

Blog Commenting: A New Political Information Space

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Introduction

Though still a small subsection of the Internet, weblogs (blogs) are becoming an increasingly prominent space for finding and discussing information – in particular political information. But because of their newness, the question remains as to what are the possible implications of political blogs on people's current information reality. As a way to better understand political blogs as a space for gaining political information and also discussing that information, a pilot study was developed whose main focus was to understand the nature of the comments posted to political blogs.

*There has been much speculation in the popular and scholarly press about the possible democratic implications of people writing blogs, with claims that the medium opens up a new space for deliberation and participation. However, less work has focused on **blog commenters** – the people who are reading blogs and responding based on what they have read. And yet, to understand the blogosphere as a new deliberative or political information space, it is critical to analyze those who are engaging in the discussion. Therefore, this study focuses not on the principal authors of popular blog sites but the readers who are inspired to post their responses.*

Political Blogs as an Information Space

Motivating Questions

- Are blogs a space for gaining political information and engaging in discussion about politics?
- Since research on political blogs is still emerging, particularly research on commenters, what methods are useful to understand blogs?

Pilot Study Design

- Content analysis of comments
- Sample: 4 popular political blogs (DailyKos, Washington Monthly, PoliPundit, Captain's Quarters); 2 mainstream media "blog-like" columns (Emily Messner, *Washington Post*, David Brooks, *NYT*)
- Time period: week of November 18-25, 2005; Murtha debate

Findings to move forward with. . .

Evidence of Discussion

- Commenters respond to blog writer
- Also commenters talk to each other
 - Refer to each other by name (username)
 - Quote each other's posts
 - Ask questions or feedback from other commenters

Analysis

Focused on four elements that have been seen as important in political communications:

Opinion Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Variety of alternative viewpoints & people engaged in a conversation• <i>Measured by:</i><ul style="list-style-type: none">– Ideological diversity– Participant variety– Disagreement with blogger
Attentiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased attention has been related to information retention as well as positively related to political engagement (Kwak, 2005)• <i>Measured by:</i><ul style="list-style-type: none">– Consideredness scale (Kim et al., 1999)– Word Count– Grammatical features
Integrative Discussion & Conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ability to integrate outside information into interpersonal discussions (Cruz et al., 2005)• <i>Measured by:</i><ul style="list-style-type: none">– Degree to which commenters cite media stories or hyperlink to alternative sources– Commentary vs. conversation
Political Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Traditional definitions of participation don't necessarily port well to online environment• Possibility of alternative forms of participation• <i>Measured by:</i><ul style="list-style-type: none">– Campaigning (Kim et al., 1999)– Complaining

Evidence of Integration

- Refer to news stories
- Cite and hyperlink to documents, stories, other blogs posts

Evidence of participation is less clear

- A form of participation exists through discussion
- However, operationalization used in the study needs to be reconsidered

Blogs as Research Focus

Why study?

- **Potential political information space** – place for people to find and discuss political information
- **Growth in readership** – becoming more mainstream
- **Influence**– media, political party, and advertiser attention
- **Readership demographics** – more likely to vote and be involved in politics

Potential Deliberative Space

- Increasing number of commenters to popular political blog sites
- Emerging dialogue among commenters where political information is shared, discussed and integrated