



Weblogs, traditional sources online and political participation: an assessment of how the internet is changing the political environment

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Abstract

Research has shown consistently that news consumption both online and offline is related positively to interpersonal discussion, political involvement and political engagement. However, little consideration has been given to the role that new sources of information may exert on different forms of political engagement. Based on secondary analysis of data collected by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, this article contrasts the influence of traditional sources of information online with that of emergent sources (blogs) in predicting further political discussion, campaigning and participation in both the online and the offline domains. The results show that the use of traditional sources online is related positively to different types of political engagement, both online and offline. Most interestingly, the article finds that blog use emerges as an equally important predictor of political engagement in the online domain.

Its analyses provide support for the contention that asserts the democratic potential of the internet.

Key words

blogs • internet • political participation • politics

INTRODUCTION

Advances in computer mediated communication (CMC) continue to feed a burgeoning debate within the social sciences and the humanities over the process of technological and social change, and the implications that technology use has for social interaction as well as for community life overall.

This debate has been characterized in terms of utopian versus dystopian views of CMC, and has been particularly acute for the internet and some of its applications (see for example Graber et al., 2004; Katz and Rice, 2002). Despite initial concerns with the possibility that certain communication technologies would actually increase social isolation, as Castells (2001) points out, most of this debate took place in the early stages of internet use before widespread diffusion of the technology, and therefore most claims were not based on a substantial body of empirical evidence.

As empirical evidence accumulates, the internet is shown to have had reinforcing effects on information-seeking and sociability. Recent findings confirm that certain web uses contribute to civic engagement and trust (Shah et al., 2005), increased volunteerism (Jennings and Zeitner, 2003), enhanced personal interactions (Hampton and Wellman, 2003), and increased news consumption (Althaus and Tewksbury, 2000). More interestingly, it appears that the much heralded information revolution and the abundance of information facilitated by CMC (Bimber, 2003; Rheingold, 2002) is not based solely on the migration of traditional news sources online. It also occurs via the emergence of an interconnected opinion space of personal journals, or weblogs (blogs), which started in the mid-1990s but really gained traction after the turn of the century.

By 2004, the Pew Internet & American Life Project (see Rainie, 2005) estimated that 8 million Americans had created blogs, and that 32 million Americans read blogs (a 58% increase in less than a year). By the end of 2008, Technorati (www.technorati.com), a blog search engine, tracked 133 million blogs worldwide, totaling 900,000 million posts daily.

Initial research on this topic has privileged blogs as forms of self-expression and self-presentation (Herring et al., 2004; Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005); however, blogs are portrayed increasingly as community forums (Nardi et al., 2004), political outlets (Kerbel and Bloom, 2005; Sweetser and Kaid, 2008; Trammell et al., 2006b) and as an interactive space within a given political website (Meraz, 2007).

This study seeks to contribute to the extant literature by examining the overall potential of blog use as an antecedent of political participation. This article proposes that due to the capability of networked structures to compose a new morphology of society, modifying relationships, economic production and political power (see Castells, 2001), facilitating horizontal communication where everyone potentially can participate in the public sphere (Castells, 2007), blogs may influence the democratic process. Thereby, blogs may constitute themselves as an alternative source of information and political action organization, resulting in increased political engagement.

Despite the fact that not all blog users visit political blogs (27% during 2008, according to Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press, 2008), and that only 3 percent of blog posts at any given time can be classified as political (see Blogpulse: <http://www.blogpulse.com/index.html>), the dense interconnection of blogs, commonly referred to as the blogosphere (Quick, 2002), constitutes a public space of discussion and social networking which can reshape or expand information availability (Tremayne, 2007) as well as the motivation to engage in politics (Dahlgren, 2005).

In light of this, it is the goal of this article to assess the impact of blog use on both online and offline political participation. Relying on national survey data collected by the Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2004 (www.pewinternet.org), we model empirically the impact of blog use in explaining online political discussion and online campaigning, as well as other forms of participation, both online and offline.

BLOGS

Although there is no agreed-upon definition of blogs (Thompson, 2003), initial definitions have referred to them as online interactive journals that facilitate information exchange between users, or 'bloggers'. Usually topics are arranged in reverse chronological order and information is updated dynamically by the person in charge of the blog, or by others who participate in it (Bausch et al., 2002; Weil, 2003). Thus, blogs can function as personal diaries, technical discussion, sports commentary, celebrity gossip or political discussion sites, etc. (Drezner and Farrell, 2004). The content of both blog postings and blog readers' comments is not necessarily edited by third parties, and usually refers to opinions, experiences, facts and questions (Coleman, 2004). Despite this lack of formal editing, it has been argued that it is easier for bloggers to post corrections or correct postings than for any other online or traditional news outlet (Bloom, 2003), particularly if one person is in charge of the blog.

Another distinctive feature of blogs is the fact that they incorporate links to other blogs, webpages, forums, etc., in such a way that blogs become interconnected and interdependent, with some of them becoming central in

terms of those to which others are the most linked (Bar-Ilan, 2005; Coleman, 2004; Drezner and Farrell, 2004; Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Singer, 2005; Thompson, 2003). Links are so important to the notion of blogging that some call this their defining characteristic (Baker and Stromer-Galley, 2006; Thompson, 2003). Yet this is by no means a singular characteristic of blogs; for example, webpages and chatrooms also have hyperlinks.

In this article, blogs are considered to be interactive, non-synchronous webpages whose host uploads postings that center around a topic. The topic need not be news, or written following the standards and practices of traditional media (balance in viewpoints, fact-based reporting, etc.). Although not all blogs allow for 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 (although this assumption is becoming problematic, with more blogs requiring registration to post comments, or not allowing them at all).

Because most blogs are unedited, posts range from trivial to serious; in fact, anything goes (Kerbel and Bloom, 2005). This feature increases access to blogs by giving everyone the opportunity to participate and express their opinions without intellectual or political restrictions. Moreover, it has become extremely inexpensive and easy to create and maintain a blog (Dearstyne, 2005; Drezner and Farrell, 2004; Jensen, 2003), more so than a typical website (Drezner and Farrell, 2004; Reporters without Borders, 2005). Similarly, all these characteristics (including reduced formality, increased freedom and ease of use) have made blogs into breaking news sites, outpacing online news outlets and broadcast media (Bloom, 2003; Thompson, 2003).

Studies about blogs have been centered primarily on explaining what they are (Bar-Ilan, 2005; Coleman, 2004; Dearstyne, 2005); their history (Bloom, 2003; Jensen, 2003); their main activities (Kerbel and Bloom, 2005); how accessible, navigable, and how easy to post they are (Trammell et al., 2006b); how to classify them (Dearstyne, 2005); and the motivations to use them (Herring et al., 2006; Trammell et al., 2006a).

In the 2004 presidential election, political campaigns experimented with blogs in order to energize their political base; in fact, they became common tools for politicians to communicate with citizens (Lawson-Borders and Kirk, 2005), with an emphasis on young voters (Trammell, 2007). One of the most interesting examples of this trend was how Howard Dean's *Blog for America* was used to coordinate campaign activities (Kerbel and Bloom, 2005). Initial studies of campaign blogs suggest high levels of content control by the campaign, very little dissent (Meraz, 2007), a tone contingent on incumbent status, with challengers adopting a more negative tone that tends to focus on previous posts (Bichard, 2006), and a tendency to maintain users

within the blog boundaries, mostly by using internal hyperlinks (Trammell et al., 2006b). More specifically, scholars studying blogs suggest that they are used primarily for expression, affiliation and observation of social and political information (Kaye and Johnson, 2004; Papacharissi, 2004). However, despite these attempts to look at particular political blogs, few studies have examined systematically the general effects of blog use in the political realm. For example, although Eveland and Dylko (2007) did attempt to establish a relationship between blog use and political knowledge and participation, they did not find significant results – an outcome that these authors attributed to the early stage of blog use diffusion.

Media use and political participation

In the past, many social ills were attributed to communication innovations. For example, television has been accused of eroding community identity (Bogart and Orenstein, 1965), decreasing trust in government (Robinson, 1976) and depleting social capital (Putnam, 1995). With the emergence of digital media in the past few years, television's 'infamy' has spread to other technologies such as the internet, which has been 'accused' of promoting a decline in social involvement, increasing loneliness and depression (Kraut et al., 1998)

This media malaise thesis is pervasive, despite the scant empirical evidence to support it. According to its more popular versions, media themes (Robinson, 1976) or frames (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Reichert et al., 2003) contribute to rising cynicism and distrust of the political establishment. However, most recently, studies have provided evidence that news and public affairs television programming is related to increased political participation (Norris, 2000; Rojas et al., 2005); the media play a conditional role which, depending on the type of genre, affects civic engagement and social trust (Moy and Scheufele, 2000); television use does not make us less trusting of others (Uslaner, 1998); and television and radio news and entertainment are unrelated to political cynicism (Bennett and Rademacher, 1997; Bennett et al., 1999).

So far, research has shown that informational uses of media are related to increased civic engagement, and entertainment or diversion uses can be related to its decline (Shah et al., 2001b). Pippa Norris has proposed an

interpretation of the evidence whereby the process of political communication can be understood as a 'virtuous circle', a ratcheting process that over the long term gradually reinforces the activism of the active. (2000: 309)

Despite the intuitive appeal of this reciprocal causation hypothesis (Verba et al., 1995) and some evidence that supports it (Eveland et al., 2003), a more plausible model to understand these relations is one of asymmetrical reciprocal causation (Rojas, 2008). Drawing on the empirical findings provided by Rojas'

asymmetrical reciprocal model, communication variables have primacy over political variables: that is, participating in politics might make one more likely to talk about politics in the future, but the relationship between talking about politics today and participating in the future is stronger. Empirical evidence supporting this notion has been reported for political efficacy (Semetko and Valkenburg, 1998), civic participation (Shah et al., 2005) and political participation (Rojas, 2008). This notion of asymmetrical reciprocal causation is congruent with findings reported by Jack McLeod and colleagues (1996, 1999) under the rubric of communication mediation, and with those reported by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and colleagues (2001) under the notion of 'storytelling neighborhood' or communication infrastructure (Matei et al., 2001), in which communication behaviors and capacities mediate the relationship of political predispositions and political behavior. The communication mediation model has provided evidence that interpersonal networks of political discussion and informational uses of media result in increased community integration and civic participation (McLeod et al., 1996). Communication practices have a direct effect on participatory behaviors, but also they have indirect effects through gains in political knowledge and political efficacy which result in participation (McLeod et al., 1999).

Somewhat more holistically, the communication infrastructure approach builds from a different theoretical understanding grounded in communicative action (Habermas, 1984), and with a stronger geospatial emphasis, it highlights how communication capacity, built on interpersonal ties and local media consumption, enhances community engagement. Despite the theoretical and methodological differences between these two models, their results are surprisingly similar. Both models provide evidence of how interpersonal and mediated communication practices result in community integration.

Internet use and political participation

Refuting dystopian views of newer technologies, many studies have found a relationship between informational uses of the internet and social capital (Shah et al., 2001a), political participation (Shah et al., 2002), and civic engagement (Jennings and Zeitner, 2003). Wellman et al. (2001) provide evidence that online interaction supplements interpersonal relations, resulting in increased voluntary association membership and political participation (see also Wellman et al., 2003). Kraut and colleagues revisited his earlier study, and claimed that the negative effects of internet use had 'dissipated'. Instead they found 'positive effects of using the internet on communication, social involvement, and well being' (Kraut et al., 2002: 49).

While some fear that news in the online environment may have resulted in societal fragmentation and displacement of community concerns, others view

the online environment as a space for political re-engagement, particularly for young people (Delli Carpini, 2000). Research shows that online news use supplements rather than supplants traditional news consumption (Althaus and Tewksbury, 2000). In fact, online information-seeking is related positively to group membership, community involvement and political activity (Kwak et al., 2006; Taveesin and Brown, 2006). Similarly, online information-seeking has been linked to increases in online interactive civic messaging that ultimately result in higher levels of civic participation (Shah et al., 2005).

HYPOTHESES

Studies of blogs designed to mobilize certain groups, such as Howard Dean's *Blog for America* during the 2004 election, suggest that the use of this tool has been associated with increased political discussion, a sense of community and political action (Kerbel and Bloom, 2005; Meraz, 2007). However, the question remains as to whether a more general notion of blog use will be related to increased levels of political discussion and participation. Since blogs combine information and opportunities for people to connect both personally and ideologically, it seems plausible that blog use will be associated with increased civic action. Moreover, despite certain criticisms from the traditional media that blogs do not comply with the fundamental norms and practices of news reporting, some citizens attribute more credibility to blogs than the traditional media (Johnson and Kaye, 2004).

Past research has established the importance of the consumption of both the traditional media and traditional media online in relation to citizens' levels of interpersonal discussion and political participation. It seems reasonable that, despite the characteristics that differentiate blogs from traditional media online, blog use will be related to increased political dialogue and political participation in the online domain, not only by influencing media coverage but also directly by circumventing the traditional media (Tremayne, 2007). Thus, this article posits the following hypotheses:

- H1: The use of blogs will be related positively to online political discussion.
- H2: The use of blogs will be related positively to online political campaigning.
- H3: The use of blogs will be related positively to online political participation.

Moreover, taking into account the complementarity notion proposed by Dutta-Bergman (2005), it can be expected that the relationship between blog use and participation will extend to the offline domain. Thus, it is expected that:

- H4: The use of blogs will be related positively to offline political participation.

METHOD

Data collection

This study relies on data collected by the Pew series between 4 and 22 November 2004. Survey interviews were conducted with a probability sample of 2200 respondents aged 18 years or older, of which 1324 had internet access. The Pew Project calculated a 31 percent response rate to its survey,¹ with a margin of sampling error for the complete data set of ± 2.3 percent with respect to weighted data. Its statistical results are weighted to correct for discrepancies in relation to the US census. This weight serves to balance the interviewed sample to match national parameters for age, gender, education and ethnicity.

This dataset catalogues the activities of Americans who use the internet in a wide variety of ways. It also taps into respondents' patterns of media use, whether online and/or offline. This particular collection of data was selected for the analysis because it provides the richest set of measures for issues regarding online discussion, campaigning, political participation and blog use within the USA. Only the respondents with internet access are considered in the present study's analyses.

Measures

Control variables Three sets of control variables were employed in the analyses. The first comprised demographic variables, the second pertained to general infrastructural internet descriptors, and the third was a set of offline informational media uses that past research relates to political participation.

Demographics The first control block includes five demographic variables, which scholars have associated with political participation (Campbell et al., 1960; Verba et al., 1995): the respondents' gender (48.8% males and 51.2% females); age ($M = 44.34$, $SD = 15.3$); level of education (evaluated with a seven-point scale of education categories, median = 'some college, no 4-year degree including associate degree'); income (assessed with an eight-point scale of income categories, median = \$50,000–\$75,000); and type of community (urban = 29%, suburban = 51.7%, rural = 19.5%).

Internet The second control block includes the place of internet connection and number of years of internet use, two variables which have been considered critical by the diffusion of technology and digital divide literature (Cho et al., 2003). Years of internet use were assessed with a single item which asked respondents how many years they had had access to the internet ($M = 6.6$, $SD = 2.8$). Whether the respondents had internet access at home (88%) or at work (48%), dummy variables coded having access as = 1.

Offline media uses The final control block comprises a series of traditional informational media uses which have become standard predictors of political activity (see for example, Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; McLeod et al., 1996;

Stamm et al., 1997). Newspaper use was established by asking the respondents whether they had spent time ‘yesterday’ reading the daily newspaper (yes = 42.1%); television news use was assessed by asking whether they had watched the news or a news program ‘yesterday’ (yes = 64.3%); political affairs books and documentary consumption were measured by asking whether in the past year they had read a book about current politics or national affairs (yes = 31.9%), or seen any documentary films related to the campaign or the candidates (yes = 17.3%). These items were recoded so a higher value was equal to ‘more’. General public affairs examination was established by asking if they followed what was going on in government and public affairs (on a four-point scale where 1= ‘hardly at all’ to 4= ‘most of the time’; $M = 3.4$, $SD = .92$).

Independent variables These are the variables of interest to this study and comprise information-seeking from traditional media online and blog use (see Cho et al. [2003] for an extensive review of uses and gratifications and the internet). Online information-seeking from the traditional media was measured using an additive index of three items which asked subjects if they had ever got news online, looked for news or information about politics and the campaign, or looked for information from local, state or federal government websites (on a three-point scale where 1 = not engaged in the behavior, 2= done it but not yesterday, and 3 = done it yesterday (mean inter-item correlation = .44; $M = 1.8$, $SD = .58$).² Blog use was measured by an additive index of two items which asked the respondents whether they had ‘read someone else’s weblog or “blog”’ or had ‘created a weblog or “blog” that others can read on the web’ (mean inter-item correlation = .34; $M = 1.2$; $SD = .37$). These items were recoded, so a higher value expresses having engaged in the behavior yesterday.

This measure of blog use is consistent with previous measures of media use employed within the uses and gratifications tradition (Rosengren, 1974), but has been expanded to incorporate the potential for increased audience activity that is inherent to the internet domain. Accordingly, in addition to inquiring about blog reading, which would constitute the typical media use measure, the present study captures additional audience activity expressed in terms of blog creation.

Criterion variables To test the hypotheses, four criterion variables were constructed. The first three variables account for political engagement online, while the fourth represents engagement offline. Online political discussion was assessed with a single item which asked the respondents whether or not they participated in online discussions or ‘chat’ groups about the elections (yes = 6.7%). Online political campaigning was measured with an additive index of three items which asked respondents whether during the past election they had: sent emails urging people to vote; sent emails urging

people to vote for a particular candidate; or sent emails about the 2004 campaign to groups of family or friends (mean inter-item correlation = .32; $M = .15$, $SD = .28$).

Other forms of online political participation were measured with a single item, which tapped the respondents' participation in other campaign-related activities using the internet, and gave as examples reading discussion group's postings, signing petitions or donating money online (yes = 7.1%). The final criterion variable considered levels of offline political participation, and was calculated as an additive index of three items which asked the respondents whether they had attended a campaign rally, given money to a political candidate or had voted in the past election (mean inter-item correlation = .17; $M = .96$, $SD = .56$).

RESULTS

Past characterizations of blog users in the US context have suggested that they tend to be young, male, white, highly educated, with higher incomes and conservative (Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Trammell and Keshelasvili, 2005). However, as blogs become more ubiquitous, differences in the characteristics found in previous studies may not be so prevalent. For 2004, this data suggests that blog users were no longer statistically different in terms of gender, income, age, education, ethnicity or ideology from internet users in general. However, the respondents that considered themselves to be strongly liberal or strongly conservative tended to use blogs more than their moderate counterparts.

A series of hierarchical regressions were conducted to test the hypotheses.³ Control variables were organized into three blocks (demographics, internet and informational media use, along with interests in public affairs), and finally use of traditional information sources online and blog use were entered as a fourth block in order to examine their potential contribution above and beyond the variance explained by all the control variables.

The first model explained 15.7 percent of the variance of online political discussion, with online behaviors explaining 6.3 percent of incremental variance (see Table 1). Both traditional media online ($\beta = .097$, $p < .05$) and blogs ($\beta = .227$, $p < .001$) contributed positively and significantly to the criterion variable. These results provide support for H1, according to which blog use would be related positively to online political discussion, and provide additional empirical evidence of the importance of traditional media online for political engagement. Altogether, the more that people seek information online both from the traditional media and most importantly from blogs, the more likely they will be to discuss politics online. The present study supports previous findings (Shah et al., 2005) according to which online informational uses foster increased levels of political discussion, yet this study

• Table 1 Hierarchical regression models predicting public engagement

	ONLINE DISCUSSION	ONLINE CAMPAIGNING	ONLINE PARTICIPATION	OFFLINE PARTICIPATION
Block 1: demographics				
Gender (Male = 0)	-.119**	.080**	.114***	.058
Age	-.072	.001	.002	.149***
Education	-.104*	-.026	.004	.029
Income	-.070	-.016	-.045	-.002
Community type	-.029	-.005	-.039	.018
Incremental R ² (%)	4.6***	0.8	2.3**	8.1***
Block 2: internet				
Internet (years)	-.001	.058	.043	.002
Home connection	.059	.013	.020	.032
Work connection	.043	-.021	-.018	.066
Incremental R ² (%)	0.9	2.2***	1.8**	0.9#
Block 3: offline media				
Newspaper	-.041	-.020	.039	.131***
Television	.014	-.052	-.040	.012
Political books	.135***	.153***	.213***	.203***
Political documentaries	.026	.098**	.100**	.066*
Public affairs	.043	.105**	.085*	.177***
Incremental R ² (%)	4.1***	10.4***	11.9***	14.5***
Block 4: online behaviors				
Traditional media source	.097*	.149***	.149***	.108**
Blogs	.227***	.197***	.141***	.028
Incremental R ² (%)	6.3***	6.2***	4.2***	1.1**
Total R² (%)	15.7***	19.7***	20.2***	23.1***

1. Cell entries are standardized regression coefficients (Betas).
2. *p* values with two-tailed significance: **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001.
3. Online discussion, *N* = 620; Online campaigning, *N* = 760; Online participation, *N* = 774; General offline participation, *N* = 773.

is able to show how in addition to traditional media use, blogs enhance political discussion.

Regarding online political campaigning, the second model explained 19.7 percent of the variance, with online behaviors explaining 6.2 percent of incremental variance (see Table 1). Both traditional media online ($\beta = .149$, $p < .001$) and blogs ($\beta = .197$, $p < .001$) contributed positively and significantly to the prediction of the criterion variable. These results provide support for H2, according to which blog use would be related positively to online campaigning. They provide additional evidence that seeking information online from traditional media is related to increased political participation. These results add blog use to the empirically established relation between certain online uses (informational media use and citizen communication) and

political participation. In this case, blog use results in political participation in the form of online campaigning.

The third model explained 20.2 percent of the variance in other forms of online political participation, with online behaviors explaining 4.2% of incremental variance (see Table 1). Both traditional media online ($\beta = .149$, $p < .001$) and blogs ($\beta = .141$, $p < .001$) contributed positively and significantly to the criterion variable. These results provide support for H3, according to which blog use would be related positively to other forms of political participation online (e.g. signing a petition or donating money online), and provide additional evidence of the relationship between seeking information from traditional media online and political participation. The previous literature (Shah et al., 2002) has identified news-seeking behaviors as explanatory variables of political participation. The current study replicates these findings and extends them to blog use.

Finally, the fourth model explained 23.1 percent of the variance in offline political participation, with online behaviors accounting for 1.1 percent of incremental variance (see Table 1). In this case, only the use of traditional media online ($\beta = .108$, $p < .01$) positively predicted the criterion variable. These results do not provide support for H4, according to which blog use would be related positively to offline political participation. However, they do provide additional support for the importance of traditional media online as a correlate of political participation in the offline domain. The following section offers plausible explanations to interpret these findings, particularly as to why the data do not support H4.

Overall, the results provide evidence of the importance of blog use for political engagement across an array of online activities. Yet at this point in time, this is not the case for offline political behaviors. As traditional media online have become more mainstream and are associated positively with engagement offline, it is plausible that as blog use continues to diffuse, it will serve a similar purpose. From the perspective of the traditional media online, the consistency of these results provides additional empirical evidence of their centrality in understanding political participation.

DISCUSSION

The unique contribution of this article lies in establishing an empirical relationship between blog use and a series of political online behaviors, including discussion, campaigning and other forms of political participation such as signing petitions or donating money. The fact that online news consumption would have similar effects to that of offline news consumption might come as no surprise, since the production of online content follows a similar logic to the one employed for offline news content, despite the

additional features of online news outlets in terms of their ubiquitous cycle, format convergence and interactivity.

With blogs, the production of content and the norms in which such content is produced are altered decisively. The appearance of citizen blogs alongside opinion leaders' blogs and journalistic blogs has the potential to amplify democratic discourse with the inclusion of new voices in the public realm, but it also has the potential to alter journalistic practices that revolve around the rational reconstruction of current affairs. This seems to be even more feasible, now that US bloggers have gained the same protection as regular journalists by law.⁴

Typically, more voices in the public arena are understood to be a democratic gain, but in order for this to materialize, someone has to listen. The results of this study indicate that using blogs results in similar forms of democratic participation above and beyond the effects of traditional media use. The positive effects of the blogosphere on certain political behaviors suggest that, beyond self-expression, blog use has societal level consequences in the form of enhanced political participation.

In a media ecology in which market forces have penetrated or 'colonized' the structure of public communication (Garnham, 1990), the blogosphere can serve to enhance the interactive dimension of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005), thus preventing further decline and potentially reinvigorating it. Habermas contends that for this to happen,

the media system must maintain its independence vis-à-vis its environments while linking political communication in the public sphere with both civil society and the political center; second, an inclusive civil society must empower citizens to participate in and respond to a public discourse that, in turn, must not degenerate into a colonizing mode of communication. (2006: 420)

Whether the blogosphere ultimately will serve these purposes remains an open empirical question, particularly considering the requirements placed on certain blogs that eliminate or restrict interactivity. However, the evidence presented in this article supports the notion of its importance as part of an emerging networked public sphere (see Friedland et al., 2006). In a networked public sphere blogs do not, and cannot, substitute traditional media; rather, they complement them. They coexist, integrating issues from the periphery of the political system or serving as a springboard for the democratic deliberation of content that is produced within the media subsystem. Thus, blogs may become a powerful political tool within the context of this networked public sphere, perhaps complemented by different online tools which currently are gaining momentum. For example, Ellison and colleagues (2007) have showed the useful value of Facebook (www.facebook.com), an internet-based social networking site, to create and

maintain certain types of social capital. As other social media or personal publication tools develop, reinforcing the importance of the new media in the political arena, it is reasonable to think that blogs will wind up having greater prevalence in the near future. In fact, the 2008 US election has attested to this increased importance of blogs as well as other social networking tools.

A diligent reader of this article might object to the causal logic employed here. Strictly speaking, this is a cross-sectional analysis and therefore, suggesting directionality can be considered problematic. Furthermore, certain researchers suggest a relationship in which community involvement would lead to increased community-based internet use (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). Despite the cross-sectional nature of this data, past research which has employed panel designs, suited to test issues of causality, has established that although reciprocal causation is present in the relationships between news use, interpersonal discussion and political engagement, the more robust effect takes place from communication variables to participation variables (see for example, Semetko and Valkenburg, 1998; Shah et al., 2005). These data do not distinguish clearly between political discussion and political participation, which makes assessing a causal order between these phenomena even more problematic. This is why instead of formally testing for mediation, the data have been presented in the form of a regression which provides some sense of the contribution of different blocks, but mostly controls for the effects of other antecedent variables and shows the effect of both online news consumption and blog use on the criterion variables. Ultimately, whether the extension of this causal logic to blog use is appropriate needs to be tested empirically, using subsequent waves of data collection.

CONCLUSION

Limitations of the study

In addition to the cross-sectional nature of the data, it is important to point out other limits of the analyses: the measure employed to assess blog use; the moderate variance explained by the models; and for offline political participation, the consistent pattern of effects presented by this article fails to materialize. Regarding the measure employed to assess blog use, these data do not allow us to distinguish between different blog content and specific traffic patterns within the blogosphere. These differences within the blogosphere are far from trivial (see Drezner and Farrell, 2004) ultimately, and future research that is able to flesh out these dimensions will provide more robust models of how the blogosphere facilitates the emergence of a networked public sphere or spheres (Fraser, 1992). In relation to the moderate amount of variance explained – and understanding that the general nature of the blog measure described above potentially underestimates the relationship

between political-oriented blog use and political participation – the models are accounting for significant variance and most importantly, incremental variance above and beyond that explained by control blocks.

Finally, regarding offline political participation, it could be argued that eventually blog-‘sponsored’ political activity will not transcend the virtual realm, and therefore could be treated as inconsequential. However, the present authors do not agree with such an interpretation: their expectation is that political outcomes of blog use will result in enhanced participation at all levels of public life. Ultimately, it is likely that the distinction between online and offline activities will become blurred very quickly, with citizens ‘navigating’ all realms of public life passing from mediated to non-mediated scenarios in a fluid fashion. However, in the meantime, it is conceivable that as political blog use expands, these relationships will become significant.

It is important to keep in mind that this study has been very careful to control for multiple concepts that serve as antecedents to political participation. In addition to demographics and controlling for internet experience and access conditions, the study has included a host of media variables which have been related in the past to expanded political participation, and yet blog use remained a significant predictor of online discussion, online campaigning and other forms of online participation. This suggests that certain facets of the democratizing potential of the internet are being achieved through the blogosphere in terms of an expanded public debate and increased participation.

At the same time, these findings pose great challenges to the notion of a blogging-centered public. Will the introduction of this multiplicity of voices, some more concerned with expression than with ‘accurate’ accounts of situations, ultimately hinder the quality of public debate? Will blog use follow a power law distribution (see Barabasi, 2002), according to which newcomers become part of an expanded public debate, but one which does not have the potential to continue to grow due to limited attention spans, among other things? Of course, these are all questions for future research, but based on the preliminary analyses presented here, it appears that the blogosphere seems to reinvigorate American politics rather than taking the wind out of its sails.

However, it could be argued that these results merely document the migration of politically active citizens to the blogosphere with no net gains in political participation. Nonetheless, other data such as escalating voter turnout in the USA since 1996⁶ are consistent with the argument of a reinvigorating political landscape. Acknowledging that new media may not be the only factor to explain this political revival, it seems plausible to think that it has an active role in such a process, although formally testing this proposition requires data which goes beyond the scope of this article.

An important caveat to consider is that, despite the important increase in internet access which has occurred over the past years (Gil de Zúñiga, 2006), other digital inequalities have appeared (for example in broadband connections or nuanced use). This study considers only internet users, and provides an optimistic outlook on the political engagement of those users that engage traditional news sources online, as well as blogs, but tells us very little about non-users and the potential pathways which can be used to further civic and political engagement among these individuals. It would appear that as the influence of online uses grows, groups without access, with limited access or that suffer from other forms of digital inequality can continue to be disenfranchised from the political system.

Suggestions for future research

Future research needs to address these questions, and most importantly, it will need to reconceptualize the relationship between news and blogs in a context of increased blurriness between news and opinion, as well as taking into account increasing fluidity between the offline and online domains. Overall, this study provides additional support for the notion that online news consumption matters for public engagement, but most importantly, that the sphere of public debate is being expanded by a blog-centered debate that contributes to a revitalization of American politics.

APPENDIX: LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS PREDICTING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

	ONLINE DISCUSSION	ONLINE PARTICIPATION
Gender (Male = 0)	.31**	2.193***
Age	.988	1.002
Education	.665*	1.053
Income	.853	.919
Community type	.812	.804
Internet (years)	1.015	1.084
Home connection	2.406	1.265
Work connection	1.802	.879
Newspaper	.688	1.347
Television	1.323	.718
Political books	2.893**	3.078***
Political documentaries	1.438	1.959**
Public affairs	1.651	2.412**
Traditional media source	3.869**	2.741***
Blogs	4.260***	2.348***
Correctly classified (%)	93.4	86.3

Cell entries are unstandardized Betas.

p values with two-tailed significance: **p*<.05 ***p*<.01 ****p*<.001.

Online discussion, *N* = 620; Online participation, *N* = 774.

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Notes

- 1 Further details about the sample can be found at http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/46/dataset_display.asp.
- 2 Cronbach's alpha for traditional source online = .71. However, bearing in mind Cronbach's alpha sensitivity to the number of items included in an equation, and that the variables in this article are mostly constructed using two items, we are reporting instead the mean inter-item correlation among items.
- 3 Despite the fact that two of our dependent variables are dichotomous in nature, we are presenting hierarchical regression models in order to ease comparability across models. Previous research has found little difference between the two procedures (hierarchical and logistic) in terms of the conclusions that arise from using one or the other strategy on the same data (see for example, Keeter, 1987). Nevertheless, for some this might not be an acceptable approach, so we present, in the form of an appendix, a logistic regression for the two dependent variables in question.
- 4 As the *San Francisco Chronicle* stated on 27 May 2006:

In a decision that could set the tone for journalism in the digital age, a California appeals court ruled Friday that bloggers, like traditional reporters, have the right to keep their sources confidential. (Lee, 2006)

In this way, the same laws which traditionally have protected journalists now apply to bloggers; that is, the First Amendment and California's Shield Law. This law only applies to the State of California as currently a law to protect bloggers nationwide is being developed: the Free Flow of Information Act.

- 5 Voting turnout has escalated by 6.2 percent in the span of eight years, reaching levels of participation similar to those achieved in the 1972 presidential elections (49.1% in 1996, 51.3% in 2000 and 55.3% in 2004). It is worth noting that more than four percentage points were gained between the 2000 and 2004 elections, which coincides with the incorporation of blog use to the political landscape (Federal Election Commission, 2007).

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