

# Blog offensive: An exploratory analysis of attacks published on campaign blog posts from a political public relations perspective<sup>☆</sup>

Kaye D. Trammell\*

*Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, 223-C Journalism Building, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, USA*

Received 6 February 2006; received in revised form 22 August 2006; accepted 1 September 2006

---

## Abstract

An advancement in online campaigning during the 2004 election cycle was the integration of blogs in candidate Web sites. This content analysis investigated the political public relations message strategy on campaign blogs during the 2004 election, focusing on attacks as a part of Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse. Results indicated frequent discussion of the opponent, reliance on attacks, and the dominance of logical appeals. Candidates focused on issue over image. The incumbent attacked more often than the challenger.

Published by Elsevier Inc.

*Keywords:* Blog; Weblog; Candidate; Campaign; Politics; Functional theory; Internet; Web; Election; Political public relations

---

## 1. Introduction

Political public relations is an expanding area of research informed by both traditional public relations and political communication. While the area generally focuses on the public service offered through transmitting issues to the news media, Froehlich and Rüdiger (2006) asserted that the “main goal of political PR is the use of media outlets to communicate *specific political views*, solutions, and interpretations of issues in the hope of garnering public support for political policies or campaigns” (p. 18, emphasis added). With the rise of personal publishing, practitioners need no longer rely on media for transmitting those messages and reaching their public.

Public relations professionals have begun investigating an emergent Internet tool, weblogs, or blogs for short, as a means to reach out to key public (Edelman & Inteliseek, 2005; Hallett, 2005) and build relationships (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Blogs appear to offer a more personal image of candidates (Trammell, 2004) and increase the interactive capabilities of a campaign Web site (Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006). Early assessments of candidate blogs found candidates engaged in low levels of negative campaigning (Williams, Trammell, Postelnicu, Landreville, & Martin, 2005). However, blog posts written later during the race were noticeably negative (Trammell, 2004). This increase in negative messaging was consistent with analyses of other campaign-controlled messages comparing the 2004 primary season to the general election period (Cho & Benoit, 2006).

---

<sup>☆</sup> The full version of this article is available upon request.

\* Tel.: +1 706 542 2409.

E-mail address: [kdt@uga.edu](mailto:kdt@uga.edu).

Using Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse, which focuses on acclaims, attacks, and defenses used in campaigns (Benoit & Harthcock, 1999; Cho & Benoit, 2005, 2006), this study investigated *attack messages* published on the official campaign blogs of Republican incumbent President George W. Bush and Democratic challenger Senator John F. Kerry during the general election cycle of the 2004 presidential race. This focus on a particular function allows scholars to better understand the communication that is a part of that function (e.g., appeals).

## 2. Method

Based on the Functional Theory methods employed by Benoit and colleagues (Benoit & Harthcock, 1999; Cho & Benoit, 2005, 2006), this study applied a directed functional approach to understand the *attack* construct and related variables in the blog posts of the two major party candidates during the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Blog posts from the official campaign blogs of Bush and Kerry were collected and archived from Labor Day 2004 through Election Day ( $N = 1190$ ). The blog post was the unit of analysis.

Categories coded in this study measured basic demographics of the item (e.g., author, date, title, word count) and content of blog posts. Even though every blog post on the campaign blog was coded, not every blog post contained a traditional campaign message like those found in news releases or other materials investigated through Functional Theory (Cho & Benoit, 2005, 2006). Therefore, it was first determined if a post made a “political statement,” meaning the post discussed the opponent, issues, or political matters in some way. Items that were marked as political statements were further analyzed to understand the nature of the political content and possible presence of an attack/negative message. Specifically, items were coded for mention of the opponent; attacks, target of the attack (person or record), and the presence of emotional, logical, or source credibility appeals. Finally, items were determined to be either issue or image-based political messages.

Three trained coders analyzed the items for this study. Inter-coder reliability was established among 10% of the items coded, using Holsti’s formula, during coder training and was high (.94 or better) across all categories. Differences were reconciled throughout the process.

## 3. Findings

Kerry posted more frequently ( $n = 694$ ) than Bush ( $n = 496$ ). Overall across both blogs, 59.6% of the posts contained political statements. Of these political statements, Kerry made 65.9% and Bush made 34.1%. The determination of an item containing a political statement was important, as items that were deemed political statements were further analyzed for attacks.

### 3.1. Discussion and attack of the opponent

RQ1 asked how often the opponent was discussed on a campaign blog. Overall, more than half (56.6%) of the blog posts discussed the opponent. Each campaign discussed the opponent at different rates. Kerry discussed Bush much more often than the incumbent discussed his challenger in blog posts.

RQ2 asked how often opponents were attacked on blog posts. Almost half of the items in the entire sample (including those that were not political statements; 49.7%) contained an attack of some sort. Of those that were political statements, 83.6% of the posts contained an attack. Of the items that discussed the opponent, 78.8% contained an attack.

H1 posited that the challenger would use more attacks than the incumbent. This hypothesis was supported at a statistically significant level; 70.6% of the attack posts came from the Kerry blog,  $\chi^2(1) = 34.60$ ,  $p \leq .001$ . Looking at each campaign on its own regarding attacks, 72.2% of the political statements on Bush’s blog contained an attack regarding an issue or his opponent. For Kerry, 89.5% of the political statements on his blog contained an attack.

### 3.2. Image versus issue

H2 posited that blog posts would focus more on the issue stance than candidates’ image. This hypothesis was supported,  $\chi^2(1) = 446.78$ ,  $p \leq .001$ , with 72.6% of the overall items containing political statements focused on issues, whereas only 27.4% framed the content using image. Additional analysis revealed that both candidates followed

this overall trend within their blogs. However, there was a greater disparity between the amount of issue and image portrayal for Kerry (79.9% issue; 20.1% image) in that he discussed issues at a greater rate than Bush (57.1% issue; 42.9% image).

### 3.3. Appeals

RQ3 asked how often emotional, logical, and source credibility appeals were used in the blog posts. Of all the items that were political statements, logical appeals were used the most frequently (63.6%), followed by source credibility (54.4%), and emotional (24.4%) appeals.

## 4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the frequency and nature of attacks on candidate blog posts from a Functional Theory perspective. In doing so, this study focused on attack messages in campaign blog posts and found similarities between blogs and the functions noted in other political public relations functional analyses (e.g., news releases; Cho & Benoit, 2005, 2006). Furthermore, by concentrating on a single function of the campaign communication, this study provided a deeper analysis of the attack function and established linkages between attacks and other variables.

This data showed that attacks were found in a large percentage of the overall messages and an even greater amount in items that were deemed “political statements.” The findings indicated that candidates used the new campaign tactic (blogs) as a place to attack their opponent. From humorous jabs to all-out assaults on issue stance, blog posts ran the gamut of type and intensity of negativity in attacks on the opponent.

It has been noted that some negative messaging “backfires” (Merritt, 1984). However, given the selectivity of the campaign Web site user, it is doubtful that findings would carry over here regarding blogs. Blog posts are not like billboards that one passes on a highway, nor are they limited to being seen and comprehended in seconds while driving 70 miles per hour. Instead, blog posts often offer up source material as a means to “check the facts” for one’s self. As such, it is believed that negativity experienced in natural settings by an information seeker during the election would be better received than that found in other media.

The audience of the blog is likely to be varied. Not only could there be casual readers who want to know more about the candidate, but there could also be invested supporters who actively read the frequently updated site. A benefit of blogs is that authors can quickly drill into a specific topic, and cite sources to support facts or assertions. This can either reinforce existing beliefs or introduce new ideas and possibly influence evaluation among readers.

Although audience reaction to posts was not examined here, some possibilities as to the strategy behind the content can be teased out based on the posts. It is evident by the amount of negativity that campaigns are not concerned with this duality of the audience. The same messages could be interpreted in different ways based on the reader. For the invested supporter, the negative messages might simply reinforce the existing viewpoint about the opponent and provide a set of talking points for interpersonal conversation about the election. For the blog reader new to the campaign, the negativity could have an impact similar to that of negative advertising where viewers rate the messages as informative (Surlin & Gordon, 1977) and even influential (Kellerman, 1984). It is much more likely that only those who are invested will continue to visit and actively read the blog, therefore one may assume it advantageous to provide that audience with fuel to spread the message.

The blog posts revealed the disparate situations of the two candidates. The differences echoed the findings of previous scholarship in many facets, from political party affiliation to position in the election. Kerry, as a challenger, had to introduce himself to the American public. He tried to do so on his blog by employing a more issue-orientated approach. Confirming the findings of others (Cho & Benoit, 2006; Trammell, 2004), this analysis showed that Kerry indeed focused more on issues over image. This is in keeping with existing research noting that the challenger has to assert himself and create a serious, “presidential” image. Additionally, Kerry attacked at a statistically significantly higher rate than Bush. The challenger had to convince the electorate that the status quo was not good enough and the country needed a change in leadership. Use of such an attack strategy, such as this is consistent with challengers in previous races.

Results indicated that the logical appeal dominated in regards to strategy in political statements. Such findings are in line with the popular sentiments regarding blogs, which position the tool as a unique medium where one can heavily

rely on source material, such as government reports or public records when making a persuasive agreement. Typically, this is done through hyperlinks to the source material, which allow the reader to further investigate the claims made in the blog or possibly accept them without digging further. This study provided evidence that rather than relying on personal testimonies wrought with emotion – which may be more effectively done on a television ad – blogs are useful tools in building logical arguments that may become difficult to refute.

#### 4.1. Limitations

This study is not without limitations. Because the study focused on a single function or construct of Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse, it is limited in that it only advances knowledge of *attacks* in campaign blog communication. Furthermore, this study only provided an exploratory analysis of how campaigns employed blogs for attacks or negative messaging. As more campaigns and races beneath the presidential level employ blogs it is likely that use of the tool will evolve and further limit these findings to what occurred in the 2004 presidential race.

#### 4.2. Future research

Future research on the functions of blogs in campaign communication should investigate the entirety of Functional Theory's constructs and seek to establish relationships between the various functions and topic categories. Now that attacks have been found to be such a pervasive part of blog campaign communication, scholars should undertake experimental studies gauging reactions to blog content and candidate evaluations as a result of exposure to attacks.

#### 4.3. Conclusion

While the majority of statements made in blog posts remain positive, the marked increase in negative messages from the primary (where the technology was first introduced) through the hot phase of the campaign showed a progression toward negative campaigning, as seen in other political public relations tools. Certainly, only future election cycles will show just how negative blog posts can get and it is difficult to make predictions with so little data. However, given that the characteristics of the medium support logical arguments, punctuated by source credibility often in the form of hyperlinks to background information, it is evident that even if negativity does not increase the skill can be honed for effectiveness.

### Acknowledgement

The author would like to express appreciation to Xiaowei Chen, John Tedesco, and Charlie Brown for their assistance on various aspects of this project.

### References

- Benoit, W. L., & Harthcock, A. (1999). Functions of the great debates: Acclaims, attacks, and defense in the 1960 presidential debates. *Communication Monographs*, 66, 341–357.
- Cho, S., & Benoit, W. (2005). Primary presidential election campaign messages in 2004: A functional analysis of candidates' news releases. *Public Relations Review*, 31, 175–183.
- Cho, S., & Benoit, W. (2006). 2004 Presidential campaign messages: A functional analysis of press releases from President Bush and Senator Kerry. *Public Relations Review*, 32(1), 47–52.
- Edelman & Intelliseek (2005). *Trust "MEedia": How real people are finally being heard, the 1.0 guide to the blogosphere for marketers and company stakeholders*. Available at: [http://www.edelman.com/image/insights/content/ISwp\\_TrustMEdia\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.edelman.com/image/insights/content/ISwp_TrustMEdia_FINAL.pdf).
- Froehlich, R., & Rüdiger, B. (2006). Framing political public relations: Measuring success of political communication strategies in Germany. *Public Relations Review*, 32, 18–23.
- Hallett, J. (2005). *Public Relations and the blogosphere: Part II*. Florida Public Relations Association white paper 5(3).
- Kelleher, T., & Miller, B. M. (2006). Organizational blogs and the human voice: Relational strategies and relational outcomes. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2) (article 1) <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue2/kelleher.html>.
- Kellerman, K. (1984). The negativity effect and its implications for initial interaction. *Communication Monographs*, 51, 37–55.
- Merritt, S. (1984). Negative political advertising: Some empirical findings. *Journal of Advertising*, 13(3), 27–38.
- Surlin, S. H., & Gordon, T. F. (1977). How values affect attitudes toward direct reference political advertising. *Journalism Quarterly*, 54, 89–98.

- Trammell, K. D. (2004, November). Year of the blog: Webstyle analysis of the 2004 presidential candidate blog posts and reader comments. In *Paper presented in the Political Communication Division, National Communication Association Annual Conference* (pp. 89–98).
- Trammell, K. D., Williams, A. P., Postelnicu, M., & Landreville, K. D. (2006). Evolution of online campaigning: Increasing interactivity in candidate Web sites and blogs through text and technical features. *Mass Communication and Society*, 9(1), 21–44.
- Williams, A. P., Trammell, K. D., Postelnicu, M., Landreville, K. D., & Martin, J. D. (2005). Blogging and hyperlinking: Use of the Web to enhance viability during 2004 U.S. campaigns. *Journalism Studies*, 6(2), 177–186.