Political blogs: Community or chaos? (Polis Summer School Paper – Guest blog)

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/07/27/political-blogs-community-or-chaos-polis-summer-school-paper-guest-blog/

It is a question as old as new media itself. Does the blogosphere improve political debate by increasing the number and volume of voices? In this paper written in a personal capacity for the Polis Summer School, Patricia Audette-Longo, the political affairs reporter for the Edmonton Journal, looks at the effect of political blogs on democratic discourse in Alberta, Canada.

By Patricia Audette-Longo.

The makings of a global community do not rest on fast access to international content-sharing websites or the immediate gratification of creating a blog housed for free by Google. Without context, knowing an unlimited amount of information is just a mouse-click away does no more to enhance your sense of community than purchasing a used Christmas ornament on eBay.

An examination of the left-of-centre political blogging community in Alberta, Canada spells out the benefits of introducing new and diverse voices to public discourse, while never losing sight of the challenge presented by increasingly "fragmented communicative networks" to cosmopolitanism. In other words, while bloggers reach to effect change, and hope to shift the "ways citizens and politicians practice politics" simply by changing the model of sharing information, their work is rarely read outside small circles of fans and vehement detractors.

This study interprets cosmopolitanism as a construction of collectivity, the establishment of which is based on empowering citizens by providing them with fair and balanced information. This analysis assumes media have responsibility to enhance global community, not just at the international level but also at the local. Within a media studies framework, the political aims of the bloggers will be evaluated, illustrating the unique challenge faced by writers who wear their political agenda on their sleeves with little pause for balance.

Intimately Linked

These bloggers' efforts do little to create community outside the relatively small percentage of people who already identify with the province's opposition movements. At the same time, this analysis does not set out to discount the power or potential of new forms of media altogether; as Charlie Beckett argues, "'new' and 'old' media are already intimately linked and … this is something that needs to be accelerated, not resisted."

The province of Alberta has been governed by the same right-of-centre party, the Progressive Conservatives, since 1971. The two main opposition parties, the centrist Liberals and left-of-centre New Democratic Party (NDP), typically split 35-40 per cent of the popular vote. Although the opposition collected just 11 of 83 seats in the Legislature in March 2008, as a rule they do not work together, instead making a point of undermining each other on the floor of the legislative assembly and in the media.

The three blogs reviewed in this study echo the partisan politics played out in the Legislature: *Tiny Perfect Blog* is authored by an anonymous NDP member who levels criticism as much at the Liberals as the government; *St. Albert Diary* is written by a prominent union spokesman who backs the NDP but lobbies for a change of party leadership; *Daveberta,* the most popular of the three, is written by a university student once heavily involved in the Alberta Liberal party.

Filling The Gap

The aim of all three is essentially the same, to re-shape the province's political agenda and register discontent with Premier Ed Stelmach. They see the mainstream media as failing to properly inform the public, although *Daveberta* author Dave Cournoyer cushions the assessment by focusing on the "limitless potential" for citizen journalists to "fill the information gap" created by cutbacks and layoffs within most corporate media organizations. As he writes, "Though the mainstream media still set much of the public agenda, they don't always do the timeliest analysis, and this is where political blogs come in. We can publish instantly, so bloggers are much more nimble and versatile."

Their media criticisms typically range from placement of stories in the province's main daily newspapers, to questioning choices of topics and sources. This changing relationship between news consumers, producers and even sources may very well force new transparency by pressuring traditional media outlets to better explain decision-making and the demands of a daily news cycle. It exemplifies an evolution of the social responsibility model of journalism, wherein citizens exercise their role as watchdogs, and usher in a "gatewatching" model as described by Axel Bruns. This plurality of voices, brought online too by social networks like *Twitter* or *Facebook*, can be celebrated.

However, there are disadvantages both in the immediacy Cournoyer describes, as well as in the withering media analysis offered by those whose political views are already set in stone. As a platform, most blogs rely upon quick, to-the-point, fun bulletins often meshed with popular culture references, leaving little room for nuance. One might argue such partisanship keeps the "establishment" on its toes, especially when bringing to light views not typically seen in mainstream media. But one could also argue, as Bart Cammaerts does, that the closed nature of some online discourse builds something of an anti-space.

Hateful Comments

To illustrate the notion of anti-space, Cammaerts points to empirical research showing that, rather than brokering a new "online public sphere," chatrooms, web forums and other online spaces for social networking can act as magnets for like-minded individuals. To be clear, Cammaerts uses the anti-space phenomenon to analyze racist and hateful comments found on social media networks in Western Europe. Hate speech is not the issue at hand when dealing with the left-leaning blogs examined here, but the questions Cammaerts raises stand in any evaluation of online community-building. Rather than enhancing an understanding of, respect for, or "willingness to engage with the other" – an essential tenet of cosmopolitanism – are the divisions felt by people of differing political views simply being nurtured beyond any hope of building consensus?

Members of political parties argue consensus is not the point of politics, particularly in a Parliamentary system where the team with the most seats controls the agenda. Likewise, consensus-building does not appear to drive partisan political bloggers. But considering, briefly, Alberta's political landscape, there is some question as to who is served best by the publication of unconfirmed gossip and innuendo about opposing opposition parties. At worst, such blog posts may protect the very status quo authors purport to attack by heightening political divisions among left-leaning individuals. Merely mimicking the politics already at play almost renders the whole exercise pointless.

This particular study focuses on change-oriented blogs alone, leaving out blogs run by conservatives. Generally, these websites appear to serve a different purpose; while also rich in media analysis, Alberta's right-wing blogs are often less preoccupied with provincial politics and more concerned with the municipal or federal arenas, where there is a far more active struggle between right and left. This raises the question of whether regular people need to feel like "underdogs" in order to launch political blogs.

At the end of the day, whether bloggers accomplish their own political goals or even share news in a way that accountably informs people who need information becomes almost a moot point. The World Wide Web is a free space, and old media must co-exist with new, settling into the crevices of social forums by redirecting audiences and facilitating, packaging and filtering information. The challenge for traditional journalism, then, will still be to get the news right, to bring diverse points of view to light without being lured by partisanship, and to engage and foster the even-handed "reflexivity and toleration" cosmopolitanism demands.

By Patricia Audette-Longo.

Appendix A: *Daveberta*

HYPERLINK "http://daveberta.blogspot.com/2008/01/premier-ed-stelmach-threatens-to-sue.html"
http://daveberta.blogspot.com/2008/01/premier-ed-stelmach-threatens-to-sue.html

Appendix B: *Tiny Perfect Blog*

HYPERLINK "http://tinyperfectblog.blogspot.com/2009/07/liberals-plan-coup-detat.html"
http://tinyperfectblog.blogspot.com/2009/07/liberals-plan-coup-detat.html

Appendix C: *St. Albert Diary*

HYPERLINK "http://diary.davidclimenhaga.ca/2009/07/kremlinology-in-alberta-how-to-assemble.html"
http://diary.davidclimenhaga.ca/2009/07/kremlinology-in-alberta-how-to-assemble.html

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