

New competencies in democratic communication? Blogs, agenda setting and political participation

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Abstract Contrary to initial predictions Internet-mediated forms of communication have not become mediums of mass communication. Traditional media still reach far more people than even the most popular websites. Still, there is evidence that blogs in particular help mobilize opinions, and set the agenda for political elites such as journalists and politicians, while providing interested citizens with a new technology of knowledge as well as a surprisingly effective way to participate in politics. This study focuses on how the presence of blogs has altered the structure of political communication.

Keywords Political communication · Blogs · Democracy · Discourse · Agenda setting

1 Introduction

While the development and ascendancy of the Internet as an informational medium has not overturned the routines and norms of political communication that existed before its widespread usage, it has altered the information environment in which political elites and interested citizens function. Blogs in particular, may be coming to serve a unique political role. Contrary to initial predictions, neither the Internet nor Internet-mediated forms of communication such as non-interactive websites, chat-rooms, bulletin boards and blogs, have become mediums of mass communication. Traditional media still reach far more people than even the most popular websites. Still, there is evidence that blogs help mobilize opinions, and set the agenda for political elites such as journalists and politicians, while providing interested citizens with a new and surprisingly effective way to participate in politics. We have already seen some evidence that blogs may have direct and/or indirect effects on political outcomes (Drezner and Farrel 2007) as well as various benefits to both citizen consumers and elite users that are distinct from traditional news media (Rosen 2007).

This study focuses on how the presence of blogs might alter the structure of political communication. I argue that blogs are a new technology of knowledge that has begun to be

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used by traditional media, political professionals and politically interested citizens, modifying the process of agenda setting, elite opinion formation and even strategies of political mobilization. In addition, blogs may alter the options for and the experience of the political participation of some citizens. Blogs modify this process because of the kind of communication that they make possible. They are an immediate, horizontally linked dialogical space, which has the effect of expanding the scope of public space and providing a structure that is closer to conversation than any traditional news medium.

I will begin by giving some background on the structure and routines of political communication as it has been studied in the U.S. Second, I elaborate the characteristics that make blogs a unique form of media in the communicative environment of American politics. Third and finally, I argue that blogs are a new technology of knowledge, which has altered the way that elites and interested citizens identify, gather, aggregate, evaluate, and deploy political knowledge.

2 The democratic intention of the press as an institution

The notion of the press as a democratizing institution, which had been only peripherally present in 18th century articulations of democracy, became a central consideration for the democratic theorists of the early 20th century (Lippmann 1922; Dahl 1956; Cater 1959; Luskin 1972). New ideas about the crucial political and particularly democratic role that news ought to play inspired both professional and principled reforms in American journalism. The sensational yellow journals which had been funded by political parties through the 19th century slowly disappeared as the idea that the American press ought to be a nobler (less partisan and more profitable) institution began to take root. By the 1920s most “newspaper men” were being trained at schools of journalism, which attempted to instill the notion that their professional obligation was to be an essential aid to democracy; proficient facilitators of political publicity as well as public discussion, debate, and decision making (Lippmann 1922; McChesney 1997; Waldman and Jamieson 2003).

These good intentions have lead journalism to become a more standardized and professional occupation and advances in technologies of communication have allowed a greater quantity and wider distribution of news output. However, scholars and laymen alike have become increasingly disappointed with the quality and variety of information offered by American news media. As the 21st century has dawned, news organizations are responsible for attempting to inform a public that has never seemed less interested in what they have to share (Bennett 1983; Gans 1979; Schudson 1995; Bennett and Entman 2001; Putnam 2000; Waldman and Jamieson 2003).

The increasingly anemic interest of most Americans in politics is certainly not all the fault of news media, but communications scholars have long noted that the news itself is ailing, not only by the standards of the democratic hope for the free press, but also by the professional expectations which developed at the turn of the last century. The roots and characteristics of the news media’s condition are attributed to different causes depending on the focus of the study, but there seem to be four major areas that are consistently noted as problematic. First, the news is biased toward elite opinion, especially White House opinion. This bias is not necessarily the result of a normative preference for the opinions of officials, but instead the consequence of a number of constraints and standard operating procedures that are characteristic of the modern press (Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Bennett 1983; Entman 2004, 1989). Second, the presentation of the news is increasingly episodic and sensational. Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams have referred to this