
Special issue
Credibility

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Submitted
July 30th, 2017
Approved
August 10th, 2018

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Communication & Society
ISSN 0214-0039
E ISSN 2386-7876
doi: 10.15581/003.32.1.39-55
www.communication-society.com

2019 – Vol. 32(1)
pp. 39-55

How to cite this article:
Sánchez-Villar, Juan M^a (2019).
The use of blogs as social media
tools of political communication:
citizen journalism and public
opinion 2.0., *Communication &
Society*, 32(1), 39-55.

The use of blogs as social media tools of political communication: citizen journalism and public opinion 2.0.

Abstract

In recent years, the political arena has been transformed into a space of public debate, a phenomenon which is both evident, yet hitherto unparalleled. A new range of digital social communication tools framed within the Web 2.0 era, with the blog often proving the tool of choice, has displaced the traditional dominance of the communication scenario previously enjoyed by the mass media, thanks to a series of more interactive, diverse and credible dynamics which place the user at the very heart of the political discussion process and facilitates processes of social mobilization and collective civic action. This study takes the above situation as its point of departure and guiding principle to propose and define political blogs as a new means of creating information and opinion, and communicating and occasioning effective influence in public agenda-setting. This theoretical work undertakes a detailed critical analysis of the potential of these tools and explains the extent to which they should be considered appropriate platforms for the communication and discussion of public issues. Moreover, it will also consider their engagement in a new, more open form of citizen journalism, free of the bias and pressures exerted by large media corporations, thus creating a digital public sphere with far greater capacity and agency for change.

Keywords

Political communication, blogs, social media, media, Internet, journalism, public opinion.

1. Introduction

In recent years, politics has seen a dramatic and hitherto unknown transformation in its channels of communication. In the face of the traditional mass media, whose homogenization of message and subordination to the large corporate interests they serve (Andrews, 2003; Singer, 2006) have converted political discussion spaces into essentially fictitious forums, in which discrepancies of opinion were admitted providing that they never overstepped specific boundaries and where the ideological spectrum was self-limiting (Chomsky, 1989), a new type

of media has emerged as a force and has democratized politics as a focus of public debate. This new phenomenon now constitutes a decisive tool not only for winning elections –as in the case of Barack Obama in 2008 (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Papic & Noonan, 2011)–, but also encourages activism, mobilization and political and social engagement (Friedman, 2006; Waring, 2006; Bennett, 2008; Castells, 2008; Van Fossen & Berson, 2008). This article focuses its interest on one specific medium, the blog, whose emergence dates back to the 1990s, and yet whose specialization, evolution and influence are still as deeply felt today.

The nature of this type of media within the political arena is changing both the way that citizens produce, acquire and process information, and the manner in which social movements that aim to communicate their causes operate. This, in turn, has given rise to a new language in which said causes are analysed (Garret, 2006). Given that there has yet to be any academic research relating an individual's acquisition of political information within a democratic society to the influence of the digital tools that this information is derived from, in this case blogs, and, furthermore, considering the potential of the blogosphere in the light of the evident politicization of the media and the role of journalism itself, (Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2015), this theoretical article takes this evaluation as its guiding principle to focus on two fundamental aims: (1) to characterize blogs as communication tools which promote and facilitate this transformation of this media framework; and (2) to undertake a critical analysis of the way in which these social media communication tools can and are proving to be decisive in a new type of citizen journalism, political communication and a more transparent, interactive and open creation of public opinion.

With the aim of rigorously addressing each of these objectives, this work also posits, and is developed from, a series of research questions which are resolved from a theoretical perspective, but which are also illustrated with supporting empirical applications. To this effect, the first aim can be broken down into the following questions: (i) are there any elements which define blogs as transformative communication tools?; (ii) how does a blog differentiate itself from other communication platforms?; (iii) do blogs have distinguishing working dynamics?; and (iv) what applications do blogs offer as social media communication tools? The second aim of this study can be broken down into the following research questions: (i) do blogs have any impact on current political communication?; (ii) in what sense do blogs create a new form of journalism more open and interconnected?; (iii) do blogs contribute positively to the information–citizen relationship?; (iv) do they influence mobilization and political decision-making?; and (v) do blogs have a role comparable to the one performed by traditional journalism?

On the basis of the above premises, the article will follow a logical sequence of development, addressing initially the general questions posed and moving on to focus on the more specific aspects outlined above. Firstly, following a brief framing of the background analysis, the work will consider the role of blogs as a communication tool, focusing fundamentally on the research questions which will provide a deeper insight into how this tool has managed to change the traditional media landscape. Subsequently, the work will examine the particular nature of blogs and the implications of their application within the political context. Finally, the analysis garnered in the article will provide a point of departure for the final section, which will offer a synthesis and series of conclusions on the relationship that exists between blogs and journalistic roles today.

2. Background

There exists a wide consensus of opinion which states that Web 2.0 technologies have played a decisive role in revitalizing public spaces and widening public opinion as Habermas (Criado & García Alonso, 2012) asserted. Likewise, such technologies have also enabled specific minority movements of a civic or political nature, which are often restricted by the mass media, to widen their scope and influence to the extent that they have been legitimized as part

of the democratic agenda. Moreover, these new social media, amongst which blogs feature as individual mass communication tools (Castells, 2009), have played an essential role in events with far-reaching social and political consequences, such as the Arab Spring (Lim, 2012) or the 15M Movement in Spain (Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014) and have been proven to be indispensable assets within a digital public arena with a highly disruptive capacity.

In accordance with Micó and Casero-Ripollés' recent review (2014), the Internet facilitates collective action in terms of mobilization, global expansion and organization (Diani, 2000; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002) and likewise generates new channels for these collective actions (Lievrouw, 2011; Benett & Segerberg, 2012; Mercea, 2012), such as protest websites, Hacktivism, crowdfunding campaign tools, online petitions, coordinated boycotts or email communications strategies (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010; Earl & Kimport, 2011). The organization of these actions within virtual communities characterized by a shared collective identity and common interests and agendas (Lomicky & Hogg, 2010) is key, as is the fact that the Internet is a medium which significantly reduces participation costs (Earl & Kimport, 2011) and so enables social mobilization to a greater degree (Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014).

Such a change in the rules of the game is a phenomenon that has come to symbolize a new paradigm in terms of its micro-scale. The media scenario has gone from solely consisting of a comparatively reduced number of unidirectional agents with greater scope and influence to these media coexisting with other tools which, like guerrilla movements, perform the very same informative functions and public opinion-forming roles, yet in a more atomized manner, in which there exists a greater plurality of information sources and focuses and which also maximise the enriched characteristics of their online content, with their plethora of links which multiply relevant facts and arguments. The simplicity of this mechanism, the ubiquity of these social media technologies via the range of devices and the bidirectionality of these communication dynamics, in which the user interacts with the source and other users, enables the influence on the political decision-making processes to be also within the reach of small individual agents or collectives. This is all the more relevant if we consider that the media not only influences what its audiences think, but establishes the appropriate guidelines which determine how to think on a range of public issues (McCombs, 2004; Valera, 2015). In the following sections, the whole process will be outlined, profiling blogs as social media communication tools and facilitators of this transformation of the media scenario, highlighting their implications within the political arena and drawing a set of conclusions based on the differences observed in relation to the traditional role of journalism.

3. The blog as a communication tool

Although there exists no consensus of opinion regarding a sole unified definition of the term (Baumer *et al.*, 2008), there is, however, a certain academic concurrence that considers blogs not only to be the most revolutionary medium since the advent of the television (Woo-Young & Park, 2012), but also the first large-scale communication tool of the phenomenon subsequently to be known as Web 2.0 (Wilde, 2007), characterized by its bidirectionality and its positioning of the user at the centre of the communication process.

Despite being a relatively recent creation, blogs have experienced a significant evolution since their emergence in the 1990s (Hsu & Lin, 2008). The taxonomies undertaken by Du and Wagner (2006) and Orihuela (2006) are practically coincident and could be considered to appropriately explain the evolutionary process of this phenomenon. Hence, there should also be a differentiation made regarding the blog's nascent stage, which dates from the first blogs to the emergence of Blogger in 1999 (at that time the most popular platform), in which blogs offered no more than a basic package containing simple texts and hyperlinks to other external sources. This is a period of atomization, novel innovation and disconnection between these tools and other means of communication. Subsequently, in the second stage until 2004-2005, blogs enjoyed far greater reach and popularity. The interface, feedback and direct content

management acquired greater relevance and enabled the dissemination of not only texts, but also other multimedia resources such as images and audio content. This is a period in which a series of benchmark blogs, such as Political Wire, Little Green Footballs or DailyKos in the USA, were born. It is also a time in which some blogs began to rival conventional media, in particular the written press, in terms of their reach and credibility, thanks to communication tools and web indexation such as Technorati or to events of deep social impact like the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the USA. Finally, the primary evolutionary cycle draws to a close with a third phase associated with the advent of the social media website, which is in essence characterized by this phenomenon becoming fully fledged in its own right, by a progressive professionalization of these communication tools and the creation of themed networks or social clusters of blogs with shared interests (Breman, 2003). This is a period which stretches to the present day, in which some blogs have become progressively integrated into traditional means of communication in the form of opinion columns or specialized sections and whose content, which now includes video, flows naturally between different platforms (microblogs, social network sites...), so widening their reach and mutually increasing feedback between them.

From a purely technical perspective, blogs were originally conceived as mere link registers, of information found on the Web (Voicu, 2015), a vision which has also both seen itself exceeded by the developments implemented in those channels and the ever-changing nature of the Internet, rich with interactivity between users and conversations and social applications to propagate content to other sites. Today, a blog can be defined as a webpage with only a minimum of or totally lacking in external editing, where users can insert their thoughts, ideas, suggestions and comments (McLean *et al.*, 2007; Murugesan, 2007). It is, in essence, a communication tool (Wright, 2006) without censorship of its contributors or corporate restrictions (Kenix, 2009), and which has progressively incorporated an increasing number of technological improvements assisted by the convergence of publishing platforms, which enables the author to classify and integrally manage the blog's content.

Therefore, when outlining a blog's most salient features, consideration should be given to the following elements: (1) a hyperlinked content structure, which links with other information sources; (2) content (texts, images, videos...) presented in inverse chronological order, an aspect which differs from the dynamic of other online media; (3) personal responsibility for the page, as it is its author who chooses the content and editorial line, moderates the participation and interaction of its readers, establishes the rights of text entries, the boundaries that affect its users and offers the opportunity to configure the graphic and even functional design of the page itself (Downes, 2004; Baggetun & Wasson, 2006); and (4) the existence of historically archived content, which allows easy access to previous entries, thus enabling the blog to grow in a structured way. From a social perspective, blogs are an example of personism, and as such represent the first social revolution of the 21st century (Verdú, 2005) thanks to the voluntary, superficial, partial nature of their interpersonal contacts, which initially enhance their dynamics.

In view of the above characterization, it can be posited that blogs are, as one of a range of communication tools with a social reach and influence, created by non-commercial sources with the aim of endeavouring to transform existing social roles and routines through critical analysis and challenge the predominant thought structures and the powers that be (Downing, 2003). In other words, they align themselves with a deliberative vision of democracy, in which the exchange of information itself is open and possesses individual opinion-changing potential via informal discussions (digital). In doing so, blogs generate communicative power (Habermas, 1998) and an array independent platforms for the creation and dissemination of content at the service of interest groups traditionally marginalized by the conventional media (Atton, 2002), focused on maximizing audiences through news packaging journalism (Kenix, 2009). Furthermore, they provoke a deeper, more open discussion of issues of public interest,

above all of a political nature, in which any individual can engage. In short, they are new, highly democratic discussion spaces (Chadwick, 2008), which operate within the parameters of the wider notion of the public sphere in which citizens, the government and information are interconnected through the conventional mass media, but also by these new alternative tools (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011), which prove especially effective in discussing issues of collective interest.

The above has given rise to the emergence of public opinion 2.0, which also logically shapes opinions in real contexts, a fact which is reflected in a greater level of citizen engagement and an increased participation in public issues (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2014). In Spain, initiatives such as Osoigo, which opens a direct dialogue between citizens and their political representatives, Poletika, a civil rights-watch and citizen engagement platform for political change, or Apps4Citizens, which promotes the use of technological applications to improve democratic quality and foster greater civic and political engagement amongst citizens, endeavour to reduce the gap between institutions and the citizens they serve whilst encouraging a more empowered, healthier and transparent democratic system. International analysis offers examples of greater reach and scope: in the USA, we find fully consolidated projects such as FactCheck or PolitiFact, the recipient of a Pulitzer Prize in 2009, whose mission it is to monitor news quality in the media, ensure ethical journalism and provide voters with accurate information so that they might be governed democratically. The relevance of post truth in an ever-increasingly commercialized and confused conventional media context is such that even one case in point, The Washington Post, features FactChecker on its masthead, a blog specifically dedicated to examining the veracity of information that institutions offer on local, national or international issues of great importance.

Despite their complementarity and undeniable similarities, for the purposes of this work a differentiation needs to be made between blogs and Twitter, the dominant microblog platform. This is as much due to certain academic confusion in considering both tools as mere equivalents as for their respective functions and characteristics, which are detailed in table 1 below:

Table 1: Features and functions of Twitter and a blog.

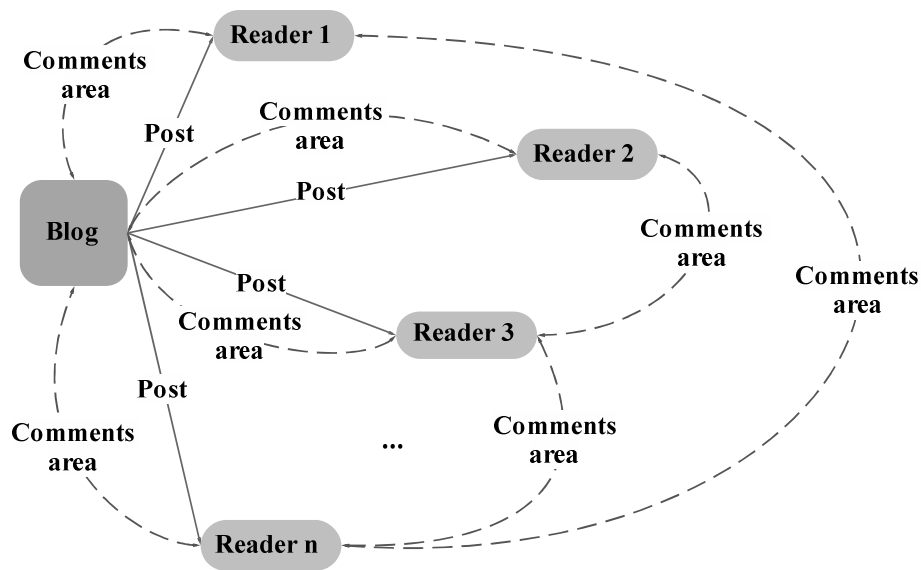
Twitter	Blog
It has a maximum length (140 characters) in each tweet	It has no maximum length
Immediacy is its principal feature	Detail and depth of analysis are its principal features
Immediate viralization of content, very agile	Slower viralization than Twitter
Live news coverage: the Twitter effect (Bruno, 2011)	It is not considered to be a tool with real-time updates
Optimum for the dissemination of breaking news (Murthy, 2011; Bruns <i>et al.</i> , 2012)	Content emphasis is placed not on the when, but on the what and its circumstances
Ambient journalism (Hermida, 2010)	More similar to online journalism
Developed for mobile devices	Although it functions indistinctly on both mobile and stationary devices, it has a greater association with the latter
It serves as a loudspeaker and promoter for content developed in detail by other sources	The page is the source in itself, the repository of its own content
Highly agile development of contact networks	The process of contact network development is slower than on Twitter

Source: Own elaboration.

Finally, from a theoretical perspective, a blog's working dynamic, as represented in table 1, provides feedback to the participative inertia which truly defines the Web 2.0 era paradigm.

It is an era in which the author takes on a leading role because it is the author who establishes the control, editorial line and the specific contents through a series of entries (posts) on the page. Such contents can be created in addition to other pieces on the Internet, but formats such as RSS enable real-time information and news feeds. Moreover, despite the notion that the communication flow might be considered one-way, and blogs which wrongly decide against including a means of contact or comments section for readers contribute to this notion, what is certainly clear is that a blog's true dynamic enables a two-way flow of communication in which entry barriers do not usually exist and readers dialogue with each other, provide detailed examination of the posts or widen the scope of the debate in other related directions. The conditions and policy governing this feedback are also determined by the blog editor. Thus, readers can (freely) express their opinions, thoughts or appraisals regarding the issue in question for any given post or entry in a public space designated for comments. Yet irrespective or not of whether this type of message occurs, it is in this space that the bulk of the interaction on the page takes place, where the reader and the author or two or more readers can engage independently, so interweaving a communication network whereby individuals can develop and orient the page contents. Lastly, from a technical perspective, the issues raised and discussed on a blog usually include inverse links or trackbacks and are classified using multiple tags, which facilitates both the search and tracking within a page and the organic positioning of the blog itself, whose posts are archived in the repository and ordered by publication date.

Figure 1: Components and dynamics of functioning of a blog.



Source: Own elaboration.

4. The blog, social media and political communication

In today's context of permanent campaign (Blumenthal, 1980; Nimmo, 1999), in which political communications transcend their electoral phase and increase their range of scope to the ordinary political cycle, blogs acquire special interest as vectors of deseasonalization, of information and support of this continual political discussion between a variety of agents with wide-ranging interests who interact throughout the socio-political system spectrum (Karlsson & Åström, 2016). In Spain, the digital community Liberalismo.org set up Red Liberal in 2004, a blog aggregator whose aim it is to group together liberal content and boost its presence on the Internet. This aggregator currently consolidates over 100 blogs within one

page, which generates content independently and explores the nuances of the political situation with the objective of representing a specific line of thinking to ultimately sway electorate opinion. Therefore, to further understand the impact of blogs on current political communication, this study will centre its interest on the analysis of (1) the structure and process of political communication itself and (2) on its applications as a social media communication tool.

In terms of the first point, the structural theoretical framework developed by Butler and Collins (1994) provides an excellent starting point as it allows for the notion of the market as an ideologically charged space. In this space, blog readers, just like traditional media audiences, are ultimately the electorate and, as such, are also subject to a certain degree of fluctuation in their voting intention. This can be influenced by a blog's editorial line and by the issues raised onto the public agenda and the discussions generated amongst its readers, enhanced by the interactive dynamics offered by the Web 2.0. In this way, a multitude of blogs contribute to highlighting specific cleavages present in society (left vs. right, religiosity vs. atheism, nationalism vs. centralism...) socially affirming groups of readers who, interconnected on similar webpages, form virtual social communities (Jones, 1997; Liu, 1999; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Nocera, 2002). Returning to the previous example, Liberalismo.org integrated Red Liberal as a collective of blogs into its virtual community, which, in turn, possess their own digital communities. However, these communities are probably interconnected by the influence of their liberal vision of the political situation set against the backdrop of the cleavage produced by opposition to this line thinking.

Furthermore, just like the traditional media, blogs also enable other facets of political communication, to be performed with relative ease, as highlighted by Butler and Collins (1994). On the one hand, they are a direct, immediate and highly appropriate channel for exerting negative publicity on candidates, parties or political initiatives (Kahn & Keller, 2004); they also constantly invoke fear or other non-quantifiable sentiments to exert influence over political issues and, thirdly, they can offer wide-ranging arguments supporting strategic voting. On the other hand, political blogs also represent an ideal breeding ground for countervoters, readers fundamentally interested in arguing against and preventing certain ideological positions, proposals or political candidates from making positive political gain (Farrell & Drezner, 2008). In the USA, where blogs often rival many traditional media in terms of influence and readership, blogs such as MoveOn or Michelle Malkin are salient examples of opposing ideological positioning which endeavour to mobilize the electorate regarding issues of public concern and which also often encourage activism to attain specific objectives.

In terms of their applications as a social media communication tool, political blogs also provide an innovative information-discussion distribution platform for a great range of issues and, on occasion, can offer a deep insight into the political arena and even undertake a promotional role within this arena. On such platforms, authors take on the role of opinion leaders in the same way Lazarsfeld *et al.* (1944) understand, as they act as information channellers and as sources of orientation and social pressure in favour of a concrete ideological election or the support of this ideology. Equally, blog authors also present high levels of interpersonal communication (Dichter, 1966; Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988; Venkatraman, 1990) and engagement with a specific type of product (Corey, 1971), in this case politics. From another perspective, corporate blogs –such as one for a political party– even give rise to their blog editors performing the role of the organization's public relations if they correctly carry out the relations and communications skills necessary that enable them to strengthen the organization's bonds with its voters or with the general public interested in its contents (Menzie, 2006). Despite its success in real terms, a good example of a corporate blog of a political nature was the one run by the Democrat candidate to the American presidential

election, Hilary Clinton, in 2016, who based a blog platform in her own domain. In addition to generating a high level of content related to her electoral programme or the running of her electoral campaign, it also produced direct interlocution with its readers via a comments section, it enabled open contact and interconnected the blog itself with communication channels on other networks such as Twitter, Facebook or YouTube.

Indeed, there is research in relation to the characterization of the type of communication conveyed through blogs (Kirby & Marsden, 2006; Fumero & Roca, 2007) which clearly points towards the generation of effects on the Internet which transcend the blog itself, such as content viralization –understood as the exponential dissemination of a specific message– or buzz marketing, persuasive multidimensional communication regarding a specific event or activity which generates its own notoriety (Balter, 2004; Ahuja *et al.*, 2007). Both types of communication fall under the umbrella term word-of-mouth, an informal recommendation between people who are defined as enjoying a high level of trust and credibility. This represents a trait which is closely associated with opinion leaders (Dichter, 1966), amplified, in this case, by the social media group echo chamber formed by the community around a blog.

However, in contrast to the comparatively reduced number of relevant blogs managed by members of the political class, there exist more consolidated blogs in the blogosphere which revolve around issues of public interest, yet which are developed by authors with no initial links to concrete political aims (Ekdale *et al.*, 2010). Despite the fact that in practical terms it is not possible to inventory the number of blogs in existence or their influence in real terms, some sites like Feedspot, however, have managed to comb the Internet to compile a list of the political blogs in the USA, based on their social analysis and content, and ordered them according to their scope of influence. These pages perform the roles of information and opinion makers on public issues similar to those developed by the conventional media and therefore constitute the central point of interest in this study.

Hence, while public participation in the traditional media has been limited to being able to obtain publication space in opinion columns or letters to the editor, the Internet has proved itself capable of providing a fruitful, relatively accessible, user-friendly channel, through which information circulates and is disseminated both horizontally and multidirectionally to a large number of users. This gives rise to a unique and extremely powerful exercise in citizen journalism (Andrews, 2003), which, in some cases, has led to both an enhancing of argumentative skills from within the traditional media to other wider civic spheres and a heightening of the impact of certain news items to the point of making minority problems and social vindications far more visible. Indeed, this is what happens, for example, in DailyKos, one of the most reputable, influential and widely visited blogs in the USA, where users can freely contribute content to the page and orient the debate towards issues of specific interest. Undoubtedly, a dynamic of this nature positively affects the democratization of the public sphere (Rheingold, 2002). Such an amplification and cross-participation dynamic regarding issues of collective interest is now influencing political decision-making processes (Gallo, 2004; Farrell & Drezner, 2008), a fact which reflects effectively the very essence of contemporary political communication, in which the traditional and electronic media coexist in a multimodal dialogue of sorts.

This effect is by no means new, at least in a theoretical context. In this respect, Maratea (2008) undertook a valuable endeavour to expand within the blogosphere the classical model of construction and communication of social problems in the public sphere, as devised by Hilgartner and Bosk (1988), and drew the general conclusion that the

blogosphere possesses the remarkable capacity to enhance the ability to communicate these conflicts. Moreover, it provides new ways in which secondary issues, which would never enjoy visibility in the traditional media, could now be disseminated. That said, this influence on the political agenda should not be considered to be generalizable. Despite the fact that blogs have taken on the role of the new media regarding politics (Savigny & temple, 2010; Donovan, 2012), attracting readers is proving a truly arduous task for a great number of webpages due to the competition which exists to rank highest on Internet search engine lists, and to this end even offering readers unique, interesting content (Drezner & Farrell, 2004) often proves insufficient. Normally, time, consistency and quality of content (Bigi, 2013), control of the message's emotional characteristics (Kim *et al.*, 2015), the social propagation of these messages (to social networks or other similar platforms) and audience interactivity to acquire visibility and relevance regarding the object of interest are all required. Only a reduced number of elite blogs are in a position to become political e-fluentials (Burson Marsteller, 2000; Gill, 2004) and thus condition one issue's greater relevance over another's.

Despite the existence of certain controversy regarding the boom and bust cycle of the blog phenomenon (Kabadayi, 2014), the full consolidation of these tools within the gamut of social media is more than evident in general terms, as is their relevance in being able to offer fast, detailed information, creating opinion and fostering a heightening of socio-political influence from a first, single reading. Again, considering the USA as our scenario, projects such as POLITICO, the aforementioned DailyKos, GeoPolitics or RealCLearPolitics have evolved towards a content-specific platform model not dissimilar to a conventional means of communication, based on an original blog structure which has been pushed to its very limits by the volume of writer contributions and the creation of a community of followers which, as an audience, exceeds in numbers the readerships enjoyed by the majority of the American written press. Nevertheless, their importance does not emanate as much from the size of the community formed, as from their skills of persuasion and the mobilization which results from this community.

The fluid dynamism of this type of new social media consequently leads to a clear interpretation of its communication. The speed of content updates (Maratea, 2008), the segmentation and variety of these segments (Gillmor, 2004), the chain of verification, which implies accuracy, the recirculation of content or identity of the users (Fox & Lenhart, 2006), the communal nature of the blogosphere, the burgeoning use of multiple technological tools all provide solid arguments which reflect the fact that blog authors place a clear orientation towards their market (van Raaij & Stoelhorst, 2008). In many cases, blog writers are all too aware of the importance of being significant, of producing and adapting content to what a potential audience would like to read at any given moment, a logic perhaps inspired in the relationship balance between the mass media and their own audiences. However, in the case of a blog, said mechanic is clearly different (Klinger & Svensson, 2015) and is underpinned by the idea of using quality to engage a potential audience, because factors like credibility, accuracy, insight or honesty make a marked difference when following digital media (Johnson & Kaye, 2014).

Hence, it becomes clear that content comprises a blog's soul and heavily conditions its potential. Perhaps, this is the most relevant argument and the one which underlies the blogosphere's working dynamics: political blogs are based on a relational paradigm to develop specific aspects of the communication process. And although blogs tend to contain information bias or are openly partisan (Maratea, 2008) –a trait which, when seen in a balanced context, also draws a full parallelism with traditional means of communication–,

their authors do not offer an allegedly neutral vision and, therefore, are not subject to an identity-image distortion and so perhaps foster a greater identification amongst their readers. The authenticity of its contents unquestionably supports, strengthens and prolongs the relationship between a blog and its users and encourages and facilitates its social diffusion.

In fact, according to Menzie (2006), bloggers are able to contribute with value-added characteristics upon (1) creating a relational link; (2) gaining online social presence, but with real personal endorsement; and (3) accrediting credibility as experts in a specific subject, thus providing trust and honest interest. This is the case, for example of Juantxo López de Uralde, Member of the Spanish Parliament for Álava who, in his personal blog, openly defends political positions coherent with his wide-ranging experience as an environmental activist. Therefore, in contrast to other spheres in which it is persuasion which gains greatest relevance, it should be concluded that in the political blogosphere, dialogue is the element with the true potential to build networks –just as numerous research works on contexts different to those on the Internet have indeed suggested over the years (Forstner & Bales, 1992; Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Dellarocas, 2003)– and, therefore, it is this dialogue which has the true potential to achieve objectives in terms of communication. This fact constitutes a clear leap forward regarding the one-way information flow that defines traditional means of communication.

The ability of political bloggers and the political blogosphere as a whole to socially disseminate topics for discussion and debate and to raise awareness about conflicts and problems of a civic nature is not, however, exempt of criticism and its own limitations. There exist a series of misgivings that offset these positive factors, ranging from the bloggers' very own sentiments (Terdiman, 2004), and even their balance between ethics and reputation when creating content (Criado & Martínez, 2009), through to the conscious and limited scope on issues that the most relevant blogs can address and which their readership perceives as being unquestionably important (Reynolds, 2003; Volokh, 2003). On a higher plane, a blog's power to influence also becomes blurred when it is the same political agent or an organization's director of communications who employs the information and comments present on its pages to anticipate the issues of interest that should be included in their own agendas (Farrell & Drezner, 2008). This implies the assumption that such types of political communication can also be programmed and coordinated.

At an applied level, several studies (Valera, 2015) suggest an inexistent influence in real terms between citizen journalism blogs and the shaping of party-political agendas. Likewise, there exists a growing problem regarding the very relational nature of the Internet that cannot be ignored and which poses a threat to the aforementioned conceptual cornerstones, above all concerning a blog's effectiveness as a communication tool. This is what Putnam (2000) coined as cyber-apartheid or cyberbalkanization, a phenomenon consistent with an extreme customization (Sunstein, 2001), and the polarization of political communications and conversations (Criado & García, 2012; Yingan *et al.*, 2012). This induces both political bloggers and their readers to adopt extreme positions by exclusively listening to voices which reinforce their own ideas, whilst at the same time excluding, ignoring or marginalizing discordant opinions. Such a phenomenon was first detected and analysed in the American presidential elections of 2004, where a total disconnection between communities following Democrat and Republican voters was observed in the blogosphere (Adamic & Glance, 2005). Nonetheless, as with the traditional media, while there probably appears to be no future segmentation of webpages, this possibility poses very specific connotations in today's socio-political context

and could even affect the very essence of the Web 2.0 era of the Internet, which is based on communication exchange and full interactivity between users.

Finally, the general considerations regarding a blog's potential as a social media communication tool and the ease with which new blogs, authors, readers, tools and contents now appear to flow perhaps offers a misleading view of a happy coexistence on the Internet and an equitable, ubiquitous distribution of contents which is subject to continuous validation. On the contrary, this is only a distorted reflection of the reality of the blogosphere, in which the audience share is clearly uneven and where the immense majority of existing blogs turn a deaf ear. Hence, due to the fact that the blogosphere has itself developed a hierarchical structure derived from Internet information search engine logic, which acts as a filter mechanism whereby only a small number of blogs are in effect visible (Drezner & Farrell, 2004; Zafiroopoulos *et al.*, 2012), starting up and maintaining a blog proves to be a costly exercise which not only requires a server to host the webpage, but also quality content, regular publications and, above all, readers who frequently visit the blog and interact with it (Drezner & Farrell, 2004; Hsu & Lin, 2008; Voicu, 2015). Therefore, despite the enormous interest in the blog phenomenon and its expansive trend, the majority of blogs –Fox and Lenhart (2006) go as far as quantifying this number at 90%– find it difficult to attain a large number of readers, and it is highly probable that a great number of blogs will be read only by the author and no more than a few other people (Du & Wagner, 2006).

Without detracting an iota of legitimacy from the principal argument developed in this work, the recognition of this limitation applies a brake to an uncontrolled generalization of its conclusions. Consequently, the majority of blogs are likely to require an established network with other sources and webpages to effectively disseminate their message, especially regarding issues that aim to find a space in the public agenda. Yet even within such intimate circles of influence, the reflections and conclusions drawn regarding the communication capacity, interactivity and social persuasion of blogs posited in this article remain intact.

5. Final considerations: blogs and new citizen journalism

There is no doubt that new social media technologies have impacted significantly on journalism, the production of news and the public consumption of information (Bruns & Highfield, 2012; Newman *et al.*, 2012). Hence, by considering that political blogs perform a communication function which, in some cases, rivals some conventional media, this research article should be concluded by underscoring the opportunity which opens up for the blogosphere in its role as an ecosystem from which it can perform the functions of journalism, just as Twitter does (Vis, 2013). Firstly, it can be concluded that the difference between amateur or citizen journalists and the professionals employed by the traditional media has become blurred (Meraz, 2007), a fact which gives rise to clear differences when granting greater public relevance to specific issues to the detriment of others. This is accentuated to the extent that blogs do not follow the agenda-setting model established by large media groups (Valera, 2015). Consequently, the information functions and creation of public opinion they engage in encompass more issues and a greater number of angles of debate (Woo-Young & Park, 2012), a fact which makes blogs both more plural and more qualitatively enriched. Therefore, the critical times experienced by journalism as a profession as far as content selection, focus and approach are concerned is more a circumstantial set of factors based on the commercialization of media corporations than a true crisis of journalistic practices, whose greater margin of expression has been favoured paradoxically by the emergence of this type of digital social communication tool.

On the other hand, there are those who disagree with the notion of similarity between investigative journalism and the supplementary information-searching roles performed by bloggers, as the latter normally lack the analysis and rigour provided by experts (Blood, 2003; Simon, 2009). Many more reasoned opinions (Andrews, 2003; Lasica, 2003; Drezner & Farrell, 2004; Gallo, 2004; Meraz, 2007), however, are more favourable to their close comparison. In accordance with the analysis by Woo-Young and Park (2012), blogs in general are capable of generating and providing more diverse information in addition to contributing a wider perspective and deeper insight to that offered by conventional journalism. Simultaneously, blogs have become powerful journalistic guards against the ethical transgressions of corporate media groups, often judged to have a defined ideological identity, a sensitivity to economic interests and which grant a low level of autonomy to the journalists who work for them (Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2015). In some cases, such as Spain, this circumstance has led to minimum levels of credibility within the conventional media (Reuters Institute, 2015) in stark contrast to the opposite perception held of its blogs (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, 2014).

Blogs can thus denounce reporting bias in the mass media by identifying and bringing to light issues of public interest deliberately omitted and, by doing so, they can create dense networks of contacts which serve as influencer platforms, information nodes (Tremayne, 2007) and content amplification. Blogosphere dynamics can therefore be understood to be a shared inertia which, despite being able to be triggered on a large scale by a reduced number of authors who can mobilize public opinion, act as a domino effect on the creation of information regarding an issue of public interest, both in terms of volume and the range of analysis perspectives offered. Hence, it aligns itself with the solid current of participative journalism and, in so doing, it shapes new news production methods and new media superstructures (Woo-Young & Park, 2012). The result gives rise to an innovative way to socialize and awaken a sentiment of collective conscience on a wide range of public interest issues which are the seed of civic mobilization (Nguyen, 2006; Castells, 2008), a role which is currently in decline in the traditional mass media.

In terms of the differences in how the working processes of journalists and bloggers differ, it appears that the specialization of some blogs and the time their authors dedicate to completing their posts are not too far removed from a journalist's working routine (Andrews, 2003), and much less so the result: in accordance with Park and Jankowski (2008), many blogs offer pieces of the highest quality, which tend to reflect both the critical and analytical skills and the professionalism of their authors' content. Examples such as La Proa del Argo in the Spanish political blogosphere, Slugger O'Toole in Britain or Mother Jones in the USA are paradigmatic in this sense. Additionally, blogs operate with nuances which differ to the working processes employed by conventional media editors in terms of their greater speed of content publication, the inclusion of hyperlinks to sources external to the blog itself and, above all, the introduction of a comments section which, upon enabling a two-way communication flow, confers the same rank to both the sender and the receiver. This clearly contrasts with the passivity which characterizes traditional mass media audiences (Singer, 2006; Woodyly, 2008; Agarwal & Barthel, 2013). Hence, the comparison between an online media journalist and a blogger seems natural (Agarwal & Barthel, 2013; Yablowitz & Raban, 2016), and is undoubtedly an appropriate analogy bearing in mind the definition of the term blog provided in this study.

In accordance with the above, there would therefore be numerous examples of blogs, one of which being political blogs, which provide an extremely close affinity to traditional journalism in terms of accuracy, depth of analysis and solidity of argument, yet by far exceed

conventional journalistic endeavour in terms of individuality. This is even more so if to this consideration we add the fact that, against the backdrop of the commercialization of the traditional media, the public views blogs as having a higher level of content credibility (Johnson and Kaye, 2004, 2014). In fact, digital media are increasingly adopting a framework based on the blog structure and are decidedly opting for content based on credibility and quality of process as ways of informing and participating in a more open, plural information society. In any case, if we ignore for a moment the digital divide, this latent phenomenon symbolizes the significance of (political) blogs as icons of enhanced democratic quality, at least in its virtual dimension, a sphere in which individuals can become reporting agents, communicators, creators of content and opinion and so act as true e-fluentials (Burson Marsteller, 2000) needing only a computer and an Internet connection to do so (Drezner & Farrell, 2004; Grossman, 2004).

The consideration that blogs are tools that are similar to online newspapers, therefore, does not constitute a new analogy (Kornblum, 2003; Trammell, 2004). Generalizations regarding the contents of the former or the latter aside, what is in no way controversial is the fact that the irruption of blogs as citizen information and political communication social network tools is not a fashion, but a reality. Both platforms represent both sides of the same coin (Lasica, 2003), which is now shaping a new sphere creating social relations, a public opinion 2.0 more receptive to a new, much more plural, participative and interesting media scenario, and which gives rise to a deep debate about a new form of journalism and the use of a type of media more open to the challenges posed by the social and political contexts of the 21st century.

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