

# **Bloggagate: How the CBS National Guard Story Affected Coverage of Webloggers**

A Research Paper Submitted for the

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## ***Abstract:***

The controversy surrounding the CBS reportage of President George W. Bush's National Guard service represented a defining moment in the relationship between amateur Webloggers and professional journalists. After weeks of controversy, CBS relented to the scathing criticism and granted the bloggers a major victory in what some have called a conflict between new and old media. But did these events change the way "old media" present "new media" in news coverage? A pilot study using content analysis techniques was conducted to analyze *New York Times* news stories from the 12 weeks before and after the September 8 broadcast to determine if any effects were observable and what implications these findings might indicate about the relationship between news media and bloggers.

## ***Introduction***

Since the founding of America, the press has traditionally served as a link between the public sphere and the private interests. In one of the classic definitions of role of journalists in American society, Walter Lippmann wrote in 1920:

The news of the day as it reaches the newspaper office is an incredible medley of fact, propaganda, rumor suspicion, clues, hopes, and fears, and the task of selecting and ordering that news is one of the truly sacred and priestly offices in a democracy.<sup>1</sup>

By raising issues and events into the public eye, journalists have provided a forum for critical debate and have granted the citizenry access to their government. Unfortunately, this access has most been often unidirectional: the citizens may perceive their world through the media, but their opportunities to add their individual voices to the debates are limited.

In recent years, new communication technology has allowed a greater number and diversity of voices to resonate in our critical debates. One of the latest examples of these innovations is the non-professional Weblogs that have sprouted all over the World Wide Web in recent years. In his own Weblog, *PressThink*, Jay Rosen defines a weblog (or blog, as they are commonly called) in the following way:

What is a weblog? A personal web page, or online journal, updated easily by an author, that links outward to other material on the Web, and presents original content – typically, links and commentary – in a rolling, day-by-day fashion, with the latest entries on top.<sup>2</sup>

Several “media scandals” in recent years, including the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, the Trent Lott birthday scandal and the more recent scandal involving CNN’s Eason Jordan, have been created as non-professional communicators raised the traditional media’s awareness of stories that seemed to be missed by journalism professionals. But are the online amateurs participants in the “priestly duties” of journalism? Do they empower the critical debates that form our democracy or do they drown them out in the noise of spectacle?

Never was this question more salient nor more confusing than during the scandal surrounding the CBS coverage of President Bush’s military service. On the September 8, 2004 broadcast of the program *60 Minutes II*, the network reported a story alleging the president had not fulfilled his service commitment to the military. The conclusions

reported in this story were repeatedly called into question when bloggers alleged that the documentation at the foundation of the CBS story were fabrications.

### ***Background***

According to some media commentators and online publishers, the unidirectional limitation of the press was at least symbolically lifted on September 8, 2004 when a FreeRepublic poster using the alias “Buckhead” (later identified as attorney Harry W. McDougald) suggested in a post that the memorandums used by CBS in their *60 Minutes II* report earlier that evening had to have been forged because of the presence of proportionally space fonts.<sup>3</sup> The next morning, the conservative blog *Little Green Footballs* quoted the Buckhead post and then posted a do-it-yourself experiment that supposedly proved “[t]here is absolutely no way that this document was typed on any machine that was available in 1973.”<sup>4</sup>

On September 11, the experiment was copied by Joseph Newcomer, a self-described typology expert, and posted to his personal Weblog.<sup>5</sup> On September 14, Newcomer and his site appeared in a *Washington Post* story.<sup>6</sup> That evening, Newcomer appeared on Fox News’s *Special Report with Brit Hume* and the following day, Newcomer was a guest on Fox News’s *Hannity & Colmes*.

In the days following the CBS National Guard story, a number of Weblogs rallied together to discuss the evidence presented in the CBS story in what has been termed a “blogswarm,” a short period of high-intensity discussion and activity. These sites, including the transparently partisan *Ratherbiased.com* and *Rathergate.com*, drew enough attention from traditional media outlets that CBS was soon pressed to defend its story and the evidence in question. On September 20, Dan Rather issued a public apology for the story, and in the following weeks CBS commissioned an independent panel to investigate the roots of the controversy. On January 31, 2005, the panel released *the Independent Panel Report on CBS News*, which ultimately led to the termination of one employee and the requested resignation of three others.<sup>7</sup>

During the controversy and following the release of the CBS Report, many Weblogs across the ideological spectrum posted articles critical of CBS in particular, but also generally charging that a new war between the “MSM” (mainstream media) and the

blogging community was being fought and won on the Internet. Charging their “MSM” opponents with elitism, typical posts decry the “vanity and arrogance of that media subculture, whose partisans still believe that they have a monopoly on describing social reality and prescribing political action, and that civilians have merely to accept what they dish out, and follow their marching orders.”<sup>8</sup>

The chief targets in these blogs appear to be *The New York Times* and CBS, which some bloggers have gone so far to say are “the same.”<sup>9</sup> The common charges are that the “MSM” are elitist, not respecting Weblogs or the average citizen.<sup>10</sup> Several bloggers posted that their work on the CBS National Guard story would change the way CBS and the *New York Times* interacted with bloggers.<sup>11</sup>

But how has the traditional media establishment treated Weblogs? Some journalists have argued that Webloggers are amateur journalists, participants in the knowledge distribution necessary for the function of democracy. Others have belittled bloggers as overactive busybodies whose nonprofessional activity actually detracts from the professional media’s effort to distribute trustworthy intelligence of the day.

### ***Purpose***

This study is an inquiry into the short-term effects of the CBS National Guard story controversy on the professional media relationship with the blogging community. In the “blogswarm” that followed the airing of the story, many of the blogs used media sources to further their arguments and many blog articles were written that framed the blogging community and the “MSM” as being in direct conflict. But did the “MSM” respond in kind?

To better understand this aspect of the relationship, this study will examine the news-editorial content of *The New York Times* both before and after the airing of the CBS National Guard story. This study is not meant to be a definitive word on this subject, but rather a pilot study to develop the framework and techniques in which to examine many other media sources from the time in question.

### ***Research Questions:***

Specifically, this study seeks to examine the following questions:

1. What effect did the CBS guard story controversy have on the frequency of *New York Times* stories mentioning Weblogging and bloggers?
2. Did the CBS controversy lead the *New York Times* to increase the number of stories about specific blogs or bloggers?
3. Were *New York Times* stories more or less likely to define blogs or blogging terminology in stories after the controversy than before the controversy?
4. Did the CBS controversy lead the *New York Times* to increase their use of blogs as sources in their stories?
5. Did the CBS controversy cause the *New York Times* to publish more blog addresses in their stories?
6. Did the CBS controversy cause the *New York Times* to frame Weblogs as in conflict with traditional journalism?

### ***Research Methodology:***

In order to isolate the effect the environmental change the CBS national guard controversy had on the media framing of Webloggers, news stories were collected from the 12 weeks preceding and following the first airing of the CBS National Guard story (September 8, 2004) for comparative purposes. The stories were identified by using a keyword search in Lexis-Nexis for the terms “blog,” “Weblog,” “Web log” and “blogger” for the dates under scrutiny. These four terms were used discretely in at least a few of the stories collected. The unit of analysis was the story itself and duplicate stories possessing more than one of the four terms were only counted as a single occurrence.

The search produced 128 stories containing the term “blog,” 59 stories containing the term “blogger,” 57 stories containing the term “Web log” and 18 stories containing the term “Weblog.” The total number of stories initially collected was 263.

The sample was then sifted to remove the non-editorial pieces from it. Letters to the editor, staff lists, story budget lists, lists of contributors and news digests were all removed from the analysis sample. Finally, the overlapping duplicate articles were removed, resulting in the sample of 168 stories.

Once collected, the stories were coded by multiple content analysis coders (to ensure a measurable reliability) to record the number of blog references. The references

were then analyzed to determine what attributes were assigned to the bloggers and blogging community before and after the event in question.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

***Framing.*** The concept of “framing” refers to the manner by which events and issues are organized and presented in order to convey a particular meaning. Framing literature represents a shift away from the study of objectivity and bias in news media and towards the study of ideology in the news.<sup>12</sup> Several definitions of framing have been presented, explicating the term in slightly different ways (see Reese, Gandy and Grant<sup>13</sup> for an exhaustive collection of the many different uses of the concept of framing).

Gamson and Modigliani defined a frame as a “central organizing idea” which is used to make “sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue.”<sup>14</sup> Entman expanded on the definition somewhat, stating:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation.<sup>15</sup>

Reese introduced additional elements to the definition, stating: “Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world.”<sup>16</sup> It is the concept that frames are persistent over time that led to the inquiry of this paper. If frames tend to be constant over time, one would expect that their usage would be consistent in terms of meaning or use regardless of the environment of the events to which they are applied. One way to test the strength of the persistence of frames is to measure the changes in the framing of a particular discourse before during and after a significant change in the media environment.

### ***Measurements and Frames***

Many of the variables measured in this study were coded simply by recording the presence of a particular trait. To answer the questions concerning the frequency of stories containing blog terminology, the number of stories profiling specific blogs, the number of stories defining Weblog terminology for the readers, the use of a blog as a source for a story or the presence of the Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) for blogs were simply a matter of counting the instances of each.

As mentioned, the stories containing blog terminology are those stories published in the *New York Times* that contain in the headline or body the terms “blog,” “blogger,” “Web log” or “Weblog.” Other terms were investigated (i.e., “blogosphere,” “Weblogger,”), but none produced any stories not already in the sample.

The presence of the blog profiles variable was measured by recognizing and recording instances when particular blogs were mentioned and discussed either because the story was profiling the blog or the story was about the phenomenon of Weblogging. An example of such a story was the September 26 story titled “Fear and Laptops on the Campaign Trail,” which profiled particular bloggers who were covering the 2004 presidential election.<sup>17</sup>

To measure whether *New York Times* stories were more or less likely to define blogs or blogging terminology in stories after the controversy than before the controversy, stories were coded for whether or not they included such definitions. A typical definition reads:

For the uninitiated, blog is short for Web log, a site on the Internet where one can become an instant publisher, filling the ether with musings and facts. They are similar to, yet different from, those of us who do much the same thing for newspapers but lack a modern cachet.<sup>18</sup>

To determine whether or not the CBS controversy led the *New York Times* to increase their use of blogs as sources in their stories, coders looked for specific references to information referenced to blog sites. An example of this occurrence can be found in the October 10 column titled “Why Did James Baker Turn Bush into Nixon,” which directly quoted content from a blog,<sup>19</sup>

To measure the use of blog addresses in a story, the coders simply looked for the complete URL for a blog in either text or in a list of resources at the conclusion of the article.

The final variable, the presence of “conflict frames” required the coders to identify and record the presence of statements that were judged to present Weblogs or bloggers as standing against or competing with the traditional news media. An example of such a frame is the portrayal of bloggers “poking holes” in CBS stories<sup>20</sup> or references to conflict between the two groups.

The coding was conducted by the researcher and two coders trained to recognize the variables and the frames. An intercoder reliability test was conducted for all variables and frames, and it yielded an agreement level of .9617.

### ***Results***

At first glance, there appeared to have been a dramatic increase in the attention given to Weblogs by the *New York Times* after the CBS National Guard story when one compared the aggregate data to the coverage before the airing of the story. Chart 1 shows the side-by-side comparison, representing a 54% increase in the number of stories mentioning blog terminology, a 45% increase in the stories profiling particular blogs, a 45% increase in the citation of blogs as a source in a story, a 35% increase in the number of stories containing blog URLs and a 50% increase in the number of stories containing the conflict frame.

However, breaking the variables down into weekly observances undermines any conclusion that these increases were due to the CBS controversy. As Chart 2 displays, the number of stories containing blog terminology did not significantly increase in the weeks immediately following the CBS broadcast. In fact, the increase in the aggregate chart that makes up the majority of the differences in the number of stories containing blog terminology seems to come from the steep rise in almost all categories during the coverage period from October 28 to November 3, the day after the election.

Similarly, the number of stories profiling specific blogs did not significantly increase until that same week, though there was a slight increase the week of September 16 to September 22, the week that contained the September 20 apology by Dan Rather. Nor did the number of stories citing blogs as sources significantly increase following the CBS guard controversy.

In fact, the weekly breakdowns of news stories seems to indicate that neither the CBS guard story nor the subsequent controversy had any significant impact on the numbers of *New York Times* stories containing blog terminology, the number of stories profiling specific blogs (as seen in Chart 3) or the number of stories citing a blog as a source (as seen in Chart 4).



Chart 5 displays the number of stories containing the URL addresses of the blogs mentioned in the story. There was a very low number of URLs listed either before or after the CBS story aired, with the exception of the week of the election. As Chart 6 shows, this rise in URL references correlates to a rise in the citation of blogs in stories around the time of the election, making any specific link to the CBS guard controversy extremely unlikely.

As seen in Chart 7, the results do demonstrate an increase in the number of media conflict frames present in stories containing blog terminology. However, it is important to note that this rise in the number of frames is largely attributable to the coverage of the CBS controversy itself or general references to the controversy (see Chart 8). When controlling for the CBS controversy coverage, there is no increase in the number of stories possessing conflict frames, significant or otherwise, until one looks at the aforementioned October 28 to November 3 period.

### ***Analysis/Discussion***

The results yielded little to no support to the claims that *The New York Times* either “discovered” blogs through the course of the controversy, nor that the controversy itself had any immediate effect on their coverage or use of Weblogs in its stories. Individual analyses of the research questions appear below.

#### What effect did the CBS guard story controversy have on the frequency of *New York Times* stories mentioning Weblogging and bloggers?

It would appear that the answer to this question is “very little if any.” Despite the difference in the aggregate numbers (there were 66 stories containing the blog terminology prior to September 8 and 102 such stories in the period following), the distribution of the stories across the weeks following suggests that the election caused the 54% increase in stories, not the CBS National Guard story controversy.

*The New York Times* has published thousands of stories over the years discussing Weblogs and profiling members of the blogging community. This coverage was consistent before, during and after the controversy. The only significant increase in the frequency of stories using blog terminology was isolated to the week of the election itself, when space was devoted to many outlets and sources for reactions to the electoral

process and the election's outcome.

Did the CBS controversy lead the *New York Times* to increase the number of stories about specific blogs or bloggers?

This study does not support the claim that the CBS National Guard story controversy led to an increase in the profiling of the blogging community in general or specific bloggers or blogs. Once again, the seemingly significant increase in the number of such profiles (45%) were largely grouped around the days surrounding the election itself, and these profiles were mostly attributable to identifying the sources for reaction comments to the election, not the CBS controversy.

Were *New York Times* stories more or less likely to define blogs or blogging terminology in stories after the controversy than before the controversy?

Neither. The *New York Times* has mentioned blogs in its stories thousands of times prior to the CBS National Guard story, and the increased public awareness of the blogging community did not drive the paper to define blog terminology with any greater frequency. In the 12 weeks before the controversy, the paper defined such terms only twice, and in the 12 weeks following it only defined the terms in one story.

Clearly, the paper feels that its readership understands what blogs are and the general manner in which they operate.

Did the CBS controversy lead the *New York Times* to increase their use of blogs as sources in their stories?

The study did not find a significant increase or decrease in the use of Weblogs as sources in stories. Although there was an aggregate increase in the number of blog citations in the latter period of observation (from 24 stories with citations to 35 stories of citations), the weekly distribution shows that the majority of this increase occurred during the days surrounding the election, a time when more institutions and media outlets are likely to be cited more often than in other weeks. In other words, the 45% increase in frequency of citations corresponds roughly to the 45% increase in stories profiling Weblogs.

*The New York Times* appears to cite Weblogs in 36% of stories that contain blog terminology, and this percentage was consistent before and after the September 8 CBS story.

Did the CBS controversy cause the *New York Times* to publish more blog addresses in their stories?

This study does not support the claim that the controversy caused any increase in the number of blog URLs in its stories. The 35% increase in URLs is less than the 45% increase in the number of stories profiling the bloggers or Weblogs, which are the stories that account for most of the URL listings. It would appear that *The New York Times* is generally confident in its readership's ability to locate the URLs of the blogs it mentions in stories through search engines or other means in most of their stories.

Did the CBS controversy cause the *New York Times* to frame Weblogs as in conflict with traditional journalism?

The study did show a rise in the number of stories that contained conflict frames, but this 50% increase occurred almost exclusively in the six stories covering the CBS controversy itself. This increase does not appear to reflect any change in the framing of Weblog or bloggers outside of the reportage of the facts in those stories.

***Study Limitations and Opportunities***

This study is obviously not a definitive work on whether the CBS controversy affected the relationship between the "MSM" and the Weblog community. The study focused on only one source, *The New York Times*, because that one source was singled out in the blogging community as a target for their endeavors.

The timeframe of observation was limited to immediate reaction by the paper. Though some in the blogging community had expressed hope for rapid changes, those changes were not likely to occur in the short-term (or potentially in the long-term) because of one victorious "battle" in the blogosphere's "war."

The main contribution of this study is to put to rest any claims that *The New York Times* was compelled, through internal decisions or external manipulation, to alter its news conventions in the covering and use of Weblogs in its stories by the CBS National Guard story controversy.

While it appears clear that the relationship between the online bloggers and the “MSM” will continually adapt to the needs and abilities of the audience and users, those changes are more likely to occur over a greater length of time and with smaller degrees of progression than many in the Weblog community seem to be advocating.

This study does provide a benchmark in time for *The New York Times* conventions concerning the general treatment of Weblogs in stories as well as several benchmarks of individual measurable variables that can be expanded upon to provide greater historical context. The future history of the “rise of blogging” will not likely hinge upon one moment or event, but will hopefully reflect the evolution of both the traditional media and the blogging community over time and many experiences.

The CBS National Guard story and the controversy surrounding it will certainly serve a signpost along the road of this evolution, but it should be viewed as one such signpost among the many that preceded it and many that will follow.

This study also contributes to future projects some tips and advice to consider in projects conducted using similar methodologies. Although there have been thousands of stories that have been published referring to blogs and bloggers in *The New York Times* alone, there has not yet been a consolidation of terminology among those who refer to the phenomenon, the publications or the individuals involved. At this moment, it would appear that any sample derived from newspaper coverage must search for several different terms: “Weblog,” “Web log,” “blog” and “bloggers” seemed to cover the spectrum of terms for *The New York Times*, but other terms (i.e. “Weblogging,” “blogging,” “Webloggers”) may be needed to ensure stories don’t fall between the cracks of the collection methodology.

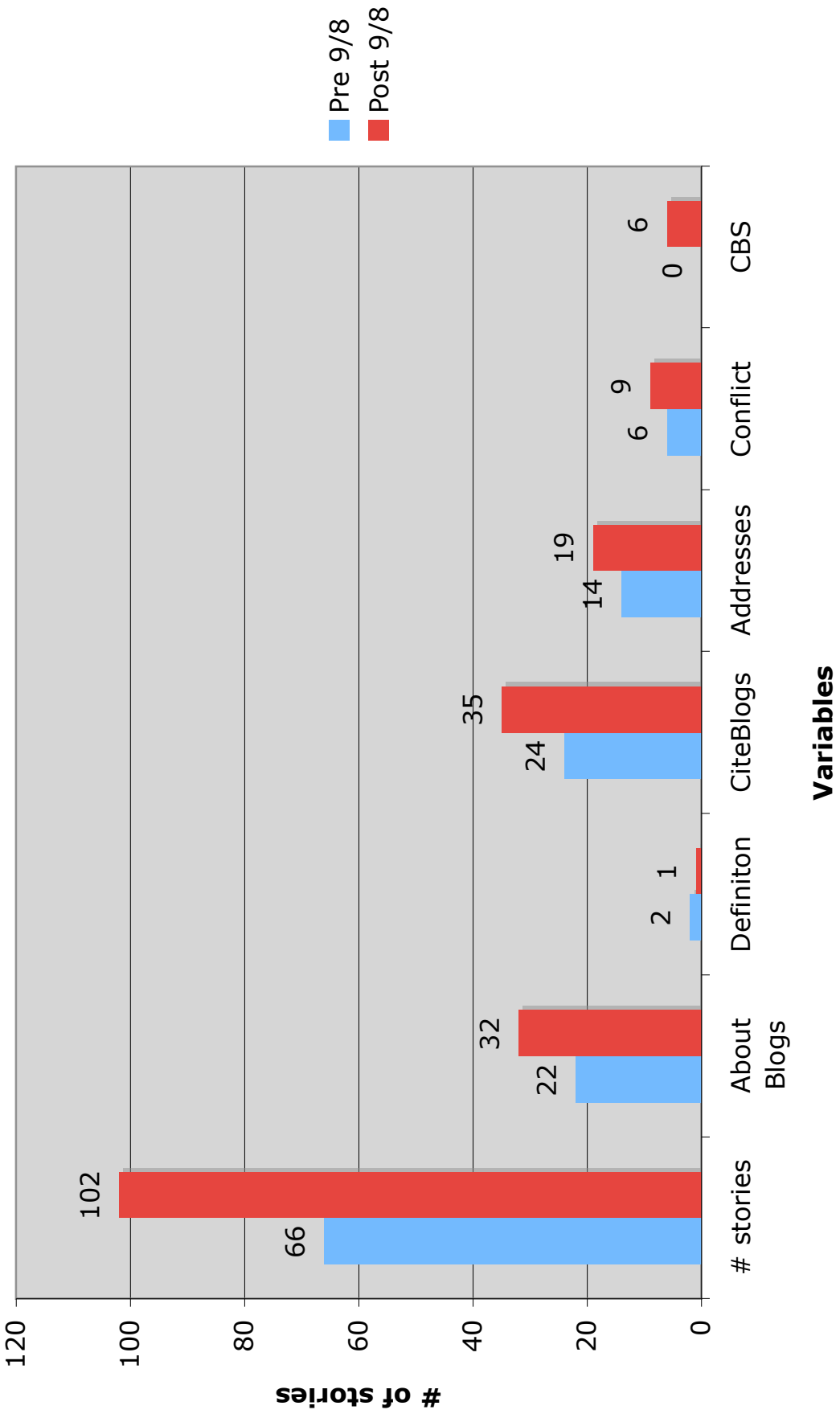
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## Footnotes and Sources

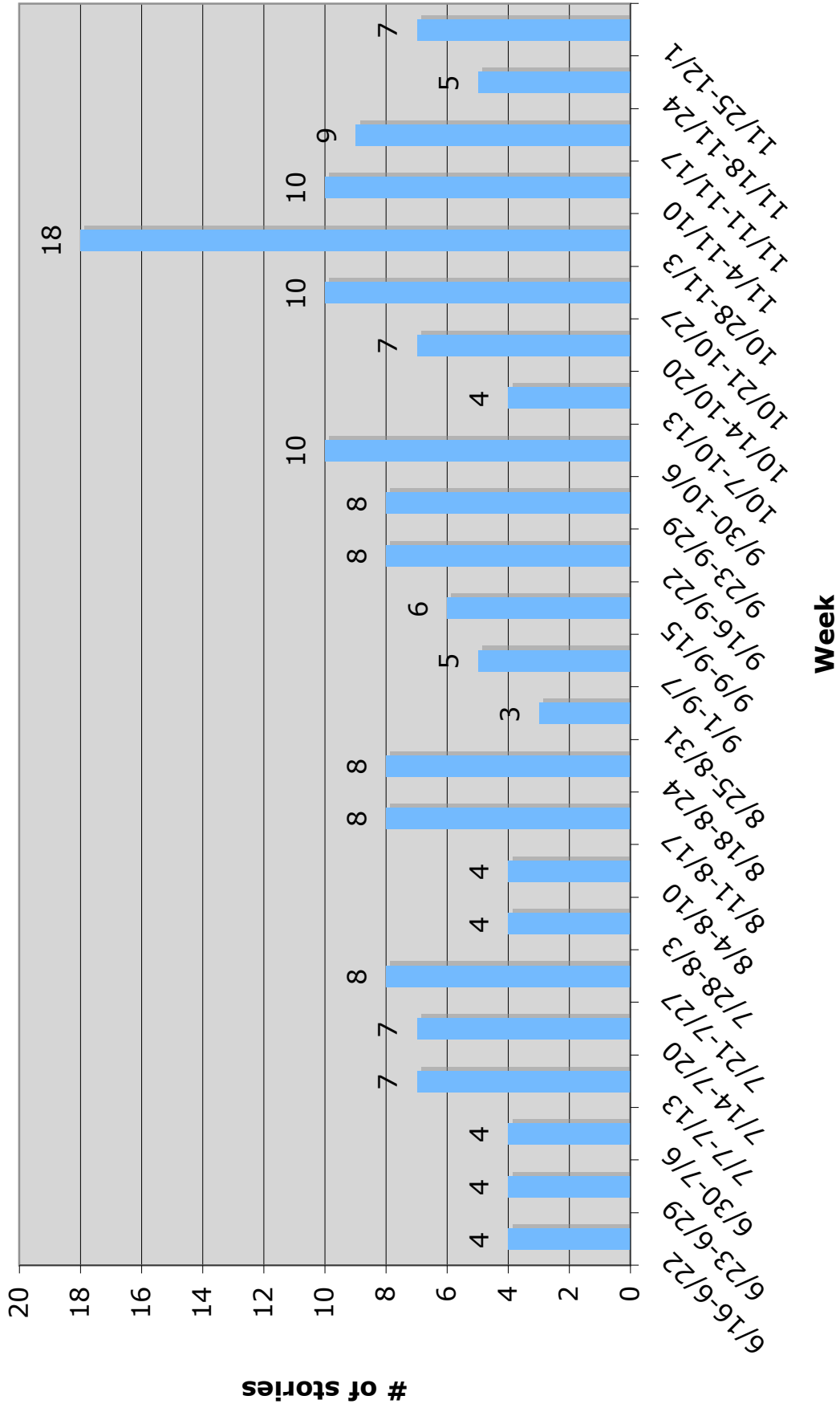
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**Chart #1: Sample comparison**

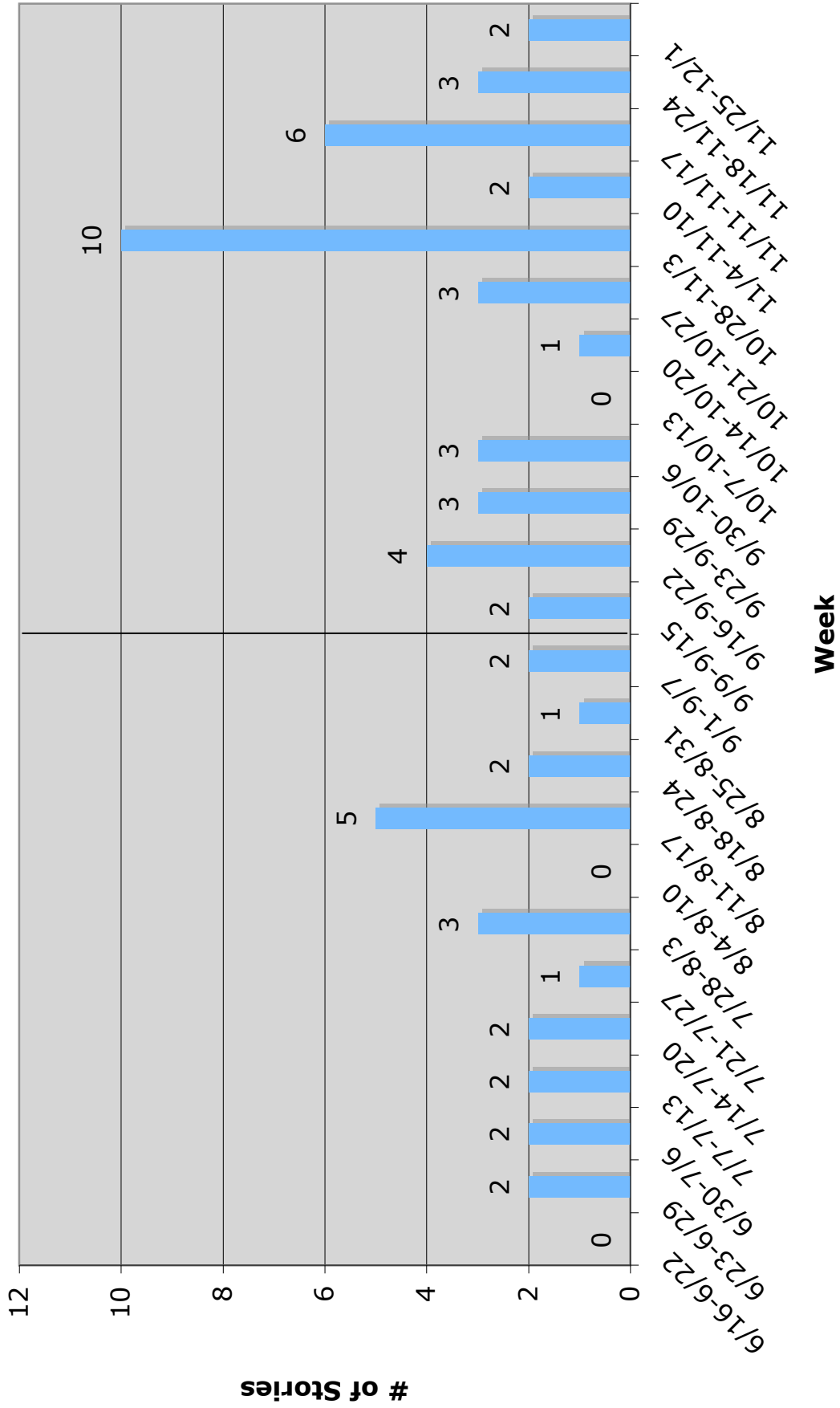


**Chart #2: Number of Blog Stories**

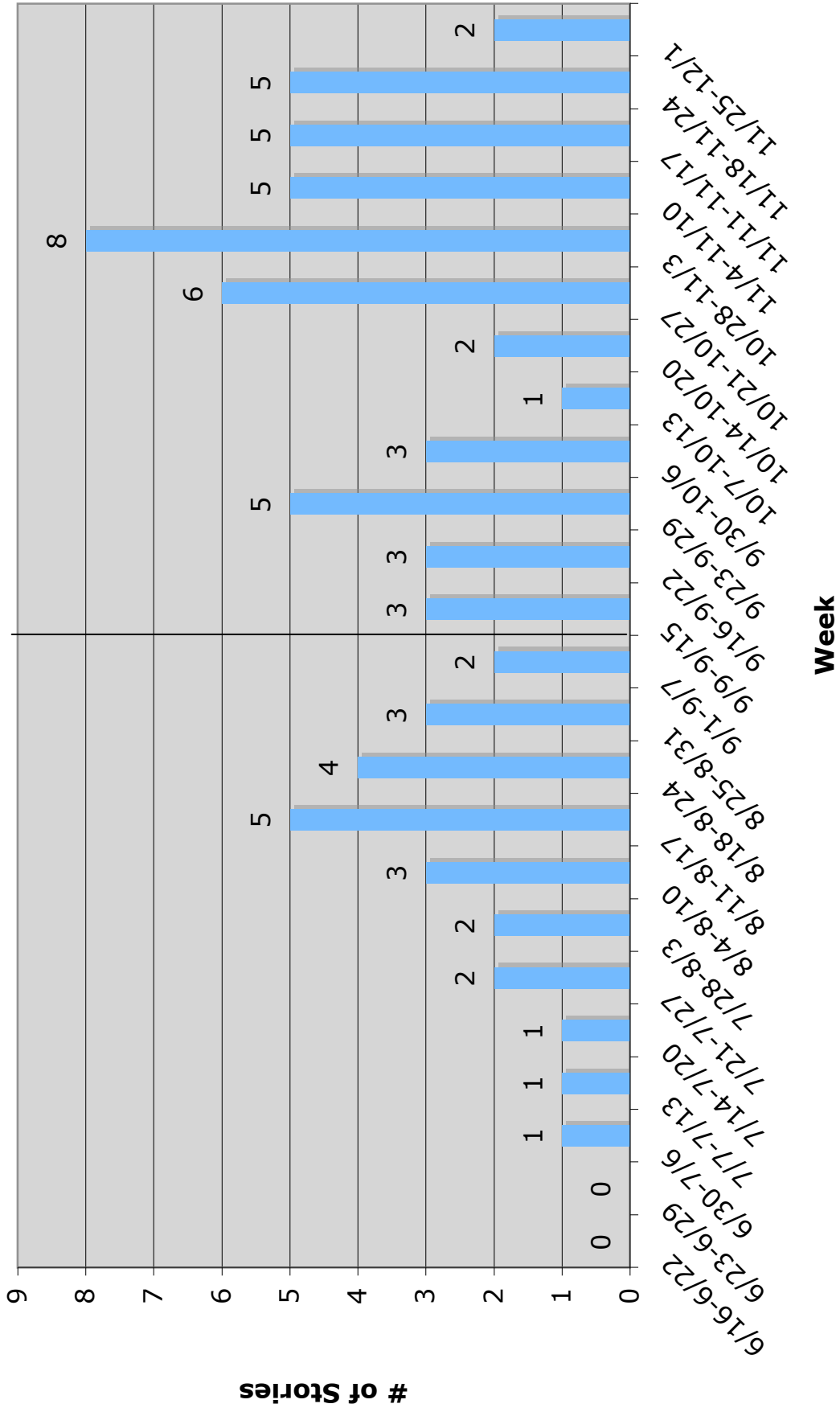




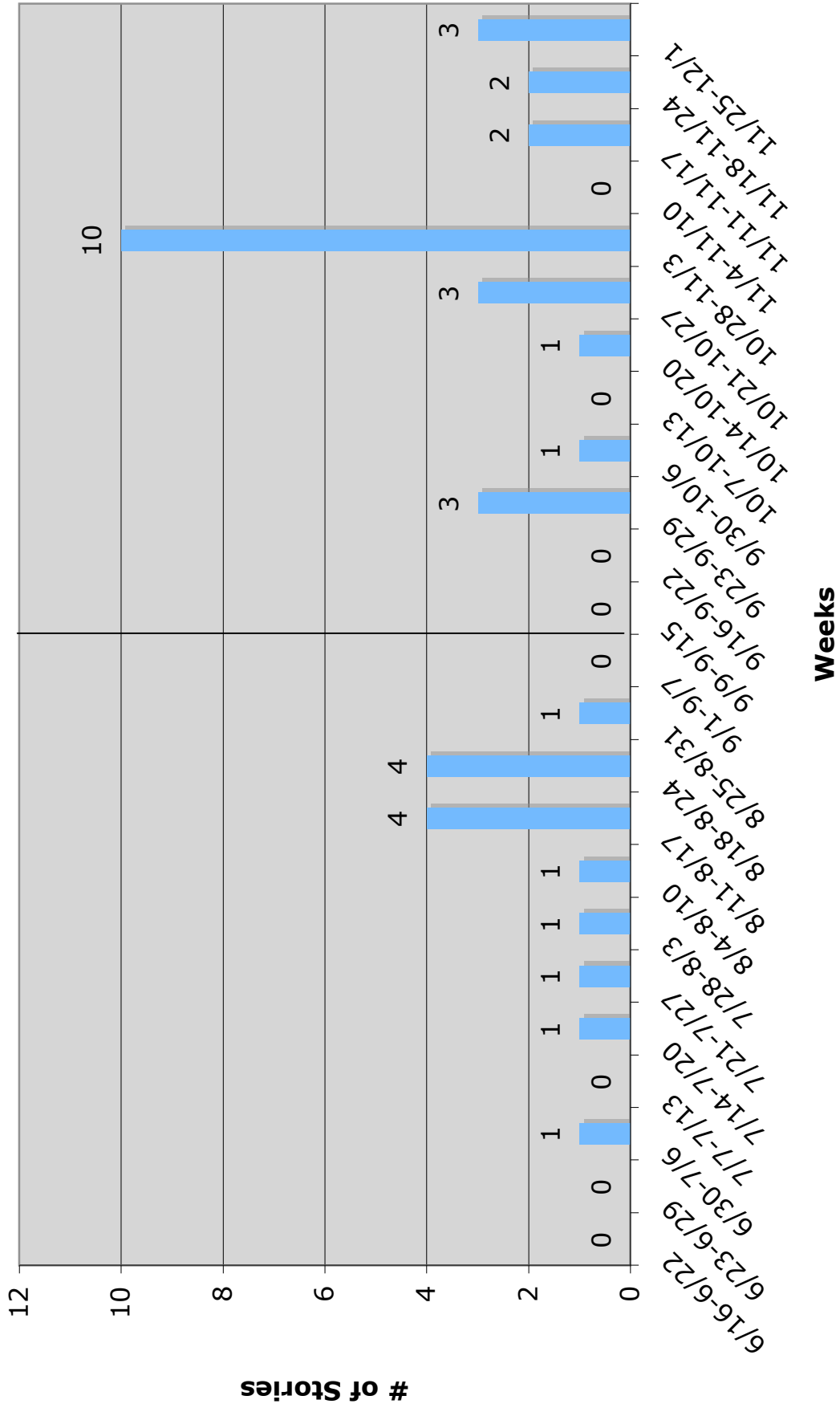
**Chart #3: Stories About Blogs**



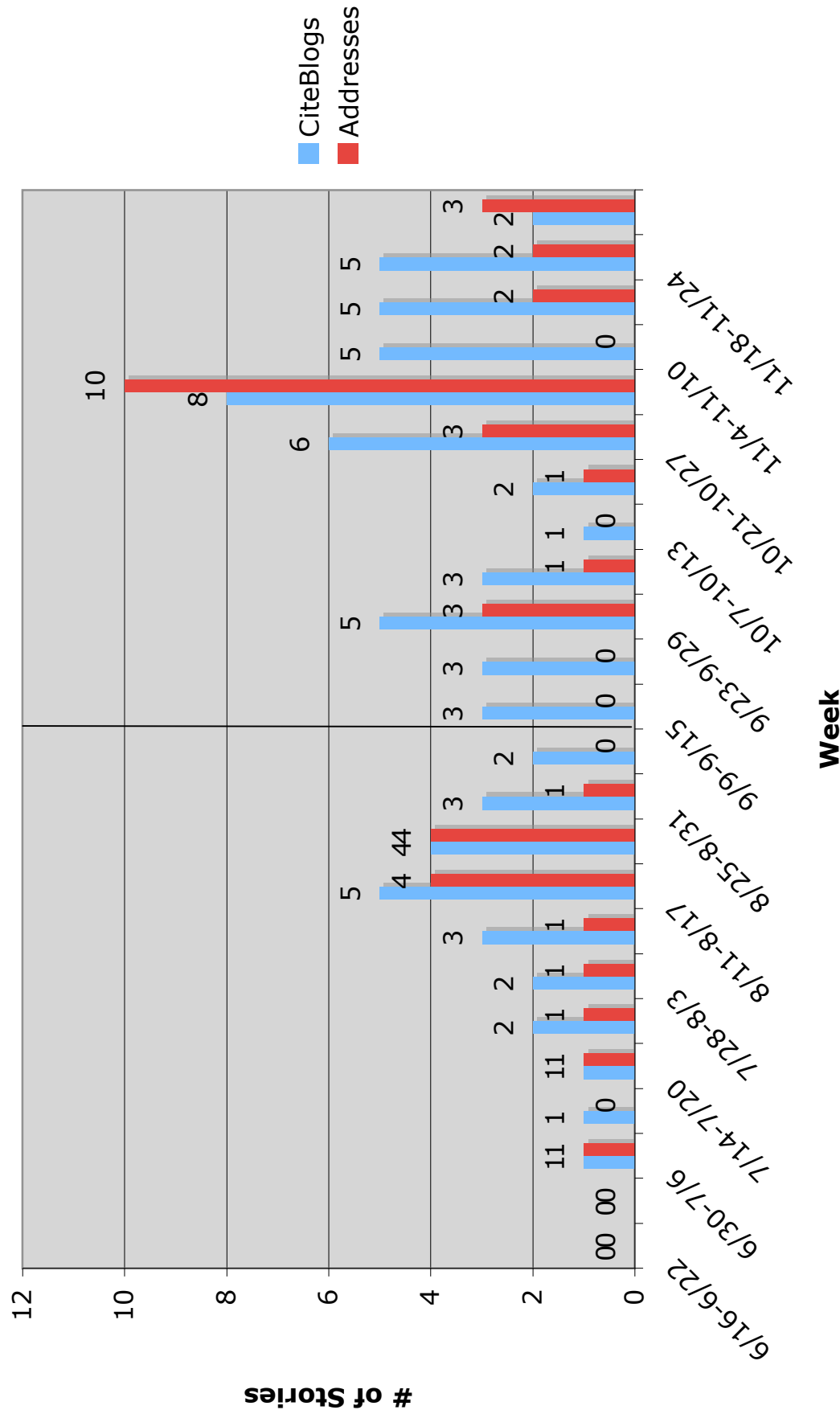
**Chart #4: Stories that Cite Blogs as Sources**



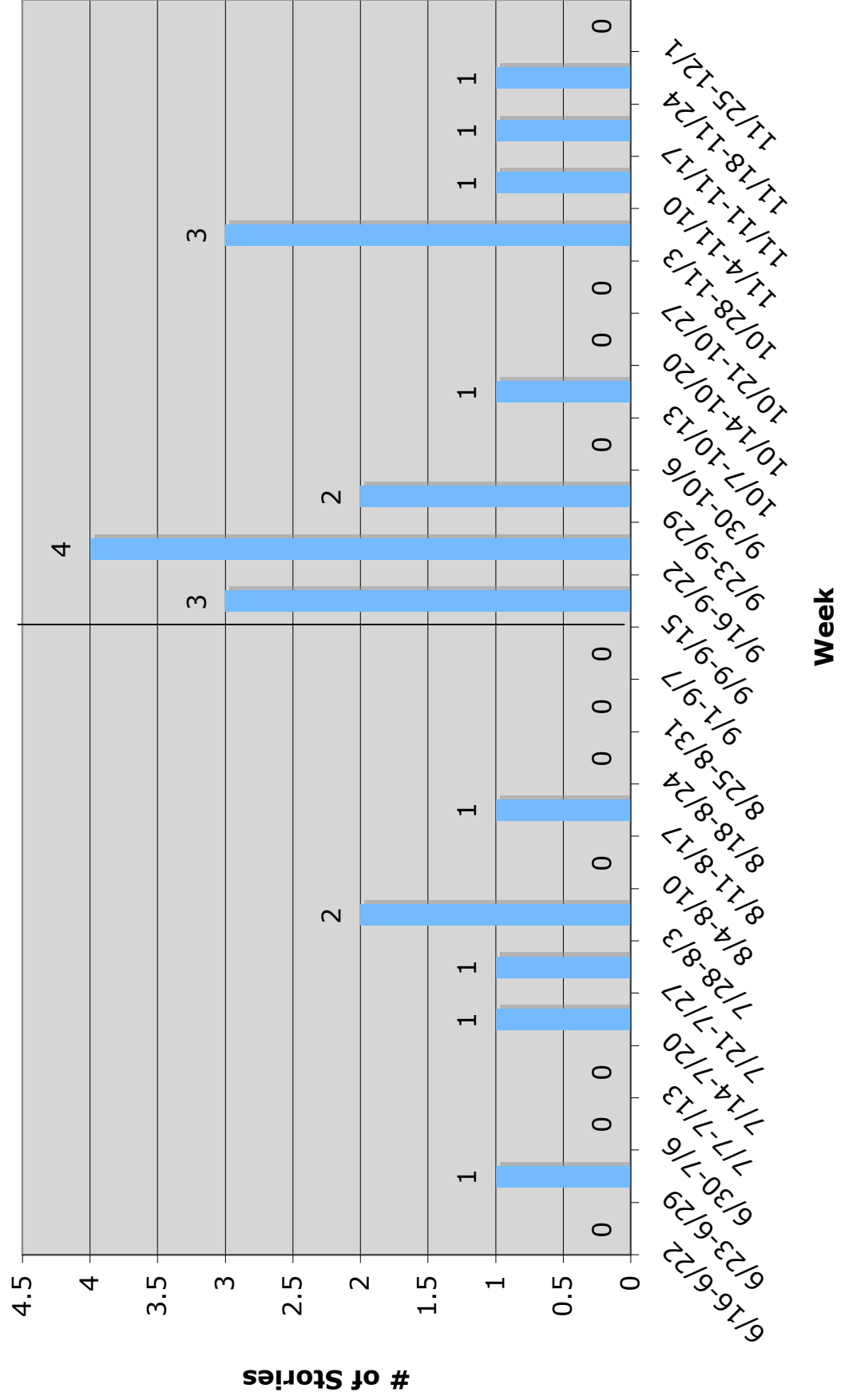
**Chart #5: Stories That List Blog Addresses**



**Chart #6: Stories That Cite Blogs/Addresses**



**Chart #7: Conflict Frames**



**Chart #8: Number of Stories with Conflict Frames/CBS References**

