital strategy as journalists learn to embrace social media (Hermida 2013; Bergin 2012). In addition, in order to determine whether there is a trend of blogs declining (or dying), I decided to do a second mapping of the Australian mainstream media blogosphere as of June 2012, and also a final update of only political blogs as of June 2013.

Twitter and Australia’s main newspaper organisations

While exact figures are difficult to obtain, the majority of Australian journalists are now on Twitter. According to data obtained from social media editors, by June 2012 Twitter
accounts were held by approximately 150 journalists across *The Age* and *SMH*, 70 journalists at *The West Australian*, 102 journalists at the *Herald Sun*, 60 at *The Australian*, 74 at the *Courier-Mail* and approximately 80 per cent of journalists at *The Daily Telegraph*. Note these figures include journalists who write about issues other than politics such as finance, travel and life-style. Jericho (2012a) estimates there are over 200 journalists on Twitter who cover federal politics and national affairs, although this figure includes journalists from all media organisations including commercial broadcasters and the ABC. Admittedly, some are not particularly active.

Several social media editors, including Georgia Waters (*SMH*) and Louise Burke (*The West Australian*), said they encourage journalists to get on Twitter. Cath Webber, online editor for *The Daily Telegraph*, believes it is ‘absolutely fundamental’ for journalists, as it is ‘massive breaking news’. Burke said journalists are encouraged to chat with people about what they are working on or what they have just written. Interestingly, there are no blogs on *The West Australian* (although, as mentioned some columns were mislabelled as such) and since mid-2012 columns and articles ceased to be enabled for comments. As the moderation of the latter rely on moderators, whether comments were disabled due to staff cuts (*The Australian* 2012) that occurred about that time is not known. Regardless, Burke believes political debate has migrated from blogs to Twitter.

People would rather have an open discussion where they can talk as if they were in a real conversation, and it’s much faster on Twitter [than on blogs]. You don’t have to sit there and wait for other people to respond, or to get through the moderation. You can have your say on your own account.

**Journalist-bloggers and Twitter**

Of the 13 journalist-bloggers in this study, three are not on Twitter – Piers Akerman, Tim Blair and Andrew Bolt. Susie O’Brien (2012) joined on 22 December 2012, with her first tweet ‘So if I am now on Twitter, does it make me a twit ... or a twat???’ There are, however, Twitter spoof accounts with 20 accounts parodying Bolt and two others called ‘Bolt Comments’ and ‘Piers’ Comments’ where some of the tweets are comments from the archives of these blogs. There is also a Twitter account called ‘Tim Blair
Blogging in the Mainstream  Mary Garden

Blog’47, an unmonitored feed account for Tim Blair’s blog; the profile says ‘Contact Tim in the comments there and pester him to join Twitter.’ Of the three who are not on Twitter, only Piers Akerman actively engages with readers on his blog; Andrew Bolt and Tim Blair no longer engage. Table 24 lists the dates the other ten journalists joined, their number of followers and total number of tweets as at 6 June 2012. Clearly, there are large differences in their usages. Chris Kenny, John Birmingham and Peter Brent are avid users who tweet 100-200 times per week, sometimes even more, whereas David Penberthy and Simon Benson may tweet only several times per week.

Table 24 On board Twitter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>date joined</th>
<th>followers at 6/06/12</th>
<th>followers at 6/06/13</th>
<th>total tweets at 6/06/12</th>
<th>total tweets at 6/06/13</th>
<th>average per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David Penberthy</td>
<td>6/03/09</td>
<td>15800</td>
<td>21800</td>
<td>2228</td>
<td>2398</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hildebrand</td>
<td>13/03/09</td>
<td>20300</td>
<td>40900</td>
<td>11300</td>
<td>15400</td>
<td>78.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Birmingham</td>
<td>2/04/09</td>
<td>18800</td>
<td>24400</td>
<td>26400</td>
<td>36700</td>
<td>198.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda Devine</td>
<td>17/04/09</td>
<td>15000</td>
<td>22000</td>
<td>4126</td>
<td>8181</td>
<td>77.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack the Insider</td>
<td>8/04/09</td>
<td>2910</td>
<td>3980</td>
<td>4751</td>
<td>7229</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Benson</td>
<td>21/09/09</td>
<td>1834</td>
<td>4001</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Brent</td>
<td>20/02/10</td>
<td>5404</td>
<td>6572</td>
<td>12000</td>
<td>21200</td>
<td>176.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Kenny</td>
<td>26/10/10</td>
<td>4368</td>
<td>8105</td>
<td>13500</td>
<td>26000</td>
<td>240.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Megalogenis</td>
<td>23/03/12</td>
<td>6502</td>
<td>19400*</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>4585*</td>
<td>72.8*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie O’Brien</td>
<td>17/12/12</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Megalogenis resigned from The Australian in November, 2012.

Most of the journalist-bloggers joined in early 2009, which according to Jericho (2012a) was the first large wave of Australian journalists going on board Twitter. The Victorian bushfires was ‘the big event that convinced journalists to join Twitter’, with The Australian’s Caroline Overington using the platform to relate what she saw as she drove around affected areas (Jericho 2012a:192). Simon Benson (2009) joined later that year, tweeting on 21 September 2009: ‘I have no idea. How does this bloody thing work?’ The second smaller wave was before and after the 2010 election (Jericho 2012a:192).

Megalogenis, however, only joined in March 2012 and told me he did not want to be distracted during the writing of his book The Australian Moment. He is now a regular tweeter, with a growing group of followers. In contrast, some of the journalists who joined in 2009 are infrequent tweeters and have fewer followers. With the exception of

47 Twitter account of Tim Blair Blog: https://twitter.com/TimBlairBlog
David Penberthy, all appear to be using Twitter more frequently. Notably, Simon Benson had made only 59 tweets in the 33 months up to 6 June 2012, but in the next year tweeted 204 times.

Several of the journalists said they use Twitter to keep in touch with the audience. Joe Hildebrand finds it to be an ‘extremely convenient, mobile and user-friendly way’ to find out what people are thinking and also to let them know what he is up to. Shoba Rao, the former Social Media Editor for The Daily Telegraph, remarked that Hildebrand is in his sort of ‘silö’ on Twitter where he can talk about a range of things, agitate and aggravate people, but also ‘take some of the acid out by giving them a re-tweet to show that he’s acknowledged them’. As well as engaging with the audience, most of the journalists are using it to promote events they may be doing and also to link to their latest blog post or promote a column. In this way, the platforms are linked and material is funnelled between them, with Twitter a useful promotional medium in that commentary posted on blogs is publicised or amplified via Twitter (Bruns 2012a). For example, here is a tweet by Miranda Devine to publicise her latest column (replicated on her blog) and one by Jack the Insider alerting readers to his latest blog post.

Figure 8 Screen shots of tweets by Miranda Devine and Jack the Insider
Twitter, however, does not seem to be the primary place for Australian journalist-bloggers to connect with readers. Although, Jericho (2012a) mentions the potential for journalists to have a conversation on Twitter, most of the journalists in this study are already conversing with readers on their blogs. As Nic Christensen, *The Australian’s* social media reporter, argues, Twitter is as an extension of blogs and the interactivity that can be found in that forum, as well as a tool for ‘linking to content’, but questions whether one can have reasonable and informed political discussion in 140 characters. Indeed, all the journalist-bloggers interviewed said they prefer to chat with readers on their blogs, because Twitter is not suited to in-depth analysis. Jack the Insider said it is rare for his blog-commenters to come on Twitter and interact with him. Interestingly, while some of the posts of these journalist-bloggers can attract hundreds of comments, from observation a link on Twitter to a blog post may not even attract a single comment, although it might be re-tweeted. John Birmingham says it is much easier to just ‘fire off one or two tweets’ than compose a post and ‘spend all day dealing with the conversation that arises afterwards’. However, what he has started to do is cut and paste tweets in response to blogs into the comment thread of the blog as he wants people to get used to expanding on their thoughts there rather than attempting to do this on Twitter.

Twitter is hopeless at political discussions; it’s fantastic for the sort of shallow cocktail-party style conversation where you just throw out some bonmots, someone replies and everyone chuckles, then everyone moves on to the next interesting person. I know from trying to engage a couple of times with people in depth […] it’s just impossible, you simply can’t do it, you cannot sustain a thought that requires a couple of hundred words to express and contextualise across a bunch of tweets which are broken up in the flow by 100s and 100s of other messages coming through. So I normally refuse to engage in anything but the most superficial way.

Other journalists also regard Twitter as a very social medium, primarily for chatting rather having a debate. The difference between a conversation on Twitter and on a blog is summarised by George Megalogenis as saying ‘hi how are you?’” as opposed to ‘what do you think?’” He does not see the point of having an argument on Twitter whereas he is quite happy to have a debate on his blog. While Jack the Insider does not spend a lot of time on Twitter, he says he loves it and overall it is a ‘wonderful thing’:

While I’m sitting writing I’ll leave it open and I’ll see comments come up and I’ll occasionally go and have a look at a few, but I don’t actively engage in the
conversation very often. I’ve made some good friends through Twitter that I would never have met any other way. It can be an angry kind of space. I take a bit of umbrage to people if I’ve linked to a column and they come out of the blue and be highly critical and abusive, and normally I give as good as I get. It hasn’t landed me into any trouble with my employer.

Scholarship about Twitter has increased dramatically in recent years and there have been a number of studies which have looked at its significance for journalism (Lasorsa et al. 2012; Hermida 2013). Although studies have found that journalists are normalising Twitter ‘to fit their existing professional norms and practices’ (Lasorsa et. al 2012), the group of journalists in my study are already used to engaging with the audience – sharing their opinions and (some at least) even personal information. Their blogs, however, are on the platform of their news organisation’s news site, whereas Twitter operates outside of this on a neutral platform. Although Lasorsa et al. (2012:6) claim that journalist-blogs are often edited to meet the standards and protocols of the news organisation, the blogs in my study were edited by the journalists themselves with no editorial interference. Whether they feel less constrained on Twitter and freer to communicate ‘virtually anything to anyone’ (Lasorsa et al. 2012:6) is less clear.

Jericho (2012a:195) argues that while Twitter can be used as a newsfeed, without active use it loses much of its purpose; ‘if you don’t use it, it becomes rather anodyne – just a stream of unconnected sentences’. Yet, in spite of the burgeoning interest in Twitter and the rapid uptake by journalists, some journalists see little or no value in it. As Isabelle Oderberg, social media editor for the Herald Sun, has pointed out, not every single journalist needs to be active on Twitter: ‘Not everyone is going to be necessarily plugged into social. Not everyone gets turned on by Twitter. Not everyone can fit in. Not everyone gets the language (Bergin 2012). Piers Akerman said an expert on social media had been trying to convince him to go on Twitter because he would get a lot of followers, but he cannot see the advantage. He said it had been pointed out to him (even though he does not know whether it is statistically true) that the ABC’s Latika Bourke predominantly tweets about fashion and yet she was meant to be a political reporter. Akerman added that he is not interested in ‘discussing his personal life’ nor the personalities with whom he interacts. Shoba Rao, the former social media editor for The Daily Telegraph, believes it is not important for a journalist such as Akerman to be on Twitter because there is already huge traffic to his blog, where he can still be influential.
With such a large following, Rao argues that Akerman does not need Twitter to push his blog any further, as the blog is ‘where the noise is’.

Although he joined Twitter earlier than the other journalists in this study, David Penberthy uses it less frequently which perhaps reflects his ambivalence about the medium. When he told blog-readers he had just opened an account, he explained:

> At its worst, it displays all the inane self-absorption (and woeful grammar) that might be the defining feature of our times – mmmm i’m luvin this cinnamon donut!!!! – but at its best it’s an incredibly powerful and convenient news tool that lets users point each other in the direction of interesting observations and novel ideas (Penberthy 2009).

A year later he wrote, ‘Twitter overloaded with the abusive and inane’, arguing that while Twitter can augment conventional journalism it will not replace it; it might actually ‘leave you feeling more offended and less informed than when you got out of bed in the morning’ (Penberthy 2010).

Another journalist who sees little value in Twitter is Andrew Probyn, a political journalist for the *West Australian* (who I had originally identified as a blogger). Probyn joined Twitter at the time of the 2010 election, and when I spoke to him in June 2012 he had only tweeted 36 times, mostly to promote his own stories and direct traffic to the website. He said people had been sending him tweets regarding a column he had written, but he did not want to get into a conversation about it on Twitter.

> If I have a genuine thought, that’s really interesting and amusing, I’m not going to waste it on Twitter. We are a commercial business and commerce feeds on good ideas, new thoughts and new analysis especially with new media […] we are desperately trying to find new ways to commercialise ourselves and the best content for attracting readers is stuff that people want to read and often it’s the more thoughtful pieces, the breaking news, a bit of humour, sketches, things like that, all the add-ons […] if you want to know what it all means, then that’s why people like me write about politics, and write sketches and try to contextualise. Twitter is not to contextualise. Twitter is for little sound bites.

While admitting he sounds like a ‘complete Luddite’, Probyn believes Twitter can be ‘totally time wasting’. Interestingly, Peter Brent admits to being a ‘bit addicted’ to Twitter: ‘I sit there and make silly comments. I say things hoping to get a response.'
Then I think “I should stop this and get on with some real work.”” His Twitter profile has ‘Quickly regrets, to varying degrees, about 80 per cent of tweets’ (Brent 2012b). As Singer (2011) has pointed out, journalists have had to reinvent themselves as conversationalists, which can be time-consuming work, sometimes of dubious value.

I joined Twitter in May 2012, and it seemed to me, after being there a short time, that a lot of journalists seem to be just chatting with each other. Nic Christensen, the social media reporter for The Australian, agrees, but added ‘this has always gone on’.

Christensen sees Twitter as an extension of the notion that they are journalists and the rest of us are civilians, and admits he is worried about that element:

The problem with Twitter and all this type of conversation is that you lose perspective […] I’ve only got 1000 people following me; that is not a mass audience. And I’m always conscious of that but I’m not sure other people are. There are 100s of 1000s of people are reading our site every day, but I might engage with 20 people on Twitter. I’m not happy with that.

Surprisingly, I noticed this extraordinary exchange between Chris Kenny and Brent, even though they both blog for The Australian. (N.B. the ‘spat’ has been ongoing, at least up to November 2013).

**Figure 9** Screen shots of tweets by Chris Kenny and Peter Brent
Although most media organisations have social media policies, and journalists have been sacked or censored over independently published tweets, Posetti (2012) points out the difficulties of regulating journalists on such sites. Posetti (2012) claims it is becoming more difficult to apply the same standards of conduct required of journalists on their official corporate accounts to their personal social media accounts. Brent even told me that he does not know if The Australian has a social media policy. ‘There is probably a general one somewhere but I haven’t seen it,’ he said.

Further research on the use of Twitter by Australian journalists in general would be useful in order to determine what content they are sharing and the extent to which such microblogging may be changing journalistic norms and practices. Are they using it to ‘mainly broadcast or chat to their colleagues’ (Farnsworth in Jericho 2012a:205)? What impact are such media having on journalism practice, including blogging? Regardless, it is apparent that Twitter is a complementary tool for the journalist-bloggers in this study, and is not the main space where they are reaching readers. That space is their blogs.

**Changes in the Australian mainstream media blogosphere**

While there is some evidence that corporate blogs have declined as companies embrace Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter (Barnes & Lescault 2012), overall blogs continue to grow. By the end of 2011 Nielsen Newswire (2012) had tracked 181 million blogs, up from 36 million five years earlier. Whether political blogs have declined or not is difficult to determine, but if there have been declines these may not be in the mainstream media blogosphere. Quiggin (2012) points out that such blogs are now attracting much larger audiences than independent blogs.

As well as the initial identification of blogs in December 2011, a second inspection of sites in June 2012 found 10 of the 114 active blogs had closed during that six-month period (these are listed in Appendix 13). Two were on money and investment, two were political blogs authored by politicians, one was on crime, one on Gen Y and the remainder dealt with general issues. During this period 21 new blogs (see Appendix 14) were also launched – four on News Limited sites and 17 on Fairfax Media sites. Significantly, seven were political blogs, three of which focus on national issues:
Fairfax Media’s *The Pulse* and *Question Time*, as well as *Henry Ergas Blog* on *The Australian*. In addition, two new political blogs focusing on state issues began on *The Examiner*, as well as two other political blogs on the *National Times: Altered States* whose focus was U.S. political issues and *The Party Line* – a group blog authored by politicians. These new blogs is hardly indicative that blogs are dying on our mainstream newspaper sites. Interestingly, when I asked Mike van Niekerk, editor of *The Age* and former online editor-in-chief for Fairfax Media, why they had so few political blogs, he replied that most journalists are now using Twitter and the time for blogs has passed. Yet, in six months, six new political blogs appeared on Fairfax Media sites, five of which were authored by journalists, not outside contributors. There will no doubt have been further changes since then, and it is worth noting that in October 2012, veteran journalist Gideon Haigh began *Cuts and Glances* – a sideways look at cricket – on *The Australian*. I also noticed that since August 2012, David Penberthy’s columns/posts on *The Daily Telegraph* stopped allowing comments altogether. As the latest post is dated 17 December 2012 it would appear that the so-called blog of David Penberthy is now inactive. In late 2012, News Limited’s *The Examiner* was also re-vamped and now there is no mention of blogs on the new site, although columns are open for comments.

Amidst all these changes, a new form of blogging has emerged. Live Blogging is a new trend where often outside contributors such as politicians are brought in to ‘live-blog’ to an audience and answer questions. Tasmania’s *The Mercury* introduced Live Blogging in July 2012 and local experts or mayors are invited in for ‘live chats’ on certain issues or events. Some of the journalists in this study occasionally use this format; for example in May 2012 Miranda Devine used it to discuss the budget with her blog readers. Fairfax Media’s *The Pulse* is a Live Blog led by Katherine Murphy (2012) which brings live coverage of politics from Canberra. Murphy told me it took a while to decide this is what she needed to do journalistically and to secure backing from her ‘boss’ [Mark Baker]. While such blogging has been studied elsewhere (Thurman & Walters 2013), to

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49 On 30 January 2013, Penberthy became editor of Adelaide’s *Sunday Mail* (Christensen 2013). *The Punch* of which Penberthy had been founding editor also ceased on 15 March 2013 (The Punch Team 2013).
50 There is a link to a Live Blogs page via the In Depth tab: http://www.themercy.com.au/blogs.html
date there have been no studies of this format on Australian news sites, even though they are an increasingly popular component due to their timeliness and small content units.

**Views of journalists and editors**

One of the challenges for commercial news organisations is how to monetise audience engagement (Green 2012). As Joe Hildebrand said, any blog with good and engaging content will always find an audience, but making money from it is another matter. Nic Christensen told me that he believes newspapers have blogs (in part) to drive traffic and create revenue – even lurkers clicking to a blog are page impressions for the site. However, one journalist-blogger said that even though newspapers thought they should get ‘on board this blog thing’ in a few years’ time they may decide there is no point. In terms of commercial interests they do not generate much income, and they are time-consuming and costly to moderate.

Not surprisingly, Shoba Rao, former social media editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, which has six of the 13 blogs identified for this study, was enthusiastic. Rao says while Twitter can work well when something live is happening, blogs provide the ability to explain issues in ‘breadth and depth’; bloggers like Miranda Devine and Piers Akerman are still relevant in the blog space and have the ability to have a conversation in a particular niche. When questioned about the demise of some popular independent blogs, some journalist-bloggers say this occurred not because the conversation has moved to social media platforms but because of a lack of resources and support. Because blogs are time-consuming, Megalogenis sees a need for a support network as without one ‘independents in the end get sucked into the mainstream’. For bloggers on a payroll, there is technical support, help with filtering comments or even a research assistant.

John Birmingham also said the independent bloggers presumably ‘just got tired’ and to work over the long haul they need a continual injection of people who are not ‘weary with the whole concept’. A blog is a very personal thing and there are many days when he gets up and ‘shudders at the idea of firing up the computer, having to be at it again’.

Jack the Insider said that if independent blogs are not properly maintained, administered and moderated they will ‘come a cropper’. This becomes a major cross to bear and after a number of years people lack the energy to keep it going, they run ‘out of steam’.
does, however, see a need for independent blogs as they are ‘just another voice’. ‘The more the merrier,’ he quipped.

**Death of Meganomics**

After 26 years as a News Limited journalist, 21 years of which were at *The Australian*, Megalogenis (2012b) announced in early November 2012 (six months after my interview with him) that he was leaving to work on other pursuits. This meant *Meganomics* would close. He told his readers that the blog was one of the most enjoyable parts of his career, and he had learnt more from his exchanges with them than in any background briefing from prime ministers or treasurers.

There was an outpouring of sorrow on his blog:

For a bunch of folks I’ve never met, and never will, and know absolutely nothing about, I feel a real sense of loss. Especially you Mr Megalogenis (Frank, 5 November 2012, 08:35am)

George, I don’t know what to say. This is like reading your obituary and you’re not even dead. I am heartbroken […] You’ve left us changed. And you’ve left footprints on our hearts (Katie 05 November 2012, 09:30am)

And some of Megalogenis’ responses:

I have real respect for people such as yourself who gave your time and thoughts to this blog. It has been a very interesting experience. I feel as if we are all friends here. Not in an icky cyber kind of [way] but as a genuine community way (Megalogenis 5 November 2012, 08:44am).

The comments thread was almost always better than the initial post. Also, one of the most pleasing parts of these exchanges was that commentators allowed me to make and correct my own mistakes along the way (Megalogenis 5 November 2012, 12:20pm).

However, after this death there was a resurrection a few months later. As mentioned, *Larvatus Prodeo* closed in April 2012. Surprisingly, on 10 March 2013, prompted by what Bahnisch (2013) described as some ‘urgings on Twitter’, they decided to re-start – ‘refreshed from what turned out to be a hiatus rather than an end’. This is surprising
since earlier Bahnisch (2012) had been heralding the death of blogs with the apparent migration of debate to social media platforms such as Twitter.

**Conclusion**

Is there a future in blogs? Twitter is a more open and public network than blogs and has clearly become a platform of choice for many Australian journalists who have adopted this medium to a far greater extent than they ever took to blogging (Highfield & Bruns 2012:95). Ten of the 13 journalist-bloggers are on Twitter, with most using it as a complementary tool to publicise or amplify blogs posts. Four are avid tweeters, with a limited analysis indicating that the use of Twitter by most of the others is increasing. However, the 140-character limit means it is not suited for the in-depth analysis or conversation that can occur on blogs. While some online conversations may have migrated to social media platforms, it is evident that blogs still have a role and a place on mainstream media sites. The journalists interviewed said they enjoy using the format and most see value in engaging with their readers. Tim Blair, one of Australia’s pioneer bloggers, began blogging in May 2001, and Peter Brent began *Mumble* in 2001. Both have blogged on News Limited sites since 2008 and 2010 respectively. Joe Hildebrand and Piers Akerman have been blogging for over six years, while Jack the Insider has kept up his popular blog for over five years. John Birmingham has blogged at various sites since May 2005 and on mainstream sites since March 2008. These veteran bloggers show no indications they are tired of blogging or wanted to stop. When I interviewed him, George Megalogenis said that even though the blog feels a bit old media for some people, it is a more enriching medium for journalists than some of the other digital offshoots.

There are, however, not that many political blogs on mainstream media sites. I identified 26 in December 2011 and of these only 13 focused predominantly on national issues and were authored by journalists. This is only a small percentage of the total blogs in the overall Australian political blogosphere, which Jericho (2012a) identified as 324 overall, with 316 independent political blogs. And yet it is likely that the blogs of journalists such as Jack the Insider, Piers Akerman, Miranda Devine, Andrew Bolt and Tim Blair (and the former blog of George Megalogenis) have much more influence than
their alternative counterparts, although Quiggin (2006:486) claims about 20
independent bloggers ‘maintain an average standard comparable to that of the opinion
pages in the quality dailies’. Jonathan Green (2012), former editor of ABC’s The Drum,
describes Andrew Bolt’s blog as ‘without doubt one of the most popular, robust,
vigorous and influential spaces for discussion around politics […] a well-read fixture
for political enthusiasts, which routinely clocked in the vicinity of three million page
impressions a month; sometimes obnoxious, somewhat loopy, but perpetually engaged
political mob’. And the rise of Twitter and other microblogging systems, if anything,
are helping integrate blogs into societal news streams, rather than sounding a death
knell.
Conclusion

This thesis studied the work of 13 Australian journalists whose blogs focus predominantly on political issues. It adapts concepts from media and communication theories, including gatekeeping and Habermas’ public sphere, and used an emergent design with a mixed-methods approach. Comment-threads in response to posts on the asylum-seeker issue were analysed to assess the quality of the discussion from the normative perspective of Habermas’ discursive ethics. This analysis was followed by interviews with journalists and editors. The findings challenge the widespread view that news organisations are ambivalent towards, and even suspicious, of audience participation and have failed to take advantage of the interactive opportunities online, as exemplified in the tag ‘they just don’t get it’ (Singer 2011). They also challenge the view that journalist-blogs are not real or genuine blogs, or little more than a re-branding of print opinion columns (Bruns 2007; Bahnisch 2007; Jericho 2011; Highfield 2011). All the journalists interviewed disagreed strongly with the notion that ‘they just don’t get it’ and their blogs are somehow not ‘genuine’. Joe Hildebrand said such comments were ‘complete rubbish’ and those who made them are ‘idiotic and wrong’. Even though the blogs in this study were found to offer varying levels of deliberative engagement, overall they have a valuable role and offer new avenues for citizen participation in the political process.

News organisations world-wide were slow to adopt blogging and were reluctant to experiment with an ‘anti-establishment format’ (Heyboer 2004) but one would expect the manner and scope of such participation, and the use of blogs, to differ by organisation and by country. Notably, in Australia, independent blogging has not emerged as an important vehicle for political debate and lags behind the U.S. and U.K. in terms of influence, and there are no A-list blogs like Daily Kos or Guido Fawkes. As Highfield and Bruns (2012:90) point out, the history of political blogging differs from many other countries and was ‘never completely new or separate from the traditional mediasphere’. One of the very first political blogs – Margo Kingston’s Webdiary – began in 2000 and was hosted on a mainstream newspaper site, the SMH.

It is eight years since Australian news organisations began incorporating blogs on their online platforms, and a number of journalists have tried political blogging with various
degrees of success. Some abandoned their blogs in a very short period (even a month or two), while some kept going for several years – for example, Janet Albrechtsen, Caroline Overington, Annabel Crabb, Samantha Maiden and Malcolm Farr. Tim Dunlop and Margo Kingston left to become independent bloggers. A small number of journalists embraced blogging enthusiastically and have now been blogging for years and show no signs of ceasing. These include most of the journalists in this study – Tim Blair, Andrew Bolt, Peter Brent, Jack the Insider, Piers Akerman and Miranda Devine. They represent a small, but influential area of online journalism, and their blogs attract much larger audiences than independent blogs (Green 2012; Quiggin 2012).

In the early stages, it is apparent that some news organisations did rebrand columns as blogs, regardless of whether the journalist moderated them or intended to engage with users and regardless of whether the journalist themselves regarded them as ‘blogs’. An example of this is The Australian’s Dennis Shanahan, whose columns were simply labelled a blog. A more recent example are the so-called blogs on The West Australian which were withdrawn from my analysis after Andrew Probyn insisted he was not a blogger and the online editor admitted it was a mistake to have called these columns blogs. Such criticism could apply now to the blog of David Penberthy on The Daily Telegraph, which over the years became simply his column opened for comments, although in the early days he did engage. However, these are exceptions.

The first of three research sub-questions addressed in this thesis was: Where do political-blogs authored by journalists occur? This proved to be a laborious process, where unexpected difficulties emerged, which do not seem to have been addressed by other researchers. As mentioned, comments to articles can be confused with blogs, although in my view the two are distinctly different phenomena. The blogs themselves were difficult to locate as they were not listed on the home page of most websites. Not only were there inactive blogs, but also it was later discovered that several new blogs had been omitted. The real lesson learnt, which is of particular import for future researchers, is the importance of not relying on an inspection of websites alone. What is needed is contact with an online editor (or a social media editor) to clarify which are their current blogs. If analysing political blogs, it might be useful to first gain a journalist’s perception of their blog or columns before the researcher classifies it as such: does the journalist consider it to be a blog, let alone a political blog?
The second and third research questions ‘to what extent are Australian political journalist-blogs a space of deliberation?’ and ‘what are political journalist-bloggers’ perceptions of blogs as a space of deliberation?’ were addressed by a content-analysis of comments on the blogs, along with interviews with journalists. Across the comment-threads, 73 per cent of the comments were from unique users who contributed only one comment, which means they parachuted in to leave a single comment and then left the site or remained as lurkers monitoring the discussion. In spite of the domination of the few, there was a high level of interactivity on most blogs, and in a significant number of comments, users openly expressed disagreement with other participants or the journalist. None of the blogs could be considered an echo chamber and 10 scored higher for disagreement than agreement. While the presence of disagreement suggests considerable heterogeneity in the views expressed, this positive indicator of deliberation is cancelled out on some blogs due to the high levels of flaming and the amount of unreasonable opinions and symptomatic fallacious arguments. One could hardly say there was much deliberation occurring on blogs which lacked Habermasian norms of reasonable dialogue (Habermas 1996), where was little respect shown towards other participants and reluctance to reasonably argue positions. Few commenters resorted to personal experience to justify their opinions, and such justifications mostly occurred on the blogs of the two female journalists, Susie O’Brien and Miranda Devine. This finding is interesting given the divide that has existed within theories of deliberative democracy, where feminists in particular have argued that personal experience is a valid and necessary form of justification (Young 2000).

There emerged clear distinctions between blogs on the tabloid sites – *The Daily Telegraph* and *Herald Sun* – and those on the site of the quality broadsheet *The Australian* and the sole Fairfax Media blog *Blunt Instrument*. The latter were the most reasonable and civil, and clearly towards the ‘good enough’ end of the deliberation continuum. In contrast, the level of vitriol on a few of the comment-threads of the tabloid blogs is disturbing. How does describing other commenters or the journalist as a moron, an idiot, a scumbag, a racist or a bigot enhance public debate? Such flaming is hardly conducive to attempts to resolve differences of opinion or obtain further understanding of an issue. On the other hand, the use of reason, logic and evidence on some blogs, especially those on *The Australian*, suggest a level and quality of political
engagement not seen in earlier formats – or even in some of the independent U.S. blogs where studies show there is a ‘one-way linear form of communication with a parallel, and sarcastic, sphere of communication occurring within the commentary’ (Kenix 2009:813), and participants shout ‘their opinion into the space, with vague reference to things others have said’ (Habegger 2011:127).

Clearly, the sites attract different audiences with the tabloids inevitably a more raucous crowd – Richardson and Stanyer (2011:985) argue that broadsheet and tabloid sites often have different readers and ‘different journalistic values and styles’. Indeed, Susie O’Brien pointed out that The Herald Sun attempts to reach the ‘ordinary person’ whereas other papers may want to reach lawyers and doctors. Interestingly, there was some cross-posting in the blogs analysed: of a total of 785 users, about 79 appeared to be cross-posters. Most were to blogs on the same news sites, and only 27 moved between a broadsheet and a tabloid site. Another factor relates to the differences in the websites’ design and affordances: The Australian uses a version of Expression Engine which does not enable commenters to reply directly to each other. On the other sites, the software enables commenters to reply either direct to the blogger or respond directly to another commenter by hitting ‘Reply’ underneath a particular comment, which creates sub-threads. Regardless of differences in software, across all the blogs the journalist was widely perceived by users to be the leader or facilitator of the discussion. On six blogs, commenters engaged more with the blogger than other commenters, including those of Andrew Bolt and David Penberthy who no longer respond.

However, the differences between blogs on tabloid sites and those on broadsheet sites are undoubtedly due in part to their moderation. The journalists who blog on The Australian are more stringent – they ruthlessly delete offensive and insulting posts, and not only maintain civility, but also actively facilitate the conversation. While it could be argued this simply means the journalists are maintaining control over information and reinforcing their traditional gatekeeping role (Hermida & Thurman 2008; Singer et al. 2011), the choice of moderation style – as this study shows – does play a part in shaping the quality and usefulness of online discussions (Wright & Street 2007). The results from coding for flaming and unreasonable statements indicate this, as there are significantly higher numbers of such comments on tabloid compared to broadsheet sites. Notably, some of the journalists have changed their approach over the years and become
more stringent, mirroring a trend that has been occurring in the independent blogosphere. Although the spirit of free speech was a hallmark of early blogs which were largely unmoderated, there has been a tightening of commenting rules over the years even on independent blogs (Zivkovic 2013).

There was also high participation by some bloggers, which contrasts with the results of overseas studies (Robinson 2011; Manosevitch & Walker 2009; Dailey et al. 2008; Domingo 2008; Besselink 2011; Witschge 2011). The journalists interviewed regarded their blogs as quite distinct from columns with comments, with the key difference being the ‘conversational component’ of blogs – they considered that engagement with readers is an essential and valuable part of their blogging practice. They were all enthusiastic about blogging, with readers giving them tips and hints, correcting and even challenging them. One said blogging made him a better journalist; another admitted the conversation on his blog had changed his mind on a significant issue. Most traverse print and digital media with seamless ease. Based on what they revealed (and all could speak off-the-record if they chose to), they are practising to varying degrees what has been called process journalism. George Megalogenis uses his audience as collaborators rather than consumers, regarding them as contacts, critics and colleagues. Andrew Bolt admitted his blog is the most interesting and compelling part of his job.

None of the journalists interviewed expressed resentment towards their workload or blogging practice, although one remarked that reading all the comments is ‘enormously time consuming’. A relative newcomer revealed she not only welcomes people’s comments, she ‘loves it’ and finds reader feedback fantastic. The unusual level of engagement evident, and the views and attitudes expressed by individual journalists, signify a profound shift in journalism practice in Australia, at least in this area of journalism practice. There was no evidence that their main motivations in developing audience participation are business driven – to increase user loyalty rather than to foster democracy (Vujnovic et al. 2010). To the contrary, the journalists said they had no editorial interference – with one being told to ‘do whatever you want’. Rather than attempting to attract a large audience they were allowed to cut as many comments as they chose. As mentioned, George Megalogenis (2008) decided to introduce strict rules on Meganomics, even if this meant publishing only 10 per cent of comments.
As mentioned, significant changes occurred in Australia’s media landscape during the course of this study. The introduction of paywalls on some sites means some journalists are now writing unique content for their blogs, instead of merely replicating print articles as blog posts. The year 2012 saw internal restructuring, redesigning and major cuts to jobs by Fairfax Media and News Limited. It also saw the closing of several major independent blogs and, in November 2012, the end of Meganomics, one of the most popular Australian mainstream journalist-blogs. In spite of these challenges and even though some political discussion has migrated from blogs to social media platforms (especially Twitter), this does not signal the end of blogging as some commentators claim (Bahnisch 2012; Quiggin 2012). During 2012, new political blogs started up on The Australian and National Times, including The Pulse which utilises Live Blogging. This is a new variation of the blogging format, which is also being used on occasion by some of the journalist-bloggers in this study, especially to cover breaking news or elections, or parliamentary sittings. Although Twitter has become an essential tool for some journalist-bloggers to promote their latest posts, and also interact with members of the public, all those interviewed expressed a preference to have reflective, in-depth conversation on their blogs. Rather than declining, it appears that blogs are evolving, with a trend towards cross-posting on other platforms.

Blogs (and Twitter) versus ‘mainstream media’ dualism has become obsolete, if not meaningless. And yet in his address at the University of Melbourne, Lord Justice Sir Brian Leveson (2012) overlooked the mainstream co-option of both blogs and Twitter, referring to them as non-mainstream practices. This is quite extraordinary considering that journalist-blogs continue to be popular, many of them – such as Andrew Bolt’s blog – attracting much larger audiences than independent blogs (Green 2012; Quiggin 2012). Not only are mainstream media blogs parts of the blogosphere, but mainstream media are at the centre of both the blogosphere and Twittersphere. Such comments by Leveson, as well as the stance of scholars who are dismissive of these blogs, serve to reinforce the relevance and significance of my study.

This research makes an important contribution to the fields of communication, media and journalism, and reveals a snapshot of the quality of discussion occurring on Australian journalist-blogs and the extent to which deliberation is occurring. It is very clear that these blogs offer varying levels of deliberative engagement with the issue at
hand, although at least they offer participants the opportunity to engage in political debate, and argue for differing views. Overall they still have a valuable role and offer new avenues for citizen participation in the political process. And journalists’ use of Twitter and the new format of Live Blogging is helping to integrate blogs into societal news streams, rather than sounding a death knell. While much has been said about the potential of independent blogs to shape democracy and reinvigorate the public sphere, scholars also need to consider mainstream media blogs. These blogs are not mere window dressing to attract audiences and boost revenue. Rather than serving only to increase the bottom line, they also increase diversity of opinion and expand the public sphere. Some of them actually reflect a second and more promising phase of public journalism, the first phase of which began in the U.S. in the late 1980s and lasted about 10 years, and included town-hall-style meetings and other initiatives that brought together journalists and citizens (Schudson 1999).

Limitations to this study and implications for future research

There are a number of limitations to this study, which could be addressed in future research. First, due to time and financial constraints only one comment-thread from each of the 13 blogs was examined. These focused on a specific issue (asylum seekers) which limits this study’s potential for generalisation. A much clearer picture and a more reliable gauge of interactivity and equality (and other indicators) could be gleaned if threads over a longer period, say a month, were examined. This would mean a range of topics could be covered as the topic of debate is a relevant variable for explaining variation in participation and in gender distribution (Janssen & Kies 2005). For example, Coleman, Hall and Howell (2002) found more women participated in debates when the topic was related to problems of everyday life and personal issues.

A related limitation was the selection of blogs and the difficulty in identifying which blogs could be labelled political. Although I included Susie O’Brien’s blog (which Jericho (2012b) excluded by ‘choice’), at the same time I omitted Wendy Tuohy’s The Perch (Herald Sun) and Sarrah Le Marquand’s blog (The Daily Telegraph) even though both deal with political issues some of the time. Perhaps future researchers need to adopt more flexible approaches to online discussion on blogs, considering there is ‘everyday’ political conversation on those blogs whose primary focus is not political
and such conversation can have real democratic value. This might also capture more blogs authored by women, as in my study only two of the 13 bloggers were women.

Third, the study only focused on the Australian mainstream media blogosphere. This means the results only pertain to Australia, and the results cannot be generalised elsewhere. This is important, because much of the literature refers to mainstream blogs as if they were a similar phenomenon across different countries and media landscapes. For example, Bunch (2008) writes that many staff bloggers at newspapers lack the ‘engaged community’ of regular commenters that independent blogs attract and Charman-Anderson (2005) argues that members of the mainstream media demonstrate more often than not that they ‘don’t get blogging’. Both Bunch and Charman-Anderson are referring to the U.S., although they write in general terms as if ‘the model that prevailed in that country was universal’ (Hallin & Mancini 2004:2). Witschge (2011) points out that the state of journalism varies greatly in different countries, and national, political and economic contexts differ. Presumably, the use of blogs varies as well. Indeed, Ruiz et al. (2011) concluded from their study of online discussion on five newspaper sites (U.S., U.K., France, Spain and Italy) the cultural context is relevant to the democratic quality of debates. Gulyas (2013) also found differences among journalists in the U.K., Sweden, Finland and Germany in relation to their use of social media and their attitudes towards them, indicative that the journalistic culture and media systems of different countries play a role. It would be useful, therefore, for future studies to compare journalist-blogs across a range of countries.

Fourth, this study only focuses on 13 political-blogs authored by professional journalists and which were on mainstream news sites. Even though a few (for example, those of Jack the Insider, Piers Akerman, Andrew Bolt and Tim Blair) have more influence than some of their alternative counterparts, these 13 blogs are only a small percentage of the total blogs in the overall Australian political blogosphere, which Jericho (2012a) identified as 324 overall. Although my pilot study (Garden 2010a) compared independent blogs with journalist-blogs, this was limited to analysing quantitative factors such as number of audience-comments and blogger-responses. Future research could compare the quality of discussion between some of the leading independent blogs and those on mainstream news sites, in spite of the difficulties of comparing journalist blogs with independent political blogs as most in Australia are now group-authored.
In group blogs more than one blogger can participate in a comment-thread and they may take turns at moderation. This difference does not seem to have been considered by other researchers of blogs, such as Mummery and Rodan (2012) who analysed Larvatus Prodeo (a group blog) and the individual blogs of Andrew Bartlett and Andrew Bolt.

Fifth, studying one medium in isolation ignores the fact that journalists discuss politics across a variety of applications including Facebook, Twitter and blogs and these are often intertwined heavily and cross-fertilise (Wright 2012b). Future research could track multiple platforms concurrently to determine whether there is a crossover between blog commenters and a blogger’s followers on Twitter, and if a new blog post is promoted on Twitter, the extent of discussion that takes place there as a result. It would also be useful to find out whether new social media such as Twitter has meant a reduction in the number of posts a journalist publishes, or the length of posts.

Lastly, the content analysis used in this study largely operationalised Habermas’ model of deliberation and his rules for rational critical communication. The question is to what degree such criteria can be applied to an online discussion that is purely discursive and not tied to any decision making. The findings suggest that some traditional indicators used to measure deliberation in other settings such as parliamentary debates may not be relevant to blog discussions, especially the indicator of off-topic. In this study, although seven of the 13 blogs had no off-topic comments, three had high percentages. Although being off-topic is considered detrimental to deliberation, two journalists gave valid reasons for allowing comments to go off-topic, and their blogs scored amongst the highest for disagreement and reasoned opinion. Another indicator of deliberation which seldom featured in this study was the use of sources. On six blogs, commenters rarely, if at all, mentioned or gave links to sources to back up arguments. In addition, there was little recourse to personal experience to justify opinions, although this may be due to what Jericho (2012a:51) calls ‘the blokey’ nature of the blogosphere. There are also the limitations of content analysis, and in particular attempting to analyse justification. The danger is that such methods fail to pick up the nuances of interactions (Wright 2012a). Future studies could complement this with a qualitative analysis in order to interpret the kinds of arguments that are being put forward and to gain insight into what kind of argumentation is used.
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APC see Australian Press Council


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Appendix 1  Sites checked for blogs

NEWS LIMITED
The Australian

Courier-Mail

The Daily Telegraph

Herald Sun
http://www.heraldsun.com.au

News.com.au
http://www.news.com.au

The Mercury
http://www.themercurey.com.au

Perth Now

Adelaide Now
http://www.adelaidenow.com.au

The Punch
http://www.thepunch.com.au

Northern Territory News
http://www.ntnews.com.au

WEST AUSTRALIAN NEWSPAPERS GROUP
The West Australian
http://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest

FAIRFAX MEDIA
Australian Financial Review
http://www.afr.com

National Times

Canberra Times

Examiner

Brisbane Times
http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au

WAtoday.com.au
http://www.watoday.com.au

The Age

Sydney Morning Herald
## Appendix 2  
### MSM blogs – ceased or inactive (1/12/2011)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>BLOG</th>
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<th>topic</th>
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<th>last post</th>
<th>sign off</th>
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<td>26/07/2008</td>
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<td>Paul Kelly</td>
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**TOTAL = 91**

*political indicating political blogs, *these two are by politicians

Fairfax: 63; 10 = political
News: 28; 10 = political
Appendix 3  

URLs of closed political blogs

1. Margo Kingston: Webdiary  

2. Janet Albrechtsen: Janet Albrechtsen  

3. Greg Sheridan: Greg Sheridan  

4. Matt Price: Matt Price  

5. Christian Kerr: Christian Kerr  

6. Phillip Adams: Phillip Adams  

7. Paul Kelly: Paul Kelly  

8. Jason Koutsoukis: Jason Koutsoukis  

9. Malcolm Farr: Malcolm Farr  

10. Samantha Maiden: Despatch Box  

11. Tim Dunlop: Blogocracy  

12. Howard Sattler: Mad as Hell  

13. Tony Wright: The Wright Stuff  

14. Peter Hartcher: News Blog  

15. Daniel Flitton: Worldview  

16. Annabel Crabb: Annabel Crabb  

17. Caroline Overington: Caroline Overington no archives could be found
## Appendix 4  
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## Blogging in the Mainstream

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### Digital Life

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| Gaming |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| The Magic Spray |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| Smoke & Mirrors |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| Rewind |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | humour |
| Monkey Wrench |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | science |

### Canberra Times

| Fly |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Secret Canberra |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| This Life |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | Canberra |

### The Examiner

| Power and Passion* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| Education Watch* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| A Fair Call |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| Blog with Claire |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | religion |
| Council Agenda |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| Crime Watch |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | crime |
| In Black and White |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| Just a Thought |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
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| Miss Gen Why |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | Gen Y |
| Saul Eslake |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| Rewind |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | humour |
| Gourmet Road |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| Statewatch |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| The Night Blogger |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | societal issues |
| Tony McCall |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| Whistle Blower |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| The Shaw Thing |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |

### TOTAL: 73

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* began during 2011

N.B. pol. j-blog other = political blogs that focus on state or overseas issues

Abbreviations: pol. = political; j-blog = journalist-blog; educn = education; tech. = technology

235
Appendix 6  Comment-threads used in content-analysis

The Australian (Broadsheet)

Herald Sun (Tabloid)

The Daily Telegraph (Tabloid)

National Times
Appendix 7 Interview schedule

The following lists the sort of questions that were used in the interviews:

1. How long have you been a journalist? How long have you been with your current employer? How long have you been blogging, and on which sites?
2. How did you get into blogging? What were your motivations? Were you asked to blog as part of your work as a journalist, or did you offer? Do you get paid extra?
3. What do you like and dislike about blogging?
4. Do you do your own moderation? If not, who does?
5. Do you allow people to use more than one anonymous screen name? If so, why?
6. Apart from the standard rules for comment on your site, have you made further suggestions and guidelines to readers and if so how have they responded?
7. Have you noticed any changes to the level and quantity of dialogue after you have implemented new rules?
8. How many comments are deleted on average?
9. A main feature of deliberation is putting forward positions based on facts/reason which are then critiqued by others – how accurately does that describe the discussion on your blog?
10. Do you think all sides of an issue are adequately represented in discussions?
11. In addition to using evidence/facts to support arguments do you think it is also effective to use personal experiences and histories?
12. Have you ever changed your mind on significant issues, or modified your stance, based on the opinions and arguments shared?
13. Has blogging affected the way you write stories, and if so how?
14. Have audience comments ever generated leads or ideas for stories? If so, can you give examples?
15. What do you perceive as the main purpose of your blog?
16. What do you perceive as the purpose of comments to opinion articles on your newspaper site and the differences between such forums and blogs?
17. Independent bloggers sometimes say mainstream journalists ‘just don’t get it’! What is your response to this and other criticisms from some scholars and bloggers?
18. Do you use Twitter? Is so, what are your views on it? Do you think political debate is migrating from blogs to such social media platforms?
Appendix 8   In-depth interviews conducted

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Note that follow-up queries were made by email, phone or DM via Twitter.
3 January 2012

Dear ________________

I am currently undertaking a PhD in Journalism at University of the Sunshine Coast My project is on Australian journalist-blogs and I would like to interview you. This interview can done Skype-to Skype or face-to-face, or else by email? Full anonymity will be assured.

I am interested in finding out your perceptions and views of blogs, and what you regard as the benefits and disadvantages of this new format, moderation styles etc.

I have attached an Information Sheet which contains details of my project, and look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

Mary Garden
Ph: 07 54940252; 0488410016

PS: If you would like a copy of any of my peer-reviewed papers please let me know.


‘Are predictions of newspapers’ impending demise exaggerated?’, Asia Pacific Media Educator (2010), Iss. 20, pp. 37-52.
Appendix 10  Research Project Information Sheet

RESEARCH PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET

‘Blogging in the mainstream: Australian journalist-blogs and deliberation’

Dear Sir/Madam,

You are invited to participate in a research study about Australian journalist-blogs. The project is interested in examining the contribution of journalist-blogs to Australian political debate and the extent to which blogs are a space of deliberation. As well as studying the conversation on comment-threads, I am also interested in interviewing journalists to determine their perceptions of blogs and what they regard as the benefits and disadvantages of this new format.

The interviews will be face-to-face or by phone, and take approximately 60 minutes. If you are unable or unwilling to be interviewed in this way, interviews can take place via email. All information you provide will be treated in the strictest confidence. Quotes from the interviews may be used in publications resulting from the research, but will not be attributed to an individual. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw from the project at any time without the need to explain your decision. Data from this project may also be used in future research projects.

All interviews will be transcribed and a copy of your interview will be emailed to you in order to allow for checking of the contents. Results will be published in the form of a final report, which, if you wish, will be made available to you. To obtain a copy, simply email the lead researcher, Mary Garden at marygarden@bigpond.com.

If you have any questions about this project, please don’t hesitate to call me at (07) 5494 0252, or e-mail me at marygarden@bigpond.com. If you have any complaints about the way this research project is being conducted you can either raise them with me or, if you prefer an independent person, contact the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Sunshine Coast: (c/o Office of Research, University of the Sunshine Coast, Maroochydore DC 4558; phone (07) 5494 4574; fax (07) 5459 1177; e-mail humanethics@usc.edu.au). Please quote the ethical clearance number LREA: S/11/356.

The University of the Sunshine Coast and I would like to thank you for your participation.

Mary Garden
PhD Candidate
University of the Sunshine Coast
Maroochydore, DC, QLD 4558
E-mail: marygarden@bigpond.com
Appendix 11  Consent form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

“Blogging in the mainstream: Australian journalist-blogs and deliberation”
(Ethics approval number HREC S/11/356.)

I have read and understood the contents of the Research Project Information Sheet for the above research project.

I agree to participate in the research project, ‘Blogging in the mainstream: Australian journalist-blogs and deliberation’.

Except where I explicitly ask for complete confidentiality for all information provided, or request a comment to be off-the-record, I give consent for my name and comments to be used on-the-record for the purposes of this research project, and in future research projects.

I agree not to blog about the research or ideas stimulated by it until all the interviews are completed.

I realise that this research project will be carried out as described in the Research Project Information Sheet, a copy of which I have kept.

Any questions I have about this research project and my participation in it have been answered to my satisfaction.

________________________________________
Name

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Signature            Date
## Appendix 12  Cross-posters

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TOTAL 10
(News Ltd 4; Fairfax Media 6)
Appendix 14  New blogs that began December 2011 – June 2012

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[News Ltd 4; Fairfax 17]