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# **Blogs, Political Discussion and the 2005 New Zealand General Election**

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## ABSTRACT

Communication technologies have altered the way people engage in political discourse. In recent years the internet has played a significant role in changing the way people receive political information, news and opinion. Perhaps the most significant difference as a result of advancements in communication and internet technology is how people participate in discussions and deliberate issues that are important to them. The 2005 New Zealand General Election fell at a time when functionality and access to fast and affordable internet allowed people to develop their own information channels and also determine how, where and to what level they participated in debate and commentary on election issues.

The aim of this thesis is to examine how blogs were used to discuss political issues during the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign period through the use of three inter-related methodologies. The methodologies used in the research are content analysis, interviews and a case study. Four blogs and the comments sections are analysed by way of content analysis for adherence to the rules of communicative interaction within the public sphere. Interviews were conducted with a number of people who blogged during the 2005 election campaign, to develop an understanding of their experiences and perceptions of the role blogging played in the election. A case study of politician and blogger Rodney Hide examines the role blogs play as a communication tool for politicians and the how they change the relationship between politician and voter.

An explosion of academic literature in recent years has looked at the participative and deliberative nature of the internet and blogs as having opened new spaces and what implications that may have for democracy. Jurgen Habermas' seminal book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, provides the theoretical basis for this thesis and the foundation for academic writing in this area. Habermas developed the normative notion of the public sphere as a part of social life where citizens exchanged views and opinions on matters of importance to the common good, so that wider public opinion can be formed.

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## **Chapter One**

### **The Scope of this Research**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

Since the development of the printing press, the way people discuss political issues has changed on a regular basis. Throughout human history, people have demonstrated a constant need for information on events occurring in the world around them and a vehicle through which they can express their opinions. From the printing press to radio and television and now the internet, people have worked to develop systems that deliver more information, more often and faster than before. In 2005 the internet was the latest technological advancement to share information and communicate. The internet has changed the way people engage with political information, news and opinion. It has also, perhaps most importantly, changed the way in which people can participate in these discussions. For a long time political discussion has taken place around people rather than with them, almost always in the mainstream media, and it has been argued that the inability to directly engage in the political process has damaged democracy.

In New Zealand the three-yearly election could be stated as the height of the democratic process and a time when people are seeking information about parties' policies, candidates, and other associated issues. Until the internet became accessible, the mainstream media provided most, if not all, of the information voters received in the lead-up to the election and often it was the politicians who set the agenda for the political discussion. Apart from attending political meetings, writing letters to the editor, and in more recent times, calling into talkback radio, voters had difficulties in expressing their views during the campaign.

The 2005 election campaign was the first New Zealand election where internet and communication technologies and affordability meant people could develop their own information channels and also determine how, when and where they participated in debate and commentary on election issues. They could also discuss what issues were important to them rather than be limited to those determined by politicians or mainstream media.

This thesis could be defined as an interdisciplinary study as it touches on a number of areas - political science, sociology, computer technologies - but it is essentially a study of communication, looking at the changes in the way people discuss politics. It builds on the premise that communication technology has social implications, one of which is democracy. The differences between an 18<sup>th</sup> century reforming activist distributing pamphlets about poll tax and a blogger challenging a government's tax policies in 2008 seem numerous on the surface. However, they can also be regarded as being quite similar – a political act where a person stands up against government, commerce and media to speak what is on his/her mind. Although the medium has changed, the spirit behind the communication is constant.

## **1.2 Public Sphere Theory, Internet and Communication Technology**

Jurgen Habermas' seminal book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), provides the theoretical basis for this thesis. Habermas developed the normative notion of the public sphere as a part of social life where citizens exchanged views and opinions on matters of importance to the common good, so that wider public opinion can be formed. He theorised that when people gather to discuss issues of political concern a public sphere is formed. Habermas developed his theory of participation in the public sphere based on a trend in the 1700/1800s where coffee houses, societies and salons became the centre of discussion and deliberation.

The internet is often related to the idea of the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001), in which citizens would critically discuss political, cultural, and other issues of public concern, since it allows for interactive communication, whereas conventional mass media only distribute messages uni-directionally. Online discussion groups and virtual communities, on the surface, appear to come close to the ideal of unconstrained public discourse. The issue of the public sphere is at the heart of any re-conceptualisation of democracy. Habermas highlighted the critical role of media in the public sphere, arguing the active role the press used to play in political controversy began to diminish in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a result of media privatisation, which commercialised the news and changed critical debate into passive consumption of mass culture. Some scholars contend media that is communicated by

electronic means, such as television, isolate citizens from one another (Poster & Aronowitz, 2001). Mass media has become the substitute for older spaces of politics, such as public discussion. Hartley (1992) goes as far as saying the media *have* become the public sphere, “Television, popular newspapers, magazines and photography, the popular media of the modern period, are the public domain, the place where and the means by which the public is created and has its being” (p. 1).

A critique of the role mainstream media play in the current public sphere, by way of encouraging and facilitating political discussion, will provide a basis on which internet and communication technologies can be measured in this study. The role of communication technology and public sphere theory will be dealt with in more detail in later sections of this thesis.

### **1.3 Research Strategy and Selection of Methods**

The aim of this research is to examine how blogs were used to discuss political issues during the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign period through the use of three inter-related methodologies. Elections are a time when people are more inclined to participate in political matters, particularly discussions around topical issues, and the 2005 election was the first widespread opportunity for voters to use blogs to engage with others, share their opinions and possibly deliberate on issues. The relatively recent development of the internet, and the even more recent arrival of blogs, demands a selection of methodologies that will seek to minimise the limitations of any one methodology.

The use of multi-method research for a PhD thesis is not new and has been recommended as a robust analytical framework. Hansen, Cottle, Negrine and Newbold (1998) state:

Good research usually benefits from the use of a combination of methods... researchers should not only consider which is the most appropriate method for study of their chosen topic or problem but also what *combination* of research methods will produce a better and deeper understanding of it. (p. 1)

This research complies with the recommendations by Hansen et al. by using three inter-related methods. The methodologies used in the research are content analysis, interviews and a case study. The content analysis provides quantitative data about how people communicated through blogs – both posts and comments – to discuss issues surrounding the 2005 New Zealand election. Quantitative data from the content analysis will identify what topics were discussed, what sources were used in writing the posts, and use of links to external websites. From a qualitative perspective, the content analysis will provide data on how blogs acted as a tool to communicate ideas and how the comments section acted as a place to debate ideas. The second method involves interviews with prominent New Zealand bloggers who wrote about political issues in the lead-up to the 2005 New Zealand General Election. These interviews will endeavour to build up a clearer understanding of the processes involved and insights as to how the posts are constructed. The third method, the case study, draws on the content and interview analysis to further explore the role of blogging in the election campaign period by an existing Member of Parliament. The case study will examine what role, if any, blogging played in the election campaign, and will outline the experiences that transpired as a result of using blogs as a campaign and communication tool.

The triangulated method approach to this thesis aims to pinpoint the values of a phenomenon more accurately by observing from different methodological viewpoints. When the findings of three methods are used, more confidence can be taken in the results (Henn, Weinstien & Forad, 2006). At the commencement of this thesis there had been no similar studies undertaken in New Zealand on the role of the blogosphere which can offer insight to the selection of optimal methodologies. This study draws from those methods often employed for research in traditional media, such as newspapers, radio and television (McGregor, 1995; Fountaine, 2002). By using traditional media research methods on data gathered from internet-based media, this study offers a new perspective on the way content analysis is employed in communication research.

The development of internet communication in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century demands researchers approach the implementation of the traditional content analysis method using new empirical techniques (Weare & Lin, 2000). Academic research is

slowly catching up with the fast-paced emergence of internet and communication technologies over recent years. Articles have been published and the work of academics (Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005; Trammell & Keshelashvili; 2005, Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004; Papacharissi, 2004; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005) has created a platform for the use of content analysis on blogs. Their development of content analysis techniques has developed and challenged the traditional approach and provided guidance for other researchers conducting blog and website analysis. The problems of conducting content analysis on website and blogs have been identified in studies such as McMillan (2000).

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The overall question with which this research engages concerns the way blogs were used in the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign for political discussion and deliberation. Six related questions will provide a platform to build an understanding in answering this question. These are:

1. How did blogs communicate opinions and ideas on issues during the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign?
2. How were ideas and issues discussed and debated within the blogs' comments sections?
3. Did the blogosphere enhance deliberative democracy through discussions?
4. What relationship did blogs have with the mainstream media?
5. How did bloggers perceive their role in communicating election information and engendering discussions around issues?
6. How did ACT Party leader Rodney Hide use his blog as part of his campaign communication?

The qualitative and quantitative content analysis answers the questions about how blogs communicated opinions and ideas, as well as how deliberative democracy was enhanced by any discussion and debate that took place in the comments section. The interview material is used to build an understanding of experiences of political bloggers as well as to consider the role political bloggers perceived they played during the election campaign. The case study, which draws from the content analysis and also interviews, looks at the role of a New Zealand politician who blogs. This

study used ACT leader and Member of Parliament for Epsom, Rodney Hide, as the central figure of the case study. Hide started blogging over a year prior to the election and no other politician was doing so with the same commitment that he was, thus making him the best candidate for a case study in this thesis.

### **1.5 Structure of Thesis**

Chapters Two and Three make up the literature review on which this thesis has its foundation. Chapter Two looks at the relationship between technology and the way politics has been discussed. It also considers literature on the role mainstream media has played in political communication along with the capacity for people to use this medium as a way to express their ideas. Chapter Three considers Habermas' public sphere theory and communicative action. It also explores current literature to consider what role the advance in internet and communication technologies has played in modifying this theory along with the criticisms that challenge many of the central themes presented in Habermas' work. In Chapter Four the use of content analysis is outlined, and the steps of its application are detailed. This is followed by a fifth chapter which provides the results of the content analysis, with particular consideration paid to research questions 1-4, and to the role of posts and comments in achieving a form of deliberative democracy. Chapter Six considers the content analysis findings in relation to the literature. Chapter Seven outlines the methodology surrounding interviews and then continues to cover the interviews held with a number of prominent bloggers. Chapter Eight takes a considered look at the role blogging played in the election campaign for New Zealand politician, Rodney Hide. Finally, Chapter Nine summaries all the findings from the three methodologies and considers the broader role blogs played in the 2005 New Zealand General Election.

It should be noted all the quotations of blogs and comments have been taken directly from the sites where they were located. There has been no editing of the text, which explains the misspelling of words, absence of grammar and the use of gratuitous language.

## Chapter Two

### Discussions of Politics: The Relationship between Communication Technologies and Political Discussions

#### 2.1 Introduction

Informationalism, a technological paradigm based on the development of communication using computers (see Castells, 2000) represents the third industrial revolution (Warschauer, 2003). Table 1: The Three Industrial Revolutions follows the transformation of the revolutions from hand tools in a workshop to computers in offices (which can realistically be in any location). These technological changes have not only impacted on the way people work, the effects are more far reaching on personal and societal levels – the ways in which we interact, learn, trade and receive information have all changed along the communication/technological continuum. This chapter highlights the changes in communication technologies and how these have impacted on the way people discuss politics. It should be noted the author recognises this chapter only skims the surface of this area and acknowledges the depth and complexities of the relationship between technology and communication and the role they have played in society, but the margins of this thesis prohibit such a review of the literature. Nonetheless, the broad patterns of change proposed by scholars of technology and society provide an important context for this thesis.

**Table 1: The Three Industrial Revolutions**

	<b>First Industrial Revolution</b>	<b>Second Industrial Revolution</b>	<b>Third Industrial Revolution</b>
<b>Beginning</b>	Late 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Late 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Mid-to-late 20 <sup>th</sup> century
<b>Key Technologies</b>	Printing press, steam engine, machinery	Electricity, internal combustion, telegraph, telephone	Transistor, personal computers, telecommunications, internet
<b>Archetypical workplace</b>	Workshop	Factory	Office
<b>Organisation</b>	Master-apprentice-serf	Large vertical hierarchies	Horizontal networks

Technology has changed the way people can talk about politics. Discussions have moved from the days of coffee house conversations through to those of the printing

press, broadcasting audio and video, to today, where people can sit at a keyboard and take part in synchronous communication with others all over the planet. Changes in communication technology have rendered time and space irrelevant as they have been replaced by *the space of flows* and *timeless time* (Castells, 2000). The space of flows refers to the material organisation of simultaneous social interaction at a distance by networking communication via new communication technologies. Timeless time is the desequencing of social action, either by the compression of time or by the random ordering of the moments of the sequence. Theorists argue about whether the changes in communication technologies are beneficial for society because of their tendency to break down existing social patterns and change social organisations (Mesthene, 2000). However, the inclination to gain access to and participate in an online world shows no sign of ceasing.

The mainstream media still dictate the news agenda, and debate on the relationship between public discussion and democracy is still dominated by the media's conduit role (Garnham, 1992). Price and Zaller (1993) say people who regularly consume news media are more knowledgeable and more likely to gain from using it. However, it could now be suggested that things are changing so dramatically that someone can be as well informed as a traditional media user without consuming any of the traditional mainstream media products. Developments in communication technologies, specifically the internet, have all but eliminated the need for conduit media organisations to engender public discussion. This research will demonstrate that while mainstream media continue to set the agenda, the public can enter discussions about politics with the mainstream media serving only as a reference tool in their discussions.

Mainstream media organisations have always been to the forefront in the use of technology; however, the revolution that was the widespread use of the internet has changed the entire media landscape. Not only do media organisations have an increased web presence that does not reflect their core business, e.g. newspapers provide video clips of big stories and television news provides text-based accounts on their websites, but grassroots journalism, made possible by communication technologies, allows anyone to write and publish news, for example the Huffington Post. The radical change in communication technology has caused news organisations

to develop strategies to effectively use information and communication technologies to maintain their role as news providers while creating revenue streams from online news services.

Not only have the ways politics can be discussed changed, but this has had an impact on the issues and topics that are discussed. Advancements in communication technologies have made it easier for the media to bring issues to the public's attention and made party policy more accessible for those who want to access it. Because of this politicians are more, and need to be more, transparent than ever in their public and private lives. On a tabloid level, this can be seen by the difference between the placement of the spotlight on behaviours of the American presidents John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton. JFK is said to have carried on numerous extramarital affairs while president that went unreported at the time and only surfaced after his death (O'Brien, 1998). In contrast, Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky was widely reported in the media after being first announced on a news aggregation website, the Drudge Report (Scandalous scoop breaks online, 1998). From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the public could access an almost unlimited pool of information on the internet and communicate with one another to discuss the meaning and implications of this information. Topics that may have once stayed under the radar of public awareness now are brought into focus by political actors aware of the need for transparency or by an active political consumer who happens to find information or bring strands of information together, with far reaching consequences.

Academics and industry observers alike are aware of the shift in the way media is consumed and used. In recent years predictions have been rife about what the media will look like as an industry and how the public will interact with it. While many of these predictions are often not played out there is a trend toward media being sought from the internet (World Internet Project New Zealand, 2008). There is a generational shift where children born after the late 1990s are growing up in a world where online media is a norm. They have grown up with the internet as part of their daily lives. Activities such as schooling, entertainment and socialisation are far removed from the ways their parents conducted the same activities. There is a world where political interaction will be found in online environments and in ways we can not yet accurately detail.

## **2.2 Significant Advancements in Communication Technology and their Role in Political Discussion**

Throughout history people have had a thirst to know and understand the world around them. This desire for information kept early societies and individuals informed of wars and trade. Berelson's (1949) study in the 1940s of New Yorkers who were deprived of their daily newspapers for 17 days by striking delivery people showed the need for news has not dwindled in hundreds of years. From this Berelson developed the dependency theory, which further studies have shown to be an accurate representation of people's need for knowledge about current events (Bentley, 1998). What has changed is the way which we receive this information. Berelson's New Yorkers, let alone the early Greeks and Romans, could not have imagined television news channels that run 24 hours a day, seven days a week and websites that are continually updated with breaking stories.

There is a forceful interplay between society and technology (Morrisett, 2003). Society creates technology, but is also created by technology. There is no question that people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially those in developed countries, have in some way been affected by the printing press, telephone, radio, television – these are, according to Ithiel de Sola Pool, the technologies of freedom (1984). Mostly these technologies have improved people's lives economically, socially and politically.

This section will look at the three significant developments in communication technology – the printing press/newspapers, radio, television – in the context of how these have changed the way in which politics was discussed and what implications this change may have had on a deliberative society. This is followed by the development of internet-based communication and some of the impacts it has had on political discussion and deliberation.

The role of the telegraph should not go unacknowledged as this was the first time people could communicate over a great distance in a matter of seconds. The telegraph, however, was limited in its capabilities, as opposed to the other previously stated media, and is on this basis not the focus for further examination in this study.

### 2.2.1 Printing Press

While the original printing press is recognised as being invented by German Johannes Gutenberg in 1440 (Eisenstein, 1980), it was still an under-utilised technology until the introduction of the steam powered press in 1812, when it became possible to print over a thousand copies of a page per hour. The impact of the printing press in Europe cannot be understated as it can be compared to the development of writing, the invention of the alphabet or the internet, in terms of its effects on society. The wider availability of printed materials also led to a dramatic rise in the adult literacy rate throughout Europe. Within 50 or 60 years of the invention of the printing press, many of the classics had been printed and disseminated throughout Europe (Eisenstein, 1969; p. 52). With access to this material people were able to develop their knowledge and discuss these works.

The same pressure to contain dissenting opinions has been repeated many times in the history of the press and the public. Before mass access to the printing press, dissemination of information could be restricted to society's elite and controlling members of the church and these groups were resistant to the idea of a wider public space. The restriction of information was in part due to the low levels of literacy and also because the production of published material was a highly skilled craft. One of the great statements of press freedom was written in 1644 by John Milton in his opposition to what he determined censorship and the denied right to free expression by the ruling elite. He says,

The Order is hostile to truth: First, as tending to efface knowledge already gained. The waters of truth have been likened to a fountain; but they will stagnate now into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition. The man of business, chiefly anxious to keep up appearances, and the man of pleasure, anxious to be saved trouble, will give up the attempt to think in religion and will become the merest formulists... Men with a good conscience and a real love of truth ought to wish for open discussion. Secondly – the Order is hostile to truth as preventing any addition to knowledge. Truth was once incarnate on earth; but it has been hewn in pieces by Falsehood, and the pieces have been cast to the four winds; and as Isis sought for the limbs of Osiris, slain and mangled by Typhon, so the friends of truth are even now looking for the scattered members. Do not be hinderers of the search (p. 33).

In New Zealand, from as early as 1840 the government had a history of attempting to influence and apply draconian laws to the press (Day, 1981). After the *New Zealand Advertiser* and the *Bay of Islands Gazette* refused to publish advertisements from the government, the new administration, led by Governor Hobson, started producing the *New Zealand Government Gazette*, in an effort to communicate their own messages.

### 2.2.2 The Pamphleteers

It is the kind of activist thinking displayed by Milton that may have been on the minds of the 17/18<sup>th</sup> century pamphleteers when they printed and distributed their pamphlets, whose print runs numbered sometimes into the thousands. Pamphlets were often written on a specific issue by people who were not writers as such but passionate about a cause or issue. The authors of the pamphlets were hardly ever professional writers, instead they were lawyers, farmers, ministers, merchants, or, as was the trend of the time, people who wrote under a pseudonym or completely anonymously. They were often printed in backstreet print shops and smuggled around in coffins, hatboxes, and baskets covered with apples, bread or dirty laundry (Keane, 1991). It was impossible for the royal authorities to find their authors and stop the publication. The pamphlet had certain virtues as a medium that allowed people to say things that were not possible in any other form (Bailyn, 1967). George Orwell (1951) provides a good summation of the pamphlet and those who wrote them.

The pamphlet is a one-man show. One has complete freedom of expression, including, if one chooses, the freedom to be scurrilous, abusive, and seditious; or, on the other hand, to be more detailed, serious and 'high-brow' than is ever possible in a newspaper or in most kinds of periodicals. At the same time, since the pamphlet is always short and unbound, it can be produced much more quickly than a book, and in principle, at any rate, can reach a bigger public. Above all, the pamphlet does not have to follow any prescribed pattern. It can be in prose or in verse, it can consist largely of maps or statistics or quotations, it can take the form of a story, a fable, a letter, an essay, a dialogue, or a piece of 'reportage.' All that is required of it is that it shall be topical, polemical, and short (p. 15).

In the mid to late 1700s pamphleteers used popular language and conspiracy theories to vilify the governing classes, contributing to the formation of a more democratic press which regarded politics as the business of every citizen, regardless of gender or

socio-economic status (Keane, 1991). The format was used in a number of ways but mostly as a tool of the activist or revolutionary to communicate their ideas.

The liberal thinking of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was that the power of information is immeasurable and if a man knows, he will be able to do (Black, 1969). While the power structures were in place and maintained control, society was in some disorder, “institutions ran badly, if at all, attitudes were confused, morals were debased through an insufficiency of knowledge” (p. 47). Black illustrates the point that in a changing world people require knowledge, based on information and awareness, to assist in rational decision making – let people know, and they will do what must be done.

One of the most recognised pamphleteers was the Englishman Thomas Paine and he is best remembered for his printed arguments in *The Rights of Man* and *Common Sense*, which defended the French Revolution and advocated for the independence of the American colony. His writing is now viewed as hugely important. His writings, which included the promotion of republicanism in the colonies and opposition to the British monarchy, were abhorred by authorities in England and America. In France his writing saw him arrested and sentenced to death, although by chance, he miraculously escaped execution.

One of the attractive features of the pamphlet was the ability to create the exact size necessary for the intended purpose. They could be a few pages – useful for short comments or rebuttals – or they could be used for longer, more serious issues. Some pamphlets in the Revolutionary period contained up to 80 pages (Bailyn, 1967). Mostly they were 5,000 to 25,000 words – or 10 to 50 pages. This size was big enough to develop an argument in full, providing an opportunity for the writer to investigate premise, explore logic and consider conclusions. They would also include supporting information such as state papers or newspaper clippings.

And yet pamphlets of this length were seldom ponderous; whatever the gravity of their themes or the spaciousness of their contents they were always essentially polemical, and aimed at immediate and rapidly shifting targets: at suddenly developing problems, unanticipated arguments, and swiftly rising, controversial figures. The best of the writing that appeared in this form, consequently, had a rare combination of spontaneity and solidity, of dash and detail, of casualness and care (Bailyn, 1967, p. 4).

Because they were so easy and inexpensive to produce, pamphlets were printed wherever there was a printing press and political ideology. Many of the pamphlets were related to a public issue or event of the time, such as The Stamp Act in America, or better pay and working conditions in England. But if they were only written to comment on issues of the day then the numbers of pamphlets would have been fewer. A greater number of the pamphlets were arguments, responses, replies, or exchanges between individuals – mostly personal polemics – and these would escalate until they reached personal abuse and ad hominem attacks. When Thomas Paine published *Common Sense*, he received at least six different replies coming from conflicting points of view. Some challenged his ideas completely and others supported only some of them (Bailyn, 1967).

The most important feature of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century pamphlet was its ability to express ideas, attitudes, and motivations that lay at the heart and mind of the writer. The pamphlets were primarily political rather than literary documents. They were the way people of the time could take their ideas, concerns, and propaganda – often polemic and radical – and present them to the public.

The printing press clearly contributed to the emergence of publicness (this is discussed more in the next chapter) being one of the factors that allowed liberal ideas, pamphlets and their vigorous debate to emerge (as well as the more formalised form of debate, the newspaper), constructing wholesale changes in political systems in countries such as France, United Kingdom and United States.

### **2.2.3 Radio**

The development of radio broadcasts was a significant step that disconnected the physical location of the speaker and audience and communication. With little cost, information could be transmitted through the airwaves. People responded to the technology positively and within 20 years of the initial broadcast in the 1920s, 70 percent of Americans stated the radio as their primary news source. In New Zealand, before the introduction of the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation (NZBC) in 1962, radio news consisted of a few BBC bulletins or the reading of published newspaper stories (Feslier, 2001). With so many people getting their news from one

source the chance for political inference, or having a government manage messages and information, is totally plausible.

The New Zealand Government introduced a regulation in 1923 that stated; “broadcasting stations shall not be used for the dissemination of propaganda of a controversial nature” (Day, 1994, p.51). Day believes this regulation “sprang from the government desire to promote national uniformity and consensus, as much as from a censor’s dark brow. It effectively curtailed discussion; radio was unable to take part in any debates, political or otherwise, that arose in New Zealand” (Day, 2004, p. 94).

It was Michael Joseph Savage, New Zealand Prime Minister 1935-1940, who first realised the power of radio broadcasts for communicating with the electorate and he readily used the medium for his 1935 election campaign, which he went on to win. He saw radio as an opportunity to communicate directly with the public, avoiding any potential bias from journalists. He was also responsible for broadcasting Parliament live – New Zealand was the first country to do so – saying, “By means of broadcasting the people are getting the truth right from Parliament, the pure, unadulterated truth” (Gregory, 1985, p.17). This was a subtle and shrewd argument, according to Gregory. It was invoked to disarm opposition criticism that the government’s move to place broadcasting under direct ministerial control threatened New Zealand’s democracy – or as a Member of Parliament said, “another step toward Hitlerism” (Day, 2004 p.96). These broadcasts of Parliament were so successful partly because by 1936 over half of all New Zealand households had a radio. There were many positive spinoffs to broadcasting Parliament; enhanced public understand of parliamentary procedure, changes in Parliamentary behaviour and increased awareness of who the politicians were (Day, 2004).

Little was done in the 1930s to remedy the strict regulations that prohibited freedom of expression. This was evident, even by Savage’s nonchalant acknowledgement that any news involving New Zealand was strictly produced and controlled by the government, with the newsreaders not allowed to alter the copy. This was also demonstrated by Savage’s ‘Sunday Evening Talk’ where he could address the nation, mostly with “paternal government guidance” (Gregory, 1985 p. 18). However,

opposition politicians and members of the public were afforded neither the same courtesy nor the right of reply.

The Government used radio broadcasts to disseminate official propaganda until dissatisfaction arose from radio journalists after the 1951 waterfront dispute when they began to lobby for a proper news department, which eventually appeared in the form of the NZBC. After the introduction of the Broadcasting Act that saw the beginning of the NZBC, the guise of independent media continued till the latter part of the 1960s and the emergence of public broadcast journalism. Along with the growth in independent, government-free broadcasting came the resolve to use the medium's power for public discussion. This change, says Day (2004), led to radio and television becoming accepted as part of a modern democracy.

With all the evolution of radio to date, a realistic concern as around radio's viability as a means of political discussion and deliberation is the way people use radio. That is, if people only used radio to listen to music the radio has a negative impact on discussion. If the same people used the radio to listen to political commentary and debate on the radio they are better able to participate in community discussion about issues.

### **2.2.3.1 Talkback Radio**

The coming together of the telephone and the radio in Talk Radio (called talkback radio in New Zealand) from the early 1980s represents a significant moment in the political use of communications media where people could make immediate comments directly to a mass audience. Talkback radio has been described as 'new' news – a mixture of some serious news with the bizarre, but essentially it is mainly constructed of soft news (Taylor, 1992; Owen & Robinson, 1993). Research has shown people who listen to talkback are more active in local and national politics (Hollander, 1996). Talkback listeners believe the medium allows for more intimacy and provides a better representation of the news than more traditional media. They also believe talkback radio to be more participatory and democratic (McGregor, 1995). Others go as far as stating talkback to be an important ingredient in democratic nation building and open, healthy debate (Jones, 2004; Turner, 2003). Talkback in

New Zealand has developed and maintained an audience, especially in the 40+ age bracket. For those who were already politically inclined, the development of political talkback radio represented the biggest step in their capacity to participate in political discussion since newspapers' letters to the editor.

The role this medium has played in people's political activity is hard to pin down, however, going on the premise that academic discussions about talkback radio are based on a limited amount of research, Hofstetter, Donovan, Klauber, Cole, Huie and Yuasa (1994) challenge the opinion of talkback as being the "harbinger of populism run rampant, providing opportunities for cynical, malevolent manipulators of public opinion to mobilize the masses and undermine the bases of legitimacy of society, provide electoral success for venal, banal, cynical manipulators of opinion" (p. 477). Their study in the United States found to the contrary and they state:

Exposure to political talk radio was associated with political involvement and activity. Frequent listeners to political talk radio are more interested in politics, pay more attention to politics in mass media, vote more, and participate more than others in a variety of political activities. They are more efficacious and less alienated than others. Although heavier listeners may use talk radio more for entertainment than for public affairs surveillance, no strong tendencies for talk audiences to be alienated, cynical, or less politically efficacious were apparent (p. 477).

Kurtz (1996) says of the USA "those who listen to talk radio are, almost by definition, more passionate about issues, more activist, more likely to call their congressman about a hot topic" (p. 260). This shows talkback callers to be more politically motivated than those who do not listen. What is less clear is whether talkback radio politicises people or if they are already politically inclined and use the medium to fuel that interest.

Talkback radio has played a part in New Zealand elections in the past (see McGregor, 1995). In the mid to late 1990s, the now defunct Radio Pacific was a hotbed of political talkback radio. During the 1993 and 1996 election campaigns the station allowed politicians to host regular time-slots. Politicians were aware of the power of this medium and were quick to engage as it was used by the leaders of both major political parties and also others from smaller third parties, even though some were openly critical of the format, namely then Prime Minister, Jim Bolger. Opposition

leader, Mike Moore, went to the extent of having his home wired to enable him to broadcast from one of his rooms (Day, 1994). This, he said, allowed him to talk about policies without having to do so in sound bites – referring to television’s editing technique that gives politicians a brief opportunity to communicate with viewers. He believed the talkback medium to be more politically effective than the usual political media management.

McGregor (1995) said there are significant implications for mainstream media when a developing audience like that of talkback in the 1990s becomes disaffected with traditional news coverage. Such implications include the further stretching of politicians’ time and availability, or desire, to front traditional media in media conferences or through media releases. She also asks the question: if amateurs exploiting the access offered by such electric town hall meetings can ask questions that have the potential to raise the level of political discourse, who needs pros? This technology has not only provided further avenues for participation in public debate, but potentially changed the nature of public debate itself, appearing to promise citizen-politician interaction in which journalists are less important, yet doing so with an entertainment format in which critical questioning is less prominent.

Political parties continue to value the power of talkback radio as they hold lists of supporters who are tasked with monitoring talkback radio and phoning in with supportive or critical comments (Espiner, 2007). When former Prime Minister Mike Moore criticised Helen Clark’s leadership style in 2007, Labour supporters were urged by senior members of the party to call talkback radio responding to Moore’s criticism (Eaton, 2007). But talkback hosts now tend to choose their own topics rather than allow those phoning in to decide, as a way of stopping party political supporters dominating the airwaves (Green & Kupferberg, 2000).

Talkback radio is a hybrid of political discussion and entertainment. This can be clearly seen on Radio Live’s daily show hosted by John Tamihere and Willy Jackson. Former Members of Parliament, they often play the roles of ‘good Maori/bad Maori’ (pragmatist/activist) in an apparent effort to stimulate people to call in and boost ratings, as opposed to making a genuine attempt to establish political discourse.

These points indicate that talkback radio is not simply a ‘people’s voice’ but it is prone to manipulation, the need to entertain rather than educate, and the bias of the host. Although it opened up new avenues for citizen participation in politics, this combination of radio and telephone technology belonged to a highly commercial context where Milton’s ideals of a critical questioning for truth were only weakly present.

#### **2.2.4 Television**

Television, more than any other medium, has the ability to convey an intimate experience. It can take viewers to an event in such a way that they see, hear and understand that event. Television gave news a face and once again, as in the times before the printing press, people were able to receive news by looking another person in the face. Television as a medium plays a significant role in shaping public opinion on issues and is central in setting the news agenda.

Television, like radio, showed exponential growth until reaching 95 percent saturation point within 20 years of it being available to the United States marketplace. However, television broadcasts, again like those of radio, require conduits and therefore the actual television set is worthless without the accompanying broadcast material transmitted to the unit (or video tape/DVD played into it) or the electricity to run it (Warschauer, 2003). Nevertheless, in Western countries, and a number of developing nations, the provision of both free broadcasts and the power to run the television allows for penetration into high-income and low-income households in roughly equal numbers.

Television was introduced to New Zealand in 1960 by the Government and, like radio, was heavily regulated. By 1963 the NZBC had developed a network of journalists who prepared news material for both radio and television but the reports read for television were mostly just information contained in radio scripts (Geary, 2001).

In a lecture to broadcasting students, Joe Atkinson (2000), quoting Herman and Chomsky (1988), described television as an anti-democratic medium. He justifies this claim by pointing out the following:

- Ratings encourage the gratification of existing preferences, not the development of new ones or challenges to the status quo.
- Commercialism serves selective interests rather than the common good.
- Advertisements encourage audiences to buy their way out of problems as individuals.
- Information markets neglect third-party preferences and the need for common knowledge, and
- Narrowcasting is socially divisive.

These factors make it difficult for an individual in a civil society to be the source for ideas, and seek a consensus within the public sphere. Here, television, as could be said of all commercial media, is less concerned with public good and more focused on commercial and financial success.

In the early years of television there was a commitment to producing quality information for news broadcasts, before it was realised entertainment had a better chance of generating revenue (Rowland, 1997), and television could have a positive influence on society.

### **2.2.5 The Internet**

The internet can be defined as a worldwide, publicly accessible series of interconnected computer networks – a network of networks. The development of the internet has been a process that has included many individuals over a number of years (for further reading on this process see Naughton, 1999). However, communication via computer networks was initially developed in science laboratories in the 1960s and was strategically backed by the US military and developed further through key US universities (Hafner & Lyon, 1996). This led to networks like ARPANET, BITNET and USENET in the 1970s and 1980s before becoming the internet in the 1990s. While the internet is used for a number of applications, such as

communication, leisure and commerce, this thesis examines internet use in relation to how it is used for the discussion of politics. Warschauer (2003) says the internet changed existing forms of representing, organising, and sharing information in four important ways.

1. Written interaction – computer mediated communication bridges the difference between spoken and written language.
2. Long distance many-to-many communication – now thousands of people can enter into a single discussion.
3. A global hypertext – the hypertext organisation of the internet allows a horizontal, associative connection between sources of information that is spread across an ever-expanding network.
4. Multimedia – the mix of textual and audiovisual content on the internet changed the representational mode organised increasingly on the power of display rather than that of narration.

According to US data, the internet is now perceived by a majority of users to be a more important source of information for them than television, radio, newspapers, and books (Digital Future Report, 2008). Users also report high levels of reliability and accuracy from established media such as print, radio and television – increasing from 77 percent in 2006 to 80 percent in 2008. The University of Southern California Annenberg School Centre for the Digital Future conducts annual research into the trends and activities of online behaviours and attitudes. The 2008 report shows some interesting developments in the relationship between internet users and politics. While the internet's role in political campaigning and candidate communication has increased dramatically since the late 1990s, only small numbers of users believe that the internet is a catalyst for political change, and this number has declined since 2006. Research has shown people are using the internet for political news because they are dissatisfied with traditional media (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). The Pew Research Centre's Internet and Campaign 2004 study found that even for those who do not consider it their main source of election news, the internet is becoming a tool for gathering election information (Rainie, Cornfield & Horrigan, 2005). The 2008 study also showed 22 percent believe the internet can alert politicians to what public opinion may be, while only 28 percent agree that using the internet gives people more

of a say in what government does. However, the number who believe the internet gives people more political power has remained stagnant since 2006, at 30 percent.

Scholars disagree on the way use of the internet interrelates with people's participation within a community. Kling (1996) says people cannot be online at the same time as participating in a community event of any nature. Being online has been shown to decrease social involvement where people give up real-life situations to spend time on the internet, and to lead to a decrease in reported face-to-face conversations (Kraut, Patterson, Lundman, Kiesler, Mukopsdhysy & Scherlis, 1998; Nie & Erbring, 2000). In contradiction to this view, the Pew Research Centre (2004) says the internet contributes to a wider awareness of political arguments and any fears that use of the internet might hurt healthy democratic deliberation have not come to fruition.

Ward, Gibson and Lusoli (2005) are concerned that the number of people engaging in politics on the internet are smaller than the wider media hype would have us believe, but those who are active online are people who are traditional political participants and activists. They fear the internet will only amplify those already prominent in the parliamentary system and discourage new voices. Adding internet-based communication to the existing channels will not, they believe, produce a democratic nirvana. They go on to say that new communication technologies should not be disregarded as a place for democracy as their research shows the potential of these technologies to attract and engage younger people, and as the internet becomes increasingly intertwined in daily life, the demands and usage will increase.

Uses and gratifications theory suggests people make conscious decisions about the type of media they consume (Blumler & Katz, 1974). The theory suggests media allow people to conduct surveillance of a community, determine how different events link a community and provide information on a community's social heritage, although it does not allow people to interact and use the knowledge they have gained – other than token measures like talkback radio and letters to the editor. The consumption of print, radio and television can be an isolated experience as often interaction with mainstream media is passive and conducted without the opportunity to give feedback or determine the way in which the information is presented, so change from

pamphlets as media became mass and commercial, though echoes of older uses in talkback. If political participation is considered to be nothing more than simply reading, listening or viewing a broadcast about a political issue, then questions about the threshold of participation in relation to a person's ability to engage in political discussion are relevant. Newspapers have been claimed to socially integrate a community and allow it to reach consensus (Janowitz, 1952), but this can not occur without people doing something with the information they obtain from the media.

Ankney (2003) hypothesised a negative correlation between community related activities such as political participation and the diffusion of communication technologies. His research indicated a strong relationship between lower instances of voter registration and political participation in those homes with cable television, suggesting a decline in the amount of socialisation within a community due to people simply staying home. As opposed to television, electronic-based communication, such as email and internet, allows people to become and remain in touch with one another. While Kling (1996) contends face-to-face communication must decrease as electronic forms increase, this to some may not impose any negative connotation whatsoever. In fact, the removed proximity of the communication may amplify the conditions in which some people would prefer to communicate. Putnam (2000) sees the strength of new communication technologies in their ability to complement – not replace – face-to-face interaction.

The need for government to embrace new communication technology is as important today as it was when the printing press became available. If political parties and politicians want to communicate with the masses in the internet age they need to have an online presence; however, the difference with this new environment as opposed to print, radio and television, is the difficulties governments would face in attempts to colonise this space. In New Zealand, political parties have not pushed any boundaries with the use of websites for campaigning and online communication, as has been the case in other parts of the world. Up until the election of 2005 the internet was a place of rich news exchange and a place for discussion for some users – even if the interface was complicated and crude – but since 2005 the technologies have become wide reaching and this has meant that some have begun to miss out on the value and benefits the internet offers. In New Zealand the government has little influence over

the way the media is operated. Since Michael Joseph Savage's propaganda filled Sunday night talks political communication has come a long way and new media continues the opportunities New Zealanders have for open and robust political coverage and discussion.

### **2.3 Communication and Models of Democracy**

The historical struggles over new media are connected to struggles between different models of democracy. These models, which ascribe different roles to communication, help us understand the political implications of these different media, and in particular of new emerging media.

Democracy, as a term, can be an honorific description of a hollow concept. Abraham Lincoln famously coined the phrase "government of the people, by the people, for the people" ([historyplace.com](http://historyplace.com)) but this is not exactly a full and detailed explanation of democracy as a concept. Cohen (1971) describes democracy as a system of community government in which, by and large, the members of a community participate, or may participate, directly or indirectly, in the making of decisions which affect them. While there has always been discussion surrounding the nature of democracy, recent developments in communication technologies have added another dimension to the effects of differing democracy models. It is recognised there are many models of democracy (Held, 1996; Elster, 1998; Fishkin & Laslett, 2003; Sartori, 1987). The purpose of this study is to consider the role of blogs and the blogosphere in relation to traditional democratic models. Strömbäck (2005) provides the starting point for this research, where he identifies four important and widely discussed models: procedural democracy, competitive democracy, participatory democracy, and deliberative democracy. This does not suggest that Strömbäck's definition of democracy is ideal or complete, but it does provide a platform for this thesis.

Strömbäck reports all four models as being procedures for, and processes of, political decision making, not about different political policies. He continues that democracy is not concerned with political ideologies, which are about different policies that operate inside a democratic framework, but instead it is simply decision making. All

four models carry different normative expectations on citizens and politicians, and from this Strömbäck postulates that the models have different normative obligations upon media and journalism.

This research will look to add to the developing body of knowledge in the area of the relationship between political discussion and communication technologies and in the interests of that outcome this study will focus primarily on the intersection of deliberative democracy and blogging. To place deliberative democracy and the blogosphere in a context, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the four models.

**Table 2: Four models of democracy – a comparison**

	<b>Procedural democracy</b>	<b>Competitive democracy</b>	<b>Participatory democracy</b>	<b>Deliberative democracy</b>
Central mechanism for securing the primacy of the common good	Free and fair elections	Competitive elections	Citizen participation in public life, both outside and within political parties	Deliberative discussions among all sections of the public and their representatives
Distinguishing and core normative expectations of citizens	Respect democratic procedures	Clear opinions of societal problems; knowledge of who has had power; knowledge about the record of the office holders; knowledge about party platforms and promises	Politically interested; engaged in associations and in public life; knowledge about how to influence public life; knowledge about relevant factual conditions; clear opinions of societal problems; trustful, cooperative	Politically interested; participate in discussions; trustful, cooperative, listening; knowledge about relevant factual conditions and moral values; readiness to change opinions; strive for consensus; committed to the values of impartiality and rationality; make sociotropic evaluations

### **2.3.1.1 Procedural and Competitive Democracy**

Procedural Democracy consists of the minimum requirements that must be in place for a democracy to flourish. It expects both the general public and those in power to respect the rules and procedures. According to this model, the right to vote, the freedom of expression and of the press, and the other basic requirements, must always be protected and respected. Therefore, procedural democracy does not put any normative demands on citizens that they should vote, should consume news journalism, should participate in public life, or should be well-informed. How people choose to spend their time and their mental energy is up to them, as long as they do not violate the basic democratic freedoms and rights. According to this model to demand that people in general spend their life keeping up with the news, getting informed, and participating in public life, is to demand too much.

Competitive Democracy, or what Sartori (1987) labels “electoral democracy” (p. 14), promotes the concept that elections are normatively essential. It is during elections that the political candidates or parties compete for the support (votes) of the electorate. The implication of this is that, in the competitive model of democracy, it is the political elites who act, whereas the citizens react. As in the marketplace for goods and services, political alternatives offer their services and products (policies, candidates, images) to voters who then act as customers and through their votes buy the ‘product’ that pleases them most. Without clear political alternatives, i.e. competing products, this process would be undermined.

According to the competitive model of democracy, elections serve several functions. First, they produce governments. Second, they are the mechanism through which the will of the people can and should be heard. Third, they make it possible for people to remove unpopular governments. Fourth, they make it possible for people to give mandate to the political alternative they prefer. Finally, fifth, the competitive nature of elections makes it likely that the final winners will be more qualified than they would be in the absence of elections.

The competitive model requires certain things of a population if people at election time are supposed to look into the future and the possible outcomes of different political alternatives. People then require an understanding and knowledge of their

personal views, the opinions of the political alternatives, and an ability to compare the electoral platforms with their own views and priorities (Dalton, 2002). People are also supposed to have an opinion about the most important problems facing the country, so that they can compare them to the issues proposed by the political alternatives.

Furthermore, they are also supposed to have some basic knowledge about how society and the political system work, in order to critically evaluate the realism in the promises made by the political alternatives.

### **2.3.1.2 Participatory Democracy**

In their book *Reviving Democracy*, Knight, Chigudu and Tandon (2002) state the most important component of a good society is participation. However, the research they undertook highlighted participation as something respondents were not strongly inclined toward. Citizens must be willing and able to mobilise one another actively to participate in order to maintain legitimate processes of representation (Young, 2002) and herein lies the tension between citizens' desire for a free and democratic society (particularly those living in Western cultures) and the need to actively undertake the actions to ensure this ongoing process of government.

According to the participatory model, democracy can never be reduced to the act of voting "yes" or "no" to predefined alternatives every general election. Democracy is more than a governmental arrangement for contesting elections. Knight et al. claim people no longer believe that representative democracy is enough and they want a participatory model that seeks action from both citizens and government. They advocate that communities need to demonstrate "activism, leadership, association and engagement" (p.164). Here, citizens could no longer sit back and expect democracy to simply happen.

The role of the government, in a participatory model, would be to "value the opinions and expectations of all citizens" (Knight et al., 2002, p. 164). Governments would also be required to engage in debates even where they may not support an idea, as well as be accepting of criticism. Knight et al. see participatory democracy as less about who wins and loses, and more about who takes part. Whereas identification with political parties might be considered irrational from the perspective of the

competitive model of democracy, it is rational from the perspective of the participatory model of democracy. If people engage in associations and political parties, and through their activities become a part of and influence these organisations, identification with the parties and other organisations is likely. For the participatory model of democracy to function in a normative manner, Strömbäck (2005) lists a number of criteria that people need to fulfil:

- People need “the kind of knowledge and information that facilitates collective action, participation and engagement” (p. 336)
- They need to know the problems the country is facing, information about the policies and ideas of electoral candidates and they also need to understand how they think and feel about issues.
- They should not distrust their fellow citizens or politicians, if not obviously warranted, but feel bonded to civic associations and political parties.

However, these expectations may be excessive, according to some researchers, as studies show that people are becoming less likely to act politically or even to cast a vote (Kornbluh, 2000; Blais, Gidengill, Nevitte & Nadeau, 2004).

Democracy thrives when people engage in public life and different types of political action, when they bond through their activities, and when they develop democratically sound attitudes. Therefore, democracy can never be built or sustained from the top of society, it has to be built and sustained by the actions of a large number of people (Pateman, 1970). In the participatory model of democracy, people are expected to engage in civic and public life. They should participate in different kinds of community activities, and learn how to cooperate in order to achieve collective goals. The more people are politically interested, the more they engage in associations and civic organisations, the more they vote, the more they develop attitudes and norms of generalised reciprocity, the better (Putnam, 2000).

There are a number of links between the participatory model of democracy and the philosophy of public journalism. The public journalism movement has two prime goals: the first is making news organisations listen more closely to their audiences, and the second is making news organisations play more active roles in their

communities. In other words; detachment is out – participation is in. The basis of this is that journalism perceives people more as active citizens rather than just spectators; however, opponents have accused public journalism of abandoning the traditional goal of objectivity in reporting.

There are a number of requirements people need to have for participatory democracy to function – they should be knowledgeable, follow public affairs, and develop attitudes and norms of generalised reciprocity, tolerance, cooperation and trust. According to Strömbäck (2005) this view has several normative implications for media and journalism. News, he states, should reflect the real social environment and demonstrate how decision making affects people. People should also be allowed to set the agenda, to speak for themselves, and politics should be an open discussion that all, not just those already involved, can partake in. This means media outlets have a responsibility to cover politics in a way that seeks to create interest and motivate people in get involved. Consequently, news should not only dwell on societal problems but also show when problems are solved.

### **2.3.1.3 Deliberative Democracy**

Deliberation has been described as a conversation whereby individuals speak and listen sequentially before making a collective decision (Austen-Smith, 1995); however, the conversations usually fall between bargaining and arguing.

The deliberative democratic ideal starts from the premise that political preferences will conflict and that the purpose of democratic institutions must be to resolve this conflict (Miller, 1993). However, this is presumed as happening in open and coercion-free discussion, with the result being a shared agreement on the issue. Listening to the opinions and thoughts of others is necessary when making a decision. Miller's thoughts here are in line with those of Habermas' vision of the normative public sphere. Habermas stresses the importance of the construction of political will through the process of deliberative democracy where that is conceived as processes which cultivate rational and moral subjects through reflection, argumentation, public reasoning, and reaching consensus (Habermas, 1992).

Political conversation does not serve democracy if it is not deliberative and among a heterogeneous group of people. The fundamental criteria of deliberative democracy include the presence of difference between and disagreement among participants with regard to opinions and arguments. Public conversation should air disagreements and include a variety of perspectives and views (Fishkin, 1995; Gutman & Thompson, 1996). Morrisett (2003) says “any interactive communication system must provide the means for deliberation, that is, the careful consideration of an issue and the likely consequences of decisions” (p. 29).

Deliberative democracy is a term used to refer to any system of political decisions based on some trade-off of consensus decision making and representative democracy. As opposed to a theory of democracy in which voting is considered underpinning action of democracy, deliberative democracy contends that legitimacy can only be reached once the public has had an opportunity to deliberate issues.

In recent years new theories of deliberative democracy have brought about a renewed interest in the subject (Sunstein, Kahneman & Schkade, 1998; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Elster 1998). The core idea of the deliberative model of democracy, according to Elster, is:

...the notion includes collective decision making with the participation of all who will be affected by the decision or their representatives: this is the democratic part. Also, all agree that it includes decision making by means of arguments offered by and to participants who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality: this is the deliberative part (p. 8).

Deliberative democracy emphasises the conceptualisation of democratic discussion as not merely expressing and registering, but as transforming the preferences, interests, beliefs and judgements of people. By discussing issues and ideas with people who hold different opinions from your own, sharing experiences and identifying ignorance and prejudice, new information and perceptions can be found. Ideally, the discussions would occur in a natural daily setting between people on all levels of society and between the government and citizens, and also include the media. If possible, the deliberative discussions should continue until mutually acceptable decisions are reached, but if that is not possible, they should continue until all factual and moral aspects of an issue have been weighed and considered (Strömbäck, 2005).

One of the problems with deliberative democracy is that instead of finding others to engage in transforming dialogue, people tend to gravitate toward others of like mind. There is no debate where people who have similar opinions on an issue talk about its merits or problems (MacKuen, 1990). Because politics can be a controversial topic to discuss, people may want to avoid such subjects due to the possible negative implications on their interpersonal relationships. There are also links here to what Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann calls the “spiral of silence” (1984). This suggests people are reluctant to speak publicly on an issue for fear of reprisal or isolation. Empirical studies show that some of the points of the spiral of silence form explanations for political apathy and the unwillingness to express one’s opinions publicly (Witschge, 2004). However, recent articles have shown the internet to foster an environment where people can more freely exchange their thoughts and opinions (O’Hara, 2002; Sunstein, 2001).

Another anomaly of deliberative democracy is that people, where politics are concerned, are generally uninformed and hold on to misinformation that helps comprise their beliefs about the world around them. A classic example of this is the high number of people in America who continued to believe that Saddam Hussein was an associate of Osama Bin Laden and that he did in fact have weapons of mass destruction when expert evidence, including the 9/11 Commission’s final report, clearly demonstrated otherwise on both accounts. According to Barabas (2004) this discrepancy between what people hold to be true and the actual truth calls into question the foundations of democracy.

Like the participative model of democracy, the deliberative model contends that if people are to participate in society, in an informed way, there is a role for media to provide the required information to enable this. Public journalism is an appropriate model for both participative and deliberative models of democracy because a requirement of this model is that media and journalism provide the kind and quality of information needed to make informed decisions.

It is important to define what is meant by “quality” and “quality of information” from web based sources. For the purposes of this thesis the characteristics of quality are drawn from the following:

- *Scope of Coverage* - this refers to the extent to which a source explores a topic. It considers time periods, geography or jurisdiction and coverage of related or narrower topics.
- *Authority* - this refers to the expertise or recognised official status of a source. It also considers the reputation of the author and publisher.
- *Objectivity* - this is the bias or opinion expressed when a writer interprets or analyses facts. It considers the use of persuasive language, the source's presentation of other viewpoints and reasons for providing the information.
- *Accuracy* - this describes information that is factually irrefutable and complete. It considers the editing and publishing policy of the source.
- *Timeliness* - this refers to information that is current at the time of publication. (The Virtual Chase, 2008)

It is because of the importance of information in the deliberative model that the role of media is so crucial to any success. This also raises the question that deliberative spaces are often compromised and abused because of the entrenched interests of some. Sunstein (2001) highlights this occurrence where some groups in the United States are so opposed in their views that communication is almost impossible and there are certainly no commonalities on which to start discussion, for example pro and anti-abortion groups. However, it would be premature to discard deliberative democracy theory on the basis of minority groups who hold polarised opinions on a single issue.

If the role of the media is important in providing people information to enable them to participate in a democracy then blogs, through the development of communication technologies, allow people to discuss the issues and ideas. The commercial imperatives of modern media do not allow for pure public journalism, and the controversies of media ownership and criticisms of political coverage in the media all provide arguments for the need of a space where ideas can be presented and free

discussion ensue. In 2005 the blogosphere provides a space that could be considered as having some of these qualities.

#### **2.3.1.3.1 Deliberative Democracy in this Thesis**

The concept of deliberative democracy used in contemporary discussions covers a variety of theoretical approaches, and like that of the broader concept of democracy, it is problematic and ambiguous within academic writing (Dahlberg, 2001; Dryzek, 2000; Gutman & Thompson, 2000; Keane, 2001; Sassi, 2001; Sartori, 1987; Tsagarousianou, 1998). Therefore, a working definition of deliberative democracy will be the normative model and the procedural rules offered by Habermas (1998). He suggests that discourse is constituted by equality among participants, the complete disclosure of procedures, the temporary suspension of domination and structural power, and the creation of a situation in which themes for discussion can be freely chosen (Gimmler, 2001).

With in the context of this thesis and the blogosphere, deliberative democracy sees the free public sphere of civil society as the principal arena for the articulation, contestation, and resolution of normative discourses (Benhabib, 2002), specifically any interaction between people within the blogosphere – this includes blog writing or reading and leaving a comment in the comments section.

#### **2.4 The use of the Internet in Politics and Political Debate**

The internet is the fastest growing communication technology of all time (Hoffman, Novak & Venkatesh, 2004) and it has become indispensable to daily life for many people. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Fallows, 2004) report 88 percent of online Americans say the internet plays a role in their daily routines. This level of importance to life online provides social scientists many areas of investigation, including the links between politics and political deliberation by internet users. The rise of the internet expands the opportunities for democratic participation and debate and creates new areas for people to engage in political intervention (Kellner, 2000). But the use of the internet for political engagement has not yet reached anywhere near its potential. There is still plenty of room for governments to provide information to

the public and use the internet as a tool for consultation. There is also a need for internet users to refine behaviours, and develop discussion and communication styles that will ensure the best use of the technologies in achieving deliberative outcomes. Maturity in internet use may also develop a space that will hold authorities to account, as was Habermas' ideal. Moreover, the current stage in the development of the internet as a whole has been likened to an early black and white television. This lack of development can possibly be explained by the limited understanding by current political actors and their staff. In the years 1995–2000 there are many examples of political parties and their individual members having basic websites that contained information that was simple reproductions of existing printed material. The internet was used as another tool to spread campaign information and policies during election campaigns, rather than offering anything new.

For the past 30 years researchers have expected communication via computer networks to produce a location for a lively and informed democracy (Arterton, 1987; Horrigan, Rainie & Fox, 2001; Rogers, 1986; Schuler, 1996). While many of the deliberative expectations have not realised anything like an Athenian democracy, there has been some progress toward greater participation in political life where there has been an increased awareness about political issues and increased capabilities for coordination, communication and outreach (Barber, 2004; Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson & Zin, 2005; Kavanaugh, Isenhour, Cooper, Carroll, Rosson, & Schmitz, 2005b).

The first politician to be widely recognised by academics and media as using the new technologies in a way which broke with tradition was Howard Dean in the United States election primaries. Dean was the first Presidential candidate to create a blog ([www.blogforamerica.com](http://www.blogforamerica.com)) as part of his internet communication strategy in March 2003. Dean's use of blogs reinvented campaign fundraising, shifting it from a small number of large donors to many smaller donors. Blogs also helped Dean create a virtual and interactive community where he was able to build a forum to communicate directly and instantaneously. During the 2004 campaign more than 40 percent of Americans used the internet to get political material (Horrigan, Garrett & Resnick, 2004). This figure is more than 50 percent higher than the number who had obtained such information in the 2000 campaign. Also, two-thirds of daily blog readers in the

United States get their national and international news from online sources (Graf, 2006).

Information and communication technology still has some way to go to demonstrate that it can improve the quality of participation, by moving beyond simple opinion sharing (White, 1997). White goes as far as saying that on the internet, democracy approaches anarchy. There has been a significant period of development and maturity in internet etiquette and behaviour since White's comments. The current developments in Web 2.0 reveal the internet as a quite different space than the stampede of the mid 1990s, in which individuals and organisations were clamouring to be part of the internet without in-depth knowledge or understanding of the online environment. Web 2.0 looks to create online communities through blogs, wikis and social networking sites. Web 2.0 is a change in the way the internet is used rather than suggesting any changes to the technical structural design determining the way users access the internet.

According to Kellner (2000), broadcast media, like radio and television and computers, have:

produced new public spheres and spaces for information, debate, and participation that contain both the potential to invigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas - as well as new possibilities for manipulation, social control, the promotion of conservative positions, and intensifying of differences between haves and have nots (p. 280).

At a time when mass, mainstream media still set the agenda for political discussion, the internet has offered new communication tools and technologies to enable individuals to meet in what has been called the virtual town hall (Wall, 2005). Kellner (1997) also argues that using internet and communication technologies properly is "essential in contemporary politics and that intellectuals who wish to intervene in the new public spheres need to deploy new communications media to participate in democratic debate and to shape the future of contemporary societies and culture" (p. 173).

A United Kingdom study (Ward, Gibson & Lusoli, 2005) that explores the debate about possible disconnection of the public with politics found those using new communications technologies are few in number and follow a similar pattern of traditional political participants and activists. They also suggest the concerning possibility that the internet will discourage engagement by amplifying already familiar voices. They conclude that simply adding the internet to existing communication channels may not achieve the idealised communication environment.

Kosicki (2003) states public deliberation is fundamental in democratic societies. So if deliberative democracy is defined as a political system based on citizens' free discussions of public issues, then at the core of deliberative democracy, say Kim, Wyatt and Katz (1999), is political conversation. By this they mean all kinds of political talk, discussion, or argument, so long as they are conducted freely, without any predetermined agenda. There is much to understand and explore about the role of the internet in political discussion and the potential that it holds.

#### **2.4.1 The Digital Divide**

Digital media such as the internet are not mass media in the sense of providing quick and cheap availability of a message to many receivers. Because of the expense of computers and internet connections, the social capital required to use them and the many-to-many communication opened up, major questions arise about how the ways new media add to public debate. The term "digital divide" refers to the widening gap between "haves" and "have-nots" concerning access to the communications technology (Potts, 1999; Katz & Aspden, 1997), that is those who are connected to new media communication (information rich) and those who are not (information poor). Recently the topic has started to receive attention from academics. According to the Social Science Citation Index and the Humanities Citation Index, between 1999 and 2004, over 150 articles have appeared in academic journals on the topic of the digital divide (Hargittai, 2004). The United Nations released a report suggesting the digital divide between rich countries and poor countries is narrowing. For example, in 2002, internet availability in developed countries was 10 times higher than in developing countries; in 2006, it was six times higher (UNCTAD, 2008). Some also argue that the digital divide is not as simple as just affording it a binary solution. The

internet “does not exist as an external variable to be injected from the outside to bring about certain results. Rather, it is woven in a complex manner in social systems and processes” (Warschauer, n.d.). The problem of the digital divide is wider than a group of people merely being without a computer or access to the web, but more of a process of social inclusion.

New Zealand is said to mirror global trends of the digital divide, in that some less socially privileged households are less likely to be connected to the internet than others. Higher income households and those with more formal education are more inclined to engage in information communication technologies (Statistics New Zealand, 2004). In New Zealand, less connected populations include Maori, Pacific peoples, single parents, older people, and people with low or no qualifications or poor literacy (Maharey & Swain, 2000). In 2006, 72.3 percent of New Zealanders had access to the internet – placing New Zealand tenth in the OECD out of 25 countries. Thirty-three percent of New Zealand households had a broadband connection, while 30.9 percent had a dial-up connection (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). With high rates of access to the internet in New Zealand, it is more likely to be the factors stated above that affect the digital divide rather than issues of connectivity.

This thesis acknowledges the existence of the digital divide and the role it plays as a barrier to people getting online. However, this study starts a step beyond this point, that is the behaviours and activities of people once they are online and engaging in the New Zealand political blogosphere. Moving beyond the impact of the digital divide in this thesis does not imply that this phenomenon is not important and relevant to internet research, but an in-depth look at the digital divide is outside the boundaries of this study. The digital divide is relevant to this thesis, however, because it limits the diversity of the pool of participants. Therefore this, and other internet research, are limited due to the exclusion of some groups within the community because of the digital divide.

## **2.5 Blogs**

Research into new media technologies is worth the attention of academics to understand the way political communication and expression are changing as the

internet plays a larger role in the lives of many people and communities. Of all web-based media, blogs have attracted the most critical attention in recent years for their potential to allow more people to take part in media and in public life more generally. Blogs are still relatively new. 2005 was the first New Zealand election where their presence was acknowledged, and their popularity has seen them migrate into politics, including the most important part of the democratic process: elections.

A blog (or weblog) has been defined as a frequently updated website with commentary and links. Blogs often consist of a number of short posts and are presented in reverse chronological order (Blood, 2002; Walker, 2005). There are a number of different genres that exist under the label blog, “on a continuum from confessional, online diaries to logs tracking specific topics or activities through links and commentary. Though weblogs are primarily textual, experimentation with sound, images, and videos has resulted in related genres such as photoblogs, videoblogs, and audioblogs” (Walker, 2005, p. 45). They have also incorrectly been described as online newsletters (see Outing, 2002).

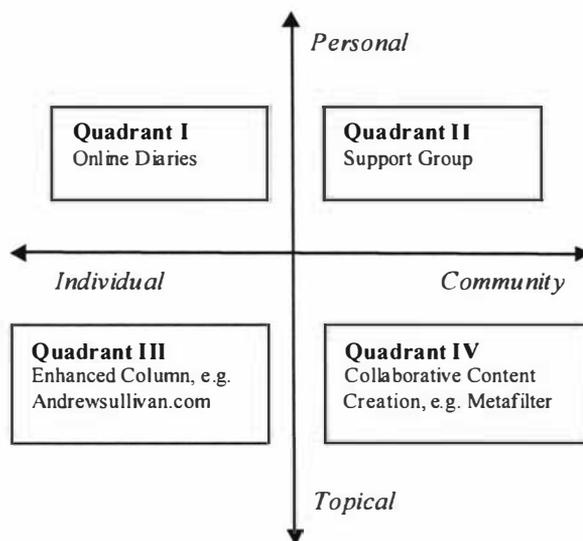
Since blogging emerged as a distinct genre at the end of the 1990s, user numbers have reached the millions. These numbers are partly explained by the easy-to-use and free or cheap software that enables their writing and uploading onto servers. Blogs have become established as a recognised form of communication and media. Media awards such as New Zealand’s annual Qantas Media Awards ([qantasmediaawards.co.nz](http://qantasmediaawards.co.nz)) and Net Guide People’s Choice Awards ([netguide.co.nz](http://netguide.co.nz)) now include best blog categories.

Blood identifies three basic types of weblogs: filters, personal journals and notebooks (In Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004).

- Filter blogs are external to the blogger (world events, politics, online happenings, etc.)
- Personal journals are based on the blogger’s internal thoughts
- Notebooks may contain either external or internal content, and are distinguished by longer, focused essays.

Empirical research on weblogs and bloggers, so far, has been limited (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004). Krishnamurthy (2002), however, based on a study of postings on a community news blog in the week after 11 September 2001, suggests they can be divided into four groups along the dimensions of personal vs. topical and individual vs. community (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Types of Blogs**

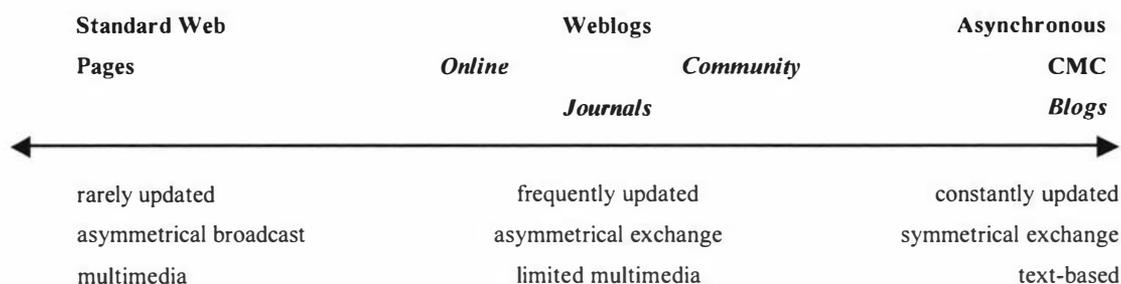


By far the majority of blogs are thought to be personal sites (70 percent according to Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004), containing reflections on everyday life and produced by individuals. Many are written for a primary audience of the other bloggers to whom they regularly link (although most are available to anyone without restriction). Many also mix links to webpages that the blogger regards as noteworthy, with commentary on those links. Through both these forms of hyperlinking, bloggers position themselves within wider knowledge networks and wider discussions, channelling information, commenting on that information and thus gaining readers and reputations. LiveJournal is an example of an online virtual community that encourages users to link their blogs to discussion groups and the social networking features that are offered within the LiveJournal site as well as inserting content from similar sites, such as YouTube.

In developing blogs in the ecology genre of the internet, Herring et al. (2005) offer to demonstrate how blogs fit between standard webpages and asynchronous computer mediated communication. They compare blogs “along three dimensions: frequency of

update, symmetry of communicative exchange, and multimodality” (p.161). From this they suggest that blogs bridge the gap between HTML-enhanced computer mediated communication (CMC) and CMC-enhanced web pages.

**Figure 2: Weblogs on a continuum between standard Web pages and CMC**



Interactive text-based CMC is generally held to be a fundamentally different type of internet communication from the static, single author, multimedia HTML documents that are the standard means of communication on the internet. In recent years, efforts have been made from both sides to bridge this gap (e.g., HTML mail and encoding schemes for multimedia attachments from the CMC side, and links to chat and discussion forums in HTML documents from the Web side). However, HTML-enhanced CMC and CMC-enhanced Web pages still remain essentially different technologies - they do not meet in the middle. Weblogs, in contrast, bridge this technological gap along several dimensions.

Although blogs are presented in various genres, there are some similarities that can be seen regardless of the blog type. They often have links to other blogs and/or webpages, which allows bloggers to provide a source or reference to the content of their post. Many, but not all, provide readers the facility to leave a comment on the page, and this function allows blogs to become a conversational type of medium. Blogs first arrived on the internet in the mid to late 1990s, the free software and ease of use making them attractive to anyone wanting to start up their own online publishing outlet. The internet allows people to share information and become an expert on any subject, whether it is a common or obscure topic, especially topics that the mainstream media does not cover well. Rare or niche information brings people together in different ways than mass media as that needs lots of people, who share an

interest in the information, to make a publication viable. For this reason mass publications opt for safe, middle-of-the-road topics to ensure commercial viability.

The real value of blogging, according to Coleman (2005) is the gathering of “dense networks of intellectuals and symbolic intercourse” (p. 277) by public-private bloggers. He believes the three main characteristics of blogs are:

1. They provide a bridge between the private, subjective sphere of self-expression and the socially fragile civic sphere in which publics can form and act.
2. Blogs allow people to express incomplete thoughts.
3. Blogs lower the threshold of entry to the global debate for traditionally unheard or marginalised voices, particularly from poorer parts of the world which are too often represented by others, without being given the chance to present their own account. (p. 277)

The ability for post readers to leave comments is the single most important feature of a blog (Mishne & Glance, 2006), which places them as a contender for consideration as a public sphere (of sorts), as described by Habermas. Mishne and Glance say blog comments serve as a simple and effective way for bloggers to interact with their readership. They are one of the defining set of weblog characteristics, and most bloggers identify comment feedback as an important motivation for their writing.

Bloggers have been said to constitute a fifth estate, fact-checking and analysing the output of the news media. Although the blogosphere is still young, says Cooper (2006), there is already an emergence of four clear genres of media criticism:

- Accuracy – concerns factual evidence mentioned in reporting.
- Framing – the interpretations or meanings of facts and events.
- Agenda setting/gate keeping – the newsworthiness of particular events and issues.
- Journalistic practice – the working methods of professional journalists and news organisations.

Cooper says the blogosphere has become a legitimate institution and is therefore a vehicle of legitimate media criticism. He also considers blogs to be an alternative media based on the premise that it is not mainstream media. He does so with traces of distrust for traditional media reporting and also dismisses the notion of blogger political and personal agendas and believes bloggers are providing a social good by holding the media to account. Cooper also states that because we can identify these genres of blog criticism it signals the blogosphere's maturation into a social object of consequence. While it is true that the blogs have managed to capture a few scalps, such as US Senate Majority Leader, Trent Lott and television journalist, Dan Rather, it would be wrong to limit blogging to this narrow role. The function of blogs goes well beyond this brief into connecting millions of people to discuss, debate and learn from one another, possibly in a way not seen since the time when pamphleteers would distribute their material or 18<sup>th</sup> century Western European coffee houses, where people would gather and discuss the issues of the day.

None of this is to suggest that blogs are not without their critics; they have been referred to as "the toilet walls of the internet" (Cozens, 2006, ¶1) and political blogs are sometimes nothing more than partisan cheerleading where only similar views are exchanged and challenging perspectives shunned. *New Yorker* writer, George Packer (2004) says,

The constellation of opinion called the blogosphere consists, like the stars themselves, partly of gases... Their second-by-second proliferation means that far more is written than needs to be said about any one thing.

All of this meta-comment by very bright young men who never leave their rooms is the latest, somewhat debased, manifestation of the old art of political pamphleteering, a lost form in this country through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (¶6)

A report (Perseus, 2004) shows that most blogging is tenuous and not consequential to national political power.

Blogging is many things, yet the typical blog is written by a teenage girl who uses it twice a month to update her friends and classmates on happenings in her life. It will be written very informally (often in "unicase": long stretches of lowercase with ALL CAPS used for emphasis) with slang spellings, yet will not be as informal as instant messaging conversations (which are riddled with typos and abbreviations). (p. 5)

In spite of the criticisms about blogs, they have been considered popular and worthwhile enough for a leading news organisation to use them specifically in the lead-up to the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign. Fairfax New Zealand Limited, owner of [stuff.co.nz](http://stuff.co.nz), used the website to host blogs by its journalists and also by selected members of the public. Discussion of the impact of blogs on New Zealand public debates arose around the 2005 New Zealand General Election. News programmes, including TV1's Agenda and Radio New Zealand's Morning Report, have canvassed opinion, and bloggers themselves have commented at the length on their role in the media. The role bloggers believed they played in the 2005 election is discussed in Chapter Seven of this thesis.

### **2.5.1 Blogs as a Forum for Political Discussion**

Since the inception of the internet there have been a number of online modes of discussion with varying forms of control, of which the blog is one (Kelly, Fisher & Smith, 2006). In the early days of the internet, political discussion would take place on bulletin board systems and then in newsgroups on Usenet and email discussion groups. Newsgroups covered a wide variety of themes and topics, such as [alt.tv.simpsons](http://alt.tv.simpsons) and [alt.politics.media](http://alt.politics.media). With advancing technologies and software, newsgroups have developed into websites where people can engage in discussions on any number of political topics, such as [www.arguewiththeveryone.com](http://www.arguewiththeveryone.com).

The major difference between blogs and newsgroups is a newsgroup may focus on a single issue, for example, pro-life issues, whereas a blog is the voice of the author and the topics discussed can be, and often are, varied and determined by the blogger. It could be suggested that the difference comes down to the reader following the topic (newsgroups) or the author (blog).

Political discussion in blogs takes place in the comments section – readers of a blog post can respond to what they have read. Walker (2007) says people who leave comments are as important to the study of blogs as those actually writing blogs. To understand political blogs as a form of deliberation or participation it is critical to analyse those who are actually engaging in the deliberation. The results of her study showed that comments sections were spaces where those of similar ideological

viewpoints conversed. However, dissenting opinions were expressed by those with the most extreme views. Moderate voices were found to be absent from discussions, something Kelly et al. (2006) believe threatens democratic online political discourse.

Political blogs use traditional media for their content – almost always from a media organisation’s website – and provide links back to articles they cite. However, it is not known if those who make comments to a blogger’s post have engaged with a number of sources to the story and provide these links as part of their comment (Walker, 2007).

Kelly et al. (2006) say “what people participating in political discourse care to discuss, as well as the particular attitudes they have about any given topic, are meaningfully related to the structure of concerns and attitudes in the larger political society to which they belong” (p. 417). Their study of online networks and political discussions shows that political competition on ideas is healthy and often rigorous. While the discussions can sometimes be emotional and contain name calling, other instances show rational, well considered responses to discussion points. They also suggest that people tend not to be marginalised because their ideas are uncomfortable, contentious, or, simply disagreed with by others. While many who contribute to the blogosphere do so with rational intent, there is a group of people who purposefully set out to annoy the other discussion participants and attempt to disrupt the quality of content. These people are often referred to as “trolls”, and are often relegated to peripheral positions by central actors’ lack of interest in responding to their provocations or views.

In a study of the 2004 European Parliamentary election it was disparagingly said of blogs that they played a marginal role in citizen information and engagement (Lusoli, 2005). However, the Hansard Society (2004) said that “from the perspective of politics or, more specifically, political awareness and participation in the United Kingdom, blogging is fresh and exciting” (p. 23). The key findings from the Hansard Society are:

- Blogging has the potential to significantly impact on political engagement and political processes as it provides an opportunity for alternative informal voices to enter into the political debate without a great deal of cost or effort.

- Blogging breaks down the barriers between public and private spaces and allows elected representatives to put across their individuality and personality.
- The availability of low-cost, low-maintenance authoring software means blogs are far easier to construct and update than conventional websites.
- The most appealing blogs are those which provide genuine debate between bloggers and visitors to the blog. Blogs that do not offer this facility give visitors little reason to return.
- At the moment, political blogging is still regarded as the pursuit of internet connoisseurs rather than ordinary members of the public. While the Hansard's jury found blogs easy to navigate, they found the tone of content unappealing.
- Blogging has the potential to be of enormous benefit to Members of Parliament and other elected representatives who use it as a listening post rather than another tool to broadcast their ideas, achievements or party dogma.

Despite the criticism of blogs from some, the findings from the Hansard Society suggest serious political deliberation on blogs is possible, and furthermore the role they can play in the relationship between the public and their elected officials can strengthen democracy overall.

Blogs and those who write them have been compared with previous forms of media. They have been referred to as today's version of the pamphlets and pamphleteers (Daly, 2005). Bloggers are a powerful force in the distribution of information and ideas and the creation of communities of conversation (Kochan, 2006). Kahn and Kellner, (2004) describe how advances in technology are developing the "structural elements for the existence of fresh kinds of highly-informed, autonomous communities that coalesce around local lifestyle choices, global political demands, and everything in-between" (p. 89). The "smart mob", as described by Rheingold (2002), is a self-structuring social organisation that is created by people using mobile technology to connect. They will gather around an area of mutual interest for a short period of time. Gillmor (2004) also alludes to historical similarities between pamphleteers and bloggers and also the tension between traditional and emergent news media. Gillmor suggests that blogs are not alone in characterising a new medium. He also introduces other technologies that are used as tools for grassroots

journalism including mobile phones that can send text messages, photos and video, wikis, and RSS (Really Simply Syndication), as these are fast ways of sending messages to a vast audience. What Gillmor is implying is rather than the focusing on technology being the reason people are creating and acting as alternative sources of news, societal relationships drive how those technologies are used (McCorkle, 2004).

To sociologists of the network society the point here is not the degree of collectivity or the dominance of certain voices in blogging. It is rather the disembedding of information sharing from both institutional structures and physical place and the emphasis instead on individuals situated within networks. Wellman et al. (2006), for example, argue that “the person has become the portal” in parts of society shaped predominantly by social networks. As people in highly mobile and densely networked consumer societies move through multiple communities in their daily lives and make more active choices about their participation in those communities, the individual takes centre stage as the node of knowledge and values. Institutions, from news organisations to nation states, are no longer so straightforwardly dominant in organising the social. Blogging provides a key example for this analysis. Waldman (2005) notes that blog readers use prominent bloggers as “trusted intermediaries”. That is, they come to trust these bloggers in sifting news and analysis which accord with and shape their taste, judgements and politics. Waldman argues that the habits of regular blog readers therefore suggest a shift in media consumption from subscribing to institutions to subscribing to people. Such habits are potentially significant, suggesting a growing emphasis upon the individual and the subjective in parts of contemporary culture, contrasting with the emphasis on processes of objective, professionally edited information which news organisations exemplify. To some commentators, there are major political implications here. Kahn and Kellner (2004), for example, argue that blogging, along with the wider technoculture to which it belongs, “makes possible a reconfiguration of politics, a refocusing of politics on everyday life, and the use of the tools and techniques of emergent computer and communication technologies to expand the field of politics and culture” (p. 93).

Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht (2004) highlight the similarities between blogs and talkback radio as fora for political discussion.

Just as with radio, the blogger can broadcast messages of their own choosing, without interruption. Limited feedback analogous to listener call-in on a radio station is possible with comments on blog posts. The comments remain “subservient” to the main communication in the posts, just as a talk show host or deejay dominates listeners. (p. 9)

Not all blogs are political in nature or content – as previously stated, most blogs are used as personal journals. Despite this, political blogs have created the mainstream perception of what the blog characteristics are. This goes some of the way towards explaining why some political bloggers have been labelled as “A-list” bloggers. That is they are perceived as being more read and influential than other bloggers – particularly more so than individuals who are hobby or personal bloggers as opposed to those who write about politics. There is also an element of “celebrity” within the community of bloggers and they receive more media attention and links from external sources (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). The small number of such A-list blogs gain their readership often through their sharp, highly partisan commentary on public affairs and through their role as focal points where others can find the latest topical links and discussions (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). A leading US-based blog, Instapundit, for example, written by Glenn Reynolds, a law lecturer at the University of Tennessee, has gained a huge following. In March 2005, Reynolds claimed his hundred-millionth page hit, with 185,000 more hits each day (Reynolds, 2005). On the smaller scale, New Zealand A-list blogger, David Farrar, claimed 40,000 visits a week in July 2005. Other New Zealand bloggers who are considered A-list include Russell Brown, Frog Blog and Just Left (Hopkins & Matheson, 2005; Fitzjohn & Salmond, 2007). Other blogs, such as Whale Oil and No Right Turn were held in high regard by other bloggers, although they were generally overlooked by the media and blog readers (based on the reader numbers provided by the blogger to Kiwiblog’s monthly blog readership statistics and information provided to the author during interviews) and therefore do not fall into the A-list category.

From their research Su, Wang and Mark (2005) suggested political bloggers sought to influence their readers, considered how others perceive their writing, were socially connected, had a purpose, were goal oriented, and were over-represented in the older age group.

## 2.5.2 Blogs as Deliberative Democracy

Despite limitations and multiple uses, many have looked to blogs for renewal and as an alternative to mainstream media and the inability to effectively participate and deliberate issues. The role of the blog, as a place analogous to a democratic public sphere where deliberative democracy can occur through online discussions, has received increased attention in recent years (Wilhelm, 2000; Dahlberg, 2001; Poster, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005). A decline in community involvement and the role of mass media in covering politics have made community-based political discussions problematic. The internet has been offered as a solution to the problem in that it allows for asynchronous discussion forums to take place (Coleman & Gotze, 2001; Hauben & Hauben, 1997). There are others who believe that increased online discussion will prompt a negative conclusion, such as a divisive quarrelling leading to the polarisation of politics (Bellamy & Raab, 1999; Davis & Owen, 1998; Sunstein, 2001). There are also recurring critical themes about online deliberation such as it takes place between like-minded people in similar locales, i.e. urban based males. Another criticism is they act as echo chambers where there should be a strong relationship between the level of media coverage an issue receives and the amount of discussion on that issue that takes place in the political blogosphere (Dahlberg, 2001).

Wallsten (2005) outlines what he believes comprises an echo chamber in the political blogosphere. His description contains three elements:

1. That the issues discussed in political blogs will closely mimic the issues discussed in the mainstream media (such that more media coverage on an issue leads to more discussion of that issue in the political blogosphere);
2. That the positions taken by political bloggers on political issues greatly resemble the positions taken by the blogger's own party leaders and publicised in the mainstream media;
3. That the frames and justifications employed by political bloggers are the same as the frames and justifications of the blogger's party leaders as publicized in the mainstream media (p. 7).

The findings of Wallsten's research showed – somewhat inconclusively – that the blogosphere sometimes acted as an echo chamber and sometimes did not. Where it did make an interesting finding was in political positions and issues where the echo

chamber effect occurred in that “the positions taken by political bloggers on political issues greatly resemble the positions taken by the blogger’s own party leaders and that the frames and justifications employed by political bloggers are the same as the frames and justifications of the blogger’s party leaders” (p. 27). He also suggests that prolific political bloggers are more likely than less active political bloggers to follow media coverage on political issues, and that the left and right of the political spectrum were divided on the sort of issues that they responded to during the 2004 United States Presidential Election.

Whether political blogging is, in fact, a form of political participation, of course, depends primarily on the definition of political participation that one is working with.

If the individual is motivated by a desire to influence the distribution of goods and values, then the activity is participation. Similarly, if they are motivated by some other goal – such as the desire for self expression – then the activity is not political participation (Wallsten, 2005, p. 4).

However, a study of those who participated in an online political discussion showed they were interested in diversity of opinions and ideas (Stromer-Galley, 2003).

Sunstein (2006) asks the broad and complicated question: “Does deliberation lead to better decisions?” He follows up by stating that often it does not, suggesting in the real world, deliberative democracy is problematic and flawed. The problem, he suggests, is deliberating groups as a whole do not obtain the knowledge that individual members have. He identifies two main failures of deliberation as informational influences, which cause group members to not reveal what they know because of the information that has been publicly disclosed by others. Firstly, if a number of people publicly state that MMP is a better electoral system than first-past-the-post, then others may remain silent, thinking: “How can that many people be wrong?” The second failure involves social pressures, where people will remain silent in an attempt to avoid the disapproval of peers and supervisors.

The knowledge of a crowd should not be underestimated (see Surowiecki, 2004). The Condorcet Jury Theorem says that the probability of a correct answer by a majority of the group increases toward 100 percent as the size of the group increases. That is to say the group will make a better decision than an individual and big groups are better

than smaller groups when two conditions are met: majority rules are used, and each person is more likely than not to be correct. Under the right circumstances a large group's statistical answer is often correct (where the answer is an objectively demonstrable fact) when judgements are made along a bounded scale (Sunstein, Kahneman & Schkade, 1998). Examples of this have been seen where groups predict winners of sporting competitions (Zajc, 2004, as cited in Sunstein, 2006), determining the number of beans in a jar (Surowiecki, 2004), and political polls. On the internet it is easy to find examples of the Condorcet Jury Theorem in action, for example the widely used Zagat website where thousands of people rate restaurants, hotels and attractions in a number of countries. It can also be seen in reviews on Amazon.com for almost every product sold. In fact, people can also review the helpfulness of the reviews.

The Condorcet Jury Theorem is not without its problems. If one of the required conditions is not met, for example, people are more likely to be wrong than correct, then the likelihood the majority is correct would be closer to zero. Prejudices also can play a large role in dealing with some questions or problems. An example of this is found in a Pew Research Institute study (2007) that showed 93 percent of Americans believed the September 11 attacks were conducted by Arabs, but in Kuwait this number falls to only 11 percent.

### **2.5.3 Blogs as Journalism**

Lasica (2003) quotes a report which suggests journalism has reached a point in its history where "its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but, potentially, by the audience it serves" (¶4). Blogs are forcing journalism to define a new identity (Robinson, 2006).

Much of the commentary on blogging has emphasised its potential impact on public debate through its impact on journalism. The US blogger and former *New Republic* editor, Andrew Sullivan, for example, calls blogging a "media revolution", citing cases such as the vigorous arguments among bloggers over a CBS News story. The news channel had revealed documents, which were later widely accepted to be fake,

that suggested President George W. Bush missed some military service during the Vietnam era. Sullivan (2004b) writes:

While CBS had a handful of experts look at the dubious memos (and failed to heed their concerns), the blogosphere enlisted hundreds within hours. Debates ensued, with different blogs challenging others over abstruse points. Yes, some of this was fuelled by raw partisanship and bias. The blogosphere is not morally pure. But the result was that the facts were flushed more effectively and swiftly than the old media could ever have hoped. The collective mind also turns out to be a corrective one (¶7).

Sullivan's comments here involve at least three claims at once. Firstly, they suggest that blogging is a functional part of journalism. A conservative gloss on blogging sees it as returning journalism to its proper track of unbiased reporting. Since the form began in the late 1990s, a number of blogs have moved from commenting on public affairs to critiquing the factual accuracy and bias of the mainstream news media's coverage of public affairs. There is even a word for this among bloggers – “fisking”, named after *Independent* journalist, Robert Fisk, who was the first to receive such sustained critique. This fact-checking has led to some high-profile retractions and corrections. Sullivan (2004a) argues further that bloggers play a more systemic role in providing forums for media-watching and thereby “adding to the forces” which brought down *The New York Times*, editor Howell Raines, the BBC director-general, Greg Dyke, and CBS anchor, Dan Rather in the scandals which beset each. Certainly, conservative bloggers in the US could be seen as playing a part in what Herman and Chomsky (1988) call the “flak” through which dominant groups control the news media.

A more radical gloss sees blogging as not simply raising the standards of journalism but as extending it into new territory, particularly by breaking down barriers between journalists and readers. Dan Gillmor, a former technology columnist for the *San Jose Mercury News* and later an entrepreneur in online journalism, writes that his blog has forced him to revise his relationship with readers:

Writing about technology in Silicon Valley, I used the blog to generate even more feedback from my audience. That audience, never shy to let me know when I get something wrong, made me realize something: My readers know more than I do. This has become almost a mantra in my work. It is by definition the reality for every journalist, no matter what his or her beat. And it's a great opportunity, not a threat, because when we ask our readers for their help and knowledge, they are willing to share it - and

we can all benefit. If modern American journalism has been a lecture, it's evolving into something that incorporates a conversation and seminar (2003, p. 6).

In this view, the interactivity of media such as blogging bridges the gap between journalists and their audiences, leading to more accurate and more insightful journalism. In another example of such “open source journalism”, cited by Rosen (2004), a United States blogger, Josh Marshall, enlisted his readers’ help to phone their local Republican members of Congress to ask how they voted in an otherwise unrecorded voice vote in 2004 on the “DeLay rule”, which changed the rules allowing Republican House of Representatives leader Tom DeLay to remain in office even if he was indicted in connection with a financial scandal. To Rosen, the blog’s innovative news gathering put pressure on Republican representatives that the mainstream news media, dependent on House of Representatives channels which were in this case controlled by the Republican Party, failed to achieve. This vision is, however, confronted by the logistical problem that journalists can rarely respond to more than a handful of the comments posted on their blogs or the emails they receive. There are few other examples alongside Marshall’s. There is also a powerful cultural resistance in journalism to engaging in debate with readers or giving them any active role in news making. Such innovative news gathering and reporting of politics is therefore better seen as emerging to play a minor role alongside established news practices rather than replacing them.

This takes us to the second claim in Sullivan’s CBS example: that blogging brings new voices into the spaces of public debate and therefore sets new agendas for that debate. The readers whom Gillmor, Sullivan and Rosen discuss are regarded by them as part of a participatory media or “we media” movement, which is taking back power from media organisations. Often cited in the claim for an agenda-setting power is the resignation of United States Senate majority leader Trent Lott after bloggers picked up on racist comments he made at a function in 2003. Also often cited is the writing of the pseudonymous Baghdad blogger, Salam Pax, during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. To at least one observer, this correspondence was far more perceptive and powerful than that written by “the crowds of well-resourced international journalists sitting in the air-conditioned comfort of five star hotels” (Dodge, 2003, ¶15). After

Hurricane Katrina hit the southern coast of the USA, a number of news organisations drew upon bloggers' accounts – some, such as the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, relying on them as their own newsgathering ground to a halt for a time – in describing the disaster's human impact and contradicting the claims of government officials about the efficacy of their response to it. Proposals in both San Francisco and South Australia that bloggers should be subject to the restrictions on balance and registration placed on journalists during election campaigns certainly suggest that politicians are sensitive to the arrival of blogging and its potential impact on established channels of public debate. In New Zealand, Prime Minister, Helen Clark, made a stinging attack on “right wing bloggers” during a radio interview with Newstalk ZB breakfast host, Paul Holmes, when her leadership was called into question (Cresswell, 2006).

Yet while such instances suggest blogging's potential power to broaden debate beyond the limitations imposed by news practice, other critics point to the anecdotal nature of the evidence. Scott (2004) is sceptical that it was bloggers rather than political opponents and journalists who brought Lott down. Haas (2005) notes that “the primary contribution of politically-oriented weblog writers consists in linking to and commenting on pre-existing internet-based mainstream news reporting and commentary” (p. 389). Moreover, he cites a number of studies which suggest that, far from challenging news agendas or the dominance of elite sources, blogs largely reproduce and thereby strengthen the narrow range of perspectives to be found in the mainstream news media. Drezner and Farrell (2004) argue that it is only under certain circumstances, such as when a major issue has been neglected by the mainstream media, that blogs have ignited national debates, such as on the question of racial profiling at airports, or kept the media focused on scandals, such as bribery allegations at the United Nations.

Drezner and Farrell also note that blogging's hierarchy, culminating in a few A-list writers, produces a small number of stars who are read by, feted by and sometimes absorbed into the media. In particular, the highest profile blogs on public affairs appear to be read disproportionately within the media and political cultures for their insider gossip and argument (Reynolds, 2004). The vast majority of bloggers have next to no impact on news agendas and are not heard. Blogs therefore provide particularly acute evidence of a wider problem that, as May (2002) notes, “the use of

ICTs may help those already engaged in politics, who are already actively participating in democratic forums, but may not necessarily encourage engagement by those not already taking part” (p. 89).

Sullivan’s third claim for the significance of blogging in public affairs is that it mediates debate in ways not found in the mainstream media because it operates by different dynamics. What these dynamics are, however, is not clear. Some writers emphasise a collective dynamic in the blogosphere. John Hiler (2002b) talks of a “collective mind”, which is able to develop ideas and analyses at a speed and precision which few individuals or even institutions can match. Thus Allan (2004) cites Australian blogger Tim Blair’s experience during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Blair, sceptical of claims by the *Independent*’s correspondent Robert Fisk that serial numbers on bomb fragments in a Baghdad marketplace were American, putting the blame for the deaths of civilians at its door, asked his readers for help. Within a day, he received confirmation from the military experts among his readers that the serial numbers were indeed American, along with detailed information on the type of missile and its place of manufacture. This “collective mind” is, however, one dominated by the small number of A-list bloggers who are most widely read. Shirky (2003) finds that as few as a dozen blogs account for 20 percent of other bloggers’ links in the US, giving them significant power in propagating ideas and arguments. He cites theorists of “power law distributions” models which predict such extreme inequalities in social systems where people can choose between options.

Singer (2005) does not believe the blog format has revolutionised the journalistic notion of democracy where the journalist is central to the task of creating an informed electorate. She does consider blogs as being “normalised as a component and, in some ways, an enhancement of traditional journalistic norms and practices” (p. 193).

The growing influence of blogs prompts a discussion on their relationship with established journalism and whether bloggers should be considered journalists or whether the concept of a journalist and the norms of journalism should expand to meet them (Smolkin, 2004). The question of whether blogging is or is not journalism is one that keeps journalists, bloggers and academics talking. However, the question that is possibly more relevant is; how can blogs and journalism work together and

what do they mean to one another? Lowrey (2006) suggests while journalism is based on a long tradition and formal structure, it can benefit from blogs and any optimism over the role of blogging seems justified. Despite any perceived tensions between the bloggers and journalists, many working within the mainstream media view the blogosphere as having great potential. In one study, over half of US journalists who responded believed political bloggers would improve overall political reporting (Roth, 2004).

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The continuum of developments in communication technology has a clear interaction with politics. Each time there has been an introduction of a new communication technology, there has been a political response to that development. It is now impossible to extricate politics from the media. Media symbiotically link political information to the public; the media need politics to fill the pages and politicians need the media to convey their messages. Essentially, in this triad it is the public who has become the forgotten party and as the media/politics relationship is mutually beneficial, so the ability for someone to participate in public discussion is limited. The inability to participate is only part of the problem. The prohibitive costs involved in setting up a newspaper or television station leave citizens relying on the honesty and sincerity of publishers and broadcasters. Governmental ownership and control of the media has a negative impact on the lives of citizens in countries like China, Burma and North Korea. While these may be extreme examples, there is clear evidence that these governments use the media to further their own agendas. The lies, manipulation and misinformation told to the Burmese public through the nation's media after the Irrawaddy Delta was decimated by Cyclone Nargis demonstrates why it is important for media to be unfettered by any power, whether that be governmental or corporate. Any organisation, corporation, or government is static or immutable and over a period of time will become unstable and therefore the need for self-preservation exists within these institutions. Media control provides a means in which communication can be infused with the language of legitimacy for the controlling institution. New Zealand has seen its share of government interference in the production of news and it is not unthinkable that future governments could introduce stricter controls over the way political information is communicated. For example, in 2007 the New Zealand

Parliament voted to restrict the way which politicians were represented in the media, prohibiting any portrayal of satire, ridicule or denigration – changes that were slated by the media and academics (MPs outlaw satire in New Zealand, 2007). Current Prime Minister, Helen Clark, is known to have firm ideas about the media and has been openly critical of journalists and the Press Council, the self-regulated industry supervisory body (Trevett, 2007).

The amazing innovations brought to us by Gutenberg (printing press), Marconi (radio) and Farnsworth (television) have all been used indiscriminately to forward political ambition. Politicians have previously jumped aboard any development in communication technology as if it were invented for their need alone. Once control of the media has been wrestled from the state, either by way of private ownership or market deregulation, commercial interests continue to keep the public from being directly involved in programming choices, leaving that to the ratings. Looking at the history of the interaction between communication technology and politics, as outlined above, shows there are lessons that need to be learned from the past. The internet is a democratic medium – or at least has the potential to be more democratic than any previous media.

The internet has the power to reconnect the people the media has disengaged and reinvigorate the interest in politics, which has been in steady decline for a number of years. However, a better understanding of the past can help facilitate us to preserve a medium that is owned by no one, yet utilised by everyone for a greater input into how their governments are run through deliberation.

This chapter has explored research in the area of communication technologies and whether they have changed the way people conduct political discussions. It also introduces the core concept of democracy and its various constructs, especially that of deliberative democracy and the role of communication technologies in the public's capacity to connect over political issues. It also demonstrates how internet and communication technologies make it possible for people to re-engage online, to put forward ideas and opinions and have them discussed. This development has led some theorists to state communication technologies are recreating the public sphere concept as described by Habermas (1989).

In recent years blogs have cemented themselves as part of the political landscape. The use of blogs in election campaigns around the world has been an organic process to date, with politicians using them in a number of ways and having various levels of success. In New Zealand, political junkies like David Farrar and Russell Brown have used blogs to carve out a niche in the blogosphere that enables them to communicate directly with others who may have an interest in the New Zealand political scene. This in turn has created a space for others to gather, which allows them to agree or disagree with the writings of not only the blogger but also those who have previously engaged in the discussion. It has been agreed that this phenomenon constitutes a new form of deliberative democracy, but one where only a few A-list bloggers, already connected to media and/or political parties, have significant influence.



## Chapter Three

### Public Sphere Theory

#### 3.1 Introduction

In order to critique the quality of debate in the media, many scholars turn to Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere. Habermas sets out a historical and theoretical account of the rise of bourgeois public debate in Western society, and in doing so provides a model of the norms of quality public debate, which has proved both enduring and influential.

Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is described as an immensely rich and influential book that has had a major impact in a variety of disciplines (Kellner, 2003). Habermas develops the normative notion of the public sphere as a part of social life where citizens can exchange views on matters of importance to the common good, so that public opinion can be formed. This public sphere comes into being when people gather to discuss issues of political concern.

Habermas' work is important to the current study because he is a proponent of deliberative democracy; a model of democratic politics that can be regarded as strong and takes into account diversity in a pluralistic society. This study intends to consider the political discussions on New Zealand-based blogs in the lead-up to the 2005 New Zealand General Election to continue the examination of the links between normative public sphere, deliberative democracy and computer mediated communication. This is not to overlook other forms of electronic democracy (see Dahlberg, 2000), but seeks to add to the increasing body of empirical research around deliberative democracy within the blogosphere. The empirical and normative approach needed to undertake this is provided within Habermas' theoretical construct.

Habermas argues that every participant engaged in communicative action makes reference to a number of pragmatic presuppositions of rational-critical communication and thus to a set of normative conditions of the public sphere. From the notion of discourse, a standard can be developed against which norms and critical enquiries

allow researchers to measure the democratic potential of the blogosphere. To define such discourse more carefully, Habermas' (1990) later work on discourse ethics takes up rules first proposed by Robert Alexy (1990) and Dahlberg (2000) offers a set of normative conditions as identified by Habermas.

Academics describe the public sphere as a place where people engage themselves in communication on public issues. More broadly, most people have come to know this place as "the media". While the two are not necessarily the same thing, the concerns for the disintegration of both through interfering commercial interests, trivial content and fragmented audiences, are the same. Habermas (1997a) refers to newspapers, radio and television as "the media of the public sphere" (p. 105) and while it is only one component of the sphere, it plays a vital role (McNair, 2000).

This thesis explores the potential of the blogosphere to expand the public sphere by providing opportunities for individual citizens to engage each other in rational-critical debate about issues surrounding the 2005 New Zealand General Election. More specifically, this thesis uses the idealised public sphere defined by Habermas (1989) in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* as a measure for online discussions about politics. This chapter begins by outlining the important role Habermas plays in the theories of public sphere and communicative action. It then examines the literature relating to the relevant theories as many of the central themes presented in Habermas' work have received much attention and criticism.

### **3.2 Origins of the Public Sphere**

There is little doubt that German academic Jürgen Habermas is the central figure in the discussion of public sphere theory (McKee, 2003; Schmidtke, 1998). In the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas provides an historical-sociological analysis of the emergence, development and disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere, a sphere founded on and maintained by rational-critical discourse distinct from the state. While his work has been criticised for its idealism and historical inaccuracies, it is still regarded as "a powerful and arresting version of the role of the media in a democratic society" (Curran, 1996, p. 82).

Habermas based his theory of the public sphere on the coffeehouses of Europe from 1680-1730 (1989, p. 32), which he considered to be first literary, then political spheres. The public sphere was seen as the arena where civil society was linked to the state as a power structure, as Habermas (1989, p. 27) states:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claim the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason.

The clubs and coffeehouses of London, Paris and Berlin numbered in the thousands during this period and they were supported by a growing free press. This allowed a forum, which consisted of mainly men, to gather with relative equality to rationally discuss issues of the day independent of the state and other political institutions.

These meeting places were contrary to the "representative public sphere" where the monarch or state used their authority to represent themselves in the lives of the masses.

When the territorial ruler convened about him ecclesiastical and worldly lords, knights, prelates, and cities, this was not a matter of an assembly of delegates that was someone else's representative. As long as the prince and the estates of his realm "were" the country and not just its representatives, they could represent in a specific sense. They represented the lord not for but "before" the people. (Habermas, 1989, p. 7-8)

Habermas suggests the idealised public sphere, where private individuals share common interests and communicate these with the state, emerged in the late Enlightenment period as a result of four factors:

1. The shift in political and economic systems from an absolutist to a capitalist state;
2. The development of print as the dominant mode of communication;
3. The rise of institutions to allow individuals in the newly capitalist systems to meet and deliberate with each other; and,
4. The transition of these deliberating individuals into a public.

The public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters, and “through the vehicle of public opinion put the state in touch with the needs of society” (Habermas, 1989, p. 31). Habermas argued for the existence of two kinds of public sphere: the political public sphere concerned with rational discourse leading to agreement on public policy, and the literary public sphere concerned with matters of taste and general social behaviour (Gunaratne, 2006).

Long before the demise of feudalism the expansion of social and business networks in Western Europe engendered a communication system that comprised mainly newsletters (Habermas, 1989). The growth in the traffic of commodities was mirrored by the growth in traffic of news. The newsletters were originally circulated among a circle of merchants, however they lacked the “publicness” and durability that was to follow in the sixteenth century. The publicness grew out of the increased power of capitalist trading and increasing interdependence between the state and the merchants. “The feudal powers, the church, the prince, the nobility, who were the carriers of the representative publicness, disintegrated in a process of polarization” (Habermas, 1989, p. 11).

The relationship between the increasingly powerful traders and the state, whose power base was eroding, became progressively more complicated.

Because on one hand, the society now confronting the state clearly separated a private domain from public authority and because, on the other hand, it turned the reproduction of life into something transcending the confines of private domestic authority and becoming a zone of public interest, that the zone of administrative contact became the ‘critical’ also in the sense that it provoked the critical judgement of the public making use of its reason. (Habermas, 1989, p. 24)

Dahlberg (2000) notes with the increase of modern capitalist societies, representative publicity and the power of the feudal authorities began to decline. This, he says, polarised society into public and private spheres.

Habermas believes that the critical reasoning could only have happened through the distribution of printed information – or the press. While the capitalist long distance trade gave birth to the press via their newsletters, Habermas says under feudalism the traffic in news had “unleashed the very elements within which this power structure

would one day dissolve” (Habermas, 1989, p. 15). The dissemination of printed material at this time was important because the physical nature of print gave it a sense of permanence. Also the development of an audience took a piece of news out of the private, something that may have been of interest to only a few, and into a larger communicative environment. This period also saw the appearance and subsequent regularity of political journals that contained “information on taxes, commodity prices, wars and reports of foreign trade” (Habermas, 1989, p. 20).

Habermas notes two main determinants for the escalation of the press. One, news had become a desired, tradable commodity and it made sound business sense to produce such a product and expand the market. More important, according to Habermas, was the attention of the state authorities once they had realised the potential power of the journals. The state use of the journals was initially limited to proclamations, promulgating instructions and ordinances, but the addressees of the announcements “genuinely became ‘the public’ in the proper sense” (Habermas, 1989, p. 21). It was not long before the state also saw the medium as an effective means to disseminate propaganda. In a developing opposition to the attempts of editorial control by the state, Habermas states,

The inhibited judgments were called “public” in view of a public sphere that without question had counted as a sphere of public authority, but was now casting itself loose as a forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion (Habermas, 1989, p. 25).

The rise of the critical reasoning in the public sphere was assisted by printed journals. Habermas gives more attention to the developments in Britain than he does to those in France and Germany. The British Government was much more progressive in separating the press from the state than their Continental counterparts and the rise of political journalism was more obvious. The tensions between the King and Parliament were replicated by the tensions between the ruling party and the opposition. Opposition parties could claim to be in tune with “public spirit” Habermas, 1989, (p. 93) on issues and legitimise any public debate.

The bourgeois public sphere was ideally the sphere of private people coming together as a public (Habermas, 1989). Traditional institutions associated with feudal rule,

such as power and domination, were antithetical to the public's desire to take culture and interpretation away from corrupt authority structures. In order for this to be realised, Habermas saw the public sphere as a place where no man would be regarded as being better than the next and any position he held in society was extraneous to his role in the sphere. He also claimed participation in the sphere was accessible to everyone.

The bourgeois public's critical public debate took place in principle without regard to all pre-existing social and political rank and in accord with universal rules. These rules, because they remained strictly external to the individuals as such, secured space for the development of the individuals' interiority by literary means. The rules, because universally valid, secured a space for the individual person; because they were objective, they secured a space for what was the most subjective; because they were abstract, for what was more concrete (Habermas, 1989, p. 54).

*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Communicative Action*

(1981) not only describe in detail this version of European political history but also seek to prescribe the characteristics of the rational communication which emerged as an ideal here and how it relates to communication within the political public sphere.

This can be separated into two main areas:

1. That which deals with the constitutive process and conduct of rational communication, and
2. That which deals with the environment within which rational communication takes place.

Both of these areas led into the analysis of the theory of deliberative democracy, identifying the conditions of rational deliberation as the beginning of democratic participation, considering the ways in which democracy can be conceptualised and where deliberative democracy can emerge.

The conditions for rational communication or deliberation can be reduced to three main rules and these rules established by Habermas are central to this research. These are:

1. Such deliberation should be open to all participants.
2. It would be free, in that no constraints would be imposed on participants.

3. All participants would be of equal status and have the same privileges in introducing, interjecting and interrogating positions in the discussion.

According to Wiklund (2005), when Habermas developed his discursive model of deliberative democracy he took the aspects he thought most appealing from the liberal and republican traditions (the liberal tradition characterises politics as private in nature as opposed to the republican tradition which views it as public) in political theory and incorporated these elements into a communicative framework. Habermas understood deliberative politics to be people discussing and negotiating between differing private ideals (Habermas, 1996).

In communicative action people endeavour to influence each other by offering claims that can be criticised and subject to wider debate. The meshing of actions is not based on pre-existing consensus about the appropriate ways of acting but it depends on give and take of encounters and the way in which those involved can make their claims influence the understanding that is being sought. Those involved in the exchange try to persuade the others of the appropriateness of their ideas or comments by supporting them in a variety of ways. Habermas refers to these as “validity claims” and states these can be broken down into three categories: the objective, external and factual world. This corresponds to validity claims based on the best way to reach a desired state; the social world of interpersonal relations regulated by social norms, corresponding to validity claims based on the normative rightness of what is being argued; and, the world of subjective experience according to which validity claims are based on the sincerity and authenticity of a person’s comments to another (Layder, 1994).

According to Dahlberg (2001), Habermas believes anyone participating in communicative action refers to a “number of pragmatic presuppositions of rational-critical communication and thus to a set of normative conditions of the public sphere” (Habermas, 1989, p. 1). Dahlberg claims that these presuppositions are not clearly or systematically identifiable. The following is Dahlberg’s summary of Habermas’ normative conditions:

1. *Thematisation and reasoned critique of problematic validity claims.*

Argumentation involves the reciprocal rational testing of validity claims in which the positions put forward and the subsequent questioning are backed by reasons.

2. *Reflexivity*. Participants critically examine their values, assumptions, and interests, as well as the larger social context.
3. *Ideal role taking*. Participants attempt to understand the argument from the other's perspective. This requires a commitment to an ongoing dialogue with difference in which interlocutors respectfully listen to others.
4. *Sincerity*. Deliberation is premised upon honesty or discursive openness in contrast to deception, including self-deception, for which one must remain 'critically alert.' Further, rational judgment presupposes that participants make a sincere effort to make known all relevant information including their intentions, interests, needs, and desires.
5. *Inclusion and discursive equality*. Debate is open to all those affected by the concerns under consideration and each participant has an equal opportunity to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever and to express attitudes, desires, and needs.
6. *Autonomy from state and economic power*. Deliberation is driven by the concerns of publicly-oriented citizens rather than by money or administrative power.

Dahlberg developed this public sphere model in his doctoral thesis, drawing heavily from Habermas' theories of communicative action, discourse ethics, and deliberative democracy. He also used Cooke's (1994) work on Habermas' idealisations of communicative rationality and Chamber's (1996) insights into the conditions of discourse. Dahlberg's well considered work here is important for future research into deliberation in online environments and updates the role of Habermas' public sphere theory, as the notion of deliberation is very much intertwined with public sphere (Witschge, 2004).

### **3.3 The Disintegration of the Bourgeois Public Sphere**

The second stage of Habermas' transformation of the public sphere, the commercialisation of the press, is a shift from publicity in the sense of openness to the model of journalism that is more familiar today – advertising and politics.

From the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the bourgeois public sphere became subject to a number of political and economic processes that led to its structural erosion (Dahlberg, 2000). There was a move toward the reintegration of the public and private domains, resulting in the structural transformation of the public sphere away from the principle of rational-critical debate on the part of private people (Johnson, 2006).

Democracy had become widespread and the fate of the political public sphere in the face of mass capitalism underwent a process Habermas called “refeudalisation”, meaning the distinction between private and public could no longer be usefully applied (Habermas, 1989, p. 142). Other factors cited for the disintegration included the increase of political rights to interest groups, leisure time, the welfare state and a growing class system. With the interlocking of the public and private domains, not only do political agencies take over certain functions in the sphere of commodity exchange and social labour but also societal powers take over political functions. ‘Zones of activity’ (Goode, 2005) appeared that were not public or private; “This sphere could meaningfully convince neither as purely private nor as genuinely public, nor could it be unequivocally located in a realm to which *either* private *or* public law pertains” (p. 151).

The increased pace of modern life did not lend itself to reasoned debate and the requirements needed for this to occur were absent. This in turn reduced the integrity of the public and private spheres. The intimate sphere was being watered down by outside influences growing on family members, such as the growth of labour markets and developments in suburban architecture which opened the family home to the public. While the destruction of the relationship of private and public spheres was not limited to urban areas (Habermas, 1989, p. 158), Habermas laments this particular development:

This surreptitious hollowing out of the family’s intimate sphere received its architectural expression in the layout of homes and cities. The closedness of the private home, clearly indicated to the outside by the front yard and fence and made possible on the inside by the individualized and manifold structuring of rooms, is no longer the norm today, just as, conversely, its openness to the social intercourse of a public sphere was endangered by the disappearance of the salon and rooms for the reception of visitors in general. The loss of the private sphere and of ensured access to the public sphere is characteristic of today’s urban mode of dwelling and living. Whether technological and economic developments have quietly adapted

the old forms of urban dwelling to new functions or new suburban settlement forms have been developed on the basis of these experiences (Habermas, 1989, p. 157).

The media were equally responsible for the transformation of the public sphere according to Habermas. His view is that the media assisted in the move toward consumption and away from his idealised literary and political spheres.

When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor also pervaded the sphere reserved for the private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individual reception, however uniform in mode. (Habermas, 1989, p. 161)

Around 1830 there was a transformation away from writers who were private persons to the publicness of consumer-driven mass media (Goodin & Pettit, 2006). The public sphere was changed because commercialisation of the media allowed some groups to have better representation than others, thus creating privilege. The move from a political press to a commercial model saw a shift away from political stories to entertainment. The change in concept of publicity meant individuals became the victim of the media's "opinion management" (Habermas, 1989, p. 193) and public relations and advertising constructed audiences, not rational individuals. The idea of rational-critical debate, from a commercial organisation's position, was not a relevant consideration. Publicity, which once meant the exposure of political domination before the public use of reason, now adds up the reactions of an uncommitted friendly disposition. Public relations has shaped the modern public sphere to the point where the sphere has, again, taken on feudal features (Habermas, 1989, p. 171).

From a modern perspective, many observers would argue the quality of the public sphere has been in decline for many years (Boggs, 1997; Kellner, 2000; Poster, 1995; Ryan, 1992). There has always been a focusing on tabloid issues such as morality, celebrity and sexuality, which were in pre-mass media times the realm of the private, and delivering "human interest" stories to willing consumers as legitimate news. One school of thought would have us believe that an important part of the public sphere equates "dumbing down" to "making accessible". However, academics feel the increasingly trivial nature of the public sphere is diverting the public's attention from more important, public matters (McKee, 2000). Issues that were once the domain of

tabloid or women's magazines are now entering wider public discourse. Van Zoonen (in McKee, 2005) lists issues such as crime, accidents, beauty contests, weddings and sports as having no relevance in the lives of the public and should not be published or broadcast as they distract the public from real issues. Beecher (2005) agrees:

The media is dumbing down as owners, editors, producers and journalists respond to what they perceive - perhaps correctly - to be the desires of their audiences. The result is a media obsession with celebrity, fame, trivia and lifestyles, to the point where many in the so-called "quality media" now believe they cannot attract a broad constituency without large dollops of celebrity gossip and soft lifestyle coverage (p. 1).

Habermas also argues the private has no place within the public. This, he feels, leads to the decline in culture of the public sphere and any requirement of participation falls to the most mundane of private behaviour (Habermas, 1989). The *Daily Star*, a tabloid sold in England, provides a tangible example of Habermas' fears. McNair (2000), quoting the paper's political editor's thoughts on the role of the publication:

We make no bones about it. We're trying to sell newspapers to a niche market, and that niche market is primarily interested in television, sport, and looking at pretty women, plus competitions, promotions, winning this, winning that. The politics that we run doesn't sell an extra copy, as far as we're concerned. So our political coverage is very confined.

McKee (2005) points his finger at "they" (being the media organisations), but many academics complain media only produce content that is easily consumed. This avoids audiences confronting stories that are not quickly explained or that are multi-dimensional. This leaves media aimed at the lowest common denominator, an approach Habermas equates to book clubs of the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. They, he claims, developed sales and distribution strategies that lowered the "entrance requirements" and the product needed to be digestible by all, thus rendering the public sphere reduced. Habermas considers "commercial" to be inferior and believes the public of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to have been better off in that they rose to the level of culture rather than, as today, culture is lowered to the masses.

McNair (2000) believes the quality of political journalism in the public sphere has declined so much that it is to the detriment of the democratic process. What we are left with is a supply of *infotainment* – "journalism in which entertainment values take precedence over information content, presented at an intellectual level low enough to

appeal to mass audiences which comprise the major media markets” (p. 4). McNair, like Habermas, suggests this quality is below what is needed to conduct a healthy democracy. This critique of public debate, which to some may be idealised and elitist, relates to the quality of information that is in the public sphere allowing for rational-critical debate, a fundamental element of Habermas’ normative public sphere.

### **3.4 Criticisms of the Public Sphere Concept**

Critics of Habermas’ theory of public sphere are numerous and it is beyond the bounds of this thesis to explore a comprehensive review of the limitations and weaknesses here, but an overview of the main themes is warranted and accordingly provided.

Practical criticisms of Habermas’ concept of the public sphere often begin with the narrow perspective in which the public sphere is explored through the bourgeoisie. Fraser (1990) contends that Habermas’ analysis of the public sphere needs critical interrogation and reconstruction if it is to be a valuable measure of democracy. Crossley and Roberts (2004) state three main problems with this issue: first, that the bourgeois public sphere was based on the idea of free and equal access between consenting participants. By stating this point Habermas is said to overlook the more coercive and power-driven attributes of the public sphere. Second, the colonisation thesis (where commercial or government interests colonise the lifeworld, see Habermas’ Theory of *Communicative Action*, 1981) simplifies the complex media practices. Third, the bourgeois public sphere demeans the emancipatory potential of counterpublic spheres.

From a historical perspective Habermas (1992) admits that his “diagnosis of a unilinear development from a politically active public to one withdrawn into a bad privacy, from a “culture-debating to a culture-consuming public, is too simplistic” (p. 438). Calhoun states the fundamental problem with Habermas’ theory is that it “does not treat the ‘classical’ bourgeois public sphere and the posttransformation public sphere of ‘organized’ or ‘late’ capitalism symmetrically”. He also says Habermas failed to consider lower forms of rational-critical media, such as the “penny dreadfuls,

lurid crime and scandal sheets... and glances only in passing at the relationship of crowds and political discourse” (p. 33).

There has been criticism as to whether Habermas’ idealised public sphere was ever a place where rational debate occurred (McNair, 2000). Kellner (2000) does not believe that discussions about politics ever transpired the way Habermas claimed through rational debate and consensus as politics throughout the modern era has been subject to the play of interests and power as well as discussion and debate.

Others have commented on Habermas’ oversight of plebeian, proletarian working class, and women’s public spheres (Negt & Kluge, 1972; Fraser, 1990).

Habermas’ critics argue that he idealises the earlier bourgeois public sphere by presenting it as a forum of rational discussion and debate when in fact certain groups were excluded and participation was therefore limited.

Habermas intended the public sphere as an ideal, rather than an empirical entity, though he used research on Britain, France and Germany to substantiate his main ideas and this has led to his work being labelled Eurocentric (Gunaratne, 2006) and the extrapolation is not sufficiently contextualised.

### **3.5 Public Sphere Theory as a Critique of the Media**

While allowing the limitations of Habermas’ account of the public sphere, both as history and a normative model, it nonetheless highlights the increasingly important role the media play in politics and everyday life. It also points out how corporations, through ownership, have colonised the sphere to promote their own interests (Kellner, 2000). As opposed to Habermas’ ideal public sphere of the coffee house times, the modern public sphere is dominated and controlled by political, economic and media elites. These controlling forces, it could be suggested, have no interest in opening up the system to wider public participation (Curran, 1993), but instead continue to mould public opinion on most issues. There are also issues about the quality of debate within the media. The corporate model of media requires it to turn a profit, which in trying to appeal to as many people as possible, has been accused of dumbing-down its content.

One prominent feature of the contemporary media which Habermas' theory raises concerns about is the extent to which the public sphere drifts toward spectacle (Kellner, 2003). McKee identifies two dimensions to this – the kinds of topics that are being discussed and the ways in which they are discussed. The media are prone to delivering content that places more emphasis on the appearance than the substance. Kellner (2003) argues:

... that media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution. They include media extravaganzas, sporting events, political happenings and those attention-grabbing events we call news. (p. 2)

History has been built on spectacle (Kellner, 2003) and all aspects of culture and social life have increased in spectacle, especially since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the spectacle grows, the one that follows needs to be even grander. In the cultural context this can be seen in the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympics and the Soccer World Cup. And in the news media, the continuing spectacle of the war in Iraq, along with the non-stories, such as the death of Anna Nicole Smith, illustrate the continued appetite for this type of drama. The media coverage of the events, and aftermath, of September 11 has been likened to that of a soap opera (Schirato & Webb, 2004). It has been suggested the melding of tabloid and mainstream journalism began in 1988 with the rise of sex scandals in American politics (Sachs, 1995), while others date this from the death of Princess Diana in 1997.

The media are partly responsible for the way the public view politicians and the political process by offering spectacle-based politics. They have been accused of “reducing politics to image, display and the stories in the form of entertainment and drama” (Kellner, 2003). This results in the public viewing politicians and politics as a narrative and spectacle. Gitlin (1996) compares media coverage of political issues to that of sports and entertainment, and also considers it an exercise in cynicism.

The coverage of politics and the political process, by the media, is not immune and often falls into the spectacle. Politicians are presented to the public in a wave of

publicity. Often this publicity is in no way related to issues of public concern, but rather as a means of solidifying a power base (Goodin & Pettit, 2006). Important and relevant public information falls by the wayside to lower level reporting:

Election campaigns, the supposed centrepiece of democratic politics, become an occasion for sound-bite advertising, celebrity gossip, staged debates and computerised calculations. (Boggs, 2000, p. 82)

The fragmentation of media is another problem of the public sphere which McKee highlights. Improvements in technology have increased the number of media channels to the point where mass communication has been broken into many niches. Garnham (1992) laments this process as he believes that many public spheres, instead of a single sphere made up of subsidiaries, directly challenges democracy. Habermas (1992), in contradicting this in later works, says there have always been competing public spheres. There have always been public spheres created around differing interests, ideologies and identities.

If one is to accept the notion of a normative public sphere, as described by Habermas, then there are implications for the media and principles of communication that should be adhered to in order to fulfil their role within the sphere. McNair (2000) states that any modern study of democracy is also a study of how the media report and interpret political events and issues. How the public come to understand politics is through a mediated media chain (journalists, columnists, sub-editors) that reaches the public in a set of journalistic codes and practices (existing culture of news values, personal styles, objectivity). This process is also susceptible to political interference by political actors and public relations people to achieve politically favourable outcomes. However, the role the media play in creating an informed public, who can express their political views, is crucial and something the media are often critiqued for falling short in.

In the current age most corporate media forms are driven by ratings, as this is the fundamental measure of success or failure in their market, and the role of media now is to deliver audiences to advertisers. Media organisations consider the audience as “a market of potential consumers” (Hoynes, 1994, p. 33). The drive for ratings by media leaves little option but to seek out the most desirable content, as considered by the mass audience. In the past, newsrooms were protected from the pressures of profits,

but they have been increasingly required to drop their role of conduits of information to that of ratings-driven entertainers. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century newspapers were regarded as “high modernist” journalism because of their domination in the market, which was eroded after the introduction of other mass media, particularly television (Flew, 2007).

These critiques can be extended beyond mass media to reflect on the potential of internet-based communication for public debate. Habermas’ view that ownership of the media undermines the public sphere requires us to consider the ownership of the internet. Is the internet owned by commercial interests? The answer to that would have to be no, no one entity owns the internet. That is not to say that there is not commercialisation on the internet. Fox Interactive Media’s (which is owned by News Corp) purchase of MySpace.com in 2005 for US\$580 million (News Corp in \$580m internet buy, 2005) and Google’s near monopoly of internet searches suggest dominant commercial players are present on the internet. Of the millions of websites on the internet, most web browsers are visiting, or being funnelled through, websites owned by a few large companies. Sites like hitwise.com and alexa.com (which itself is a subsidiary of amazon.com) that rank the world’s most-visited sites show a number of familiar and powerful organisations dominating.

Sunstein (2001) talks about a concept called the “Daily Me” which suggests internet news consumers are able to select their personal news diet as if they were choosing from a buffet table. This, he believes, is not without its problems. The ability for news consumers to filter the news they want to hear and ignore the rest will result in a “decrease in shared communication experiences and exposure to materials that have not been chosen in advance but that nonetheless is beneficial” ( Sunstein, 2001, p.48). The fragmentation that ensues from such a situation does not allow for communities to have mutual understanding. The result of this can breed extremism and hate groups. Another problem of news filtering, according to Sunstein, involves a distinctive character of information. He believes that information is a public good, in that the sharing of information can benefit others. Where information is filtered through such consumerist technologies there may be a shortage of information in the public sphere to the point where individual choices are not made with reference to their social

benefits. In the end, Sunstein sees fragmentation through user choice leading to less public and more private communication online.

### **3.6 Participation within the Public Sphere**

While people may be better informed about political issues than they have ever been (Levine, 2002), there is growing evidence of public apathy toward politics (Ward, Gibson & Lusoli, 2005). Participating in a democracy is an imperative for a well functioning society, but is not something people show strong inclination toward (Knight et al., 2002). Some academics believe the media is responsible for this decline. Habermas believes that not only is any form of printed material inferior to people gathering together to discuss issues, media control over society endanger the chances of any meaningful public discourse (Peterson, 2005). Wilson (1985) says media turn politics into a spectator sport or a consumable commodity. McKee goes as far as stating:

If the media were not allowed to produce such distracting trivia, if it were forced to be quality, serious and rational – argue some writers – then people would become more involved in politics. (p. 176)

To participate in the public sphere one must be prepared to enter into discourse with others (Thornton, 1996). However, for the discussions to function with an appropriate level of rational-critical discourse there are conditions that need to be applied. As discussed above, these include:

- avoiding the use of emotion or emotive language
- a focus on the rationality of the content
- a common interest in truth.

Rationality is of great importance to Habermas' theories (Kellner, 2000). To create a standard for rationality in this thesis, as a concept and a practical guide, Toulmin's (1969) model is used as a platform on which rationality can be reached through persuasive argument. These principles were considered and applied when developing the questions in the content analysis protocol. Of course Habermas' communicative rationality is a set of theories that sets out the requirements for communication to be successful, and these also play a significant role in this thesis.

Calhoun (1992) states the public sphere must be a system where ideas can be critiqued as being imperative to ensure a healthy debating process. Any ideas put forward must be available for input from others as this means participants will be able to find meaning, not only in any consensus but also in the deliberation process.

According to the participatory model (for further explanation see section 2.3.1.2), democracy can never be reduced to the act of voting “yes” or “no” on predefined alternatives every general election. Democracy is more than a governmental arrangement for contesting elections. Knight, et al. (2002) claim people no longer believe that representative democracy is enough and they want a participatory model that seeks action from both citizens and government. They advocate that communities need to demonstrate “activism, leadership, association and engagement” (Knight, et al. 2002, p.164). Here citizens could no longer sit back and expect democracy to simply happen.

The role of the government, in a participatory model, would be to “value the opinions and expectations of all citizens” (Knight, et al. 2002, p. 164). Governments would also be required to engage in debates even where they may not support an idea, as well as be accepting of criticism.

Whereas identification with political parties might be considered irrational from the perspective of the competitive model of democracy (for further explanation see section 2.3.1.1), it is rational from the perspective of the participatory model of democracy. If people engage in associations and political parties, and through their activities become a part of and influence these organisations, identification with the parties and other organisations seems a natural consequence.

However, these expectations may be excessive according to some researchers, as some studies show that people are becoming less likely to act politically or even to cast a vote (Kornbluh, 2000; Blais et al., 2004). While people are less inclined to engage in institutional politics in a traditional sense, they may be participating using forms that fall under the radar of current political participatory measures. In the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century it was easier to determine participation through town hall meetings

and a fewer means of communication that were less fragmented. People's activity could be more readily measured. Communication technologies, while continuing to fragment the public by adding another channel of information (this channel, the internet, offers potentially unlimited sources of information) have created the ability to participate in politics by carving out a space between modern power structures, for example, the government and media. Habermas' historic description of coffee houses and the pamphleteers allow us to draw comparisons to internet-based communication, especially the blogosphere, where politically interested actors are operating outside of the conventional areas of discussion, but the point is they are involved in presenting ideas and debating issues, and are doing so in a way that is not obvious or easy to measure.

There is a need at this time to define what constitutes participation. A clear definition of the term can be problematic. Is participation the same when one is forced to be involved as opposed to that of someone who willingly engages? Is the simple act of registering to vote an honest form of participation? Ideally in this current study participation would involve some voluntary form of activity or action. In the traditional sense of political participation this would involve: discussing political issues with others with a goal to influence voting behaviour, and writing or phoning Members of Parliament (acts such as registering to vote cannot be considered here as this is a legal requirement in New Zealand). Donovan, Bowler, Hanneman, and Karp (2004), when examining links between members of social and interest groups with associated political activity, represent political engagement in terms of eight questions. They asked respondents if they engaged in various forms of political action that tap different varieties of activity. Respondents were asked if they had voted in the last New Zealand General Election, worked on a political campaign, discussed politics with others during the campaign, participated in a protest march, signed a petition, written to a newspaper, phoned a radio talkback show, or participated in a boycott.

Groombridge (1972) challenges the act of writing to a politician as political participation; only when a person talks directly to members of a political party. By this definition the actions of the Exclusive Brethren in the lead-up to the 2005 New Zealand General Election cannot be counted as being political actions as they acted

without the full knowledge and sanction of the National Party (Espiner, 2005). Or by taking it a step further, the mono-directional communication of views from political parties is not participation. Others (see Street, 1997) share Habermas' view that discussion – the exchange of competing perceptions – is important in the overall political process. On the opposite end of the spectrum from Groombridge is the post-modern position where even the audience of mass media can be considered political participants. The question that needs asking here is does non-direct political activity, or in the case of this thesis, online political participation such as reading and commenting on a blog, actually matter if that does not transfer into a tangible act of participation, such as voting or active campaigning, in the “real world”. Or to put the question more bluntly: does online political participation actually mean anything?

The internet can be considered as being another option for people to participate in politics and this is attractive to many of those who invest time reading and commenting on blogs because of the perceived failure of the mainstream media. One study showed the levels of internet use to be strongly linked to those already involved in political participation (Weber, Loumakis & Bergman, 2003). What this current study does not answer is whether the higher level of political participation is a result of internet usage, or whether people with a great interest in politics are also more likely to use the internet.

The internet is a relatively new medium that enables the development of new forms of participation that are not necessarily subject to the constraints of traditional life (Poster, 2001; Saco 2002; Turkle, 1995). Unlike traditional media the internet is not a passive medium from which information can be inadvertently obtained. Blogs and websites are not like radio or television news that can be seen or heard without seeking them, but are actively sought by the user and this is an important difference between the two. Blogs have potential because of the way they differ from the mainstream media in regards to participation, when they are considered through the public sphere critique of the media. Mainstream media does not require participation of anyone, whereas blogs demand participation if people want to engage within that sphere. Many of the criticisms of modern democracy involve that lack of participation in many of its facets, e.g. voting and issue deliberation, and the finger has been pointed at the media as a significant reason for this disintegration of the public sphere,

as Habermas views it. For a democracy to flourish it needs a rich public sphere of dissenting voices and robust debate, something mainstream media has not provided for a long time, if ever.

From this point it is considered that the act of writing a blog, reading blogs (also known as lurking) and leaving comments on posts are active forms of participation under the new terms as set by the growing number of people who are turning to the internet to seek out new ways of connecting with like-minded people who want to debate political issues. It is the position of this thesis that if a person is using communication technologies to deliberate with others over political issues then that person can be deemed to be participating. Any act of online deliberation assumes a threshold of participation has been reached.

### **3.7 An Evaluation of the Critique of Habermas**

According to Kellner (2000), Habermas fails to adequately explain the precise institutional and normative functions of the media and the public sphere within constitutional democracy. He does not:

adequately theorise the nature and social functions of contemporary media of communication and information, they are for him mere mechanisms for transmitting messages, instruments that are neither an essential part of the economy or polity in his schema, and of derivative importance for democracy in comparison to processes of rational debate and consensus in the lifeworld (p. 275).

Habermas makes a distinction between the “communicative generation of legitimate power on one hand and the manipulative deployment of media power to procure mass loyalty, consumer demand, and compliance with systemic imperatives on the other” (Habermas, 1992, p. 452). It is the overlap of these two processes – the spontaneous forming of opinion in autonomous public spheres and the organised extraction of mass loyalty – that interests Habermas (1997b). Communicatively generated power can impact a political system insofar as it assumes responsibility for the pool of reasons from which administrative decisions must draw their rationalisations. If the normative arguments added by the system have been invalidated by counter arguments from previous political communication then there is a situation where not

everything is acceptable. For the latter, Habermas says democratic procedures are meant to provide the needed communication to help in will-formation. For the public sphere to function, more is needed than just the institutional guarantees of the constitutional state (Habermas, 1992). This suggests the public sphere needs the support of cultural traditions and patterns of socialisation from free people.

Kellner believes that in Habermas' distinction between communicative generation and manipulative deployment, the media cannot play a role in democracy, nor the transformation of democracy, because they are, in Habermas' view, "systemic imperatives of manipulation, governed by 'media' of money and power, and thus are excluded from the possibility of contributing to the politics of a broader societal democratization" (2000, p. 275). In the past, power structures have separated television, newspapers and radio from critical and opposing voices being widely heard, initially through government control and then corporate power. Those who wanted to partake in public discussions have been pushed to second tier broadcasting channels, using such devices as public access radio or local/regional television.

Habermas, Kellner says, in what he states as being central to his critique of Habermas' position of the media within the public sphere, focuses his model on face-to-face communication and discussion and ignores communication which transpires through communication in the media or via communication technology. Kellner argues the development of new global public spheres because of the internet and associated technologies requires new considerations of the public sphere concept.

Even at its height, Habermas' public sphere serves, if nothing else, as an ideal of what the media should be, says Kellner (2003). A number of theorists have stated the internet offers a location where a public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Gimmmler, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002; Poster, 1997), like that idealised in Habermas' *Structural Transformations* can exist (Papacharissi, 2002; Ubayasiri, 2006).

### **3.8 The Public Sphere, the Internet and Deliberative Democracy**

With consideration of the criticisms of Habermas' work in relation to this thesis we must now look to the criticism's role in internet and communication technologies.

New communication technologies can attract discussion about their abilities to politically mobilise people (see Chapter Two for further discussion). One of the discussion points to the development of the internet and CMC, as a second media age (Holmes, 2002), that engendered the possible invigoration or renewal of the public sphere and deliberative democracy through internet-based discourse. Kellner believes that new democratic politics uses new media and computer technologies to serve the interests of the people and not corporations or other power institutions. Kellner (1995) says that the internet has:

produced new public spheres and spaces for information, debate and participation that contain the potential to invigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas. (¶19)

Papacharissi (2002) offers the enthusiastic statement that as “public space, the internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions” (p. 11).

If the public sphere is in a state of flux, where Habermas highlights the rise and fall of a critical public (Downey & Fenton, 2003), then the internet is at the forefront of the evolving public sphere, particularly when politics is the focus of discussion (Dahlgren, 2005). Poster (1997) talks of years of decline where:

contemporary social relations seem to be devoid of a basic level of interactive practice which, in the past, was the matrix of democratizing politics: loci such as the agora, the New England town hall, the village Church, the coffee house, the tavern, the public square, a convenient barn, a union hall, a park, a factory lunchroom, and even a street corner. Many of these places remain but no longer serve as organizing centers for political discussion and action. It appears that the media, especially television but also other forms of electronic communication, isolate citizens from one another and substitute themselves for older spaces of politics (p. 178).

The rise of the internet expands the realm for democratic participation and debate and creates new public spaces for people to become politically involved (Kellner, 2000). Despite previous comments to the contrary, Habermas, in his acceptance speech for the Bruno Kreisky Prize, said “use of the internet has both broadened and fragmented the contexts of communication. This is why the internet can have a subversive effect on intellectual life in authoritarian regimes. But at the same time, the less formal,

horizontal cross-linking of communication channels weakens the achievements of traditional media” (Habermas, 2006).

Dahlberg (2001) is optimistic about the prospect of online deliberative democracy, believing that with appropriate structural management the internet may become a means to expand the public sphere, although he offers some critical analysis of an online public sphere where one of the fundamentals of Habermas’ normative theory, inclusion, is concerned. He says “marginalization of online rational-critical deliberations will occur as long as consumerism and other non-critical private modes of interaction dominate cultural participation and individualized interaction dominates politics” (p. 628). Socio-economic and infrastructure issues are also important to avoid inequities and ensure full inclusion. The internet is offered up as a new bastion of democracy. While online discussion groups and virtual communities seem to come very close to the ideal of an unconstrained public discourse, it is important to not become too excited about the possibilities of the internet or to consider it as some kind of utopia for political discussion. Slevin (2000), in disagreement with Dahlberg, feels that Habermas’ ideal public sphere is unrealistic and will not be realised on the internet as it has not been in other forms of media. Jenson (2002) argues that political dialogue and deliberation can occur in a range of contexts such as coffeehouses, as described by Habermas, but what this fails to consider is the decline of political engagement, as has been previously stated in this thesis. It is not that other venues cannot be used to talk politics, it is that they are not being used as much as they have previously. While accepting the above points, it is a focus of this thesis to apply the three rules stated by Habermas (as outlined in Section 3.2). That is, to examine whether Habermas’ criteria of the public sphere is met in the New Zealand political blogosphere.

Blogs can be regarded as a leap back to the coffee houses as talked about by Habermas. That is, private concerns can easily be discussed and turned into public issues. This is unlike other forms of electronic media, where the people have little or no chance of participating in public discourse. The rise of the internet has given new life to the public sphere after its refeudalisation by mass media in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By allowing the voices of otherwise unheard millions the blogosphere could be considered the rebirth of the public sphere. Political blogs provide a forum for people

who may not be confident to speak publicly to do so in person and in doing so blogs provide an interesting space for political talk through a combination of political information with opinion expression and conversation (Walker, 2007).

Barton (2005) points out what is so striking about personal blogs is their similarity to the 18<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois diaries and letters described by Habermas: “Through letter writing the individual unfolded himself in his subjectivity” (Habermas, 1989, p. 48). This subjectivity, “as the innermost core of the private, was always already oriented to an audience” (Habermas, 1989, p. 49).

The notion of participation is a foundation of democracy and, as has been already stated, discussion can be considered an act of participation. Discussion does not need to be limited to one-to-one or one-to-many lecture conversations but can also include text-based interaction. Although the blogosphere is still a relatively new concept, it does offer some potential to evolve into a miniature public sphere of its own (Fromkin, 2003), and unlike traditional forms of media, the internet does not have any form of editorial supervision and the liberal preference is for the internet to remain this way (see Warnick, 2001).

The phenomenon of A-list bloggers contradicts Habermas’ criteria of rank, which he stipulated as a rule of discursive engagement. Some bloggers outrank others based on their previous position or pre-existing personal networks (Ó Baoill, 2004). The Drudge Report is an example of a blog that ranks highly in terms of readers, but it also benefits from search engines like Google and del.icio.us. Readers of the Drudge Report (or any website) can link a page to these search engines and as they do so those links become higher in the ranks for specific search terms.

Since it became widely accessible in the mid 1990s, the internet has become a predominant feature in the lives of many Western countries, including New Zealand. By 2005 three-quarters of New Zealanders have access to the internet at home or at work (New Zealand Internet Usage Stats and Telecom Reports, n.d.), a significant increase from 22.2 percent in 2000. This increased access to the internet provides the opportunity for people to engage in political discourse and express their opinions. Holt (2004) suggests the internet has changed the face of public discourse,

highlighting the immediacy and the overcoming of space and time. He also points out other unique features that internet communication offers; these include the users' ability to remain anonymous and the unregulated nature of the internet, which encourage people to more freely express themselves.

On people have access to the internet (see Section 2.4.1) the barriers and requirements to participate in online discussion are low. Many websites only require someone to register as a precursor to membership, although without the most stringent investigation by website moderators anyone signing up for membership can provide fraudulent information about themselves. Discussing politics online allows people to avoid some of the obstacles that stop them doing so on an interpersonal or group level. Such things as becoming involved in conflict or confrontation is enough to put some people off entering political discussions in the flesh and the asynchronous nature of web-based discussion gives time and freedom not to have an immediate response.

With internet-based discussion and/or political participation comes the ability of the user to moderate their level of participation. This can range from being an observer, or lurking, to occasional posting/responding, to engaging in full participation as a significant contributor (Holt, 2004). Holt believes internet communication can bring together people with opposing views and ideologies to create a space where discussion and debate on political issues can take place. He states "the internet medium is ideal for discussing competing or alternative ideologies".

This means the communication venue that stands the best chance of gaining the most participation is the one in which competing viewpoints (based on variant ideologies) are easiest to transmit and receive. On these requirements, the internet is clearly an attractive form of communication, being open to many, largely unregulated, and widespread enough to guarantee a broad dissemination of utterances. (p. 14)

Blogs are not the answer to increased participation in politics. They do offer an alternative to the current public sphere that is the mainstream media. Blogs demand participation if one is to deliberate – unlike the passiveness of the media they are an active and interactive medium. Public sphere theory cannot idealise blogs as it cannot idealise current media structures.

### 3.9 Conclusion

Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) remains the standard piece of writing where the public sphere is concerned. The historical and theoretical concept provided by Habermas has been the attention of much academic attention and criticism. Discussion and public deliberation of issues underpin successful democracies. The public sphere is the place where people can discuss not only the events of the days, but also the power structures that dominate societies. Current media structures are not without problems; media ownership, government involvement and profits before quality outputs allow public sphere theory to provide a relevant critique of how the media interests have colonised the public sphere and the consequences of such a move. Political discussion and opinion formation, since the development of internet and communication technologies, have begun to wrestle the agenda of political discussion away from the control of the media, and blogs are playing a lead role in this process (Metzgar, 2008; Woodley, 2007). Academics are divided on the role of communication technologies in the modern public sphere but many are enthusiastic about their potential, with Kellner (2000) saying public debate over the use of new technologies is of utmost importance to the future of democracy.



## **Chapter Four**

### **Content Analysis Methodology**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This research focuses on how bloggers communicated their opinions on political issues and how comments sections in blogs discussed and debated issues during the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign. Content analysis was employed as the primary methodological procedure to deconstruct the text into quantitative measures. More specifically this study seeks to clarify themes and functions in which blogging was used as a communication tool to deliberate on issues to measure any relationship between the blogosphere and the public sphere, as described by Habermas. This chapter considers content analysis as a methodology, including any associated problems and limitations, previous use and how it can be applied in an online context – specifically political communication in New Zealand blogs during the election campaign period.

#### **4.2 What is Content Analysis?**

Content analysis has been described as a “formal system for doing something that we all do informally rather frequently, drawing conclusions from observations of content” (Stempel, 1989, p. 124). Holsti (1969) states content analysis is “any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (p. 14). The most noted and accepted definition of methodological technique was provided by Berelson (1952); he describes content analysis as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (p. 18).

Content analysis, as a research methodology, allows researchers to sort through large amounts of data with relative ease in a systematic fashion, and it can be a useful technique for allowing researchers to discover and describe the focus of individual, group, institutional, or social attention (Weber, 1990). McNabb (2002) points out that using content analysis to recognise characteristics within the examined content does not identify anything as being true or false. Content analysis can only measure the

usage or presences of those characteristics. It also allows inferences to be made which can then be corroborated using other methods of data collection.

Content analysis is a way to describe and analyse communication content in a comprehensive way. According to Hansen et al. (1998), content analysis is less prone to subjective selectiveness and idiosyncrasies and is one of the most commonly used communication analysis tools in research.

In critiquing Berelson, Stempel (1989) and Kaid and Wadsworth (1989) suggest the key elements to understanding and performing a content analysis are objectivity and being systematic. These, according to Krippendorff (1980), are the “dual requirements to replicability and validity” (p. 19). There has been little disagreement that all undertakings of content analysis should be objective and display little, if any, bias. There has, however, been discussion surrounding the notions of manifest content and quantification. Krippendorff offers a less restrictive, alternative definition of content analysis that challenges manifest content and quantification. He states content analysis is a “research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use” (p. 18).

There is agreement that analysis needs to be systematic, that is, be reliable, and all units of analysis need to be stated and applied equally. Stempel (1989) states:

Systematic means, first, that a set procedure is applied in the same way to all the content being analysed. Second, it means that categories are set up so that all relevant content is analysed. Finally, it means that the analyses are designed to secure data relevant to a research hypothesis. (p. 125)

While Berelson’s definition is widely accepted, Holsti (1969, quoted in Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989) adds to the requirements of being systematic and objective, the need for generality. Simple descriptions, without comparisons and relationships drawn from theoretical concerns, are of limited value. Holsti (quoted in Emmert & Baker, 1989) says the need for objective and systematic inquiry adds the need for generality. This suggests the arguing and descriptions of content are of limited worth without comparisons and relationships drawn from theoretical concerns. Under Holsti’s definition as stated above, the technique of content analysis is not restricted

to the domain of textual analysis, but may be applied to other areas such as coding student drawings or coding of actions observed in videotaped studies.

Content analysis can also be used in the examination of trends and patterns in documents. For example, Stemler and Bebell (1998) conducted a content analysis of school mission statements to make inferences about what schools hold as their primary reasons for existence. In this study they focused on whether the criteria being used to measure programme effectiveness were aligned with the overall programme objectives or reason for existence.

### **4.3 Why Content Analysis?**

Content analysis has become one of the most prevalent methodologies used in mass communication research, and it is also widely used in other disciplines. The use of content analysis for web-based texts, while relatively new, is comparable to its being used in traditional media such as newspapers and television (McMillan, 2000).

Content analysis has been used successfully in previous internet based research, for example, Esrock and Leichty's (1998) examination of how corporations use websites to promote their social responsibility programmes, and Pen, Tham and Xiaoming's (1999) exploration of current trends in web-based newspapers. More recently, content analysis has been undertaken on the websites and blogs of 10 Democratic candidates contesting the 2004 United States Presidential Election (Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu & Landreville, 2006b) and used to analyse content and gender of Polish bloggers in relation to motivations for blogging (Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmokl & Sapp, 2006a). These studies have demonstrated the versatility of content analysis for use on non-traditional media.

Kaid and Wadsworth (1989) claim content analysis has a number of distinct benefits, such as the ability for a researcher to work with large amounts of unstructured material in a quick and unobtrusive manner and with a minimum of resources. Following on from this, Krippendorff (1980) emphasises four prime advantages of content analysis that while made in the context of text-based sources such as newspapers, are relevant to web-based content. These are:

- it is unobtrusive,

- it accepts unstructured material,
- it is context sensitive and thereby able to process symbolic forms,
- it can cope with large volumes of data.

Stempel (1989), quoting Lasswell (1948, p.37), states his approach to content analysis' role within communication research as being "*Who says what to whom with what effect*" (p. 125). Similarly, Holsti (1969) states that content analysis describes the characteristics of communication by asking *what, how, and to whom* something was said. He believes communication research can be fully realised when content is related to the communicator, audience and effects.

#### **4.4 Problems and Limitations of Content Analysis**

As with all methods, content analysis is subject to a number of limitations. A commonly cited drawback with content analysis is that it is limited to the examination of recorded communication. If the researcher wants to provide explanation into other areas, for example media effects or news selection, then alternative methodologies need to be used. Content analysis alone is not sufficient to determine the communicator's intent in writing the text under investigation. Carney (1972) describes the limitation that "to make inferences from message to *intent* will require ... several different content analyses, ... some type of theory, ... or external data, and a study, on the communicator" (p.196).

Another limitation of content analysis is that it focuses on frequencies and does not take into account what is absent from the text, rendering limitations to what can be quantified. That is, a researcher will only focus on what categories he or she has predefined and this can result in missing other significant areas (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991).

Carney (1972) believes the major limitation in using content analysis is the subjectivity involved in coding, which involves the researcher identifying particular phrases or concepts. He states, "The same document can mean wholly different things to different users" (p. 197). Where validity refers to the "extent to which [a variable]

measures the construct the investigator intends it to measure” (Carney, 1972, p. 15), Weber (1985) believes issues surrounding validity can result from ambiguities in meaning or definitions. Holsti (1969), however, suggests that problems involving reliability can be overcome by employing more than one coder. Krippendorff (1980) suggests that it is not ideal for the developer of a code to also be the administrator; however, he concedes that it is acceptable when resources are limited.

Conducting content analysis on the internet comes with its own set of problems and limitations. For example, the transient nature of web pages can make it difficult to capture data. One study (Koehler, 1999) found that in a random sample of 344 web sites, less than 75 percent could be found at the same URL after one year. Much of the criticism that has been directed at content analysis is related to misuse and abuses of the method rather than anything to do with the structure of the actual method of collecting data. McMillan (2000) does not believe the internet poses any new problems for content analysis but does believe that researchers need to employ rigour and creativity to avoid losing focus. Weare and Lin (2000) believe the size of the internet makes representative selection of samples complicated and that this is something all communication researchers who migrate into the internet need to consider. However, Weare and Lin identify strategies which assist in the mitigation of such difficulties, for example web tracking software, the use of factor analysis for validation of message meanings, and easily coded web content analysis software. These strategies are considered further in a later section.

#### **4.5 The Use of Content Analysis on Internet-based material**

Practical inquiry into communication content has been undertaken since at least the 1600s but not until the 1940-50s, though the work of Berelson and Lazarsfeld, did it become a recognised research tool (McMillan, 2000). The rise of electronic media in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has generated new ways that researchers approach the implementation of traditional research methodologies, including content analysis. A number of disciplines beyond communication have turned their attention to issues of measuring and analyzing content located on the internet. These include the fields of library or information science, political science, marketing, and also education. The internet has opened areas for content analysis research that necessitate the development of new

empirical techniques (Weare & Lin, 2000). However, the work of academics such as Lawson-Borders and Kirk (2005), Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005), Herring, et al. (2005), Papacharissi (2004) and Kerbel and Bloom (2005) have laid a platform for the use of content analysis on blogs. Their development of content analysis techniques has challenged the traditional approach and provided guidance for other researchers conducting blog and website analysis.

It should be noted that at the planning and research design stages of this thesis, there was little in the way of guidance for examining how blogs were used in discussing politics. A number of studies have conducted content analyses of websites and blogs and these have shown that the methodology is suitable for application on internet based content, even where various media types are used (Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Herring, Scheidt, et al. 2004, 2005; Herring, Kouper, et al., 2004; Papacharissi, 2004; Trammell, Tarkowski, & Hofmohl, 2006). There were not, however, studies that sought similar research outcomes, and consequently the approach developed for the content analysis required creative thinking and strategies that had not previously been used – a situation that follows McMillan's (2000) suggestion that creativity is needed to “ensure content analysis can be applied in the dynamic communication environment of the Web” (p.17). This was especially the case when choosing the unit of analysis.

The internet presents something of a research dichotomy – on one hand it facilitates data gathering like no previous medium; on the other its sheer size and mutability complicate the development of scientifically random samples. As content on the internet increases, researchers need to continually progress their methods to confront the challenges of developing reliable and valid analyses of internet-based content, no matter what their area of communication research (Weare & Lin, 2000). As political discussion moves from the mainstream media to the internet, content analysis techniques, which have been the foundation method for previous research in this area, will need to adapt to new forms.

The exponential growth of the internet in terms both of users, estimated to be one billion users online in 2005, and of content, in excess of 320 million home pages accessible on the internet, has researchers asking if the internet is moving too fast for

examining communication. McMillan (2000), in an examination of 19 studies that apply content analysis techniques to the web, questions whether this growth makes content analysis a redundant tool for web-based research. McMillan concludes that content analysis can be applied to web communication, but that doing so poses potential problems for researchers in four of the five steps in the content analysis process, as described by Krippendorff (1980). In the first step where the research questions are developed, content analysis of the web is both similar to and different from traditional media in that traditional media, such as newspapers and broadcast, have a commonly accepted sequencing of messages whereas the hypertext nature of the web allows users to interact with online content in an individual and unique way. The web is able to combine different media within itself, such as text, audio, still images, and animation. Traditional media, such as video, print and broadcast, all offer these independently. The internet also allows for many communication activities, one-to-one and one-to-many communications, asynchronous and synchronous messages.

The second step in content analysis research, sampling, presents some unique challenges for web-based content analysis. The first challenge for a researcher is to identify the units to be sampled. This will normally be determined by the research question. If a data set is derived from the internet, the selection of samples can become more difficult. However, if the data is presented in a similar format to that from an offline source sampling, this can be accomplished more easily. When the list has been created the researcher needs to identify how to develop a random sample. There are many ways this can be achieved but the sampling process needs to act in the best interest of individual research situations. Koehler (1999) has detailed various ways researchers can capture websites and manage the content, but researchers must also bear in mind the need to be cautious about copyright laws when gathering online material.

Thirdly, internet researchers must take care when defining units of analysis. As with the sampling stage, coding units need to be instance specific. There are, however, some standards surrounding context units in traditional media that do not directly translate to the online environment, examples of which include the column-inch and/or word count for newspapers and time measured in seconds for television and radio. Newhagen and Rafaeli (1996) propose five central qualities of internet

communication that distinguish it from traditional media. These are: multimedia, hypertextuality, packet switching, synchronicity, and interactivity. These qualities, they say, capture what is, or can be, different about internet-based communication.

According to Weare and Lin (2000) several researchers have sidestepped definitional issues by not focusing on specific messages and instead focusing on single web pages as defined by URLs – either home pages (e.g., the first page presented when entering a website) or randomly drawn pages (Bates & Lu, 1997; Bucy, Lang, Potter & Grabe, 1999; Ha & James, 1998; Haas & Grams, 2000; Koehler, 1999). They conclude that this strategy works well for research questions that focus on generic dimensions of web content such as the frequency of updates to web pages and the use of graphics and links. It facilitates rapid data gathering and coding, and, in this context, the home page may be an appropriate unit for analysis.

Keyton (2006) says that in most cases the unit of analysis is obvious. This claim is appropriate when referring to hardcopy material, such as newspaper stories/front pages/headlines or content from printed advertising, or even material broadcast from radio and television. However, the complexities of the online world are making the unit of analysis more complex. For instance, the way blog content is read changes depending on the type of software by which it was created (as can be seen in Figures 4 and 5). If a researcher were to use only a webpage as the unit of analysis when studying blogs, then it is possible to miss much of the content written on a page because the reader is required to click on a link to view the entire post on a different webpage. Thus a researcher of blogs, and other internet based material, is required to identify what constitutes a unit of analysis outside of the traditional definition. While this is a challenge to the traditional approach to this methodology, not to do so may mean missing data.

The training of coders and checking the reliability of their coding is stated as the fourth step. Weare and Lin (2000) believe that coding web-based material is similar to traditional content in that extensive training and careful attention are required to produce reliable data except that “researchers must take a number of added precautions due to the complexity and volatility of Web-based content” (p. 287). McMillan does not see the internet posing any new challenges in the last of the five

steps: analysing and interpreting the data. Here researchers need to maintain the rigour in their analysing and interpretation of the findings, which is exactly the same as in traditional content analysis.

#### **4.6 The Content Analysis Process**

Material that is sourced from the internet may differ to content that has traditionally been examined (newspapers, television, and radio); however, the process in which the analysis takes place is the same. From her study, McMillan (2000) concluded content analysis to be a methodology well suited for internet-based material. Academic literature is now full of examples where content analysis has been successfully applied to personal homepages, business and political websites (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Gibbson & Ward, 1998; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). This research is consistent with other empirical analyses of web genres (e.g., Bates & Lu, 1997; Ha & James, 1998; McMillan, 2000).

The procedure for conducting a content analysis has been approached in a number of ways, however, this current research adopted the content analysis process as defined by Hansen et al. and Krippendorff. The number of steps in this process can range from four steps to as many as 12 or more steps. This study will use the procedure as stated by Hansen et al. (1998). Krippendorff offers the same process except step four occurs as part of step three. Hansen's steps are as follows:

1. The definition of the research problem.
2. The selection and sample of media.
3. The defining the analytical categories.
4. The constructing a coding schedule.
5. The piloting the coding schedule and checking reliability.
6. The preparation of data and analysis.

While there have been significant developments in adjusting traditional content analysis to the fast moving online environment, the fundamentals remain solid and therefore the work of Hansen et al. and Krippendorff, while seemingly dated, is still relevant. This study will also draw on the more recent work of Trammell and

Keshelashvili (2005) and Trammell et al. (2006b) and the advancements they have introduced to the methodology.

#### **4.7 Definition of the Research Problem**

Qualitative empirical research is generally based on a series of research questions, and this research is no different in that respect, as the development of the internet and communication technologies have opened new research avenues and questions. One of the challenges for internet researchers is not in the asking of a question in itself, but narrowing down the question to keep it in context with existing or emerging communication theory. The content analysis undertaken in this study will assist with developing an understanding to the way in which blogs were used in the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign for political discussion and deliberation over issues that were pertinent.

#### **4.8 Selection and Sample of Media**

Due to the restriction of time and resources it is often not possible for a researcher to analyse all of the media in a research area. One of the advantages of content analysis in this context is that it allows for the analysis of larger amounts of material. There remains, however, the need to sample media, dates and content.

Conducting a content analysis on web-based material, including blogs, is complicated because content, and the pages the content is located on, can be removed or altered at any time. Existing posts can be updated or deleted and comments may be added at random. The internet is a constantly evolving medium. Some researchers find these challenges so intractable that they argue that “selecting a true random sample [from internet content] may be next to impossible” (Bates & Lu, 1997, p. 332). Therefore this research, like that of Hashim, Hasan, and Sinnapan (2007), who also considered this challenge in their study, “will take into these concerns into account and follow the primary steps mentioned to ensure a smooth process of conducting content analysis research of the internet” (p. 6).

The choice of media and titles to be analysed depends on the nature of the research problem or subject (Hansen et al., 1989). The type of media selected for this research was blogs, in particular Kiwiblog, Hard News, Just Left and Rodney Hide (see Table 3: Sample Information for more detail). These particular blogs were selected for this research based on a number of criteria. These include:

1. Political content.
2. Symmetrical or semi-symmetrical exchange between bloggers and those leaving comments as well as commenters communicating with other commenters.
3. Filter or personal journal structure. (Filter blogs are defined as primarily containing observations and evaluations of external, typically public events. Personal journals are defined as primarily reporting events in the blogger's life and the blogger's internal states and/or reflections.)
4. Bloggers who were deemed to be well regarded during the sample period.
5. The representation of a range of styles in political blogs.

These criteria do not allow for demographic diversity, which is a complicated issue in the New Zealand blogosphere and is discussed in more detail further on.

It should be noted that Russell Brown, while not a full time journalist in the traditional sense during the sample period, has been employed in such roles in the past, and he worked in the broader media (i.e. writing a column in a weekly magazine and providing political and technology commentary on television and radio) during the 2005 election campaign period. David Farrar and Jordan Carter both have professional associations with Internet New Zealand (Internet New Zealand is a non-profit organisation dedicated to protecting and promoting the Internet in New Zealand and fostering a coordinated, cooperative approach to its ongoing development). Rodney Hide is the sitting Member of Parliament for the Epsom electorate and the leader of the ACT Party of New Zealand.

**Table 3: Sample Information**

<b>Blog Name</b>	<b>Web Address</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Blog/Blogger Information</b>
Hard News	publicaddress.net	Russell Brown	<p>Russell Brown's Hard News began in 1991 as a weekly news and media commentary on Auckland student radio station 95bFM, and continued until September 2002. Russell set up publicaddress.net, which houses eight other bloggers and various guest speakers.</p> <p>Russell was once an active member of the Labour Party, and while his blog tends to sit at the left of centre, he has criticised the Labour Government. Russell is also a journalist and media commentator and could be considered New Zealand's pre-eminent blogger.</p>
Kiwiblog	kiwiblog.co.nz	David Farrar	<p>David Farrar started Kiwiblog in July 2003 and it has gone on to become one of New Zealand's most read and referred to blogs. David is active in the National Party and he acted as the campaign manager for the Wellington Central seat in the 2005 election.</p>
Rodney Hide for Epsom	rodneyhide.com	Rodney Hide	<p>Rodney Hide is the incumbent Member of Parliament for Epsom and leader of the ACT party. He started his blog in April 2004 and Rodney has become one of New Zealand's most prolific bloggers. During the campaign period he often wrote and sent his posts on his mobile phone. Most of the content is based around his activities and opinions on issues.</p>
Just Left	jtc.blogs.com	Jordan Carter	<p>Just Left was started as opportunity for Jordan to discuss politics in April 2004. Jordan is an active member of the Labour Party and acted as the campaign manager for the Wellington Central Labour candidate during the 2005 election. During the research period the content on his blog was pro-Labour and strongly supported their campaign.</p>

If the blogs considered for this research are placed along a political continuum they broadly cover the political spectrum (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Blogs along the Political Continuum**



The number of posts by each of the four bloggers examined for this research varies widely and indicates individual blogging styles. Each of the bloggers was employed full time in other positions so they all had to find the time to make their posts.

Initially, this research was only going to consider the posts made by the bloggers, but during the testing phase of the content analysis protocol it became obvious that in order to gain a better understanding of the role blogs played in the 2005 New Zealand General Election then the comments sections of each blog would also need to be considered. Although to date little work has focused on blog commenters (Walker, 2007) their importance has been noted by other internet researchers (Trammell et al., 2006a) when examining blog content, as “comments create the potential for conversations to emerge within each individual blog post” (Xenos, 2008). This thesis makes an important contribution to research on blogging by paying close attention to the comments sections.

Blogs often allow the blogger to receive comments as an option that is designed to invite feedback and reactions to post. Trammell and Williams (2004) found that only 8 percent of blogs analysed in their sample allowed users to leave comments, whereas Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright (2004) found the ability to leave comments on 43 percent of blogs, and Papacharissi (2004) noted email to be the most popular form for asynchronous feedback.

#### **4.9 Sample Dates**

As with the selection of media, the sample dates need to be determined by the research subject – especially when the research is concerned with a specific event. This study related to events in the lead-up to the 2005 New Zealand General Election and like previous studies conducted on media surrounding New Zealand elections (McGregor, 1995; Fountaine, 2002), concentrated on the official campaign period, which is four weeks prior to the 17 September 2005 election day. The sample dates for this study comprised 13 even numbered dates over a four week period starting 20 August and ending on 16 September (see Table 4: Sample Dates for the 2005 New Zealand General Election along with Table 5: Total Number of Posts on Sample Dates for the number of posts made each day of the sample period).

A point of difference that should be recognised when conducting a content analysis between blogs and other traditional media, for example newspapers, is that a blog post can be added to at any time through the ability of readers to leave feedback in the comments section, whereas newspapers, once printed, are in their final form. If a blog is taken as complete on the day it was posted then a researcher runs the risk of excluding subsequent content that could prove important in the overall research. A post may generate discussion that can continue over a number of days. Therefore when considering blogs in content analysis research a researcher needs to state a date at which blog content was captured and considered final, even if discussions surrounding posts continues. This date will depend entirely on individual research problems. For this current research this date is 12.01am, 17 September 2005, as this was the official Election Day and rendered blogs subsequent to this date no longer a forum for pre-election debate. Also, New Zealand law prohibits electioneering or campaigning on the day of voting. Blogs recognised this and erred on the side of caution, turning off comments and avoided posting anything that could be deemed party political on 17 September.

**Table 4: Sample Dates for the 2005 New Zealand General Election**

<b>Day of the week</b>	<b>Date</b>
Saturday	20 August
Monday	22 August
Wednesday	24 August
Friday	26 August
Sunday	28 August
Tuesday	30 August
Sunday	4 September
Tuesday	6 September
Thursday	8 September
Saturday	10 September
Monday	12 September
Wednesday	14 September
Friday	16 September

The selection of these dates is based on the similar research conducted by Fountaine (2002) and McGregor (1995) around media coverage during New Zealand election campaigns.

As in content analysis of traditional media, one of the first steps is to define the time period of the study (e.g. a constructed week of newspaper issues). As noted earlier, changes in the content of websites necessitates rapid collection of data. Earlier internet research that used content analysis used shorter time frames to address this, especially if the subject of the research was news websites that change content almost constantly. In McMillan’s (2000) study of 19 content analyses of web-based material, the data collection took place in a time period of between two days and five months. Kerbel and Bloom’s (2005) study of a presidential candidate’s blog during the 2004 American election was one of the largest samples in current literature; their sample lasted 10 months between March 2003 and January 2004.

**Table 5: Total Number of Posts on Sample Dates**

	<b>Kiwiblog</b>	<b>Hard News</b>	<b>Just Left</b>	<b>Rodney Hide</b>	<b>Total blogs per day</b>
20 August	2	0	3	2	7
22 August	17	0	8	5	30
24 August	19	0	3	2	24
26 August	7	1	5	1	14
28 August	6	0	1	3	10
30 August	6	1	2	1	10
4 September	8	0	4	3	15
6 September	8	1	5	2	16
8 September	7	1	6	4	18
10 September	9	0	0	3	12
12 September	17	1	8	1	28
14 September	19	1	8	1	30
16 September	15	1	1	2	19
<b>Total blogs</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>231</b>

This study attempts to balance the limitations of time and available resources with the desire to analyse blog content in the lead-up to the election. These sample dates, set within the time frame, are within the ratio as stated by Bailey and Lichty (1972). Hansen et al. (1998) warn against having too short a sample period and to avoid events that affect the nature of attention. This study attempts to address the concerns over shorter sample periods.

**4.9.1 Research during Election Campaigns**

Conducting research during the official campaign period can be problematic, for example there is a spike of interest in politics that is not normally present and by

focusing on this period, researchers may miss other periods in an electoral cycle (see Negrine, 1994). Supporters of such pre-election research, on the other hand, believe that it is the wider interest in political events that occurs at such an important time that suggests when research should be conducted. This study takes note of Negrine's warnings and ensures the research concentrates on the activities during the stated period, avoiding generalising as to the wider use of the blogosphere and internet.

The use of blogs during election campaigns, like many other areas involving online communication, is still an emerging area due to the relative recentness and constant development of the technology. The study of blog use at election time is as important to examine as the use of blogs at all times to ensure that all facets of public life are covered in the growing body of knowledge in blog research.

#### **4.10 Selecting the Unit of Analysis**

A unit of analysis is essentially what the researcher counts and these units must be selected for every category a researcher selects. The decision about the unit of analysis depends primarily on what information is required for the study. The units may range from a word, to a news story, or a web page.

Krippendorff (1980) suggests five ways of defining a unit: 1) a physical unit (this may be a book, time, pages); 2) a syntactical unit (chapters in a book, headlines, articles or sentences in a newspaper); 3) a referential unit (objects to which the unit refers); 4) a propositional unit (redesigning sentences and other units into propositions which can be analysed); and 5) a thematic unit (recurring elements).

Trammell et al. (2006b), in their content analysis of blogs during the 2004 US presidential election used blogger's posts as a unit of analysis. However, their research did not consider the comments that were placed in response to the post and they concluded this limited their findings.

While blogs may, and usually do, contain a number of postings on a single page (see Figure 4), many blogs allow readers to read each post on a separate page (see Figure 5). Most blogging technical architecture allows for the original post to appear on the

comments page, or a link is provided to enable a pop-up box that contains the comments. While the structure of individual blogs will vary, the unit of analysis for this study will be the post, as written by the blogger, and any comments associated with the post. Within this unit of analysis the blog and each following comment will all be examined individually.

Figure 4: Main blog page containing a number of posts

**David Farrar**  
BPP's blog

MAY 2006  
Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat  
1 2 3 4 5 6  
7 8 9 10 11 12 13  
14 15 16 17 18 19 20  
21 22 23 24 25 26 27  
28 29 30 31

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We have action to protect & educate worldwide. Learn how you can help!  
www.WildAid.org

RECENT COMMENTS  
**Sensible NZers (5)** **McPhie** said:  
The election decided whether tax cu... [go]  
**A Principled Act (23)** **oster\_mok** said:  
I think national has snookered her... [go]  
**Hypocritical Greens (77)** **Stain** **Ranapio** said:  
Loquix: Oh, silly boy. Where's t... [go]  
**ACT on Corporate Accountability (24)** **bran\_xsmaller** said:  
...And, despite liking the man, Rod... [go]  
**Draft Submission on Size of Parliament Bill (49)** **stiel** said:  
Excellent draft submission DPP, co... [go]  
**Main Article In Factbook (41)**

**May 30, 2006**  
**Sensible NZers**  
Polls  
63% of NZers don't believe Michael Cullen, when he says tax cuts are unaffordable. This is pleasing, even though the figure should be 95% as all but the most partisan pundits say it is obvious you can afford tax cuts with a \$2 billion surplus.  
Our beloved PM of course disagrees and attacks the polling company. Now it is true Colmar Brunton does tend to have National 2% or so more favourable than other polls, but when you have 63% stating a view, that can't be explained away by such nuances.  
The Dom Post gets one thing wrong in its story. They claim:  
*The poll also debunked National claims that thousands would flood across the Tasman after tax cuts in Australia. Only 17 per cent said they were considering shifting.*  
The last time I checked 17% of four million is around 680,000.  
Posted by David P. Farrar at 07:10 AM | Comments (5)

**May 29, 2006**  
**A Principled Act**  
National  
National shows it is fully ready to make right the accidental election broadcasting over-spending, which has left broadcasters out of pocket. Leader Don Brash has submitted a bill to amend the Broadcasting Act which will allow the Electoral Commission to pay the \$110,000 to the five broadcasters and in turn be paid by National.  
I expect this bill could be introduced with unanimous leave of the House and passed through all stages under urgency.  
It will also no doubt serve as the starkest of comparisons for ethical behaviour compared to Labour who over-spent by \$418,000, broke their word to the Chief Electoral Officer, and refuses to acknowledge any wrongdoing whatsoever.  
Posted by David P. Farrar at 04:50 PM | Comments (23)

**Draft Submission on Size of Parliament Bill**  
Politics - NZ (General)  
Like **No Right Turn**, I'm planning to put in a submission against the bill to reduce the size of Parliament to 120 MPs.  
My current draft is below. Feedback is welcome from people on it.  
SUBMISSION TO  
Justice and Electoral Committee  
REGARDING  
Electoral (Reduction in Number of Members of Parliament Amendment Bill)

Some blog sites, such as those of David Farrar and Jordan Carter, list the category of the topics that are frequently discussed, for example politics, economics, the internet and humour. Often these lists have over 20 categories and there is much crossover in content within these categories. For example, a blogger may have a category titled Politics but also have a category called Wellington Central, which also covers political issues within that electorate but is still relevant in the context of the 2005 New Zealand General Election. Because of this, the current research disregards the classification of topics as stated by bloggers so as to ensure the inclusion of all possible posts in the sample period, and will use a definitive list of political issues that have a New Zealand context, as can be seen in similar election time research undertaken by Fountaine (2002) and McGregor (1995).

Figure 5: Blog Page containing the post and comments



Based on the above definition of the unit of analysis, a total of 253 posts and associated comments sections, from the four blogs, are eligible for consideration (refer Table 5).

#### 4.11 Category Construction and Development of Coding Schedule

The coding schedule for this research was divided into two sections. The first concerned the post as written by the blogger; the second concerned any subsequent comments or discussions. While the number of people commenting on the original post may number from one person to 100 people, the comments section will be considered in its entirety as well as by individual comments or commentators. By analysing the comments this way we are able to examine how individual comments relate to development discussions and deliberation as well as indicating any trends from the total comments. Holsti (1969) says the success or otherwise of a content analysis is dependent on its categories, as they are an essential part of the research design.

This study concurs with McMillan (2000) that using content analysis in raises potential problems and researchers need to exhibit creative ways of addressing potential problems. In regards to this study it was deemed important to view the post and the comments as separate.

#### **4.11.1 The Post**

Here the content analysis protocol seeks to identify some of the basic aspects of the post, i.e. the allocated data number, date, blogger and blog topic. Other factors considered were any links to websites or other blogs, the use of photographs or other forms of media (for example, video and/or audio), and the mentioning of political figures. Also of consequence was the relationship the post had with mainstream media. In categorising this, the researcher sought to identify how the post was engendered, either by a story in the news media or by an original thought by the blogger. Berelson (1952) divides categories into two types; substance (what is said) and form (how it is said).

According to Kaid and Wadsworth (1989), the formulation of categories is the most important step in a content analysis. The researcher should develop categories to “represent the concepts embodied in the research question” (Stempel, 1989, p. 203). Stempel believes there are advantages to using category systems that have previously been developed by other researchers, if they are appropriate. Where the categories from previous studies are not satisfactory he outlines three factors a researcher should keep in mind when undertaking a content analysis study. First, categories must be pertinent to the objectives of the study; second, categories should be functional; and third, the system of categories must be manageable. These factors are interrelated and any discrepancy in one will affect the others. There is, at this time, no standard category construction for the content analysis of blogs (McMillan, 2000). In their evaluation of online campaigning, Trammell et al. (2006b) coded categories that included the basic demographics of the item (e.g., author, date, title, word count), hyperlink destination (e.g., media article, poll, special interest group), topics discussed on blogs (e.g., speech, debate, ads), political statements, and appeal strategies. While this current study does not consider all of Trammell et al.’s categories because of their

relevance, the advice offered by their study has been considered in the development of the coding schedule.

An area of relevance for this study was how a blogger's post added to the wider sphere of discussion around an issue that played a role in the 2005 New Zealand General Election. To achieve this outcome the content analysis protocol included questions to identify the attempt to start discussion on issues. Some clarification of aspects from the content analysis protocol sheet is required to assist with the coding for this study. When ascertaining what the post was primarily concerned with, one of the answer options, "the provision of information" refers to a blog's attempt to create reader awareness of a media story, incident, or political policy release. It assumes the reader has no prior knowledge of the information. Furthermore, when a blog makes a "comment", the blogger, in the post, would present an opinion or idea that belonged to the blogger. Generally the post would contain particular words or a sentence structure like "I think...", "The [insert topic] is in my opinion..." Incidentally this measure is also applied for the writings that appeared in the comments section.

Where coding for instances of analysis/review is concerned, it was deemed that the blogger is writing the post after an examination of content (whether that be in part or in its entirety) from a political party's policy or actions, a media story or blog post.

It was also decided, in trying to gain a full understanding of these New Zealand political blogs, to see if bloggers wrote posts in direct response to media stories and, in particular, other blog posts. It was common in the times of the pamphleteers for ephemera to be created in direct response to something that had been written (Newman, Rael & Lapsansky, 2000) and by coding for these instances it would become clear if this trend continued in the blogosphere.

Personal experiences were coded as such where bloggers wrote about their own experiences. This was coded to see if bloggers would write about topics only based on how others experienced them or through media and blogs. It was thought that writing about the experiences of others could limit the authenticity of posts as opposed to writing about one's own interactions and experiences. These coding instances were defined by the writer describing something they did, attended or witnessed.

#### 4.11.2 The Comments Section

For the second part of the coding schedule, the comments section, content was considered under three headings identified by Habermas (1997b) to help examine the content with specific regard to the constructs of public sphere theory. These are: rational debate (any topic can be raised by any participant, and it will be debated rationally); universal access (anybody can have access to the space); and the disregard of rank (the status of participants is ignored). These three rules, which he established for the participation within the public sphere, are outlined more fully below.

It was decided that each of the comments made in the comments section should be considered as an individual entity, rather than all of the comments as a whole, despite the comments section being part of the unit of analysis. The individual analysis would provide a more thorough examination of how the comments were used as a means of discussing political issues and what relationship this had to a Habermasian public sphere. The problem in trying to achieve a deeper understanding of comments is that while the post and any associated comments are deemed to be the unit of analysis, they are also considered as individual units – a situation that conflicts with pure content analysis theory. The decision to code in this way was made to measure the interaction between people who engage in discussion or debate within the post or comments section. If, for example, a post and 100 comments were coded as one unit, many of the subtleties could be missed and a lesser understanding of discussions in the blogosphere would result.

Using Habermas as a guide and examining other studies that have also looked Habermas for theoretical guidance when conducting an investigation of internet spaces as public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001, 2007; Dahlgren 2005; Kellner, 2000; Papacharissi, 2002, Poster, 1997) along with studies that had previously considered content analysis of blogs (Halavais, 2002; Herring et al, 2004; Herring et al, 2006; Papacharissi, 2006; Singer, 2005, Trammell et al, 2006) and studies that had consider New Zealand media at election time (Fountaine, 2002; McGregor, 1995) questions were devised (these coding protocols can be seen in Appendix 1 and 2).

#### **4.11.2.1 Rational Debate**

The blogs in this study were examined as to the extent to which they were used as virtual meeting places, where people could discuss issues that arose in the lead-up to the election, rather than acting as portals for political news stories. Accounts of how these spaces acted as what Habermas terms the “domain of common concern” (1989, p. 36) are varied and mostly anecdotal. Ideas on what constitutes rational discussion within the blogosphere are wide and varied (Barton, 2005).

After considering Habermas’ public sphere and communicative action theories, along with recent literature, a list of attributes were looked for to examine whether the rules of communicative engagement were observed within the blogosphere. These included examples of quality of discussion, ad hominem attacks, criticism and use of emotional language, and assertion. The rules around defining the quality of exchange need investigation (Dahlberg, 2007). The rise of internet activism, also known as cyberactivism or hacktivism, is giving rise to “various forms of radical counter-publicity to challenge the boundaries of dominant discourses and subsequently to bring excluded issues and identities into debate within the mainstream public sphere” (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 842). This, coupled with the known behaviours brought about by anonymous online activities has created an environment that is problematic. While Holt (2004) claims being anonymous online allows people to express themselves freely, others abuse this opportunity to engage in behaviours outside of social-norms that are considered inappropriate in interpersonal situations.

For this research, the quality of discussion can be described as any discussion that appears to try and further the intellectual and rational debate. The key to understanding the Habermasian concept of public sphere is in separating it from the medium in which it develops. There are three validity claims that are an intrinsic part of language, and so which exist in all statements made: The claim to truth, the claim to truthfulness and the claim to normative validity (Hinton, 1998).

Assertion in this research is considered as an unsupported statement of belief. That is, whenever someone says something to be the case, they are making an assertion. Making an assertion in a comment does not necessarily make it true and no matter how confidently it is asserted, assertion is no substitute for argument or discussion.

The only way other people can assess the truth of an assertion is to examine reasons and evidence that might be given in support of it, or else to seek out evidence or reasons not to believe it (Warburton, 2007).

Other factors that are looked for by the content analysis; ad hominem attack and use of emotional language, are said to be part of informal logic and not rational (Jørgensen, 1998). Ad hominem arguments are those that attack the source rather than what is at issue (Walton, 1998). Emotional language in this thesis was considered language used in a manner that is perceived to be destructive, controlling, unjust, and cruel (Waldron, 2009). Examples of these include the writer use of profanity, name calling or using excitable language.

The content analysis also looked for people making attempts to divert the course of the discussion or argument and for those making obvious partisan comments where ideology takes precedence over deliberation. An example of this practice, known as trolling or baiting, would be where a post and comments relating to National's tax policy was interjected by someone stating that Don Brash was homosexual or the devil.

#### **4.11.2.2 Universal Access**

While blogs have been acclaimed as easy to use and freely available to anyone who wants to use them, there are a number of barriers to participation within the blogosphere. The status of an individual should have no bearing on determining whether the individual should be accepted or excluded from the public sphere (Gaus & Weech, 2008). The obvious hurdle is the ownership of, or access to, a computer that has an internet connection. A certain level of literacy and computer skills are also required. Additionally, comment has been made which suggests blogs actually reduce the ability for people to participate online (Lampa, 2004). Taking this a step further it could then be suggested that a significant barrier to participation in the blogosphere is the possibility of being totally overwhelmed with everything that is written and opting not to join in. The inability to read everything that has been written on a particular blog or on an issue over a number of blogs is a real issue for readers – and this does not count other internet-based information sites such as newspapers and homepages.

Unlike the coffee houses that Habermas describes, the blogosphere has little in the way of direct and identifiable restriction to anyone based on gender, race or social position. It could be suggested that more indirect barriers exist that keep people from participating. The types of factors here, however, tend to be self-imposed by those visiting or reading blogs (as opposed to those who have barriers that prevent them from getting online in the first place). Political discussion is not universally popular and tends to require a certain level of knowledge to engage. Some people are simply not interested in political issues or may not feel they possess the competencies to join in such discussions and therefore do not participate. This study looked to establish exactly how many voices were present in the blogosphere in the context of this research; that is, within the comments section of the four blogs considered in this research during the official election period.

There are three types of identification labels people who left comments on a blog can give themselves: their real name, a pseudonym or “anonymous”. It is possible for people who leave comments to “steal” the real name of another person (e.g. David Farrar leaving comments as Russell Brown) as a pseudonym, or to use a name that appears to be that of a real person. It is not possible in the confines of this research to identify these instances and all names will be taken at face value. Other than identifying names, no additional information about individuals was sought.

The ability for people to enter dialogue is an important aspect of blogs – even though the quality of discussion ranges from intelligent, considered opinions to banal drivel. However, the blogosphere provides a means by which anyone who wishes to can exchange ideas and enter into discussions about politics. It is to this end the content analysis sought to identify whether the blogosphere did act as a place where discussion transpired and deliberation resulted.

The concept of the blogosphere acting as an echo chamber was discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. This study looks to see if the New Zealand political blogosphere is, as has been claimed, a collection of familiar voices, or if a number of people sought to utilise the comments sections of the examined blogs as a way of discussing political issues.

#### **4.11.2.3 Disregard of Rank**

Unlike the three other blogs examined in the study, Russell Brown (along with the other blogs in the Public Address stable) does not allow readers to make a comment directly to the blog site. The blog does allow for comments to be sent to the author, Brown, who then acts as a gatekeeper, deciding whether or not to publish those comments in any following blogs. The mediated comments diminish the ability for people to engage in open, rigorous discussions on Brown's Hard News blog. Brown is such an important figure in the New Zealand blogosphere that any study would be incomplete without his presence. His decision to not allow comments on his blog also makes an interesting contrast to the other bloggers in this study.

One phenomenon that has occurred in the blogosphere, a common pattern that has been observed in older web-based communication technologies such as bulletin boards, is the "celebrification" of bloggers. The New Zealand experience is no different from the wider international situation in that some bloggers have become known as A-list bloggers. Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) note that A-list bloggers' thoughts and ideas are heard more widely outside of the blogosphere and in the mainstream media. Hopkins and Matheson (2005) made similar findings within a New Zealand context, this study will closely consider the four blogs and what implications their A-list categorisation may have had. It should also be noted that the label of A-list blogger does not denote the same significance in New Zealand that it has in the United States and the United Kingdom. In relation to this study, the bloggers examined in the content analysis are easily reachable by anyone who wishes to contact them. Farrar and Carter had no recognisable identity throughout New Zealand before they started blogging and it would be a stretch to suggest they obtained this during the sample period. Brown, although a recognised columnist and commentator, could not be described as high profile or mainstream. Only Hide had levels of recognition that could be considered an advantage to his blog being considered more identifiable than the others. As this thesis will later show, the level of attention received by these bloggers, while more than most New Zealand political bloggers, did not reach anything like that of examples in the United States.

#### 4.12 Piloting the Coding Schedule and Checking Reliability

It is important to pilot the coding schedule on a smaller sub-sample to ensure any necessary fine tuning of the protocol. Hansen et al. (1998) highlight's four types of problems that are often found in coding schedules; categories need to adhere to a single level of classification; categories are not properly categorised and there is inadequate differentiation between categories; having too many categories and many are not used in the coding; and units of analyses are confused, leading to an inability to relate different categories and dimensions.

When piloting the study, there also need to be checks on the reliability of the coding process. Because content analysis sets out to be a systematic and objective methodology, researchers need to be concerned with reliability, that is, the consistency of classification. Krippendorff (1980) believes the term reliability should be associated with three different classifications:

*Stability* – the degree to which a process is invariant or unchanging over time.

It is the measurement to which a procedure can be used to produce the same results in repeated analysis.

*Reproducibility* – the degree to which a process can be recreated under varying circumstances, at different locations, using different coders.

*Accuracy* – the degree to which a process functionally conforms to a known standard, or yields what it is designed to yield.

Stempel (1989) notes three reasons why discrepancies may arise between coders: 1) inadequate definition of categories; 2) failure of coders to achieve a common frame of reference; and 3) oversights. He does offer the following to increase reliability: work out precise definitions of categories, go over the definitions and coding procedure with all coders, and conduct trials where the results are compared. The idea of carrying out spot checks during the coding period is also suggested to ensure reliability remains constant.

When running a substantive test of the coding sheets it became obvious that changes were needed. Coding of the blog postings and comments were initially both on one sheet; however this did not allow for the detailed examination of the comments and

any discussions that occurred between commenters. As a result of this, a coding schedule was developed for the post and one for each of the comments.

#### **4.13 Data-Preparation and Analysis**

The use of computers for content analysis procedures has become common practice. Stempel states that the use of computers can save time and provide highly reliable coding. Hansen et al. (1998) agree that effort of imputing coded data into a computer is rewarded with gains in efficiency and speed when analysing. Once the content of the transcripts has been coded and categorised, SPSS or other statistical programs can be employed for more quantitative analyses and calculation of reliability (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2001). Employing computer software like Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) allows researchers to perform percent agreement calculations and final coder reliability figures.

The data analysis needs to address the questions set out by the research question, however there needs to be a certain amount of flexibility and open-mindedness on the part of the researcher when analysing the data (Hansen et al., 1998). The content analysis data for this research was entered into and analysed using SPSS 15.0. Using this statistical analysis application helped make sense of the data, especially frequencies, cross tabulation and tests of significance.

#### **4.14 Conclusion**

Content analysis is a well established method of data collection. Its use for online sources, however, is still developing and researchers need to be flexible in its application. A number of studies have successfully used content analysis in blog research despite internet communication technologies being a quickly changing environment. The aim of this thesis is to examine how blogs were used to discuss political issues during the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign period and content analysis provides a means and a foundation to identify quantitative data on blog use. This chapter has looked at the considered the theoretical implications and the possible advantages and disadvantages of using content analysis. It has also outlined the process by which it will be applied in this study.

The following chapter shows the results of the content analysis of the use of blogs in the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Content Analysis Results**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the results of the content analysis of selected political blogs in the campaign period of the 2005 New Zealand General Election. These results provide empirical evidence of how blogs were used as a space for deliberation and discussion on political issues that arose during the election campaign. The results demonstrate the extent to which the blogosphere acted as a public sphere, as described by Habermas (1989), where people could exchange views and opinions on issues. More specifically, the content analysis looked for examples of Habermas' three rules pertaining to the composition of a normative public sphere. These are:

- Such deliberation should be open to all participants.
- It would be free, in that no constraints would be imposed on participants.
- All participants would be of equal status and have the same privileges in introducing, interjecting and interrogating positions in the discussion.

The following questions, which go a long way in attempting to answer the research questions this thesis is based on, are addressed in this chapter:

- How were blog posts and comments sections used as a communication tool?
- What were the topics discussed?
- What role did the mainstream media play in topics discussed?
- In what ways was deliberative democracy enhanced by discussion in the blogosphere?

The content analysis sought to identify first some of the basic aspects to the post, such as who was posting, how often, and what topics were detailed in the post. Other factors considered were any links to websites or other blogs, and the use of photographs or other forms of media (for example, video and/or audio) that mentioned political figures. Also of consequence was the relationship the post had with mainstream media. By this the researcher sought to identify how the post was

engendered, either by a story in the news media or by an original thought by the blogger.

The content analysis examined posts and any comments made in the comments section of the blog during the official election period. Four blogs were selected for examination over a period of 13 sample days in the official campaign period (see Chapter Four for more detailed information on the blogs selected for this study). A total of 231 blog posts and 1703 comments were coded during the sample dates.

With the growth of internet-based communication in the late 1990s and early 2000s, weblogs are a recent incarnation. The way blogs are used by people to discuss politics and how the blogosphere acts as a deliberative public sphere is a new phenomenon and has become an area of interest for researchers. This section will outline the results of the content analysis conducted on the four blogs that were examined for this thesis. The discussion of the findings can be found in Chapter Six.

## **5.2 The Post**

Section 4.8 of this thesis provides a general overview of the individual bloggers and outlines a range of broad criteria for their selection in this study. These criteria include politically orientated content, filter or personal journal structure, and bloggers who were deemed to be well regarded and maintain a readership.

This section demonstrates how each of the bloggers used their blog for individual effect. It shows the emphasis and focus of their writing, which goes some way to encapsulating individual style. The style of blog for this study is understood as comprising quantity of posts, word length, use of comments section and types of sources – it does not include the way the posts were written. Each of the bloggers had a unique approach and the examination of the four bloggers helps to widen our knowledge of this practice. The micro analysis of the blogger's work goes a long way towards understanding the way in which the blog was presented and therefore answering the research questions.

### 5.2.1 Rodney Hide

As a political figure who was contesting the electorate seat of Epsom in the 2005 New Zealand General Election, Hide was a regular blogger (see Table 6). His blog was used, among other things, to detail ACT's policies, and this can be seen in the instances in which his blog is coded as providing information. Hide was also more inclined to discuss personal experiences than the other bloggers in this study. The occasions where he wrote about personal experiences mostly related to his time on the campaign trail, for example, when he appeared on the Radio New Zealand Education Debate, Shine TV and ASB Breakfast show, as can be seen below;

Linda Clark "Nine to Noon" had Trevor Mallard, Bill English, Metiria Turei and me on 10 to 10:30 on education. (Hide, 2005b)

Just done a pre-record on Shine TV with Dail Jones, Peter Dunne and Sue Bradford. (Hide, 2005c)

Table 6: Rodney Hide

Focus of the Post	N	Percent
Provision of information	23	41.8
Comment	13	23.6
Analysis/review	5	9.1
Personal experience	13	23.6
A rebuttal of a media story	1	1.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Hide used his blog as a campaign tool to gain wider media attention and personalise himself to the voting public. In particular, he could use the blog to publicise his activities during the election campaign without any interference from the traditional gatekeepers played by the media. In an example provided below, Hide uses his blog to update people of his campaign activities, which possibly would not have been covered by the mainstream media. He also uses this opportunity to draw attention to another campaign activity – his appearance on National Radio:

We're out riding the buses through Epsom this morning. Epsom people are loving the attention -- they now know they're the most important electorate in the country and they're pleased that we're taking their vote seriously.  
Richard Worth, Stuart Nash and I will be on Linda Clark's "Nine-to-Noon" show on National Radio after the nine o'clock news this morning. (Hide, 2005d)

The role Hide's blog played in his campaign and in his role as a politician is further examined, as a case study, in Chapter Eight.

### 5.2.2 David Farrar

David Farrar's blog (see Table 7) was the most likely of the blogs studied in the content analysis to provide information to readers during the sample period. The total number of his posts focused on informing readers was the highest among the four bloggers (n=98) and also made up the highest percentage of his own posts (53.6%). The types of information he offered include Helen Clark's refusal to comment on the convictions of her drivers for speeding offences until after any appeal deadline (Farrar, 2005i, Wait for the autobiography) or Helen Clark's blaming of National Party supporters for being abusive during the televised leaders' debate (Farrar, 2005j, Clark blames audience). These examples of information provision were by no means neutral information and highlight the negative angle taken toward political opponents. These types of events were seized on as opportunities to attack opponents' leadership ability or character flaws. It should be noted that this type of post was not exclusively the domain of Farrar but was produced by all the bloggers.

Table 7: David Farrar

Focus of the Post	N	Percent
Provision of information	98	53.6
Comment	58	31.7
Analysis/review	23	12.6
Personal experience	3	1.6
Other	1	.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Along with providing information, commenting was also a common trait in Farrar's blogging. This was often done in association with the provision of information, as can be seen in the example below. Farrar highlights a story in *The New Zealand Herald* pertaining to Labour's childcare policy; he continues the post by stating his thoughts on the issue and provides a comment as to why he thinks this way:

The Herald states that 63% of childcare centres were privately owned and ineligible for funding by Labour. You have to wonder about the decision making of a Government which didn't even check out facts like this before making an decision. But hey who needs facts when you have ideology. Sadly it is not. The u-turn was forced on them due to the election campaign. If re-elected there is little doubt Labour will continue to tilt the balance against the private sector whenever and where ever they can. Rather ironic as it is the private sector which pays the tax which allows them to spend so much money. (Farrar, 2005a)

When writing about National's plans to adjust the secondary tax threshold, Farrar's blog provides a personal comment by stating his opinion on the issue.

It is clear that Labour is scared shitless about how to respond to the latest proposals from National. Clark refused to go on radio at all, and her only comment is that it is nothing new. This is of course wrong because there is new policy. Clark just desperately doesn't want to be on the wrong side of public sentiment like she was after Orewa. (Farrar, 2005c)

After National released its policy outlining temporary tax relief on petrol due to increased prices at the pump, Farrar posted the following;

The bottom line is that the Government has stood to gain almost \$100 million more in GST over the next six months from the high petrol prices, so rather than invent loopy ways to spend it, National will give it back through reducing the petrol tax. (Farrar, 2005d)

When analysis (n=23, 12.6 percent) was coded as the primary function of the post, the types of content included the figures around Labour's student loan policy and poll results. It should be noted that at the time of the election, Farrar owned a market research company, Curia, which in the past has been contracted to carry out political polls. Farrar has a personal and professional interest in covering polls and he spent a number of posts deconstructing and analysing poll results during the sample period.

In the post about tax relief on petrol, cited above, Farrar also provides some analysis of the policy:

The \$100 million cost, will not be funded by reducing investment into roading, but out of the extra GST which has been collected due to the record high price of petrol. The net fiscal impact will be negligible. (Farrar, 2005d)

An example of Farrar providing analysis and then making a comment on that analysis (in the last paragraph of the follow quote) can be seen when he posted on the practicalities of National's policy on secondary tax rates for students:

I know a lot of the students who work for me will love National's policy to reduce the deduction rate for secondary tax to under 20% from the current 33%.

Many students have a couple of part-time jobs. Their combined income puts them in the lowest tax bracket but instead of having tax deducted at 15% on their second job, they have more than twice as much deducted and have to wait a year or more to claim it back - if they even remember to. This can make a significant difference to weekly income.

I'd say over half the students who work for me are using a secondary tax code, and will benefit from this. A very sensible change. (Farrar, 2005b)

The number of personal experiences recorded by Farrar was low (n=3, 1.6 percent). He was the only non-politician blogger who posted information about a personal experience.

### 5.2.3 Russell Brown

Russell Brown’s results (see Table 8) differ markedly from those of the other bloggers examined in this content analysis, for a number of reasons. First, the style of blog is more that of a column which one would find in a traditional publication, such as a magazine. Brown’s posts were nearly six times longer, based on the average number of words per post, than Carter’s, who had the next highest average at 237.4 words per post. Second, he almost always covered a number of issues in a single post whereas the others wrote mostly about a single issue or point per post. For example, in a post titled “The Odds” (Brown, 2005a), the issues that were covered include poll results, National’s proposed tax cuts, National’s arts and culture policy, a radio interview with United Future leader Peter Dunne on an Auckland-based student radio station, 95bFM, the Maxim Institute and an article in the *Pohutukawa Coast Times* about MMP.

The primary focus of Brown’s posts was both the provision of information and commentary (n=7 for each option). This question had a multi-code option when coding, resulting in the same number for each category. An example of this is seen below:

So the Maori Trustee Office enjoys a reprieve, apparently. In yesterday's Herald lead story, which was presumably based on somebody's actual statement, the trustee's office was one of those over which Don Brash's "knife" was said to be hovering. (Brown, 2005b)

**Table 8: Russell Brown**

<b>Focus of the Post</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Provision of information	7	35.0
Comment	7	35.0
Analysis/review	6	30.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.0</b>

While telling readers that the Maori Trustee Office is to be spared National's cost-cutting, a story that Brown also provides a link to, this information is coupled with his personal comments later in the post:

Who knows? It's not like National is averse to making policy on the fly on these issues. Last night on Campbell Live, Gerry Brownlee (who appeared because the programme refused to accept Don Brash's condition that those emails could not be raised in an interview) had it put to him by the host that if National was being consistent it would abolish the "race-based" Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs. Brownlee fumbled around for a while and eventually suggested that perhaps that ministry could be folded into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Sorry? Was that a policy, or did he just fcking make it up on live TV? (Brown, 2005b)

Brown was more inclined to provide analysis or review of policy, polls or other issues that arose in the election period than other bloggers in this study. On other occasions Brown linked to other bloggers who had analysed policies and political philosophies. In the following example, Brown discusses National's lack of health policies in relation to race-based funding.

Anyway, other people unravel this stuff better than I do. Frogblog links to a Jon Johansson essay on Orewa I, and No Right Turn says his piece. And David Slack stays so wonderfully calm.  
So, yeah, what those guys said... (Brown, 2005b)

Many of Brown's posts can be identified as being anti-National more than they could be regarded pro-Labour. Policies offered by the National Party were often under his scrutiny as was the performance of National Party leader, Don Brash. For example:

As I have noted before, several of National's key policies *suck*: they were originally devised not as a platform on which to govern but to pull in targeted elements of the vote. Abolishing parole might please the Sensible Sentencing Trust, but on the evidence it makes no sense. Ditto for work-for-the-dole and the immigration policy. There are other examples. And did anybody really believe Brash's rationale for his vote on the Civil Union Bill? (Brown, 2005a)

As a journalist and writer, Brown's research and writing skills were obvious in his posts. His writing showed how blogging differs from traditional journalistic practice as many of the values held dear in traditional journalistic definitions, such as objectivity and fairness, were not present in his writing. It is this freedom of writing that many bloggers advocate as being important, and any introduction of a model where blogging is seen as quasi-journalism, as with the attempted introduction of a "Bloggers code of ethics," is widely seen as not consistent with the notion of blogs (Schmidt, 2007).

The number of posts that were written by each of the bloggers in the sample period is the first example of the differences in style between each of the four bloggers examined in this study. Farrar's prolific output (n=133) is quite different from the more sedate posting of Brown (n=7). Brown's approach to his posts could be regarded as being journalistic. Examples of this include the consideration and research given to each post and that each post deals with a number of issues. This differs to the other bloggers who would post about one topic per post. Brown has distanced himself from the Labour Party, (Brown, 2005d) by stating that he has not been active in the Labour Party, nor is he a member of the party since starting his role with Radio New Zealand National's Media Watch programme. In a break away from traditional journalistic practice, Brown clearly supported the policies of one party over another.

For a little light relief, National's Communications policy. All 82 words of it... Is this some sort of joke? (Brown, 2005e)

National's platform is incoherent; its ironic advantage going forward may be that some of that incoherence has begun to infect Labour's platform. (Brown, 2005a)

Brown also spent more time than other bloggers linking the National Party to the Exclusive Brethren and doing so in a negative sense:

National is just a bit closer to this outfit than I am personally comfortable with a mainstream political party being. (Brown, 2005f)

#### **5.2.4 Jordan Carter**

The content analysis showed that Jordan Carter gave more attention to the analysis/review, in frequency terms, than other bloggers (n=17, 31.4 percent, see Table 9). On 13 (24.1 percent) occasions this analysis was conducted on political polls carried out by professional market research and/or media organisations, for example One News/Colmar Brunton or the *National Business Review*. Of the 17 occasions on which analysis/review was identified as the reason for the post, 13 of these were related to detailing the results of such polls. An example of analysis of a poll can be seen below:

The problem with this poll, of course, is that it was taken before National's tax cut announcement. What the Herald poll shows though, is that that announcement did not catapult National in front of Labour. Not that it is a remotely useful methodology to compare half a sample with the other half of one, but we'll set that aside for a moment. (Carter, 2005a)

**Table 9: Jordan Carter**

<b>Focus of the Post</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Provision of information	38	43.7
Comment	31	35.6
Analysis/review	17	19.5
Other	1	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Carter, in providing information to his readers, often presented the National Party in a negative way and would provide an editorial alongside his analysis. The content analysis will go on to show that Carter pushed his political position and argued accordingly in the comments section. In relation to Habermas' rules for communication, on which this thesis is based, Carter is by far the least compliant blogger of the four examined. However, this does not suggest the other three bloggers fulfilled Habermas' ideal.

### 5.3 The Origins of the Posts

In order to develop an understanding of how bloggers used blogs to communicate their opinions on issues during the 2005 New Zealand election, each post was subjected to a 23-question content analysis coding questionnaire. From this it was identified that of the 231 posts that made up the sample, 193 included content that was relevant to the election and thus suitable for further analysis. The remaining 38 posts contained information that was outside the parameters for this study and were excluded on that basis.

**Table 10: Frequency of Posts**

<b>Blogger</b>	<b>No of posts</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Average no of words per post</b>
Rodney Hide	37	16.0	93.8
David Farrar	133	57.6	168.6
Russell Brown	7	3.0	1356.4
Jordan Carter	54	23.4	237.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>231</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

David Farrar (see Table 10) was by far the most prolific blogger during the sample period, providing 57.6 percent of the total posts (n=133). His posts have a mean of 168.6 words. On the other end of the output scale, Russell Brown's Hard News had

only seven posts in the four week period. However, his average word count for the posts was 1356.4 words, meaning that he made a significant contribution to political discussion despite the small number of postings. Jordan Carter's Just Left posts (n=54) had a mean of 237.4 words and Hide (n=30), a mean of 93.8 words.

The length of a post is no reflection on the quality of content but it does provide examples, like frequency of posts, of some differences in individual blogging styles and the way bloggers cover issues. Individual blogging styles and approaches are considered at more length in Chapter Seven, Interviews with Bloggers. While blog style will be considered in this study, it is not a main focus of the research. In this chapter, discussion of blogging style will be limited to the frequency and content of posts. Each of the bloggers examined for this research individualised the way he presented his posts, e.g. the way he wrote and how often he would post each day. Some chose to write in a provocative manner and others used a journalistic approach to tackle issues in a way that could be considered researched and measured. However, this thesis presents evidence that suggests that, overall, the blogs tended to have more in common with each other than they had differences.

#### **5.4 The Focus of the Post**

The provision of information – where the provision of information refers to a blog's attempt to create awareness of a media story, incident or policy release – was found to be the most frequently recurring reason for bloggers to make a post, both overall and individually. Contrary to some of the literature on blogging, this thesis shows information is much more important than analysis of personal experience. However, commentary also figures highly in the content analysis results. Of the 231 posts that constitute the sample for this study, 166 posts or 71.9% were coded as providing the reader with information. This category was a multi-code option that allowed up to five reasons for the post and this resulted in a number of posts serving to achieve one more than one purpose. For instance 86 posts (37.2%) provided both information and some form of comment within the same post.

Interestingly, although the provision of information was strongly tied to stories in the mainstream media, there was only one instance in which a news story was directly

challenged by a blogger. This was when Hide challenged a story about a right wing conspiracy (Hide, 2005a). That is not to suggest that the content of media stories was not commented on, however this was the only occasion where a story was directly taken to task on its content. There were also no instances in this sample where bloggers made a rebuttal of the content in another blog. While bloggers examined in this study would comment on the content of another blog they did not directly refute or challenge the content. They tended to focus on their own ideas or pushing their political position.

**Table 11: All Bloggers**

<b>Focus of the Post</b>	<b>Number</b>
Provision of information	166
Comment	109
Analysis/review	51
Personal experience	16
A rebuttal of another post	0
A rebuttal of a media story	1
Other	2

Each of the four blogs showed a similar pattern, in that the provision of information was always the most coded reason for posting, followed by comment – although Brown had equal numbers of both categories. Analysis/review was the third most frequently coded category for all the bloggers other than Hide, for whom personal experience was the third most frequent category.

A central question for this section was what topics individual bloggers focused on. To examine this, cross tabulation and frequencies provide insight to each of the bloggers' use of the medium, and what kind of information they were communicating, as can be seen in Table 12.

The content analysis showed the reasons for the post were effectively the same for all of the bloggers, despite differences in politics and style. The high incidence of posts acting as a source of information is not entirely unexpected because there was a correlation between the provision of information and posts based on a news story that had appeared on the website of a media organisation.

**Table 12: A Comparison of the Focus of the Post**

Focus of the Post	Rodney Hide		David Farrar		Russell Brown		Jordan Carter	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Provision of information	23	41.8	98	53.6	7	35.0	38	43.7
Comment	13	23.6	58	31.7	7	35.0	31	35.6
Analysis/review	5	9.1	23	12.6	6	30.0	17	19.5
Personal experience	13	23.6	3	1.6	-	-	-	-
A rebuttal of a media story	1	1.8	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other	-	-	1	.5	-	-	1	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The reason behind bloggers making a comment was two-fold; first the comments were directed at political issues or actors, and secondly, media stories that were published during the campaign period – 27.3 percent of comments were done when the post was based on a media story. Many posts were not content to provide information, but also attempted to persuade the reader on the issue. With each of the bloggers being politically aligned in some way, this is not overly surprising. The next chapter will examine these findings in more detail.

### **5.5 Topics That Were Raised Within the Posts**

During the coding process this study allowed for coding of up to five campaign issues in each of the posts. This methodology was used by McGregor (1995) and Fountaine (2002) in their research on the media during New Zealand elections. However, unlike stories in the mainstream media, blogs were sometimes posted on a number of different issues. While no post in this study coded over five issues within the post (although, Brown did cover five) that was only by chance and had any post done so then the data collection would have been hampered by this oversight.

The content analysis shows the leading topic posted in blogs during the 2005 election campaign was taxes. Tax policy was the major theme of blogs and, according to public opinion surveys, the number one issue to the voters (Tax greatest concern to voters says poll, 2005) during the campaign, as the National Party was promising significant tax cuts if they were to take the Treasury benches, while the Labour Government was promising financial assistance through targeted tax credits in its

Working for Families package. This issue captured much of the popular political debate in the campaign period.

Election campaign (polls) and Election campaign (roadshow) were second equal for topics raised in posts. Polls were covered by all of the bloggers at some stage during the campaign period. Carter (n=13, 22.4 percent) had polls as his most frequent post topic whereas Brown (n=4, 17.4 percent) and Farrar (n=11, 8.9 percent) had polls as their second most frequent topic and Hide had polls as his fourth equal topic (n=2, 5.0 percent). While coverage of polls was a regular topic for the bloggers to post about, the person most affected by poll results, Hide, was the least inclined to discuss the topic.

The Election campaign (roadshow) category included campaign events that occurred during the election period. These include speeches, campaign launch events, politicians visiting universities and other venues, public meetings and other campaigning activities. As two of the bloggers, Farrar and Carter, were campaign managers for candidates standing in the Wellington Central electorate, and another blogger was contesting the seat of Epsom, it is no surprise that this topic rates so highly.

Table 13 shows Election campaign (leadership) to be the fourth most frequent topic and this category included such factors as commentaries on a politician's ability to lead. Prime Minister Helen Clark and Leader of the Opposition Don Brash were almost the only party leaders represented in this section. Commenting on a column in a Sunday newspaper by Chris Trotter, Carter says:

The reason for this is quite obvious, in my view. People have had twelve years to hear and see Clark as Labour leader, including six years as Prime Minister. They know how she will react in any given situation, and they find her a compelling and competent leader. That is why she has been, and remains, a popular prime minister.

Brash on the other hand is a new arrival in politics. He also has a whiff of the extreme about him and we all know Kiwis' views on extremists. People have not had the chance to sound him out, and they remember what he has said and done in the past (with a few kind reminders c/- us) (Carter, 2005b).

**Table 13: Topics Covered in Post: All Bloggers**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>% of Cases</b>
Taxes	38	15.5	19.8
Election campaign (roadshow)	30	12.2	15.6
Election campaign (polls)	30	12.2	15.6
Election campaign (leadership)	17	6.9	8.9
Election campaign (style)	16	6.5	8.3
Election campaign (candidates)	12	4.9	6.3
Election campaign (other)	10	4.1	5.2
Election campaign (coalition formation)	10	4.1	5.2
Election campaign (advertising/publicity)	8	3.3	4.2
Maori issues	8	3.3	4.2
Student Loans	8	3.3	4.2
Education	7	2.9	3.6
News media	6	2.4	3.1
Business development	5	2	2.6
Economic policy	5	2	2.6
Housing	5	2	2.6
Political debates	5	2	2.6
Social welfare	5	2	2.6
Other	5	2	2.6
Health	4	1.6	2.1
Industrial relations	2	0.8	1
Crime	1	0.4	0.5
Cultural issues	1	0.4	0.5
Defence	1	0.4	0.5
Election campaign (funding)	1	0.4	0.5
Ethnic minorities	1	0.4	0.5
Foreign Affairs	1	0.4	0.5
Trade	1	0.4	0.5
Transport	1	0.4	0.5
Unemployment/Employment	1	0.4	0.5

The two bloggers who made the most reference to leadership throughout the campaign period, Farrar and Carter, were politically aligned bloggers and they both made attempts to undermine the leadership qualities of the opposing leader on the basis of their own political philosophy rather than the individual or action. It could be suggested that opinions on what constitutes excellence in political leadership began and ended with a shared political philosophy with either National or Labour (or one of the minor parties). This precluded any sense of objectivity being present in the presentation of the topics.

**Table 14: Topics Covered in Post: Individual Bloggers**

	Russell Brown		Rodney Hide		David Farrar		Jordan Carter	
	N	%*	N	%*	N	%*	N	%*
Business development	1	4.3			4	3.2		
Crime	-	-	1	2.5	-	-	-	-
Cultural issues	1	4.3	-	-	-	-	-	-
Defence	-	-	-	-	1	0.8	-	-
Economic Policy	-	-	2	5.0	2	1.6	1	1.7
Education	1	4.3	1	2.5	4	3.2	1	1.7
Election campaign (style)	2	8.7	1	2.5	10	8.1	3	5.2
Election campaign (advert/publicity)	-	-	1	2.5	5	4.0	2	3.4
Election campaign (roadshow)	1	4.3	15	37.5	9	7.3	5	8.6
Election campaign (candidates)	-	-	4	10.0	4	3.2	4	6.9
Election campaign (leadership)	1	4.3	1	2.5	10	8.1	5	8.6
Election campaign (other)	-	-	1	2.5	8	6.5	1	1.7
Election campaign (polls)	4	17.4	2	5.0	11	8.9	13	22.4
Election campaign (coalition formation)	2	8.7	1	2.5	7	5.6	-	-
Health	1	4.3	-	-	3	2.4	-	-
Housing	1	4.3	-	-	1	0.8	3	5.2
Industrial relations	-	-	-	-	2	1.6	-	-
Maori issues	5	21.7					3	5.2
News media	-	-	-	-	6	4.8	-	-
Political debates	-	-	1	2.5	3	2.4	1	1.7
Social welfare	2	8.7	-	-	2	1.6	1	1.7
Student loans	-	-	1	2.5	6	4.8	1	1.7
Taxes	1	4.3	8	20	18	14.5	11	19.0
Trade	-	-	-	-	1	0.8	-	-
Transport	-	-	-	-	1	0.8	-	-
Unemployment/employment	-	-	-	-	1	0.8	-	-
Other	-	-	-	-	2	1.6	3	5.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>100</b>

\* = percent of total posts made

The fifth most frequently coded category, Election campaign (style) contained such topics as the allegedly stolen emails from Don Brash's computer (the emails were either stolen or leaked from within the National Party, depending on who you talk to), the Exclusive Brethren involvement in campaigning on behalf of the National Party, and Helen Clark's scolding of an Air New Zealand pilot. This category contained many events in the campaign that could be described as dirty politics or mud slinging. While heralded as genuine political issues by the bloggers who were using them in a

politically opportunistic way, the issues may be better considered a distraction from the real issues or policies.

It is worth noting that Carter spent 56.8 percent of his total posts discussing events, strategy and other issues directly related to the election campaign itself and 34.5 percent dealing with issues of policy, whereas Brown used 56.2 percent of his posts to detail issues of policy. This finding points to the differences in style between bloggers, even in cases where they shared similar political beliefs.

Of the top 10 issues coded for the overall study, positions 2-9 were concerned directly with the election campaign – the exception was Taxes, which ranked as the most discussed topic and the tenth position, which had Maori Issues and Student Loans with equal representation.

Bloggers' ability to post on issues of their own choice allowed them to avoid issues that contest their wider political philosophies. It also allows for positive comments on issues that are favourable to their respective parties. Farrar, unlike Brown and Carter, was impartial enough at times to criticise National on policy or campaign strategy if he believed that the party had erred or were operating outside his wider political thinking. This is something that he also admitted to doing during the interview conducted for this thesis, which is covered further in Chapter Seven.

## **5.6 Blogs and the Mainstream Media**

This study examined the relationship between blog posts and the traditional news media, specifically seeking to understand what relationship there was in terms of topic selection between those media and blog posts. It also looked at the practice of linking, or attributing, the website from which bloggers sourced information. Any dependence of mainstream media on bloggers has been weak in the past, although since the period studied in this thesis media organisations, particularly in the United States, have taken to regularly watching high-profile political blogs so as not to miss a breaking story (Aschenbrenner & Miksch, 2005).

Previous researchers have labelled blogs as being an entirely parasitic form of media (Niles, 2007); that is, blogs acquire content or ideas from already existing online media organisations. However, the findings from this study question that finding's applicability to the New Zealand context (see Table 15). Over half (52.9%) of the posts that contained content relating to the 2005 election were not directly related to, or were not explicitly engendered by, mainstream media. It should be noted that the involvement of the media was ascertained by whether the blogger made a direct reference to the story appearing in the mainstream media, which may well understate any relationship.

**Table 15: Post Based On a Story in the Media – All Bloggers**

<b>Based on a media story</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Yes	90	47.7
No	103	52.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>100</b>

On an individual level (see Table 16) it was Farrar who had the most instances of explicitly basing his posts on media stories. A majority of his posts based on a media story were based on *The New Zealand Herald* website (n=25), followed by Stuff (n=16), and he also had the widest range of media from which he based his posts.

**Table 16: Post Based On a Story in the Media – Individual Bloggers**

<b>Based on a media story</b>	<b>Rodney Hide</b>		<b>David Farrar</b>		<b>Russell Brown</b>		<b>Jordan Carter</b>		<b>Total</b>
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	
Yes	5	17.2	50	47.2	5	71.4	32	61.7	92
No	24	82.8	56	52.8	2	28.6	19	38.3	101
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>		<b>106</b>		<b>7</b>		<b>51</b>		<b>193</b>

Carter used stories from *The New Zealand Herald* website (n=10) and Scoop (n=6). Brown, although the total number of his posts was low, had the largest percentage of his posts based on existing media coverage, partly because he covered many topics in each post. Like Hide, his posts were based on stories from *The New Zealand Herald* website, Scoop and Stuff, but both have frequencies of low significance.

The three most coded media used as a source were all internet-based. Where a post was based on a story that had appeared in the media, *The New Zealand Herald* website was by far the most popular source from which to obtain information (see Table 17). It should be pointed out that the coding question about media sources was a multi-code option. Of the 90 posts that were explicitly based on a story in the media, 22 referred to more than one media source. For example, in one post Russell Brown referred to the New Zealand Herald newspaper, Radio New Zealand’s website and scoop.co.nz (Brown, 2005a), while in another he refers to nzherald.co.nz and stuff.co.nz (Brown, 2005e). This brings the total of various media sourced to 119 from the 90 individual posts.

The Fairfax website, stuff.co.nz, where material from the country’s two other large newspapers was available, was the second most popular location to draw from in constructing blog posts. The actual newspapers that are the tangible product associated with the most coded websites, being *The New Zealand Herald* and the Fairfax-owned *The Dominion Post*, were only referred to in six posts, showing a strong trend for bloggers to receive their information only from online sources. The independent media website Scoop appeared as the third most coded source.

**Table 17: The Medium from where the Post was Sourced**

<b>Media Used</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent*</b>
The NZ Herald newspaper	3	2.5
The NZ Herald website	40	33.6
The Dominion Post	3	2.5
The Press	2	1.7
Stuff	24	20.2
Otago Daily Times	2	1.7
TV3 News	2	1.7
One News	3	2.5
TVNZ website	6	5.0
Radio New Zealand broadcast	2	1.7
Radio New Zealand website	1	.8
Scoop	12	10.1
Unknown/not stated	2	1.7
Other	17	14.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*= percentage of posts based on media stories

The relationship between the blogs, as a text-based medium, and links to text-based sources, such as newspaper websites, is notable as bloggers preferred to link to sources that were text-based as opposed to audio or visual. The best illustration of bloggers preferring to link to text-based sites is that Television New Zealand's and TV3's news websites, both visually based media, only produced two links. This is despite both having very good websites that contained text and video content. One could argue that this finding is encouraging, given research suggesting that people who spend a lot of time watching television tend to be more poorly informed about political issues than those reading newspapers (Chaffee & Frank, 1996; Prior, 2005). With people increasingly inclined to spend less time watching television and getting online (Broadband stealing TV viewers, 2008), it is tempting to speculate that the quality and amount of political information they are potentially exposed to could lead to higher levels of participation in politics outside of voting.

Farrar most frequently linked to media sources: he linked to *The New Zealand Herald* website on 25 occasions, which constitutes 62.5 percent of all links to that source. Likewise with stuff.co.nz, Farrar's links to stories from this site make up 70.8 percent of the sample total. At the other end of the linking spectrum was Hide, who only linked to five media sources. Hide's use of posting from his mobile phone can go some way towards explaining his non-linking to his sources as while he can post to his blog, inserting hyper-links via a mobile phone is somewhat more difficult, due to limited functionality.

### **5.7 Use of Links to Sources**

In only 10 cases the post was based on a story in the media but no link was provided by the blogger. As could be expected with the blogs, every time a story referred to was located online there was the possibility to create a link from the blog to the location of the story. The expectation of a link being made is based on knowing that blogging software easily allows for inserting a hyper-link to any source when writing a post. In each of the 10 instances (see Table 18) in which there was no link provided directly to the source story, this can be explained by the source being a non-web-based source, for example One News, Radio New Zealand National, or the physical

edition of a newspaper (as opposed to the online version). This choice to link to a news source was entirely at the blogger's discretion.

While each blogger considered in this thesis provided multiple links, Russell Brown would have up to four or more links to various sources in his posts. However, unlike the other bloggers, who were more likely to focus on a single issue, he covers a number of topics in each post.

**Table 18: Was There A Link to the Story in the Post?**

<b>Links to stories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Yes	79	88.8
No	10	11.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>100</b>

When the mainstream media was not identified as the source of the post (see The ACT Party, or more specifically, Rodney Hide, was the second most frequently coded non-media source. His position here is purely on the back of his posting about his campaign activities during the election; this result is not reflective of an overall pattern in the blogs under consideration in this study. Besides his sourcing himself, no other blogger referred to Hide as a source in their posts. As can be seen in Table 21, Hide's sources were either himself or the ACT Party on 21 occasions. It is possibly a limitation of the content analysis section that Hide, in his role as politician, is coded differently in this category than the other bloggers considered for the study. The results show a real skew toward ACT as being a source when the instances coded could be determined a personal experience, as is the case with other bloggers. ) bloggers themselves were the most prominent source of information by providing personal experience or offering their opinion/insight on an issue or event. The personal experiences that were drawn on can be exemplified by David Farrar's post titled *DPF in Auckland*,

There won't be much blogging this weekend as I'll be spending most of it on the road. I'm driving a van of staff and Young Nats up to Auckland today for Sunday's campaign launch, and back again on Sunday afternoon. (Farrar, 2005e)

**Table 19: Non-Media Sources of the Post**

<b>Non-media source</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Labour party/politician	5	4.8
National party/politician	3	2.9
ACT party/politician	21	20.2
NZ First party/politician	2	1.9
Blog	23	22.1
Website	6	5.8
Unknown/not stated	8	7.7
Personal experience/thoughts	26	26.0
Other	9	8.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>100</b>

Other examples where personal experience was the non-media source include Farrar telling of his developing a student loan calculator (Farrar, 2005f), and Carter providing an overview of the events, and a summary of the main points of each speaker at a candidate's forum he attended at Victoria University in Wellington (Carter, 2005c). Brown also used personal experience as a source on one occasion:

I appear to have been married by Don Brash! A letter from Dr Brash arrived this week addressed to "Russell and Fiona Brown". As far as I know there is no database in which we are listed by anything other than the surnames we have used all our lives, so it's a bit of a mystery. (Brown, 2005c)

The ACT Party, or more specifically, Rodney Hide, was the second most frequently coded non-media source. His position here is purely on the back of his posting about his campaign activities during the election; this result is not reflective of an overall pattern in the blogs under consideration in this study. Besides his sourcing himself, no other blogger referred to Hide as a source in their posts. As can be seen in Table 21, Hide's sources were either himself or the ACT Party on 21 occasions. It is possibly a limitation of the content analysis section that Hide, in his role as politician, is coded differently in this category than the other bloggers considered for the study. The results show a real skew toward ACT as being a source when the instances coded could be determined a personal experience, as is the case with other bloggers.

The third most coded non-media source was other blogs (23.5 percent). Posts would comment or refer readers to issues that were raised on another blog. In the example below, Carter links to the blog he is talking about, Frogblog, to allow his readers to see first-hand the results he is describing.

FrogBlog has updated their table showing that families earning up to \$70k are better off with Labour, than with National's tax bribe - and that doesn't even include the massive lump of debt that we'd have to pay off if National gets their hands on the purse strings. (Carter, 2005d)

In the example above some of the text was hyperlinked to the table that Carter refers to. Readers were able to click through to Frogblog for more information, should they wish.

**Table 20: Was there a Link Provided to the Non-Media Source?**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Yes	23	12.0
No	169	88.0
<b>Total</b>	192	100.0

There were occasions where it was impossible to link to a source as it was not internet-based, such as personal experiences/thoughts and politicians as sources. However, it was always possible to link to a website or a blog and yet a link was not always provided. The non-linking to non-media sources is a curious finding as linking is a simple procedure to do within the blog's technical architecture. Bloggers were far more inclined to link to news websites (see Table 18) than when the source was a non-media site. Bloggers would often mention other blogs by name but not include a direct link to the post or comments section referred to, as demonstrated here in a post by Farrar where he writes about one of Carter's posts but does not provide a link;

And Jordan who has an uncanny ability to claim every poll ever published is good news for Labour has said this about the last week of polls:  
 "What a week in hell for National's first week. And what a delicious one for Labour"  
 "So an interesting result. Once again, nothing to complain about" (Farrar, 2005g)

However, most New Zealand blogs, especially those of a political nature, have reciprocating links to other blogs in a blog roll contained on the blog page. The blog roll often contains links to blogs across the political spectrum and do not exclude opposing voices.

Of the links to non-media sources, 47.8 percent (n=11) were made to support a claim that bloggers had made, while 43.5 percent (n=10) were used to provide further information. For example, Farrar linked to the National Party website to alert his

readers to National’s temporary reduction in the petrol tax. He also provided another link that pointed readers to a site that had a student loan calculator that compared National and Labour’s repayment calculations. Brown, in more of a journalistic approach, provided links to support his claims in all of his posts. Hide used a link to trademe.co.nz as part of an ACT fundraiser and another to a speech he wrote which was located on the ACT website. Carter provided links to provide more information and support a claim on one occasion each.

There were also instances coded where linking to the source was not possible; examples of this include public appearances by politicians.

**Table 21: Individual Bloggers’ Non-Media Sources**

Source Quoted	Name of Blogger			
	Rodney Hide	David Farrar	Hard News	Just Left
Labour Party/politician	1	2	0	2
National Party/politician	0	1	0	2
United Future Party/politician	0	0	0	0
ACT Party/politician	21	0	0	0
Green Party/politician	0	0	0	0
NZ First Party/politician	0	2	0	0
Blog	1	18	1	3
Website	0	6	0	0
Unknown/not stated	1	6	0	1
Personal experience/thoughts	0	17	1	9
Other	0	3	0	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>22</b>

Linking to other websites, not including links to blogs, was not common practice for the bloggers, with only 12 percent of posts having at least one link. Russell Brown linked to 29 websites in the seven posts included in the sample period whereas David Farrar only linked to 13 websites over 133 posts (9.78 percent). However, Brown had a tendency to link to a number of non-political sites, such as music and technology-related websites, as well as political, within the same post, whereas Farrar’s links were almost exclusively associated with politics in some way. Hide and Carter had four and three links respectively, and like Farrar these links had political associations. This finding, once again, highlights the differences between Brown’s approach to his blog as opposed to the other three bloggers in this study.

**Table 22: Individual Bloggers Linking to Non-Media Sources**

	<b>Blogger</b>			
	<b>Rodney Hide</b>	<b>David Farrar</b>	<b>Hard News</b>	<b>Just Left</b>
Yes	4	9	7	3
No	25	97	0	47

Where the bloggers linked to other websites, the coding showed it mostly occurred to support a claim or statement they had made (47.8 percent). This link was effectively used in a manner that could be considered as being not too dissimilar from that of an academic reference. The bloggers also used the links to provide further information (43.5 percent) on the subject they were writing about; for example Carter used a link to TNS, a market research company, to provide further information about the results of a poll (Carter, 2005e) and Farrar used a link to provide a profile of Dr Jon Johansson when discussing his political commentary during the campaign (Farrar, 2005h).

There were 34 instances in which posts in the studied blogs linked to other blogs. Of the inter-linking among the bloggers examined in this research, Farrar was the recipient of the largest number of links from the other bloggers (n=6, 15.8 percent). He was followed by Brown (n=3, 7.9 percent) and Hide (n=2, 5.3 percent). Carter did not have any links directed to any of his posts.

**Table 23: Types of Multimedia Files Used**

<b>Type of File</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Video	1	5.9
Photograph(s)	9	52.9
Cartoon(s)	2	11.8
Graphic	2	11.8
Advertising	1	5.9
Audio	1	5.9
Other	1	5.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Where the link was coded as “other” (that being the blog was not one of those examined in the content analysis of this study), the most frequent blog that was linked to was Frogblog (n=7). Keith Ng and NZ Pundit were linked to on four occasions

each. Other links were made to No Right Turn, Whale Oil, Cathy Odgers and Aaron Bhatnagar – all of whom were politically active bloggers during the campaign period.

As a multimedia medium, the internet easily allows users to insert images, video or audio files into web pages and this is no different when the webpage is a blog (refer to Table 23). In fact by using blogging publishing systems, such as blogger.com or as part of a content management system, it is a very simple process to include media files into a post. Because only 17 posts of the 231 posts (7.4 percent) coded included some form of multimedia file, it seems surprising how infrequently this function of blogging was used. Again, like the relationship between links to text-based media (see section 5.5 in this chapter), there is an indication bloggers are more inclined toward providing readers with their ideas and comments in their own words as opposed to using audio-visual material. Of the multimedia that was used, photographs were the most common file included in a post.

## **5.8 Comments Section**

There were 1703 comments made as part of the posts that were considered for this research. It should be remembered that Russell Brown's blog, Public Address, does not allow readers to make comments to a post. This has been discussed previously and will be examined further in the interviews chapter.

Determining an individual commenter's political persuasion was based solely on what they had written in their comment(s), as no other information about them was presented in the comments section. Sometimes a person leaving a comment would provide a link to their personal website, but these were ignored by the researcher as they did not fall within the conditions of the content analysis method.

### **5.8.1 Where the Comments Came From**

One of the important parts of this research was to identify how large the New Zealand political blogosphere was by determining the number of individuals participating in political discussion. While there were 1703 comments made during the election period, it was identified that these were made from only 338 different names or

identification tags. While it is possible that an individual used more than one name under which to leave comments, all of the names were taken at face value and coded as such.

Table 24: The Frequency of the Number of Comments Made is a cross-tabulation of the number of comments made by individuals and their frequency. This table clearly shows a majority of commenters made three or fewer comments (n=236, 69.78%).

Table 25 shows a cross-tabulation of the 35 most frequent commenter identification numbers along with their total number of comments, while

Table 26 shows which blogs the comments were made on.

**Table 24: The Frequency of the Number of Comments Made**

Number of Comments	Frequency	Percent
1	153	45.23
2	45	13.31
3	38	11.24
4	21	6.21
5	12	3.55
6	15	4.44
7	9	2.66
8	9	2.66
9	1	0.30
10	0	0.00
11-20	20	5.92
21-50	11	3.25
51-100	3	0.89
100+	1	0.30
<b>Total</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>100</b>

Of the bloggers studied in this thesis Farrar (comment ID 121) made 28 comments, Carter (comment ID 240) 27 and Brown (comment ID 420) 12, during the sample period. Hide made no comments on any blog, not even his own. Hide's blog is looked at in more detail in Chapter Eight.

**Table 25: Top 35 Most Frequent Commenter IDs**

Rank	Commenter ID	Number of Comments	Percent
1	360	110	6.5
2	477	94	5.5

3	15	90	5.3
4	104	67	3.9
5	202	45	2.6
6	204	36	2.1
7	121	28	1.6
8	447	28	1.6
9	11	27	1.6
10	239	27	1.6
11	139	26	1.5
12	177	26	1.5
13	208	24	1.4
14	185	23	1.4
15	171	22	1.3
16	449	20	1.2
17	142	19	1.1
18	337	18	1.1
19	427	18	1.1
20	436	18	1.1
21	514	18	1.1
22	406	17	1.0
23	3	16	0.9
24	182	15	0.9
25	114	14	0.8
26	361	14	0.8
27	501	14	0.8
28	443	13	0.8
29	79	12	0.7
30	376	12	0.7
31	387	12	0.7
32	420	12	0.7
33	374	11	0.7
34	475	11	0.7
35	515	11	0.7

**Table 26: Crosstab of Commenter to Individual Bloggers**

<b>Commenter ID</b>	<b>Rodney Hide</b>	<b>Jordan Carter</b>	<b>David Farrar</b>
3		3	13
11	7		20
15		86	
28	7		
79			12
104		17	50

114			14
121		1	27
139			26
142		19	
171			18
177			16
182			13
185		20	
202		37	
204		29	
208	8		11
239		23	4
337	7		11
360	1	88	21
376	11		
406			10
420	1		11
427			10
436			18
443			10
447		14	14
449		20	
475		11	
477		54	40
514		12	
515			11
521	7		

The top 10 commenters made almost a third (32.3 percent) of all comments in this study. The top commenter, who used the name Paul (comment ID 360) when leaving comments, was also the leading contender for use of emotional language and ad hominem attacks. He can best be described based on his comments as a left-wing voter, probably a teacher and someone who likes to escalate a discussion into a conflict. Paul was the only person of the 338 individuals, as can be seen in

Table 26, who made a comment on each of the three blogs where a comment function was available – and he only just qualified for this unique position as he only made one comment on Hide’s blog. Coding for the frequency of commenting showed a number of those who were inclined to leave comments did so over two blogs, but 153 people, or 27.7 percent, only made only one comment on a single blog.

### 5.8.1.1 Comments Made That Related to the Election

Those leaving comments did so almost exclusively about topics which pertained to the election (95.6 percent), with only 4.4 percent referring to something else. In some cases these non-election comments can be explained by spam. Because none of the blogs had spam protection at the time of the election they were occasionally recipients of non-related comments. On other occasions people had made comments that could be deemed random and unintelligible as they had little in common with the other comments made under the same post.

Most of the comments that were made were short – two sentences or less (see Table 27). However, a combined total of 43.5 percent was a reasonably high figure for those making a comment that was constructed of five or more sentences.

**Table 27: Length of the Comment**

<b>Length</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
2 sentences or less	963	56.5
3-5 sentences	488	28.7
More than 5 sentences	252	14.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>1703</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The collection of data around the length of comments was to provide an insight into the amount of detail people were putting into their comments. This is not to suggest that quantity is any indication of quality of the comment but it does go some way towards reflecting the thought and effort placed in responding to the blogger or another commenter. Also, someone leaving a comment is better able to make a detailed explanation of their point if the comment is longer than five sentences.

### 5.8.1.2 What the Comments were About

The primary reason people left comments, as shown by the coding (see Table 28), was to engage directly in discussion with another person who had made a comment as part of a post. The definition of “directly engaging” is where a person leaves a comment specifically addressed to another commenter by their name or pseudonym. Often

when a person was directing a comment to someone they would copy the section of the text they wanted to comment on. An example of this can be seen below where the commenter, Aj, responds directly to stephen about a previous comment.

Aj, aren't housing mortgage costs partly tax-deductible in the US? That's an effective subsidy. Posted by: stephen  
 stephen:~  
 "housing mortgage costs partly tax-deductible in the US? That's an effective subsidy."  
 Yes of course. Probably cancels each other out. Isn't the USA version of 'capatilism' wonderful ? Posted by: Aj

Discussing the content of the post was the second most frequently coded reason for leaving a comment (see Table 28). This is not a surprising finding as the post should be expected to engender most if not all following comments, but this was not entirely the case. Often the comments section of a post would initially concentrate on the post content and then move on to other topics that arose from following comments. The topic discussed in a comments section following a post could change a number of times in the course of the discussion. In his post *The Smoking Gun*, Farrar (2005k) presented his thoughts on the Treasury's initial costings on Labour's student loan policy and the involvement of Finance Minister, Michael Cullen. However, the discussion section, while initially discussing the issue, also covered the general reliability of Treasury's forecasting and moved on to the issue of New Zealand having the highest interest rates in the OECD.

This trend was also present in Jordan Carter's blog; an example of this is his post attacking National's proposal to temporarily cut the excise tax on petrol (2005g). The ensuing discussion, which had 106 comments, wove through a number of topics that included Labour MP Philip Field allegedly influencing immigration decisions for a Thai man who worked on his house, Centrebet's odds on the outcome of the election, public transport, National's possible coalition partners, and John Key's comments on student loans.

**Table 28: Primary Concern of Comment**

	Frequency	Percent
The content in the post	425	25.0
Engaging with blogger about post content	92	5.4
Engaging with blogger about other	3	.2

Another commenter	565	33.2
Content of a previous comment	369	21.7
Combination of content and commenters	192	11.3
No relation to post or subsequent comments	52	3.1
Other	5	.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>1703</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The third most frequently coded primary concern for making a comment was to reply to a previous comment. This category differs from that where commenting is directed to another person who has left a comment, as these comments are made toward the content without addressing the person who made the comment. For example,

Fine words but mental health workers are out on strike today over their pay deal being messed around with. So Labour's rhetoric isn't being matched with action.  
Posted by: sock thief

Hang on - the mental health worker strike today is nothing to do with Labour. The government has given the DHB's the funding to make a good settlement. The DHBs, for whatever reason, are holding out. That's their stupidity.  
Posted by: Jordan

The separation and differences between the categories “Content of a previous comment” and “Another commenter” are subtle; hence it makes sense to combine the two in analysis: 54.9 percent of all comments in this study were used to engage in discussion with others about political policies and other ideas. This clearly indicates willingness by those within the New Zealand blogosphere to use blogs as an opportunity to directly engage in political discussion and debate with others.

**Table 29: Commenter Tries To Establish Expertise or Authority on the Issue**

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	589	34.6
No	1114	65.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1703</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Where the category of other was coded as the primary reason for the comment, these were recorded as being two cases of spam and two of people asking off-topic questions for readers to respond to.

Where people who made comments displayed any level of expertise or authority on an issue the content analysis coding (see Table 30) showed they were primarily inclined to claim some form of knowledge on an issue (n=545, 79.4 percent). The claim of knowledge had a threshold of a person stating their awareness of events, previously unknown information or extending the information in a discussion. People who provided links or contacts to others that would allow them to gain further information were also included in this category – as can be seen in the first example below.

I have put in a few scenarios and all beat labour (EASILY) - Nearly everyone is better off with National - that has a nice ring to it - and it is the truth - not a deception like labour puts out - - so remember in case you missed it the first time  
www.taxcuts.co.nz Posted by: Peter McK

Speaking of speculative policies, I've heard a rumour about Labours next policy to be announced. Posted by: coge

The problem in National could be summed up even more simply; in fact in just two words: "Murray McCully".

Everything that guy has ever been in charge of has been a disaster. I hear he is already trying to blame everyone else internally - but this time the party leader has given him full control, so he must take the responsibility. Posted by: anon nat

**Table 30: Commenter Establishing Level of Expertise or Authority on an Issue**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Claims of knowledge	531	79.4
Claims of experience	83	13.1
Works in field	10	1.6
Use of name or pseudonym	19	3.1
Use of jargon	5	.7
Identification	13	2.0

The second most frequent coding of expertise or authority in the comments section were claims of experience (n=90, 13.1 percent). The experiences referred to in the comments came in a number of variations, from personal living experiences, such as in example one below, to being at and commenting on a political event or campaigning for a party or candidate.

I'm lucky - earning >\$100k. 2 children at uni.

I know exactly how expensive it is to raise a family Posted by: Aj

My own observation is that the so-called poor kids are generally the fattest. The same goes for their parents.

Half the world's population wouldn't mind the "poverty" you mention. Posted by: dogsbody

Surprise, surprise, The New Zealand Herald, which is running a campaign to get National elected, ends by saying National are still in the race!

I'm campaigning in torry heartland (Jenny Shipleyville) and I can tell everyone that National's king hit tax policy has been a flop here... Posted by: Tony

**Table 31: Comment Contains Ad Hominem Argument**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Yes	50	2.9
No	1653	97.1
Total	1703	100.0

Blogs have been accused of being a septic place of communication. However, this study shows that less than 3 percent of all comments were in some directed ad hominem way. The findings show that for the most part people were focused on the topic of discussion but if there were conflicting philosophies on an issue between people in the comments section, or if political figures were targeted, then things could get quite nasty. It should also be noted that many instances of ad hominem were fairly benign.

Tim you are one hell of a contrary bugger. Posted by: Paul

Tim wihtout wanting to offend your honed intelligence or worldly sensibility, but you are nothing short of a fuck-wit. Posted by: Paul

As for PC, give over you pretentious tosser, you're starting to sound like that old lush Winnie Peters. Posted by: Paul

You show yourself to be an illutterate dork so over whom, other than other illiterate dorks, do you expect to have influence? Posted by: Adolf Fiinkensein

However, Paul, in one comment actually tackled another commenter about their use of ad hominem attack

Pundito - please don't be offended if I ignore you less intelligent ad hominem comments but thanks for the benefit of your commanding knowledge of economics.

There were a number of people who had much higher incidences of ad hominem than others. Of the more significant people commenting, Paul (comment ID 360) wrote the largest number of ad hominem attacks (n=14, 12.7 percent). Insolent Prick (comment

ID 202) and Adolf Fiinkensein (comment ID 11) produced the same percentage of instances (11.1 percent), but the actual numbers were five and three respectively. Of these three people who left comments, two are unknown and one, Adolf Fiinkensein, was interviewed for this research as he also blogged on political issues during the election on the Sir Humphries site ([www.sirhumphries.co.nz](http://www.sirhumphries.co.nz)), which has subsequently shut down.

**Table 32: Individuals Who Used Ad Hominem Attacks**

<b>Individual ID Number</b>	<b>Number of ad hominem incidents</b>	<b>Blogger's Total number of comments</b>	<b>Percent</b>
360	14	110	12.7
202	5	45	11.1
11	3	27	11.1
104	3	67	4.5
142	3	19	15.8
487	3	7	42.9
239	2	27	7.4
475	2	11	18.2
477	2	94	2.1
15	1	90	1.1
42	1	1	100.0
180	1	7	14.3
259	1	8	12.5
368	1	2	50.0
374	1	11	9.1
390	1	5	20.0
396	1	4	25.0
421	1	6	16.7
504	1	3	33.3
514	1	18	5.6
525	1	1	100.0
547	1	1	100.0

Of the 22 individuals who used ad hominem argument, 13 only used it on one occasion and nine people who used it did so two or more times. It should be noted that 316 individuals, who made 1139 comments, did so without using any personal attacks.

It is here that the comments sections appear to be the least compatible to Habermas' normative public sphere theory. People were happy to criticise or challenge other people's comments or the content in the blogger's post (n=396) and they did so with

what could be described as an intention of widening the debate or attempting to refine the accuracy of an argument. Many of the emotionally heightened comments did nothing to add to the discussion and they often verged on personal attacks, as can be seen in the examples below.

Sorry craig I credited you with more intelligence,what words didn't you understand.?  
Posted by: Red Fred

Milne? You mean the gay dwarf? Oh yes, I do remember him! There's more chance of Helen converting to Christianity than him winning Rakaia. And Sutton's on his way out one electorate south, too. And so's David Parker in Otago, where Jacqui Dean is about to kick his arse, and bye-bye Invercargill to Labour, too.  
Oops I put homosexual and dwarf in the same sentence - how un-PC; I must be a xenophobe sexist gay-hater baby-killer like Dr. Brash. Posted by: Like Hell

weizguy ...

Don't assume, you're making an ass of urself! Posted by: p

Who fucking cares, Jordan?

What are you trying to do? Distract voters from the fact that you have no policy of substance, so you dredge up some rubbish that some National Party person wrote to the Leader a YEAR ago? Posted by: Insolent Prick

**Table 33: Comment Contains Emotionally Heightened Language**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Yes	126	7.4
No	1577	92.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>1703</b>	<b>100.0</b>

In an example of Godwin's Law (Godwin, 1994), a theory that suggests the longer an online discussion grows the more chance there will a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler, Red Fred (396) likens the National Party to Nazi stormtroopers. The example below by was the 32<sup>nd</sup> comment associated with the post:

Oh yes unlike good nazi stormtroopers these losers were the ones who were not prepared to go in and bayonet the wounded.ie those that did not survive the rabid rights assault on the sick the lame ,widows and deserted mothersetc etc.Goodness Ruth Richardson nearly got away with the cash registers in the hospitals. Posted by: Red Fred

Carter made a post on the denigration of the comments section and pointed blame to right-wing bloggers.

I've observed with a tinge of disappointment the change in the tone and acuity of debate in the New Zealand blogs over the past year... This year, though, things have changed. I don't know whether it is the proximity of the election, the growth in the number of bloggers on the fringe right and the departure of many left bloggers, or

something else, but I do know that things have changed for the worse. There is considerable rancour and an unhealthy excess of ad hominem attacks in comments on all the blogs. There is less discussion of the issues and more vapid points (Carter, 2005f).

Ironically this posting generated 50 comments, of which the majority, if only to enforce Carter's point, descended into a discussion about whether Hitler was right-wing or not.

**Table 34: Use of Emotional Language**

<b>Individual ID Number</b>	<b>Number of incidents</b>	<b>Bloggers Total number of comments</b>	<b>Percent</b>
360	26	110	23.6
202	16	45	35.6
239	6	27	22.2
15	5	90	5.6
477	5	94	5.3
487	5	7	71.4
11	4	27	14.8
104	4	67	6.0
142	4	19	21.1
374	4	11	36.4
171	3	22	13.6
396	3	4	75.0
3	2	2	100.0
208	2	24	8.3
406	2	17	11.8
522	2	2	100.0

Carter's accusation that any denigration of political discussion in the New Zealand blogosphere was the fault of the right-wing could be regarded as misguided as Carter himself is the only blogger examined for this study who was in the ad hominem and emotionally heightened language tables, where he was listed seventh and third respectively.

There were 126 examples where the comment contained emotional language and of these only 16 people were coded as having made more than one. It is interesting to note 11 of the 16 (68.8 percent) of the individuals who made these statements are also found in Table 32. Like the ad hominem comments, the majority of incidents of

emotional language came from the same two individuals: Paul (n=26) and Insolent Prick (n=16).

The analysis shows how the majority of the comments were made in an effort to engage in reasonable discussion or debate on issues. A majority of people who made comments did not employ such tactics.

**Table 35: Comment Contains**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Proof/evidence of claim/statement	210	19.6
Assertion	430	40.2
A diversion from argumentation	30	2.8
Partisan position	345	32.3
Other	54	5.1
Total	1069	100.0

The purpose of this question was to better understand how the public sphere criterion is met in the comments section, in particular rational debate. This question will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

The use of assertion was clearly a favourite of people leaving comments. Many of the people who made a comment simply declared something to be a fact without any proof – or even an attempt to provide evidence of the statement being true.

How much is that going to cost? By my guesstimation, it'll be more than \$9.4 billion over 3 years. Posted by: Greg Stephens

As for business – as much as people love to bash the successful business; maybe its time for people to wake up and smell the coffee – who provides jobs!? Posted by: Kaiwai

So they lied when telling how much they'll spend on tax cuts. Fantastic. Those cuts will do little to help families out, instead they make it financially better to not have children when compared to Labour's policy. Another failed policy by the Nats. Posted by: Greg Stephens

State housing in its current form is a poverty trap. Labour quite likes to create poverty traps, because it creates resentment, envy and distrust of success, and gets them to continue to vote Labour. Posted by: Insolent Prick

The partisanship demonstrated by those leaving comments came as no surprise based on the findings from the post section. What was an interesting finding from the

content analysis was the amount of emotional and philosophical attachment displayed by some people to their political association, as can be seen in the following examples.

Craig R - someone has to make up National's policy, because nobody in National's doing it. You guys have two-pagers on major and important areas of public policy. It verges on the pathetic. Posted by: Jordan

the problem isn't who is doing what.  
it's the fact that he is a pathological liar.  
let's not fuck around here, a flip flop is a euthanism for Lie. Posted by: Paul

Jordan, you are a fucking looser and just a stupid Labour party hack. Some of us have real jobs and hot chicks to play with. Get a life dude, and a girlfriend. Fuck Helen is ugly. Yik. Posted by: trent

Sometimes the partisan position came not in the way of a direct attack on a party, but in the form of a comment on a policy, as can be seen below.

Welfare for Families is Stupid - Stupid - Stupid. Posted by: Gooner

A diversion from the argument was most often in the form of a troll. Usually this was someone who was politically opposed to the way a discussion was developing and distracted discussion participants by introducing a completely new topic or by using offensive language in order to elicit an emotional response.

## **5.9 Conclusion**

The results of the comprehensive content analysis of New Zealand's 2005 General Election campaign provided a number of distinct trends as to the way blogs were used as a way of discussing political issues. The key findings of by the content analysis in the post section were that blog posters were mostly providers of information and when doing so they were inclined to make comment about the issue they were providing on. Any serious analysis of issues was minimal and rebuttals of media stories or posts were almost non-existent. Taxes dominated the blogosphere like no other topic. This finding from the content analysis is parallel with a survey which showed that topic being the most important to the public. The election campaign and the issues associated with it, such as polls, leadership and the roadshow, were also of significant importance. Almost half of the posts were based on an existing media story and these stories were linked to on a regular basis. Where the media was not the

primary source for the blog, the blogger's personal experience or thoughts were found to be the most coded, followed by ACT politician (Rodney Hide), and thirdly, other blogs were regular sources for posts. However, unlike media sources, non-media sources were rarely linked to.

The comments sections of blogs were the scene of much robust and stimulating debate, but also the venue for the completely banal. The comments were, however, consistently on topic, focusing almost exclusively made on the election. There were many examples of two or more people engaging in discussions and debates that added to the deliberative nature of blogs. While David Farrar's blog had a right-leaning political slant, it was also the site of the most reasoned debate on issues in its comment section. The comments section of Jordan Carter's blog, while also hosting genuine discussions, was more likely to descend into the trivial and off-topic irrational squabble. Overall the range of participation in the blogger's comment sections was small. Almost a third (32.3 percent) of the comments in the sample were written by the top 10 commenters and 153 people (27.7 percent) only made one comment. Only one person made a comment on Farrar's, Carter's and Hide's blogs.

In summary, the content analysis shows the New Zealand blogosphere to be represented by single focused posts that are on average 464 words in length, and comments sections that provided an environment where people could partake in rational communication with others over issues surrounding the election campaign. This chapter provides the first content analysis on New Zealand political blogging and sets up the following chapter, which will look at how these findings compare and contrast with international research and experiences of blogging during an election.



## **Chapter Six**

### **Content Analysis Discussion**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the findings of the content analysis of the posts and comment sections in the campaign period of the 2005 New Zealand General Election and considers the results in relation to other blog research and public sphere theory.

The findings in relation to the posts fall into four main areas: what role the selected blogs played in the election campaign period as a way of discussing issues; the styles of the blogs; what influence blogs had on which topics were discussed, and a look at how the blogosphere allowed for deliberative discussion during the election campaign. These areas will be analysed in more detail in this chapter as they relate directly to the research questions posed at the start of this thesis. Other implications of the findings are beyond the scope of this study, but provide the basis for possible future research.

#### **6.2 The Role of Blogs in the 2005 New Zealand General Election**

Farrar, Brown and Carter have made the decision, for one reason or another, to participate in New Zealand politics by running a blog and sharing their political thoughts and opinions. In doing so they have drawn others to participate, whether that participation is just reading the posts or more actively contributing by commenting on what they have said. Hide's reasons and motivations to blog, it could be suggested, differ from those of the other bloggers in this study. The more noble pursuits of democratic debate or the engaging in political philosophy possibly run second, in the case of Hide, to self-promotion and electioneering for the party vote – all important in proportional representation political environment.

By far the majority of blogs on the internet are thought to be personal sites (70 percent by one count) that contain reflections on the everyday life of individuals (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004). Many are written for a primary audience of the other

bloggers to whom they regularly link (although most are available to anyone without restriction).

An important point that should be noted about the use of blogs in the 2005 election campaign goes beyond “how” they were used and considers the fact they “were” used. That is, people got online and participated in discussions about politics. This can truly be considered a step toward a more democratic society. As has been previously established (see Chapter Two), there has been a decline in public political discussion in recent years. The gathering of a community in the town hall to listen to a politician outline their vision for society, and the opportunity to question them about issues, now seems quaint. This role has been assumed by the mass media and the messages they carry are managed by politicians and their communication professionals. The public has by and large been removed from the process. These recent developments in communication technology have allowed people to be transformed from passive observers of politics to active participants in the process.

Despite the claims that blogs were only a fad that would disappear from the New Zealand political media in the next election cycle (Fitzjohn & Salmond, 2007), blogs have in fact established themselves as part of the current political landscape. Throughout the world studies have shown their ongoing role in the entire election process, including and especially elections in Canada, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Poland and the US (Griffiths, 2004a; Trammel et al., 2006a; Keren, 2004; Hopkins & Matheson, 2005). Farrar claimed that he had 40,000 individuals visit his blog each week in July 2005 and other blogs reported to have had an increase in the number of site visits in the months leading up to the election. While the numbers were still relatively small, there is an indication that blogs have developed to a point where they can be considered to play a functional and multifaceted role within politics, especially when you consider they were effectively nonexistent in the 2002 election. Blogs, and the technologies that provide them, are not the answer to many of politics’ woes. The diminishing participation in the process, along with falling numbers of voters around the world, will not be resolved by this technology, as it has not been addressed by any previous communication technology. New technologies have often been a part of larger social changes as discussed in chapter two. For example the pamphleteers such as Thomas Paine emerged as a political force both

because of the printing technology available to them but also because of the rise of ideas of freedom and the weakening of upper-class power. Radio was a significant social force during World War 2, both for establishing the power of National Socialism in Germany and for transmitting messages of resistance in occupied Europe (Welch, 2002). As a result, new technologies, although initially radical or apparently dramatic in effect, have soon become established parts of the broader media environment. However, the differences between media prior to the internet and the current series of internet communication tools differ like the political philosophies of socialism and democracy. What is known today as the mainstream media is presented to the public as a product determined by media élites, whereas blogs allow people to be involved to the extent that each individual determines, if they choose to participate at all. This transformation has seen the growth of a sub-politics where the processes that shape society rise from the bottom up (Beck, 1992). A good example of this is the rise of the internet in China where the Chinese Government has been forced to halt protests because they had started via internet communication. The government's concern was less about the issue being protested and more about the ability for people to organise activities and create a movement.

### **6.2.1 Blogging Styles and Political Discussion in the 2005 New Zealand General Election**

There is no other way to interpret political blogs other than as partisan writings. The blogs examined in the study gained readership often through their sharp, highly partisan commentary on public affairs and through their role as focal points where others can find the latest topical links and discussions – or more precisely, what the blogger deems those topics to be. New Zealand political blogs were without exception politically aligned towards a specific party or ideology. Farrar and Carter were both often providing cheerleader style posts for their respective parties and Brown was, while in a more considered and intellectual approach, providing the political left with favoured posts. Hide was never going to be anything but supportive of his own actions – anything else would be irrational. Munger (2007) asks if the blogosphere generates truth or truthfulness and suggests that in elections such concepts are needed but often absent. What was seen in the New Zealand political blogosphere in 2005 was subjective perspective. Facts, for the bloggers, were not always necessarily

considered, and if it was upheld as a standard, the facts could have worked against the party lines that they were pushing. This is particularly so with Carter, and to a lesser extent, Farrar and Brown.

Media stories that were referred to in posts were also interpreted through a bloggers' political ideology. When referring to media reports from election associated issues, bloggers would refer to media bias if they did not portray a party in a positive light. This was also the case with political commentators and polls. In this respect, New Zealand blogs reflect wider trends. Research in the United States in particular suggests that bloggers are motivated to take part in political debate because of their strong political attachments.

Blogging affords bloggers an opportunity to assert an individual style in their posts, unlike more traditional forms of media. Brown's blog writing can best be compared to an opinion piece or column that one is able to read in a daily newspaper.

Traditionally, these are known to be subjective in nature and have, certainly in the Anglo-American traditions of journalism that have dominated in the twentieth century, a lesser status as news. What differentiates a column or opinion piece from journalism are the regularity of its appearance in a publication, the fact it is personality driven, and its inherently subjective point of view. Posts from Farrar, Carter and Hide could be likened to brain dumps. Many of their posts contain the types of spelling and grammatical errors that attest to the posts not being proofread by the writer or even read back before posting. Their posts often had a narrow focus and frequently covered a single issue; however, one familiar trend common to all the posts, including Brown's, was the politically subjective nature of the content.

There are a number of differences in how Brown, Carter and Farrar present politics and how this is discussed within their blogs. There is a level of complexity to the public debate which Brown is seeking to contribute to and promote. He does not simply address one issue but rather a number of inter-related issues. When Farrar and Carter's writing is contrasted with that of Brown, there is an obvious politicisation of information as opposed to information and analysis mixed together. There are two suggestions that can be offered in this regard. Firstly, the politicisation of information acts as evidence of the previous claim that Carter and Farrar's posts are motivated by

their ideological perspective and they were less upfront about this. Secondly, Brown and Farrar/Carter are filling different roles within the blogosphere. Farrar was more inclined to start discussions whereas Brown was outlining the discussion parameters and providing analysis on this. That is, Farrar was focused more on the process of analysis that he would share with his readers, engaging in discussion with them in the comments section and allowing an organic development of ideas, whereas Brown's blog focused on the product, with readers given fully formed and complete thoughts. Gillmor (2004) would give higher regard to the Carter and Farrar approach to blogging as he is a proponent of the philosophy that suggests "audiences know more than me". Brown's blogging style is more in line with traditional forms of public debate or presentation of opinions, comparable to newspaper columns. Farrar and Carter were promoting a different kind of discussion that challenges the role of deliberation around political issues. From the content analysis, Carter's blog was shown to be so politically aligned to the Labour Party and the discussions held within Carter's comments section could be deemed detrimental to development of any deliberative process rather than going some way to advance the deliberation on issues. Farrar, while having a strong association with the National Party, was prepared to criticise the party if he was personally opposed to any of their actions. His performance in his comments section when discussing issues with others showed Farrar inclined to enter into communication that sought to develop ideas and while doing so maintained a higher standard of interaction than Carter.

Although Farrar's and Carter's blogs are comparable under the broad definition of what a blog is, in how they functioned and general content, to contend Farrar and Carter had a similar approach to blogging is not realistic when considering their nature in relation to public sphere theory's rules for communicative interaction. Habermas' rules for communicative action demand certain criteria be upheld. Dahlberg (2001) says analysis of communication reveals that every participant engaged in moral-practical discourse makes reference to a number of pragmatic presuppositions and thus to a set of normative conditions of the public sphere. These criteria include rational-critical discourse that is open to criticism and critique as opposed to ideas and opinions being dogmatically asserted. In the blogs studied for this thesis there was little reflection on cultural values, assumptions, and interests within a larger social context, and because of the strong links with political parties,

there was certainly a lack of concern for the New Zealand public outside of having their respective political philosophy in power to implement an economic and social programme. Carter's blog did not allow for rational-critical debate in the same way Farrar's did as Carter tended toward a more provocative style in his posts, which was reflected in the comments section. Brown's not having a comments section as part of his blog, as well as reinforcing the traditional column archetype, distances him from the conditions to be appropriate under Habermas' ideal. Hide on the other hand, while having a comments section that saw some robust and fiery debate, did not participate in any of the discussions.

The strategic nature of blogs should not be overlooked. In trying to determine an ideal speech situation, Habermas (1979) suggested participants in a discussion do not behave strategically; however the bloggers in this study were all strategic in some way. During interviews for this thesis, discussed further in the next chapter, bloggers stated they would often choose to avoid writing anything that could be detrimental to the wider cause. Farrar, when writing about Winston Peters' allegations of inappropriate behaviour from the National Party candidate for the Tauranga electorate, Bob Clarkson, did not link to any of the media coverage that was associated with this incident. This is despite this being a widely reported story during the campaign. Brown is often criticised in the blogosphere for not writing anything negative about Labour. If Helen Clark was being criticised about her performance or Labour had run into trouble, Brown, some right wing bloggers anecdotally suggest, would post about internet developments or the latest Play Station games. This research found there is some element of truth to that claim; although Brown was more likely to attack National than Labour, on a limited number of occasions he did critically comment on Labour. Carter admits to avoiding writing anything to fuel any negative story about Labour. Within the wider New Zealand blogosphere, some of the bloggers from Sir Humphries would meet in person to discuss matters pertaining to the blog and how to use it. Other meetings between bloggers also took place, but these were often in a social setting and advertised on various blogs.

The different styles of individual bloggers make it difficult to construct judgements about blogging and the election. There are generalisations that can be made that based solely on the content analysis, but what is interesting about the blogs here is that in

many ways they are more similar than they are different. While the number of participants is few, the amount of data gathered from them clearly shows a number of trends, such as political alliance, regular posting, using mainstream media as a source and using their blogs as a way to inform readers. Many of the larger differences found are in the attitudes behind the practice and are more apparent in a qualitative sense.

### **6.3 Blogs and Mainstream Journalism**

A common criticism of blogs is that they are too reliant on existing media for their content. Blogs often cut and paste sections of text from online news reports and have it in posts as content. Along with possible copyright infringement it could be considered a lazy way to generate post content. There is nothing necessarily disingenuous or wrong with this practice other than it bases all following comment and analysis on the text as opposed to bloggers seeking alternative information to add to a wider discussion of events and issues. A common criticism, in the content of the claim that bloggers provide a richer debate than news journalism is flawed because of their reliance on mainstream media to provide many of their writing topics. That is if the mainstream did not cover issues then blogs probably would not have conducted discussions on the issues. This reliance certainly weakens the claim of some bloggers to be creating a better form of journalism and richer public debate. If the mainstream media did not cover issues then blogs probably would not have conducted discussions on those issues. The relationship is therefore more complex than the claim that blogging beats journalism at its own game, as Sullivan (2004a), discussed in chapter two, proposes.

The provision of information was the most common reason for bloggers to post, however in doing so there were some effects for the reader in consuming these posts. By providing information in their posts, the bloggers were bringing attention to issues that readers may not necessarily have been aware of, in a similar way to someone picking up a newspaper and reading a political story. In the course of bloggers providing political information there are similarities between the role of a blog and mainstream media/journalism. That is, the blog acts like a source of information in a way that has previously been the almost sole domain of the mainstream media. An

example of this could be that when someone turns on their computer in the morning, an RSS feeder has compiled a list of posts that have recently been made and these posts contain information that is sourced from a news story. As well as being an easy way for the blogger to construct a post, directing readers to a media story and offering an opinion on the content also has a social consequence that is worthy of note. The impact on a reader of a blog, before they have had an opportunity to develop their own opinions of a media report quoted in a post, presented by a recognised opinion leader, can invoke a parrot effect. This occurs when a blog reader is less inclined to challenge the blogger's stated point of view, and go as far as repeating the writings as their own opinion, as to avoid being in conflict with a known opinion leader's views on a political party's position.

It is still reasonably rare for blogs to "break" a major news story. The Dan Rather and Trent Lott affairs are often touted as examples, and a more recent example is Mayhill Fowler's post on the Huffington Post, a website and blog, where she revealed Barack Obama's comment that small-town American voters "cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them" (Helmore, 2008). In New Zealand these instances where blogs penetrated the media were few and reasonably inconsequential (Fitzjohn & Salmond, 2007). The best instance of a New Zealand blog post breaking into the media covered by this research was when blogger Aaron Bhatnagar reported that Labour Cabinet Minister Judith Tizard had walked out of a meeting, allegedly stating that she deemed the meeting to be of little political value because the media had not been invited. His posting, at 9.49pm on the night of the meeting, was picked up by another blogger, Peter Cresswell (Not PC), at 8.53am the next day. Other blogs started linking to these sites and *The New Zealand Herald* printed a story two days after the meeting, on 13 September, 2005. *The New Zealand Herald* journalist who wrote the story, Claire Trevett, admitted she discovered the incident on David Farrar's [kiwiblog.co.nz](http://kiwiblog.co.nz), who linked back to the original posting by Bhatnagar. She also acknowledges that she, along with colleagues at *The New Zealand Herald*, used blogs as a source for other stories. While not a story of great importance, it does demonstrate that the highest profile blogs are well read among journalists and others within the political elite. But does this suggest that bloggers are journalists, or a least performing journalism? Helmore (2008) writes that the distinction between journalist and blogger becomes blurred, however these instances are more exception than rule.

While this thesis does not suggest that blogging and journalism are similar or even truly comparable activities, it does agree with Matheson (2004) that blogs have gone some way to revolutionise journalism by commenting on, and contribution to, news stories. Hiler (2002a) has suggested, and this thesis concurs, that topics discussed in blogs largely represent an extension of commentary found in other news media.

In regards to Habermas' public sphere theory, there was never any pressure for the coffee house discussions to introduce new information, but rather to reflect on the issues of the day. Like blogs the coffee houses were not agenda setters, but played the role of a space for discussion. With this in mind perhaps it is unreasonable to expect blogs to perform this role simply because the technology allows for the transmission of messages to a potential mass audience. The connection between blogging and mainstream journalism is considered further in the next chapter.

### **6.3.1 Blogs as an Echo Chamber**

From the blogs considered in this content analysis there were clearly two primary sources for blog content that was engendered by mainstream media stories, nzherald.co.nz and stuff.co.nz. The other notable source for generating content was news resource and press release website scoop.co.nz. Wallsten (2005) sums up his definition of the echo chamber effect in the blogosphere (see Chapter Two) stating that "calling the political blogosphere an echo chamber suggests that the political expression found on political blogs is closely related to, if not entirely derivative of, the content of mainstream media coverage" (p. 7). This is not, however, always the case as can be seen in the analysis of the posts of 40 A-list blogs over the period of two months preceding the US Presidential Election of 2004, which did not find evidence of an echo-chamber effect in conservative blogs (Adami & Glance, 2005).

In the New Zealand context, only having two main newspaper organisations has led to something of an echo chamber in the political blogosphere. Rather than the echo effect being different voices saying the same thing, there is, like Wallsten (2005) described, a collection of the same issues being covered based on existing media reports. The mainstream media sets the agenda for the discussions within the blogosphere. Bloggers are in a losing battle with the mainstream press, which, say

Hennessy and Martin (2006), continues to set the agenda based on conventions of objective journalism, a tradition that stipulates a reliance on official, and likely governmental, sources. However, Hennessy and Martin's premise is based on the assumption that bloggers actually would like to be performing the same role as journalists, which in the case of this study is not the case (discussed further in Chapter Seven). The bloggers in this study would suggest they are simply exercising their rights, which are offered in a democracy, to express their opinions on the issues of the day. The echo chamber effect is a consequence of people (bloggers) with similar interests obtaining their information from limited sources (mainstream media).

When the source of the post was non-media sources there was much less of an echo chamber effect and these types of posts also allowed for a better reflection of the individuality of the bloggers. Carter (36.8 percent of non-media links) and Farrar (32.1 percent of non-media links) were far more likely to provide personal opinions than Brown and Hide. This corresponds with other research where "opinion posts" were the most common post (Tremayne, Zhen, Lee & Jeong, 2006).

Where the source was not a media outlet the results of this study are skewed because of Rodney Hide's use of his blog as a source of personal promotion throughout the campaign period. Talking about himself in the role of a politician significantly increased the instances of ACT politicians being the source of a post. The way Hide uses his blog are considered in more depth in Chapter Eight.

The context is important for understanding many of the findings in this study. Such is the case with the echo chamber effect. To brush off the blogosphere as being a total echo chamber is not valid as this term is only relevant in a political context where voices are many and sources are few. It is possibly unreasonable to expect a blogger, who writes in their spare time, to track down sources and investigate data before making their post. With blogging being an amateur activity it is not surprising there will be some repetition of discussion around issues and opinions, but it does not remove the validity of the writings by bloggers. This indicates that blogs did not set the agenda for the media or for the public, and that any discussion of the public sphere needs to acknowledge the enormous continuing power of mainstream media to shape that sphere. This is also a finding in a UK based study which concluded blogs had

little influence on the agenda of mainstream media (Collister, 2008). This finding offers an alternative view to the often stated criticism of blogs being an echo chamber. It is not simply that the echo chamber theory might be too reductive and obvious given the self-referential world of blogs, but it is a theory that is actually challenged by this finding.

#### 6.4 Blogs' Influence on the Discussion of Issues

New Zealand's small population makes it inevitable that a few bloggers will dominate the blogosphere, and when these people are already within existing networks or structures there is a tendency that they will refer to the same topics. Brown and Carter's tendency to focus on political polls (22.4% of topics covered in posts, see Section 5.5) is in line with the current trend in mainstream media to concentrate on the "horse race" rather than any substance within a campaign, such as the policies offered up by the parties. The horse race concept suggests that election news is based primarily on the notion of winners and losers, and this can be an easy way to report and interpret election coverage. It is a common and concerning practice and bloggers' frequent reference to polls is comparable with observations made by academics and practitioners, who have stated that election news focus has become more focused on which politician is ahead in the polls, than on the political process and important issues (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1994).

**Table 36: Top Election Issues**

The NZ Herald/DigiPoll	Blogs (Policy Related Only)	Blogs (All Issues)
1. Tax	1. Tax	1. Tax
2. Health	2= Student Loans	2= Election campaign (polls)
3. Education	Maori Issues	Election campaign (roadshow)
4. Law & Order	4. Education	4. Election campaign (leadership)
5. Welfare	5. News Media	5. Election campaign (style)
6. Economy	6= Economic Policy	6. Election campaign (candidates)
7. Student Loans	Business Development	7. Election campaign (other)
8. Unemployment	Social Welfare	Election campaign (coalition)
9. Moral Issues	Housing	8= Election campaign
10. Immigration	7. Health	Maori Issues

*The New Zealand Herald/DigiPoll* survey (see Table 36) conducted during the campaign showed that tax and health were the issues of greatest concern to voters (Tax greatest concern to voters says poll, 2005). This was followed by education, law and order, welfare, the economy and student loans. Until May 2005, tax only rated as an issue for 5.8 percent of respondents, but after the Budget and policy releases from National and Labour the issue rocketed to being important to 22.5 percent of respondents. The topics posted by bloggers coded for this study showed a correlation with these concerns in that tax was the most discussed issue during the campaign with the issue accounting for 15.5 percent of all posts, although the parallels ended there. The second most frequent issues were responsible for 3.3 percent each. The cost of the interest-free students loans and tax cuts that were offered by Labour and National respectively came under a lot of scrutiny by bloggers, who deconstructed both the policies and the figures that the parties were claiming.

The difference between the topics bloggers choose to post about and the results of the survey show there is a gap between the blogosphere and what the media are reporting – or at least what topics are important to voters. *The New Zealand Herald/DigiPoll* results are not associated with the amount of media coverage the issues received, but how important the issues were to respondents of the survey. The issues that the public placed importance on, other than tax, were different from those of the bloggers. Although the content analysis showed a link between the media being used as a source and post content, Table 36 shows that bloggers are prepared to post about issues that are of importance to them. It also shows that bloggers place different weight on issues from the voting electorate.

The list of topics used in this study was based on that of Fountaine (2002) and McGregor (1995) (to view the list see Appendix 1 or for discussion see section 4.10), who used the list in relation to newspapers, however, the list is less suitable to online communication as can be seen from the content analysis findings. There is a need to add or modify categories in this table to adjust to a new media environment and style of politics. It was clear that blogs, like mainstream media, had a focus on the election campaign, political scandals and the horse race, and the list needs to reflect this more precisely. For example, in the 2005 campaign there was frequent reporting on political scandals, such as Helen Clark's speeding motorcade and her approaching a pilot in the

cockpit for his making inappropriate comments, while Don Brash and the National Party were defending their relationship with Exclusive Brethren. These types of instances need to be recorded with better clarity and categorisation in future research.

## **6.5 Blogs as a Space for Deliberative Discussion**

This study considers normative public sphere theory, as developed by Habermas (1989). When the findings from the content analysis coding are contextualised by his criteria for the public sphere, they raise some interesting points. For example like the coffee houses he describes, blogs act as a location for individuals to come together to discuss issues without the need for status (although that does help) and anyone can join the discussion. However, participants within the blogosphere were more interested in their own politics and there was a hesitancy to critically examine their values, assumptions, and interests which made seeing the perspectives of others difficult.

Theoretically it is possible for people in New Zealand to set up and maintain a weblog as the ability to access the internet and free blog software is widespread. The motivation for people to start and maintain a political blog in New Zealand is the subject for another thesis, although there is research to explain this on a macro level (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht & Swartz, 2004). Factors that would prevent a person participating in the blogosphere are more likely to be issues such as literacy and economic capability, although centres in New Zealand, such as libraries, provide free internet access. These barriers to blog participation differ greatly to those Habermas' described in Western Europe during the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century. At that time there was less tolerance of women's participation in politics, or discussion about politics, and the lower social class were also often left out of public debate.

In democratic societies there has been a shift away from public communication through discussion to mass communication through the media. Wright Mills (1956) viewed the differences of mass and public as being:

In a public, ... (1) virtually as many people express opinions as receive them, (2) Public communications are so organised that there is a chance immediately and effectively to answer back any opinion expressed in public. Opinion formed by such discussion (3) readily finds an outlet in

effective action, even against – if necessary – the prevailing system of authority. And (4) authoritative institutions do not penetrate the public, which is thus more or less autonomous in its operations.

In a *mass*, (1) far fewer people express opinions than receive them; for the community of publics becomes an abstract collection of individuals who receive impressions from the mass media. (2) The communications that prevail are so organised that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect. (3) The realisation of opinion in action is controlled by authorities who organise and control the channels of such action. (4) The mass has no autonomy from institutions; on the contrary, agents of authorised institutions penetrate this mass, reducing any autonomy it may have in the formation of opinion by discussion. (p. 304)

Based on Wright Mills' definition, and the results of the content analysis confirm this, blogs can be described as being a public communication. The comments section in this study allowed blog readers to feed into a discussion and participate by sharing their ideas and opinions as well as responding to those of others.

Sunstein (2008) says it should be clear that the Habermasian view of the blogosphere faces a particular problem if people are reading blogs that conform to their own pre-existing beliefs. However, in New Zealand there appears to be a different blogosphere emerging to that in the US, where readers of blogs are prepared to read across political boundaries and engage with political differences rather than avoid them. In a sense the listening to all voices, no matter where they come from, is what Habermas was hoping for when writing about the public sphere. The US political blogosphere is evolving as a number of political community-based spheres within the wider public sphere – invisible philosophical borders separating differing world views.

The 1703 comments that comprised this study were composed by 338 individuals – or at least that number of different comment identification tags. The content analysis showed one-third of all comments were made by 10 individuals. This small number of regular commenters engaging in discussion is too small to constitute a representation of the wider population. With 153 people only making one comment it is difficult to say that this, while important in the infancy of online political discussion, is going anyway to become a conversation. These single comments, which allow a person to voice their opposition to something that has been said or to correct information, are

still important in the overall development of discussions and can assist readers in creating an understanding of an issue. Why though make one comment and then leave a conversation or not participate in further discussions? Previous studies go some way towards answering this problematic question. There are indications that it is the way people behave in online discussions that deter others from becoming involved. Often people, when leaving a comment, focus their attention toward the blogger and reinforce the points that have been presented but sometimes disagreeing on points of philosophy, politics or social comment, and in doing so opinions are expressed in a way that is derogatory toward the blogger (Jacobs, 2003). Papacharissi (2004a) says such messages pose a threat to democracy and, by their very nature, thwart the development of a public sphere. Trotter (2006) draws attention to “the viciousness of the (mostly) young New Zealand males who inhabit this fetid environment. Their hostility towards the Left extends far beyond honest disagreements between fair-minded citizens over how best to organise human society” (p. 4). This research casts doubt on Trotter’s claim that the nastiness is solely the domain of the right. Paul, the most frequent user of ad hominem attacks identified himself as being a supporter of the left and his attacks were directed at those in the blogosphere who identified themselves as being on the political right. His attacks also included those who were not present in the sphere, such as the National Party leader, Don Brash. In one instance he refers to Brash as “a pathological liar”. The second and third most frequent users of ad hominem attacks, Insolent Prick and Adolf Fiinkensein, were very much of a right-wing political point of view.

The criteria for participation within the public sphere, this is, open to all participants, no constraints imposed on participants and participants would be of equal status, require those doing so to engage with one another in rational-critical discourse by avoiding the use of emotion or emotive language, focusing on the rationality of the content and having common interest in truth (Calhoun, 1992; Thornton, 1996). In doing this participants within the blogosphere should be able to find meaning from the ideas of others even if consensus is not achieved, but the discussions as described above fall outside of these criteria leaving those involved without the positive outcomes of healthy debate and with a possible sense of frustration and futility. The content analysis also showed people in the comments section were prepared to discuss issues by using assertion. In fact they were inclined twice as often to use

unsubstantiated statements as they were to offer a comment that could be ratified or backed up. For Habermas this is not good enough. If his public sphere theory requires the media are to uphold certain standards then for blogs to share any sense of legitimacy they need to adhere to these normative values and seek to provide information that is accurate, collaborative and free from commercial or political prejudice. This is directly related to Habermas' call for validity in the claims of participants. While persuasion is an acceptable part of a communicative encounter this must be achieved through social norms of interpersonal action and the normative rightness of what is being argued – both are areas the blogosphere falls short on. Calhoun (1992) would suggest that this kind of finding reminds us of the limitations of Habermas' theory as well as the limitations of actual debate. Habermas overlooked forms of public debate where the emotive and the sensational play a role alongside the rational-critical, and it is an open question whether these forms of debate contribute to debate. However, they certainly do not do so in terms of a model that requires participants to be rational, collaborative and people judged by the quality of their arguments.

The confrontational style of discussion that is present in the New Zealand political blogosphere reflects that of the New Zealand's Westminster-style parliamentary system where opposing parties confront one another to debate issues. The US style of government is less directly confrontational but more polarising. It is interesting that the corresponding political blogospheres reflect these qualities. This suggests there are wider social norms that determine the rules for online discussions. This subject is beyond the scope of this thesis but deserves further exploration, as based on this current study it is difficult to say if one is better or worse than the other.

One of the common criticisms of conversations in the blogosphere is the lack of rational discussion and the ability for participants in the sphere to reach a consensus. The rational-critical debate arising from a public sphere, says Habermas (1989), "was supposed to transform *voluntas* into a *ratio* that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all" (p. 83). Here Habermas suggests rational debate in the public sphere will conclude with the formation of public opinion. The content analysis of the 2005 political blogosphere saw little in the way of discussion that sought to achieve

any sense of collective agreement. There were instances where information was shared in order to achieve better understanding, such as with the actual cost of the student loan scheme. However, information sharing did little to overcome the differences in political philosophies; once agreement was reached on the total cost the discussion continued on the merit of such a policy and no agreement was reached here. The behaviour of some in the comments sections was such that it was very difficult to engage in rational discussion. The use of divisive language and personal attacks indicated that some participants purposefully attempted to hijack any real discussion from proceeding. This is not to suggest there was no discussion taking place. Commenters were discussing and debating issues and opinions throughout the campaign period. There was a lot of personal engagement between individuals where questions and feedback were traded. In many respects the sharing of information was more prevalent than any level of consensus and because of this the New Zealand political blogosphere is developing into an information trading post as opposed to a place where common ground is achieved. Along these lines, Posner (2004) believes that the blogosphere, because of its size and the number of people involved, could become a way of collecting dispersed information. Sunstein (2008) says it is also important that reasons and information are being exchanged in a way that can lead to corrections and real creativity.

The 2005 New Zealand General Election was regarded by a number of commentators to have possibly been the dirtiest campaign in New Zealand's history (Alley, 2005; Milne, 2005; Clifton, 2006). This was illustrated a number of times by politicians personally attacking each other, even well after the election, resulting in the Prime Minister referring to the National Party leader, Don Brash, as corrosive and cancerous, an attack that seemed to genuinely surprise the New Zealand public and political pundits. Instances like these created a wash of comment and discussion in the blogosphere and the muckraking and sleaze that was featuring in the campaign, via the mainstream media, was being mirrored online. Rather than setting fresh and radical agendas for mediated politics, blogs on public affairs make most sense when regarded as reflecting already existing competing agendas surrounding the election campaign. The campaign strategy of the Opposition National Party sought to foster a sense of dissatisfaction with the two-term incumbent Labour-led Government. National's main slogan was "Change the Government" and its highly prominent

billboard campaign was less about its main policy platform of tax cuts than about presenting Labour as failing to deliver sound government and National as the party of common sense.

When considering the research question regarding the blogosphere's relationship with deliberative democracy, this research shows blogs often fall short of the high standard Habermas set for his theory of public sphere and deliberation; however, there were also instances where Habermas' ideal was approached more closely. With this finding being so inconclusive, what then are we left with? The content analysis shows us issues, opinions and ideas were presented in the posts and discussions around the posts were conducted in the comments section. This finding in itself is significant. Without the internet and the communication technology that drives blogs, this communicative interaction would never have taken place. All those who participated in the blogosphere, by means of writing posts or comments, or even just reading, could not have done so and would have remained at the mercy of mainstream media for all of their political and election information. By the manifestation of discussion of the events of the 2005 New Zealand General Election through blogs, we can state firmly a public sphere was formed. However, it is from this point that the contrast between the public sphere in this research and that describe by Habermas becomes problematic. It becomes so because the evidence from the content analysis demonstrates that the criteria for public sphere is not always clearly reached. There are instances where these ideals are approached, and sometimes even passed, but on many occasions they fall short. The posts were often partisan and, in the case of Hide, used for publicity and electioneering. The way the posts were presented by the blogger was often for purposes other than seeking a deliberative outcome, thus rendering them democratic in nature, in that people could participate, but not deliberatively democratic because consensus was not sought and/or reached. The comments sections were similar in that there were occasions where discussion occurred, where information was shared and arguments were built and challenged, but unfortunately, this was not the norm.

This thesis has previously discussed the news media's preference for covering the election strategy and the leadership horse race during a campaign, and the known criticisms of this practice were also stated. What has been seen in this study is a

similar result from blogs, although the blogosphere differs from the media in that it does not hold to key journalistic principles like balance and objectivity. Like the media, the blogosphere has a penchant for “gaffes” and “blunders”. The result of this was a bandwagon effect where any media report portraying a politician, in a negative sense, was embraced by opposition bloggers and presented in a way that can be described as an attempt to persuade readers to vote in a particular way. For example, Farrar took the opportunity to portray Helen Clark as an arrogant, out of touch leader on a number of occasions after she reprimanded an Air New Zealand pilot for comments he made over the airplane’s public address system. Carter and Brown took every opportunity to associate Don Brash with the Exclusive Brethren, much of which was speculation and assertion. This in many respects represents a challenge to agenda-setting theory as blogs not only want to tell you what to think about, but attempt to tell people what to think.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored some of the key findings in relation to the role of blogs in providing a place to discuss politics and looking at the blogosphere in relation to Habermas normative ideal for a public sphere. The content analysis results have implications for how politics is discussed in the environment of internet and communication technologies. It is encouraging to see people connecting and discussing issues that are not only covered in the media, but are also important specifically to them. While the blogosphere does not discriminate on the basis of gender or social position, it does demand a level of political acumen and knowledge to allow for rational debate, as it is here that a person is judged in the blogosphere. Although people are gathering and using the blogosphere as a communication tool, the current norms do not create the venue Habermas describes. While some of the rules for communication outlined by Habermas’ in his writing about 18-19<sup>th</sup> century coffee houses are met by the blogosphere, such as participation of women, the failure to reach agreement through deliberation is highlighted in the content analysis because of the behaviours of some participants. If blogs are not being used to reach consensus on issues, or if they are used to reach agreement but are unsuccessful, they fall short of the expectations outlined by public sphere theory. They do, however, allow for the

sharing of information to raise the level of wider knowledge that future discussions can be built on.

## Chapter Seven

### Interviews with New Zealand Political Bloggers

#### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the findings of the content analysis and is associated with the fifth research question of this thesis; how did bloggers perceive their role in communicating election information and engendering discussions around issues? To answer this question, interviews were conducted with a number of prominent New Zealand bloggers who posted regularly about matters around politics. The chapter will initially outline the importance of interviews as a data collection method and the methodological considerations as they apply to this study. As this study sought to understand how blogs were used as a way of discussing politics, it made sense to talk with those who were offering their thoughts and opinions on issues and also about their personal experiences while blogging. To achieve this outcome the use of qualitative interviews is a logical choice.

The second part of the chapter will give a background to the bloggers and examine the statements and observations made by the participants during the interviews. The bloggers can only be considered experts in that they are describing their own experiences and how they interpret them and make sense of others. This, according to Seidman (1991) is what interviewing, as a methodology, best offers.

One major point of difference this study has from those undertaken by Gumbrecht (2004) and Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht (2004), is that this current study consists of a population as opposed to a sample of bloggers. New Zealand's population of four million people make it an ideal and feasible location to undertake a holistic study of the political blogosphere in a democracy. In the lead-up to the 2005 election the number of political bloggers was in the tens and of these only a handful were updated regularly or even semi-regularly. Even fewer of these blogs commanded a wide-ranging audience – a judgement based entirely on the number of comments made to a post. The poor quality of writing and atypical points of views made in the posts can go some of the way to explain the low readership. Interviews were conducted with the writers of every prominent individually-authored political blog that was active during

the election period. The only exceptions to significant bloggers participating were when two bloggers were unavailable at the time the interviews were being conducted.

These interviews were conducted in order to better understand the experiences gained by bloggers who immersed themselves into the New Zealand political blogosphere, both as individuals who regularly posted their thoughts or comments on their blog and as those who may have also engaged in discussions in the comments section. By committing their time and attention to the events within the blogosphere these people gained an insight that few others would have had the opportunity to develop. In getting to know the issues of the campaign, such as free-student loans and tax cuts, or by regularly reading what the mainstream media were reporting and how they were reporting the issues, they built a position of understanding and experience.

## **7.2 Interviews as a Data Collection Method**

Interviews are a common form of data collection that are used in a number of settings, for example market research, political polling and academic analysis. They are an accepted means of data gathering (Anderson, 1987). They can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Within qualitative approaches to communication research, interviews are a useful form of data collection because they allow exploration of perspectives and perceptions (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

A total of 12 interviews were conducted during November and December 2005, closely following the September election. While the sequence of questions was not strictly the same for each interviewee, the interview guide ensured that similar types of data were collected from all the participants (see Appendix 5).

This study used one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews to obtain perspective, ideas, views or experiences from the participants. The semi-structured interview is one of the most frequently used qualitative methods of data collection (Selman, 1980), and was employed in this study to gather the needed information from bloggers. All interviews were conducted by the researcher. The interviews lasted approximately an hour and they were all recorded and transcribed.

An issue with interviews as a way of getting information is the question of whether researchers should focus on what the participants have done, or are doing, or the way they express themselves about what they have done or are doing (Berger, 2000). This point is relevant to this study as some of the participants became quite animated about some of the issues raised by this study, especially any discussion of bloggers from the opposite side of the political spectrum. However, this thesis will only use the information as presented in the transcriptions of the interview and only comment on the way something was said if it is deemed particularly pertinent. Data from interviews has its limitations because participants only report their perceptions and experiences on what has happened. Those perceptions are subject to personal bias, anger, and lack of awareness (Patton, 1990). Interview data is also subject to the participant reacting to the interviewer and providing self-serving responses.

The interviews focused in on several issues, the role of their blog in the election, their political position, the role of the blogosphere as a place for discussing political issues, mainstream media coverage of the election, and the comparison of bloggers to journalists.

The results of the content analysis conducted as part of this study showed how often posts were made, reasons for the post, the topics of the post, the relationship of the post to existing media stories, and also who made the comments and how comments were made. This data is valuable in creating a picture of political blogging but it does not provide the qualitative information that is needed to get a full understanding of the “scene”. The nature of content analysis can not provide the answers to such questions as to how other blogs and the media influenced posts, personal views and opinions of the worth of the blogosphere or what the importance of the participatory nature of democracy is to bloggers in an online context. Interviews also allow for the exploration of previous political participation and behaviour.

The content analysis has provided some answers to research questions one and two and this chapter attempts to address research questions three, four and five (see Section 1.4). This chapter looks to find the significance of the blogging practice of the participants and how the bloggers perceived their role in enhancing deliberative democracy through discussion, while comparing this information with the findings of

the content analysis conducted in the thesis. Relationships between bloggers and the media, and how media utilised the blogosphere are also focused on.

### **7.3 Previous Interview-Based Blogger Research**

Because blogs and the blogosphere are developing areas of research, there is limited, but growing, empirical data available. However, much of the blogging research to date has been conducted around the motivation of bloggers (Gumbrecht, 2004; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht & Swartz, 2004). These studies found that motivations for blogging included the documentation of one's life; providing commentary and opinions; working out emotional issues; "thinking by writing"; and promoting conversation and community. Popular media have salivated over the authors of high profile American blogs such as the DrudgeReport, Wonkette, and Andrew Sullivan's The Daily Dish; however, there remains much to be asked still of bloggers about their intentions and self-understandings with respect to blogs as a space of public discussion.

One of the few New Zealand studies to interview with bloggers is Fitzjohn and Salmond (2007). They looked at the impact blogs may have had on influencing the outcome of the 2005 New Zealand General Election and also what influence, either direct or indirect, blogs had on media coverage. While Fitzjohn and Salmond are unable to offer any credible empirical data to substantiate many of their claims, in the course of their book chapter, bloggers are quoted as being experts. The bloggers were asked to identify media stories during the election campaign that were influenced in some way by blog discussions. The findings from these interviews, with which this thesis would concur, is that blogs had little impact on wider mainstream media coverage. Fitzjohn and Salmond did not appear to ask questions about bloggers interpretation of others in the New Zealand political blogosphere, views on wider media coverage and the importance of deliberative democracy to the bloggers. Their research was also limited to a few bloggers as opposed to this thesis attempt to gain information from all of the important bloggers in 2005.

### **7.4 Interpreting Interview Data and Findings Categories**

Qualitative researchers face the challenge of interpreting and making sense of their interview data. The interpretation of data is at the core of qualitative research (Flick, 2002).

Mason (2002) states three ways that interview data can be interpreted: liberal, interpretative and reflexive. This study will use the interpretative approach to look for meaning or representation in the data:

An interpretative reading will involve you constructing or documenting a version of what you think the data mean or represent, or what you think you can infer from them. (p. 109)

The first decision to be made when analysing interview data is whether to begin with case analysis or cross-case analysis (Patton, 1990). Beginning with case analysis means writing a case study for each person interviewed and to begin with cross-case would mean grouping together different answers from different people.

This research uses cross-case analysis to establish connections among participants. The interview transcripts were examined for important trends, themes and concepts, and the commonality is discussed in this chapter, with a view to understanding how the blogs collectively contributed to rational public debate at election time. More specifically, the analysis will consider key events, processes and issues (see Patton, 1990) as detailed by the bloggers.

The data has been broken into themes which were identified as the common elements. These are:

- Bloggers' views on the blogging and deliberative democracy.
- Bloggers' views on other bloggers and the blogosphere.
- Bloggers' views on the role of blogs in the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign.
- Bloggers' understanding of themselves as journalists.
- Bloggers' thoughts on the election coverage by mainstream media.

The discussions and interactions that took place created an alternative to the established and managed means of sharing and debating political ideas. Letters to the

editor, politicians or interest groups, along with phone calls to talkback radio stations and infrequent town hall public meetings with politicians, which were not so long ago some of the only means of active participation, now appear supervised, superficial and weak forms of political participation.

### **7.5 Background to Interview Participants**

Bloggers in the New Zealand political context are typically a narrow group – generally white, educated, middle class males – and they cannot be artificially broadened, for there are few members of other demographics available for study. This is a finding recognised in previous blogger research and this study acknowledges this trend.

Interviews were conducted with 12 individuals. All those who were asked initially agreed to participate in the interviews. In fact many bloggers were very keen to discuss their blogs and those of others. An attempt was made to contact as many political bloggers who were posting in the lead-up to the 2005 election. Some of the interviewees were very insistent that any information they provided that could lead to their being identified should remain confidential. It is important to note that efforts were made by the author to have women and non-European New Zealand participants involved in the interviews. One participant who initially agreed later found her role as a blogger placed her in a compromised position with her employer. She was reluctant to court any further negative attention and withdrew her participation. Tim Selwyn was the only Maori participant and both Keith Ng and Tze Ming Mok were Chinese, the latter being the only female participant. This is not to suggest there are not more Maori, Pacific Islanders, and women present in the New Zealand political blogosphere, but during the 2005 election campaign period, these were the higher profile, active bloggers.

Each of the participants was initially contacted through information that was obtained via their blog site. An email was sent explaining the nature of the study and what would be required of them should they choose to participate, including their rights under Massey University's Research Ethics Committee regulations. Those bloggers

who replied and agreed to be interviewed were followed up by email or a phone call to arrange interview times.

Participants were told the interview would be face-to-face, 45-90 minutes, long. All were happy at the prospect of this interview length. All of the bloggers were met by the researcher in a mutually suitable location. Participants were also happy to be contacted again for follow-up questions or to more fully explain an area of interest.

Adolf Fiinkensein and ZenTiger were both bloggers on the now defunct Sir Humphries site. These two blogs could be considered further to the right on the political spectrum than those of Aaron Bhatnagar and David Farrar. Bhatnagar has been active in Auckland local body politics and was once affiliated with the ACT Party. Bhatnagar ceased his blog soon after the election for a number of reasons, which included attacks on his writing by major political figures.

Tze Ming Mok is a stable-mate of Russell Brown, at the liberal, left-wing Public Address blog. Tze Ming Mok's web site describes her as a fiction writer, poet, freelance journalist, and socio-political commentator (Mok, 2005).

Through his or her blog a person can align him or herself with like-minded people in their community and they can have and express contrary views to those that may be widely held. When talking about political blogs, Su, Wang and Mark (2005) say bloggers can "broadcast their message to the world yet they have the option to keep their identity secret. People can vent anger, reveal desires, and exact revenge without fear of repercussion" (p. 12). The bloggers who were interviewed for this study were all very passionate about their political convictions – whether they were to the left or right of the political spectrum. Sometimes the level of passion was so elevated it became misdirected to the point of their being aggressive and irrational over some issues. When taking into account the statements made by the bloggers it is easier to understand how this can occur.

The bloggers had strong opinions on their own political philosophy and these would have been clearly evident to readers. Whale Oil stated that he been to the political right of Genghis Khan most of his life. His posts are sometimes ad hominem in nature

and have been particularly nasty toward Prime Minister, Helen Clark. His position can be summarised by the following remark:

... I have probably become more liberal as I have got older but I could never contemplate ever voting Labour, never have, never will, I just can't countenance their philosophy, I can't stand socialism, it doesn't work, and I am an ardent capitalist. (Whale Oil, personal communication, December 6, 2005)

Sometimes blogs become a proxy for the party they support. The National Party have benefited from the work Farrar has done on his blog as they have not had to set up a blog for the party or its leaders as a direct result (Anonymous, personal communication, July 10, 2008). This despite Kiwiblog not being a National Party blog nor was Farrar's intention for it to be one. The same can be said for Adolf Fiinkensein. When asked if he used his blog as a way of disseminating pro-National messages, Fiinkensein defensively replied:

No, certainly not, I don't have any connections with the National Party, I am a paid up member but that is about it, I mean I have no inside connections with the party, I just talk about what I perceive to be National policy. (Adolf Fiinkensein, personal communication, December 5, 2005)

This proxy effect can also work against the party as there are blogs that can cause a level of embarrassment and cringe within party ranks due to what some blogs are saying. This was particularly the case for the political right as they had larger presences in the blogosphere during the 2005 campaign period and not all blogs were well received by the National Party.

Tim Selwyn was the only Maori blogger in the study. His politics are stated as being left-wing (see Table 37). Selwyn was the first person to be charged in New Zealand with sedition in 100 years after putting an axe through the window of Helen Clark's Mount Albert electorate office and distributing inciting pamphlets. Selwyn stated he was a Maori Party supporter, but he was not a member of the party, saying, "I think I would be biased towards the Maori Party in some way, I must be, but not overtly" (Tim Selwyn, personal communication).

Carter was happy to put his political party, Labour, ahead of the overall objectivity of his blog. He admitted that many of his posts were purposely made to better the cause

of Labour. This was particularly so in the last days of the campaign when he felt that there was a good chance National could win. His general tactic if he disagreed with what the party, or one of its politicians, was saying, was not to talk or post about it. His view was that he was not an open-minded critic of the party and he would have defended something he completely disagreed with:

I am in a position where I can wear several hats and where me going on publicly about my criticisms [of Labour] would be unwise, put it that way. It would make my position in the party untenable so I can't do that ...  
(Jordan Carter, personal communication, November 11, 2005)

While Carter says that there is no editorial interference from the Labour Party, he does admit that he does “promote the Labour party because I believe in it”.

Bhatnagar's association with the National Party goes back a number of years to his involvement with the Young Nats. He has also been active in local body politics and a member of the ACT Party, where he served on an election campaign with Rodney Hide.

I am involved in the National party and I do have the National party logo on my website, things that I say can be held as a reflection on my, on the political institution that I am a member of. (Aaron Bhatnagar, personal communication, December 7, 2005)

Keith Ng, who also posted at Public Address, provided some of the most comprehensive, near-journalistic coverage of the election seen among the blogs that were followed for this thesis. Ng was the only blogger whose politics were difficult to determine. Even his Public Address stable-mate, Brown, was unsure of his exact political position. Ng's veiled politics could be deemed one of the reasons his writing was considered important and balanced by other bloggers. His approach to covering the issues during the campaign was to ensure they were taken seriously as can be seen below:

I was politically pretty agnostic, I guess what I was trying to achieve was to create reasoned arguments that you know where I see facts as being neglected I wanted to bring up those facts, that was my sole purpose, it wasn't make one party win, it wasn't to push a political agenda. (Keith Ng, personal communication, November 23, 2005)

Idiot/Savant was, like Ng, a blogger who displayed journalistic type qualities. That is to say, his writing was research and presented in a similar way to conventional journalism. However, his blog differed from Ng's, and the conventions of traditional journalism, in his non-objective approach to writing. Idiot/Savant considers himself "Irredeemably Liberal" and his writing is clearly left-wing in character.

David Farrar, Russell Brown, Rodney Hide and Jordan Carter have been profiled in more depth in Chapter Four. Their selection for this study is based on a number of criteria, for example, the political content of their blog, a filter or personal journal structure, and they were bloggers who were well regarded by readers and other bloggers.

**Table 37: Interview Participants**

<b>Blog Name</b>	<b>Blogger Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Political Leaning</b>
Whale Oil	Anonymous	Male	Right
Hard News	Russell Brown	Male	Left
www.bhatnagar.co.nz	Aaron Bhatnagar	Male	Right
Adolf Fiinkensein	Anonymous	Male	Right
Tumeke	Tim Selwyn	Male	Left
Yellow Peril	Tze Ming Mok	Female	Left
No Right Turn	Idiot Savant	Male	Left
ZenTiger	Anonymous	Male	Left
Poll Dancer	Keith Ng	Male	Centre
Just Left	Jordan Carter	Male	Left
Rodney Hide	Rodney Hide	Male	Right
Kiwiblog	David Farrar	Male	Right

The heavily skewed gender trend, as seen in Table 37, reflects one of the criticisms of the public sphere which was also the domain of males. This is not to suggest women have no role in political blogging, only that during the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign, they were less active as political bloggers. The role women play in New Zealand political blogging is an area for further research.

Some of the bloggers had a longstanding relationship with discussing politics over a computer network. Bloggers such as Farrar, Idiot/Savant and Brown had previously been active on Usenet for internet based political discussions. Usenet required a

higher level of understanding to enable those interested access to the discussion groups. Recent developments in internet communication tools have made political discussion easier to participate in and as a consequence it has opened up the sphere for anyone with access to a computer. It was these technological developments that paved the way for the other bloggers in this study to increase, or start their online political involvement.

For Farrar, Brown and Idiot/Savant, a history in Usenet use has allowed them to mature their online communication skills to a point that is far ahead of the numerous recent blog adopters. Their Usenet experience allows them to view their blogs differently to other bloggers. To them their blogs have less to do with elections and politics in general and are more about providing a place for quality posts and robust discussions to occur. They are committed to online public discussion irrespective of the tool being employed. Other blogs, such as Bhatnagar and Sir Humphries, have appeared and then disappeared after the election once they have served a purpose. These types of blogs concerned themselves less with quality of discussion in attempts to reach wider political goals.

The bloggers were, therefore, almost all readily identifiable by their political orientation. Some explicitly stated that their blogging was part of their involvement with a political party, while others claimed to inhabit an independent political position. Very few sought to position themselves on the side of politics.

## **7.6 Bloggers' Views on Deliberative Democracy**

It was important to ascertain how bloggers viewed their role in the election and to see if they believed they were working toward a greater good by facilitating discussion around issues or if they were maintaining a blog for self or political gain. We can then view this in light of public sphere theory as well as determine the context in which these actors were operating. Participants in Habermas' public sphere did not participate in coffee house discussions for the primary reason of playing a role in the public sphere; they were simply there to discuss issues that were of importance to them. The notion, or label, of a public sphere was attached to a historical series of events and followed a long time after the actual events. The same can be said of the

2005 New Zealand political blogosphere and those who participated in the discussions. A theme that arose from the interviews with some bloggers was a belief in the concept of a deliberative sphere and knowing the importance of thrashing out an issue in a public domain. This belief was held without an awareness of the actual theoretical concept. Not one of those interviewed was familiar with Habermas or public sphere theory, yet the bloggers identified the blogosphere as being a place of influence for their ideas and believed that the deliberative nature of blogs did have some effect on them.

The value of a range of opinions being publicly shared was more important to the bloggers than the range or identity of the participants. While this is not true of all the bloggers spoken to, it was the majority perspective as can be seen from the comments in this section. Farrar summarised the overall feeling of many bloggers when he said:

I don't think [a limited number of people participating] is necessarily a big thing because I think what the discussions are about, about getting opinions and facts out on the table, and even if it is the same group of people you still are having that debate. (David Farrar, personal communication, November 24, 2005)

There was less agreement, however, about whether blogs were significant in public debate. In his role as a politician, Hide places high value on blogs' as a space of debate in a deliberative society, particularly as a form with potential in "overcoming that tyranny of TV", which he believes has become a powerful and authoritarian medium. Idiot/Savant, while describing his blog as a vehicle for participating in a democracy, and while emphasising the importance for himself of deliberation, believed blogs not to be very influential in achieving those wanting to deliberate with an eye on reaching any kind of consensus. Idiot/Savant has a rather sceptical view of blogs' ability to act as a form of deliberation or blogs as a notion of democracy:

I see a blog is basically just somewhere to voice my opinion, I guess if you heard democracy is a great conversation amongst citizens in an effort to persuade one another of the right course of action or at least to build a temporary coalition to ram something through, which is how it really works, where part of the great conversation is we figure out what the hell are we going to do. (Idiot/Savant, personal communication, December 1, 2005)

The concept of deliberation was linked by many bloggers to the provision of comments sections after each post. Indeed, so important were comments to the idea of deliberation that bloggers such as Selwyn regarded other bloggers, such as Brown, that did not allow comments, as not a proper blogger. For Selwyn it was essential to have bloggers' ideas contested in the comments sections and by not allowing others to provide a critique, the value of the idea could not be properly determined. This is a sentiment that was shared by Whale Oil. They both felt a comments section was the heart of the conversation and by Brown not permitting others to challenge or critique his posts, he was not acting under their definition of a blogger, as they feel it is important for a blogger to be able to stand and defend their writing. Whale Oil and Bhatnagar went as far as suggesting Brown could not be regarded as a blogger in the true sense and that his blog was more of a common list. However, Brown's response to that criticism was the irony of being accused of being unaccountable for not having a comments feature by people who blog under assumed names.

Zen Tiger considers the blogosphere to be over-hyped, but what it was able to achieve was the rapid spread information, political attacks or links to other sites where there were critiques of policy.

Bloggers, as part of their wider blogging experience, took the time to read the comments they received after their post and would often engage in the discussions that followed. This allowed the bloggers to develop an intimate understanding of discussions and also to gain insight into people's thoughts and opinions on issues (the use of the word "intimate" is an indication that the comments section consisted of a recollectable number of names who would leave comments and discuss issues). This relationship between the blogger and reader is one of a number of ways in which blogs differ from the mainstream media. Whether or not it was a conscious decision of either party to become involved in a relationship within the sphere is less important than the conventions and culture that developed.

Habermas (1989) discusses a period in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when traditional power structures collapsed and was replaced by the rise of a public sphere where something approaching public opinion could be formed and access was guaranteed to all citizens. Any person could take a seat in the coffee houses to talk about the issues of the day.

So too could the burgeoning blogosphere be deemed a move away from communicative confinements of the past – both in a technologically and media power sense – and instead a new alternative space for people to meet and thrash out the important issues of the day. However, the literature around blogs as a space for deliberation is contradictory. Some theorists dismiss this idea and view the blogosphere as an echo chamber of political views as opposed to an alternative sphere of information and views. Opposing this view is the Pew Institute’s finding that the internet is contributing to a wider awareness of political views and internet users are exposed to a wider variety of political arguments (Pew, 2004).

Chapter Two of this thesis discusses the opening up of public spaces online and it is evident from this study that not all blogs are part of this space.

Outside of the normative view of blogs as a public sphere, what can be seen in this study was a handful of people who were acting for of selfish or political gain, for example working to ensure a particular political party is elected. There was no really commitment to a greater social ideal or a specific desire to build an Athenian agora, nor even a clear indication toward any importance of rational-critical interaction between those involved. If we subscribe to the idea that bloggers do not knowingly operate within a public sphere and do not subscribe to the rules and conventions, then what are we left with and what are the expectations of the New Zealand blogosphere?

### **7.7 Views on Other Bloggers and the Blogosphere**

While deliberative principles were present in many bloggers’ sense of what political debate should include, much of this disappeared from sight when they discussed other bloggers. As discussed above, some such as Idiot/Savant were sceptical about reading the blogosphere as anything more than opinion-sharing. But criticism was more often focused on individuals who failed to live up to standards of debate that bloggers understood as applying to political discussion. While they may not be experts in politics, media or communication, their extended association with the blogosphere gives what phenomenologists would term lifeworld experience to comment and offer insights into the online occurrences in the lead-up to the 2005 election.

Not all of the bloggers had positive comments to make about the medium they had adopted – in fact some were quite scathing of the blogosphere. Idiot/Savant articulated it as a place that “brings out the best in people as well but it really does bring out the worst in people”. Selwyn described blogging as “the least popular people using the widest possible medium to convey the most unfounded ideas to the smallest possible audience for the minutest of effects”. Brown was critical of blogs as being a useful tool to engender quality political discussion:

...there is this noble ideal of blogs and their comment forums is this great virtual town square where grand ideas get discussed and generally wasn't... where I think the blog story isn't that great, is in the actual discussion of ideas, there weren't that many people doing it and I think people are put off by the nastiness of those comments and it puts me off. (Russell Brown, personal communication, December 6, 2005)

The opinion of the blogosphere being a toxic place that is held by Brown and Selwyn was quite common among the bloggers, but the content analysis conducted for this study doesn't completely support this belief. While there was clear evidence of people acting in ways that would not be considered acceptable in interpersonal situations, such as name calling, promoting extreme ideas and emotional use of language, this type of behaviour was clearly in the minority. A lot of the communication that took place in this study was between people who shared a common concern and interest in the 2005 election and the activities that surrounded it. There is the possibility the bloggers, in thinking back to the election a year after it took place, might remember the positive aspects of the discussions taking place less than they do the negative and unproductive posts and comments.

The question of who was considered the most important blogger throughout the election campaign was asked of all interviewees to get an understanding of what attributes bloggers sought in their own reading. While Farrar and Brown were readily mentioned by some as being notable bloggers, it was Idiot/Savant who was regarded the highest by most interviewees. Brown commented on his excelling in looking at the fine print of issues. These instances of praise and respect for the quality of output were even made despite differing in political ideology.

I actually rate Idiot/Savant from No Right Turn and there is no apparent party line there, it is pure left wing blogging, which I like. (Whale Oil, personal communication, December 6, 2005)

Idiot/Savant, he is great. I butt heads with him a number of times and I actually have got a lot of respect for him, I don't necessarily agree with his view points, but he is a very reasoned writer and there are times when I have made postings where I have actually invited him to challenge my post because I do respect the quality of his argument. (Aaron Bhatnagar, personal communication, December 7, 2005)

The bloggers here provide a sense they value non-institutional means of mediation. Bhatnagar's reference to the respect he has for Idiot/Savant's work highlights the move from trust in traditional media authorities toward online social networks (Slevin, 2000). Whale Oil, for example, testifies to being on the far right but still offers kudos to the quality of output from a political foe, which is notable given that his comments toward other bloggers from the left are hostile and critical. It could also be suggested that the rationality and quality are more important to bloggers than the political associations to which the argument is attached. This is important in relation to Habermas' (1989) institutional criteria that he described as preconditions for the emergence of the new public sphere. Here the bloggers are saying that they are less interested in whom the person is, but they are welcome to participate in discussion based on the rationality and quality of their debate; an important idea that was realised in the normative view. Habermas suggests the coffee house discussions were in some way organised by these criteria and those involved supported the implementation. The blogosphere has few, if any, rules for participation, but appears to move naturally toward the qualities that Habermas outlined.

Some bloggers suggested that blogs were used to carry a party line or were in some way deceiving in order to achieve a great political objective. Carter took a dim view of the content right-wing bloggers used in their posts;

People lie ... a classic one would be Sir Humphries blog where the facts seem to take the backseat quite a lot of the time, I am very critical of him on a number of occasions comments and so on because they either make things up or they just leave out key facts. (Jordan Carter, personal communication, November 11, 2005)

Carter's accusation of Sir Humphries' inappropriate use of information is somewhat blinkered in the sense that by his own admission he used his blog in a similar way. Carter stated he would strategically leave out potential politically damaging

information and also avoided entering debates on such issues. His thinking was it was better to smother the issue in silence rather than discuss it and give it oxygen. Bloggers from the Sir Humphries' stable admitted to meeting informally in person to discuss how to best make use of the site to advance their cause.

The bloggers expressed somewhat contradictory views on the quality of debate within the blogosphere. The comments sections were somewhat perplexing places for the bloggers, who admitted to avoiding them since the quality of discussion was not to a standard they found acceptable. This is an interesting contrast to the belief held by some bloggers that in order for a blog to be "real" it needs to have a comments section, yet they are hesitant to participate in this forum. Ironically, each side of the political divide pointed the finger at the other side for diminishing the quality and integrity of the comment discussion. Brown says;

You have got every right to take someone up on what they have said ... I mean this is the thing that consistently puzzles me about some of the right wing bloggers is that they will say the most appalling heap of obscene things. (Russell Brown, personal communication, December 6, 2005)

While Brown and Carter view the political right as being the instigators of gutter type comments, Farrar sees the situation the other way around, where commenters from the left are responsible for low grade comments;

... unfortunately from time to time [I have] to delete comments other people make. I am very aware a number of National MPs read my blog and when people make outrageous slander, I want them to be able to feel it is a safe environment. They shouldn't have to be reading that stuff.

The political predisposition of both Brown and Farrar comes through here with each blaming the other side for denigrating the comments section. This is simply a case of each being blind to their political bias. When trying to reach the goal of consensus within the blogosphere this immediately causes problems as both Farrar and Brown, who are reflective of the wider sphere, are unable, or unwilling, to consider other points of view if they contradict the party view. While political bias in blog writing is nothing unusual, and is prevalent all over the world as it is within the wider media, the difference in the New Zealand situation is the limited number of blogs that cover politics and therefore the greater extent to which bloggers are forced to engage with conflicting ideologies.

Selwyn suggests that bloggers could be partly responsible for the quality of their comments sections when he makes the observation that the initial comments determine the rest of the discussion following a post.

... if that first comment is a very rational or sane or precise or debating it factually or whatever without any of those arguments, the rest of the comments that follow are very similar and the whole thing is lifted whereas if you get the first one or two comments are just throw away comments or they are just deliberately offensive or they are just trying to bait someone then that ruins the entire thread, it is just completely shot. (Tim Selwyn, personal communication, December 3, 2005)

As previously mentioned, unlike other bloggers interviewed for this thesis, the people from Public Address, Russell Brown, Keith Ng and Tze Ming Mok, had no facility to allow readers to make comments and feed into discussions. Mok was especially pleased with that arrangement as she viewed discussions in the comments section with some contempt, even suggesting she would stop blogging if comments were introduced at Public Address.

I don't think there is very much worth in the ideas of the debates that go on in David Farrar's comment section, from what I have seen, but then again I find it difficult to read because of the crap. I mean a lot of it is abuse... who can be bothered screeding through the abuse to the one good point that one person might make really.

I have said that basically if there is a comment section I am not going to do this anymore. I don't find it helps because it is just the same people [who are] always dominating the comment section and it is so difficult to moderate and you just end up with like they post about anything, about nothing. If you look at anything on David Farrar's blog, or on Jordan Carter's they just might make this incredibly innocuous comment about "I saw this in the news," and then they have like a hundred comments. The same five people just bitching at each other, it is something that really doesn't really appeal to me. I think as a woman and, I am pretty used to political argy bargy, but so I am not like some wilting flower, but it just seems something that is completely pointless and it reminds me of a lot of student politics actually, which I was also involved in my time at Otago. (Tze Ming Mok, personal communication, December 5, 2005)

Mok continued to blog after the election but remained true to her statements and stopped her blog in December 2007, and in her last post she referred to the introduction of PA System (a forum that allows the public to discuss issues raised on Public Address) as a "large factor" in her decision to cease blogging. Mok admitted

during the interview to making comments on the pages of other bloggers and the content analysis from this research verifies this claim. She left a comment on Jordan Carter's on Friday, 26 August 2005 at 1:02pm. What Mok's comment suggests is how not all bloggers work on the same set of conventions, but on different models.

Blogs, it was suggested by Jordan Carter, covered issues more intelligently and with more depth than traditional media. Other interview participants suggested the blogosphere existed on the back of poor or lazy journalism. There was something akin to self-righteousness in the attitudes of these bloggers when discussing the limitations and weaknesses of the mainstream media. This trend is examined most in section 7.9 of this chapter.

Adolf Fiinkensein believed that blogs did in fact improve the quality of the debate. Talking specifically about student loans, tax cuts and Treaty issues as important issues of the campaign, Fiinkensein stated that for the limited group of people who viewed or participated in the debate there would have been a direct benefit. He qualified this statement by suggesting the New Zealand blog community is small and incestuous. He credits as few as 30 individuals who commented regularly on his site. It should be noted that during the campaign period Fiinkensein made 45 comments to the blogs that were examined by content analysis. Of these, 39 were made at Kiwiblog, two at Just Left and four on Rodney Hide's blog. The paradox of Fiinkensein's claims is that he was a poor example of someone using the blogosphere to engage in quality debate as he was often insulting, aggressive and a heavy user of ad hominem argument toward others in the comments section, for example:

You show yourself to be an illiterate dork so over whom, other than other illiterate dorks, do you expect to have influence? (Fiinkensein: September 4th, 2005 at 2:35 pm (post 147, comment 1103))

Other bloggers identified his behaviour as a reason why others or they personally did not participate in online discussions.

Based on the answers given to a specific question directed to all of the interviewees, it is clear that bloggers read across the political spectrum and no blogger exclusively read blogs on a single side. Everyone admitted reading David Farrar's Kiwiblog on a

daily or semi-daily basis. Jordan Carter, Russell Brown and Idiot/Savant also featured highly in the daily reading lists.

**Table 38: Blogs That Were Read by Other Bloggers**

<b>Blogger Name</b>	<b>Blogs They Read</b>
Aaron Bhatnagar	David Farrar, Jordan Carter, Sir Humphries, Rodney Hide, Idiot/Savant, Russell Brown
Adolf Fiinkensein	David Farrar, Jordan Carter, Rodney Hide
David Farrar	Idiot/Savant, Jordan Carter, Russell Brown,
Idiot/Savant	David Farrar, Jordan Carter, Russell Brown, Keith Ng
Jordan Carter	David Farrar, Frogblog, Russell Brown
Keith Ng	David Farrar, Frogblog, Russell Brown, Jordan Carter
Rodney Hide	David Farrar, Frogblog, Russell Brown, NZ Pundit, Sir Humphries
Russell Brown	David Farrar, Just Left, Idiot/Savant, Public Address blogs, Keep Left NZ
Tim Selwyn	David Farrar, Sir Humphries, No Right Turn, Public Address, Aaron Bhatnagar, Sir Humphries, Rodney Hide, Frogblog, Idiot/Savant
Tze Ming Mok	David Farrar, Public Address blogs, Frogblog, Idiot/Savant, Jordan Carter
Whale Oil	David Farrar, Aaron Bhatnagar, Idiot/Savant, Jordan Carter, Kathy Oggars
Zen Tiger	David Farrar, Rodney Hide, Jordan Carter, Frogblog, Aaron Bhatnagar

Communication between bloggers was sometimes tense and on occasions it simply broke down during the campaign. Interview data suggests that many of the views held by the bloggers were tied to their political beliefs. On a number of occasions accusations would arise of poor behaviour by bloggers on the opposite side of the political spectrum.

I have had a war with Jordan Carter... he said on his blog that I was a racist, and a whole bunch of other things... He refused to apologise so I have got a personal vendetta against Jordan. (Whale Oil, personal communication, December 6, 2005)

I couldn't stomach any of the [right-wing bloggers], there was just no point. It would just be a waste of time and make me angry. (Jordan Carter, personal communication, November 11, 2005)

However, the content analysis showed by number of incidents that neither side was any better or worse than the other in regard to online behaviour. Carter's claim above is a little contradictory in that some of the posts and comments he wrote were loaded with emotional language and ad hominem attacks. It could be suggested that it is not

the blogosphere that causes people like Carter and Whale Oil to engage in hostile exchanges, although it does have qualities that allow for such behaviour, but instead it is people's aggressive personalities and inability to communicate effectively that is to blame.

As can be seen there are large amounts of respect for other bloggers, but this is outweighed by animosity and feuding between certain individuals. This has a negative impact on the discussions that take place and also on the overall value of the blogs as a way of legitimately discussing politics. Bloggers have a level of suspicion toward others within the blogosphere. They do not mind other blogs but do not necessarily want to engage in discussion with them. Bloggers initially state they see the value of what happens in the blogosphere, but when pushed there is a level of sport that is also going on and both sides want their "team" to win - both on election day and in the blogosphere.

The reading of blogs across the political divide, by those interviewed, contradicts the Daily Me theory as presented by Sunstein (2001). The political/social differences in New Zealand as opposed to the United Kingdom or United States, where the theory was devised, are numerous. Firstly, New Zealand's small population keeps most people within a few degrees of separation. Jordan Carter and David Farrar worked for the same organisation and many of the bloggers knew each other through university or social connections. Secondly, the fewer number of blogs in the New Zealand political blogosphere compared with the United States, in particular, make it easy to read most, if not all, of the significant posts in a reasonable time period. Thirdly, New Zealand's political culture/climate differs from that of the United States. Political parties have demonstrated more of a drift toward the centre rather than a polarisation of ideas.

### **7.8 The Role of Blogs in the 2005 New Zealand General Election Campaign**

The presence of blogs is thought to have little influence over the outcome of an election (Fitzjohn & Salmond, 2007) and opinions about the role blogs played during the election differs between bloggers. For example, the content analysis showed Carter paid a good deal of attention to polls, Ng dissected the numbers involved with

the student loan and tax policies, and Brown provided a critique of National Party's policies. Jordan Carter articulated the over-arching feeling reasonably well when he said,

For the people who write [blogs] and read them probably they found it quite important but I think that the connection with a broader audience is quite tenuous and so the influence, if you like, of them is less than some of the people who like them would like that to be. (Jordan Carter, personal communication, November 11, 2005)

David Farrar did not believe blogs played any role in expanding the number of issues but sometimes provided a different angle in which issues were considered and discussed. Farrar says during the election campaign period there was not an issue that ran on blogs for days and became visible to the mainstream media as an issue and which it then finally picked up. Russell Brown, like many of those interviewed, did not consider blogs to be a replacement of the news media, now or in the future.

I am absolutely not one of those people who think that blogs will replace the mainstream media, I think there is always a place for expertise but I think there is a fairly clear symbiosis already. (Russell Brown, personal communication, December 6, 2005)

Farrar agrees with Brown and cites the main reason to be his belief that the press gallery in Parliament has a herd mentality. There tends to be, according to Farrar, a consensus that evolves within the press gallery around how a particular party is doing. He believes this is how the media played a significant role in setting the issues. When members of the press gallery chase a story they do so as a collective, all trying to get the same story. When they do this, a party or politician is forced to respond because of the media's attention to the issue.

Idiot/Savant was quite pessimistic about the role he and fellow bloggers provided, in part because of his concerns about the quality of comments. While other bloggers praised his writing and the quality of comments his own posts engendered, the findings of the content analysis support his statements about the quality of interpersonal exchanges in the comments section:

... I have a very low opinion of what I do, I think it is generally a screaming match, people regurgitate their talking points, usually they talk past one another, in part this is because these are issues where they are about choices not about the questions of what proportion of the economy

the state should make up for example is something which is ultimately down to the preferences of the individuals concerned and that is why we vote. (Idiot/Savant, personal communication, December 1, 2005)

While the bloggers expressed scepticism about the overall effects of their medium, there were some areas in which blogging was considered effective.

I thought the big impact that blogs had on the election campaign was actually on the style of [political] advertising... and that providing a way into issues for people, a kind of aggregate for stories and provide some sort of individual perspective. (Russell Brown personal communication, December 6, 2005)

Brown's view of blogs as a news aggregator is supported by the findings in the content analysis. However, Selwyn believed that blogs put more scrutiny on issues than the mainstream media could.

... [blogs] were good with the superficial things as well, it is like analysing the election campaign almost as if it were slow motion, you know, by frame by frame by frame so there is far more analysis of it. (Tim Selwyn, personal communication, December 3, 2005)

Selwyn thought the blogosphere was becoming bogged down by the weight of analysis provided by a number of blogging punters. This is something he was supportive of as opposed to the television current events shows that may only give an important issue, such as the Treaty of Waitangi, a few minutes of shallow coverage for what is a complex issue.

Claims of an impact on politics from the blog discussions of policy are lent some credence by the number of Wellington-based Parliamentary staffers and civil servants who were reading prominent blogs (these were identified by the bloggers visiting IP address). Public Address contributor Keith Ng regarded these readers as an important audience for his writing for just this reason: they are the people who could instigate policy or political change:

I think that a lot of people who were involved in the campaign were also involved in the blogosphere which kind of made for an interesting dynamic that in influencing the blogosphere you are actually influencing the wider political campaign which is in turn influencing everything else, so I guess it is not about changing the mainstream opinions it is about influencing people who then influenced people. (Keith Ng, personal communication, November 23, 2005)

Tze Ming Mok held quite firm views on the way her blog, and others at Public Address, were being used. She alluded to the blog being some kind of mental refuge for some readers:

... a lot of Public Address is kind of preaching to the converted anyway. Left wing sites and right wing sites, we have our loyal readership and in some sense we were providing a relief and a sense of community for people who were feeling stressed out and afraid that the evil right wing would take over so it was important for them to be not collapsing into despair, that is the community aspect of it. (Tze Ming Mok, personal communication, December 5, 2005)

She believed the great power of her blog lay not so much in changing the attitudes of its readers, because the attitudes were generally left-wing or liberal. She also believes people read it for ideas that were presented and to get some sense of reassurance on what people of like minds were thinking. She also believes that people would turn to the blog because they could not understand or did not want to bother reading media reports on the budget or the complexities of the tax cut policy, so they would see what bloggers thought or how others were commenting on the issues.

## **7.9 Bloggers Understanding of Themselves as Journalists**

The discussion about whether bloggers can be considered journalists has been continuing since the inception of blogs. Academics differ in their opinions on the role of blogs in journalism (Andrews, 2003; Lowrey, 2006). Blood (2002) suggests the mandate of bloggers differs from that of journalists, while Lasica (2003) states blogs are creating a new media ecosystem and others suggest blogs have transformed traditional journalistic practices (the role of blogs in journalism is considered in Chapter Two). After initial suggestions that mainstream media would decline because of the introduction of blogs, the timbre of this argument has dropped off to a more realistic view that suggests blogs will play a role in reporting of issues, but not to the extent that was initially purported. The participants in this study also had a range of opinions on the extent to which bloggers might act in the role of a journalist. Bloggers are claiming to be covering issues through discussions in a better way than journalists, because they're doing it in their own voices. In their view they are not equals but better than journalists in this regard. For bloggers to consider their practice better than

journalism is of little surprise when considering the general contempt held by bloggers toward mainstream media.

Apart from Russell Brown, Keith Ng and Idiot/Savant, the bloggers interviewed did not consider themselves to be journalists or to be fulfilling the traditional role of the media. In fact there was a sense of aversion to the concept of being a journalist by other bloggers. However, while Idiot/Savant did not feel his role in the election fits into the traditional mould of journalism, he does consider himself a journalist.

I am simply an opinionated bastard venting my spleen. There are things I am interested in and I vent my spleen about them, I am not a neutral journalist, I am not, or in some ways I am trying to inform the public but I mean its more that. I see it as a vehicle for participation. The general philosophy here is participate or perish. (Idiot/Savant, personal communication, December 1, 2005)

Most bloggers do not call themselves, nor want to be considered a journalist (Cook, 2005; Lasica, 2002). Brown does consider Idiot/Savant to be a journalist and goes as far as stating if he was running a magazine he would employ Idiot/Savant to oversee the fine print on legislation copy. The bloggers' opinion of not considering themselves journalists is a finding in line with international research. In other countries A-list bloggers are often also professional journalists (Park 2003), but in New Zealand Russell Brown was the only blogger in this situation (Keith Ng and Idiot/Savant, it could be suggested are not A-list bloggers).

For Brown the difference between bloggers and journalists is less about what is written and more about how the content is written.

... it is not just [the use of swear words in the content], but there is a kind of write it as you want to write it and not to someone else's style or format or length and Fiona Ray is my partner and before she started her blog she said I don't know if I will be able to do it and I said look honestly it is the easiest thing I write is the blog because I am writing exactly what I want to write, you know, and it is what is in my head and I am not having to worry about whether it is what someone else wants. (Russell Brown, personal communication, December 6, 2005)

Aaron Bhatnagar believed journalists used blogs as a barometer of where a story was going and the public mood toward the story. He uses the example of a Labour Party candidate, Steven Ching, and some ethical issues which Bhatnagar was unable to

work through. He said, “my blog, Sir Humphries, David Farrar, we actually started asking quite a few questions and pointing out inconsistencies in the argument and the next day we would see these same kind of arguments being mirrored in the Herald...”

Keith Ng approached his role with more acumen than most bloggers. He described himself as being more of a journalist for the blogosphere as opposed to being a blogger in the blogosphere, and went as far as conducting interviews with political commentators and prominent politicians, such as Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Michel Cullen. Conducting interviews was a rare occurrence outside of the Public Address bloggers. In the United States it is quite common for politicians and other high profile figures to be interviewed on a blog site, such as Talking Points Memo, but according to Ng, the feedback he received after his interviews were posted and the site statistics showed readership of his interviews was lower than his normal writing. He found this disheartening and ceased with the traditional journalistic interview format.

The role Keith Ng played in the pre-election blogosphere came to the attention of other bloggers. As mentioned previously, Ng’s blog was closer to a traditional form of journalism than any other the other bloggers spoken to with the exception of Idiot/Savant. The coverage he gave the costs of Labour’s interest-free student loan policy could be considered in-depth and thorough. Mok made a comment about this during her interview, identifying it as a significant point in the role of political blogs:

I thought [Ng’s coverage of student loan policies] was really important actually, I wouldn’t be able to quantify how important but I think that it was definitely something that we hadn’t had before, I think he personified a new kind of journalism basically, or not a new kind but one we are low on or haven’t seen much which is the role of journalist as hard core geek, as the numbers geek but also as philosophical geek. (Tze Ming Mok, personal communication, December 5, 2005)

Ng’s coverage of the tax cuts as proposed by the National Party highlighted a significant difference in the way blogs and media can cover an issue. In a post on 23 August 2005, Ng concluded that National’s tax cuts were affordable but he had made an error in the way did his calculations. However, the next day he wrote another post in which he said,

Yesterday, I wrote that National intends to fund its tax cut by increasing debt to 26.3% of GDP by 2008/09. Well, it turns out that I was right for a small part - National does intend to raise debt in 2008/09 by 1% of GDP, but that's compared with 2006 figures (which will be National's first budget), not 2004 figures, and damn, it makes a pretty big difference.

So, I retract my last post (will keep it on there for comical and self-flagellation purposes), and I apologise sincerely for any fiscal indigestion I may have caused. (Ng, 2005)

If Ng was a journalist for any of the major daily newspapers he would not be able to retract such an error so lightly. His language would not be as relaxed about the error. Interestingly, from a deliberative sense, it was Idiot/Savant who Ng acknowledged as assisting him in working through the figures after his initial post on the matter.

Brown acknowledged the neutral way Ng wrote his blog, whereas, he says, the rest of the Public Address bloggers used their blog to say what they think:

Rather than having to worry about questions and balance and objectivity and that sort of thing I can just say I think this, which doesn't mean that I don't take fairness and balance seriously in the blog but it means I can actually express my advantaged opinion... blogging does give you the freedom to be subjective. (Russell Brown, personal communication, December 6, 2005)

There are a number of activities that clearly separate bloggers and journalists in this study and this includes the most basic of journalistic requirements; research and ensuring the accuracy of sources (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). An example of this is the difference with which Carter views the production process of his writing to that of journalists. His ability to write and post content also exposes some of the criticisms that are aimed at bloggers, that being the publishing of information that is not fact-checked (as in the role of a subeditor). The question of fact-checking and research demonstrates the way in which different bloggers conformed with or deviated from the norms of professional journalism:

I also probably write what I do a great more quickly than the average journalist would unless they are reporting for a deadline because I don't have the time to sit down and really thoroughly research things. (Jordan Carter, personal communication, November 11, 2005)

Fiinkensein also admitted to spending little time checking the facts of his writing. In opposition to this practice, Zen Tiger ensured he at least referenced where his

information came from, but also acknowledged that subjectivity plays a role in identifying facts.

Just about everything I do I have a link back to something that triggered it so people can go and see the source, I mean in terms of fact checking yeah I don't think you ever know how much, you know, what the facts actually are unless you actually directly observing them because you can find any number of blogs and new sources to support a fact but it doesn't stop the fact from being misreported in the first place. (Zen Tiger, personal communication, November 28, 2005)

The content analysis supports Zen Tiger's comment. It was common for bloggers to link to a source, especially when that source was a news organisation's website, but links to non-media organisations, such as websites, blogs and personal opinions and experiences, were only made on 12 percent (n= 23) of posts.

Idiot/Savant also sees value in ensuring his posts are as factual as possible.

I will usually run something through Google, particularly when looking for a quote, or when newspapers have said someone said "X" I will usually take them at their word, sometimes I will try and find the original speech because I like to link the original source, if its an issue of law then I will dig around some books that I have... (Idiot/Savant, personal communication, December 1, 2005)

Mok conducted an interview with National Party MP Pansy Wong as part of her blog and she considered this to be an act of "proper" journalism as opposed to her normal posts. Having had experience in student journalism she believed she could differentiate between two forms of writing. But her approach in questioning Wong was not in a way a professional journalist would approach an interview, in a normative sense, as defined by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001). Mok stated that, "I thought I would pull out my old student media tricks and just ask her lots of mean questions" and "poor Pansy didn't enjoy it very much." Based on this example, Mok does not fulfil the necessary criteria to be considered a journalist, despite performing a similar function to a journalist, as Mok's agenda leaned more toward politically exposing Wong as opposed to sourcing information that would contribute toward balanced and objective reporting.

One of the clear indicators that bloggers were not journalists was the obvious reliance on media stories as a genesis for the topics that were written about. This can be seen in the results of the content analysis conducted for this study, see Chapter Five.

Further evidence of the agenda setting role played by the mainstream media was disclosed during the interviews. All of the bloggers spoken to obtained information from the websites of New Zealand-based media organisations, such as *stuff.co.nz* and *nzherald.co.nz*. Often posts were made solely based on the stories that were reported on these websites. Adolf Fiinkensein stated that the media were “very important” as a source of his blog.

The news consumption of bloggers was also of interest. The main and distinct finding from the interviews showed that only one of the bloggers watched television news. While the reasons were varied, the common theme among bloggers was a frustration at the quality of reporting. The inability of television news to cover complex issues with any depth is something that is not lost on the academic community and as heavy consumers of news, especially political news, bloggers were inclined to want the depth and breadth of coverage. In order to get the desired amount of information bloggers were prone to use print media – that is actual hard copy as opposed to online content.

*The Dominion Post, The New Zealand, Sunday-Star Times* and *The Herald on Sunday* were all New Zealand publications that featured prominently in blogger’s reading repertoire. Other online versions of international newspapers that were read included *Washington Post, New York Post, The New York Times* and *Jerusalem Post*. Much of the readership of publications was to assist in their post production and to sometimes source from a wider variety of media – although the content analysis showed this not to be the case. All of the bloggers spoken to for this thesis could be considered “media junkies” and are naturally drawn to current events in New Zealand and internationally.

### **7.10 Thoughts on the Election Coverage by Mainstream Media**

The discussions with bloggers around the media's coverage of the election focused on two main areas. First, they were asked to detail their overall impression of the media's performance in covering the election and its associated issues, and second, how the media encouraged discussion around the issues.

When asked what they thought of how the media covered the election and the surrounding issues, responses ranged from Adolf Fiinkensein's "abysmally" to Idiot/Savant's "I don't think they were particularly bad" to Keith Ng who believed that the mainstream media "did an excellent job". Most felt the media's performance was not as good as it could have been and also, interestingly, not as good as it needed to be. Bloggers seemed to place much weight on the need for people to be presented with information to assist them to decide which party they should vote for. Jordan Carter used some of the strongest language to describe the New Zealand media's efforts.

I don't have a very high opinion of the general media in New Zealand, I think that the TV is often quite infantile and the press media seems to be unable to take in consistent political view points, they flip flop all over the place ... there was a lack of analysis and people don't actually write stuff, you get this sort of bombardment of snippets and what happened on the campaign trail. (Jordan Carter, personal communication, November 11, 2005)

Many of the criticisms of the media by the bloggers interviewed for this study reflect the criticisms from the wider academic community. There was frustration shown about the media's tendency to focus on the people stories and party strategies and disinclined to report the issues. Among others, professional journalist Russell Brown commented on this:

I thought what was really lacking in the mainstream media coverage of the campaign was some more detailed or deeper policy analysis, it just didn't seem to get there. (Russell Brown, personal communication, December 6, 2005)

Brown also wondered if it is still possible for the media to cover politics comprehensively. He points to Radio New Zealand becoming so concerned with being risk-averse to their demonstrating bias to either side that they have effectively become unable to cover the issues with any depth.

Ng started his blog with the idea of discussing politics for people who were not into politics and looked to cover opinion polls and other general political discussion that may not have directly affected the public. However, once he started blogging his opinion of the media changed quickly and he believed that the media were more interested in covering the impact of tax cuts for political party ratings rather than the actual impact of tax cuts on the economy and individuals.

... that what was missing was the niche that I could fill was actually to look at real issues instead of looking at whether parties should advocate tax cuts out of political interest look at are tax cuts affordable. (Keith Ng, personal communication, November 23, 2005)

Some of the bloggers also knew that their perspective was skewed when they considered media organisations and their coverage of politics. Aaron Bhatnagar said “being a political partisan you always react strongly against the media when you think that they are unfairly knocking your new policy launch”.

The bloggers interviewed concur with McKee (2003) in that instead of providing the depth of coverage the media are dishing out information in a way that is digestible to the mass, or as McKee calls it, dumbing down. This is an interesting claim as it suggests bloggers were in part performing their role because they perceive the media as poor. The motivation here, it can be suggested, is striving toward higher values in political coverage and there is also a suggestion of idealism. This position is united with the Habermasian view of deliberative democracy.

It is clear from the content analysis in this study that bloggers frequently use the mainstream media as the source of a story, but what of the reverse? Research has found that mainstream media are becoming more inclined to source information from blogs when reporting on current news events (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt & Wright, 2004; Meraz, 2008). Another study showed 70 percent of journalists who use blogs do so for work-related tasks (Blog Herald, 2005). A similar trend can be seen in this current study. According to a number of bloggers, journalists were regular consumers of blogs. David Farrar’s site statistics, for example, are dominated by visits from people within the internet domains of Parliament, APN (largely *The New Zealand Herald*), Auckland University and Treasury.

the people who are reading the blogs are the journalists ... if you go and look at the site meters, the stack counters, and you flick through you will see a lot of these lead back to journalists website like a fairfax.com or through their broadband connection. (Zen Tiger, personal communication, November 28, 2005)

Russell Brown said he knew that journalists read his blog and although Whale Oil did not have empirical evidence to support his stance he believed that the media were using blogs as a way of getting story ideas.

I am almost certain that some mainstream media journalists are now reading blogs to get ideas, you know, its too happier coincidence that you see some ideas coming through in the mainstream media 3 or 4 days after it has been blogged and so I think they are starting to get ideas from the bloggers. (Whale Oil, personal communication, December 6, 2005)

The bloggers were divided over the role of the media in the lead-up to the election. The media were accused of being too trivial, lacking detail and not focusing on the real issues. However, many who were frustrated by the limitations that now seem to be inherent in the media were also aware enough to know that under-resourced journalists were doing the best they could. There were also times where all felt the media had performed adequately; these were often aligned to the bloggers' place in the political spectrum and who was under the media's microscope. This again shows the bloggers' almost total inability to separate their political position from a sense of wider public good or the need for journalists to present a story in an impartial and objective way.

### **7.11 Conclusions**

This chapter is based on 12 face-to-face interviews with political bloggers who were active in the lead-up to the 2005 New Zealand General Election. It considered the views, opinions and experiences of this group. The bloggers came from across the political spectrum; however all of the bloggers except one was male, despite efforts to address this imbalance.

In this study the participants constituted more than a just a sample of political bloggers, but encompassed much of a population of bloggers. New Zealand's unique

situation of small population and close proximity allows for access to all of the political bloggers.

This chapter has discussed the interview data with the goal of identifying commonalities in their experiences and attitudes to the roles played in pre-election blogging. From the data bloggers showed that they were dissatisfied with the quality of news reportage in New Zealand and had looked elsewhere to fill their need for quality information. There was also more importance placed on the ability to express their opinions than there was for where the expression occurred.

Bloggers took some indignation to being labelled a journalist as they saw their roles as complementary or as an opinion piece. They felt there was a clear distinction between the two writing forms and did not want to be associated with journalism as there was a cynical view held toward the media. This view created a desire by some bloggers to reach a higher level of discussion and have a better type of debate taking place within the blogosphere.

It is plausible that the relationship among bloggers, and also that between bloggers and those who made comments, has rewritten the conventions of political interaction. It has been demonstrated that people no longer need the mainstream media to conduct a broader conversation on political issues and there is little need for a corporate or governmental conduit to establish the basis and location for these discussions as the blogosphere is starting to fulfil this role.

What is interesting is the dim view of the blogging medium that is held by a number of those who were interviewed. This criticism must surely be targeted at those who use it and the content that is within the sphere as opposed to the medium itself. Mostly, bloggers believed their role had little impact on the election other than for those who read the posts or made comments. There was little impact on a macro level. The other finding of note stated in this chapter was that the blogosphere or the technology that drives it was less important to the bloggers than the ability to communicate their views and be able to discuss them with others.

The bloggers have changed aspects of their lives to participate in the blogosphere – for them it is a full bodied experience, which is a possible explanation for the passion and anger that is sometimes displayed by the bloggers in their posts and also in the comments they write. While it is true that some bloggers are more committed to their blogs than others there is however a shared passion and enjoyment for what they do. It is an extension of their interest in politics and their need to communicate their ideas with others.

In 2005 the bloggers and blogosphere were removed from the political mainstream and they actively tried to distance themselves from the mainstream media. This invites the question of what space they were actually inhabiting? There is not a straight-forward answer here. Bloggers currently find themselves in between Habermas' states of the elite and public. What they are is a new, emerging group of people, a "politerati" who are politically aware, generally intelligent and wanting to engage with others about the political issues of the day, and for this group the blogosphere is the location of choice for them to do this.

## Chapter Eight

### Rodney Hide: A Case Study of a Politician Blogger

#### 8.1 Introduction

Politicians around the world have been generally awkward and slow in adapting to information and communication technologies and the potential of blogs is no exception. In the future online communication will become an integral part of politics, especially so during election campaigns, as politicians are progressively more inclined to use internet and communication technologies as a campaigning tool. To date little has been written specifically about the experiences of politician bloggers – especially in a non-American context (Auty, 2005). However, in recent elections in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, politicians have taken to the internet for campaigning and promoting their political agendas.

Alongside those communication tactics, some politicians have created and maintained a personal blog; for example in New Zealand ACT Party leader Rodney Hide and Christchurch Central Labour candidate Tim Barnet both ran personal blogs leading into the 2005 election. Previously, politicians considered it unimportant to maintain a blog. In the United Kingdom election of 2005 the Conservative Party leader, Michael Howard, decided that a blog was not worth the effort (Jackson, 2006). Within 12 months, new party leader David Cameron had started a blog on the free blogger.com site specifically to cover a trip he made to India. Each post contained either photographs or video of Cameron talking about his experiences in India. Cameron has now also developed his dedicated blog, webcameron, which is hosted on the Conservatives' website. Cameron told the BBC he set up the blog because young people "get their news off the internet" and dismissed claims his blog was a gimmick. He said he intended to spend a lot of time working on the blog (Cameron launches personal blog, 2006). The reasons for the Conservatives' change of attitude towards blogging can only be conjecture, however one of the obvious features in the change of Conservative leaders in 2005 was generational, in that Howard was 61 and Cameron 36.

West and Orman (2002) provide research showing an increase of a phenomenon they have dubbed “celebrity politics”, a trend they feel raises concerns for the democratic process. They say, “If we don’t take back the celebrity politician system, citizens might well face a political contest between a basket-ball player versus a football player, or a comedian versus rock star, or a movie star versus a television situation comedy star. Elections are a key vehicle by which representative democracy takes place” (p. 119). They also describe how current politicians and candidates are employing tactics normally associated with celebrities to enhance their image and emphasise the messages they are communicating.

In 2005 it can be suggested that blogging was still not an obvious way for politicians to communicate with the public. Although blogs have become a standard feature of the political campaign landscape, questions around their use are still worth considering. This chapter looks at the experiences of politician bloggers internationally and in New Zealand, and more specifically examines New Zealand politician and leader of the ACT Party, Rodney Hide. 2005 was the first New Zealand General Election in which a politician ran a blog covering their experiences and offering thoughts and critiques of their own and other parties’ policies. In the 2005 New Zealand election there was only one other sitting MP, Tim Barnett, to whom Hide’s blogging efforts could be compared, but there is a body of international experiences, such as Cameron’s in the United Kingdom, that can be used. The chapter will also draw from Hide’s blog, other studies of politician and political blogging, and an interview conducted with Hide by the author of this thesis.

A politician using a blog to communicate and receive feedback in a Habermasian sense is a complicated prospect. From the outset the politicians challenge a number of the rules set out in public sphere theory simply by being politicians. Their position in Parliament automatically gives them rank, which a normative public sphere seeks to disregard. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was quite common for MPs to issue pamphlets, thus trying to participate in the public sphere but also risking undermining the role of the sphere. General political and campaign use of blogs constitutes publicity and public relations on the part of the politician, which Habermas suggests directly attempts to manipulate public opinion and therefore challenges the normative function of the sphere.

## 8.2 Politician Bloggers – International experiences

The internet serves many politicians as a convenient tool for traditional activities that further their own goals, such as targeting persuasive, unmediated messages to voters (Selnow, 1998, Singer, 2005). Margolis and Resnick (2000) believe that the internet has become a new place to do old things, such as attacking opponents and touting endorsements while avoiding close interaction with voters to avoid losing control of their messages (Stromer-Galley, 2000). However, a growing number of politicians are including blogging as a tool in their election campaign communication plans, most notably Howard Dean during his campaign for the United States Democratic presidential nomination in 2003. Dean used blogs successfully to raise funds and to gain both grassroots and wider support (Rice, 2003). One appeal of such websites is clearly that they offer politicians the potential to bypass the critical – sometimes cynical – framing of public debate in the news media (Bale, 2003). Griffiths (2004b) argues that blogs have allowed a re-conceptualisation of the way in which aspects of political campaigning are conducted. Politicians can now be connected with the electorate in ways that are not possible through traditional media channels. Lamb (2004) similarly argues that a successful political blog would see a candidate “write an ongoing blog to his potential constituents explaining his positions on issues. They could read his pitch and offer feedback, creating a kind of political dialogue that would be based on substance more than sound bites” (¶4). Yet campaign blogs such as Dean’s, which are part of highly managed communication strategies, and where the writing is done by professional communication staff on behalf of candidates, do not fit comfortably within that description. Indeed, leading conservative blogger Dave Winer dismissed Dean’s blogs as a “gimmick” for this reason (Lamb, 2004). Such blogs are perhaps better understood as providing the opportunity for politicians to develop relationships with voters based more on personal, lifeworld qualities than policy or ideology as opposed to the notion that they are a way to generate campaign funding. The ostensibly intimate connection of the politician’s blog, with the online diary format’s characteristic emphasis on the subjective and the personal, may well still need to be analysed in terms of critiques of the managed presentation formats of personality politics.

In an article in the *Guardian*, Bell (2006) is critical of politician bloggers in the UK, suggesting they are using a centralised model of communication for which Alastair

Campbell became synonymous. She says that “between now and the next election the increase in politicians blogging will be like lemmings falling off a cliff, but a word of advice if I may. Unless you have an inner blogger - don't bother” (¶11). Bell acknowledges that politicians, like the media industry, need to constantly change consumer and technology patterns – either adapt or die.

The United Kingdom is host to a number of politician bloggers who have received both praise and criticism. In *Political blogs: craze or convention*, the Hansard Society has reported that “from the perspective of politics or, more specifically, political awareness and participation in the United Kingdom, blogging is fresh and exciting” (p. 23). Websites have proved an effective way for elected representatives to communicate with their electorate, along with a wider political audience. In the United Kingdom, in 2004, 406 of the 659 Members of Parliament had a personal website, although few were also blogging. One of the early adopters of political blogging in the United Kingdom, Labour MP Tom Watson, believes part of the value of his blog is that it forces him to explain when he changes his mind, as his older posts are still there to be read, although many MPs would probably prefer not to have to be quite that accountable (Thompson, 2004). In May 2007 it was reported that just seven of Australia's 225 federal parliamentarians maintained blogs (Ward & Cahill, 2007). This absence of Australian politicians in the blogosphere is not because they are unaware of the technology but have made the calculation that Australia has a fundamentally different political system in which the internet does not offer the same advantages as that of other countries, especially the United States. However, the differences in the political systems of the two countries is certainly not the only reason why the internet, and its associated communication technologies, have impacted on the way politics is discussed online in either country – there are also geographical and social reasons. Ward and Cahill (2007) offer a number of reasons as to why blogging has not emerged as a place for political discussion in Australia. They suggest that Australians are more inclined to get their news from the mainstream media, and as a country, Australia has simply not connected with blogging. For this finding they suggest that Australia lacks the critical mass of population necessary for a blogosphere. One of Australia's more successful blogs, failed to maintain enough revenue once it separated from the website of a major daily newspaper's website. Another reason they suggest is because, as opposed to the United States, Australians

are not upset about anything. The suggestion here is that the United States is embroiled in the Iraqi war and public opposition to the Bush regime and its policies has led to a polarisation among American citizens, creating a vibrant political situation that has flowed into the blogosphere.

Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad ([www.ahmadinejad.ir](http://www.ahmadinejad.ir)) also puts aside time each month to blog as does the Swiss Federal Councillor, Moritz Leuenberger ([moritzleuenberger.blueblog.ch](http://moritzleuenberger.blueblog.ch)) and UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown ([www.number10.gov.uk](http://www.number10.gov.uk)).

During the Danish election in 2005 it was suggested that blogs served well as a decentralised campaign tool. Klastруп and Pedersen's (2005) study indicates that political blogs are a powerful means to represent the personal face of a candidate and to disseminate information about party organisation and activities. However, the Political Weblog Project, designed to encourage politicians in the UK to use the internet to communicate with voters, closed after four years stating that "MPs have no interest in offering added accessibility, accountability and transparency" by way of a blog ([bloggerheads.com](http://bloggerheads.com)).

While there is a growing academic literature on the impact on blogs on media and electoral politics, there are relatively few studies on blogging by members of legislatures (Small, 2008). Small suggests this is due to the fact very few legislators are actually blogging. The Congressional Management Foundation (Congressional Management Foundation, 2006) found that in 2006 only 9 percent of 100 US politicians' sites and 5.3 percent of the 438 House Member sites featured a blog, despite many of these politicians having a personal website. A similar story is seen in Canada, where about 3 percent of parliamentarians operated blogs in the House of Commons (Ward & Francoli, 2007).

Loïc Le Meur, a French blogger and an advisor on internet-related topics to Nicolas Sarkozy during the French presidential campaign, constructed a list of 10 reasons why politicians should have blogs (2004). The list ranges from closer relationships with voters to using a blog to spread political thought. The list is probably best considered

a heuristic device, but it does contain some points of particular interest to this study.

They are:

1. *To get closer to their audience, their supporters* – Even in an openly democratic country there are few opportunities for members of the public to interact with politicians in a one-to-one situation. Political life is known to be demanding on time and opportunities for politicians to sit down and talk freely with constituents is limited. It is easy enough to view their speeches in the media and read their policies, but to arrange a personal interaction with either a local representative or cabinet minister can be difficult. However, should a politician start a blog, and allow for comments to be made, a direct channel of communication can allow for open discussion with supporters and others who want to make contact.
2. *To create a permanent open debate with them* – One of the reasons why discussions within blogs are different is because they are public. It is harder for a politician to ignore or avoid answering a question or repelling to a comment made on their blog than they can in a public meeting. In those situations, people may have the opportunity to ask a single question and a full and proper answer may be confined by limits of time. In a public situation a politician can, with the aid of proper training, avoid answering awkward questions, but because there is the absence of time and space in the blogosphere, a discussion can run for long periods.
3. *To test their ideas easily and quickly, to enrich them and get new ones* – For a political leader blogging an idea is a very fast way to get feedback. Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former Minister of Finance in France and one of the leaders of the French Socialist Party, made a post on his blog about Arnold Schwarzenegger's banning of gay weddings in California. He asked the readers of his blog what they thought about that decision. Over 100 comments were made in reply to the post. Not only did those who made comments offer their personal view on the topic but they also provided links to articles and other resources about the issue. There is a benefit here to politicians to not only test what the public is thinking about an issue but also to develop their own knowledge and understanding.
4. *To reach a younger audience and help young people get more interested in politics* – The internet is a popular form of communication and leisure for people under 35. These are also the people who often feel excluded from, or have no interest in, politics. Blogs provide a non-threatening platform for politicians to

present ideas to younger voters and also allow them to participate in political discussion in an anonymous way. As has been previously stated, the absence of space and time in the blogosphere allows this group to engage when it suits them rather than at a predetermined time.

5. *To become famous if you are an unknown politician or to start a political action –* A blog is an easy way for a politician, either local or central, to gain wider attention this way. There are a number of examples where someone who may have remained otherwise unnoticed began to build a following, such as the United Kingdom MP and blogger Tom Watson.

Time demands for politicians, as Le Meur alludes to in point 1, could be reason enough to prevent some politicians from blogging, but Coleman (2005) offers another reason for limited numbers of politicians taking up the practice.

... the problem facing politicians who blog is that they are professionally implicated in the very culture that blogging seeks to transcend. Politicians live in a world of certainty and tribal loyalty which is at odds with the blogging ethos of open - mindedness and knowledge - sharing. As long as politicians are expected to be never in doubt and ever faithful to catechistic party messages, their blogging efforts are always likely to look more like simulation than authentic self - expression (Coleman, 2005, p. 276).

This suggests that party politics and blogging may be antithetical (Small, 2008). One requires secrecy and solidarity and the other requires openness and self-expression.

In 2005, politicians following the lead of the early adopters like the United Kingdom's Tom Watson, who started blogging in March 2003, look to the internet to evade the media and get their messages to the public without the media performing their traditional gatekeeper role. The provision of information from politicians to the public is moving away from a mediated tripartite system of governments-media-public to a more direct form of communication between the politicians and the public (Tumber & Bromley, 1998). Politicians who use their blogs as a way of circumventing the media raise a paradoxical situation where the media are purposefully avoided but still use the unmediated content of the site to remain informed of the activities.

Politicians have not used internet and communication technologies as well as they might have and messages can be confusing and fall outside of a wider campaign strategy (Selnow, 1998; Trammell & Williams, 2004). Garrett (2004) offers suggestions to political campaigners to help maximise efficacy. These include to “write posts in a personal voice, update several times a day, encourage comments, moderate comments, hyperlink to internal and external sources, hyperlink to other blogs, and call the readers into action” (Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu & Landreville, 2006, p. 24).

### **8.3 Politician Bloggers: the New Zealand Experience**

Going into the 2005 New Zealand General Election, there was only a handful of politicians who were blogging and even fewer doing so with any commitment or conviction. The only politicians recognised for blogging at this time were ACT’s Rodney Hide and Labour’s Tim Barnet (Hopkins & Matheson, 2005; Fitzjohn & Salmon, 2007). A number of blogs were written by people in party political roles, including Frogblog (written by Green Party parliamentary staff), Kiwiblog (written by David Farrar, manager of the National campaign in Wellington Central) and Just Left (written by Jordan Carter, manager of the Labour campaign for the same seat). What characterises political blogs from this perspective is the blurring of the roles of their writers. These sites were partly internal party mechanisms, gathering support, communicating campaign messages to the faithful and providing gossip for that community of activists; and partly tools to communicate with the wider public, particularly far more radical voices who perceive themselves as marginalised by the mainstream media.

The newspaper company Fairfax New Zealand Ltd provided an opportunity for politicians from all of the major political parties to contribute to a blog on its news website, stuff.co.nz. Five parties were represented by their leaders (Don Brash, Winston Peters, Jeanette Fitzsimons, Tariana Turia and Jim Anderton), while Labour was represented by the (relatively) technology-savvy minister, Steve Maharey. These politicians’ blog entries read as little more than press releases, and contained none of blogging’s usual interactive features, such as links to other online material, archives or the ability to offer comments or feedback to the author. Brash, for example, wrote:

In Wellington yesterday, Bill English and I launched an education initiative that will be a vital building block to raising literacy and numeracy standards in our schools, to the benefit of all New Zealanders. Currently, there is far too much politically correct nonsense around the reporting of failure, and problems that could lead to failure, in our schools (Brash, 2005).

Like Brash's blog, Prime Minister Helen Clark's blog, which was hosted on the Labour Party website, was not characterised by any private, individual voice or sense of immediacy or spontaneity and it is difficult to believe the posts were written by her:

Wet and miserable weather did not dampen spirits at the two Palmerston North schools I visited today. At St Peter's College, where they were marking the 30th anniversary of the opening of the school, the auditorium was full for celebrations that included speeches, singing, a stirring haka, an audio-visual presentation featuring images from the school's opening 30 years ago, and the cutting of a formidable cake. In my address I recalled that Norman Kirk had attended the school's opening, in what was one of his last public engagements before his untimely death in August 1974. (Clark, 2005)

Only rarely was there any hint of a personal perspective on issues. It is generally accepted that members of the parties' media units or press secretaries wrote many, if not all, of the postings. The parties were thus attempting to reproduce the conventions around political speeches – fronted by politicians but researched and crafted by support staff – in blogging. Clark's weblog had 35 entries between 8 March 2004 and 27 August 2004 but was discontinued without explanation. This half-hearted approach to blogging could be explained by the authors' lack of familiarity with writing in such a mixed public-personal genre. It could also be explained in terms of the risk to institutions by precisely that mixing, which might lead to some caution. Only months before, Labour MP John Tamihere had ceased his blog after a post comparing members of the TV3 news staff to Hitler and Goebbels caused a political storm (Tamihere Slammed over Nazi Comments, 2005). Clark was not alone in having third party written posts as Don Brash's blog on the stuff.co.nz website was also written impersonal and insincerely.

The main feature for politicians to ensure they positively utilise their blogs is the ability for them to transfer aspects of their personalities and make intimate connections with the reader – something that would be more difficult to achieve in

traditional media situations. However this raises a number of concerns about the implications of political debates that occur within the political blogosphere. The openness of the blog, the possibility for readers to contact a political blogger and the opportunity to enter into a discussion with a member of parliament, all require more from a politician than has previously been offered and this too has serious implications for politicians.

The examination of both New Zealand and international experiences of politicians who blog show that it is still a developing form of political communication where there are no fixed rules or absolutes. Politicians, the media and the public are still forming their relationships with one another as the old norms have been rewritten by the emerging blogosphere. Blogs, it seems, differ to mainstream media in that social, geographical and political facts play a major role in their take-up. There will also almost certainly be counter-cultural elements and the attraction of blogs being viewed as non-commercial entities that need to stand on the quality of the content. Unlike commercial publications, blogs have no marketing or promotion to assist in higher readership.

#### **8.4 Rodney Hide: Case Study of a New Zealand Politician's Blogging Experience**

Rodney Hide is the leader of the ACT Party, Member of Parliament for the Auckland electorate of Epsom, an environmentalist and a blogger. He entered the New Zealand Parliament in 1996 and quickly established a reputation for exposing government waste and overspending – earning him the title “Perk Buster”. His party, ACT, sits to the right of the political spectrum. They have liberal tax and economic policies and hold conservative values on issues such as crime and punishment. They also push for a more transparent and accountable form of government. In a 2006 speech, Hide stated that ACT was for individual freedom, choice and personal responsibility, doing the best for our natural environment and for smaller, smarter government, and creating a prosperous economy, a strong society, and a quality of life that is the envy of the world (Hide, 2006).

In academic literature there is currently a lack of case studies that consider the blogging practices of individual politicians. There are few examples of politicians who blog being covered in any great depth, although there are a couple of well known examples. In October 2006 Canadian parliamentarian Garth Turner was expelled from the Conservative Party, in government at the time, because comments he made on his blog breached caucus confidentiality (Argitis, 2006). This incident was covered in some detail in by Small (2008). The successes of Howard Dean's blog during his presidential attempt are by far the most well known example of a politician blogging (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Meraz, 2006).

Hide was by far the most prolific political party leader blogging during the campaign. He started his blog on 27 April 2004, announcing Richard Prebble's departure as ACT Party leader, and his and parliamentary colleague Ken Shirley's decision to put their names forward to lead the party. Between April 2004 and the election he posted over 1,600 entries and received nearly 15,000 comments. Hide was responsible, unlike Clark and Brash who used their staffers, for all the content he posted on his blog. He was able to use the site in rapidly responding to media coverage. For example, when the *Sunday Star-Times* (Laugesen, 2005) reported damaging evidence that senior figures in ACT helped back Don Brash's National Party leadership coup, Hide was able to work to discredit the news story quickly on his blog. He also used the blog to inform supporters about upcoming events and media activity, such as interviews or leaders' debates. Most striking of all, the blog provided a constantly updated picture of Hide as an individual, in a context that was less formal, was entirely controlled by Hide himself, and appeared uncontrived. In fact, Hide's blog site was personalised in such a manner that a site visitor was able to see if Rodney was online at the time, so that he could be contacted directly and without delay. In the context of pre-election polls suggesting that Hide, and the ACT Party, were heading for political oblivion, and where it was imperative for him to maintain the highest profile possible in order to retain his place in Parliament, this quite personal communicative form may have had some political force. It could be assumed that few of the technically savvy Epsom voters, who were wavering between the ACT and National candidates, read Hide's blog. But the blog's potential role in galvanising Hide's team, raising his profile and managing his wider media profile, cannot be discounted. Blogging emerges from the 2005 election campaign as a tool in the armoury of the personality-based politician.

During the interview with Hide he stated that when he first started blogging he was writing about more mundane topics which he thought would be helpful to people following him on his campaign to win the leadership of the ACT Party. He felt after a while it was become tedious, because as a politician he could not reveal anything salacious in his blog and he wanted to avoid scandal:

I started off when I did the campaign I was very much “here I am in Hawera” and I am talking to this group, what a great meeting we had and here is a picture of me and I was doing that and here is some sausage rolls that I got (Hide, 2005, personal communication, November 23, 2005).

He evolved his blog posts to try and use them to debate political ideas. He made the assumption that the people who read his blog on a regular basis probably viewed the world in a similar way to him and therefore purposively increased the intellectual level of his content. He found this style of writing quite a tough discipline at first because trying to condense an issue or political philosophy into a paragraph or two can be difficult. Hide did consciously progress toward a more narrative form of writing.

Say I spend the weekend going around all the fairs [in Epsom] and all the rest of it, I don't put that up on my blog, what I do I will be thinking about something and I will go and blog, you know this is interesting, we will look at these wankers at the Daily Otago Times or ghee whiz I had a very interesting experience at the Finance and Expenditure select committee (Hide, 2005, personal communication, November 23, 2005).

Hide tended to write short informative posts. Compared with the other bloggers studied in the content analysis for this study, Hide had an average word length of 93.8 words per post. In comparison David Farrar had 168.6 words per post, Russell Brown 1356.4 and Jordan Carter 237.4. Hide believed blog writing is unconsidered writing and he did not put as much thought or effort into constructing his posts as he would a speech or letter, but rather he makes one point and does so in a style he feels is suited for internet reading. This style is purely anecdotal, based on his own internet reading preferences and not on any empirical research. He says he is unable to read long emails or articles and therefore creates his blog posts to reflect this – as can be seen by his post length in comparison with the others considered in the wider study. When constructing the post, Hide says the first sentence is crucial in capturing attention, and

a different writing style is used to ensure the point is carried in the fewest possible words.

Hide is aware of the intimate communication his blog has with its readers and how it can enable him to personalise his public profile. He realises that people can get to know a lot about a person unintentionally because of its intimate nature, but he is also aware there are limits to that. As a politician, there are issues and events he would purposefully not blog about. Despite this, Hide is excited by the potential and power of the communication technologies.

I am not going to tell you anything intimate, the nature of a politician, you can't be saying you know, I saw a hot girl and took her out for a drink and I thought I could get into her pants... (Hide, 2005, personal communication, November 23, 2005).

During the interview Hide referred to blogging as a conversation and for him to acknowledge that his blog is a conversation is an important step in political blogging. This positions his blog away from it being a single-directional communication where Hide is in control of the discussion to a two-way asymmetrical discussion where the politician is engaging with others. For Hide to make this statement is curious as he does not engage with anyone in the comments section. He qualifies this position by saying that entering into a committed relationship with the public through a blog is a scary prospect; "while it gives you the ability to instantly commentate on an issue that has a huge downside because there is an expectation that you will comment, if you know what I mean, it is very hard to duck, I am blogging every day and if something happens it would be very hard for me to go silent". He also admits that he could become consumed in the discussion section of his blog and not fulfil his other responsibilities as an MP. A politician could not be expected to fulfil their roles as elected representatives as well as answer every comment or partake in every debate that was conducted on their blog. When the European Parliament considered the impacts of information and communication technologies on a parliamentarian's work, they found it allowed representatives faster dissemination of information about their views and activities and, easier and broader contact with their citizens (European Parliaments Research Initiative, 2005). Many of the politicians in the study were positive about the move toward communication technologies, but complained about the extra workload.

One of the contradictions about Hide's use of comments made by his blog readers was his unwillingness to engage back with them directly. From the time Hide started blogging in 2004 to the day of the interview in late 2005, he had received in excess of 15,000 comments, but he did not reply to any of these on his blog. This is despite his admission to reading every one of them – he has his blog set up so a comment will be emailed directly to him as soon as it is placed. According to Hide, he chooses to abstain from any arguments that may occur between commenters on his blog. He was committed to not getting involved in an argument with commenters because he felt that often there was no winner and the arguments could be circular. He says he does not want to use the blog as a place to argue and “at the end of the day they are anonymous and you feel a bit silly responding to someone anonymous”. A study of the United Kingdom's politicians' blogs interestingly found a similar finding that the politician was not inclined to enter into a debate with those who left comments but would instead write a new post on a subject or comment that had been made (Auty, 2005).

This position conflicts with other statements Hide has made about his blog being used as place to discuss issues. In a discussion that took place after Hide's post on capital gains tax (Hide, 2005c) some robust debate ensued about the value of such a tax and how good policy is more important than whether it comes from a left or right agenda. Like in other discussion areas, comments were made directly to Hide but to no avail. Here Hide is happy to provide a location for these discussions to occur, but he was not prepared to become involved, even when ACT policy was being debated. It could be suggested that his not doing so is in line with wider ACT political philosophy in that Hide and ACT are opposed to intervention, regulation and involvement of government. In a sense, by providing and afterward not intervening in the activities of individuals in his blogs comment section – either positively or negatively – Hide was enacting ACT's free market liberal ideology. The content analysis for this study shows that other than posting about topics surrounding the campaign, which he did on 26 occasions, he discussed economic issues in two posts, taxes in eight posts, and student loads, crime, and education on one occasion each. During the interview Hide said he regards himself as a politician who is “quite keen to debate on the issues”. He also said he believed in the importance of debate taking place outside of the

mainstream media, like those that occur in the comments section of his blog. Again, these statements contradict his blogging and deliberative behaviours. There is a discrepancy between how Hide sees his blog being used and how the findings of this research show him using it. This could indicate some limitations in his understanding of how his blog worked in the election or what his role as a blog owner requires to achieve deliberation and democratic discussion within his comments section.

Hide views his blog as a progression of technologies that fulfil a campaigning role. His blog is something equivalent to the politicians, who in the old days would travel around their electorate holding meetings on street corners, blaring out of a megaphone while standing up on a box. They would “yell at people and people would come out and gather and it was quite a thing, they would see a politician and have a bit of fun” (Hide, 2005, personal communication, November 23, 2005). Television, he believes, has created a gap between politicians and those they represent. People are disinclined to venture out of their homes to engage in politics, but happily view it on their couches as it unfolds from a television studio or press conference. What Hide sees is the technology of blogging acting as a soap box in cyberspace whereby people can metaphorically open the door and engage with a politician.

... not only can you hear what [the politician] has got to say, he can actually give you feedback and no one stops. It's older than democracy and that's the bit that I am just am so excited about because it sort of overcoming that tyranny of TV which becomes so powerful and in a way democratic because TV is a very authoritarian medium.

...God knows in five years time we will laugh at what we are doing now and so it is, it is a huge opportunity to engage in your little community, I mean you might be a bloody pornographer and have your little pornography debate, you might be interested in music or you might be an ACT person and so there are all these little wee things like its like going off to what probably happened in the 30's, 40's and 50's where there were sort of reading clubs or socialist clubs where you know people would gather and discuss books, there is that opportunity there ... (Hide, personal communication, November 23, 2005).

Analysis of Hide's blog during the 2005 campaign period shows that he used it to great effect when it came to campaigning. During the sample period that was used in this research, between 20 August and 16 September (see Chapter Four for more detail), Hide made 30 posts, and of those, 22 were about either his personal campaign or to do with the wider election campaign. For example:

We canvassed half the electorate today. That's the way to find out what's going on. We'll do the other half tomorrow.

The overnight team are printing another letter for tomorrow with quotes from tomorrow Sunday papers. They'll pick the papers up first thing and the letters will be done for the canvassers by nine. (Hide, 2005e)

The remaining seven posts (as one was coded as being non-election related) were used to cover party policy. However, sometimes the posts were not used to discuss or present ACT Party policy and they were combined with content about Hide's campaigning activities. An example can be seen below (Hide, 2005f):

Good to see that National has determined to can Labour's 5 cent tax hike on petrol -- but why bring it back in come April. It's a bad tax -- and should go.

Off to Morning Report at 7:10 on taking the Force out of the RNZAF and Holmes on ZB at 7:50. Then it's a full day campaigning through Auckland.

Here, Hide uses the post to comment on National's response to Labour's policy to increase petrol tax, and he only uses seven words to detail his, or ACT's, thoughts on the subject. Again on 7 September he refers to the Green Party's policy on capital gains tax. At no stage in the post did he refer to or state ACT's policy on the issue.

In the period from 1 July to beginning of the actual election campaign period Hide used his blog to talk about the negative effect of other parties' policies, especially around tax and student loans (as these were the major issues of the 2005 election) along with ACT's party policy on these issues. He did this on a more regular basis than in the campaign period. On 6 July Hide comments on and critiques National's tax cut policy and also compares this with Labour's increased spending on families. He also looked at other parties' pension policies and gave his interpretation as to why they were problematic (12 July). With readership numbers increasing on many blogs in the lead-up to the election it could be said that Hide may have been better to have continued to push ACT's policies and attack those of opposition parties during this period. This indicates a non-strategic and uncoordinated approach to his blog, which was indicative of how New Zealand politicians' blogs were still in their infancy in 2005. At that time they had only begun to enter the consciousness of the media and public (Jackson, 2006).

It is difficult to categorically state why Hide failed to push ACT's policies and discuss those of his political opposition, especially when he was adamant about the democratic nature of blogs and their ability to convey unmediated messages, but this is a significant finding. Hide's blog was mainly used as a campaign promotional tool in the same way that many other politicians use basic webpages. So in essence the only difference on many occasions was that Hide was using blogging technology as opposed to HTML-based webpages. By focusing his posts on providing supporters with innocuous accounts of his locality and campaign activities he did provide the chance for supporters to attend some of his events if they were interested. However, it did not go any way towards achieving Hide's earlier claim to intellectualise his writing, nor did he use his blog as a place for democratic discussion. When he was away from his laptop or office computer, Hide would post using his mobile phone. The functionality of this, e.g. a small keyboard making longer posts tricky, could explain his short posts and a number of spelling and grammatical errors. There is also a relationship back to the nonstrategic approach to his blog – posts appeared to be made at will on random or momentary topics instead of with any consideration.

The question of whether Hide's blog played any role in his winning the Epsom seat is worth considering. His prolific blogging during the election could be argued to have enhanced his personal profile during the campaign, although this is hard to substantiate. Hide believes the blog had "zero" effect in his electorate win, attributing success to more traditional campaign methods. Hide believes what shifted people in Epsom was actually getting out and walking down the street and mostly they were unaware of his blog. Hide accepts blogs have a huge impact in America and believes they have potential in New Zealand. He believes people who are going to his blog regularly are going to vote for him anyway and they are reading it to reaffirm their decision, or they are political enemies checking what he is up to. Hide does not believe people will decide to vote for him or not based on blog reading alone. This raises some important issues and questions for politicians who choose to blog. If the main readers are the converted – whether friend or foe – how does this relate to the wider issue of political blogging? This also has implications for politician blogs as places of deliberation where opinions can be challenged and altered.

In relation to his overall profile, again Hide says that his blog did little to raise awareness of him or his campaign. He hypothesises most of the people reading his blog were part of the New Zealand blog community. He knows it personalises him but there are limits to the raising of his profile.

Hide is conscious of the fact that anything he publishes on his blog is there for all time. He thinks blog postings are stronger than making a statement in the newspaper because “it is always there and predications that you make will haunt you, statements that you say will haunt you, so I have used it very conservatively and I don’t think I have begun to unleash its real potential” (Hide, personal communication, November 23, 2005).

A politician’s blog does have a certain amount of public relations value (Jackson, 2006) and Hide admitted that he was often contacted by the media purely on the basis of something he had written on his blog. He also admits to writing posts for the purpose of titillating the media and leveraging mass attention for his writing. When asked if he was contacted by the media because of something he had blogged, he admitted he had been a “couple of dozen times” and he also stated how he would post things “just for fun”, knowing the media would seize on his post.

Hide admits that he has a good relationship with the media, although he adds he is hard on them because he believes being an MP and journalism are both important jobs and play a large role in the lives of many people. He does not like to see sloppiness in the media and will tackle individual journalists and news organisations where he sees fit in relation to himself or the ACT Party. Hide was not afraid to use his blog to rectify what he believed to be poor journalism. In two cases, ACT’s role in the change of the National Party Leadership and when journalist Irene Chappell carried out what Hide referred to as “such poor reporting” of his and Don Brash supposedly bumping into each other campaigning on Lambton Quay, Hide used his blog to rebut and explain what actually happened, as opposed to the stories that ran in the media. While this could be considered rapid response public relations, for Hide it was not that crude. While he did correct a story that had run in the media, and his actions were purposive, it was not a situation that he felt he needed to defend, as Hide is an astute politician and would not have allowed the situation to have arisen if he believed it was

politically damaging. He did admit to posting about the Brash meeting because he wanted to have the correct information about that specific incident put into the public arena. Hide recounts the meeting on Lampton Quay between himself and Brash took place at the request of the National Party, who had asked him to come down. The media reports took the angle that Hide had ambushed Brash, which was not the case, and Hide had been conscious throughout the campaign that his blog afforded him the opportunity to explain to the media and other readers his side of the meeting. He knew his blog was often read by the media and because of this his posts could not only inform supporters and political enemies, but double as some kind of media release to provide his side of the events.

Hide was acutely aware of the power of the blogosphere, crediting it with being more powerful than the mainstream media. He stated if he were to offer information that was not correct, “I would have got away with it in the newspaper, I would have got away with it on TV, [but] I couldn’t get away with it on my own god damn blog” (Hide, 2005, personal communication, November 23, 2005). What he was referring to here was the ability of readers to utilise the internet to qualify or challenge anything he posted on. The thousands of readers of the blog could investigate anything he had posted and if the content was found wanting, Hide could be exposed in a wider media arena, potentially bringing negative political consequences. There are examples of this happening in the United States where a “gotcha” type of citizen journalism has exposed details of a blog as being inaccurate, such as the examples of Trent Lott (Lessig, 2004) and the *60 Minutes* story on George W. Bush’s National Guard service (*60 Minutes* Wednesday Canceled, 2005). These occurrences have not been reflected as much, if at all, in New Zealand or Australia, and certainly did not happen to Hide during the election campaign period.

Where Hide did find the medium useful was using it to gauge public opinion. Using his blog as a research tool is not why he started his blog but it was something he identified as being useful after he had started. From his blog statistics he was aware that there were up to 7000 individuals reading it each week and he realised he could use them as “a little advisory group, a focus group” (Hide, 2005, personal communication, November 23, 2005). This he found to be very influential for him, particularly on how to better phrase issues on a macro level. Hide uses his blog here

in a similar way to other politicians around the world, as was highlighted by French politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn, and he is able to directly attribute specific instances where he used ideas that were received by commenters to his blog and how it impacted on his campaigning:

I was going on the Kim Hill show and I blogged in the morning and then I was driving out there and I can download the emails from my phone and I down loaded them and ran through them and there was some very, very good suggestions which I actually took on board and I don't even know who they were but I knew they were very regular commentators so I knew that they were quite clever and I thought I hadn't thought of that, I hadn't thought of that, and I am writing a speech on environmental issues and I put up one of the key things that I am going to be talking about and I put it on my blog and there had been a bit of a row between the Greens and the ACT people and I am actually thinking I could have phrased that better because I understand what they misunderstood so it's a great testing ground and I actually did that in the campaign. (Hide, 2005, personal communication, November 23, 2005)

There is an argument that suggests a government needs to know what people are thinking in order for them to properly govern. Mill (1811, in Bromley & O'Malley, 1997) says:

It is the natural, nay, we may confidently say, the necessary effect of a free press, so to harmonise together the tone of the government and the sentiments of the people...By the free circulation of opinions, the government is always fully apprised, which, by no other means it ever can be, of the sentiments of the people, and feels a decided interest in conforming to them. (p. 20)

To further this Bromley and O'Malley (1997) say people and the government are under a moral necessity to act together and a free press assists them uncompromising their views to avoid, in the worse case scenario, a violent uprising. A scaled down approach to this thinking could also apply between the politician blogger and the reader. In a public relations context this is known as two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This suggests that either side of the communication will be willing to make adjustments to accommodate each other in the hope of achieving mutual benefit. There was no evidence in the content analysis or through the interview that Hide made any adjustments to his position on issues or policy decisions.

What Hide was probably most successful in achieving through his blog was conveying himself as a non-traditional Member of Parliament. His blog had evidence of his personality and sense of humour. Using posts to tell readers how he was called “pertinacious” by the National candidate for Epsom, and how he needed a dictionary to find out what it meant, describing a “cool” piece of technology he found on the internet and berating opposition politicians in good humour all gave a sense of Rodney Hide as an individual. It is not easy to access the real person behind the political mask when presented through the mainstream media but more easily achieved through their blog (Auty, 2006). Hide’s blog was obviously all his own work and could not be considered the sterile writings of a press secretary, as was the case with Don Brash and Helen Clark’s 2005 efforts, or a collection of party affiliates offering support content, as was the case with Frogblog. It was sometimes chatty and informal and other times detailed and informative, but it consistently showed off the personality of Hide, as can be seen from his post after the launch of ACT’s official campaign:

Campaign launch went off real well -- except the camera melee at the start of my speech knocked one auto-cue about so I flew on just one wing.

Still, I knew the speech pretty well and no one noticed.

The entertainment worked out well, it was a great crowd, people liked my speech, and they clapped and laughed in all the right places!

Now that we've launched -- we can start campaigning real hard! (Hide, 2005g)

All this personalisation could seem disingenuous if the parts are considered individually; an intelligent politician campaigning for his party’s existence along with his individual seat during an election campaign, access to an unmediated web publishing tool and a desire to create positive communication with the electorate. While there is not anything wrong with this per se, Hide has simply used an informal and personal channel to be informal and personal. Hide’s academic, business and political background leaves no doubt of intelligence and acumen, which coupled with his personal interest in computing and technology, may have led him into a situation where he saw an opportunity to use blogs as a point of difference in the New Zealand political landscape.

He also tries to maintain a decent level of language on his blog. He will even go the extent of deleting comments that are loaded with what he deems bad language. He is also perplexed at the way people behave online as opposed to real-world situations. He is opposed to the way people use bullying and abuse online.

And I just don't understand that part of blogging, they would never behave like that in a room and they will gang up and you will see someone makes what others think as a silly of statement and then three or four commentators gang up and I haven't figured out how you could stop that, I try and sort of be polite with my posts. (Hide, 2005, personal communication, November 23, 2005)

Because of this kind of online behaviour, and also with a high public profile, he is careful to be polite on the internet – more so than in real life. Again, he is worried about what he publishes online coming back to bite him at a later date. One of the things about the use of blogs during the election campaign that surprised Hide was the way each side of the political spectrum used them. His observation was the right or centre-right bloggers railed against the media but he felt the left-wing blogs would attack people on them. Hide is concerned about some of the material that appeared in the comments section of his blog as he was concerned that he would become associated with it. In the early days of his blog, journalists had confused the post and the comments section and had attributed comments that people had written as being Hide's comment.

I try and sort of be polite with my posts and I was quite worried this happened at the start where journalists were confused by blogs and actually attributed comments that people had written to me. (Hide, 2005, personal communication, November 23, 2005)

Blogging provides some real concerns for politicians and it is experiences like these that explain why some are hesitant to enter the blogosphere. Association can be an important element of politics and being misquoted or having a quote misattributed can have serious implications.

More than ever the worlds of politics and popular culture are merging. It is increasingly difficult to separate the politician (political ideologies) and the public persona. The 2005 New Zealand General Election was fought in an American presidential style campaign where the leader was presented to the public instead of the

party or the policies they offered. The increase of political marketing and the trivialisation of politics have not gone unnoticed and has been the subject of much criticism (Franklin, 1994). Hide's actions as a blogger, with the objective of raising his profile, could be considered outside the role of a politician. There are a number of examples where his blog has been used to promote activities which are quite removed from the normal politician's brief. He has blogged on activities in his life that include his time as a contestant on *Dancing with the Stars* (even the name of the show indicates some previous level of celebrity), competing in a series of high profile long distance ocean swimming events, his significant weight loss, and the publishing of his book, *My Year of Living Dangerously* – along with the promotional tour that followed.

When one of Hide's blog readers made a comment suggesting he should quit politics to become a full-time celebrity, Hide wrote an emphatic post to refute the allegations made against him and defending his life choices.

I don't know of another MP who has achieved as much as I have in the past twelve months in Parliament... I know Epsom residents are very pleased with their MP's performance and especially my independent line with me working with all parties to promote competition and choice. They like having an MP who works right around the electorate and who stands up for them in parliament -- and doesn't toe either National or Labour's party line. The ACT party actually stands for something.

I think Stanley objects to me posting about my dancing, swimming and other extra-curricular activities. Perhaps he would prefer that I spent my down time like I used to with other MPs drinking and eating too much. The difference is that they don't blog about it.

Politics is about ideas and policy. But it is also about people. It's important for MPs to represent and be in touch with people from across the political spectrum and from all walks of life. That's why it's important for MPs and party leaders to get out and about and not just in stage-managed photo shoots.

I like going dancing. I like going swimming. I enjoy the activity. I am a better person better able to do my job as MP as result of being fitter and healthier -- and for taking regular breaks from politics to go for a swim or a dance -- just to get away from it all.

But the best part is that I get to meet people, to talk to them outside of a political context, and to get to understand better their concerns and aspirations. I meet people who I represent who I otherwise would not meet.

I meet them in a context where we can talk with each other rather than me talking at them.

In the process I raise a few bucks for worthy charities. I am pretty proud of that.

I am now MP for Epsom and Leader of ACT. I need to step up to the big ideas of the free market and the policies needed to reverse New Zealand's economic slide -- and to do this I need to remember that politics is about people and that it's okay to take a break, have some fun, and to dance. (Hide, 2007)

Street (2003) suggests that rather than seeing political communication as an application of commercial marketing, it should be viewed as the communication of show-business. He says, "Politicians concerned with how they look and sound, the techniques of self projection/promotion that they use, and the associations they exploit, might be best understood as analogous with the practices of popular culture" (p. 86). He goes as far as suggesting that politics is not simply like a soap opera, but is in fact a soap opera because politicians are acting like stars or artists. When Hide, via his blog, explained his reasons for going on *Dancing with the Stars*, he used the opportunity to remind readers when the show was on and what number to phone or text to vote for him. It is easy to suggest that Hide is conjuring up a form of communication that is not known as traditional political communication, rather it could be considered an act of celebrity, thus coat-tailing the criticism levelled at Hide on his blog by a poster called Stanley (as seen above). Within a New Zealand context, Hide could be regarded as one of the first celebrity politicians and he, like Paris Hilton (who is regarded for being famous without actually having a basis for that fame), takes his profile into spheres where he has no natural recognition for these abilities, but seems determined to widen the stage for his performance. Hide is blurring the distinction between the private and the public. If Hide is, as he claims, using swimming or dancing as mere recreation and a way of personalising himself with those he meets in the course of undertaking these extracurricular activities, then one could question the need to publish these activities on his blog or before the glare of the media. Political communication is achieved through lifestyle choices as much as it is by policy decisions and political ideology (Street, 2003).

## 8.5 Spooks – When Blogging Goes Bad

Hide met a number of people on the campaign trail and in his daily business as a Member of Parliament who referred to his blog, which segued into further discussion. One experience he was not prepared for was a stalker and harasser who used the pseudonym Spooks. Hide describes his online interaction with Spooks as the scariest thing that has ever happened to him as a parliamentarian – Hide says the events “scared me shitless”. This section is a disclosure of how a public website can be hijacked and brought down by an unstable individual; while this is nothing new in the history of online communication, the importance of the Spooks saga lies in the close relationship and apparent limitlessness of online access to politicians through their feedback channels or discussion sections. In one of his posts, David Cameron says that he was happy to receive nearly all of the comments, indicating some of the comments had been less than favourable – although he was almost certainly not harassed to the level Hide was by Spooks. On one occasion Cameron answered a number of the questions posed to him via the feedback function and did so in some detail. However, if campaigning politicians are looking to interact with the public in a more meaningful way, and want to give readers a sense of themselves through an increased personal experience, this may be jeopardised by individuals like Spooks, forcing politicians back into a mediated communicative position. It also undermines the quality of debate that can take place and creates an insecure venue for those wishing to engage in discussing issues with the proviso of a deliberative outcome. This situation also has links to the theoretical constructs on which this thesis is based. Namely it undermines Habermas’ rules for communicative action because it fails to try and reach mutual understanding and there is no shared valued system. Because of Spooks’ behaviour Hide was forced to act in a dominating position, making him an elite person in the view of the public sphere. There was also little inclination on behalf of Spooks to enter into rational debate, another prerequisite of Habermas’ thinking. The following will provide a case as to why these claims are made.

Spooks is an ex-civil servant who had previously been a member of ACT for 10 years, and who is known to Rodney Hide. Hide said that he had met Spooks on occasion and could not believe that he, who seemed a normal, rational person, could be the same one who terrorised him and others online. Spooks’ real name and details are known to

the author of this study but will remain confidential so as not to provoke or incite further interaction between individuals referred to in this thesis.

Spooks was initially like any other person leaving comments directed to Hide or other commenters, and he would enter into discussions. Hide says that Spooks started to get stroppy, but he just chose to ignore it in the first instance, although things started to deteriorate after a short while. Spooks started posting up to 200 messages a night in the comments section, as well as emailing Hide directly. He then started using different online names and pseudonyms and conducting conversations with these supposed multiple users in the comments section, interacting in a discussion about an issue – in reality Spooks was having conversations with himself. Then he started posting under names and pseudonyms of people who were already visiting Hide's blog. It was established that Spooks was posting under the guise of other people's identities as all of the posts made were traced back to the same IP address. Posting under other names started causing confusion among the regular users who saw comments that had been apparently made by them.

The comments descended to threats of physical violence to such a degree that Hide almost called the police. In fact, David Farrar, who was also a victim of harassment by Spooks, received phone calls and death threats and was forced to take out a restraining order, believing his safety was genuinely at risk. Hide was forced to restrict access to his IP address and only then did the harassment stop.

The author of this thesis is in possession of 268 emails or comments that were sent from Spooks and were identified back to the same IP address. These were provided by Rodney Hide and used with his permission. Some examples of the content sent to Hide include:

You fucking beauty! Fucken ripper.  
You drew first blood.  
And you turned it into a war.  
You could have stopped it at any time.  
The war has just begun.  
You night as well start looking for your new career now.  
Liar, cheat, hatemonger.

Hide = Hate

Jack

But if there is further interest in these matters, including further damage to my web "reputation", I can make things very interesting, and I suspect very damaging. I expect correct details of what took place to replace what is there now.

But IMHO, our (barely) esteemed leader might have over-stepped the boundaries.

At the very least, I will be at the State of the Nation address. I will by then have put together a more complete picture (with my web-page exhibits) to be seen by anyone who might just be interested. Anyone!

While I am at the State of the Nation address, rest assure that you will be very much aware of my presence.

I am VERY angry.

Jack

What a pity, I enjoyed the speech today.

I notice that you have locked me out.

Thanks for nothing.

Be very concerned, Rodney, be very concerned.

Jack, The Troll

God...I am such a jerk....but I get such a kick out of baiting people...do you think that I am sick?

He also accused Hide of writing comments under his name:

This should be fun. What a waste of valuable CIB time, Rodney. All because you fraudulently posted my name a few hundred times. God the papers are going to love this one. Ho ho ho. "Rodney Hide charged with wsting the Police time" yippee.

It was not long before Hide realised that he was dealing with someone who was "very, very sick". While the situation ended without any serious incident the experience was enough that Hide and Farrar reconsidered their future as bloggers and very nearly stopped altogether. The Hide/Spooks situation does highlight the fact that in a relatively small country like New Zealand, the nature of the accessible and intimate relationship between politicians and the general public, which can be further enhanced through the blogosphere, is one that can be potentially fraught with problems. Most of

the experiences Hide has encountered through or from his blog have been very positive, although he has set up security systems on his site to mitigate future incidents like that of Spooks.

Outside of people leaving offensive comments on a politician's blog, there has been no similar experience reported widely in either mainstream media or academic writing to that of Spooks' behaviour toward Hide. At the time there were media organisations in New Zealand who were aware of what was happening and wanted to run the story, but Hide and Farrar implored the media that the story not run for fear of provoking Spooks and having the situation escalate – something the media understood and agreed to.

## **8.6 Conclusion**

In the interview conducted with Hide he said that his blog should not be held up as a model of an intellectually rigorous blog where ideas are discussed by first-rate minds. While this is true, it does provide an online location where two important occurrences take place; first, the writings of an existing politician who discusses the events on an election campaign trail and comments on issues and policies important to the election, and second a place where anyone can reply to the politician and discuss issues with other readers of the blog. While this did not always occur in the way Habermas envisioned a normative public sphere, it is an important step toward that ideal.

There does seem to be a conflict between how Hide views the way his blog was used in the election period and how it was actually used. While encouraged by the idea that the blogosphere represented a deliberative forum for people to discuss politics he did not at any stage engage in this action within the comments section and seldom did he do so within his posts. He also used his blog far less to discuss policy and ACT's position on issues than he did to describe the actual election campaign itself. In some sense this could be considered a wasted opportunity by Hide to pursue the development of deliberative democracy online, but as his blog was not following a predetermined strategy, the fact he regularly blogged during an election campaign, known to be a frenetic period for political candidates, demonstrates his commitment to maintaining a dialogue with readers.

When comparing Hide's blogging to Le Meur's points about why a politician should blog, one can get a sense of the dichotomy Hide is on occasions. While he opens his blog for anyone to read and make comments, he relies solely on the premise that his personality will be communicated through his writing because at no time does he make his posts to start a discussion and maintain them in the comments section. He does not engage with those leaving comments on his posts, even after admitting he reads every one of them, and seldom does he use posts to follow up on comments or issues that arose. Le Meur says it is harder for a politician to ignore or avoid answering a question or reply to a comment made on their blog than they can in a public meeting, however it is safe to claim that Hide did not use his blog as a two-way form of communication where broadened knowledge or a deliberative outcome was sought.

Hide did use his blog for the benefit of his political situation. While not responding to feedback in the comments section, he admitted to taking the general feeling of the comments and touted that as public opinion – especially where he would ask for thoughts on an issue – he would then quote these “findings” in the wider media. Hide also used his blog on a number of occasions where he sought to build his public profile or leverage media attention. Analysis of Hide's blog showed that he would use it to emphasise his activities even when these were well outside of his role as a politician. While it could be argued that he was responding to existing media attention, such as when he was on *Dancing with the Stars*, mostly Hide would provide a preamble to his activities involving the media.

Hide did take a risk by blogging his way through an election. With no real frame of reference to work on or previous knowledge of blogging in an election campaign, he was in some ways fortunate for the experience to not have backfired on him. There are a number of ways in which politically motivated people could have taken advantage of his comments section and the Spooks situation is testament to that. Hide could have inadvertently posted contentious information that resulted in wider negative media coverage or, if it was only being read by those already intending to vote for him, a waste of time and energy.

Politicians will inevitably be increasingly drawn to use blogs for any number of reasons; personalisation, campaign communication, regular updates for their electorates, fundraising or simply for the “me too” factor. Hide’s blogging experience in 2005 can provide a checklist of considerations when they contemplate joining the blogosphere. There are benefits to having a presence through a blog, but there are also pitfalls of which politicians need be constantly mindful. Although, in Hide’s opinion, the blogosphere isn’t necessarily a collection of the greatest minds, it is a place for dangerous minds and any opportunity will be seized by political opponents.

## Chapter Nine

### Summary of Findings and Conclusions

#### 9.1 Introduction

This study has concentrated on the role of four blogs during the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign. More specifically the research considered how blogs enabled people to connect and discuss political issues outside of the mainstream media. This study is the first in-depth look into the New Zealand political blogosphere. The evolution of mass communication technology, which enabled politics to be presented to a wider audience, began with the printing press and continues today by means of communication through the internet. It is constantly developing and the blogs are another step in this continuum.

In Chapter One the research question which directed this study was stated as, “How did blogs communicate opinions and ideas on issues during the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign?” This was followed by five sub-questions:

1. How were ideas and issues discussed and debated within comments sections?
2. Did the blogosphere enhance deliberative democracy through discussions?
3. What relationship did blogs have with the mainstream media?
4. How did bloggers perceive their role in communicating election information and engendering discussions around issues?
5. How did ACT party leader Rodney Hide use his blog as part of his campaign communication?

Chapters Five and Six examine the content of the posts and comments sections from the blogs of Russell Brown, Jordan Carter, David Farrar and Rodney Hide. These chapters are addressed by the first three research questions. Chapters Seven and Eight account for questions four and five respectively.

This chapter starts by summarising the findings of the content analysis, interviews and case study. It then discusses the key implications of these findings in regard to blogs as a means of deliberative democracy and public sphere theory. The chapter goes on

to look at significant developments in the New Zealand political blogosphere since 2005, but first it will consider the limitations of the research.

## **9.2 Limitations**

The limitations of specific methodologies and their application are detailed in the relevant chapters (see section 4.4 Problems and Limitations of Content Analysis and section 7.2 Interviews as a Data Collection Method).

The content analysis is grounded in quantitative data gathered from a sample of four blogs, both posts and comments. The sample period for the research, 13 days, was sufficient, however the study could have benefited from a larger sample size. The analysis of Rodney Hide's blog showed his practice was removed from the other three, and Russell Brown's not allowing comments to be made on his blog was also problematic. The study concentrated on the better known blogs in the New Zealand blogosphere, but the study could have benefited from non-A-list blogs. Expanding the sample could possibly have introduced commenters who avoided large blogs.

Although the interviews were based on semi-structured interviews and similar questions were posed to each of the participants, relations developed better with some participants than others during the interview process. That is, it was difficult to enjoy, or feel comfortable in the presence of, some of the people interviewed. This undoubtedly stimulated some level of bias on the part of the researcher. It is important to note that despite the best efforts of the researcher the participants skewed heavily toward white males. In saying this, the make up of those interviewed reflects that of the blogosphere in gender, race and political leaning.

The selection of Rodney Hide for the case study of a politician blogger was limited in that he was one of a very few politicians who were using blogs to communicate with voters. He was certainly the most high profile due to his innate desire to attract as much media attention as possible, along with his role of party leader for the ACT Party.

### **9.3 Summary of findings**

This study offers a number of important findings that provide an insight into the role of blogs during an election. First, blogs, like mainstream media, are drawn to covering the election as a spectacle, as opposed to focusing on parties and their policies.

Second, where the mainstream media acted as the source for the topics discussed, there was an echo chamber effect. Third, the comments section is dominated by a small and active group of people who are so politically aligned that any semblance of consensus through deliberation is close to impossible. Fourth, it is conclusively argued that blogs provide a new public sphere as described by Habermas. While some aspects of the blogosphere reflect a public sphere, in the theoretical sense, of Habermas' normative ideal, there are other features that fall well outside of these stringent parameters.

#### **9.3.1 Content Analysis**

The content analysis of the New Zealand political blogosphere in the lead-up to the 2005 election provides a unique perspective of how this new communication tool was used. The quantitative data gave an insight into the way in which bloggers used their posts. While there were some differences between the bloggers in style, such as how often and how much and topics discussed, there were a number of similarities among those studied for this research. The posts were primarily used to provide information and comment on an issue. There was some commonality between blogs and the mainstream media's coverage of the election. While taxes, which was shown to be the public's most important issue, was the topic most covered by the bloggers, the other leading topics were based around issues pertaining to the style of the election, such as leadership, strategy, polls and the roadshow, as is known to be the case with the news media. There was a strong link between blog topics and links to the mainstream media. That is, almost half of all posts were based on an existing story almost always located online. Where the source was not from a media organisation the source was mostly another blog or the personal thoughts/experiences of the blogger.

The comments section provided a space for some lively and robust debate, although it was found that the majority of comments were being made by a small and vocal group of people. Of the 1703 comments made in the sample period, these came from 338

individuals, and of those individuals, 153 people made only one comment. Moreover, while the comments section was a place where discussion and debate did occur, deliberation to the point of consensus was rare. Some of the behaviours displayed in the comments sections were a challenge to rational discussion occurring, but events like emotional language and ad hominem attacks were the domain of a few.

Unlike overseas blogs, especially those from the United States, New Zealand blogs did not receive much attention from the mainstream media. This is despite journalists being known to be avid readers of many blogs. However, the New Zealand blogosphere also differs from that United States in that there is less polarisation in blog readership. New Zealand commenters were found to be leaving comments on more than one blog, leading to the assumption that those making comments are reading across the political divide.

In relation to the use of content analysis as a methodology for this study, there were some challenges in the way it was applied to the data collection. It required taking a new look at an old methodology. This was particularly evident with the unit of analysis. Selecting the entire post or comment, in retrospect, was possibly a too large unit and therefore comparison between bloggers was problematic because of the different blogging styles, such as Farrar's tendency to write multiple short posts in a day where Brown was inclined to write a longer post, covering a number of issues. Future blog research needs to consider the unit of analysis size to best reflect the studies outcomes.

In the coding process the coding protocol allowed for a maximum of five different focuses within the post. As has been previously stated, much of the coding design were based on the work of McGregor (1995) and Fountaine (2002) and moulded to be used in an online environment. The work of both McGregor and Fountaine was focused on newspaper stories during election campaigns. Future studies in this area should consider studies that have employed internet based content analysis, as opposed to other applications of the method, to ensure the lessons of others are directly related. The use of a newspaper based study for the design of the content analysis protocol did prove to have limitations in the coding of some questions, such as the number of sources or media a post quotes and the number of focuses a post may

have. There were also a number of differences between the topics posted about in the blogosphere and those in the newspaper based study, requiring a review of the answer options within the protocol. Many of these problems may have been overcome with a more thorough and rigorous testing and piloting stage.

The content analysis showed a number of interesting findings about how blog posts were used. Tax was the main topic covered throughout the sample period, with Maori the only other policy issue coming in the top 10 most coded topics at tenth. Other policy related topics did feature outside of the top 10. Issues pertaining to election strategy and activities made up most of the coded topics within the top ten.

With the exception of Hide, the bloggers were very reliant on the mainstream media for their posts. This finding is consistent with international blog research in this area. The bloggers are engaging with the issues of the day – as was the case in the coffee houses. There is also a suggestion that media continue to be agenda setters of public discussion when it comes to political blogs topic selection.

The discussion that took place within the comments sections of blogs was dominated by the same voices with over a third of all comments being made by 10 individuals and the largest group (45.2%) only making one comment. There was, however, evidence of discussion taking place in the comments section as a third of all comments were made in response to another comment and often these comments were directed to people by name. This is an encouraging finding as it shows that blogs did act as a place for political discussion, although it is disappointing that the discussion contained so few participants.

The quality of discussion was generally quite good with only a few people regularly resorting to using emotional language (7.4%) or ad hominem attacks (2.9%). Most people used their comment in an attempted to properly engage and make a genuine effort to further the discussion by offering new information or commenting on previous information.

### **9.3.2 Interviews**

The bloggers who participated in the interviews unanimously agreed that the role they played differed from that of a journalist and the blogs they wrote differed from traditional media. Many were emphatically opposed to the notion of any similarities between blogging and journalism. While the bloggers were proud of their efforts, there was a belief that blogs had not expanded the political discussion very far. In fact some suggested that blogs could not act as a modern town square or public sphere. There was, however, an overwhelming belief in the concept of a deliberative democracy from those interviewed. An ability to express opinions on issues and to have other people feed into the discussion was an attractive concept for the bloggers. There was also a frustration on the part of the bloggers toward the mainstream media. None felt well served by the media, as was apparent by their reluctance to consume news media, and the blogosphere was in some way a refuge for them to find the information they wanted on an issue without being dictated to.

This thesis provided the first in-depth investigation into New Zealand political bloggers. From now a benchmark exists, from which future actions and research involving the New Zealand political blogosphere can be measured and compared. To their readers, bloggers can be just anonymous contributors to political discourse, apart from those who have a public profile, such as Russell Brown and David Farrar. However, these interviews detail some of the motivations and political philosophy that are not seen in the public writings of the bloggers.

### **9.3.3 Case Study**

The case study of Rodney Hide comprises data from the content analysis and material that was obtained in an interview with Hide, along with other material he provided. Hide is a particularly media and technology savvy politician who utilised his blog to good effect in the 2005 election campaign, using the communication tool like no other New Zealand politician. Hide used his blog to share information about his activities on the campaign trail. He also used his blog, with some success, to gain wider media attention by planting information that he knew the media would be drawn to. This success can be attributed to Hide's political nous and having a lengthy period in the lead-up to the campaign in which he was able to experiment with his blog's capabilities.

In 2005 there was little in the way of politicians blogging, in a similar vein as Hide in which to compare.

Despite suggesting the power and potential of blogs to allow voters to engage with politicians and the political process, Hide did not use his blog to discuss issues with those who left comments. Moreover, in 73 percent of all his posts, Hide referred to his campaign activity and in other posts he discussed ACT policy. The differences between politicians who blog and regular bloggers, such as Farrar and Carter, are significant in that the objectives of Hide's blogging were to further himself and that of his campaign – an interesting strategy considering Hide's belief that his blog played no part in his winning the electorate of Epsom.

The interview conducted with Rodney Hide provides one of the first case studies into the practice of a politician blogger since the mainstreaming of the blogosphere. A number of media and academic articles have been writing about Howard Dean's use of a blog during his presidential bid in 2004 and of others who followed as a consequence of his success. Hide's efforts were nothing like the high profile fund raising endeavours of Dean, and they were never intended to be, nor did they receive the attention of mainstream media coverage other blogs managed. Hide, it could be said, had little or no strategy around his blog use and he never considered it, or intended it, to play a part in his success as an electorate parliamentarian. In many ways that is what makes the case of Hide's 2005 blogging efforts interesting.

What Hide achieved by using his blog to communicate with his readers was he effectively cut out the mainstream media, who have for so long been the only conduit for politicians to communicate with a mass audience. Hide's bypassing the media allowed him to communicate his messages to his audience without any mediating forces or gatekeepers. This has a number of implications for politicians, media and voters. Politicians can now feasibly direct their communication outside of the media. The traditional exchange between politicians and media sees the media act as the public's guardian, delivering information that is collected and prepared by trained specialists in the roles of editors, sub-editors and journalists. The development of communication technologies has changed this position and now the public not only

have to look at a number of sources to collect the information, but they have to verify that information for themselves. This is problematic, to say the least, and sees the realisation of the Daily Me concept.

#### **9.4 Implications of Blogs on the Public Sphere**

This thesis is based on public sphere theory as offered by Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). He writes of a time when private people gathered together as a public and articulated the needs of society with the state (p. 176), before the refeudalisation when commercialism and mass media diminished the role of the community and private persons. Blogs, and other internet and communication technologies, have been said to mirror the diaries and letters that assisted in the development of the bourgeois public sphere (Barton, 2005). The impact of the modern online sphere has had, without doubt, an impact on public political discourse, both in New Zealand and in other western countries.

Dahlberg's (2001) requirements of public sphere discourse that he developed to determine which online deliberations are facilitating rational-critical discourse suggest a number of factors that do not show up in this research. Dahlberg's requirements of reflexivity, sincerity and the reciprocal critique of normative positions that are provided with reasons rather than simply asserted, are lacking from the posts and comments alike. This study showed that a majority of the discussion that took place in the comments sections involved a few, dominating voices. There appeared to be less inclination to deliberate than to win the discussion. Thompson (2003) is support by the findings of this thesis when he points out:

If we read selectively, concentrating on weblogs that adopt a serious, responsible tone, we can find aspects of the utopian public sphere invoked by Habermas. If, however, we read more broadly among weblogs, we are likely to find not a public sphere but a lot of bubbles isolating writers by ideology (¶7).

Blogging requires its readers to take the chaff with the wheat. In places such as the United States where there are a large number of bloggers, rising in a hierarchy of status to a small number of A-list bloggers, much material will be sifted out. The quality of material may be higher there, perhaps at the expense of variety and

richness. In the much smaller New Zealand blogosphere, there is little evidence of Sullivan's (2004a) "collective mind" checking the statements of dominant voices, bringing significant new points into debate and setting new agendas. The current New Zealand political blogosphere is floating somewhere between ideals that Habermas describes and a stupefied collection of communication divergence that concludes without meaning or developing discussions toward a deliberative conclusion. The increased mediation on blog sites indicates the unabashed free-for-all style of discussion does not work or that people are unable, or unwilling, to naturally comply with social norms that exist in the real world, transferred to an online environment. These points do not bode well for a rational-critical public sphere within the blogosphere, at least not as Habermas would have it.

The blogosphere has given us another forum for debate, and one which operates according to slightly different dynamics to the dominant public forum of the news media. The personal dimension of the blog is not as amenable to control by the public relations machine of party politics as many other media forms (although Hide used it to some effect). That must be considered healthy. The emphasis in this regard should be on the comments sections, which most of the blogs studied here provided under each posting. The content analysis showed many of those comments came from members of an informal community which developed around the blogs. This group of people appear to have a genuine interest in partaking in political discourse and number in the hundreds. Many of those people are likely to be already politically active, yet many others are likely to be voices not otherwise present in political debate. Blogs – unlike the opinion polls, leaders' debates and press release wars to be found in broadcasting and print – are unlikely to have affected the election result.

This is not to suggest the demise of the mainstream media as we know it. Firstly, the link between blogs and the media are obvious from this study. Political blogs use the media for the basis of posts, although this is not to imply that blogs are entirely parasitic on the media for their existence. There is, however, an emerging symbiosis between the two. Secondly, not everyone is connected to the blogosphere. There will always be a group of people who shun the online world and are content to consume media by traditional means. This, along with the commercial and marketing power of media organisations, ensures the status quo for the foreseeable future. This can lead to

people operating in differing spheres, increasing the prospect of the Daily Me phenomenon occurring.

The use of blogs and other forms of internet communication by politicians, like Rodney Hide, is increasing the world over. It appears politicians and political communicators are still experimenting to find the best way to utilise the medium. Because there are no rules or constraints on its application, internet communication is unlike working with established, traditional media, such as printing and the news media. It is important that blogs and other future communication tools remain independent and free from political interference so they can allow users the right to exercise free speech and communities to discuss issues that impact on them. If political powers were able wrestle the control of blogosphere away from independent users there is the possibility controls and regulations could be implemented, such as the case in China where bloggers must register with the government and words such as “freedom”, “democracy” and “human rights” are blocked (Microsoft Censors Chinese Blogs, 2005). There is also the real chance that government control would allow them to dominate the agenda of public discussion.

Overall the political blogosphere in the lead-up to the 2005 New Zealand General Election was disappointing. It was an opportunity missed. While it gave a voice to those who may have otherwise been silenced, it attracted too many individuals who used their voice to devalue the discussion or debate in which they were participating. Mostly the problems occurred in the comments section. In one instance when Farrar posted about Labour’s smear campaign on Don Brash he was required to delete four comments for making defamatory remarks about the sexuality and fidelity of Members of Parliament. This resulted in Farrar imploring commenters to stop competing to achieve the most insulting remark. However, there were many occasions, and by far the majority, where comments were useful and aided in widening the knowledge of those participating. Often many engaged in the discussions showed themselves to be smart, articulate individuals. However, mostly these people were merely talking past one another and failed to agree on the issue or conclude with a resolution on the best way forward. Too often internet anonymity provided the means for people to behave in ways that they would never consider in interpersonal situations, using language that would see them ostracised in social

environments. Possibly, and hopefully, in years and elections to come people will moderate their own behaviour and learn to communicate via computer networks in ways that seek to establish a consensus through robust deliberation.

This thesis considered the rules for the public sphere that were stated by Habermas (see Section 3.2) for participation within the blogosphere. When considering those rules it is difficult to say that the blogosphere operates as a normative public sphere. The blogosphere is not completely open to all participants for social/economic and functional reasons. Issues such as the digital divide and literacy will require government intervention to ensure the ability for all to have access to the internet, and the skills to negotiate and interact within this space. For those who are already engaging online there is a need to set aside what is almost unreasonable amounts of time to wade through the share volume of material posted each day. This time is not always available to working and family people. If those who comment within blogs want to write something that is rational and offers a significant contribution (Baumer, Sueyoshi & Tomlinson, 2008) then time is required to consider the content of the post and other comments that have been made.

Habermas' second rule can be considered from two perspectives. Firstly, if ad hominem attacks are perceived as constraints to participation by readers who are considering leaving a comment, then it can be suggested there is a lack of freedom to freely participate in the blogosphere. However, as this study did not consider the perspective of blog readers there can only be an assumption that ad hominem attacks may deter people from getting involved in online discussions. This could possibly be attributed to a fear of being abused by a blogger or other commenters, leading to embarrassment. The evidence from the content analysis shows that the bloggers were in no way deterred from continuing their practice despite each of them receiving personal attacks of some sort. The only time any serious consideration was given to stopping a blog can be seen in the Spooks situation (see Section 7.16).

The equal status of bloggers must be called into question when considering Habermas' third rule. While it is possible for anyone to start a blog, make comments or just read posts, there are issues that threaten the egalitarian nature of Habermas' ideal. The recognition of A-list bloggers instantly creates a tiered system that suggests

one blogger is better or more important than another. This can be seen in the New Zealand experience as well as internationally. It could be argued that this A-list status can be legitimately earned by any blogger through quality writing in their posts and a steady feed of information, such as in the case of David Farrar, or it can be established by way of an existing reputation, such as Russell Brown. Despite the way a blogger earns the distinction of being considered A-list, they leave the ranks of mere mortals and are considered in different regard. Also, the power a blogger has to exclude individual commenters from participating (by identifying and blocking an IP address) creates a discrepancy which challenges Habermas' rule. Brown did not have a comments feature available for people to feedback, thus creating a one-way flow of communication and Carter was known to turn off the comments function on occasion.

The bloggers in the New Zealand political blogosphere had styles across the spectrum of the pamphleteers during the American Revolution, common citizens engaged in a debate of ideas, and those from Western Europe, elites who looked down on members of the lower classes. While most of the bloggers were aware of the notion of pamphleteering, they were not inclined to make the link between the activities of the writers in the 1700s and what they were doing in 2005. However, the link is obvious and what happened in the New Zealand political blogosphere was similar to the work of pamphleteers such as Thomas Paine. While the mode of communication may differ, the intention and spirit were comparable.

### **9.5 The Political Blogosphere Since 2005**

There have been changes in the New Zealand landscape of political blogs since the 2005 election, but surprisingly not many. Most of those interviewed for this study are still blogging but many of the smaller, less frequented blogs have ceased. As can be expected there was a drop in readership in the months after the election but those numbers rebounded by the beginning of 2007 to be at the levels just prior to the election, and in the case of some blogs, the visitor numbers were higher. In relation to the bloggers spoken to for this research, David Farrar continues to run Kiwi Blog in his spare time and it maintains the position of New Zealand's most read blog. Jordan Carter reduced his post output for a considerable period of time after the election and in early 2008 he announced he would be standing at the next election as a Labour

candidate in the Hunua seat. His post output has remained consistent. Rodney Hide has continued to post throughout his term as the Epsom MP and has used his blog to increasingly reflect his personal development as a dancer, writer, and his public weight loss (Hide has shed almost 50kgs since the 2005 election). Russell Brown has developed the Public Address site to add to the Public Address System, which allows people to interact and participate in forums by leaving feedback on the site. Other bloggers, including Tze Ming Mok, Aaron Bhatnagar and the Sir Humphries collective have gone by the wayside, although the Sir Humphries bloggers have appeared in other locations.

Carter and Bhatnagar have both entered politics since the 2005 election; Carter, as previously mentioned, is the candidate for Labour in the Hunua electorate, and Bhatnagar is a councillor on the Auckland City Council. When Bhatnagar ceased blogging after the 2005 election he must have been well aware of the potential problems his writing may cause because he deleted all of his posts and also cleared the online cache of all his backed up material so that no trace of his writing exists online. The benefit of this is that unless someone has retained printed evidence, there is no way his past content can come back to cause him any problems. However, Carter still maintains his same blog and the content is available for all to see, which coupled with his political ambition may have been the motivation for him posting these comments:

Like many young newcomers to progressive politics, I was a firestarter - I always ended up taking extreme positions, debating extremely vigorously, in black and white tones... Fine, of course, except that as mentioned a lot of that was mediated electronically. Which means that now, as an older, wiser, much more moderate and middle of the road kind of guy, I am for the rest of my life going to have my words from the past thrown back at me... I know that quotes out of context can be used in all sorts of nefarious ways, I've done it myself... So, to all those (multitudes of) young readers of the blog: if you want to let fly, try not to do it with your keyboard. (Carter, 2008)

One of the interesting developments to emerge is the need for aspirant participants in the comments section to register to enable their ability to leave a comment. Farrar, Brown and Hide have all activated this. The Public Address System registration page alludes to the need for vigorous debate; however they ask users to refrain from

personal abuse and aggressive behaviour towards others. Any conduct deemed in breach of this can see comments deleted by moderators and access to the site limited or de-registered. Farrar has introduced a demerits system that awards points for unwelcome conduct, such as posting off-topic, blatant trolling and highly inflammatory comments. He has also introduced Comment Karma. This is a system that allows readers to vote for what they believe to be good comments and vote against bad comments. It is interesting that New Zealand's two prominent bloggers, Farrar and Brown, have both initiated a system of mediation as part of the comments made to their sites. While this could indicate a growing awareness of the importance of rules to govern online discussion and debate, it is more realistic to suggest that the blog owners are frustrated by the inability of people to make comments in a way that is civil and intelligible, let alone develop an idea to the point of broad consensus. This mediation, or establishment of rules of engagement, is contrary to Habermas' rules for communicative interaction, but one can understand the dilemma blog owners are faced with here as too many people under the guise of anonymity or a pseudonym behave in a way which discourages others from participating.

In the past 12 months there has been the start of two blogs that are worthy of note. The first is The Standard, which started after the anonymous collection of writers perceived a gap in the political left of the blogosphere. The posts on this blog have been personal and register high levels of ad hominem attack that have taken political discourse back a step or two in the process. The blog has been accused of having affiliations with the Labour Party. The second blog of note, and for all the wrong reasons, is KiwiBlogBlog. This blog consists of five anonymous contributors who believe Farrar's Kiwi Blog is worthy of critical attention, in the pejorative sense. The posts can only be described as a nasty series of personal attacks on Farrar's sexuality, personality and also attempts to associate his business with inappropriate practices. It is highly left-wing, borders on tabloid newspapers' gutter press style with its desire for sensationalism and gossip, and often comes close to being completely defamatory.

## **9.6 Conclusions**

The growth of internet and communication technologies has changed the way people discuss politics. All communication and media have had a social and political impact

and the internet is no exception; in fact it can be suggested the internet has had more social impact than any of its predecessors.

The 2005 New Zealand General Election was an important step in political discussion being taken away from the control of media and commercial interests. This structural transformation has allowed people to re-engage and direct political conversation as they choose, not as someone or some organisation determines.

This thesis has provided a foundation for future research into blogs' role in political discussion in New Zealand, if not internationally. Online communication has cemented its place in our society and culture and political discussion may never be the same again.



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## Appendix 1: Content Analysis Coding Schedule: Posts

### Content Analysis Coding Schedule Content Analysis of Blogs during the 2005 New Zealand General Election

SECTION 1: This section needs to be coded for each post

1. What is the number of the post?		_____				
2. Where was it posted?						
Rodney Hide:RodneyHide.com	1					
David Farrar: Kiwi Blog	2					
Russell Brown: Hard News	3					
Jordan Carter: Just Left	4	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. Does the post contain content that relates to the 2005 election, politicians, or party policy?						
Yes      If yes, go to Q3	1					
No <i>If no, finish here</i>	2	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4. What day of the week was it posted?						
Monday	1					
Tuesday	2					
Wednesday	3					
Thursday	4					
Friday	5					
Saturday	6					
Sunday	7	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5. What date was it posted?		<input type="checkbox"/>				
6. What month was it posted?						
August	1	<input type="checkbox"/>				
September	2					
7. What time was it posted? ( <i>Use 24-hour clock</i> )		<table border="1" style="display: inline-table; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px;"></td> </tr> </table>				
8. What is the post primarily concerned with?						
Provision of information	1					
Comment	2					
Analysis/review (e.g. of policy)	3					
Personal experience	4	<input type="checkbox"/>				
A rebuttal of another post	5	<input type="checkbox"/>				
A rebuttal of a media story	6	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Other ( <i>state</i> ) _____	7	<input type="checkbox"/>				
9. What topic(s) were covered in the post? (choose up 5 topics)						
Agriculture	1					
Broadcasting	2					
Budget deficit	3					
Business development	4					

Crime	5	
Cultural issues	6	
Defence	7	
Economic policy	8	
Education	9	
Election campaign (style)	10	
Election campaign (funding)	11	
Election campaign (organisation)	12	
Election campaign (advertising & publicity)	13	
Election campaign (roadshow)	14	
Election campaign (candidates)	15	
Election campaign (leadership)	16	
Election campaign (other)	17	
Election campaign (polls)	18	
Election campaign (coalition formation)	19	
Election campaign (Maori seats)	20	
Energy	21	
Environment	22	
Ethnic minorities	23	
Fishing	24	
Foreign Affairs	25	
Grey Power	26	
Health	27	
Housing	28	
Immigration	29	
Industrial relations	30	
Inflation	31	
Maori issues	32	
News media	33	
Party list (local)	34	
Party list (national)	35	
Political debates	36	
Poverty	37	
Referendum	38	
Regional issues	39	
Sport	40	
Social welfare	41	
Student Loans	42	<input type="checkbox"/>
Taxes	43	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tourism	44	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trade	45	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transport	46	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unemployment/Employment	47	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women	48	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other ( <i>state</i> ) _____	49	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. What was the length of the post (number of words)?		_____
11. Was the post explicitly based on a story in the media?		
Yes	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>If no, go to question 14</i>		
12. Which media was the story sourced from?		
The New Zealand Herald newspaper	1	

The NZ Herald website (nzherald.co.nz)	2	
The Dominion Post	3	
The Press	4	
Stuff (stuff.co.nz)	5	
Otago Daily Times newspaper	6	
Otago Daily Times website (odt.co.nz)	7	
TV3 News	8	
TV3 website (tv3.co.nz)	9	
One News	10	<input type="checkbox"/>
TVNZ website (tvnz.co.nz)	11	<input type="checkbox"/>
Radio New Zealand broadcast	12	<input type="checkbox"/>
Radio New Zealand website (radionz.co.nz)	13	<input type="checkbox"/>
Scoop	14	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unknown/not stated	15	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other ( <i>state</i> ) _____	16	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Was there a link to the story in the post?		
Yes	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Go to question 16</i>		
14. Who/what was the source of the post		
Labour Party/politician	1	
National Party/politician	2	
United Future Party/politician	3	
ACT Party/politician	4	
Green Party/politician	5	
Maori Party/politician	6	
NZ First Party/politician	7	
Blog	8	
Website	9	
Unknown/not stated	10	
Personal experience/thoughts	11	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other ( <i>state</i> ) _____	12	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Was the source linked to?		
Yes	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Were there any links to other non-news websites (not blogs)?		
Yes	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>If no, go to question 19</i>		
17. How many links to other websites (not including blogs) were there?		
		<input type="checkbox"/>
18. What is the primary purpose of the link(s)?		
To support a claim	1	
To challenge a claim made by someone else	2	
To provide further information	3	
Other ( <i>state</i> ) _____	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. Were there any links to other blogs?		

Yes	1	
No	2	
<i>If no, go to question 21</i>		<input type="checkbox"/>
20. Which blogs were referred to?		
RodneyHide.com	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
David Farrar	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hard News	3	<input type="checkbox"/>
Just Left	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please state)	5	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____		
_____		
_____		
21. Were there audio and/or visual materials used in the post?		
Yes	1	
No	2	
<i>If no, go to question 23</i>		<input type="checkbox"/>
22. If the post used audio or visual materials, what type were they?		
Video	1	
Photograph(s)	2	
Cartoon(s)	3	
Graphic	4	
Logo	5	
Advertising	6	<input type="checkbox"/>
Animation	7	<input type="checkbox"/>
Audio	8	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please state)	9	
_____		
_____		
_____		
23. How many comments were made on this blog entry?		
		_____

## Appendix 2: Content Analysis Coding Schedule: Comments

### Content Analysis Coding Schedule Content Analysis of Blog Comments during the 2005 New Zealand General Election

SECTION 2: This section needs to be coded for each comment associated with a post

- |   |   |  |                          |
|---|---|--|--------------------------|
| 1. What is the number of the comment?   |   |  | _____                    |
| 2. What is the number of the person who made the comment?   |   |  | _____                    |
| 3. What is the number of the post this comment is associated with?  |   |  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Does the comment contain content that relates to the 2005 election, politicians, or party policy?      |   |  |                          |
| Yes   | 1 |  |                          |
| No  | 2 |  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. What is the length of the comment?   |   |  |                          |
| 1 – 2 sentences   | 1 |  |                          |
| 3 – 5 sentences   | 2 |  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| More than 5 sentences   | 3 |  |                          |
| 6. What is the comment primarily concerned with?  |   |  |                          |
| The content in the post   | 1 |  |                          |
| Engaging with blogger about post content  | 2 |  |                          |
| Engaging with blogger about other   | 3 |  |                          |
| Another commenter   | 4 |  |                          |
| Content of a previous comment   | 5 |  |                          |
| Combination of content and commenters   | 6 |  |                          |
| No relation to post or subsequent comments  | 7 |  |                          |
| Other ( <i>state</i> ) _____  | 8 |  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Does the person writing the comment try to establish any level of expertise or authority on the issue? |   |  |                          |
| Yes   | 1 |  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No  | 2 |  |                          |
| 8. How do they do this?   |   |  |                          |
| Claims of knowledge   | 1 |  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Claims of experience  | 2 |  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Works in field  | 3 |  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Use of name or pseudonym  | 4 |  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Use of jargon   | 5 |  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Identification  | 6 |  | <input type="checkbox"/> |

9. Does this comment contain ad hominem argument?

Yes 1

No 2

If so, what is said?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

10. Does this comment contain criticism of the content in previous comments and/or the post?

Yes 1

No 2

If so, what is said?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

11. Does this comment contain emotionally heightened language?

Yes 1

No 2

If yes, please detail

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

12. Does the comment contain: (choose as many as apply)

Proof/evidence of claim/statement 1

Assertion 2

A diversion from argumentation 3

Partisan position 4

Other (*state*) \_\_\_\_\_ 5

### Appendix 3: Title of Post

#### **Jordan Carter**

30 - 30 - 30  
UF MP shoots mouth off  
Latest Kiwi Carnival  
ON/CB Poll: August 2005 #2  
Labour's Campaign Opening  
National's campaign opening  
Labour: Housing Policy  
Early Childhood Ed extended  
The \$11.5bn bribe is out  
National's \$11.5bn Black Hole  
Frog's table updated  
Funding Tax Cuts with Debt-\$12.8bn of it  
Armstrong  
Fascinating Chris Trotter in the Indie  
The New Zealand Herald Poll - August 05  
Amusing cartoon  
NBR Poll - August 2005  
What the left is up against  
Milne gets stuck in  
the polls, the polls  
New Zealand? Or the new Australia?  
Brownlee shoots mouth off  
Brash on knighthoods: Relic #1  
Brash on powhiri: Relic #2  
Fairfax/AC Nielsen Poll: Sept 05  
ON/CB Poll: September 2005 #1  
From the poor to the rich  
Don't write it down: National's bribe plans  
Not political (really)  
The big lie from National  
An extract from "that" memo  
State Housing  
Brash Flip Flop FLAPS!!!!  
Brash v Brash  
Crystal Clear on Brash: Train-wreck  
Territory  
3 News/TNS Poll: September 05  
Candidates' Forum at VUW  
Unkind photo op  
SST/AC Neilsen Poll  
Wellington Central poll  
polls etc to come  
HoS Digipoll: Sept 05  
ON/CB Poll: September 2005 #3  
Bretherengate 2005 = Corngate 2002?  
Breathtaking Bribery  
Fairfax/AC Nielsen Poll: Sept 05 #2  
Tauranga!  
The soul of the nation  
Labour on the Maori Party

Vic Forum with the PM  
Nats at Public Meetings  
Another nice Tory :)  
Student Loan Costings  
Away from the Computer

#### **Russell Brown**

The Odds  
Just Making it up  
Bad policy, baby  
Interesting day  
Gadzooks!  
Hitching Sinners

#### **Rodney Hide**

Big Picture Stuff  
David Lange Memorial Service  
Hollywood comes to the campaign  
RNZ Education Debate  
Simpler, Flatter, Faster!  
Winston's Plan  
Epsom  
Entrepreneurial government  
Business New Zealand  
3 weeks to go  
Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy  
Roger, Ruth and Richard  
Winston feeling the heat  
On Line Auction  
Campaign launch  
ACT is back  
Two Kiwi Heroes  
MMP 101  
Yikes!  
Campaigning  
ASB Breakfast  
Shine TV  
Leaders' Debate  
Epsom  
Exclusive Brethren vs The Greens  
Canvassing  
On the buses  
Epsom on the map  
D-1  
It's over to the people  
Anything Could Happen

#### **David Farrar**

DPF in Auckland  
Wait for the autobiography  
Aristotle's Books  
Is it safe to speed when overtaking?

Spam Law  
Labour-Greens 'lunacy'  
Secondary tax rates  
Keith Ng on Steven Ching  
Faux Pax  
The Press endorses tax cuts  
aux Pax II  
National's Tax Cuts  
Tax Savings  
Tax Calculator  
Tax Calculator  
Under \$50,000 and maximum 18% tax  
My own student loan calculator  
1st week's sleep  
Labour's average student  
Grant is annoyed  
Blogs by Party Affiliation  
Cellphones in Cars  
New Zealand Herald on Labour U-turn  
Student Loan Calculator  
A clear choice  
BusinessNZ Conference  
Workplace Law  
Workplace Law Scores  
Pat Robertson is insane  
Transport  
Transport Scores  
Vote ACT if you are a Christian!  
In Praise of Female Sexuality  
Debt Projections  
Party Finance Spokespersons  
Dr Jon Johansson  
Party Finance Spokesperson Scores  
Party Leaders  
The New Zealand Herald DigiPoll  
The hammer case  
Wednesday's Tom Scott  
Oh these are good!  
DPF in the media  
One million visits  
Marc Ellis pleads guilty  
Maori Party fading?  
Tax Cuts Analogy  
Brash on Agenda  
Own goal!  
SST Poll  
Sunday on Donna Awatere-Huata  
Labour's response  
Tactical Voting  
ISP Survey  
How not to become Premier  
The Public Address Gallery  
Back on the agenda  
Clark blames audience  
InternetNZ IT Debate

ODT Poll  
Campaigning in Rongotai  
Espiner on the Air New Zealand fiasco  
Respecting Religious Beliefs  
Chief Justice Rehnquist has died  
One News Colmar Brunton Poll  
\$100 million for elective surgery  
Another e-mail  
What will Winston do?  
Housing Policy  
Let's make this simple  
The big smear  
People stop it!  
Chief Justice Roberts  
New Zealand First  
TV3 Poll  
This is beyond belief  
Hooters coming to New Zealand  
Sinister group spends \$353,000 on smear  
ads  
Heh  
Bastards  
Hobbs in the lead  
Silent Running is down  
An interesting individual  
The madness that is Radio New Zealand  
The problem with New Zealand  
Coalition Compatibilities  
Goodhew ahead in Aoraki  
Stupidity or Malice?  
Electorate Polls  
Scum  
More New Zealand First confusion  
Nice detective work  
Celebrity Endorsements  
Arrogance Personified  
Broadband Pledge  
Very sad  
Another good present  
The poverty industry  
How to win an election  
Move to scrap Holocaust Day  
Petrol Tax Relief  
Orwell would be proud  
Mr Pontell  
VUWSA Elections  
Oh this is so sad  
A new standard of accountability?  
National on brink of victory  
Small Business Minister  
Helen's new standard  
There are times I like the Maori Party  
Health Targeting  
Mad Maharey  
Tauranga Antics

Maharey sums it up  
Student Loan Calculator  
Dirt on Winston  
Case closed  
Fairfax Polling in Wellington  
Question of the Day  
Ombudsman kicks ass  
The Smoking Gun  
Teacher approves kids attacking National  
billboard  
The cost of the bribe  
The PM At Vic  
Quote of the Day 14 August 2005  
VUWSA Election Results  
The New Zealand Herald Poll

Clark refuses to act on Field  
The New Zealand Herald gets it wrong  
Helen does a jug scull  
Attacking the messengers  
The Hooters Staff Manual  
A voting guide based on who you vote  
Thanks  
Election Drinking Game  
A very very bitter man  
Play this song!  
Ten reasons to vote to change the  
Government  
Regime Change Time!  
No political comments



## Appendix 4: Identification numbers and names of people who made a comment

- |                      |                                     |                              |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. 19                | 64. blackjack                       | 125. david@tokyo             |
| 2. A.J.Chesswas      | 65. blah                            | 126. DavidW                  |
| 3. Aaron             | 66. Blu                             | 127. davis                   |
| 4. Aaron B           | 67. bms                             | 128. Davros                  |
| 5. Aaron Bhatnagar   | 68. Bob                             | 129. DB                      |
| 6. aboutown          | 69. Bob Howard                      | 130. DC                      |
| 7. ACTor             | 70. book'emDano                     | 131. dc_red                  |
| 8. actor             | 71. Bretherns                       | 132. deb                     |
| 9. Adam              | 72. Brian                           | 133. Deborah                 |
| 10. Adam Neira       | 73. Brian (Shadowfoot)              | 134. debt consolidation loan |
| 11. Adolf Fiinensein | 74. Brian Boyko                     | 135. deceasededwardmorrow    |
| 12. adult personals  | 75. Bruce Haycock                   | 136. DenMT                   |
| 13. ag               | 76. bustedblonde                    | 137. Dennis                  |
| 14. aile droite      | 77. buy viagra                      | 138. Dfool                   |
| 15. Aj               | 78. buy viagra online               | 139. dim                     |
| 16. Ak               | 79. Cadmus                          | 140. dm                      |
| 17. AL               | 80. cale                            | 141. Docent                  |
| 18. Aladin           | 81. Caleb                           | 142. dogsbody                |
| 19. Alan             | 82. can I have some cuts<br>please  | 143. dover                   |
| 20. ald              | 83. canine                          | 144. Drone                   |
| 21. Alex             | 84. cap                             | 145. DT                      |
| 22. alistair         | 85. Caskman                         | 146. Ed Snack                |
| 23. AM               | 86. Cathy                           | 147. Eleanor                 |
| 24. ammonia          | 87. che tibby                       | 148. Emmess                  |
| 25. Andrew           | 88. Chefen                          | 149. Enkidu                  |
| 26. Andrew Jones     | 89. chris                           | 150. Errol                   |
| 27. Andrew Straw     | 90. Chris O'Connell                 | 151. F.M.                    |
| 28. andrewf          | 91. ChrisBishop                     | 152. Face Lift               |
| 29. andrewfalloon    | 92. Chrongen                        | 153. fairway                 |
| 30. angel            | 93. cin77                           | 154. Fi                      |
| 31. Anita            | 94. Cliff Mail                      | 155. Fiona                   |
| 32. Anna             | 95. Clint                           | 156. Fletch                  |
| 33. Anne             | 96. coge                            | 157. Fletcher                |
| 34. annika flounders | 97. Comrade_Tweek                   | 158. Francis Kingi           |
| 35. Annoyomous       | 98. confused jew                    | 159. free slots              |
| 36. anon             | 99. Conor                           | 160. frog                    |
| 37. anon nat         | 100. Conor Roberts                  | 161. g kerr                  |
| 38. anonnat          | 101. Craig                          | 162. Gareth                  |
| 39. anon.            | 102. Craig Hall                     | 163. Gareth Robinson         |
| 40. anonymous        | 103. Craig Ranapia<br>(OtherPundit) | 164. gatoh                   |
| 41. anonymouse       | 104. Craig Ranapia                  | 165. Gavin                   |
| 42. Anti Socialist   | 105. Crass                          | 166. gavinm                  |
| 43. Anton Foljambe   | 106. Crig Ranapia                   | 167. Gaynor                  |
| 44. Aono             | 107. culma                          | 168. Gaz                     |
| 45. Archon           | 108. curious                        | 169. Gazza                   |
| 46. aristocracy      | 109. Daisy J                        | 170. gazzadelsud             |
| 47. Asher            | 110. dan                            | 171. gd                      |
| 48. Ashley Clarkson  | 111. Daniel                         | 172. geniusNZ                |
| 49. aspidistra       | 112. danielle di riscio             | 173. George                  |
| 50. B.J. Melville    | 113. darkness.network               | 174. Glenn                   |
| 51. b2               | 114. Darren                         | 175. Gman                    |
| 52. BadAunt          | 115. dave                           | 176. Gone by lunchtime       |
| 53. baxter           | 116. Dave Christian                 | 177. Gooner                  |
| 54. Beagle           | 117. Dave Moore                     | 178. Gordon Paynter          |
| 55. belch            | 118. davegeenz                      | 179. gordonk                 |
| 56. belro            | 119. David                          | 180. GPT                     |
| 57. belro629         | 120. David Cormack                  | 181. Grace                   |
| 58. Belt             | 121. David Farrar                   | 182. Graeme Edgeler          |
| 59. Ben Wilson       | 122. David P                        | 183. Graham watson           |
| 60. Berend de Boer   | 123. David Seymour                  | 184. Grant Diggie            |
| 61. BerlinBear       | 124. David.M                        | 185. Greg Stephens           |
| 62. bernard          |                                     | 186. gumboot                 |
| 63. Bernard Darnton  |                                     | 187. Hangon                  |

188. Hannah Collings  
189. hans  
190. heretoday  
191. Hobbo  
192. home equity loan  
193. Horamia  
194. iain  
195. Ian Allan  
196. Ian Peter Daly  
197. icehawk  
198. Idiot/Savant  
199. inside scoop  
200. insider  
201. Insight  
202. Insolent Prick  
203. Isabel  
204. ishy  
205. Jackman  
206. Jake  
207. Jake Quinn  
208. James  
209. james c  
210. James Christmas  
211. James Doherty  
212. james green  
213. James Gribble  
214. James W  
215. jamesh  
216. JamesP  
217. Jan D.  
218. Jason  
219. Jay  
220. jaykay  
221. JBA  
222. JC  
223. jean  
224. jennie  
225. Jeremy  
226. JesusCrux  
227. Jim D  
228. Jim Peron  
229. JL  
230. jnzed  
231. Joe Hendren  
232. Joel  
233. Joely Doe  
234. john  
235. John Pickering  
236. johnie  
237. Johnny  
238. Jono  
239. Jordan  
240. Jordan Carter  
241. Jordan W  
242. Josh  
243. Jules van Cruysen  
244. Justin  
245. JW  
246. jwm  
247. Kadmiel  
248. kaiwai  
249. kakariki  
250. Kate  
251. Kath  
252. Katherine  
253. Keith  
254. Kelly Broadbent  
255. Kenny S  
256. Kent  
257. Kent Brockman  
258. Kieran  
259. Kimble  
260. Kiwi Bob  
261. kowhaikiwi  
262. Krimsonlake  
263. Kyle Chapman  
264. kyotolaw  
265. L.E  
266. labour insider  
267. Lazlo Hollyfeld  
268. lc  
269. Le Clerc  
270. Leftbane™  
271. LeftPilot  
272. lei fang  
273. Lewis  
274. Libertyscott  
275. Like Hell  
276. Lin Nah  
277. Lindsay  
278. Lindsay Addie  
279. Lisa.K  
280. Little Birdy  
281. llew  
282. Logix  
283. Lou  
284. Lucyna  
285. Luke Byers  
286. lyndon  
287. Madeleine  
288. Madeleine Flannagan  
289. Manolo Pedreschi  
290. mara  
291. marc alexander  
292. Marcus  
293. Marcus D  
294. Marion  
295. Mark  
296. Mark Ellis  
297. Martin Paulo  
298. Match  
299. Matt  
300. Matt Nippert  
301. Matt Parkinson  
302. Matthew Flannagan  
303. Matthew Webster  
304. Maurie  
305. Max Soy  
306. Melta  
307. Merc  
308. Michael  
309. Michael Coote  
310. Michael Mabbet  
311. Michael Taylor  
312. Michael(left)  
313. Michael(right)  
314. Mick  
315. micronaut  
316. Mige  
317. Mike  
318. Mike Campbell  
319. Mike Collins  
320. Mike Moore  
321. Mike Readman  
322. Mike Rika  
323. Mike Steeneveld  
324. MikeE  
325. mikey bill  
326. mikeybill  
327. miki  
328. Millsy  
329. Milton  
330. MooLoo  
331. Morg  
332. moth  
333. Mr K  
334. MrK  
335. MrTips  
336. Mukesh  
337. Murray  
338. Nathan Mercer  
339. Neil  
340. Nice one  
341. nick  
342. Nick Shannon  
343. Nickster  
344. Nigel Kearney  
345. nigel6888  
346. noizy  
347. Non Mainstream Kiwi  
348. observer  
349. Oliver  
350. online pharmacy  
351. Ordinary Kiwi  
352. Oscar128  
353. Owen  
354. Owen McShane  
355. p  
356. pacman  
357. Panda  
358. paolo  
359. PatMC  
360. Paul  
361. Paulc  
362. PaulL  
363. pauly  
364. payday advance  
365. payday loans  
366. peasant  
367. Penny  
368. pertinax  
369. Pertinax QC  
370. Pete  
371. Peter  
372. Peter Cresswell (Not PC)  
373. Peter Grooby  
374. Peter McK  
375. Peter Metcalfe  
376. peterquixote  
377. phentermine  
378. Phil  
379. Phil Barclay  
380. Phil R  
381. phil u  
382. Phillips  
383. Pliny  
384. Popular and Competent  
Prime Minister  
385. postprandium  
386. Princess  
387. Psycho Milt

388. pucca  
 389. Pundit  
 390. pundito  
 391. Rachel C  
 392. Random Calf  
 393. randomness  
 394. Randy Schitz  
 395. RDE  
 396. Red Fred  
 397. Redbaiter  
 398. refinance  
 399. reid  
 400. resistantsoy  
 401. rex  
 402. Rex Hammer  
 403. Rich  
 404. Richard  
 405. riggs  
 406. rightkiwi  
 407. Riroriro  
 408. Rob Davies  
 409. Rob Good (Puntiki)  
 410. Rob Hosking  
 411. Rob O'Neill  
 412. Rocket Boy  
 413. Rodney  
 414. Roger Greenslade  
 415. Roland Sapsford  
 416. Ross Miller  
 417. RSB  
 418. Rudy Canozza  
 419. russ  
 420. Russell Brown  
 421. RWDB  
 422. Ryan  
 423. S  
 424. S Heath  
 425. sagenz  
 426. Sally  
 427. Sam  
 428. Sam Vilain  
 429. Sandra  
 430. Sara W.  
 431. Savant/Sage  
 432. Scott  
 433. Scott Cavemen  
 434. scruffy dog  
 435. Sean  
 436. Shawn  
 437. Shes bonkers  
 438. Silas  
 439. Simon  
 440. r  
 441. Simon Pound  
 442. Simone  
 443. Sinner  
 444. sock thief  
 445. Sophie M  
 446. soren.lorenson  
 447. spam  
 448. span(ner in the works)  
 449. SPC  
 450. spector  
 451. Spooks  
 452. stanley climbfall  
 453. stef  
 454. Stephanie  
 455. stephen  
 456. Stephen Cooper  
 457. Stephen Glaister  
 458. Steve  
 459. stuart  
 460. Susie Bell  
 461. t selwyn  
 462. Take2CupsofFlour  
 463. Tane  
 464. Tane W  
 465. te liberal  
 466. Ted  
 467. Terence  
 468. Terry Johnson  
 469. tess  
 470. the Black Dutchman  
 471. The Whalerider  
 472. The Worm  
 473. TheProphet  
 474. Thurston  
 475. Tiberias  
 476. Tim  
 477. tim barclay  
 478. tmh  
 479. Toa Greening  
 480. Tom S  
 481. TomV  
 482. Ton y  
 483. Tony  
 484. Tony Clark  
 485. Too Right  
 486. Tracy Page  
 487. trent  
 488. trevor loudon  
 489. Trish  
 490. Tristan  
 491. Trog  
 492. Tumbleweed  
 493. tze ming  
 494. Untamed  
 495. Ursula  
 496. Vanzyl  
 497. viagra  
 498. viagra online  
 499. voter  
 500. weight loss pills  
 501. weizguy  
 502. werd  
 503. Whaleoil  
 504. Whig  
 505. Whitebread  
 506. wildebeest  
 507. will  
 508. Willie  
 509. Winston Smith  
 510. yann  
 511. Zach  
 512. Zenskar  
 513. ZenTiger  
 514. Zippy Gonzales  
 515. Fastbike  
 516. Act  
 517. Johan van der lijn  
 518. Anthony  
 519. Charlotte W  
 520. Stan  
 521. Pseudoantidisestablishmentarianist  
 522. Stephen Baird  
 523. Peter1234  
 524. Matty  
 525. Jamesx  
 526. Dave M  
 527. Tim Knight  
 528. Danny  
 529. Doug  
 530. Simon Poulton  
 531. gravebrook  
 532. Ms Maple  
 533. Stanley  
 534. Lukas Schroeter  
 535. Graham  
 536. Dnz  
 537. Gorden Kindell  
 538. Greig  
 539. Overtaxed Worker  
 540. Blair  
 541. Serene  
 542. Isoceles  
 543. Donw  
 544. Jam  
 545. M'lud  
 546. Tan Suede  
 547. JFK  
 548. NickB  
 549. REL  
 550. Paul K  
 551. Ms Vile File  
 552. Prosolution Pills



## Appendix 5: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your background both politically and how you got you into blogging?
2. What role do you believe blogging played in having issues discussed during the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign?
3. What role do you believe MSM played in having issues discussed during the 2005 New Zealand General Election campaign?
4. How important is journalism as a source of information for your blogging?
5. What MSM do you usually read/watch/listen to?
6. Do you consider your blogging as journalism and yourself a journalist? If not, why not?
7. What are your views on how MSM covered the issues during the election? Was there anything in particular that was stood out as being poor and/or anything that was well covered?
8. Do you think that blogging during the election improved the quality of debate around issues?
9. What do you believe were the strengths and weaknesses of blogs during the election?
10. Was there any event, posting, person within the blogosphere that stood out to you as particularly significant during the campaign?
11. What blogs did you follow regularly throughout the election period?
12. How influential were these on you?
13. Who was your standout blogger during the election? Why?
14. Where is your own political position and do you believe this is consistent with your blog writing?
15. Is the participatory nature of blogging important to you?
16. Have you ever written to the editor of a newspaper or phoned talkback?
17. What did you think of the way politicians used blogs during the election? Rodney Hide?
18. What do you believe was your contribution to the debate on issues during the campaign