e-Citizens : Blogging as Democratic Practice

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Abstract: Bloggers are able to publish political commentary online, without having to deal with traditional media gatekeepers, such as news editors and other media professionals. Networked blogging is impacting on political life as individual politicians and citizen-journalists go online in the newest media genre. The *blogosphere* helps construct citizen-users' democratic literacies and participation in new ways. Using a governmental framework and selected examples, I analyze the generic features of the political *blog*, and the nature of the relationships and capacities formed by the personal modes of address in specific virtual publics. Blogs are obviously more than ways of "preaching to the choir" (Lenhart, qtd in AFP, 2003) … but what is the nature of the e-governance work they are doing?

Keywords: Blogs, democratic literacies, participation, governmentality, political marketing

1. Blogs: a promising new media form for democracy?

> *It has taken 10 years of talk about "new media" for a critical mass to understand that every computer desktop, and now every pocket, is a worldwide printing press, broadcasting station, place of assembly, and organizing tool – and to learn how to use that infrastructure to affect change.* (*InTheseTimes, 28/10/03*)

I want to unpack Howard Rheingold's statement as a preface to my argument about both the positive, and potentially negative, ways in which politicians, those seeking to be elected, and others not directly involved in representative work, have taken so readily to the weblog form. My questions are about the kind of changes being effected by people's rapid adoption of new forms of online mobilisation and address, and whether particular political weblogs are being used as tools for increasing participation, engaging constituencies, creating publics, and mobilising citizens or, on the other hand, for the political marketing of a personality. If a politician's blog serves the first four aims, for example, then a new media form has been successfully adapted to do democratic work. If it serves the fifth, or even if there are elements of "me-media" approaches to customising and individuating interactions between representatives and citizens, then it is possible that this use will merely compound a growing cynicism about elected representatives and democratic processes. The blog's routine uses of personalised information and the daily discipline of writing a journal of activities on the part of the representative can be seen as a means of governing the relationships of citizens and representatives. If blogs are changing the way a critical democratic mass interacts, and possibly re-establishing or creating democratic literacies, how is this happening specifically?

1.1 The blogosphere and politics

To anyone with an interest in new media and political communications, one of the most note-worthy features of the media coverage of news from the July , 2004 U.S. Democratic Convention was the inclusion of references to weblogs, the mainstreaming of weblog commentary, and the growing perception that blogs have colonised the political news environment. Not only are there now thousands of blogs from the left of politics, we are told, but Republican party supporters are countering strongly with anti-Kerry blogs. These phenomenon would not be news to bloggers, many of whom have been operating for years in the borderless online field of networked personal journals known as the blogosphere.

It is easy to see why political marketers see the blogosphere as a ready made audience ripe for targeted political address. The size, scale and enthusiasm of participant audiences are potentially huge, e-literate and already interested in politics. Yet to see the participants simply in this way is to misunderstand the phenomenon. It is a space of writers and publishers. According to the early bloggers who experimented and tried to archive the

exploding blogging phenomenon (see *the page of only weblogs*) – and to those who wrote short histories of blogging (see *Rebecca's Blog*) – bloggers began listing their sites with each other in the late nineties. They were surprised by the exponential growth of weblogs, and wanted to track a new popular use of online connectivity. It was harder than they thought. Individual bloggers quickly gave up large-scale tracking after two or three years and, while remaining interested in how their individual blog ranks (for example, on the ranking site of a left-wing journalism node, such as salon.com) and in how many others are linking to their site, now leave it to search sites dedicated to such work. Apart from the raw hit counting, ranking and the trailing of links (see the blog indexing sites *Blogdex* and *Technorati*), attempts have also been made to represent how the *blogosphere* works when shifting news around (see, for example, Stephen VanDyke's 'infographic' – a visual representation of web interaction which drew 47 detailed comments from bloggers and pundits posted over the next three days – and was sent onto lists like Steven Clift's democracy online forum *do-wire*).

All this activity exemplifies the point that the *blogosphere* is thought of – both by bloggers and others – as a network of individual websites in complex and layered relations both with each other, and with the main mass media in its more traditional offline and online forms. These relationships are reworked or renewed on a daily basis. Some commentators , e.g., Glenn Reynolds of *Instapundit*, the most read weblog on the internet with about 100,000 daily hits, links weblogs to the other non-"public" forms of web connectivity such as email and forums and calls this the "dark matter" of the internet. In an article for *Wired* he acknowledges the "stringers" who supply him with material which is not being published elsewhere (Reynolds, 2004). The magical attractions of the blog are its reach, its capacity to go round media gatekeepers and the ability to create a sense of community of users privileged to write and read what is not being published elsewhere – yet.

The popularity of form itself, the various diverse connectivities which it creates, and the capacity to function alongside, and apart from, what calls the "colonising" mass media (Meyer, 2002) are all features which have encouraged political commentators to see blogging as a welcome addition to democratic debate.

A good example of the creation of this "democratic space" is *Watchblog* which brings together a multi-edited site where equal space is given to three main trajectories of US political thought - Democrats, Republicans and Third Party - and where the slogan on each column reads "Critique the message and not the messenger", indicating the blog's commitment to argument and reasoned dissent. Blogs are seen as providing a sphere in which citizens may reflect and, in that deliberative process, become empowered. A comment from an early blogger exemplifies this view:

> *We are being pummeled (sic) by a deluge of data and unless we create time and spaces in which to reflect, we will be left only with our reactions. I strongly believe in the power of weblogs to transform both writers and readers from "audience" to "public" and from "consumer" to "creator." Weblogs are no panacea for the crippling effects of a media-saturated culture, but I believe they are one antidote.* (Rebecca's Blog September 2000.)

While there's no doubting the scale of participation in the blogosphere or its democratic potential, the personalising features of the blog seem to give support to the idea that new media is individuating citizens or causing small like-minded groups to form around a blog resulting in the phenomenon called "preaching to the choir." A brief account of a famous and exemplary personal blog follows to illustrate how the "about me" features of blog writing can reinforce the potency of political commentary and create a space for deliberation during times of national and international conflict. This is a site which demonstrates all the features which have made blogs popular : it is quirky, intimate and eccentric. Its owner rants and raves occasionally. The blog was widely read during the Iraq war.

2. *Salam Pax* : modelling the citizen reader/journalist in the personal space of the political blog

Firstly, some comments on the blog as a communication form. The online diary has evolved as a popular communicative and narrative genre: blogs are often concerned with the felt effects of small daily events. The most admired blogs are not only marked by the number of links to others in the *blogosphere* , as noted above, but sometimes by the scale of the exhibitionism and eccentricity.

How does personal blogging become a means of e-mobilisation? The personal "homepage," had been the first form of online self-publishing, and self-publicity. The composer or website owner took advantage of the new media potential to say whatever they wanted online. The early homepages could look very banal and confessional. They were often only "about me" in a way which made the most useful print media analogy the family album or memoir. Nevertheless they made the private, public, at a scale which could not have been achieved before and which suited the peer to peer connectivity of the internet.

Blogging really took off as a communication phenomenon when the compositional practice became networked, interactive and engaged with large scale political events. Most blogs still remain personal: owned and updated by individuals, linked to others according to the whims of their authors.

Redden et al in "Warblogging as critical social practice" argue that it was not until the aftermath of the events of September 11 that the blog both connected to, and in some cases supplanted, traditional media, and achieved a status as amateur journalism (Redden, 2003, 68-79). This is something which Rheingold had predicted would happen, just because the technology was there to allow it to happen.

During the second US war against Iraq and terrorism, blog activism became a force for media and politicians to reckon with when blogs rose to political prominence as providers of online samizdat. (*wikipedia*, the online collaborative dictionary, gives the literal translation of samizdat as "self-publish" but it can be read as "giving it among yourselves", or "passing it," a clandestine publishing of forbidden or dissident material.) Bloggers in the know published material which was not or could not be published elsewhere, reporting from places and perspectives which could not be accessed by western media. Blogs reconstruct the public/private nexus : they work from the premise that what is of interest to others is a highly individual perspective on the world, expressed in narrative forms where the 'real,' the expression of deep feelings, and the immediacy of changing contexts count as sound compositional techniques of address.

The war blog of the "Bagdad blogger", named Salam Pax to protect his anonymity – whose 2002-2003 weblog entries (dear_raed.blogspot.co) have since been printed as a paperback under the auspices of the *Guardian* newspaper in the UK – illustrates the convergences and ambiguities present in the narrative blog form, and a contribution to the formation of citizen literacies.
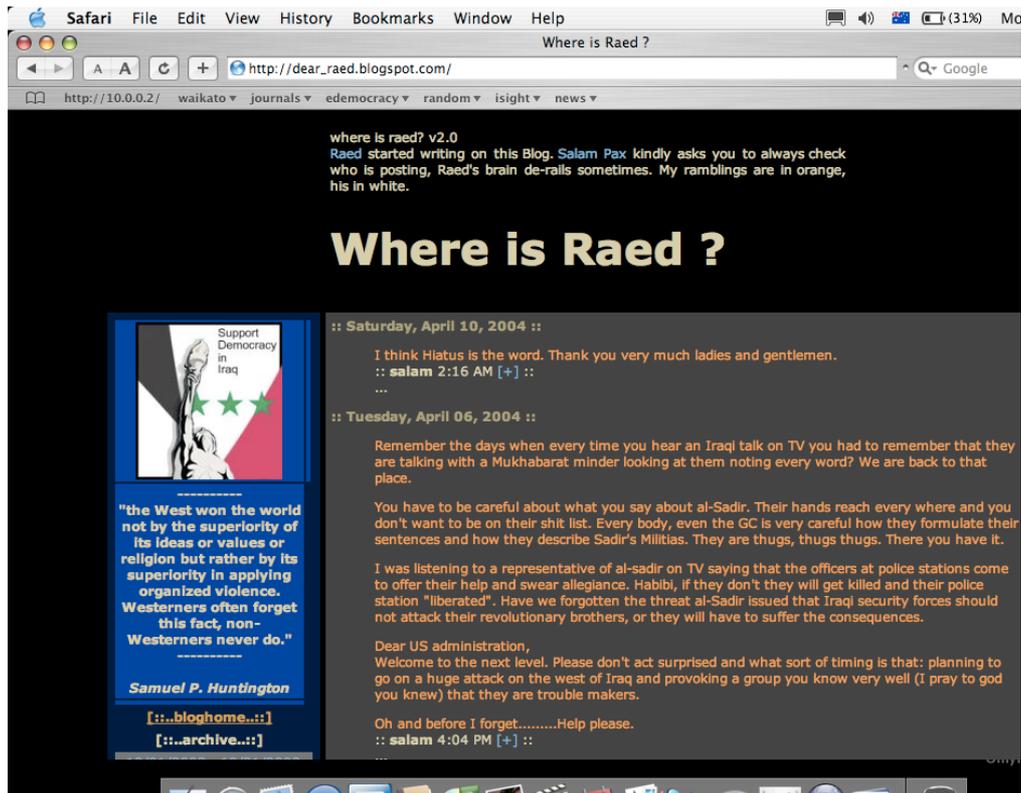
Salam Pax's war blog had "powerful , subversive appeal" for western readers according to Ian Katz's introduction to the paperback compilation (Katz, in Pax, x). Salam Pax appears in "dear-raed" as an Iraqi professional, working for an architectural firm, who is immersed in American culture and awaiting the arrival of US bombs. His family house, named the Hotel Pax, is over-full with relatives, some of whom are described to demonstrate the family's religious and political heterogeneity, thus preventing stereotypical responses from readers trained by mass media representations of cultural and religious difference. Salam waits for the war to begin, at first confidently and assertively, expressing his quirky personality in extreme rants against Saddam's regime, and against Bush's America. He writes in a lively and engaging way and, as his editor says, in "perfect idiomatic English." True to the blog form, the journal varies : it has longer pieces of description, short philosophical entries, outbursts, jokes and raves, expression of deep feelings, all mixed in with a raft of tantalising details of the young professional's everyday life and beliefs. Over the short war and its long aftermath, readers of the blog get to know about Salam. As his blog gains notoriety, he is subjected to US and Iraqi citizens'

disbelief, criticism, as well as support from bloggers round the globe. He expresses his fear because he offers successful samizdat and of being "passed along" in a dangerous way. He tries to eliminate the blog only to find later that *blogspot* does not delete its archives, on Saturday, 21 December, 2002, he writes to "Dear Raed" :

> *Just after deleting this blog, I told Diana that I wish there was another Iraqi blogger. I have done a sort of mental exercise on how that weblog would be.*
>
> *To start with it would be in Arabic and discuss as little as possible. If cornered , it would be very pro-Palestinian and pro-Saddam – just to be on the safe side. It would also be filled with quotations from the Koran and Hadith or maybe Um Kalthum songs. What I am trying to say is that most "western" readers wouldn't get it, because it would be so out of their cultural sphere.*
>
> *This mess I'm in really bothers me. With all my talk*

of anti-Americanism (is that the word?) I still make references to their culture, music and their movies. I got whacked for saying 'Fuck you'- I should just have said inachat khawatkum*, but no one would have understood. Just as most Iraqis don't understand what is being said by Americans. … This is not the dialogue of equals we dreamt about. (Pax, 54)*

Here the blog indicates the blogger's conceptualisation of his imagined audience and their capacities. One can infer his question: who would read the Iraqi blog, the one that he ironically imagines as a perfect Iraqi blog, except those already converted to a particular belief? Salam's audience is different – as his comments on their responses show. He will never meet them ; they belong to different kinds of collectivities and have different loyalties. Yet the daily nature of the blog means that, as Anderson noted about organic ideas on citizens and print culture during the rise of the nation-state, writer and readers share a "steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity" (Anderson, 1991, 31) which allows these citizens to be imagined in a kind of horizontal fellowship not, of course, of "the nation", but as a collective of people who are testing the limits of being forced to take up sometimes unwelcome positions by their governments. Blogging on the war from Sadam's location under the bombs, in terms that a Western educated net-savvy elite would find informative, empathise with and enjoy, can help anchor not only different attitudes to the war (expressed through his version of the reactions of family members), but particular capacities in the audience of blog-lurkers, and the composing pool of other bloggers.

In Foucauldian terms, the conduct of the blogger helps "govern" the conduct of others– in this case – their attitudes to the war and to "difference". It helps to mobilise both online pro-war and anti-war rhetoric in the West as readers challenge the authenticity of his Iraqi identity, and had to reorder stereotypical Orientalist assumptions about the Iraqi people. The blogger presents a voice, and body in cyberspace, less often heard in western reporting. His whole blog is "about me,"

but a "me" which presents an individual with the representative function of everyman. It provides the means to all Western war writers to link and reference to someone "over there." It raises the issue of the personal costs of regime change at the level of the individual household and the imposition, by force, of democracy: an issue of growing political importance in the U.S., especially as the body bags are still being brought "home" to the heartland which provides the military with its recruits.

The blog brings the strategy and statistics of the approach to war represented in White House and Downing St. briefings, and CNN reporting, down to the level of the rising price of water for families holed up in Bagdad. As Katz says, "He was just like us." (Pax, ix).

The literacies acquired by reading the blog are democratic and intercultural ones – and formed daily by a conjunction of shared and demonstrated media competencies, critiques and political knowledge.

As is the practice of most political bloggers, Salam regularly comments in detail on the inaccuracies of online reporting, and compares accounts of the same events by Western journalists, thus modelling the citizen-reader at the same time as the citizen-journalist. The blog provided a personalised space for reflection. Whether the reflection takes place *on the blog* itself, or is reflected in *the uses that people made of the blog*, it does not much matter. In this case, personalising and individuating responses to war occasioned the taking up of different political positions online, also later for different audiences when Salam's work was printed. Web archiving also makes the blog entries accessible, traceable and the information offered retrievable and free. It is of note that the site was kept online and sometimes hosted and assisted by other US bloggers during the war. (The BBC now offers an Arabic site carrying a translation of news stories   at http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/news/).

Democratic literacies – including the empowering capacity to accept and publish different views – are formed in

reading the bloggers' invitations to engage in debate about :

- an unmoderated non-government response to Coalition policy from an "enemy" citizen;
- corrections to media reportage, e.g., "THE GUARDIAN IS WRONG. Check your facts baby." (Pax, 66);
- posting oppositional responses;
- contentious issues such as the appropriate ways to oppose the war e.g., Salam's vitriol about the "human shields" (Pax,102-103);
- the witnessing and reporting of the behaviour of British and US troops in Iraq.

Salam Pax forces a collective "owning" of the war, even by those opposed to it, even if the blog is or was, as some online and offline commentators have continued to suggest, inauthentic.

3. "It's a whole new ball game" : empowering citizens and the campaign blog

As mentioned above, blogs have also allowed a reconceptualisation of the possibilities of political campaigning, and put a sense of citizen empowerment back into the selection contests for presidential candidature. Howard Dean's campaign, particularly, is thought to demonstrate the power of e-mobilisation, but it used the already existing free service of *Meetup.com* which is designed "to facilitate online co-ordination among registered users" (*Netpolitique*, 2003). The campaign copies earlier progressive internet sites such as *MoveOn.org* which was begun in 1998 to assist in constructing and securing grassroots progressive activism, and to "bypass big politics and big media." There seems general agreement that Dean cannot claim to have started did not anything new, as Tom Paine in "Onward Deaniacs" argues: Dean did not initiate the "insurgent" movement but was "as much a creation of it as he was its organiser," and that even if Dean were to retire, grassroots activism would grow (Paine, 2003). At least 600,000 people were activists in Dean's campaign and may have been online activists before. Dean could be regarded as a mainstream catalyst.

Following the end of Dean's fight for nomination, the official Dean blog to defeat Bush, *Democracy for America*, has spawned many additional blogs. Dean refers to his innovative nomination campaign techniques on the new blog –" planting seeds on the internet, meeting face-to-face at the grassroots, bringing new people into the process" - these were the means used to democratise the fight, and deal with disparities in US campaign funding. Supporters de-centralised the campaign, and remained loyal to its broad progressive ideals when it was over. Despite the fact that Dean himself notes that " Today, half of Americans don't even bother to vote" the energy is high in the individual testimonies and narratives on *Blog for America*. Here an enthusiast's entry describes the power of the movement :

> *As one of a sea of people, one of the heartbeats on the mall today, I knew I was marching for hundreds who could not be there. I was so glad that Gov. Dean was with us on the mall.* Being one of us! *(my italics) Please give him a big thankyou! There will be no stopping what was started today. It's a whole new ball game. And we are leading.*
> http://www.blogforamerica.com/

E-mobilisation has moved off-line to a political use : "smartmobs" of supporters are sustained by such narratives and by the heroic narrativisation of Dean. In the political blog for election purposes, the "about me" feature of blogs can be prioritised over issues. As in selling any commodity, the information about Dean and now the nominee, Kerry, is carefully scripted. The original "About Howard Dean " was political marketing, but Dean's latest campaign is about "taking back America from special interests that control the rightwing leadership of our Congress and White House". The power of the internet to alter people's perspectives about their capacity to change events and, as Dean says, "the innovative techniques learnt through our nominating process," has morphed an individual campaign to one which has reinvigorated democratic participation for the present Democratic nominee, and might even defeat a campaign mounted with the Bush coffers. The Gary Hart blog, on the other hand, has shut down.

As a new form of everyday interactivity for politicians and citizens, politicians' blogs are governing citizens by producing literacies – in this case it was a realisation of the pooled strength of the many, the legitimacy of energetic activism, and the political cause rather than the individual politician. Meyer (2002) speaks of the colonisation of politics by media, of media protocols and political protocols pulling in different directions, but a blog can provide reminders of the lengthiness of political processes and the spaces to reflect on democratic responsibility and specific issues. It can remind voters of the importance of the ballot, and of being active in causes which create social capital in a way which few other new or traditional media genres can. *Democracy for America* is, however, organised around a charismatic figure – one who let go the reins of his personal campaign and gave it up to the "unruliness" of the internet. The democratic literacies re-learned (including a belief in grassroots activism) may yet prove to be powerful tools for the Democrats later this year.

4. Constituency and Party Blogs - Avoiding the "Days of Our Lives" Syndrome

Politicians' blogs can help to familiarise citizens with their representatives as individuals, and inform them about constituency work; recruit supporters for existing and would-be representatives; and market a party's or politician's ideology. Techno-utopians also believe that the blog can increase participatory democracy by constructing focused virtual publics. By allowing connected citizens into the public world of government through the "private" perspectives of politicians, the blog becomes a governmental tool. Blogs turn activities which appear to be a simple provision of information by politicians, and a "finding out about government" on the part of citizens, into new forms of "governing" citizens by setting up different relations of power. The politician's blog models a version of appropriate representative-citizen conduct. The blog's generic characteristics – as recently co-opted by politicians as different as Tom Watson (UK) and Meg Lees (Australia) – help form an audience's capacities as citizens, and thus their knowledge and expectations of their representatives. In these sites the

"About me" feature can be deployed to attract return visits. It helps if one writes well and informatively.

Watson's and Lees' blogs are both serious about their political objectives, and whilst "personal" in contrasting ways, take on the whole a less marketing and frivolous approach to political life than *Simon4Mayor*, a blog dedicated to a campaign for election as Lord Mayor of London. Tom Watson's blog is widely cited, linked and copied ; Meg Lees' "journal" is part of a well-designed website which is marketing a new party. Both blogs offer citizens political commentary and a feedback facility, but Watson allows much more interactivity, and a daily comment space which regularly displays the number of comments each posting elicits.

Meg Lees has a "senate biography" which records her service on committees, and a "personal biography," although this is very "un-bloggish" as it is written in the third person An example of a road to Dasmascus experience makes a characteristically Australian cultural reference to a well-known challenging disaster "It was a narrow escape on the road from Nangwarry to Mt. Gambier during the Ash Wednesday bushfires of 1983 that changed Meg's life." Her rather schoolmarmish persona and photograph on the personal biography page is accompanied by information about a second marriage and a new combined family of six children, all of whom are at university. This section is kept separate from her "journal" at "Meg's Desk" where she takes issue with opponents and journalists, writing densely argued, and prolifically hyperlinked, essays on public health, renewable energy and other issues on which the Australian Progressive Alliance seeks to find public consensus on bipartisan concerns. Meg's Photo Gallery is called "Out and About" and here the family homepage analogy comes into its own again. There are many shots of Lees in her constituency, enjoying herself, "caught" in informal clothing and poses.

Despite the Gallery, what distinguishes Lees' entire website is its slight formality of tone: there has very little of the revealing self-display as a writer which Tom Watson's blog regularly demonstrates. Lees' is an outreach blog, but it is not directly interactive. Citizens will see a

carefully crafted representation of a dedicated worker-representative, someone who is committed to, and skilled in, civil and rational argument, and who eschews the worst excesses of political behaviour. Lees is a representative who has found a way to deal with a minority party's lack of news worthiness by, in the words of Jello Biafra "becoming the media." She is a good example of the amateur citizen journalist, and one who is using the blogosphere for its ability to deal with important micro issues which are not "sexy" in mainstream media terms.
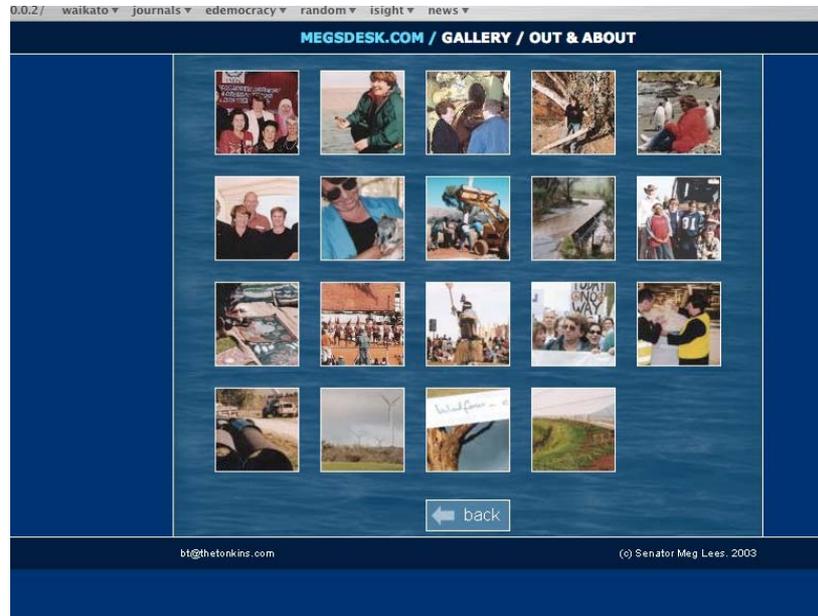
The striking feature of Tom Watson's blog, on the other hand, is the ordinariness and often the brevity of its daily entries. Rather than taking the tutelary, Senate-desk approach of Lees, this blog is dedicated to addressing its audiences as if it were a daily note to equals, but with most of the communication going one way. It is more fun, much less hard work, full of recognizable blog-writing : idiomatic and slangy, with jokes on the Tories' support for dropping the age of voting such as "Now they're in favour of it I'll have to oppose it." It is a "dialogue of equals" i.e, "ordinary constituents." The blog is part of the blogosphere in a self-referential way with 18 links to other blogs. One of the entries below is about meeting up with "a couple of Sandwell bloggers." There are comments in return.

The citizen literacies developed through reading Watson's blog are similar to those produced by Lees' journal. Readers see modeled for them the workings of national government – either from opposition perspectives or from those in power. The representatives' ability to lay out and defend political beliefs displays to citizens a working political system. Their recording of daily activities signifies and makes real democratic accountability and transparency. Their (civil) critiquing of the actions and decisions of opponents shows the everyday routines of an adversarial but familiar and workable Westminster system. The main difference between the blogs is in personal presentation and writing style. Lees has to convince the un-converted, whereas Watson is free to write to his electorate's largely Labour supporters. Watson is in local constituency mode on his blog, whereas Lees is a Senator with a constituency to earn.

5. Conclusion

The blogosphere provides examples of experimentation with new forms of democratic deliberative space, minority advocacy for maintaining humanistic values during international crisis, expanded kinds of grassroots mobilization, a reactivation of engaged citizenship, as well as opportunities for political marketing. The uses of the personal in each blog differ. "About me" is a standard feature of many websites, but when it is deployed well in particular political blogs it can serve to teach, anchor or model shared democratic literacies. The citizens and representatives who write blogs can be seen as amateur journalists, recolonising mediated politics through a personal internet genre which intersects with, and subverts, mainstream media. There are possibilities that the "free dialogue among equals" provided by some blogs may be eventually co-opted - in the ways suggested by all institutional appropriations of successful but "wildcard" phenomena. Organising sites, ranking mechanisms and search engine databases are already categorizing and sorting blogs.

Predictions that party member blogs will be organized not by individual representatives but by the parties themselves are starting to come true. The U.S. Democratic Party, for example, has responded to cable television's coverage of only the speeches of its political celebrities, such as Kerry, Clinton and Edwards, by opening its doors to an "official" Convention blogger, Eric Schnure, posting at *boston-dparty.com*, and to other bloggers, and by targeting young potential supporters with this form of communication (Harper).

The online BBC News World Edition's reporter even commented on the Convention in blog form noting, in one post, the mutual suspicion and self-regarding nature of the "surreal" Bloggers' Breakfast : "I snapped pictures of them. They snapped pictures of me. I interviewed them. They interviewed me."(Anderson, K 2004).

When and if political parties mainstream blogging in a long-term, strategic way, the "governmental" possibilities of civil society communication may start to be delimited, and the political "spin" which has so disenchanted and alienated voters in recent years may return. For example, the official blog which Schnure runs is full of comments on Kerry's "true nature." An example under the header "Our Dad for President" runs: "I mean, the guy dove into

a lake and administered CPR to his daughter's hamster."
(*boston-dparty.com*)

True to the "unruliness" of cyberspace, and particularly of the blogosphere, ways will be found to handle "spin," marketing, and biased "preaching to the choir," but they will have to be established within the limitations of larger contingencies such as government's control of infrastructure, bandwidth and internet regulation, and mass media's trainings of audiences to expect entertainment rather than news, and human interest stories rather than policy discussion.

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