

I Can Speak Freely Now: I Can Speak Freely Now: U.S. Political Blogs as a venue of

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Submitted for publication in *Blogging the Global Society: Cultural, Political and Geographical Aspects*. October 1, 2010

I Can Speak Freely Now: Blogs as a Source of Democratic Deliberation.

Abstract

This chapter examined the deliberative potential of blogs and blog users. It investigated whether heavy reliance on blogs promotes positive characteristics - political efficacy, political interest and political involvement - needed to foster democratic deliberation, or leads to negative attributes - low trust, selective exposure and political partisanship - that hinder democratic deliberation.

Results show that unlike those who rarely rely on blogs, heavily reliant individuals are more involved in current events and are more trusting of the government, but they are also more likely to practice selective exposure by reading ideologically consistent blogs. Further, heavy reliance predicts involvement and selective exposure.

The deliberative potential of blogs is boosted by users involvement in political issues but impeded by their propensity to seek out blogs that contain agreeable information. Instead of evolving into a public sphere, blogs may be becoming issue-oriented zones in which deliberation is limited to an ideological perspective.

I Can Speak Freely Now: Blogs as a Source of Democratic Deliberation

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s resurrected hopes of reinvigorating democracy by creating a space where democratic deliberation could take place and the voice of the people could be elevated above the din of special interests and have a greater influence on public opinion (e.g. Jones, 1995; Rheingold, 1993).

Some envisioned the Internet as a deliberative democratic forum where citizens engage in rational debate over common problems that leads to more informed public opinion that can help guide decision-making by public officials (Dahlberg, 2007; Habermas, 1989). More recent research, however, has raised doubt about the Internet's ability to stimulate democratic deliberation. Rather than bringing people together to engage in rational debate, the Internet may be creating communication outposts where likeminded people gather to reinforce their preexisting opinions and attack those who hold opposing ones, leading to increased polarization of political views (Galston, 2003; Sunstein, 2001). Blogs that typically post highly partisan content abet polarization by attracting users who seek out opinions that support their point of view and avoid those that challenge them (Johnson, Bichard, Zhang, 2009). Thus, political discussion on blogs may represent the antithesis of democratic deliberation ideals.

While several studies have examined whether the nature of blog discussion constitutes democratic deliberation (Koop & Jansen, 2009; Xenos, 2008), what has not been as extensively researched is whether reliance on blogs leads to positive political attributes, such as increased self-efficacy, political interest, and involvement as well as negative effects such as low trust, selective exposure and political partisanship. This study then examines whether reliance on blogs influences political attributes that foster or hinder democratic deliberation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Democratic Deliberation

Interest in democratic deliberation first began to flourish during the 1970s in response to people becoming less trustful, less interested and less engaged in the political process (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Putnam, 2000). Democratic theorists argue that political conversation really is the soul of democracy and that for democracy to thrive it must have an engaged and informed citizenry (Fishkin, 1991; Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Kim, Wyatt & Katz, 1999). Also, decisions derived from democratic deliberation are believed to benefit democratic governance more than simple majority rule or decisions made only by elites (Kim, 2006; Strandberg, 2008).

While theorists have devoted considerable attention to discussing the importance of “democratic deliberation” to the political process, it is not always clear what is meant by the term (Bohman, 1996; Hardy, Scheufele & Wang, 2005). Several studies have used the terms “democratic deliberation” and “public sphere” interchangeably (e.g., Vergeer & Hermans, 2008; Dahlberg, 2007), though the public sphere as envisioned by Habermas (1989) is technically the space in which the activity of democratic deliberation occurs.

Democratic deliberation has been defined as “discussion that involves judicious argument, critical listening and earnest decision making. Full deliberation includes a careful examination of a problem or an issue, the identification of possible solutions, and the use of these criteria in identifying an optimal solution” (Gastil, 2000, p. 22).

Therefore, deliberative democracy is a process where citizens voluntarily participate in discussions about public issues (Kim, et al., 1999). During deliberative discussion, participants carefully examine a problem or issue, identify possible solutions, establish or reaffirm evaluation criteria, and use these criteria to identify the optimum solution to the problem (Dahlberg, 2001, 2007; Gastil, 2000; Sunstein, 2001). The quality of public deliberation depends on informed participants offering diverse opinions.

Democratic deliberation is typified by several important characteristics including a diversity of points of view in which people are given equal opportunity to express themselves; a rational and critical debate focusing on an issue or a set of issues; a discussion of issues of social importance; and an arena to develop solutions to problems:

- Participants must represent a wide range of views so that different perspectives are debated and discussed. Deliberation only occurs when participants engage in a constructive manner with differing points of view rather than simply agreeing with and reinforcing views that are similar to their own (Koop & Jansen, 2009; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). Similarly, people must be given both adequate and equal time to voice their point of view rather than having the forum dominated by one or two voices (Dahlgren, 2001; Gastil, 2000; Koop & Jansen, 2009). While public deliberation scholars are concerned with getting a wide variety of viewpoints, public sphere researchers stress the importance of universal access to the deliberation site (Habermas, 1989).
- Democratic deliberation is not an intellectual free for all, but a forum for rational and critical debate normally focused on a particular issue or set of related issues. Ideally, participants will enter a debate armed with critical, well-reasoned arguments, will express them even in the face of potentially hostile reaction from others, will listen to conflicting viewpoints before reacting, and will be open to revising their preferences in light of new information or perspectives offered by other participants (Chambers, 2003; Hardy, et al., 2005; Wright & Street, 2007).
- Democratic deliberation should revolve around areas of social interest that are not normally questioned in the political arena (Habermas, 1974, 1989).
- A deliberation forum is not simply a place to engage in rational debate, but a venue to develop solutions to problems. Democratic deliberation is how the public should “identify, draw attention to and interpret social problems and

propose solutions” (Curran, 2000, p. 136).

Blogs and Democratic Deliberation

The potential for the Internet and its components, such as blogs, to serve as a forum for democratic debate has been the subject of recent research. Blogs are considered advantageous for democratic deliberations for the following reasons:

- Blogs eliminate geographic constraints to deliberation, thereby lowering the cost of travel for both organizers and participants (Delli Carpini, et al., 2004; Kim, 2006).
- Gatherings can be assembled quickly to discuss pressing issues (Delli Carpini, et al., 2004).
- Blogs are not as subject to commercial pressures or government control as traditional media, which allows people to express their views more freely (Dimaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Wojcieszak, & Mutz, 2009).
- Personal anonymity and the absence of verbal cues prevent judgments based on race, gender, and attractiveness (Papacharissi, 2004).
- Blogs might increase the participants’ abilities to engage in democratic debate (Price & Capella, 2002; Price, Nir & Capella, 2002).

Therefore, online deliberative discussions are at least equal, if not generally superior, to face-to-face ones.

As blogs have emerged as a legitimate alternative to the mainstream press, so has interest in whether blogs do serve as a site for deliberation. Proponents argue that blogs embody the spirit of the public sphere by providing a “virtually local” forum for public debate missing since the days of coffee houses and salons (Keren, 2004; Thompson, 2003) NOT IN REFS. Blogs foster a sense of community among users who gravitate toward the ones that share their viewpoints (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, 2007; Johnson, Kaye, Richard, & Wong, 2007; Kaye & Johnson, 2006; Papacharissi, 2004;

Trammell, Tarkowski & Sapp, 2006). Blogging, then, allows anyone with Internet access to erect a platform online to voice his or her views and provides an easy way for people to comment on posts made by others (Baoill, 2004).

Critics, however, argue that most blogs fall short of serving as forums for democratic deliberation for three major reasons: Blogs are not structured to promote democratic debate; they tend to attract those who share points of view rather than hold a diversity of opinions; and the nature of blog discussions normally fall far short of the deliberation ideal:

- Few blogs serve as forums of discussion and many do not allow comments but simply serve as a soapbox for the blogger. Other blogs allow reader comments to be posted on the blog, but they must first go through a gatekeeping process in which the blogger decides whether the comment is appropriate to post (Baoill, 2000). Even when blog users are allowed to comment on blog entries, their comments are not nearly as prominent as the original post (Barton, 2005). Because bloggers may post comments about a dozen or more topics, blog structure does not foster a sustained, robust discussion. While certain comments may generate a long thread of follow-up remarks, most blog users state their views then move on to another topic (Baoill, 2000).
- Blogs do not typically attract a mixture of individuals who bring a variety of points of view required of a deliberative forum. Most blogs focus on specific interests such as gun control or gay rights that limit the topic of conversation, and like-minded blog users tend to congregate on blogs that represent their points of view, rather than alternative perspectives. Such homogeneity within online groups reduces the quality of debate because diverging opinions, which are necessary for a fruitful debate on issues of public concern, are missing (Albrecht, 2006). More importantly, partisan sources such as blogs may create a vicious circle by encouraging likeminded people to gather in “cyber ghettos” and engage

in “enclave extremism” where they may have little contact with, or understanding of, outside groups and thus followers may become progressively more extreme in their political positions (Dahlgren, 2005; Sunstein, 2007; Xenos, 2008).

- Critics also claim that blogs fail to achieve perhaps the main deliberative goal: promoting a rational and critical debate that leads to consensus. Blogs, like many other online forums, tend to be dominated by few individuals who espouse their views without offering supporting evidence. Also, partisan blog users are not often willing to listen to conflicting opinions or revise their views as a result new information. Rather, blog participants attack the positions of those who oppose them (Dahlberg, 2001; Poster, 1997; Strandberg, 2008). Even among those who argue that most online discussion is largely civil (Papacharissi, 2004), blogs at best may offer only a public space for discussion rather than a true site for deliberation.

Characteristics of Blog Users

While Habermas (1989) argued that in the public sphere everyone must have the ability to participate in democratic deliberation, he was aware that elite citizens would be more likely to do so. He argued that those who are more politically interested, who believe they have the ability to influence the political system and who engage in politics are more likely to participate in democratic discussions.

Indeed, blogs users appear to be models for democratic discussion. For example, blog users are distinguished from non-blog users by their strong interest in and extensive knowledge about politics, their regular participation in online and offline political activities, especially their work on behalf of candidates or issues (Delli Carpini, et al., 2004; Gastil, 2000; Graf, 2006), and their high level of political efficacy (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, 2007). Blog reliance, then, could create a virtuous circle by attracting the political active and interested who read the blogs and become even more interested and

active in politics. Users, however, tend to be more likely than non-users to be distrustful of the media and government institutions (Graf, 2006; Johnson & Kaye, 2004, 2007). Additionally, political blog users tend to be highly partisan and seek out information that supports their already-held political attitudes and avoid information that challenges those views (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2006, 2008; Sunstein, 2001, 2007). Indeed reliance on blogs has proven to be a stronger predictor of seeking out supportive information than any other online source (Johnson & Kaye, 2009). Therefore, blog use reinforces users' existing partisan positions rather than leading them to seek both sides of an issue and weighing the merits before reaching a decision (Zhang, Johnson, Bichard & Gangadharbatla, 2009).

Thus, partisanship and selective exposure may be the antitheses of public deliberation. Additionally, blog users do not demographically resemble the U.S. population as a whole or even the average Internet users. Blog users are young, well-educated males with high incomes (Eveland & Dylko, 2007; Johnson & Kaye, 2004, 2007; Technorati, 2008), whereas Internet users more closely resemble the American mainstream. That is, women and men are equally likely to be online and gaps based on race, age, education and income have narrowed (Pew Research, 2008).

Research Questions

Whether blogs are or can become spheres of democratic deliberation largely depends on the users. The blogs themselves are merely a place of convergence. It is the users and the way they participate that distinguish rational deliberation from mere expression of opinion.

This study examines whether those who heavily rely on blogs tend to be more likely to possess positive political attributes that lead to deliberation, such as increased political efficacy, political interest, and involvement, as well as negative attributes such as low trust, selective exposure and political partisanship, which inhibit discussion than

those who are less reliant on blogs for political information. Therefore, this study will address the following questions:

RQ1. Do levels of political attributes associated with fostering democratic deliberations (political efficacy, political interest, political involvement) differ between those who rely heavily on blogs and those who rely rarely on blogs?

RQ2. Do levels of political attributes associated with impeding democratic deliberations (political distrust, selective exposure, political partisanship) differ between those who rely heavily on blogs and those who rely rarely on blogs?

H1. Reliance on blogs predicts political attributes associated with democratic deliberation (political efficacy, political interest, and political involvement) after controlling for political ideology, the ideology of the blogs individuals rely on, and demographic variables.

H2: Reliance on political blogs predicts political attributes that may impede democratic deliberation (political distrust, selective exposure, and political partisanship) after controlling for political ideology, the ideology of the blogs individuals rely on, and demographics.

METHOD

An online survey that specifically targeted blog users was posted from April 23 to May 22, 2007. To specifically reach blog users, the authors contacted 109 bloggers to request a survey announcement and a link to the survey URL. The bloggers were randomly selected from various online sources that compile a list of political blogs (e.g. etalkinghead, blogspot-List of Political Blogs, Yahoo! Directory). The survey was linked by 70 bloggers whose blogs represent diverse ideologies, such as the conservative *Boortz News*, the middle-of-the-road *Moderate Voice*, and the progressive *Daily Kos*.¹ Additionally, a “snowball” technique was used, which allowed respondents to

automatically forward the survey to fellow blog readers (Babbie, 2002).² The survey was completed by 1,989 respondents who were eligible to vote in the U.S.³

Survey Variable - Blog Reliance

The degree to which users rely on blogs for news and information was assessed by a question that asked respondents to mark their level of reliance on a 1-5 scale that ranged from “never rely on” to “very heavily rely on.”

Survey Variables - Political Attributes

Survey respondents were asked about several political characteristics that have been identified as those that are catalysts of democratic deliberation:

- Political efficacy was measured as a summed index made up of two items from the National Election Studies conducted by the University of Michigan: “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does” and “Every vote counts in an election, including yours and mine.” The response options ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The polarity was reversed on the first efficacy item. Reliability for the efficacy index is .54.⁴
- Interest in news and current events was measured on 0-10 scale with 0 as “no interested at all” and 10 as “very interested.”
- Involvement in contemporary issues and events was assessed by the following question: As a result of blogging my involvement in general news and current events has “greatly decreased,” “decreased,” “stayed the same,” “increased,” “greatly increased.”

Respondents were also asked about characteristics that are impediments of democratic deliberation:

- Trust in the government was also assessed as an index comprised of items

taken from the National Election Studies: "Most of our leaders are devoted to service," "Politicians never tell us what they really think," and "I don't think public officials care much about what people like me think." The response options also ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The polarity was reversed on the second and third statements. The reliability for the trust index is .74.

- Selective exposure was measured by the question, "How likely are you to purposely connect with blogs that share your point of view on issues?" Respondents selected from 0-10 scale with 0 as "not likely at all" and 10 as "very highly likely." This question ascertains the likelihood of seeking agreeable information, which is a criterion of selective exposure. Individuals do not necessarily have to attend only to what they find acceptable to be selective.
- Political partisanship was assessed by asking respondents to mark on a 0-10 scale how strongly tied they are to their political party of choice.

Survey Variables – Ideology

Two questions asked about ideology. The first examined respondents' political ideology and the second examined the ideology of blogs that they visited most often. The options for both questions were; "very liberal," "liberal," "moderate," "conservative," "very conservative."

Survey Variables – Demographics

Respondents were asked their gender, their age as of their last birthday and estimated their 2007 income. They also selected their highest level of education from among seven options that ranged from "less than high school," to "Ph.D. degree" and "other."

Survey Variables – Single Item Measures

The single item measures used in this study have been used in other Internet

studies. Single item measures may sometimes be unstable, but because of the large sample size and that these variables were shown to be reliable in other published studies, they are regarded as appropriate for this study. For example, a single item reliance question is typically used in other reliance studies (e.g. [Banning & Sweetser, 2007](#) NOT IN REFS; [Flanagin & Metzger, 2000](#)) NOT IN REFS. The political interest and political involvement measures were also used in other studies ([Lee, 2005](#); [Stroud, 2008](#)).

Data Analysis

First, reliance on blogs was recoded as a separate variable that grouped respondents as either very heavily/heavily relying on blogs (those who marked 4 or 5) sometimes/rarely relying on blogs (those who marked 1 or 2). Moderate users (those who marked 3) were excluded from the two group comparisons. Independent sample t-tests were then run to ascertain differences between heavy and light blog users on the variables that foster democratic deliberation and on those that inhibit it.

Next, regressions were run to examine the influence of blog reliance on the political attributes that may either impede or lead to deliberation. The regression controlled for demographics and ideology of the respondents and of the blogs they visit most often by entering the independent variables in blocks. For each regression, one of the political attributes (political efficacy, political interest, political involvement, selective exposure, political distrust and political partisanship) was entered as the dependent variable. Next, demographics (gender, age, education, income) were entered into the first independent variable block, the second block consisted of blog and personal ideology, and reliance on blogs was entered into the third block for each regression.

RESULTS

The profile of this survey's respondents shows that just over three-quarters (77.3%) are

male and almost nine out of ten are white (89.5%). The respondents are highly educated with 89.7% reporting some college or higher, and they report an annual income of \$90,500 on average. Additionally, they average 47.7 years of age and have been accessing blogs for an average of 5.2 years. The demographic characteristics of this survey's respondents are similar to the profiles of blog readers reported by others (Blogads, 2006, Graf, 2006).

Looking at the political attributes that foster democratic deliberation shows that the overwhelming majority of blog users (82.7%) expressed a strong interest in current events and news. Additionally, almost three-quarters (74.8%) credit blogs as a catalyst to greater involvement in general news issues. Respondent also tend to believe they have the power to bring about political change. Just over one-half (51.0%) claim high levels of political efficacy (those who marked 8,9 or 10 [range= 2-10]) and 37.1% report moderate levels (marked 5,6 or 7).

Although the respondents are highly self-efficacious they do not seem to trust the government. Only 13.2% of the respondents report high to very high levels of trust, 47.0% say they are moderately trustful and four out of ten (39.8%) claim low to very low feelings of trust. Respondents are also moderately likely to connect to blogs that share their worldview ($m=8.35$, range 1-10). The respondents, however, are not strongly tied to a political party ($m=5.62$, range 1-10). Further, about one-third (32.1%) expressed weak party ties, 36.0% moderate ties, and 31.9% strong ties.

When asked their political ideology, almost six of ten (57.7%) responded that they are conservative, 24.4% moderate, and 18.0% consider themselves liberals. Their ideology closely matches the ideology of the blogs they read; 63.6% visit blogs that are conservative in nature, while only 18.5% access liberal-leaning blogs, and 17.8% favor ideologically moderate blogs.

Heavy Blog Users vs. Light Blog Users

The first research question investigates differences between respondents who very heavily/heavily rely on blogs and those who sometimes/rarely rely on blogs on their levels of political efficacy, interest and involvement in current events – attributes that are associated with democratic deliberation. Heavy blog users are significantly more involved in issues of the day than light blog users ($t=8.75$, $df=1520$, $p.<000$). Heavy and light blog users do not differ on either levels of political efficacy or interest in news and current issues (Table 1).

When looking at the characteristics that impede deliberation heavy blog users are more trusting of the government than light blog users ($t=2.59$, $df=1337$, $p.<01$). Neither group, however, is very trusting. On a scale of 3-15, trust levels of heavy blog users average 7.47, and light blog users 6.91. Heavy blog users are also significantly more likely to seek information from blogs that concur with their own opinions ($t=11.20$, $df=1520$ $p.<001$). The combination of low trust in the government and selective exposure to a narrow range of agreeable perspectives may inhibit democratic deliberation. There is no difference between heavy and light blog users on strength of ties to a political party, but there is a significant difference between the two groups on political ideology. Heavy blog users are significantly more conservative ($m=3.52$) than light blog users ($m=3.15$) (Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

How much respondents rely on blogs may influence their outlook about world events, and thus their willingness to engage in rational discourse and problem solving. Regression analysis was used in this study to ascertain whether reliance on blogs predicts political efficacy, and interest in - and involvement with news and political events. The first hypothesis is partially supported because blog reliance is a strong and significant predictor of only involvement ($\beta=.21$, $p.<.001$). Individuals who rely heavily on blogs and are heavily involved in world affairs tend to be females ($\beta=.06$,

$p < .05$). Reliance on blogs does not predict whether individuals believe they have power to bring about political change, neither does it influence their interest in world events. But younger respondents who visit conservative blogs are more likely to be highly self efficacious, while males who visit liberal blogs are more interested in news and politics (Table 2).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The study next turns its attention to the variables that tend to inhibit democratic deliberation (low trust in the government, selective exposure and political partisanship) Regression analysis investigated whether reliance on blogs predicts these characteristics. The second hypothesis is partially supported because selective exposure is predicted by reliance ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$). Those who rely heavily on blogs and who practice selective exposure by visiting blogs that promote like-minded perspectives and opinions tend to be conservative ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$) females ($\beta = .07$, $p < .05$) who do not visit liberal blogs ($\beta = -.09$, $p < .05$) (Table 3).

On the other hand, blog reliance does not predict whether blog users are trusting of the government or political partisanship. Although the t-tests indicate that heavy blog users are significantly more trusting of the government than light blog users, the regression analysis does not indicate a predictive strength. Controlling for the respondents' ideology and the ideology of the blogs they visit most often weakens the regression. The regression analysis, however, does suggest that highly educated liberals who do not connect to conservative blogs are trusting of the government. Further, older, male conservatives are the most strongly connected to their political party of choice (Table 3).

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

CONCLUSION

Whether blogs have the potential to heighten democratic deliberation is a matter of debate. Blog enthusiasts envision a blogosphere as a focal point of rational persuasion and conversation where social and political issues are discussed among diverse users and consensus is reached (Delli Carpini, et al.; Dimaggio, et al., 2001; Wojcieszak, & Mutz, 2009). Others, however, take a more cynical look and believe that blogs hinder democratic debate largely because they attract a homogenous audience whose purpose is to push their point of view while discounting other perspectives (Dahlgren, 2005; Sunstein, 2007; Xenos, 2008). This study of 1,989 blog users compares those who heavily rely on blogs to those who rarely rely on blogs. The question is whether reliance on blogs leads to positive political attitudes, such as political efficacy, political interest and political involvement, which have been linked to democratic deliberation or to negative attributes such as low trust, selective exposure and political partisanship.

This chapter reveals three main findings that bear on the deliberative potential of blogs:

- Whether comparing means with a t-test or controlling for other variables via regression, users who rely heavily on blogs are significantly more likely than light blog users to report greater involvement in news and politics as a consequence of their use of blogs.
- Heavy blog users are significantly more likely than light blog users to report

exposing themselves selectively to like-minded blogs.

- Overall, while effects found here are significant they are not very strong. Blog reliance explains 4.5% of the variance of involvement in news and politics and 5.1% of the variance of selective exposure. While these are respectable levels of explanatory power for a single variable, the relationships are weakly determinative. Heavy blog users are only somewhat more politically involved and somewhat more selective in information exposure on average than light blog users.
- Regression results find no significant relationship between blog reliance and four other indicators of positive or negative deliberative potential—political efficacy, interest in news and politics, trust in government, and political partisanship.

These results oppose a vicious circle interpretation of blog use—namely, that the more people read blogs, the more they become politically disaffected and selective in what they read, and these negative attributes lead them to read blogs more often, which further reinforces the negative attributes. As discussed in the literature review, some observers believe the objective and structure of blogs lead to growing polarization, partisanship, and “enclave extremism” (Dahlgren, 2005; Sunstein, 2007; Xenos, 2008). If such views are correct, it should be the case that those who use blogs more heavily would show dramatically higher levels of information selectivity than lighter users, but findings here indicate only a moderate impact, at best. The moderate impact may also result from the fact that heavy blog users admit to preferring sources that support their view (7.6 on a 10-point scale), but this does not mean that users avoid balanced blogs or even ones that oppose their viewpoint. Also, partisanship and low trust in government, particularly among conservative bloggers, should be appreciably greater among heavy users. No such effects were found here. The findings, then, do not suggest that greater reliance on blogs leads to a vicious circle of extremism, partisanship, and distrust.

While perhaps blog users differ from the general public in these negative attributes, increasing reliance on blogs does not seem to lead reliably to the negative attributes among blog users. If blog users are different than the general public, the findings are most consistent with the view that blog users differ largely due to self-selection and not as a consequence of the causal impact of blog reliance. If blog reliance causes escalating negative attributes among blog users, then those who rely more heavily on blogs should have markedly more negative attributes, but instead the differences between heavy and light blog users are moderate and mixed.

Neither, however, do the findings support a virtuous circle interpretation of blog use. Again, the literature review indicates that some observers believe that the structure of blogs lends itself to encouraging deliberative engagement (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, 2007; Kaye & Johnson, 2006; Papacharissi, 2004). Some researchers (Muhlberger, 2005; Neuman, 1986) suggest that political engagement follows a virtuous circle—one in which more engagement yields more positive attributes such as political knowledge and political efficacy, which in turn encourage yet greater engagement. The interactive nature of blogs creates the expectation that heavy blog users would be sharply more involved in news and politics than light blog users, while the data here indicate only a moderate impact. Likewise, the virtuous circle interpretation anticipates that heavy blog users would be appreciably more politically efficacious and interested in news and politics, on average. The findings here indicate no significant relationship. Again, the findings are most consistent with the view that, **at most**, certain types of people are drawn to blogs, not that blogs greatly reshape people into virtuous citizens.

To the extent that blogs have a causal impact on the deliberative fitness of participants, blog reliance pulls in two opposing directions with respect to such fitness—it moderately increases engagement, a positive outcome, but it also moderately increases selectivity, a negative outcome. These findings are not consistent with a view of blog participants as motivated to engage a diversity of others in public problem

solving—a key part of the definition of deliberation. If blog users were seeking out deliberations with the aim of solving public problems by critical and rational discussion with opponents, heavier blog users would not show higher levels of ideological selectivity and there should perhaps be more evidence of a virtuous circle from blogging. Additionally, the finding of high homogeneity among blog users, who are predominantly male, white, educated, and conservative, reinforces the conclusion that diversity, and thus deliberation, does not draw blog users. On the other hand, if blog users were primarily focused on confirming their own presuppositions, the findings should perhaps show stronger evidence of heightened selectivity among heavy blog users.

A final issue is whether this chapter correctly stipulates, in its regression analyses, that blog reliance affects engagement and selectivity rather than the reverse. Certainly, it is imaginable that the direction of causality may be reversed or bidirectional, as suggested by other research (Zhang, et al., 2009). This chapter, however, starts with literature that suggests that structural features of blogs may enhance such factors as engagement and selectivity. Granting these authors' supposition that blog use drives such factors related to deliberative potential, the analyses here find moderate and conflicting effects of blog use on deliberative potential—even granting that all the effect is in this direction.

Solutions and Recommendations

This chapter begins with a puzzle: the view, from one quarter, that blog users might be supercharged deliberators and the view, from another quarter, that bloggers are deliberatively unfit—that they are polarized, focused on confirming their presuppositions, and unwilling to interact with a diversity of others. Both views cannot be simultaneously accurate. The findings in this chapter leave yet another puzzle: bloggers do not appear to be strongly deliberative or anti-deliberative, and the activity in

which they are engaged does not appear to be meant as either a deliberation or purely for the confirmation of presuppositions. As a potential solution to these puzzles, a third interpretation of the motives behind blog use is proposed.

Rather than motivation to deliberate, a motive to become more informed might explain both moderately higher engagement and selectivity. Engagement follows directly from a desire to be informed. Also, as people become more knowledgeable about an issue, they begin to rule out certain positions based on consistency with their other beliefs and values. Thus, as people become more informed, they become more selective (Johnson & Kaye, 2009). For example, those who have studied biological evolution may dismiss creationist websites. To the extent that information on political issues in the United States is substantially organized into ideological camps with deeply different readings of available data, it is not surprising that selectivity tends to follow ideological lines. Selectivity, then, is not necessarily a feature imposed by blogs on users, but may be a feature of the organization of political disagreement by interest groups, politicians, and various quarters of the public sphere.

The implications of a possible information motive for the deliberative potential of the Internet is mixed, given that the motive in this case appears to direct people along ideological cleavages. For successful deliberation, people must be informed but also willing to listen to opposing points of view, synthesizing a more defensible view from all they hear. Apathy and ignorance are not conducive to deliberation, yet, regrettably, much evidence suggests the public is appreciably apathetic and ignorant. Thus, if a desire to be informed drives intensity of blog reliance or is enhanced by greater blog reliance, it does contribute knowledge and points of view that could be leveraged for deliberation. The selectivity of the information motive is not conducive to deliberative potential, but blogs are not, it appears, deliberative forums. An important question is whether the selectivity of bloggers would adversely affect their engagement in more deliberative forums. To the extent that such selectivity is not intense and is driven by a

desire for more information rather than the reverse, it might not adversely affect such deliberative potential—an issue that may deserve further research. For recommendations, then, this chapter moves to a discussion of future research possibilities.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This chapter examined the impact of blog reliance among blog users on characteristics that can boost or hinder democratic deliberation. The respondents to this study were those who were eligible to vote in the United States. Because our research findings may depend on the particular political structures and elite organization of the United States, replication of this study in other countries with differing institutions would be helpful.

The social, cultural, and political environments within various countries may influence the deliberative potential for blog users. The two-party political structure that exists in the U.S. is sharply divided ideologically, which may very well influence democratic deliberation among U.S. citizens. To fully understand the role blogs play in deliberation, comparisons should be made among users in different countries. Tracked over time and across multiple countries, such research could clarify democratic trends in the global blogosphere and the root causes of these trends.

Additionally, the relationship between the political structural features organizing a given issue and the polarization of blog discussion should be studied. Such research can compare blog user reactions and blog treatment of issues in a given country that involve differing degrees of elite polarization. Such research could provide valuable insights on the dynamics of how blogs affect their users within a given culture, could more firmly establish the causal direction of blog effects and ascertain whether users are drawn into virtuous or vicious circles of blog reliance.

Another potentially fruitful area for further research, suggested in the conclusion, would involve a more detailed experimental examination of the selectivity and deliberative potential of blog users. The conclusion sketches an alternative explanation to both the view that blog users are more deliberatively fit and the view that blog users are more highly selective and polarized. That alternative is that blog users are simply people who seek out information on an issue in which they are interested, which typically involves some selectivity. Blog users of differing persuasions could be experimentally given information of varying quality both consistent and contrary to their views. Heavy blog users could be compared with light blog users to determine whether they show more resistance to attitudinal shifts and less sensitivity to the quality of information.

Lastly, blog reliance and the potential for democratic deliberation may depend on the motives behind blog use. An examination of self-reported motives and how they track with deliberative fitness or lack thereof could provide insights on the deliberative potential of blog users and provide additional evidence regarding the "information seeking" interpretation of blog users' motives advanced. The current dataset contains information on blog users' motives in the United States, and preliminary analysis suggests that information seeking is an important motive.

Notes

1. Links to the survey were posted on the following blogs: A Family in Baghdad, A Family in Iraq, Ace of Spades HQ, Ann Althouse, AOL, Appalachian Scribe, Betsey's Page, Blogometer, Boortz News, Brian's Blog, Center for Citizen Media, Citizen Journalism, CNN, Crooks & Liars, Daily Kos, Dan Gillmor, DC Metblogs, Democratic Underground, Fark, Firedoglake, Hassenpfeffer, Highclearing, Hotline Blogometer, brianhornback.blogspot, edwardwillett.blogspot, journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink, Nofishnonuts, Secrets In Baghdad, Joanne Jacobs, Newshounds, www.wakeupamericans-spree.blogspot, Huffington Post, Hullabaloo, Infomaniac, Instapolit, Instapundit, Jay Rosen's Press Think, Jesus General, Journalism.co.uk, Khalid Jarrar, Knox News No Silence Here, KnoxViews, Mike the Mad Biologist, Mindy McAdams, Moderate Voice, MoveOn.org, NewsHounds, NewsBusters, NewsDissector, Obsidian Wings, Oraculations, Outside the Beltway, Poliblogger, Political Mavens-Sтивен Taylor, Politics in the Zeros, PowerLine, Power of Narrative, Poynter.org/Romenesko, Pressthink.org, Raw Story, Skippy the Bush Kangaroo, Slate, Teaching Online Journalism (UNC), Tell Me a Secret, tojou.blogspot, Unqualified Offerings, Wake Up America.
2. The survey's first question asked respondents to enter their e-mail addresses; all but 17 (99.1%) complied. The respondents' e-mail addresses together with a computer generated ID (programmed to appear on every completed survey) were used to delete duplicated surveys. Additionally, after sending the completed survey a Web page would immediately appear thanking the respondents for their participation and verifying that the survey had been sent so respondents would not retransmit the survey.
3. This method of convenience sampling was appropriate for specifically reaching a narrow group of blog users (Babbie, 1990). Any attempt at random sampling this small group of Internet users would result in a large non-qualification rate (At the time of data collection only about one-third of Internet users connected to blogs). Therefore, posting announcements of the survey on various types of blogs was an appropriate method. Additionally, the survey instructed that only those who are eligible to vote in the U.S. complete the survey.
4. The efficacy index is below the normal .70 standard for internal reliability. Low reliability scores, however, are not unusual for an index of only two items. One of the main ways to ensure reliability is to use measures that have proven reliable in previous research (Babbie, 1990). Therefore, the authors combined the two items into an index because these two items from the National Election Studies have proven reliable in past studies.

Table 1
Comparisons between Heavy Blog Users and Light Blog Users

	Heavy Blog Reliant (n=1345) (Means)	Light Blog Reliant (n=177) (Means)
<u>Variables that Foster Democratic Deliberation</u>		
Political efficacy_(mean range 2-10) (t=-.116, df=1516, p=.907)	7.13	7.15
Interest in news (mean range 1-10) (t=.763, df=1517, p=.446)	8.73	8.64
Involvement in news (mean range=1-5) (t=8.75, df=1520, p=.000)	4.04A	3.46B
<u>Variables that Impede Democratic Deliberation</u>		
Trust in government_(range 3-15) (t=2.59, df=1337, p=.009)	7.47A	6.91B
Selective Exposure (mean range 1-10) (t=11.192, df=1520, p=.000)	7.64A	6.00B
Political Partisanship (range=1-10) (t=1.26, df=1446, p=.208)	5.72	5.42
<u>Ideology</u>		
Political Ideology (conservative = 5) (t=4.33, df=1458, p=.000)	3.52A	3.15B
Political Ideology of Blogs Visited (conservative = 5) (t=4.437, df=1381, p=.000)	3.49A	3.13B

* Means scores with capital letters = horizontal comparisons - differ by $p < .05$ independent samples t-test.

TABLE 2
Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Blog Reliance as a Predictor of Variables that Boost Democratic Deliberation

<i>in</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>Interest in</i>	<i>Involvement</i>
<i>Politics</i>	<i>Efficacy</i>	<i>News and Politics</i>	<i>News &</i>
Gender (female = positive)	.01	.06*	.06*
Age	-.08**	.04	.04
Education	.04	.02	.05
Income	.01	.03	.00
R2	.007	.009	.010
Significance	.021	.008	.002
Blog Ideology (conservative = 5)	.20***	-.10*	.00
Political Ideology (conservative = 5)	.03	.03	.03
R2	.054	.014	.010
R2 Change	.047	.005	.000
Significance	.000	.001	.011
Blog Reliance	.00	.05	.21***
R2	.054	.016	.055
R2 Change	.000	.002	.045
Adjusted R	.050	.012	.050
Sig. of Change	.000	.001	.000

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

TABLE 3
Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Blog Reliance as a Predictor of Variables that Impede Democratic Deliberation

	<i>Trust In Gov't</i>	<i>Selective Exposure</i>	<i>Political Partisanship</i>
Gender (female = positive)	.04	.07*	.13***
Age	-.04	.04	.09**
Education	.14***	.00	.04
Income	-.01	-.00	.02
R2	.024	.007	.025
Significance	.000	.032	.000
Blog Ideology (conservative = 5)	.13**	-.09*	-.06
Political Ideology (conservative = 5)	-.10*	.11*	.12**
R2	.030	.014	.030
R2 Change	.006	.007	.005
Significance	.000	.002	.000
Blog Reliance	.04	.23***	.03
R2	.031	.065	.03
R2 Change	.001	.051	.001
Adjusted R	.027	.061	.027
Sig. of Change	.000	.000	.000

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

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Key Words

Democratic Deliberation: A process in which participants carefully examine a problem or issue, identify possible solutions, establish or reaffirm evaluation criteria, and then use these criteria to identify the optimum solution to the problem.

Blogs: A website that is usually maintained by an individual or groups of individuals that includes regular entries of news and commentary.

Public Sphere: A space where groups of individuals freely congregate to discuss matters of public interest, engage in deliberation and reach a common judgment.

Public Discourse: Discussing a matter of public interest in a public forum.

Political Information: Facts concerning government and politics.

Political Debate: Public discussion of political issues that at least involve two different sides expressing their viewpoints.

Online Deliberation: A blog, online discussion group or other Internet forum where individuals can gather to examine a problem or issue, identify possible solutions, establish or reaffirm evaluation criteria, and then use these criteria to identify the optimum solution to the problem.