

Blog Commenting: A New Political Information Space

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Though still a small subsection of the internet, weblogs are becoming an increasingly prominent space for finding and discussing information - in particular political information. But because of their newness, the question remains as to what are the possible implications of political blogs on people's current information reality. As a way to better understand political blogs as a space for gaining political information and also discussing that information, a pilot study was developed whose main focus was to understand the nature of the comments posted to political blogs. There has been much speculation in the popular and scholarly press about the possible democratic implications of people writing blogs, with claims that the medium opens up a new space for deliberation and participation. However, little work has focused on blog commenters - the people who are reading blogs and responding based on what they have read. And yet, to understand the blogosphere as a new deliberative or political information space, it is critical to analyze those who are engaging in the discussion. Therefore, this study focuses not on the principal authors of popular blog sites but the readers who are inspired to post their responses.

Introduction

Though still a small subsection of the internet, weblogs are becoming an increasingly prominent space for finding and discussing information - in particular political information. Considering that a few years ago the term did not exist, the growth of blogs is astounding. While no one knows the true size of the so-called "blogosphere," Technorati.com (the Google of blogs) now indexes 22.4 million - a number that is estimated to double every five months. People are not simply publishing more blogs, however; increasingly people are reading and responding to them - engaging in a discussion with the principal blog author as well as other commenters.

In many ways blogs provide an interesting space for political talk - combining political information with opinion expression and conversation. And there has been much speculation in the popular and scholarly press about the possible democratic implications

of people writing blogs, leading some to see blogs as the next big hope for a truly deliberative political sphere. As Glenn Reynolds, who runs the popular Instapundit blog, has noted, "Prior to World War II, Big Media was countervailed by other institutions: political parties, churches, labor unions, even widespread political discussion groups. The weblog phenomenon may be viewed as the return of such influences—a broadening of the community of discourse to include, well, the community" (Kline, Burstein, De Keijzer, & Berger, 2005).

However, little work has focused on blog commenters - the people who are reading blogs and responding based on what they have read. These *commenters* are important because in order to understand political blogs as a form of deliberation or participation it is critical to analyze those who are actually engaging in the deliberation. In other words, scholarship needs to not only look at the principal authors of blogs but also the readers who are inspired to engage in a discussion and post their own responses. This pilot study is an attempt to focus on blog commentary, specifically looking at four areas- opinion diversity, opinion quality, integrative discussion and political participation.

Though, as many have claimed, simply having the technology will not necessarily change our democracy (Uslaner, 2004); the question remains as to what are the possible democratic implications of political blogs on people's current information reality. Are blogs a new space for gaining political information and engaging in new forms of discourse and deliberation? A space for gaining political knowledge? Or even a new form of participation? And because research on political blogs is still emerging, particularly research on commenters, the development of methods for understanding blogs is critical. Consequently, the operationalization used is discussed.

The emergence of the blog as a new information reality

Called the "grassroots media sensation of 2004" (Swope, 2005), there is significant evidence that blogs are becoming mainstream. A November 2004 Pew Internet & American Life survey found that 27 percent of internet users (32 million people) say they read weblogs - a full 58 percent jump from February of last year. And possibly more surprising, 12 percent of internet users say they posted comments on blogs (Rainie, 2005). But why the flurry of interest in the blog medium? Optimists claim that the growth in popularity among blogs is no less than revolutionary. Arguing that blogs have finally capitalized on the democratizing potential that so many have promised from the Internet, these proponents say that blogs have enabled the "true democratization of the information age" (Petersen, 2004). However, others claim that blogs are simply the "e-flavor of the month" and are dangerous rumor mills which contribute to divisive discourse and the already significant amount of misinformation available on the Net.

Whether the newest form of technological entertainment or the latest hope for participatory news-making, blogs are of real interest to researchers because of their significant growth in numbers, readership and influence. Specifically for information researchers, blogs are important because of the role they play as a space for finding and discussing political information. Though the weblog has its roots in other communication technologies - usenet groups, listservs and electronic bulletin boards - the scope, reach and popularity of blogs is considerable. With just one political blog - the Daily Kos-drawing approximately 11 million visitors per month, political blogs are an information reality for many.

The Focus on Blog Commenters

Studies to date have focused mainly on blog producers. Herring (2004); Nardi (2004); and Papacharissi (2004) have all looked at the socio-cultural phenomenon of blogging - specifically its social activity and motivations for maintaining a blog. A considerable amount of other work has focused on the relationship of blogging and journalism, questioning whether or not blogging can be considered journalism, the pressure blogs place on the mainstream press, and the concerns over information credibility and objectivity (Andrews, 2004; Lasica, 2003; Matheson, 2004; Smolkin, 2004). And those who have looked at the political aspects of blogs have focused mainly on the relationship between blogs and public opinion and political organizing (Bloom, 2003; Carpenter, Nardi, Moore, Robertson, Drezner et al., 2004; Coleman, 2005; Drezner & Farrell, 2004; MacDougall, 2005; Silver, 2004)

Less focus, however, has been placed on the commenters of blogs - those who read blog posts and then provide their own perspective and opinion. However, particularly on the elite blog sites, active communities of blog commenters have emerged. It is not uncommon to see blog posts receiving anywhere from 300 to 500 comments per post. In this study focus was placed on commenters because it is in their postings that a dialogue emerges among the posters or between the posters and blog author. And often in this dialogue political information is shared, discussed and integrated. Though the nature of the discourse in the posts ranges in quality and focus, large scale conversations about politics are taking place in the blogosphere. And, importantly, those conversations are not simply being undertaken by those who write blogs. These political conversations are occurring among those who read and comment on blogs.

Study Design and Operationalization

Because research on political blogs is only now emerging, the development of methods for understanding blogs is critical. As noted, this is particularly true for those who engage in

commentary on the sites. Findings reported in this study are based on data collected from a sample of four popular political blogs and two mainstream media “blog-like” columns. In order to have a range of ideological viewpoints, two liberal blogs (the DailyKos and Washington Monthly) and two conservative blogs (PoliPundit and Captain’s Quarters) were selected. Due to the range of blogs available, I focused on the elite, influential and popular blogs. The focus on these “A-list” blogs is consistent with research to date (Drezner & Farrell, 2004; MacDougall, 2005; Matheson, 2004).

Again, the focus of this research is to understand the nature of political blog commenters, specifically the information discussed, the range of opinion expressed and the quality of that opinion. The method employed, therefore, was a combination of content analysis of a sample of blog posts and corresponding comments and a more qualitative approach for understanding the nature and context of the comments. For the purpose of this study, I chose to focus on four elements that have been seen as important in political communications: *opinion diversity*, *opinion quality*, *integrative discussion and conversation*, and *political participation*.

Opinion Diversity

Some have claimed that political blogs are simply partisan rumor mills and “ideological lynch mobs” (Rall, 2005) where only those with similar political opinions engage in discussion while oppositional views are silenced. But others argue that blogs are an additional or alternative space for discussion, opening up an avenue for a greater range of opinions (Kline, Burstein, De Keijzer, & Berger, 2005). To better understand this, blog comments were coded using a category of analysis called *opinion diversity*. Opinion diversity represents the degree to which a variety of alternative viewpoints and people engage in conversation on a topic of concern. In order to determine the degree to which the political blogs seem to allow the expression of differing viewpoints, four variables were created and coded: *Ideology*: text was coded as conservative, moderate, or liberal; *Participant variety*: the number of unique commenter names were counted for each blog posting; *Disagreement with Blogger*: whether or not commenters of the site disagree with the original post of the blog owner; and *Tone*: borrowing from Papacharissi (2004) and as a way to measure the attitude or tenor of the conversation, passages were coded as to their overall tone.

Opinion Quality

The idea of opinion quality is related to what some researchers have termed mindfulness (Timmerman, 2002 in Kwak, et al. 2005). Mindfulness is an indicator of how involved or

attentive a person is to a conversation. This is important because increased attention has been shown to play a role in attitude formation and information retention as well as being positively related to political engagement (Kwak, et al. 2005). Comments were coded using a category called *opinion quality*, which represents how thoughtful or considered the comments are. In order to measure quality, three variables were developed:

Consideredness Scale: Borrowing from Kim et al. (1999), comments were evaluated on their level of consideredness. A scale from 1 to 4 was used (1 = Irrelevant or off-topic; 2 = Expressed an opinion but didn't provide reasons or rationale for that opinion; 3 = expressed own opinion and gave reasons and rationale for the opinion; 4 = expressed considerations for all side of debate or encouraged participants to think about issue from a different perspective); *Word count of each comment*; and *Grammatical Features*: As a measure of how attentive or concerned a commenter is about her posting, comments were rated on a scale from 1 to 3 as to their grammatical clarity.

Integrative Discussion and Conversation

Opinion diversity and quality are only two factors that are important for public opinion formation and political participation. Researchers have also argued that behavior is influenced by one's ability to integrate outside information into interpersonal discussions (Cruz, Boster, & Rodriguez, 1997 in (Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005). For example, Kwak et al. (2005) found that integrative discussion, defined as "the extent to which individuals bring information they have learned from the media into political discussion" is positively related to political engagement. Political blogs provide a unique opportunity to understand integrative discussion. Most political blogs are dependent upon traditional media for sources of information. Original posts by the blogger often refer to mainstream media stories, hyperlinking to news articles reported by someone else. Though the blog owner often uses the mainstream media as a source of commentary, it is less clear if blog commenters are engaging in integrative discussion - citing media stories, hyperlinking to alternative sources, or integrating other outside information into their comments.

Comments were coded using a category called *integrative discussion and conversation*, which represents the degree to which commenters cite media stories, hyperlink to alternative sources, or integrate other outside information into their comments. It further measures whether or not commenters engage in a discussion with one another or simply provide their own commentary on a particular issue without really responding to others in the commenting group. Three variables were created to measure this category: *Cite media story*: whether or not a media story was cited; *Hyperlinks*: hyperlinks to external websites; external blog posts; the mainstream media; or government sites were coded; *Commentary or Conversation*: Part of the concept of interpersonal discussion, is that it is a discussion. In order to determine whether or not commenters seem to be engaging in conversation

with one another, comments were coded as to whether they seemed conversational or commentary in nature.

Political Participation

A number of scholars have hypothesized that there is a relationship between talk and political participation (Eveland, 2004; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005; Lenart, 1994; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Scheufele, 2000). It has also been argued that normative conceptions of what constitutes political participation are too limiting and do not necessarily transfer well to an online environment. Instead, some have argued that the Net provides the possibility for different types of participation (Dahlgren, 2005). Borrowing from Kim et al.'s (1999) conception of "campaigning" and "complaining" types of participation, I was interested in whether a different form of political participation could be seen in political blog discussions. Using Kim et al.'s (1999) concept, two variables were created to operationalize political participation: *Campaigning*: Defined by Kim as participatory activities *within* the political system, comments that called others to action - encouraging them to vote, join a political campaign, hyperlinking to a political party, or contacting an elected official were coded as "campaigning;" *Complaining*: Defined by Kim as activities outside the political system, comments that indicated that the poster had attended or was attending a demonstration, wrote a letter to the media or called a talk show were coded as "complaining."

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings from the study are not surprising and suggest that the political blogs sites in this sample seemed to be spaces where those of similar ideological viewpoints conversed. If differing opinions were expressed, they were expressed by those with the most extreme views - moderates were notably absent from the blog sites. The lack of moderate opinion may be accounted for by the tone of discussion in the blog sites. In my limited sample, those that had a minority opinion were most often targeted as "trolls" or "flamers," people who deliberately set out to provoke the ire of other blog participants. In addition, opinion quality - as measured by "consideredness" - was relatively low on blog sites where people seemed less concerned about explaining or accounting for the "other side's viewpoint." However, in a community where most people are of a similar ideological leaning, it may become less important to overtly state other viewpoints. This may also lead to this sense of short-hand discourse - where people stereotype or create caricatures of opponents' views or even where people don't need to spend time acknowledging a different viewpoint.

The integrative discussion findings were somewhat complicated. There was less time spent citing and hyperlinking to media stories than I first theorized. Though the blog owners tended to link to a number of outside resources, that linking and citation did not necessarily translate to the commenters' postings. Though commenters seemed informed about current news stories and wrote about their opinions of national events, most did not provide cites or other support for those viewpoints. This is most likely a problem with measurement, however, not an indicator that commenters are not engaging in integrative discussion. In synchronous discussion people do not spend a lot of time citing specific news stories and it may be that it is not appropriate to expect something different in the online environment.

The political participation findings were inconclusive and will need to be addressed in future work. I coded instances where commenters engaged in "campaigning" forms of engagement. The comments all took the form of urging others to call their congresspeople or indicated that the commenter had called their representative. In only one case was a "complaining" form of engagement coded. Here, a commenter had expressed concern with the way the mainstream press was covering a story and had called the newspaper to complain. Though the campaigning/complaining operationalization of participation is an interesting concept to port into the blogosphere, at this point my sample size is too small to draw any real conclusions about whether or not a new form of participation is emerging in the blog community.

Possibly the most interesting and unexpected finding is the amount of community information sharing that does exist in the blog sites. Commenters often refer to each other by user name, quote each other's posts, or ask questions and feedback from others in the community. These are strong indicators that an information community is emerging on some of the blog sites.

Future Work

The preliminary findings are promising and are leading to a more extensive study of political blogs as a space for commenter information sharing and political discourse. As noted, the approach of this study is different because of its focus on commenters. The methods and findings will be helpful for others studying blogs as an information reality.

Though probably neither a boon nor bust for political discussion, blogs do provide an interesting space for political talk and integration. They do seem to be a space where a community of people engage in discussion about political information, expressing opinions and possibly altering their own perspective. Though the real implications for participation are unclear, a new form of discussion and deliberation may be emerging. In order to truly

understand the nature of the space a larger sample needs to be collected. However, the ideas and method of operationalization employed in this work is useful and portable to a sample that includes a wider range of blogs.

Though these preliminary findings may not be particularly surprising, there is some promise in where they can help guide future work. Because the focus of this work is on the people that are responding to blogs as opposed to those producing blogs, the study has the potential to contribute to ideas about how blogs may be a space for active engagement in finding and discussing political information. As a consequence, much of the excitement about the blogosphere as a new space for civic engagement is possibly borne out for blog commenters, since commenting does require an active level of engagement; it is not simply a passive media relationship.

The commentary analyzed in this pilot study demonstrated that a level of engagement and debate is occurring by people who read blogs and then are inspired to comment on the information that they have read. And though blogs may not be the democratizing force that optimists have claimed - a space for rational, critical and balanced debate - they may be a space where people who are interested and impassioned about politics discuss current affairs in a public forum. They may be a space of a new form of deliberation - one that embraces more emotional, angry or entertaining forms of interaction. But to continue to understand this, more work blog commenting needs to be undertaken.

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