



Blogs - a Democratic Tool? A Global Megaphone for Civil Protest?

Sarah Genner (University of Zurich, Switzerland) Panel 5, Tue., 2:30-4:30

1. Introduction

Blogs are very dynamic web pages providing internet resources such as text, hyperlinks, pictures and videos. Blog content gets periodically updated and is presented in reverse chronological order. "Posts" are "articles" in a blog and readers are invited to comment on blog posts. Unlike creating a web page ten years ago, blogs are a very simple and cheap way of publishing content across national boundaries.

Blogs are an important part of the so-called "Web 2.0".¹ It has often been claimed that the "second version" of the Internet has an enormous potential to democratize the public sphere. As it has become very simple for everyone with an Internet connection to publish opinions and to participate in transnational conversations, many hope that blogs are a powerful new force capable of transforming existing patterns of social inequality and facilitating new forms of public engagement and communication within a global civic society.

But there are not only optimists: academics like Professor Cass Sunstein claim there is a risk that the Internet leads to a fragmentation of the public sphere. He believes mainstream media, as the basis of public debate and the dissemination of common values, is threatened if everybody can put together their own mix of information online.

Looking back on the history of media and information technology every new media has been accompanied by hopes and fears that later seem exaggerated. On the whole, the emergence of blogs only marginally affects the public sphere. The realm of democracy is not to be expected because of new technologies nor does the web endanger democracy. Blogs add a new layer to the public sphere that keeps getting more and more complex: international, national and regional mass media (TV, radio, newspapers), online mass media, and online communities (global, local).

The first part of this paper presents some challenges to research on blogs. Popular hypotheses about the web, politics and the public sphere are discussed in the second part. The third part overviews circumstances in which blogs have played a more or less important role in politics or political news coverage. Part four presents the constraints to the power of blogs. I argue in part five that much of the distribution of attention online reflects the political structures offline. Some examples in the paper are from a mainly Swiss perspective.

2. Challenges to Blog Research

The total number of blogs is almost impossible to count. First of all, a definition of what a blog is blurs around the edges. By the end of 2007 the biggest blog search engine Technorati monitored about a hundred million blogs. During the last few years the number of blogs has been doubling approximately every six months. Many of the private blogs in which people publish pictures of their cat's birthday or their favorite recipes are of no political relevance at all. Some of the millions of blogs are politically relevant, but again: there are no perfect criteria for political relevance. Furthermore, there is no good data on where exactly people are blogging from. People in country x may be using a blogging service in country y. Blog research therefore faces empirical problems.

For my study, I analyzed hundreds of blog mentions in hundreds of political articles in Swiss mainstream media to measure the impact of blogs on a large audience. Drezner/Farell (2004) argue that blogs need to get picked up by mass media to get the broader public's attention.

3. Popular Hypotheses about the Web, Democracy and the Public Sphere

Four hypotheses are often mentioned when it comes to the Internet and its impact on politics. For three of them hardly any empirical evidence can be found.

a) Blogs increase political participation

Optimists claim that thanks to the "democratic potentials" of blogs, many more citizens, grass root organizations and other activists will



participate in political discourse (on a global, national or local level). Whereas mainstream media keep a lot of opinions and information out of their news coverage (traditional media as “gatekeepers”), blogs provide the possibility of publishing neglected or suppressed information worldwide. For the first time, they say, everyone with an Internet connection is given the opportunity to publish their political opinions.

Although blogs and other digital tools have made it easier for civil society to create transnational online networks political participation in general is unlikely to increase. Studies (e.g. Paetzolt 2006) have shown that it is quite an illusion to think that technology is going to change people’s minds about politics. It is much more true to say that the web doesn’t increase people’s interest in political issues but that political participation increases people’s interest in the web.

b) Blogs increase the “digital divide”

Many prominent academics (e.g. Sunstein 2001, Putnam 2000, Norris 2001) have warned that the web might rather be a danger to democracy than making political discourse a more democratic space. Norris (2001), for example, writes about the “digital divide” or the danger that the web may reinforce the existing gap between the technologically rich and poor. The hypothesis that blogs and the web in general rather reinforce than level out inequalities is supported by empirical research.

As already mentioned, web content, such as blogs, requires up to date traditional media to be relevant for a broader public. An analysis of blog mentions in Swiss mainstream media between 2000 and 2007 clearly demonstrated that factors like celebrity, educational background and sex are significant in predicting who’s blog is getting mass media resonance. Blogs by politicians and journalists got mentioned and cited much more often than blogs by “normal citizens” (Genner 2007). As a general rule blogs seem to make those voices even louder which were already heard by a large audience before the web existed.

c) Blogs may replace traditional journalism

As with every innovation in information and communication technology, it has been argued that blogs may completely change journalism and eventually replace traditional media such as newspapers and television. The old “Riepl’s law” though, claiming in 1913 already that “old media never gets replaced by new media”, seems to be true for blogs too. Further developed media don’t make their precedents obsolete, said the editor in chief of a Nuremberg newspaper Wolfgang Riepl.

Academics agree that it doesn’t make much sense to distinguish between blogs and journalism (Neuberger/Nuernbergk/Rischke 2007). Many blogs are written by journalists and are embedded in online portals of traditional news media. In many ways blogs and traditional media are not competitive but complementary information news services.

Blogs change most of all how information from areas of conflict and crisis gets to a large audience. When there are no journalists “where it happens” (e.g. the London bomb attacks, the tsunami or during the protests in Burma where no international journalists were admitted), eye witnesses publish texts, pictures and videos in blogs or other online platforms. International media cite these sources when they lack information.

d) Blogs increase fragmentation

Putnam (2000) warned about the emergence of “cyberapartheid” and “cyberbalkanization”. Sunstein’s book “Republic.com” (2001) shows the negative effects of every person “customizing” their communications: “it increases people’s ability to hear echoes of their own voices and to wall themselves off from others”. With the emergence of millions of blogs there seems to be a danger of a fragmentation of information. Is the process of democratic decision making in danger if the mass media lose their role of providing a basis for public debate?

There is little evidence that blogs lead to a dramatic fragmentation of the public sphere. The mere existence of millions of blogs does not make them necessarily powerful. Most blogs are neither politically relevant nor do they have more than a few readers. According to the largest German online survey (ARD / ZDF-Online-Studie für Deutschland 2007), the number of blog readers is increasing constantly, in Germany it is now at about 11% of internet users. Compared to the use of traditional media this is still a small number. In 2007, many more people in the USA said, TV (69%), newspapers (34%) and radio (17%) were their primary sources of political information.² Mainstream media remain by far the most important providers of orientation and selection in an age of information abundance. A study of hyperlinks showed that blogs link much more often to online articles by mainstream media than to other blogs. As blogs, in addition, systematically comment on each other, a segregation, like Sunstein expected it, seems unlikely.

4. How Blogs Have Changed Politics so far



US pioneers

Earlier than in most other countries, some cases in the US raised discussions about the political impact of blogs. First of all the “warblogs” after 9/11 who reported first hand information from an authentic point of view got a lot of attention in the US. In 2002, the Boston Globe³ wrote about Senator Trent Lott’s resignation as Senate Republican Leader: “The descent of Trent Lott brings the rise of ‘bloggers’”. Lott had made racist comments at a party. According to the Economist⁴, mainstream media were initially blind to his remarks, but the “blogosphere” denounced them vigorously, and would not let up, finally forcing others to take notice.

Two top journalists, Dan Rather (CBS) and Eason Jordan (CNN) lost their jobs when bloggers revealed that they had published fake documents or made wrong statements about George W. Bush and the war in Iraq. The US military gave “embedded journalists” special training in Iraq. Bloggers – anonymous Iraqis like “Salam Pax” and “Riverbend” and the US journalist Christopher Allbritton – helped an international audience understand what was going on in Iraq from a much more independent perspective.⁵

Howard Dean, candidate for US president in 2004, collected an enormous amount of money for his campaign thanks to his blog.

Blogs as a challenge to press censorship

Especially in regimes where human rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of press are not granted, blogs provide an opportunity to publish information that would get censored in traditional media. The international organization “Reporters without Borders” has published a handbook for bloggers in order to support “cyberprotest”. Especially in China and Iran blogs are considered an important tool for protest movements. Thanks to these – in most cases anonymous – blogs, information about unacceptable conditions and events gets to Western media which is a challenge for authoritarian regimes trying to make sure they control what information gets published. On the other hand, bloggers in such countries are at risk. If their anonymous online identities get revealed they often go to prison for many years.

Blogs shape news in mainstream media

In framing theory it is argued that the media can elevate issues and devise interpretive frames for them that shape the boundaries and content of political discourse and public opinion. The media can therefore socially construct focal points that frame the issue in a particular way. If the mainstream media constructs focal points through which political actors must operate, the blogosphere has the capacity to construct focal points through which the media operates (Drezner / Farrell 2004: 17-18). Drezner and Farrell call it the “agenda-setting power of blogs”. Especially if mainstream media overlook an issue that is highlighted by the “blogosphere”, they can push that issue into the media spotlight.

Blogs watch mainstream media

As Bruns (2005) argued in his book “Gatewatching”, blog networks are a means of watching the traditional “gatekeepers” of information: mass media. He is a promoter of collaborative news production. US professor Jay Rosen started “NewAssignment.Net”, a project that intends to push the collaboration of bloggers and professional news journalists. When media criticizes the media, it is in many cases not very neutral as different media belong to the same company. Blogs are often more “independent” and seem to be a good “watchdogs” within the media system itself. The most successful blog in German speaking Europe for instance is BILDblog that “watches” BILD. The biggest German tabloid newspaper is often said to “misinform” 11 million German readers per day. BILDblog writes about all the mistakes, wrong information and unfair campaigns by BILD. Even if BILDblog reaches many thousand readers a day, a large part of them may not be typical BILD readers but journalists and other well informed citizens.

Thematic blogs “extend” the public sphere

In 2007, there was a national and quite emotional debate in Switzerland about the fast growing number of German immigrants. The German IT specialist Jens Wiese started blogging about being a German in Switzerland in 2005. Swiss mainstream media interviewed Wiese and cited Wiese’s blog regularly. In his blog, Wiese commented on news coverage and interested web users commented on his posts in his blog. Blogwiese.ch became a small thematic public sphere interacting with a large audience and providing a platform for discussions. It can be argued that blogs are under specific circumstances “extensions” of the public sphere that is usually provided by mass media. Krusenstern.ch offers outstanding information about Russia and Ukraine. The blog by Swiss journalist Jürg Vollmer is another example for a news service about a subject that is of interest for a broad public only from time to time. Not only German speaking Russia correspondents for mainstream news media read and comment on his blog.

Local communal blog

When riots broke out in French suburbs in 2005, a group of Swiss journalists chose an unconventional way of reporting. They went to a suburb near Paris, Bondy, and tried to connect with young people involved in the riots. The journalists blogged from Bondy and other French suburbs and started including local people in reporting news. Many international newspapers referred to BondyBlog.fr during and after the riots as it was a constantly updated and seemingly authentic news source. Later it became a platform for everyone interested in suburban problems in France.

Another example shows how blogs may change the dissemination of political ideas and information. In the Swiss municipality Arlesheim, two



local, but at first anonymous bloggers wrote about the need to have a full-time school. Many citizens started discussing the issue in those blogs until a major newspaper and a political party picked up the issue. In Zurich, Switzerland's biggest city, the president of Zurich's parliament has been writing a blog about his work for interested citizens to read. In Birsfelden, also a Swiss municipality, the president blogs about communal politics. There is no data on who is reading those blogs. It is to be expected that citizens who are both politically active and technically skilled use these blogs at a disproportionately higher rate.

Perfect for small communities

What might be irrelevant for an international or national public, may be interesting on a local level. Or specific issues are not of interest to a broad public but for certain communities on a global level. Like regional or thematic newspapers, blogs are useful for small communities. Thanks to the cheap way of publishing, blogs can provide a platform for information and exchange if the production of a newspaper would be too expensive. Blogs can also make it easier to connect protest movements, political parties, NGOs and "civil society".

What makes the dissemination of information complicated is the fact that blog content does not get delivered at home like most print media or information by e-mail ("push" media) but users have to consciously look for information online ("pull" media). RSS feed readers⁶ are a possibility to check news in a large number of blogs in a single program. But only a small percentage use feed readers that allow them to customize their daily online news cocktail.

5. The Constraints to the Relevance of Blogs

It is often overlooked by optimists that the mere fact that some information can theoretically get read by a worldwide audience, doesn't mean it is going to be read by more than just a few. The distribution of readers varies largely: very few blogs get read by millions, and millions of blogs get read by just a few. Those who don't have time to read many different blogs every day may prefer watching TV, listening to the radio or reading the newspapers. Traditional mass media generally offer denser and probably also more balanced information.

Many bloggers have stopped blogging over time as it is a very time consuming activity. A condition of political blogging is therefore not only enough time but also financial resources (it is for most bloggers a voluntary activity), technical skills, a tendency to public exposure and the wish to express one's political opinions. Given these circumstances, it is very unlikely that more than a small part of the population is ever going to use blogs as a form of political participation. Many blogs have been embedded in web pages of mainstream media and the bloggers are professional journalists. The hope of many that blogs may finally transform the information monopoly of the mass media as "gatekeepers" has to be put into perspective.

It has often been claimed that blogs make political discourse more transparent as discussions remain digitally archived and as information can get published anonymously that would not get published by mainstream media or in a country with a censored press. Transparency is an important element of democratic political systems. At the same time the possibility to publish anonymously anything you want makes it easier than ever to publish unconfirmed gossip or defamatory statements. This makes the information, especially in anonymous blogs, not always very reliable. Finally, the sheer abundance of information makes the political discourse not that much more transparent: The more people publish their opinions online, the less anyone is going to get attention.

6. Politics Goes Digital

High quality political information is provided by civil services and by media professionals. Equally propaganda, counter-propaganda, protest and political small talk can be found online. This process of digitalization doesn't necessarily mean a more democratic political discourse even if the technical structure of the web – every computer can connect to every computer worldwide – seems very democratic at first sight. What is new in the age of digital politics, is the fact that web content is often only a mouse click away from each other, can be accessed 24 hours a day and is digitally archived. Blogs do have a privileged Google ranking as web pages with lots of links and regular updates (two main characteristics of blogs) get listed at the beginning of the search results.⁷

It is not to be expected that power structures online are going to be a great deal different than those offline. The publication tools have been "democratized", i.e. accessible for everyone with an internet connection and some technical skills. Still citizens do not receive more attention in political debates than before the existence of the web. In the end, technical democracy doesn't make the public sphere more democratic on the whole. On the one hand, blogs provide indeed possibilities for protest movements to connect more easily, to publish explosive information anonymously in countries with authoritarian regimes. But it has become a wide spread practice of states and regimes to control the web and to identify "cyberdissidents". When it becomes too hard to control what gets published, a regime like the military junta in Burma just cuts the internet connection.

Of course, the answer to the initial question – „Are blogs a global megaphone for protest?“ – is yes and no. They can be if international media



are paying attention to a certain region or a late-breaking subject anyway – like China before and during the Olympics – but they make it sometimes even easier for autocratic governments to identify protesters and throw them into jail.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 „Web 2.0“ was coined by O'Reilly to express that the Internet has become more participatory and interactive. From an academic point of view it is not possible to distinguish two different versions of the web.
- 2 Tages-Anzeiger vom 18.01.2007: Blogs wichtig für US-Wahlkampf. Online: www.tages-anzeiger.ch/dyn/news/ausland/709635.html [September 2007].
- 3 Mark Jurkowitz, „The descent of Trent Lott brings the rise of ‘bloggers,“ Boston Globe, 26 December
- 4 Economist, „Mississippi Burning,“ 21 December 2002, p. 39.
- 5 „Salam Pax“ is a pseudonymous blogger from Iraq whose site „Where is Raed?“ received notable media attention during (and after) the 2003 invasion of Iraq. „Riverbend“ is the pseudonym of the author of the blog „Baghdad Burning“, launched August 17, 2003. Riverbend's identity is carefully hidden, but the weblog entries suggest that Riverbend is a young Iraqi woman from a mixed Shia and Sunni family, living with her parents and brother in Baghdad. Before the United States occupation of Iraq she was a computer programmer.
Christopher Allbritton is a blogger and journalist, best known for starting the blog „Back to Iraq“ during the 2003 Iraq War. After he raised \$15,000 from his readers, he became the Web's „first fully reader-funded journalist-blogger“.
- 6 The initials „RSS“ refer to „Really Simple Syndication“. RSS is a family of web feed formats used to publish frequently updated content such as blog entries, news headlines, and podcasts. An RSS document (which is called a „feed“ or „web feed“ or „channel“) contains either a summary of content from an associated web site or the full text. RSS makes it possible for people to keep up with web sites in an automated manner that can be piped into special programs or filtered displays. / Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rss_feed [April 2008]
- 7 : Why Google loves Weblogs. Online: www.microcontentnews.com/articles/googleblogs.htm [September 2007]