The Effective Role of Blogs in Shaping Public Opinion

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Abstract

Communication in the contemporary world has vastly evolved from a period of letter communication, airmailing, to the modern data communication courtesy of improving technology. The emergence of the internet in 1990s has greatly changed the way people interact to a fast, convenient, and cheap mode through cell phones reducing the world to a global village. Blogs is helping people to express their opinions through debating; professionals are also using it as a means to pass information, as broadcasters use it to pass news across the world within milliseconds (Sullivan, 2012). In this study, the primary aim was to research the effective role of blogs in shaping the public opinion. A total of 71 participants were used and the results of the analysis showed a positive correlation between the use of blogs and the impacts on shaping opinions. Moreover, a high percentage (88%) of the users recorded that blogs have positive impacts on their lives as compared to the mainstream media.
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Introduction

August 6th, 1991 is contemporarily remembered as the ultimate spark as the world ushered what today seem like a global revolution in mass communication and public relations. The aftermath of the World War II may be credited with the growth of consciousness among countries and the people within (Miller & Shepherd, 2004, pg. 87). Several world leaders converged in different parts of the world to sign political treaties, business partnerships, and international diplomacies. Little did the world know that this was the beginning of a need to communicate in real-time, but the distance would be a huge impediment. Hence, science found a new niche for innovation that would later reduce the world to a mere village with tremendous developments in computerized web protocols, data services and telephony whose use is seemingly inevitable for smooth business processes. Campus in his study finds that the rising effect of consumer generated media comprising of online forums, blogs, web chat applications and podcasts have truly revolutionized public relationships between employers and employees, politicians and common citizens, a country and its leadership among many other online topics discussions (Campus 2012, pg. 21).

The concept of quirky blogging community is as a result of this beyond limit interaction among stakeholders for a particular subject on a blog. Hence, more questions, uncertainties, and speculations of the impact of blogging on people affect their opinions on specific subjects. Many scholars, politicians, governments and individual professionals have taken advantage of this
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communication space to showcase their prowess in their fields of expertise, their opinions about social topics, and questions about public matters (Smith, 2011, pg. 13). Journalists have also used the blogging strategy to airing vital information, breaking the news to the public in real time reducing the typical television news broadcasting. Researchers also have their blogs that have gathered an enormous academic following and opinion podium that currently helps in research topics. The changing paradigm of public relation, access of information, and public participations through opinions is a rich and interesting topic for discussion and analysis (Shanahan, 2011, pg. 56). Hence, I am compelled to hypothesize that blogs impact positively than negatively on public opinions with a comparison to the classical media platforms.

**Purpose of the study**

Because blogs have emerged as a fast, dynamic and interactive podium for creating public relations, it leaves us at a stance to speculate the future of communication. For example, the robust blogging on election campaigns and political ideologies currently in the United States is a result of this phenomenon. Besides, online fashion forums, medical knowledge awareness and discussions, and traffic information interactions among many other public issues. The blogs have influenced deliberations and communications surrounding such matters (Chen, 2012, pg. 43). Therefore, I will take an interpretive dimension in investigating, understand, analyzing, discussing the important roles of how blogs shape public opinions. Moreover, to achieve this objective, I must answer the following critical questions.

1- Do you trust blogs you get information from?

2- What type of blogs do you usually use?

3- Why do you use these kinds of blogs?
Moreover, I would state my hypothesis for this study as; blogs impact positively than negatively on public opinions with a comparison to the classical media platform.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section contains reviews of some of the relevant peer-reviewed journals, books and authenticated articles to understand and analyze the studies with relevance to my viewpoint. Besides, with a close reading, I will also identify, support and academically criticize some of the methodologies used in these studies comparatively to my approach to study. Moreover, I will also compare and contrast these studies by exploring the methods and findings compared to the ethics of scientific research.

A study done by Smith and published in the Journal of Public Relations, 2011, *Becoming “Quirky” Towards an Understanding of Practitioner and Blogger Relations in Public Relations* contends that corporates have in particular cases used the blogging approach to favor their interests over clients’ interests in marketing. In the survey Smith employed live interview with bloggers on their motivation towards the topics they write. Moreover, he used survey monkey to interview six marketing professionals from three marketing agencies on their view on the information they give or get from blogs. With each interview lasting 35 to 45 minutes, Smith finds that corporates use bloggers to write about their products or services to intensively broadcast the perceived importance of the goods and services. Therefore, readers and users of such services or products would be compelled to try them out and in the process corporates gain market shares (Smith, 2011, pg. 39). This way the blogs positively shape opinions of product and service users by using a tactical public relation approach.
On the contrary, a counteractive finding by Smith indicated that bloggers may use the so-called “black sheep” approach to defame a corporate and its products and services. By this method, a taint of reputation and negative perception is created by the company and its products rendering some of the product and service users to have a demoralized perception of the enterprise. The blog in this scenario not only shapes the kind of thinking towards those particular products but also shapes the client base and market share. Hence, his conclusion that blogs have an undisputed impact in positively shaping the public opinion.

*Understanding Opinion Leadership and Motivations to Blog: Implications for Public Relations Practice* is a study done by Prof. Segev and Prof. Villar alongside Fiske. The trio was investigating what motivates people to blog and the reception of that information to public relations. A random sampling was used to identify participants from Technorati directory and a total of 552 participants took the interview through an online survey. The study concluded that people participate in blog discussions only as an easy way of getting access to news that is important but may not be featured in many mainstream news broadcasters like Television networks and radio stations (Segev, Villar & Fiske, 2012, pg. 104). Moreover, more public discussions were noted on political blogs as compared to any other type of online discussion. Further, it was discovered that the public interacted more as many people were able to express their political alienation as compared to a typical debate. Their conclusions were that public opinions were more sincere about the emotional nature of written discussions on blogs.

Another study was done by Woodly (2008) to investigate the competencies in democratic communication concerning blogs, agenda setting, and political participation revealed a contrary explanation of this phenomenon. The findings showed that traditional media still has a more
significant reach-out than the current common popular websites. This study has contradicted most research done by many scholars like Smith (2011) and Segev et al. (2012); however, he supported the claim that blogs have positively shaped the opinions for political elites, for instance, politicians and journalists. Woodly’s contention is that the norms of political communication have not formerly improved, but rather the communication environment has been interrupted. Moreover, his arguments are weakened by the fact that new technology positively impacts opinion because of the increased population that adopts it. Though his findings are contrary to the standpoint that blogs achieve their purpose of shaping the public opinion than the traditional approach of communication, he focuses an exponential growth and a possibility of future of conscience argument.

Etling et al. (2014) in a research publication of Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Harvard University, realizes that Russian political blogs are the most divergent in opinions compared to the major mainstream media platforms. In their study titled, *Blogs as an Alternative Public Sphere: The Role of Blogs, Mainstream Media, and TV in Russia’s Media Ecology*, the trio is convinced that more opinions of varied nature are noted on blogs of political discussions. The sample size for the research amounted to 1000 top blogs within Russia. The topics were monitored and the public opinions studied. The results were compared to the typical television and radio services. Other findings were that other media avenues like the mainstream televisions and radio stations do not attract more opinions and discussion. In conclusion, the study narrowed down on the opinions blogs provide an alternative interactive space, a public sphere and fast and easy forum for civic discussions. Hence, the study confers to the hypothesis that blogs have significantly influenced and shaped the opinions of the public.
Theoretical Framework

History of Blogging

Justin Hall while studying at Swarthmore College began by creating a personal homepage named “links.net” little did he knew that his 1994 proposition would become the internet culture of the modern world. In 1997, the word blog was coined by Jorn Barger, who created one of the most successful blogs of the 1990s “Robot Wisdom” (Kang, Lee, You, & Lee, 2013, pg. 185). Innovative developments followed the online revolution and in 1998, a first news blog was unleashed while in 1999, the online Merriam-Webster library adopted the word “blog” from the initial “weblog.” By the year 2006, a Technorati’s directory report indicated some up to 50 million blogs worldwide (Shanahan, 2011, pg. 61). In 2016 January, approximately 275.9 million blog accounts were reported; this shows an exponential growth and acceptance of blogosphere as a mode of communication.

Theory of Communication

Conscious analysis and understanding of blogs relate to the theory of socio-psychological tradition which is fundamentally explained by an individual interaction model (Vlăduțescu, 2014, pg. 86). Besides, this approach contemplates that individual on an internet platform exhibits an independent sense of freedom that motivates them to speak more and without fear of intimidation because of the free virtual space. Scholars have narrowed down this theory three substantial approaches; the behavioral archetype that explains how people are driven by individual personality, learning experience, and situational differences. The second approach is a cognitive model that considers the tactics in which people acquire, interprets, and reacts to pieces
of information (Gonzalez-Bailon, 2013, pg. 207). From this theory, the contemporary communication system is explicitly explained. The blogs have taken an interactive approach that is free from intimidation and gives free space to personality expression.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and the Sampling Methods

Data used in this study were collected from various online sources by an integrated approach. First, a list of top most interactive blogs was sampled from the Technorati’s blog directory, and a random sample applied to identify the specific blogs to study. Technorati is a website listing worldwide blogs and rank them according to special parameters of interest, for instance, the number of users, the popularity, and the subjects covered. A total of ten blogs identified were carefully monitored on the aspects of topics covered, the volume of interactions towards the topics and a sample of the peoples’ opinions. The type of blogs was identified and classified, and this would help us understand the users’ interests. Secondly, the subjects were identified, and some of the users’ opinions sampled to figure out if they are positive or negative.

A survey monkey was conducted among student users whose emails were obtained from the university’s administration database. A total of 300 students were contacted and requested to participate in the study. A forward letter was sent to prior them to assure them of confidentiality of the information and the usefulness of the research to me and the university. A total of 77 participants turned up and filled the questionnaire which I then analyzed depending on the factors of interest highlighted.
RESULTS

The survey results are data from 77 participants turned up for the study. Out of the 70 who responded to the first demographic question, 88.57% were people between the age group of between 25 and 34 while the remaining 11.43% were between 18 and 24 years old. Moreover, while testing the media platform where the participants preferred getting news articles and other important information, 88.73% preferred information from the internet, 9.86% preferred the television networks as the remaining 1.41% were satisfied by information from radio channels. While introducing the question on blogs, participants were asked if they ever run a blog or not, it was discovered that 30.99% were actually running their personal blogs while 69.01% did not have personal blogs. To study the magnitude of use of blogs, the participants were asked if they often contributes to the online topic discussions, 6 (8.45%) out of 71 indicated that they contribute very frequently, 34 (47.89%) contributed frequently, 21 (29.58%) rarely, and 10 (14.08%) have never contributed.

The survey also requested the participants on the level of trust they have for blogs and the results showed that 25.71% completely trusted blogs, 21.43% did not trust blogs as 52.86% were not sure of trusting the information on blogs. Out of the 64 who answered the question on the type of blogs they use frequently, 46.88% used the Guide, 12.50% used the Giver, 6.25% used The Niche blogs, 32.82% used the Guest Host blogs and 1.56% used the rogue blogs. I also wanted to know why the participants used the blogs, 66.67% used them to get information, 28.79% to pass time and 4.55% to contribute on discussion topics. Testing on validity of information the participants read on blogs, 13.04% strongly agreed that blogs improved the validity of information, 69.57% agreed, 14.49 disagreed, as 2.90% strongly disagree with
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information on blogs. The very important question was about the impact of the discussions, when asked if the discussions ever changed their opinion about something in life, 72.86% replied with a Yes as only 27.14% replied with a No. Lastly, I asked them if they would recommend blogs as an important source of information for other people, 66.67% replied with a Yes as 33.33% indicating a No.

![Figure 1: The Types of Blogs Used By Participants](image-url)
Figure 2: Perception on the Validity of Information People Got from the Blogs
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DISCUSSIONS

In this discussion, the study will try to answer the primary questions that relate to the thesis statement to find out if the results support or refute it. On question about trust of blogs, it was discovered that 25.71% completely trusted blogs, 21.43% did not trust blogs as 52.86% were not sure of the information on blogs. This question has significant impact on my thesis, firstly, if 52.86% are not sure about blogs and 25.71% completely trusted blogs while 21.43% did not, it clear that blogs are a significant source of information to the positive than negative. Besides, it was discovered that many participants preferred reading news articles from the internet as compared to other forms of media platform. For instance, the internet contributed to 88.73% as
radio tailed at 1.41%, I could conclude that internet which include blogs, is far much significant for the study than the mainstream media. I also wanted to find out the perception to information people read from the blogs and the results indicated that 13.04% strongly agreed that blogs improved the validity of information as 69.57% agreed. This is a clear indication that blogs are very significant in assisting people read what they like on the internet. Moreover, only 17% disagreed with information from blogs. It therefore supports the thesis that indeed blogs are significant. To again test the validity of blogs, I used a different question to test the same results. The question asked the respondents on the willingness to recommend blogs to other people, 66.67% agreed that they would recommend the blogs for others to read. This study also found out that Guide blogs were the most used followed by guest host blogs because they added much information to the users than any other type of blogs.

CONCLUSIONS

From the survey, it could be concluded that blogs have significantly contributed to the source of information that people believe in and read. Besides, the use of blogs was high for those that contribute directly to peoples’ lives for example the guide blogs and the guest host blogs that discusses matters of daily importance. Further, many people are found to be enjoying the use of blogs as some use it to acquire knowledge, others just read to pass time but the fact is that they still use it. Moreover, in comparison to the mainstream media, blogs were very popular with a high percentage score of 88. Hence, blogs contribute significantly as a source of information in comparison to classical mainstream media.

Limitations of the Study
Several problems were encountered in this study,

I. The expected number of participants were initially 300; however, only 71 turned up for the study.

II. Funds were limiting to carry out a comprehensive study with a larger sample size for a more realistic generalization.

III. The statistical analysis and approach was more of inferential than quantitative; hence, more measurable parameters were not included to better describe the population.
List of References


Appendix

Survey monkey link:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/create/?sm=4f34CJa7XDF2598zazbfeUDNbSmwoTsZcMDN48nQ2Xs_3D