

Models of Restraint:  
The Adoption of Blogging Software  
by the U.S. Broadcast News Networks

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### **Abstract**

I am interested in exploring how traditional news organizations, and television network news divisions in particular, are adopting and deploying emerging media technologies, which allow them—and at times obligate them—to interact with their audiences in new ways. Since 2005, all of the major broadcast networks' news divisions have begun their respective blogging efforts, which serve as excellent case studies of the way in which news organizations are utilizing new online media.

News organizations are masters at managing the division between front stage and back stage. Broadcast news networks are deliberate and strategic about who appears on camera and who works behind the scenes, the content that appears on the air and what's left on the cutting room floor. But the turn to blogs as an element of their online reporting has introduced new forms of interactivity, where audience feedback is not merely received, but actually included as part of their online presence in the form of comment threads and discussion board posts. Managing this unruly torrent of user feedback has proven a practical and an ideological challenge for these organizations, long steeped in a tradition of one-way communication. In response to this challenge, each of the networks has adopted unique technologies, policies, and moderation strategies in an attempt to limit their legal exposure from user-provided content, and to embrace the new demand for interactivity while also maintaining the front-stage/back-stage division on which the credibility and authority of journalistic institutions so often depends.

All this raises a number of interesting questions. As journalistic institutions engage more and more fully in interactive online spaces, how are these tensions

changing journalism itself? How do the technical systems and moderation strategies put in place shape the contours of the news, and how do these journalistic institutions make sense of these systems and strategies as part of their public mission? What is the role of audiences and publics in this new social and technical space? And how do journalistic institutions balance their claim to be “town criers” and voices for the public with the fact that their authority and continued legal standing depend at times on moderating, and even silencing the voices of individuals?

### **Introduction**

Over the last two decades, the news divisions of the three U.S. broadcast networks—ABC, NBC, and CBS—have faced dwindling audiences for their evening newscasts and much of their other current-events programming (Lafayette, 2005; Squires, 2005; Steinberg, 2005). In recent years, attempting to halt this decline, all three networks have turned to the Internet as a medium through which to reach new and younger audiences. For networks like ABC and CBS, neither of whose news divisions is currently tied to a 24-hour cable network, the Web has also provided a medium through which to compete with cable news channels and a means of spreading news content to audiences around the clock (Squires, 2005; Steinberg, 2005; Lafayette, 2005). In the period between 2005 and 2006, as part of a larger online expansion that continues today, all three networks introduced blogs associated with their various news broadcasts (Johnson, 2005, 2006c; Lafayette, 2005). In the press, representatives from the networks, along with media critics and the anchors themselves, struck a similar tone in how they justified the addition of blogging to the aims of network news. Blogging promised not only “transparency” but a “dialogue,” an “informal and conversational”

space where “personal, intimate contact with news consumers” would occur and “advise the coverage” carried by the newscasts (Johnson, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Squires, 2005).

As the news business has continued to shift in response to the demands of the digital age, blogging has become an essential part of these journalistic institutions—but not always solely or primarily for the reasons foregrounded their spokespeople. In the world of network news, concepts like “transparency” and “dialogue” are enmeshed in longstanding and carefully rehearsed dramaturgical routines (Gusfield, 1980; Schudson, 2003). The careful distinctions between front stage and back stage (Goffman, 1959; Hilgartner, 2000) are still painstakingly managed within these organizations.

As such, it would be foolish to think that the interactive technologies of the Web have been adopted into news organizations’ routines *de novo*. On the contrary, they are imbricated in existing policies and workstyles (Boczkowski, 2004; Deuze, 2007). Moreover, just as blogs must be made to fit into a larger institutional culture at the news networks, they are also brought into being in the face of an existing technological infrastructure, which each network has built up over time, and as such blogs and blogging software must be seen to exist within a larger set of technological affordances and constraints (Bijker, 2006). In fact, many of the content management systems (CMS’s)—the primary software frameworks the networks use to publish online content—were developed years before blogs and other more interactive Web applications became prominent, and are optimized for very different workflows than are currently employed by the networks’ digital divisions. As one software developer affiliated with MSNBC.com put it to me in an interview, “A lot of these CMS’s in major news organizations were created several years ago or more. And they aren’t necessarily in

tune with the way people publish content now.” The widespread use of blogging software at the networks has simultaneously provided a technological resource for getting around the constraints of these publishing platforms, while at times complicating the ability of the networks to move forward with the process of updating and optimizing their existing software.

It’s also worth recognizing that when a network promotes its content as a blog, and adopts a design layout or piece of software that is recognizable as a blog, it is invoking a set of norms and standards that stretch beyond—and cannot entirely be controlled by—journalism and its traditional institutions. Blogging introduces feedback mechanisms—comment threads, social news tools, and more—that constitute opportunities for audiences to interact with journalists in ways they never have before (Deuze, 2003). To more fully understand all of these tensions and dynamics, I undertook a research project that involved interviewing software developers and producers—ten in all—at the Websites of each of the broadcast networks’ news divisions.<sup>1</sup> I was interested in how they described the purpose of their projects, the considerations that go into building the Web presence of the networks in general, and news blogs in particular, as well as how they conceive of their sites’ users.

Throughout the paper, I point to a number of theoretical lenses for better understanding the subtleties and forces at work in network news blogging, including Goffman’s notion of front stage and back stage as employed by Hilgartner (2000),

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<sup>1</sup> This number has been rounded off to help ensure that some anonymized quotes remain unidentifiable, as it might otherwise be possible to discern the identity of a source by process of elimination. The figure remains a close approximation of the number of interviews conducted.

Bijker's (2006) description of the "obduracy of technology," and—toward the end—insights from Boczkowski's 2004 book, *Digitizing the News*.

### **Stage Management and the Performance of Authority**

While I won't be adopting a strictly dramaturgical perspective in this paper, the concepts of stage management and the performance of authority developed by Hilgartner (2000) will potentially prove very useful in examining how the networks deal with Web technologies. Hilgartner's scheme concerns the manner in which organizations carefully manage their public face while restricting access to their private operations. Using terms like "front stage," "back stage," and "stage management—language developed by Goffman (1959)—Hilgartner shows how an organization's authority often rests on its ability to focus audience attention on its finished public products, while simultaneously restricting access to the messy process of "sausages being made."

Hilgartner (2000) takes the National Research Council as his primary example, but many, if not most, types of organizations rely on the same process to assert and protect their authority. Journalism, too, provides a compelling example, and it's in this context that news organizations' adoption of new interactive technologies becomes particularly interesting. On the one hand, the transparency afforded by digital technologies can at times interfere with news organizations' ability to stage manage—as *Washington Post* journalist and media critic Howard Kurtz (2009) put it, "the parting of the digital curtain [at times] reveals a process that its practitioners would undoubtedly rather keep from public view." At the same time, digital technologies also create affordances that assist organizations in stage management. Even the language of Web

development mimics that of Goffman (1959), dividing the functionality of Websites into a “front end” seen by audiences and a “back end” maintained by programmers and editorial staff. But while much can be said about the visual composition and end-user functionality of news Websites—and these things will enter into my discussion—this is not ultimately a paper on interface design. In exploring the public identity networks have sought to cultivate through their recent online expansions, I will turn first to the narratives their spokespeople have put forward and cultivated in trade journals and newspapers.

### **News About News Blogs**

While a few Web contributors at MSNBC.com began experimenting with blogging as early as 2002, it wasn't until the period between 2005 and 2006 that blogging became a staple of network television news sites. In April of 2005, Jeff Zucker, then president of the NBC Universal Television Group, attended a conference convened by Yahoo! on high-speed Internet use. In his remarks he suggested the Internet was already having a major impact on the television news industry, implying that NBC News—like its competitors—would have to change with the times. “I don't know why Brian Williams isn't blogging right now,” he said. “We should be looking for a more interactive component and experimenting more” (National Post, 2005).

Just over one month later, in May, Brian Williams' first blog entry appeared (Williams, 2005). Williams' blog attracted far more media attention than the comparatively low-profile and experimental blogging efforts at MSNBC.com that preceded it. By August, the *Daily Nightly* had caught the eye of the *New York Times*, and in an article from the paper's Arts desk, Williams opined that the blog was an

attempt to “lift the veil” and “expose [*Nightly News* staffers] as a collection of humans grappling with how to spend our precious 22 minutes each night” (Steinberg, 2005).

That same year, the other two broadcast networks were both faced with tumultuous changes to their anchor staffs after the death of Peter Jennings at ABC News, and the forced resignation of Dan Rather from the helm of *Evening News* at CBS. After the initially devastating impact of these events had subsided somewhat, both networks reframed the process of anchor succession as an opportunity to recast their brand identities—a process that, by chance or by design, included an expansion of their online efforts (Johnson, 2006a). ABC News announced in December 2005 that its new anchors, Bob Woodruff and Elizabeth Vargas, would begin a blog to accompany *World News Tonight*, promising among other things that adopting a dual-anchor format would give both Woodruff and Vargas time to take on new roles, including blogging and engaging with viewers online (Lafayette, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Shortly thereafter CBS announced that Katie Couric would also have a substantial online presence on CBSNews.com—a promise that was eventually cashed out in the form of the *CBS Evening News* blog, *Couric & Co* (Johnson, 2006c).

As mentioned above, both media critics and spokespeople for the networks during this time assumed a common rhetoric, pledging transparency and dialogue with news audiences through the adoption of new technologies. Moreover, many network executives were quite frank about their desire to use online media to offset their

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<sup>2</sup> It's worth mentioning that not long afterward, *World News Tonight's* anchor staff changed over again after Bob Woodruff was severely injured while on assignment and Elizabeth Vargas departed the broadcast on maternity leave. According to media accounts (Gold, 2008) and my interview sources, this was somewhat disruptive to the network's online hopes for *World News*, which were subsequently reframed somewhat in light of the fact that the new anchor, Charles Gibson, “isn't much of a blogger.” It remains to be seen how *World News's* newest new anchor, Diane Sawyer will contribute to the Website.

declining television viewership and—in the case of ABC News and CBS News—to compete with cable news. In fact, both ABC News and CBS News also experimented during this time with streaming 24-hour broadband television programming to the Internet—an effort that continues today at both networks, albeit with little fanfare (Bauder, 2004; Agence France Presse, 2005).

The account of the networks' blogging efforts above, taken primarily from newspapers and trade journals, ultimately privileges the blogs of the evening newscasts. But as I will discuss, these were neither the first, nor have they necessarily been the most successful of the networks' blogging efforts. The trade journal accounts are largely the outcome of stage management—the networks as they wish to be seen front stage. They foreground the opportunities and incentives the networks considered in getting involved with the Web, including reaching new audiences and reducing some of the competitive advantages enjoyed by cable news networks. Full of optimistic futurism and rhetoric about transparent, participatory journalism, these accounts generally omit many of the more mundane back-stage reasons the networks currently start blogs or find them useful. The next section of this paper will examine in more detail how and why network news divisions make use of blogging software.

Afterward, I will go some way toward deconstructing the rhetoric surrounding the conversational nature of network news blogs and their ability to “lift the veil” surrounding the back stage of network news. While not disingenuous, the conversational promise in media accounts masks a series of tensions that editors and journalists must manage in interacting with their audiences online. Lastly, I will explore

the way in which the networks have conceived of and situated their audiences amid the process of adopting and adapting blogs and blogging technology.

### **What is a Blog?**

The potential of emerging digital media for reaching new audiences has made interactive tools, including blogs, very attractive to network news divisions. But at the same time, the ubiquity of blogs and blogging software, and their penetration into popular culture has created a set of cultural norms and expectations surrounding blogging that news networks cannot fully control, and at times this presents difficulties in the networks' ability to stage manage. As the conventions and conceptions surrounding blogging—inside, and to some extent outside the news industry—have shifted in recent years, blogs have moved from being a curiosity or a decoration on network news sites to a relatively common reporting tool.

One of the most common observations on the part of producers, developers, and executives at the different networks during my interviews was the fact that as the uses to which blogs are put have broadened, a substantial gray area has emerged surrounding the definition of a blog, especially within the context of journalism. From a social construction of technology perspective, myriad user groups have arisen, introducing a set of contested meanings that continually whirl around the technology and its editorial forms (Pinch & Bijker, 1984; Pinch & Kline, 1996). It was generally agreed by my sources that traditionally, distinguishing characteristics of blogs have included format—chronologically ordered, generally brief posts—as well as editorial style, with posts tending to be informal, personality-driven, and often written in the first person. However, while network news blogs may be similar in format to traditional blogs,

numerous people pointed out that they had long since diverged stylistically and editorially from their non-journalistic counterparts. Some journalists, like this producer from CBS Interactive (the digital arm of CBS and CBS News), went so far as to lament what he viewed as the negative connotations the term “blog” carried over to CBSNews.com and other news sites:

You know, I don't know what a blog is anymore. A blog to me now—if you can really say what a blog is—is someone just being goofy and posting pictures of their friends drunk. But...Marc Ambinder has a blog. Well, his blog has a lot of incredible facts, and...incredible reporting. And maybe it's in a blog format, a blog template. But he's writing it like a story, you know? That term blog...It's just such a loaded term.

Michelle Levi, a CBS Interactive producer in Washington, D.C. who contributes regularly to the network's *Political Hotsheet* blog similarly noted,

I think it's interesting that we call *Political Hotsheet* a blog in some ways. Because any story that I've ever written, for the most part, unless it's a personal story, like “I traveled with the campaign this day and this is what I learned, first-person, Michelle Levi.” Other than that, it's “Sarah Palin announced today that she would step down as governor.” And it's a story. But we put it in blog form, I think, to keep up.

This adherence to traditional journalistic style in news blogs was often seen as something that had evolved over time. “It's clear,” said one producer of the earliest blog entries at his network, “that there was sort of an engrained concept of what a blog is that now, if you look at it, really feels outdated. You know, now a blog is just a place to report.”

But this convergence of editorial styles was not unidirectional. Even as blog posts began to look more like news stories, the tone of stories also began to change. Mike Davidson, a developer and CEO of MSNBC's Newsvine subsidiary, who at the time of

our interview was constructing the new blogging software for MSNBC.com, put it this way:

We're moving towards a world where articles are shorter. And they're edited less. And they come out more often per day. And they are tied specifically to an index page of the authors. Articles are becoming very bloggy, whereas five, ten years ago they weren't.

Davidson hypothesized that the shift was in large part an economically driven one:

Journalism itself has never really been a profitable thing. It's always been just a way to aggregate attention...to sell advertising against. And...unfortunately, it's not the stories that take three, four weeks to research and another week to write that make the most money. It's the stories that were generated quickly, that are of interest to a wide array of people.

Whatever the reason for the convergence in styles, Ben Tesch, a Web developer by trade and head of MSNBC.com's R&D group, agreed that when it came to supporting the work of the site's editorial staff,

The...consistent struggle is editorially, what's the difference between...a blog post and any other thing that gets written on...a news site? ... If you look at it at that granular a level, there's a lot of instances where you could go either way. You could say, "Well, this article could be a blog post and this blog post could be an article. So what's the difference?" Why bother even drawing a line that says there is a difference?

This increasing agnosticism toward the distinctions between blogs and stories was further underscored in the design strategy of the various news sites. A CBS Interactive producer had this to say:

Even the look of the blog and the story are coming together. ... In the past—and I think you see this across the board—blogs were sort of housed in their little blog home, and you had the blog homepage...or a section, or maybe you're linking out to it from a section. More and more, that content is bleeding into our headline stacks and into our section fronts, so they are often the story, as opposed to some sort of sidebar that provides opinion or analysis...that wouldn't satisfy someone looking for the whole picture.

All this discussion on the convergence of styles—from editorial tone to visual and interface design—invites the further question: Why bother to have blogs at all on a network news site? As Tesch and one of the producers put it, why bother to draw a distinction between stories and blog entries when “a blog is just a place to report?” As I’ll point out later in this paper, some network news blogs do maintain a distinctly informal and interactive editorial style, to which the moniker “blog” is well-suited in its traditional sense. But for now, it’s important to appreciate a far more mundane, back-stage reason why the networks have come to find blogging software useful.

As I mentioned briefly before, each network news site is published using a software program called a CMS, or “content management system.” These proprietary programs were built in-house over the span of several years. And by most accounts they are large, somewhat dated and often clunky pieces of software, designed around workflows that no longer dovetail with the organizations’ current Web publishing strategies. Here’s how one CBS Interactive staffer with a background in television, described their experience of the network’s CMS:

It’s actually been so frustrating for me coming into this world, because I’m used to putting on a good show, telling a good story. But after you tell the good story, there’s like 18 steps to get that story out that I’m really just not used to. And it drives me nuts that I have to worry that, “Oh, my God. I have a smart quote in the third graph and I have to go back in and change everything,” or you know, “The lower third is a little bit lower.” And it’s just not the way I think—in Web-speak.

Blogging software, on the other hand, offers a self-contained CMS, that can be deployed independently of this legacy software developed by the networks.<sup>3</sup> Many blogging CMS’s are free and open source, and can be installed in less than half an hour.

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<sup>3</sup> That said, CBS News is actually the exception among the networks in that it runs its blogs through its primary CMS—and it’s probably not a coincidence that it maintains fewer blogs than either ABC or NBC.

Moreover, the availability of commercial hosting services can free the network altogether from the burden of maintaining or installing software. Some of the most popular blogging software packages have release cycles of six months or less, meaning they can be constantly upgraded to take advantage of the latest Web-publishing technologies. And, perhaps equally important, blogging platforms are designed for publishing by non-technical users. The legacy CMS's at the various networks, on the other hand, are rarely as flexible. Not only are they not user-friendly, they are slow to improve from a user perspective. "It's no longer the days where the sites and the scope of things are small enough where you can do a redesign of a major site in an overnight flip of the switch," notes Tesch. The back end software of large sites has grown to the point that it's analogous to a system of public works. As with a sewage or a subway system, upgrades are often piecemeal and take place over months and years. The comparative ease of deploying a new blog has made blogging software a popular kludge for expanding the content offerings of network news sites. Says Mike Davidson:

One of the things that is almost always easier about a blogging platform, as compared to a traditional CMS, is just the editing of content. ... It's so easy to create an article in WordPress, or even in Movable Type for that matter. I mean, it's very, very easy. And a lot of these CMS's in major news organizations were created several years ago or more. And they aren't necessarily in tune with the way people publish content now.

In Bijker's (2006) terms, the networks' primary CMS's are "obdurate technologies," too valuable and engrained in network routines to abandon entirely, too large to replace or rework overnight. They have both a momentum and a sort of path dependency that make them hard to experiment with or adapt to reflect new publishing styles. And in such a situation, blogs are frequently deployed by Web producers as a means of starting or experimenting with new projects without enlisting the effort and manpower of their

site's Web development staff on tasks and tools that might prove time-sensitive, redundant, or even abortive. This is true even when the project in question may not be tailored to work best on a blog format. "In the work-a-day world, blogs are created because they're simple to create," says Tesch. "You know, it's something that can just be spun up quickly. It just sort of happens that way sometimes. And then a couple months later you look around and you're like, 'Why do we have this blog, exactly?'"

### **Broken Stages**

Tesch's observation underscores the experimental nature of many network blogging efforts, and constitutes a bit of a departure from the hitherto clean cut narrative about neat public front stages and gritty backstage deliberation at the networks. To be sure, the concepts work to a large degree. Just as with Hilgartner's (2000) example of the National Research Council and its reports, it is extraordinarily important to news organizations that the integrity of the process by which news is gathered and assembled be trusted by the public. As with the NRC's work, much of this day-to-day process is kept from public view—especially in the world of television news, where trained cameras create a very public *mise en scène* revolving around a small cadre of anchors and on-air correspondents, while the vast majority of news-gathering staff remain anonymous to audiences.

And in fact, even in network news blogs public controversies arise when stage management breaks down, the most notable example being in April 2007, when the content of a video essay by Katie Couric that had been cross-posted to *Couric & Co.*

turned out to have been largely plagiarized from a piece in the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>4</sup> This incident made national news and resulted in controversy on two levels. The first, of course, was that explicit plagiarism would occur at all at a national news organization. The second, however, was the revelation that Couric wasn't always the one writing her highly personalized opinion pieces. Like all of Couric's video essays, this one had featured her giving her personal opinion on a contemporary issue—in this case, the fate of public libraries—and offering insights from her own life. It was, on every level, intended to appear as a personal essay, written by Couric. As it turned out, the script had been written—or lifted, rather—by a junior producer at the network, who was fired within the week (Daily News, 2007; Nolan, 2007).

But as much as the appearance of integrity matters at network news sites, the experimental nature of blogs means that there is no accepted standard for a polished final product in the same way there is for a National Research Council report. Network news sites are littered with blogs that are broken, or haven't been updated in months or years.<sup>5</sup> Even at CBS News' *Couric & Co.*, where some authorship practices turned out to have been carefully veiled and very different than what was publicly presented, blog entries are not always polished and perfect. In fact, live posts are left on the site from the blog's development phase, containing pages of gibberish posted for the mere sake of

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<sup>4</sup> In the wake of this incident, many media critics focused their attention on CBS' blog. However, it's important to note that Couric's video essay was not exclusively posted to *Couric & Co.*, but also appeared on television and CBS Radio. The blog, however, allowed audiences and critics to easily locate the essay after CBS' initial retraction, and thus became the focal point in the ensuing controversy.

<sup>5</sup> A few of many examples include the original blog for ABC News' *This Week*, which was a broken page for several months in 2007 and eventually folded when anchor George Stephanopoulos began his own blog; Jan Crawford Greenburg's law blog, *Legalities* at ABCNews.com, which has no link from the site's main blog index, wasn't updated between July and September of 2009, and has since fallen silent again in the wake of her move to CBS News—no notice of her departure from the network was ever provided on the blog, which still describes her as an ABC Washington correspondent; as well as MSNBC.com's *Alpha Channel* development blog, which hasn't been updated in over two years.

testing the underlying software. As Ben Tesch underscored, blogs are frequently kludges, or the products of editorial experimentation, created because they are easy to create and maintained only until they are no longer convenient.

### **What's in a blog?**

If the above account describes how many news blogs get their start, it also leaves out a key, defining characteristic of blogs on network news Websites—namely, their relationship to television. Ed O'Keefe, ABC News' senior producer for special projects and innovation, noted that

Obviously these are tools that enable an on-air personality, an anchor, somebody that you want to support and promote, to reach out in a new space and potentially find a new audience. That's an incredible advantage of the blogs and the Web space in general. You know, George Stephanopoulos can have a presence on Twitter and Facebook and have a blog. And he is reaching out to an audience that might not necessarily view him on our broadcast. It's possible that there's crossover, but it's also possible that you're reaching out into an environment and into an audience that you're not necessarily reaching elsewhere. That's a tremendous advantage.

Similarly, Michelle Levi, who produces *Washington Unplugged*, a daily political talk show streamed to the Web, starring CBS News' Sunday-morning anchor Bob Schieffer, noted that the audience for *Face the Nation* likely fell into a substantively different demographic than the daily Webcast. Going online, then, is not only about spreading your content round the clock at a non-24-hour network—it's also about reaching an audience in a different age group, with different media-consumption habits. To the extent that the Web offers an additional channel for promoting the same on-air personalities we watch on television, it's merely an additional tool the networks can use to manage the same front stage—and veil the same back stage—as before. But online, in a largely text-based medium like a blog, where the “natural” division between on-air

talent and off-air production staff falls away, who becomes visible? Is network news blogging really a medium restricted to on-air talent? Or does the swathe of network journalists represented online extend beyond this tip of the iceberg? If so, what does it mean for the time-honored staging practices of television news?

In fact, O’Keefe, Levi and others suggested that the Web in general, and blogs in particular, often gave a public voice to producers, production assistants, broadcast associates, and other off-air correspondents and journalists who generally remain behind the scenes in television news—particularly in light of the high “kill ratio” at broadcast networks, where many prospective stories generate work for personnel, but never make it to air. Ed O’Keefe summarized the situation:

It’s a tremendous opportunity for them [the off-air staff], too. ... There’s a tremendous amount of work and energy and reporting that goes into every day at ABC News—and everywhere else, quite frankly, that does reporting of the news—that doesn’t get seen on air, that is not going to be on *World News*, that is not necessarily going to make it on *Nightline*, that might not be relevant anymore by the time we get to the fresh material that’s going to be on *Good Morning America*. ... [Blogs are a] tremendous outlet for people to write, to learn, to experiment, to participate and make more of what they’re doing on a day to day basis.

Similarly, a senior producer at CBS Interactive said that while the Website staff frequently courted contributions from on-air correspondents, it welcomed content from off-air staff as well. In fact, young off-air journalists often viewed blogging for the Website as an opportunity for career advancement:

On the Web it’s more egalitarian. ... If you’re a good blogger. If you’ve got something interesting to say, we’re going to post it, you know? We’re not going to say, “For every one producer, we need two correspondent posts.” We want the correspondent posts, but if a correspondent isn’t comfortable blogging, or Tweeting, or whatever, that’s fine. ... But we have...a BA [broadcast associate] on the desk in DC who’s written some of...the most...insightful posts I think I’ve seen on the *Political Hotsheet*. Because she’s...a great young writer,...her stuff gets posted up there with her byline, just like it would if it were Bob Schieffer. ... More

and more we're seeing people who are saying, "Hey, I'm a BA over here at radio or at television, but I'd really like to write for you guys on the site."...We get a lot of that,...people who say..."I really want to know what you guys do, because over here I'm just booking crews, and you guys seem to be actually writing, and people are getting their stuff on the site."

While individual journalists, both on- and off-air, may have specific agendas regarding the various network news blogs, it's also worth exploring what the networks more generally are hoping to get out of their footprint in the blogosphere. While, as O'Keefe suggests above, there is considerable desire at the networks to use blogs to promote broadcasts and on-air personalities—and a great deal of what goes into network news blogs is promotional in nature—the promotional impulse is not devoid of tensions. I was commonly told that purely promotional blogs were turn-offs to Web audiences. O'Keefe, for instance, also remarked that

Our approach has been to say that if you're going to establish a blog, this is something that needs to be constantly updated, something that needs active participation, and it has to go beyond promotional. It can't, again, just say, "Here's what's coming up on X show," or "Here's what we just said on X show." ... I don't think that's very interesting to folks.

But on the ground, this approach appeared to be more of a guideline, or even a platitude, than a rule. For instance, O'Keefe hypothesized that the defunct blog for ABC News' *This Week* may have been scrubbed after it "became too promotional." Another producer, who had left ABC News, critiqued the network's evening news blog, *The World Newser*, saying it rarely offered anything beyond a preview of the evening's lineup, "and perhaps what the standup open will be." Other network news blogs and bloggers have made attempts at a value-added approach, providing material that is supplemental to the broadcast. And there are blogs from the networks that provide truly original content. CBS' *Political Hotsheet*, for instance, bills itself as a Washington-

insider blog, and covers Beltway politics in a wonkish level of detail unlikely to make most of the network's broadcasts. One senior producer elaborated somewhat on the variety of blogging approaches on display across the various networks:

[*Couric & Co.* is] clearly something used to feature material—that is, an enhancement product that brings more attention to and more focus onto the broadcast. It's all based on the broadcast. Very little of it sort of comes from something that isn't sort of based in television. ... Obviously Brian Williams...walks that line the best of providing real meat in his blog without making it feel too promotional. You know what I mean? Yet, still promoting his newscast. ABC News, their [investigative unit's] blog...*The Blotter* is clearly a breaking news vehicle. And if you didn't even know that Brian Ross investigated for television, you could probably read that blog for a week and not be forced to go watch television, or have someone say, "Hey, you need to go watch television to see the rest of this story."

Decisions about when, whether, where, and how to break news online prove to be one of the greater complexities in the stage management and political ecology of the broadcast news organizations as they move online. As late as 2007, executives from the major networks stated publicly that while the Web might loom large in the future of broadcast news organizations, television would, in the near term, continue to be the primary battlefield on which they competed for ratings and attention (Johnson, 2006c). Two years later, in 2009, a CBS Interactive staffer told me that this state of affairs had changed "not a bit," adding that the Website was still largely "parasitic" on the television network for funding and manpower. Similarly, a senior CBS Interactive producer conjectured that the day was still a ways off when a major network would pay to send out a broadcast crew for the sole purpose of generating Web content. Thus, much of the information that makes it online at the networks is originally intended for their various television broadcasts. Moreover, the individual news programs at a given network are generally protective of stories they've produced for their own broadcasts, to the extent

that they are often reluctant to share material with one another, except in a promotional capacity, let alone publish stories early online that could be held for a show.

At the same time, for ABC News and CBS News—both networks without associated 24-hour cable channels—the Web is often the only medium through which to report news as it breaks. Publishing early to the Web can often bolster a network’s claim to have broken a story. Additionally, the Websites of the various networks have a distinct interest in promoting themselves as breaking news sources, where visitors can come any time of the day or night to find the latest news. One senior Web producer described this as a difficult balance, always inherent in online editorial decisions, between leveraging the reporting resources and audience-draw of the network’s television properties, while avoiding the appearance of being a mere promotional vehicle for broadcast. A few of the many tensions inherent in the broadcast-Web relationship—within and between the various networks—are encapsulated in the following story shared by a staffer at CBS:

When it came out that John Edwards was having an affair—admitted to the affair [in an interview]—[ABCNews.com] put [the interview] on *The Blotter*. And we [at CBS] saw it. And it was spectacular. And everyone was like, “Oh, my God. We gotta get this story up.” We got the story up. We also happened to have some great footage of Katie Couric during her Presidential campaign interviews where she asked him about infidelity and she got his comment saying, “I think it’s the core value of being a president or a vice president. People have to believe you.” So we ran that clip on top of this incredible news. And ABC News, in fact, didn’t even run any of the interview. Apparently they were holding it for *Nightline*. And NBC didn’t lead with it—they were in the middle of the Olympics. ... And when our coverage went off at the end of the half hour, [a senior CBS News staffer] said, “We kicked their ass.” Like, “We just owned that story.” .... And he said, “That Brian Ross is an idiot for putting this thing on his blog.” Because if it wouldn’t have gone on the blog, they would have blown everyone away at six-thirty. ... Everyone would have been left flat-footed ... watching ABC News with their mouths open. But instead, CBS News managed to really kick their butts—subjectively, you could argue. So, who won in that? Who’s the big winner in that? And, I think you could argue that, you know, maybe *Nightline* was the big

winner, really. Because *Nightline* managed to get all three networks to mention that they had this interview. But definitely, ABCNews.com won that. Because, where did everyone go? As soon as the news broke, ABCNews.com was the place to get that. The *only* place to get that [emphasis original].

The above story is complex and revealing in many respects, foremost, perhaps, among them the unabashed primacy given to the television medium by prominent broadcast staff. While television is—unsurprisingly—still the primary medium for television news, and the role of the Web as a delivery medium quite obviously remains in flux, all of the people I spoke with involved in the broadcast news Websites agreed that their end goal would be an environment in which on-air and online endeavors become mutually supporting. Ed O’Keefe of ABC News was one of the more sanguine respondents concerning this possibility:

It’s been amazing to watch the coordination that has developed. Ideas that originate on the Web are finding their way onto broadcast more and more every single day. And it’s really exciting to watch that. More and more, you’re seeing that whatever happens on *Good Morning America* will become a Google trend or hit Yahoo! Buzz, or be out there as one of the more popular items of the day, simply because it was on *Good Morning America*. And you’re beginning to see that virtuous circle that did not necessarily seem possible a few years ago. I don’t think this is an us versus them medium. I don’t think that you’re going to see television or Web. I think it’s television and Web. How we get there is still an evolving process. But there’s no question in my mind that one supports the other, and that goes both ways.

### **Situating the Audience for Network News Blogs**

Note that while the contours of the networks’ front stages may be dynamic and contested as each organization grapples with how best to summon a future in which “television and Web” coexist generatively, the networks continue to back-stage the vast majority of their operations. O’Keefe’s virtuous circle notably involves Web *staff* generating ideas for television, and television segments generating *audience* clicks. Despite peans in press coverage and trade journals to the dialogue networks are having

with viewers online, generally speaking Web audiences aren't the ones generating story ideas for *Good Morning America*. The most popular blog-hosting services on the Web, including LiveJournal (2009), Automattic's WordPress.com (2009), Google's Blogger (2009) and Six Apart's TypePad (2009), foreground terms like "community" and "conversation" in their descriptions of what a blog is. But as described above, it's clear that the various network news divisions have substantially adapted the the blog form to meet their own needs. So, the question arises, what happens to the role of "the user" after a blog has been welded into the larger structure of the news organization? Or more simply, if we admit that the role of the user is both nebulous and diverse everywhere online, how have the networks conceived of and situated their online audiences? Here, for the sake of examination it's helpful to divide the discussion a bit and distinguish between (a) users as legal constructs of the networks as institutions, and (b) users as experienced by editorial staff—while recognizing, of course, that these two perspectives are interrelated at every level.

### **The User and the Institution**

From an institutional perspective, all three networks treat user-contributed comments on stories and blog posts simultaneously as an asset and a liability. As one senior producer put it, active users who contributed comments and other content were seen as a "very prime source for monetization," in that engaged users and online communities have become valuable assets on which to capitalize in many emerging online business models. On the other hand, the prospect of letting visitors post whatever they want on an institutionally branded Website is perceived as a great liability within news organizations, all of which are accustomed to carefully measuring their own

content against strict professional and legal standards. As Michelle Levi, a CBS Interactive producer, puts it,

There's a quote [placed between a blog entry and the ensuing user comments] saying "CBS News content stops here. We're not responsible for these things." You are giving a little bit of a playground for people to say what they want. But it's still on a Webpage that has the name "CBS News" on top of it. And no matter what, it will be associated with that news division.

Sources at other networks made similar comments. Put another way, the networks at large are concerned about legal and image problems they might contract from the "personal, intimate contact with news consumers" they have promised. They are enamored with the possibilities of interactive media, but concerned about letting users play on their front stage. To manage this tension, each of the networks has adopted one or more strategies for moderating user comments.

**MSNBC.com.** MSNBC.com was the first of the three broadcast networks' Websites to create blogs, though its early efforts did not involve the broadcast division itself (MSNBC.com and its television cousins, NBC News and the MSNBC cable channel, are actually separate, but related companies within MSNBC). At their inception in 2002, these Weblogs were not hosted with blogging software at all, but were instead a simple modification of the graphic template used by the network to post regular print stories. There was no comment thread to which visitors could post, and users were encouraged to send their comments to an email dropbox, from which a blogger would select several to publish to the blog the following day in a letters-to-the-editor style entry. This setup allowed for a great deal of selectivity when it came to deciding which comments would see the light of day. But it was also time-consuming, and the use of the network CMS, called Workbench, which had not been designed for blogging, proved to

be awkward. Eventually, the various blogs were switched over piecemeal to other third-party software platforms, the preferred one being Community Server by the software company Telligent. Community Server and the other blogging platforms obviated the need for digests of emailed comments, allowing users to post their comments directly to the blog. But from that point on, MSNBC.com has continued to use a system of pre-moderation, in which submitted comments are not made visible to site visitors until they have been approved by the blogger or another MSNBC staffer.

**CBSNews.com.** CBSNews.com also began its blogging efforts using its own content management system, but unlike MSNBC, the network has continued to operate in this way. The CBS News software has evolved greatly over time, however. In 2008, CBS acquired CNET Networks, a technology media company with its own powerful—but by some accounts, not terribly user-friendly—content management system, the features of which have gradually been merged with CBS News’ own CMS. Even in its original form, however, CBS News’ blogging tool accepted user comments, and its system of moderation has remained largely the same. Users wishing to leave a comment are required to accept the site’s terms of service, as well as a code of conduct, known as the “Rules of Engagement,” and register for an account using an email address, password, and zipcode. Recently, CBS Interactive has also begun allowing users to register and log in using their Facebook accounts. Once users have been identified, they may submit comments on any story or blog post. To the user, comments appear to have been published instantaneously upon submission. However, behind the scenes newly submitted comments are run through a software algorithm, which searches for foul language and other inappropriate content before publishing each comment. If such

content is found, the comment is either sanitized or blocked entirely before publication, and then entered into a moderation queue, which a team of human moderators at CBS Interactive's Florida office then reviews. All comments published to the site include a hyperlink visitors can use to report abuse. Comments flagged in this manner are also added to the human-moderation queue. Those found to be in violation of the site's terms of service are removed promptly. Even with software algorithms, dedicated moderators, and crowdsourced abuse-reporting, CBS Interactive has not always been comfortable letting users comment on the site. As such, from the inception of its blogging efforts, CBSNews.com's CMS has included the ability to disable comment threads altogether. A senior producer there recalls that "we went through periods where we didn't offer comments."

For awhile we didn't post comments, because maybe we weren't so comfortable with the moderating structure, we weren't comfortable with the software—that it was really filtering out things, say racial epithets and things like that. As the technology improved we felt more comfortable with it. But also it became sort of a changing philosophy, which is that, "If we have no comments at all, are we engaging at all with our readers?"

While comments are now accepted as a general rule on CBSNews.com, the staff reserves the right—and the technical ability—to turn off specific comment threads if they risk becoming particularly inflammatory. When possible CBS Interactive's editorial staff in New York make this decision as a group, but employees are encouraged to "err on the side of caution" and take individual initiative when necessary. "No one's going to come down on you for turning off a comments section because it's getting out of control," said one senior producer.

**ABCNews.com.** If, from a user perspective, CBS News is slightly more open than MSNBC in its method of moderating user comments, ABC News is yet more

permissive, though equally vigilant behind the scenes. ABCNews.com's blogs publish user comments instantaneously upon submission and require no registration. There is no "report abuse" link embedded in each comment. Instead, *every* comment, once published, is subjected to review by a full-time staff of moderators contracted by ABC News solely to review user-submitted material. As an arbiter of what is acceptable, this moderation staff employs the same standards and practices manual used by journalists at the network. Senior producer Ed O'Keefe describes it as "A very, very thick book," that "they follow to a T." When comments are found to be in violation, the moderation staff will remove them promptly. Or, if the infraction is a minor one, often the staff will simply sanitize the comment. For instance, if a user includes a hyperlink (which the network forbids), moderators will often leave the comment up while removing the link. As with CBS News, even with a rather rigorous system in place, the network is not always happy with the results. "I can't say that we've never considered going to some other system," says O'Keefe. At the time of this writing, ABC News continues to consider switching its comment threads to an MSNBC-like system of pre-moderation. A select few blogs—most notably that of the network's investigative reporting unit, *The Blotter*—are already subject to careful pre-moderation, as material appearing there is frequently controversial, legally sensitive, and/or relies on anonymous sources.<sup>6</sup>

**Newsvine.** Possibly the most open comment moderation system of any of the networks comes from Newsvine, a digital subsidiary of MSNBC that has been integrated into the Web footprint MSNBC.com. Newsvine is a "social news site" or what's sometimes referred to as a "community blogging platform." Users on such sites can

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<sup>6</sup> It's easy to imagine any variety of ways that post-moderated commenting here (e.g., "Deep Throat was my college roommate.") could legally expose the network.

write their own blogs and/or, in the case of Newsvine, post links to news stories all over the Web as entries in their blogs. Users of Newsvine browsing the site vote on the quality of these entries, and of individual comments. These votes are aggregated by the Newsvine software, which uses the resulting rankings to lay out the front page and other sections of the site with popular articles, as well as to boost the status of users who've contributed well-received material. To ensure that the site contains the latest breaking news (rather than waiting for users to post links to stories), articles from the Associated Press are also automatically posted to the site. But as with user-contributed posts, their visibility is at least partially determined by member votes. Newsvine was acquired by MSNBC in 2007 and is maintained by the network as a separate, but related online brand with its own independent Web domain. MSNBC.com stories are now fed to Newsvine in the same manner as articles from the Associated Press. And in fact, clicking "Discuss" at the bottom of an article on the MSNBC.com homepage will drop you into the article's comment thread on Newsvine.com. Some MSNBC and NBC News personalities, including Robert Bazell, Chuck Todd, and Rachel Maddow, have kept blogs on the site, or at least used its blog functionality to interact with their audiences. Newsvine is possibly the best example of what the CBS Interactive producer above referred to in discussing the monetizable qualities of active, engaged users. Indeed, in acquiring Newsvine, MSNBC was specifically looking for a way to cash in on a small, but particularly active and valuable demographic, which they call "news explorers."

Newsvine CEO Mike Davidson explains:

News explorers are the very high-involvement people who have an above-average interest in news, who are very likely to forward stories to friends, who are very likely to comment on stories themselves, who aren't satisfied reading a quick, three-paragraph AP blurb about a topic. ... Those people are the ones that

generate a ton of page views and spend an inordinate amount of time on your site. ... [Newsvine is] the site within the company that is specifically geared to deal with those sorts of people and to make the most out of them.

Of all the different moderation models discussed so far, Newsvine undoubtedly gives the most freedom and authority to users. Not only do comments and stories on the site get curated entirely by users (if only through automated processes), stories from mainstream news sources and MSNBC journalists are presented right alongside user-generated material, with little to differentiate one from the other. This lack of distinction on Newsvine between user-generated content and professional reporting—and even between content from MSNBC and elsewhere—is striking when compared to the philosophy of the three primary broadcast news sites, as is the fact that Newsvine’s layout is automatically generated from user votes. By way of contrast, take this quote from a senior producer at CBS Interactive on the tensions inherent in laying out the front page of a network news site:

Obviously you want to incorporate as much automation as possible because of limited resources. But how can you overtake that automation as easily as possible, so that you can customize your site, your page? On any given day you want to customize. You don’t want just the last three videos that went into your system. You want to customize the best three. And do you populate that by most popular? But sometimes most popular isn’t exactly the way you want to present your site. If it’s “Man Eats Own Foot,” and you’ve got three sub-stories on that, you probably don’t want your average user to come and say, “This is what CBSNews.com” is all about.

In my interview, Davidson explained what is likely already apparent by now:

MSNBC.com and Newsvine are able to coexist peacefully because of the brand separation between the two. Newsvine exists at its own domain, with no MSNBC branding beyond the byline appearing on stories from the network. This brand

separation lets users have their say, but obviates the need for close moderation of comments. Davidson called this the network's "arm's length community concept:"

We just don't really do any filtering at all. And so, the reason why it's nice to have kind of a slight brand separation between the two [sites] is that we can open up comment threads on Newsvine for MSNBC stories, and because they're branded Newsvine, it's not as important as it would otherwise be to tightly control what shows up. And as you know, from reading user comments on really any site that allows them, sometimes comments are awful, and those ones come down. But other times there are comments that are, you know, not worth deleting, but not really the sorts of things that you would want to show up on your flagship site, necessarily.

In other words, the moment when a user clicks "discuss" on an MSNBC.com story or jumps to Chuck Todd's space on Newsvine, they are dumped—somewhat jarringly—into an entirely different site, with vastly different branding, layout, and user interfaces. Moreover, the users of Newsvine are by no means exclusively, or even primarily, interested in content from MSNBC.com. The setup takes the small disclaimer mentioned by Michelle Levi, "our content stops here" and blows it up into a sort of virtual border crossing. Users are allowed greater freedom on Newsvine, but at the expense, perhaps, of their direct involvement with the network, which shuffles them off of its front stage entirely.

Ironically, this border crossing can sometimes result in *greater* moderation aimed at users coming from MSNBC.com. While comment moderation is sparse on Newsvine, users can flag comments as abuse. A staff moderator will then delete extraordinarily offensive ones, but more often give users warnings, suspensions, or "slaps on the wrist," explaining to them why their comments are out of line with the collegial community norms of Newsvine. Users entering the site via MSNBC.com "Discuss" links are often less likely to know what Newsvine is, let alone that it has a set

of social norms substantively different than—and predating its association with—MSNBC.com. And that, says Davidson, makes them more likely to get flagged:

The people that come over to Newsvine in that way are not familiar with the ethos of Newsvine. ... They feel like they are about to leave a comment on a major media site. And sometimes there are bad behaviors that go along with that. If you're reading some sort of article—or watching some sort of video—by a pundit on MSNBC...[and] you want to leave a comment about it, flaming what you just saw, you're not necessarily aware that that's not really acceptable behavior on Newsvine. That's not really what people do. And so, often those threads are the toughest ones to moderate, because you have people who don't know the rules.

The contrasts in moderation strategy and social norms between Newsvine and MSNBC.com will only get more interesting in the near future. ABCNews.com and CBSNews.com held off on blogging until they were certain it was a project they wished to pursue—at which point the networks adopted a standard publishing platform of one sort or another to host all their blogs. MSNBC.com, on the other hand, began blogging earlier and took a more experimental approach to the medium. As a result, the site's blogs are currently hosted by a variety of different blogging platforms, including Community Server, TypePad, and MovableType. The company is now seeking to standardize its blogging platform, and the developers at Newsvine are in the process of designing a new blogging CMS for MSNBC.com, which will eventually usurp all these other platforms. The tool will be a more fully featured version of the publishing system used by members of Newsvine itself, and Newsvine hopes its users will also benefit from the upgrades made for MSNBC.com staff. At the same time, the question remains as to how much this new software—reverse engineered from Newsvine's laissez faire moderation technology, and with its capacity for aggregating users' opinions of an article—will impact the moderation policies on the MSNBC flagship site. The likely answer is, “not much.” While Davidson made it clear that he prefers Newsvine's way of

moderating comments to MSNBC's, calling pre-moderation "the quickest way to kill a conversation," he also said the software will be developed to MSNBC.com's specifications, including an option for pre-moderation. "We have to support all of it, unfortunately," he said.

### **Editorial Experiences With Users**

While the above descriptions outline the various networks' policies, writ large, for handling user comments, they don't say much about how editorial staff experience these comments—or whether they actually feel the need to respond to them, as the public rhetoric about news blogs' conversational nature would suggest.

At CBS News, one staffer explained that because blogs were increasingly used as a tool for publishing traditional reporting, user comments rarely added value.

It seems to me that 70 or 80 percent of them [commenters] are people with an agenda. And they use the bottom part of these blogs—and I'm sure it's the same across the board for all network news and all news sites—to forward their agenda and have little fights among each other. ... And very rarely does it forward the conversation. I would love for it to. But it's very rare that you get either an email back from a reader or a comment lower down that would warrant a reply. ... I think our blog in some ways is a little bit of a hybrid between, you know, your traditional, looser-format-and-sometimes-opinionated blog and a traditional story. You know what I mean? Like, in some ways it doesn't seem like it is a blog. And so, for people to respond underneath—They're not responding to me, the author. They're responding to Sarah Palin.

Her observation is an interesting one, in that it suggests part of the reason some network writers find user comments to be of little value is that they are written in response to something that is intended as a formal professional product, written with journalistic objectivity in mind, rather than as an informal conversational lead-in or even an opinion piece, conveying a point of view with which users can engage. This

state of affairs recalls Meyers' (1990) distinction between "narratives of nature" and "narratives of discovery." The news story, from this perspective, is presented as a narrative of nature—explicating a causal chain of given and indisputable facts—while the comment thread is seen as an invitation for users to talk amongst themselves about the natural order of things, as opposed to a place to engage with the author of the piece or interrogate the process of discovery. As the one CBS Interactive producer said previously, not allowing comments may signal a *lack* of engagement with users. But it seems that merely allowing users to post shouldn't be equated with engagement either. At Newsvine, Mike Davidson discussed what he considered to be the tendency of news organizations to equate engagement with the mere addition of comment features in Web software:

There are people in the news business who think that there's a big community button that you can just push. And things happen. And as an editor you don't need to really do anything other than push that button. And that's when it gets dangerous. Because you ask for features to be built, and then you let people use them. And you don't really end up connecting with them at all as a news organization.

Despite his observation, it would be overly simplistic, disingenuous, and tendentious to write a polemic here about networks ignoring user content. First, such an argument assumes that all or most user-submitted content is insightful or worth reading. And while such an assessment could kick off a larger treatise about the social construction of value (see Braun & Gillespie, this symposium), suffice it to say here that a reasonable proportion of user comments on news sites could be called "tedious" with a high degree of intersubjective reliability. Or, as one exasperated user on a networks site put it after trying to start a discussion on a recent article, "Almost everyone posting here acts like a f'head" (fleetwood1955, 2009).

Second, while they may ultimately prove the exception rather than the rule, there are numerous examples of blogs among the network news sites where bloggers do engage with users to a substantial degree and where user comments influence journalistic content on a regular basis. For instance, science writer Alan Boyle's *Cosmic Log*, the first blog launched by MSNBC.com in 2002, maintains its relatively informal editorial style and has become an online destination for experts in astronomy and aerospace. The blog frequently receives informed comments from professionals in these fields, many of whom use the threads not only to engage with the subject matter, but to supply facts about physics and aerospace happenings omitted in the actual blog post.<sup>7</sup> Boyle frequently engages with users by replying to the threads, and in fact he says that commenters not only add value to the blog, but at times actually help him out:

[When] I started out, I would say to myself, "Well if anyone comes in and has some little technical point that they're incorrect about, I'm going to write back and I'm going to correct that for them." And I now understand that I just really can't do that. And there may be comments that have value, but like I say, get some little point wrong. And I feel a little more sanguine about letting that sort of thing go through, and just trust that if I get around to it I'll try to correct something that I feel is important and can be corrected, and sometimes other commenters beat me to it, and kind of take some of that load. And I really appreciate that—when other people weigh in and contribute usefully to the conversation.

While Boyle's blog, like all blogs on MSNBC.com, pre-moderates comments, unlike some bloggers at the network, he moderates the comments himself and does so promptly, often within a few minutes of their being posted. Moreover, far from viewing pre-moderation as antithetical to good conversation, Boyle argues that it's an essential prerequisite. It allows him to ensure that the conversation is civil, and the elevated discourse, he says, maintains pro-social norms on the blog, making the comment

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<sup>7</sup> See the comment threads from Boyle (2007) and Boyle (2009) for good examples.

threads worth reading and adding value for those who choose to visit. While required registration might accomplish some of the same goals, Boyle also said he believes it would be enough of a barrier to access to discourage comments from occasional and first-time visitors, who might otherwise pepper the discourse with new ideas and insights. Boyle's experience demonstrates that within the guidelines set by the networks and the software architectures that run their sites, there is some latitude afforded individual bloggers as to how to engage their audiences, as well as a diversity of opinion on the value of existing moderation strategies.

To Mike Davidson at Newsvine, who tended to be critical of many of the network news blogs and pre-moderation of comments in general, Boyle and others who ran their blogs similarly were "real bloggers:"

So you have your Bob Sullivans of the world and your Alan Boyles of the world, who really run their blogs like personal blogs. I think it's great. They're the ones writing the articles. They're the ones pulling up the editor in a Web browser. They're the ones hitting publish. They're the ones manually approving comments very quickly. They're the ones going into comment threads and responding to users. To me that's a real blog. What they are doing is legitimate, real blogging for a large media organization.

Davidson was not the only interviewee to draw a distinction between "news blogs" and "real blogs" on the basis of bloggers' editorial style and engagement with users. Multiple respondents cited ABC News White House correspondent Jake Tapper's blog, *Political Punch*, as another example of a "real blog." Tapper posts to *Political Punch* multiple times a day, and it has become, by some metrics, the most popular blog at ABCNews.com. Like Boyle, Tapper generally writes his blog individually, though it occasionally has other contributors. While the blog ostensibly revolves around his political reporting, Tapper frequently writes in personal tangents, including personal

stories and thoughts on TV shows, films, and other popular culture. While he rarely participates in comment threads, Tapper does respond to users in his posts on occasion and frequently interacts (albeit in limited fashion) with his audiences via Twitter. It's worth noting while ABC News executives have been vocally and enthusiastically supportive of Tapper's blogging efforts, ABCNews.com maintains strict editorial oversight over its blogs, an approach which has not always meshed easily with his attempt at an informal or irreverent style. Tapper recently told *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz (2009), "I have had my struggles achieving the right tone...It's not always easy for a mainstream organization to accept what a blog is."

While there are blogs, like Tapper's and Boyle's, that have achieved a large and/or influential following of active users, some of the producers I talked with were quick to point out that these engaged visitors are in the minority—and that network news sites are designed to serve a much broader, generally passive audience. A senior producer at CBS Interactive commented that

I think more and more you're seeing more of a passive Web user. You know, someone who says, "I want an all-in-one shop. Show me some video and keep it rolling. And give me the stories that I want, because I don't want to go through my bookmarks. I don't want to go through a bunch of stuff. ... And I don't want to set up a customizable Google page. I just want a place where I can just go and I sit and am entertained for a little while."

In line with this observation about the preponderance of passive users, many of the most-trafficked blogs at the network news Websites feature little or no interaction between users and editorial staff. This preponderance of passive audiences isn't unique to blogs, either. Michelle Levi noted that in producing a Webcast for CBS Interactive, she and her collaborators had actively sought to interact with their audience through the Web, and regularly solicited audience questions and comments for guests appearing on

the program. Despite the fact that the Webcast's audience numbered in the tens of thousands, the questions "just haven't been coming," she said.

Every once in awhile we'll have a show that gets six or seven. But, let's say 50 percent of them are not necessarily usable. ... While the technology's there to do it, we haven't found that people are just dying to get involved in the show. I think they're almost fine watching what we want to produce.

### **Moderation and Staging**

By now an interesting picture is coming together of what stage management looks like online at the networks. And Weblogs constitute a curious front stage—or piece of one. The networks' digital divisions have at times been willing to let their blogs look broken or abandoned. Frequently blogs that are updated are either little more than alternative templates for traditional news writing, or in the words of one producer, amount to "enhancement products," containing little more than promotional content aimed at directing viewers to their television sets. In general, little access has been granted to back stage processes. The absence of new, working, or original content in these cases may not always be desirable to the networks' respective Web staffs, but it does not critically damage the credibility of the larger network news divisions, whose authority and audience is still—for the time being—primarily grounded in television. And while not all news workers at the networks have taken to the blog editorial form, many have found great advantages in the ease with which blogging software allows them to publish and to experiment.

The presence of online content submitted by users, however, is treated with great ambivalence. It is welcomed insofar as it's seen as a prerequisite for capturing audiences online, or a sign that people are reading the site—and this is especially true in light of the evening news' continual ratings decline. But at the same time, when

networks allow users to publish content to their sites, the collective institutional concern is that they are effectively allowing those users to speak for them and to play on the network stage. As such, user-generated content is surrounded by disclaimers and subject to careful scrutiny, sometimes before its publication, sometimes afterward, and often both.

It's early yet to say how the stage management practices of the networks will change as they continue to delve deeper into the Web and its ever-evolving roster of interactive services and applications. But already the observations in this paper on how the networks have taken to blogging show clear patterns that can easily be extended to the same organizations' experiences with other emerging media. For instance, the news networks are just now beginning large-scale experimentation with the micro-blogging service, Twitter. Already at least one visible stage-management controversy has erupted on this new playing field. ABC News recently reviewed its professional protocols with regard to Twitter after correspondent Terry Moran posted a frank comment by President Obama ("Pres. Obama just called Kanye West a 'jackass'...") before the latter had a chance to add that his remark was off the record (Alexander, 2009; Shaer, 2009). As Gaye Tuchman (1978), Herbert Gans (1979), Charlotte Ryan (1991), and many others have pointed out, the news media's authority and credibility are extraordinarily reliant on their access to institutional sources, the White House being foremost among these. While Moran's tweet ultimately turned out to be a relatively minor dust-up for ABC News, it's hard to imagine it occurring in an arena with higher stakes—and it's thus easy to understand why executives at the network were swift to lay down the law, issuing the following statement through a spokesperson:

There should be a very dark, easily understood line between material that is approved, vetted and published, and material that has yet to reach that standard...The message to our employees is very clear: If it's approved and published, then people can tweet it or share it on Facebook.... Prior to that happening, the information is not to be shared. (Shaer, 2009)

As Hilgartner (2000) demonstrated in his study of the National Research Council, and as others in science and technology studies have long known (Collins, 1983), controversies such as this one, where institutional decorum is breached, provide insights into the the more mundane normative structure of organizations. In the case of the networks, it's clear that while some correspondents manage to use Twitter—like the blogging platforms that preceded it—in a playful and experimental fashion, there are distinct boundaries, and penalties for crossing them, when it comes to what parts of the news gathering process can be made public and what should be kept back stage. This emphasis on policing journalistic editorial style and restricting access to the back stage isn't limited to ABC News. Even before the Terry Moran incident, a senior producer at CBS Interactive had this to say about how CBS is keeping Twitter a professional space:

Every correspondent who's been trained on Twitter has said, "So, why do people care what I'm eating for breakfast?" And the answer is, "No one [cares]. We don't want you to Tweet anything about breakfast. We want you to Tweet the news. Use it as a hard news tool." And that's how we use Twitter.

The promotional quality of network news blogging also carries over to many of the networks' Twitter accounts. Following a smattering of TV news personalities on Twitter reveals that much of what's posted by the networks consists of updates concerning who and what will appear on one television show or another.<sup>8</sup> Even some of television news' most enthusiastic Twitterers and recognizable personalities, like David Gregory, the

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<sup>8</sup> For examples, you can examine the Twitter accounts of ABC News' George Stephanopoulos, CBS News' Andrew Cohen, or NBC's *Dateline*.

anchor of NBC News' *Meet the Press*, have described the service as "just another marketing tool" (Stanley, 2009).

As Boczkowski (2004) put it, "the past survives in the future" (p. 70). Many of his observations about the adoption of Web publishing by newspaper businesses from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s are easily transferrable to the networks' adoption of Web technologies a decade later. Like the newspapers, the networks have been largely reactive in their adoption of new technologies, including blogging. Ed O'Keefe, a senior producer at ABC News, explicitly told me that the networks frequently waited on innovations and proofs-of-concept from others before adopting new publishing tools. And while MSNBC.com dipped its toe in the water as early as 2002, none of the broadcast divisions of the major networks became involved in blogging until late 2005, long after the word "blog" had become a household term. Also in line with Boczkowski's (2004) observations is the fact that network news blogging is defined by its relationship to existing editorial practices and most often to the television broadcasts. Content for the Web is largely parasitic on television journalism efforts, and much of the material that appears online in blogs is explicitly intended to promote television personalities and/or broadcasts.

### **A Concluding Invitation**

It will seem anticlimactic, but beyond these simple observations, I don't wish to draw any grand conclusions. The questions I've raised in this paper are jumping-off points for my dissertation, and one reason I've submitted this conference paper is to invite feedback and critique from the community of journalists and academics it concerns. I'd like to know what attendees of this conference think about my

assessments, what questions I should be asking, and what questions I've yet to pursue. My experience so far with this project has raised many lines of inquiry that I'm eager to consider. How do news blogs fit into the larger digital strategy of the networks as they move online? How do the various policies and moderation strategies actually affect the dynamics of conversation on the various news sites? And how much more can I learn by looking at the sites from the perspective of users? Does it matter, for instance, that commenters on the *Daily Nightly* think of themselves as an online community—"the regulars," as they call themselves? How do they see their relationship to the Website? And how are specific communities/networks of users regarded by the editorial staff that engages with them? For that matter, what's the difference between "audiences" and "users?" I've been using the two terms interchangeably—as my sources generally have—but there's a world of semantic difference between the two that's waiting to be explored. In short, I've raised more questions than I've answered—in my research and, no doubt, in this paper. As such, I welcome your comments, ideas, and suggestions as I expand on this research and consider what the next phase of my inquiry might be.

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