Chapter 6

Blogs, Journalism, and Political Participation

Homero Gil de Zúñiga

These days, much has been discussed about the role of new technologies and their effects on people’s daily lives. While academics have long studied such effects, even everyday people seem to marvel over the pace and impact of technological change (Bimber, 2001). Thus, to some extent and as expressed in other chapters of this book, we all hope to better understand how new technologies influence our lives.

Among the myriad new technologies and tools online, one in particular seems to hold a singular place in our media-saturated world, which some social scholars have dubbed the information society (Lyon, 1998; Webster, 1995; Castells, 2000). I am referring here to weblogs, or blogs. In this chapter, I would like to focus on the role that blogs may have as novelty mechanisms of communication, information and mobilization.

Although still at an early stage, blogs are a singular new media tool because they might represent the ultimate online mechanism by which people communicate, interact, learn, stay informed, discuss issues and, finally, participate or remain engaged in political or civic activities. They are an efficient means of communication in part because practically anyone can set up a blog, often at little to no cost and with only basic computer skills. Moreover, blogs facilitate discussion across time and space because they are asynchronous and accessible to anyone with an Internet connection, and their hyperlinked structure encourages truly interconnected exchange in a many-to-many communication setting.

Since their introduction around 1999 (Herring, Scheidt, Kuper & Wright, 2007), blogs have grown exponentially in popularity, making them one of the most prominent activities on the Internet. As of December 2008, an estimated 133 million blogs have been catalogued since 2002, and at least 900,000 new posts, or blogs entries, are produced every single day (Technorati, 2008a). This vast quantity of information and immense opinion conglomerate is generally known as the blogosphere (Quick, 2002). Although it is true that many of these blogs do not strictly cover topics that deal with current events and political information, some of the most widely read blogs discuss public affairs, and in some cases have done so with great impact on the wider media discourse (Wall, 2005). The influence that these blogs—and blogs generally—have on mainstream media and public opinion is a subject matter that deserves consideration.

Therefore, in this chapter I intend to analyze, first, what blogs are and their relationship with journalism as a profession. Second, I will try to shed some light on how blog consumption—that is, reading and contributing in the blogosphere—intervenes in explaining citizens’ levels of political participation. In order to do so, I will hereupon present analyses based on national U.S. and Colombian data (Puig & Rojas, 2008; Gil de Zúñiga, 2008).

Blogs

As an embryonic tool for information and communication, and given their dynamic nature, blogs are somewhat difficult to define and codify in a universal way. Initially, academics referred to them as mere interactive diaries that facilitated information exchange among their participants, otherwise known as bloggers (Bausch, Haughey & Hourihan, 2002). More concretely, I define them as follows (Gil de Zúñiga et al., in press):

Blogs are interactive, non-synchronous Web pages whose host uploads postings that center around a topic. The topic need not be new, nor need it be written following the standards and practices of traditional media.

Although not all blogs allow for writing comments on the postings, blog readers typically are assumed to be able to respond by writing comments to bloggers’ postings as well as to other readers’ comments.

As previously noted, although not all blogs are related to issues of politics or current events, there is a gradual increase in the number of such blogs, and they are becoming more noticed among Internet users. In 2004, only 9 percent of people who were using blogs said they ever visited blogs about politics or current events, and only a scant 3 percent of the total blogosphere could be classified as political (Rainie, 2005; Blogpulse, 2007). Nevertheless, blogs that deal with public affairs and related issues are today among some of the most frequently visited blogs, as a recent Nielsen Online study found (Rattner, 2008).

Thus, it’s becoming increasingly important to see this new interactive media and communication tool as central to understanding the modern political landscape. For instance, among the “A-list” blogs, or the 10 most visited in 2008, there were more than 80 million unique visitors, that roughly corresponds to the entire Internet user population of Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Romania combined (Internet World Statistics, 2008). New to the top 10 list in 2008 was the HuffingtonPost, which fashions itself as an “Internet newspaper” covering politics and news of public interest (Technorati, 2008b). Also on the list was the Daily Kos, another well-known political blog. In May 2008, the HuffingtonPost was the blog with most inbound hyperlinks from other
blogs, while the Daily Kos remained among the top 10 blogs in terms of total hyperlinks (Technorati, 2008c).

With blogs, a new door has been opened for public opinion formation creating a parallel information realm or space—a space that enriches and supplements what traditional media provide both online and offline. It’s a space in which mainstream media have ceased to be the unique suppliers of and gatekeepers for news and political information. This development has provoked certain restless for many journalists, just as it has piqued the curiosity of media scholars (Tremayne, 2007; Gil de Zúñiga, Lewis, Willard, Valenzuela, Kook Lee & Barthes, 2009). As blogging has grown in popularity and in its influence on politics and media discourse, and as (newspaper) journalism increasingly has adopted an online orientation, the two streams have crossed paths, raising new and interesting questions about the nexus of blogging and journalism. It is precisely this intersection that will be analyzed in the following section. Before that, however, let us consider more closely (1) the most common topics in the blogosphere and (2) the motivations for blogging in general.

There are a number of studies that seek to explain the rise of blogs—how they ought to be classified, and what motivates their use (Deansyne, 2005; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmold & Sapp, 2006). In terms of topical focus, the most frequent subject is the blogosphere revolves around ordinary issues and life experiences of the bloggers themselves. These personal blogs are closely followed by blogs that talk about hobbies, sports and technology. In third place are blogs that deal with current events, political issues, and news about the government. Last are blogs that usually post about entertainment-related topics, such as videos, games, movies or music (see Table 6.1).  

As for the motivations to blog, scholars have catalogued that some of the most usual motivations relate to seek information, to provide commentary, to participate in community forums, to document daily life, and to express oneself (Nardi, Diane, Michelle & Luke, 2004; Kaye, 2007; Huang, Yong-Zheng, Hong-Xiang & Shun-Shin, 2007; Li, 2007). And among all of them, one of the categories that continuously gains strength related to information creation (Kaye, 2005; McKenna & Pole, 2004). In this study, we might envision a three-part typology.  

A factor analysis found that bloggers are primarily motivated to create and maintain their sites in order to (1) inform and influence the opinion of their readership, (2) express themselves, or (3) forge and reinforce social connections, staying in touch with family and friends as well as meeting new people (see Table 6.2).

### Bloggers and Journalism

The intersection between blogs, also often referred to as "citizen journalism," the blog that is specifically devoted to inform and comment about issues that matter to public opinion, and more traditional journalism initiates a set of issues that need attention. These range from one of the more obvious questions, “Are bloggers real journalists?”, to more complex challenges, such as whether blogs serve a journalism-like function in creating and promoting a better democratic process and a healthier political landscape. This section intends to address the first of the questions, and the subsequent portion will take up the latter.

Some of the blogs that generate greater traffic and are more widely read have been created by professional journalists, and for some time people have steadily associated the tasks that blogs perform to be similar to those that are taken for granted in the more traditional media—online and offline (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005). Nevertheless, this contrasts with the idea that most bloggers do not understand that what they do should be considered a form of journalism. To be more precise, barely 34 percent of bloggers perceive their blog is a form of journalism. Under this circumstance, is blogging a form of journalism or not? Journalism professionals and academics continue to debate this question (Andrews, 2003; Blood, 2003; Robison, 2006; Singer, 2005, 2007). The debate often centers around the extent to which bloggers behave as qualified journalists, abiding by the deontological practices of the profession (Haas, 2005; Lasica, 2003; Matheson, 2004). These practices are bound up in the abiding rules of journalism: check sources and cite them; be objective;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6.1 Most Common Subjects in the Blogosphere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6.2 Factor Analysis of Motivations for Blogging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To motivate others to action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To influence the way people think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To share practical knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To express yourself creatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To entertain people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To document personal experiences and share them with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To stay in touch with friends/family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To network or meet new people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Variance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Primary loading of a variable on a factor is indicated by boldface type. N = 233
Educational Only
Blogs and Political Participation

So far I have examined the somewhat pervasive and increasingly influential incursion of citizen journalism into the public and media discourse through blogs. Also, in a brief way, I have presented evidence about the relationship between citizen journalism and traditional journalism, and the conditions under which they might coexist in the same direction, governed by a deontological journalistic code of conduct. In this section, I focus on the effects that blogs may have on their readers, and also examine the effects, if any, that this type of media consumption has in the realm of political participation.

The effects of individuals' media use on political engagement has been analyzed by a number of scholars (McLeod et al., 1996; McLeod, Scheufele & Moy, 1999; Shah, Schneirbach, Hawkins, Espino & Donovan, 2002; Wellman, Quinn-Haise, Boase & Chen, 2003; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004). Generally, a basic axiom has been presented. When citizens use the media to keep up to date, be informed, and increase their knowledge about public affairs and current events, they tend to participate at a higher rate than those who do not use the media in such a manner. Conversely, research indicates that when media use is directed to fulfilling entertainment functions or simply for recreation or amusement, then such media consumption will be associated with lower levels of political interest, general social participation and civic engagement (Shah, McLeod & Yoon, 2001; Shah et al., 2002). These relationships have been empirically proven to remain constant regardless of the media platform, whether traditional or digital (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Knut et al., 2006; Shah, Cho, Eveland & Kwak, 2005). This association between participation and media use is so consistent that scholars have coined the phrase virtuous circle, by which practicing one of them will unobtrusively predict individuals to engage in the other one and vice versa (Norris, 2000; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995; Eveland, Shah & Kwak, 2003). More recently, however, some studies have shed new light on this virtuous circle, stipulating a clearer directionality or causality in the aforementioned relationship. This way, information-seeking behaviors come to predict to a larger degree a future political participation than the opposite direction of the circle (that is, political participation predicting future media use) (Rojas, 2006; Shah et al., 2005; Semetko & Valkeburg, 1998).

Nevertheless, when it comes to blogs, there seems to be a very long way in order to elucidate the mechanism of this so-called virtuous circle. An initial effort in this regard showed that general blog use predicts political participation—and it does so beyond the effect of other variables that were included in the model and which also predict political participation (see Table 6.4).
Figure 6.1 Theoretical representation of the relation between passive blog use, active blog use and political participation.

To move beyond this explorative point, the next step I sought to take with regard to informational blog use and political participation is to examine distinct behavior by everyday users in the blogosphere. I tried to determine whether a more passive use of blogs—i.e., reading and browsing blogs but never commenting on others' posts—or a more active use of blogs—i.e., commenting and publishing entries in blogs that reveal information and current events—differently predicts political engagement. Results indicate a subtle difference between a passive behavior and a more active one. Although both are highly statistically correlated \( r = .406, p < .001 \), the latter robustly predicts that citizens engage in political participation \( \beta = .590, p < .01 \); see Table 6.5. It still remains to be seen whether this segregation between these two types of behavior represents a fixed state of blog use; or, conversely, if it may be that individuals who begin to browse and lurk on informational blogs in a moderated way, increasingly begin to post and comment and end up participating more actively. Such active behavior would ultimately increase the level of political contribution. This is, of course, a recommendation for future research in this area.

Similarly, as the types of blogs—news vs. entertainment—and the use individuals make of those blogs—active vs. passive—significantly explain the process of participating in politics, other characteristics may also alter the relationship and the effects that blogs have on participatory behaviors. A suggestion to advance research along these lines may be based on the different tones and the different language employed in the comments while discussing or deliberating upon an issue. For instance, there might be variations in the learning process, self-efficacy perception and ultimately political participation depending on whether the discussions took place in a civil or uncivil tone.

### Final Remarks

The first conclusion I may draw is that blogs are rapidly diffusing in our Information Society and they are probably here to stay. Moreover, blogs are emerging both as an alternative and as a complementary channel for people to be informed about public affairs and current issues and to discuss, reflect and deliberate. Thus, blogs may facilitate the creation of a common public sphere—a space that, albeit virtual, contributes to a better-informed citizenry and a healthier democracy. Perhaps the first stone to this foundation has been established, as there is a clear relationship between using informational blogs and casting votes, donating money to candidates, or simply participating at a higher level in the current political process.

In a recent book, Gillmor (2006) describes blogs as journalism by the people, for the people, in a very optimistic way. Although the situation that I just described in this chapter is promising, it all has to be interpreted with caution. This chain, or virtuous circle, of media use and political participation has been largely established with other traditional media online and offline. Nevertheless, for it to transpire correspondingly to the blogosphere, a number of precepts might be needed. At the outset, not all blogs are of journalistic value and not all them influence positively and meaningfully, the public opinion—and by extension, civic engagement and political participation. I believe there is room for optimism as some citizen journalists who actually perceive their work as a form of journalism end up behaving as traditional journalists. This may be a first step. However, it is an important first step as it provides the means of useful information—by the citizens, to the citizens and for the citizens—for a healthier democracy.

In theory, then, blogs have the potential to greatly affect society and the way we communicate, get informed and participate in the democratic process. This might occur in at least two ways: (1) by altering the form in which citizens learn and discuss important issues and (2) by extending the work of journalism.

Blogs can provide the essential public space for citizens to learn about and debate issues that matter to them and their communities. Theoretically, such
deliberation and discussion in the public sphere could lead to a body politic that is more informed and thus more engaged. In short, blogs may help create a better environment for better politics.

Like political discussion among citizens, journalism is also essential for sustaining a healthy democracy. Journalists have long provided the news and information that a society needs to learn about its leaders and their policies. Likewise, journalistic-oriented blogs contribute to the dissemination of information, both in quantity and in quality—adding to the amount of news and commentary available online, as well as presenting sometimes novel or alternative agendas not represented in the mainstream media. Furthermore, blogs can serve as an additional watchdog for society, not only monitoring the work of politicians, but also scrutinizing the coverage and possible biases of traditional journalists.

Notes
1 Other new media/new technologies that may be also included in this list are, for instance, Social Network Sites as YouTube or MySpace; Voice over Internet Protocol as Skype; and citizen based video websites as YouTube or BlipTV.
2 U.S. data: I am grateful to John B. Horrigan and the Pew Internet and American Project for providing the data used in this research and also would like to acknowledge that the Pew Project bears no responsibility for the interpretations of the findings or the conclusions reached in this study. Further details about the sample can be found at http://pewinternet.org/PPF/h46/dataset_display.asp.

Data for Bloggers and Journalism Section: Data were collected through phone interviews with 233 self-described bloggers, 18 and older, who had been identified in previous PIJAL surveys. The interviews were conducted from July 5, 2005, to February 17, 2006; during that period, as many as 10 attempts were made to reach every sampled telephone number. PIJAL calculated a response rate of 71% for these callbacks to bloggers; response rates from the original surveys ranged from 28.4% to 34.6%. The margin of error for the complete data set on bloggers is ±6.7% with respect to weighted data. PIJAL's results are weighted to compensate for non-response and match national parameters for age, sex, education, and race, all of which are U.S. census definitions.

Data for Blogs and Political Participation Section: This part of the study relies on data collected by the Pew's series between the 4th and 22nd of November, 2004. Survey interviews were conducted with a probability sample of 2,200 subjects 18 years of age or older, of which 1,324 had Internet access. Pew Project calculated a 31% response rate to their survey, with a margin of sampling error for the complete data set of ±2.3% with respect to weighted data.

Colombian data: I am also grateful to Hernando Rojas (UW Madison) and the Centro para la Investigación en Comunicación Política de Universidad Externado de Colombia for providing the data used in this research and also would like to acknowledge that the Research Center bears no responsibility for the interpretations of the findings or the conclusions reached in this study.

Data for Bloggers and Political Participation Section: Data were collected between June 22 and July 10, 2006. It took place after the general presidencial elections in Colombia. The sample was designed to represent Colombian adult population, who for the most part live in urban areas (75% of 47 million Colombian citizens live in cities). Participants were selected using multi-level, stratified and random techniques yielding a total of 1,009 face to face cases with a response rate of 84%. For greater detail about the data see Puig, E. & Rojas, H. (2008). Internet use as an antecedent of expressive political participation among early Internet adopters in Colombia. International Journal of Internet Science; Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2008). The dark side of the blog: analyzing dynamics of blog use and their impact on political participation. World Association for Public Opinion Research. New Orleans, May 13–15, 2008.

References

Gillmor, D. (2006). We the media: Grassroots journalism by the people, for the people: O'Reilly Media, Inc.
Papacharissi, Z. (2004). Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups. New Media & Society, 6(2), 259.
Ratner, A. (2008, April 6). The 10 biggest blogs are—how’s that again? The Baltimore Sun, 24A.
Tremayne, M. (2007). Harnessing the active audience: Synthesizing blog research and


