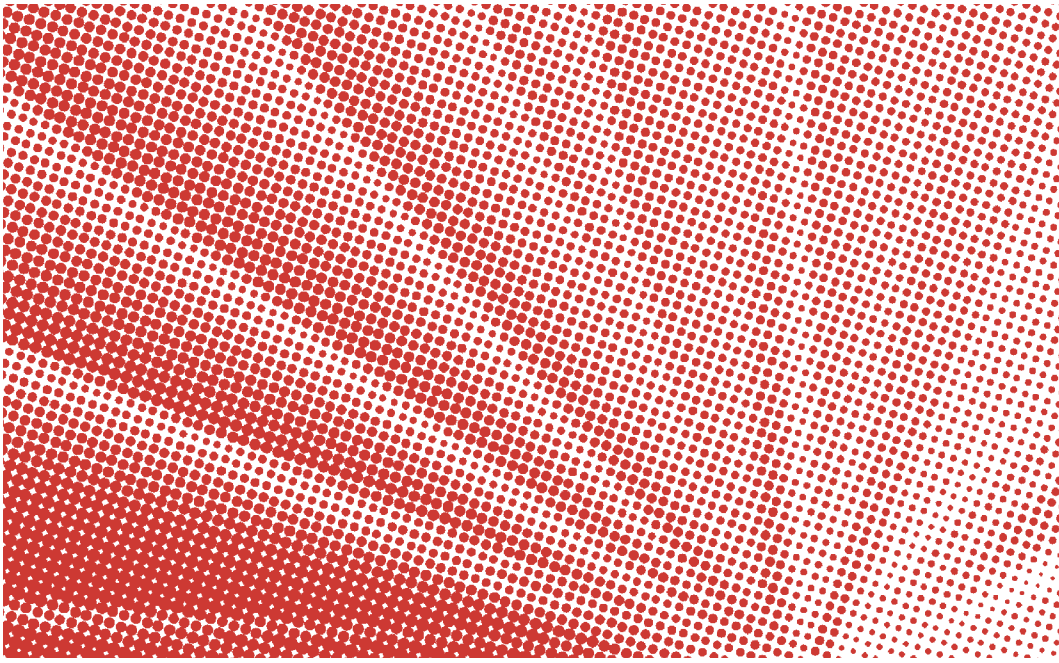


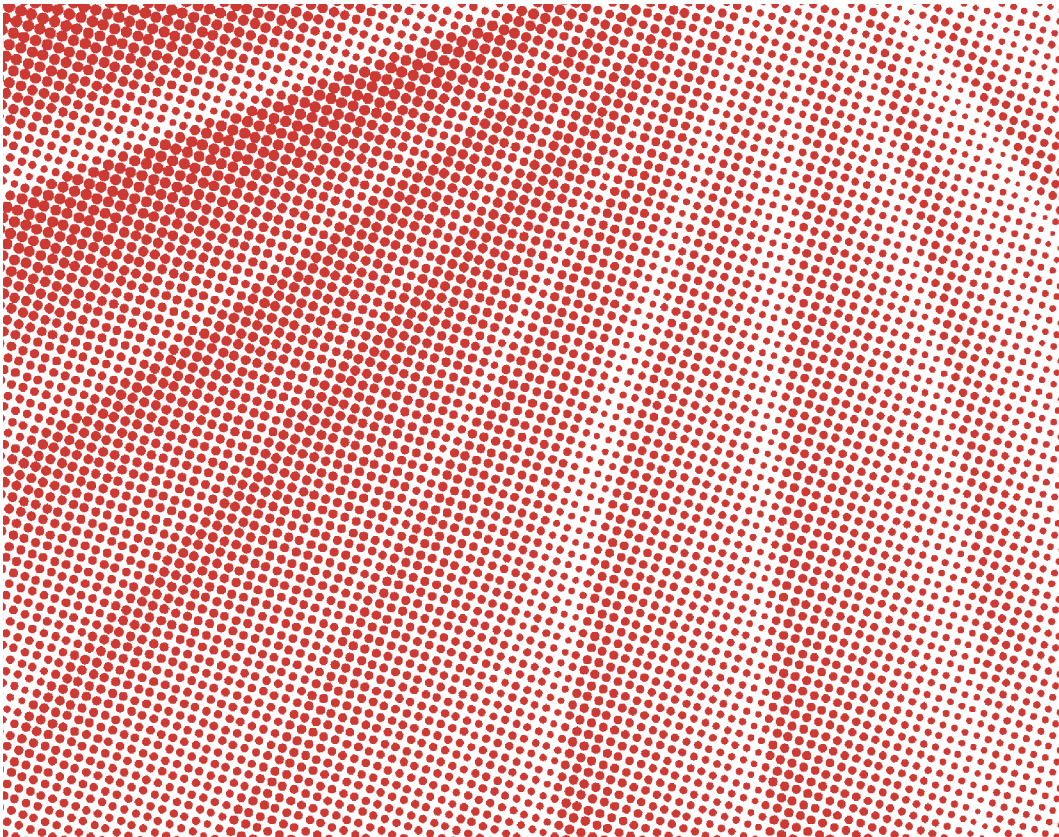
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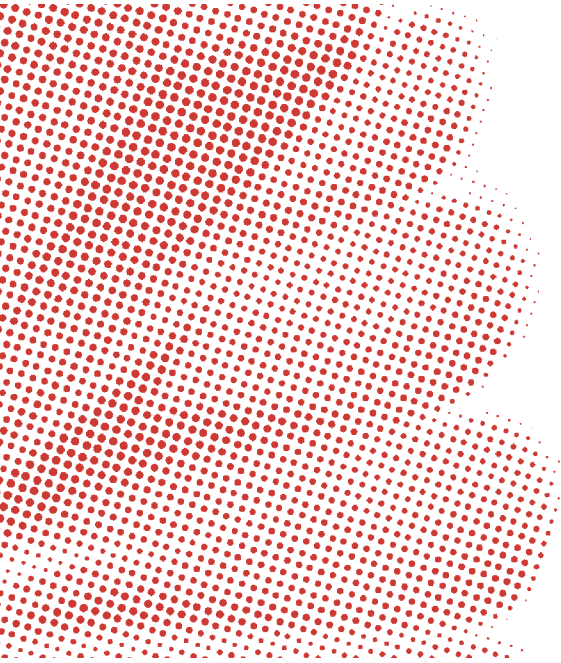
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Blogging Democracy:
The contribution of political blogs to democracy





WINNING ESSAY BY Gareth Lewis



Blogging Democracy: The contribution of political blogs to democracy

BY GARETH LEWIS

“THERE IS NO MORE IMPORTANT STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY THAN ENSURING A DIVERSE, INDEPENDENT AND FREE MEDIA.”

—BILL MOYERS, POLITICAL JOURNALIST¹

In Ancient Greece, any citizen could visit the highest ranks of government to voice his political concerns and ordinary men were selected to make judgments on major civic decisions². America in the 1800s saw the rise of political pamphleteering: leaflets were distributed containing passionate rants, designed for the discussion and expression of public opinions of every stripe and colour³. In the 20th century, however, to have a meaningful political voice and access to the media, Canadians required privileged connections in the press, a journalism degree or the capital to start a new publication. Now, thanks to weblogs, any civic-minded citizen with a computer, a modem and the moxie to express their opinions can contribute to the media and the public dialogue.

Weblogs, more commonly known as blogs, are unassuming web pages, which often contain regularly updated commentary, insight and analysis, provide hyperlinks to related news articles, and cover topics ranging from Esperanto poetry to NASCAR driving. In 1999, the number of blogs was estimated at less than fifty; by 2006, 175,000 new blogs were created each day, adding themselves to the staggering 50 million existing worldwide⁴. Although still a relatively new technology, blogs have already made a large impact in Canada. Canada has one of the highest rates of Internet usage in the world⁵, and of these online Canadians, 42% report having read blogs.⁶ While a majority of these blogs are little more than personal diaries, a new breed of political oriented blogs has reshaped the media environment, rejuvenated political discussion and created a generation of amateur journalists and pundits.

“Freedom of the press is limited to those who own one” said AJ Liebling, the renowned American journalist.⁷ A free and vibrant media, full of diverse and contrasting voices is the key to Canadian democracy and culture. The recent trend of Canadian media consolidation, however, equals fewer owners, and therefore, fewer freedoms. With the news media providing a vital space to carry out public debate, the concentration of media ownership can result in the owners’ opinions crowding out all others. In 1990, 17.3% of Canadian newspapers were independently owned; in 2005, only 1.0% of newspapers were independent⁸. In fact, two companies, CanWest and Sun Media, own almost 50% of all daily newspapers in Canada. Dissenting views, new

ideas, and local concerns are harder to hear when cities thousands of miles away receive the same homogenized news feed. Blogs provide the antidote to this uniformity; democratizing media and expanding press ownership to anyone with access to the Internet. Andrew Sullivan, a prominent American blogger⁹, believes that blogs have revolutionized journalism by making the price of entry into the media market minimal and have inspired hundreds of thousands of passionate outsiders to storm the ramparts of professional journalism.¹⁰

Before recent blogging software, such as LiveJournal and TypePad, publishing on the Internet required technical knowledge of detailed HTML code. These new blogging programs, however, now give the average computer users the platform to write, edit, design and publish their own editorials, broadcast to a potential audience of millions, for a very minimal cost¹¹ using basic, user-friendly programs.

Blogging is also an overwhelmingly unpaid, part-time enterprise. Free of advertisers to satisfy and bosses to placate, bloggers are motivated by their passion and desire to be heard. The majority of blogs contain raw, unpolished writing; free of outside influence, they represent the simplest form of human conversation, as though Canadians are collectively thinking out loud. And while some seek widespread readership, many are content to simply get their opinions heard, and to connect with a few other like-minded people they would not have met otherwise.

Once the cocktail party taboo, discussing politics has become the staple of several blogs, and topics normally confined to stuffy parliamentary hearings, such as budget allocations, are debated at length by citizens wanting to be heard. Even mainstream media outlets, such as *The Globe and Mail*, have blog-like sections, where readers are invited to comment on news stories. Political blog forums can resemble a town hall meeting: albeit, one filled with alpha males, where everyone has the floor and no one is afraid to put their two cents in.

Behind the safety of the computer screen, strangers will passionately debate the most controversial topics with relentless fervour. Place the same group in a room together with the same topics and with luck, a few comments might accompany the awkward coughs and squirms. Why the difference? Something about the relative anonymity of blogs empowers people to shed their apprehensions of expressing strong opinions in public. Voices that would otherwise be stifled by public self-censorship blossom in the blogosphere¹², with blogs working as a technological tequila shot

by helping political bystanders shed their inhibitions and express their true feelings.

Granted, while some of these opinions are misguided, ill-informed or outright lousy, a true democracy is about ensuring every citizen has a chance to express their political voice. Any media development that encourages greater self-expression can only be seen as a positive force for democracy.

What is truly revolutionary about blogs is their ability to spontaneously generate online discussion communities around any given piece of information and their ability to multiply and mutate dialogue in a rapid, self-replicating manner across the Internet¹³. Democracy is not possible without free competition of ideas, and this online medium allows more people from around the world to 'compete ideas' more easily and directly than ever before. Political blog forums instigate discussion and help restore the lost art of public conversation; one of the original intents of the democratic media. Just as the tyranny of the 90 second TV story ushered in an era of sound-bite politics¹⁴, blogs can bring back issue-based politics and help substance triumph over image. Blogs' interactive nature helps facilitate debate over political policy, and helps avoid the automatic acceptance of catchy bumper sticker slogans.

A tour of the Canadian blogosphere shows the buffet of perspectives given a voice through this new medium; reflecting the diversity of our country in a way that would be problematic in the mainstream press. For example, the 'Mader Blog'¹⁵ gives voice to a conservative dogma advocating an increased Canadian role in global security and closer US relations, while 'Not A Colony'¹⁶ argues for stronger Canadian sovereignty and increased separation from American policy. 'Le Revue Gauche'¹⁷ is a self-proclaimed, unabashed libertarian communist blog from Alberta, while 'Downtown Eastside'¹⁸ gives political voice to the marginalized in Canada's poorest neighborhood. While mainstream media would become schizophrenic trying to represent all of these perspectives, blogs give each viewpoint the opportunity to present its opinions and contribute to democratic debate.

While blogs can serve as virtual soap-boxes for Canadian political opinion, they are also valuable tools for delivering alternative voices and perspectives from other areas of the world. Ten years ago, only the most seasoned war correspondents had the ability to meet civilians in a foreign combat zone and talk to them about their emotions, their daily challenges, and their lives behind the frontlines. Today, Canadians from Victoria to

Moncton can sit at their computers and receive first-hand reports from inside war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. The “Baghdad Blogger”, a 29-year-old Iraqi architect, wrote about the difficulties of life during the war and reached millions of readers who connected to his grassroots reporting.

Helping Canadians envision life in other countries, blogs are a direct link to citizens around the world and help bypass the filters of the mainstream media and government censors. In fact, in countries with heavily censored public expression, blogs can serve as the lone outlet for broadcasting dissent and criticism. Hossein Derakhshan is a leading Iranian dissident living in Canada, whose blog¹⁹ is responsible for helping thousands of Iranians create Persian blogs to voice opinions criticizing government repression and religious intolerance. While certain countries such as Egypt and China have begun jailing authors of critical blogs²⁰, thousands of other brave citizens in repressive states continue to create anonymous blogs in the hopes of influencing politics and moving their country towards democracy.

In a strong and free democracy, the media is relied upon to provide trustworthy and reliable information, so that its citizens can be well equipped to make informed civic choices. To maintain the public trust, the mainstream media has a duty to work accurately and stand behind its reporting. Blogs are forcing greater accountability on journalists, since readers can review sources and make immediate commentary; transforming passive readers into avid fact-checkers. Everyday, thousands of Canadian blog readers have the opportunity to act as amateur editors for even the largest media outlets. While a misplaced fact or quote can slip by a small editorial staff, it is much harder to elude thousands of passionate, inquisitive bloggers.

It was a conservative American blog, Powerline.com, which exposed the forgeries of the documents used in the 60 Minutes story on President Bush’s service in the National Guard, resulting in Dan Rather’s resignation from the CBS Evening News²¹. Closer to home, blogger Bruce Rolston, a Canadian military reservist, revealed the inaccuracies in a December 2001 study by a University of New Hampshire professor estimating that 3,767 civilians had died as a result of military action in Afghanistan. Although the report was presented as fact in the UK *Guardian*, the New Jersey *Star-Ledger* and several other major newspapers, Rolston proved the flawed methodology in the study, including conflated casualties with fatalities, double counted single events and reliance on dubious news sources²². Rolston’s analysis prompted

deeper investigations by the media, resulting in a more accurate number of around 1,000 deaths.

Critics of blogs attack their credibility, claiming that the low barriers of entry and lack of outside editing allow anyone to publish opinion as fact unchecked. While this does occur, bloggers do not publish in a vacuum, and like their scrutiny of the mainstream press, bloggers avidly fact-check, dispute and debate other blogs. This helps perpetuate a self-correcting environment, where an incorrect fact or quote will be quickly flagged and often changed instantaneously. Compared with the mainstream media's reticence to admit mistakes and its tendency to bury corrections within its pages, the blogosphere contains a very efficient and much speedier cycle of correction.

Virtually every reader of a blog has the chance to be an editor; if there is a factual error, misrepresentation or even a spelling mistake, readers are often compelled to add a quick posting to alert the author. Now that consumers can become intensely involved in editing, discussing and debating with the very people providing their news, blogs are changing the nature of the media's relationship with the audience, holding both parties more accountable for the information they provide and consume.

While blogs will not transform apathetic citizens into political activists, they do give the opportunity for those who want a greater civic voice, but have been unable to contribute because of limited access or barriers to entry. The days of the media elite delivering information to passive readers have evolved into dialogue and discussion between the media, the consumer and amongst the public themselves. No longer content to watch the democratic process from the sidelines, consumers demand more involvement in the press, more access to information and more of a voice in politics. Blogs have provided the equalizing platform to make these demands and satisfy these needs. *Time* magazine called blogs, "a genuine alternative to mainstream news outlets, a shadow media empire that is rivaling networks and newspapers in power and influence"²³. While not replacing the press, blogs are more likely to coexist, infiltrate and supplement traditional media by increasing public debate, civic involvement and strengthening democracy. One can safely bet that the mainstream media, reinvigorated by blogging and a more interactive relationship with readers will not only survive, but will become more accountable, and contribute more to the democratic process than ever before.

Notes:

- 1 http://en.thinkexist.com/quotes/bill_moyers/
- 2 Paul Cartledge, *The Democratic Experiment*, BBC History, Jan 2001, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/greeks/greekdemocracy_01.shtml
- 3 David Kline and Dan Burstein, *Blog! How the Newest Media Revolution is Changing Politics, Business, and Culture*, CDS Books, New York, 2005, xii
- 4 David Sifry, *The State of the Blogosphere*, Aug 2006, <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000436.html>
- 5 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/am/ca.htm>
- 6 http://www.prdirect.ca/en/view_release.aspx?TrafficID=3370
- 7 <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/27716.html>
- 8 [http://www.cna-acj.ca/Client/CNA/cna.nsf/object/OwnershipHistory/\\$file/Ownership%20of%20Canadian%20Daily%20Newspapers%201990-2006.pdf](http://www.cna-acj.ca/Client/CNA/cna.nsf/object/OwnershipHistory/$file/Ownership%20of%20Canadian%20Daily%20Newspapers%201990-2006.pdf)
- 9 The Daily Dish · <http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/>
- 10 Kline and Burstein, p. 369-374
- 11 The cost of a blog can vary from 0\$ using free internet access (library, school, etc.) and free blogging software (Blogger, LiveJournal...) to around \$200/year for high speed internet access and premium blogging software.
- 12 A collective term encompassing the network of blogs
- 13 Rebecca MacKinnon, *The Worldwide Conversation*, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University, Spring 2004, http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/presspol/research_publications/papers/working_papers/2004_2.pdf, p. 14
- 14 Kline and Burstein, p. 21
- 15 <http://www.maderblog.com>
- 16 <http://www.notacolony.ca>
- 17 <http://plawiuk.blogspot.com/>
- 18 <http://www.downtowneastside.blogspot.com>
- 19 <http://www.hoder.com>
- 20 Heba Saleh, *Egyptian Bloggers Fear State Curbs*, BBC News, Feb 22nd 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/6386613.stm
- 21 Julien Pain, *Internet-Censor World Championship*, "Internet Censorship Report", Reporters Without Borders, p. 83
- 22 Kline and Burstein, p. 12
- 23 Kline and Burstein, p. 380
- 24 Kline and Burstein, p. 5
- 25 Kline and Burstein, p. 243

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