

**BLOGGING, JOURNALISM AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: ASSESSING THE
VALUE OF THE 'BLOGOSPHERE' AS A NEW FORM OF THE PUBLIC
SPHERE. A CASE STUDY OF THE MAIL & GUARDIAN ONLINE'S
BLOGMARK**

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FORTUNE SIBANDA

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Supervisor: Vanessa Malila
Co-supervisor: Professor Guy Berger

Abstract

The study seeks to investigate whether weblogs can act as virtual public spheres, where people can meet to discuss issues of interest to them. It uses the Mail & Guardian Online's Blogmark as a case study. Weblogs – highly interactive online journals comprised of links and postings in reverse chronological order – are fast becoming an avenue of choice for many internet users wanting to share opinions and news with others online. Because of their unique read-and-write characteristics, some have equated them to the 18th century coffeehouses, around which the early forms of citizen involvement in public affairs began in early capitalist Europe. Despite their growing popularity, however, not much scholarly work has been dedicated to the practice of blogging in Africa, and particularly in South Africa.

The study's theoretical framework is drawn from Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere. While noting some of the criticisms of the Habermasian model, it is argued that the concept is instrumental in our understanding of the relationship between the media and democracy. The study, however, adopted a re-worked model of the concept of the public sphere. This model argues for the need to have a multiplicity of public sphericules (instead of one single public sphere as advocated by Habermas), around which individuals can congregate to discuss issues of common concern to them.

Using a combination of qualitative content analysis, self-completion questionnaires and a semi-structured interview, the study found Blogmark to be an example of how emerging internet genres such as weblogs can be vehicles of citizen involvement in public life. A range of issues were discussed in the blog, from politics, race and

gender issues, to personal anecdotes, relationships, and sex. However, while some posts exhibited high levels of interactivity, with many bloggers joining in to offer their opinions, some read like online monologues. The study argues that although blogging is a practice that is still limited to a few privileged individuals, with the ever-rising size of the ‘blogosphere’, weblogs such as Blogmark are making a small but not insignificant contribution to the number of voices that can be heard in the public realm.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

The study focuses on the practice of blogging and seeks to investigate whether weblogs can provide a virtual public sphere, where people can meet to discuss issues of interest to them. It uses the Mail & Guardian Online's blog, Blogmark, as a case study. Although the study also touches on issues around the relationship between blogging and journalism, and on the potential of the internet as a tool for political communication, the major focus of the research is to assess the public sphere potential of Blogmark, a concept that was introduced by German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas and further developed by other scholars.

This introductory chapter provides the general background to the study, and highlights its significance to scholarly work on the practice of blogging. The chapter also outlines the study's objectives, and the research methods used. Finally, the chapter provides an outline of the structure of the study.

1.1 Background to the study

The Mail & Guardian (then called the Weekly Mail) was founded during the height of the apartheid rule in 1985 by two journalists who had just found themselves jobless after the newspapers that they had worked for ceased their operations (almost without notice) in a suspected politically-motivated closure. Operating in arguably the harshest period of the apartheid era, the new newspaper soon established a reputation for its unflinching approach to news coverage, focusing on the very topics that the mainstream media in the country conveniently skirted, particularly state brutality against the opposition and its supporters in the townships (Merrett and Saunders, 2000; Jackson, 1993). It continued to play a pivotal role during and after the transformation period in the early 1990s, including helping to usher in new democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994 (Forrest, 2005). To this day, the Mail & Guardian continues to set the trends in investigative journalism, often exposing corruption in high circles.

The Mail & Guardian has a long history of firsts in the use of technology in the country. In 1985, the Weekly Mail, was the first newspaper in South Africa to use desktop publishing technology, with the acquisition of two Apple Macintosh computers and a laser printer for newspaper production (Manoim, 1996). In 1994, it became the first African newspaper to go online with the launch of the Mail & Guardian Online (M&G Online). The M&G Online's website is internationally recognised for its quality and up-to-date content, with readers from Europe, North America and Africa ("About us", 2006). Continuing to set trends, the newspaper recently introduced a space on its website, Blogmark, which enables its readers to meet online and discuss issues of concern to them. The feature also enables the readers to provide running commentary on the stories covered by the newspaper. This is the blog that is the subject of this study.

1.2 Significance of the study

A new form of online communication gained popularity in the West in the aftermath of the September 11 (2001) bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York (Wall, 2005). This form, which involved individuals writing down and sharing their ideas and opinions on any issue ranging from the "War on Terror" to personal musings, came to be known as "wee-blogs", later simply shortened to "weblog" (Herring, *et al.* 2004). Since then, the practice has been growing at a very fast rate. For example, Technorati (2006), a blog indexing and search engine, revealed that 50 million weblogs had been created worldwide by the month of August 2006, and this figure will double every six months. While it may be true that Africa is a 'late starter' in the adoption of such forms of communication, the continent is currently undergoing rapid transformation and growth in the use of interactive internet genres such as chat forums and discussion boards (Wilson, 1999). In particular, blogging is fast becoming an avenue of choice for many internet users, political activists, and newspapers on the continent. Despite its growing global popularity, however, it is only in recent years that any scholarly work has been dedicated to the practice of blogging. Further, most of the work on blogging has focused on the practice in the North (and a few studies in Asia), with little or nothing having been written on the practice in the South in general, and in South Africa in particular, where the phenomenon seems to have taken

off on a high note. The value of this study, therefore, is to provide a fresh, local perspective on the global debate on the utility of blogging, with a special focus on how this genre may enable citizens to take part in public discussions and debates.

1.3 Objectives of the study

The major goal of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of the practice of blogging in South Africa and what goes on in this new form of communication, which has been touted by some as a new virtual public sphere. The study seeks to find out how Blogmark functions as a space for public debate and deliberation for the M&G Online's readers. It seeks to find out what issues people are blogging about, and also the nature and level of debates in the blog, in an attempt to find out if this space really exists as the discursive arena representative of the public sphere that it is touted to be.

1.4 Methods of the study

In order to evaluate Blogmark's potential as a modern-day version of Habermas's 19th century model of the public sphere, a case study design was adopted for the study. A case study is an empirical approach which uses multiple sources of evidence to investigate certain phenomena in their contextual setting (Yin, 1984). By its nature, case study research focuses on a particular situation, or event, with the main aim of providing holistic sociological descriptions of it. For this reason, the approach is most valuable when one wants to obtain a wealth of information on a relatively 'new' area of study such as blogging. The case study design is open to the use of various other methods to investigate phenomena, thus, a multimethod approach combining both qualitative and quantitative methods of social scientific enquiry was adopted.

Qualitative content analysis was the major technique that was used in the study. With its roots in scientific research, the technique equips one with tools for the analysis of large amounts of media output in a systematic fashion (Kaplan, 1943). Content analysis helps one state the frequency of occurrence (or non-occurrence) of signs in a media sample under study, in order to say something about the relevance of this frequency. This method was used to analyse the blog's posts.

Self-completion questionnaires were also administered to a purposively-selected group of bloggers. The questionnaire was posted on the blog and 12 of the most active bloggers during the sample period were requested to download it, fill it in and email it to the researcher. The questionnaire was meant to elicit the bloggers' own perceptions of Blogmark, i.e., whether they perceived the forum as a public sphere or not. This method was chosen because it enabled the researcher to get a considerable amount of information from people from far-flung locations inexpensively.

Finally, I also conducted one semi-structured interview with the M&G Online's editor and publisher. This was done with a view to finding out the motivations, on the part of the newspaper, for setting up Blogmark. The biggest advantage of this technique is the wealth of information it generates, as it allows one to probe further into an interviewee's answers, thus gaining access into their inner perspectives, past experiences, and feelings on the subject.

1.5 Thesis outline

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The present chapter provides the general introduction and background to the study, and outlines the aims and objectives of the study, as well as its significance, and methods employed.

Chapter Two presents the theoretical framework informing the study, and a review of the literature that was used in the study. The chapter begins by outlining the Habermasian concept of the public sphere, as well as the criticisms that have been laid against it. It is proposed that there is a need to move away from the rather outdated Habermasian conception of the public sphere as *the* only sphere, to one which acknowledges the need for the existence of multiple public spheres or public sphericules. Taking this view, the chapter then argues that internet genres such as weblogs have an immense role to play in enabling physically distant people to take part in public debates, where they can discuss issues of common concern. The second part of the chapter defines weblogs and analyses their potential to act as virtual public spheres.

Chapter Three recounts the history of the Mail & Guardian from its conception at the height of the apartheid era to the present day. The chapter outlines the role the newspaper has played historically in enhancing democracy and transparency in South Africa through bringing the actions of those in power under the light of public scrutiny. The chapter also focuses on the history of the M&G Online. It is noted that the newspaper has a long history of firsts in the innovative uses of technology to disseminate news, and continues to set the trends up to this day, with the introduction of interactive features for its readership like Blogmark.

The research methods and data analysis techniques adopted for the study are outlined in Chapter Four. The chapter begins with a reminder of the study's aims and objectives and the research design adopted, through an examination of the case study technique. A major section of the chapter is dedicated to outlining the content analysis procedures that were undertaken, including sampling issues, category formulation, and coding. The chapter also examines the two other techniques that were used in the study: the semi-structured in-depth interview and the self-completion questionnaire. Finally, the chapter outlines the research procedure followed, the research instruments used and the problems encountered in executing the study.

The presentation of results and the evaluation of Blogmark's public sphere potential are the focus of Chapter Five. It is argued that despite the fact that blogging is still limited to a privileged portion of the South African citizenry, the practice plays a significant role in enhancing active citizenship for that group of South Africans that blog regularly. Thus, while noting the limited and exclusionary nature of the monolithic, over-arching public sphere model advocated by Habermas, the study argues that platforms like Blogmark provide opportunities for enhancing citizen involvement in public discussions, albeit also on a limited scale.

Finally, in Chapter Six I touch on the broad conclusions reached during the evaluation of Blogmark. The chapter also highlights some areas for future research.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented an introduction to the study and outlined the background (and significance) of the study. The following chapter presents the theoretical framework informing the study. It also introduces to the practice of blogging, and explores its relationship to journalism, as well as its public sphere potential.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the theoretical framework that informs the study, including the debates surrounding the relationship between blogging and journalism. It is divided into two major sections. The first section focuses on Habermas's theory of the public sphere and seeks to address some of the criticisms that have been laid against it. Notwithstanding these criticisms, however, I argue that the concept remains useful for understanding the relationship between the media and democracy. Thus, instead of moaning the loss of the outdated Habermasian bourgeois public sphere model, I argue that there is also a need to examine contemporary modes of 'public sphere-ing' like blogging which have been made possible by the advent of information communication technologies (ICTs). This section concludes by arguing that a re-worked version of the concept – one which acknowledges the existence of smaller 'public sphericules' which operate within a larger public sphere – is more appropriate in modern societies as it can better promote the ideals of deliberative democracy than does a single, over-arching public sphere as originally advocated by Habermas. The second section focuses on weblogs and discusses the potential that they have to act as modern-day public spheres for citizen participation in public affairs. It is argued that although assessing the full impact of blogging in Africa (and the world over) may be slightly premature at this stage (since the practice is still limited to a few privileged individuals), blogging is becoming an avenue of choice for many internet users wanting to share information and opinions online.

2.1 The media and democracy

The study draws its theoretical underpinnings from the Habermasian (1989)¹ concept of the public sphere and seeks to see how it applies to the online practice of blogging. Although almost five decades old now, Habermas's much-discussed theory and model

¹ Although The structural transformation of the public sphere was originally published in Habermas's native Germany in 1962, it was only available in English in 1989 (translated by Thomas Burger). All references to the book will be taken from the English version.

of the public sphere continues to inspire thinking and debates about the relationship between the media and democracy in many ways.

Modern politics is highly mediated politics; thus, liberal notions of democracy place a lot of emphasis on the centrality of the media in democratic polities². It is arguable that the study of democracy in contemporary society is also a study of how the media report and interpret political events and issues; of how they facilitate the efforts of politicians to persuade their electorates of the correctness of their policies and programmes; and of how the media themselves sometimes seek to influence the political process and shape public opinion (McNair, 2000:1). Thus, the health of democracy in modern times has increasingly been linked to the health of systems of communication, although, of course, democracy cannot be reduced to media issues alone (Dahlgren, 1995:2). Dynamic and open public communication systems are indispensable to the development of full citizenship;³ how we organise these systems will have profound implications on the quality of public life (Murdock, 1992:18).

The 'public sphere' traditionally refers to the space between civil society and the state in which the critical scrutiny of the state and the market take place. That the actions of the elites to exercise power should be underpinned by critical scrutiny and informed public debate facilitated by the media is one of the central themes of the concept. Although Habermas's critics may dispute the extent to which a properly functioning bourgeois public sphere ever existed during early capitalist Europe, they all agree that such a space should exist, and that the media should be at its core (Dahlgren, 1995; Curran, 1996). My analysis of the concept will focus on some of the major issues raised by Habermas (1989), and the ensuing criticisms that have been laid against the idea; among them issues of access, common interest, participatory parity, rationality

² The study urges a distinction between two models of democracy; the classical active citizen and the liberal/representative democracy models. The former, also known as participatory democracy, is said to be the 'original' model, which was practiced in Athenian Greece, where citizens would meet in a public square to deliberate issues of public import. The liberal or representative model grew with the rise of capitalism and mass society in the 19th century. In this model, the public is given the power to regularly vote into public office, representatives who are held accountable for the needs of the society (Held, 1993:18). Habermas's notion of the public sphere draws from the former model, as it places emphasis on the unmediated public participation of citizens in the political process through debate.

³ My usage of the term 'citizenship' is borrowed from Beetham and Boyle who note that, historically, citizenship emerged from the political systems of ancient Greece, where being a citizen of a polity meant direct participation in public policy- and decision-making processes (1995:130).

and the alleged disintegration of the public sphere. But first, I will give a general overview of the concept.

2.2 The public sphere as a historical narrative

Although notions of what can be termed the public sphere – which thematised the role of citizen participation in the political process – can be traced back to ancient Greece, Habermas traces the emergence of his model of deliberative democracy to the 18th century coffee houses, salons and table societies of Britain, France and Germany. His seminal book, The structural transformation of the public sphere, is a historical narrative in two acts, in which, in the first part, he recounts the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere just after the demise of feudalism and the emergence of capitalism. In the second part, he narrates how this sphere lost its critical function as it came to be dominated by vested political and economic interests.

The public sphere designates a physical *agora* in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is a space in which individuals congregate to form a public body in which matters of common interest are deliberated upon, “in an unrestricted fashion” (Habermas, 1989:59; 1974:49). Historically, it arose in the political contest between the emerging business class and the aristocracy, with the physical movement away from the courts to the towns as centres of public life being symbolic of the new trends. It consisted of voluntary associations of private citizens united in the common aim to mediate between the public and the state through debate (Habermas, 1989:82). This meant that information about state functioning was to be publicly accessible so that its activities would be subject to critical scrutiny and to the force of “public opinion” (Calhoun, 1992:17). Later, it meant transmitting the considered “public opinion” of society to the state via forms of legally guaranteed free speech, free press, and free assembly, and eventually through the parliamentary institutions of representative government (Fraser, 1992:112). Public opinion, in the Habermasian sense, came to refer positively to the views held by those who participated in rational-critical debate in the public forums, and it functioned as a check on the legitimacy and the powers of governments (Calhoun, 1992:17). Thus, although it was an informal sphere of socially congregated individuals, the public sphere came to have influence far beyond the physical coffee houses and salons.

In the second part of the narrative, Habermas traced what he perceived as the public sphere's disintegration. Although he acknowledged that the scale of modern mass societies required that the mass media had to play a central role in mediating the public sphere, Habermas blamed the sphere's decline on the mass media, which he saw as increasingly articulating the vested personal interests of the elite, rather than the interests of the general public (1974:49). For Habermas, institutional and personal interests potentially pollute the process of public discussions. Thus, he argued that the creation of genuine consensus across lines of difference required that people put aside their personal interests and, by implication, their cultural, economic and other identities so that the formation of public opinion can occur in an environment that is relatively free from individual and institutional power plays (1989:36).

These considerations led him to be sceptical of the potential of commercialised media to create the conditions under which public deliberation and opinion formation can take place in a spontaneous and relatively open way (Lunt and Stenner, 2005:59-60). No longer fulfilling their role of producing an informed citizenry, he saw the mass media as contributing – in collusion with the state and the market – to the dilution of public debate with commercial messages, a process which worked to serve only the interests of the status quo (Brady, 2004:341). As the media increasingly promoted a culture of passive consumption and political apathy, the public sphere soon became a “sham semblance of its former self” – being more an arena for advertising than for rational-critical debate (Calhoun, 1992:26).

In the following subsections, I now discuss some of the talking points that have been raised by scholars on Habermas's narrative. My discussion will focus on the debates around the issues of universal access, participatory parity, the notion that public sphere debates always focused on ‘common interests’, and the assumption that a properly-functioning public sphere took the criticism of the activities of the state and the market as its *raison d'être*. These issues are chosen because they offer an interpretative framework that acts as an entry point for understanding the many complex issues that are central to the public sphere concept. In addition, the issues were chosen because they are some of the benchmarks against which my evaluation of Blogmark as a modern-day public sphere was based.

2.2.1 Universal access and openness

A pre-requisite for a properly functioning public sphere, according to Habermas, is that of “universal access”, that is, access both to politically important information that enables one to participate in the debates, and access to the public sphere itself. Thus, he writes that, from its origins in early modern Europe, “the public sphere of civil society stood or fell with the principle of universal access” (1989:85).

While this may be true in an ideal situation, it is obvious that in reality there can be no real universality of access to the public sphere. This is because the entire adult population of a nation-state, even the smallest one, cannot possibly be physically present in the same public sphere. However, there can be representative access that allows a sample of the population to express its opinions (and the opinions of those it represents) to the public as a whole, and to the powers that be. Access of this kind may be viewed, if not as a condition for democracy in general, as an essential element of the public sphere in liberal democracies (McNair, 2000:107). Of course, we know from Habermas himself that the bourgeois public sphere’s claim to either full or representative accessibility was not in fact realised, a fact that he acknowledged in his later works (1974; 1992). As most observe, the sphere of which Habermas originally wrote was not only comprised of a small group of educated and propertied individuals, but was also the preserve of European males, with women and men of other ethnicities being excluded (Calhoun, 1992; McNair, 2000, Thompson, 1995).

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive criticisms of the claims of the universal accessibility of the bourgeois public sphere comes from feminist critics Fraser (1992) and Landes (1988). Central to their argument is that women of all classes and ethnicities were excluded on the basis of their gender. This was not a contingent historical circumstance; rather, it was constitutive of the very notion of the public sphere, for the notion was juxtaposed to the private sphere in a gender-specific way:

The public sphere was generally understood as a domain of reason and universality in which men were uniquely equipped to participate in, while women, being inclined (supposedly) to particularity and... frivolous talk, were commonly thought better suited to domestic life. Hence the masculine character of the bourgeois public sphere was not an incidental aspect: it was a

fundamental feature of a public sphere which, in its very conception, was shaped by a deeply rooted set of assumptions about gender differences (Landes, 1988 in Thompson, 1995:254).

It is rather ironic, therefore, that Habermas's pinnacle of deliberative democracy was inherently undemocratic as it excluded, not only women and people from lower social classes, but also men from other races and ethnicities as well (Papacharissi, 2002). Some questions have, as a result, been asked about the legitimacy, and indeed, the usefulness of the whole concept of the public sphere: how are we to view these social features of the late 18th century whereby a group of privileged men communicated with each other in the context of small coffee houses, salons and exclusive societies? Was this a genuine public sphere or in fact an extension of political exclusivity? For some, the concept still has currency in modern society, for in principle the public sphere was inclusive, although in practice it turned out to be different:

The critical point of Habermas's approach is to show that the idea of the bourgeois public sphere was... *in principle* open: whoever had independent wealth and education was, regardless of standing, status, class, or gender, entitled to participate in public debate. No one was excluded... though many were, *in practice*. The ideal of a universally accessible voluntary association of private people, coming together as equals to engage in unconstrained debate in pursuit of truth and the common good was utopian to be sure, but it was a utopia that was, and still is, worth pursuing (Finlayson 2005:12; original emphasis).

The exclusionary nature of the actually existing 18th century public sphere also makes one question the veracity of some of Habermas's other claims, including that once in the public sphere, everyone participated as equals, without regard for status or class.

2.2.2 Participatory parity

Also central to the notion of the public sphere was that, "far from presupposing the equality of status, [it] disregarded status altogether" (Habermas, 1989:36): this was an arena in which participants set aside such characteristics as differences in birth, education and fortune and spoke to one another "as if" they were equals (*ibid.*). One can criticise Habermas's account on two levels; first, for its rather naïve romanticisation of individual involvement in public affairs. His ideal of 'disinterested' individuals who shed their social, political, economic and private identities and interests once they are participating in the public sphere is not achievable in real life;

in fact, it can be argued that such identities are central to the nature of the contributions an individual brings to the discussions, as it is from them that he/she derives their beliefs and interests.

Secondly, some object to Habermas's insistence that the shedding of individual identities and disregarding statuses is a necessary pre-condition for deliberative democracy. In fact, it can be argued that such an abstraction from social inequalities may work to privilege the interests of dominant social groups over those of subordinated ones (see Haas and Steiner, 2001:125-126). For Fraser, the phrase "as if" signals that inequalities among interlocutors were not eliminated but only "bracketed" – an exercise in pretence (1992:119). If gender, education and property ownership were the public sphere's main criteria for admission, was it then possible to disregard these altogether once inside? Fraser thus radically proposes that participants in the public sphere generally should not 'bracket' or abstract from social inequalities, but instead, they should explicitly thematise them to ensure that everyone's interests are brought out in the open and are therefore discussed openly (1992:120).

2.2.3 Discussion of matters of common interest

Another problematic area in Habermas's narrative is the claim that crucial to the functioning of the public sphere was a need for an unequivocal separation between public and private issues, as well as rational and emotional issues. The public sphere was to deliberate only on issues of "common interest"; private interests were not only undesirable, but were also inadmissible (Habermas, 1989:27). This was the only way, he argued, that genuine 'public opinion' – in the strong Habermasian sense of consensus about the common good – was generated (1989:16).

Far from ensuring the generation of public opinion, this 'rule' was in fact an attempt to render some issues 'private' and therefore beyond the realm of public discussion (Johnson, 2001:228). Perhaps rather than just advocating the quarantining of 'private' concerns from 'public' ones, we need to take a more critical look at the terms 'private' and 'public', as these terms, after all, are not simply straightforward designations of social life, but are in fact culturally determined classifications and labels (Haas and Steiner, 2001). In political discourse, such terms can be deployed to

de-legitimise some interests, views and topics, while valorising others, and thus this can work to promote (and maintain) dominant interests in society (Fraser, 1992:133). Thus, as there are no naturally given, *a priori* boundaries of what is 'public' or what is 'private', no topics should be ruled off limits in the public sphere. What will count as a matter of common concern worthy of public debate should be decided through discursive contestation, for a deliberative democracy model of this nature requires guarantees for all that issues that are pertinent to them will be discussed and resolved appropriately (Haas and Steiner, 2001:133).

The same criticism can be levelled against Habermas's insistence on the centrality of 'rationality' in the public sphere. Habermas conceives of an ideal of disinterested participants in the pursuit of consensus through rational-critical discussion, insisting that, "rational argument was the sole arbiter of any issue" (1989:16). This has been identified as one of the most contentious issues in Habermas's narrative, with various scholars arguing that public deliberations in complex pluralistic societies are likely to involve strongly held emotions that need to be faced, expressed and reflected upon without restraint, thus his insistence on the need that arguers remain sober and not emotional naturally falls away (Lunt and Stenner, 2005:76; McNair, 2000:10).

2.2.4 Critical scrutiny of the state and the market

As an institutionalised arena of discursive action, the public sphere was viewed normatively as being separate from the state, as it was a site for the production and circulation of discourses that were critical of the state (Habermas, 1989:25-6). It was also conceptually distinct from the official economy, as it was not an arena for buying and selling, but one of debating and deliberating. Thus, the bourgeois public sphere was defined as, "a body of private persons assembled to form a public" (Habermas, 1989:82). The emphasis on "private persons" signalled, among other things, that participants were not state officials, and that their participation was not undertaken in any official capacity (Fraser, 1992). Accordingly, their deliberations did not eventuate in binding decisions, but only in "public opinion" (Gimmler, 2001:24).

Although the removal of this sphere from both state and market control are essential to democratic theory, it is also important to bear in mind that a total separation

between the state and the public sphere would render the latter ineffective as it would imply that its deliberations and opinions are not binding. Fraser calls this a “weak” public sphere, whose deliberative practices end only at the level of opinion formation and does not encompass or influence decision-making (1992:134). She, instead, advocates a “strong” version of the public sphere, which has a greater capacity for co-operation with other forms of authoritative decision-making, like parliaments and the mass media. This implies that debates in the public sphere must find their way into decision-making structures like the parliament through the media.

2.2.5 A narrative of decline

As mentioned earlier, the second part of Habermas’s narrative traces the disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere in the context of advanced industrial capitalism and representative democracy. According to Habermas, with the advent of liberal (mass) democracy, the public sphere’s coherence came apart as many less educated citizens entered this sphere. The state became more interventionist; the boundaries between public and private began to blur, with large organisations and other interest groups becoming key political partners with the state to the detriment of public accountability. The result is that public opinion gradually lost its autonomy and critical function, leading to the “refeudalisation” of politics (Habermas, 1989:201). Habermas located the media at the centre of this disintegration.

He argued, much along the lines of early mass society theory⁴ and Frankfurt School⁵ traditions that because of commercial imperatives, the media replaced a culture of “rational-critical debate” with that of mass consumption. According to his critique:

The increasing prevalence of the mass media, especially where commercial logic transforms much of public communication into PR [public relations], advertising and entertainment, erodes the political functions of the public, as it

⁴ Mass society theorists are a coalition of thinkers including scholars, culturalists, and political theorists like John Stuart Mills, T.S. Elliot, Friedrich Nietzsche and Emile Durkheim. The theorists pessimistically foretold the atomisation of man due to the breakdown of traditional social relations owing to the advent of industrialisation and ‘mass culture’ (see Bennett, 1982; Hall, 1982).

⁵ Led by scholars like Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Max Horkheimer, the Frankfurt School theory sought to find reasons why the working class failed to organise itself into a politically powerful group after the upheavals of the early 20th century. The scholars concluded that the answer to the working class’s apparent stasis lay in advanced capitalism, which had – with its allure of material products – eliminated any consciousness or need for change from among the workers. The media were placed at the centre of this stasis (Bennett, 1982).

becomes fragmented, losing its coherence. It becomes reduced to a group of spectators whose acclaim is to be periodically mobilised, but whose intrusion in fundamental political questions is to be minimised (Dahlgren, 1995:8; see also Murdock and Golding, 1974:227).

This chorus has been taken up by academics and media professionals alike and continues today. For example, a prevailing belief in British political culture is that we are living in an era of “dumbing down”, a phrase which seems to suggest that,

although we live amidst apparent communicative plenty, we are actually being starved of information – starved, that is, of the *right kind* of information; the kind that we require to function politically and to perform our civic duties. We live in an era of proliferating media outlets... but their content is increasingly shaped by the low, base needs of commerce and profit rather than the higher motivations of culture and civic duty... (McNair, 2000:x, original emphasis).

Thus, while it is commonly agreed that news is now faster, and more easily available than ever before, it is not necessarily more informative. This translates into pervasive pessimism about the relationship between the media and democracy.

Several criticisms have been laid against this section of Habermas’s narrative. Some critics question what they see as Habermas’s fairly wholesale incorporation of an outdated Frankfurt School theory and its pessimistic outlook on the mass media:

The notion of audiences as passive dupes of media manipulation is one that cannot be sustained – although that is not to say that it should simply be replaced by a celebration of their autonomy and freedom... Habermas’s argument is ultimately both utopian and highly normative (McNair, 2000:25).

Similarly, others assert that today’s media audiences are relatively highly educated, well-informed, and more semiologically sophisticated, and thus it is doubtful whether they can be regarded as “enthralled and manipulated consumers” as the Frankfurt School theorists supposed (Thompson, 1995:255; also see Fiske, 1987a:286; 1987b:74).

Perhaps the difficulty with Habermas’s model is that it is rooted to the notion of unmediated face-to-face interaction, and his inability to find - in modern mass society - an environment for a mediated public sphere corresponding in character and function to that of early capitalism. His analysis thus falls short of providing answers to questions on how, in contemporary society, deliberations can take place without

mediation, given the logistical problems of coordinating the participation of large, geographically spread, and diverse populations (Lunt and Stenner, 2005:60; Brady, 2004:337). The other weakness with Habermas's narrative, as some scholars also point out, is that perhaps he not only idealised the bourgeois public sphere, but also failed to examine other, non-bourgeois competing public spheres (Fraser, 1992:115). Indeed, it is clear that Habermas's critique treated the early bourgeois public sphere and the modern-day public spheres asymmetrically, in the way that he ignored the presence of the "penny dreadfuls" of early capitalism and other less "rational-critical" branches of the early press, with the result being, perhaps, an over-estimation of the degeneration of the bourgeois public sphere (Calhoun, 1992:33).

With these observations in mind, the next section argues that in modern mass societies, a new conception of the public sphere theory that recognises the need for a plurality of public spheres is necessary. In this conception, small, localised public spheres are seen as co-existing within the larger general public sphere of, say, national debate. It is argued that this arrangement better serves the ideal of Habermas's deliberative democracy model than one based on a singular public sphere.

2.3 Multiplicity and diversity: towards an alternative model

Habermas's account stresses the singularity of the bourgeois public sphere, its claims to be *the* public arena, in singular, casting the emergence of additional spheres as developments signalling fragmentation and decline (Gitlin, 1998:168). For Habermas, confining public life to a single, overarching public sphere is a positive and desirable state of affairs as it helps focus attention on issues of collective concern to all; and a multiplicity of spheres represents a departure from, rather than an advance toward, democracy. This view has met with many criticisms, which argue that the bourgeois public sphere was never *the* public sphere: at the same time as it existed, there was a host of other competing counter-publics, including peasants', women's, and working-class publics; all of which had a conflictual relationship with it (Fraser, 1992:116).

Some point out that deliberative processes in a single public sphere will always tend to operate to the advantage of dominant groups, thus arguing for a 'one size fits all' public sphere will subordinate minorities' interests (Dahlgren, 1995:17). Thus, it is

further argued, arrangements that accommodate a contestation among a plurality of public spheres better promote the ideal of participatory democracy than does a single public sphere (Fraser, 1992:122-123; Haas and Steiner, 2001:131). Curran (1996) proposes an alternative model that is made up of a set of inter-locking sub-spheres (or “public sphericules” to borrow from Gitlin (1998)), which operate within – and whose deliberations feed into – the larger general public sphere. Although other scholars also explore this model, (for example, McNair, 2000; Gitlin, 1998; Fraser, 1992), Curran’s model remains the most well developed, and thus deserves further examination.

Curran’s model has two tiers. In the first tier, there is what he calls the “organised public sphere”, which is characterised by small, special-interest and affinity spheres, into which private individuals gather around to deliberate issues of particular concern to them. Such spheres typically have a medium through which their deliberations are disseminated to the larger community. Curran identifies media like party presses, trade union and corporate journals etc., as playing the role of mediating between the spheres (1996:60). Such media work as horizontal communication outlets which enable individual members to be speakers, as well as listeners in a group of like-minded people:

The public in a democracy should have opportunities not just to read about, or to watch and listen to the development of political debates as spectators, but to participate directly *in* them, through channels of access... communicating vertically, via the institutions of the media to those of the government and state, as well as horizontally to other members of the media audience (McNair, 2000:105-106, original emphasis).

In the second tier, there is what Curran calls the “general public sphere”, that is, that bigger sphere into which all those discussions from the special-interest sub-spheres can feed. The general public sphere can be understood as that domain in which the smaller sub-spheres interact. This sphere is serviced by unaligned media, which are committed (in principle) to the public good and provide the means through which individuals and organisations of different interests are linked together (Curran, 1996:61). The principal media of this sphere – its ideal type – are the mainstream media and in particular, the publicly-funded media, which are the best suited for the promotion of cultural mutuality and collective agreement (Garnham, 1995:248). This re-worked model of Habermas’s concept is the one that I found useful to adopt for

this study. Using this model, the study measured how much of a public sphere Blogmark is for the particular section of the South African citizenry which meets online to blog on issues of importance to them.

The next section seeks to define weblogs and outline their potential to act as virtual public spheres. The discussion is located within the wider debates about the potential that the internet is argued to have as a liberatory political communication tool. I will present both the utopian and dystopian views of this debate.

2.4 The internet as a tool for political communication

What opportunities or threats does the internet, with its new forms of public interaction like weblogs, pose for citizenship? Since the advent of the internet as a mass medium in the early 1990s, responses to such questions have been at two different extremes. While dystopian responses have focused on the negative aspects of internet culture such as surveillance, pornography and cultural imperialism, utopians have enthusiastically affirmed its democratising potential (Hill and Hughes, 1998:1).

The internet has evolved from being a plaything of a small, close-knit community of the tech-savvy to a global phenomenon used by millions of ‘ordinary’ people around the world (Lenert, 2004). It has grown so much in stature and usage that it now occupies a central place in many debates on the relationship between the media and democracy (Hill and Hughes, 1998). It has also undergone significant transformation towards becoming a more participatory and interactive medium, with dialogic forms such as weblogs, bulletin boards, wikis and chat forums being typical of this trend. Although its usage is still unevenly distributed between the North and the South (and between the rich and the poor), many have touted it as a panacea to some problems facing the world, from poverty reduction to fighting crime and despotism (Rheingold, 2002). Importantly though, for the purposes of this study, it has been argued that the internet can augment avenues for personal expression and promote citizen activity, thus reinvigorating the ideals of participatory democracy envisaged by Habermas.

As noted earlier, information is an essential resource for active citizen participation. One of the reasons some critics think that the public nowadays fails to participate in

political processes is that they do not get sufficient information from their media to do so. Without basic knowledge about the government, how it works, and who runs it, people simply tune out, it is often argued (Golding and Murdock, 2000:77). Thus, for utopians, the promise of nearly unlimited information delivered to one's desk at the click of a few buttons holds the promise of a better democracy (Papacharrissi, 2002:16). The availability of government web pages, parliamentary session records and legislative proposals online in modern democracies are consequently viewed as pointers to this potential (Gimmler, 2001).

Yet another reason why there is so much enthusiasm regarding the democratic potential of online forms of communication is that they are not only comparatively cheap, but are also able to transcend geographical boundaries, enabling the sharing of ideas and opinions between people from far-flung places, making "it possible to hold national town hall meetings in which the nation (or some sizable portion) meets possibly to debate and certainly to decide issues of the day" (Hill and Hughes, 1998:2; see also Dahlgren, 1995:20). As a result, internet enthusiasts envision that as more and more people connect to the World Wide Web (and engage in political debates), governments will become more accountable to the people (Hill and Hughes, 1998:1).

Indeed, one can see how this vision can be a reality. For example, the explosion of online political activism illustrates the practical uses to which the internet and other ICTs have been put to achieve political ends (see Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Gilmore, 2004:92, Kerbel and Bloom, 2005; Harcup, 2003:371). Virtual community theorist Howard Rheingold (2002) enthusiastically proclaims that advances in ICTs have helped transform the "dumb mobs" of totalitarian states into "smart mobs" of politically-aware citizens, who are linked together by their computers, cell phones and digital cameras and personal digital assistant (PDA) devices. He cites the example of how the Filipino population managed to stage a mass protest that helped bring down a despotic government through Short Message Services (SMS) (in Gilmore, 2004:92).

Thus, it is contended that: "the alleged decline of the public sphere lamented by academics, politicians, and several members of the public will be halted by the democratising effects of the internet and its surrounding technologies" (Papacharrissi, 2002:11; see also Deuze, 2003). Without a doubt, many people now have more access

to a broader variety of information, news and political messages than ever before. For the utopians, this presents positive implications for citizen participation, and represents some hope for democracy. Habermas's model of deliberative democracy hinges on active citizen participation through debate in a public arena. Understanding the public sphere this way, one can see how internet-enabled platforms such as weblogs fit the concept exactly since they enable access to pertinent information; openness in pursuit of particular issues; public engagement through opinion sharing and debate; and a public network of connected participants (Gimmler, 2001:25).

However, it is also worth stressing that these promises of a revival of active citizenship (which is said to have been on the decline since the advent of industrial capitalism and the commercial mass media) need not lead into a blind celebration of the internet's capabilities. As Papacharrissi rightly argues, while the internet is providing a public *space* for people to meet and interact, we are yet to see how this will translate into a public *sphere*,

It has to be clarified that a new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere. As a public space, the internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As a public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions. A virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy (Papacharrissi, 2002:11).

Indeed, it would seem that the liberatory potential that the internet promises is restricted to those with access to computers and connectivity, and those with the financial, technical and cultural resources that are required to use the technology. This fact alone contributes to an electronic public sphere that is "exclusive, unrepresentative, elitist, and far from ideal – not terribly different from the bourgeois public sphere" (Papacharrissi, 2002:11). This is especially the case in Africa, where connectivity, poor infrastructure, shortage of computers and skills, and high illiteracy levels have had a serious bearing on who can participate in the new virtual forums⁶.

⁶ African countries face a "dual digital divide" – at one level, the major contributor to the digital divide facing Africa is the lack of basic infrastructure and telephone networks necessary for internet penetration. However, even among the portion of the population that has access to a telephone, internet subscription is limited who can afford it, presenting a second digital divide (Rorycroft and Anantho, 2003:61).

An empirical study by Hill and Hughes concluded that, to some degree, people are talking about politics and protesting virtually against less democratic governments on the internet (1998:107). And if the mere fact that political discourse against repressive governments is taking place is a good in itself, then the utopians have reasons to celebrate. Perhaps the internet *will* bring about a wider democratic revolution in the world. But for now, it is too early to tell. With only about 15% of the global population having access to the internet, and English and other European languages accounting for more than 70% of the languages used in most internet web pages, one can see how celebrating the internet's democratising impact the world over seems a little bit too hurried for now (Internet World Stats, 2006b; Global-reach, 2006).

Currently, the internet is populated by primarily white, male, middle class, and 'first world', users (Hill and Hughes, 1998:5). Even within the 'first world', disparities still exist – despite its tremendous growth rate, the internet still remains a tool used by mainly a very specific group of people; approximately 15-20% of the American and West European public⁷ (Hill and Hughes, 1998:6). As a result, sceptics fear that the development of electronic communications will only serve to exacerbate the informational disparities between the less industrialised and more industrialised countries (Panos, 1998). Thus, Gitlin observes that online discussions, much like real life ones, are currently being dominated by elites who are already better equipped to influence public policy formation off-line: “to those that are information rich (or information-glutted), shall more be given” (1998:172). However, before discussing the public sphere potential of weblogs, I will briefly define what they are first.

2.5 Defining weblogs

A new form of online communication gained popularity in the West in the aftermath of the September 11 (2001) bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York (Wall, 2005). This form, which involved individuals writing down and sharing their ideas and opinions on any issue ranging from the “War on Terror” to personal musings, came to be known as “wee-blogs”, later simply shortened to “weblog” (Herring, *et al.* 2004:1). Weblogs (or just ‘blogs’) soon became the avenue of choice for some

⁷ This group alone accounted for 80% of heavy internet users by the time they conducted their study in May 1997 (Hill and Hughes, 1998:81).

internet users wanting to share information and opinions, commentary and news with others online (Matheson, 2004:448). Although the practice has not spread as quickly in Africa as it has in most parts of Europe, North America and Asia, blogging is growing at a very fast rate. Technorati (2005), a blog indexing and search engine, notes that between September 2004 and January 2005, as many as two million new blogs were registered by individual bloggers⁸.

Although they are fast gaining popularity, weblogs are still very difficult to define and it is only in recent years that any scholarly work has been dedicated to them.

Generally speaking, a blog is an online journal comprised of links and postings in reverse chronological order (Gilmor, 2004:29). The user simply logs on to their account and uses a template to add text, hyperlinks, images, audio files and other multimedia objects. The software then formats the material in HTML, records a date at the top of the entry, and inserts the text at the top of the user's weblog, pushing previous entries down the page. The activity of updating a blog is "blogging", and someone who keeps a blog is a "blogger". Weblogs typically link to other websites and blog postings, and many allow visitors to comment on the original post, thereby opening up discussions. Blogs run a wide gamut of topics and styles; one may be a running commentary on current events in a specific area, another may be a series of personal musings on what one had for breakfast in the morning (Gilmor, 2004; Wall, 2005; Bar-Ilan, 2005). Bloggers write as much (or as little) as they choose on a topic, and although entries are presented together on the page, each post is given a permalink (derived from 'permanent link') on the sidebar, which makes for easy referencing and retrieval (Blood, 2003:61).

Journalists constitute a major group of professionals that blog regularly, hence the practice has been linked to journalism by many (Blood, 2003; Andrews, 2003). Recently, it has become common for newspapers to provide space for their staff to blog, for example, in the United Kingdom (UK), the Guardian runs a blog which enables its journalists to interact with their readers. In South Africa, the Mail & Guardian's blog, Blogmark is an example of a traditional media company embracing

⁸ These figures have grown at a dramatic speed since then – for example, in September 2006, Technorati revealed that 50 million blogs had been created worldwide by August 2006, and this figure will double every six months (Rachman, 2006).

blogs as a way of interacting with its readership. However, unlike with some newspapers, Blogmark is open to anyone who may want to blog (and has the means to do so), not just to the newspaper's staff.

Sometimes a blog is not a 'one-man show' – there are community blogs where anyone with the means can become a member (for example, <http://www.metafilter.com>), or group blogs with a small number of pre-invited regular members (for example, <http://www.misbehaving.net>) or a mixture of group and community blogs, where a small number of authors review and moderate the submissions from a very large set of bloggers (Bar-Ilan, 2005:297-298). Blogmark is an example of a community blog, which is controlled by a central moderator and is open to literally anyone, but whose members are primarily derived from the Mail & Guardian Online's readers.

2.5.1 Defining features

Because of their ever-growing numbers, weblogs vary, but there are a number of features that characterise them. First, blogs are usually set up to display postings in reverse-chronological order with the most recent post on the top of the page to the oldest one at the bottom. Secondly, blogs are (potentially) highly interactive as they provide an opportunity for readers to comment on blog postings or to correct an error:

Blogs... tend to be part of running conversations. One blogger will point to another's posting, perhaps to agree but often to disagree or note another angle not found in the original piece. Then the first blogger will respond, and other bloggers may join the fray (Gilmor, 2004:30).

This dialogic, read-and-write, nature of weblogs differs markedly from the traditional means of public communication, like the mainstream media, which tend to be much more static and one-way. As a result, blogs and other forms of virtual interaction like bulletin boards and chat rooms have been touted to be at the forefront of redefining the nature of the traditional relationship between audiences and producers of news. Rheingold notes that because such forms are produced by those who also consume them, they have a unique horizontal and cyclical, rather than vertical structure. The consequence of this is that blog readers can be considered as being more 'active' readers than those of mainstream media, who are thought of as 'passive' (2000, 133-148). Although most of the input from the 'audience' can be as short as a single

sentence or a sarcastic word, the boundary between ‘consumer’ and ‘producer’ in the blogosphere⁹ is considerably blurred. However, unlike other virtual forms of interaction, weblogs allow for more careful and extended dialogue which may stretch over time. While online chatting normally happens in real time, bloggers write down messages and leave them for others to read and respond to in their own time. This means that conversations are bound to be much slower, more carefully thought out and may stretch over days, with most responses much longer than the one-line responses that are typical of chat rooms (Hill and Hughes, 1998:130).

Finally, a major characteristic of weblogs is that, through the use of hyperlinks, bloggers can respond to, and comment on news and topical issues covered by the mainstream media. The blogger often scouts for information appearing elsewhere on the World Wide Web and then links it to his/her post. He/she may briefly summarise the link’s content or may provide commentary, criticism, additions, or other personal thoughts about the issue being linked. In the blogging world, ‘hyperlinking’ plays a very important role, not just because it helps the blogger summarise and contextualise complex stories, but also because it helps establish the blogger’s credibility and, therefore, trustworthiness (Blood, 2003:61).

In addition, unlike in traditional journalism, where the “scoop” factor and commercial imperatives are prioritised, bloggers do encourage their visitors (through the use of hyperlinks) to leave their site to verify, or indeed get a better understanding of an issue elsewhere before any discussion can begin (Wall, 2005:166). Secondly, unlike with many journalists who claim to “know it all” (Matheson, 2004:456), many bloggers acknowledge that they might not have enough information on an issue, hence they refer one elsewhere. For some, weblogs are leading to the birth of a new model of public communication in which knowledge is seen not to reside in one individual speaker or writer, but comes as a result of deliberation:

One way of characterising such emergent practices is as a journalism of linking rather than pinning things down, that is situated within a model of knowledge-as-process rather than knowledge-as-product. Readers of the news weblogs are set along paths of exploration, rather than given nuggets of information... (Matheson, 2004:457-458).

⁹ The ‘blogosphere’ can be defined as the sum total of weblogs or websites related to a certain blog (Hiler, 2002b:1).

The next section of the chapter discusses the relationship between blogging and journalism, with particular reference to its implications for the theory of the public sphere. The relationship between the two practices is by no means a simple one and the section only presents a summary of the arguments on the debate.

2.5.2 The relationship between blogging and journalism

In her comparative study of the epistemology of news production and blogging, Wall (2005) notes three distinctive traits of the two practices. First, she notes that whilst traditional news journalism's narrative style is impersonal, detached and seeks to present 'both sides' of the story as much as possible, most news blogs are personal, opinionated and one-sided. Secondly, with traditional media, the audience is viewed solely as a consumer of information, while with weblogs, the audience is viewed as a co-creator of content. Finally, while the story forms of traditional media are highly structured (for example, the 'inverted pyramid' approach), weblogs are an ongoing conversation which explicitly encourages the incorporation of more voices in telling a story (Singer, 2005:178; Grabowicz, 2003:75). Blog texts, Wall asserts, "are much more open to co-writing and co-production" (Wall, 2005:157ff). As a result, some bloggers now take on some duties of journalists. For example, some take part in the editorial function of selecting newsworthy and interesting topics, and then adding analysis, insight and commentary, while some occasionally provide first-person reports about an event or a subject (Lasica, 2003:73; Matheson, 2004:252).

Thus, for most scholars, the debate on the relationship between the two practices is organised around the idea of weblogs being seen as either challenging or as complementing mainstream journalism. Matheson notes that prominent blogger Ken Layne's statement to British journalist Robert Fisk, "It's 2001, and we can fact-check your ass", set the tone for the blogging-versus-journalism debate in the media (2004:252). Without a doubt, a number of current-events-bloggers have come to see their *raison d'être* as offering instant critique of traditional media coverage of events, thus serving as a 'corrective mechanism' for sloppy reporting:

In doing so, bloggers often nudge print media to be richer and more balanced... blogs serve as a corrective mechanism for bad journalism, sloppy

or erroneous reporting. To the extent that a blogger knows something about a particular topic, he or she can take a news report into a more detailed and illuminating realm (Andrews, 2003:63; see also Hiler, 2002b:1).

It is clear that this self-appointed “fact-checking” role adopted by bloggers means that the relationship between bloggers and journalists is always going to be an uneasy one. For example, while some bloggers tend to view journalists as lacking personal contact with their readers, journalists themselves view bloggers with equal scepticism (Regan, 2003:69; Matheson, 2004:252). Consequently, some blog enthusiasts tend to argue that, although distinct from professional journalism, weblogs can be seen as a complementary form of ‘participatory media’ that, if done well, can enhance, not only the connections between journalists and their readers, but also the levels of participation in the public sphere of debating citizens (Blood, 2003: 62). It is, as a result, argued that we should stop approaching the blogging and journalism debate as a binary, either or choice: “instead, we should recognise that we’re entering an era in which they complement each other, intersect with each other, and play off one another” (Lasica, 2003:73; see also Deuze, 2003:210). Weblogs enthusiast Dan Gilmor, who coined the phrase “we-media” to describe the way in which weblogs enable “the former audience” to become publishers, argues that the most important thing about weblogs is that they enable more people to have a say in the public sphere: “we are hearing new voices - not necessarily the voices of people who want to make a living by speaking out, but who want to say what they think and be heard, even if only by relatively few people” (Gilmor, 2004:139).

This is not to claim, however, that weblogs may supplant traditional media, or indeed that the advent of weblogs will necessarily make people become more active citizens. Some critics argue, and rightly so, that online forms of interaction are still largely an extension on the ‘old media’ that we are already familiar with, and that it is difficult to envisage how the advent of the internet can in itself lead to increased citizen participation (Hill and Hughes, 1998:130-131). The internet is not going to create a political utopia simply because people can chat or post messages on blogs such as Blogmark; if people do not participate in political debates offline, it is very difficult to see how they can, all of a sudden, want to do it online.

Without a doubt, the mainstream news media still wield a considerable amount of power to determine what kind of news and information is available in the public sphere although, of course, the interactive nature of new media forms such as weblogs allows for more audience involvement in the production and dissemination of news (Lennon, 2003:77). In fact, some media organizations now see blogging not only as a way of sourcing for news, but also as a way of cementing loyalty, trust, and credibility with their readers (Glaser, 2003). As mentioned earlier, news organizations such as MSNBC in the USA, the Guardian in the UK and the Mail & Guardian in South Africa, run blogs within their own websites, as a way of generating public debates between ‘ordinary’ people and professional news producers. In some instances, traditional media are embracing the bloggers as part of their newsgathering machinery, as was the case especially during the US invasion of Iraq, when some news organisations who could not get access to the war zones relied on blogger accounts of events, both as primary sources of news and also as on-the-spot reporters¹⁰ (Wall, 2005; 2006). For some, this synergy is giving birth to a new kind of journalism – one which is more of a “rhizomatic conversation than a top-down lecture that has traditionally characterised mass communication strategies” (Gilmor, 2004:xiii). Thus, one can argue that bloggers are complementing journalists’ efforts at disseminating information that is vital to participation in public affairs (Lasica, 2002).

The next section focuses on the potential role that weblogs can play as public spheres. The section argues that although it can be said that weblogs can lead to the balkanisation of the public sphere, their potential to act as virtual platforms for citizens from diverse geographical and social backgrounds to meet and share ideas and opinions should also not be underestimated.

2.6 Weblogs as virtual public spheres

Because of their dialogic and interactive nature, one can argue that weblogs are an ideal platform for a debating citizenry. For this reason, an explicit parallel between Habermas’s 18th century coffeehouses and the ‘blogosphere’ has been drawn by some, who argue that the latter is very much like, but also a better version of, the former:

¹⁰ Examples include; The BBC Warblog (www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/2870361.stm), Back to Iraq (www.back-to-iraq.com), The Command Post (www.warblogcorner.blogspot.com), Sgt. Stryker (www.sgtstryker.com), and Blogs of War (www.blogsofwar.blogspot.com)

For starters, you don't have to be European to participate. The blogosphere is increasingly global, and as more and more countries come online, it will become even more so. Even language barriers are starting to come down, due to tools like Google's Translator. Also, bloggers don't have to travel to find the nearest coffee shop. Just log onto the web and you're in... Finally, the blogosphere is free - both for bloggers and for readers. For less than a price of a cup of coffee, you can take part in the global conversation with some of the smartest and most informed people on the planet (Hiler, 2002c:12).

Some say that perhaps the value of weblogs lies in that they may work to equip individuals with the necessary debating skills that they may need to participate in face-to-face public discussions in real life. It is posited that as the individual blogs his/her opinions and ideas, a new awareness of their reflective inner self may develop into a trust of their own perspectives and opinions, thus giving them the confidence to articulate their opinions to others, even beyond the blogosphere (Blood, 2002:6). Thus, with the ever-rising number of new bloggers in the cyberspace, it is arguable that weblogs have contributed to the increase in the number of voices that can be heard in the public sphere, and according to Lasica: "The good thing about them [weblogs] is that they introduce fresh voices into the national discourse on various topics and help build communities of interest" (2003:71).

By the simple technology that allows visitors to chronologically post comments on published posts, weblogs have the ability to create interest groups (similar to Curran's 'organised public spheres'), around which people can debate issues among themselves. However, this is not to imply that simple access to these technologies will necessarily lead to increased citizen participation. People may use such forms because they like them or find them useful, not because they somehow turn someone into a political "junkie" overnight: "an 'off-line' person who today does not care about politics will become someone with a computer and internet connection who still does not care about politics tomorrow" (Hill and Hughes, 1998:44). Thus, contrary to utopian views of cyberactivism, the expansion of the internet is not likely to turn uninterested, uninformed, apathetic citizens into interested, informed and active cybercitizens. In fact, some caution that new technologies are actually contributing to the further disintegration of the public sphere and inducing fragmented, nonsensical, and enraged discussions, otherwise known as 'flaming' or 'ranting and raving' – traits which obviously stand in sharp contradistinction to the Habermasian ideal of rational

arguers¹¹ (Downey and Fenton, 2003:189). Hence, dystopians fear that the flood of information provided by the internet will amount to “misinformation that does nothing but obscure sensible political dialogue” (Hill and Hughes, 1998:181).

Therefore, while some people argue that computer-aided communication will make the world a smaller place, serving to break down ethnic, geographical, age and gender barriers, there are others who fear that as the internet grows, people will turn to specialised websites and newsgroups, thus balkanising society. In fact, some warn that cyberspace runs the risk of dividing society into even smaller factions as the media begin to ‘narrowcast’ messages to specific groups. They point out that while the internet has spawned thousands of radical websites and forums which enable the public to debate freely, the benefits of these trends are not yet immediately clear as, more often than not, these sites are populated by people that have similar views, conversing among themselves (Abramson *et al.* 1988, in Hill and Hughes, 1998:4). Thus, as the virtual public sphere becomes subdivided into smaller and smaller discussion groups, the Habermasian ideal of a public sphere that connects many people to others with differing views becomes elusive. Critics therefore propose that unless the deliberations from the diverse public sphericules can ultimately feed into one general public sphere, cyberspace is serving only to split up society into even more ineffective smaller blocs – with dire consequences for deliberative democracy:

One could argue that the internet may foster the growth of transnational enclaves of great value... but their value depends ultimately on how influential these enclaves become in the context of the mass media public sphere and formation of public opinion beyond the radical [enclave].... In other words, the possibility for political public spheres to emerge is likely to rest in part on the ability of autonomous public spheres to create alliances and organize solidarity (Downey and Fenton, 2003:190).

As a result, many scholars, although stressing the need for a multiplicity of competing public spheres, also emphasise the need for “an additional, more comprehensive arena in which members of [the] different publics [can] talk across lines of cultural diversity” (Fraser, 1992:117; see also Kahn and Kellner, 2005; McNair, 2000). This perspective tallies with the model adopted for this study that was developed by Curran as discussed in section 2.3. Taken this way, therefore, it can be argued that online

¹¹ Apparently, ‘flaming’ and other ‘anti-social’ behaviours are very common in online debates, owing largely to the anonymity that is possible in virtual communication (Hill and Hughes, 1998:23-24).

platforms' potential to act as public spheres that facilitate citizen participation in public affairs can be realised *only* if these platforms' deliberations can find a way into broader, national (and international) public spheres via the mass media. It is only in this way that the utopian vision of effective, internet-enabled citizenship can be achieved. My focus on Blogmark derives from the belief that although weblogs are not yet in widespread use, they do nevertheless contribute to public participation, deliberation and expression.

It is true that while some new media no longer feed directly from the face-to-face group discussions of the 18th century Habermasian ideal, they have instead invented their own publics and forums for discussion, whose deliberations have the potential of being of wider political influence (Boyd-Barrett, 1995:231). The increasing prominence of identity politics in which phenomena like feminism, gay, ethnic, and youth movements have grown can be regarded as examples of public deliberations that have been carried out in the modern day mass media (Calhoun, 1995:34). It is, thus, my belief that rather than moving towards a state of disintegration, the diffusion of technology and the spread of the 'new' media generally have enriched the possibilities for grassroots citizen participation. So instead of bemoaning the loss of the 18th century Habermasian bourgeois public sphere, there is a need to appreciate the existence of new "public sphericules" that exist in modern society that have been made possible by ICTs (Buckingham, 2000:31).

2.7 Conclusion

The chapter started with a discussion of Habermas's influential model of deliberative democracy, the concept of the public sphere. It focused on various contentious issues in the concept, arguing that there is need to move away from Habermas's rather outdated 18th century model, which was exclusionary in nature, towards a more participatory model shaped around the need to have contesting public spheres into which individuals from different social classes and with different interests can fit.

The second part of the chapter explored the democratic potential of interactive internet genres like weblogs, in expanding public dialogue and providing a new kind of virtual public sphere in which citizens can meet to discuss issues of concern to

them. It was noted that while the internet carried with it the potential to create a global community that can influence politics for the better, it also equally carried as large a potential to tribalise the world into separate groups of like-minded individuals. Despite these mixed emotions, however, I concluded by arguing that while internet genres such as weblogs cannot easily be defended as occasioning autonomous rational-critical discussions leading to consensus and wider public opinion formation, they do have the potential to enhance public debate and involvement in civic culture. It was further argued that this potential could be fully realised especially if these genres are connected, one way or the other, with the larger public sphere via the mass media, so that deliberations therein are heard beyond the blogging enclaves.

The following chapter focuses on the history of the Mail & Guardian and the Mail & Guardian Online, the latter of which is the host of the blog that is the subject of this study. It is noted in the chapter that the newspaper has a long history of firsts in the innovative uses of technology to disseminate news, and continues to set the trends up to this day, with the introduction of interactive features for its readership like Blogmark.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MAIL & GUARDIAN

3.0 Introduction

The chapter recounts the history of the Mail & Guardian from its conception to the present day. This is important because it seeks to place the area under study in its historical context. The chapter is divided into three major sections. The first section discusses the newspaper's formative years from 1985 right through to the State of Emergency period and the collapse of the apartheid regime in South Africa in the early 1990s. The second section elaborates on the relationship between the media and democracy that was touched on in Chapter Two. As stated earlier, one of the roles that the media can play in enhancing democracy is through bringing the actions of those in power under the light of public scrutiny. Operating in arguably one of the harshest periods of the apartheid era, where an increasingly isolated minority government sought to hold on to power by any means necessary, the Mail & Guardian built a reputation for its uncompromising attitude to the establishment, which saw it publish a series of exposés that played a small but not insignificant role in ushering in a new democratic order in South Africa. The second section focuses on the Mail & Guardian's battle for survival in the 'new' South Africa and outlines the continued role it played in enhancing democracy and transparency in the newly-independent state. Even after independence, the newspaper continues to be a thorn in the flesh of erring politicians, continually exposing their acts of indiscretion to public scrutiny. The final section of the chapter looks at the Mail & Guardian Online (M&G Online), which is the host of the Blogmark. It is argued that the Mail & Guardian has a long tradition of firsts in the use of technology in the industry. Building on that tradition, the M&G Online has continued to lead the pack in the online newspapers category, introducing such initiatives as discussion forums for readers, interactive coverage of news and major events, and lately, setting up a blog for its readership.

3.1 The Weekly Mail: formative years

The history of the Mail & Guardian (then called the Weekly Mail) begins with the double closure of the Rand Daily Mail and the Sunday Express in March 1985, when

two journalists, Anton Harber and Irwin Manoim, finding themselves without jobs, decided to use their severance packages to start up a newspaper (Merrett and Saunders, 2000:459; Jackson, 1993:59). The impetus for starting up a new newspaper came from the realisation by the two that there would be a “yawning gap in the market for a progressive-minded newspaper with strong opinions” after the closure of (especially) the Rand Daily Mail (Manoim, 2005a:1).

The Rand Daily Mail had become a vocal critic of the apartheid regime and was one of the few white-owned newspapers at the time that reported on events in the no-go areas of the peri-urban settlements known as ‘townships’, where most black people who worked in the urban areas resided. This had led to it losing its erstwhile white readership, and the drop in circulation that ensued was used by its financiers, Anglo-American, as an excuse to pull out of the venture, thus leading to its closure. Although financial reasons were cited, many believed that the closure was a result of pressure from both white capital and the political elite, who were not comfortable with the newspaper’s continued exposure of the injustices of the apartheid state (Jackson, 1993:73). Suddenly, a whole group of journalists found themselves made redundant. After failing to secure jobs in the mainstream and pro-establishment media that continually used to label them as “a bunch of political activists” for their work at the Rand Daily Mail, many of them immigrated to Australia. However, for those who were left behind, it was clear that they had to start up their own newspaper if they were to remain in their beloved profession (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991:12-13).

For Harber and Manoim, the latter option was more appealing than immigrating. Thus, they set out to start up a weekly newspaper that sought to tell its South African readers, “the unsweetened truth about the country they lived in, painful or otherwise... it was not expected to grow rich or famous; merely to be an honest spectator” (Merrett and Saunders, 2000:462). The Weekly Mail (as it was christened) would cover such issues as: “politics (both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary); the Frontline States; foreign news (not only personalities, but processes too); economics (monetarism, welfarism and their critics); labour (the underlying patterns as well as strikes)... and a great deal more, including intelligent arts coverage, a satirical column and entertainment listings” (Manoim, 1996:5). It also sought to cover, in the tradition of the Rand Daily Mail, what was happening in the townships,

as a way of educating its largely ignorant white readership and the international community of the goings-on in those areas (Merrett and Saunders, 2000:463). In early 1985, South Africa was starting on the path of a long slide into repression, violence and recession. While most white South Africans experienced relative peace in suburbia, black people in the townships were locked in a series of clashes with the police and the army, protesting human rights abuses and the denial of equal political and economic opportunities by the white minority government. These clashes were becoming bloodier by the week.

In a solicitation letter that was sent out to the proposed newspaper's potential shareholders, Harber and Manoim pledged that the paper would be, "non-partisan and non-polemical. It will not, in general, carry an editorial comment. Its policy will be broadly critical of the status quo in South Africa, but without affiliation to any political party or organisation. It will concentrate on critical, independent analysis, rather than in pursuing a particular 'line'" (Manoim, 1996:5). And in a series of adverts and hand-distributed leaflets, the founding editors promised their potential readers that the paper would also be "non-sexist, non-racist, and non-escapist. No Charles 'n Di 'n Sol 'n Anneline 'n vicars 'n knickers" (Manoim, 1996:10).

After a positive response, especially from liberals and leftist white professionals, academics, philanthropists and business leaders who contributed a few thousand rand each, the newspaper was launched on a shoe-string budget of R50 000. On June 14 1985, exactly six weeks after the closure of the Rand Daily Mail, the first edition of the Weekly Mail rolled off the presses, and its headline story entitled "Detainees link SAP [the South African police] men to Renamo", immediately signalled the new publication's aim — it was going to tell the 'real' South African stories the mainstream media always skirted (Forrest, 2005:1). Since then, the Weekly Mail's main focus has been political news, and it developed into one of the most influential newspapers in the dying years of apartheid, especially during the increasingly tense State of Emergency period between 1986 and 1989, with its press clamps, mass detentions, assassinations and security crackdowns in the townships. In a very short space of time, the Weekly Mail rapidly acquired a reputation as a newspaper that challenged the legitimacy of the regime and documented an emerging protest culture that was virtually ignored by the mainstream press (Merrett and Saunders, 2000:463-

464; Jackson, 1993:63). In a frightening era where newspapers routinely vilified the African National Congress (ANC) and other opposition parties as terrorists, the Weekly Mail was the first newspaper to put human faces to the opposition leadership and to provide balanced accounts of their activities and policies (Jackson, 1993:65). It was also the first newspaper to sympathetically discuss such ‘fringe’ issues as environmentalism, gay liberation and gender (“History of the Mail & Guardian”, 2005:2). This inevitably meant that it received hostile attention from government’s security agents, who during the State of Emergency were being given greater power to intervene in everyday life.

In its general outlook, the Weekly Mail could be classified as a social-democratic press, a section of the press that emerged as something of a hybrid of both progressive-alternative and conventional libertarian media practices. This outlook differed from the openly partisan progressive press, (also known then as the ‘comrade press’ or ‘the people’s press’) because the Weekly Mail criticised both the apartheid state and left-wing mistakes, a position that occasionally produced tensions between it and its left-wing activist readers (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991:6-7; Jackson, 1993:51). Further, although the social-democratic press was generally supportive of the broader democratic struggle, it remained independent of specific political movements. Adherence to ‘objective’ journalistic practices (i.e. well-researched articles, checking of facts, soliciting for ‘both sides of the story’, etc.) were additionally applied (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991:12). The Weekly Mail was also unique in that in an era where newspapers could be easily classified as either a ‘black newspaper’ or a ‘white newspaper’, the new publication was neither:

Most would-be customers could not make it out: was it a white newspaper, or a black newspaper? White newspapers did not write so much about blacks. They did not put pictures of blacks on the front page. Black newspapers did not have such long, serious articles and such small headlines. And where was the soccer? The pin-ups? (Manoim, 2005a:2-3).

All the newspapers of the period, even the liberal ones, were aimed at racially-defined markets and some even ran segregated editions, one for whites, one for Africans (sometimes even one for Asians and coloureds). For example, The Star, provided separate ‘white’ and ‘township’ editions of its newspaper and readers learned how to tell them apart with a glance at the front page: “if there were white faces, pet dogs or

vintage cars in the page one picture, it was a white paper [and] if there were black faces, boxing gloves or footballs, it was a ‘township’ [black] paper” (Manoim, 1996:28). No wonder, then, that the Weekly Mail seemed so strange. According to its founding editor, it was the first newspaper whose news selection was colour-blind: “it chose its news by significance rather than colour, which meant that more often than not, there was a black face in the front page”, and that alone guaranteed that it was ignored by a large section of the lucrative white readership market (Manoim, 1996:28). The issues covered were considered too ‘red’ by white readers, and in an era when communism and African nationalism were seen as anarchic, many predicted that the newspaper would not last more than three months (Manoim, 1996:27).

However, among white liberals and left wingers, the reaction was different: this was just what they had hoped for, just a few weeks after the closure of their beloved Rand Daily Mail. An early readership survey revealed that the newspaper was bought mainly by “slumpies” (i.e. slightly left, upwardly mobile professionals), who lived in Johannesburg’s affluent Northern suburbs (Jackson, 1993:58). This was a group of disaffected people who were not happy with what they saw in the state-controlled and mainstream private press, and were always on the look-out for any alternative voice on political developments during the mid-80s to the 1990s (Merrett and Saunders, 2000:474). Although defined as ‘alternative’ and ‘fringe’ by the government, the newspaper seemed to be quite influential, as illustrated by a survey that was carried out a year after its launch, which revealed that the Weekly Mail was read by virtually every editor and news editor of both the English and Afrikaans mainstream press (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991:188; Merrett and Saunders, 2000:476; Jackson, 1993:49). In addition, the newspaper built a readership ranging from the still-jailed Nelson Mandela and the exiled ANC leadership, to key foreign policy decision-makers worldwide (Forrest, 2005:1). However, this growing reputation would result in a lot of unwelcome attention from the government, which culminated with its closure (for a month) during the height of the State of Emergency period.

3.2.1 The State of Emergency (1986-1989)

This was perhaps the harshest period for any newspaper, alternative or mainstream, to operate in. The white minority government led by President PW Botha was coming up with harsher press laws by the day, all engineered to stifle any criticism of the increasingly heavy-handed government political clampdowns in the townships, which had by now been declared a no-go area for the press by the government. In addition, the laws were meant to stifle any independent opinion regarding the apartheid regime circulating in the public realm during the period.

Starting with the December 1986 vow by government to “crush” the so-called alternative press, every few months the press regulations were updated, and with each new update, statutory press censorship became the norm. In addition, several political activists and organisations were ‘banned’ and it was declared illegal for newspapers to carry any reports on them. By 1988, the State of Emergency regulations filled 32 A4 small print pages, and of these, “eighteen of them were devoted to ‘thou-shalt-not’ rules aimed at the press” (Manoim, 1996:71). But perhaps the most disturbing component in the regulations was that of the “subversive statement” – a catch-all phrase which covered any statement which might be seen as weakening public confidence in the government, promoting disinvestment in the country, undermining the on-going forced military conscription, or inciting consumer boycotts, or encouraging general civil disobedience like staying away from school or not paying rent (Manoim, 1996:61). Tomaselli and Louw note that: “from six definitions of a ‘subversive statement’ decreed on 12 June 1986, we could, including main clauses and sub-clauses, which did not seem to be working in any logical order, discern 17 definitions” (1991:178; see also Jackson, 1993:136). That the press regulations were convoluted and unintelligible was by no means an accident; in fact, the more ambivalent their wording, the wider the area of uncertainty, and the more likely that journalists would be cautious and thus resort to self-censorship (Manoim 1996:74). The government’s motivations for these laws were threefold. First, they were to make it as difficult as possible for the now banned anti-apartheid movements to mobilise their supporters; secondly, they were to get the commercial press to extend even further its self-censorship; and thirdly, they were to drive the country’s ‘progressive’ journalists out of the profession (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991:186).

However, due to the threat of international censure and sanctions, the last thing that the government needed was bad publicity, especially about its heavy-handed treatment of the media. Thus, the assault on the press had double-pronged motives; by stifling coverage of opposition political groups at home (whose activities were often ignored by the mainstream press and the government-controlled South African Broadcasting Corporation, the SABC), the government was, “hoping to sanitise embarrassing information fed to the local whites who remained largely ignorant of the uprisings in the townships” (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991:187). Secondly, it was hoped that as long as the press could not report the real situation in the townships, international pressure for sanctions for ‘non-existent’ acts of police brutality would abate (Jackson, 1993:138; Manoim, 1996:62). Thus, one of the state’s most valuable propaganda weapons was the claim that South Africa was a parliamentary democracy with a free press. Hence, although the government would have wished to, closing down newspapers might have proved a little too embarrassing and would court unwanted international attention. The only way to eliminate them, therefore, was to do so slowly and discreetly (Manoim, 1996:117).

To this end, the Home Affairs Ministry set up a Directorate of Media Relations (DMR) in 1987, a statutory body that usurped the powers of the a voluntary Media Council introduced by media owners only a few years before¹². As a way of controlling information flow, the DMR, together with the Directorate of Publications and the Bureau for Information, were responsible for the registration of all practicing journalists in the country, as well as monitoring media output for any ‘violations’ of the harsh laws. Soon, several alternative publications received ‘warnings’ from the DMR, while certain issues of New Nation, Al Qalam, South and Die Steem were banned from circulation after having been found violating one or two of the many ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’ of the period (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991:178-179).

Under the new regulations, reporters and photographers were not allowed into ‘unrest’ areas, which effectively barred them from covering the turmoil in the townships. They

¹² The Media Council (MC) had been formed in 1983 as a voluntary association by the Newspapers Press Union, a private body formed by media owners as a buffer against government moves to introduce statutory registration of all practicing journalists in the country. However, the government still went on to introduce the DMR, as it felt that the MC was not doing enough to rope in the ‘errant’ alternative newspapers that were mushrooming all over the country (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991; Jackson, 1993).

also could not report on ‘police action’ in curbing the ‘unrest’, nor could they name detainees, which meant that state security agents had a free reign to deal with the increasingly restless black populace (Jackson, 1993:135; Manoim, 1996:71). However, for many newspapers, the regulations did not make much difference since the areas they cordoned off, like reportage of opposition politics and unrest in the townships were issues they dealt with only sporadically anyway. But for the Weekly Mail, this was more of a serious problem: the paper’s main purpose was to provide coverage of the very topics which were now forbidden, so now it was faced with a problem as to how to proceed (Manoim, 1996:72).

3.2.1.1 Self-censorship

This was to be the beginning of a game of cat-and-mouse between the alternative newspapers and the state authorities. The Weekly Mail’s approach was to “push the envelope” – to publish as much as it could get away with under the vaguely-worded press regulations (Forrest, 2005:1-2). The newspaper’s other strategy was to mock the absurdity of the restrictions by seeming to comply with them. For example, to circumvent any censure, the newspaper resorted to calling in its lawyers to screen almost every word of every edition for potential infractions before it went to press (Manoim, 1996:74). In place of the words deemed ‘dangerous’ or unpublishable by the lawyers, were blank spaces which were ostensibly acts of self-censorship. However, most of the times, the text was blanked out in such a way that a patient reader could guess what had been censored and reconstruct the likely meaning (Merrett and Saunders, 2000:466).

One of the Weekly Mail’s famous editions of the ‘blank page’ era was the June 20 1986 edition whose blank front page was headlined, “Our lawyers tell us we can say almost nothing...”, in reference to a lead article that the paper’s lawyers had advised the editors not to print (Forrest, 2005:1-2). Some editions were even bolder, carrying insertions on the blanked out pages that the ‘news’ could not be written because the government did not allow it. Annoyed by these blank spaces, the government soon banned them as well. However, the Weekly Mail ignored this, and continued to blank out text and signal obliterations for readers. This act of defiance was informed by the belief that any prosecution for the offence of “saying nothing” would bring ridicule

upon the authorities that they did not want to be exposed to (Manoim, 1996:64). Even so, the Weekly Mail was raided, seized, repeatedly prosecuted, and ultimately, closed.

3.2.1.2 Closure

The newspaper's inevitable first brush with the law occurred soon after its first birthday, when the Bureau of Information announced that it was seizing copies of the Sowetan and the Weekly Mail under the Emergency Regulations. Although the latter was not charged then, this was to be the beginning of a series of regular visits by the police every Thursday evening just before copies of the newspaper were loaded into distribution vans. In the meantime, other publications like New Nation and South were closed for periods as long as three months on various charges of subversion. The Weekly Mail's turn came soon enough in November 1988 after the paper carried a report on a mysterious firebombing of a 'dissident' church group in Johannesburg. In his statement announcing the ban, the Minister of Home Affairs, Christoffel Botha, stated that after examining several issues of the newspaper, the Weekly Mail, to his mind, "promoted the esteem of banned organisations and fanned uprisings by mustering support for illegal organisations and fomented feelings of hatred for the security forces and government" (Manoim, 1996:96, 111). However, the public outcry that followed the closure took the government by surprise, and the pressure that followed, including a diplomatic rebuke of the South African government by the diplomatic corps, saw to it that before the end of the same month, the Weekly Mail was back on the streets again (Tomaselli and Louw, 1991:89; Manoim, 2005b:2).

It is also interesting to note that although the Weekly Mail showed sympathy to the black majority's struggle for self-rule, it did not, quite unlike other alternative publications of that time, do so blindly. Perhaps one of the paper's major tests of its commitment to non-partisanship was illustrated when it broke the story of Winnie Mandela's links to the disappearance of a 13 year-old political activist Moeketsi 'Stompie' Seipati towards the end of the State of Emergency period. According to Manoim, one of the no-go areas in South African journalism during the time was Winnie Mandela:

Classified as a 'banned' individual by the apartheid government, Winnie Mandela was, to most people, an unsullied icon of the struggle...[She was

imbued with] the mystique of martyrdom: a beautiful woman who endured with regal grace the petty spites of a crass regime. With her husband invisible in an island prison, Winnie Mandela became the embodiment of black resistance to the entire world (1996:119).

Thus, when the Weekly Mail got news of how the infamous Nelson Mandela Football Club was terrorising people in the townships, and how the group, which also acted as Winnie's bodyguards, had allegedly beaten 'Stompie' to death, the paper was faced with an ethical dilemma. Although regretting that such a story would play into the hands of the apartheid state, which by now had perfected the art of smear campaigns, the Weekly Mail went ahead and broke the news of the alleged murder (Manoim, 1996:119). While the paper was accused of "damaging the struggle" by ANC politicians and activists, its vindication was perhaps shown by the fact that soon after coming out of prison in 1990, the Weekly Mail was one of the first newspapers Nelson Mandela gave his first press interview to (Manoim, 1996:125; 2005b:2).

The release of Mandela saw the beginning of a protracted negotiation period between the country's major political players as South Africa was slowly moving towards majority rule. During this period, the Weekly Mail continued being a positive catalyst in the country's political transformation.

3.3 The transformation period (1990-1994)

The events of February 1990 – beginning with President F.W. de Klerk's announcement in parliament of the release of Mandela, the un-banning of the ANC and other opposition groups – largely vindicated the role played by South Africa's alternative press in the last years of the apartheid era, although ultimately, those events also signalled the end for most of these publications (this point will be returned to below). The Weekly Mail responded to the new political dispensation with an abortive attempt to enter the daily newspaper market scene.

3.3.1 The Daily Mail

The end of the State of Emergency in December 1989 and the promise of a new political order in the country saw profound changes at the newspaper. As the only survivor of the numerous 'protest' publications which had sprung up in the State of

Emergency years, the Weekly Mail found that it now had to adjust to the changing political and market conditions. One of the ways in which it tried to reposition itself was through an attempt to enter the daily newspaper market. The political climate of the period felt just right to start a new newspaper, as Manoim recollects:

At the weekly staff meeting which followed the Mandela release, we presented an impromptu argument for launching a daily newspaper. This was the big moment to push ahead, we said; the political culture of the country was about to change radically; the established press would soon be left behind. The gap in the morning newspaper market left by the demise of the Rand Daily Mail was still vacant... (1996:128)

Soon, hurried plans were drawn, staff was recruited and machinery was bought and within four months (in June 1990) – exactly five years and one week after the launch of the Weekly Mail – the Daily Mail was launched (Manoim, 1996:131). However, although surrounded with so much optimism, a series of factors, both political and economic, combined to stifle the project from its conception.

First, the launch of the Daily Mail was pre-empted by the Argus group's launch of a morning edition of its large daily circulation flagship, The Star. This meant that the two had to battle it out for the small advertising cake in the daily newspaper market and, needless to say, Argus, with its huge resources, was better prepared to face the competition (Manoim, 1996:130). On the political front, the wave of euphoria that had greeted the release of Mandela and the promise of peace talks between the ruling National Party (NP) and the ANC had subsided by mid-June of 1990. It had become clear that the 'new South Africa' would not magically dawn – at least, not for a while. Peace talks had degenerated into a petty feuding, coupled with in-house fighting within the ANC and escalating violence in the townships. It was clear that, “now was not an auspicious moment for a 'new South Africa' newspaper; ...not when a daily launched in the spirit of optimism was instead filled with gloom” (Manoim, 1996: 134). The project was thus doomed to fail, almost bringing down the Weekly Mail with it. Facing mounting debt and little corresponding revenue, the paper was pulled off the streets. The last issue appeared on 4 September 1990, after only 44 editions.

Another factor, according to Ntshakala and Emdon, was that the de Klerk government had won the “image game” and had managed to convince the international community

that apartheid was now a thing of the past. As a result, Western governments and the Church withdrew their funding from a host of alternative publications that they had supported during the State of Emergency. This funding would henceforth be channelled into ‘development’ or education instead (1991:225). Needless, to say, this spelt disaster for many of them, thus, New Nation, New African, South and Vrye Weekbald, Saamstaan and Grassroots subsequently folded. Now, even the most financially-stable of the alternatives, the Weekly Mail, was on the brink of collapse due to its rather uncalculated foray into the daily newspaper scene and had little hope of being saved by international donors. After the collapse of the Daily Mail, the Weekly Mail was left with a large debt owing to Caxtons Printers, a subsidiary of Argus, which had printed the Daily Mail (Manoim, 1996:140). The result was a ‘debt management’ agreement between Caxtons and the Weekly Mail in terms of which the latter was going to be wholly taken over by Caxtons should it fail to settle the debt by April 1991. However, while the take-over bid was averted, the new circumstances forced to the Weekly Mail to shift from its “cheeky and combative approach” to a “more reasoned and constructive tone” in a bid to stay alive (Ntshakala and Emdon, 1991:225).

During the debt management period the Weekly Mail tried all strategies to keep afloat. And one of these ways was through a partnership with the British-based Guardian of the Guardian Newspapers group. This relationship, which began with the Weekly Mail carrying the Guardian Weekly as a supplement in its editions, was to become a very fruitful one, culminating with the merger of the supplement and the weekly to form the Weekly Mail & Guardian in 1992 (I will return to this part of the history in section 3.4 below). Even then, circulation and advertising at the Weekly Mail figures continued to drop, pulling the weekly deeper into debt.

Arguably, the Weekly Mail’s most important role in the early 1990s was its coverage of the roller-coaster transition process. The paper’s flagging fortunes were revived by one of its famous exposés, the scandal involving the NP and one of the major opposition parties at the time, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which came to be famously known as ‘Inkathagate’, towards the end of July in 1991. Based on leaked top-secret police documents, the story, which was broken during the Guardian/Weekly Mail partnership, revealed that the IFP leader, Chief Mangosuthu

Buthelezi, was negotiating for a coalition government with the NP – a move that was meant to relegate the more widely supported ANC to a peripheral role in post-apartheid South Africa. In the context of Buthelezi's attempts to project himself as the foremost anti-apartheid leader, and therefore a 'natural' choice for Presidency in the new South Africa, these revelations were "dynamite". (Forrest, 2005:2). This exposé played a crucial role in forcing a now embarrassed and weakened NP to make concessions, including demoting two of its cabinet ministers and re-opening its stalled talks with the ANC (Manoim, 1996:153). Although by now the Weekly Mail's credibility was at its highest point again and circulation figures had begun to pick up, the paper continued to lose money and it became clear that it could not sustain another loss-making year (Manoim, 1996:186). Thus, the publication was forced to merge with its British ally, the Guardian, to form what was then called the Weekly Mail & Guardian.

3.4 Post-independence period: the Mail & Guardian

The Weekly Mail and the Guardian merger came about more by accident than by design. The agreement between the two parties to have a two-in-one newspaper where the Weekly Mail was to carry the Guardian Weekly as a supplement was not paying the expected dividends. For one, South African readers were not too keen on the rather dense and grey 'serious' format that the Guardian Weekly was famous for, and British readers in South Africa were still not buying the Weekly Mail as expected (Manoim, 1996:190; 2005b:3). Secondly, spiralling freight and airmail charges meant that the Weekly Mail was actually making greater losses than before. Thus, the decision was made for the Weekly Mail to go under the Guardian's wing and operate as its subsidiary (Manoim, 1996:190).

A joint company was created, M&G Media, which pooled Weekly Mail assets with those of the Guardian, the latter being a minority shareholder with a little under 50% of the shares. The new publication's name was to combine the names of both partners and was to be called the 'Weekly Mail & Guardian' (Manoim, 1996:191). Although the recapitalisation resulting from the merger meant the new company grew bigger and recruited more staff, the Weekly Mail & Guardian continued to make losses with each issue. After the euphoria of the 1994 first-ever democratic elections in South

Africa, people seemed to be tired of politics and soon shifted attention to other things (Manoim, 1996:193). This meant that for the next six months, sales stagnated and although advertising figures were improving, the paper still could not break even and the debt grew bigger. This is when it was decided that in order to survive, the option was to sell all the shares to the Guardian which had more capital to keep it afloat (Manoim, 2005b:3). For its part, this was a perfect opportunity for the Guardian to enter the South African newspaper market, which was held to be one of the fastest growing markets on the continent. Coupled with prospects of post-apartheid peace and the expected economic growth, newspapers from Britain (the Independent) and America (the New York Times) were all waiting to make an entry into the local market, thus the Guardian could not grab this chance fast enough (Manoim, 1996:194; 2005b:3).

With the sale in 1995, the Guardian became the majority shareholder and the newspaper was further re-christened the 'Mail & Guardian', a name it still uses today. For seven years, under different editors, the Guardian also failed to make the paper profitable, but somehow, it was kept alive (Manoim, 2005b:3). 2002 became a watershed year for the Mail & Guardian, when for the first time, the newspaper was put into the hands of black ownership when it was sold by its British owners to Zimbabwean publisher, Trevor Ncube ("About us", 2006:3). This was followed by another landmark appointment of the newspaper's first black editor, Mondli Makhanya, in the same year (Forrest, 2005:3). Under Ncube, the paper began its long road into self-sustainability. First it was weaned off the Guardian's financial support and began running on its own funds. In 2004, it recorded its first small operating profit and a sharp growth in advertising revenue from R15m in 2002 to close to R40m (Haffajee, 2005:1; Forrest, 2005:3). In spite of early financial uncertainties, the newspaper carried on the historical role that the Weekly Mail had started, that of exposing corruption in public circles.

3.4.1 Reporting in the 'new South Africa'

With the arrival of the a new democratic government in 1994, many observers predicted that the Mail & Guardian, together with a host of other alternative publications that had been at the forefront of pressurising the apartheid government to

reform, would lose their purpose. While most of these publications did indeed shut down, the Mail & Guardian seemed to grow from strength to strength. Despite its early problems, the newspaper today records steady growth in circulation, with current figures at about 50 000 copies per week, which is double the figures attained during the early and late 1990s (“History of the Mail & Guardian”, 2005:2). The rise in popularity can only be attributed to the fact that by maintaining its investigative, no-holds-barred brand of reporting, the newspaper was demonstrating to all that it was capable of being no less critical of the new dispensation than the old (“History of the Mail & Guardian”, 2005:2).

Soon after independence, the Mail & Guardian wasted no time in repositioning itself as a more acerbic critic of the new ANC government and a champion of democracy in the new South Africa, by turning the spotlight on the growth of corruption and abuse of public office by the new ruling elite (Forrest, 2005:2). For example, under the editorship of Philip van Niekerk, one of the earliest post-independence exposés by the newspaper concerned the appointment of Liberia’s corrupt former finance minister, Emmanuel Shaw, as adviser to South Africa’s state oil company. In a series of 25 articles, the newspaper revealed how bank records showed that Shaw’s South African company was paying the bond on a R2.4-million house owned by the Central Energy Fund CEO, Don Mkhwanazi, who had awarded Shaw the advisory position in the first place. Mkhwanazi later stepped down, while the reporter who broke the story, Mungo Soggot, received the Foreign Correspondents Association’s coveted Journalist of the Year Award (Forrest, 2005:2). However, the biggest break would come towards the end of 2002 under the editorship of Mondli Makhanya, when a reporter, Sam Sole, monitoring a police inquiry into Deputy President Jacob Zuma’s financial adviser, Schabir Shaik, happened on court papers indicating that Zuma was the focus of the investigation. Among them was a copy of the famous encrypted fax from a French arms company allegedly discussing a bribe for the Deputy President. The story proved a political disaster for Zuma, and with Shaik convicted, he was soon to appear in court to answer charges of corruption. He was forced to resign as Deputy President in mid-2005 (Forrest, 2005:2).

Today, the Mail & Guardian’s investigative coups have continued under current editor Ferial Haffajee, who succeeded Makhanya in early 2004. For example, early in 2005,

the newspaper's head of investigations, Stefaans Brümmer, again made another political scoop with his "Oilgate" exposé, which indicated that state oil money had been channelled to the ANC before the 2004 election via an ANC front company, Imvume Management (Forrest, 2005:3; Haffajee, 2005:2). Thus, although changed in many ways, the Mail & Guardian has essentially remained the same newspaper that was launched on June 14 1985. Manoim notes,

The Mail & Guardian is not the Weekly Mail. The Weekly Mail ethos could not endure beyond the era of protest... the paper's range has broadened... yet on every page, one can hear echoes of the old Weekly Mail: a take-no-prisoners style of critique; a sense of nose-in-the-air superiority; an obsession with either political intrigue or with sex; a caustic wit; an abiding hatred of anyone wealthy or powerful... other papers: Business Day, Die Burger and The Star, voices of the old establishment, have effortlessly transformed into voices of the new. The Mail & Guardian remains where it began, on the outside, a lone voice of contrariness (2005b:3).

On its website, the newspaper declares that it caters for a niche market of readers, who are interested in "a critical approach to politics, arts and current affairs". Its readership draws from among professionals, academics, diplomats, lobbyists, and non-governmental groups ("About us", 2006:3). Today, the Mail & Guardian runs an internationally renowned online version, the Mail & Guardian Online, which has a readership from as far as North America, Europe and Asia.

The next section presents a brief history the Mail & Guardian Online, the host of the blog, Blogmark which is the subject of this study. The section also shows how the Mail & Guardian has always been at the forefront of innovative uses technology to provide better and more interactive services for its readers from its formation years to the present day.

3.5 The Mail & Guardian Online

The Mail & Guardian has a long history of firsts in the use technology in the industry in the South Africa. In 1985, it was the first newspaper in Africa to use desktop publishing technology to produce a newspaper even before the name 'desktop publishing' became known (Merrett and Saunders, 2000:460-4). This came about more by circumstance than by design. Manoim recounts how, in the early years of the Weekly Mail, because the hurriedly set up publication could not afford to buy

mainstream publishing technology, the whole newspaper had to be produced entirely on personal computers, thus becoming one of the world's earliest examples of the use of the now common Apple Macintosh-based desktop publishing systems:

Most newspapers of the era had invested millions of rands in electronic editing systems, which had transferred almost the entire grubby, labour-intensive newspaper production process into computerised form. At the Weekly Mail, I managed to create a rather crude approximation of the same system for R30 000. It was the first example in this country – and perhaps the world – of newspapers using a technique that, much later, was given the name “desktop publishing” (1996:17-18, 135-136).

With two Apple Macintosh computers, an optical scanner and a laser printer, Harber and Manoim were able to do the work of the entire editing and page design department of a normal newspaper on the space of a large desk – at a fraction of the cost (Merrett and Saunders, 2000:460). The appearance of the Weekly Mail demonstrated the possibilities of cheap hi-tech newspaper production and ushered in a new era of desktop publishing (Pinnock, 1991:144). Later, Manoim was to become a kind of “technical godfather” for other alternative publications like the New Nation and South, which he helped to set up computerised production systems that were based on the Weekly Mail model (Manoim, 1996:22-23).

Initially, access to new technologies in desktop publishing equipment was through universities because of costs, but by 1986, these technologies could be found in the offices of many service, political and labour organisations via personal computers. The advent of these relatively cheap technologies was a boost for the democracy movement in South Africa, as it aided the development of smaller newspapers, which could produce whole publications with minimum capital and machinery. For the first time, “the new print technologies were making possible mass participation in a socialised production process, the practical means of which were increasingly [becoming] accessible” (Pinnock, 1991:144). Based on the Weekly Mail's experiences, and despite the State of Emergency, other weeklies using similar technology began to mushroom. These newspapers often acted as training grounds for community journalists and, in the process, gave many erstwhile unskilled activists the opportunity to reach out to many people with their messages (Pinnock, 1991:145).

In the 1990s, the Weekly Mail continued with its experimentation with technology in news production and distribution, and its partnership with the Guardian was particularly beneficial in this regard. For example, the Guardian Weekly insert was put together much like the Weekly Mail, entirely on a personal computer. When the pages were complete, they were transmitted via phone lines to print shops to its other markets, which include America, Canada, Australia and, of course, the Weekly Mail in South Africa (Manoim, 1996:191). This allowed the Weekly Mail to experiment on how it could send its own pages to people outside South Africa and thus an idea to start an electronic subscription service was born (Manoim, 1996:198). This was the beginning of the M&G Online.

Launched in 1994, the M&G Online was the first online newspaper in Africa. Originally conceived as a separate product run by a separate company from M&G Media, the edition was meant for overseas readers (“About us”, 2006:2). Initially called the ‘Electronic Mail & Guardian’, the paper was an e-mail only subscription service that allowed readers living outside South Africa’s borders to receive stories hours before they reached the newspaper’s hard copy subscribers. Soon, the service expanded into a searchable online archive, published in partnership with one of the country’s pioneer users of ICTs in the Non-Governmental Organisations sector, SANGONeT. A world wide web site (www.mg.co.za) was added, which in turn progressed from producing a weekly mirror of the printed newspaper to generating its own daily news (“About us”, 2006:1). Today, the M&G Online works closely with the parent newspaper, but has its own dedicated editorial staff who produce breaking news on a daily basis to complement the analytical, in-depth feature articles from the print version (*ibid.*). On its website, the M&G Online states that it is “a pan-African daily, electronic-only newspaper, published all day, all week, aimed at readers serious and not so serious”, and that it caters for, “an extremely argumentative readership of South Africans who prefer their news delivered fast and daily, plus homesick South Africans abroad, would-be tourists, and foreigners with a special interest in Africa” (“About us”, 2006:1). The founding members of the M&G Online are Bruce Cohen and founding editor Irwin Manoim. Riaan Woolmarans is the editor and Matthew Buckland is the publisher.

The M&G Online has received numerous accolades and awards, including a Webby Award honourable mention in 2005 and being voted one of the world's top 175 websites by Forbes.com in 2001 ("M&G Online recognised in 'online Oscars'", 2005:1). Dubbed the "Oscars of the internet", the Webby Awards are determined by the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences and seek to honour trendsetting news websites on the internet. The Webby Awards Committee receives entries from more than 40 countries worldwide and some of the nominations in 2005 included the Guardian Unlimited, BBC, ESPN, The New York Times on the Web, The Wall Street Journal Online and Washingtonpost.com ("M&G Online recognised in 'online Oscars'", 2005:1). The Award was given for the M&G Online's groundbreaking interactive elections guide, which it launched during South Africa's 2004 General Elections. Using the latest flash technology, the guide enabled users to navigate around a map of the country to read the major campaign events as they happened and also to monitor the voting patterns and results as they came in.

Continuing to set trends, the paper recently introduced a blog on its website, Blogmark, which enables its users to log on to blog their thoughts and to share ideas with others online. The feature also enables readers to provide running commentaries on the stories covered by the paper. Launched in October 2004, Blogmark is like an community blog (see section 2.5) in a notice board format on which readers post any topic that they might like to talk about and allows other users to read and comment on it. According to the Mail & Guardian's current editor, Haffajee, the newspaper receives enough reader correspondence to fill up to three of its hard copy pages and, therefore, electronic discussion forums like Blogmark are a way of accommodating readers' views and encouraging, "an exciting spread of opinion [in] a nation debating [with] itself" (Haffajee, 2005:2). The present study analyses this blog and seeks to determine the extent to which it provides a platform for South African citizens to engage in public debate over matters of common concern, in an effort to evaluate the blog's public sphere potential.

In March 2006, the Mail & Guardian Online, in collaboration with Rhodes University's New Media Lab, also achieved a first in its coverage of the local government elections through the use of blogging technology. The newspaper set up an election blog, "Blogging the local government elections" (see

<http://electionblogs.mg.co.za>), in which it invited the country's biggest political players to blog their campaigns, thus providing them with new means of communicating with their voters and also promoting citizen debate in political issues. The blog proved to be a success, with almost all the opposition parties' leaders, including Tony Leon (Democratic Alliance), Mangosuthu Buthelezi (IFP), Patricia de Lille (Independent Democrats), Bantu Holomisa (United Democratic Movement), Pieter Mulder (Freedom Front Plus), and a host of other parties, participating in the venture. The blog featured a lot of reader comments and questions directed to the politicians on various topical issues, including corruption, racism, the on-going Jacob Zuma corruption and rape trials, and the South African presidential succession issue.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented a biographical sketch of the history of the Mail & Guardian, which is the host of Blogmark, the blog that is the subject of the present study. I illustrated how the newspaper has always played a small but crucial role in enhancing democracy in South Africa, by not only covering issues that had been ruled out of the public domain by an increasingly desperate political elite, but also by empowering its readers with the information that they may have needed to make positive contributions towards South Africa's drive towards democracy and majority rule. Even after independence, I argued, the Mail & Guardian continued to promote political transparency through its continued exposure of the misdeeds of those in public office. In one section of the chapter, I also outlined how the newspaper comes from a long tradition of innovative uses of technology for news production and dissemination in the country, and thus I explored the events leading to the birth of the Mail & Guardian Online, and also the introduction of Blogmark, and later, a local government elections blog.

In the next chapter, I present the research methods that were adopted for the study. Using a case study design, the study used a combination of content analysis, self-completion questionnaires and semi-structured in-depth interviews. I will also outline the research procedure and instruments I used, as well as the problems I encountered.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the research methods used in the study. It begins with a discussion on the study's aims and objectives, and the research design adopted. A major section of the chapter is dedicated to outlining the content analysis procedures that were undertaken, including sampling issues, category formulation, and coding. The chapter also examines the two other techniques used in the study: the semi-structured in-depth interview and the self-completion questionnaire. The last two sections outline the research procedure followed and research instruments used.

4.1 Aims and objectives of the study

The study sought to investigate whether weblogs can act as virtual public spheres, where people can meet to discuss issues of interest to them. It used the Mail & Guardian Online's (M&G Online) blog, Blogmark, as a case study. In order to achieve this, a set of posts from the blog were selected and analysed, paying particular attention to the subjects, themes and levels of debates therein, as a way of finding out if this space really exists as the discursive arena that it is touted to be. A secondary goal of the research was to find out the reasons and motivations – on the part of the M&G Online – for setting up Blogmark, and exploring the number of ways, if any, that the discussions on the blog acted as news leads for the newspaper.

4.2 The research design

In order to evaluate Blogmark's potential as a re-worked version of Habermas's 18th century model of the public sphere, a case study research design was adopted for the study. A case study is an empirical approach which uses multiples sources of evidence to investigate certain phenomena in their contextual setting. It is by its nature both exploratory and descriptive (Yin, 1984:13). Case study research contrasts with the experimental and social survey designs in that it is particularistic and descriptive, that

is, it focuses on a particular situation, event, or organisation, with the main aim of providing holistic sociological descriptions of it (Hamel, *et al.* 1993:1; Yin, 1984:14). For this reason, the approach is most valuable when one wants to obtain a wealth of information on a relatively ‘new’ area of study such as blogging (Wimmer and Dominick, 1991:150; Stake, 2000:24).

Case study research allows for the triangulation of many research techniques, in fact, as Wimmer and Dominick write, “the more the data sources that can be brought to bear in a case, the more likely that the study is valid” (1991:150). The openness of the case study approach to a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods is one of its major advantages over other approaches to social inquiry. Qualitative methods like unstructured interviews can be used to supplement findings from traditionally quantitative methods like content analysis, and vice-versa. By moving back and forth between techniques, a case study researcher is most likely to gain further insight into issues they might have missed if they utilised only one method (Holsti, 1969:12). Accordingly, a combination of content analysis, self-completion questionnaires and qualitative interviews were used for the study.

While one can differentiate between many types of case studies¹³, the present study can be classified as an instrumental case study. In such a study, a single case is studied as a stepping stone into knowing the larger characteristics of the population from which the case was drawn (Stake, 1994:237; Gomm, *et al.* 2000:99). Further, this type of study requires that in order for the researcher to understand the nature of the case, its historical background, physical settings, and other contexts; including economic, political, and aesthetic features, should be outlined in great detail (Stake, 1994:238). However, it should be noted that if one wants to make any generalisations beyond the particular case being studied, it is imperative that special attention is paid to the issue of sampling, both between individual cases and within the case itself (Gomm, *et al.* 2000:103). This is because sampling has a bearing on the nature of the conclusions that are drawn about the case being studied. The next section discusses the sampling procedure that was used in the study.

¹³ For example, Stake differentiates between intrinsic, instrumental and collective case studies (1994:237-242).

4.2.1 Sample selection and size

The advantage of content analysis over other techniques of textual analysis like, for example, semiotic analysis, is that it enables one to analyse large bodies of media content through the process of sampling (Hansen, *et al.* 1998:100). Blogmark's archives stretch from as far back as 11 October 2004 (when the blog first went online) up to today, which means that the number of posts available is well into the thousands. Considering the volume of the material available, the major challenge faced was the selection of posts to study.

With content analysis, it is neither possible nor desirable to analyse absolutely all the content of a media title. Observations can be made on a selected amount of text so that inferences can be drawn about the larger text from which the sample was drawn (Berelson, 1952:174). However, it is also important that this sample must be representative. A representative sample can enable one to give adequate descriptions of very large quantities of content. In sampling theory, a 'representative' sample means a sample which is not skewed or biased by the personal preferences (or hunches) of the researcher (Hansen, *et al.* 1998:103). In addition, such a sample must take into consideration that some content (for example, sports reports) has seasonal variations, and if the problem necessitates representation of the various days of the week, samples must be chosen with this in mind (Berelson, 1952:177).

Thus, bearing in mind not to rely on a short sample period which might coincide with seasonal variations (or other major events) that might affect the levels and nature of interaction on the blog, I monitored Blogmark for a total of 14 days stretching over two months beginning in October 2005. I chose October as the starting month because it was the month when the study was conceived. I then chose the first Monday of October as the starting date. The sampling strategy I adopted was one continuous week, i.e. from the first Monday (3rd) of October 2005 right up to Sunday the 9th October 2005. A 'rolling' or constructed week was also added, i.e. one Monday of one week, followed by the Tuesday of the next week, and so on, until I had monitored all seven days of the week. The constructed week began on the first Monday after the

continuous week (i.e. Monday 10th October) and went right up to Sunday 27th November 2005. This yielded 112 individual posts¹⁴.

The ‘constructed week’ approach is a common sampling strategy in content analysis. For example, in Singer’s (2005) investigation of political communication in weblogs run by journalists, a constructed week between 15 February and 15 March 2004 was used. The approach seeks to eliminate the occurrence of constant errors in the sample:

It is well known that the news volume in any medium varies from day-to-day. For example, on Mondays there is usually not a great deal of news from government agencies because most are closed on Sunday... therefore, when studying a period such as one, two, three months, one should attempt to compensate by seeking a distribution that will, in the long run, represent the time period equitably (Budd, *et al.* 1967:26; also see Hansen, *et al.* 1998:103).

Indeed, with Blogmark, these variations were visibly evident. For example, on an ‘average’ day, the posts ranged from 5 to 10, while on some days, they ranged from nil to 17.

The individual blog post was the unit of analysis. I saved all the posts on the sample days, including the comments, in Portable Document Format (PDF) which enabled me to analyse the blogs in their original online format (for similar research procedures, see Bar-Ilan, 2005:300; Kerbel and Bloom, 2005:6-7). The following section discusses the three data gathering techniques used in the study, i.e., content analysis, the interview, and the questionnaire.

4.3 Data gathering techniques

4.3.1 Content analysis

Arguably the most famous definition of content analysis comes from Berelson, who said it is: “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (1952:18). This definition is useful because it highlights some key aspects of the method’s origins and concerns. First, the claim to “objectivity” and the emphasis on “manifest” (i.e. observable)

¹⁴ See Appendix (A) for an example of a typical post in Blogmark

content reveals the scientific underpinnings of the method. Like most quantitative techniques, content analysis was designed to replicate the rigour of the natural sciences on the study of social phenomena (Deacon, *et al.* 1999:115). However, the claim that the method provides value-free insights into the study of content has been questioned by many. For example, Hansen, *et al.* argue that ‘objectivity’ in content analysis is an impossible ideal serving only to mystify the values, interests, and means of knowledge production which underpin such research:

Content analysis, of course, could never be objective in the value-free sense of the word: it does not analyse everything there is to analyse in text – instead, the content analyst starts by delineating certain dimensions or aspects of texts for analysis, and in so doing, he/she is of course making a choice – subjective, albeit generally informed by the theoretical framework and ideas which circumscribe the ideas which inform his/her research (Hansen, *et al.* 1998:95).

Consequently, some definitions of the method leave out the references to “objectivity” and place emphasis only on the requirement that it be “systematic” and “replicable”. For example, Kaplan’s definition reads: “the technique known as content analysis [helps] state the frequency of occurrence [or non-occurrence] of signs in a given body of discourse in a systematic and quantitative fashion” (1943:230). However, according to Berelson’s original usage of the term, ‘objectivity’ in content analysis should be understood to refer to the requirement that the categories and units of analysis used must be defined so precisely by the individual researcher that if different analysts apply them to the same body of content, they can secure the same results (1952:16). Objectivity in this sense refers to the way in which the method is carried out on the basis of explicitly formulated rules: even if the researcher makes personal decisions about his/her data, it implies that these decisions are guided by an explicit set of rules that minimise (although probably never quite eliminate) the possibility that the findings reflect his/her biases rather than the content of the data being studied (Holsti, 1969:3-4; Berelson, 1952:17).

Linked to the issue of objectivity is the prerequisite that the method must be carried out in a way that is both systematic and reliable so that its results can be verified by other investigators who follow the same steps as the original researcher (Berelson, 1952:171). It is thus an important requirement that any content analysis study must include some way of checking the reliability of its findings. One such way is through

outlining, step by step, all the procedures taken, including the theoretical framework that informs the study, and the reasons for formulating the categories and units of analysis used (Budd, *et al.* 1967:14-15) (see section 4.3.1.2).

Finally, content analysis assumes that the quantitative description of communication content is meaningful. The assumption implies that the frequency of occurrence (or non-occurrence) of various characteristics of the content itself is an important factor in the communication process. This means that counting for counting's sake does not achieve or prove anything; in fact, everything that is counted must in some way relate to the investigator's main question and must seek to address it or provide answers to it (Berelson, 1952:20; Hansen, *et al.* 1998:106). The major purpose of the method, therefore, is to identify (and count) the occurrence of specified characteristics of texts, and through this, to be able to say something about such texts' wider social significance (Hansen, *et al.* 1998:96).

Perhaps the greatest advantage of content analysis is that it is methodical. All sampled material is submitted to the same set of categories. To this extent, it equips one with the tools for the systematic description of large amounts of media output, and at the same time it also allows for verification of results/findings (Holsti, 1969:127). Because the method allows one to produce the 'big picture' (delineating trends and patterns of large aggregates of texts), it is well suited to dealing with the 'mass-ness' of the mass media. Arguably, it "remains the only available tool for establishing maps, however faulty, of [media] output" (Gerbner, 1990:62, in Deacon, *et al.* 1999:115).

Historically, content analysis developed in two different strands, i.e. the 'pure' quantitative content analysis on one hand, and what has come to be called 'qualitative content analysis', which focuses on the analysis of emerging themes and issues in media content, on the other. The present study uses the latter strand. The next section outlines qualitative content analysis' characteristics in relation to its scientific predecessor, quantitative content analysis.

4.3.1.1 Qualitative content analysis

Perhaps the first thing to mention is that there is really no strict dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative content analysis. Just as the latter assigns numerical values to certain categories and units, so qualitative content analysis also contains quantitative statements in rough form (Berelson, 1952:116). The difference, however, is that the values of the qualitative strand are less explicit, for example, descriptions like “repeatedly”, “rarely”, and “usually”, etc. are common. This is not, however, to imply that precision is not necessary in qualitative analysis; in fact, depending on the nature of the study, more precise ways of enumeration can be used.

Secondly, qualitative content analysis employs less formalised categorisation than quantitative analysis. This is partly attributable to the fact that the former technique provides for the counting of such complex issues as themes that cannot be easily categorised in a scientific manner, thus, it allows for more individualised operationalisations (Berelson, 1952:125). Thus, the basic unit of analysis is likely to be more complex in qualitative than in quantitative analysis:

Quantitative analysis tends to break complex materials down into their components so that they can be reliably measured. “Qualitative” analysis, on the other hand, is more likely to take them in as they are on the assumption that meanings preside in the totality of impression, the *gestalt*, and not in the atomistic combination of measurable units (Berelson, 1952:126).

This is not to imply that for the qualitative analyst, simply impressionistic or ambiguous category formulation is the norm. In fact, the requirement is that the researcher must state as precisely as possible what indicators are relevant in the particular content being investigated, including the coding procedures employed. An example of qualitative content analysis that was adopted for this study is thematic content analysis.

Thematic content analysis can be placed in the middle of the quantitative/qualitative methods of social enquiry continuum. While it shares many of the principles and procedures of the rigour of the former, it also has the traits of the interpretive and subjective approaches of the latter. While quantitative content analysis is interested with the frequency of occurrence of certain categories, thematic content analysis is concerned with the presence/absence of certain themes, issues or genres in texts under

study. This implies that the approach is more exploratory than the former: here, data is read through looking for ‘themes’ that arise, the aim being to end up with key themes that describe the essence of the text being studied. The advantage of thematic content analysis is its stretch. It involves a fairly flexible unit of analysis based on decisions about “themes of meaning” (Wilbraham, 2005:1). This differs from ‘pure’ content analysis, which relies on fixed units of analysis like word counts. Like critical discourse analysis, thematic content analysis seeks to analyse texts in their contextual settings (see Fairclough, 1995).

However, the method has been criticised in that, although it is grounded in positivism, it is not that ‘scientific’, as some of its findings are too dependent on investigator intuition. It has, as a result, been seen as a “soft option” which attracts those who either cannot do, or spurn through ignorance, statistical rigour (Wilbraham, 2005:5). Nonetheless, thematic content analysis provides one with a tool for a subject- and/or a theme-based description of large chunks of media texts. The study now turns its attention to the discussion of the categories that were measured in the data, including their relevance to the aims and objectives of the study.

4.3.1.2 Characteristics measured in data

A taxing task in any form of content analysis-based study is category formulation. While any number of text characteristics can be categorised and counted, the characteristics which are singled out for analysis should relate directly to the aims and objectives of the study (Hansen, *et al.* 1998:106). Thus, the questions which the study sought to answer in the first place must be the foundation upon which the categories are developed. Content analysis studies done without clearly formulated categories are almost certain to be no value, thus Berelson argues that content analysis, “stands and falls by its categories” (1952:147), to draw attention to the fact that categories are not mere pigeonholes into which material is grouped for analysis, but form that crucial link between the actual counting and the theoretical framework. It is important, therefore, that during the formulation of the study, the researcher works closely with the data so that he/she is able to develop the categories inductively (Holsti, 1969:95). The process consists of moving back and forth from theory to data, testing the usefulness of tentative categories, and then modifying them in the light of

the data. The categories finally chosen must of necessity be exhaustive and mutually exclusive. The following sub-sections outline the categories that I used in my evaluation of Blogmark.

4.3.1.2.1 Subject matter/genre categories (genre analysis)

This is the most common category used in qualitative content analysis studies. It seeks to answer the most elementary question about the content being studied: what genres or subjects are present? (Holsti, 1969:104; Berelson, 1952:149). Fortunately for this researcher, the blog already has 15 pre-set subject categories into which all posts were to be classified. These are; Music, Politics, General, Short story, Technology, Online diary, History, Current affairs, Travel, Poetry, Business, Sport, Education, Movie review, and Television. The requirement is that every blog entry must fit into any one of these categories; and the onus is on the individual blogger to decide how their post is classified. I noticed, however, that some bloggers did not take particular care to classify their entries. As a result, most entries were classed into incorrect categories, for example, an entry discussing sport would be out under ‘Education’, etc. In addition, most bloggers left their entries under the ‘General’ category (which is the default category for all entries). This meant that the researcher had to re-classify all the entries into their correct categories, and while doing this, I noticed that some posts could not fall into any of the above 15 categories and, thus I added another category I called ‘Unclassified’ to capture these¹⁵. An example of such a blog would be the 6th October post entitled “For **Hanabi**”, or “Far out **Hanabi**” by **Dionysus_Stoned**¹⁶. This blog was virtually unclassifiable, thus, I decided to put it, others similar to it under the ‘Unclassified’ category I had created.

After putting all the posts into their categories, I counted the number of entries within the different subject categories and, in conjunction with information on the number of ‘reads’ and comments each entry had, I used this information to determine which subject category was the most popular (and an area of mutual interest) on the forum. This enabled me to make informed judgements on whether or not the forum satisfied

¹⁵ See Appendix (B) for an example of a typical ‘Unclassified’ post

¹⁶ All blogger’s names will be written out in **bold** in order to distinguish them from the other names used in the study (for example, the names of authors and writers cited in the study).

another of Habermas's necessary conditions for a well-functioning public sphere, i.e. that the space is for the discussion of matters of common interest only.

4.3.1.2.2 Theme/issue category (thematic analysis)

A theme is "a single assertion about some subject matter" (Wilbraham, 2005:2).

Theme categories seek to classify texts according to the themes or issues that are being raised (Hansen, *et al.* 1998:113; Holsti, 1969:116). Thematic analysis of this kind "does not rely on the specific use of words as units of analysis, but relies upon the coder to recognise certain themes or ideas in the text, and then to allocate these to pre-determined categories" (Beardsworth 1980:375, in Deacon, *et al.* 1999:118).

However, a major drawback with thematic analysis is that it is time-consuming and laborious as the researcher has to make sure that he/she has gone through all their data to develop sufficient categories into which to capture the data (Holsti, 1969:116).

Thematic analysis is also complex in that the unit of analysis is not so easily identifiable. This is because a single sentence can contain several assertions, all classifiable under a single theme or each classifiable under separate themes. As a result, it is important that in developing theme categories, the analyst must be able to detect the major motifs in the text and recognise them in their various forms (Budd, *et al.* 1967:48; Berelson, 1952:139). After thoroughly going through my sample, I managed to come up with 25 separate themes which I then coded for in my coding schedule. I coded for a maximum of five themes per post.

Breaking down the content from the subject categories into themes helped me to gain an even deeper understanding of the nature of the interactions on Blogmark. While subject matter categories yielded an estimate of which topics/subjects were of common interest to the bloggers, thematic analysis helped me explore the levels of recurrence of different themes within those topics. This worked to further shed light on the issues of common interest in the blog.

4.3.1.2.3 Direction/value-stance categories

These refer to a *pro* or *con* treatment of a subject matter. Basically, the question is: is the communication *for* or *against* the particular subject (or *neutral* towards it)? (Berelson, 1952:150). Also known as evaluative categories, direction categories

include the favourable/unfavourable, negative/positive, critical/uncritical, friendly/hostile, optimistic/pessimistic dichotomies. All these pairs generally contain a third category – “neutral” – which is used to code for a non-committal stance within the text (Holsti, 1969:107; Budd, *et al.* 1967:50-51). In this study, direction categories were used to measure the bloggers’ attitudes towards only those issues that dealt with the state and government¹⁷, the market (capital) and the media. The aim was to see if the Habermasian ideal applied that discussions in the public sphere are critical of both the state and the market and are directed towards making both these institutions more democratic and transparent. The analysis of attitudes towards the media was added to shed light on the issue of the relationship between the media and blogging, a subject which was discussed in detail in the study’s theoretical framework. In the Habermasian conception of the public sphere, the media were seen as playing the role of information provider and disseminator to, and from, this sphere, thus, I found it useful to measure the attitude these bloggers had of the media in general.

In determining blogger attitudes, the study used a three-point nominal scale outlining the dimensions ‘positive/favourable’ and ‘negative/unfavourable’, with a ‘neutral’ dimension in between. Negative/unfavourable was operationalised to refer to all expressions of disapproval, be it of the policies, actions or decisions, etc. of the referents; while positive/favourable was the opposite, i.e. expressions of approval of the actions or the conduct of the referents. For example, if a post carried sentiments that expressed dissatisfaction with government policy or actions, it was coded as ‘*negative*’, whilst if it expressed satisfaction about the way government was performing, it was coded as ‘*positive*’. However, if it contained both elements, i.e., contributors in the thread argued for both sides, it was coded as ‘*neutral*’. In an attempt to determine America Online’s (AOL) groups users’ attitudes toward government, Hill and Hughes used similar dimensions, although theirs were labelled “anti-government” and “pro-government”, respectively (1998:52).

¹⁷ In casual usage, the term ‘state’ refers to a set of institutions that possess the authority to make the rules that govern people in one or more societies, having internal and external sovereignty over a definite territory, while ‘government’ refers to a specific body of persons that have the authority to make and enforce laws within a civil, corporate, religious, academic group, or other organisation such as a state (Anderson and Olsen, 1957:28). Although Habermas only mentions the state as being at the centre of deliberations in the public sphere, I also found it useful to investigate the attitude of the bloggers towards those who administer or supervise state functioning, i.e., government.

Determining the direction of content was probably one of the most frustrating problems faced by this researcher because it was one area in which the element of subjectivity was impossible to eliminate entirely. Because many texts are not clearly ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ (or ‘neutral’), I had to rely on the above pre-determined operationalisations of what constituted favourable or unfavourable expressions before coding began. This was a way of ensuring the validity of the findings: “the more precise and complete the definitions are, the easier the job of classifying the data will be. Although such definitions are subjective, they tell the reader of the study how the final figures were obtained” (Budd *et al.* 1967:51).

4.3.1.2.4 Form/type of communication category

This has to do with ordinary distinctions among forms of communication. This category is obviously very broad but it was very useful, particularly as a framework within which to make distinctions between debates and conversations in the blog (Berelson, 1952:158). The study adopted Hill and Hughes’ (1998) operationalisation of the distinction between a debate and a conversation in their analysis of AOL’s Usenet groups. According to their distinction, a debate is characterised by two or more people promoting conflicting points of view, while one person speaking alone or with other people agreeing to his/her views is characteristic of a conversation (1998:49). This category was useful for my study as well since I had initially sought to reveal how much debating actually goes on in Blogmark. Debate is a central feature of the public sphere, so I set out to evaluate Blogmark against Habermas’s model by counting the presence/absence of debates on the blog.

4.3.1.2.5 Intensity categories

Finally, I coded for intensity or ‘emotionalism’ categories. This category refers to the “strength” or “excitement” value with which the communication is made (Berelson, 1952:160). I aggregated the number of ‘flames’, insults and instances of swearing in the sampled blog posts. Rationality and soberness, not emotionalism, are key features of Habermas’s public sphere model, thus by so doing, I sought to investigate the “rational-criticalness” of the blog (Habermas, 1989:16). Again, I relied on Hill and Hughes’s operationalisation of ‘flaming’. According to them, ‘flames’ are vitriolic attacks on individuals where someone in a discussion decides, “[to ignore] the merits

[of another's] argument (or even the lack of them) in favour of a personal *ad hominem* attacks... preferring instead to offer insults" (1998:59). Apparently, 'flaming' is common attribute of online forms of interaction, owing largely to the anonymity that is possible in virtual communication:

Combined, the lack of visual and auditory cues and the protection of anonymity increase the likelihood of uninhibited, anti-social behaviours. Such behaviours are common enough in computer mediated messaging that they have a label – flaming... The natural propensity of computer users to flame each other is probably exacerbated by the fact that political discussion is inherently confrontational as people discuss policies from vastly divergent points of view (Hill and Hughes, 1998:23-24).

'Flaming' obviously poses a potential obstacle to the thoughtful debate that is at the heart of Habermas's deliberative democracy model. Consequently, a task was undertaken to document the extent to which flaming actually occurred in Blogmark.

The next following sections discuss the two other techniques that were used to complement the study's content analysis findings.

4.3.2 Semi-structured in-depth interviews

Bower once remarked that, "the best way to find out what people think about something is to ask them" (1973:vi, in Jensen, 1982:240). Indeed, interviewing is one of the most powerful ways we can use to understand our fellow human beings. In qualitative research, semi-structured in-depth interviews are meant to equip the researcher with an understanding of the subject's inner perspectives on an issue; to retrieve their past experiences; and importantly, to obtain descriptions of events or scenes that are not easily observable (Lindlof, 1995:5). The technique relies on open-ended questions which seek to elicit, not only the subject's opinions on issues, but also why and how they do certain things. This type of interviewing is "essentially a technique for discovering that there are perspectives on events other than those of the person initiating the interview" (Gaskell, 2000:38).

Grounded in qualitative research, the *sine qua non* of semi-structured in-depth interviews is seeing the social phenomenon being investigated from the point of view of the actor (Bryman, 1984:77-78). This is done in order to gain a more nuanced

understanding of the beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations of the people being interviewed (Fontana and Frey, 1994:368). The open-ended questions used are invitations to the respondent to talk at length about the issue being discussed. Hence in such interviews, the researcher does not strictly lead the inquiry with a set of pre-determined questions as in, for instance, a survey. He/she has full latitude to make follow up questions on issues that may come up from the respondents' answers through gentle probing and targeted questioning (Wimmer and Dominick, 1991:148). This is one of the reasons why the technique has been likened to a one-on-one conversation, or to use Lindlof's phrase, "a conversation among equals" (1995:5; also see Fontana and Frey, 1994:371). Like any conversation, most of what is said and meant emerges in joint interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee:

Any research interview is a social process, an interaction or cooperative venture... It is not merely a one-way process of information passing from one (the interviewee) to another (the interviewer). Rather, it is an interaction, an exchange of ideas and meaning, in which various realities and perceptions are explored and developed. To this extent, both the respondent(s) and the interviewer are in different ways involved in the production of knowledge (Gaskell, 2000:45).

However, unlike an ordinary conversation, semi-structured interviews rely a lot on the use of a topic guide or interview schedule which enables the interviewer to stay on track vis-à-vis the original aims and objectives of the research (Deacon, *et al.* 1999:66). Thus, behind the apparently natural and casual exchanges seen in successful semi-structured interviews is a well-prepared interview schedule (Gaskell, 2000:40). Closely resembling the structure of self-completion questionnaires, interview schedules contain the major issues that the interviewer seeks to obtain from the respondent. However, as experience shows, the schedule should not be followed in a slavish fashion. The researcher is allowed to use his/her imagination to recognise situations when issues beyond the schedule come up in the discussion and need following up (Strelitz, 2003:101). Accordingly, a skilled researcher will always give considerable latitude to interviewees to speak broadly on a subject, while also keeping them within range of the topics in the schedule:

Inevitably, the interviewee will 'ramble' and move away from the designated areas in the researcher's mind. 'Rambling' is nevertheless important and needs some investigation. The interviewee in rambling is moving onto areas which most interest him/her. The interviewer is losing some control over the

interview, yielding to the client, but the pay-off is that the researcher reaches the data that is central to the client... (Measor, 1985:67, in Bryman, 1988:46)

Further, in-depth interviewing always leaves room for second or third visits, which may enable the researcher to follow up on unclear issues from previous encounters (Wimmer and Dominick, 1991:148). However, in the present study, only one interview was done, which was supplemented by follow-up questions sent via email.

Also central to the success of the in-depth interview is the establishment of a rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee. Because the goal of the technique is understanding rather than interrogating, it is paramount that the researcher establishes rapport with his/her respondents. The researcher must be able to rid him/herself of the 'researcher role' and attempt to see the situation through the lenses of those being interviewed (Fontana and Frey, 1994:367). This is in keeping with one of the epistemological underpinnings of qualitative research, that is, its express commitment to seeing the social reality through the eyes of the actor (Lindlof, 1995:21). This means that a researcher has to present him/herself as a learner, rather someone with preconceived academic notions of the issue under investigation. This also means that social scientific issues have to be presented in the simplest language possible so that both the interviewer and interviewee are on the same ground (Gaskell, 2000:40).

Only one in-depth semi-structured interview was carried out for the study. The person interviewed was Matthew Buckland, the Publisher and current Editor of the M&G Online. Besides being publisher, Buckland also acts as webmaster for Blogmark. Among his duties as webmaster, he monitors the daily posts, moderates them for language and other ethical considerations. Buckland also responds to various blogger queries and requests for online help. The aim of the interview was to find out the motivations, on the part of the newspaper, for setting up Blogmark for its readers, and also to probe for Buckland's past experiences on Blogmark and if the blog has changed or affected the way that M&G Online relates to its readers. The interview also sought to explore the number of ways, if any, that Blogmark discussions influence the way the newspaper covers its stories.

4.3.3 Self-completion questionnaires

The study also employed self-completion questionnaires. Although traditionally self-completion questionnaires are regarded as the most structured form of questioning (Deacon, *et al.* 1999:64), this study used an open-ended questionnaire technique which, in many ways, is almost like an in-depth interview (although not quite). Used this way, the questionnaire enabled me to collect data about the respondents' attitudes, behaviour and opinions on a wide range of topics or issues (Hansen, *et al.* 1998:225).

Questionnaires are by no means all of a standard format, and can vary markedly according to the various needs of each individual study. They can be used in face-to-face situations (most common), or handed out, or posted to individuals for self-completion or completed by the interviewers telephonically. Their major advantage is that they standardise and organise the collection and processing of information, in the way that identical questions can be asked to a very large number of people and the data obtained can be analysed in the researcher's own time (Hansen, *et al.* 1998:225). However, the needs of the research determine the types of questions that will be asked: some questionnaires simply seek out factual information (and thus may require "yes" or "no" answers), others may seek out opinions or attitudes, so open-ended questions are used. The study relied on the latter as the aim was to find out the bloggers' attitudes, opinions and experiences on Blogmark.

Also grounded in the qualitative research tradition, self-completion questionnaires are an attempt at "seeing the world through their [interviewees'] eyes" (Bryman, 1988:61), i.e. viewing events, actions, and values from the perspective of the people who are being studied rather than from the perspective of the detached, 'objective' laboratory scientist. For the qualitative researcher, each individual has his/her own social history and perspective on the world (Fontana and Frey, 1994:374; Lindlof, 1995:6). The best way to get a slice of that world is through open and often lengthy observation and/or dialogue. However, unlike the semi-structured interviews described above, self-completion questionnaires make the least demands on the personal and social skills of the researcher, as they do not depend on active social interaction (Deacon, *et al.* 1999:69).

In addition, in order to obtain useful and meaningful information about any of the areas being investigated, some consideration must be paid to the question of sampling, that is, to the question of just how many respondents to send the questionnaire to (Hansen, *et al.* 1998:226). In an ideal situation, it is obviously advisable to send them to as many people as possible so that one will be able to generalise the findings. However, this is not always desirable or possible. For this reason, I relied on a purposively-selected sample, chosen simply because they were the most active bloggers during the sample period. The obvious danger is that the information gleaned from this group may be of limited value, since it can only reflect the views of a small number of people, who are not representative or typical of the population under investigation (Hansen, *et al.* 1998:226-227). However, much qualitative research techniques of this kind are not so pre-occupied with generalisation of this kind, but simply to gain a deeper understanding of the social phenomena under investigation (Hartmann (1987:16, in Hansen, *et al.* 1998).

Consequently, the questionnaire was administered to a purposively selected group of bloggers. This was intended to find out the bloggers' own perceptions of Blogmark, i.e. whether they perceived the blog as a public sphere or not. This method was chosen also because it enabled me to get a considerable amount of information from people from far-flung locations relatively quickly and inexpensively (Hansen, *et al.* 1998: 225). My original intention was to email the questionnaire for self-completion to a group of five active bloggers, i.e. those bloggers whose posts appeared more often than others during the sample period¹⁸. However, I ran into a few problems, chief among them was that I did not have the chosen bloggers' email or contact details. I then initially tried to get the Blogmark webmaster to send the questionnaire to the bloggers on my behalf, but this was not possible either due to ethical considerations. As a result, I decided to blog the questionnaire myself (since I was also a member of the blog) and about a month later, all my potential respondents had obliged. The following section outlines in greater detail the research procedure followed.

¹⁸ Five bloggers were chosen because it was a manageable number to deal with.

4.4 Recruitment of respondents and research procedure

The study's respondents comprised one person for the semi-structured interview and another five for the self-completion questionnaires. While the recruitment for the former technique was relatively easy, recruitment for the latter proved to be more difficult than was anticipated.

4.4.1 The semi-structured interview

The interview was conducted with Matthew Buckland, the publisher and editor of the M&G Online, who is also the webmaster/site administrator of Blogmark. Setting up an interview with Buckland was made easier by the fact that in addition to being an alumnus of the Rhodes University's School of Journalism and Media Studies, he was also a good friend of some lecturers in the department's New Media Lab. Thus, initial contact was via one of the lecturers, who sent him an email explaining my intention to conduct the study, and detailing what sort of help I would need. Buckland responded by offering to help me in anyway I required, including agreeing to the interview itself.

The interview itself was done over one day at the M&G Online's offices, and was supplemented by follow-up emails for clarification. The interview schedule for the interview was developed only after I had finished analysing the data and the responses I got from the bloggers via the questionnaire¹⁹. This was done in order to ensure that any issues that I may have found in the blog or from the bloggers themselves would be directed to the editor, as a way of 'tying up' loose ends.

4.4.2 The questionnaire

The questionnaire²⁰ was administered to five of the most active bloggers during the sample period. To determine who my respondents were going to be, I tallied all the blog posts and comments in the sample. I then drew up a table which represented, in numerical order, the total number of posts each blogger had made. From the list, the first 12 bloggers were then targeted for the questionnaire (see Fig. 1).

¹⁹ See Appendix (C) for the Interview Schedule and Appendix (D) for the Interview transcript

²⁰ See Appendix (E) for the questionnaire cover letter and Appendix (F) for the filled out questionnaires

	Name	Number of Posts
1	Dionysus Stoned	52
2	FruitundVeg	49
3	blue peter	48
4	Micatyro	41
5	MedusaJane	33
6	Hanabi	30
7	Whitey	29
8	Jack Tonsil	25
9	Spoo	21
10	S.A Chick	19
11	Fcuk The System	18
12	wwatcher	17

Table 1: Top 12 bloggers (by number of posts and comments made) during sample period.

Twelve bloggers were targeted because I was aware that I would not get a 100% response rate if I targeted only the five bloggers that I needed. However, one of the major problems was that I did not have my targeted respondents' email or other contact details. Thus, I decided post the questionnaire on the blog. In the post, I invited the 12 bloggers above to take part.

The post²¹ received a few 'hits'(reads) in the first few days. However, due to the fact that many new posts were also coming in at the time, it was slowly being pushed off the first page of Blogmark into the archives even before any of my respondents had offered to take part in the study. However, after a few days, some bloggers started making comments on the post, and this meant that the post's visibility was assured as it appeared regularly on the "Recently read blogs" and "Most recent comments" columns on the site's first page. As a result, this drew the attention of many readers²² and soon, a discussion ensued about my study's aims and objectives. Slowly, some of my targeted respondents also joined the discussion and most expressed concern that although they wanted to take part in the study, they were worried that their real (offline) identities might in the process be revealed. Thus, one blogger advised:

One of the problems has to be the issue of trust. You are asking them to give away quite a lot of information, and people here tend to value their anonymity. If I could suggest something, it would be to make it more clear [*sic*] that the information is safe. Try to work out a way that the questions and answers are sent to an official email at your university - that might help. You would also be able to extract quite a lot of information from Blogmark itself – try asking the blog gods who run Blogmark (with the permission of those affected of course). Good luck. (**GaryM**, 14/06/2006).

²¹ See <http://www.Blogmark.co.za/index.php?q=node/4602> or Appendix (G) for the post

²² While the average number of reads each post got during the sample period was 232 reads, my post received a total of 609 reads.

Thus, after I made assurances that their identities would remain confidential since I would only use their pseudonyms, a few agreed to take part. In total, six (**Dionysus_Stoned**, **blue_peter**, **MedusaJane**, **Hanabi**, **Jack Tonsil** and **wwatcher**) promised to fill in the questionnaire, although in the end I got everyone's response save for **wwatcher**'s. The sample that was finally recruited had three males and two females. The rest of the bloggers in the top twelve did not respond at all, although some of them were online during the time the questionnaire was put up.

4.4.3 Research instruments

The study relied on two major instruments for the analysis of data. These were the coding manual and the coding schedule²³. These were developed inductively after I had read through the data several times in order to ascertain the categories and themes that I had to code for. The coding schedule was the 'invoice' or sheet upon which I entered the values I was counting in the posts (Deacon, *et al.* 1999). One sheet was used per post, which meant that I had a total of 112 sheets for each of the entries in the sample. The coding manual contained the 'codes' or numbers for each of the variables I had on the coding sheet. The manual was designed mainly to ensure uniformity in the coding of the themes found in the sample. In coming up with the manual, each theme was allocated a unique number (1-25) and a summary heading. Under each of these summary headings, I listed all the other possible topics that will be included as part of that particular theme.

After all the data was coded for, the next step was the analysis, which presented a daunting challenge for the researcher, as the amount of the content proved to be much higher than originally anticipated. Thus, I had to rely on computer-assisted research to analyse the data. In particular, I used Statistica, a statistical software programme, to analyse my data and to find correlations and cross tabulate my findings. Microsoft Excel was also used in the creation of some of the study's graphs, although many of the graphs were created using Statistica. Computer-aided analysis has the obvious advantage of speed, accuracy and precision that would otherwise not have been achievable by human analysis, especially of such large amounts of data (Deacon, *et*

²³ See Appendix (H) for the Coding schedule, and Appendix (I) for the Coding manual

al. 1999:329). However, I had to make sure that the percentages and tables generated were not for their own sake, but were made in order to answer the initial questions that the study sought to answer.

4.4.4 Problems encountered

When the study was originally conceived, it was the intention of this researcher to also code for the basic demographic characteristics of the bloggers in the sample. These included the sex, location, occupation and hobbies/interests of the bloggers, to the extent that these statistics could be determined from the bloggers' personal data publicly available on Blogmark²⁴. Normally, Blogmark requires that every prospective member fill in their personal details under the categories of "city", "country" and "biography" upon sign up to use the service. Although this was not compulsory, most bloggers used the feature to state their occupations, hobbies and areas of interest. These and other pointers were going to be gleaned to provide the researcher with the nominal data on the demographic characteristics of Blogmark's population. Unfortunately, however, by the time I was ready to collect the data, the personal information of each blogger had been security-protected, and removed from public view, meaning that it could only be accessed by the blog owner alone. As a result, I was not able to discuss issues of access in the blog (specific to these bloggers), as the information would have enabled me to draw broad conclusions about the demographic characteristics of the kind of people who participated on the blog, and by induction, those who did not. However, the study itself makes references to issues of internet access in South Africa in general. This will be discussed later below.

4.5 Conclusion

The chapter presented a discussion of the research methods and procedures followed in conducting the study. Content analysis, qualitative interviews and the self-completed questionnaire were discussed in depth, including the reasons for their adoption as suitable methods for the study. Also, references were made to similar studies that relied on almost the same data gathering techniques. The last part of the

²⁴ Personal information about each blogger could be accessed by anyone by simply clicking on that blogger's name

chapter focused on outlining how the research was actually carried out, including its limitations and problems encountered.

In the following chapter, I now go on to present the study's findings. The quantitative features of the blog are presented first, with the qualitative features following thereafter. Finally, I also measure the presence/absence of debates and 'flames' in the sample. The last section of the chapter analyses the implications of these findings on the applicability of the public sphere concept to Blogmark.

CHAPTER FIVE

DATA PRESENTATION AND EVALUATION OF BLOGMARK

5.0 Introduction

The study sought to evaluate Blogmark's potential to act as a public forum for debate modelled along the lines of Habermas's concept of the public sphere. In order to achieve this, a set of purposively-selected blogs were analysed using qualitative content analysis, the results of which were supplemented with findings from self-completion questionnaires that were administered to five selected bloggers, and one semi-structured in-depth interview with the Mail & Guardian Online editor. The results of the study are presented in this chapter as follows: the first part of the chapter details the quantitative features of Blogmark, while the second part outlines the blog's qualitative features. Finally, the chapter focuses on the implications of the study's findings in light of the theory presented earlier.

5.1 Presentation of findings: evaluating Blogmark

The following sections assess the 'public sphere-ness' of Blogmark based on four criteria, beginning, in the first section, with a description of the quantitative features of the blog, in so far as these shed some light on the numbers of the people who were on the blog, and the quantity of the information that was in circulation on the blog during the sample period. The attempt to measure Blogmark's 'population' and size was made in order to answer a basic question: how many people make use of the blog? In the second section, an attempt is made to sketch a qualitative map of the blog's content, by aggregating the subjects and themes, etc. therein, in order to shed light on the relative popularity of each topic and theme in the sample.

In the third section, the attitude of the bloggers towards the state, the market and the media are investigated. This is an attempt to measure the amount of "critical scrutiny" (Calhoun, 1992:17) that the bloggers directed towards institutionalised forms of power, a feature which is central to the concept of the public sphere. Because the Habermasian concept of the public sphere places a lot of emphasis on the need for debaters to always remain sober and calm while deliberating, an attempt was also

made to examine the way in which the Blogmark users conducted their discussions, by measuring the presence/absence of ‘flames’ in the sampled posts.

5.2 Quantitative features

The study’s sample was drawn over a two-month period dating from 3 October 2005 to 27 November 2005. The sample had 112 unique posts. These posts, including the comments/replies that they generated, involved a total of 61 different bloggers. Further, the 112 posts received a total of 25 998 reads or ‘hits’ during the period. This translated to an average of 232 reads per post, with the most read post having 594 reads (“Cheating”, 03/10/2005), while the least read post had 67 hits (“God Help Us”, 07/10/2005). The reads or ‘hits’ are automatically recorded by the website every time someone accesses a particular post. Admittedly, the system of recording was not a reliable way of really knowing if every visitor actually read the post(s) that they opened, or if these were unique ‘reads’. However, 25 998 read in just two weeks suggests that the Blogmark has a significant number of users.

There was a combined total of 483 comments/replies in the sample, and the post with the highest number of comments (33) was “Racism in nightclubs?” (10/10/2005). Further, while a total of 27 posts (24% of the sample) had no comments, the average number of comments was 4 per post. The comments form a central part of this study in that they make the idea of private individuals meeting in a public space to share ideas and information, and to debate on topical issues a reality. It will be illustrated below how this dialogic characteristic of weblogs actually enables physically distant people to engage in highly interactive public discussions online.

5.3 Qualitative features: genre analysis

Genre analysis is one of the most common ways of describing some basic features of the media sample being studied. Derived from the qualitative content analysis technique, the method seeks to answer basic questions about the sample being studied, such as what topics or subjects are present in the sample? (Holsti, 1969).

According to the study’s findings, the five most popular subjects in the blog during the sample period were ‘Current affairs’ (23%), ‘General’ (16%), ‘Politics’ (13%), ‘Online diary’ (9%) and ‘Short story’ (6%) (see Fig. 1 below). ‘Television’, ‘Movie review’, ‘Business’, and ‘Technology’ were unpopular topics, with a combined total of slightly less than 5%, while ‘Poetry’, ‘History’ and ‘Sport’ did not record any entries at all during the period. However, there was also a high number of posts (17%) that fell under the category I named ‘Unclassified’. This category was reserved for all those posts that could not be fitted into any of the above 15 pre-set subject categories (see Chapter Four on how these were determined).

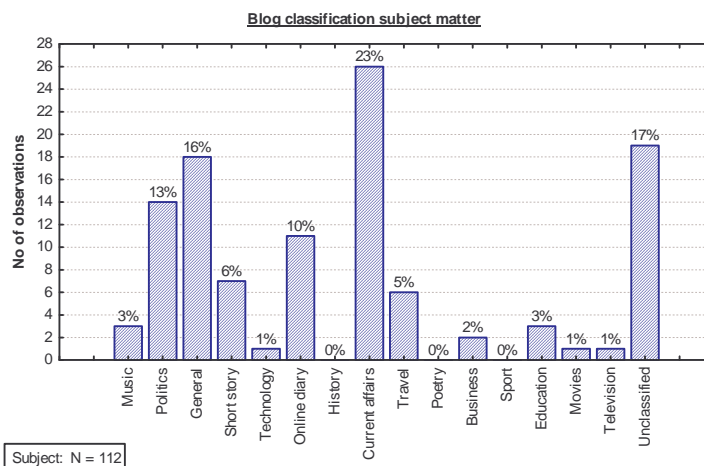


Figure 1: Blog classification by topic popularity during sample period.

Perhaps interesting to note about these findings is that although weblogs have been dismissed by some as nothing more than personal online diaries (see Chapter Two), only a total of 11 items (10%) appeared under the ‘Online diary’ category – as compared to a combined total of 38 items (about 34%) which fell under ‘Politics’ and ‘Current affairs’. This means that more people are actually using the blog for discussing politics and current events than using it as an online journal. However, this is not to conclude that these two topics were a clear favourite with everyone in the blog, as the responses obtained from the questionnaires revealed that some bloggers were more interested in blogging about personal experiences and issues than about current affairs and politics. For example, of the five bloggers to whom the questionnaire was administered, three (**MedusaJane**, **Dionysus_Stoned**, and **blue_peter**) ranked personal issues as the subjects they liked to blog the most about. Another blogger (**Hanabi**) ranked personal issues second to ‘Business’, while only one (**Jack Tonsil**) ranked ‘Politics’ and ‘Current affairs’ as the subjects of choice.

In terms of reads per subject, ‘Current affairs’, with 5636 reads (21.6%); ‘General’, with 4578 reads (17.6%); ‘Politics’, with 2953 reads (11.3%); and ‘Short story’, with 2201 reads (8.5%) were the most read subjects in the blog. ‘Unclassified’ blogs also had a large share of reads, taking up 4087 (or 15.7%) of the reads during the period (see Fig. 2 below).

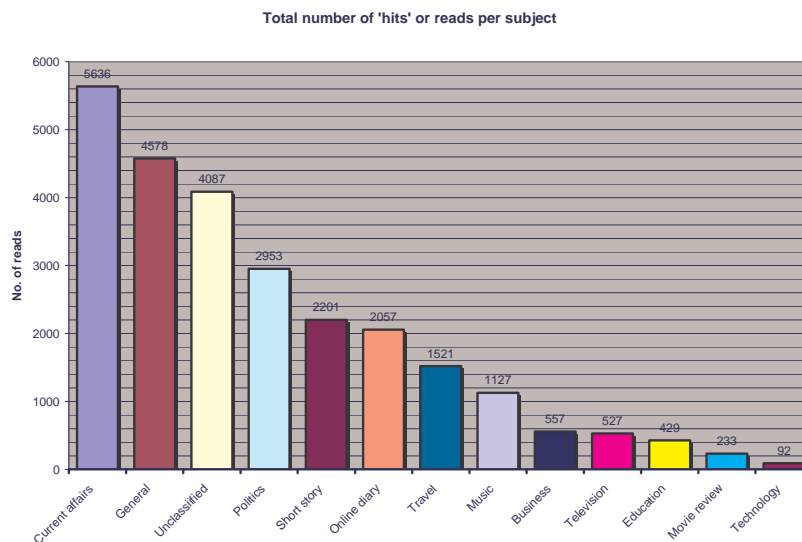


Figure 2: The most read subjects/topics in the blog.

The five least read subjects in the sample were ‘Business’, ‘Television’, ‘Education’, ‘Movie review’, and ‘Technology’. They had a combined total of 1838 reads (7%). Once again, ‘Current affairs’ and ‘Politics’ proved to be a subject of choice for the blog’s ‘readership’. The implication here is that the blog is extending possibilities for citizen involvement in public affairs, in the way that it enables this particular group of people to access information that may be vital to their participation in the public sphere. The next section focuses on the results of the thematic analysis of the sample.

5.4 Qualitative features: thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was also another fruitful technique for analysing the content of the blog. The method helped me to further breakdown the subjects found in the sample into smaller units of meaning (or themes) in order to see which themes/issues were of mutual concern among the bloggers.

I had a total of 25 themes to code for. A few of these themes will be discussed in greater detail below, using selected posts to support my arguments. The themes selected for discussion were chosen because they were illustrative of the major focus of the research. Fig. 4 below shows the full list of themes I encountered in the sample (see also Appendix I).

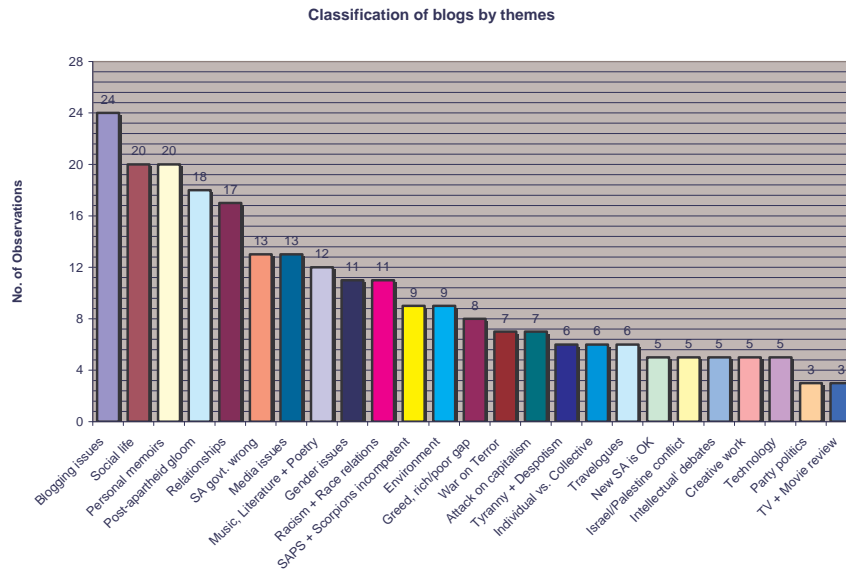


Figure 3: Classification of posts by themes.

5.4.1 Theme one: “Blogging issues”

The most recurrent theme in the sample was what I termed ‘Blogging issues’. This theme, which occurred 24 times, included requests for technical help from the Blogmark webmaster by bloggers (for example, “If you would like a unique”, 26/10/2005), and posts about blogging in general. Below is a typical post:

This is my blog spot and I am proud of it. I opened this space 4 months ago with the intent to post comments on current affairs and discuss questions that are raised by the experiences of life in general. This just might be a discussion with one participant, but I hope that I can get to hear other people’s views too. Blogging/documenting one’s experiences is said to breed progress. I do not hesitate to say that I will stop blogging if it does not lead me to greatness... I feel nostalgic, and I feel left behind by the progress made by the world on the east of the Atlantic. I have to keep up with current events on that side of the world. From this week onwards, I will explore the world outside this bubble created by my U.S environment. This is a great promise... Here we GO!
(Wandile, “Intoduction” [sic], 03/10/2005; see also (“A year”, 03/10/2006).

In particular, the issue of censorship proved to be a topical matter in this theme. The issue was brought up by bloggers who expressed dismay at the way in which the

Blogmark webmaster seemed to regularly censor their views by deleting their posts. For example, a frustrated **Whitey** complained that his/her attempts to expose the (alleged) corrupt activities of a local politician in the KwaZulu-Natal Province, Mohammed Valli Moosa, were being thwarted by the website's administrator:

These people, Valli Moosa and The Greater Wetlands Park Authority... are grabbing land from the Zulu and Tonga people... If these developments are going ahead like scheduled, we will have riots in Zululand and the National Government will use force, as in 1996, to resolve the land grabbing from the Zulu Nation. Well, this is the OIL GATE Scandal in our area... I can not link to the atrocities of Valli Moosa... because Blogmark deletes my postings if I do that. Well this is about as much as I have to disclose today ("What have I done?", 08/10/2005)

Later, **Whitey** argued that Blogmark did not allow people to express themselves freely on the blog, especially if their opinions were critical of the government:

There is not much we can do... We really have no way [of] getting the Government to listen, they are on a self-destruction course [*sic*] and if we link between two web sites to proof [*sic*] a point, the Blog Spot [former name for Blogmark] removes our Posting. You will be lucky if one of your postings survive more than a day... ("God Help Us" 07/10/2005).

One of the most heated debates over the issue of censorship concerned two short stories ("Refusal" and "Pixie Dust") posted by **Ian Fraser** that were removed from the blog because they were offensive. One post on the issue generated quite a lot interest, with a total of 395 readers and 11 comments. In the thread, a blogger (**Dionysus Stoned**) argued that while the stories in question were controversial, the Blogmark webmaster should not have removed them without asking the users of the blog if they were offended by them:

I agree that "Pixie Dust"... is by no means a great piece of fiction. But do u [you] agree that it should NOT have been removed? Were the comments left by you, and other bloggers, not a more democratic way of approaching its insertion into the public realm and this community? "Sexual violence with a woman as the object of the violence". Is this the problem? The book Beloved (which I love), in its treatment of sexual violence, left me damaged (but of course [**Ian**] **Fraser** is not [Toni] Morrison). Anyway, u [you] need to say more, unless [if] u [you] believe that representation in itself is what is wrong with the piece. Or is it personal? ("Refusal and Pixie Dust", 26/10/2005).

However, according to other bloggers (notably **Hanabi**, **Dreaded Outsider** and **blue_peter**), the stories deserved to be removed because of their misogynistic outlook. In response to the above post, **Hanabi** argued:

[Pixie Dust was] a piece of obscene shit and no, I don't agree with you about it being removed. In fact I was one of the people who reported it and I am glad it's removed. I suspect I feel as strongly about blogging on a blog site that allows such a piece to exist as you do about blogging in a space that censors. I wanted to leave Blogmark after it appeared because I don't want in any way to be associated with something like that. And I almost did. Representation of sexual violence in itself is not the problem. The way that piece was written was the problem - it was presented as sexual titillation, something to read for kicks... I spose [suppose] for me the worst thing was the amorality of the piece... Sexual violence is a reality for a lot of women in this country. It is unspeakably offensive to me - and it was to friends whom I asked to read it - that a description of extreme sexual violence should be presented in this way. If PD [Pixie Dust] manages to be political in any way, it does so by simply supporting the status quo of patriarchy where woman-hating and femicide is seen as an effective way to keep the bitches under control. Look, you're entitled to your opinion, I respect the fact that you feel so strongly about it but there is no way that I support it... (**Hanabi**, 26/10/2005).

Dreaded Outsider also argued that the stories were “disturbing and disrespectful of women and the very real problems they faced”. However, the blogger said that the webmaster acted wrongly in summarily pulling down the post:

The ongoing debate about Pixie Dust has created turbulence just below the surface and brought some mega issues to the forefront of the blog battle. I am in support of **Hanabi** on certain issues but would not have taken the law into my own hands and forced the hand of the blog team. On this issue I have to side with **Dionysus[_Stoned]** and say that there should have been some interaction as a summary removal sets some dangerous precedents (**Dreaded Outsider**, 26/10/2005).

blue_peter, also felt the webmaster should have let the story run its course as a way of promoting debate on the blog:

It was a tough call... but the authorities eventually made it... And while I am a firm believer in free speech, I also appreciate that there are limits to that freedom and that a piece of fiction like that can, very reasonably, be deemed to have crossed the line... If this was a film I don't think it would have made it past the censors... because it depicts extreme sexual violence against a woman in a way that is very offensive. Now personally I think that censoring it actually plays into the hands of the author since it creates controversy. My personal preference would be to let it disappear into obscurity. The majority opinion was that it was in poor taste and it DID engender a constructive (if at

times acrimonious) debate about misogyny. I agree that in cases like this it can be better to leave the piece in question up for about two weeks so that people can at least debate it. Then, when there are enough complaints, the person in charge has to make a call whether to pull it or not... So what I'm saying is that I am slightly uncomfortable about the fact that it got pulled but I accept the considered judgement of those who pulled it (**blue_peter**, 27/10/2005).

In another post, **Lucretia Revisited** decried the site's webmaster's alleged heavy-handedness, which he/she said had the overall effect of stifling debate on the blog:

Maybe I'm wrong, so shoot me, but this place sure seems to resemble a glorified discussion board/forum... the interface has been tweaked to make people believe that they are actually "blogging" but it is becoming readily apparent that we is [*sic*] being watched ... and rapped on the knuckles if we stray a little bit too far over to the other side than is good for us... This kind of ... er ... censorship ... is what happens on severely moderated "Discussion Boards" it even happens on boards/forums that appear to have NO censorship, until someone starts attacking the administrator, then wham, they are banned and posts deleted. I've been on many [discussion] boards where this has happened. Blogging ain't supposed to be fettered by those restrictions, is it? (**Lucretia Revisited**, "So is this Blogmark", 26/10/2005)

However, some bloggers were in favour of moderation which, they argued, ensured that people did not abuse their rights to free speech. For example, **wizard** reminded everyone that while people should cherish their rights to free speech and expression, both these freedoms were not absolute:

Yes... unfortunately if it was completely open it would soon get shut down by the Government. It would soon get full up of porn or at the least links to porn. I have every sympathy with the 'blog team' as they have a fine line to walk between censorship and absolute freedom, without upsetting the bloggers who like the right to free speech and the risk of lawsuits from libelled politicians. They will never get the right decision for both sides (**wizard**, 26/10/2005).

This view was also supported by the M&G Online editor, Matthew Buckland, who argued in an interview that the moderation of the blog was done in order to ensure that no material that was copyrighted, indecent or libellous was posted on the site:

We have had bloggers post copyrighted material from other websites, which we had to take down. We have had complaints from people who claimed they were being defamed, and we have had to take those posts down. And we have

also had [posts] that dealt with unsavoury issues like pornography posted on the blog and those had to be taken down as well²⁵.

Buckland also revealed that any offensive posts were removed from the site only after the webmaster got a complaint about the post, upon which the webmaster would read the offending post to ascertain if indeed it was offensive, before removing it.

5.4.2 Theme two: “Post-apartheid gloom”

Entries grouped under this theme had common elements of pessimism with regards to the current state-of-affairs in post-Apartheid South Africa. Among the reasons that were cited for this pessimism included alleged state bureaucracy, poor service delivery, corruption, escalating poverty and crime, and a perceived general economic meltdown. There were a total of 18 posts with this theme. In one example, a blogger complained about the appalling service standards in the country, and singled out the state-owned telecommunications company, Telkom and the South African Police Services (SAPS) as the chief culprits:

You have an emaergency [*sic*]. You call the 112 Emergency Line. The recorded voice says “All our opperators [*sic*] are currently busy, please try again later.” LATER. Well, later is not soon enough. I have an EMERGENCY for crying out loud. I may be dead later, how the hell am I suppose to call then!?? When or if you get through, and you ask the police to come out, you wait, and wait, and wait.... And 72 hours later they still haven’t arrived. Well guess what, by this time I AM DEAD! What is our country coming to? We don't get the protection we are supposed to. We don't have protection at all!! (S.A Chick, “Emergency?”, 10/10/2005).

Other posts with the same theme included “The Robots” (03/10/2005), “God Help Us” (07/10/2005), “Survival of the fittest” (08/10/2005), “State of the nation” (07/10/2005), and “What have I done?” (08/10/2005). However, there were also a few posts (five) that seemed to counter the blog’s dominant gloomy outlook on the ‘new’ South Africa. In one of them, **blue_peter** tries to comfort a fellow blogger, **Zephilia**:

Sorry to hear about the accident to your colleague, **zeph[ilia]**. And sick people preying on kids is always upsetting. But there is also some good news amidst the bad. Not much, admittedly but at least Bafana [the South African national soccer team] qualified for the [African] Cup of Nations next year. Sibusiso

²⁵ Interview with Matthew Buckland (15/10/2006). All statements and quotations from Buckland will be drawn from this interview.

Zuma was brilliant and did you see that he jumped into the (white) coach's arms after he scored the second goal? That was a sweet moment... (“monday morning”, 10/10/2005).

There were a few more posts of this nature (see “Who is poisoning whom?”, 03/10/2005; and “God help us”, 07/10/2005), but the number of ‘negative’ posts on the situation in the country by far outnumbered those with a positive outlook, by a ratio of almost 4 to 1. In addition, because there was a considerable number of posts that specifically focused on the SAPS – most of which depicted the police force as corrupt and ineffectual – this theme was coded for separately and is discussed below.

5.4.3 Theme three: “The SAPS has failed us”

There seemed to be a general feeling in the blog that the SAPS was failing to protect the country’s citizens and to control crime. The force was seen as corrupt, or generally inefficient and inept, or just plain lazy. Below is a typical post on this theme:

I had a robbery at my house mid last year...phoned 10111, 112, 911 and was told the popo [police] are on the way... 2 hours...8 hours... a day...2 days... a week... a month, a security company contract, electric fencing, infra red beams, panic buttons...3 months...a year and a half later, still waiting for them to arrive. On one phone call the station actuallyy [*sic*] told me, the cops got lost, and couldn't find my place so rather then go back and get a GOD DAMN MAP BOOK!!! The fuckers just rather though to go sit and play cards or beat up on some prisoners... never trust the police most of them are in with the criminals and syndicates anyway (**S.A Chick**, “Emergency?...”, 10/10/2005).

In another post, **God Help Us** felt that people in the country now had to take it upon themselves to solve crime, since the police kept bungling all investigations:

The SAPS have botched two murders that I know of. Had they investigated these murders – Jay Hirschberg and Tracey Thompson – properly and profesionally [*sic*], then someone would have been brought to book. But now after all the time lapse, evidence has either gone missing, destroyed or gone cold and any new detective would have a tough time, if not an impossible task to investigate these cases. The objective of this blog is to create awareness of these two cases and hopefyly [*sic*] someone, somewhere will take enough notice and help the parents of these two children... to find a way get the South African public and SAPS to sit up and help us. You can read more about these cases by logging on to: <http://www.sanguae.com/skop.html> and you can sign the petition to President Thabo Mbeki here: <http://www.sanguae.com/skoppetition.html>. Please South Africa, it’s not only us that needs your help, but many others who are in the same boat as us. We cannot do this on our own (“God Help Us”, 07/10/2005).

Lucretia Revisited also argued that with the lack of protection from the police, most South Africans were now going to resort to vigilantism, something which took the country a few centuries back on the “civilisation scale”:

People snigger and make “liberal” jokes about these fortified suburbs that are springing up all over the place. They say that this is a privilege of the rich and that it is actually forcing crime into other areas. That may be true. Tough Shit! It’s survival of the fittest, all over again. If a person doesn’t take charge of their own environment and safety, when the law enforcers obviously can’t do it for them, who else is going to do it? Moaning about it and blaming the police, isn’t the answer. Yes, it’s a feudal system. But it’s a system that works and as long as the SAPS can’t keep their finger on crime, more and more people will bandy together and resort to a lager mentality. We imagine we are sophisticated and that our lifestyle is ultra-trendy and modern but when you think about it, we are not much better off than the serfs were in the Middle Ages (“Survival of the Fittest”, 08/10/2005).

Another blogger, **NiK** added that he/she was “not overly impressed” with the general performance of the SAPS because of their “perrenial [*sic*] inevitable “lost docket” game, intermittent regular reports of corrupt practices and varied interpretations of justice according to status in society... not to mention stumbling around over all the clues” (“Viva Scorpions”, 07/10/2005). However, there was a post in which one blogger argued that the police were doing their best under the circumstances:

There’s a better way to register your frustration at the lack of progress wrt [with regards to] criminal investigations. The South African Police Service have launched an interactive site that encourages comments, leads, complaints etc. You can go to www.saps.gov.za. ... The police have a tough job - which admittedly they are not doing very well - but let’s be as constructive as we can in order to help them do their job better. At least we should give them credit for making an effort to encourage feedback (**blue_peter**, 07/10/2005).

Nevertheless, this sentiment was drowned by the chorus of posts criticising the police’s performance. A few entries under this theme also focused on the then on-going attempts by the government to merge the SAPS and the Scorpions²⁶ under one Ministry. Perhaps not surprisingly, most bloggers were fiercely opposed to the move, arguing that this would literally take the sting out of the Scorpions (see “Viva

²⁶ Established in 2001, the Directorate of Special Operations (more popularly known as the Scorpions) is a multi-disciplinary agency that focuses on organised crime and corruption. This crack force is seen by many South Africans as efficient and professional. In 2005, President Thabo Mbeki set up a commission to look into the Scorpion’s mandate, with a view of merging it with the SAPS. Many people protested at this proposed move, and it was eventually dropped this year (SAInfo, 2006).

Scorpions”, 07/10/2005; “In further defence of the Scorpions”, 10/10/2005; and “Gun control”, 26/10/2005; and “Scorpions and SAPS?”, 04/10/2005).

5.4.4 Theme four: “South Africa government policies are wrong”

Grouped under this theme were all posts where bloggers were critical of specific government policies, projects and programmes. There were 13 posts with this theme. Specific policies and projects such as the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE)²⁷ programme, the Gautrain project²⁸ and foreign policy came under severe attack in the blog. For example, BEE was viewed by some as inverted Apartheid-style racism:

The BEE programme... [is] a counter ‘Togetherheit’ programme which the government of SA calls BEE... It’s rapidly becoming more Byzantine than the Apartheid wankers dreamt of in their philosophy... This Togetherheit programme is turning into a quagmire of bureaucratic black tape as increasingly the beady eye of the State is brought to bear on every facet of commercial life; with the intention that no one should even contemplate any commercially oriented action that does not intimately involve a black person. Even black people have to be intimately involved with black people... One of the emerging downsides of the programme is that it creates discriminatory vested interest structures between competing black individuals. In having to make a decision to employ or share ownership with a statutory black person the most logical and sensible approach has to be to choose someone who is connected to the system in some way: someone that is, who is “greased”. Logically, therefore, when choosing between a competent qualified and skilled black person and a buffoon who represents the Party’s [ANC’s] interests or who has a cousin on the tender board: but both of whom can be considered as “having grease”, then centuries of history and present anecdotal evidence suggests that the latter gets the job. Grease always trumps merit... (NiK, “Why talk of interest rates”, 11/11/2005).

In a related post, **FruitundVeg** argued that such government policies as BEE and quota systems in sports actually worked to achieve the opposite end of their intentions – he/she felt they alienated the different races from each other and thus worked to engender, instead of eradicate, racism (“**S.A Chick**, your concern”, 10/10/2005).

²⁷ Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) is an affirmative action programme meant to redress the inequalities of Apartheid by giving previously disadvantaged groups – specifically Black Africans, Coloureds and Indians – economic opportunities previously not available to them. It includes measures such as employment equity, skills development, targets for ownership and preferential procurement (SAInfo, 2006).

²⁸ The Gautrain is a proposed 80-kilometre mass rapid transit railway system that will link Tshwane and Johannesburg. It is hoped that the system will offer commuters a viable transport service during South Africa’s hosting of the 2010 Soccer FIFA World Cup.

Another government initiative which was unpopular in the blog was the Gautrain project, which was viewed suspiciously by some as nothing but a gravy-train project:

The Gautrain mess brings up an obvious but interesting problem that never sees coverage in the mainstream press. It's usually assumed that investment is always good for an economy and thus the uplifting of the people. It is seldom reported as being detrimental to an economy. The Gautrain is a prime example of investment for the self-enrichment of the few with no regard for the long reaching social, economic and political ramifications of a first world project in a third world country. A first world country can for a time, absorb the blows of such rank profiteering (**bb_matt**, "When investment smells bad" 27/11/2005).

Other bloggers criticised the government for its environmentally-unfriendly policies ("Let us talk whaling", 07/10/2005; and "Harassment of sea turtles", 09/10/2005); defence spending ("Knockdown discount tanks", 04/10/2005); and foreign policy on Zimbabwe ("The Robots", 03/10/2005). One of the reasons proffered by Buckland on the high levels of pessimism on the blog was that maybe the blog was populated by a few similar-minded individuals, most of whom belonged to the erstwhile ruling class under Apartheid, but who now felt sidelined by the new multi-racial, post-Apartheid government:

First of all, internet [usage] in South Africa is not representative of the country, it is actually used by only 10% of the country and it is highly skewed towards wealthy South Africans, and that happens to be, generally speaking, white South Africans²⁹, so it is not surprising that you experience that kind of negativity online, specifically from white South Africans who haven't bought into the 'new' South Africa project.

Absence of scholarly research on the demographics of users of genres such as weblogs and chat forums in Africa means that it was difficult for this researcher to prove or disprove the above assertion for the continent. However, socio-economic factors, including levels of education, language and income, are highly correlated with the use of the internet the world over (Wilson, 1999:110). For example, studies in America and Europe reveal that most users of these genres tend to be primarily young adult professional white males, within the middle- to the upper-middle class income brackets (see Herring, 2003; Hill and Hughes, 1998). In South Africa, market research results have also revealed similar trends, with the majority of the internet users being

²⁹ Recent statistics put the number of South Africans with access to the internet at 5,100,000 as at September 2006, which represents about 10.4% of the population. However, it was difficult to confirm the demographic breakdown of these users (source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#za>)

Whites (21%), followed by ‘Coloureds’ and people of Asian origin (both 11%), and then Blacks (1.3%) (Dix, 2003). This means the public ‘sphere-ing’ made possible by the blog does not allow for ‘representative access’ (see section 2.2.1 above), something which renders it as exclusive and exclusionary as its bourgeois predecessor.

5.4.5 Theme five: “Gender issues, sexism and chauvinism”

There was also a group of posts which deserves mention that I grouped under the umbrella term “Gender issues, sexism and chauvinism”. This theme appeared 11 times in the sample. Included under the theme were all the posts which discussed gender inequality and sexism in relationships (especially in marriage). An example is **Memoria**’s post which asked: “Why is it tolerated for men to cheat and who gives them that right to cheat... why [do] most women feel that it's better for a man to cheat?” (in “Cheating”, 03/10/2005; see also “His wife doesn’t know”, 04/10/2005). Another post, “The politics of pregnancy”, queried gender role stereotyping which portrayed women as having no other role in life except that of motherhood and child-rearing (06/10/2005). Other posts grouped under this theme dealt with misogyny (“thirtysomething”, 03/10/2005; “For **Hanabi**”, 06/10/2005), sexual harassment of women in the workplace (“Loser bosses”, 18/10/2005), and sexual violence against women (“Refusal and Pixie Dust”, 26/10/2005).

There was also a group of posts that I included under this theme in which ‘fights’ often broke out between the bloggers after someone made a sexist comment in a discussion. For example, the post “Glossy living” (08/10/2005) started off with **Zephilia** expressing wonderment at the glossy lifestyles of the modern youth, but quickly degenerated into an ugly war of words, as accusations of chauvinism were made. Part of the thread is quoted extensively below:

Zephilia:

Almost everyday when I arrive for work, I feel slightly anxious. I never felt this way at varsity, but as I get older I feel uncertain... I know its got a lot to do with self-esteem issues. But lately I've been wondering if it also doesn't have a lot to do with the fact that everyone around me looks like they've just stepped off the pages of a fashion magazine. Their clothes, their hair and their make-up are amazing. And these are just students. How in god's name do they manage? Not only do they look like models, but some of them are driving the

flashiest cars around. BMW A1's and the new mini, just to mention a few... The price of clothes is horrendous. How can anyone justify paying so much money for an outfit that is going to be around for one season?

Fcuk The System:

It's an epidemic. You're a woman, I presume. Lots of sex will cure your anxieties, trust me.

Hanabi:

It's a plague. You're a man, I presume, **Fcuk**? Lots of sex might help to clear that pretentious brain of yours - you've forgotten to keep your little pose. Didn't you know, that kind of comment is what dumb drunk men make in bars, not wannabe intellectuals who correspond with [Noam] Chomsky.

Zephilia:

Obviously... Dear **Fcuk**: When I wrote my blog I knew it was brainless blabber. But so what? You had a choice to read it. If you don't like the content, move on. My point is that people, including men, are so concerned with their looks and what they drive. I don't know if I want to live in a world like this, because it is affecting me. And I hate it.

blue_peter:

Yeah, **Fcuk** get your brain out of the gutter for a second. Actually I wonder whether you aren't just taking the piss... but, **Z[ephilia]**, I agree with you about the attitude of students. It's sad that we have become such a materialistic society. ("Glossy living", 08/10/2005)

In a related post, **Hanabi**, **blue_peter** and **Jay** attributed the prevalence of what they felt were high levels of misogyny in the blog to the "high testosterone levels" of Blogmark users, arguing that the blog was too much of a male dominated terrain ("For **Jay**", 08/10/2005). Further, **Hanabi** revealed in the questionnaire that while Blogmark users in general could easily discuss issues like racism and racial inequalities, she felt that they were not so open-minded when it came to discussing issues about sexism and gender inequality: "Some other issues would be fine, such as racism. Gender issues I've blogged about – these are the most sensitive ones for me – and I've gotten a lot of flak for it (from a few people, admittedly, but it got really ugly)...". (16/06/2006). Thus, it would seem that even though the bloggers cannot see each other, they seem to guess at each others' sex and they then engage with each other based on these guesses. This seems to have a negative effect on the nature of interaction on the blog as these guesses are factored into the way the bloggers address each other and reply to each other's posts as shown the above example. It will be illustrated below how the bloggers' acquired online statuses are actually used by

others to ‘bully’ or seek to intimidate the other less well-known bloggers from freely participating in the discussions in the blog.

The last theme that was chosen for analysis relates to the issue of racism and race relations. It would seem, contrary to **Hanabi**’s assertion above, that race was also another contentious issue in the blog, as it often provoked strong reactions from bloggers whenever it was brought up for discussion.

5.4.6 Theme six: “Racism, race relations and xenophobia”

This theme, which included all posts on race relations, slavery, interracial relationships, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, occurred 11 times in the sample. Three related posts were chosen for illustration purposes.

In the first post (“New blogger”, 07/10/2005), **S.A Chick** asked: “I have just registered on Blogmark. So I am a new blogger. I would really appreciate it if someone out there can reply to my blog, titled [*sic*] “Racism in Nightclubs?” I really need to know wheter [*sic*] I’ve got my facts straight or not.” This query was met with a flurry of responses, some of which accused **S.A Chick** of “digging up the past”:

Let us FCK the system and call it racism. Some night clubs have a distinct cliental, like in Verulam, Phoenix and Diepkloof. I will not go to these night clubs, but I will not call them racists. Why are we always calling on race when we cannot have it our way? What a shame. Let us move on and stop digging up the past. Some night clubs in Pongola will not allow a white man in, they say it in your face, you are there to fck their woman and you must leave soonest (**Whitey**, 09/10/2005).

Although this particular post had a good number of comments (seven) and an average number of reads (240), it would seem that **S.A Chick** was not satisfied with the feedback, hence, he/she decided to post the topic again on another day:

I heard on the radio a couple of weeks back that an Indian group, trying to get into a nightclub in Pretoria was not allowed in. The bouncers said that it wasn't because of their skin colour that they were turned away, but because of the way they were dressed. I know that some clubs in Pretoria have certain dress codes. But we all know that Indians usually dress fairly good. I would just like to know whether anyone out there has any idea what happened to that story. And which club it is (**S.A Chick**, “Racism in Nightclubs?”, 10/10/2005).

This post got an even higher number of reads (442) and recorded the highest number of comments (33) for a single post in the entire sample. However, an in-depth analysis of the dialogue revealed that most of the comments ranged from the trivial, to the downright dismissive and insulting. For example, **Hari Seldon** retorted that **S.A Chick** was “[too] trigger happy” by making unfounded racism claims (10/10/2005). The majority of the replies in the thread turned out to be jokes laden with sexual innuendo and sarcastic humour, with one blogger, **FruitundVeg**, leading from the front by accusing **S.A Chick** of instigating a misguided race crusade. The thread soon degenerated into a war of words between the two bloggers, with **FruitundVeg** taking every slightest opportunity to poke fun at **S.A Chick**, and arguing that the topic the latter was bringing up was “boring”. In the end, **S.A Chick** was warned by another blogger (**Micatyro**) that: “if you can't handle a bit of ‘rude’, this place [[Blogmark](#)] is gonna hurt ya [you]” (10/10/2005).

Thus, for the second time in a row, **S.A Chick**'s query about racism in South African nightclubs was not addressed at all, with the discussion being drowned instead by sexual banter. Perhaps fortunately for **S.A Chick**, the topic was restarted again in another post by **Dreaded Outsider** (“**S.A Chick**, your concern”, 10/10/2005). In this post, **Tafelberg** reminded the blogger that racism was a worldwide phenomenon, and not something that was specific to South Africa alone:

It's not just in SA. Are you trying to kid anyone that racism is only a phenomenon in South Africa? It's worldwide and in many countries that didn't go through the history that SA did, it's far worse because it's covert. If they want to find an excuse to exclude you, they'll find it, even if they just say they're full. That's why they have dress codes, it's just a pathetic weasel excuse for racism or class discrimination (**Tafelberg**, 10/10/2005).

Tafelberg was supported by **Hanabi**, who accused **S.A Chick** of naïvety. However, this time, the discussion was conducted in an orderly fashion, with each discussant sticking to the original topic of the post – although **S.A Chick** also “got a lot of flak” (**Hanabi**, Questionnaire, 16/06/2006) for broaching the subject:

Hanabi:

Sigh you're how old, 23? You've lived where else except SA? Oh, england[*sic*]... I lived in Japan for five years and I can tell you a few things about 19th century racial discrimination there ... I suggest you grow up a bit more, travel a bit more and get a bit better informed before you make statements like the above.

S.A Chick:

Concentrate on problems in your own country It's not about whether there is racism in other countries or not. South Africa is supposed to have no racial discrimination whatsoever since 1994. We are South Africans and we need to focus more on the problem here. That's why nothing gets done in the end coz everybody is too concerned about what goes on in other countries, and they don't concentrate on the issues in their own.

FruitundVeg:

Naive! You have to be to make a statement like "South Africa is supposed to have no racial discrimination whatsoever since 1994." Your insignificant little nightclub incident aside, I'm afraid that many Seffricans [South Africans] still regard each other with a little suspicion, and in some extreme cases, possibly burning hatred. With a past like we've had, it will take more than the passing of a single generation to wipe out the harm that has been perpetrated by a set of unjust laws dedicated to oppressing the larger part of our society. To end... while concepts based on the colour of one's skin, like Affirmative Action, quotas/transformation in sport and Black Economic Empowerment, remain a legislated part of our society, racial discrimination will be an ongoing problem in SA. Everyday there are accusations and reports of racism in the Halls of Justice, Parliament, business, places of education, sports... Maybe someday it will all go away; where we are able to leave the past behind us, live for the present and the future, and co-exist in love, peace and harmony.

MedusaJane:

Racism in SA is not just a "white" thing. Reports from primary school that Khani says "*stupid umlungu*" (stupid white person). He learnt that somewhere, and since he's eight, he learnt that post-1994...

Dreaded Outsider:

Racism is a big issue. I socialise and party sometimes in a pretty mixed crowd. I never really get into awkward situations but then I do not frequent places in Melrose, Bryanston, Rivonia, etc...

S.A Chick:

Race shouldn't be a problem. Why can't we all just live in peace and harmony. If you don't like someone, leave them alone and just let them be. Why stare, why give sly remarks. They didn't hurt you, why try and hurt them?

Micatyro:

It's bigger than race It's called differentism - ask any kid who's been bullied at school because he wears glasses, anyone in a wheelchair who can't gain access to a toilet in a shopping centre, the fat guy who has to book two airplane seats because they only allow for "normal" sized people to sit in them. If the whole human race suddenly went blind and deaf we'd all start discriminating against people who smelled different. So come on out and party **Tafelberg**, spread the love and let's get this gene pool flattened out a bit. In a couple of thousand years the human race will be beige with vaguely slanted eyes - or just little pieces of charred, blackened dust (10-11/10/2005).

This thread can be used as a good example of the possibility of achieving the Habermasian ideal of people engaging with each other online on a topical issue through the medium of talk, in the way that we saw a ‘rational’ debate being conducted by the bloggers over the issue of racism (this point will be returned to below). Habermas’s ideal of a public sphere is one in which private-individuals-as-citizens meet in a public space to discuss issues of mutual concern with each other (in an unrestricted fashion), with the aim of achieving some sort of compromise over the issue being debated. In the above example, Blogmark users discuss racism in South Africa, with some arguing that it is an issue that needs to be remedied.

The next section of the discussion investigates the level of debates in the sampled posts. Debate is a central feature of the concept of the public sphere, without which there is no public sphere to talk about.

5.5 Qualitative features: presence of debates

Using the distinction between debates and conversations adopted from Hill and Hughes’ (1998) study of America Online’s Usenet groups (see Chapter Four), the study’s findings revealed that an overwhelming number posts in the sample were not debates. In fact, only 32 (29%) out of the 112 sampled posts were classifiable as debates, while 80 posts (71%) were not debates (see Fig. 4 below).

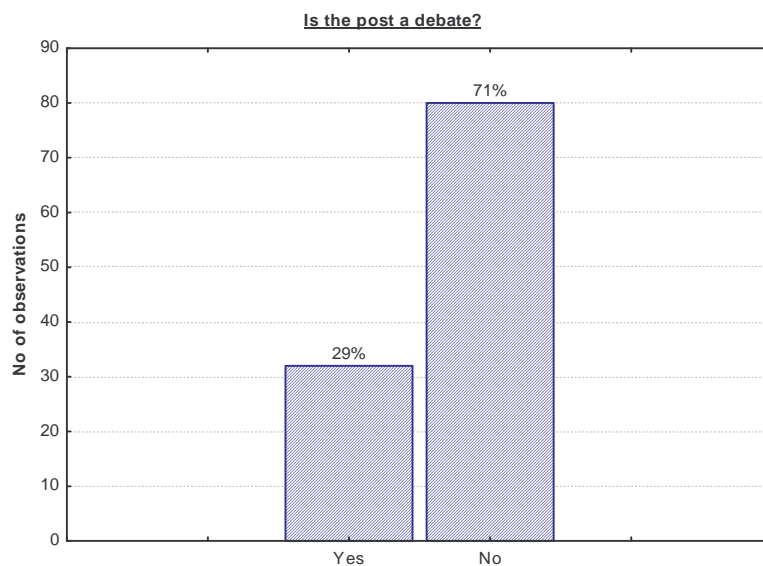


Figure 4: A graphic representation of the presence/absence of debates in the sample.

Some of the bloggers themselves complained that they found the blog too “chatty” and too “forumy” (“So is this [Blogmark](#)”, 26/10/2005), and they blamed this on the website’s administrators, whom they accused of stifling debate in the way that they deleted posts that might otherwise have initiated heated debates. Thus, **Lucretia Revisited** pointed out that [Blogmark](#) was more of a “glorified discussion board” than a blog (“So is this [Blogmark](#)”, 26/10/2005). Buckland, however, argued that moderation was done in order to stop offensive posts being published on the website, and not to stifle debate:

To say that we censor and stifle debate is an unfair comment from the bloggers... because by far the majority of blog posts are [kept] and we do not take them down... 99% of the blogs go through but there is a percentage of blogs that unfortunately we need to regulate or take down if they transgress our rules. It is not a free-for-all, [because] it is under the [Mail & Guardian Online](#) site so they have to adhere to our values: we are anti-hate speech, we are anti-racism, we are anti-gender insensitivity, and we are anti-pornography. So if there are those transgressions, we will take those blogs down and we make it very clear to bloggers in our Terms and Conditions.

While some bloggers can argue that the hosts’ heavy-handedness had the overall effect of stifling debate, it was also evident that, at times, debate was not high on the agenda of some of them, who professed to seeing the blog as more of a “playground” than anything else. According to **Dionysus_Stoned**:

The blog is more like a playground where people in offices around the country go to socialise during their proverbial “break time”. Certainly this is not how everyone uses [it], but it is the hegemonic tendency. Still, debates happen and I guess this feeds into how we come to view different issues (Questionnaire, 18/06/2006).

In fact, as has been illustrated above, there were only a few instances where bloggers actually discussed issues seriously, without letting personal vendettas and ribald humour ‘dilute’ the deliberations. This tendency obviously had a negative impact on the presence and quality of debates in the blog. Perhaps one can, as a result, see how Habermas’s insistence that interlocutors in the public sphere should always put aside their personal interests (so that issues can be tackled in an environment that is relatively free from individual power plays) has some validity and applicability even in online forms such as these. It would seem that there are some bloggers who had acquired some sort of online status and are more dominant and popular than others in

the blog, and who tended to use this dominance to ‘bully’ the other newer or less popular bloggers. For example, in the thread on racism in South Africa quoted above (10/10/2005), it is clear that **FruitundVeg** uses his/her popularity with the other older members of the blog to poke fun at **S.A Chick**, and actually succeeds to get ‘support’ of the other bloggers, who only can warn **S.A Chick** that he/she has to be prepared to face a bit of rudeness in the blog. Other examples of individual power plays between the bloggers include “For **Hanabi**” (06/10/2005); “**FuV** bends over” (07/10/2005); and “Working title” (07/10/2005).

On the other hand, other bloggers blamed the lack of constructive debates in the blog on what he felt was a tendency by most bloggers in the site to be so consumed in their own viewpoints that they did not have time to listen to what others had to say:

It was just getting too cramped there. Notice I didn't use the word *dialogue*. Read on... and you'll get a good example of what I was saying earlier, about us bloggers having conversations with ourselves. I say this up front, ...you, like the rest of us, are so wrapped up in your own view of the world that you can't see the wood for the trees, no-one can see what's really going on... Hey, don't get me wrong, I can relate. But it's quite a sad indictment as to the human condition, I'd say... that even with the advantage of careful consideration, which is an opportunity afforded to us as bloggers, we just ricochet off each other, go off and have a completely insular experience, then end up describing that experience, trying to pass it off as dialogue... Huh? And that's what happens in the world at large; that's how we communicate... This has been... a beautiful illustration of the over-intellectualised garbage that IS Blogmark. You're all the fucking same, and I'm including myself, you're all COMPLETELY out of control. (**Jack Tonsil**, “For AA”, 18/10/2005).

While internet utopians argue that as more and more people connect to the web, viable online communities will form around which individuals acting as citizens will influence political decision-making, the dystopians conversely fear that “the flood of information provided by the internet will wash up a large share of misinformation that does nothing but obscure sensible political dialogue” (Hill and Hughes, 1998:181). Judging from the above findings, one can see the reality of the dystopians’ fears: very few issues were debated in the sampled posts, and in that small number of posts which have elements of debate, only a few of these debates were conducted in the ‘serious’ and thoughtful manner of the Habermasian ideal.

However, there were still some posts that had good quality debates, notably those that focused on the lack of freedom of speech on the blog (see 5.4.1 above). In current affairs, the posts “God Help Us” (07/10/2005), “Viva Scorpions!” (07/10/2005, and “In further defence of the Scorpions” (09/10/2005), also had some quality debates. Environmental issues (“A New Style of Wealth”, 04/10/2005) and discussions on social ills like alcohol and drug abuse (“**RAZORSPIKE**”, 09/10/2005), also contained quality debates. Thus, despite the low numbers of debates in the sample, some bloggers still professed to enjoy a high level of “intellectual” engagement on the blog:

I’ve enjoyed a lot of the intellectual stimulation on BM [Blogmark] but recently a higher percentage goes right over my head. Some days I think it's just me and then occasionally I realise not. I think being deliberately obscure can indeed be pompous and that there is no need. On the other hand, I enjoy a good play with words and perhaps I just can't be as bothered as what some are, to ponder the stuff that gets complicated (**Jay**, “For **Jay**”, 09/10/2005).

Further, a few international current affairs like the USA’s “War on terror” (“Lies of war”, 03/10/2005; “Terrorist bombings”, 18/10/2005) and the Brazilian referendum (“Gun control”, 26/10/2005) were also characteristic of the Habermasian “rational-critical” debates.

Another fruitful area of the evaluation concerned investigating the presence (or absence) of emotionally-charged language and insults in the sampled posts. The findings of this investigation are discussed in the following section.

5.6 Qualitative features: presence of insults or ‘flames’

In this section, I sought to measure the “rationality” with which discussions were carried out in the blog. This was achieved by counting the instances where insults and emotionally-charged language were used during deliberations. This was an attempt to assess the blog against another of the Habermasian conditions that discussions in the public sphere must be conducted in a manner that is rational and sober, and not emotional. Insults or ‘flames’ pose an obvious obstacle to the thoughtful debate of the Habermasian ideal, one of which is to deter some people from free participation. Indeed, **Hanabi** revealed that the amount of “flak” she got from some “extremely antagonistic” bloggers whenever she tried to bring up issues on gender inequality for

discussion in the blog forced her to become a bit reserved and guarded (Questionnaire, 16/06/2006).

However, the results of the study revealed that the blog was relatively free of ‘flames’, with only 26 posts (23%) containing emotionally-charged language, instances of swearing and bloggers trading insults. Perhaps the important thing to be drawn from these findings is that even in the heat of debate, arguers in Blogmark are still able to keep their cool and deliberate in a sober fashion. However, there were still some posts that contained extreme cases of insults, anger outbursts and cursing. For example, **Whitey** in “Let us Talk Whaling” (07/10/2005) and “What have I done?” (08/10/2005), used such phrases as “Shit Face” and “Ass wipe” in reference to an allegedly corrupt local politician. **Hanabi** observed that the anonymity associated with blogging afforded some people a chance to say things that they may not otherwise say in a face-to-face public discussion:

Some important issues have been raised and some bloggers have debated it intelligently, it’s true. However, my very own experience has been extremely negative [with regards to] gender issues specifically. I have blogged about it assuming that it could be a space for intelligent and open-minded discussion, but it seldom worked like that. I’ve experienced the most astonishingly ugly attacks from one blogger in particular. And that highlights a particular problem with blogs and forums of this nature – because it is anonymous, people often say things that they would not say to a person’s face. This leads to unproductive pointless exchanges of hostility (**Hanabi**, Questionnaire, 16/06/2006).

These findings are in keeping with an assertion made in Chapter Four that ‘flaming’ or ‘ranting and raving’ is a common attribute of online forms of public interaction such as these, owing largely to the anonymity that is synonymous with them.

5.7 Qualitative features: “critical scrutiny”

In this section, I probed the attitude of the bloggers towards the state (and government), the market (capital) and the media. An ideal Habermasian public sphere is critical of institutionalised forms of power (such as government and corporate bodies), as a way of bringing those with power into public scrutiny, and hence, accountability. In determining the attitude of bloggers, it was important to take into account the overall ‘tone’ within which a statement was made. For example, a phrase

like “corporate greed” could not be inferred solely on the basis of how frequently it appeared in a post, but on the specific context in which it was used.

5.7.1 *The state and government*

There was a widespread dissatisfaction with various governments in the blog, with many bloggers expressing unhappiness with regard to their policies and programmes (see Section 5.4.2 to 5.4.4.). According to Fig. 6 below, of the 32 posts that mentioned the state and government, an overwhelming 29 (or 91%) were critical of government, while only three (9%) were neutral. No post was pro- or supportive of government. Seven of these references were directed towards governments of other countries (i.e., other than South Africa - specifically the governments of the USA, Britain, Australia and Brazil). The rest of the references (25) focused on the South African government.

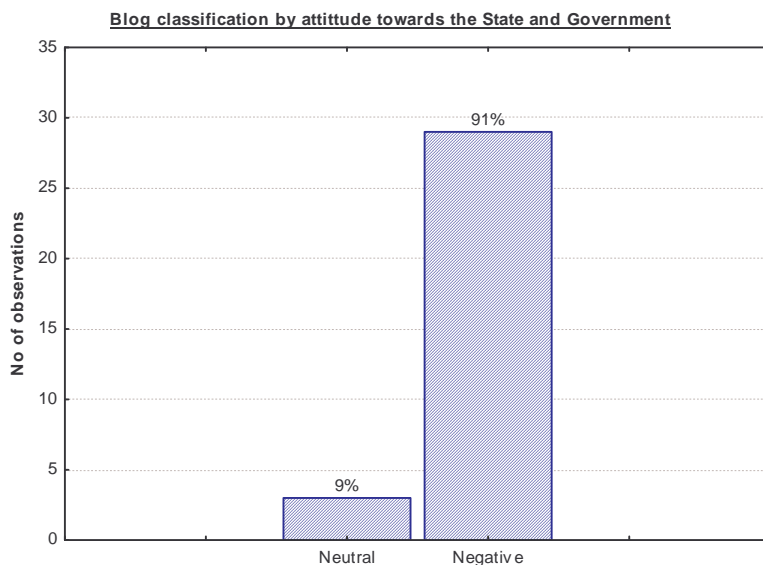


Figure 5: Blog classification by direction (attitude) towards the state and government.

One blogger remarked that the South African government was “abound with people who have mental illness or are members of Alcoholics Anonymous” (“Who is poisoning whom?” 03/10/2005), while another mentioned that: “they [the government] are on a self-destruction coarse [sic]” (07/10/2005). For **biggles**, the South African government just cannot seem to get anything right:

I drive through a set of traffic lights half a dozen times a day and run the gauntlet of black and white joke sellers, toy sellers, cross-dressers, rubbish collectors and a few unashamed beggars. The flower sellers call me ‘captain’ or ‘my hero’ and risk an untimely death by dodging in and out of the traffic.

My space is invaded by entrepreneurs, preserving their dignity by aggressively marketing their wares or their abject poverty. As I look straight ahead with my window up wondering what has happened to my constitutional right of privacy, what happens to the Lotto billions, why we need new submarines and planes and why we are bailing out a neighbouring country when there is such a need for basic subsistence at home? (**biggles**, “The Robots”, 3/10/2005).

As I have already stated above, most of the hostility towards the South African government was directed at the state security agencies and state-owned companies. In addition, the Head of State, Thabo Mbeki, also came under attack for allegedly being out of touch with the realities of the people he governs (“State of the Nation”, 07/10/2005).

5.7.2 Market

All eight posts in this category were anti-market. Criticism of capitalism focused on the rise of consumerism, materialism, and the resultant environmental degradation:

WEALTHY South Africans still consume more resources than their poor compatriots. Emitting up to 500 times more carbon dioxide, burning 1000 times more fossil fuel, eating 15 % more beef, chicken and fish, and contributing up to 700% more pollution in the form of waste, non-recyclables and disposable products... the rich are getting richer by exploiting the earth’s limited resources and the poor are getting poorer because of the failure to address the wealth gap in terms other than simple production and consumption... Heavy sports utility vehicles (SUVs) for example, are commonly featured in South African motoring columns, are yet not only are they uneconomical but responsible for burning oil at a rate that now exceeds the planets ability to deliver proven oil resources. A simple boycott by motoring journalists would deny manufacturers free advertising. Money spent on developing SUVs could be better spent on giving all South Africans access to cheap and environmentally friendly transportation systems - instead, industry continues to pump out large automobiles as they naively expect poverty alleviation to emerge alongside sustainable development - a trickle-down economics that, would in theory, uplift the poor to similar levels of over-consumption (**david robert lewis**, “A New Style of Wealth”, 04/10/2005).

In another post, **david robert lewis** blamed the slow progress on the implementation of social welfare programmes like the Basic Income Grant (BIG) on “market fascists” and “market liberals” who were depicted as greedy and insensitive to the needs of the poor (“BIG”, 26/10/2005). Other anti-market posts included, among others, “New Age Media Moguls” (10/10/2005), “Mail & Guardian going broke” (26/10/2005), “How safe is our money?” (03/11/2005) and “Hold on please” (19/11/2005).

5.7.3 Media

The media are a central part of the public sphere as they provide the ‘raw materials’ for discussions in this sphere. Indeed, the study’s respondents revealed that newspapers like the Sunday Times, the Cape Times, The Star, The Independent, Business Day, and the Mail & Guardian; radio (mainly SAFM); and TV (SABC, etv and Sky TV), were the major sources of some of the issues that they sometimes blogged about on Blogmark. According to the study’s findings below, there was a total of 21 direct references to the media in the sample, and of these, 11 (52%) were negative, while 8 (38%) were neutral, and the remaining 2 (10%) were positive.

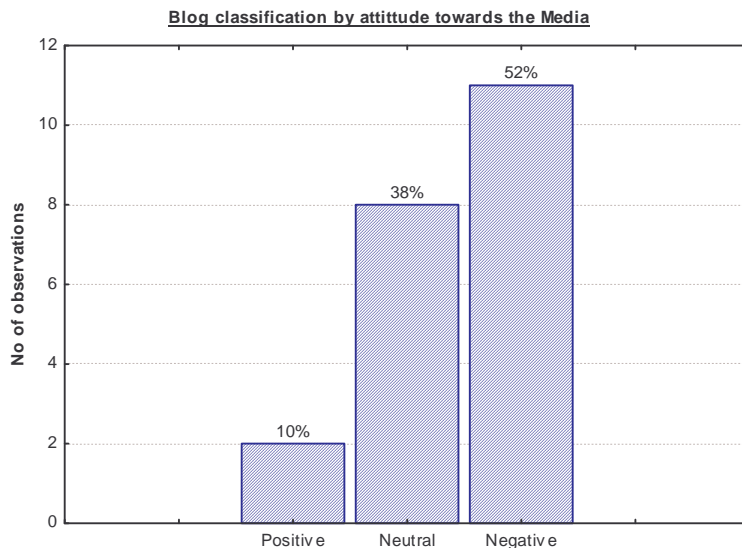


Figure 6: Blog classification by direction (attitude) towards the media

Criticism of the international media was mainly with regards to their coverage of the USA’s “War on Terror”, with many bloggers accusing the media of being complicit in the war (“Who is poisoning whom?”, 03/10/2005; “Lies of war”, 03/10/2005). The international media were also criticised for being over-protective of ‘big business’ and politicians (“Me & Chomsky”, 06/10/2005). The Australian media, in particular, came under harsh criticism from **Gideon Poyla** for failing to expose that country’s alleged racist foreign policies (“Democratic tyranny”, 07/10/2005).

The South African media were also accused of crimes of omission. For example, **bb_matt** expressed surprise at how silent the mainstream media were on the “bad investment” that was the Gautrain project (27/11/2005), while **ghynx** pointed out that blogs like Blogmark were doing a tremendous job in keeping people informed about

current affairs, “Seeing as we can’t count on the [mainstream] media for truthful information [anymore]” (“**RAZORSPIKE**”, 10/10/2005). For **Whitey**, newspapers were nothing but a waste of precious natural resources:

Say Martinus [van Schalkwyk – Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism] had Balls... He would do the right thing and ban all printed media. Why? Because off all the millions of tons of green house gas produced for this literate verbal diarrhea [*sic*] to be sold on every street corner. All the millions of hectares of natural forest and habitat devastated to make way for your precious paper to be manufactured... (“Say Martinus had Balls”, 09/10/2005).

There was also a deep distrust of the commercialised media, which were seen as no longer fulfilling their role of keeping the public informed because they were so caught up in the race for profit. For example, in a discussion on racism, **Hari Seldon** said the media were guilty of regularly ‘spicing up’ issues in order to attract readers, and thus advised fellow bloggers to always take what the media say with a pinch of salt:

When the media gets holds of a story on supposed racism one has to view it through a cynical lense [*sic*] as they, especially tabloids lover [*sic*] to bump up the story a bit. Not saying that that is what happened here but it could have been a dress code problem. I'm quite open minded but I wouldn't go to a cross dressing party in Melville... Don't presume that because the media use the r word that that is what actually happened. Telling readers that people were turned away because they were improperly dressed doesn't sell papers. (“Racism in Nightclubs?”, 10/10/2005).

The same distrust was also displayed by **Dreaded Outsider**, who argued that while racism was an issue in South Africa, the media tended to exaggerate it: “Remember the media need sales and listenership and saying people were turned away for dress code doesn't interest the public.” (“**S.A Chick**, your concern”, 10/10/2005). Other examples include posts by **Fcuk The System**, who always signed off all his/her posts with a Chomskian quotation: “The media are, effectively, corporations that sell privileged audiences to other businesses, and naturally, we would expect them to reflect the perspectives of the sellers, the buyers and the product” (see “Me & Chomsky”, 06/10/2005).

Case study: “New Age Media Moguls”

Perhaps the most illustrative case study of the bloggers’ attitude towards the media is **david robert lewis**’s post “New Age Media Moguls”, in which the blogger accused the Independent Media Group (IMG) of corporate greed (10/10/2005). The post also

linked to two other articles written by David Robert Lewis entitled “New age media moguls” and “Independent Media Group colluded with apartheid” which appeared in an online magazine, The size issue. The articles in question allege that the IMG admitted to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that “it failed in the area of human rights and colluded with the apartheid state, arguing that ‘the commercial nature of the company limited its political role in exposing apartheid abuses’” (2006:8b). This post seems to have attracted the attention of the IMG, with the editor-in-chief of the group, Peter Sullivan, dismissing the claims in the post as nothing more than fanciful thinking in a local monthly magazine, The Media:

This imaginative linking of fancy unto fancy reads like the search for weapons of mass destruction... it is mischievous, reeks of conspiratorial rot, and the idea that the Sunday Independent's front page is for sale to the highest bidder or one that's in our pocket – is both absurd and actionable (“Enron of the media”: 2006:6).

While it was not within the scope of this study to analyse the veracity of the blogger's claims, or indeed the IMG's rebuttal, what is perhaps more important here is that this is an example of how a weblog can kick-start a debate which can spill over to a wider audience beyond the enclave of the blogging community, and across different media. Thus, while the original post did not seem to attract a lot of attention from the Blogmark users (it only had 178 reads and two comments), it did generate a lot of interest ‘offline’. While I did not come across any other blogs of this kind within the study's sample, it is possible that this may not be an isolated case where deliberations in the blog sometimes spill over to involve a larger public. These findings are in keeping with the findings of other studies of how bloggers use the form to start up issues that end up being topical even in the mainstream media (see, for example, Singer, 2005; Deuze, 2003; Kerbel and Bloom, 2005; and Hiler, 2002).

The next section of the chapter analyses the implication of these findings, and evaluates the usefulness of Blogmark as a virtual public sphere.

5.8 Utility of Blogmark

It was argued in Chapter Two that in modern mass society, arrangements that accommodate a plurality of smaller public spheres (or ‘public sphericules’) better

realise the Habermasian ideal of private citizens getting involved in public debates than a single over-arching public sphere. A public sphericule is characterised by small circles constituted around affinity interests, into which private individuals gather around to deliberate on issues of particular concern to them (Curran, 1996). Borrowing from this model, it is arguable that Blogmark is one such public sphericule, which allows a certain portion of the South African citizenry to meet online to talk about issues of concern. Further, this modern form of public interaction is not as 'rigid' as the bourgeoisie public sphere was in three ways. First, it allows virtually anyone who has access to the internet, the time and the capacity to join in the fray. Secondly, any topic and any issue can be brought up for discussion. Besides pornography, copyrighted and defamatory material, no issue is ruled off limits in this sphere; even issues previously regarded as being too personal and private, like sex and marital problems are discussed freely here. Thirdly, unlike the bourgeois public sphere, Blogmark seems to allow for women to be part of the discussions. Although it is impossible to draw broader generalisations beyond the questionnaire sample, the fact that two of the five bloggers who responded to the questionnaire were women can be used to support this assertion. However, it is also important to note that despite the presence of women in the blog, it would seem that issues such as gender equality and racial equality were still viewed as peripheral and "boring" (see "Racism in Nightclubs?", 10/10/2005), and were never really discussed in a manner that reflected this apparent inclusivity. The implication here is that the inclusiveness of the blog is on the surface, as most bloggers do not seem to want to embrace issues like gender equality as topics worthy of 'serious' debate. In fact, as the results showed, one female blogger complained to another that the blog was too much of a male dominated terrain, a feature which forced her to be careful about the topics she brought up for discussion ("For **Hanabi**", 06/10/2005).

However, as the study showed, the blog is an unusual and interesting public space – it presents people from anywhere in the world with a means to converse on a relatively even footing. With the ever-rising number of new bloggers in the cyberspace, it is arguable that blogs such as these are making their small but not insignificant contribution to the number of voices that can be heard in the public realm. This argument was also echoed by Buckland, who noted that while it may still be too early to say with any certainty how the 'blogosphere' will actually shape public opinion,

there was a high likelihood that weblogs will be very useful as public forums for debate, especially once the internet becomes accessible to the majority of the people:

Well, only if the internet can represent the diversity of our country to a greater extent and there is constructive debate, the platform and the tools are there... I think blogs could be immensely valuable for enhancing public debate in South Africa. This is because the blog format allows ordinary people without resources or technical skills to publish for free, to be out there and to make a noise and that's a fantastic thing.

While not all discussions in Blogmark were not typical of the ideal Habermasian “rational-critical” debates that lead to the formation of public opinion, the blog, nevertheless, showed that it does have a role to play in the broader processes of citizen engagement and public participation in the way that it enabled a group of physically distant individuals to meet online to share ideas, discuss politics and current affairs. The relative popularity of the subjects ‘Current affairs’ and ‘Politics’ over, say, ‘Online diary’ or ‘Short story’ (both in terms of number of posts and reads, supports this assertion. Further, the study showed that, in the true Habermasian fashion, the blog served as a space in which the actions of the state and government, the market and the media were subjected to critical public scrutiny. Governments in general were subject to a lot of criticism, as they were seen as increasingly failing their constituencies the world over. That the actions of the political and business elites are subjected to public scrutiny and debate facilitated by the media is one of the defining features of the concept of the public sphere. Taking this view, one can see how the internet, through such form as weblogs, is inevitably going to bring people to a virtual roundtable where issues are debated in public, and authorities are held accountable.

However, the internet also has the potential for balkanising society and increasing the gap between those who can participate in citizenship and those who cannot. Indeed, Blogmark has both these trends – at one time it, exhibits characteristics of an all-inclusive public realm for individuals to meet and exchange ideas, while in other times, it is like an online community of people who have the same views on politics and current affairs (for example, on the performance of the South African government). Thus, one blogger remarked that: “forums, or in our case, blogs like this tend to get a bit closed (within a small community), radical or generally dogmatic or

fundamentalist” (Cath, “So is this Blogmark”, 26/10/2005). However, while it is important to acknowledge that the public sphere offered by the internet is only open to those with the resources necessary for participation (contributing to a sphere that is as exclusive and elitist as Habermas’s bourgeois model), the study argues that the diffusion of technology has enriched the possibilities for citizen participation, through the provision of alternative opportunities for public interaction for the citizenry.

In other words, the utility of such forms may lie in how they link with the larger public sphere in the ‘real’ world through, for example, providing quality feedback to journalists at the Mail & Guardian, and also acting as a source of news for the newspaper. However, as Buckland revealed, Blogmark is yet to reach that stage where it acts as a source of news for the newspaper, largely because the newspaper does not have enough staff to monitor all the posts for news leads. However, the blog has been useful, especially during the London subway bombings in July 2005, where South Africans based in London were asked to blog their experiences of the tragic event. It was pointed out in Chapter Two that the provision of more immediate and personal angles to news is one way in which weblogs can collaborate with traditional media in order to enrich the information that is circulating in the public domain.

Blogmark is a mixture of the ‘serious’ and the ‘not-so-serious’, with a few posts leading to animated debates, while most are more like casual conversations, laced with humour and personal anecdotes. The former group of posts tended to be focused on politics and current affairs, environmental issues, race, and gender issues, while the later group focused on music, television and the arts; as well as on sex, relationships, and alcohol and drug abuse. While some of the ‘serious’ debates were often ‘diluted’ by sexual banter and were left unresolved, some were taken through to their ‘logical end’, with those involved showing a high level of debating skills.

While discussions of some issues (like censorship and freedom of expression) were debated in a more relaxed and easy-going manner, some, like gender inequality and racism, were tension-filled, with different bloggers exhibiting strongly held convictions and beliefs, often a recipe for heated arguments. While some posts were eye-opening and seemed to be clearly thought out and well-written, some appeared more like ‘rants’, produced in the heat of the moment, without much regard for

grammar, spelling or structure. Further, some posts exhibited high levels of interactivity, with many people joining in to discuss a certain topic, while others were like online monologues.

The bloggers themselves did not know what to make of this mix, with some calling it a “glorified discussion board” (**Lucretia Revisited**, 26/10/2005), while others were even harsher, referring to the practice of blogging as nothing more than “over-intellectualised garbage” (**Jack Tonsil**, “For AA”, 18/10/2005). Others, on the other hand, still found the blog “a space for intelligent and open-minded discussion” (**Hanabi**, Questionnaire, 16/06/2006), where they experienced a bit of “intellectual stimulation” (**Jay**, “For **Jay**”, 09/10/2005). For the M&G Online, the idea of starting up the blog was, according to the editor, to: “give the readers a platform where they can express their own views [on various issues] and to conduct their own [debates and discussions]”.

When asked if they viewed the blog as a useful forum for public debate, four of the study’s five respondents said yes they did, while only one (**Hanabi**) of them said no for two reasons. First, **Hanabi** said she did not find it useful because only about 20 to 30 people usually took part in the deliberations at any given time, and secondly, she felt there were a lot of “unproductive [and] pointless exchanges of hostility” among bloggers that tended to swamp the discussions (**Hanabi**, Questionnaire, 16/06/06). However, those who felt that the blog had an immense potential as a public sphere pointed to the fact that “topical items tend[ed] to have quite a bit of [quality] comment³⁰”, although they also pointed out that this quality also varied from time to time (**MedusaJane**, Questionnaire, 28/06/06; **blue_peter**, Questionnaire, 26/06/06).

Despite these mixed findings, however, the overall impression is that weblogs nevertheless can augment avenues for public participation and expression, thus living up to the public sphere idea as conceptualised by Habermas, although in a slightly modified two-tier model as suggested in section 2.3 above. The study’s results revealed that the ideal of a coffee house or salon where a voluntary association of

³⁰ Some of the issues cited here included the then on-going Jacob Zuma trial, and the Togo national football team’s players’ strike during the FIFA World Cup that was held in Germany in June 2006.

private individuals come together to engage in discussions over matters of mutual interest can be achieved, albeit also on a limited scale.

Further, the results revealed that different people blog for different reasons – to express their opinions and to get other people’s opinions, to access and share information that is unavailable in the mainstream media, and to socialise. The high numbers of posts on the issue of censorship already referred to above (see section 5.4.1) bears testimony to the fact that the bloggers value their freedom of expression, and most see the blog as a space in which they can articulate their views and share information and opinions freely from any form of institutionalised control. For example, **Hanabi**, a journalist by profession, revealed that blogging provided her with an outlet to freely express her thoughts without the constraints of space, or an overbearing editor:

I work for a newspaper [name withheld] as a layout sub [-editor]. When something takes my fancy I write stuff – usually for the Metro section of the paper – mostly about music. Working for a paper I’m acutely aware of space and other constraints when I write. On the blog I can ramble on as long as I like. I’m also free to say exactly what I think and feel. There’s no editorial policy to consider, or what you know the editor likes or not. Just whatever you feel like saying. I also enjoy getting feedback, when it’s meaningful (often not) (**Hanabi**, Questionnaire, 16/06/2006).

A question was posed to the study’s respondents on why they joined Blogmark – and the most recurrent response was on the need for community interaction. For example, while **Dionysus_Stoned** said blogging provided him with an opportunity “to be introspective or be silly” and “frivolous”, he also mentioned that he was attracted to Blogmark because of the “high level of community interaction that the site allowed” (18/06/2006; see also “Refusal and Pixie Dust”, 26/10/2005). **blue_peter** also said he joined Blogmark because he wanted a “community” to share his ideas with:

I was feeling a bit down and I wanted to write about my experiences as well as share ideas with a broader audience of (presumably) intelligent fellow bloggers. I carried on because I liked the people at Blogmark, I was interested in their ideas and I found blogging to be personally rewarding... and I like the fact that this is personal blogging but also you are immediately part of an online community. It’s not just about me, it’s personal and communal (**blue_peter**, Questionnaire, 26/06/2006).

Jack Tonsil (Questionnaire, 14/06/2006) said that he joined simply because he “likes to write”, while **MedusaJane**, on the other hand, said the blog provided her with a ready-made “audience” and “a place to connect with others” (Questionnaire, 28/10/2005).

Seemingly, the aim of most of these bloggers is to disseminate information and to express their opinions related to the disseminated information. Starting discussions with others and discussing personal life are also of equal importance. The bloggers disseminate information, but for whom? Who reads the blogs, why, and how often? These are intriguing questions beyond the scope of this study, however, they have to be answered someday if we want to gain an even deeper insight into the blogosphere.

5.9 Conclusion

The study purported to offer an analysis of Blogmark for the purpose of measuring the blog’s public sphere potential. By analysing the nature of interaction on the blog, the study sought to find out if weblogs such as this one really existed as the discursive arenas that they are touted to be. The chapter presented the findings of the evaluation by discussing both the qualitative and quantitative features of the blog. The analysis of the findings was discussed within the framework of the objectives of the study, and was informed by the theoretical considerations and literature review presented earlier in Chapter Two.

The study’s findings showed that with a little less than 26 000 reads in a space of two weeks, the use of the form in South Africa was too significant to be ignored. A thematic and genre analysis of the blog’s content revealed that, contrary to assertions that weblogs are nothing more than electronic diaries, some users were using the form to engage in discussions on local and international politics, current affairs, and gender and race issues. However, the results of the study also showed that personal and private issues such as relationships, sex, and social life, etc., were of equal importance to the bloggers. The results further showed that the Blogmark ‘community’ was highly critical of the government, the market and the media, and thus acted as a potential counter-balance or check against abuses of power by the elite – a characteristic which was identified as being crucial to the public sphere concept.

The chapter concluded by stating that weblogs such as Blogmark have an immense potential to act as a virtual public sphere for individuals to meet and discuss of concern. Although I noted that the practice of blogging was still limited to an elite few, and that participation in the blog was not based on the concept of egalitarianism, I argued that if Blogmark is seen as part of the multiplicity of public spheres that must exist alongside the larger national public spheres such as those provided by the mainstream media, the blog does play a crucial role in enabling a certain group of the South African citizenry to express themselves among peers and to the public at large.

The last chapter sums up the key issues arising from the study's results and analysis, as a way of wrapping up the discussion. The chapter also suggests areas for further research.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUDING REMARKS

6.0 Introduction

The chapter sums up the key issues that arose from the study and presents areas for further research. The summation focuses on the major results of the study's findings, as well as the analysis of the implication of those findings.

6.1 General discussion

The study was an evaluation of Blogmark's potential to act as a public sphere where individuals can meet online to deliberate on issues of importance to them. The study was conducted using a combination of content analysis, self-completion questionnaires with a selected group of bloggers, and a semi-structured in-depth interview with the Mail & Guardian Online's editor.

The dearth of academic literature on the subject of blogging, especially on the practice in Africa, means that the study had to rely almost entirely on examples drawn from European, Asian and American studies. However, it is my hope that this study has contributed an African perspective to the global knowledge-base of academic work on the phenomenon.

The study argued that although Habermas's concept of the public sphere was valuable in our understanding of the relationship between the media and democracy, the concept, at least as outlined by Habermas, was exclusionary and elitist. Some contentious issues in the Habermasian narrative were identified, chief among them the issues of universal access, participatory parity, the requirement that rational argument was a pre-requisite during all deliberations, and the public sphere's alleged demise. It was argued that Habermas may have idealised the bourgeois public sphere, since he viewed the emergence of alternative public spheres as sign of the beginning of the demise of this sphere. Thus, it was suggested that, for the concept to retain its usefulness in modern societies which are characterised by 'mass-ness' both in size and scale, there was a need to allow for the existence of a multiplicity of public

spheres, from which people of different interests and statuses can find a vehicle through which they can converse among themselves and with the rest of the world via institutions like the media. This was a view which was also shared by scholars like Fraser (1992), McNair (2000), Gitlin (1998) and Curran (1996).

Taking this re-worked model of the concept, it was argued that the diffusion of technology, especially internet genres such as chat forums, wikis, discussion boards, and recently weblogs, has an immense potential in enabling people to make use of relatively accessible platforms through which their voices can be heard other than via the traditional channels such as the mainstream media. Because of their unique features such as high interactivity and their potential to complement traditional media's coverage of events, it was argued that weblogs can revitalise citizen involvement in public deliberations. Indeed, explicit parallels were even drawn by some blog enthusiasts between weblogs and the salons and coffee houses of early capitalist Europe (see, for example, Hiller, 2002).

The analysis of the study's data revealed that Blogmark was a mixture of the 'serious' and the not-so-serious. For example, the study found that while there were a few posts that were typical of the Habermasian (1989) "rational-critical" debates, most of the posts were more like casual conversations, some laced with ribald humour and personal anecdotes. Further, in some posts, the participants exhibited high levels of debating skill, while in others, individual power plays often diluted, and at times took the discussions totally off topic.

A genre analysis of the blog's sample revealed that topics like 'Current affairs' and 'Politics' were among the popular issues of discussion among bloggers. However, the 'Online diary' and 'Short story' categories also had a fair share of popularity. On the other end of the spectrum, the 'Poetry', 'History' and 'Sport' categories did not record any entries at all during the sample period. Thus, contrary to assertions that weblogs are nothing more than electronic diaries, most users were using the form to engage in discussions on local and international politics, current affairs, and gender and race issues. However, the study's results also showed that there was, in practice, no participatory parity in the blog, as some bloggers seemed to use their acquired online

statuses to dominate others. This was especially the case in the posts that dealt with issues of gender and racial equality.

The thematic analysis revealed that among the top themes in the blog were what I termed “Blogging issues”, “Gender issues, sexism and chauvinism”, and “Racism, race relations and xenophobia”. A majority of the themes, however, were directed against the South African government, with most bloggers expressing dissatisfaction with its performance with regards to many issues, chief among them being alleged state bureaucracy; poor service delivery; corruption; failure to curb escalating poverty, and crime; environmentally-unfriendly policies and legislation; foreign policy; and a perceived general economic meltdown. In particular, state security agencies like the South African Police Services (SAPS) and state-owned companies like Telkom, got the brunt of this criticism. Further, the results showed that the bloggers were highly critical of the operations of big businesses, capitalism in general, and the commercial media. That the actions of the political and business elites are subjected to public scrutiny and debate facilitated by the media is one of the defining features of the concept of the public sphere. Thus, in the true Habermasian fashion, the blog served as a space in which the actions of the state and government, the market and the media were subjected to public scrutiny.

In terms of presence/absence of debates in the blog, the study’s results showed that only 29% of the sampled posts had elements of debate in them, while the rest (71%) were more like conversations than anything else. The low levels of debate were attributed (by some bloggers) to the lack of freedom of expression on the blog, while some attributed it to the lack of will by others bloggers to listen to other people’s views. However, the study’s results also showed that there were some posts which had some constructive debates, especially with regards to issues of freedom of expression, current affairs and politics, environmental issues, as well as discussions on social ills like alcohol and drug abuse. Thus, while some bloggers said that they viewed the blog as more of a “playground” where they can be “silly and frivolous” (**Dionysus_Stoned**, Questionnaire, 18/06/2006), some, on the other hand, professed to enjoy high levels of “intellectual stimulation” on the blog (**Jay**, “For **Jay**” 09/10/2005).

Although it had been originally anticipated that the blog would have high instances of ‘flaming’, ‘ranting and raving’ and generally emotionally-charged language because of the anonymity that is synonymous with online genres like these, it was surprising to note that even in the heat of deliberations, the Blogmark users still managed to contain their emotions, with only 23% of the sampled posts containing elements of ‘flaming’. However, there were still some posts which had extreme cases of anger outbursts, insults and cursing, all of which tended to affect the nature of deliberation on the blog, with some bloggers confessing that they have had to become more cautious and a bit more withdrawn because of the amount of “flak” that they have received from a few “antagonistic persons” (**Hanabi**, Questionnaire, 16/06/2006).

Despite these mixed findings, however, it was concluded that with the ever-increasing number of people in the blogosphere, blogs such as Blogmark are helping to increase (in their small ways) the number of voices that can be heard in the public sphere, albeit on a limited scale. It was argued that although the practice was still limited to a few individuals in the country, Blogmark could be viewed as one of the many public spheres which should exist in order to enable the different sections the South African citizenry to find their own space into which they can group to share ideas, discuss politics and talk in general on any issue. Thus, while Blogmark did not contain the ideal Habermasian “rational-critical” debates leading to consensus and the formation of public opinion, the blog, nevertheless, showed that it does have a role to play in the broader processes of citizen engagement in public life.

It was finally noted that while it may still be too early to say with any certainty how the ‘blogosphere’ will actually shape public opinion, there was a high likelihood that weblogs may prove to be useful as virtual venues for public deliberation. However, the issue of accessibility, scarce resources and skills means that for now, practices such as these will only be limited to a few privileged individuals, especially the case in developing countries such as South Africa.

6.3 Scope for further research

The study also opened up a few issues that may need to be followed up if we are to gain an even deeper understanding of the phenomenon of blogging. In particular, it

would be illuminating to investigate the reasons why people blog and what uses they have for weblogs. In the present study, most of the bloggers that were asked this question gave varied reasons, ranging from the need to belong to a ready-made online community, to the need have some freedom to write one's ideas without the constraints of space, or an overbearing editor, features that are often associated with the mainstream media. However, the study's sample consisted only of five bloggers; thus, a more extensive investigation on this issue (on a bigger sample) might be more illuminating.

The lack of scholarly work on blogging in an African context means that a lot may be happening in the African 'blogosphere' yet it goes undocumented. Indeed, since this study began, there has been an explosion of 'political' blogs such as Mzalendo.com in Kenya; BigPharaoh.com and Manalaa.net, both in Egypt; ethiopundit.blogspot.com and weichegud.blogspot.com (both in Ethiopia); and enoughzimbabwe.org in Zimbabwe, whose main focus is the provision of news and commentary on local politics, democracy and governance issues, as well as online resources. Operating in an environment where government control of the media is the norm, it would seem that the reason behind starting these blogs was the need for an open space where people can access information and views that are free of governmental control ([BBC Focus on Africa](#), 2006). Thus, sociological studies of such blogs would go a long way in adding to the academic knowledge-base of the practice in Africa.

6.4 Conclusion

The chapter presented the concluding remarks by discussing some of the major findings of the study. The implications of these findings were discussed in the light of the theory of the public sphere that underpinned the study. The chapter also suggested areas for further research in the areas of blogging, journalism and politics, and noted that there was a fertile area for scholarly research in the 'political' blogs that have erupted around the continent in the last few months. These investigations, it was argued, would add an African perspective on the global debates on the utility of blogging, and its public sphere potential.

Appendices

1 Appendix (A): A sample post on Blogmark

A free blog service provided by Mail & Guardian Online | Tern



It's your life

[Mail & Guardian Online](#) » [Blogs Home](#) » [NiK's blog](#)

Viva Scorpions

This business of Justice minister Mabandla announcing that she wants to dump the Scorpions has a Trojan horse feel to it.

In the same way that our society will be better off with some competition for Telkom in the fixed line business and we all agree on that [excepting for the Telkom crew] it is good for our democracy for the SAPS to have some formal [and obviously unwanted] competition.

The fact that the SAPS is unhappy with the independent nature of the Scorpions seems to be a perfect reason to continue their independence...Do we really want another all powerful John Vorster type minister of Police and interrogation services?

Who ever heard of a bureaucrat wanting to get rid of part of their portfolio anyway...it seems unnatural. As to tensions between the SAPS and the Scorpions undermining the country's security this seems a spurious argument that would be hard to rationalise on any reasonable history of democratic precedents.Competition is always healthy for the body politic.

Most of us are not overly impressed with the general performance of the Police Services anyway, most of the time: what with the perennial inevitable "lost docket" game, intermittent regular reports of corrupt practices and varied interpretations of justice according to status in society...not to mention stumbling around over all the clues so often it becomes embarrassing...Viva Scorpions.

By [NiK](#) at 07/10/2005 - 20:05 | [Current affairs](#) | [NiK's blog](#) | 171 reads

From the streets

Now that would be telling...No I think not.. Not this whiteman, but they are cleaning the system and that is all that matters. Same as bean counters working for SARS. You can run but you cannot hide...

I am Anthony Whiteman and The Truth Will Prevail

By [Whitey](#) at Sun, 09/10/2005 - 10:09 | [reply](#)

You said it straight

I like what you said NiK and I beg to differ from By Feuk The System at Fri, 07/10/2005 - 21:59 |, I know where they recruit from and it is not as you state it. I would like to agree with you, but then you must not generalize to this extent, be more specific. I also miss Zuma as Vice president, but he has not been judged yet in a court of law. This will be a great milestone in our democracy. Spatially the day our leader is acquitted.

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Promo blog

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2 Appendix (B): A sample of a typical 'Unclassified' post

A free blog service provided by Mail & Guardian Online | [Terms](#)



www.blogmark.com
It's your life

[Mail & Guardian Online](#) » [Blogs Home](#) » [Dionysus Stoned's blog](#)

"For Hanabi", or "Far out Hanabi"

This space is now vacant. if you would like to place an advert here, please leave a comment and someone will get back to you.

By [Dionysus Stoned](#) at 06/10/2005 - 18:06 | [Dionysus Stoned's blog](#) | 212 reads

Notes

We all probably begin as normal people until one day when we write something that strikes a chord and people leave notes. That is the day when we all become note-whores.

By [Spoo](#) at Fri, 07/10/2005 - 00:49 | [reply](#)

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3 Appendix (C): Interview schedule

Interview guide for Matthew Buckland

1. What were your motivations for setting up Blogmark? What was the idea behind it?
2. What about ethical issues on the blog? Ever had any problems with these?
3. And legal issues?
4. There seems to be a huge amount of outcry from bloggers that they are being censored by the blog's moderators (for example, 'Pixie Dust'). What do you make of this? How is the moderation of the blog actually done?
5. Use of 'flames' and insults, for example, when someone calls a government/public official an "ass wipe" or threatens them with unspecified action. How do you deal with that?
6. In terms of feedback from bloggers in Blogmark, do you have any particular policy directed at addressing these?
7. In your own opinion, how do you see the role of Blogmark? Do you think that it is providing citizens with a public space to meet and discuss issues of mutual concern? Would you equate it to a virtual public sphere?
8. Is there any way in which posts in the blog influence the way your newspaper covers its stories? Have you ever used the blog as a source for news?
9. Finally, any interesting past experiences on the blog that you may want to share with me?

4 Appendix (D): Interview transcript

Date: Friday 15th October, 2006.

What were your motivations for setting up Blogmark? What was the idea behind it?

The idea behind Blogmark was essentially to give our readers a platform to express their own views and conduct their own (*inaudible*) ...to basically provide a platform for them.

What about ethical issues on the blog? And legal issues? Ever had any problems with these?

We have heard bloggers post content... copyrighted material from other websites, which we had to take down. We have had complaints from people who claimed they were being defamed, and we have had to take those posts down. And we have also had blogs that dealt with unsavoury issues like pornography posted on the blog and those blogs we had to take them down.

On issues of defamation, how do you decide to take a post down? [Use of ‘flames’ and insults, for example, when someone calls a government/public official an “ass wipe” or threatens them with unspecified action. How do you deal with that?]

Normally with defamation, if there is no complaint its generally left like that, we only react if somebody complains about a particular blog posting. We have an abuse email address which readers and bloggers can email and that will cause us to take action against the particular blog or blogger. And we obviously have rules which are there to guide the behaviour of the bloggers.

What of instances where someone posts racist things or makes gender-insensitive remarks/assertions on the blog?

No matter what the abuse is, we only react when someone complains. And what we hope by that is that we get 99% of the racist comments, the gender insensitive comments, the defamatory posts, or the vulgar posts. The community is [right now] just too big for us to moderate the posts before they are published. So we hope that the community can be self-regulating and to some extent it has worked.

In terms of monitoring and moderation, is there one person who is dedicated to listening out to such reports of abuse? Someone who is actually logged in to the blog to watch out for such incidences on a full-time basis?

The guy who created it monitors it quite a lot, and we have somebody in the Mail & Guardian who is plugged into the email address that people can use if there has been abuse.

There seems to be a huge amount of outcry from bloggers that they are being censored by the blog’s moderators (for example, ‘Pixie Dust’). What do you make of this? How is the moderation of the blog actually done?

I know the particular blog that you are referring to and we reacted on a complaint from a user and we read the blog ourselves and we agreed with the user and we took it

down. To say that we censor and stifle debate is an unfair comment from the bloggers and whoever was making those comments because by far the majority of blog posts are posted and we don't take them down. So I say 99% of the blogs go through but there is a percentage of blogs that unfortunately we need to regulate or take them down if they transgress our rules. Its not a free-for-all, its under the Mail & Guardian Online site so it has to adhere to our values, we are anti-hate speech, we anti-racism, we are anti-racism, we are anti-gender insensitivity, we are anti-pornography. So if there are those transgressions, we will take those blogs down and we make it very clear to bloggers in our rules and terms and conditions. So from our point of view it is on a take-it-or-leave-it basis.

In terms of feedback from bloggers in Blogmark, do you have any particular policy directed at addressing these? [I realised from going through the blog that at times there is a story on both the Mail & Guardian and the Mail & Guardian Online and the bloggers are complaining or bringing in different perspectives from the way the story was covered in the newspaper, etc. So what happens to such kind of input/feedback?]

To tell the honest truth, we should monitor that kind of feedback, however, we don't really monitor it and it is really a function of us having small staff and not having enough time. However, some of the bloggers and readers do email us and tell us if we have made a mistake on a story and we investigate and if that turns out to be right we correct that mistake.

Is there any way in which posts in the blog influence the way your newspaper covers its stories? Have you ever used the blog as a source for news? As part of your news gathering strategies?

No, not really. We would like the blog to be part of our news gathering strategies, for example, we would like it to be a source of news, but to tell you the honest truth we don't really monitor it a great deal. It could be part of our news gathering strategies... We have asked our journalists to blog on Blogmark to get the behind-the-scenes ideas of what is happening on a story... its quite a scary place to be because they (the bloggers) give their opinions as opposed to reporting on it in an objective and balanced manner. And we have asked, during the London bombings we have asked people in the UK to blog on our site to share their experiences. This was quite useful because they gave a nice on-the-ground perspective on things.

There was a huge amount of pessimism on the blog in my sample about the 'new' South Africa especially about the performance of the government especially its agencies like the police force (the SAPS) and state parastatals like Telkom, etc. would you say that this is representative feeling of the wider South African public or its only that blogging enclave?

First of all, the internet in South Africa is not representative of the country, it is actually used by only 10% of the country and its highly skewed towards wealthy South Africans, and that happens to be, generally speaking, white South Africans, so its not surprising that you experience that kind of negativity online. Specifically from white South Africans who haven't bought into the new South Africa project, so it is not surprising that there is that negativity online and obviously its wrong and its despicable, but the internet is not representative of South Africa. I will give you an example in which we ran a mock online vote and before even the results were made known, I knew what the results were going to be – perhaps it was incredibly naïve to

run that vote. The party that won that online vote by a clear convincing majority was the DA (Democratic Alliance), followed by the Freedom Front, both of which represent less than 12% of the country in terms of offline voting patterns. That just gives an example of the skewed demographics and ideological slant online. That's a problem for us.

Recently you ran a blog on the local government elections that were held in march early this year, are there any plans to do this on bigger government elections?

Absolutely we got a very exciting blog strategy on the map. What we did on the local government elections is that we got top politicians (excluding the ANC unfortunately – we did invite them a couple of times but they declined the offer) and in most cases the heads of the parties to blog with us and give us their personal perspectives and more personal views on the election. It was quite successful and building on that, we want to approach opinion leaders throughout South Africa and get them to blog with us on regular basis. So yes, definitely we will take that model further.

Finally, do you see weblogs such as yours providing some sort public space for people meet and discuss issues, albeit maybe it's a certain section of the population? Do you see blogs working towards that general trend?

Well, only if the internet can represent the diversity of our country to a greater extent and there is constructive debate, the platform and the tools are there. So yes, I think blogs could be immensely valuable for enhancing public debate in South Africa. This is because the blog format allows ordinary people without resources or technical skills to publish for free, to be out there and to make a noise and that's a fantastic thing.

5 Appendix (E): Self-completion questionnaire cover letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am currently undertaking research on the utility of the Mail & Guardian Online's blog, Blogmark as a public forum for debate for the M&G Online's readers, both within and outside South Africa. The research is purely academic and is in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Master of Arts Degree in Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University, here in Grahamstown, South Africa.

The study relies on an assortment of content analysis, interviews (mainly with the Blogmark team) and self-completion questionnaire techniques in order to achieve its aims. You have been chosen to participate in questionnaires, along with 11 other bloggers, simply because you were the most active participant on the blog during the period on which the study's sample was taken, which is between 03 October, 2005 and 27 November, 2005.

The twelve bloggers involved in this study are; Dionysus_Stoned, FruitundVeg, blue_peter, Micatyro, MedusaJane, Hanabi, Whitey, Jack Tonsil, Spoo, S.A Chick, Fcuk The System, and wwatcher.

Please fill in your answers in the blank spaces provided in the attached self-completion questionnaire below. Feel free to expand on your answers and provide examples (or personal experiences), where applicable, to support your responses. The completed questionnaire must be forwarded directly to me on the email address below.

The information obtained from you will be treated as confidential and will be used for academic purposes only. The collated results/findings will be available for your perusal (on request) upon the study's completion.

I have been granted permission by both Rhodes University and the M&G Online to conduct this study.

Your co-operation in this regard is be greatly appreciated.

Many thanks,



Fortune Mgwili-Sibanda,
MA Candidate, Rhodes University,
School of Journalism and Media Studies,
Grahamstown, 6140
South Africa.

email: mgwili@yahoo.com

6 Appendix (F): Self-completion questionnaires (with answers)

6.1 *blue_peter*

Questionnaire

(Please fill in your answers in the spaces below each question)

PERSONAL DETAILS

Blogmark Username: blue_peter

Sex: male

Current occupation: student

Interests (hobbies): media, psychology

Location (Country): South Africa

BLOGMARK

When did you first start using Blogmark?

1 September 2005

How did you come to know about Blogmark?

Followed a link on the M&G site

Briefly, can you please tell me why you blog?

I started blogging because I was bored with my job, I was feeling a bit down and I wanted to write about my experiences as well as share ideas with a broader audience of (presumably) intelligent fellow bloggers. I carried on because I liked the people at Blogmark, I was interested in their ideas and I found blogging to be personally rewarding.

Why do you use Blogmark in particular?

I like the M&G brand, and I like the fact that this is personal blogging but also you are immediately part of an online community. It's not just about me, it's personal *and* communal. It is a combination of a personal blog space and a discussion forum.

Do you belong to any other blogging community besides Blogmark? If so, state which one(s) and how it is different from Blogmark in terms of users and issues that are discussed therein.

No, I briefly joined one of the generic blogs in the US somewhere but I posted once and never again. I can't even remember the name. I only use Blogmark. How is it different? You have to put in a lot of work to establish a personal blog page on one of those sites – and then cultivate your 'readers' and slowly build up a 'fan-base' if you want to call it that. I don't have the time or the interest to do that. Admittedly it is a much safer space since you won't get attacked the way you do at Blogmark sometimes. But it is not as interactive. And importantly it is not South African. Here there is a 'meeting of like minds' in a sense. We are almost all South African I think (even the ex-pats) so there is a proudly South African feel about it.

BLOGGING PATTERNS

How often do you logon to Blogmark to post a blog? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).

It depends on my time, access to the Internet etc. At the moment I am a busy Master's student with limited Internet access. I have posted only 7 times this year. (A few times in January when I was on holiday and again now – I am on holiday again.)

How often do you logon to Blogmark to read other people's blogs and post comments on them? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).

It also depends. If I am following an interesting post for example, or I am enjoying a particular blogger's comments, then when I was working full-time with full-time internet access it could be many, many times a day (up to 20). Now with limited internet access it is much less. Yesterday I was on quite a bit. But this year it has been about twice a week if that.

How often do you logon on to Blogmark just to read other people's blogs without commenting yourself? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).

Same as above. Won't decide in advance whether I want to comment or not.

How often do you reply to other reader's comments on your blog? (state frequency)

I will try to comment on each new reader's comments at least once. If it is a 'friend' then not always.

USES OF BLOGMARK

What are the issues, among those listed below, do you blog most about? (please rate between 1 and 5, with 1 being the highest and 5 being the lowest)

Politics and current affairs	2-3
Economics and	5

business	
Culture, arts and entertainment (incl. music, movies and TV)	2-3
Personal (incl. online diary, personal anecdotes, creative work and fiction, etc)	1
Sport	3
Other (please specify)	Psychology, lately 1

Please give reasons as to why you blog the most about the issue chosen as # 1 above?

Well I am very interested in psychology and am studying to be a psychologist. Since this interest gives me a chance to comment on my and other people's lives, experiences etc. it is a perfect fit between my own interests and my interest in other people.

Also, as I mentioned earlier, I am interested in the connection between the personal and the political. A personal blog which connects with other people's experience enables meet to look at that.

Do you feel free to discuss anything (sensitive issues or otherwise) that you may want to discuss on the blog? Give reasons for your answers.

Not always. I am a bit shy about discussing really personal issues. For example, I don't feel comfortable discussing issues about my relationship, except in broad terms. But sometimes I will. Also, I don't want to offend other people too much so I won't really say exactly what I feel about a subject. But again it depends. Generally I am quite comfortable on the blog. It is anonymous.

MEDIA CONSUMPTION

How often do you read the Mail & Guardian and the Mail & Guardian Online? (State frequency, for example, every week)

Every week or every other week.

Do you consider the Mail & Guardian and the Mail & Guardian Online to be your major source of news? Give reasons for your answer.

No, not my major source of news. I listen to the radio and watch TV news. I read whatever papers come my way. But I like the M&G Online and the M&G.

What other media do you rely on for news/information? (state channel, station, title or web address, etc)

Cape Talk 567 (radio)
SABC 3 (TV)
etv

SAFM (radio)
Sunday Times
Cape Times
News24.co.za

Do you actively blog about issues/stories you have read in the Mail & Guardian and Mail & Guardian Online? Please give reason and examples (where possible).

I think I have once or twice. Examples? Well I read a story about “Daddy ecstasy” (the re-discover of MDMA) which I blogged about. I also blogged about Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka’s trip to the UAE.

Finally, do you feel that Blogmark is a useful public forum of debate? Please give a reason to support your answer.

I think it is a very useful public forum. As for the quality of debate, that really varies. But generally I think it can be a good debate. Just recently there was a discussion of the Togo football player’s threat to strike at the World Cup. We discuss issued of politics, poverty. Yesterday I started a debate on Psychology.

Thank you for you patience and co-operation.

6.2 *Dionysus_Stoned:*

Questionnaire

(Please fill in your answers in the spaces below each question)

PERSONAL DETAILS

Blogmark Username: Dionysus_Stoned

Current occupation: Writer/Researcher (believe it or not)

Interests (hobbies): Sheesh....film, swimming, philosophy, writing, fiction and so on

Location (Country): South Africa

BLOGMARK

When did you first start using Blogmark?

About a year ago but the M&G would probably have the date

How did you come to know about Blogmark?

I followed the link at the bottom of a news article on the M&G Online

Briefly, can you please tell me why you blog?

I don't really know. Most of the stuff I write to earn a living is pretty serious, and I guess bogging allows me to indulge a more frivolous side of my writing.

Why do you use Blogmark in particular?

Because of the high level of community interaction that the site allows. This is probably my strongest reason for using Blogmark.

Do you belong to any other blogging community besides Blogmark? If so, state which one(s) and how it is different from Blogmark in terms of users and issues that are discussed therein.

I once registered on GNU, but abandoned that blog. I also have another blog on Interactivist Info Exchange. The latter blog is used to hang my writing about political economy and social movements. There is also blog called the stone sheet that I host on some server space that I have. However, until I actually spend time working on the style sheets, I probably won't use it.

BLOGGING PATTERNS

How often do you logon to Blogmark to post a blog? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).
 It depends...at one stage I posted something virtually every day. At the moment, maybe once a week. But I have also gone months without posting

How often do you logon to Blogmark to read other people's blogs and post comments on them? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).
 I log on every day. I don't always post comments however. It really depends on my mood

How often do you logon on to Blogmark just to read other people's blogs without commenting yourself? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).
 see above

How often do you reply to other reader's comments on your blog? (state frequency)
 Almost always, even if only to thank them for reading and commenting

USES OF BLOGMARK

What are the issues, among those listed below, do you blog most about? (please rate between 1 and 5, with 1 being the highest and 5 being the lowest)

Politics and current affairs	2
Economics and business	3
Culture, arts and entertainment (incl. music, movies and TV)	4
Personal (incl. online diary, personal anecdotes, creative work and fiction, etc)	1
Sport	5
Other (please specify)	

Please give reasons as to why you blog the most about the issue chosen as # 1 above?
 Well it's the nature of how I use the space. Most of the stuff I write to earn a living concerns politics and economic theory in some form. Blogmark is where the character DS goes to be introspective or be silly. still, politics seeps in.

Do you feel free to discuss anything (sensitive issues or otherwise) that you may want to discuss on the blog? Give reasons for your answers.

Yeah, pretty much. The pixie dust censorship annoyed me, but I have never been personally censored, either by the blog admin or other members of the community.

MEDIA CONSUMPTION

How often do you read the Mail & Guardian and the Mail & Guardian Online? (State frequency, for example, every week)

Everyday day I think

Do you consider the Mail & Guardian and the Mail & Guardian Online to be your major source of news? Give reasons for your answer.

Yep, ever since I was a kid and it was the Weekly Mail. The online edition has got some way to go before it replaces print dailies in my news reading regimen, but its getting there (so I still buy The Star). The Friday print edition of the M&G is however an important node in the unfolding of national debates, and I read it religiously.

What other media do you rely on for news/information? (state channel, station, title or web address, etc)

etv's 7pm news

The Star

Mail & Guardian (print and online)

The Independent

indymedia

Do you actively blog about issues/stories you have read in the Mail & Guardian and Mail & Guardian Online? Please give reason and examples (where possible).

I guess. For instance I wrote something that emanated from the M&G coverage of the Khutsong saga. There are many other examples that I don't feel like recalling

Finally, do you feel that Blogmark is a useful public forum of debate? Please give a reason to support your answer.

Yes, to an extent, but the blog is more like a playground where people in offices around the country go to socialise during their proverbial "break time". Certainly this is not how everyone uses the blog, but it is the hegemonic tendency. Still, debates happen and I guess this feeds into how we come to view different issues. But maybe I will think more about this and get back to you on Monday.

☺

Thank you for you patience and co-operation.

6.3 Hanabi:

Questionnaire

(Please fill in your answers in the spaces below each question)

PERSONAL DETAILS

Blogmark Username: Hanabi

Sex: the superior one!

Current occupation: journalist

Interests (hobbies): writing / travel / photography / reading / movies/ gardening

/talking shit / DIY / music

Location (Country): South Africa

BLOGMARK

When did you first start using Blogmark?

Round about May last year

How did you come to know about Blogmark?

I know Matt Buckland, he sent me an email

Briefly, can you please tell me why you blog?

I work for a newspaper [name withheld] as a layout sub. When something takes my fancy I write stuff – usually for the Metro section of the paper – mostly about music. Working for a paper I'm acutely aware of space and other constraints when I write. On the blog I can ramble on as long as I like. I'm also free to say exactly what I think and feel. There's no editorial policy to consider, or what you know the editor likes or not. Just whatever you feel like saying. I also enjoy getting feedback, when it's meaningful (often not).

Why do you use Blogmark in particular?

I'm not much of an internet forum type of person, but I had been reading several American blogs for about two years prior to getting active on Blogmark. I really fancied getting my own blog, but the technicalities of the whole thing stumped me. I didn't think I would be up to setting up my own blog. when I stumbled onto Blogmark, it was, in a way, what I had been looking for. Of course less personalised than my very own blog would have been, but I really appreciate the fact that there was a technical team to take care of that side of things (something I have no interest in or aptitude for). Also, the forum aspect of BM is fun.

Do you belong to any other blogging community besides Blogmark? If so, state which one(s) and how it is different from Blogmark in terms of users and issues that are discussed therein.

Nope

BLOGGING PATTERNS

How often do you logon to Blogmark to post a blog? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).

It's very erratic. I've only posted 12 blogs in the just over a year I've been there ... that's once a month on average. However, I go through very inactive periods where I won't blog at all.

How often do you logon to Blogmark to read other people's blogs and post comments on them? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).

Also very erratic. At the moment, hardly ever, not even once a month. When I'm active it could be several times a day.

How often do you logon on to Blogmark just to read other people's blogs without commenting yourself? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).

At the moment I go there almost every day (as a visitor, I don't log on) and if it's a quiet day at work, numerous times. On a busy day, I could skip the blog. I would say on average over the one-year period, four to five times a week.

How often do you reply to other reader's comments on your blog? (state frequency).

That's very hard to say. It's completely dependent on whether I like the person, find the comment meaningful, and have anything to say to them...

USES OF BLOGMARK

What are the issues, among those listed below, do you blog most about? (please rate between 1 and 5, with 1 being the highest and 5 being the lowest)

Politics and current affairs (with politics I mean gender politics, the only kind I'm really interested in!)	3
Economics and Business	1
Culture, arts and entertainment (incl. music, movies and TV)	1
Personal (incl. online diary, personal anecdotes, creative work and fiction, etc)	2
Sport	5
Other (please specify)	

Please give reasons as to why you blog the most about the issue chosen as # 1 above?

I love writing about what makes me happy, and those are usually the things that excite me most.

Do you feel free to discuss anything (sensitive issues or otherwise) that you may want to discuss on the blog? Give reasons for your answers.

No, not really. Personally sensitive issues I've avoided, mostly because there is animosity between me and some members of the blog. I can't really reveal too much of myself in a place where there are people (One person in particular) who are extremely antagonistic towards me. Some other issues would be fine, such as racism. Gender issues I've blogged about – these are the most sensitive ones for me – and I've gotten a lot of flak for it (from a few people, admittedly, but it got really ugly). Which has led to me withdrawing from active participation on the blog for periods. I guess you could put that down to my feeling that there is a lack of maturity among some bloggers. Also, not a shared value system. So you're not really on the same page as a whole bunch of people, and that means you have to be quite guarded.

MEDIA CONSUMPTION

How often do you read the Mail & Guardian and the Mail & Guardian Online? (State frequency, for example, every week)

Mail and guardian, once or twice a month

M&G Online, a couple of times a week (if there's something that catches my eye when I'm on the BM site).

Do you consider the Mail & Guardian and the Mail & Guardian Online to be your major source of news? Give reasons for your answer.

No. the radio is, I listen to it a lot while at home. Plus working in a newsroom I get exposed to news there all the time.

What other media do you rely on for news/information? (state channel, station, title or web address, etc)

Radio – Safm

Whatever newspaper has a headline that grabs my attention : The Star, Beeld, Business Day.

I have no tv.

Do you actively blog about issues/stories you have read in the Mail & Guardian and Mail & Guardian Online? Please give reason and examples (where possible).

No

Finally, do you feel that Blogmark is a useful public forum of debate? Please give a reason to support your answer.

I don't know about useful as such. It's not such a big forum, I don't know how many people use it on a regular basis, 20, 30? Some important issues have been raised and some bloggers have debated it intelligently, it's true. However, my own very particular experience has been extremely negative re gender issues specifically. I have blogged about it assuming that it could be a space for intelligent and open-minded discussion, but it seldom worked like that. I've experienced the most astonishingly ugly attacks from one blogger in particular. And that highlights a particular problem with blogs and forums of this nature – because it is anonymous, people often say things that they would not say to a person's face. This leads to unproductive pointless exchanges of hostility – so no, not a useful public forum of debate!

Thank you for you patience and co-operation.

6.4 Jack Tonsil:

Questionnaire

(Please fill in your answers in the spaces below each question)

PERSONAL DETAILS

Blogmark Username: Jack Tonsil

Sex:.....M.....

Current occupation: copy writer

Interests (hobbies):.....yoga.....

Location (Country):.....SA.....

BLOGMARK

When did you first start using Blogmark?

18 months ago

How did you come to know about Blogmark?

The **Dreaded Outsider** told me about it

Briefly, can you please tell me why you blog?

I love to write

Why do you use Blogmark in particular?

Cos it's the site I know best

Do you belong to any other blogging community besides Blogmark? If so, state which one(s) and how it is different from Blogmark in terms of users and issues that are discussed therein.

No

BLOGGING PATTERNS

How often do you logon to Blogmark to post a blog? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).

Once a day

How often do you logon to Blogmark to read other people's blogs and post comments on them? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).

20 times a day

How often do you logon on to Blogmark just to read other people's blogs without commenting yourself? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).

5 times a day

How often do you reply to other reader's comments on your blog? (state frequency)

I reply to most comments, so, depending on the comments

USES OF BLOGMARK

What are the issues, among those listed below, do you blog most about? (please rate between 1 and 5, with 1 being the highest and 5 being the lowest)

Politics and current affairs	1
Economics and business	1
Culture, arts and entertainment (incl. music, movies and TV)	2
Personal (incl. online diary, personal anecdotes, creative work and fiction, etc)	5
Sport	4
Other (please specify)	

Please give reasons as to why you blog the most about the issue chosen as # 1 above?

It's what I know best

Do you feel free to discuss anything (sensitive issues or otherwise) that you may want to discuss on the blog? Give reasons for your answers.

Yes, because of anonymity

MEDIA CONSUMPTION

**How often do you read the Mail & Guardian and the Mail & Guardian Online?
(State frequency, for example, every week)**

Once a week

**Do you consider the Mail & Guardian and the Mail & Guardian Online to be
your major source of news? Give reasons for your answer.**

No. TV is easier

**What other media do you rely on for news/information? (state channel, station,
title or web address, etc)**

TV/Radio

Sky/94.7

**Do you actively blog about issues/stories you have read in the Mail & Guardian
and Mail & Guardian Online? Please give reason and examples (where possible).**

No

**Finally, do you feel that Blogmark is a useful public forum of debate? Please give
a reason to support your answer.**

Yes. You get the more emotional angle.

Thank you for your patience and co-operation.

6.5 Medusa_Jane:

Questionnaire

(Please fill in your answers in the spaces below each question)

PERSONAL DETAILS

Blogmark Username:...MedusaJane

Sex:.....F.....

Current occupation:.....Accountant

Interests (hobbies):...Children, reading, drinking cappuccino

Location (Country):...RSA

BLOGMARK

When did you first start using Blogmark?

2005

How did you come to know about Blogmark?

From the M&G Online link, I think.

Briefly, can you please tell me why you blog?

An audience for my writing, a place to connect with others.

Why do you use Blogmark in particular?

I like the way that users can interact and keep track of each others comments. Also the way that one's entry appears on that day's blog, so you're not reliant on getting your own referrals to the blog.

Do you belong to any other blogging community besides Blogmark? If so, state which one(s) and how it is different from Blogmark in terms of users and issues that are discussed therein.

No

BLOGGING PATTERNS

How often do you logon to Blogmark to post a blog? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).

Weekly

How often do you logon to Blogmark to read other people's blogs and post comments on them? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).

Daily

How often do you logon on to Blogmark just to read other people's blogs without commenting yourself? (Answer should state frequency, for example, once a month, etc).

Daily

How often do you reply to other reader's comments on your blog? (state frequency)

Usually reply, if it is indicated.

USES OF BLOGMARK

What are the issues, among those listed below, do you blog most about? (please rate between 1 and 5, with 1 being the highest and 5 being the lowest)

Politics and current affairs	5
Economics and business	5
Culture, arts and entertainment (incl. music, movies and TV)	5
Personal (incl. online diary, personal anecdotes, creative work and fiction, etc)	1
Sport	5
Other (please specify)	5

Please give reasons as to why you blog the most about the issue chosen as # 1 above?

The reason I blog is to use my own experiences to make a subjective social commentary from my perspective.

Do you feel free to discuss anything (sensitive issues or otherwise) that you may want to discuss on the blog? Give reasons for your answers.

I value the anonymity of blogging. Some things may seem too personal to blog.

MEDIA CONSUMPTION

How often do you read the Mail & Guardian and the Mail & Guardian Online? (State frequency, for example, every week)

M&G Weekly. M&G Online – occasionally.

Do you consider the Mail & Guardian and the Mail & Guardian Online to be your major source of news? Give reasons for your answer.

Yes, Only occasionally read other papers.

What other media do you rely on for news/information? (state channel, station, title or web address, etc)

SABC news, The Star, Local Newspaper.

Do you actively blog about issues/stories you have read in the Mail & Guardian and Mail & Guardian Online? Please give reason and examples (where possible).

No


Finally, do you feel that Blogmark is a useful public forum of debate? Please give a reason to support your answer.

Yes. The interaction of the bloggers is testimony to this. Topical items tend to have quite a bit of comment, although matters can get quite heated. Example that springs to mind is the JZ rape trial.

Thank you for you patience and co-operation.

7 Appendix (G): Blogging the questionnaire (1st page only)

A free blog service provided by Mail & Guardian Online | Terms



Mail & Guardian Online
Home » blogs » my blog

Research questionnaire: for D_S, FuV, BP, Mic, MJ, Hanabi, JT, Spoo, S.A. Chick, Feuk and Wwatcher

[view](#) [edit](#) [track](#)

Hi all,

I am currently undertaking research on the utility of the Mail & Guardian Online's blog, Blogmark as a public forum for debate for the M&G Online's readers, both within and outside South Africa. The research is purely academic and is in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Master of Arts Degree in Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University, here in Grahamstown, South Africa.

In particular, I would like a select group of bloggers (12 in all) to fill in the attached self-completion questionnaire and return it to me on the attached email address.

The twelve bloggers involved in this study are; Dionysus_Stoned, FruitandVeg, blue_peter, Micyro, MedusaJane, Hanabi, Whitey, Jack Tonsil, Spoo, S.A Chick, Feuk The System, and wwatcher.

These have been chosen to participate in study simply because they were the most active participants on the blog during the period on which the study's sample was taken, which is between 03 October, 2005 and 27 November, 2005.

Your co-operation in this regard will be greatly appreciated.

Attachment	Size
Self-completion questionnaire.doc	84.5 KB

By mgwili at 13/06/2006 - 10:24 | Education | mgwili's blog | 609 reads

Hi Mgwili

I asked someone to forward my questionnaire to you. let me know if you've got it yet.

I doubt that Spoo is still around - someone from the US, as I recall, who just came and "blitzed" the blog with comments a couple of times.

Cheers,
MJ

By MedusaJane at Fri, 23/06/2006 - 14:26 | reply

Just got it!!!

Thank you a million times!

By mgwili at Wed, 28/06/2006 - 16:39 | edit | reply

Search

mgwili

- blog
- creat
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Promo blog

Find out promote and max readers!

What's

A blog is free, per to use a journal, post you poetry, I current critique blabber for publ

8 Appendix (H): Coding schedule

<u>CONTENT ANALYSIS CODING SCHEDULE</u> <u>Blogmark, Mail and Guardian Online</u>			
Blog No:		Date:	
1. Identifier categories/Demographics			
(a). Blogger (username):			□ □
(b). Sex: (01=Male, 02=Female & 03=Unknown/Undetermined)			□ □
(c). Location: (01=South Africa, 02=USA, 03=Australia, 04= Unknown/Undetermined)			□ □
2. Subject matter			
(a). Headline (<i>Copy verbatim</i>):			
(b). Code for classification			
01. Music	02. Politics	03. General	04. Short story
05. Technology	06. Online diary	07. History	08. Current affairs
09. Travel	10. Poetry	11. Business	12. Sport
13. Education	14. Movie review	15. Television	16. Unclassified
			□ □
3. Themes/Focus			
<i>Code for theme or major focus of the blog and its comments, up to a maximum of five MAJOR themes per thread.</i>			
01. South African government pursuing wrong policies	02. The future is bleak for South Africa/post-apartheid gloom		
03. Things are working out just fine in the new South Africa	04. SAPS + Scorpions are failing to do their job		
05. Party politics, national and local government elections	06. The USA and the 'War on Terror'		
07. Tyranny and despotism (other governments)	08. The Israel/Palestine conflict		
09. Gender issues (incl. the plight of women)	10. Racism, race relations and Xenophobia		
11. Media issues	12. Environmental issues/degradation		
13. Criticism of modern lifestyles, greed, middle class life	14. Attack on capitalism and its effect on modern life		
15. Social life (incl. refs to socialising, drinking, drugs, etc)	16. Relationships (incl. marriage, love, sex, dating)		
17. <u>Blogmark</u> issues (including censorship, other blogs)	18. Music, poetry and literature (incl. sharing lyrics)		
19. Television programmes/shows commentary	20. Personal memoirs and musings		
21. 'Intellectual' discussions (on philosophy, politics, science)	22. The individual versus the collective		
23. Creative work and fiction	24. Technology	25. Travelogues	
			□ □
4. Popularity			
(a). Number of hits/reads	□ □ □	(b). Number of comments	□ □ □
			(c). Number of links □ □ □
5. Blogger attitudes (direction)			
<i>If case deals with government (or any of its agencies), market-related issues, or the media, code for the direction by placing appropriate number in the boxes on the side. Otherwise, proceed to code for 6 and 7.</i>			
	Pro/favourable (+)	Neutral (0)	Con/Unfavourable(-)
Government/State	01	02	03
Market	04	05	06
Media	07	08	09
			□ □
6. Form/Type of communication			
Is the blog a debate?			
01. Yes			□ □
02. No			□ □
7. Intensity			
Is there any use of emotional, or inflammatory language, or insults, aka "flaming" in the blog?			
01. Yes			□ □
02. No			□ □

9 Appendix (I) Coding manual

Content analysis Coding manual

The following is a list of the themes to be counted in the content analysis:

- 1) **South African government is pursuing wrong policies, projects, programmes and initiatives**
 - Black Economic Empowerment does not help solve problems of unequal distribution of wealth
 - Inconsiderate local government policies/legislation, etc.
 - Non-performing government ministers/ministries
 - Defence spending (SANDF)
 - Gautrain
 - Government is insensitive to people's needs (including local communities)
 - South Africa government policies not clear to the people,
 - Government is too over-involved in private affairs (economic)
 - Dictatorial tendencies in South African government
 - South Africa government pursues the wrong policies on Zimbabwe (foreign policy)
- 2) **The future is bleak for South Africa/post-apartheid gloom**
 - Bureaucracy/red tape
 - State-owned companies (Telkom, for example), are incompetent
 - Deteriorating service standards
 - Brain drain
 - Lazy workforce
 - Deteriorating standards in the inner cities (government to blame)
 - South Africa government responsible for poverty
 - Economic issues (deteriorating economy, prices and rates going up)
 - Government not addressing escalating poverty, crime, HIV/Aids, burglaries, muggings, vigilantism, etc.
- 3) **Things are working out fine in South Africa**
 - Infrastructure development
 - Socially, politically, culturally, economically, etc.
 - The government is doing a good job
- 4) **The police force (including variations like the Scorpions) is failing to do its job**
 - Scorpions and SAPS are not doing a good job/Corruption is therefore rampant
 - SAPS failing to solve crimes
 - Accountability and legitimacy of SAPS and Scorpions
 - SAPS and Scorpions merger/Performance of SAPS and Scorpions way below par
 - Corruption in the police force and in the Scorpions
 - The Scorpions are a relic of the apartheid state
 - The SAPS/Scorpions merger debate
- 5) **Party politics, national and local government elections**
 - Jacob Zuma's trial (ANC succession plot)
 - ANC is an undemocratic institution, beyond reproach, incapable
 - Local government elections (municipal elections). Recruitment for support for a candidate
 - Opposition politics/politicians
- 6) **The USA and the "War on Terror"**
 - The USA is a bully nation
 - George Bush is a liar, bully, war monger, etc.
 - Tony Blair (UK), John Howard (Australia) complicit
 - Atrocities committed by the US and her allies in Iraq and Afghanistan
 - Conspiracies on 9/11
 - The war was about oil, not WMDs
 - US Defence spending at the expense of other services like social, water, etc.

- 7) **Tyranny and despotism (of ‘other’ governments, for example USA UK, Australia)**
 Undemocratic governments (other)
 Fascism and dictatorial tendencies in government (other)
 Tyranny and human rights abuses
 Erosion of individual freedoms (speech, assembly, movement, etc)
 International government’s double standards and wrong policies (excl. ‘War on Terror’)
 Autocratic political systems
- 8) **The Israel/Palestine conflict**
 Israel’s right to nationhood, etc
 Who is wrong who is right?
 USA and the West’s involvement in the Middle East crisis
 Political policies being pursued to solve the crisis
- 9) **Gender issues, chauvinism, sexism (including the plight of women, sexual harassment, etc)**
 Relationships and gender issues: society treats men and women unequally (is quick to judge women) on issues of extra-marital affairs
 The plight of women
 Pregnancy
 Misogyny
 Work environment relationships
 Sexual harassment, sexual crimes, and unwarranted sexual attention
- 10) **Racism, race relations and xenophobia**
 Racism in South Africa/racial segregation
 Inter-racial relationships
 Deteriorating standards in South Africa's inner cities (“aliens” to blame)
 Racism in America: there is an urgent need to create racial harmony in America
 Slavery (America): to compensate or not to compensate? And affirmative action
 Xenophobia
 Anti-Semitism
- 11) **Media issues**
 Commentary on mainstream media coverage of issues
 Commentary on newspaper article
 Media monopolies
 Corporate media affairs/ the media are out to make a profit and promote the system/status quo
 International media complicit in America and Britain’s unnecessary invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan
- 12) **Environmental issues/degradation**
 People are destroying the environment through their consumption and spending habits
 Environmental degradation/ let us conserve our natural resources/ catastrophes predicted
 Protected areas (national heritage sites)
 Global warming, climate change
- 13) **Criticism of modern lifestyles, greed, middle class life**
 Gap between the rich and the poor rapidly increasing
 Consumerism
 Power and greed, politicians and the wealthy are greedy and always hungry for power
 Discussions about the meaninglessness of middle class lifestyles
 Lifestyles of the rich and shameless/the decadence of the rich
- 14) **Attack on capitalism as a philosophy**
 Attacks on capitalism, greedy corporate entities
 Society has become too materialistic (due to living up to the capitalism tenets)
- 15) **Social life (includes references to socialising, going out, sport, drinking, alcohol and drug abuse among the youth, etc)**

Young people's lives are moving too fast these days/young people spend most of their time drinking, taking drugs and bed-hopping
Drinking, extolling the virtues of beer, etc.
Nostalgic memories of the days gone by (1970s, 80's etc)
Behaviour of the young 'uns these days is shocking
Drug/substance and alcohol abuse
Death, tragedies
Sport
Reckless driving (community news/community announcements)

16) Relationships (including marriage, family life, dating, love, sex, etc)

Relationships: marriage, divorce, etc.
Dysfunctional families/family life
Unrequited love, failed marriages, failing marriages
Personal anecdotes on relationships
Sexual jibes, innuendo, recounts of sexual 'conquests' by bloggers
Internet/online dating, mail order brides

17) Blogmark issues (including censorship and references to other blog conversations, etc)

Blogging in general
Discussion about other people's blogs, or conversations from those blogs spilling over to Blogmark
Erosion of individual freedoms of speech, assembly, on Blogmark etc
Censorship of material from Blogmark
Miscommunication in Blogmark, people misusing the forum,
Trolls and the 'Kill Zone'

18) Music, poetry and literature discussions (includes sharing/dedicating lyrics)

Discussions of lyrics in a poem or a song, etc.
Music reviews, photography

19) Television programmes/shows commentary

Commentary on particular TV programmes/shows and their relevance to real life
Movie reviews

20) Personal memoirs, musings

Personal history, experiences
Personal anecdotes
Online diary

21) 'Intellectual' discussions (on philosophy, science, and political science, etc.)

Philosophy and science
Intellectual debates on philosophy, metaphysics, and other intellectuals: Freud, des Cartes, etc
Discussion of political ideologies: liberalism, leftism, conservatism, etc.

22) The individual vs. the collective

The individual vs. the family
The individual is supreme: celebration of individualism
Constitutional matters. The Constitution and individual rights
Erosion of individual freedoms of speech, assembly

23) Creative work and fiction

Short stories and other creative work done by bloggers
And composition of poems, etc.

24) Technology

The advantages of technology in modern life
The negative side of technology advancement (e-mail spam)

25) Travelogues

Discussion of experiences/activities while travelling, etc
Recommendations to visit certain places, etc.

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