

**METACOMMUNICATION AND INTERACTIVITY: A CONTENT
ANALYSIS OF AUDIENCE FRAMING ON AN ADVOCACY GROUP'S
BLOG**

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ABSTRACT

This study adds to research on audience framing, metacommunication, and online textual and technical interactivity by examining a blog on a third-party, advocacy Web site. Results from a quantitative content analysis of blog posts indicate that audience frames follow patterns similar to journalistic ones. Overall, the majority of blog posts and frames present were negative in their tone. Diagnostic and Metacommunication frames were the most frequently employed. Additionally, the overall amount of metacommunication indicated that bloggers posted divisive, polarizing opinions about Puerto Rico's status and tended to blog about the blog itself and its users, instead of engaging in more detailed, deliberative discourse. Ultimately, the results of this article indicate the blog did not take advantage of textual or technical devices, which hindered chances for interactivity and mobilization.

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Spanish-American War, the United States has maintained control over the island of Puerto Rico. To this day, the inhabitants of this "commonwealth" exist in a sort of legal limbo, part American, and part Puerto Rican. To determine whether Puerto Ricans wish to maintain the status quo, become an independent nation, or integrate into the United States, plebiscites, or national referendums, have been held informally on the island several times over the past two decades. Although not recognized by the United States Congress, these polls do reflect the considerable amount of controversy and polarized condition of the Puerto Rican populace.

A task force report commissioned by former President Bill Clinton and completed during the presidency of George W. Bush in December 2005, recommended that the United States Congress mandate a plebiscite take place in Puerto Rico within a year. Because 2006 came to a close without resolution, this study explored how the Internet was being used to mobilize and inform citizens interested in this movement. To accomplish this, a Web site was selected. *Let Puerto Rico Decide* (www.letpuertoricodecide.com) serves as an information center and a community

for those interested in this movement, and works in conjunction with the Citizen's Educational Foundation, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C.

The purpose of this study was to determine the frequency and tone of blog posts, frames, and topics in the discourse on a third-party, advocacy Web site's blog. Additionally, textual and technical interactivity were assessed. While there is some ferment in the communication discipline on what, or what is not, a blog, this study considers a blog to be a section of a Web site that offers frequently updated content that is posted, and commented on, by users in reverse chronological order (Blood, 2002).

RELATED LITERATURE

FRAMING

The current study of the Let Puerto Rico Decide (LPRD) blog is guided by framing theory. Framing theory suggests that the media have the power not only to select what is covered, but also how items are covered. It is asserted that for the mass media, "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Tankard (1997) suggests that, in mass media news content, framing is a process of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration influenced by the news organization. For the purpose of this study, the operational definition of a frame is a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143).

Scholars argue that frames help organize reality for both journalists and news consumers (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Gitlin (1980) argues that media frames organize the world both for journalists who report it and for consumers who rely on their reports. As such, it is suggested that both audience and media frames need to be empirically analyzed (Scheufele, 1999).

Little research has focused audience frames, in comparison to media frames, and most of these studies have been qualitative (e.g., Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Gamson, 1992; Liebes & Katz, 1986). Only a couple of studies have examined audience frames using quantitative approaches (e.g., Rhee, 1997; Constantinescu & Tedesco, 2007).

Some researchers argue that frames are inherently valenced and can be categorized as being positive, neutral, or negative in tone, a theory supported using a scale in an experimental study of effects of news content (De Vreese & Boomgarden, 2003). This study found that frame valence did affect respondents' attitudes.

Additionally, results from multinational content analyses of international news events and elections support the finding that frames can be clearly classified by valence (Kaid, et al., 2005; Williams & Kaid, 2005). These studies indicate that journalists use differing tones as an intrinsic part of the reporting process.

This study aimed to advance framing literature by examining audience framing in the online environment. Its goal was to determine the extent to which blog posters' dialogue followed patterns of news media framing from prior research.

METACOMMUNICATION

Different labels have been used to discuss the concept of metacommunication. For example, media narcissism, self-reflexive reporting, meta coverage, and metacommunication are terms frequently used to describe how the media have shifted their focus more and more to their to themselves and their own conjecture about myriad issues and events.

The study of metacommunication has mostly emphasized the role that the media have begun to play in the political process. Instead of reporting the news of a political campaign, the media increasingly appear to behave more like a self-aware and participatory institution. This trend of mediated politics is an area of noted concern (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Graber, 1997; Mazzoleni & Shulz, 1999; Swanson & Mancini, 1996).

The Metacommunication frame is typically characterized in two ways: As the news media's self-referential actions and reflections on the nature of the strategies/processes between political public relations and political journalism (Esser & D'Angelo, 2002), and as self-reflexive coverage of the role of the media and the reporter in the process. It appears that the self-reflexive Metacommunication frame is a superficial, less meaningful type of news coverage. Alternatively, scholars argue about the effects of strategy/process metacommunication.

On the negative side, researchers suggest that strategy/process news is adversarial and is detrimental to the democratic process (Blumler, 1997; Kerbel, 1997, 1998). However, other scholars purport it to be beneficial and educational. They argue that this type of reporting serves to inform the electorate and enhance the democratic public sphere (D'Angelo, 1999; McNair, 2000).

Prior research has found high levels of metacommunication in international political campaign coverage (Esser & D'Angelo, 2006). Additionally, the self-reflexive Metacommunication frame was also found frequently employed in televised and Web content of the 2003 U.S. war with Iraq (Williams, 2006). Constantinescu and Tedesco (2007) found that the Romanian media employed self-reflexive and strategy/process Metacommunication frames in news Web sites' coverage about an international crisis.

Prior scholarship has typically examined the Metacommunication frame, and the practice of metacommunication, as a mass media issue. This study aimed to determine whether, and to what extent, the Metacommunication frame was prevalent in blog user's postings and not just a journalistic trend. It also extends this theoretical construct by applying it to a debate about legislation on an advocacy group's Web site.

TEXTUAL AND TECHNICAL INTERACTIVITY

Habermas (1962/1989) suggested the existence of a public sphere where many different types of individuals can converge to share in dialogue. Stromer-Galley (2002) argued that Internet users, who participate in online discourse, find an environment to talk that provides them with a sense of equality. Stromer-Galley's (2003) findings indicate that the Web offers much to the user in terms of content availability and dissemination of information.

Similarly, Foot and Schneider (2002) called this online public space the Web Sphere. They argue that the Internet fosters a Web sphere that offers political, cultural, and social information as well as expression of ideas from multiple sources (Foot & Schneider, 2003).

Prior Web site and blog scholarship indicates a relationship between the encouragement of active discourse, successful online mobilization efforts and interactive features. Earlier studies examined online political dialogue posted by users on Usenet and other public forums, such as Yahoo! groups (Stromer-Galley, 2002; Dahlberg, 2000).

Trammell et al. (2006) suggest that it is important to consider textual and technical elements of a blog to properly evaluate interactivity. Multi-media, online games, and features such as forwarding information via e-mail are considered examples of technical elements. However, a major feature the researchers argue is a vital form of interactivity on a blog is the presence of internal and external hyperlinks. The researchers suggest that the presence of hyperlinks on blogs provides a way for users to have the opportunity to experience the three types of interactivity that McMillan (2002) identified: user to-system, user-to-user, and user-to-document interactivity.

Dimitrova et al. (2003) argued that hyperlinking on a news Web site could be considered a form of gatekeeping, and that there are ways in which the strategic use of external hyperlinks could enhance the information provided on a Web site. However, the study found that online newspapers are not likely to link to external news sources and that online newspapers aren't utilizing the interactivity of the Web. The study argued that the lack of external hyperlinking is an indication of the gatekeeping power of online editors: "By choosing certain hyperlinks and ignoring others, online newspapers are more often than not keeping the gate to the vast information available on the Internet closed" (p. 412).

Similarly, in the 1996 campaign, Stromer-Galley (2000) found presidential candidate Web sites only linked to pages within their own respective sites. These instances of providing internal rather than external hyperlinks suggest producers of online content exercise the power of selecting certain sites, content, and interactive features to possibly further their own agendas. This practice, therefore, can be viewed as one that gives Internet content providers the power to perpetuate their worldviews while ignoring differing or alternate perspectives.

Conversely, Foot et al. (2003) analyzed the hyperlinking practices of U.S. Congressional candidates during the 2002 midterm campaign cycle. The researchers' findings were encouraging in that they found that these candidates frequently linked to external sites; therefore, they were taking advantage of the interactivity of the Web. In essence, these candidate's Web sites became portals to other sites and destinations of their own.

Researchers argue that in addition to providing hyperlinks for users, Web sites should afford users the ability to insert hyperlinks of their own, adding an element of user control. Peng, Tham, and Xiaoming (1999) argued that providing users with control of online content (e.g. hyperlinking) is a vital form of interactivity. Furthermore, in the context of a political campaign, Stromer-Galley and Foot (2002) found that allowing users some control over the content of the Web site, led to feelings of empowerment and connection between the Web site visitors and the political candidates.

Williams, et al. (2005) found that in the 2004 presidential election, candidates' use of interactive (e.g., providing numerous hyperlinks, allowing users to post comments, and providing ways for users to donate money and to mobilize) proved mandatory on the Bush and Kerry Web sites. They argued that providing interactivity for users was an essential element for mobilization.

Beyond the use of technical elements, researchers argue that Web sites can create a sense of interactivity by using textual features. For instance, Newhagen, Cordes, and Levy (1995) argued that textual engagement is a form of interactivity. For example, Web site users who encounter engaging content may consider their experience with the text as being interactive. Therefore, such interactivity could be considered a perceived form of interactivity. The news consumer or Web site visitor has a feeling of interactivity based on their engagement with the text.

Textual interactivity is argued to be as important as the technical features offered. For example, Trammell et al. (2006) also suggest that hyperlinks are an important interactive element for candidate blogs and that blogs were used as a personal way to talk to and, often, to send mobilization messages to the audience. The researchers argue that examining text-based interactivity (e.g., such as direct address to the audience, and explicit calls for action) and technical capabilities in online campaign communication can be useful, as candidates appear to use a variety of message appeal strategies on the Web in attempts to create an interactive environment that fosters mobilization.

Through early work in developing a coding scheme called "Videostyle," measuring tactics employed in political ads, Kaid and Davidson (1986) detailed a number of appeals used by candidates such as calling for change and inviting participation. Trammell et al. (2006) argue that, "Some of these strategies are interactive on two levels: the technical manner in which they are displayed and the spirit of the text. For example, the 'inviting participation' strategy is essentially a request for the reader to interact," (p. 27).

This study aimed to advance research about interactivity on a blog. It sought to examine the level of technical and textual interactivity provided.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present research was designed to measure the prevalence and tone of frames and topics in blog posts. The study asked:

RQ1: What was the overall tone of the blog posts?

RQ2: What were the most prevalent frames in the blog posts?

RQ3: What was the tone of the frames in the blog posts?

RQ4: What were the most frequently mentioned topics in the blog posts?

RQ5: What was the tone of the topics in the blog posts?

RQ6: What was the level of interactivity in the blog posts?

METHOD

To answer these questions, a content analysis was performed on the Web site's main blog posts. In order to obtain data that were distributed equally over time, the researchers coded blog posts using a random systematic sample of blog posts over a six-month period ($N=113$). The study used a sampling interval of every tenth post, beginning, starting with the first entry on July 1, 2006 through December 31, 2006. Naturally, a blog post could contain more than one frame or topic. Therefore, frames and topics served as units of enumeration ($N=297$, $N=331$, respectively).

Each blog post was coded for overall tone: positive, negative, neutral. These were considered trichotomous variables, and each post was identified as being positive, negative, or neutral based on the overt, dominant characteristics of the discourse provided by the blog poster. For example, a post coded as positive would contain respectful dialogue, an optimistic outlook on topics, and congenial language. A negative post contained ad hominem attacks, a pessimistic outlook on an issue, and coarse language. A neutral blog post was operationally defined as having no clear tone or slant one way or the other. Neutral posts contained facts in a journalistic manner, without an overt show of bias or judgement.

The manifest content of the blog posts was analyzed deductively, and frames were coded as being either present or absent. These frames include the five generic news frames identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000): morality, economic consequences, conflict, human interest, and responsibility. In addition, numerous general and contextual topics specific to Puerto Rico, (e.g., legislation in Congress pertaining to Puerto Rico's status) and the three main options for the island's future (independence, statehood, or status quo) were also coded as present or absent. Furthermore, each frame and topic was evaluated as being positive, negative, or neutral in the blog posts. Moreover, the presence or absence of technical and textual interactivity was determined.

Two trained coders performed coding of the blog posts. Intercoder reliability was established at .92 across all categories, using Holsti's formula (North, Holsti, Zaninovich, & Zinnes, 1963).

RESULTS

Research questions sought to identify the frequency and tone of frames and topics identified in the blog posts. Research question 1 (RQ1) asked about the overall tone of the blog posts. Results indicate that the posts were nearly evenly split between negative and neutral tone, with 45% of the posts being overall negative, 43% neutral, and 12% positive.

The second research question (RQ2) asked what the most prevalent frames were in the blog posts. Eleven audience frames were identified in the debate over Puerto Rico's status. Table 1 lists the frames in order of frequency of occurrence in the blog posts.

Results for RQ2 indicate that the three most frequently occurring frames were diagnostic, metacommunication, and social identity. The diagnostic frame, which was identified by discussion of the reasons for and effects of Puerto Rico's status, was found 82 times, accounting for 28% of identified frames. The metacommunication frame identified when bloggers wrote in a self-reflexive manner about their reasons for contributing to the discussion, their role as a blogger, about other bloggers, or about the blog in general. It occurred 77 times, making up 26% of all identified frames. Third, the social identity frame involving discussion of whether from a cultural standpoint the residents of the island were more Puerto Rican, American, neither, or both, and was found 44 times, accounting for 15% of all frames.

Occurring with moderate frequency were the political consequences, conflict, economic consequences, and prognostic frames. The political consequences frame was used when bloggers discussed the implications of a change in Puerto Rico's status on public affairs and issues of governance. This was present 24 times, accounting for 8% of all frames. The conflict frame, found 20 times and making up 7% of the frames, was characterized by a focus on the opposition faced by the opposing sides. The economic consequences and prognostic frames both occurred 19 times, each accounting for 6% of the total frames. The economic consequences frame dealt with the financial effects Puerto Ricans would face with a change in status, particularly with regard to changes in taxation. The prognostic frame typically included the blogger's expectations for when and how the issue of a change in status would ever be addressed.

The human interest, morality, responsibility, and game frames occurred very infrequently, each accounting for 1% of identified frames. The human interest frame was identified by the presence of personal, emotional and anecdotal evidence as part of a blog post. The morality frame consisted of discussion of whether Puerto Ricans were being treated fairly or lawfully. When the responsibility frame was found, it included information about who was to blame and who needed to act to remedy the situation. Finally, the game frame was characterized by discussion of which status option was gaining or losing momentum.

The third research question (RQ3) sought to determine the tone of the frames in the blog posts. Table 1 shows the frequency with which each frame was found in a neutral, negative, or positive blog post. Chi-square analyses were run to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the tone of the frames in the blog posts.

Results for RQ3 show that the diagnostic frame occurred most frequently in posts with a negative tone (44%), followed by positive (43%), and neutral (13%), a statistically significant finding, chi-square at 14.659; $df=2$; $p < .001$. The metacommunication frame was most often in negatively valenced posts (55%), then positive (35%), and neutral (10%), chi-square at 22.623; $df=2$; $p < .001$. The social identity frame was found in posts with a negative tone half of the time (50%), followed by positive (39%) and neutral (11%), a significant finding, chi-square at 10.409; $df=2$; $p < .001$.

Interestingly, the political consequences frame was generally presented in a positive context (63%), more often than negative (29%), or neutral (8%), chi-square at 10.75; $df=2$; $p < .005$. Unsurprisingly, the conflict frame was largely in negative blog posts (70%), then neutral (30%), chi-square at 14.8; $df=2$; $p < .001$. The economic consequences frame was evenly split between

positive and negative valence (42% each), while the prognostic frame was most often found with a positive valence (47%).

The human interest frame was evenly split between posts with a negative or neutral tone. The morality and responsibility frames were each found 3 times, once in a neutral post, and twice in negative posts. The game frame was always found in a negative blog post (100%). Since these frames were found very infrequently, little inference can be drawn from this data.

TABLE 1: FRAME PREVALENCE AND TONE IN BLOG POSTS

Frames	Prevalence	Neutral	Negative	Positive
Diagnostic***	82 (28%)	11 (13%)	36 (44%)	35 (43%)
Metacommunication***	77 (26%)	8 (10%)	42 (55%)	27 (35%)
Social identity***	44 (15%)	5 (11%)	22 (50%)	17 (39%)
Political consequences**	24 (8%)	2 (8%)	7 (29%)	15 (63%)
Conflict***	20 (7%)	6 (30%)	14 (70%)	0 (0%)
Economic consequences	19 (6%)	3 (16%)	8 (42%)	8 (42%)
Prognostic	19 (6%)	4 (21%)	6 (32%)	9 (47%)
Human interest	4 (1%)	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	0 (0%)
Morality	3 (1%)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)	0 (0%)
Responsibility	3 (1%)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)	0 (0%)
Game	2 (1%)	0 (0%)	2 (100%)	0 (0%)
Total	297 (100%)	43 (15%)	143 (48%)	111 (37%)

Note: $N = 297$. Percentages are of all frames present in the blog posts. *** Difference between frame tone is significant, $p < .001$. ** Difference between frame tone is significant, $p < .05$.

Research question 4 (RQ4) asked what the most frequently occurring topics were in the blog posts. Table 2 lists the topics in order of frequency. The two topics that occurred most frequently were “becoming 51st state” and “becoming independent.” These represent two of the potential outcomes for Puerto Rico’s status, the other being “maintaining status quo.” Occurring with moderate frequency were the issues of “American politics,” the LPRD social movement in general, and the economy. Some of the major issues which seem to be at the heart of the debate, including representation, dissatisfaction with status, and nationalism, occur (as with most of the issues) fewer than 20 times in the blog posts.

Research question 5 (RQ5) concerned the tone of the topics. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the relationship between topic mention and overall blog post tone. Chi-square analyses were run to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the tone of the topics in the blog posts.

The two major solutions to Puerto Rico’s status frequently discussed in the blog posts were presented primarily in neutral and negative ways. The topic of “becoming the 51st state” was found nearly as often in neutral and negative posts (45% and 40%, respectively), followed by positive (15%), chi-square at 9.631; $df=2$; $p < .01$. Becoming independent was mostly found in negative and neutral posts (45% and 39%, respectively), followed by positive posts (16%), chi-square at 6.653; $df=2$; $p < .05$.

Discussion of American politics was largely included in negative posts, (53%), followed by neutral (28%) and positive (19%), chi-square at 6.063; $df=2$; $p < .05$. Discussion of the LPRD social movement in general was most often in negative posts (56%), then neutral (37%), and positive (7%), chi-square at 9.566 $df=2$; $p < .01$. The difference between overall blog post tone and discussion of the economy was not significant, chi-square at 5.429; $df=2$; $p < .066$.

TABLE 2: TOPIC PREVALENCE AND TONE IN BLOG POSTS

Topics	Prevalance	Neutral	Negative	Positive
Becoming 51st State*	65 (20%)	29 (45%)	26 (40%)	10 (15%)
Becoming Independent**	49 (15%)	19 (39%)	22 (45%)	8 (16%)
American Politics**	32 (10%)	9 (28%)	17 (53%)	6 (19%)
LPRD Social Movement*	27 (8%)	10 (37%)	15 (56%)	2 (7%)
Economy*	22 (7%)	9 (41%)	10 (46%)	2 (9%)
Nationalism	19 (6%)	7 (37%)	7 (37%)	5 (26%)
Votes about Status	16 (5%)	7 (44%)	7 (44%)	2 (13%)
Education	11 (3%)	4 (36%)	5 (46%)	2 (18%)
Dissatisfaction with Status	11 (3%)	3 (27%)	5 (46%)	3 (27%)
War in Iraq	10 (3%)	2 (20%)	7 (70%)	1 (10%)
International Issues	10 (3%)	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	0 (0%)
Patriotism	9 (3%)	2 (22%)	5 (56%)	2 (22%)
Representation	8 (2%)	2 (25%)	6 (75%)	0 (0%)
Taxes	8 (2%)	2 (25%)	5 (63%)	1 (13%)
LPRD Web site	6 (2%)	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	0 (0%)
Crime	4 (1%)	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	0 (0%)
Healthcare	4 (1%)	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)
Legislation in Congress	4 (1%)	0 (0%)	2 (50%)	2 (50%)
Satisfaction with Status	4 (1%)	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	1 (25%)
Poverty/Welfare	3 (1%)	2 (67%)	1 (34%)	0 (0%)
Bureaucracy	2 (1%)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)
Maintaining Status Quo	2 (1%)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)
Recent News	2 (1%)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)
Defense	1 (1%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Immigration	1 (1%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Terrorism	1 (1%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	331 (100%)	127 (38%)	156 (47%)	48 (15%)

Note: $N = 331$. Percentages are of all topics present in the blog posts. ** Difference between Frame Tone is significant, $p < .05$. * Difference between Frame Tone is significant, $p < .10$.

Research Question 6 (RQ6) sought to identify whether the blog was used to call its readers to action. To code for this, the researchers looked for explicit textual statements that asked other blog posters or readers to perform an action.

Fifteen percent of the blog posts contained at least one of these statements. Most of these “calls” were written like commands or directives, with strong language. Blog users commanded each other to “tell the truth,” “stop using scare tactics,” and “state where you stand.” On four occasions, blog posters invited others to become more informed by reading additional materials.

Two of these posts contained the Web addresses where further information could be found. The Web site's lack of technical features prevented these from becoming interactive hyperlinks. Results for RQ6 indicate that blog posters were infrequently using the blog to call each other to action.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the discourse on a blog on an advocacy group's Web site, and found high levels of metacommunication and negativity, and little interactivity. The Web site that contained the blog remained unchanged for weeks at a time, while the blog received multiple entries each day from one of two-dozen bloggers.

BLOG POST TONE

Results for RQ1 indicate that the overall tone of the blogs posts was largely negative or neutral, with only 12% being framed positively. It is important to note how the blogger's posts are similar to the problem identified of negative mass media political coverage. The issue of polarization and hostility in general is an interesting finding that is similar to the concerns about "shout TV."

FRAME PREVALENCE

The results about frame prevalence revealed some interesting findings. For example, the metacommunication frame was the second-most dominant frame identified. Perhaps because of the innate interactive and at times informal nature of blogs, people feel compelled to directly address other users when providing feedback. Also interesting was the negligible frequency of some of the other frames. Bloggers did not often write about who was to blame for the current situation (responsibility frame), or even what they anticipated would happen (prognostic frame). Instead, they seemed focused on defining the problem at hand from a macro level (diagnostic and social identity frames) than on a personal, micro level (human interest frame).

FRAME TONE

Results for RQ3 were that the frames used by the blog users were mostly in negative blog posts, in keeping with the general finding regarding negativity of blog posts. As one would expect, the conflict frame was most often negative, 70% of the time. Not all frames were negative, however. The political consequences frame was only negative 29% of the time. Interestingly, bloggers seemed to focus on the positive political outcomes of whichever status option they favored.

The metacommunication frame occurred in negative posts 55% of the time. Many of the blog posts included strong attacks against the arguments and the character of fellow bloggers. This negatively valenced use of the metacommunication frame often consisted of personal insults.

Users typically chose a letter of the alphabet or short nickname to "sign" their posts. For example, Xavi (2005) wrote: "Blah blah blah, the same debates, the same comments, the same blah blah blah." Typical of the tone of many of the posts, another blogger, FCL (2005), clashed with N about an argument made previously: "Wow, I get off[f] the blog for a couple of days and

N has a field day with me. I would expect comments like that from somebody as neanderthalistic as N, I never said to relegate Spanish to street language, anyways everybody else can read, unlike you.”

A comment from a newcomer to the blog used the metacommunication frame to share his comments: “First of all, let me say that I do not enter this blog claiming to be an expert or overly familiar with the status issue. Perhaps that will only make a discussion with those of you who are more knowledgeable about the subject all the more valuable. Having said that, please allow me to respectfully pose one question to any blogger participating in this discussion who would like to respond” (S, 2005).

TOPIC PREVALENCE

RQ4 aimed to identify the most prevalent topics discussed on the blog. Blog posts most frequently focused on two of the potential outcomes for Puerto Rico’s status. These were often short posts with a blogger stating his or her position vehemently with little regard for deliberation. This is a particularly discouraging finding given the potential the Internet affords citizens to become informed, share ideas, and mobilize each other.

TOPIC TONE

The tone of the topics was the focus of RQ5. Since many of the topics occurred very infrequently, it is hard to draw conclusions about their tone. The negative tone of “American politics” and the “LPRD social movement” may point to a strong sense of futility and despair concerning Puerto Rico ever actually being able to decide its future. The people using this blog took the opportunity to vent their frustrations with the system and to attack the positions of others.

INTERACTIVITY

In assessing the level of technical and textual interactivity, a surprising finding was that there was practically a complete lack of the use of any technical features on the blog. In addition to no multi-media, graphics, or other elements, there was almost a complete lack of the use of hyperlinks. While there was a higher level of textual activity at 15% in which blog posts contained explicit calls to action for the user, the amount was low. Results for RQ6 indicate that users were not offered technical features nor did they use the text to call each other to action.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

There are several noteworthy implications that this study provides that are important for scholars of framing theory, metacommunication, interactivity, and blogs. This study advances framing theory by assessing the frequency of audience frames on a blog. Audience frames were found to follow similar patterns to media frames, with high levels of negativity and metacommunication. In the absence of technical interactivity, audience frames on blogs may become more negative and self-reflexive.

Some scholars have criticized traditional news media for the way it frames news stories as polarizing and self-reflexive. For example, using “talking heads” pundits espouse vitriolic and partisan rhetoric with little time given to substantive discussion of the issues (Nimmo & Combs, 1992). The Internet brought hope of a participatory revolution, whereby anyone with access to a computer could join in the discussion of political issues, thus bringing more voices and greater perspective on the issues.

What this study found, however, is that the dialogue found on blogs may be just as partisan and lacking in substantive thought as that delivered by traditional media. Furthermore, this research indicates that one of the most frequent ways in which Internet users communicate with each other is through metacommunication.

IMPLICATIONS

The Internet can be used to create and foster a sense of community and engagement among its users. Results of this study suggest that international not-for-profits organizations, businesses, and political entities seeking to harness the power of the Internet, can benefit by providing interactive elements on their Web sites and blogs. Doing so can foster excitement and enhance relationships. However, simply including a blog on a Web site can be not an effective use of the technology. Blog users can be mean-spirited and drive away potential contributors to the Web site. The tone and quality of the discussion on this blog may have benefited from greater oversight by the Web site’s creators. There may be a need to provide interactivity through guided discussion and the use of hyperlinks. Perhaps instead of attacks and rebuttals, a more interactive forum would foster a greater exchange of ideas. An official representative of the movement, company/organization, or individual should present themselves to the Web site users and work to set the agenda and tone of the discussion.

LIMITATIONS

As with all research, there are limitations. This study is no exception. It focused on one Web site over a six-month period. While the size of the sample was small, the blog posts were representative of the blog because of the random sampling procedure. This Web site was rarely updated and there seemed to be no interaction between the content on the Web site and the blog posts. Therefore, this study was unable to analyze more technical and interactive features that have been found to help guide and motivate discussion. Finally, some of the frames and topics occurred too infrequently to infer about their tone. However, the absence of such topics and frames points to a larger issue of concern: People may be using the Internet not to share and disseminate information, but to broadly state their stance on an issue and attack the viewpoints of others.

FUTURE RESEARCH

There are strong opportunities for future research in this area. Scholars should look to compare these findings with other, more interactive Web sites employed by advocacy groups and other organizations. Likewise, the types of frames used in discourse on Web sites that host video blogs (vlogs) and social networking Web sites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace) should be analyzed. Among the questions this study raises are, “How would bloggers frame discussions on a more interactive

Web site?” “Does interactivity change the tone of audience frames and quality of discourse?” and, “Is the prevalence of the Metacommunication frame affected by the presence of interactivity?”

CONCLUSION

The Internet offers numerous ways for people to become engaged and invested in social issues and organizations. A well-run blog has the potential to affect people’s cognitive, affective, and behavioral inclinations. This study points to the need for blog creators to consider how the amount of control and level of interactivity they afford their users may affect the tone and type of discourse found on that blog.

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