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BLOGGING AS A DEMOCRACY TOOL FOR MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT – SOME FINNISH EMPIRICAL RESULTS

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Abstract

Blogging, keeping personal diaries (logs) on the Internet, is a new publication channel allowing in principle anyone to express their thoughts to a worldwide audience without any editorial interfering layers. This new publication channel is very crucial to politicians too. What they say on their blogs can critically affect their popularity as politicians, both in good and bad. Neglecting the new media can be costly, especially if a contact with the young generations is looked for. This article discusses the concept of blogs, their role in democracy and policy-making, and finally reports on a survey on the Finnish Members of Parliament blogging practices in September 2006. Our study shows that there seems to be no connection between running a blog and success in parliamentary elections for the members of Parliament.

1. Blogging

Blogging is a new phenomenon allowing virtually anyone to publish their ideas and thoughts over the Internet. A web log, blog, *is a publication of personal thoughts, experiences, and web links. It is updated frequently and is usually a mixture of what is happening in a person's life and what is happening on the web or in the media* [1]. There is ample evidence that blogging is a key tool also for politicians [2], blogging was for example in a central position in the presidential election of USA in 2004 [3]. In an Australian study, the importance of blogs in political life was notified already as early as 2003 [4, page 114]: *“The recent rapid growth in interest in blogs, in particular, and their tendency to be used to make comment in the public domain on matters of public interest, indicates the rapid adoption of online publishing tools within the Victorian community.”*

Blogging is an integral component in e-democracy. Hagen [5] states that *“Electronic Democracy is any democratic political system in which computers and computer networks are used to carry out crucial functions of the democratic process – such as information and communication, interest*

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articulation and aggregation, and decision-making". He further divides electronic democracy into three sub-topics: Cyberdemocracy, Teledemocracy and Electronic Democratisation. [6] also define three sub-fields of eDemocracy in a slightly different fashion: information provision, deliberation, and participation in decision-making.

Key words for blogging are personal touch, frequent update and taking or an attitude to issues of general interest. A recent article summarizes the motivations as follows [7, page 41]: "*Bloggers are driven to documents their lives, provide commentary and opinions, express deeply felt emotions, articulate ideas through writing, and form and maintain community forums.*" This means that blogging, sharing of ideas is at the kernel of any well-functioning society [8, page 87]: "*...the entry of ideas into the public domain is a core dynamic of social evolution*".

A blog could be in principle very impersonal, for example reporting on the incidents of an organization, but usually the metaphor is that of a published personal diary. Blogging can be too a marketing tool, for example the "person" to be presented in the blog could be a product [9]. In principle, the application of web as an open diary for any object is open for any kind of idea.

In the blog, the writer is expected to tell something about issues in his/her personal sphere. A key activity is to attract readers on a frequent basis in a society where attention is scarce [10]. This means that continually, fresh and interesting material must be included. Reporting continuously just and solely on personal happenings is anyway not the idea of a blog. More wisely, it should be used as a tool for taking part in general civil discussion.

Blogging could be compared to keeping frequent columns in a journal or newspaper. This privilege is however given to just few persons, and this activity usually binds the writer somewhat to the editorial line of the host publication. Within blogs, totally uncensored writing is possible, and for anyone.

Blogging enjoys popularity among users. Blogs can be easily found with powerful search engines such as Google, and a recent study [11, page 622] reports that "*Weblog users judged blogs as highly credible – more credible than traditional sources...Weblog users rated blogs higher on depth of information than they did on fairness.*". Blogging is done, as the keepers of blogs find the activity rewarding, interesting and fun [7, 12].

2. Blogging of Finnish Members of Parliament

The Finnish Parliament has 200 members. We surveyed the www-sites of the Members of Parliament in August 2006. The time should have been politically active, as parliamentary elections found time in March 2007.

Usually a Member of Parliament has three or four different sites:

1. the official site maintained by Parliament
2. the official site maintained by his/her party
3. the official site of the parliamentary party group (maintained by the party), sometimes associated with the previous
4. the official personal site, maintained by the Member of Parliament and his/her staff.

We concentrated our studies on the pages that the Members of Parliament are personally responsible for (group four above), and whose contents and settings they can edit. At this level, differences in the www-sites may occur. When the pages are maintained by the parliament or by the party, they follow an universal format, and differences between the different sites are few.

We performed the analysis with the Google search engine during September-October 2006. All data was input into an Excel sheet, and it is further analyzed by Excel and SPSS. The data we collected are reported in Table 1. Items 1-4 were collected from data outside the Internet. Later we added to our collected data the number of votes the Members of Parliament got from the elections, and the calculated reference figure for the candidate. ² This data can be used to build a link between the success of the member of Parliament and other factors. The item 36, integration of a blog, was added to the survey as a new element since year 2005, when the first data collection round took place. Here we concentrate on reporting data around blogging of the Members of Parliament.

² The Finnish election system is too complicated to be explained here, but the reference figure is one indicator of the success of the Member or the Parliament in the elections. In this, the differences between smaller and bigger electoral districts are mainly eliminated. More on the Finnish election system can be read from the Finnish Parliaments www-site: <http://web.eduskunta.fi/Resource.php/parliament/aboutparliament/presentation/elections.htm>

Table 1 Data collected from the Finnish Members of Parliament's websites

1. name
2. party
3. electoral district
4. number of votes in last elections
5. portrait, yes/no
6. age mentioned, yes/no
7. municipality of residence mentioned, yes/no
8. family members mentioned, yes/no
9. education mentioned, yes/no
10. career reported, yes/no
11. working address provided, yes/no
12. home address provided, yes/no
13. mobile phone number provided, yes/no
14. fixed-line work phone number provided, yes/no
15. e-mail address provided, yes/no
16. link to party site provided, yes/no
17. link in the parliamentary site to official personal site provided, yes/no
18. list of publications provided, yes/no
19. Curriculum Vitae (CV) provided, yes/no
20. political manifesto provided, yes/no
21. a ready-to-fill contact form provided, yes/no
22. assistants represented, yes/no
23. identical information in Finnish and English, yes/no
24. identical information in Finnish and Swedish, yes/no
25. meeting calendar, yes/no
26. meeting calendar history, yes/no
27. meeting calendar future, yes/no
28. samples of publications and speeches made outside Parliament, yes/no
29. number of Google hits
30. the personal site ranking in Google
31. used domain, fi/net/com/ws/org/other
32. number of picture elements on the site
33. data of last site update provided, yes/no
34. the URL of the site
35. existence of the personal site, no/yes/several/not functioning
36. a blog integrated to the site

In our analysis of the websites of the Finnish Members of Parliament, we found that 87,5% of the members have a working personal website. A general conclusion from the material is that about one quarter of the members are doing little or no work with websites, and one quarter are working excellently with them. About half of the Members of Parliament maintain websites, but do not do it diligently. Of the 175 Sites, there was a blog in 52 pages (29,7%). This leaves 123 pages (70.3%) without a blog.

Blogging is a form of (inter)active discussion with others. Other indications of interactivity in communication of the Member of Parliament are for example application of web forms on the www-page (item 21 on our list) or provision of a e-mail-address (item 15 on our list) or mobile (item 13 on our list) or fixed-line (item 14 on our list) phone number. Correlations between applications of these different media are reported in Table 2.

Table 2 Allowance of other communication channels by blogger and non-blogger Members of Parliament (total sample 175 Member of Parliament)

Other media	Bloggers (n=52)		Non-bloggers (n=123)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Mobile phone number provided	42 (80,8%)	10 (19,2%)	112 (91,1%)	11 (8,9%)
Fixed phone number provided	41 (78,8%)	11 (21,2%)	102 (82,3%)	21 (17,7%)
e-mail address provided	100 (100,0%)	0 (0%)	116 (94,3%)	7 (5,7%)
Contact form provided	11 (21,2%)	41 (78,8%)	27 (22,0%)	96 (78,0%)

From Table 2 we are to conclude different things. There seems to be a weak substitution effect between mobile phones and blogs. Non-bloggers seem to be a little more eager to give their mobile phone numbers than bloggers. With fixed phones, the substitution effect is not visible: the figures are about the same for bloggers and non-bloggers. Of bloggers, a little bit bigger proportion does not give their fixed-line telephone number. Maybe we can conclude that bloggers consider classical fixed-line telephones as an old-fashioned communication channel.

We can too compare delivery of fixed-line and mobile phone numbers from the table. The proportions are around the same for both groups. There is maybe already an effect, that mobile phone is seen as the main channel, and fixed-line phone contact is left out as unnecessary. It is to be remembered that from all this we can of course not know how the Members of Parliament really use their phones: do they answer or not, and do they answer personally or thought some third parties.

Having a possibility to e-mail contact is integrally bound to blogging. If you blog you are also giving a possibility to contact yourself with e-mail. E-mail seems to be well rooted in the political culture also otherwise, since of those who run a www-site, just 7 (5,7%) Members of Parliament do not provide an e-mail address (again, from this we can of course not conclude how they actually do run e-mail communication).

Ready-to-fill forms, on the contrary, are not very popular. For both bloggers and non-bloggers, they exist just for around 22% of the sites. Maybe this kind of communication can be seen as bureaucratic and cumbersome: e-mail can do almost anything (and usually more) than contact forms.

If we take a look at the 30 Members of Parliament, who got the best reference value from the elections, 11 (36,7%) of them had a blog. If we take a look at the 30 worst grades of reference value, 10 of them (33,3%) had a blog. This result very strongly suggests that running a blog has no relation to the success in the elections.

3. Conclusions

Blogging is establishing itself as an important tool for political and civil discussions. Blogging gives a publication channel even for those who have it difficult to access to journals, newspapers, radio and television – the classical publishing media. Blogging is an externally unedited activity, which means that the contents of the blogs can be very radical. Blogging is a key tool for e-democracy.

Key elements of blogging are personal touch, frequent update and taking or an attitude to issues of general interest. Without constant update of interesting contents, blogs fast lose their readers in a world scarce in attention. About one fourth (26%) of the Finnish Members of Parliament have integrated blogging to their www-interaction portfolio.

We shortly also studied the correlation between using blogs and other communication means. Maybe the most interesting finding here was that Members of Parliament somewhat seem to substitute between mobile phones and blogs. Bloggers do not give their mobile phone numbers on the Internet as eagerly as non-bloggers. Further, many Members of Parliament have already abandoned giving fixed-line phone numbers – mobile phone seems to be the dominant phone interface.

This study did not study the quality of the blogs found, but public press in Finland has paid a lot of attention to the fact that many blogs of Finnish Members of Parliament are not updated in a constant way, or that many Members of Parliament have totally abandoned their blogging as soon as they got again elected to the Finnish Parliament (for the next four years). So the total number of really working, productive blogs by the Finnish Members of Parliament is smaller than found in this study. Our study shows that in our sample, running or not running a blog by a Member of Parliament seems not to have any effect on the success in the elections.

Our database offers a possibility for further analyses. As longitudinal data begins to cumulate (we plan to continue the data analysis for the coming years too), trends and patterns in www-site supply of Finnish Members of Parliament hopefully begin to emerge. Further, theoretical research will surely lead to connections between different items of the database, connections which can then be studied in practice.

Our sample is comprehensive for the Finnish Parliament. Of course, however, results can not be generalized to other countries. Hopefully we can in the future conduct international studies comparing different countries' parliaments. The data collection instrument should be general and relatively error- and interpretation free, but one of the difficulties of this type of research is that data collection and interpretation is a quite labour-intensive research phase.

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