As a new feature of the media system, the blogosphere is an extremely interesting subject for scholarly inquiry. One might spend research time along a variety of lines: why people blog, why people read blog content, the relationship of the blogosphere to the established media outlets, the who/what/when of blog content production and consumption, the subject matter of blog posts, the effects of exposure to blog content, the potential for and limitations on interactions, and so on, for quite a long list. Given that the blogosphere is a recent addition to the media mix, and itself a (presumably) unintended consequence of a technological innovation (computer-mediated communication, as a channel) and a heavy investment in infrastructure (the Internet, as an information transport resource), it is unsurprising that so much foundational inquiry into the blogosphere is warranted, and that the initial scholarly answers to the questions are so divergent! It seems fair, to me, to consider this situation as a real-life instance of the old joke about blind men arguing among themselves about what kind of thing an elephant is, each placing his hand on a different part of the elephant’s anatomy.¹ We might be able to stipulate that the blogosphere has quickly become a social object of some degree of consequence and interest, but beyond that the insights we have into it will necessarily be shaped heavily by what aspects of the blogosphere we focus upon (the part of the elephant’s body) and the tools we use to investigate it (our hand, and sense of touch). One of those body parts this blind man happened to touch was the way bloggers would share their understandings of the meanings of current events—the frames in which they understood the bare facts—and the hand with which I reached out was rhetorical framing analysis.

My personal interest in the blogosphere began when I noticed that bloggers would frequently take issue with some aspect of a news story—that a genre which seemed at first glance to be confined to trivial personal stories could in fact be a vehicle for substantive media criticism. Indeed, much of the content in the blogosphere is talk about hobbies,
personal experiences and aspirations, relationship failures and successes, food and beverage preferences, specialized technologies and gadgetry fascinating to the blogger, self-promotion, and the like. And no doubt, there are substantial lines of inquiry to be pursued in this, related to questions about representation of oneself in cyberspace, representation of others in cyberspace, disclosure, deception, trust, interaction, uses and gratifications, political advocacy, and various other dimensions of computer-mediated interpersonal and mass communication. Perlmutter (2008), Kerbel and Bloom (2005), O'Donnell and McClung (2008), and Kaye (2005) are a few examples of such work.

The media criticism blogging seemed to me to be qualitatively different. This struck me as very much an instance of "talking back to power," in that an ordinary citizen with a relatively modest financial investment in a computer and Internet connection could take issue with professional journalists and the established news media outlets with whom they were affiliated. Not only could an ordinary citizen question the veracity of factual assertions in the news products, but—to the topic of this book—he or she could problematize the interpretations of facts routinely packaged with straight news reporting. I noticed that sometimes the media criticism was direct (as in, "Today's story in the [name of outlet] gets the issue completely wrong.") and other times it was indirect (as when a blogger drew facts from mainstream reporting and then built a different interpretation around them). In sum, it seemed to me that blogging could be a genuinely populist vehicle for critical analysis of the mainstream news media's framing, very much along the lines of the critical news framing paradigm D'Angelo (2002) described.

Viewing this as a version of consumer-to-producer feedback (i.e., the blogger as consumer of the mainstream outlet's news product), a strikingly new element is that the feedback is publicly available at the wish of the author of the feedback; put bluntly, the means of production are entirely in the hands of the blogger, and the mainstream outlet subject to the criticism is in no position to gatekeep the criticism. This is, of course, much different from a newspaper editor's power to run, edit, or reject a critical reader's letter to the editor, or a broadcaster's decision to take a call on air, or not. Moreover, a good number of blogs enable comment threads, and readers of the blog criticism can contribute their thoughts. There is an opportunity for the collaborative generation of critique in the blogosphere which seems to me to be an unprecedented feature in our media system.

In short, the evolution of the blogosphere offers both a rich subject to scholars interested in the relationship of the press and the public and a deep niche of media criticism to examine. And just as the innovation of computer-mediated communication suggested fresh questions (how is interpersonal communication different/similar when it goes through
this new channel?) and rethought applications of time-proven methods of inquiry, so does this content innovation of serious media criticism in the blogosphere. In my opinion, qualitative inductive methods are a good choice in this situation, given the exploratory nature of the inquiry into a new communication phenomenon. That was the approach I chose for earlier work aimed at developing a typology of blog media criticism I was seeing and at sketching an analytical framework for the structural characteristics of blogosphere as a component of the public sphere (Cooper, 2006). I believe rhetorical framing analysis is a particularly useful tool for exploring this new body of mediated content widely available at minimal cost, and in the rest of this chapter I will try to show why.

It will be helpful to first describe a working definition of blogging and the blogosphere. To give a sense of the scope and nature of media criticism blogging, I will summarize a typology then supply a few concise illustrations of framing critique written by bloggers. This will lead to some observations about the unconventional authorial voice some bloggers use, and some thoughts about the suitability of a qualitative approach to this material.

Some readers may be unfamiliar with the blogosphere, and a Google search of “blog” is likely to come up with a large quantity of rather unimpressive material! I can recommend a number of blogs on which—in my opinion—there frequently appears thoughtful and thought-provoking commentary on the events of the day and the reporting of those events. No doubt others would put together a different list, and there are many others I could add to these! To best assess the media criticism blogging I would advise that one bracket off one’s own political viewpoint, the better to focus on the substance of the argumentation the blogger is constructing. I mention this because in conversations with other academicians I have noticed that the blogger’s politics is often the first thing they react to, and I think that can easily obscure the essential strengths and weaknesses of the argumentation. Put another way, I am of the mind that the quality of the media criticism a blogger makes (with regard to logic and evidence) is one matter, and whether the critique reinforces or goes contrary to one’s personal ideology and political preferences is another. Another caution is that comment on the political issue of the day is not, in itself, media criticism; comment on the press’s performance in covering the political issue of the day, including comment on the interpretations offered in the coverage, is media criticism.

That said, I believe the following blogs are useful starting points for a reader who wishes to get acquainted with media criticism blogging, as these authors often put up such posts:

Instapundit (http://pajamasmedia.com/instapundit/)
Power Line (http://powerlineblog.com/)
Hot Air (http://hotair.com/)
Patterico’s Pontifications (http://patterico.com/)
Big Lizards (http://www.biglizards.net/blog/)
Protein Wisdom (http://proteinwisdom.com/)
QandO (http://www.qando.net/)
Back Talk (http://engram-backtalk.blogspot.com/index.html)

These are not necessarily the most visited sites; one can check the traffic statistics on Technorati to see which blogs get the most visits. However, these blogs give a good sense of the range of style and substance in this genre, particularly with regard to media criticism and argumentation.

**Defining Characteristics of the Blogosphere**

Since preexisting meanings and current usage reciprocally influence each other in a living language such as English, it is unsurprising to find a degree of ambiguity in the terminology for a new phenomenon, even as the terminology finds its way into common usage. The nouns *blog* and *blogosphere* are no exception, and it will be helpful here to be as precise as possible about what they refer to, for the sake of clarity in the following discussion of their characteristics.

A blog is a variety of personal Web page formatted as a series of dated/time-stamped entries displayed in reverse chronological order. The entries are archived on the site, each having its own URL (called a permalink); hence each post is directly accessible.² The author may be a single individual or, as has become more common in the last few years, a small group of individuals. A good number of mainstream news outlets have added a “blog” feature to the online versions of their product, but I would distinguish these from the blogs produced by individual private citizens, even if they do share certain format or style characteristics. The issue is the degree of editorial independence of the blogger when the site is affiliated with an established corporate entity. That would be an interesting line of inquiry in itself, and my guess is that mainstream journalists enjoy somewhat more editorial independence when they blog than when they report for their parent news outlet, but presumably less editorial independence than a private citizen blogging on a Web site he or she owns and operates.

At the level of the media system, the independent blogger (sometimes called “citizen journalist”) occupies a special niche in the media ecology. At a minimum this is a new channel for audience feedback. It is my view that the population of active bloggers and the document universe of their products (named the *blogosphere* by Bill Quick, 2001) have already evolved well beyond a simple feedback path into a decentralized and self-organizing institutional counterbalance to the established news out-
The Oppositional Framing of Bloggers

It is in the blogosphere that one finds news media criticism ranging from abusive, trashy, and shallow to courteous, professional, and deeply insightful. Perhaps most intriguing is the media criticism which is stylistically unrefined yet contains potent insights and substantive objections to the mainstream content. That is to say, the authorial voice may be unorthodox, even transgressive. Yet the content is worthy of serious consideration. In my view, it is crucial for the reader of blog documents to clearly distinguish the style from the substance of the thinking, if one is to fairly appraise the quality of the documents as intellectual works. Style and substance are separate variables, and it is a mistake to assume they are highly correlated in any easily operationalized way. The examples later in this chapter serve to illustrate this point.

A Typology of Media Criticism Blogging

Watching the Watchdog (Cooper, 2006) was my attempt to begin to see regularities and patterns in the media criticism which was proliferating in the blogosphere. Quite simply, I proceeded much as an ethnographer might try to understand an unfamiliar culture, collecting artifacts and gradually sorting them when I could perceive commonalities. I scanned a good number of blogs daily (and still do!), followed their embedded hyperlinks to both source material and other bloggers, and printed posts which struck me as raising some substantive critical point. When the criticism seemed to consist primarily of a personal attack (ad hominem, ad feminam), to be factually unsupported, or to contain some clear logical weakness, I excluded it from the collection. Without a doubt, my approach depended on me being a fair and impartial observer—but this is true of qualitative methods in general, I believe. This was explicitly an inductive venture, aimed at reducing the huge volume of blogging which made some critical reference to mainstream news product down to an abstract typology of this particular subset of the blog docuverse. No doubt other researchers could choose a different approach and gain valuable insights into media criticism blogging, but I preferred a qualitative, inductive approach for the reasons mentioned earlier and will return to, later. (And I have no doubt that other researchers using a similar approach might see a different pattern in the data!)

After a good amount of time sorting (and resorting) the pile of printed blog posts, I found that the criticism seemed largely to fall into four categories with regard to the substance of the post. One could account for nearly all of the posts, it seemed to me, with four major categories of critical problematic raised by the bloggers—and sometimes a single post could contain more than one. To my eye, the critique could center on these dimensions of the mainstream news product: (1) accuracy (facticity of the accounts of events); (2) framing (adequacy of the
interpretations offered); (3) agenda-setting/gate keeping (news judgment); and (4) journalistic practices (integrity of the production process). Within those categories there seemed to be subvarieties, much like the genus/species classification of living things. Framing is the subject of this book, so it is appropriate to go into greater detail about that category. Of the blog critiques of framing, there appeared to be these three varieties: (1) disputing the frame (arguing the supplied interpretation of facts was deficient, in some way); (2) reframing a set of facts (offering an alternative interpretation); and (3) contextualizing (offering additional relevant facts). Again, a single post could contain more than one variety of framing critique.

Of course, this two-level typology rests on some notion of what a frame is, as a construct applied to mediated information products. My understanding of news frames, as a phenomenon scholars can perceive and examine (Cooper, 2006, pp. 105-106), is congruent with that described by Kuypers in a number of works (Kuypers, 2002, p. 7; Kuypers 2006, p. 7; Kuypers & Cooper, 2005, p. 2; Kuypers, Cooper, & Althouse, in press; Kuypers, in this volume). Put plainly, the frame of a news story is the storyline which subsumes the collection of raw facts into an interpretation of the meaning of events. Essentially, the frame is the short answer to a simple yet profoundly meaning-centered question: what’s going on here? It is difficult for me to imagine a news story which does not offer some interpretation or meaning to the audience. My view is that news production inherently involves framing, no matter how scrupulously the reporter and editor may try to bright-line a distinction between straight news and opinion, and no matter how carefully they might try to remain neutral in reporting on some controversy. It might be the case that the lede or headline is the straightforward statement of the frame; it might also be the case that the frame is best perceived as the “take-away” idea suggested by the complete story. If the frame is essentially a holistic characteristic of a news product, this would suggest that a similarly holistic inquiry into framing is warranted.

Consider a hypothetical example in which the news/interpretation distinction might initially seem easy to make: a local news outlet reporting an armed robbery at a convenience store. True enough, the event itself is a simple fact: a holdup took place. But even in classic straight news style, beyond a one-paragraph recitation of names, place, and time the reporting will typically provide other information, such things as quotes from eyewitnesses, a narrative of the crime as it took place, a quote from the perpetrator’s mother, some statistic about crime rates in the area, some sort of back story on the perpetrator or victim. These are all conventional elements of such reporting, and most likely readers would be dissatisfied with only a paragraph of cold facts. My view is that one can best perceive the frame by considering the totality of the information
contained in the report with a close eye for word choice, supplementary detail, cause-and-effect assertions (especially implicit causal links), and use of sources, with good consideration for what might have been but was not included. The juxtaposition (or exclusion) of these other elements with the bare facts suggests the frame. In this hypothetical, for instance, the news story might frame the robbery as the savage act of a deranged or drug-impaired individual, the desperate act of a victim of structural injustice (social class, race), the rational and purposive act of a calculating professional criminal, a manifestation of general cultural decline, a tragic slice of life in a bad neighborhood, a symptom of the erosion of law and order, the consequence of trouble in the regional or national economy, a manifestation of simmering class/race tensions, evidence that some sort of government policy is working or not working, and so on.

All those are at least arguable understandings of the meaning of such an event, and one can imagine how the running text of the story would vary, depending on the reporter's own understanding of the meaning of the event. And one can certainly understand how readers might disagree with the reporter's understanding—or the understandings of the sources the reporter chose to include—as embodied in the text of the reporting. As Kuypers (this volume) maintains, there is an intrinsically persuasive dimension to news reporting, which is why rhetorical framing analysis is indeed a useful scholarly tool which deserves a place among the other methodological approaches.

Watching the Watchdog examined a good number of examples of the varieties of blog media criticism, contemporaneous with the writing of the book. It will be helpful at this point to look at a few more examples of framing critique, current at the time of this writing. The reader is encouraged to obtain both the blog posts and the news stories which prompted the bloggers' critiques, the better to assess the framing in the news product, the blogger's objection to it, and my conceptualization of the relationship between the two. D'Angelo (2002, p. 876) identified the critical paradigm within scholarly framing studies as being characterized by its position that "frames are the outcome of newsgathering routines by which journalists convey information about issues and events from the perspective of values held by political and economic elites." While the authors of the posts are not, themselves, critical communication scholars, these posts seem to me to nonetheless embody that problematization of elite values shaping news products, albeit in unconventional ways. The bloggers may accomplish that problematization explicitly by objecting to what they perceive as deficiencies in the framing of the mainstream news product; they may do this implicitly, by proposing an alternative frame they think makes better sense.
Surgeon General Nominee Withdraws

In early March of 2009, the online version of the Washington Post ran a brief story (Shear & Kurtz, 2009) indicating that Sanjay Gupta, who had been offered the post of Surgeon General in the new Obama administration, had declined the position. The story does not appear obviously different from routine news reporting on Washington politics, in that it begins with a straightforward description of events, then proceeds to some background which suggests an interpretation of the withdrawal. The lede is this:

Sanjay Gupta, CNN’s chief medical correspondent, has told network officials [he] will not leave his television career to become the U.S. Surgeon General, according to sources familiar with his decision. Gupta, who had been described as the leading candidate for the public health post, withdrew his name even as President Obama hosted a health care summit at the White House today that Gupta did not attend.

On her eponymous blog, Ann Althouse dug into the background information contained deeper in the story, and offered a concise and tartly worded reframing in a post she titled, “What Happened with Sanjay Gupta?” (Althouse, 2009). She quoted from the Washington Post report, formatting the quote as a hyperlink to the story. Then she offered an alternative frame. In its entirety, this is her post:

“Gupta, who was once named one of the ‘sexiest men alive’ by People Magazine, was never officially named to the post and continued to report on CNN. He did not issue a statement or explain his decision Thursday. Sources said the medical journalist told CNN executives that he wanted to devote more time to his medical practice and to his duties at the network. But one source close to him said he was very disheartened by Daschle’s fate and fearful he was not going to get a prominent role in the health reform process.”

Okay. I understand. Thanks for the explanation, WaPo. He’s rich and prominently sexy. He can’t go into government without major flash and admiration. And some people were even going to pick at his credentials, maybe beat him up the way they did to poor little Tom. That won’t do.

To my eye, the paragraph Althouse pulled from the Washington Post story does contain the frame for the event described in the story’s lead. It is typical of mainstream news product, in that unnamed sources pro-
vide detail suggesting a motive for the action and thus predisposing a reader’s interpretation of the withdrawal, beyond the simple fact that Guptay had declined the position. As is often seen in reporting on events such as this, there are two somewhat divergent explanations offered: that Guptay preferred not to leave his medical practice and network reporting (the “inside story”), and that he was reluctant to go through the confirmation process given the limited clout of the White House position he was offered (apparently the “inside inside story”). It seems fair to observe that this passage in the news story frames Guptay’s withdrawal as primarily a career decision. In contrast, the blogger eschewed the polite language and refined syntax of elite journalism, reframing Guptay’s withdrawal as an ego-based decision.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{The Treasury Secretary Testifies}

A Bloomberg News story described an appearance of the Treasury Secretary before the House Ways and Means Committee, concerning the state of efforts to stabilize the banking sector (Schmidt, 2009). In every respect, this is a straight news story summarizing the testimony of an administration official before a legislative committee charged with oversight of the official’s function. The lede seems to me to clearly state the frame:

Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner said the U.S. bank rescue program may cost more than the $700 billion Congress approved, and he pledged to crack down on companies and individuals who try to avoid paying taxes. Testifying before the House Ways and Means Committee on the Obama administration’s 2010 budget, Geithner pledged to work with Congress to “determine the appropriate size and shape” of further bailouts.

The story proceeds in a classic inverted pyramid format, adding supplementary detail about Geithner’s testimony. The story caught the attention of Jim Geraghty, who writes the Campaign Spot blog attached to the \textit{National Review Online} Web site. He posted a very concise critique by contextualization, at which he hinted in the title, “Tim Geithner, on the Case against Tax Cheats” (Geraghty, 2009).

“You mean those who try to avoid paying taxes like... Tim Geithner?
Geraghty’s comment was a reference to an issue which had come up in Geithner’s earlier confirmation hearing; he had agreed to pay a substantial sum in back taxes and penalties. In an update, Geraghty relayed another contextual detail from his readers, that the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, Charlie Rangel, had himself admitted owing back taxes.

Patrick Frey piggybacked onto Geraghty’s post with an even more concise reframing of the story. In this case, the title of the post was itself the reframing: “Tax Cheat Tells Tax Cheat He’ll Crack Down on Tax Cheats.”

**A Prominent Columnist Reconsiders His Position**

Humor is a staple of blog criticism, and an interesting example can be found in the criticism of a piece by *New York Times* opinion writer David Brooks. The exchange began with a Brooks column (2009a) in which he expressed serious misgivings about the fiscal initiatives of the new administration, even though he had supported the Obama candidacy during the general election campaign. As Brooks described it in a follow-up column a few days later (2009b), that piece had prompted the White House to contact him.

On Tuesday, I wrote that the Obama budget is a liberal, big government document that should make moderates nervous. The column generated a large positive response from moderate Obama supporters who are anxious about where the administration is headed. It was not so popular inside the White House. Within a day, I had conversations with four senior members of the administration and in the interest of fairness, I thought I’d share their arguments with you today.

The piece proceeded to detail a number of lines of rebuttal those individuals took in the conversations; indeed, almost the whole column was devoted to the administration’s rebuttal to Brooks’s first piece. The last paragraph included this passage:

Nonetheless, the White House made a case that was sophisticated and fact-based. These people know how to lead a discussion and set a tone of friendly cooperation.

Ed Morrissey (2009) was troubled by Brooks’s follow-up column, as the title of his Hot Air post indicates: “Revolt Over: White House Puts Brooks Back on the Leash.” He was dissatisfied by Brooks’s assertion that the follow-up column was an exercise in fairness, and raised a criti-
cal point about the nature of the opinion/news distinction (emphasis in the original):\textsuperscript{16}

We often complain about regular reporters injecting their opinions into what should be objective articles. This is the reverse of that problem. Brooks writes an opinion column, but the opinions are supposed to be \textit{his}. In this column, he basically turns his newsprint space over to Rahm Emanuel and his staff and merely takes dictation. Had Brooks and the New York Times run this as an interview news piece, it might seem less obsequious than how it appears in Brooks’s column today.

Ed Driscoll (2009) linked Morrissey’s post and raised a tongue-in-cheek, but pointed, question about the appropriateness of the White House’s contact with the journalist. The entire post, including the title, is this:

\begin{quote}
When Luigi Met David

Nice little career you’ve got there, Mr. Brooks—shame if something were to happen to it. We can guarantee that you won’t get done over by Robert Gibbs\textsuperscript{17} in a White House press conference for fifteen bob a week.
\end{quote}

This example illustrates a number of common features in blog media criticism. The nature of the channel (computer mediation) facilitates a reader’s access to earlier commentary and source material through hyperlinking; thus, there is a great deal of collaborative development of the critique, and supporting material can be referenced more concisely than in print format. In this case, Morrissey based his criticism largely in the traditional conception of the mainstream press standing apart from the political power structure (the Fourth Estate notion), with Driscoll highlighting the possibility of a certain degree of intimidation in the White House’s contact with the journalist. Pop culture allusions also appear frequently, as in Driscoll humorously invoking the tone of dialog from a mobster movie. In this case, the humor was a concise but pointed reframing of Brooks’s follow-up column: rather than being a story of “equal time,” it was a story of intimidation. In turn, that suggests that the critique very much belongs in the critical paradigm, in that the blogger objected to what he saw as an illegitimate exercise of power by the political elite.

\textbf{Donations to the Palestinian Authority}

A Reuters’ analysis of external financial support for the Palestinian Authority (Entous, 2009) outlined a number of concerns about the
precarious political and financial state of the Authority, and the reliability of the pledges made in fund-raising efforts. The story begins in this way:

Rich states and investors have announced a record $14 billion to aid the Palestinians and their economy in a string of Western-backed meetings meant to boost President Mahmoud Abbas in his power struggle with Hamas. But diplomats said many of the pledges made at five donor and investor conferences held since December 2007, including one in Egypt on Monday, were counted more than once, have yet to materialize or were too vague to rely on.

The story goes on to give detail about the uncertainty of the financial support promised, the low Palestinian GDP, the low per capita income, and various contingencies affecting the actual provision of the promised support external support for the Palestinian Authority. It seems fair to say that the article itself is a critical reading of the state of affairs, focused on political tensions and economic difficulties.

Charles Johnson (2009) provided an alternative frame for the political and economic complexity described in the Reuters story. The post is a good example of a blogger reframing a set of facts; he did not take issue with the facts provided in the reporting, but provided a much different understanding of the situation. Apart from linking the story and quoting its lede, the bluntly worded post in its entirety is this:

For decades, money has been pouring into the coffers of one Palestinian strongman after another, from Arab states and clueless Westerners, and all the Palestinians have to show for it is the ultimate welfare state—a death cult society whose main business is indoctrinating their children to hate and kill. So naturally, here come the deep pockets people again, pledging more than $14 billion that will go down the same hole of terrorism and hatred.

Some General Observations on Blog Critique

One quickly sees that the authorial voice of bloggers is considerably more diverse than the authorial voice of mainstream journalists! Some bloggers strike a restrained tone with a good degree of detachment—quite similar to mainstream opinion journalism. Others are restrained in wording, but more directly personal in their reflections on events and mainstream reporting. Some seem to relish skillful use of irony and sarcasm, and some take this confrontational style to a point some might find overly blunt. I think the best explanation of this variety is simply that the authors see themselves as outsiders to the journalistic
establishment. Their voices tend to be unconventional because they are private citizens rather than paid professionals drawing a salary from a commercial entity operating within a long-established social institution. At a minimum they thus are not bound by journalistic conventions in their authorial voice; at maximum, the voice they choose may be a direct statement of their oppositional stance to the media elite. And in general, I would characterize media criticism bloggers’ voices as oppositional, sometimes to the point of being transgressive.

A visitor to the blogosphere expecting the detached, measured, restrained word choices of the professional journalists may indeed be put off by the more blunt style of many blog critics. This overtly argumentative tone (as opposed to the refined argumentative tone I see in much mainstream reporting) is unsurprising, in that the blogger is rebutting or countering the argument he or she perceives to be embedded in a piece of mainstream content. Put plainly, this is an outsider contesting the conventional wisdom of the insiders. In my view, it is important for a student of this genre to be mindful that the stylistic characteristics of blog critique are a textual variable independent of the fundamental quality of the thinking underlying the critique, and to look beyond the surface characteristics of the writing toward the underlying use of evidence and reason. Even if one does not enjoy the style of the expression, the quality of the thinking may be compelling.

The notion of quality requires further explanation here. I suggested earlier that congruence between the blogger’s politics and the researcher’s is not, in my opinion, sufficient as an indicator of the quality of the blogger’s oppositional argumentation. Taking that position seems to me to reduce scholarly inquiry to tautology: opinion one likes is good, and one accepts it as insightful; opinion one dislikes is bad, and one rejects it as defective. What characteristics, then, might we use as indicators of quality? If blogging is a persuasive activity, then quality benchmarks from rhetorical analysis are applicable. Logical or argumentative fallacies diminish quality; well-executed induction and deduction increase quality. I believe Toulmin’s model (2003) is also helpful in this regard. A good fit of evidence and warrant, leading to a blogger’s claim that events are better understood to mean something other than the mainstream product’s frame, is an indicator of good quality. And particularly in the case of a critique by contextualization, the blogger may point out some powerful qualifier (i.e., a limitation) on the framing in the mainstream product; this, too, is an indicator of good quality in the critique.

Again, I am seeing both mainstream journalism and blogger critique of it as persuasive activities. Professional journalists implicitly or explicitly offer frames to their readers, and media bias is a perpetual issue in large part because of this complexity. News stories perforce provide framing, as it is impossible for journalists to decide the relative
importance of various facts (as in the traditional inverted pyramid format) without having some background frame in mind, reflectively or reflexively. A journalist cannot lead a story or write the headline (or compose the background graphic, in broadcast news) with everything that will appear in it, all the complexity of the event or issue. The lede or headline may state the frame the story supplies to the reader, but again I would observe that the holistic frame of the story (the “take-away” sense of the meaning of events) is not necessarily coterminous with the lede or headline.

Often that frame is contestable, and bloggers do indeed contest it. When bloggers engage (presumably, intuitively) in framing critique, they may simply object to the frame they perceive in the mainstream content (argue, for instance, that there is a discontinuity of some sort in the Toulmin structure). Alternatively, they may reframe (replace the warrant and claim, based on the data/evidence as provided in the mainstream text) or they may contextualize (provide additional data/evidence, or replace the data/evidence in the mainstream text). 25

By no means do I mean these concluding remarks to be taken as an argument against the utility or validity of quantitative approaches to the scholarly study of news framing and media criticism! I am very much of the mind that the variety of tools for scholarly inquiry is a disciplinary strength, and I enjoy learning about colleagues’ work which differs from mine. Quantitative approaches are uniquely suited to measuring prevalence, proportion, and size; they can make use of excellent statistical tools, both descriptive and inferential. And certainly there are limitations on the knowledge claims one can make from a qualitative approach, particularly one rooted in rhetorical studies. My sense is that both qualitative and quantitative approaches are appropriate and useful for studying framing, as they have relative strengths and limitations that complement each other. With that important clarification in mind, there are reasons I prefer to use an inductive, qualitative, rhetoric-based analysis to examine blog media criticism.

Perhaps the biggest single reason is that blog criticism of mainstream news products is a new development in our media system. The factors which enabled the development of this content genre are recent: digital convergence in the dissemination of information products, the construction of the necessary access infrastructure (the Internet), and the declining cost of the required equipment (personal computers). 26 I do not believe it is safe to assume this particular content genre will in all crucial aspects mimic the media criticism which was available before. To the contrary, even a casual perusal of blog media criticism shows there are many differences. In general, I am of the mind that bottom-up (meaning, from phenomena toward theory) inquiry is appropriate when one lacks confidence that the phenomena are already understood with sufficient
clarity. In a sense, a quasi-anthropological exploration of texts is a good choice when one encounters a novel body of texts. Granted, that there are important limitations on the knowledge claims one might make from this type of qualitative inquiry, but to me the overriding factor is that the texts are different from those with which we are already familiar.

An intrinsic task in a quantitative study of framing in some set of texts is the need to operationalize, and an unavoidable question is the validity of the coding scheme. To me this is essentially a reasonable person issue, in many respects similar to the reasonable person standard in common law. Reliance on earlier works in the literature is no doubt appropriate, but nonetheless cannot offer complete assurance that the coding is impeccable, particularly when the texts of interest are something new. Chains of reliance from study to study could just as well result in the perpetuation of an error (i.e., mismatch between findings and the actual characteristics of the phenomena) as in continued quality assurance of the knowledge claims from the study. Again, it is important for me to emphasize that in no way am I dismissing the utility or validity of this kind of approach to the study of texts! Quite simply, I think a researcher must carefully consider the vulnerabilities of his or her method of choice; the fit of the method’s strengths and limitations to the characteristics of the texts (as best they are known at the time) is crucial.

Particularly in the case of a quantitative study of framing, devising a coding scheme effectively presumes some sort of preliminary framing analysis on the part of the researcher, and hence requires the reasonable person judgment to have been made. If nothing else, which words or phrases are to be counted as textual units? And what clues would be recognizable as indicating the frame? Whether a researcher chooses to use a coding scheme from the literature or creates one from scratch, there is the presumption that the things being counted are, in fact, good indices of frames. Again, I have no fatal objection to this approach. I am simply pointing out that some sort of qualitative framing analysis is the foundational step, whether tacitly in the reliance on prior studies or de novo in the intuitive judgment of the researcher. In this light, the routine practice of training coders and measuring intercoder reliability is, at bottom, a check that the reasonable person standard has adequately been met.

The stunning complexity and subtlety of language—the many ways to express thoughts denotatively with a multiplicity of connotative meanings—is a caution that careful study of framing is by no means a simplistic venture. The use of sarcasm or irony in the text shows this clearly: the meaning a reasonable and fluent reader would construct from the passage may well run opposite to the actual wording. Sarcasm and irony are plentiful in blog media criticism, as the examples above suggest.

Lurking behind these thoughts is my foundational epistemological viewpoint—that theory ought not to be an end in itself and should never
be taken as more than the current state of intersubjective knowledge. Rather, because theory is a tool with which one can gain insights into real life, theory development work optimally is the crafting of better tools with which to gain those insights. This is my personal touchstone when considering theoretical work: what does it tell me about reality? With how much fidelity (accuracy, validity), as best I can perceive it? And once again, I am left with what amounts to a reasonable person standard for the quality of scholarly knowledge.

Neither constructionism nor postmodernism contradict that position, in my view. Even if social reality is socially constructed in general—just as theoretical/scholarly reality is socially constructed within an elite academic group—the universe of actual human beings’ interactions nonetheless is a thing apart from our abstract understanding of it. (I would not expect any great objection to the observation that the physical universe is a thing apart from our current version of astrophysics.) Hence, it is useful that some amount of scholarly attention proceed inductively from the microphenomena of human interactions and reciprocal influence (mediated, or not), groping toward an abstract understanding of the regularities which may be present in those phenomena. Indeed, this is an inherently reductionist venture—just as learning life lessons from our personal experiences is a reductionist effort, at bottom.

Kuypers (this volume) has made a strong case that rhetorical criticism is inherently viewpoint-centered and first-person in tone, and that it is inherently persuasive in nature. I would add that it is in the nature of an issue that is debated in the public sphere to give rise to competing ways for an individual to make sense of facts, and competing ways to assess the relevance and consequence of facts. If that were not the case, there would be nothing to debate! The implication is that some of the most interesting things to study—public issues—necessarily entail disputation of frames. Further, the frame may well be an overall understanding or impression the reader derives from a text, and thus not readily identifiable in the form of specific word choices or phrases. Again I am left with the thought that a reasonable person interpretation of a text’s frame is required, and that framing is best understood holistically.

I think I see a particularly good fit of this approach with blog media criticism. The blogosphere is a new channel, now becoming a structural component of the media mix. The barriers to entry into this space are minimal, and hence the blogosphere is a technological facilitator of citizen journalism of various sorts, including reportage, commentary, and critique. Thus there is a confluence of the channel characteristics and the author-centric nature of rhetorical criticism in general. This seems to me a good explanation for the proliferation of media criticism in the blogosphere, and the stylistic characteristics of the genre as it has evolved in the blogosphere’s short existence. This also strikes me as a solid ratio-
nale for the use of rhetorical framing analysis as a way to begin to understand the genre.

Notes

1. I hope no reader is put off by the use of the masculine pronoun in this passage. That is the way I heard the joke told, but in any case the knowledge problem is independent of gender. It would be the same for a group of blind women (or visually impaired sentient beings, of any particular cohort) trying to understand the nature of the mysterious thing in front of them! I am fond of the story, as it seems to me to contain a profound insight into the nature of inquiry: the tool does influence the finding.

2. A very helpful glossary of blog terms is available at the Samizdata site (http://www.samizdata.net)—a blog, itself—and I am indebted to the authors for bringing some clarity to the lexicon!

3. This point is elaborated much more fully in the last few chapters of Watching the Watchdog (Cooper, 2006).

4. That passage is a caution against taking an unorthodox style, in blog criticism, to indicate a deficiency in quality. I am of the mind that the corresponding error, regarding the content of mainstream news outlets, is taking the “professional” style to indicate good quality in the reporting—but that is an argument to be explored elsewhere.

5. Later in this article, I will take up the notion of “reasonable person” as a crucial element in any inquiry, whether qualitative or quantitative. My view is that neither qualitative nor quantitative methods can avoid the issue of the researcher’s fairness and reasonable judgment, in arriving at the findings.

6. The online world is loaded with neologisms and metaphorical usage! If the term is unfamiliar, docuverse is the neologism for the metaphorical term, document universe.

7. This data-creation and data-reduction process in many ways resembled the way an ethnographer explores some unfamiliar cultural field in the hope of coming to an understanding of it. At first I just surfed the blogosphere, much as I would walk around a physical neighborhood, and printed posts that seemed striking and pertinent to my inquiry, much as I would make field notes of things that caught my eye. As best I was able, I “bracketed off” my familiarity with media and CMC theories and tried to remain free of preconceptions about what I would see in the posts. I followed embedded links much as I would ask informants to recommend others I should talk to, and over time came to think of some bloggers as “key informants” in that their work often pointed me toward other bloggers of interest or suggested some general insight. The posts I printed were something like interview transcripts, in that my goal was to surface the regularities in behavior (in this case, what became the typology of blog media criticism) and what seemed to be shared understandings among the natives (what counted as evidence and reasoning supporting the critique). The sorting process was much like the coding and pattern-identification process one might use to reduce a large batch of interview transcripts to a set of insights into the life-world of the informants (see Miles & Huberman, 1994, for an encyclopedia of techniques.)
I'd ever do an "ethnography" of texts, but this approach to blog media criticism seemed warranted for the reasons I mentioned earlier. Without a doubt, this was a heuristic venture! Lest it seem totally bizarre, consider that a qualitative inquiry into "blogger culture" probably wouldn't raise any eyebrows. A difference, here, was that I did not devise a data collection instrument, the way I would prepare an interview guide; I used the blog posts as the statements of the bloggers. Analytically, though, the task seemed much the same. And the same concerns about reliability and validity applied, as they would in any qualitative research (see Kirk & Miller, 1986, pp.13–59).

8. To my eye, that distinction has become quite blurry in recent years, in any case. One now finds overtly interpretive pieces on the front pages of newspapers, and "what does it mean?" features are a staple of broadcast content.

9. A narrative differs from a frame. Narrative includes some sort of plot line, events unfolding over time. A frame is shorter, in time—a snapshot organizing interpretation of a set of facts. While readers are used to complexity and ambiguity in narrative—as in, say, a novel or movie—they are more oriented to specificity in frames. That is why I think of the frame of a news story as the "take-away" idea which subsumes the facts detailed in the story.

10. My thought is that the reporter is framing events both by his or her word choice in the description of events, and also in the choice of sources to include in the story and choice of potential sources to leave out. In other words, a reporter acting as "conduit" for sources' frames is not just passively relaying the sources' frames to the audience, but actively selecting which sources' frames to relay in the first place, and actively deciding how prominently to feature them in the finished story. In the hypothetical armed robbery story, the reporter might choose to feature quotes from the perpetrator's mother, the perpetrator's lawyer, the police chief, a terrified bystander, the store owner, a neighborhood resident, a social worker or advocate, and so on. The reporter makes decisions about which potential sources to contact and where to place their quotes in the story. By my lights, this is framing by the reporter, every bit as much as the descriptive copy the reporter writes.

11. I find bloggers' biographies of interest, as oftentimes the bloggers have noteworthy credentials in professions other than journalism. In these examples, for instance, Ann Althouse is a law professor and Patrick Frey (a/k/a Patterico) is a county prosecutor. This is not meant as a slight to other bloggers who make their living in lower-status jobs, however. I am strongly of the mind that what matters in blog criticism is the strength of the critique, regardless of the critic's resume. The vigor of this marketplace of ideas convinces me of the strong democracy potential the blogosphere offers.

12. Lest the reader dismiss this post as the sniping of a die-hard opponent of the new administration, we should note that Althouse supported the Obama presidential run. One can see this, explicitly, in her posts during the 2008 campaign, which are available in her archive.

13. There was a one-sentence mention of this controversy in the Bloomberg article, about a third of the way into the copy, and no further reference to it in the balance of the article. To my eye, it is clear that the article had not emphasized this in a way that warrants considering it part of
the mainstream product’s frame. In contrast, this fact (that Geithner had acknowledged a problem in his tax filings) was central in the bloggers’ contextualization and reframing.

14. There was no reference to Rangel in the Bloomberg story.

15. An oddity about this column is that while the tone of copy is cordial to the verge of being deferential—Brooks raised no objection to four administration officials contacting him to discuss his earlier criticism of fiscal policy—the title has, to my eyes, a connotation more in keeping with the bloggers’ critique. Brooks titled his follow-up column, “When Obamatons Respond.”

16. This objection would fall into the *journalistic practices* category, in the *Watching the Watchdog* typology.

17. At that point in the post, Driscoll embedded a hyperlink leading to a story on the White House press secretary’s recent jabs at media figures (Rick Santelli, Jim Cramer, and Rush Limbaugh) who had been critical of the new administration (Youngman, 2009).

18. For illustrations of this, see Power Line and Ed Morrissey’s posts on Hot Air.

19. For illustrations, see Instapundit, Big Lizards, the Anchoress, and Althouse.

20. For illustrations, see QandO, Ed Driscoll, and Allahpundit’s posts on Hot Air.

21. For illustrations, see Ace of Spades and Little Green Footballs.

22. An excellent summary of such problems is available in Weston (2000).

23. For good examples of bloggers utilizing induction and deduction in their critique of mainstream reporting, see this author’s case study of blog critique of “fauxtography” (Cooper, 2007).


25. *Watching the Watchdog* has a good quantity of examples of such critique.

26. For a more detailed discussion of economics of blogging, particularly the low barriers to entry, see chapter 6 in *Watching the Watchdog*.

27. A helpful overview of the reasonable person standard in common law is available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reasonable_person_standard. The standard legal reference is Keeton, Dobbs, Keeton, and Owen (1984, pp. 173–193). While its primary use in law is in determining negligence, here I am arguing there is a similar reasonable person construct implicit in scholarly identification of news story frames, regardless of whether a qualitative or quantitative method is used. And in general, I would maintain that peer review is the academic enactment of the reasonable person standard!

References


