

University of KwaZulu-Natal

*Blogging*: Investigating the role played by blogs in contemporary South African Journalism and the Public Sphere.

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## Declaration

I, Michelle Ishioma Atagana, hereby declare that the contents of this thesis, unless specifically indicated to the contrary, are my own work, and that the thesis has not been submitted simultaneously or, at any other time, for another degree.

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South African Journalism and the Public Sphere.***

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Masters of Art in  
the School of Literary, Media Studies and Creative Arts, in the University of  
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**Unless otherwise specified in the text, this dissertation is the author's own  
original work.**

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I dedicate this thesis to my mother who passed away before the final corrections were completed.

## **Abstract**

This thesis seeks to investigate the role that blogs play in contemporary South African journalism through examining six blogs in the South African blogosphere and their content choices. This thesis draws on four key theoretical frameworks around which the research questions have been formulated: New Media and Journalism, Journalistic Blogging, Audiences and the Public Sphere. There are three key research questions:

1. What is the role played by blogging in contemporary South African journalism?
2. To what extent has the blogosphere become a Public Sphere?
3. How have blogs influenced/changed/impacted on the style and content of South African journalism?

The qualitative data collected through blog observation, interviews with blog owner/editors and concluded focus group discussions with blog readers, is designed to help reveal the role blogs and bloggers play in contemporary South African journalism, and through discussions with the audience and monitoring conversations online, help explore the possibilities of a public sphere.

The conclusion of this thesis is that blogs do play a role in contemporary South African journalism and can serve as an effective public sphere. Defining what it means to be a journalist and recognising the differences between blogger and journalist is an issue that needs to be effectively understood before a conclusive agreement is to be reached in the blogger/journalist debate. However, for now the relationship between South African news agents and South African bloggers is promising.

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## Glossary

**Atom** – The name Atom applies to a pair of related standards. The *Atom Syndication Format* is an XML language used for web feeds, while the *Atom Publishing Protocol* (*AtomPub* or *APP*) is a simple HTTP-based protocol for creating and updating web resources.

**Facebook** – is a free-access social networking website that is operated and privately owned by Facebook, Inc. Users can join networks organized by city, workplace, school, and region to connect and interact with other people. People can also add friends and send them messages, and update their personal profiles to notify friends about themselves.

**Google Reader** – is a Web-based aggregator, capable of reading Atom and RSS feeds online or offline. It was released by Google

**Micro-blogging** – is a form of multimedia blogging that allows users to send brief text updates or micromedia such as photos or audio clips and publish them, either to be viewed by anyone or by a restricted group which can be chosen by the user. These messages can be submitted by a variety of means, including text messaging, instant messaging, email, digital audio or the web.

**MySpace** – a social networking website with an interactive, user-submitted network of friends, personal profiles, blogs, groups, photos, music, and videos for teenagers and adults internationally.

**RSS** – RSS (abbreviation for Really Simple Syndication) is a family of Web feed formats used to publish frequently updated works—such as blog entries, news headlines, audio, and video—in a standardized format.

**Twitter** - is a social networking and micro-blogging service that enables its users to send and read other users' updates known as *tweets*. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 bytes in length. Updates are displayed on the user's profile page and delivered to other users who have signed up to receive them.

**Web 2.0** – The term "Web 2.0" refers to a perceived second generation of web development and design, that aims to facilitate communication, secure information sharing, interoperability, and collaboration on the World Wide Web. Web 2.0 concepts have led to the development and evolution of web-based communities, hosted services, and applications; such as social-networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, and folksonomies.

**Web 3.0** or **Semantic Web** – The Semantic Web is an evolving extension of the World Wide Web in which the semantics of information and services on the web is defined, making it possible for the web to understand and satisfy the requests of people and machines to use the web content.

**Wordpress** – Weblog software (also called blog software or blogware) is software designed to simplify the creation and maintenance of weblogs. As specialized content management systems, weblog applications support the authoring, editing, and publishing of blog posts and comments, with special functions for image management, web syndication, and moderation of posts and comments.

**Zoopy** – an online and mobile social media community, hosting user generated videos, photos, audio and notes. It launched into closed beta in late 2006 and moved into live beta with public access on 5 March 2007.

# Chapter One – Introduction

## 1.1 Rationale behind this study

As a media student, I find the ever-changing world of the media fascinating. During my second year at university I was introduced to the concept of web design, which further fuelled my interest in the many absorbing spectra of the Internet and World Wide Web alike. During this time I was also introduced to the concept of blogging and the various ways it had replaced traditional websites. In my third year I was named editor-in-chief of *Nux*, the University of KwaZulu-Natal Campus Chronicles, a role that required me to find new ways to engage students' attention toward the news and the newspaper alike. I found my answer later that year at the 2005 Captivate student conference at Rhodes University in Grahamstown where a blog was created for all student media practitioners. The *Nux* blog, unlike the newspaper's website, gave students an opportunity to be a part of what we do at the newspaper; it gave them an inside look. We were able to upload the editorials and stories, which didn't make it into the paper; students could comment on what they liked and what they thought had no place in the paper. This gave us the opportunity to find out what was best for the students. As the editor, it made my job easier and more enjoyable.

In 2006 I began a blog of my own and began reading blogs consistently. The process of blogging provided a creative outlet for me, not only as a writer, but also as a student dealing with the day to day problems of university life. I also discovered that the more popular blogs, in the selection that I read, were not those that only spewed personal matters or ranted about the mind-numbing state of their professional lives. These were blogs that looked critically at the state of the world, news or any aspect of interest, and provided a well-structured criticism or discussion

around the topic. This discovery was based on the number of people discussing issues raised and the amount of visits registered of their various hit counters. I began to subscribe to these blogs through Google Reader, a web-based program that allowed me to collect blog entries and catalogue them by author through various categories. I also found myself on many occasions engaging in various discussions which sparked my interest. After about six months it became apparent that these blogs, though not replacing newspapers or journalists, were providing their audiences with a steady and ready platform of debate. Audiences discussed topics and exchanged ideas on topics, and in some ways and cases re-wrote the post (article) that was being discussed. This kind of conversational approach toward news is something that traditional news media is unable to provide. Though many news corporations today have incorporated blogs into their websites to encourage debate, the idea was not theirs, but that of the citizens, and there is always the issue of the 'gate' provided by editorial staff such as active selection of which comments go through, based on editorial policies and guidelines provided in their terms of use – a good example is *Thought Leader*, which is discussed in-depth later in the thesis.

In a country like South Africa, particularly because of its current political climate and the newness of its democracy, a phenomenon such as news discussion is an interesting area of study. I began observing news blogs and other blogs in the South African blogosphere. The responses from my first discussions with blog owners and readers encouraged me and proved that the South African blogosphere was worth studying. So I constructed a more in-depth research design. The blogosphere in general has encouraged passionate debate amongst journalists, media

commentators and academics in the last few years, and I believe South African bloggers are helping shape the changing South African journalistic landscape.

## **1.2 Overview on blogs and the blogosphere**

“In the last decade, the development of the Internet has enabled journalists both to distribute news and to find information and news stories in other ways” (Windell and Grasfstorm, 2007).

“Everyday there are 120 000 new blog sites registered – a staggering 43 million a year. According to a blog search engine, Technorati, there are [over] 70 million blogs in existence” (Bullard, 2007).

“The blog represents freedom to writers, and it has recently become the new frontier of journalism and journalistic writing” (Quinn *et al*, 2005:75).

“New Journalistic organisations like Slate and the Drudge Report have emerged, as has a growing community of ‘bloggers’ – individuals who maintain their own news sites with material of variable quality, from the diary entries of enthusiastic hobbyists to the professionally managed sites of columnists like Andrew Sullivan” (McNair in de Burgh, 2005).

Journalists have found new media technologies extremely useful, as explained by Windell and Grasfstorm in the above quote. One of the ways in which the Internet has enabled journalists to present news and search for news stories is through the use of Weblogs (blogs). Duncan Riley, an Australian blogger, argues that: “Blogging has changed the world. Information is no longer controlled by a select

few, and can be disseminated with ease to anybody with access. The Internet is the conduit, but blogging is the great enabler, allowing anyone to write and be heard” (Riley, 2008).

A weblog, more commonly referred to as a blog, is an online journal that consists of links and entries, with the latest entry at the very top of the page. One of the key elements of a blog are these entries, which are made by its author or authors. Dan Gillmor, in *We The Media*, refers to blogs as the missing link in communication. He explains the interconnected nature of blogs as: “Weblogs typically link to other web sites and blog postings, and many allow readers to comment on the original post, thereby allowing audience discussions” (Gillmor, 2004: 29). Most blogs are very audience-centred as the authors are writing for their specific audiences, and most thrive on the idea of debate so the more the audience comments on issues they’ve raised, the better for the author and the blog. This nature of “audience-centricity” is what makes blogs an interesting area for journalism. Ethicist Jay Rosen in Gillmor (2004) refers to blogs as an “extremely democratic form of journalism”. Blogs are written by people, for people; it is the epitome of the democratic way and Gillmor states: “What the best individual blogs tend to have in common is voice – they are clearly written by human beings with genuine human passion” (Gillmor, 2004: 29).

However, not every blog is readable or worth the attention of the general public. Blogs have for a long time served the needs of life chroniclers (people who enjoyed recounting their lives to others). However, a new kind of blog/blogger has grown in the last few years as Palser describes:

“The simple, linear structure of Weblogs has long served the needs of software developers and teenage diarists alike. Now blogging is confronting journalism, with the rise of current-events blogs that deconstruct news coverage, spew opinion and even scoop the big media from time to time. The best news bloggers are articulate, independent thinkers. In some ways, they are the antithesis of traditional journalists: unedited, unabashedly opinionated, sporadic and personal” (Palser, 2002).

This thesis argues that the blogosphere has a lot to offer the world of journalism and the average reader alike, an issue the Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell explore in their paper *A Web of Influence*:

“Blogs are becoming more influential because they affect the content of international media coverage. Journalism professor Todd Gitlin once noted that media frame reality through "principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters." Increasingly, journalists and pundits take their cues about "what matters" in the world from weblogs. For salient topics in global affairs, the blogosphere functions as a rare combination of distributed expertise, real-time collective response to breaking news, and public-opinion barometer. What's more, a hierarchical structure has taken shape within the primordial chaos of cyberspace. A few elite blogs have emerged as aggregators of information and analysis, enabling media commentators to extract meaningful analysis and rely on blogs to help them interpret and predict political developments” (Drezner and Farrell, 2004:34).

The blogosphere is constantly changing and growing. There are more than 70 million active blogs in existence, according to *The Blog Herald*, as people clearly see the need for blogs, and some have identified appropriate uses for such a platform. The blogs do not just facilitate or encourage news presentation and reception; they provide a platform for social activism, which in turn encourages social change. In today's society where human rights violations have become the norm and consequently have been rendered too mundane to attract long-standing attention from mainstream media, the blogosphere provides an alternative. Blogs also provide political outlets, as Drezner and Farrell argue:

“Blogs are beginning to emerge in countries where there are few other outlets for political expression. But can blogs affect politics in regimes where there is no thriving independent media sector? Under certain circumstances, they can. For starters, blogs can become an alternative source of news and commentary in countries where traditional media are under the thumb of the state. Blogs are more difficult to control than television or newspapers, especially under regimes that are tolerant of some degree of free expression” (Drezner and Farrell, 2004: 38).

### **1.3 The South African blogosphere**

In a recent post on ITWEB ([www.itweb.com](http://www.itweb.com)) discussing the possible growth of online advertising to R23 million by the end of 2008, the growth within the South African online landscape was put forward with figures of connected members of the population:

“Some 10% of South Africa's population is connected to the Internet”, according to leading ICT analyst Lindsey McDonald. “We're looking at some 4.8 million connected



people, which includes business and university”, says McDonald. World Wide Worx estimates that this figure is slightly lower. "At the end of 2007, 3, 95-million South Africans had access to the Internet, expected to grow by around 10% in 2008. Of these, around 4% are accessing the Internet only on their mobile phones.”

According to Arthur Goldstuck’s blogging statistics in the first half of 2008 on Zoopy, 26 179 blogs are registered to South Africa, and this does not include South Africans blogging from overseas. Goldstuck further produces statistics of 48 120 monthly blog posts as of January 2008, compared to 39 938 in August 2007. The page views as of January 2008 stands at 10.448m and the number of unique users in January 2008 stand at 1.791m. The growth in the blogosphere in the last year proves that the blogosphere is becoming a viable media format in South Africa in its own right.

This research examines six South African blogs as its case study. These blogs were chosen because they represent significant components of the aspects of the South African blogosphere, which interest me and could meaningfully contribute to my research. The research examines two strands of blogs: blogs that comment and critique the news and the current political climate in South Africa, and personal blogs that lend themselves as a platform for critical discussion and debate. The first strand of blogs examined includes *Wibble* edited by Laurian Clemence (Account Strategist for *Google*, South Africa), *South Africa Rocks* edited by Nic Haralambous (General Manager of *Zoopy* - Gauteng) and *Thought Leader*, a blogging platform owned by the *Mail & Guardian Online*. The second strand of blogs include: Matthew Buckland’s *matthewbuckland.com*, Vincent Maher’s *Media in Transition* and Mike Stopforth’s *mikestopfoth.com*.

### 1.3.1 Sample Background

**Wibble** - Wibble is a multi-user blogging platform, which anybody can use. Its purpose is not rudimentary, however: it is more for those who have a basic level of understanding and expertise in their fields or industries and can provide interesting commentary on particular subjects. It aims to attract thought leaders to become involved in debates concerning South African issues, but also international topics.

**SA Rocks** - *SA Rocks* was formed as a response to the negativity facing the country over the past couple of years. It is particularly retaliation against the blog *SA Sucks*, which is written by a South African in the Diaspora. People are invited from all over the globe to contribute their experiences of South Africa. The site also chronicles specific areas of South African living, such as wine and food, and tourist destinations. *SA Rocks* is a news website run by a citizen and written by citizens dedicated to providing optimistic news.

**Thought Leader** – *Thought Leader* was created in 2007 by the *Mail & Guardian Online* team. The purpose of the platform was to provide thought-provoking opinion from *Mail & Guardian* journalists and columnists as well as other writers, commentators, intellectuals and opinion makers across various industries and the entire political spectrum. The creators specify that “*Thought Leader* is not only a platform for some of the country’s established writers and personalities but is home to some of the country’s up-and-coming writers” ([www.thoughtleader.co.za](http://www.thoughtleader.co.za)). *Thought Leader* provides one of the first offerings of

its kind in that it provides readers with the opportunity to comment on and discuss issues raised by contributors.

**Matthew Buckland** – Matthew Buckland is a web entrepreneur. He is the General Manager of Publishing & Social Media at 24.com. His blog serves as a window into his world and his professional life. Readers are privy to developments in his work environment. He mostly comments on developments within the technological world of the media and the ways in which it affects South Africa and its place in the global village. The blog also presents a deeply personal side as Buckland invites the readers to share his proudest and sometimes intimate moments such as his family triumphs.

**Vincent Maher** – Vincent Maher is the portfolio manager for social media at Vodacom, one of South Africa's largest mobile telecommunications companies. As a former academic and online strategist at *Mail & Guardian Online*, Maher's blog is somewhat media-centric. Like Buckland, Maher comments on technological advancements in the media industry; his commentary quite often critically analyses the possibilities of these technologies. A constant fixture on this blog is Maher's lack of confidence in the concept of citizen journalism. Every so often readers are invited into Maher's personal world and his opinions on things other than the media such as his family and his Xbox.

**Mike Stopforth** – Mike Stopforth is an entrepreneur, heading up *Cerebra*, a social media company. Stopforth's blog is one of only a few blogs that are interested in media marketing through Web 2.0. The blog looks at issues in

media marketing as well interacting with fellow new media thinkers with the concept of the “27diners”, which is a social networking movement for the “geeks” of South Africa. The blog chronicles the day to day activities of Stopforth as he engages various new media tools and marketing strategies. And like Buckland and Maher, readers are often privy to personal victories as well losses of the author.

#### **1.4 The purposes of this research**

The aim of this research project is to examine the way in which emergent new media technologies are impacting on journalism through an examination of journalistic blogging (blogging with an informative purpose). The research endeavours to unravel the blogging phenomenon, in terms of its influences on the world of journalism and the reception of news media. The world of journalism is in transition due to the advent of new media technologies and accessibility. In conducting this research I hope to be able to understand better the contribution blogging and bloggers alike can make, are making and have made in mainstream journalism.

This research draws on four conceptual areas of study, in which the research questions have been formulated. The theoretical frameworks are as follows: New Media and Journalism, Journalistic Blogging, Audiences and the Public Sphere. There are three key research questions in terms of which the purpose of this research may be explored:

1. What is the role played by blogging in contemporary South African journalism?

2. To what extent has the blogosphere become a Public Sphere?
3. How have blogs influenced/changed/impacted the style and content of South African journalism?

This research consists of an examination of interactivity. Blogging by nature is a very interactive medium, something that Wall comments on in her paper *Blogs of War*: “Audiences and producers blur both in creating the blogs and in bringing them to life through an interactive performance between blogger and audience”, (Wall, 2005: 166). For any blog to be successful, three key players are required: the owner of the blog, the blog itself and the reader of the blog, and each component is equally important. This construction of dialogue between audience and creator, text and reader, allows for the success of the blog. Interactivity allows the audience to be part of the process of production as identified in blogs by Robinson: “Bloggers routinely use readers as both sources and as co-authors” (Robinson, 2006: 75). This research explores how this kind of interactivity has helped with the notion of citizen journalism.

Furthermore, this research examines the extent to which the new media, and blogging in particular, could be said to be contributing to the development of an online public sphere. “The Internet’s capacity for interactivity has resulted in greater expectations for public political deliberation and citizen participation in the public sphere, through political campaigning and beyond” (Janack, 2006). Blogging has created a way for the audience to take part in public debate. The blogs, which I use as my case study, allow readers the opportunity to comment on posts (stories) and discussions have developed based on the issues that are

pointed out in the stories. Consequently, I examine blogs as a new public space and a realm for public interaction and public debate.

I would argue that this research will contribute both to the academic and media landscapes in South Africa. The South African blogosphere is an under-researched field, and this research will augment the little literature that exists on the subject. This subject is not only important because of the changes it presents to the media world, but new media technologies such as this provide us with a new way of seeing. For news media it presents effective ways for audience research, which allows them the opportunity of giving the audience what they want. And as mentioned above it provides a ready platform for debate.

## **1.5 Thesis Breakdown**

**Introduction (Chapter one)** – the introductory chapter serves as a guide to the thesis; it provides an understanding of the subject matter as well the rationale behind it. It provides basic background information on the research sample as well as a clear definition of the research questions.

**Literature Review (Chapter two)** – this chapter provides the conceptual context within which the research is designed. Four theoretical perspectives are discussed in this thesis – those of the New Media and Journalism, Journalistic Blogging, Audiences and the Public Sphere. These perspectives create the backdrop on which the critical discussions and conclusions are based.

**Research Methodology (Chapter three)** – this chapter discusses the tools that are used to analyse the data, which materialized from the research. The chapter discusses various methods used in conducting the research and the ways in which various data was collected.

**Research Findings: data analysis and discussion (Chapter four)** – this chapter presents the findings which emerged from the research. It analyses and discusses the findings of this research against the theoretical backdrop provided in chapter 2.

**Conclusion (Chapter five)** – this chapter draws conclusions from the research findings based on the research questions provided in the introductory chapter.

## Chapter Two – Literature review

It is important to find relevant pieces of literature to guide my research through critical analysis, in order to enhance and strengthen the theoretical framework of this thesis. The all-encompassing question that this thesis aims to answer is, what are the roles played by blogs in contemporary South African journalism?

In order to understand the role blogging can or does play in journalism and the changing public sphere, I have drawn on literature concerning the following theoretical areas:

- New Media and Journalism – I have chosen this as my starting point to gain an in-depth understanding of the new media and its various modalities. Here I look at new media technologies and the way they have changed news presentation and reception. This further leads to the concepts of convergent journalism and multimedia journalism and the revolutionary stances they are claiming in contemporary journalism.
- The Public Sphere – here I explore the changes in thought regarding the public sphere. The possibilities that lie in the concept of a virtual public sphere and the sustainability of the blogosphere in taking on the role of such a space.
- Journalistic Blogging – here I explore the possible necessity for bloggers and the synergy that can/and possibly could exist between bloggers and journalists. Concepts of citizen journalism are briefly looked at in a “DIY” sense of journalism.
- Audiences – the move from the existing active audience to a more interactive audience is examined, as well as the idea of media citizenship.

My data analysis will be simplified through the thorough examination of these key theoretical perspectives.



## **2.1 New Media and Journalism**

Pavlik (2001) argues that digital information technologies and the convergence that they facilitate are fundamentally changing the world of journalism: “There is emerging a new form of journalism whose distinguishing qualities include ubiquitous news, global information access, instantaneous reporting, interactivity, multimedia content, and extreme content customisation” (Pavlik, 2001:31). My research examines the way in which technologies of the new media, as mentioned by Pavlik, are changing journalism. One of the ways Pavlik looks at technological influence in journalism is by examining journalists and the way in which they do their jobs. Pavlik explores changes in the newsgathering process due to technological advances:

“With the development of the Internet the problem can be even worse, with journalists sometimes even conducting interviews via e-mail. Conversely, the Internet can also help to improve the quality of news-gathering, especially when on deadline or in after-hours situations. With increasing amounts of public records and corporate information published in complete form online (e.g. the Federal Elections Commission now publishes on its web site, [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov), in real time the data it collects on campaign contributions, making it both a highly reliable and timely source for journalists covering political campaigns), reporters can now effectively use online tools to gather news and information, check facts and even find sources off the Web, from list-serves and chat rooms... Digital technology is also transforming the nature of storytelling and the presentation of news online. The once basic inverted pyramid news-writing style is becoming obsolete in the online news world. It is being supplanted increasingly by immersive and interactive multimedia news

reports that can give readers/viewers a feeling of presence at news events like never before” (Pavlik, 2000:230-232).

Writing about the USA, McNair states that “In what some have termed the blogging ‘revolution’, thousands of journalistically inclined web logs jostle for attention in the networked, digitised media environment of the twenty-first century” (McNair in de Burg, 2005:25). However, the life expectancy of the average blog lies in uncertain terrain, something Andrews refers to as a fad that could likely fade away:

“On the flip side, most of the million or so bloggers (it’s a tough crowd to estimate) would not call themselves journalists. Many are teenagers, working through their own identities and connecting with other like-minded kids. The majority of blogs are simply personal Web sites, posted because blogging software automates much of the HTML coding needed for Web publication. This convenience appeal has led some to predict that the medium will fade once the even greater convenience of real-time, word processor-like editing of any Web site becomes the norm” (Andrews, 2003:63).

According to Quinn (2005), journalists are interested in three kinds of blogs: the ones that report the news, the ones that critique the news, and special interest ones that could very well talk about the life span of the writer’s rose-bush. De Wolk emphasises the written word on the web: “Despite its multimedia video streaming, real-time audio and animated GIFs, the reality is that the principle medium online remains the written word” (De Wolk, 2001:90). Though the web allows for fancy gadgetry, it is without a doubt that blogging requires some form of writing ability. Though some might disagree, arguing that a fair amount of bloggers are teens chronicling their daily experience for their friends’ amusement, it is important to note

that if a blog is not coherently written very few people will read it. The written word is still important and the ability to construct a sentence helps the writer to gain readers.

### **2.1.1 New Media Technologies**

At the turn of the century, improvements in Internet access created a more cost effective climate for most of the population with some of the most basic mobile technologies. The introduction of wireless Internet has made the browsing experience a speedier and more efficient one, and Quinn emphasises how this improvement has aided journalistic ventures: “Broadband boosts convergence because people can quickly download bandwidth-greedy content such as multimedia” (Quinn et al, 2005:9).

Before delving into a technical discussion about the intricacies of the Internet and the kind of communication it has given rise to for the last five decades, it is important to understand what it consists of. Holmes (2005) gives a very simple explanation:

“Today the Internet has consolidated into a ‘network of networks’. Mostly originating from USA, the major networks which have added themselves to the Internet include ARPANET (government-funded), Fidonet (alternative cooperative), Usenet, the WELL, and thousands of corporate and government intranets, and the World Wide Web” (Holmes, 2005:47).

Digital technology has changed the way in which we conduct our daily lives and our professional lives. Pavlik explicates the reach of these digitised influences:

“In today’s digital, online world, content is once again undergoing a profound transformation, largely enabled, if not driven, by technological change. No one

can dispute the increased speed of news flow. Stories break at the speed of light, circling the globe instantly via the Internet. Reports [are] online. Financial news sites, such as [www.thestreet.com](http://www.thestreet.com), can influence market performance in seconds, as day traders react to the instant reporting of company performance reports, pronouncements from Federal Chairman Alan Greenspan or even rumors on Internet chat-rooms and bulletin boards” (Pavlik, 2001:231-232).

The technology is not just changing the way in which we conduct ourselves but the very essence of our being, for as the technology rebuilds itself, it causes a rebuilding of society itself. Gingras argues that: “It can be said without hyperbole that the Internet is causing no less than a complete rebuilding of our civilization’s central nervous system. As the rewiring proceeds, new media forms and new businesses will continue” (Gingras in De Wolk, 2001:139).

### **2.1.2 Convergent Journalism**

There is a great deal of discussion in the media industry about the need for convergence and what this means. Defining convergence is a case of being in the “eye of the beholder”; there is no set definition for the term “convergent journalism”. The simplest definition is the coming together of media technologies, or as Quinn explains, “convergence is a revolutionary and evolutionary term [for a] form of journalism that is emerging in parts of the world” (Quinn et al, 2005:3). Convergent journalism deals with multiple media platforms and multiple products being produced for each of those platforms.

There are several forms of convergent journalism, which Quinn identifies. For the purposes of this research I shall be dealing with three of them. The first is structural convergence, which emphasises changes in the newsgathering and distribution process. Quinn uses the example of newspapers hiring multimedia media producers and editors to repackage print stories for television while a separate Web team produces original content for the web. This type of convergence is becoming more and more prominent in the South African media sphere; the *Sunday Times* in early 2007 hired a team of multimedia producers to create television-like content for web users. The second type of convergence is information-gathering convergence, which deals with media companies requiring multi-skilled reporters. Quinn expresses the controversy inherent in this type of convergence as debates have arisen about whether or not one person can produce good quality multimedia stories. With enhancements in digital technology, Quinn explains that this is becoming a reality. One person can produce good quality multimedia stories by simply understanding the technology and being able to use it. The third type of convergence is storytelling or presentation convergence. Quinn places this strand of convergence in the hands of a working journalist and his/her ability to adapt. Gordon in makes a prediction of how this convergence will change the storytelling process:

“...New forms of storytelling will arise from a combination of computers and portable newsgathering devices, and the interactive potential of the Web and television, as journalists learn to appreciate each medium’s unique capabilities” (Gordon in Quinn et al, 2005:6).

Convergent journalism is lagging behind in terms of the audience; they are aware of the technology and have been immersed in it. It is now up to convergent journalism

to meet them. The audience is not restricted to one medium; they have become fragmented in their consumption of media texts. People do not just read the newspaper or accept it as their sole source of information for the day; more and more people are reading online newspapers, and signing up for mailing lists for their favourite sites and news or entertainment blogs. The *Mail & Guardian Online* in recent years is increasingly developing more ways to deliver the news to their readers. They have repackaged their website to enable their readers to access the site from their mobile phones and other mobile devices that can access the Internet. Newspapers across the world are realising the necessity of convergent journalism and its reach potential. Howard Tyner expresses why convergence is imperative:

The newspaper is and will be for a long time the engine to gather and edit news. But it won't be enough to just deliver that information to newspaper readers. We [also] need for our news and information to go to the eyeballs of Web consumers and TV viewers and cable customers and even radio listeners, although they are not using their eyes" (Tyner in Quinn et al, 2005:8).

Convergence allows for the delivery of news to audiences at the audiences' convenience, not the newspaper's or the television network's. It allows for the provision of news in the form audiences want. By providing this kind of service news corporations are finding that more attentive audiences are emerging. What this means is that audiences are taking more interest in the news through responding to content and are even helping to generate some of the content by posting their stories on news sites.

### 2.1.2.1 Online/Multimedia Journalism

An online portal of communication is becoming increasingly necessary for many print publications, and South Africa is effectively taking its place in the field of online journalism. The *Mail & Guardian Online* is one of the most widely read online newspapers in South Africa and it is recognised internationally as well. The newly launched *Sunday Times* multimedia portal, through its newly formed daily production paper *The Times*, is becoming a fast favourite amongst browsers and newsreaders all over the country, according to the web statistics tracker *Afrigator*. Multimedia content is crucial to the rapidly developing world of journalism. The convergence of broadcast and print online has given rise to new ways of reporting, and also to the reception of news.

A multimedia story is unlike the average story; its components include elements from other media forms. Quinn explores how multimedia journalism differs from normal journalism:

“Multimedia journalism represents a different form of storytelling and a different narrative structure. It also is available, when archived online, for rediscovery and redistribution. Because of its non-linear format, it welcomes interactivity and two-way communication. Audiences can play with it, play it over and over again, and add their feedback and comments. Best of all, it responds to many more of the senses. We can hear, we can see, and because of the emotional impact of good video, we can feel” (Quinn et al, 2005:149).

Multimedia is first and foremost visual, and the content of a multimedia story needs to be carefully planned in order to tell the best visual story. A good multimedia story works through a combination of video, stills, music, text and sound bites. There is a semantic shift in news delivery, which De Wolk (2001) argues that it is not simply a story for readers, listeners or viewers; it is a story for all three. As a result of the unique nature of multimedia, a new type of audience has emerged: an audience called the End User. A multimedia media story involves three basic levels of packaging, which De Wolk explains:

“A first level, which provides a brief summary that’s more than a headline but quickly lets the audience decide whether it wants more of the story; a second level, which opens up the story significantly from the simple headline version; a third level, which allows the audience to go deep into the story and makes a great deal of in-depth information available if the audience chooses to pursue it” (De Wolk, 2001:15).

## **2.2 The Public Sphere: The new public place**

A prominent aspect of the discussion of new media and journalism is the question of whether the new media are facilitating the emergence of a new public sphere. Jurgen Habermas' concept of the Public Sphere is of a space in or “a realm of our social life in which public opinion can be formed and access is granted to all citizens” (Habermas in Durham and Kellner, 2001). Habermas' notion of the public sphere is particularly important in understanding the role of the media in modern liberal democratic societies. As the media were increasingly subjected to the demands of capitalist society, Habermas argues that they began to relinquish their role as facilitator of the public sphere. The new media, however, have changed this



scenario. Poster argues that a new public sphere is on the rise: “the age of the public sphere as face to face talk is clearly over; the question of democracy must henceforth take into account new forms of electronically mediated discourse” (Poster in Lister *et al*, 2003: 220). The Internet, quite logically, seems like the best place for social interaction and debates of importance to take place. “The Internet and related technologies have created a new public space for politically oriented conversation; whether this public space transcends to a public sphere is not up to the technology itself” (Papacharissi, 2002:12). The possibility of the Internet as the new "Public Place" comes in the form of Weblogs (Blogs) and news forums, where a citizen can post a topic of their choosing and allow other citizens to respond with their own opinion. As Fraser argues, “public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion; in addition, they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities” (Fraser in Calhoun, 1997:125). In a country such as South Africa with a growing Internet public, social identities are often constructed and reconstructed online.

Lister argues that “as a ‘public’ communicative space the Internet does indeed appear to offer highly specific and limited engagements – whatever your politics, whatever your fetish, a corresponding website and a ‘sense of community’ can be found online. The Internet as postmodern communication space has almost become a ‘given’ of cyberculture studies” (Lister *et al*, 2003:178). The growing South African blogosphere continually demonstrates a sense of community; an example would be the blogosphere’s response to former *Sunday Times* columnist Bullard’s controversial piece on bloggers as ‘wannabe journalists’ (Bullard, 2007). “In the Internet age, everyone with access to a computer, modem, and Internet service can

participate in discussion and debate, empowering large numbers of individuals and groups kept out of the democratic dialogue during the Big Media Age” (Kellner, 1998:6). Politically-inclined blogs give South African people the opportunity to be part of the democratic debate.

McKee believes that the Internet “has changed the nature of the public sphere in western democracies. It’s revitalized traditional grass-roots political involvement” (McKee, 2005:172). In the 2003-2004 elections in the United States, Howard Dean used a blog as part of the campaign, much to his detriment. However, 2006 was dubbed the “Year of the Blog” in Canadian Politics, and 2007 saw Nicolas Sarkozy win the French elections, with his blog being the most popular amongst those of the candidates. The South African audience is entering an era of democratic debate; a time in which, due to the developing political climate it is important for everyone to take a stand and let their voice be heard. Blogs such as Dear President ([www.dearpresident.com](http://www.dearpresident.com)) and [www.sarocks.co.za](http://www.sarocks.co.za) invite the South African audience to have their say about South Africa and write a letter to the president about their various concerns. Khan and Kellner (2003) tend to see the Internet as a contested terrain used by various dominant groups to push their own agenda. Peter Dahlgren explores the possibilities of undercutting shared public culture:

“If the Internet facilitates an impressive communicative heterogeneity, the negative side of this development is of course fragmentation, with public spheres veering toward disparate islands of political communication, as Galston (2003) had argued. Here opens up yet another important research theme, one that must encompass an overarching systemic perspective. That various groups may feel they must first coalesce internally before they venture

out into the larger public sphere is understandable; however, cyber ghettos threaten to undercut a shared public culture and the integrative societal function of the public sphere, and they may well even help foster intolerance where such communities have little contact with or understanding of one another” (Dahlgren, 2005).

In a society like South Africa where access is only granted to a privileged few, it is quite impossible to say how successful this public space can be.

### **2.2.1 The Counter-public sphere**

Habermas’ original concept of the bourgeois public sphere has come under a considerable amount of criticism in the last few decades. Recent scholars such as Rodger Payne (2006) find his perception of political rhetoric to be quite inconsistent with and not reflective of reality in terms of communicative practices. The result of this has turned the attention of theorists to the idea of a counter-public sphere; a sphere of thought that could possibly exist alongside and within the dominant public sphere. This argument, therefore, suggests a multiplicity of public spheres, some reflecting dominant political discourses and others reflecting active opposition. “If deliberation is constrained by structural conditions, the solution is typically to make those structures more democratic – accessible to otherwise excluded participants and wide open to public scrutiny” (Payne and Samhat 2004).

The counter-public sphere premise suggests that there is an opportunity for change in normative notion through challenges to the design of the dominant public sphere. Within the comments on *Thought Leader*, dominant ideologies with regards to politics and societal norms are often criticized with great scrutiny; *SA Rocks* also

leans toward this counter-public sphere notion through a more positive outlook. Discussions on *Thought Leader* often place major government supporters on the losing end. In a recent (2nd September 2008) *Thought Leader* post, Sentletse Diakanyo critically analyses the recent alignments of black owned-business with African National Congress (ANC) president Jacob Zuma. His analysis deals with the growing number of black businesses that have come out of the woodwork since Zuma's rise to power. He also discusses the implication of the Mbeki administration business supporters moving to the Zuma camp:

”The Times reported that Busa representatives held a meeting with President Mbeki on Friday, August 29 2008, and part of the discussion revolved around the Zuma issue. The Times reports that Brian Molefe rightfully insisted that any resolution would have to be within the law. It would not be far-fetched that the ANCYL, the Young Communist League, Cosatu, SACP and the ANC would see this meeting as organized business conniving with the President against Zuma. After all, Zuma’s supporters have been talking about a conspiracy that they had never been able to prove. This recent development presents them with ammunition to launch an offensive against the office of the President; in a ridiculous attempt to further intimidate the judiciary and the NPA into submission. ([www.thoughtleader.co.za/sentletsediakanyo](http://www.thoughtleader.co.za/sentletsediakanyo)).

The piece generated a fair amount of discussion on *Thought Leader*, with readers questioning whether or not the author's personal biases contributed to his analysis, and others agreed with what the author had said; they made references to newspaper articles to support the discussion. The South African political climate sits on two sides post Polokwane; people who support Jacob Zuma, and people who do not. *Thought Leader* has much discussion about the political future of South Africa,

underdog opinions have been heard, and support has been generated for those who seem to have none. However, the discussions on *Thought Leader* are still based on dominant ideologies and dominant political figures, whether it is to support or criticize them; dominant ideologies are still the focal point of debate. These ideologies include issues of democracy seen in the interest of the ruling party and political affiliations.

The public sphere is a contested terrain of information and discussion, with the available new media technologies many counterpublics are erupting within the public sphere. Payne notes, "Once counterpublics gain access to the public sphere, they compete with opponents to score socially sustainable points. The situation in Iraq has worsened partly because that is how the evidence has been presented and considered in the American political context. Anti-war opponents have sought withdrawal from Iraq since the war began; yet, immediate withdrawal from Iraq is not overwhelming embraced by the American people and is probably not a socially sustainable argument at the moment" (Payne, 2006:26). Discussions within specific counterpublics seek to gain support and recognition within certain social parameter as social sustainability is crucial to their survival.

### **2.2.2 The Virtual Public Sphere – the blogosphere**

Much discussion has developed amongst many academics about the powers held by the Internet as a new public sphere and public meeting place. Harrison (2005) explains the notional concept of the public sphere:

"The public sphere is a notional space, existing between civil society and the state. It is a social setting, frequently non-institutional, where individuals

obtain information or education and undertake discussion and deliberation about contemporary events in all their diversity. It can exist formally (a town hall meeting open to the public) or in an informal setting (an internet chat site [or the blogosphere]” (Harrison, 2005:108).

Technological advances mentioned earlier in this chapter seem to show the great reach potential of the Internet. Web related applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Second-life and blogs have proved that online meeting places can and do exist. Academic institutions around the world are incorporating these technologies into their lecturing styles and graduate students use these technologies as research tools in ethnographic research. For the purposes of this research, these technologies, blogs in particular, have been assessed with relation to journalists and audiences alike in terms of news production and news reception.

The South African blogosphere is constantly growing and it has grown into a community. McKee works with a definition of the public sphere:

“...as a metaphorical term used to describe the virtual space where people can interact. It’s where each of us finds out what’s happening in our community, and what social, cultural and political issues are facing us. It’s where we engage with these issues and add our voices to discussions about them, playing our part in the process of society reaching a consensus or compromise about what we think about issues, and what should be done” (McKee, 2005:5).

The all-encompassing nature of the blogosphere is underestimated, a fact politicians around the world are starting to rectify. The influential reach of blogs is manifold.

Writing about the United States political climate, Drezner and Farrell explore the magnitude of this reach: “[the] top five [American] political blogs together attract over half a million visitors per day. Jimmy Orr, the White House Internet director, recently characterized the “blogosphere” (the all-encompassing term to describe the universe of weblogs) as instrumental, important, and underestimated in its influence” (Drezner and Farrell 2004:32). Commentary on blogs is watched as closely as newspaper headlines. Entertainment channels no longer want phone calls during shows; comment on their blog is preferred according to *Sky News*. The conversations online are what politicians and celebrities are looking to follow, as the audience is speaking directly, not through a news report. The South African audience is learning quickly to follow these developing trends. South African bloggers are constantly banding together or debating a point. A good example would be the David Bullard column on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May, entitled *Name and Shame Offensive Bloggers*, mentioned above. Platforms such as *South Africa Rocks* ([www.sarocks.co.za](http://www.sarocks.co.za)) and the *Mail & Guardian Online’s Thought Leader* ([www.thoughtleader.co.za](http://www.thoughtleader.co.za)) have presented a public arena for discussion and debate and potentially a sustainable realm of public interaction.

As mentioned above, blogs and social networking tools such *Facebook*, *Myspace* and *Twitter* are getting the attention of society’s power players. These new media technologies are an intrinsic part of the media and like the media and becoming more and more commercialized. Viney explores the worry about the public sphere in this age of commercialization:

“Academics worry that the public sphere is becoming too commercialized, just as journalists worry that ‘the media’ is becoming too commercialized. Academics also worry about other aspects of the public sphere: trivialization,

spectacle (rather than rational argumentation), and citizens becoming too apathetic about public issues” (Viney, 2008:38).

Virtual spaces are a sought after commodity, celebrities use *Twitter* to create dialogue with their audience and inform them of their latest ventures. News agents also use this tool to report breaking news to their online audiences in a hundred and forty characters. Bloggers are encouraged to make money through their blogs by opting for things such as advertising from various companies within their blogs. This level of commercialization within the public sphere is leading to fragmentation. Viney (2008) maintains that the fragmentation of the public sphere through, as McKee notes, “[the] demands of various niche audiences and identity groups, [is] breaking up the common cultures” (McKee, 2005:2).

No matter how enigmatic the idea is, or the possibilities as well as realities which have come about because of the technology, one must always be wary of whose ideology is being enforced through the debate. Is it part of the dominant ideology or the dissent? In a country like South Africa, a key factor must be discussed when deciding on this new public sphere. Access is a key factor of the blogosphere/new public sphere discussion. One can argue that the part of the population that has access to the technology and are able and have put this to use, are not the ones who are in dire need of being heard by the powers that be. The xenophobic attacks in late May 2008 caused great discomfort around the country. Many attributed this kind of behaviour to ignorance; many bloggers and intellectuals took great pains to express their disgust online and explain ideals of an African identity and called for the attackers to stop their terrorist acts. The idea was a good one; however, it was a



wasted effort, as the people it was meant for do not have access to blogs or any technology that could allow them to hear the message.

### **2.3 Journalistic Blogging**

There has also been a good deal of discussion about journalistic blogging. The first thing that usually comes to mind in terms of blogging and journalism is the issue of news. Defining news helps place what journalistic bloggers do. Stephens (1988) writes that news is 'new information about a subject of some public interest that is shared with some portion of the public. . . News is, in effect, what is on a society's mind' (in Wall, 2005:154).

Traditionally, journalists in mainstream media are expected to answer, "Who? What? Where? When? Why? And How?" in the first two paragraphs of a news report. In the case of blogging, however, the style is generally completely different. As stated previously, blogging represents the freedom of the writer and is a form of citizen journalism. Quinn introduces the idea of a more personal angle when it comes to blogging - an angle that can change the way in which we look at journalism. "A blog is personal, direct and interactive. It is the human voice and imagination amplified by the power of the web" (Quinn *et al*, 2005: 76). This idea of journalistic blogging suggests that journalists are able to tell their story with a more human voice (with the help of the audience). The audience is better able to relate, understand and interact with the story better because of the way in which it has been presented. Audience participation is encouraged in what Wall expresses as, "audience participation in content creation; and story forms that are fragmented and interdependent with other websites. Ultimately, these shifts suggest that some forms

of online news such as blogs have moved away from traditional journalism's modernist approach to embody a form of post-modern journalism"(Wall, 2005:154).

Several writers have emphasised the way in which blogging is changing the form and content of contemporary journalism. Bloom (2003:39), for example, argues, "If journalism is the first draft of history, blogs might just be the first draft of journalism. The rapid-fire, spontaneous nature of blogs (typos and all), makes them at once fascinating, immensely valuable as an early source of breaking stories, and frustrating in that much of what appears in blogs ends up being clarified or corrected later", which gives us a sense of the way in which the content of journalism might be changing. And Quinn *et al* suggest that blogging is changing the style of journalism: "At its best, a blog is a form of personal journalism that opens the public up to a whole new role in the news business" (Quinn *et al*, 2005:75).

Quinn (2005: 76) argues that the blogosphere is much more than a carefree place where people experiment with every topic known to man; he looks at it as a post-modern news organisation with a different angle on presenting topical issues. The blogosphere gives people the opportunity to report directly without issues of political economy and gatekeeping. There are no gatekeepers in the blogosphere: it is the writer and the medium, and the story may be posted unchecked and unedited. It is very difficult physically to find the author of a blog post against their wishes, which brings us back to the idea of the writer's complete freedom. Quinn explores the idea of bloggers as "servant journalists" who are willing to report what professionals cannot or will not report: "Blogs that report the news are the most interesting phenomenon ... this is unfiltered news available to a global audience. This is the

public taking over where the professional journalist can't – or won't – go" (Quinn *et al*, 2005: 76). Quite often, the issue of history is raised when discussing news reports, and often it appears that journalists are writing the first draft of history. Quinn argues that bloggers are caught in the middle of historic events and are writing history as it happens. The interesting thing about this is that bloggers do not just feed through the facts, but they present them with a lived experience and a human tone.

"On the web, people learn from one another about what does and does not work," (De Wolk, 2001:65). Due to the nature of blogging and blog directories, bloggers are able to share information with each and offer advice on blogging etiquette. Bloggers are able to advise each other on what is appropriate and what will be in bad taste to share in the blogosphere. However, there are no set rules on how to blog or what to blog, so it is difficult to predict what a blogger can say online. "A lot of web sites have turned content provision over to readers, allotting space for individuals to host Web logs, or blogs as they are more commonly known. This proliferation of media options appears to have created mass media in which everyone has a [seemingly unfettered] voice," (Quinn *et al*, 2005:39-40).

### **2.3.1 DIY Journalism: Journalists need Bloggers**

Blogging with regard to journalism has been categorized in many different ways, as Wall notes:

"Various attempts have been made to identify the type of journalism news blogs produce. These concepts include personal journalism, do-it-yourself journalism, black market journalism, 'we media', and postmodern journalism. Blogs have been described as a form of 'personal journalism', in which

individuals – both amateur and professional – provide first-hand reporting, personal commentary, and places for others to contribute or respond (Allan, 2002: 127). They have also been dubbed ‘do-it-yourself journalism’, which does not [according to] Halavais (2002) ‘follow the canons in fact-checking, seeking out alternative or opposing views or attempted impartiality’” (Wall, 2005).

J.D Lascia wrote in *Journalist Trade* in August 2003 that the “transparency of blogging has contributed to news organizations becoming a bit more accessible and interactive” (Lascia, 2003:70). Traditional journalism works; there is nothing wrong with it, aside from the simple issue that it is one-sided. Newspapers do not host audience meet and greet evenings, where they sit and converse with their readers about the paper and stories that have been published. The only means of dialogue that exists between newspapers and their readers are letters, only a select few of which get published.

The Internet, and subsequently blogs, has given the audience the opportunity to communicate issues and thoughts that had been otherwise denied to them in print media. The concept of citizen journalism first began around the early 2000s with the growth of easy publishing tools on the web. Citizen journalism has since become a buzzword in and around the blogosphere. The issue, however, is not whether someone can write, but can they write well? Blogging or publishing on a blog does not require the same carefully crafted channels that mainstream media use and adhere to. The rise in blog activity around current affairs has begged the question of a new type of journalism arising. The bloggers ability to break stories and gain

access to events closed to media, before any major news group has created disturbances in the world of professional journalism. Dan Gillmor, in his book *We The Media*, explains what this type of journalism is and can be:

“The coverage of important events by nonprofessionals is only part of the story. What also matters is the fact that people are having their say. This is one of the healthiest media developments in a long time. We are hearing new voices – not necessarily the voices of people who want to make a living by speaking out, but who want to say what they think and be heard, even if only by a relatively few people. One of the main criticisms of blogs is that so many are self-absorbed tripe... [What is exciting however] is that the growing number of blogs written by people who want to talk intelligently about an area of expertise is a sign of something vital. Blogs can be acts of civic engagement. They can also be better, or certainly offer more depth, than the professionals who face the standard limitations of reporting time and available space (or airtime) for what they learn” (Gillmor, 2004:139).

There clearly needs to be some kind of synergy between the professional journalist and the blogger. The obvious argument raised by a professional journalist is that bloggers are amateur ‘wannabe-be’ journalists who have very little regard for the traditions and the simple rules that are the cornerstone of journalism. However, the world is changing and so are the content delivery methods, which Lasica expands on:

“In a world of micro-content delivered to niche audiences, more and more of the small tidbits of news that we encounter each day are being conveyed through personal media—chiefly Weblogs. Call it participatory journalism or

journalism from the edges. Simply put, it refers to individuals playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, sorting, analyzing and disseminating news and information—a task once reserved almost exclusively to the news media” (Lasica, 2003:71).

Bloggers are able to introduce new ways of handling stories; when news groups dispose of stories that fall off their radar after a few days, bloggers are able to keep stories alive through reinventions. Bloggers can examine the story from all available angles; something a professional journalist could never get away with. Bloggers are able to give readers encouragement that allows them to feel that they are part of the process by responding to comments and actively reacting to what the readers have to say, bloggers are able to gain the trust of their readers because readers feel they are ordinary citizens like them.

#### **2.4 Audiences: Active and Interactive**

Since the 1980s, media scholars have agreed that audiences need to be understood as active participants in the creation of meaning. “While, it was argued, the text has the power to propose or suggest particular ideological readings, the audience should be seen as active decoders who will not necessarily accept the positions being offered” (Strelitz, 2000: 38). The active audience theory emphasises that the audience are active readers of text. Hall’s *Encoding and Decoding* (1980) looks at the audience’s ability not only to understand the message, but their ability to become active producers of messages. “In reception analysis, audiences are seen, as Fiske and de Certeau suggest, as active producers of meaning, not consumers of media meanings. They decode media texts in ways which are related to their social and

cultural circumstances and the ways that they individually experience those circumstances” (Totosy de Zepetnek, 1999).

The new media has seen a further development in the question of the active audience. Whereas activity has traditionally been limited to the interpretive tasks available to audiences, new media allows for the generation of media content. Bloggers are members of the audience, who have taken a message, which has been given to them, and created their own message. They are able to interpret the message in a way that is relevant to their specific circumstances and then reproduce it on their blogs. Bloggers are now active producers of media messages and the media seem to have joined the audience on the receiving end. With the development of new media technologies, interaction between author and reader has become feasible. Tim O’Reilly (2005) tries to explain what Web 2.0 (the term used to describe Internet-based services that emphasize collaboration and sharing, rather than less interactive publishing) is, and looks at key differences between Web 1.0 and 2.0. These differences significantly illustrate how new technologies are making communication and interactivity easier. O’Reilly points out that where there were once personal websites, now there is blogging, and where publishing was crucial to 1.0, participation is crucial to 2.0, and content management systems have given birth to wikis. A wiki is software that allows users to easily create, edit, and link pages together. Wikis are often used to create collaborative websites, which means visitors are able to add and edit content. These new improvements in media technologies have provided the basis for a more active audience, which Marshall (2004: 12) refers to as “the interactive audience”. “One form of interactivity relies on replicating the interpersonal and its value for the appropriation of meaning... New media’s

interaction was a continuous connection or at least the promise of continuous interactivity between source and audience” (Marshall, 2004:14-15). This links the interactive audience in South Africa, for example, with reality shows which rely on interactivity through the Internet and SMS technologies in order to communicate with their audience. Interactivity in the case of blogs fits into what Lister *et al* (2003:21) refer to as “registrational interactivity”, which refers to the opportunity which new media texts give their audience to write back, adding on to the existing text with their own thoughts and opinions. However, the new media audience is somewhat limited in South Africa due to access, as I have previously mentioned. The blogs I have examined can be accessed through mobile web devices such as mobile phones, personal digital planners (PDAs) and devices such as the Apple iPod touch. Due to this unique capability of access through mobile devices their audience is considerably larger.

#### **2.4.1 Media Citizenship and Audience Participation**

The audience in traditional media, such as newspapers, radio and television, is clearly defined. According to Bucher that (the defined audience) is not always the case with regard to the Internet:

“Things for the first time chanced with global television programs like for example CNN or Sky News. In the case of the Internet global reach of communication has become the standard feature of the media. The question arises, if this strengthens or weakens the power of the audience. One can find reasons for both answers. On the one side one could suggest, the more programs or websites we have for selection, the more cultural differences we get presented the more alternatives the audience has” (Bucher, 2002:3).



The choice afforded to the audience through the Internet gives them a better understanding of international affairs through comparison. However, Bucher argues: “the more alternatives a single user has to deal with, the more he depends on help from the communicators to make a rational choice. Without deciding which of the two alternatives is the right one, one can state that the communicative and intercultural competence of the audience is a decisive feature for its power or its weakness” (Bucher, 2002). If that is the case, this then transcends into a “communicative interpretation of globalization” (Bucher, 2002), which means that global communication is always intercultural. Anthony Giddens conceptualizes globalization thoroughly:

“Globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens, 1990:64).

The audience is migrating into an interactive phase through participation and media citizenship. They are citizens of the global village and through the Web they are able to communicate in that village.

The concept of media citizenship was first introduced by Yu (2006) in a discussion about urban populations and their uses of “new media and communication technologies, such as talking (on television), linking (via the Internet) and clicking (mobile phone keyboards), to transform and dislocate the networks of communicative practices and hence refigure subjectivities” (Yu, 2006:304). Yu further explains that through practices of talking, linking and clicking, people can turn themselves from media consumers to media citizens. The active audience is a

construct based on socio-political societal norms. Yu discusses the transition from an active audience to media citizenship: “As a social and political category, the audience can be reconstructed as an integral part of media citizenship through their media practices” (Yu, 2006:305). The audience is involved in many media practices; they co-author stories with journalists (Yu, 2006), and they actively help in the production of reality shows such as *Big Brother* and *Idols*. Through participation, the audience is able to transcend into media citizens. However, as Yu explains, “as media citizens, people are not fully informed citizens, capable of open and direct political engagement with the state. Instead, they are simply one step beyond being merely active consumers and audiences of the media” (Yu, 2006:304). Thus media citizenship is beyond media production and consumption tending towards a more “integral role of media and communication technologies in fostering political participation” (Yu, 2006:304

Through the growth of Web 2.0 tools, audiences have grown to expect to be involved in news production. “While the web provides greater access to the world at large, it turns out that many of us want the media to address what's happening close to home, and we not only want to see the news, we want to be the news” (Miller, 2008). Newspapers are finding ways to develop around the idea of citizen journalism, which is where the heart of audience participation lies. Traditional media is gearing toward community-produced content. Web tools such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Google* and *Wordpress* have made it possible for audiences to become self-publishers, hence changing their expectations in terms of the kind of interaction available on the web (Miller, 2008). The interactive nature of the emerging media texts creates a shift in the relationship between audiences and text (Ibrahim, 2007). “Audience participation

in determining the outcome of a show has emerged in tandem with lifestyle and reality television and a “post-documentary” culture (Corner), which incorporates the active and technologically activated audience as part of the programming format”(Ibrahim, 2007). Audience participation in news is made possible through text messaging, blogging and twittering; these tools have allowed the audience to breach the boundaries between production and receptions of media messages. Through participation, blogs cultivate relationships with their audience.

## **Chapter Three – Research Methodology**

The preceding chapters have explained the theoretical framework and the reasons behind my embarking on this research. In this chapter, I will present the methodology through which my research is structured. This includes my research design, method of data collection, the research procedure and my approach to data analysis and presentation.

Due to the fact that my research involves both people and text, and the process of trying to understand how people identify with the role of the blogosphere in terms of a sphere of public debate as well as understanding the blogosphere's role in contemporary South African journalism, I have adopted both a content analysis and an ethnographic approach toward the research. This means that this research is qualitative in nature and hence will produce qualitative data.

### **3.1 Understanding Ethnography**

Ideally ethnographic research is more commonly used in sociological or anthropological research, where the researcher is immersed in the social group or community s/he is investigating. By doing this, the researcher is able to gain invaluable behavioural information through becoming one with the group or community. In some cases, complete immersion is impossible, and adapted versions of ethnography needs to be employed in order to gather information that will facilitate an understanding of the research subject.

Ethnographic research within a cyber-community such as the blogosphere takes place in four stages. Nocera (2002) provides a comprehensive outline of these four stages:

“[The first stage] corresponds mainly to access to and familiarization with the community's language. In the same way, contact with key users within the group is established to let them know about the purpose of the research. The practice that predominates in this first approach is passive observation; the goal here is to learn basic skills and gain social and cultural knowledge for coherent, fluid interactions in the future with the virtual community under study... [In stage two] the researcher has learned basic notions for interacting with the community; he or she is ready to begin with participant observation. Participant observation allows for entry into those limited zones of meaning otherwise impossible to reach” (Nocera, 2002:4).

These first two first stages fit in well with my research design and my approach toward data collection. Through observation useful information about the blogosphere can be gained and analysed. Information gained during the second stage of what Nocera (2002) describes can prove invaluable to research of this nature. Nocera further explains the remaining stages:

“[In stage three] the participant observation stage will identify some relevant and key informers within the virtual group. Through focused ethnographic interviews, these informers can provide in-depth knowledge and interesting accounts about their personal experiences and the community's cultural framing. These interviews have an ethogenic influence, because their goal not only revolves around ethnographic information, but is also directed at personal accounts highlighting interesting differences between local cultural

prescriptions and what is really accomplished and perceived from that cyberculture. Account information facilitates access to those contents which are not yet totally shared, but that will soon be incorporated into the cultural framing of the virtual community. This kind of qualitative data gathering and analysis opens a window onto the sociopsychological dynamics of public and private life within the group. [Lastly in the fourth stage] a concluding analysis is made so as to arrange the resulting emerging categories found during the research process... In the field of virtual communities, the main axial category from which an ethnographic approach usually starts is the text-based discourse as social action.” (Nocera, 2002:4).

### **3.2 Research design and data collection**

In this section, I shall present my research design, the way in which I went about my research. I will explain my methods of data collection and collation for the successful completion of this research. My objective was to collect data that would provide plausible information on the role played by blogs in contemporary South African journalism as well as evaluate the possibilities of a new public sphere. The data generated by this research will be analysed in relation to the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2. The following are the research tools used within my research design and methodology:

- **Blog sampling process:** From the beginning of this research, it was important to choose the right blogs. The chosen blogs needed to represent the crux of the South African blogosphere with regard to what it offers, and the calibre of bloggers within it.

- **Observation:** The process of observation was done in two parts: first passive observation during the sampling phase, where a number of blogs were observed. Then after the final blogs were chosen, a more focused observation took place.
- **Semi-structured interviews:** Once the observation process was concluded, I conducted online interviews with the owners/editors of the chosen blogs.
- **Contributor questionnaires:** Blogs such as *Thought Leader*, *SA Rocks* and *Wibble* are contribution-based blogs, so I thought it necessary to get information from the contributors to those blogs as well.
- **Online focus group discussions:** The second part of my research explores the possibility of the blogosphere as a new public sphere. In order to examine this aspect I created a group on Facebook, and invited South African blog readers to take part in discussion over a certain period of time

### 3.2.1 Blog sampling process

“Sampling is a central part of everyday life. Dipping a toe in the water, flicking through a magazine, ‘zapping’ across television channels, sipping a glass of wine are all examples of the kinds of routine sampling activity we constantly engage in” (Deacon et al, 1999:40). The South African blogosphere is a vast and an expanding one, and for this research I wanted blogs that would represent all spectrums of the South African blogosphere, as well as provide answers for the questions the research poses. This meant that the samples needed to be specifically chosen to fit the research. For the kind research I was conducting, I didn’t want frivolous blogs that documented the life span of the author’s fungi collection. I needed blogs that meant something to the

blogosphere, blogs with a fair amount of following, and whose authors/editors had reputable presence in and around the blogosphere. Another aspect, which contributed to my blog selection process, was the issue of access, which I mentioned in Chapter 2. I needed blogs that were accessible to a wide variety of the South African audience. These blogs reach a larger number of people because of their influence within in the blogosphere and their use of various blog traffic application to increase their readers.

Based on the above-mentioned factors, it is quite clear that I chose to use a non-random sampling process. Non-random sampling is a purposive selection process that is not determined by chance, which is most commonly used in qualitative research (Deacon et al, 1999). Non-random sampling has various methods depending on the type of research that is being conducted. For my research I chose to use 'typical-case sampling'. "With typical-case sampling the researcher seeks to identify a case that exemplifies the key features of a phenomenon being investigated. The method needs to be supported by other, more generalised sampling evidence to support the claims to typicality" (Deacon et al, 1999:53).

I chose six blogs out of the approximately 26 000 blogs registered to South Africa. I did this because it would be impossible to conduct this kind of research with 26 000 blogs and difficult to manage the data generated by the research. The six blogs chosen provided platforms that could generate answers for the proposed research questions I presented in Chapter 1. On the issue of journalism and the public sphere I chose three journalistically inclined



blogs: *Thought Leader*, *SA Rocks* and *Wibble*. I call these journalistic inclined blogs because though journalists do not write them for journalistic purposes and are not exclusively written by journalists; they deal with topical issues pertaining to South Africa and sometimes the world at large. The *Mail & Guardian Online* publishes *Thought Leader* as mentioned in Chapter 1. *Wibble* is a blog platform created to give journalists the opportunity to embrace the world of blogging. *SA Rocks* is the true embodiment of citizen journalism through allowing citizens to have their say about the good things in South Africa.

The other three blogs I have chosen for my research are personal blogs. These blogs are owned by some of the most influential people in the South African blogosphere, according to Mandy de Waal in an article published on *Money Web – Undictated* in August 2008. According to de Waal, they are the ‘social media stars’ of the South African blogosphere, ranking at number seven on her list of influential blogs and bloggers:

- **Matthew Buckland** – Buckland’s blog [matthewbuckland.com](http://matthewbuckland.com) has been referred to by blogger Mike Stopforth as possessing “a keener understanding for the media and its intersection with the Web than anyone else in the country - I am intimidated by his intellect” (Stopforth, 2008 on [www.moneyweb.co.za](http://www.moneyweb.co.za)).
- **Vincent Maher** – Maher’s *Media in Transition* was described by Darren Smith in the *Influential Bloggers’ list of Influential* ([www.moneyweb.co.za](http://www.moneyweb.co.za)) *blogs* as straddling “the worlds of academia, design, media, technology and puts his [Vincent Maher’s] views across

in a way which is engaging, thought provoking, sometimes infuriating. But always entertaining” (Smith, 2008 on [www.monyweb.co.za](http://www.monyweb.co.za)).

- **Mike Stopforth** – [mikestopforth.com](http://mikestopforth.com) is not just about social media or the world of web 2.0, it is about Mike Stopforth whose influence as a blogger Dave Duarte notes “extends beyond his website - he was one of the first, and most prominent blogging evangelists to business in South Africa” (Duarte, 2008 on [www.moneyweb.co.za](http://www.moneyweb.co.za)).

### **3.2.2 Observation**

“Research into the ‘effects’ of the mass media usually conjures up images of social surveys about, for example, people’s attitudes to violence on television or the political views of different newspapers. But many researchers argue that such surveys do not get to grips with the complexities of such attitudes. Indeed, they suggest that the very notion of ‘attitudes’ oversimplifies the contradictory, differentiated and variegated views of the world which lies beneath such seemingly simple questions. For that reason they seek to use other methods to uncover these views. In particular they have turned to qualitative methods, including observation” (Deacon et al, 1999:248). There are various types of observation such as simple observation, participant observation and ethnography.

As mentioned earlier, the observation process for this research took place in two stages.

### **3.2.2.1 First stage observation**

My blog observation process began in early 2007, while I was still deciding on the focus of my thesis. I used the simple observation process in this stage of my research; this type of observation takes the 'fly on the wall' approach. "The observer has no relationship with the processes or people being observed, who remain unaware of the researcher's activities. Certainly such studies are perfectly possible in communications" (Deacon et al, 1999: 250). I subscribed to over fifty South African blogs through Google Reader. These blogs ranged from politics, lifestyle to personal diaries. After following and collecting information from these blogs, I finally settled on the six blogs mentioned earlier in this chapter.

### **3.2.2.2 Second stage of observation**

After selecting the final blogs for this research, I decided to restructure the observation process. I began collecting information not only pertaining to the blog posts but on the comments and on links and trackbacks that referred to the blogs or particular posts.

For this stage of my observation I use participant observation; this requires the researcher to get involved, to some extent, in the activities of the people being observed. Throughout my research, I have been immersed in the blogosphere, I am a contributor to *Thought Leader* and I have guest-blogged on *SA Rocks*, I occasionally comment on *Wibble*, [mikestopforth.com](http://mikestopforth.com), [matthewbuckland.com](http://matthewbuckland.com) and *Media in Transition*. Through this type of immersion I have been able to gather descriptive and interpretative data. I have observed discussions in the blogosphere from a distance and as part of

the discussion. In all my dealings in the blogosphere, particularly with the six selected blogs, I have tried to be as reserved and unbiased as possible. "Observation of 'the lived experience' gives the researcher the opportunity to collect different types of data, from numerical, to explorative, descriptive and interpretive" (Viney, 2008:93). Ideally, for the ethnographic component of this research, one would need to observe the bloggers in their natural environment such as the Geek 27 Dinners or the Blogger Braais. However, due to time and accessibility constraints, video footage of the events had to suffice. As an existing member of the South African blogosphere, the bloggers welcomed my constant presence on their blogs and provided regular posts to aid my research.

### **3.2.3 Semi-structured interviews**

"In the most general sense, all research asks questions. How many hours' television on average do children watch per week? ... However, if all research is underwritten by questions, not all research seeks answers by asking them directly. Much research involves seeking 'circumstantial evidence': drawing conclusion on the basis of what people say and do in other contexts and for other reasons" (Deacon et al, 1999:62).

After the observation process, I decided to conduct interviews with blog owners/editors. For these interviews I chose to use a 'semi-structured interview free format'. A semi-structure interview as Deacon notes: "abandons concern with standardisation and control, and seeks to promote an active, open-ended dialogue," (Deacon, 1999: 62). Even though this interview style bears resemblance to everyday

conversations, it does not adhere to the same conventions. The interviewer is always in control of the conversation with the aid of an interview guide, while allowing the freedom to explore questions further.

The reason I chose to use this interview format was because it provided the freedom to explore aspects of the blogosphere that I might have missed in my initial investigation. As all my participants lived outside my geographical area, these interviews were conducted online through Google Talk instant message system. The interview guide was designed on the basis of findings of the observation period. These questions were mostly open-ended and the interview process was conducted in a discussion-like manner, giving participants the opportunity to explore each topic, creating new questions in the process. These discussions generated plenty of data and created interesting topics for the focus group discussion and questions for the contributor questionnaires.

### **3.2.4 Contributor Questionnaires**

Three of the blogs, which are examined in this research, are contribution-based blogs. What that means is that a significant amount of the time the editor(s) require outside contributors to provide content. I felt that in order to fully assess these types of blogs it was paramount to include those contributors in the process of examination. During the observation stage I was able to detect the most popular as well as the most consistent contributors. Hence, I designed a self-completion questionnaire for five contributors from each blog based on the specific blog and what it provided for readers. These questionnaires were then tested on individuals to make sure the participants would understand every question thoroughly, after which

they were sent via email with instructions and the purpose of the research. Fifteen questionnaires were sent out and all fifteen came back. Getting information from contributors did prove difficult at first as some of the contributors were reluctant to reveal some of the personal details which the questionnaire required, but after careful explanation and assurance of anonymity they were willing to co-operate.

### **3.2.5 Online focus group discussions**

One dimension of the theoretical framework in which this research is centred is evolution of the active audience into what is becoming a more interactive and participatory audience. I felt it was necessary to include the audience in the examination process. Unfortunately it is very difficult to organise audiences from different blogs so I decided it would be best to create a group on Facebook, which I invited readers of blogs in general to join in the discussions. The online focus group discussions were on-going based on research questions, theoretical frameworks and developing trends in new media. Every week a new discussion topic was posted and group members were sent a message with instructions. I tried to be more an observer of the discussions than a part of them, and in that way I hoped to get the best results from the audience without any influence.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

Analysing data involves providing order within the various data collected throughout the research process. The various occurring patterns must be organised and relationships between various elements of the data need to be identified. Data interpretation allows the researcher to attach meaning and significance to the information that emerges from the analysis.

Data analysis was carried out during various stages of the research process. I began it during the observation stage where I read each of the blogs almost on a daily basis in order to understand the tone and the purpose of each blog. This provided me with a sense of the content, the purpose of the blog and the goal of the owner/editor. The information generated from the focus group also helped shape the questions which were posed to the blog owners/editors and contributors which allowed for focus within the research.

As this research is about understanding the influences and impacts that blogging and the emerging South African blogosphere is having on contemporary South African journalism, it was important to examine the content of discussions around the blogosphere. The literature provided in the previous chapter shows the increased use of new media technologies in traditional media. Most commonly, the use of blogs by mainstream media has been identified in Chapter Two, and it was important to identify the opinions of mainstream media with respect to the blogosphere itself, through careful analysis of the content and topics discussed within the blogosphere.

### **3.4 Research Ethics**

I obtained permission from the University of KwaZulu-Natal to pursue my research and I completed the ethical clearance form to declare that my method did not violate the rights of my participants. In terms of the ethical considerations, I obtained the written consent which was required from all the participants. I gave each participant the necessary information about the research and assured them that their privacy and the privacy of their online identities would be protected. This process is valuable

for data collection in ethnographic research as it assures mutual respect and trust between the researcher and the participants.

### **3.5 Limitation of the research**

In such a wide and ever-changing field of study, it is impossible for this research to fully answer all the questions pertaining to all areas of this topic and the issues arising from the findings. Furthermore, this research cannot be generalised to a wider area of study such as the American blogosphere or that of the United Kingdom. Also, due to the fluidity of the Internet, it is impossible truly to investigate the reach of the South African blogosphere. New media technologies also provide an access problem for some and in the case of South Africa this applies to a significant proportion of the population. Also the cost of conducting face-to-face interviews due to the geographical location of the participants, restricted my communications mostly to online and in some cases telephonic interviews. In this research I tried to utilise the necessary qualitative methodology tools in such a way that the data and findings would constitute a sound descriptive and interpretative investigation in order to help further our understanding of the role played by these new media technologies in contemporary South African journalism.



## **Chapter four – Research Findings: data analysis and discussion**

I divided my empirical research into three stages: firstly, a blog sampling process (first stage observation) which involved close observation of the South African blogosphere in early 2007. This included informal discussions with blog owners and editors. The process provided encouraging results which led to the final blog selection. A secondary observation process was then initiated in August 2007 with the final six blogs. This involved monitoring the daily traffic and discussion flow on each blog in order to categorically place them within the study. Information generated from the observation phase provided a platform which allowed me to construct an interview schedule for blog owners and editors. These interviews were semi-structured as they allowed me to deviate from the schedule and follow up interesting points raised by the editors/owners of the blogs. As half of my sample consisted of contribution-based blogs, I found it necessary to include the contributors as mentioned in the previous chapter. The final stage of the research involved an online focus group which included blog readers and the public. Each stage of the research provided information that was crucial to the subsequent stages and the overall development of the entire thesis.

In analysing and discussing my data, the same format is used throughout all five stages of the research and I discuss them separately. I do this because it is necessary to outline the progression of the research process and the increasing depth of the data acquired from blog sampling to the online focus group.

#### **4.1. Blog Sampling Process – first observation stage**

The blog sampling process involved an observation of the South African blogosphere, thereby establishing a feel of the South African blogging climate and how it fitted in with the rest of the world. It began in early 2007 with fifty blogs, which I subscribed to these blogs through Google Reader. This allowed me to collect and store entries made on each blog on a daily basis in chronological order. I also needed to observe the blogs with regard to the focus of research, and to find blogs that would best represent what I was intending to research. After a month I started removing blogs that weren't representative of my research and though each of the fifty blogs chosen for the initial phase of the research brought an interesting area of study to the research, it was vast and needed narrowing down. I needed to find blogs that had an informative purpose and if possible some sort of journalistic atmosphere. At the end of the second month of observation I dropped thirty blogs from the research. This elimination process was based on deciphering the content of each of these blogs and how they could contribute to the core purposes of my research. The discussions which were encouraged by the owners/editors and the amount of traffic each blog received on a daily/weekly/monthly basis were also an important factors.

#### **4.1.2 Analysis of the blog sampling process**

My analysis of the blog sampling process was based on the core focus of my research which is an examination of blogging and its influence on the contemporary South African journalistic climate. Information received during the blog sampling process was analysed with respect to content. I use content analysis loosely as I do not categorise by differentiating between particular words, ethnicities or gender. The content I wished to pursue was mainly a means to understand better blogs that had

journalistic inclination such as providing information to its readers or playing some sort of purposive role in the blogging community. As mentioned earlier, Quinn (2005) suggests that journalists are interested in three kinds of blogs: the ones that report the news, the ones that critique the news, and special interest ones that could very well talk about the life span of the writer's rose-bush. As a researcher I was interested in blogs that had relevance to the media and the news in general. Using the information generated from my theoretical research I was able to deduce which of the blogs would be valuable for my purposes. During this sampling stage I deduced that though a lot of special interest blogs existed within the South African blogosphere, they were mostly blogs that dealt solely with some aspect of the writer's personal life. After six months of observing the fifty blogs I was able to choose six blogs that had both special interest and a critical angle on the news and the media.

#### **4.2. Second Stage Observation**

After the blog sampling process observation period, in which I adopted a 'fly on the wall' approach to my observation, I was able to generate enough information to restructure my next and final observation phase. The final six blogs provided rich research material as they each had various areas of interest in keeping with the purpose of the thesis. The first three blogs were contribution-based blogs, each serving a purpose for the audience. *Thought Leader*, the *Mail & Guardian* initiative, served the purpose of critical discussion with the audience with regard to politics, media and current affairs. *Wibble* on the other hand serves as a platform to introduce journalists to the concept of blogging while encouraging various *Thought Leaders* to join in the debate. *SA Rocks*, as mentioned earlier, was developed as a response to

bad publicity regarding the country and is dedicated to reporting good news about South Africa. The other three blogs, though personal blogs, have an informative purpose by keeping the audience abreast of developments in the media, marketing and technological worlds. Each aspect of these blogs was monitored; I collected information that only pertained to the posts but also comments and patterns that emerged such as discussions that circulated amongst bloggers.

As mentioned in the above section, the observation process required a degree of content sensitivity with regard to which topics were of special interest to the research. Due to the time frame of the research, issues that dominated the discussions on the blogosphere were politically-motivated and somewhat freedom- and emancipation -centred. This meant that I had to take note of these discussions while looking at comparative articles in both print and electronic media. Hence the research required me to keep abreast of current affairs issues that dominated the blogosphere, in terms of monitoring blogger and non-blogger opinions.

#### **4.2.1. Analysis of second stage observation**

This phase of the research lasted a further six months; I did this simply because I wanted to stretch out the observation process to allow for other information aside from the heated political climate to be discussed on the blogs. Each blog provided interesting opinions on the various issues which came up. At times these opinions generated conflict as owners/editors and commentators/contributors occasionally disagreed on the topics of discussions.

*Thought Leader* generated useful information regarding journalism and various issues surrounding the press. A fair amount of discussion focused on the issue of press freedom in Zimbabwe and whether the press would ever be liberated from the grips of tyranny. Some of this discussion on press freedom translated into the current South African climate and whether or not the South African press was in danger of facing the same restrictions that were now apparent in Zimbabwe. These discussions often referred to newspaper articles and online news reports.

Another component of this research has been to monitor or rather explore the role blogs could play in cementing an online public sphere. As emphasised in chapters one and two, the idea of *Thought Leader* is one that unites the concept of citizen journalism with traditional journalism. Though some of the writers/bloggers that write for *Thought Leader* are established writers/journalists, they do not write in their capacities as professionals, but as citizens with worthwhile opinions. The blog style of *Thought Leader* allows for commentary from members of the public and opens up debates and discussions on topics surrounding current affairs in South Africa and the rest of Africa. Discussions and debates on *Thought Leader* are subjected to something of a 'thou shalt not' approach. Contributors and commentators alike are provided with strict guidelines on what is appropriate and what is not. The *Thought Leader* comment guideline begins with a firm word of assurance: 'we welcome as much interaction and vibrant discussion between our contributors and their readers as possible - but we do want the website to be a mature and thought-provoking environment, so some guidelines apply to posting comments'(thoughtleader.co.za). All the comments posted on *Thought Leader* are held over for moderation from what could be a minute to twenty-four hours. The comment guidelines provided by

*Thought Leader* staff have been put in place to help facilitate a fair and balanced debate. Commentators are asked to stick to the topic of debate in their commentary. There are cases where comments are removed during the process of moderation due either to their sexist, racist or inappropriate classification which *Thought Leader* comment guidelines warn against.

During my observation period I was able to become part of some of these debates, discussing topics with the authors in almost real time and responding to other commentators. Among the political issues which dominated the *Thought Leader* space, a character that raised heated discussions was David Bullard and his infamous axing from the *Sunday Times*. This discussion trend was common along the natives of the blogosphere, a debate that strode along the South African airways for some time.

While reading *Wibble* I was able to see a different aspect of journalism and blogging, the contributors at *Wibble* providing an interesting aspect to lifestyle blogging. The average *Wibble* contributor-blogs are based on the concept of the lived experience by using interesting anecdotes to get their points across. A post titled “The world is way bigger than we think” on 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2005 exemplifies the *Wibble* style. The post chronicles a cricket experience with a lesson about the world as the author explains: “For those who watched the cricket final you would have seen the cameras flash across every few minutes to some slick looking, leather wearing bollywood star. An Indian lady sitting close to me confirmed that this was a guy by the name of Shahrukh Kahn – Bollywood’s most famous actor and an absolute icon in India- the equivalent of a Brad Pitt in our scenes I thought – well I was wrong. This guy gets

over 5,000 fan-mail letters (physical post) a day and at any one time has 6 bodyguards surrounding him – which, is in slight contrast to any icon in the western world that we know. And, this was the first time I had ever heard of this person!” ([www.wibble.co.za](http://www.wibble.co.za)).

Many such posts find their way in and around *Wibble* with interesting titles such as “The fashion of crime” which details the demise of the steering wheel lock, listing possible and in some cases comical reasons for the demise. And the “Halle-freaking-lujah!!!” post that celebrated the ousting of the quota system in South African sport. As a contribution-based blog, *Wibble* does not adopt as many rules as *Thought Leader* does. *Wibble* functions almost as a personal blog to its contributors, allowing them to say whatever they want within ethically responsible limits.

*SA Rocks*, like most positivity media, is purely intent on reporting good news and the positive aspects of the country. The contributors of *SA Rocks* bring a certain colloquial eloquence to their writing, informing and educating their readers. The mantra of this blog has always been to promote South Africa and all the splendour it has to offer. During the observation process I was able to decipher that *SA Rocks* wasn’t a deluded child’s dream, the editor and contributors alike realising that South Africa is far from a bed of roses, but they wish to see it for its possibilities, and hope through their writings others would in turn see what they see. A post on *SA Rocks* in early May entitled “5 reasons to stay in SA and 5 reasons to leave”, explains the constant struggle and the need for a well-balanced view.

Content-wise *SA Rocks* is able to survive in an environment where almost all news seems second-hand. Nic Haralambous the editor of *SA Rocks* strives to be true to the purposes of the blog by encouraging cultural initiatives. The bulk of *SA Rocks* content is culture-related news that most often is over-looked by mainstream media. *SA Rocks* attempts to track every success story with regard to South Africa and blogs it. It is at the heel of every initiative for change, covering the million people march against crime live, with on the scene live blogging. With regard to the public sphere, there is a growing force in *SA Rocks* attracting the attention companies such Virgin money and ETV. Based on information gathered from the observations, *SA Rocks* is doing a good job of getting itself noticed and discussed by other media and practitioners alike.

The other three blogs involved in the research provide far less complicated notions about their purposes, the way in which they are perceived by their readers and their subject matter. Though personal, the owners of these blogs pride themselves on serving some small duty by informing interested members of the public. Information generated from these three blogs proved very useful to the research as it is a study that involves new media technologies and trends within the South African media climate. In monitoring these blogs I was able to gain useful information about the South African blogosphere, a post on Mike Stopforth's blog informing me of the release of the latest South African Internet and blog statistics which were realised in early 2008. The bulk of the discussion that was observed on these blogs dealt with the web and advances within the web that could further enhance the media world, such as mobile internet and the mobile phone as a multimedia tool. Social media also dominated the content, as the rising star of the media world social media



marketing is of particular interest to Mike Stopforth, and the way in which small business can utilise these technologies for their advertorial purposes. In early 2008 Matthew Buckland answered a few questions about the emerging mobile Internet and its future in the form of an interview with Arthur Goldstuck. Goldstuck explains the three driving forces of mobile Internet:

“There are three basic drivers: one is the improving capability of handsets to access the Internet. E-mail on a cellphone is almost a given, and web browsing is beginning to go that way. The second driver is the explosion of content and applications that allow users to get more out of the handsets and also to personalise them and turn them into extensions of their identity, as well as gateways to a world of information and personal management. The third driver is the great need in unconnected regions to access the kind of information, tools and communication that the Internet makes possible. That will be a major driver in Africa” ([www.matthewbuckland.com](http://www.matthewbuckland.com)).

The interview further explains the various possibilities for South Africa of mobile technology using the Japanese as a case platform. This interview proved to be an interesting piece for unique users as a fair amount of traffic was registered on the day of publishing and there was some mention of the piece on Twitter.

Discussions of interest often cropped up that involved almost all of the South African blogosphere. One such discussion concerns the fictional character Bolton Deventer, who stirred up the blogosphere with regard to his identity. Deventer came onto the blogosphere in 2007 and within a few months he was known by virtually all bloggers, with over 250 friends on Facebook and more than 100 followers on Mybloglog. He held the interest of the blogosphere for months, including members of the

blogosphere such as Vincent Maher and Matthew Buckland. An interest which led Buckland to spread the news that there is a slim possibility that Deventer's identity might be revealed. "So Bolton Deventer, the spoof online marketer, has entered the upcoming local blog awards. The rather odd-looking Deventer, who runs the blog "Webtraffickmaker" is a fictional character, a clever and funny parody of an Internet marketer from Ermelo, apparently created as a "major social experiment". An entire persona was created, which included profiles on Facebook and Mybloglog, which sparked speculation across the blogosphere at the time. Now, Bolton's latest post claims that should he win an SA blog award, Bolton/the Creator-behind-Bolton will pitch up to claim it, ultimately revealing his true identity. But for now his identity is still shrouded in mystery... but I have my theories as to whom it may be" ([www.matthewbuckland.com](http://www.matthewbuckland.com)).

Each blog allowed the audience the opportunity to share their opinions and in cases where differences of opinion arose between blogger and reader, the blogger changed the post to include more evidence from both sides. During my observation of these blogs, I found that they were able to provide interesting and engaging content. There was also a lot of interactivity between these blogs, in the means of linking to each other's posts and blogs.

#### **4.3 Semi-structured interviews**

After the observation process, I understood the basic premise of the South African blogosphere which was about communication and sharing of information. However there were questions that needed answering, questions which were raised by my observations such as blogger backgrounds, their understanding of the South African

journalistic climate and blogosphere. With this in mind, I constructed a semi-structured interview schedule for the owners and editors of these blogs. I wanted to 'tap into' and probe certain issues such as how the bloggers see the blogging experience in this expanding sphere of communication. Do they see themselves playing any important role in the communicative practices of society? Or are they just diarists with time on their hands? I also wanted to relate the information I received during the observation process to better understanding the growing popularity of this kind of journalism, if indeed we can call it that. There is also the issue of a developing group identity and ultimately a new kind of public sphere, or an expansion of the existing public sphere in the South African journalistic context.

Due to the geographical impediments I experienced, the semi-structured interviews were conducted online using instant message applications such as *Google Talk*, *Windows Messenger* and *Skype*. These tools were particularly effective because they possess not only written but voice and video components. The interviews took place in August 2008 with all six blog owners and editors in the space of one week. Although I concede that this is a rather small sample of the South African blogosphere, I believe that when combined with the rest of the research, such as the contributor questionnaires and the online focus group, it does serve to provide useful and descriptive data. The questions posed in the interview schedule were open-ended conducive to dialogue and subjective expression. I developed the interview schedule to reflect how blog owners and editors see the South African journalistic climate through the processes of blogging and engaging with the blogosphere – from chronicling their lives, to having a specific purpose for their blogs and interaction with

each other and the blogosphere. Consequently, there were four sections to the interview schedule:

### *1. Blogging background*

In this section, I asked simple questions regarding when participants started blogging and what introduced them to the concept. I also asked questions relating to their personal background such as occupation. This was done to establish how long they had been blogging as well as understand their occupational background in order to see if it could be related to their blogging. This section was mainly relevant to the personal blogs; however, the contribution-based blogs owned by individuals also provided suitable answers.

### *2. Blogging behaviour and habits*

Here, in order to probe the bloggers' behavioural choices and habits, I asked questions pertaining to their blogging patterns, and also reading patterns. These questions searched for patterns in their interaction with the blogosphere and each other. Through asking simple questions, such as how often do you blog, and how consistently do you blog helped me to categorise the flexibility of the bloggers and their dedication to their respective blogs. I also needed to find out what kind of blogs they themselves read and why. Their choices of blogs to read and the blogs they wished to link to, provide valuable insight to how they feel they fit into the South African blogosphere. I also asked them about their blog traffic, and how they monitored, and if necessary, attempted to improve their traffic. Each aspect of these questions were discussed with the participants and thoroughly explained. As

mentioned above, this section was mainly relevant to the personal blogs; however, the contribution-based blogs owned by individuals also provided suitable answers.

### *3. Key concepts presented in the blogs' content and their purpose*

In this section, the purpose was to explore the reasoning by content choices for the blogs and the overall purpose of each blog. As mentioned in Chapters One and Three, each blog provides a specific area of interest for this research. The questions I asked in this section aimed to find out why each section was decided upon. The key elements of this research were to explore what role new media technologies such as blogs play in contemporary South African journalism, hence providing a deeper understanding into the key concepts that drive these blogs and their purpose are of paramount importance to the research.

### *4. Audiences and the Public Sphere*

Two of the key theoretical concepts through which this research was analysed were the public sphere and audiences, this I felt that I needed to ask questions of this nature in order to explore further these theoretical notions. Here I asked questions about monitoring conversations on participants blogs and how they facilitate debates. I also wanted to explore the relationship between the blogger and the reader, and ways in which that relationship translates into the blogs and the message of the blog. With regard to the three contribution-based blogs understanding audience dynamics is essential to gaining an accurate perceptive on the blogs and their purpose. Also, it was important to gauge the owners' and editors' opinions of whether the blogosphere was becoming a new public sphere or was merely an expansion of the existing public sphere.

### **4.3.1. Analysis of semi-structured interviews**

For the analysis of this section, I go through each of the six blogs separately, based on the categories presented in the above section. The reason for analysing these blogs separately is that the interview schedules were blog-specific so it makes sense to analyse them independently. Each blog is analysed on its ability to inform, educate and entertain.

#### **4.3.1.1. Thought Leader**

The *Thought Leader* interview schedule was more journalistically inclined as *Thought Leader* is owned by a media company. *Thought Leader* is the only blog in the research owned by a media company and the only one which includes contributors who are also print journalists. The questions on the interview schedule tried to develop this fact.

##### *a. Blogging background*

Because *Thought Leader* is a company-owned blog personally oriented questions were rather impossible answer, however some of the questions were reworked for *Thought Leader*. So here finding out why the Mail & Guardian Online chose to create this blog was the key element and also who was eligible to contribute to it. According to the creators, as was mentioned previously, *Thought Leader* was established in 2007 with the aim of providing a platform for intelligent and stimulating opinion from *Mail & Guardian* journalists and columnists as well as other writers, commentators, intellectuals and opinion makers across various industries and political spectra. '*Thought Leader* is not only a platform for some of the country's established writers

and personalities but is home to some of the country's up-and-coming writers. *Thought Leader* is all about debate, offering readers the opportunity to comment and discuss issues raised by contributors' (thoughtleader.co.za).

*b. Blogging behaviour and habits*

As discussed earlier, although this section is again more suited to individually-owned or run blogs, I was able to rework some of the questions for *Thought Leader*. Some of the key questions in this section were to probe *Thought Leader's* interaction or place in the blogosphere as well as examine its consistency and its traffic monitoring strategy. Some of this information was gained in the observation process; the South African and European blogosphere is well aware of the contribution made to communication by *Thought Leader* as a fair amount of blogs and websites link back and subscribe to *Thought Leader*. All one needs to do is Google the words *Thought Leader* and find them. "*Thought Leader* editors are on hand all day editing and uploading new articles every few hours" says *Thought Leader* creator. This answers the question of consistency but raises another issue, "Is a blog truly a blog when there are people on hand editing the writers' words?" The answer is: "Yes, simply because the editors do not change anything, they simply correct unfortunate grammatical errors after all we are still a newsgroup". *Thought Leader's* traffic is monitored by Amatomu ([www.amatomu.com](http://www.amatomu.com)) another creation by *Mail & Guardian Online* to help track the growing South African blogosphere.

*c. Key concepts presented in the blog's content and its purpose*

The purpose of *Thought Leader* as mentioned throughout the chapters of this thesis was to facilitate debate amongst intellectual thinkers and thought provokers within

the community. Content is crucial with a blog such as *Thought Leader* as its sole purpose is to generate thought-provoking debates within the community. Contributors to *Thought Leader* are provided with categories in which they can post their pieces, such as news, politics, perspective, media, marketing and business. The content on *Thought Leader* tends to be dominated by mostly those of political and current affairs orientation. One of the most prominent debates on *Thought Leader* during my observation period was an article asking readers to imagine that Robert Mugabe the Zimbabwean president was white. The article explores what would have happened if a white president had done what Mugabe was doing. The question is posed as to how world leaders and organisations would respond to the following: “The overwhelming majority of Zimbabwe’s population remains black, the murder and torture continues, the destroyed economy with its 100 000% plus inflation, the 80% unemployment, the average lifespan of 37 years, the ban on the media, the election rigging and the total onslaught on the population is all still there, but done in the name of a white, instead of a black president... [Concluding that] the white president would have had his backside handed to him a long time ago [by world leaders and organisations such as the UN and SADC]. In addition he would have been styled a butcher, not a liberator. He would be facing a future along the lines of Saddam Hussein rather than president in a government of national unity” ([www.thoughtleader.com/traps](http://www.thoughtleader.com/traps)). This is the type of discussion that dominates *Thought Leader*.

#### *d. Audience and the public sphere*

Understanding the role *Thought Leader* plays in terms of their audience in facilitating debate and discussion was essential to the success of this research. Audience



participation is crucial to the success of an enterprise such as *Thought Leader*, with creators stating that '[they] welcome as much interaction and vibrant discussion between [their] contributors and their readers as possible -- but [they do warn that they wish] the website to be a mature and thought-provoking environment, so some guidelines apply for posting comments'(thoughtleader.co.za). As mentioned above and in the preceding chapters, the comments from the audience are moderated classifications provided by the *Thought Leader* creators, such as sexist, racist and/or inappropriate classifications.

The article mentioned in the above section created a great deal of debate on *Thought Leader* with responses from both sides of the argument. One reader said: "I get your drift. If a white president treated black Zimbabweans (at least those not in league with him) as Mugabe has the world would scream racism. However, that raises the question as to why didn't everyone scream racism when Mugabe destroyed the productive white farmers of Zimbabwe, thus turning his country from a breadbasket into a basket case? It's true that whites were a small minority in Zimbabwe. Did that make it more justifiable to attack THEM and take THEIR farms and property? Is it racist even to stand up for Mugabe's white victims?" and another responding with an opposing view saying, "...what if GW Bush was black. Will the world have allowed him to invade Iraq? Will he be illegally imprisoning [people] in the Guantanamo [Bay]? Will the innocent civilians being killed by his hired mercenaries in Iraq be considered collateral damage? Traps, you are always bringing race into your debates. Why is it that you always see in black and white? Did the likes of Botha get their place at The Hague, or were they innocent victims of the ANC terrorists? No, whether Mugabe was white or black or yellow is neither here nor

there, you are just trying to play a race card and your point is to try as much as possible to get whites onto your side. It is a fact that whites also committed atrocities on their kith and kin. What if Hitler was black? What if Lumumba was white? Would he have been assassinated? What if Mandela was white? Would he have been, up to the present day, still labelled a terrorist by the USA yet the white apartheid govt was the ally of the USA (getting all support to defend itself against these black terrorists)?" ([www.thoughtleader.co.za/traps](http://www.thoughtleader.co.za/traps)). As interesting as the debate was, there was very little interaction between the writer and the readers. What I did find astonishing were the readers themselves. They responded to each other and confirmed or disproved each other's claims. *Thought Leader* is an audience platform, the writer presents them with an issue worth discussing and they discuss it, which leads us to the public sphere. However, the question arises: "Who is the public?" How different are intellectuals sitting in their "hollowed coffee-house" of the educated elite to intellectuals sitting behind a computer discussing the same things.

#### **4.3.1.2. SA Rocks**

*SA Rocks*, though contribution-based, is owned by an individual; the categories of the interview schedule were perfectly suitable and did not need to be modified. *SA Rocks* operates on a small scale which means that unlike the vast number of *Thought Leader* contributors, it has only seven contributors. The questions on *SA Rocks* tried to exploit the good news regime it has adopted. A fact to be stressed is that though the interview schedules generally have the same sections, some questions do differ slightly from blog to blog.

*a. Blogging background*

As the founder and editor of *SA Rocks*, Nic Haralambous established *SA Rocks* as a form of positive social activism. Believing it's better to stay and find the good in a country where everyone else prefers to see the bad and run, "I had reached tipping point and it was either get involved to change the mentality or leave. I chose to stay and fight the best way I knew how". Established in early 2007, *SA Rocks* invites all South Africans both in the country and outside to tell their South African stories of good news. As the editor and owner of *SA Rocks* Nic Haralambous produces a fair amount of the content and edits the content of the contributors. He also manages the business of the blog, the marketing, sales and advertising, which includes sourcing for advertisers and promoting the blog.

*b. Blogging behaviour and habits*

Though *SA Rocks* is relatively small, it has a strong presence in the South African blogosphere and a growing presence in other blogospheres. *SA Rocks'* interaction with the blogosphere is quite prominent as various bloggers are invited to have their say on a sometimes once-off basis. Each person that writes for *SA Rocks* gets listed on the supporter page with a link to their blog and they reciprocate that link on their own blogs. This way *SA Rocks* is widely recognisable throughout the South African blogosphere. As editor, Nic Haralambous makes it a priority to read as many blogs as possible: "I subscribe to a lot of South African blogs as well as blogs overseas, yes it becomes difficult to keep up with everything but its like reading the paper, just make some time and get to it. Also keep up on twitter see what everyone is talking about and what they are reading". Consistency is important for *SA Rocks'* existence and each of the regular contributors is assigned a specific day of the week on which

their articles are posted. However, should something of interest occur during the course of the day, the editor would blog about it regardless of time of day. *SA Rocks* enjoys over a thousand page-views per day and monitors the blog traffic through *amatomu* and *Afrigator* a blog tracker created to monitor blogs not just in South Africa but all of Africa.

*c. Key concepts presented in the blog's content and purpose*

Though most often classified, the content of *SA Rocks* also provides other categories such as culture, events and featured pieces – pieces with an interesting element such as award wins by South African groups or people, or issues worth discussing. One such issue was the youth pledge which inspired a fair amount of conversation on *SA Rocks*. The pledge goes, “*We, the youth of South Africa recognising the injustices of our past, honour those who suffered and sacrificed for justice and freedom. We will respect and protect the dignity of each person, and stand up for justice. We sincerely declare that we shall uphold the rights and values of our constitution and promise to act in accordance with the duties and responsibilities that flow from these rights*”. This pledge has been the subject of many discussions both on and off line and *SA Rocks* takes issue with only a part of the pledge in a post by its editor which goes: “...In essence I think it can't be too bad to make children aware of their role in a country, an absolutely important role. However, I take task with one sentence this is the part where my apartheid museum story is relevant – ‘*Recognising the injustices of our past*’. Why include this sentence? Why make children bitter from such a young age? Why try to force them to relive something that they were never a part of? Why not just teach them history, the history of our ancestors and of this country? Why the need to state explicitly that

we must recognise the injustice? Because in my mind all that is being insinuated is that we recognise the past and are going to get our own back today”. Such content finds its way to *SA Rocks*, but it diversifies itself in that articles about wine and food and the most authentic South African restaurants are featured as well.

*SA Rocks* has also become more of a community initiative with bloggers asking the editor of the sight to help with exposure for other activist groups. One such group is presented as follows: “FILMMAKERS AGAINST RACISM (FAR) – an initiative launched on 23rd May 2008 in response to the shocking wave of xenophobic violence hitting South Africa – will be producing six 24 minute documentaries, as well as [eight] 30 second Public Service Announcements, which will be broadcast by SABC, and hopefully e.tv and MNET as well as community TV stations”. The *SA Rocks* editor issued a statement saying, “The site seems to be a general awareness site with more of an action-based campaign at the centre of the awareness. I think it’s a fantastic idea and it is great to see filmmakers and the arts getting involved practically and taking the initiative. If the filmmakers lead the public is bound to follow”. In so doing *SA Rocks* constantly fulfils its intended purpose which is to provide the South African with good news or positive concepts regarding the country and by so doing build “a better and stronger community”.

#### *d. Audience and the public sphere*

Monitoring audience conversation is a key component of *SA Rocks* as it prides itself on being citizen-oriented. Unlike *Thought Leader*, *SA Rocks* does not practice comment moderation and seldom removes a comment or post simply because of the response it received. However, if the author requests their piece be removed the

editor does oblige. “There are no limitations other than hate speech or defamation. Contributors are free to represent any views as long as the post/opinion is balanced and debatable. I don’t stand for racism on my website”. These are simple rules of etiquette in society which allows for a fair and balanced discussion. *SA Rocks* has been described by other bloggers as fitting into a new journalistic climate where the audience opinion comes before that of the state’s. As Haralambous notes, “*SA Rocks* doesn’t fit into a journalistic climate at all. We are not trying to take on or represent ourselves as journalist. We are citizens writing about positive events and debating South Africa as a focal point. Obviously there is a sense of citizen journalist appeal, but that is just a sense”. These citizens have managed to grab the attention of the media and corporations around South Africa.

Discussions on *SA Rocks* take the form of informal conversation. A sense of causal eloquence is perceived throughout the blog, it is not an arena set just for intellectuals. Since it was developed by a young person (Haralambous being 23 at the time he created *SA Rocks*), the younger members of society have found it easier to relate to *SA Rocks*. This might be the reason why discussions such as the youth pledge receive a lot of responses from the audience. Different responses arose concerning the pledge and Nic Haralambous’ issues with it, one reader saying “I am sorry, but what is wrong with recognizing the injustices of the past? They happened. As soon as history is forgotten it is doomed to be repeated. What is wrong with a reminder of how horrible oppression can be, with the pledge of, by living up to our constitution, never allowing it to happen again? Why can’t children be taught to remember this?” While another stated that “There is nothing wrong with remembering the history - what happened, how things changed, and where we are

now. Study it in History like the world wars, Vietnam, Boer war etc. But I'm sorry - repeating this every single day at school? When we dwell on the past then that is where we stay. I think this sort of thing just fuels animosity between races and what's done is done. Focus on how we can make SA better and cope with the MASSIVE challenges facing the country which frankly right now looks to the outside world as if it's headed in the wrong direction. Get on with it. Live and integrate, don't keep harping on about how the 'black people' triumphed over the evil 'white people' - that's not a message conducive to healing and forgiveness". The debate carried on over a few days with Nic Haralambous responding to each reader's comment, as well as the readers responding to each other. This type of dialogue between writer and reader is common for *SA Rocks*, as I discovered during my observation process. Whether or not it is a public sphere is an issue which is debateable – there is a case for public interest. As Haralambous notes, "*SA Rocks* has an interest of the public/for the public rather than public interest. I think that what I provide is an alternative to the depressing news. I like to put the public in my news, articles and events. Getting them involved in positively enhancing the country. That means that they want to read and want to change and want to feel positive". By getting the audience involved in almost all aspects of *SA Rocks*, Haralambous has managed to keep constant two-way dialogue with the audience making them media citizens. Something emphasised by Yu (2006), "As a social and political category, the audience can be reconstructed as an integral part of media citizenship through their media practices".

#### **4.3.1.3. Wibble**

*Wibble*, like *Thought Leader* and *SA Rocks*, is a contribution-based blog that seeks to get enterprising thinkers to write and comment on issues relating to their area of expertise. Also, as an individual answered for *Wibble*, the interview schedule was more conducive to the sections determined by the observation process as outlined in section 4.3. *Wibble* took a more lifestyle approach toward the content which the interview schedule chose to explore.

##### *a. Blogging background*

Also established early in 2007, *Wibble* has grown in readers in the last year and a half, attracting various individuals to be a part of its contributor list. Unlike *Thought Leader* and *SA Rocks*, which are almost exclusively invitation-based contribution, *Wibble* welcomes anyone to sign up and join their blogging family. Laurian Clemence was hired as the editor before they went online; she already ran a successful personal blog. “As the editor I was hired to get the ball rolling. For six months I was in charge of recruiting new writers, getting the word out, helping the sales person secure advertising, and give ‘passion presentations.’ These involved telling people about blogging, the interactive Internet and Web 2.0 – mainly companies and advertising agencies, as we wanted to explain to them how to use blogging within their communication strategies. I also had to edit and monitor incoming posts. We obviously had a quality and content standard we wanted to adhere to.”

##### *b. Blogging behaviour and habits*

*Wibble* has over 400 registered users. However, not all users contribute through the creating of posts, some of them are just readers, and hence it slightly difficult to



judge accurately how many contributors *Wibble* has. However, there is still a fair amount of discussion that goes on the blog which helps in building a presence within the South African blogosphere. There is a fair amount of interaction with the blogosphere through links from other bloggers and bloggers referring to articles on *Wibble* on their blog. The blog does run into some consistency issues as they are solely reliant on audience contribution and, as most of their contributors are working, they have very little time to spare and unlike *Thought Leader* they do not have as many active contributors. However, the blog does manage to get updated once a day and sometimes it is updated more than once a day. *Wibble* traffic is monitored through *Afrigator* and receives around fifty thousand page impressions a month.

*c. Key concepts presented in the blog (content) and purpose*

*Wibble* has multiple categories for multiple industries and verticals: technology, news, politics, business, finance, entertainment, reviews, sports and health, with new categories – less classifiable in relation to the former – being added when required. *Wibble* presents little to no limitations to its contributors. As Clemence notes, “we wanted to keep the commentary/posting interesting, but it is important that a standard was kept, as anyone could sign up and write their personal afflictions onto a Blogger or Wordpress blog. *Wibble* was designed for a different purpose. We also tried to appeal to a wide variety of educated people”.

The *Wibble* editor encourages contributors to take ideas from the news and mainstream media, believing that blogging plays a role in the current journalistic climate in South Africa. “Journalists and bloggers seem to fight against each other – or at least bang their heads against the same wall. They should work together, and

although traditional [journalist] purists believe that the greying edges of writing are due to Blogging, it's just the way it has become. One can't fight Web 2.0, because it's a reality, and the climate is slowly changing and starting to adapt to [blogging].” The writing style on *Wibble* is not necessarily journalistic to say the least; however the contributors do take a certain lifestyle magazine approach toward the writing.

Posts on *Wibble* are generally shorter than those of *Thought Leader* and *SA Rocks* and they reflect more on the author's choice than a unique sense of societal issues. Hence, sporting news hence takes some precedence here, one item being the quota system in sport where one of the contributors expresses his joy at the banning of the quota system with the following post:

“Well, well well, the South African government seems to have defied all odds and taken to heart the advice that so many people have tried to beat into it for years with regard to quotas in sport. Heard this on the news this morning and there's an article on it too: Sports Minister Makhenketsi Stofile said that there are to be no more calls for quotas in SA sport and talent will be developed from the ground up. Hallelujah!!!! I can't tell you how much faith this has given me that the SA government actually does have more than three brain cells to share amongst the whole lot of them. I've always been hugely against politics getting its stinky fingers into sport so I just hope that the government can follow through with all the "big talk" and leave SA sport up to the people who know how to make it work - whoever they may be. Granted, it's not the panacea we've been waiting for, because we still need to find people who actually know their arses from their elbows to run bodies like SARU and Swimming SA (etc.) - but it's a start. And before people start making all

sorts of stupid comments about white-dominated sport in SA, I agree with equality, representation and blah blah blah.... but it's good to see that it's being done the correct way now. Isn't it wonderful when you take the emotion out of it? Logic prevails. Better late than never I suppose.”

Throughout *Wibble* such posts are found which deal with an individual's interest and opinions from the important to the mundane. *Wibble* has a relaxed concept toward their content: if it is interesting enough to write about then it is interesting enough to be on the blog.

#### *d. Audience and the public sphere*

Unlike the other blogs mentioned in the previous sections, *Wibble* does not have that big audience conversation system. Comments on *Wibble* are few and far between, this possibly being a result of the above-mentioned issues such content choices. However audiences are reading the material posted on *Wibble* as suggested by the page impressions, they are just not responding to it. The editor has strong feelings about the blogosphere as a possible public sphere: Clemence notes, “It's a community, and a very strong one at that, just from my own personal experience. [Bloggers] are generally very supportive of each other. It is a place where people interact, share photos, clips, music, opinions – it is very much a public domain – if not more so than face-to-face [conversations] these days, what with social networking.” And one hopes that *Wibble* will fulfill all those requirements of a public sphere.

#### **4.3.1.4. Matthew Buckland, Mike Stopforth and Vincent Maher**

I decided it would be better to analyse the three remaining blogs together as they are personal blogs and the owners responses to questions tended to interconnect. Their interview schedules were identical as their blogs raised the same types of questions. Each of these blogs is very new media-centric, with each author's biography stating their dedicated interest in Web 2.0.

##### *a. Blogging background*

Each of these bloggers has been blogging for more than two years and began blogging as a means of expressing themselves and sharing ideas with their peers. There are no contributors on these blogs, all content is written by the owner aside from reader responses and when the owner wishes to express someone else's view they simply do so by linking to the original post.

##### *b. Blogging behavior and habits*

Like most bloggers in the South African blogosphere, these bloggers try to read as many blogs as possible. They keep up with what is happening in the blogosphere through *Google Reader* and through trackbacks they are able to monitor specific discussions and to be updated when they are not at their screens or online. These bloggers are very popular within the South African blogosphere as are their blogs evident by the number of people who link to them and those they wish to link to. As two of these bloggers (Matthew Buckland and Vincent Maher) were the brains behind the Amatomu, the blog traffic tracker mentioned above, it is easy to see why they chose to use it to track their blog traffic. Mike Stopforth is the co-creator of *Afrigator*, hence he uses it to track his blog traffic. Altogether they receive over two

thousand page-views per day. Consistency for these bloggers is not a prominent issue, they try to average about one post per day unless it is an interesting blog day with a lot of information surfacing that needs discussing.

*c. Key concepts presented in the blogs' content and purpose*

Without a doubt these are personally oriented blogs which first and foremost chronicle the interest and sometimes daily antics of their owners. However each of these bloggers has set their blogs to serve a purpose that does much more than chronicle their lives. As these are professional men, they have incorporated that part of their lives into their blogs. Their content provides insights into key areas such as new media and more specifically web 2.0, marketing and social media. These blogs tend to play an educational and informing role in society through discussing the latest developments in the media world and the merits these developments hold. They observe debates in their various industries and present a point of view on their blogs. One such case is Vincent Maher explaining the confusion in defining the term multimedia with a post that expresses the following:

“There is an ongoing debate in both academia and the media industry about the meaning of the term multimedia. The distinction is subtle so I will illustrate with examples. On the one hand there are those who argue that there is a distinction between multi- and multiple- media, by pointing out that putting some video next to some text does not equate to proper multimedia in terms of both presentation and user-experience. The true multimedia, by this definition, is something more than the sum of its parts AND something that has a form of its own that is recognisable. In other words, true multimedia is a different type of story-telling that fuses different types of media into a new

cohesive form. This is a point worth considering, because the reality is that the only dramatically new form of storytelling to emerge as a result of new media is the video/computer game. There are of course other new hybrid forms like blogging, like podcasting, like videocasting, like geo-tagged microblogging, like folksonomical aggregation and so on. Each of these are variations of audio or video representations of real people or things involved in some or other activity, or text.” ([www.vincentmaher.com](http://www.vincentmaher.com))

Maher’s piece goes further to introduce his readers to the concept of Massively Multiple Media (M3) and its claim to the power formerly owned by multimedia. His piece reads like an academic paper for non-academics who make up a large proportion of his audience.

Pieces like these are popular occurrences within these blogs as seen in Matthew Buckland’s interview with Arthur Goldstuck on [www.matthewbuckland.com](http://www.matthewbuckland.com), and Mike Stopforth takes it upon himself to explain the next steps for social media on his blog, writing:

“Much of the hype and noise surrounding social media and its meteoric rise (especially in the USA) has abated. Perhaps owing to the global economic crisis, arguably due to the apparent lack of sustainable business models and possibly as a result of some semblance of reasonable thinking, we’re no longer reading about \$1.6 billion investments in YouTube and \$15 billion Facebook valuations. At the same time social media or Web 2.0 or new media or whatever the heck you choose to call it certainly hasn’t disappeared either. On the one (marketing) hand we’re seeing significantly higher budget percentages being pushed at below-the-line, experiential and digital (for the

purposes of this conversation including online and mobile) channels - a sure sign that business takes the effect that the social media evolution has had on their customers pretty seriously. Agencies are feeling this - a fact that keeps my company and me very busy.” ([www.mathewbuckland.com](http://www.mathewbuckland.com))

These are the facts present in the South African blogosphere; as much as people wish to chronicle the particularly mundane happenings of their everyday lives, they also wish to be part of something much bigger through industry discussions such as these. These are topics that traditional journalists do not take the time to discuss and those who do are special interest journalists who may or may not be involved in that particular industry.

These blogs provide solid content on industry and invite people to discuss these changes with them as well as their readers. These blogs also wish to inspire change. Mike Stopforth, during the xenophobic attacks, called on his fellow bloggers to help spread a message of peace and to collect goods for those who had been affected by the attacks. Every now and again the readers are invited to share personal triumphs such as the birth of their children or accolades they may receive.

#### *d. Audience and the public sphere*

Unlike the contribution-based blogs, these blogs are not very concerned about dialogue with their readers. Their aims are not necessarily to incur debates but to introduce blog readers to interesting topics and developments. That being said, there are conversations on these blogs, they are not necessarily debates, but reader additions and question about what the author has said. An interesting example is a response to Mike Stopforth’s social media piece, saying: “Excellent post. I think you

really hit the nail on the head when you said ‘the answer to the digital evolution is not scrapping everything you know to embrace everything you don’t.’ That’s exactly where some pundits and self-proclaimed gurus like Joe Jaffe get it wrong. Jaffe in particular misses the mark when he sets up the answer as ‘either/ or’ (mainstream v social) rather than ‘and’. It’s all about the mix and the connectivity.” Sometimes issues do develop in to massive debates and the authors get involved with readers responding to them, some of these debates breaking out into other new media avenues such as Facebook or twitter. These blogs are built to be platforms which represent a type of public sphere simply because individual opinions are the dominant norm on these blogs.

#### **4.4. Contributor questionnaires**

The self completion questionnaires given to contributors were intended to facilitate a better understanding of the content choice of the contribution-based blogs as they were the primary content providers. I also wanted to explore their reasons for choosing or in some cases agreeing to contribute to these blogs and their opinions on the concept of blogging and the role they feel it plays in the current South African media climate. I had five respondents from each blog; they were chosen because their posts were some of the more popular ones and they were consistent in their posting. I will be assessing these responses per blog.

##### **4.4.1. Thought Leader**

The five respondents I used from *Thought Leader* had little to no blogging experience prior to their involvement with *Thought Leader*; they had been invited based on their occupations as lawyers, food scientists, lecturers and writers. They all agreed that their choice of content focuses on a fair amount of current affairs, mainly



politics which is almost a given with the *Mail & Guardian's* reputation. Their behaviour within the blogosphere is almost non-existent as they seldom read other blogs other than those which they contribute to. However, their feelings about the blogosphere are optimistic as they see it as occupying a space in the new journalistic climate. "They [the blogs] cover all areas previously occupied by mainstream journalism and allow a far wider range of views which otherwise would not have been heard." "Blogs, depending on the host site are mostly social un-researched commentary. It is the man on the street's view of life as it unfolds. I believe blogs are there primarily to call people on their [drivel]. Journalists and respected social commentators all have agendas, however much they may try to convince us that they are impartial."

These respondents believe that blogs, *Thought Leader* in particular, serve a wide area of public interest in creating debates. One of the respondents notes, "Blogs are mostly un-edited, therefore are pure. They are there to give the real picture of life and not a watered down, sugar-coated corporate agenda version of life designed to sell copies or shape public perception of certain issues." They find that the need for debate in the current political climate in South Africa allows blogs such as *Thought Leader* to lend itself as an expansion of the existing public sphere.

#### **4.4.2. SA Rocks**

The five respondents from *SA Rocks* were more familiar to the blogging concept as they had and still successfully run their own blogs prior to contributing to *SA Rocks*. Some of these contributors had been invited by Nic Haralambous and others approached him because they admired what he was doing and wished to be a part

of it. They see blogs taking on many different roles such as “a means of testing public opinion, a way of finding sources, extra informal comment on an issue”; “offering a variety of voices, from which you often see dominant views emerging”; “they highlight and give wider access to the existing, real world debates.” These respondents are active in the South African blogosphere constantly, reading blogs, searching for new ideas and ways to enhance their discussion on *SA Rocks*. They agree that entities such as blogs are critical to democratic debate, especially in a society like South Africa where change is almost a given. Some of the respondents believe that it is an established and viable public sphere while some disagree simply because access is not always granted to those who need it, allowing the voice of the elite to be heard while the disempowered still remain in the silent.

#### **4.4.3. Wibble**

The *Wibble* respondents unlike those from *Thought Leader* and *SA Rocks* were not all invited nor did they approach the blog editor, they simply signed on and began blogging. Again here some of them had little to no experience of blogging but were eager to write. Content choices as mentioned in the *Wibble* analysis section were fairly relaxed. The respondents simply went about their daily lives and found interesting things to blog about. Their interaction with the blogosphere is for some, fairly restricted to *Wibble*, while others have ventured into the blogosphere to find it to be “critical to participation in an energetic democracy” noted a regular *Wibble* contributor. Their responses to the blogosphere as a public sphere are quite positive as they believe it “may be considered THE new public sphere. People love to be heard and they love to be involved, blogging gives them that avenue of expression about their lives and helps them find similarly minded people to share their lives with.

It is going to be a slow start, but in time as more and more people have the access to the Internet then it shall become even more viable. People will of course need to be educated on this new platform, but that can be done with time”. Again, access being the key issue to the growth and success of the blogosphere in becoming a viable public sphere, it is proving difficult for anyone truly to judge the blogosphere.

#### **4.5. Online focus group**

I developed an online focus group on Facebook as a way to reach out to the audience. I found that I had heard the views of blog owners and contributors but I hadn't heard the views of the audience which was necessary for the research to be a success. The group consisted of sixty members and forty of those members were active at any given time during the discussions. Each of the people who took part in the discussion was guaranteed anonymity during the presentation of the findings and the research was carefully explained to them before hand.

The discussion began with exploring readers' interaction within the blogosphere. All of the participants were avid blog readers and some of them had their own blogs. More importantly most of them read the blogs I used as my research sample. Some of them subscribe to blogs through *Google Reader* as most of my sample did. One of the key questions asked was: “How do blogs fit in and contribute to the current South African journalistic climate in terms of educating, informing and entertaining?” Examples of the responses follows: “I think they play an important part in creating a journalistic sphere – where journalists and other members of civil society can speak about the current news events. It forms part of the functions of journalism, named above”; “It is really interesting to engage with other people who share similar

interests to you (hence the primary reason we're all on the same site). It is important for the blogger to write a blog post with substance, something that can be backed up by factual evidence. The way in which the writer describes any given topic should be done so in a way that engages the audience to contribute, argue, debate or agree with the original post. I do think in that way this becomes a good platform to learn about other opinions on a given topic. People also respond to visual stimulation and I think this is when things become entertaining and informative too. Blogs also provide a platform to showcase one's portfolio, be it video, pictures and/ or copy and the person concerned can then learn, improve and adapt to new trends, techniques"; "South Africans together with other global citizens inhabit a network society where digital media is rapidly developing and replacing the old media systems. Thus, blogs is one of these new digital media that play a new role in the workplace of South African journalism." These responses suggest that the audience believe that blogs serve some journalistic purpose and contribute to the current journalistic climate in South Africa.

Another important point raised in this research is the idea of a public sphere. Bloggers and contributors had various opinions on the blogosphere serving as a public sphere. When this issue was posed to the audience their responses were supportive in outlook: "I do believe that [blogs serve] as a public sphere. Julius Malema, ANC Youth League President caused a massive outcry with his 'Kill for Zuma' comments. On a blogging scale people discussed and debated this issue until the matter was taken further. I do think that it's a good sign of a healthy, developing democracy where people engage and interact on blogs with topics relating directly to the ruling party or governmental issues" said a respondent. Another notes, "Blogs

serve a public/democratic interest by giving interactive platforms to the audience, to be able to give their own feedback to reporters/public figures, which in the past they were unable to do. Blogs is one of the technologies that have given the audience the possibility of two-way communication.”

The online focus group presented an insight into how the audience is thinking and what they think is relevant as much of the discussion is about what the audience wants and needs.

## Chapter five: Conclusion

In this final chapter I conclude my research by reaffirming my general findings and resituating them in the wider context of South African media and consider the inference of these findings for contemporary journalism and public sphere in South Africa. I go back to the leading questions of this study: “What is the role played by blogging in contemporary South African journalism?” “To what extent has the blogosphere become a Public Sphere?” “How have blogs influenced/changed/impacted the style and content of South African journalism?” The impact of blogs on South African journalism needs to be understood and evaluated. I will discuss the findings in terms of how the South African blogosphere is contributing in a positive or negative way to the new journalistic climate in South Africa. I will also discuss the possibilities of a new public sphere or the emergence of a counter-public sphere through the South African blogosphere. I will also look at negative outcomes and consider possibilities for further research in this area.

The findings of this study are descriptive and interpretative. Though context specific, this research would interest scholars because it provides data which could extend or revise current thinking about the South African audience, the blogosphere and the public sphere. Although research has been done on blogs in Europe and the United States of America, the specifics of this research, that is, understanding the role of blogs in the current journalistic and consequentially the political climate, will provide evidence for broader perspective on the relationship between blogging and journalism and a well-represented way of studying the media.

Throughout this research I have carefully examined the content each of these blogs provides in order to answer the empirical questions posed in Chapter One. Hence I proceed with drawing my conclusions from the findings regarding the extent to which the South African blogosphere is contributing to:

- The new journalistic climate in South Africa
- The creation of an interactive audience
- Facilitating the emergence of a new public or counter-public sphere

For the sake of clarity, I will draw my conclusions under the headings of the three areas of my theoretical framework discussed in Chapter Two.

### **5.1 New media and journalism**

A key concept I used in theorising and formulating this research is the notion that new media technologies are changing the face of journalism and the way in which we approach story-telling. Pavlik (1998) has been very vocal in discussing these new technologies and what they mean to journalism and communication in general, stating that: “The work of journalists and other communication practitioners has been changed dramatically by a variety of technologies and a phenomenon called “convergence” in an era that is called the information age” (Pavlik, 1998: 6). Clearly this is true of South African journalism today; journalists are using these tools to tell their stories faster and more effectively. Interviews are being done over the Internet and, as discussed in Chapter Two, a fair number of news agents are starting to incorporate multimedia reporting in their story telling. Examples include *The Times* multimedia portal, *Mail & Guardian Online* and the newly established video link at *The Witness*. These newspapers like others in South Africa and the world see the merits of getting their information out there faster and with more visuals. This also

resonates in what Vincent Maher discusses in his blog relating to multimedia and the emerging concept of Massively Multiple Media (M3). Massively Multiple Media is concept that works on the premise of a special report which includes everything. “These might involve a series of text stories, photographs, audios, downloadable documents and videos” (Maher, 2008). The advent of Web 2.0 and the emerging Web 3.0 have changed the way in which news/content is presented to the audience is another factor examined by this research, the way in which new media technologies have changed the presentation and reception of news.

## **5.2 Journalistic blogging**

When discussing journalistic blogging, writers and academics such as Rebecca Blood (2003) refer to four types of blogs, those written by journalists; those written by professionals about their industry; those written by individuals at the scene of a major event and those that link primarily to news about current events. The sample of this research fit into the types of blog that Blood describes. A fair amount of *Thought Leader* is written by journalists as well as professionals and individuals linking to the news. *SA Rocks* takes a more on-the-scene approach by covering events such as the one million people march against crime. *Wibble* also takes on the role of on-the-scene reporting through sporting events such as the cricket game. And finally the last three blogs, as stressed in the preceding chapter, are written by professionals about their industry.

However, the question which this research asks is not just about fitting into a predefined mould of what journalistic blogging is, but whether or not the content can be considered as journalistic, subsequently creating a role for blogs in contemporary



South African journalism. With that being said, it is important to go back to Chapter Two where the meaning of news is discussed because effectively what journalists do is report the news. Stephens (1988: 9) writes that news is 'new information about a subject of some public interest that is shared with some portion of the public. . . News is, in effect, what is on a society's mind' (in Wall, 2005). As mundane and elementary as it sounds, the best way to arrive at a conclusion regarding journalistic blogging and the role blogs play, is by looking at the samples and seeing if they not only fit in to Blood's definition of journalistic blog types but also Stephens definition of news:

- Firstly, looking at *Thought Leader* and what its purposes are, it is plausible to conclude that it is journalistically inclined because for a fair amount of the time, *Thought Leader* discusses information on society's mind which Stephen refers to as being news.
- Secondly, *SA Rocks*, which describes itself as the opposite of depressing news, serves what Stephen refers to as information relating to 'some public interest that is shared with some portion of the public'. The growing numbers of *SA Rocks*' following which is well over three thousand registered users, suggest that information provided by *SA Rocks* appeals to the interests of some portion of the online public, providing them with sometimes new information and expanding on existing information about positive things regarding South Africa.
- Thirdly, it is slightly difficult to identify *Wibble* in terms of journalistic blogging due to the issues pointed out in the previous chapters with regard to content and the way in which content is presented. However, there is the notion of magazine style reporting which *Wibble* does adopt, their content being

directed at a more leisure-seeking audience and it is mostly individual opinions of existing ideas.

- Lastly, the three personal blogs provide increasingly interesting content about their industries. In today's society, industry has become a big part of what we do and think about, especially with new technologies being introduced in every area of our lives. Hence it is fair to say that these blogs do serve some sort of journalistic purpose, because not only do they introduce us to these concepts of our everyday lives, they help us understand these technologies better and suggest ways in which other industries can incorporate them in their daily working environment to improve efficiency.

Judging from the above discussion, it is safe to conclude that there is a place for blogs in contemporary South African journalism. The above discussion can also be reexamined through the statement by Bloom (2003) in Chapter Two, in which he argues, "If journalism is the first draft of history, blogs might just be the first draft of journalism. The rapid-fire, spontaneous nature of blogs (typos and all) makes them at once fascinating, immensely valuable as an early source of breaking stories, and frustrating in that much of what appears in blogs ends up being clarified or corrected later" (Bloom, 2003). Therefore this is part of the role played by blogs in journalism: they provide journalists with a start to investigating bigger and more interesting stories. News agents such *The Times*, *The Witness* and *News24* incorporate blogs on their website and encourage their journalists as well as their readers to blog.

### 5.3 The public sphere: the new public place

A prominent quest throughout this research has been the attempt to understand the blogosphere through relating it to the public sphere. This essentially involves determining whether or not the blogosphere can become or is a sustainable public sphere. Through theorising this, research issues such counter-publicity emerged, enhancing the theoretical framework to include the possibility of the blogosphere as an emerging counter-public sphere. The media forms part of the public sphere, and is usually dominated by the more powerful players of society. As we become active in this globalised era, it is possible for the *consumers* of the content to interact with the *producers* of the content. As argued by Fink, “The Information Age is known for the ‘communication revolution’, as the traditional communication methods have been transformed from one-way communication models to interactive platforms between media practitioners and the audience of a product” (Fink, 1996: 68). Arguably, a public sphere is much more than a form of two-way communication between consumer and producer but a platform of debate and societal discussion.

Looking at the findings provided in the previous chapter, there is evidence to suggest that the blogosphere functions like a public sphere. Using the contribution-based blogs as a backdrop to understand the blogosphere’s relation to a public sphere, it is quite easy to see a culture of debate and discussion. These blogs have built a sense of community whereby their members and guests are able to discuss issues facing society today. Dominant ideologies find their way into the blogosphere and also find themselves being challenged by bloggers with different ideologies. The blogosphere works in the same way that *Thought Leader*, *SA Rocks* and *Wibble* operate in that it is a community within the web. There is a fair amount of dominant ideologies within

the blogosphere which suggests the expansion of the existing public sphere where dominant ideology is the norm, by focusing on issues in the media such as politics, economics and popular culture. However, also within the blogosphere counter ideologies emerge, creating a counter-public sphere within the same space by reporting on the issues the media consider unimportant or irrelevant. Bloggers within the South African blogosphere see it as a democratic community in which every voice is heard and all groups can be represented, especially in this new socio-political climate which South Africa has entered. In their paper, *New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere*, Downey and Fenton notes that:

“Public communication can define a political community, but it does not in itself provide the conditions for social integration and may lead to greater fragmentation rather than greater intersubjectivity. While new media are clearly not solely responsible for the generation of counter-public spheres, through contributing to the destabilization of the public sphere and the generation of new forms of fragmentation and solidarity, they are central to this process that presents both opportunities and dangers to the theory and practice of democracy” (Downey and Fenton, 2003).

When looking at the three contribution-based blogs, it is quite logical to conclude that *SA Rocks* is a counter-public sphere as it goes against the current dominant ideology represented in the mainstream public sphere regarding South Africa as a crime dominated country with a rising emigration statistics. On the other hand we must conclude that even though *Thought Leader* itself is not a counter-public sphere, some counter-publicity does develop within the comments due the fact that the readers themselves challenge dominant ideologies through their responses to the

various posts. When looking at *Wibble* it is difficult to conclude whether or not it is a public sphere or a counter-sphere as there is very little audience conversation.

In answering the question of whether or not the South African blogosphere is a public sphere, I would have to conclude that it is indeed an emerging public sphere. However, it is not representative of all publics. This is because not all South Africans have access to the Internet, and by extension blogs as of yet, but it is already an important step in connecting ordinary citizens with power players. Which is evident in the case of *Thought Leader* where industry and political leaders are invited to blog and respond to citizen posts.

#### **5.4 Audience: active and interactive**

Audience participation and media citizenship have become crucial in the current media climate around the world. Maher's article, quoted above, also explores audience participation and media citizenship stating that: "Part of the consequence of the explosion of User Generate[d] Content, particularly blogging, has been that audiences have gradually begun to accept the responsibility previously only in the hands of editors: that of ordering and making sense of large volumes of disparate content" (Maher, 2008). New media technologies have increased the responsibilities previously afforded to the audience as is evident in Maher's piece and the content with which we are presented today. Hypertextual technologies allow the audience to choose their route while reading an article. Stories are no longer linear but Hypertextual, hence creating different possible meanings.

I created the audience component of this research so I could better understand the way in which the audience interacts not just with the blogosphere but the text as well. As discussed in the preceding chapter a fair number of the blogs in the sample provided sufficient information with regard to audience conversation and participation. The distinction between author and reader has become blurred and the active audience is falling away to make room for a more interactive audience: a new generation of audience members that not only actively creates meaning from the produced content but are active producers of content. The relationship between blog readers and blog writers is symbiotic in that during the process of discussing an article on a blog, that article becomes reshaped based on the commentary provided by the readers.

What is identified in the *Thought Leader* sample is that content production has been handed over almost completely to the audience. This is a fact that resonates throughout the blogosphere, because the content has been handed over to the audience to create and recreate as they see fit. Newspapers now run polls on their websites asking the audience what they want to see in the paper and what they think is no longer necessary. Although this new way of receiving and producing content by putting responsibility in the hands of the audience may be exciting it has its limitations, something which Maher points out, arguing that to “[expect] a user to devote their full attention to this embedded interface and to modulate between active and passive viewing modes creates user experience dissonance. What they are being asked to do conflicts with the way they are already interacting with the environment surrounding it and this creates a sense of discomfort and disappointment” (Maher, 2008).

It is beyond doubt that the way in which the audience is responding to media information is changing. A good proportion of this research sample proves this point through the way in which the respondents engage with their audience. The audience no longer waits for the information to come to them but they actively go out seeking the information. It is clear that new media technologies have changed our reception of news by allowing us to choose and reject information based on our preferences.

### **5.5 Final comments**

Based on the above discussion and the preceding chapters, it is accurate to say that this research has answered the questions posed at the beginning of the research conclusively. However, due to the size of the sample and the growing magnitude of the South African blogosphere, more research is needed in all areas for a truly accurate conclusion to be reached. Defining what it means to be a journalist and recognising the differences between blogger and journalist are issues that need to be effectively understood before a conclusive agreement is to be reached in the blogger-journalist debate. However, for now the relationship between South African news agents and the South African blogosphere is promising.

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## **Appendices**

- 1a. Informed consent form for research sample
- 1b. Informed consent form for contributor questionnaire
- 2a. Contributor questionnaire
- 2b. Semi-structured interview schedule for personal blogs
- 2c. Semi-structured interview schedule for Thought Leader
- 2d. Semi-structured interview schedule for SA Rocks/Wibble

**Appendix 1a: Informed consent form for research sample**

**Agreement to participate in a research project**

I am gathering information for my Masters of Arts research project at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I would be grateful if you, as a owner/editor of a blog within the South African blogosphere, would agree to answer some questions and allow me to observe your blog.

The project I am working on is entitled “ *Blogging: Investigating the role played by blogs in contemporary South African Journalism and the Public Sphere*”. I hope to collect information from blogs, bloggers and readers of blogs to help me understand the role blogs play in South African media.

I would like to interview you for approximately 20mins after I have analysed the information gathered from your blog. I hope to use this information in my research and I will not force answers or any questions against your will. Your name will be used in the research as you are a major part of the sample, however if you wish for your name to be omitted I shall do so. You are free to withdraw from the research at any time and all documentation will be destroyed after I have typed up my thesis.

Thank you for your time and cooperation.

Michelle Atagana  
Masters student  
University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg Campus)

**AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT**

I.....(name of participant) understand the contents of this letter and the nature of the research project, and consent to participate in the research project.  
I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, if I so wish.

**SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT**

**DATE**

.....



**Appendix 1b: Informed consent form for contributor questionnaires**

**Agreement to participate in a research project**

I am gathering information for my Masters of Arts research project at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I would be grateful if you, as a contributor of a blog within the South African blogosphere, would agree to answer some questions and allow me to observe your contributions.

The project I am working is entitled “*Blogging: Investigating the role played by blogs in contemporary South African Journalism and the Public Sphere*”. I hope to collect information from blogs, bloggers and readers of blogs to help me understand the role blogs play in South African media.

I would like you to complete a self administered questionnaire based on the blog you contribute to. I hope to use this information in my research and I will not force answers or any questions against your will. Your name will not be used in the research. You are free to withdraw from the research at any time and all documentation will be destroyed after I have typed up my thesis.

Thank you for your time and cooperation.

Michelle Atagana  
Masters student  
University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg Campus)

<b>AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT</b>	
I.....(name of participant) understand the contents of this letter and the nature of the research project, and consent to participate in the research project. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, if I so wish.	
<b>SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT</b>	<b>DATE</b>
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**Appendix 2a**

**Contributor Questionnaire: Masters Research**

**Working title:** “*Blogging: Investigating the role played by blogs in contemporary South African Journalism and the Public Sphere*”.

**Brief background:** *The aim of this research project is to examine the way in which emergent new media technologies are impacting on journalism and the public sphere through an examination of journalistic blogging.*

**Instructions**

*Please answer each question with as much detail as possible and try to answer every single question. Thank you very much for participation.*

1. Name and occupation:

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2. Do you own or run a blog?

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3. Please give a brief background of your experiences with blogs

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4. Which South African blog(s) do you contribute to? Please reason for choice(s)

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5. How many blogs do you visit on a daily basis? Please name them

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6. How do you choose what to write on the blog you contribute to?

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7. How do blogs fit in and contribute to the current South African journalistic climate in terms of educating, informing and entertaining?

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8. Do blogs play a role in contemporary South African journalism? If yes, please explain:

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9. Do blogs serve a specific public interest in terms on creating debates? If yes, please explain:

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10. Can the blogosphere be considered a new public sphere? And is this viable in South Africa?

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## Appendix 2b

### Semi-structured interview schedule for personal blogs

**Working title:** “*Blogging: Investigating the role played by blogs in contemporary South African Journalism and the Public Sphere*”.

**Brief background:** *The aim of this research project is to examine the way in which emergent new media technologies are impacting on journalism and the public sphere through an examination of journalistic blogging.*

#### Instructions

*Please answer each question with as much detail as possible and try to answer every single question. Thank you very much for participation.*

#### **Blogging background**

1. Editor/Owner:

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2. How long has your blog been in operation?

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3. Why did you choose to start blogging?

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#### ***Blogging behaviour and habits***

4. How many hits a day does your blog get a day?

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5. How many South African blogs do you read a week?

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6. How many blogs do you like to and why?

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7. How often do you blog?

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**Key concepts presented in the blog (content) and purpose**

8. Please give a brief background/purpose of your blog

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9. What are the different categories that you post under and why?

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10. How does your blog fit in and contribute to the current South African journalistic climate?

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11. Do blogs play a role in contemporary South African journalism? If yes, please explain:

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**Audience and the public sphere**

12. Does your blog serve a specific public interest? If yes, please explain:

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13. How do you monitor discussion on your blog with the audience?

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14. Can the blogosphere be considered a new public sphere? And is this viable in South Africa?

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## Appendix 2c

### Semi-structured interview schedule for Thought Leader

**Working title:** “*Blogging: Investigating the role played by blogs in contemporary South African Journalism and the Public Sphere*”.

**Brief background:** *The aim of this research project is to examine the way in which emergent new media technologies are impacting on journalism and the public sphere through an examination of journalistic blogging.*

#### Instructions

*Please answer each question with as much detail as possible and try to answer every single question. Thank you very much for participation.*

#### **Blogging background**

1. Editor/Owner:

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2. How long has Thought Leader been in operation?

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3. Why did the Mail & Guardian choose to establish Thought Leader?

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4. How many contributors does Thought Leader have?

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#### **Blogging behaviour and habits**

5. How many hits a day does Thought Leader get a day?

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6. How often is Thought Leader updated?

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**Key concepts presented in the blog (content) and purpose**

7. Please give a brief background/purpose of Thought Leader

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8. What are the different categories that your contributors post under and why?

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9. Are contributors given the freedom to express whatever views they deem necessary? If not, what are the limitations?

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10. How does Thought Leader fit in and contribute to the current South African journalistic climate?

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11. Do blogs play a role in contemporary South African journalism? If yes, please explain:

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***Audience and the public sphere***

12. Does Thought Leader serve a specific public interest? If yes, please explain:

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13. How do you monitor discussion on Thought Leader with the audience?

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14. Can the blogosphere be considered a new public sphere? And is this viable in South Africa?

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## Appendix 2d

### Semi-structured interview schedule for SA Rocks/Wibble

**Working title:** “*Blogging: Investigating the role played by blogs in contemporary South African Journalism and the Public Sphere*”.

**Brief background:** *The aim of this research project is to examine the way in which emergent new media technologies are impacting on journalism and the public sphere through an examination of journalistic blogging.*

#### **Instructions**

*Please answer each question with as much detail as possible and try to answer every single question. Thank you very much for participation.*

#### **Blogging background**

1. Editor/Owner:

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2. How long has SA Rocks/Wibble been in operation?

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3. Why was SA Rocks/Wibble established?

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4. How many contributors does SA Rocks/Wibble have?

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#### ***Blogging behaviour and habits***

5. How many hits a day does SA Rocks/Wibble get a day?

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6. How many blogs does SA Rocks/Wibble link to and why?

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7. How often is SA Rocks/Wibble updated?

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***Key concepts presented in the blog (content) and purpose***

8. Please give a brief background/purpose of SA Rocks/Wibble

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9. What are the different categories that your contributors post under and why?

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10. Are contributors given the freedom to express whatever views they deem necessary? If not, what are the limitations?

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11. How does SA Rocks/Wibble fit in and contribute to the current South African journalistic climate?

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12. Do blogs play a role in contemporary South African journalism? If yes, please explain:

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***Audience and the public sphere***

13. Does SA Rocks/Wibble serve a specific public interest? If yes, please explain:

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14. How do you monitor discussion on SA Rocks/Wibble with the audience?

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15. Can the blogosphere be considered a new public sphere? And is this viable in South Africa?

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