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Blogs in Campaign Communication

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In Election 2004, campaign Weblogs—or blogs—became a standard feature of campaign Web sites. Monitoring the adaptation of emergent technological tools into political communication assists future generations of scholars to understand the genesis of communication applications and explore future uses. Blogs are online diaries where information is electronically posted, updated frequently, and presented in reverse chronological order. Three concourses of research provide insight into blogging as a political communication function: the investigation of the blog as a social diary, the analysis of blogs as organizing tools, and blogs viewed as a form of civic, participatory journalism. The authors do not claim that blogging had a significant impact on the 2004 election outcome. However, they do argue that its effective use has been demonstrated and emerging applications of the tool pave the way for future campaign communication, one the authors suggest will become a standard part of campaign communication.

Keywords: *blogs; blogging; political communication; campaigns; elections; Internet*

The investigation of emergent technological tools in campaign discourse is documented each major election cycle. Monitoring the adaptation of such tools into political communication assists future generations of scholars to understand the genesis of communication applications and explore future uses.

New to the common political lexicon in national political campaigns are the words *blog, blogger*, and *blogosphere*. Weblogs or blogs are defined as online diaries where information is electronically posted, updated frequently, and presented in reverse chronological order (Blood, 2005; Bowman & Willis, 2003; Keren, 2004; Welch, 2003). These electronic journals are similar to print but have the added dimension of allowing response from readers by interactively posting responses. Blogs are frequently viewed as running commentary on issues of the day. The blogger is the author-critic-diarist. The blogosphere is the ever-expanding universe of bloggers who link to news sites and each other.

Blogging emerged as a ready communication tool in 1999 when Pyra labs created the product blogger. This user-friendly program permits information to be frequently

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updated, provides templates for user ease, and is offered free to its users. Now owned by Google, blogging has quickly grown to one of the more widely used products available on the Internet.

In this article, the authors do not claim that blogging had a significant impact on the 2004 election outcome. We do argue that its effective use has been demonstrated and emerging applications of the tool pave the way for future campaign communication, one that we suggest will become a standard part of campaign communication.

Importance of Blogs

Certainly one measure of importance is the sheer number of blog sites. According to Technorati.com (2004), there are more than 4,298,000 sites. That becomes more impressive given that a study from the PEW Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, Gallows, & Horrigan, 2004) noted that "a mere 2% of Adult Internet users maintain Web diaries or Web blogs." Interestingly, that same study notes that "11% of Internet users have read the blog or diaries of other Internet users." That was not the case in elections held just 2 years ago. Blogs, while emerging, were rarely used in the 2002 elections and certainly lacked the visibility to give them any credence. Yet even then, scholars were forecasting the utility of blogs to create a "loyal following" (Cornfield & Rainie, 2003).

Blogs can be shown to have significance because of the precision-focused arguments they are capable of making. Matt Drudge, who focuses on political gossip, provided extensive coverage of "Monicagate," beating many traditional news outlets to the latest gossip on the tawdry tail. Trent Lott and Howell Raines were toppled with the assistance of bloggers who took them to task over the Iraq war (Jensen, 2003). These examples remind us that words can have an impact.

As important as individual voices when provided with a resonant medium, the voice of the media outlets is ever present. Election 2004 marked the year that blogging became the communication signature of journalists (Packer, 2004). CyberJournalist.net (2004) posts a list of blogs produced by professional journalists both as affiliated with particular news organizations and their personal sites. The list grows almost daily.

Reporters often write columns for print formats and then expand both on the content and the method of inquiry in parallel blogs, some hosted by news outlets (*The New York Times, The New Republic*, or ABC), whereas others are privately written by the journalists themselves. Those sites hosted by news organizations are usually under the control of the editorial staff. The locus of control implies that the blogs are less about opinion and more about reporting reliable data and insights. Len Apcar, editor in chief of NYTimes.com, noted that blogs provided "a vehicle here for short-form information, continuous updating, some development observations, insights, that might not rise to a full article but are worthy of reporting" (Dube, 2004). As such, critics and insiders alike might contend that such sites mimic the appearance of a blog but are more realistically described as an "updated news service" (Dube, 2004).

The model hailed by one of the larger blog sites, http://bloggingofthepresident.com, is that of Theodore H. White who was both active as a campaign speechwriter while developing his tome *The Making of the President 1960*. The brainchild of Christopher Lydon, a former public radio host in Boston, the site chronicles the development of Internet and Weblog politics in 2004. The emphasis on strategy makes this site particularly relevant to consultants and scholars. Viewing author intent of a message strategy and then gauging the effects enable communication professionals to test, mimic, and institutionalize effective techniques.

Alternative outlets as well as the pressure to follow leads emerging in the blogosphere prompted journalists to take more risks. Journalists in the mainstream press have been accused of being influenced by the business of news. Critics are quick to point out that the news professionals "do a terrible job of news reporting" (Dube, 2004). Shutting down bureaus, reducing costs by use of pool reporters, and the decreasing number of competitive newspapers in a single market result in less competition among news outlets and more repetition of news rather than conflicting perspectives. Freed from the economic pressures, bloggers opened doors and created pockets of public opinion that pressured the mainstream into assessing the validity of stories the dominant parties and candidates might be tempted to suppress. Matt Drudge and his now-famous daily report gave way to a bevy of voices insisting on investigations. One notable example is the exploration of President Bush's military service record by Calpundit. Blogger Kevin Drum has since been hired by the *Washington Monthly* and his work transferred to that site (www.washingtonmonthly.com). Some might argue that bloggers are budding journalists auditioning for top positions.

In kind of a survival of the fittest in the electronic communication arena, individuals can bid for attention of readers. Simultaneously, journalists track hot stories by viewing the daily rankings of blogs on sites such as Daypop (http://www.daypop.com/), Feedster (http://www.feedster.com/), Technorati (http://www.technorati.com/), or Blogrollings Top 100 (http://www.blogrolling.com/top.phtml).

The preponderance of early research supports that the field of journalism embraced blogging in election 2004. At a minimum, the field has added a tool. The impact of that tool is still in question.

Who Blogs and Why?

Blogs have resonance with the advance communication guard. In part, it allows participants to avoid media's overdominance of horse race stories (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004). That may explain why those who view themselves as disenfranchised find blogging a useful tool. Bloggers tend to be people younger than 30 and predominately women.

Blogs have an aura of authenticity. Certainly, the campaigns have gotten so good at staging media events with great photos that campaigns tend to guide the media shots. According to one study, the trigger for lead election stories was initiated by campaigns the most of any other trigger function at 41% compared to other triggers such as elec-

tion results (26%) or the 21% of stories driven by the press (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004). Rarely is the reporter's point of view focused on how policy decisions affect people's personal lives or what the candidates are like as people (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004). Furthermore, the "major Internet news sites make less use of interactivity . . . have fewer links to external sites, and offer fewer chances to see and hear directly from the candidates on their election front pages than they did four years ago" (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004). For many readers, newspapers have simply lost their gravitas compared to blogs:

> For all the history made by newspapers between 1960 and 2000, the profession was also busy contracting, standardizing, and homogenizing. Most cities now have their monopolist daily, their alt weekly or two, their business journal. Journalism is done a certain way, by a certain kind of people. Bloggers are basically oblivious to such traditions, so reading the best of them is like receiving a bracing slap in the face. It's a reminder that America is far more diverse and iconoclastic than its newsrooms. (Welch, 2003)

Blogs have appeal because of the freedom it permits participants. As peer to peer rather than hierarchical in nature, blogs permit individual expression.

> The mantra has always been, "keep your message consistent. Keep your message consistent," says John Hlinko, director of Internet strategy for Clark. That was all well and good in the past. Now it's a recipe for disaster. . . . You can choose to have a Stalinist structure that's really doctrinaire and that's really opposed to grassroots. Or you can say, "Go forth. Do what you're going to do." As long as we're running in the same direction, it's much better to give some freedom. (Mack, 2004)

Other bloggers gain credibility from firsthand experiences they relate in a diary-like memoir of unfolding events. For example, troops in Iraq filed stories from the war zone while those at home followed with interest the GI's perspective. Similarly, campaign staffers such as Dean's Allison Stuntz give readers a real-time account of events aboard the campaign press bus. The energy created by the immediacy of the experience and the seemingly unfiltered stream of consciousness leads readers to think they are gaining insight into the real experience. Keeping communication "real" became the most appealing element of the blog-style communication.

Blogs in Campaign Communication

Research on blogs is limited, but it is a growing area of study as scholars seek to examine their applicability to political, social, and cultural issues. Three concourses of research provide insight into blogging as a political communication function. First, there is the investigation of the blog as a social diary. Second, there is the analysis of blogs as organizing tools. Third, blogs are viewed as a form of civic, participatory journalism.

Blogs as Social Narrative

The Internet empowers users to develop communication communities through multiple channels such as chat rooms, support groups, electronic mailing lists, personal Web pages, and blogs. The electronic posting of blogs provides an opportunity for people to share their thoughts and experiences on the Internet (Deuze, 2003).

The 2004 political election has sparked a plethora of bloggers that inject their point of view. "There's no question about it: [Blogs] are a key part of the political media," according to Eric Olsen of Blogcritics.org (Seper, 2004). Bloggers were prolific at the Democratic and GOP convention in 2004, with both parties allowing bloggers to register as media representatives to cover the campaign.

Academics are exploring such issues as group dynamics, political content, and timestamps with blogs. Kaye Trammell, a professor at Louisiana State University, wrote her doctoral thesis on the political content of blogs (Glaser, 2004). Most of the beginning blogs included links to other sites, and blog editors often included additional comments. Weblog editors may provide context for an article by juxtaposing it against other articles or related subjects. Considered in this constructed context, the message may take on additional meaning or lead the reader to conclusions contrary to the reader's initial suppositions.

A further aspect of the social narrative is the study of how a message chains out in a population. The social activism of bloggers promotes "democratic self-expression and networking" (Kahn & Kellner, 2004, p. 91). As blogs and those who monitor them become more sophisticated, their impact may become increasingly clear. Even now, sites like Technorati.com can track the buzz of certain topics over time. Such issue tracking permits scholars to assess the social narrative of politics in ways that would traditionally be investigated through survey methods using participant recall or content analysis of newspaper features, which is not necessarily tracking social narratives at all. Tracking conversations occurring in the blogosphere provides real-time insight into the rise and fall of conversation topics and the intensity of that discussion.

As part of the social structure, blogs invoke the voyeuristic element of communication into the mix. As one reviewer writes, "People like to peek into others' lives" (Jensen, 2003). Nothing attracts readers like juicy gossip. Sites often spring up that are oppositional in nature. The Democratic National Committee's Kicking Ass: Daily Dispatches From the DNC keeps supporters tuned in to the issues of the campaign. The purpose, as stated in the "About" materials, states that "Kicking Ass is our opportunity to talk directly to Democrats about what it's going to take for us to win—and why it's so important for us to do so" (Kicking Ass, 2004). Frequently, the "about" section is informative as to writer intent and/or interest. Blog messages are used to serve another social function. They provide insight into social acceptability. Messages are used like trial balloons to see how ideas and the language expressing them are received and how people react to them. Technorati (2004) includes a section called "Election Watch 2004," which gives a constant tracking of attention given to political Web sites and journalists. In this way, journalists, political junkies, and strategists can

monitor blogs to determine the shelf life of a story, any rebuttal to the facts being offered, and interest level of the stories. But two other features are important as well. A blog can help strategists gain insight into how interested people are in talking about an issue and the stickiness of the message itself. Political talk is often about buzz (Cornfield & Rainie, 2003)—the increase of chatter related to a topic or story. A sticky message is one that has staying power, seems to adhere to various conversations, and takes a shelf life of its own. Such issues are finished only when bloggers tire of them, which may be far longer or shorter than traditional media outlets.

Thoughts can be influenced if the reader chooses to consider outside opinions. Readers can be exposed to both popular and analytic thinkers of the day as they convey their assessment of some motivating event. For communication scholars and political strategists, being able to assess the incendiary moment that compels speech is instructive. Commentators in campaign 2004 range from folk-wisdom PBS icons like Garrison Keillor to more sagacious figures like Gore Vidal or Harold Bloom. Either through individual posts or interviews, they add their analysis to the assessment of campaign 2004. For those seeking more in-depth analysis, the blogosphere permits the development of an argument. In the soundbite culture (Whillock & Slayden) that dominates radio/television coverage and translates into a diminutive news hole for print, think pieces find their space.

As a social measure, blogs permit a rather quick assessment to speech due to the quick response of the reader. Longer think pieces are often followed by bursts of emphatic sentences and bold-faced declarations. More often than not, such responses are more tirades than argumentative retorts. Often, the responder *fisks* another person's thoughts. A fisk is the "dismemberment of a piece of text with close analytical reading" (Packer, 2004, p. 2). The term is a slap at British war correspondent Robert Fisk whose anti-American reporting was so inaccurate, according to bloggers, that the verb *fisk* is to take an argument apart point by point.

As in previous eras where oral cultures necessitated the presence of others, blogs are social in nature. Typically, blogs cluster around ideas. Blog watchers in the 2004 election can readily identify those who are liberal, conservative, or libertarian. As in 18th-century journalism, blogs are often the province of the political parties and candidates themselves. In dispute is whether it is the idea or the emotional connection toward ideas that bonds bloggers. One blogger argued the point this way:

> Jay Rosen, I think it was, suggested, "Blogging isn't Journalism." This gives blogging a lot more freedom, in fact: It gives us the ability to inject authenticity, (and its twin daughters of emotionality and bias) into what we cover. But at the same time, it brings politics back to a human level. This—more so, I think, than community organization, is the key to an invigoration of alienated people back into the political system. (Stoller, 2004a)

Inherently, good blogs demand response. Weak ones die for lack of a response.

Organizing Through Blogs

By the late 1990s, blogs started to proliferate along with blog building tools and blog lists (Blood, 2005). Three markers of blog-speech are important for organizing groups. First, blog-speech is short and emotive. The style of blog communication has its roots in the journalistic tradition. Typically, blogs are written in headlines style, and like headlines, readers are often drawn to explore a story based on it. Yet one significant difference in the style of journalists and the blogger is the emotive quality:

> Big Media does "human interest" stories—but this is mere sensationalism. There remains the essential failure to connect politics to the human, to us; a failure to tell us why and in what ways any of it matters to us. Blogs take up this important slack. (Stoller, 2004b)

The authenticity of voice certainly applies to journalism as well. In an abrupt departure from traditional readership, the *Chicago Tribune* discovered that during the Democratic convention more readers turned to its blogs than to its news stories (The Media Center, 2004). Although often from traditional journalistic sources, there is something about the blog voice that says that it is not a corporate voice. It is the difference between appealing to an interactive public rather than a passive audience. As an organizing tool, it excites people around messages and encourages response.

A second marker for organizing is the use of blogs as a motivational tool. Blogging was first used as a motivational tool to encourage supporter involvement. In the Howard Dean primary campaign, the Internet and accompanying blog were staple sources of information for Deaniacs. The person who led this movement, Zephyr Teachout, believed that people wanted to become engaged. Clearly, she was correct. By the time the fall 2003 campaign was ramping up, there were 30,000 visitors a day to the Dean Weblog (Weiss, 2003). Resultantly, Teachout reached a people who have only brief moments of time they can follow politics and often do it from their desks.

A key measure of success is the visibility of the blog. Success is determined by the number of hits a blog site receives and the return visits it generates. The prose is not only less formal, but the responses are reminiscent of heated conversations. Described by *Vanity Fair* writer James Wolcott (2004), blogs are about "thinking and linking" (p. 146).

Campaigns quickly adopted motivational tools to solicit active participation. Many people were prevented from involvement because of the brevity of time they had to commit and the necessity of participating in a different way: from the comfort of their computer desks. The use of blogs permitted such people to become engaged in a political movement through stops and starts in time.

It is important to note that motivations are sometimes inspired by an imposed bandwagon device. Sophisticated manipulation techniques permit the distortion of hits through Really Simple Syndication feeds.

> Really Simple Syndication (RSS) is a lightweight XML format designed for sharing headlines and other Web content. Think of it as a distributable "What's New" for your site. Originated by UserLand in 1997 and subsequently used by Netscape to fill channels

for Netcenter, RSS has evolved into a popular means of sharing content between sites (including the BBC, CNET, CNN, Disney, Forbes, Motley Fool, Wired, Red Herring, Salon, Slashdot, ZDNet, and more). (*Introduction to RSS*, 2003)

As a motivational tool, the bandwagon technique can be strategically applied to campaigns. The user, as with all campaign communication, must be the one who determines the veracity of the message.

A third marker of blogs is as a participatory outlet. Perhaps one reason for the rise in blog participation was the decline of Internet interactivity in 2004. The Project for Excellence in Journalism (2004) study claimed, "No sites studies this year offered anywhere near as many interactive opportunities as we found in 2000." Blogs do more than merely permit participants to interact, often they are part of story creation. Larry Lessig, professor of law at Stanford Law School and founder of the school's Center for Internet and Society, notes, "There will be a change that comes from the fact that people are participating in the construction of the political story around them. That in my view will be the most important political event in the last hundred years" (as cited in Lydon, 2003). That is the conclusion of Christopher Lydon in his opening commentary for *The Blogging of the President: 2004*. Lydon argued that a *New York Times* story got it wrong when they reported that the Dean campaign used new Internet tools to capture Internetizens: "nary a hint of the more plausible counter-story: that free citizens online drafted Howard Dean and are carrying him like a hood ornament on their campaign" (www.bloggingofthepresident.com).

Participation has its rewards: Bloggers stay on the Web site longer when they blog. "Though only 10 percent of visitors to Kerry's site check out the blog,' Bell [blogmeister for the Kerry campaign] said, 'those people tend to linger longer'" ("Web Journals," 2004). With longer pass-through, the campaigns have the ability to influence readers by exposing them to additional information. But for all the hype, people enjoy the act of participation.

Campaign supporters, desiring a mission of importance, can be tasked with weighing in on blog discussions. Kerry's Web master (or more familiarly called blogmeister) Dick Bell was successful in getting staffers and volunteers to do just that during the New Hampshire primary, thus providing a response to attacks and a proactive positioning on the issues.

Using blogs, campaigns have the ability to glean good ideas from supporters. In Dean's Blog for America (2004) site, this comment supports the claim:

The blog is also a spirited forum for political discussion, and the hub of the Democracy for America online community. 24 hours a day, people from all across the country—and the world—are debating, organizing, arguing, joking, and bringing innovative ideas to our organization.

Equally compelling is that strategists who study key reporters' sites get the opportunity to craft messages specifically targeted to their interests and styles. For campaigns,

this can mean granting the "scoop" to a reporter whose readership is in line with the campaign's target public. Similarly, it helps campaign spokespersons become information sources for reporters instead of flaks.

Civic, Participatory Journalism

Balnaves, Mayrhofer, and Shoesmith (2004) found blogs are a new form of participatory media that bypasses traditional gatekeepers and allow more individuals into public discourse. Some might consider blogs a new form of participatory journalism. Although the content and purpose may vary, the online diaries have allowed for collaborative discussion on topics from politics to sports.

> Weblogs fall into the one-to-many (individual blogs) or many-to-many (group blogs) model of media, with some allowing no or little discussion by users and others generating robust reader response. Either way, the weblogs inevitably become part of what is now called the "blogosphere" . . . the linking to and discussion of what others have written or linked to, in essence a distributed discussion. (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p. 23)

Communication channels such as blogs have created a forum for discourse on politics and other public affairs topics salient to users not necessarily affiliated with traditional journalism organizations (Cohen, 2002). To call blogs "independent media" would be inappropriate, "but clearly their editors [are] engaged in seeking out and evaluating the 'facts' that are presented to us each day" (Blood, 2005, p. 130).

Another way researchers assess the impact of blogs focuses specifically on the impact on traditional journalism coverage in print or broadcast (Boczkowski, 1999; Cohen, 2002; Mattheson, 2004). Blogs present a new context for understanding the role between journalists and their audiences in which the latter has the potential to become more involved, interactive, and a producer and not just consumer of information (Mattheson, 2004). The electronic diaries are a challenge for journalism because of the new options such as hyperlinks, synchronous activity, and immediacy. "The line between journalism and other forms is blurred by the many news-related weblogs maintained by people who are not employed as journalists" (Mattheson, 2004, p. 449).

Still another yet decidedly similar approach is to assess the way traditional journalistic outlets embrace blog tools. Many traditional media with a Web presence have made blogs a part of their package.

For journalists, blogs are another of the many "informants" that lead to story ideas. Blogging academics such as University of Tennessee Professor Glenn Reynolds host widely referenced blog sites. Reynolds, who teaches constitutional law and the Internet, developed his political blog in 2001 (Smolkin, 2004). Named instatpundit.com, this blog site is ranked third in terms of user hits (Blogrolling.com, 2004). On November 4, 2004, Blogger.com cited Reynolds's site as the third most referenced site that day. During the 2004 election, journalists routinely browsed this and other sites for story insight.

Conclusions

A pertinent question is whether blogging has changed political discourse. The answer is not yet clear, but some researchers have found it has changed how some people think about politics and provided a new channel of communication (Glaser, 2004). For example, political bloggers have demonstrated influence when they focused attention on House Speaker Trent Lott's racial comments (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Keren (2004) studied 5 years of posting for one blogger to try and develop hypotheses about the politics of blogging.

Similarly, *The Sacramento Bee* newspaper columnist Daniel Weintraub (2003) watched his political blog expand and increase interactivity with others during a particularly heated political debate. Discussion leading to the recall of California Governor Gray Davis was a leading topic of Weintraub's blog, a movement that gained momentum in posts to his blog that paralleled the rising groundswell movement among the population.

As with the introduction of any new media device, many campaigns used them without knowing what specific communication function they could serve. Some campaigns used them because it is considered hip, whereas others used them strategically or not at all.

Clearly, blogs are not the ideal tool for either political reporting or historical analysis. Blogs did not proportionally increase the way Americans access the Internet for information. In 2004, a mere 13% of Americans got their political news from the Internet (Packer, 2004). Presumably, an even smaller number of those got their information from bloggers, although to date no study has demonstrated the exact proportions.

Currently, the blogosphere resembles an echo chamber. Messages go in and rattle around far longer than a news story in the more traditional news outlets. The shelf life of a story is expanded in part due to the fact that people may become aware of it and feel compelled to comment at differing times. Even though there is a high repetitive content to the issues and themes, observers can assess the effectiveness of certain arguments and their persuasive power while simultaneously monitoring those that fade away when viewed in light of public scrutiny. The most useful use of blogs in Election 2004 was as a journalistic device.

The blogosphere itself is not sufficient to tell the story. In 2004, news stories still required magnification and credibility brought by the major news media. Furthermore, people who tried to cover the election through their blogs did little better (if any) than the journalists they mimicked. "Blogs remain private, written in the language and tone of knowingness, insider shorthand, instant mastery. Read them enough and any subject will go dead" (Packer, 2004, p. 4).

A key question for future researchers is Internet preservation of blog documents. Although there is little doubt that the running commentary of this election will be of inestimable value as documentation for future historians, there is substantive doubt of how such documents will be catalogued and preserved for future use. The British Library is one of the few organizations seeking to preserve these documents (see e.g.,

Cornwell, 2004). Questions will certainly arise in the future concerning ownership rights when some future scholar uses these documents in a profit-making venture. For now, the history will be written by insiders. Hopefully, they will enlighten the communication field by providing insight into what they tried, what worked, and what failed. At that point, we will be able to draw more realistic conclusions about the potential use and value of this emerging technique.

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