Blogosphere With a KO Punch

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In this essay I outline the forces needed to make sure a blogosphere is ready to influence its ecosystem when needed. I focus on the role of blogs in influencing the action of an entity within the ecosystem. I use the mass media as a target to be influenced, and I point out the blogosphere's ability to influence domain name institutions such as ICANN and the Coalition Against Domain Name Abuse (CADNA). Elsewhere, I outline the need for transparent information credibility within a community.

Political economy of information production is about the interaction of human beings, institutions (including governments), and technology. To increase production efficiency, they need to be effectively aligned with each other and operating within the right incentive structure.

To wield influence, the blogosphere must concentrate its pressure on the ultimate vehicles of influence, namely, mass media and Congress. I draw some analogies based on successful blog stories concerning politics and the Harry Potter phenomenon. The , below, focuses on how the networked blogosphere allows individuals to monitor and disrupt the use of mass media power, as well as to organize a community for political action. The Diebold story, second example below, is about how networked blogs allow individuals and groups to gather, report, comment on, and distribute information, and to play the role of the mass media in framing discourse that is of public interest. Such power is enabled by a peer-to-peer (P2P) information-production technology.

The Diebold story also demonstrates that targeting the bottom line of the entity being influenced, directly through the media or indirectly, can be a very effective blogosphere strategy.

What are blogs?
1. Blogs are online journals where a user can post his or her thoughts for anyone with Internet access to read. The subject of the thoughts depends on the blog. Some bloggers write about themselves, some about politics, some about an interest like domain names, some about a given company or product. Unlike wikis and markets, blogs are not a mechanism for aggregating information. They
    a. Act as ecosystem watchdog by keeping other bloggers and traditional media pundits in check.

    b. Provide current information about events of the day.

2. Blogs cater to niche markets. Unlike a TV station or mass-circulation newspaper, a blog doesn't have to chase a common denominator. Of course, a niche audience can also be an audience cut off from outside viewpoints and unwelcome information; readers and blog can become more extreme and unrealistic as a result.

3. Blogs' strength is in coordinating action that comes from distributed ideas, without the need for a leader. They are driven by uncoordinated but mutually reinforcing actions.

4. New entrants face low barriers to entry and can be successful if they provide something of immediate interest to users, as in Sinclair's BoycottSBG.com (now a parking page through Sedo!) story. That is, a new blog can take off without having a large base of participants to start with.

5. A blogger doesn't have to play the guessing game forced on news editors. A mass media outlet must pick topics that will be interesting and relevant to mass numbers of people without being too upsetting for other large numbers of people. A blogger, on the other hand, is driven by one force: "what I care about now."

6. A blog facilitates conversation between blog owner and/or a small number of like-minded members. Participation in Wikis, by contrast, is anchored around a single text that is clearly a collective output. Wikipedia's strengths include cumulative knowledge and fast corrections by the community. Underlying its success is the fact that most people want the process to work.

KO push structure
There are a number of reasons for a blogosphere to want to influence mass media:
1. To have them correct coverage of a given story.

2. To spread industry news. Mass media is complementary to blogs in that it reaches uninformed and undecided audiences. Thus, it can heighten attention for a blog's coverage.

3. To change public perception and discourse.

Why does mass media fail to pick up "important" stories?
1. Media may be focused on other issues due to internal operating dynamics of editorial responsibilities and hierarchies.

2. The media may not appreciate/understand the importance of a given story or issue.

Characteristics of effective blogs:
There is no one action plan to influence mass media. Desired elements include:
1. Cross-linking, which is a distributive approach to finding solutions. Shi, Tseng, and Adamic study the dynamics of blogs and note that bloggers link to each other based on topic and judgment about quality, not only on how well connected the

blogs may already be. Adamic and Glance show that only about 10 percent of the links of any randomly selected blog go to a site across the ideological divide. This may increase up to 15 percent for A-list blogs.

2. An implicit or explicit call to action, as in the Sinclair story.

3. Passion for a cause, as evidenced by all successful stories.

4. Use of credible evidence when correcting a mass media story.

5. Use of complementary approaches when different blogs tackle the same issue. A community solution increases passion and involvement. The Sinclair story is a very good example. In the Harry Potter controversy, fans posted the cease-and-desist letters they got from Warner Brothers' lawyers.

6. Involvement of academics, as in the Sinclair story. (The effect of using a celebrity is not clear. The Bush-Trump video polarized the political blogosphere along party lines.)

7. Calls for the community to boycott media, as in the Sinclair story. A target's bottom line can be hit through a decrease in subscriptions and/or ad clicks.

8. Use of weapons besides blogs, such as e-mails to the ultimate decision maker and the cultivation of personal media relationships.

Domain name applications
In general, to improve our industry's image, we need to complement blogs with new technologies and introduce some credibility-enhancing mechanisms. Thus, we need some kind of filtering and distributed collaboration. I briefly outline two cases:

1. CADNA: The Internet Commerce Association (ICA) has had limited effect in fighting the CADNA, at least in the mass media. Over the long term, the ICA cannot be a viable solution because it is based on contributions from community members. If contributions dry up, as they seem to be, it will be money down the drain. Moreover, the ICA represents a top-down reactive approach to fighting domain name interests. We need a bottom-up grassroots approach through the domain name blogosphere.

   Thus, a number of the above techniques would be more effective than the ICA. That is, we would be better off if we combined blogs with other instruments.

2. ICANN: Thus far, the blogs seem to retroactively discuss one issue at a time, instead of taking a holistic approach. We can use a distributed blog attack to find a way to hit ICANN's interests. For example, go directly to a higher level in the hierarchy, the Department of Commerce, which, for now, has the ultimate influence on ICANN's survival.

Examples:

Example 1: Sinclair Story

Sinclair Broadcast Group (SBG) is one of the largest owners of television broadcast stations in the United States. They own and operate programming and sales to 62 stations, including multiple local affiliates of ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC in Florida, Ohio, Wisconsin, and other states that were hotly contested in one or both of our recent presidential elections.

A week and a half before the 2004 election, SBG informed its staff and stations that it planned to preempt the normal schedule of its 62 stations to air a documentary called *Stolen Honor: The Wounds That Never Heal.* The documentary was reported to be an attack on Democratic candidate John Kerry's Vietnam War service. The story broke on Sunday, October 9, 2004, in the *Los Angeles Times* and the Kerry campaign filed a complaint with the Federal Election Committee (FEC) and the Federal Communications Committee (FCC). Neither of these two committees acted or intervened, but the *Los Angeles Times*' story was blogged on a number of political sites, including [Talking Points Memo](), [MyDD](), and [Daily Kos](). That same day, Nick Davis started a Web site, BoycottSBG.com, on which he posted the basic idea that a concerted boycott of local advertisers was the way to go to reverse SBG's decision. Another site, StopSinclair.org, began pushing for a petition, while Talking Points Memo posted a letter from a reader who suggested that stockholders of SBG could raise questions about the move. Talking Points Memo continued to steer its readers to sites that helped them identify their local affiliate's sales manager and its advertisers. By October 15 more than 50 advertisers were pulling ads, and a number of mainstream media had picked up the story. As a result of the pressure on advertisers, Lehman Brothers downgraded the expected 12-month outlook for the price of SBG, which led to the company's stock dropping 8 percent even as the S&P 500 rose by about half a percent. The next morning the stock price fell another 6 percent, reaching its lowest point in three years. Bowing to the stock prices drop, and indirectly to their shareholders, the same day SBG announced that it would not show the documentary and instead would present a more balanced program using portions of the documentary. The day following the announcement, the company's stock price bounced back to where it had been on October 15.

Example 2: Diebold Story

This story is about Diebold Election Systems, one of the leading manufactures of electronic voting machines. There has been sparse converge by mass media about the risks of using such machines.

In January 2003, Bev Harris, an activist focused on electronic voting machines, was doing research on Diebold and had set up a whistleblower site called BlackBoxVoting.com. A tip guided her to an openly available site where Diebold

stored more than forty thousand files pertaining to how its system worked. She set up space on her Web site for technically literate users to comment on the files. In July of that year she published a report noting how access to the Diebold open data could have been used to alter the 2002 election results in Georgia. She announced a call for action to her readers to get these files, copy them, and store them at multiple places.

One of the original analyses on the data was performed by a group of computer scientists at Johns Hopkins University led by Professor Aviel Rubin and released in a working paper in July 2003. The report presented criticism of the Diebold system and its vulnerability. This gave the incident immediate academic credibility. The study was followed by other independent sources that found a wide range of flaws in the system. In response, claiming copyright violation, Diebold demanded removal of the material by Harris, her ISP, and other sites where the data and relevant items had been posted. The protagonists that carried the torch were college students, beginning with two students at Swarthmore College. Diebold invoked the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), which requires hosting companies to remove infringing material when copyright owners notify them of the presence of such material on their sites. The universities obliged, and required the students to remove the material from their sites. The students however, kept moving the files from one student to another's machine and injected the material into P2P file-sharing networks such as FreeNet, eDonkey, and BitTorrent.

The Diebold campaign against the students was bad enough that the company issued a letter promising not to sue the students. The court nonetheless awarded the students damages and attorneys' fees because it found that Diebold had "knowingly and materially misrepresented" its copyright claims in its letters to the ISPs.

Example 3: Lott-Thurmond story

This is a good example of connected blog action across ideology and of how blogs can influence mainstream media.

In 2002, Sen. Trent Lott committed an indiscretion on the hundredth birthday of Sen. Strom Thurmond, a fellow Republican. Decades ago, Thurmond had run for president as a segregationist. Lott enthusiastically said at the birthday party that, if Thurmond had won, "we wouldn't have all these problems over all these years." The major newspapers mentioned the incident but paid it little attention. Then it was picked up and circulated by liberal blogs, quickly followed by some of their conservative counterparts. Within three days a call had arisen for Lott to step down as majority leader of the Senate. Within a week, the story surfaced in the mainstream media and became a major embarrassment. In the end, Lott stepped down.

Example 4: Bush-Trump Video

> To encourage voter awareness and participation in the 2004 presidential campaign, a short video in the spring of the same year, compiled from footage of newscasts and Donald Trump's hit TV show *The Apprentice,* was circulating across the Internet. It was framed as a mock preview for the show. A segment of the video shows a boardroom, where Trump fires Bush.

Example 5: Harry Potter

> Initially J. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books, and Scholastic, her publisher, welcomed fans creating independent Web sites and publishing brand-related material. Warner Brothers, which bought the film rights in 2001, took a different view. The studio's practice was to seek legal action against Web sites whose domain names shared any of the studio's brand names. It announced that such sites would be suspended until the studio assessed what the site was doing with the Harry Potter name. In many cases, Warners said it would allow the site owner to continue using the brand but retained the right to shut it down if "inappropriate of offensive content" showed up.

> The brand enthusiasts felt betrayed. Some received threatening cease-and-desist letters from studio lawyers. After learning about such studio actions, an American fan named Heather Lawver formed an activist group called Defense Against the Dark Art. Claire Field, a 15-year-old from Great Britain, received a cease-and-desist letter for her site HarryPotterGuide.co.uk. With the help of her parents, she hired a solicitor, a decision that brought the struggle to the attention of the British media. The story received worldwide attention. Lawver and Field, an ocean apart, began coordinating media outreach and activism against the studio. As the media exposure intensified, studio executives publicly acknowledged their naiveté and miscommunication and put their brand litigation aside.

Additional References

1. Cass R. Sunstein, Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge.

2. Yochai Benkler, The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom.