LECTURE OR ENGAGEMENT? COMMUNICATION WITH READERS ON THREE NORTH CAROLINA NEWSPAPER EDITOR'S BLOGS

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To Ashlee and Dave, for support, help and patience
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“I think I’m the person selected to keep a diary of the last days of a friend that has contracted an incurable disease and is growing ever weaker . . . . My friend is the newspaper industry,” Madison Taylor, editor of the Burlington, North Carolina Times-News, wrote in his editor’s blog on 3 August 2008.

Taylor’s blog post referred to the Times-News’ decision to reduce the size of the paper by eight pages. “Dozens of readers wanted to know why” the pages were cut, he wrote. He included a link to his column from that week, with more details about the reduction in pages.

Taylor’s post demonstrated three changes occurring in journalism: falling profits, shrinking staffs, and changing audience demands. Newspaper revenues declined 23% between 2006-2008 (Morgan 2009) and the Chicago Tribune, the Baltimore Sun and The Los Angeles Times all have filed for bankruptcy. Increasingly, readers – especially younger ones – are going online for news. The editor of the Dallas Morning News, Bob Mong, described this change in a Time Magazine article:

I’m 57. When I was 21, about 70% of people my age read a newspaper regularly. For people my age now, it’s still about the same percentage. But in the Dallas market today, only about 30% of people between 18 and 24 look at a newspaper fairly regularly. That’s a 40% gap. That's not good news for the newspaper. (2006)
Between 2001 and 2008, print circulation of U.S. newspapers fell 13.5% for daily editions and 17.3% for Sunday issues, with big city metro papers seeing the biggest drop in circulation (Morgan 2009).

John Yemma, editor of the *Christian Science Monitor*, noted that, “You can’t change user behavior. You have to accommodate it” (Yemma 2008). Audience behavior and demands also are changing, which means that journalists may need to change along with them. Journalists are using social media tools such as blogging, Twitter (an instant message-style service), RSS (updates sent through syndication), and podcasting (audio files delivered by syndication), to address the fact that the Internet’s effect on communication creates, “the end of the captive audience as we’ve known it” (Yemma 2008). Audiences can use a variety of tools such as RSS to personalize their online experience with news and other media. Gone is the linear, on-size fits all method of newspaper delivery on the printed page. In its place is non-linear, online delivery system through which audiences can pick and choose the content they want.

Newspapers add social media tools such as blogs to keep in touch with this audience or re-establish connections. Newspapers establish official blogs, not only for news, but for a myriad of topics that interest their readers. “*The San Antonio Express-News* has a bowling blog. *The News Tribune* in Tacoma, Washington, has a fly-fishing blog. A pet blog is popular at the *Commercial Appeal* in Memphis. Several newspapers have launched parenting blogs” (Hull 2007).

Blogs are social media tools that are identified by frequently updated content posted on the Internet, typically on a certain topic, whether general or specific. The
content, in the form of text or multimedia such as pictures, audio, or video, is dated and organized chronologically, as in a diary.

The ability for a visitor to the blog to comment on an entry may also be enabled, although comments are not always enabled in all blogs. Visitors usually have a way to subscribe to the blog using various technologies such as an RSS feed or by receiving new posts by e-mail.

The tone of a blog is not the same as the tone of the newspaper story. “Blogs are fostering a new kind of editorial voice in our writing: intimate, off-the-cuff and breezy” (Moor 2006). Along with a difference in tone, blogs differ from opinion columns for various reasons: While print columns are published on a pre-set printing schedule, blog posts can be published and placed in front of an audience online at any time the author wishes, without waiting for printing and distribution. Readers can usually comment directly on blog posts and create more immediate discussion. “Not only do the blogs provide a direct link to readers and a venue for shedding light on behind-the-scenes newsroom decisions, they also offer a level of immediacy and personal contact that print columns do not” (Yahr 2008, 10). There also is unlimited space for blog posts and for comments, unlike the limits on space in the pages of a newspaper.

A journalist can put content in a blog that wouldn’t fit in a story. In the 23 May 2008 post in *The News & Observer’s* editor’s blog, the editor focused on a story from that day’s paper on pay raises for state lottery employees. The editor was interested in the story and decided to access a public database to examine the current pay for lottery officials. He concluded that many of the salaries of lottery employees were lower when compared to other state officials’ salaries. His analysis didn’t make it into the story, but
the questions he raised about the lottery and its employees were interesting enough to the editor to post a follow-up in the blog about the story.

Newspapers publish blogs because they create a conversation on a range of topics that can be obscure or vital. “The best newspaper blogs generate an avalanche of posts and comments from captivated readers, get linked to by other blogs and, ideally, drive more traffic to newspaper Web sites” (Hull 2007).

The Editor’s Blog

Public interest in newspaper issues such as the reduction in pages Taylor had to explain, staff changes, the decision to put a certain photo on the front page, or the policy for deleting reader comments on stories online, can be explained to the public through an editor’s blog.

For this study, an editor’s blog was defined as a Web page with content posted by a newspaper’s executive editor – as opposed to other editors such as features, etc. – that contained posts listed on the page in reverse chronological order, and on which comments from readers were allowed.

The value of an editor’s blog can be understood through the following example. When readers were upset over the headline used in Raleigh, North Carolina’s News & Observer newspaper’s front page, “Trooper had sex in patrol car,” editor John Drescher posted to the editor’s blog five days later on 26 September 2007, as more complaints continued to come in over time. He wanted to explain the decision to use the headline. “‘[The blog] was the perfect forum for something like that, where readers want an explanation now,’ says Drescher, currently the N&O's executive editor. ‘In my view, that was probably the best use of the blog in recent months’” (Yahr 2008, 10). By using their
blogs, editors can respond to the newspaper audience’s movement to online communication and the use of social media.

New York University Associate Professor of Journalism Jay Rosen, who is a blogger, said in an interview with PBS that the most successful newspaper blogs allow fanatics in the newsroom to write about unusual topics, solicit reporting help from readers, or use community members to write blogs for the paper (2006). An editor’s blog can use all three of these approaches. Editors are nothing if not fanatics about the news and the reporting of it. Editors also involve audiences with the news by quoting from reader letters, phone calls or emails in their posts and seeking comment on the posts.

Editors’ blogs are different from other newspaper blogs. Other newspaper blogs may be written on a certain reporter’s beat, or by a section editor blogging about their part of the paper and the topics covered in it. Some are even written by readers. Unlike these kinds of blogs, many editors write their blogs about the topic of the newspaper itself.

If readers follow this type of editor’s blog, they can expect a certain kind of insider content about the newspaper and its daily, inner workings. In his description of his blog, Greensboro, North Carolina’s News & Record editor John Robinson wrote on 24 August 2004, that, “its purpose is to engage you in public conversations about the newspaper.”

To further define editors’ blogs, scholarly research has shown that there are two general types of blogs (Sundar 2007). A filter blog is a catch-all on a certain topic with links to other content but less emphasis on original content. In the second style of blog, original content is created in the style of a journal, commonly with an editorial slant that
shows the opinion of the writer. The goal of many editors’ blogs is to create new content that reveals what’s going on in the newsroom and they often follow the journal format.

_A survey of blog post content._ When research was gathered for this study, an unscientific survey was done to explain what kind of newspaper-related content is being posted in editors’ blogs. This informal survey of posts categorized the newspaper-related content in one month of one editor’s blog’s posts. The posts were taken as an example of what is being written in editors’ blogs. Newspaper-related postings in the Greensboro, North Carolina _News & Record_ editor’s contained information on staff changes, how often the name of the paper was bungled in the media or by readers, new designs for the paper’s Web site homepage, and a new online feature called Ask a Reporter.

Also included were posts about the use of new social media tools in journalism, the effect of online communication on teenagers and their ability to write and read, and the gains and losses in newspaper circulation. The editor’s blog covers the newspaper itself.

Connecting and conversing with the public and newspaper readers with tools such as an editor’s blog are important goals for many reasons. One is that public opinion of journalists is declining, because people believe journalists are out of touch or motivated by commercialism (The Bivings Group 2006). “The credibility ratings for most major news organizations are either flat or have slipped since 2004” (Pew Research Center 2006).

Editors’ blogs also help to put a human face on the newspaper, as is evident in this two-sentence post by the Greensboro, North Carolina _News & Record_’s editor John Robinson on 17 September 2008, in his blog: “Today’s front page headline ‘Fed OKs $85
million loan to rescue AIG’ makes me want to go back to bed. Sorry about that.” The actual figure was 85 billion, not million – a significant error that would make any editor wince, but Robinson acknowledges it in a self-deprecating manner.

Robinson understood how readers must have felt when they saw the incorrect headline. He didn’t have to wait until the next day’s print edition to point out the correction, as his remarks were immediately disseminated through his blog.

Examining Editors’ Blogs

When a newspaper editor starts a blog, he or she has a new tool to interact with the audience. This paper will examine this interaction. When editors create blogs to talk about the internal workings of the newspaper, a unique kind of communication is going on – and that communication has gone largely unexamined. If readers do not respond to the blog and if the editor does not consider the responses, there really is no conversation and the editor’s time and effort on the blog might not further the newspaper’s goals. It is also unclear if editors use blogs as the major tool to communicate with readers, or if it is one of many tools they use, along with email, face-to-face, phone, and other tools. Where do editors’ blogs fit into the editor’s toolbox?

If communication with readers is a mark of success for an editor’s blog, then this paper addresses the overall question: How are editors communicating with their readers on their blogs? This series of research questions was used:

**RQ1:** How many posts did editors write in their blogs?

**RQ2:** How many comments from readers did blog posts receive?

**RQ3:** How many times did editors mention reader communication (e-mail, face-to-face discussion, etc.) in their blog posts?
**RQ4:** How often did editors respond to comments left by readers?

This study benefits newspaper editors and social media practitioners by providing an inside look at three North Carolina newspapers that use editors’ blogs. The results of this paper will provide a benchmark to which newspaper editors and social media practitioners can compare their own blogging initiatives and goals for readership, or editors can use the information to decide if they should start an editor’s blog. The results may also help create guidelines for the use of this new technology so that any benefits for journalism can be better understood.

Very little research into the content and usage of editors’ blogs is currently available. A review of existing literature that informed this paper follows.
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Scholarly research on blogs is limited, as is research on the newsroom’s use of blogs, including editor’s blogs. Some best practices and opinions about blogs are found in interviews with reporters and editors published in trade journals. While not peer-reviewed, trade journal articles offer a look into the use of blogging in the newsroom.

The available research into blogging, editors, the newsroom and journalism was categorized into three areas: online audiences for blogs, blogging in the newsroom, and the editor’s role as a blogger.

**Online Audiences for Blogs**

No other news medium is growing its audience more than the Internet (Morgan 2009). About 37% of Americans go online regularly for their news (Morgan 2009). A Pew Internet & American Life study found that 42% of Internet users have read blogs, and 11% read blogs daily (Smith 2008).

*Internet audiences, news, and civic engagement.* A 2008 study found that 23% of Americans read blogs about current events (Pew Research Center). This is up from 2006, when 4% of Americans said they regularly read blogs on the news (Pew Research Center 2006). Visitors to blogs also participated by commenting. One trade journal article reported that the Raleigh, North Carolina paper *News & Observer* received 29,000 comments on its stories during a nine-month period (Gsell 2009).
As Internet audiences look for online news sources, their usage and interests can be tracked with metrics such as page views on specific stories. Newspapers can use the specificity provided by these metrics to better understand what their audiences want (Tewksbury 2003). Newspapers can track which stories were most viewed, linked to, and commented on (if comments on stories are available). They can also use search engine analytics to see what search engines readers use and what kinds of words and phrases they use to find the newspaper. Using that information, they can understand what content is in demand. For example, a common search term of “weather Fourth of July” may prompt the newspaper to put a larger focus on that topic on their homepage or weather Webpage.

Newspapers can also take advantage of the way local and regional news is consumed online. Although a Pew study found that Google News, Yahoo News, and AOL News were the most popular destinations for online news readers, and major TV network Web sites such as CNN.com received a large share of the traffic (Lenhart and Fox 2006), research also found that local and community news was important to readers. Nearly all of the respondents in the Pew Internet study who said they at least sometimes read a newspaper said they spend a significant amount of time seeking local news (Lenhart and Fox 2006). Community-building online social media technology such as editors’ blogs can provide a way to reach out to this audience seeking local news. How much local news was discussed specifically on editors’ blogs would be a good path for future researchers to study, as local news was found to be one of the most important sources of reader interest that newspapers have (Lenhart and Fox 2006).
Newspapers can gain reader interest online with civic engagement and community-building. Online audiences for news blogs were found to be civically engaged and involved in community building (Moy et al. 2005). Internet users were likely to participate in their community’s activities and social interactions, and individuals who used the Internet in their daily lives integrated it more often for communication, their work, and volunteering (Moy et al. 2005). These studies indicated that the online audience for news blogs was engaged within the community the newspaper covers. Since newspapers cover the community, they can offer engagement for these readers who have an interest in local social interactions.

**Blogging in the Newsroom**

Research has found that the use of blogs by newsroom staff was likely to change journalism and the way that newsrooms work (Andrews 2003; Fisher 2006; Lowrey and Mackay 2008). Many newspaper staffs use blogs. A 2008 study of the 100 top United States newspapers by circulation found that 93% had reporter blogs (The Bivings Group 2008). Two themes in the research about newsrooms and blogs were 1) the importance of a commitment to blogging and 2) the reasons why newsrooms use blogs.

*Newsroom commitment to blogs.* If a newsroom staff used blogs, research found that certain commitments and resources were required. Within trade journal articles, experts on blogging and newspaper staff members have characterized blogging as time-consuming and sometimes difficult to manage (Nielsen 2007; The bloggers weigh in [2007]). One informal survey found that the length of time spent creating content for blogs, along with dealing with comments that aren’t constructive to the blog’s goals, made the tool less attractive for journalists. Five major metropolitan newspaper
journalists’ chief complaints about working on a blog were their own personal anxieties, blogging’s endlessness, the time commitment, and the venomous comments (The bloggers weigh in [2007]).

Quality posts take time and effort to create. Interviews in trade journal articles note that to start a blog and use it to its fullest potential a blog author must commit to the time and effort the blog demands. Editor of the Greensboro, North Carolina News & Record and editor’s blog author John Robinson was profiled in a trade journal article about blogging, and said his blog, “takes a significant commitment of time, not only to write thoughtful posts, but also to monitor and maintain the site” (2006). Access to technology, staff and other resources were three factors for newsroom staff to be capable of committing to blogging. One study by Lowrey and Mackay noted that “Commitment to blogging content is especially strong at larger papers, which have more resources and are able to differentiate tasks more efficiently” (2008, 76).

Why newsrooms use blogs. Available research points to several reasons why newsrooms use blogs (Robinson 2006; Morris and Ogan 1996; Hindman, Ernst, and Richardson 2001; Lowrey and Mackay 2008). First, blogs now represent mainstream tools accepted by a wide audience. Second, as readers go online for news, they have a choice where to get it. Non-affiliated, non-journalists can publish blogs or other news and take away some of the audience and authority of mainstream media. Finally, blog technology has become increasingly affordable and simpler to use.

Blogs in the mainstream. The latest research shows that blogging is moving from being a fad to a mainstream communication method. Technorati, a major search engine that indexes blog posts, released a “State of the Blogosphere” report in September 2008.
Within the report, Technorati noted that their past research into blogging found a variety of conclusions about both the number of blogs available and their readership. However, “All studies agree . . . . that blogs are a global phenomenon that has hit the mainstream” (Technorati 2008). Blogs’ mainstream popularity made blogs attractive tools for newspapers.

Blogs re-establish and strengthen authority. Researcher Susan Robinson found that journalists also used blogs to help re-establish their authority (2006). Online audiences can choose from plenty of unaffiliated, non-journalists who blog about the same stories on which journalists report. Non-journalist bloggers represent competition, especially when the potential audience can go wherever it wants for news and ignore traditional journalistic channels (Morris and Ogan 1996). As Robinson found, a reporter might start a blog to attempt to take back a measure of that lost authority (2006).

Newsroom resources. The technological resources available to a newspaper editor may be limiting as well, depending on his or her geographic location. A 2001 scholarly study of newspaper editors’ familiarity with and use of technology showed a gap between rurally-located newspaper editors and urban-based newspaper editors (Hindman, Ernst, and Richardson 2001). Editors at newspapers based in urban areas were more likely to use technology, such as e-mail, online news sources and to have an official Web site for the newspaper (Hindman, Ernst, and Richardson 2001). As the cost of sophisticated technology and software declines, this gap may be closing. An updated study would be a possible path for future research.

Editors and blogging awareness. If an editor was aware of local blogging activity, he or she was more likely to use blogs as sources, refer to blogs during meetings and to
implement blogs on the newspaper Web site, according to research by Lowrey and Mackay (2008). Not only was the use of blogs locally an invitation for change by editors, but Lowrey and Mackay found that it changed the job of reporters in the same way. Reporters used blogs as sources, discussed them at meetings, and started their own blogs if local blogs existed and they were aware of them. Competition likely prompted the change. If local bloggers were publishing, the newsroom staff felt the need to publish in the same way (Lowrey and Mackay 2008).

The Editor’s Role as Blog Author

Newspapers offer various kinds of blogs, including those written by newspaper reporters, photographers, section editors, and even readers. Compared to other newspaper blogs, research shows that editors and, in turn, their blogs, serve a unique role in journalism and communication. It is generally accepted that executive editors direct what appears in their newspapers, as well as how it appears. Editors bear the responsibility of managing the content in their newspapers. Executive editors also represent the newspaper in the public realm, and consider themselves to be the primary advocate for journalistic values throughout the organization (Gade 2008).

By offering an editor’s blog, a newspaper provides its audience a direct line of communication to the person who controls the newspapers’ editorial content and represents it in the public eye. As one study determined, “Editors no longer deal simply with an occasional reader calling . . . . Every reader becomes a potential writer, media critic, and publisher” (Dougherty 2005, 48).

An early editor’s blog. The blog started by the editorial board of the Dallas Morning News was one of the first behind-the-scenes newspaper blogs. It was started in
July 2003 with the goal of connecting with readers and involving them in the editorial decision-making process on newspaper content and design. The blog put the editorial decisions in the public eye to demystify the process for readers (Wiley 2003). Readers responded enthusiastically and appeared to appreciate the inside look into how decisions were made and who was making them (Wiley 2003). Editors’ blogs are following in these initial steps.

Editors and public service. The advent of editors’ blogs can be seen as an indication of the executive editor’s desire to share his or her decision-making process with the public in a way that is faithful to public service. In one study published in the *Newspaper Research Journal*, editors were found to be, “driven … by the grand vision of journalism’s influential role in shaping public life” (Akhavan-Majid 1998, 85). The study found that helping people through public service was ranked highly, with salary ranked lowest (Akhavan-Majid 1998).

Editors and change. Editors were seen as important agents of change in one study, especially as the business model for newspapers needed to be updated to attract new readers and keep existing ones (Gade 2008). The study also found editors to be important managers in the newsroom and throughout the newspaper organization. The editors also valued their roles, within and outside of the newsroom, and considered themselves to be advocates of journalistic values (Gade 2008).

The newspaper industry is transitioning into a new era and editor’s blogs are a part of the transition. As the *Anchorage Daily News* editor Patrick Dougherty said: “Blogging certainly seems like a wonderful way to do something – but what that ‘something’ is for newspapers still seems in need of exploration” (2005, 50).
METHOD

The goal of this paper was to analyze the editor’s blog’s role as a journalistic and communication tool and discern its effectiveness for fostering discourse between the public and the newspaper. This study examined the editor’s blogs at three newspapers in North Carolina from March 2008 through August 2008. Each blog was actively being updated at the time of this study and was written by executive editors.

Criteria for Blog Selection

Defining ‘editor.’ The blogs used for this paper were written by the newspapers’ executive editors, as opposed to an editorial editor, features editor, or other section editor. The executive editor, who is the top news executive, has not just a relationship with a section of the paper, but with the entire paper and the staff of people who work on it. Each editor’s blog used in this study was written by one or more editors whose position reflected this definition.

Defining an editor’s blog. Existing research does not provide specific criteria to distinguish an editor’s blog from blogs produced by others. However, applicable definitions of a blog were available. Professionals and experts in technology make helpful references when studying something as mercurial as Internet technology and its effect on communication. Author of The Weblog Handbook and blogging pioneer Rebecca Blood defined blog as a Web site that “is updated frequently, with new material
posted at the top of the page” (2000). Jason Calacanis, CEO of the search engine Mahalo.com and co-founder of the blog network company Weblogs, Inc., defined blogs as having three characteristics: “The first is reverse chronological order, the second is unfiltered content . . . . and the third is comments” (2005).

These criteria were applied, along with two more criteria: posts were written by the newspaper’s one or more executive editors, and the content within the posts was more than just the editor’s column published in the print edition of the paper, then re-published online in the blog. More content had to be posted to the blog besides the editor’s regular column or other feature from the print newspaper. Other posts in the blog that were not limited to just reprinting the print pieces by an editor provided the unique content created outside of the print edition and created the level of communication with readers that makes blogs valuable.

*Official blogs.* All three blogs were a newspaper’s official blog for the executive editor of a newspaper. The blogs were designated as ‘official’ because they were linked on the newspaper’s Web site or embedded into the newspaper’s Web site as a part of the site.

*Ownership.* All three newspapers were owned by different companies (see section below, *Profiles of the Three Editors’ Blogs*, for details on ownership of each newspaper). Some newspaper owners or publishers require that staffers must blog at all newspapers which they own, as a matter of operational policy, taking away the choice of a newspaper staff to blog or not. By focusing on newspapers owned by different companies, this study was not unfairly biased toward one company’s operational policies.
North Carolina. The blogs examined are also exclusively published by newspapers based within the state of North Carolina. North Carolina residents often are early adopters of technology and social media. Because the selection of blogs is limited to North Carolina, the results are not generalizable. Results can only provide insight into blog usage and activity.

Profile: Social Media in North Carolina

The people in the state of North Carolina, especially those living in the Triad region and the Research Triangle Park region, have a unique perspective on technology. Beginning with the opening of the Research Triangle Park in the 1960s, the information technology and biotechnology industries have become a key part of the state’s economy. RTP, or ‘the Triangle,’ includes Raleigh in the center, with Duke University, the University of North Carolina, and North Carolina State University creating the three points of the triangle. Companies located in RTP include Nortel, Cisco, IBM, NetApp, and Sony Ericsson, and together they employ more than 52,000 people (The future of great ideas [2007]). “It is the workplace of technical, chemical, and biomedical scientists and patent holders whose discoveries have impacted the lives of all citizens in this country and around the world” (Weddle, Rooks and Valdecanas 2006, 2).

Companies such as Ignite Social Media, iContact, and Koroberi that specialize in social media consulting and implementation also are springing up in North Carolina. These companies sponsor major conferences on social media, such as ConvergeSouth and Blog Carolinas. Other funding from these technology companies supports organizations such as Social Carolina, Triangle Usability Professionals Association, and Refresh the
Triangle, all of which help educate professionals in North Carolina on social media tools and Internet applications.

Corporations in the private sector are not the only adopters and promoters of social media within the state. Leaders of government projects use social media to reach out to constituents. RE3.org is a project created by the North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention & Environmental Assistance that uses Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace to teach residents to promote a ‘lifestyle’ of recycling, reducing, and reusing in the state.

One unique example of ingenuity in North Carolina’s social media usage is 30THREADS, a Web site created by two bloggers who also are professionals in the media industry. The 30THREADS.com site is a portal that works like a blog, and links to featured posts made by other bloggers in North Carolina, especially the Triangle region. The site also includes local news and links to other Web sites. The site includes featured photos, live videocasts made by 30THREADS staff, a chatroom, and a way for readers to submit content. Within traditional newspaper media markets, North Carolina’s major newspaper, Raleigh’s News & Observer, is known for innovation in online content. The News & Observer started one of the earliest Web content operations in the 1990s (Dewitt 2008). Local CBS television news affiliate WRAL, based in Raleigh, North Carolina, is an innovator of new technology. WRAL-TV moved to a high definition format well before other stations, and it is one of the leaders in online and mobile device news and video content (Whitney 2005).
These are just a few prominent examples of how the residents and entrepreneurs of North Carolina have responded to new social media technology with innovation and vigor, making the state worthy to focus on for the purposes of this paper.

**Quantitative Blog Analysis Method**

The four research questions were answered through the following quantitative research method. For the time period of March to August 2008 (a total of six months, or 26 weeks), 438 blog posts were archived and counted for three blogs: the Raleigh, North Carolina *News & Observer*, the Greensboro, North Carolina *News & Record*, and the Burlington, North Carolina *Times-News*. A total of 1,352 comments to these posts were also archived and counted. The identity of each commenter also was cataloged, to account for readers who make multiple comments. Comments that were left anonymously were cataloged together as if each anonymous comment was made by an individual. Comments left by a blog’s author also were counted and archived.

Within the text of each post, it was noted if the blog author mentioned communication with a reader. A post was counted if an editor mentioned a reader’s phone call, reader comment on the blog, e-mail to the blog author, or any other communication (face to face, etc.).

*Method of archiving posts and comments.* Blogs were accessed once at the end of each week, and every post and comment was saved within an html file. Since comments can be added or deleted from a blog over time, the week-long time limit was imposed to create a block of time that was equal for each blog.
Profiles of the Three Editors’ Blogs

Note: Circulations were determined by the Audit Bureau of Circulations Database -- http://www.accessabc.com/index.html -- except for The Times-News, which was found on the rate card on the newspaper’s Web site.

**The News & Observer**
Editor’s Blog URL: http://blogs.newsobserver.com/editor/home
Circulation: Large. Daily – 323,828; Sundays – 205,654
Publication frequency: Daily
Location: Raleigh, North Carolina
Length of time blog has been published: Started August 1, 2005
Editors’ names: John Drescher (Executive Editor), Dan Barkin, Steve Riley, and Linda Williams (Senior Editors).
Owner of newspaper: Orage Quarles, President and Publisher, The News and Observer Publishing Company
Mission statement of editor’s blog: “Top editors answer questions and talk about The N&O's print and online news reporting.”
Tagging: Yes

**The News & Record**
Editor’s Blog URL: http://blog.news-record.com/staff/jrblog/
Circulation: Daily – Medium. 155,882; Sundays – 97,177
Publication frequency: Daily
Location: Greensboro, North Carolina
Length of time blog has been published: Started August 24, 2004
Editor’s name and title: John Robinson, Editor
Owner of newspaper: Family-owned Landmark Communications
Mission statement of editor’s blog: (from first post) “Welcome to my Weblog. Its purpose is to engage you in public conversations about the newspaper. The key word is public. Readers have several ways to reach out to us now, but they are all two-way streets between the writer and the paper. This is the first method that encourages dialogue back and forth between me and our readers in full view of anyone visiting the site.”
Tagging: Yes

**The Times-News**
Editor’s Blog URL: http://madisontaylor.freedomblogging.com/
Circulation: Daily – Small. 25,350; Sundays – 27,327
Publication frequency: Daily
Location: Burlington, North Carolina
Length of time blog has been published: Started May 1, 2007
Editor’s name and title: Madison Taylor, Executive Editor
Owner of newspaper: Freedom Communications, Inc.
Mission statement of editor’s blog: (from first post) “Taylor will be giving readers on the World Wide Web insight into the happenings here at The Times-News. Got a comment about something you read? Have a suggestion concerning coverage? Want to praise The Times-News staff for the work they’ve done? Let Madison know through his blog.” (from second post) “I usually write about issues within The Times-News and the newspaper industry. I’ll take questions from readers and I’ll also every now and again take a poke (in good humor of course) at local institutions and issues. I hope to regularly post a budget about things that will be published later on our Web site and in The Times-News print edition.”
Tagging: Yes
FINDINGS

RQ1: How many posts did editors write in their blogs?

In this study, a blog post was counted each time an individual entry was made to the blog Web site. Editors published a total of 438 posts total for all three papers for six months (Table 1). There were 184 days during the six months, which means editors published an average of two posts per day. *The News & Observer*’s editor’s blog had a total of 91 posts, *The News & Record* had a total of 253 posts, and *The Times-News* had 94 posts total over the six month period of time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>August</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The News &amp; Observer</em></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The News &amp; Record</em></td>
<td>38</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Times-News</em></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In general, editors posted frequently, and only rarely did more than three days pass during which there were no posts made in any of the three individual blogs.

**RQ2: How many comments from readers did blog posts receive?**

The total number of blog posts with comments in was 276, or 63% of all posts. The posts without any comments totaled 162 total, or 37%. Individually within each editor’s blog, 64% of posts to The News & Observer’s editor’s blog had comments. The News & Record blog had a total of 70% of posts with comments. The Times-News blog had a total of 41% of posts with comments.

On average within all three blogs combined, posts were likely to receive at least one comment more than half of the time an editor published a post. The total number of comments for all three blogs during the six months was 1,352, or an average of three comments per post (Table 2).

Table 2. Ratio of Reader Comments to Blog Posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog</th>
<th>Total Posts</th>
<th>Total Comments</th>
<th>Approximate Ratio of Comments to Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News &amp; Observer</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>3:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News &amp; Record</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>998</td>
<td>4:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times-News</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>.94:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>1,352</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The News & Observer’s editor’s blog had a total of 265 comments, or 19.6% of the total number of comments left in all three blogs over six months. The News & Record blog had a total of 998 comments, or 73.8%, and The Times-News blog had 89 comments, or 6.6% (Table 3).

Table 3. Number Of Reader Comments in Each Blog Over Six Months (2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>August</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News &amp; Observer</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News &amp; Record</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times-News</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,352</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This comment count did not include comments made by the blog’s author, that is, the newspaper’s editor. In the case of all three newspapers, if an editor left a comment, it was identified as such with a label showing the editor’s name. Because of this, it was clear which comments were left by the blog’s author.

The identities of commenters were recorded to see how many individuals left comments, and to determine how many comments an individual person made. In all three
blogs, a combined total of 444 individuals left comments. At The News & Observer’s editor’s blog, 119 individuals commented. The News & Record blog had a total of 290 individuals who commented, and The Times-News blog had 35 individuals who commented.

Out of a possible 1,352 comments, 46 total (or 3%) were left anonymously. Specifically, at the News & Observer’s editor’s blog, 20 comments were anonymous, or 7%. The News & Record’s editor’s blog had 26 anonymous comments, or 2%. There were no anonymous comments left at The Times-News’s editor’s blog.

Since the identities of anonymous commenters cannot be determined, the 46 comments left anonymously weren’t included in the count of individuals who left comments. The identity of an anonymous commenter could be one person, the same person 46 times, or some unknown combination. It was not clear how many individuals posted anonymous comments.

Some individual commenters left only one comment over the six month of this study, while others left more. On each blog, the number of comments left by each individual according to their usernames was cataloged. (Table 4). Out of a total of 1,352 comments cataloged for all three blogs, three individuals left more than 31 comments each, while 286 individuals left one comment. (Anonymous comments were not included.)
Table 4. Frequency of Comments by Individuals in All Three Editors’ Blogs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Comments</th>
<th>Number of Individuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than 31 comments</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 16-30 comments</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 6-15 comments</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 3-5 comments</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two comments</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One comment</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ3: How many times did editors mention reader communication in their blog posts?

A total of 105 posts, or 24%, included some mention of communication with readers. This communication included phone calls, e-mails, letters, and face-to-face conversations. In their posts, editors also mentioned online communication such as comments left to the editor’s blog itself, and readers’ comments on other stories online.

One example came from The News & Record editor’s blog on 25 March 2008. Editor John Robinson’s post, “The newspaper’s front page,” was about a reader’s phone call. The reader called to complain that the front page of the newspaper did not contain a story that marked the 4,000th American death in Iraq. Robinson explained the factors that influenced the decisions made about the content of the newspaper that day. Without the reader’s phone call, this blog post may not have been written and published; but because a reader called, Robinson was able to answer to concerns about the paper for that reader.
and for others who were curious.

A note to further explain the answer to this research question: Some blog posts mentioned more than one kind of communication, such as e-mails and phone calls, in the same post. These instances were still only counted one time. For example, in one blog post, there were two reader phone calls mentioned. That blog post was counted once as it had some form of reader communication mentioned in it. The total count of posts for research question three was focused on the number of posts, not the number of times readers talked to an editor, and then the editor referred to it in the post.

**RQ4: How often did editors respond to comments left by readers?**

Editors responded to comments a total of 300 times, which means they responded to about 22% of reader comments. There were 241 editor comments at *The News & Record* blog, which is a response rate of 24%. There were 59 editor comments at *The Times-News* blog, or a response rate of 66%. *The News & Observer* had no editor comments.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary

By answering the research questions, this study determined how often editors from three North Carolina newspapers posted on their blogs and how often they communicated with their readers through their blogs. This case study provides a window into blog activity by newspaper executive editors and the statistics provide a snapshot, but cannot be used to draw conclusions that are applicable elsewhere.

Editors posted frequently. Editors are relatively committed to post frequently in their blogs. Editors are less responsive to comments, but they mention talking to readers in their posts. This study’s categorization of posts according to the number of times editors mentioned communicating with a reader (via e-mail, phone, or other means) showed that editors talk to readers in places inside and outside of the blog, creating a combination of avenues for discussion about the newspaper.

Within all three blogs, phone calls with readers were mentioned in 27 blog posts, e-mails in 58 blog posts, comments left on the editor’s blog in 14 blog posts, and online reader comments made to stories or newspaper blogs online were mentioned in 11 blog posts. Face-to-face communication with readers was mentioned in two posts, and letters were mentioned in 12 posts. The blog is not the center, but a complementary tool, to editors’ interests in audience opinion.
Editors posted, on average, twice a day during the six month period of study – a frequency that suggests that the postings were a high priority and that posting did not interfere with their other duties. A majority (more than 50%) of their posts received at least one comment. All of these findings were positive indications that the blogs were communication tools for editors.

*Editors differed when commenting back to readers.* Each editor’s blog had a different frequency of editor comments. *The News & Observer*’s editors did not respond to any comments during the time period of this study. *The News & Record* editor responded to about one in every four comments, while the editor of *The Times-News* responded to two out of every three. Additional research is needed into editors’ reasons for commenting and into what is said within these editor-reader exchanges.

*Editors used blogs as complementary communication tools.* The research showed that 24% of blog posts mentioned reader communication of some kind, such as phone calls or letters. Editors quoted directly from their audience’s written correspondence from letters or emails, summarized face-to-face discussions and phone calls, and wrote entire posts about these conversations. In the *News & Observer*’s editor’s blog, a post on 28 May 2008 addressed a reader’s negative reaction to a photo that was published of a dying race horse that had been injured in an accident. A reader responded by telling the editor in an e-mail she thought the photo was disturbing and unnecessary. The post was written by editor Steve Riley to respond to this reader and to explain and defend the reason for the editorial decision to publish the photograph. Because editors published posts in their blogs that responded to readers in this way, the editor’s blog was not the focal point in the conversation, but just one more tool that facilitated communication.
In another example, the *Times-News* editor’s blog by Madison Taylor included regular posts called “The E-mail bag,” in which Taylor quoted from part or all of a reader e-mail and then answered back in his post. Since one quarter of all posts from all three blogs over six months included some kind of reader communication of this nature, and this communication was the main subject or a supplement to the content of the posts themselves, editors seemed to be quite focused on what readers thought and said. Future research is needed to determine what kind of content editors talk about in the posts themselves. For example, what percent of the time do editors write posts about the behind-the-scenes editorial decisions, versus subjects such as local events, sports results, and the newspaper industry as a whole, etc.?

*Comments and commenters.* This study provided information about the people who left comments. Editors received comments to at least half of all posts they made. The majority of these comments were left by individuals who commented once during the sixth month period, and never again. Another a segment of commenters profiled in this study left numerous and frequent comments over time and could be called ‘power commenters.’ A few of these individuals were found to have left more than eighty comments over the six-month period. A supplemental finding in this study about people who commented was that anonymous comments were not as frequent as one might suspect within the Internet, a medium where anonymity is very easy to achieve.

Because the identities of commenters were recorded, it was found that 444 individual people commented on at least one post (not counting anonymous commenters). (It is also possible that more than one person could have had more than one screenname, so the information collected is comments per individual screenname.)
Out of this number, 64% of individuals left exactly one comment over the six month period, which suggests that the majority of people who read the blogs and left a comment only did so once. (This does not necessarily mean that these individuals are reading one post and never coming back, as how many people read a given post cannot be determined from this study.)

One unexpected finding was that three individuals were found to have left many of the reader comments. Two of these individuals were commenters from the *News-Record* newspaper. One left 82 comments, and another left 80 comments; combined, the two left 16% of all comments left at the editor’s blog.

The final individual to leave a large amount of comments was on the *News & Observer* editors’ blog. This person left 58 comments, or 22% of all comments left on the editor’s blog.

The high number of comments these three individuals left were not all on a single blog post or a small number of posts on controversial subjects. Instead, these individuals commented on a variety of posts over time, suggesting they were seeking engagement with the newspaper and the editor over the long-term, versus over one hot topic.

Findings also showed that anonymous comments are not as frequent as one might assume, despite the fact that Internet communication can so easily be anonymous in nature. Only 3% of all commenters were recorded as being anonymous.

*Specific findings from the News & Record editor’s blog.* The categorization of data led to surprising results regarding one blog in particular, the *News & Record* of Greensboro, North Carolina. This editor’s blog was found to have had more than double the number of posts than the other two blogs examined in this study. This particular
editor’s blog represented a majority of the number of posts, comments posted, and responses in comments by the editor that were categorized in this study. The findings from this one blog illustrate the significant differences that can be found between the three different editor’s blogs sampled in this study.

Curiously, the other two blogs both had nearly the same number of posts, at 91 posts total for the *News & Observer* and 94 posts made by the *Times-News*. This similar number of posts was despite the fact that the two papers were vastly different in circulation and regional population levels (see the section of this paper, *Profiles of the Three Editors’ Blogs*, for details). This may suggest that the frequency of posts in the *News & Record* was unusually high and a unique occurrence, but additional research with a statistically significant sample would be required to determine what an average number of posts made to editor’s blogs may be.

In addition, the *News & Record* editor’s blog had the highest number of comments made to any of the blogs. Part of the reason for this could be tied to the fact that this blog simply had more posts than the other blogs. A total of 74% of all comments from all three blogs categorized in this study were posted to the *News & Record* editor’s blog. The *Times-News* editor’s blog had 7% of all comments, and the *News & Observer* had 19%.

The *News & Observer* is based in the state’s capital city, with a higher population than Greensboro or Burlington, and with the largest circulation of the three newspapers represented in this study. Yet its editors’ blog did not get anywhere near the level of comments as one might expect.
In relation to this finding, the editor of the *News & Record* also responded back to comments left on his blog with more frequency than did the other two editors. In fact, the *News & Observer*’s editors never responded in comments during the six month timeline.

Why the *News & Record* had much higher numbers was somewhat beyond the scope of this paper. The large number of posts may point to a dedicated editor. The editor also responded to comments much more often than the other blog editors. This openness and willingness to respond on a regular basis may have helped encourage more individuals to comment, with the confidence that they would be acknowledged.

Some other possible factors for the *News & Record* editor’s blog’s higher rate of comments may have been discovered in the process of researching the data. It was noted that this blog, in particular, seemed to have comments coming from other blog authors. Commenters’ names often were hyperlinked to their own blogs, and the editor’s posts often referenced other bloggers. The exact number of times these comments from other bloggers appeared was not recorded, and research was not conclusive to determine if the editor’s interaction with other bloggers was a factor in the high number of comments he received. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine if Robinson linked to other bloggers, which brought those bloggers to his blog, who then commented. Future research could determine if this is the case. Among blog authors, it is a common practice to visit other blogs and link to them from their own blogs. By participating in other blogs by commenting on them and linking to them, a blog author can help raise the profile of his or her blog.
A follow-up conversation with editor John Robinson. In order to determine some of the factors for these unexpected results at the News & Record, the author of this study initiated an e-mail interview with editor John Robinson.

Robinson explained that, in the past, he did visit the Web sites of local bloggers in Greensboro, with the goal of establishing a dialogue with them. This may be a factor for the number of comments left on his blog, and his willingness to respond back to people he knew to be bloggers themselves. This conversation with bloggers took place during the time period that this study was conducted.

However, the e-mail exchange revealed that Robinson is not talking to bloggers as much as he did in the past. Robinson noted that the number of bloggers has increased too much for him to have time to track them all. He now uses Twitter (an online instant messaging service) for online conversations. Of Twitter, Robinson said, “There’s a different audience there, and I seem to connect with a different type of Greensboro person” (2009). While Twitter provides a wider group of people to talk to and hear from, he says, he finds his time divided between Twitter, his own blog, and other bloggers and their posts.

Another problem Robinson encountered recently was that the local blogs have “become factionalized to the extent that it is almost toxic” (2009). Robinson encounters bloggers who he said “hate the paper,” because of a progressive viewpoint that the newspaper’s editorials express. “That kind of unconstructive discussion drag[s] me down mentally and spiritually” (Robinson 2009).

Despite this difficulty, Robinson emphasized the importance of using blogs to establish a dialog, not just a one-sided lecture. Talking and listening to other bloggers
“make[s] me smarter. Linking to things they have to say is an important part of the online culture” (2009). While Robinson has chosen to divide his communication between several types of social media., his situation may or may not be similar to other bloggers and editors. Interviews with other bloggers may reveal if this is a wider trend.

**Conclusion**

From Robinson’s experience and the findings of this study, it appears editors’ blogs require dedication and commitment to be successful. The blogs were markedly different in the number of posts, number of reader comments, and the number of comments left by editors. The findings of this study lead to the conclusion that the editors’ blogs were used as complementary tools by editors who were willing representatives of their newspapers in the public eye. By committing to a blog and using it effectively, editors are reaching out to audiences in new ways. With the advent of new tools such as Twitter, editors can look forward to using additional, powerful social media tools to create communities online and establish connections with readers.

The results from this study of editors’ blogs at three North Carolina newspapers will provide insight to other editors who are using blogs or expect to use blogs as a communication tool, and will help researchers as they establish new benchmarks in the study of new media.


_________. 2009. (No subject.) Personal e-mail. (accessed 12 June 2009).


The bloggers weigh in. 2007. Editor & Publisher 140 (12).


