

Social Epistemology and Social Media: An Exchange

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Editor’s Note: Conducted over email during January and February 2012, this exchange between Nicholas Munn, Monash University, and Paul de Laat, University of Groningen, addresses issues in, and related to, their articles published in Social Epistemology 26.1 (2012). Both Munn, in “The New Political Blogosphere”, and de Laat, in “Open Source Production of Encyclopedias”, examine questions related to social epistemology and social media. This exchange focuses on political blogs.

Paul de Laat (PDL) offers questions and observations to which Nick Munn (NM) responds.

Points Closely Related to the Articles

PDL: Your criticism of [Alvin] Goldman is sometimes overblown (if I read him correctly). You interpret him (Munn 2012, 59) as arguing that blogs completely depend on mainstream media for the facts (and then you go on providing some famous counterexamples of bloggers that dig up new content). That interpretation, however, seems ill-founded. Looking at Goldman (2008, 114), he argues that blogs do free ride on traditional media for the facts and subsequently engage in superior acts of fact-checking. Indeed. But the creation of content is also on their menu: after all, he approvingly quotes Posner (2005) as saying, that millions of amateur posters sustain and nourish political blogging.

NM: I take it that you are referring to the passage in my text that reads: ‘He argues that the political blogosphere is reliant on mainstream media for content?’ (Munn 2012, 59) If so, I did not intend for that passage to be read as indicating that Goldman requires the complete dependence of the blogosphere on mainstream media. As long as there is a significant dependence on mainstream media for content, I believe that the criticism applies. While it would be stronger if the dependence was complete, this isn’t necessary. I take it that Goldman’s position is captured in any situation where the following two conditions obtain: Political blogs rely on the work of the mainstream media as a starting point; and the mainstream media is cut out of the readership/response loop by individuals going straight to political blogs.

With regard to Goldman’s acceptance of the passage from Posner (2005) on sustaining and nourishing, I took that comment to be referring to the process of editorialising and analysis that the political blogosphere undertakes, having been provided with the core data sets by the mainstream media. The content they produce is new, yes, but it remains parasitic on the mainstream media insofar as the basic information required for the activities of the bloggers is found and reported by the mainstream media outlets. The problem in a case like this is not that political blogs are redistributing mainstream media

data, but that the new content they produce could not have been produced without the mainstream media (and, that the ability of the mainstream media to continue producing content is undermined by the success of the blogs).

PDL: Many assertions play a crucial role in your text – but I would like to see some supporting data. Most influential political blogs are made by non-amateurs (Munn 2012, 62): data? [And are these top blogs the same as the ones you mention by name in the article later on?] Amateurs discovering important facts is a marginal phenomenon (Munn 2012, 62): data? What's more, the only source you mention (Hindman cs 2003) is no longer accessible. (But rest assured: the reader can obtain it from a Princeton link, as I just did.)

NM: The blogs mentioned later in the text are a good sample of the top blogs, and they are largely comprised of professional journalists. The Hindman paper gives a good overview of the disparity between the top blogs and the average blogger in terms of influence, as measured by views and links. As you mention, the link which appears in my paper has become non-functional at some stage recently. The Princeton link you refer to is, I take it, www.cs.princeton.edu/~kt/mpsa03.pdf? Readers should be referred to this in future.

In terms of hard data, a more recent, and well-detailed analysis of the power of various blogs can be found in Farrell and Drezner (2008, available online www.henryfarrell.net/publicchoice2.pdf.) The two articles by Bowers (2010a, 2010b) that are mentioned in the text also provide data on these issues. These have the added benefit of being freely available online. The names I mention, Mickey Kaus (*KausFiles*), Michelle Malkin (*michellemalkin.com*), Andrew Sullivan (*The Dish*) and Joshua Marshall (*Talking Points Memo*) are all highly ranked bloggers on the *Technorati* lists of influential political blogs. For current influence rankings of political blogs, particularly in the US, one can visit technorati.com/politics/. There are various subdivisions available within the *Technorati* page that can be used to customise the data further.

One note on this point is that the blogosphere remains in a state of rapid change. In the relatively short time between writing the first draft of this paper for a conference in 2010, and acceptance in 2011, the balance of blogs has moved noticeably towards group blogs, many of which are run as businesses in their own right. This move away from blogs as the preserve of individuals, towards blogs as businesses, is worth looking at. I believe that we will find that this is further evidence of the professionalization of the blogosphere, and that young journalists will look to work for websites as a first step into the business. Places like *Daily Kos* and the *Huffington Post* already hire interns and offer work experience for students (details of which can be found on the respective websites).

PDL: You argue that some bloggers are getting absorbed so to speak in conventional media. Why do you remain silent about the very real prospect of them becoming much more 'traditional-media' than before? Becoming forced to speak with the voice of their

master, thereby diluting their partisan stance? In the end you devote a few words to this – maybe some more words are warranted.

NM: In part I speak little of it because I do not want to engage in speculation when the results may shortly be available. As I have detailed, there is a lot of this absorption happening (Nate Silver, Ezra Klein, and Matt Yglesias have all moved to such companies), and following the content of those who have begun working for larger companies may well enable us to draw actual data, rather than mere speculation. But the available data sets were limited then, and the topic is possibly important enough for analysis in a paper of its own.

I do, however, agree that this is an important concern, and it may be one that works on the blogosphere as a whole, rather than solely on the individuals within it. As blogs in general become accepted, will their approach become more mainstream, less risky? I fear the answer is yes. A closely related concern is that, even if their voices are not toned down, their availability may be. An example of this can be found with the experience of Nate Silver (*FiveThirtyEight*), who is now writing for the *New York Times*. His blog is subject to the *Times* paywall, which restricts access to the online version of the paper after 20 article hits a month. I have personally stopped reading it as frequently because of this.

Points for General Discussion

PDL: The 'data' about something are often not unambiguous: a variety of answers can be entertained. Experts often disagree on vital matters, whether global warming or the speed of neutrino's. One may try to formulate epistemologically correct ways of handling such disagreements in media and blogs. How do traditional media versus new blogs fare in this respect?

NM: Traditional media often seem to have a 'party line' to which they adhere. So, for example, one does not expect to hear *Fox News* in the US praise any Democratic Party action. The epistemic disagreement in such a case is segregated between competing organisations. To hear the other side of the debate, one watches another channel. Similarly, one reads multiple newspapers to get multiple perspectives on the issues. One feature of the blogosphere which appears to give it an advantage here is that in standing outside the traditional structure, there is more willingness to engage in critical self-reflection. It is fairly common to see President Obama attacked from the liberal blogosphere for his decisions, while the left-leaning mainstream media support him.

Having said this, it is worth noting that the traditional media and the blogosphere share a harmful tendency towards becoming echo chambers, in which disagreements are ignored or forcibly removed from the debate. That is, both parties can tend towards a position wherein decisions as to which side of a disagreement to present are made on the basis of previously held beliefs, or political positions, rather than on the merits of the data as presented. It is not clear that the blogosphere offers any clear advantages over

mainstream media on this point. It is, however, clear that there is no special disadvantage held by the blogosphere here. (I note this is beginning to answer the following question, so will end here)

PDL: More generally, a central epistemological problem with media to me seems to be not only the reporting of false information/data or only a part of available data, but also the interpretation of the data, the stories erected from them. Obviously, one can go several ways with the same data. So how would you say does the political blogosphere fare in this respect in comparison to traditional media? To what extent is one epistemologically superior to the other? And how to define such interpretational superiority in the first place? Bear in mind that we are talking politics here, not science! Is this whole question not arguably more important than the subordinate aspect of getting-the-political-facts-straight?! So I argue for comparing traditional and blog media on two main criteria: information and interpretation, unearthing political facts and developing political views. [This question is linked to your echo chamber discussion] In Goldman and others, I would argue, there seems to be too easy a transition from information and truths to becoming informed and taking correct political decisions.

NM: The different ways in which any data set can be taken are not all epistemologically equal. Any given data can be presented favourably, neutrally or badly. Obviously there are instances where this determination is difficult, but such hard cases are marginal ones. Most of the time, for example, the creation of new jobs in a depressed economy is an unequivocal good, and if it is not presented as such, the parties doing the presenting are engaged in partisan interpretation. Part of the reason the blogosphere has epistemological advantages is that many blogs are devoted to a sort of meta-analysis of data. They look at how other news sources treat data sets, and analyse this treatment, rather than analysing the data set itself.

The question of how to define interpretational superiority is an important one. In large part, it can be answered by appeal to relevance. If there are other interpretations, or further relevant information, which would alter the expectations of a reasonable person when confronted with that information, and these other interpretations are not mentioned, then that failure suggests an inferior interpretation. If the answer to 'why would you interpret the data in that way?' is that it best suits one's own agenda, rather than that it is the best available interpretation, one is acting in an epistemologically dangerous manner. Obviously, this doesn't give us a clear metric for deciding these things, but it provides the kind of beginning which can root out the most egregious cases of mis-presentation.

The initial discovery of relevant political information may seem at first to tie quite closely into funding, that is, big organisations with more staff and more money may be expected to be better at discovering relevant information. But if there is such a correlation, it is clearly imperfect, as a wide variety of other factors work to undermine the impact of funding. So, for example, a media source which contributes to the Republican Party, or has a primary readership/viewership from that party, has disincentives to expose failings of that party. An independent or smaller organisation is

less vulnerable to disincentives of this kind, so may be able to discover or disseminate information that is left untouched by bigger parties.

Interpretation also provides its own difficulties. The position of the media agency within the political structure can provide its own constraints on the available interpretations of the data, for example. One important function of the blogosphere is to make information on the existence of competing interpretations available to the politically interested public. To draw again from an example I use in my article, Nate Silver at *FiveThirtyEight* devotes a lot of time to showing the various ways in which polling figures can be interpreted, and to explaining why particular interested parties choose particular interpretations of the available figures. This sort of undertaking does not, I think, fit cleanly into the information/interpretation framework you suggest.

On the worry about the transition from the availability of information to the state of being informed, I take it that your concern is something like the following: Even given the relevant information, many people will not know what to do with it. It is important to know not just that, for example, the unemployment rate has fallen, but also the factors that play into the unemployment rate, and whether the change can meaningfully be ascribed to any particular political actions undertaken on either side. Information alone cannot provide people with this, and interpretation is not considered by Goldman.

I think that the blogosphere is at its strongest when it comes to interpretation of information, whether that information is publicly available, such as employment figures, or provided through the mainstream media. It provides a broader coverage of the possible interpretations, and analysis of why any of them are good interpretations, than is usually available through the mainstream media.

PDL: To what extent is it important/necessary that Goldman (and you yourself presumably) stick to a veritistic social epistemology? Sticking to the term veritistic, you argued that political blogs are gaining veritistic momentum so to speak. But if we strike that term, and consider the issue in more general terms, do blogs not also score well? Do they do not also provide entertainment and amusement as seems to be so important politically? And might this by any chance strengthen their more epistemological impact?! We live, after all, in an era of emotionalized media.

NM: I think that on the whole, blogs do score well even absent a veritistic social epistemology. Readers are drawn to particular blogs not only by the strict informational content of the site, but also by the means with which that information is distributed. Good writing, humour, an ability to make connections and offer thoughts, or further material to pursue ... all of these add value to blogs. So there is no need to restrict discussion of the benefits of blogs to their veritistic benefits. If we can satisfactorily answer your question above, then yes, I think all the other points you mention could help enhance the epistemological impact of the blogosphere.

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