

Blogs and the New Politics of Listening

STEPHEN COLEMAN

A relentless desire to reconnect with the public—or even to connect for the very first time with them—has become a contemporary preoccupation of the political elite. Everywhere technologies, techniques and styles—from e-voting to candidate selection via reality TV to MPs wearing open-necked shirts—are being employed to generate circuits of connectivity, porousness, recognition and sympathy between rulers and ruled, representatives and represented, the remote Them and the disenchartered Us.

The impetus for this urge is, on the one hand, the demise of duty-driven political participation, so that the public is voting, joining, spectating and trusting the political process less than ever before, and on the other hand, the rise of reflexive and affective, rather than simply obligatory and instrumental, constructions of identity and citizenship.

Politicians' wish to connect has more to do with adaptive self-preservation than any desire to hang out with the plebs. With the rise of mass consumerism, the decline of deference and the emergence of permissiveness, Britain has become a more hands-on culture. Designers are less preoccupied by boundary walls and increasingly interested in notions of interactivity. Emblematic of the new enthusiasm for interactivity are supermarkets and hypermarkets which have eradicated the barrier of the counter and offer people direct access to retail merchandise, mediated only by the cash nexus and manipulative constructions of mass taste. Supermarkets are sites of sophisticated control within which the goods on offer can be touched and the consumers seduced by techniques ranging from

background muzak to inescapable displays. Supermarkets appear to offer unmediated experiences, but in reality what the customers can see and touch and how they are themselves seen and touched is determined by well-orchestrated production.

As with the supermarket, so with the museum, the schoolroom, the leisure centre and the radio phone-in. All of these have become in recent years more interactive spaces, appearing to democratise hitherto disciplinary relationships between providers and receivers, but often exposing 'users' to patterns of mediated interaction in which outcomes are both more predictable for those in authority and more palatable for the governed. As Andrew Barry has astutely observed, 'Whereas discipline is direct and authoritative, interactivity is intended to turn the user . . . into a more creative, participative or active subject *without* the imposition of a direct form of control or the judgement of an expert authority.'¹

In this age of interactive relationships, the state lags behind. The polling station, the council chamber and the courtroom are characterised by conspicuous regulation, enforced silences and mysterious spaces of exclusion. State buildings are not designed to make subjects feel free and in control. Whereas the market thrives on the illusion that customers are sovereign, the state has never quite managed to throw off the illusion that citizens are its subjects. The state is remarkably insensitive in its encounters with citizens. For politicians, bureaucrats and political scientists what matters is 'who gets what, when and how'.² The political fixation upon the strategic

pursuit of interests reduces political participation to such parsimonious instrumentalism that it attracts ever-diminishing numbers of the dutiful (and elderly) and the obsessed (and unrepresentative.) Dealings with the state are confined to the remote and impersonal communication of demands and complaints. As for the wider sphere of state-citizen relations (voting, joining parties, attending public meetings, responding to policy consultations), non-participation has become the public's default position. Above all, citizens complain that politicians do not listen to them. The old media, and the old politics, are dominated by the images of the unacknowledged citizen and the unhearing representative. Politicians are under greater pressure than ever to be seen as listeners. As one stated, in response to the Fabian Society's 'Just Listening' project in which a dozen Labour MPs conducted listening sessions at various venues around the country, 'All politicians, myself included, can easily fall into a default mode of talking at people with answers for everything. It is a very useful discipline for us to be forced to sit, listen and take in what is being said' (Andy Burnham MP). But are there more modern and sophisticated techniques of hearing the public than simply sitting in a hall with a group of self-selected citizens?

The rise of the political blog

Two years ago few people had heard of blogs. A blog (short for 'web log') is a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal (or log) for an individual. Blogs tend to be updated daily, providing an ongoing account of the beliefs, discoveries and personality of the author. Blog software allows bloggers to archive their past entries so that they are searchable and to link any entry to any other material, both in other blogs or elsewhere on the web. So, blogs become a form of networked expression; an

ongoing experiment in the social production of reflection and knowledge. (The screenshots are examples of the wide variety of blogs that can be found online.)

Blogs are fast becoming sophisticated listening posts of modern democracy. To blog is to declare your presence; to disclose to the world that you exist and what it's like to be you; to affirm that your thoughts are at least as worth hearing as anyone else's; to emerge from the spectating audience as a player and maker of meanings. If sitting at home and voting anonymously in endless populist plebiscites is not what democracy needs, blogging is a source of nourishment for a kind of democracy in which everyone's account counts.

The most transformative impact of blogging is upon journalism. Journalists are increasingly setting up their own blogs in order to tell the stories that are filed but not used, collect information from their readers and audiences, and promote activism around issues that concern them. Not only professional journalists, but a new breed of citizen-reporters, utilising mobile-phone cameras and discrete networks of intelligence, are breaking down the old dichotomy between message-sender and message-receiver.

As ever, where journalists lead, politicians follow, in an attempt to present themselves to the public as 'real' people. In the UK, a few MPs such as Tom Watson, Richard Allan, Clive Soley and Boris Johnson have active blogs. In the United States, politicians compete with one another to use blogs as effectively as Howard Dean did in his early campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Politicians, who are used to shouting through megaphones and broadcasting through microphones, will not find it easy to adjust to a communicative ecology where the stage belongs to everybody. The main democratic role of politicians in liberal democracies is to represent citizens who are prevented by a variety of barriers (time, distance,

competence, interest) from speaking for themselves. To represent is to claim knowledge about what the represented need, want and value. The ways of obtaining such knowledge are crude. Politicians claim legitimacy through elections in which voters are asked to opt for a broad package of often disparate policies. Between elections they rely on opinion polling, which provides a snapshot of public thinking, ignorance or prejudice. And they spend time talking to their constituents with a view to sensing the public mood and cultivating trust in their capacity to reflect it.

The rhetoric of representation is based upon the implicit claim that 'We know who you are and what you need—often better than you know it yourselves.' Politicians are needed because of the dispersed, disaggregated character of the

public, which only expresses itself as a collectivity through representation.

The increasingly accepted notion that the personal is political challenges the belief that experience is only politically significant if it can be represented as a collective interest. As people have adopted more personalised conceptions of political life, greater significance has been attached to narrative testimony, dramatic enactment and public conversation as forms of political self-presentation. Many recent debates around the politics of gender, ethnicity and youth have been conducted more through informal self-presentation than official representation. Traditional politics has tended to follow, sometimes quite slowly, behind these movements of public self-expression.

MPs' web sites are a good example of the representative claim. They are

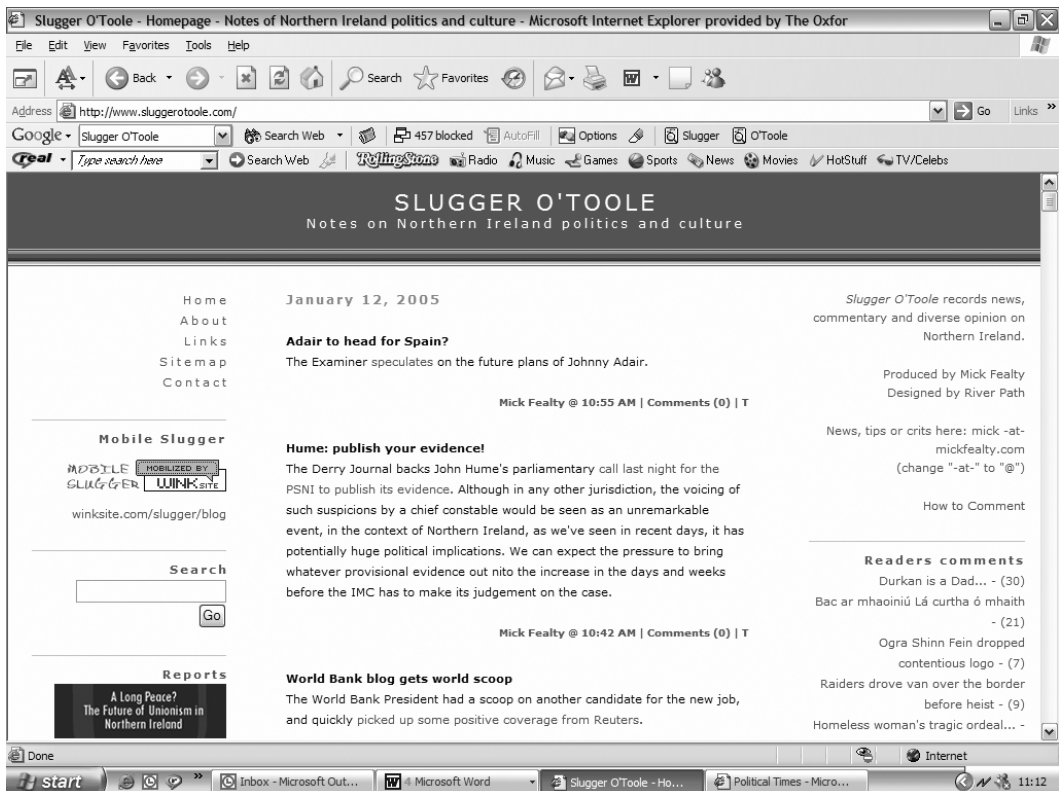
Richard Allan (LibDem MP for Sheffield Hallam) has one of the few lively and regularly updated politicians' blogs.

dominated by three main messages: 'This is me and this is why you should trust me. This is how hard I've been working in your interests. Come to me if you're in trouble because I can speak up for you.' They belong to a discourse in which politics is about being spoken for and looked after.

As vehicles for self-presentation, blogs diminish people's need to be spoken for by others. So, journalists can reflect on their stories without checking them with editors; civil servants can contemplate policy without having to follow traditional bureaucratic paths; and civilians about to be bombed (such as the Baghdad blogger, Salam Pax) can express what it feels like to be opposed to a dictatorship as well as opposed to an invasion. At their best, blogs provide a channel for authentic expression that is free from

the repressive controls of traditional media. That is why blogs have become a key source of information and analysis for people who prefer to trust their own judgement rather than depend upon the spin, censorship and narrow agenda of the usual sources.

The problem facing politicians who blog is that they are professionally implicated in the very culture that blogging seeks to transcend. Politicians live in a world of certainty and tribal loyalty which is at odds with the blogging ethos of open-mindedness and knowledge-sharing. As long as politicians are expected to be never in doubt and ever faithful to catechismic party messages, their blogging efforts are always likely to look more like simulation than authentic self-expression. However many jokes they tell or safe vulnerabilities they



Sluggie O'Toole's blog on Northern Irish politics is as good a source of informed commentary as can be found in any newspaper.

expose, the public will never relax in their company and will be ever suspicious that today's 'spontaneous' blog entry was yesterday's faxed 'message' from the party HQ. Blogging politicians are always going to be seen as a little bit like those old Communist apparatchiks who had to sit in the front row at rock concerts and pretend to swing to the beat.

This criticism applies to politicians as we have come to know them, not blogging as we have come to know it. If political representation were to become more direct, with the once-every-four-years mandate replaced by an ongoing, conversational relationship between representatives and represented, blogs could become valuable sites of democratic interaction. To the very limited extent that there are signs of this greater communicative directness and accessibility in existing politicians' blogs, it could be argued that we are witnessing the emergence of a new democratic relationship.

The structural transformation of the blogosphere

The main political value of blogging is not to be found in politicians presenting themselves to an audience of potential voters, but in the dense networks of intellectual and symbolic intercourse involving millions of private-public bloggers. The blogosphere is characterised by three democratising characteristics. Firstly, it provides a bridge between the private, subjective sphere of self-expression and the socially fragile civic sphere in which publics can form and act. As democracy becomes more sensitive to affective dimensions, attention is paid to a revalued recognition of subjective and intersubjective articulations. As several commentators have observed, it is often within the safety of private or familiar environments that people feel most able to speak as citizens.³ By allowing people

to both interact with others and remain as private individuals, blogs provide an important escape route from the 'if you don't come to the meeting, you can't have anything to say' mentality.

Secondly, blogs allow people—indeed, expect them—to express incomplete thoughts. This terrain of intellectual evolution, vulnerability and search for confirmation or refutation from wider sources is in marked contrast to the crude certainties that dominate so much of political discourse. As Mortensen and Walker have explained,

We post to our blogs as ideas come to us. Daily, hourly, weekly; The frequency varies, but it is a writing that happens in bits and pieces, not in the long hours of thought that suit the clichéd image of the secluded scholar in the ivory tower. In this sense blogs are suited to the short attention span of our time that worries so many traditionalists. Blogs are interstitial for the writer as for the reader.⁴

Thirdly, blogs lower the threshold of entry to the global debate for traditionally unheard or marginalised voices, particularly from poorer parts of the world which are too often represented by others, without being given a chance to present their own accounts. Blogs such as the South Korean Ohmy News (<http://www.ohmynews.com/>) and Blog Africa (<http://blogafrica.com/>) are refreshing additions to a global debate in which contributors have tended to be better at speaking for than listening to the world's least privileged. In Iran blogging has become the sphere of opposition debate. As Hossein Derakhshan, whose *Editor: Myself* (<http://hoder.com/weblog/>) blog is one of the most widely respected sources of Iranian political commentary, has observed,

Weblogs have functioned in numerous ways for different parts of Iranian internet users:

- They have provided first-hand reports from several events such as students protests;

- they have helped young people find new dates or know more about potential dates, in lack of legitimate dating services;
- they have helped parents to get to know more about their children's values and norms;
- they have provided Iranian immigrants outside of Iran with first-hand information about the new and unofficial Iran (new values, new lifestyle, new slang etc.);
- some of well-known webloggers have been hired by newspaper publishers to write for them, something they had never had a chance;
- they have attracted several of top officials and politicians as their regular reader, in some cases they have commented on some posts in some weblogs;
- they have popularized the concept and use of utf-8 standard as the ultimate standard for putting Persian texts on the Net;
- they have hugely increased the total volume of searchable Persian content on the Internet, both directly by their own content, and indirectly by popularizing the idea of full utf-8-friendly Persian websites;
- they have shifted the attention of many young users from chat-rooms toward reading and writing weblogs;
- they have encouraged a number of groups of webloggers to gather and publish e-zines (such as *Cappuccino*, a weekly e-zine with more than 50,000 visitors per month) based on their experiences as webloggers.

(<http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/006659.html>)

It is as channels of honest self-presentation that blogs make their greatest contribution to democracy. If Walter Cronkite's famous sign-off 'That's the way it is' was the dictum of the world of media-represented factual certainties, 'That's the way I am' is the dictum of a self-expressive culture where truth emerges in fragmented, subjective, incomplete and contestable ways.

Realising a marketplace of ideas?

For democracies to operate efficiently there must be means of aggregating the

vast array of individual self-expressions into a coherent, albeit pluralistically constructed, 'public voice'. Nobody, however open-minded or motivated by democratic values, can have the time or interest to read hundreds of thousands of daily-evolving blogs. This problem of communicative scale is often addressed in two ways that are undermining to democracy. Firstly, there are the phenomena of social herding and group polarisation, whereby people cluster around sources of information and channels of communication that support their values and prejudices.⁵ British newspaper reading is a good example of this: people choose newspapers more to reinforce than to shape or challenge their beliefs. The more they read, the more certain they become that social reality is as they believe it to be—and that this reality is shared by a wider readership which comes to represent 'the public'. Likewise, a person with set views about, say, the right to hunt foxes is likely to select web sites and blogs produced by others of a like mind and use these to reinforce his or her repertoire of 'sure facts'.

A second response to the problem of communicative scale is to only seek information from prestigious sources with established reputations. This is the information-seeking equivalent of only ever eating in restaurants one has eaten in before—a recipe for incurious conservatism. MPs' blogs could be beneficiaries of this approach, but this would be at the cost of crowding out all the new and unexpected voices that a lowered entry threshold to the sphere of public communication could be making available to us.

Both of these responses to the genuine difficulty of 'listening to everyone' constitute a serious challenge to the liberal notion of 'the marketplace of ideas'. According to the central metaphor of contemporary democracy, the process of seeking and adopting ideas should be as free and extensive as the economic

process of shopping in a competitive marketplace. In fact, markets are never quite as free as they are depicted in economic theory, and the promotion of ideas in actually existing democracies is always constrained by resource as well as culturally symbolic inequalities. Nonetheless, the idea of the marketplace of ideas is attractive, suggesting as it does the liberal-minded ideal of deliberative rather than narrow, self-interested opinion formation.

Just as representatives exist to aggregate the interests, preferences and values of diverse, represented publics, the democratic potential of blogging is likely to be realised through techniques of aggregation rather than simply via millions of unique acts of self-expression. At the MIT Media Laboratory a project called Blogdex has been devised to index the most popular hypertext links between vast numbers of blogs:

Blogdex uses the links made by webbloggers as a proxy to the things they are talking about. Webbloggers typically contextualize their writing with hypertext links which act as markers for the subjects they are discussing. These markers are like tags placed on wild animals, allowing Blogdex to track a piece of conversation as it moves from weblog to weblog.

Blogdex crawls all of the weblogs in its database every time they are updated and collects the links that have been made since the last time it was updated. The system then looks across all weblogs and generates a list of fastest spreading ideas. This is the list shown on the front page. For each of these links, further detail is provided as to where the link was found, and at what time.

(<http://blogdex.net/about.asp>)

Other, similar projects have been set up to survey, categorise and extract thematically related data from blogs. For example, London Bloggers (<http://londonbloggers.iamcal.com/>) plots blogs on to the London tube map, so that one can click on to a tube station and find out blogs being produced in that area. Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com/cosmos/>

[breakingnews.html](#)) crawls through blogs and registers the most talked about news stories and related conversations in the past twelve hours.

Such meta-blogging techniques, which hover on the borderline of surveillance, but provide an important service for democratic accountability and aggregation, may well turn out to be of greater long-term political importance than the production of individual blogs. But they also open possibilities for manipulative practices, already being used in e-commerce.⁶

Blogs as democratic tools

The democratic potential that blogging represents is not historically new. There is a battle for the soul of the internet, just as there has been for every previous new communication medium from the printing press to radio. There have always been those who have seen new media as a way of strengthening existing relationships of power, and others who regard them as a means of giving voice to the unheard and power to those outside the political elite. The radical potentiality of print was played out dramatically in the pamphlet wars before and during the English Civil War of the seventeenth century. After the restoration of monarchy and the old order in the 1660s, licensing, and later taxation, served to preserve communicative power in the hands of an elite. Likewise with early radio, which began to be used as a medium of interpersonal communication, as well as by non-government organisations, before broadcast monopolies were enforced in the mid-1920s.⁷

From its emergence as a public network in the mid-1990s, the internet has been a contested site. There are those who have wanted the net to become one grand, global shopping mall; who have been desperate to regulate and tax online activity; and who have sought to make money out of a range of questionable

merchandise from shabby cyber-porn to insecure e-voting software. On the other side have been individual users who have produced their own websites, virtual communities, open-source software and a range of gatekeeper-free content. If there are democratic claims to be made for the internet, their realisation is closely linked to the capacity of ordinary people to enter, shape and govern it to a greater extent than with any previous communication medium. It is as an extension of media freedom that blogging should be taken seriously.

Notes

- 1 Andrew Barry, *Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society*, London, Athlone Press, 2001, p. 149.
- 2 Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*, New York, 1936.
- 3 Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*, Cambridge, 1998; William Gamson, *Talking Politics*, Cambridge, 1992.
- 4 Torill Mortensen and Jill Walker, 'Blogging thoughts: personal publication as an online research tool', in Andrew Morrison, ed., *Researching ICTs in Context*, InterMedia Report, 3, Oslo, 2002.
- 5 Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com*, Princeton, 2001.
- 6 Chrysanthos Dellarocas, *Strategic Manipulation of Internet Opinion Forums: Implications for Consumers and Firms*, MIT Working Paper, 2004, <http://ccs.mit.edu/dell/papers/onlineopinionforums.pdf>
- 7 Lesley Johnson, *The Unseen Voice: A Cultural History of Early Australian Radio*, London, Routledge, 1998.