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The Hansard Society’s e-Democracy programme seeks to develop innovative ways of using new interactive technologies to reconnect Parliament with citizens and encourage participation in the democratic process. The e-Democracy Programme’s cutting edge research explores the potential for interactive technologies to create new channels of communication and participation between Parliament and the public to enable citizens to scrutinise and influence legislation and those who represent them.

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Chapter One
Political Blogs – Craze or Convention?

A new item on the e-Democracy agenda?

“People always remember the Benn and Crossman diaries, now every MP has a chance for posterity. Blogging can provide a link between us and our constituents in an easy, effective, and innovative way.”
Brian White MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on e-Democracy

The Hansard Society is an independent non-partisan organisation working to promote effective parliamentary democracy. The Hansard Society e-Democracy Programme was established to examine how democratic institutions can adapt to the information age. At the outset we rejected exaggerated claims that the internet was about to make representative democracy obsolete and introduce ‘push-button democracy’. Our interest has been in strengthening representation through better communication and pursuing opportunities for engagement.

A key part of our work has been concerned with setting up and evaluating online parliamentary consultations, enabling citizens to have a direct channel of communication to their representatives. Our latest web-based initiative, www.tellparliament.net, provides an online platform that links people with relevant experience and expertise via the internet to official select committee inquiries and the scrutiny of legislation.

The Hansard Society has investigated the extent of the digital divide, the use of the internet by young people and senior citizens, and carried out wider audits of political engagement. Our report What do we want from MPs’ websites? gave an overview of the impact websites are having in the British political arena and how parliamentarians could best utilise them. MPs’ websites, when they first appeared, took their lead from the commercial model and resembled political fliers or brochures. Since then, the growth of websites tried to keep pace with these developments. They have started to include SMS text messaging, polling and online discussion forums to tap into constituent feedback and interaction. The websites have become more conversational than broadcast orientated. One recent high-profile development in this area has been weblogging.

Blogging with a political focus has taken off in the USA. It has been used to varying degrees by underground and mainstream groups alike, and is to be found in almost every aspect of US political activity, from organising grass-roots activism to monitoring the progress of Presidential campaigns. The popularity and success of these US efforts has given political blogging a global momentum.

In the UK, individuals and groups on the margins of political institutions have been running blogs. But the adoption of weblogs by politicians in North America has spurred on a number of politicians in the UK to incorporate blogging into their communication toolbox.

A determined ‘blogger lobby’ has taken these developments as an opportunity to push blogging to the fore of the e-Democracy debate. Despite the hard-sell and techno-evangelism, at these formative stages it has yet to be proved that the success of blogging can be emulated in the British parliamentary arena, and that its contribution can be meaningful and long-lasting.

Beyond the hype and early promises about blogging, there were calls for an inclusive, objective debate about its potential value in our parliamentary democracy. The Hansard Society was keen to do what it could to ensure it took place. It was also aware of the need to encourage parliamentarians and others who represent the political institutions of the UK to get involved.

We worked with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on e-Democracy (APPG) to set up a debate about blogging amongst parliamentarians, held in January 2004. Though the focus was on new media, the debate also covered MPs’ experiences of how keeping a traditional diary has affected political careers, especially around election time. Issues such as the importance of staying connected with citizens and the accountability of elected representatives were addressed. The speakers, Tony Benn, Tom Watson MP and Clive Soley MP, contrasted well with each other, outlining different ways of keeping people informed and James Crabtree, one of the activists behind the Voxpolitics e-democracy project, joined the debate to bring an extra-parliamentary approach. The intrinsic value that weblogs bring to political communication was best encapsulated by Clive Soley MP: “They are a platform for an MP’s views, and they allow for feedback from readers, of a sort you don’t get anywhere else.”

Following this APPG meeting, the Hansard Society set up a programme of research to assess the current state of political blogging in the UK. In the process of developing this ‘snapshot’ we would be able to identify where this blogging activity had come from, what contribution it is making to the democratic process and where it could progress in the future. It would also help orientate those who are interested in entering into the debate on the role of new media in the British political process. This report outlines the research carried out.

We hope it proves useful both to those currently involved in blogging and those who are curious about this increasingly conspicuous new media tool.
Chapter Two
General Overview

Blogs are online publishing platforms. There are many varieties of blogs, but the range of this variation is constrained by certain parameters. Like conventional websites they are hosted on servers, viewed through internet browsers and accessed by keying in a web address (URL). A blog has an author, known as a ‘blogger’. Keeping a blog is known as ‘blogging’.

Blogs are diary-like in appearance but run in reverse chronological order, with the most recent post first. Similar to a diary or journal, posts are made on a regular basis and accompanied by the date and time. Editorial control, including the subject matter, length and tone of each posting, is at the discretion of the blogger. Most posts contain links to other websites or blogs that are of interest or relevance to the blogger. The success or visibility of a blog rests on the extent to which the blogger links and engages with other bloggers. As a result, blogs have become so numerous and interlinked with each other that they can be regarded as potent online communities or social networks. Another feature of a blog is the facility that allows visitors to the site to respond to the blogger’s original post. In this way blogs can become places not only of self-expression on the part of the individual bloggers, but platforms for dialogue and debate.

These features distinguish blogs from conventional websites, forums, message-boards and other web-based communication tools. However, not every blog is a blog in the strictest sense. There are sites where people keep journals but do not offer the opportunity for comment. Some sites present information in the format of an entry, or ‘post’, on a blog, and even allow comments on those posts, but they are not examples of self-publishing – for example, the blog set up to provide coverage of the June 10 2004 London Mayor and Assembly elections at http://race4cityhall.blogspot.com was presented in a weblog-format, but was not an example of self-publishing reflecting the views of an individual blogger. These sites may resemble blogs, but they are, more accurately, websites built in a weblog format. The people who have put these sites together have made a conscious decision to turn away from standard site designs and have adopted weblog formats because of the ease and low-cost of running and maintaining them.

The proliferation of weblogging is largely down to the availability of cheap, user-friendly authoring software. When the first blogs appeared in the mid-1990s they had to be built from scratch by people with the right sort of programming knowledge/technical expertise. This made blogging a specialist pursuit, but in 1999 the first free-to-download, build-your-own blogging software was launched. Those with small budgets, limited time and scant technical awareness were now able to publish online.

There are currently two forms of authoring tools available to bloggers. ‘Off-the-shelf’ packages, like market-leader Moveable Type, are powerful and versatile but require self-installation, configuration and hosting. These often have a cost implication. Hosted (and most often free of charge) packages, like Google’s Blogger, give bloggers space on a community site. They take care of all the configuration and hosting on behalf of the blogger, but offer fewer features and less opportunity for customisation. All these packages are relatively immature. They follow the ‘classic’ blog model in terms of their appearance, while the programmes themselves are constantly being refined and updated. Of course, there are still those who prefer to construct their blogs from the basic HTML.

With a user-friendly interface combined with the spirit of free self-expression, blogs have taken off and captured people’s imaginations across the world. Roughly similar numbers of men and women blog, but the 2003 NITLE ‘blogging census’ showed that women are more likely to write diary-style blogs, with 80% of those blogs that had a political focus being written by men.

Blogs are to be found in almost every country and on every conceivable subject. Currently there are some 2,647,636 blogs on the internet (Technorati, 2004). The vast majority of these are written in English, followed by Portuguese, French and Farsi (NITLE Census, 2003). The greatest frequency of blogging is to be found in the USA. Consequently, the blogging community-space, sometimes known as the ‘blogosphere’, is dominated by US-authored blogs focusing on issues related to the USA.

When weblogs first emerged in the mid-1990s they were informal and small-scale websites that resembled journals where their authors posted a mixture of news and opinion. These blogs were constructed by people with intricate technical knowledge for the consumption of a special-interest audience, usually other bloggers. Blogs were then part of an underground or even counter-culture.

Today, blogging is on the cusp of becoming mainstream. This progression is bringing blogging into exciting new domains. There are now major efforts underway to harness blogging as a tool for political engagement. Elected representatives, in particular, are being encouraged to adopt blogging as a means of interacting with their constituents.
Weblogs have long been utilised by political activists – for example, in the organisation of World Trade Summit and anti-war demonstrations, or media and advertising subversion. Recently, however, prospective presidential candidates in the United States have turned to weblogs for campaigning purposes. What we are seeing in the USA is the extension of blogging throughout the political spectrum.

UK-authored blogs have been around from the late 1990s and although politically-focused blogs have had a presence since that time, it was only in 2003 that the practice of political blogging really began to be taken seriously. In March 2003, Tom Watson MP became the first parliamentarian officially to adopt a weblog. A determined group of campaigners began to push blogging as a tool to promote accessibility and transparency amongst parliamentarians. With statements like “By 2010 we think most politicians will have one [a blog].” (Crabtree and Davies, 2003) set against a background of political disengagement, record low turnout at the 2001 General Election and a vigorous debate on military action in Iraq, the UK media began to take notice and political blogging entered the mainstream.

Chapter Three
Research outline

A number of questions must be addressed to determine whether blogging is something UK politics wants or needs. For example, do blogs facilitate effective deliberation? Do they truly engage the public in the political process as never before? Can people learn in a purposeful manner from blogs? Where will blogs fit into the range of other new media tools that are being fostered as a means of promoting political participation and awareness? Can blogs make a genuine difference to the accountability of elected representatives, and increase the transparency of political structures? Will blogs become an indispensable tool capable of creating and maintaining an effective dialogue between the electorate and the elected – something that will one day become as established as writing to your MP but with more tangible results?

Or will MPs and blogging part company after the initial interest has died away – another victim of evangelical attempts to patch up relations between representatives and constituents in the face of flagging election turnouts? If this does happen, is it because blogs are not appealing to the electorate or because the dialogue expected by the public becomes too candid and demanding for the MP?

These questions have been raised but are yet to be confronted. They must be addressed before making promises to the public and parliamentarians that weblogs could fail to deliver. However, to begin answering these questions, we must first take stock of UK-based political blogs and their penetration.

Our aim was to take a qualitative approach, thereby obtaining a less generalised but more nuanced understanding of political weblogs and their potentials. We set out, firstly, to evaluate those blogs which are regarded as the vanguard of UK-authored political blogs, and, secondly, to assess the scope for blogs to play an effective role in promoting political awareness and participation in the UK. The research methodology, therefore, combines our observations based on a sample of weblogs and the interviews
with the bloggers themselves. In addition, a jury of people from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and minimal awareness of blogging was set up to review our sample blogs. They were given the task of monitoring two blogs per week over a four week period. A set of questionnaires was used to record their views and opinions of each blog. These were followed by an evaluation questionnaire at the close of the monitoring period. Both types of questionnaires are available from the Hansard Society.

Our sample blogs were chosen to represent a cross-section of political blogging in the UK. A mixture of individually and collaboratively authored blogs, they cover a range of topics, political perspectives and practical approaches to blogging. Although some of the blogs overlap and share similarities, for the purposes of the project we classified them into eight categories:

The MP www.tom-watson.co.uk

Tom Watson is a Labour MP for West Bromwich East. He first won his seat in 2001 and started his website not long after. In March 2003, he turned over the main activity on the site to blogging thus becoming the first MP to keep a blog. Tom sees his blog as a way for him to “share the dilemmas of representing people”.

Tom’s site was produced and designed on his behalf by fellow bloggers. He personally updates it on a daily basis, which he views as important for maintaining the credibility of the blog. The content of posts ranges from digests of media articles, reflections on activity in the House of Commons, commentary on issues and links to sites he has found on the internet.

The Councillor www.lynnefeatherstone.org/blog.htm

It is not only Westminster politicians who are using blogs. Lynne Featherstone is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Haringey and a member of the London Assembly. Lynne enjoys writing and started her blog in October 2003 as a complement to her newspaper column in which she tries to make her work in local government transparent and accessible.

Lynne’s blog forms one section of her website and she aims to update it once a week with her reflections on the varied life of a councillor. The blog does not offer the chance to comment on posts but visitors can email Lynne with comments or use other feedback options available elsewhere on her site.

The Overseas Blog www.blogforamerica.com

Blog for America is the blog for Democrat Howard Dean’s 2003/2004 Presidential campaign. It is obviously not a UK-based blog but it was important to acknowledge and include it because of the attention it received and, as a result, the role it played in inspiring similar efforts in the UK.

This blog was a key element of Dean’s campaign for the White House. By starting a blog in March 2003, Dean’s campaign team were able to tap into web-based social and activist networks to generate awareness and accumulate millions of dollars in donations. They showed that blogging could become an effective tool for electioneering.

Dean was unsuccessful in his campaign but the blog has lived on, keeping a critical eye on the Presidential race between George W Bush and John Kerry. Senator Dean does not maintain the blog personally, instead this is carried out by his staff. In that sense, Blog for America is an example of an electioneering, a news and a collaborative blog.

The Candidate www.iandale.blogspot.com

Iain Dale is the Conservative Party’s prospective parliamentary candidate for North Norfolk. He is also a political commentator and owner of Politicos bookshop. His is an example of a blog harnessed for the purposes of electioneering in the UK. Iain hopes it will prove useful for those interested in keeping abreast of his efforts to become a Member of Parliament.

Iain had been blogging prior to becoming a candidate, and recognised the potential of blogging for his campaign, which started in 2003. He has built and maintains his blog himself. He is keen for visitors to use the comment facilities, particularly those living in the North Norfolk constituency. It is this potential for interaction that he believes will make blogging an essential part of political communication.
Harry Hatchet is a journalist and blogger. He began blogging at Harry's Place in November 2002 “out of a mixture of curiosity, frustration with crank-dominated discussions... [and] the desire to express a minority opinion.”

Harry's Place has undergone a number of developments since its launch. The most noticeable of which is that Harry has been joined by four others who collaborate on the blog. Harry believed it was natural for journalists, whose work is often the spur for blog-based debate, to start their own efforts. The majority of content on Harry's Place revolves around drawing attention to and commenting on interesting articles. In Harry's opinion, though blogging is not revolutionising political debate, it does give it a new energy.

VoxPolitics is a blogging project that sets out to discuss how information and communications technologies can bolster the relationship between citizens and decision-makers. The blog is maintained by a group of dedicated individuals recruited from a number of UK-based think tanks working in social and economic policy. The VoxPolitics campaign has been drawing their work together since 2001, with its blogging element kick-started in 2002.

The VoxPolitics team see contemporary UK politics as “a tired business” and believe if it is to be reinvigorated, new actors must be brought in and information made as widely and creatively available as possible. As well as being a source for this dissemination, they have also designed the VoxPolitics blog as a place where debate on these developments can take place.

The Campaigners
http://weblog.greenpeace.org

Just as politicians, journalists and think tanks are using blogs to supplement their activity, so too are campaigning and lobbying organisations in their attempts to generate awareness and increase accountability.

Greenpeace UK run a number of blogs each covering a current campaign. These are updated on a daily basis by a team of bloggers directly connected with the campaigns.

Greenpeace UK have had an effective online presence for years but in 2002 began to adopt blogging into their web-based communication strategies. Blogging, they felt, would be an effective means of creating a more immediate and personal connection between people and the issues they were drawing attention to, whether it was war in Iraq or logging in Tasmania.
Chapter Four
First impressions

We monitored eight blogs in the sample and tracked them closely over a period of two weeks. The first period of observation was from April 14 to 21, 2004. The second observation period took place from May 31 to June 6, 2004. The breakdown of this small sample nevertheless still helped us to identify conceptually important themes that will be useful to future investigation and policy work.

First, we looked into the number of entries posted by the bloggers, authors or site staff, in our sample of blogs. The most active bloggers were in the political journalist's blog, accounting for 34% of the total of entries during the observation period. This was more than double the number of bloggers' entries in the two other most prominent sites – the MP's blog (Tom Watson MP) and the Overseas blog (Blog for America – Howard Dean's blog). However, while the entries in the MP's blog were posted by Tom Watson MP himself, party activists posted the entries on the Blog for America. It is worth noting that the political journalist's blog is also maintained by several other blog-activists posting alongside the principal blogger, journalist Harry Hatchet.

All three of the most active blogs had by far the largest amount of reader-added comments. The rest of the blogs were much less active, with some having few or no bloggers' entries at all for several days, and reader input was severely limited. One of them had no feedback facility at all (the Councillor), another has only recently added such a function (the Candidate, who was developing his skills), while the rest, despite having the capability for comment, carried very few. The activity levels of each blog are listed in Chart 1 [top right].

An important aspect of blogging is that it is not just a self-publishing phenomenon but also, as a process of individual writing, it is a form of self-expression or confession. It takes out the barriers between public and private spaces or, as Crampton pointed out, “[For these authors] the blog is not a separate part of their lives, as if they had a private and public life. The blog is an ordinary, everyday aspect of who they are.”ix One of the blog authors analysed in this study, Lynne Featherstone, summed up the aim behind her blogging: “The goal of my blog is to try and make politics more real, to give an understanding of what I do and what I think on a daily basis. It is often reported that people think politicians do nothing and are all the same. My mission is to debunk that myth and demonstrate by the blog exactly and from a personal viewpoint, how I spend my day so that people can then have a closer look inside a politician’s working life.”

An authentic voice and personalisation was also the driving force behind the Greenpeace blog: “For years Greenpeace communicated its message through the official website www.greenpeace.org and, after that, with a more activist oriented section at http://act.greenpeace.org. Since the organisation is composed of people who are great storytellers, from campaigners to activists, we thought the blog format could have been interesting to communicate our issues in a more personal way.”

While Lynne Featherstone started her blog following a recommendation by her party campaign manager, Tom Watson MP started his blog as a personal endeavour, not directly as a campaigning tool. Simply because blogs provide a record of what MPs have said, they keep them more readily accountable, as Tom Watson explained: “It keeps me honest – I have to justify changing my mind.”

This was confirmed throughout our monitoring. Distinguishing four primary modes of expression in the bloggers' postings – fact, opinion, experience, and questioning – we found that more than half of their messages were expressions of opinion, less than a quarter referred to experience, while 14.3% were factual, and only 6% sought answers. This could indicate that political blogs, and blogging in general, are a modern type of soapbox, where enquiry and interaction are of less importance than furthering one's views. This insight also indicates that there is a lot more work to be done in terms of politicians participating in online forums such as the blogosphere, rather than simply putting forward their own opinions for the public to read.
Also of note is the role of the media in influencing blog content and vice versa. The internet is often regarded as a model for breaking down the barriers of official media and giving an opportunity for alternative voices to be heard. Just as online consultations are opening up, beyond ‘the usual suspects’, by giving the general public an opportunity to influence public affairs, so too weblogs provide the opportunity to access information in a new way. As one of the bloggers interviewed explained, his goal was: ‘to provide the sort of commentary which sometimes seems to be lacking in other parts of the media’. Similar motives were revealed by a political candidate, Iain Dale, for starting a blog: ‘It bypasses the filter of traditional media outlets and allows people to get to know you a bit more as person.’ The media with its appetite for gladiatorial politics and exclusive stories proved to be increasingly frustrating for both citizens and politicians alike or as Lynne Featherstone put it: ‘The sound bite world demanded through media is far too simplistic and I have long been a believer in trying to communicate the more complex range of issues and debate.’ However, she also admitted that the media are also helping along the way, ‘for example the Guardian has done a lot to promote blogging and begin to get people interested. But blogs have to be interesting too!’

A recent example of creative use of weblogs was instigated by MySociety’s Downing Street Says viii – a website that posts press statements from the Prime Minister’s Office in weblog format with the facility for visitors to comment on them. The same press releases are available at No 10’s official website; however, taking them out of the conventional Government context and adding the feedback facility seemed to the MySociety collaborative to be more appealing to the more media-savvy and internet audiences of the 21st century.

Tom Watson MP stressed that when he started blogging he was astonished both by the previously invisible culture he found himself immersed in, and also by the responsiveness of the people who he encountered online. That political weblogs were able to tap into new social groups, and engage them in politics in new ways, was also recognised by Lynne Featherstone: ‘[They] may reach people who are not usually interested in politics but are e-literate’, as well as by the Greenpeace blogmaster: ‘We all noticed that bloggers constitute a strong community, and as such, can have a strong impact on politics.’

In the same vein, Jonathan Briggs, a blogger on the Re.engage site, expanded on what is to be done if we are to improve the genre as well as enlarge the pool of people currently involved in the blogosphere: ‘It is important to see your blog as part of a much bigger set of sites/documents and that contributing to other blogs starts/continues the dialogue. Secondly, that people want to talk and contribute. We need to find further ways to make this possible, easier ways for people who are less wordy. I mention this because I really feel that people have to learn to blog or comment and that once you have started to comment it becomes easier. The blog world is full of simple questionnaires and quizzes that give people a start in expressing themselves. We need to create some of these for political blogs.’

Greenpeace and Blog for America, both campaigning blogs, draw our attention to another aspect worth considering in further applications of this new tool in political communication. Both weblogs are largely run by activists and site staff. The question that this raises is whether, when posting entries, these site staff are posting by proxy for their candidate or organisation, or are participating in the discussion and expressing their own particular points of view. The fact that there are bloggers speaking by proxy for others begs the question of whether misinformation, intentional or unintentional, is occurring. Having blog site staff also undermines the authenticity aspect of blogging that was initially identified as the original feature of this web format. Websites, for example, never have made the claim of being the authentic product of their owners; they always presupposed the presence of staff – often an IT specialist who would look after an MP’s website. Blogging has the potential to overcome this gap and to promote the politician as owner and creator of a blog. e-Democracy activists behind the Voxpolitics project hold very strong views regarding the authorship of MPs’ blogs: ‘If they [politicians] run a blog, they must write their entries themselves. If they do not, people will know, and they will not be interested. Blogs are interesting to the extent that their author is actively involved, and any blogging MP must be too.’

However, an alternative view on the issue of blog authenticity was offered by the blogmaster at the Greenpeace campaigning blog: ‘There are not specific authors to the blog, we normally assign an author to each sub-blog developed [each covering a current campaign]. We have many voices.’

This brings us to the question of blogs as campaigning tools at election time. In the run up to the last General Election, the Labour Party launched, as part of their e-campaign, a ‘web in a box’, off-the-shelf software to foster the website presence of its party candidates. Should we therefore expect a launch of off-the-shelf party weblogs in the run-up to the forthcoming UK elections, modelled on their American counterparts and run by blogmasters in party headquarters, as it happened in the States?

These are some of the questions that need to be discussed and explored further. The basic point, however, is that it seems that political blogs do demonstrate an ability to enhance political debate and communication within the online community. What needs to be examined is whether this dialogue and debate is separate from the general public debate or whether blogs serve as a bridge between politicians, activists and citizens via the internet. This raises questions as to how elected representatives can use the communication space which blogs afford and how blogs can link into the formal representative structures that already exist.
Chapter Five
Blog Jury

Blogs exist in the public domain. They are constructed (by individuals or groups) to be used by members of the public in the hope that they will serve the public good either by spreading information or providing a platform for discussion. So, what do the public think of weblogs and their objectives?

As part of our stock take of politically-focused blogging in the UK, we were very keen to draw in opinions and ideas from the very public that these blogs were targeting. For previous research projects the Hansard Society had recruited a ‘jury’ (or sample group) of members of the public to gather information, and we adopted a similar approach for this research project into weblogging.

Eight jurors were recruited to monitor eight blogs over a period of four weeks. The jury members would pass judgement on what they read and saw. They would rate the blogs on their content, design, opportunities for dialogue and efficacy as a resource that set out to enhance political awareness and participation. Our ‘blog jury’ consisted of two women and six men. They came from a range of backgrounds and areas of the UK – varying in income, age and ethnicity. Most had some awareness of blogging but none were bloggers themselves. All members of the jury had voted in previous elections, some had had contact with their MP in some form but none were members of political parties. Most rated their awareness of political issues and processes as fair, yet deemed their level of participation as either limited or poor.

Jury members were required to fill out a review questionnaire for each of the blogs they monitored on a week-to-week basis. The questionnaire asked the jurors to indicate their preferences along numbered scales or to select terms from a list. At the end of their service the jurors were also offered the opportunity to evaluate blogging, its impact on their political engagement and areas in which blogging might develop from their personal perspective.

Initial Impressions

The political blogs followed for this research were built either with ‘off-the-shelf’ blogging software or following the ‘universal’ blog format. This format has evolved over the past decade and both bloggers and audiences are comfortable with it. Our jury members, too, reported no major problems with the design and structure of the blogs. They felt the designs were basic but clear and welcoming. They could easily navigate around the blogs, differentiate between posts made by the bloggers or visitors to the blog, and get to where they needed to be to make their own posts. Therefore, in terms of first impressions, the jury reacted warmly to the look and feel of the blogs.

Subject matter was more likely to cause the jurors to navigate away from the blog. The jurors identified the content of the blogs as a combination of news and opinion. Where the jurors liked the writing style of the blogger(s), they described it as ‘insightful’ and ‘clever’, with some jurors adding ‘objective’ and ‘humorous’. Where reactions were negative, the jurors described the bloggers as ‘boring’, ‘overbearing’, ‘opinionated’ or even ‘academic’.

Having Their Say

The most often cited advantage of political blogging to the political process is the opportunity for dialogue via the posting of visitor response to the posts originally made by bloggers. Therefore, as part of the review process, the jurors were asked to post at least one comment and then check on its impact at a later date.

However, as indicated above, some of the blogs did not offer visitors the facilities to post comments. We have discussed the merits of this blogging approach and explained why these websites can only be described as ‘blogs’ in a loose sense. Our jurors found it frustrating when a ‘blog’ did not offer posting opportunities. On no occasion was the jurors’ desire to comment felt more strongly than on ‘blogs’ where posting was not allowed.

The majority of blogs on the web do allow commenting and this was reflected in the sample of UK-based political blogs used for this research. The jury identified most of the responses to the original blogger-authored posts as having come from visitors to the site, and noted that the majority of these posts were in agreement with the blogger’s post and sought to expand on its content. The jurors found the process of making their own comments straightforward and, in the main, they also commented on posts which contained material reflecting their own point of view.

As part of the review process, jurors were required to check back on their posts after at least a day and record any activity that had occurred as a result. The jurors were able to relocate their comment[s] easily but they were largely disappointed with what they found. In nearly every case jurors reported very little activity around their comments; very few got responses from either bloggers or other visitors. It was evident that this lack of dialogue was a source of disappointment for certain members of the jury:
There doesn’t seem to be as much ‘action’ as I’m sure the writers would like. If this was busier, it would be a good place to discuss issues with others.”

Yet, despite the eagerness of most of the jurors when it came to the tasks that involved making posts, one juror did not share in the enthusiasm. This juror contacted the research team to request exemption from the posting requirements. Although we accepted this appeal, we enquired into the reasoning behind it. The juror explained that despite good political awareness and an interest in political weblogging, they simply had no desire to enter into any form of dialogue with either a blogger or any of the other visitors. This puts an interesting perspective on the motivations the public have for utilising blogs.

At the end of every review questionnaire, jurors were asked whether they would ever return to the blog they were monitoring. On all but one occasion, the answer was no. They were also asked if they felt that their political awareness and participation had been positively affected by the blog. In every case the jurors indicated that they felt nothing had changed. Yet, despite negative responses to the individual blogs sample, our jury were more positive about the future potential of weblogging to enhance political engagement in the UK.

**Mixed Reactions**

In an age where the public distrusts politicians and journalists to an equal extent, political blogs are increasingly being touted as an alternative to traditional channels of political communication. But would our jury consider using blogs to keep up-to-date with politics in the future? There were those who were enthusiastic about using blogs as an alternative or supplement to conventional media:

“The ‘traditional’ media do not give balanced information, sometimes even disinformation; blogs give the opportunity of sourcing opinions and information that have not undergone media or political spin.”

Indeed, for one juror the appeal of blogs was their freedom from editorial control, a licence to go further and be more opinionated than the mainstream media are able to:

“You can get the extremes of viewpoint that you might not get in the newspapers or on TV. There is a sense that you are getting access to things that the old media may be afraid to publish.”

Some of the jury, however, were not as encouraged by their experience, seeing the use of blogs as the pursuit of a small but vocal political elite:

“If most ‘political’ blogs are like those I’ve seen I don’t believe they can be seen as offering a representative view of politics. They may yield particular moments of insight into a person’s views but they are too random and on such a tiny scale that they would be hopeless for the purpose of ‘keeping up’ with UK politics.”

The jurors believed that the best use of blogs were those targeted at niche or local audiences. They felt that this approach could have a more lasting influence on UK politics: for example, as a means of encouraging young people to participate in political debate:

“Younger people are more likely to be happy with this than with the traditional ‘letter to the Times’ type of approach at getting your views into the public domain.”

A lot of the hype around UK-based political blogging came as a result of MPs starting their own experiments. The jurors’ feedback on the MP’s blog that featured in our sample was mixed, but they were interested in the idea of their own constituency MP starting a blog because of the greater proximity to their lives and communities, and the opportunities blogging posed for two-way dialogue:

“Blogs will be increasingly important as a channel for access as they are a very efficient means for getting information to people and for canvassing opinion from the public. They are much easier than traditional channels in engaging debate. They also utilise technology that allows mass participation that has not as yet been possible.”

Blogging is a personal endeavour undertaken predominantly by individuals offering a personal slant on events, ideas and issues. From the jury feedback it was clear that the ‘personality’ of a political blog was a key determinant of its success:

“There are some really committed and interesting individuals and communities out there who have something of worth to say. However, there are an awful lot of gasbags as well, and at the moment, the quantity of the latter is in danger of drowning out the former.”

With weblogging, perhaps even more so than websites, people can cheaply maintain a presence on the web without needing a lot of technical knowledge. When we consider this from the viewpoint of a country where citizens often feel that they have something worthwhile to contribute to the political and policy debate but are prohibited (if indirectly) from mainstream political debate, the democratising nature of blogs is very appealing. Yet, as we have seen from their responses, the jury approached this potential with caution:

“The prediction that ‘on the internet anyone can be a journalist’ has come true. The trouble is that not everyone should be a journalist.”

So, would any of our jury consider setting up their own blog, whether it be politically-focused or otherwise? Despite being impressed with the simplicity of setting up a blog, the answer was no in almost every instance:

“Happy though I am with my life – I’m not sure it would make fascinating reading. Perhaps I’m wrong – but even so I’d still struggle to make the time.”

Only one of our jurors considered blogging as something they would consider putting effort into, stating:

“We humans are here to develop ourselves to our full potential physically and spiritually and to support others to do the same. The major part of this is communication and dialogue in all forms between humans on a personal level. I think a blog could contribute to this process.”
Jury Conclusions

The observations from the jury as they used and reviewed a sample of the first UK-based political weblogs revealed some valuable insights into the public’s perceptions of political bloggers and blogging.

The jury we recruited for this project had either little or no previous experience of weblogs and had certainly never considered using them for promoting political engagement. Yet, as we watched the individuals over the duration of their jury service, we saw them quickly become proficient in their use of blogs and confident about offering their opinions on what they read.

Although the blogs in our sample received mixed reviews on an individual basis, they did inspire the jury who could envisage many different useful applications for blogs in UK politics. The blogs in our sample represent the vanguard of UK-authored, politically-focused blogs, and what has been demonstrated by our jury is that the British public are increasingly aware of their existence. However, it is very evident that if blogging is to realise its potential and make a genuine impact on UK politics, it must continue to develop.

Blogging is often cast as a tool for putting the average citizen at the centre of political debate. Yet what we saw from the jury was that, despite being impressed by the simplicity and low-cost of setting up a blog, the actual practice of political blogging was seen as a pursuit for enthusiasts.

The jury’s experience also suggested that blogs that dealt in localised or specialised content would have the greatest success and longevity. This, then, opens up fantastic potential for MPs interested in improving the quality of consultation with constituents. Some of our jurors also saw blogging as a mutually beneficial pursuit for MPs and their constituents in terms of scope for effective two-way dialogue. This interactive opportunity is one of the most exciting and valuable aspects of political blogging. Yet, on occasion, the jury revealed that not everybody wants dialogue. In these cases, the blogs did not become redundant because they were still able to provide useful personal insights or supplement conventional media sources.

Clearly, some members of the public will get news from blogs, some will get conversation and some will get nothing. Blogging in general is evolving, and blogging with a political focus is one branch of that development. We have seen that the public can see value in blogging. It remains to be proven that blogging can secure a place in the medley of resources attempting to get the UK public and their elected representatives together.

Chapter Six
Conclusions

Blogging is nothing new; it has been around almost as long as conventional frame-set websites. From the perspective of politics or, more specifically, political awareness and participation in the UK, blogging is fresh and exciting. Bloggers are very good at monitoring themselves and their surroundings, and there are some excellent studies and reports available. For this study we observed blogs that represented the UK-authored politically-orientated blogging field. From this exercise we were able to identify some interesting practices and potentials that we believe have (or will have) a significant impact on political engagement and political processes.

The blogs we looked at all followed a standard blogging-model, but within those parameters there was variety in the bloggers’ approach to maintaining their sites. Some blogs were written by individuals, some collaboratively. Some blogs were written by the owner (or blog-personality); some blogs were maintained by an appointed staff. Some were updated on a daily basis; some were less routine. The range of practical approaches came as a result of the subject diversity of the blogs – in that the blog of an MP will necessarily look and feel different to that of a campaigning charity. This last factor in itself says a lot about the development of political blogging in the UK; something that was once regarded as counter-culture has now shown it has the potential to become institutionalised.

We put our sample of political blogs under the scrutiny of a ‘blog jury’ made up of members of the public with little or no experience of blogging. From the reviews submitted by the ‘blog jury’ it was evident that the jurors found it difficult to connect with the bloggers and felt that the blogs lacked the sort of appeal that gave them reason to return. Content was at the root of this problem. The jurors could not find enough to empathise, or even disagree with, in what they read. The blogs in the sample were also marked by low levels of debate between visitors and this proved to be another turn-off for our jury. Few members of the jury explored other blogs beyond those
they were assigned, citing either lack of interest or being overwhelmed by the sheer number of blogs on offer.

In isolation none of the blogs in the sample caused much excitement amongst the jury. However, when they considered the blogs together, and political blogging in general, the jurors were struck by the potential. They recognised an opportunity for alternative, informal voices to enter into the political debate without a great deal of cost or effort. These voices could provide information and perspectives that were not readily available in the mainstream media thus offering a more colourful, textured representation of political views and ideas in the UK.

All but one of the jurors said that starting a blog is not something they would consider. Despite acknowledging that setting up and looking after a blog was easier than ever, lack of technical expertise put some of the jury off. Limited time, writing ability and internet access were also put forward as factors that stopped them joining in with blogging. Although they might be prepared to visit other people’s blogs, the practice of blogging still had connotations of being a pursuit for internet connoisseurs. Clearly, the factors contributing to these feelings must be investigated further if we are to properly understand how blogging and other web technologies can facilitate interaction and dialogue between citizens.

The citizens on the jury saw the same factors that prohibited their take up of blogging as being problematic for elected representatives. For them, blogging was not something that every parliamentarian would want or be able to do. In some instances blogging could become more of a hassle or embarrassment than a benefit, for example, if an MP were to make a statement that went against party line, was incriminating or was plainly ill-informed. Nevertheless, our jury were keen to see blogging become a credible addition to the array of new media tools available to elected representatives interested in stepping up interaction with their constituents.

Blogging is an example of a new media resource that can increase the transparency and accessibility of parliamentarians and their work. But parliamentarians must not take on blogging passively. They must ask questions of blogging and look to adapt it to their needs. As with the upkeep of their websites, parliamentarians may wish to appoint someone to blog on their behalf, but they may also find the process of self-publishing a fulfilling and efficient way of communicating with constituents. They may decide to adopt a blog-based website as a low-cost, low-maintenance alternative to keeping a standard website. Or, instead of replying to a series of emails all making the same request individually, MPs may wish to blog their reply.

However, one of the most important questions parliamentarians have to consider is what their motivation is for blogging. Is it to share information or to make statements in the conventional spirit of blogging? Of the blogs we observed, it was apparent that a higher frequency of broadcasting was taking place than two-way dialogue. Perhaps what will give blogs permanence and value in the political process is if elected representatives use them to ask more than tell. The opportunity to ask questions and gather information from constituents (and other actors) is one of the most underused qualities of blogging and one of the most obvious benefits to parliamentarians.

Footnotes
i Democracy Online: What do we want from MPs’ web sites?, Hansard Society, 2001
ii A detailed account of the APPG meeting on MPs and Blogging is available at http://bill.verity-networks.com/billblog/stuff/00000074.html
iv See http://www.blogcensus.net/weblog/
v See http://www.technorati.com/
viii See http://www.downingstreetsays.com/
ix Copies of questionnaire are available from the Hansard Society at edemocracy@hansard.lse.ac.uk
There are audiences to debates and web fora have mushroomed as crude listening posts, inviting hitherto silent interactive relationship with the public, formats such as phone-ins, studio-audience voices of the public. As the broadcast media have come under pressure to adopt a more chatter, but a scarcity of tools and techniques for hearing the diverse and multitudinous it's like to be you; to affirm that your thoughts are at least as worth hearing as anyone Politicians, who are used t o shouting through megaphones and broadcasting through everyone's account counts. democracy needs, blogging is a source of nourishment for a kind of democracy in which If sitting at home and v oting anonymously in endless populist plebiscites is not what else's; to emerge from the spectating audience as a player and maker of meanings. 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.

The main public complaint against politicians is that they rarely really listen to people. 78% of a UK representative sample of 909 (polled by yougov, January 7-9, 2004) agreed with the statement that: "Nobody in government ever listens to people like me." There is a widespread sense that the political elite spends so much time talking to itself (media commentators and producers are perceived to be part of this systemic and incestuous loop) that it has lost – or never gained – the capacity to talk with, rather than to, real people. In fairness to politicians, this is a pervasive problem of contemporary communication: there is an abundance of sophisticated technologies for booming out messages to people, seducing them with background muzak and transmitting incessant broadcast chatter, but a scarcity of tools and techniques for hearing the diverse and multitudinous voices of the public. As the broadcast media have come under pressure to adopt a more interactive relationship with the public, formats such as phone-ins, studio-audience debates and web fora have mushroomed as crude listening posts, inviting hitherto silent audiences to "have their say".

Blogs are the latest and most 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.

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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, 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.

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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 to dependence 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 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 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 [Eliasoph1, Gamson2, Stromer-Galley3]. By allowing people to both interact with others and remain as 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 cliché 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 for the reader.” (p.266)

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 Hossein Derakhshan’s Editor: Myself [http://hoder.com/weblog/], 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.

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 [Sunstein5]. 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 websites 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 Lab 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 webloggers as a proxy to the things they are talking about. Webloggers typically contextualise 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 12 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 [Dellarocas6].

**Blogs as symbols of a free internet**

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 17th 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. [See Lesley Johnson, *The Unseen Voice: A Cultural History of Early Australian Radio*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 cyber-porn to 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.

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