

The Impact of blogging on domestic and international politics: Networked Journalism

Written by Charlie Beckett

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CHARLIE BECKETT, JAN 7 2008

There are few more circular arguments than those that spiral around the impact of media upon politics. And as soon as you mention New Media that circle turns in to a vicious or virtuous cycle depending on your view. Internet Evangelists like Joe Trippi claim that blogging, email, websites, and social networking are transforming political communications. That in turn is changing the process of politics and politics itself. On the other hand, Internet Sceptics like Cass Sunstein (Republic.com 2.0, 2007) and Andrew Keen (Cult of the amateur, 2007) accept the power of new technologies but fear that it is debasing political debate. Others like Kai Hafez (The Myth of Media Globalisation, 2007) suggest that the debate is not actually changing very much in substantive social or political terms. Almost nobody, however, argues anymore that it is not having an effect on the structure, practice and business model of communications around politics.

But what are we talking about here? Let's try to establish a few ground rules for the debate around those new communication technologies. That partly involves defining what we mean by blogging. I also want to propose a model of looking at how the news media will change and how politics could be damaged or developed through new forms of journalism. This model is a multi-natured, multi-facetted understanding of journalism and new technology as socially connected. It blends Old and New media and professional and citizen journalism in to something I call Networked Journalism. As I argue in my forthcoming book (SuperMedia, Blackwell US, April 2008) journalism is already becoming more interactive and user generated. The real debate is not whether this is a 'naturally' or 'innately' good or bad thing. It is happening but it's effects are not inevitable. The real debate should be about how the production and consumption models can be created to sustain a quality, public service, accessible news media that can carry out the vital roles journalism plays in enhancing civil society and the public sphere.

But first, let's try to get our terms in order. Blogging is now a very old-fashioned form of New Media. Matt Drudge first exposed the Lewinsky scandal more than a decade ago. There are now a whole range of blogs all based on the core concept of a more personal form of serial online posting. Some like Guido Fawkes overlap with the mainstream political media but are the views of one very partial producer. Others like the Daily Kos are clearly campaigning and partial but function as the nodal point of a network. Some like that of the BBC's Nick Robinson are secondary to his mainstream political reporting. Others like Media Matters act as media critics or watchdogs. There are also all the professional media commentators like myself, some of them academics such as Adrian Monck at City University. There are international bloggers such as Cedric Kalonji in the Congo, and they can be politicians themselves, even the British Foreign Secretary has something which appears to be a blog.

So talking about blogging – even without including the social networking sites and websites that they now closely relate to and resemble and interact with – is really to talk about a vast range of activity that is both journalistic and activist. And that's where I think things have changed and are continuing to shift.

The old argument used to be whether blogs had the same impact as mainstream media. Had they forced a resignation? Had they changed an election result? Well, I would suggest that it is entirely credible to argue that blogs have had an impact on real political events or processes such as the failure of Joe Lieberman to be selected as Democrat candidate for Connecticut. They did seem to play a part in the recent Australian election. They did seem to

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help end the careers of people like CBS anchor Dan Rather and Trent Lott and possibly helped the Democrats to victory at the last mid-term elections in America. But keeping score like that is to miss the point.

The blogs are becoming much more various in their format and their function. They are now part of the whole system of reporting politics. The political blogs in the UK, for example, did have a role in reporting political scandals such as John Prescott's sexual liaisons with his secretary and his meetings with the American billionaire who wanted to buy the Dome. They would not have been able to carry the story themselves but they added elements that pushed the agenda forward for mainstream media political reporting. I see this as a welcome, if volatile, new element in political journalism that adds openness and critical debate. Although others, especially political correspondents, warn that it risks increasing the amount of unverified information in the public domain and so cheapening the currency of political debate. But my point is that this is now a fact of life and it is "networked journalism".

It allows activists and the members of the public a remarkable opportunity to contribute to political discourse. Not just as people who post replies or who join radio phone-ins but as actual news gatherers, discussants and agenda-setters. The professional hacks read the political blogs, they leak to them and they float bits of information through them. In turn, the bloggers can only really exist in any meaningful way with the core reportage and knowledge of the political correspondents. I think that this is a much healthier situation than the old model whereby lobby hacks would nudge and wink and hunt as a pack and where proprietors could exert hidden influence over limited column inches or restricted screen time.

Networked Journalism is much more than a few blogs. It is about professional journalists recognising the full range of new media platforms and the role of the public throughout the journalistic process. It is about using their own blogs to reveal their workings and to invite comment and contributions. It is about using techniques such as crowd-sourcing to involve the citizen in the process of gathering information. It is about allowing a flow of user-generated-content as part of the reporting, rather than a separate item. It is about feed-in as well as feed-back.

The 2007 CNN/YouTube Presidential debates were an attempt at this which showed how a compromise approach to New Media can mean missed opportunities. It was a positive step that CNN and the candidates allowed people to post online video questions. It brought up a whole series of issues in a language that many non-political citizens would have found relevant and understandable. But the show remained rigidly edited and the format was locked in the traditional TV studio. Compared to the flow of informal political debate on Facebook or MySpace it was stilted and unsurprising. But it was, at least, an attempt at networked journalism.

A more local example of where Networked Journalism worked was demonstrated by the Florida newspaper, The Fort Myers News Press. After Hurricane Katrina The Press took legal action against the American Federal Emergency Management Agency, (FEMA), to obtain all the data on relief payments to local citizens. It generated a massive data-set which the newspaper put online. It then asked its readers to comb through the information. Within 24 hours 60,000 searches were made. These produced hundreds of stories for journalists to follow up of anomalies in relief payments. Neither the journalists nor the citizens could have achieved that editorial output on their own. It was a tremendous example of Networked Journalism in action.

And this is international. Coverage of events such as the recent demonstrations in Burma or the violence around the Kenyan Elections has been deeply enhanced by the use of blogs and the Internet in general. This is all part of the greater communicative power of digital technologies. Mobile phones, especially those with video and still photo capacity are as important as PCs. As the Chinese have shown, the Internet can be filtered and suppressed but it is much harder to do that than it was to control conventional media organizations or to block traditional media technology.

Of course, even where it works, Networked Journalism is no guarantor of healthier politics. The media can improve the range of debate and the levels of information. New Media and blogs can increase connectivity between governed, communicators and the governed. Networked Journalism can bring the public in to the heart of the process. But real social or economic policy change is a question of political power and choice – or the lack of it. The Media has always been part of that process but even with the instrument of the Internet it can not replace it. But Networked Journalism is something worth embracing. It is something that societies should invest in, as well. It requires greater Media

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Literacy on the part of journalists as well as the public. That will come through education and training but above all it comes through professional and public self-interest. In the face of massive, complicated challenges such as global warming, we will need and want a more open, connected news media. At the heart of it will be Networked Journalism.

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