

<研究ノート>

## Internet Political Blogs Role in Promoting Citizen Activism And in Shaping American Political Debate

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Internet political web logs or blogs, as they have come to be known, have been in existence for a little over ten years and in fact the word blog has yet to be recognized by the spell check software found in Microsoft Word. However, even though blogs are a fairly recent phenomenon, they are becoming widely recognized by influential people in both business and academic circles as powerful tools for not only educating the electorate but also for their role in encouraging and enabling citizen activism. The blogs allow ordinary people to help mold public policy, influence elections and shift the direction of public discourse. Political blogs started out as platforms that challenged the reporting of traditional media but are now referred to as the "New Media" along with other internet tools such as social networking sites and video hosting sites. Since the 2004 American presidential campaign, when Howard Dean launched a powerful political insurgency campaign largely using this "New Media", political candidates, advocacy organizations, traditional news outlets and other corporate interests have jumped into the "blogging" fray. This paper will examine the praise political blogs are receiving and take a look at exactly what a blog is, how they originated, how they function and who these "bloggers" are. It will also discuss the intentions of the developers of the internet and why political blogs are particularly suited to activists in the United States. The evolution of the blogs political influence in the United States will be traced and several examples of the power of the blogs will be closely outlined. Finally the role of blogs and internet technology in several U.S. presidential campaigns will be discussed.

According to the Wall Street Journal, in an article marking the 10th anniversary of the blog, they have done more to change the world than anyone could have imagined. (Varadarajan, 2007) In an interview by American journalist Bill Moyers with Kathleen Hall Jamieson who is a professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and the director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, Moyers asked Jamieson if the New Media is affecting politics. She outlined just how the New Media is revolutionizing communication in the political sphere.

New Media refers to the Internet, the blog, the Web (World Wide Web), video hosting sites like YouTube, and social networking sites like My Space and Facebook. Jamieson tells us that there is more information available to the public than there has ever been before and that getting access to that information is easier than ever. She described how we can now within a matter of minutes, locate political candidates positions on issues, contrast their positions to the other candidates and search news interviews where candidates are held accountable for discrepancies between their past and current political positions. We can then search for contextual information in various news sites. We can watch videos of the candidates and hear in their own voices their arguments for their issue positions. We can also watch political interview shows that have been archived on the internet where what she calls "substantive exchanges about substance" take place. Using the site YouTube we can watch videos of debates between candidates. If we have issues that are important to us we can easily identify which candidates best represent our viewpoints. (Bill Moyers Journal, 2007)

These web tools empower citizens by providing a fast way to retrieve and analyze information but they are also the tools that made political blogging possible and allow for a dialog between the blogger and their audience and the audience with other audience members. In 2006 Time magazine named their person of the year "You". The author of the article, Lev Grossman, states that in 2006 the big story "was about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before." He calls the internet the "million-channel people's network" and states that the internet is about "the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will change the world and how the world changes." (Grossman, 2006) Steven Fry, a technology writer for the British Guardian newspaper, refers to the collaborative capacity of the internet and its' various formats such as blogs as the "architecture of participation" which encourages users to add value to the application as they use it. He sees the reciprocity between the user and the provider as the most powerful aspect of the blogs. The technology, which allows for both uploading and downloading of information he sees as facilitating creativity, collaboration and sharing between users.(Fry, 2007)

In the short ten years since their inception blogs have evolved greatly. In 1997 the blog was the province of a very few technology nerds. The first person to write a blog is recognized by Oxford English dictionary as Jorn Barger. He began his blog called Robot Wisdom in 1997. He began by searching for and gathering links to other web pages on the internet that he found interesting and he posted them on his web page along with his own commentary. On December 23, 1997 Mr. Barger wrote, "I decided to start my own webpage logging the best stuff I find as I

search the internet on a daily basis." Webpage logging was soon shortened to weblog and then soon there after became blog. Blog was quickly adopted as both a noun ( weblog) and as a verb, to blog. To blog means to post and edit one's own blog. The author of the blog became known as a blogger. The blog has since evolved into a vehicle for forceful and opinionated writing with many of the opinions being on politics in the United States. What is called the "New Web" or Web 2.0 has expanded dramatically the technology available to blogs. Web 2.0 is considered a new generation of web based communities. According to Stephen Fry "technologies such as blog software, social networking, bookmarking, podcastes, RSS feeds, social network software and application programming interfaces provide significant enhancements over the read only websites such as Jorn Barger's Robot Wisdom site. Today's political blogs are part of an online political discussion. Bloggers use links to other sites and other discussions expanding their audience and they also allow for their readers to leave comments about the post. Readers are free to challenge, correct or add information to the blog post in the the comments section. It is a virtual free market of ideas and opinions. Internet users are going to that free market in very large numbers. (Fry, 2007)

A 2006 report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project gives us a portrait of who bloggers and blog readers are and provides statistics that show the widespread reach of blogs. They found that, as of mid 2006, about 147 million Americans were using the internet. Of those 147 million 57 million read blogs and about 12 million keep a blog. About 11% of blogs focus on politics and government. (Lenhardt and Fox, 2006) Tunku Varadarajan, writing in the Wall Street Journal online calls blogs "a techno-psychological revolution among readers of news and opinion." According to Varadarajan "the daily reading of virtually everyone under 40 and a fair amount of those over 40 includes a blog or two." (Varadarajan, 2006) Bloggers are the most avid online news readers in particular, political news. Bloggers, most of whom have high speed internet connections at home, are highly likely to read news online several times a day. Ninety -five percent of bloggers get news from the internet and 71% say they do so daily. Bloggers also gather news from diverse sources. Seventy-two percent look for online news or information about politics or political campaigns compared to 58% of all internet users. Ninety percent of bloggers allow comments to be posted on their blog which serves to create a sense of community for the readers which in turn expands the audience of the blogs. Over half of all bloggers say they have never published their writings or media creations anywhere else. One of the most distinguishing characteristics of bloggers is their youth. More than half (54%) are under thirty and bloggers are evenly divided between men and woman. (Lenhart and Fox, 2006) These statistics show the democratic nature

of blogs is giving a voice to people who previously may not have had one. Where as in the past if a person wanted to have their writing published they were subject to the selectivity of editors but now they can easily start a blog on the internet with a potential audience of millions. Of course just being on the Internet doesn't mean that the blogs writing will be well received or even read by more than a few friends. One of the major criticisms of blogs is that the vast majority of blogs are simply poorly done. In the arena of politics, where strongly held opinions may be just as strongly opposed, there is the potential for trouble resulting from slanted or manipulated facts and even slander of ones opponents.

The democratic nature of the internet blogs is part of what makes them uniquely suited to Americans. Blogs give their writers a platform from which they can exercise one of their most beloved constitutionally guaranteed rights, that of free speech. The right to criticize the U.S. government without interference is considered one of the most important elements of free speech. Democracy as defined in the dictionary is "government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them or by their elected representatives under a free electoral system or as put more simply by President Abraham Lincoln, "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" ( Lincoln, Abraham) According to Joi Ito, in his online collaborative essay "Weblogs and Emergent Democracy" the developers of the internet hoped that it would become a platform for intelligent solutions to help rectify the inequality in the world. Ito tells us that the Internet's founders saw a potential of enabling a more direct democratic system. A system that evolves away from the broadcast style of managed consensus to a democratic style of collective consensus derived from many conversations, such as those on the blogs. (Ito, Joi) Ito also states that a functional democracy is governed by the majority while protecting the rights of the minorities. To achieve this balance the democracies need to guarantee a competition of ideas. He sees the internet as a commons where the competition of ideas can take place. Ito describes how the competition for ideas has evolved. The printing press gave rise to the possibility of providing more information to the masses which in turn gave rise to journalism and the press. Many now argue that we are now at a point where journalism and free press have been replaced by the voice of mass media operated by large corporations and a result there is less diversity and more internalization of the competition of ideas. (Ito, 2004)

Journalist Jay Rosen believes that blogs "are undoing the system for generating authority and therefore the credibility of news providers that has been accumulating over the past 100 years because the one-to-many broadcasting model of communications doesn't describe the

world anymore. So people who have a better description of the world are picking up the tools of journalism and doing it. He calls it a potentially transforming development. (Rosen, 2003) According to Ross Mayfield, CEO of the social software company, Social Text, blogs have developed three kinds of networks, creative, social, and political. The creative network is close associates with deep trust and strong bonds and with a strong crossover of interests and production of content. A social network is the traditional blog form. A political network is similar to a representative democracy where blogs receive links from thousands of other blogs. Each link can be thought of as a vote and the blogs with the most votes can be seen as having a great deal of influence. Joi Ito, using his own blog as an example illustrates how one blog entry or post can have an operational purpose, a social purpose and an impact on a political network. On his blog about Emergent Democracy he may be speaking creatively to a small group of researchers, socially to a larger group of friends who are thinking along with him and trying to grasp the concepts being laid out; and on a political level to readers he doesn't know, but is hoping to influence with his talk about a new kind of politics. (Ito, 2004)

Political blogs are usually waging one of three different kinds of campaigns through their blog posts. These include educational campaigns, advocacy campaigns, and special campaigns. The educational campaign often has a hidden agenda of garnering support for the advocacy campaign that is about to be waged. Most blogs advocacy campaigns involve attempts to influence decision makers such as congress members, governors, the President, state legislators and corporate boards and C.E.O.s. Bloggers will appeal to their readers to take some action to this end. Many blogs link to sites which allow their readers to find the contact information for their own elected officials making it possible to easily e-mail their representative. A special campaign is often but not always the result of a failed advocacy campaign. One example of a special campaign is the campaign of Ned Lamont to unseat the incumbent senator Joe Lieberman. Senator Lieberman, a Democrat is a strong advocate of the Iraq war and at the time of his re-election campaign the majority of American were not in favor of war. Lieberman had aligned himself with President Bush's Iraq policies at a time when many Americans were beginning to believe that Bush had manipulated the country in to the war. Bloggers and their troops of online activists set to work to unseat Liberman and pushed hard for his Democratic rival Ned Lamont in the primary election. In politics the incumbent candidate almost always has a large advantage but because of the massive online rallying of support for Lamont he was able to defeat Lieberman in the primaries. Lieberman, a powerful senior senator was forced to run as an Independent to stay in the race.

Political blogs often have a clearly stated political bias. If we look at two early political blogs, or "proto-blogs" as James Taranto, Editor of OpinionJournal.com calls them, we can see the different directions the political right and left took in their blogging. (Varadarajan, 2007) These two blogs both had their roots in the the key role they played in the impeachment of President Bill Clinton. The right leaning blog was called the Drudge Report. In January of 1998 the editor of the blog, Matt Drudge caught wind of a story that Newsweek Magazine was considering running. When Newsweek's editors decided not to print the story Drudge posted it on his blog. It was a story that was going to shake Washington D.C. and reverberate around the world. It was the story of a Whitehouse intern who had carried on a sexual affair with President Bill Clinton, or as it became to be known, the Lewinsky affair. Had Matt Drudge not circulated the Newsweek story and brought it to the worlds attention when the mainstream media hesitated, the story may never have reached the world. President Clinton made several denials of the story in public and even testified under oath that no affair had taken place and when the truth came out these denials lead to his impeachment for perjury and obstruction of justice. After several months of persistent media coverage of the story many Americans began to feel disheartened by the partisan nature of the reporting. In September of 1998 two liberal technology entrepreneurs, Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, began a project called "Censure and Move On" They created a website and circulated a petition calling on Congress to drop the Impeachment proceedings as they felt that Clinton's actions didn't fall under the U.S. Constitutions definition of an impeachable offense. They asked that the lesser punishment of Censure be imposed and that the Congress then move on to addressing the important issues facing the country. There website MoveOn.org survives today as one of the most powerful hubs of action for liberal political causes. These days they are focused on opposition of the Iraq war and other Bush administration policies.

Today, according to Taranto, right leaning bloggers tend to follow the model of Matt Drudge of the Drudge Report. They see their role as acting as a check of what they perceive as the liberal tendencies of the mainstream media. An example of one of their greatest triumphs concerned the episode known as Rather-Gate. Dan Rather, a senior journalist with CBS TV network reported on six documents that his network received that they claimed were from the files of President Bush's commanding officer when he served in the National Guard as a young man. The documents seemed to show that Bush was derelict in his duty. Rather reported on the news show that his network had analyzed the documents and found them to be legitimate. Within hours of the report several right leaning bloggers began their own check on the authenticity of the documents. They found their own expert who claimed that the documents were forgeries and several blogs such

as Free Republic, Powerline and Little Green Footballs began asking their readers to put pressure on CBS to withdraw their story. Finally blogger Matt Drudge became involved and this triggered the Associated Press to pick up the challenge to Rather's report. In the end CBS news withdrew their report, fired the producer of Rather's show and forced Rather to apologize. Rather ended up retiring a year later and a year earlier than expected. Rather had been a long time nemesis of conservatives who saw him as the supreme embodiment of the liberal bias in the press. His apology and early retirement brought them great satisfaction. Dan Rather continues to stand by his story and points out that the documents were never conclusively proven to be forgeries and adds that even if they are the story of Bush's neglect of service is true. (Varadarajan, 2007)

The left leaning blogs followed the lead of Move-On.org and the blogs became a hotbed of progressive activism. Before the blogs came along conservatives successfully used talk radio shows to speak to their supporters, raise news issues, target opponents and raise money for political campaigns. As more and more independent radio stations were bought up by large corporations that advanced a conservative agenda opposing viewpoints were getting harder and harder to find on the airwaves. Blogger Jane Hamsher in a Wall Street Journal article about blogs comments that "in the 1990's railing at their radios and T.V. sets became the isometric sport of the silent majority." Progressives felt isolated and sidelined by what they saw as the mainstream media's advancing of the conservative agenda. That isolation ended with the advent of the progressive blogs. The online discussion groups have become the liberal version of conservative talk radio. According to a George Washington University study of the internet Democrats, the political party with whom the majority of left leaning blogs align themselves, outnumber the more conservative Republicans by almost 2 to 1 among what the study calls "Online Political Citizens". Liberal blogs such as the Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo, Firedoglake have been very successful in creating online communities to fill the void liberals felt in the 1990s. These blogs motivate their readers to become active, raise political issues and their ultimate goal is helping to determine political races. (Varadarajan, 2007)

The liberal blogs success in influencing political discourse can be seen through several powerful examples aside from those already cited. In 2002, U.S. Senate Majority leader, Republican Trent Lott made some comments in a speech at a party held honoring the retirement of U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond. During Thurmond's 1948 unsuccessful campaign for U.S. president he advocated a policy of racial segregation in the U.S. In Lott's speech for retiring Thurmond he suggested that the U.S. would have been better off if Thurmond had been elected as President. These comments were seen by many as outrageous and as a tacit approval of racism. Liberal

bloggers, led by Talking Points Memo's Josh Marshall, began digging through public documents and recordings to see if they could find any more evidence to support their fears about Lott. Unfortunately they found plenty of evidence. Although this party was a public event attended by members of the mainstream media organizations the comments were ignored until bloggers helped to create a political crisis by bringing the story to the public. The media eventually followed the bloggers lead as the story spread across the internet. Senate Majority leader, Trent Lott, in one of the most powerful positions in Washington D.C. was forced to step down as the Majority leader.

Another powerful example of the blogs influence was during the 2006 mid-term elections. During the 2006 Virginia Senate campaign of Republican George Allen, who at the time was considered a strong contender for the 2008 Presidential race, a young Indian-American man working for Allen's challenger recorded a video of Allen at a campaign stop. The young man named S.R. Sadith was a college student working as a volunteer on the campaign of Allen's opponent Jim Webb and tasked with tracking Allen's campaign and videoing his speeches. At the time of the video Allen, the incumbent, was considered the likely winner and held a comfortable lead in the polls. During a campaign stop Allen called attention to Sadith who was in the back of the room and said, "Say hello to macaca back there and welcome to America" Sadith's video was uploaded to the video site YouTube where it quickly "went viral" meaning that it spread rapidly across the internet. Bloggers picked up the video and started investigating the story finding out that macaca was a racial slur. Many more stories surfaced that hinted at Allen's racist inclinations. Finally local Virginia media picked up the story from the blogs and then national media. Allens lead began to slip and eventually he was defeated by his once "long shot" Democratic rival, Jim Webb. The "macaca" video put an end to Allens presidential aspirations. The defeat was also significant because Allen's defeat gave Senate Democrats a one seat majority in the Congress ending a long domination by the Republicans which was one of the hoped for goals of the liberal bloggers.

Blogs have also been a very strong voice in support and opposition of the Iraq war. In fact, the second Iraq war is the first war to be covered by blogs. Since 2002 bloggers have been breaking stories and shaping an alternative narrative on the war from that of the mainstream media. War-blogging has gone beyond the usual left - right divide that is most often found on the internet. In the 2004 Presidential primary races Democratic candiadates Howard Dean and Wesley Clark started blogs to express their opposition to the Iraq war along with expressing their views on other issues. Other voices on the blogs about the Iraq war included U. S. soldiers serving in Iraq. These blogs gave readers an intimate glance at the realities of war and the soldiers viewpoints



often differed from the "official" story being told by the Whitehouse and the mainstream media. U.S. bloggers often linked to the soldiers blogs and the soldiers and their families participated in the comments sections of many blogs. Bloggers also linked to the blogs of Iraqi citizens who described the terror and miserable conditions they were living under. One blogger, a Bagdad woman in her thirties, who wrote her blog in English, chronicled her life in Bagdad from 2003 until the fall of 2007 when she and her family joined many fleeing Bagdad to become refugees in Syria. Blogs linked up to her writing to remind their readers of the part of the story of the Iraqi conflict that wasn't being seen on American T.V. Many of the soldier bloggers returned to the U.S. and became active critics of the Iraqi war and joined the activism on the internet. In the 2006 midterm elections in the U.S. eleven veterans of the Iraqi war or Afghanistan ran for House or Senate seats. Ten of the eleven ran as Democrats and liberal blogs rallied together to support them.

In the 2008 Presidential race probably every candidate has a website with a blog. According to Joe Trippi, campaign manager for Howard Deans 2004 presidential bid, it is difficult for establishment candidates, companies and media to gain control of the internet because of it's decentralized and scattered nature. He feels that progressive or insurgent candidates and companies that challenge that staus quo and have a forward-looking vision have an advantage on the internet as it is a forward moving medium that embraces change. (Trippi, 2004) Two insurgent campaigns that have harnessed the power of the internet are those of Howard Dean and Ron Paul. The success of Howard Dean's use of the internet to organize a grassroots campaign took many by surprise. He utilized a social networking site called Meet Up and was able to quickly increase his support base via the efforts on the Meet Up members reaching out to their contacts. Also at the time of his campaign no candidate had ever raised as much money as he did through the internet. Another candidate who has raised a lot of money on the internet is Ron Paul an anti-war populist Republican running for the 2008 presidential race. According to NPR news blog Paul is said to be more popular online than he is in the polls. Ron Paul's supporters are using a medium called Vlogging or video blogging to promote his candidacy. Video's of his supporters across the country talking to him are posted on You Tube. Each candidate has a site on You Tube but Ron Paul's gets more hits than any other. Ron Paul astonished everyone when in one day he raised \$6.1 million dollars online from contributions by 37,000 backers.(NPR, 2007)

Political blogs in America are shaping the political debate and increasing citizen activism. They offer new insights and their reporting sometimes offers more accuracy than the mainstream media. They often pick up stories that have been passed over by the mainstream media and can offer

in depth coverage on their issues of choice as they don't have to answer to anyone above them. The readers of blogs preferences are considered and a well functioning blog acts as an online community. Generally speaking political blogs encourage their readers to evaluate the content in the blog and corrections and additions are welcomed. Successful bloggers do fact checking and link to their sources. Political bloggers tend to be young and liberal bloggers outnumber conservative bloggers by 2-1. The democratic nature of the internet with its open platform and networking capabilities appeals to bloggers as does the ability to collaborate with other bloggers. Political blogs have shown a capacity to both benefit candidates such as Howard Dean and to gravely damage the political careers of politicians caught in a scandal such as Bill Clinton and Trent Lott. In political races it is often the insurgency campaigns that benefit most from the Internet. Bloggers in general seem to prefer the types of candidates that run against the status quo. Many politicians are now recognizing the power of the blogs. In his 2004 presidential bid Howard Dean was speaking to the power of the internet in fueling his insurgency campaign and he said "We listen. We pay attention. If I give a speech and the blog people don't like it, next time I change the speech." Whether or not blogs influence will overtake that of the mainstream media is yet to be known but it is clear that there are now clearly two cultures. The culture of the emerging internet technology and the culture of conventional mainstream media sources such as radio and T.V. seem to be coming to a clash. The blogs reflect political trends in the U.S. that aren't getting much attention in the mainstream media and they will continue to have an impact.

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