

**Blogging for Democracy: Deliberation, Autonomy, and Reasonableness in the
Blogosphere**

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Introduction

The increasing popularity of Weblogs, or blogs for short, opens up the possibility of a new kind of “public square” that has the potential to extend and deepen the way in which we interact and engage each other in political discourse. In particular, the recent surge in the popularity and influence of blogs points to the growing importance of this type of political engagement. Politicians and citizens alike are increasingly bypassing the traditional modes of political communication and instead utilizing the internet as a way to communicate and engage with both like-minded individuals and opponents. These moves are promising to proponents of deliberative democracy since they seem to point to the development of vibrant online public forums where political issues can be freely and openly debated. This paper will critically evaluate this promise and ask whether or not blogging is consistent with the main theoretical tenants of deliberative democracy. My argument is that, despite some initial promise, blogging fails to satisfy several important criterion of deliberative democracy. In making my argument, I have divided the paper into three sections. In section one I argue that in order to understand blogging’s potential contribution to deliberative democracy, it must be considered within the context of the information society. In section two I sketch and develop an ideal model of deliberative democracy. Finally, in section three I apply this model to blogging and argue that while it has the potential to be a valuable practice that can expand the opportunities for citizens to engage politically, so far this initial promise remains unfulfilled. This is due to an overly narrow range of practices and opportunities that severely limit its effectiveness as a deliberative democratic forum.

Section 1 - From a Post-Industrial Society to an Information Society: the blogosphere as public space

New advances in information technology have opened up the internet as a new “public square” for public deliberation. Citizens who once were constrained in both a temporal and geographic manner now have access to other citizens who may be located anywhere in the world twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Moreover, anyone with access to a computer, when not using it to bank, shop, or even date online, can now use the internet to conduct research, read or watch the news, post his/her own opinions to websites, engage in political debates, and organize support or opposition to virtually any issue on the political landscape. In many respects, these developments seem to confirm the rise of a new, postindustrial or information society that has its own unique social, economic, and political practices and networks (Castells, 2000).

Driven by a group of sociologists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, some theorists began to articulate a view of society that they labeled the post-industrial. Writers such as Daniel Bell (1973), Alvin Toffler (1970) and Peter Drucker (1969) outlined a vision of society that charted the shift away from large scale manufacturing as the main organizing principle of society to one driven by service industries. Just as Marx, Weber and Durkheim had chartered the transformation of agrarian society and the rising dominance of industry and manufacturing, the post-industrial theorists argued that humanity was entering nothing short of a new epoch (Kumar, 1995: 1-2). In *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society* (1973), Bell outlined this shift and argued that information and theoretical knowledge would become the dominant currency of this new society by being the main source of value and of growth of the future. For Bell there are three main characteristics of post-industrial society. The first is the shift from a manufacturing economy to one driven by service industries. No longer would manual labor and heavy manufacturing be the defining characteristic of work, but rather the rapid growth of professional and technical employment. Second, this new engine of society would be increasingly dominated by the centrality of the new science-based high-tech industries that utilized knowledge and information as commodities to be exploited for profit. Finally, the third major change would see the rise of a new technical

elite coupled with the advent of a new principle of stratification based on a specific skill set characterized by knowledge and information (Bell, 1973:14-20). Driving this transformation, according to Bell, was the increase in the amount of information technology and its ability to expand and add value to the existing modes of production.

My basic premise has been that knowledge and information are becoming the strategic resource and transforming agent of the post-industrial society...just as the combination of energy, resources and machine technology were the transformation agencies of the industrial society (Bell, 1980: 531, 545).

Thus, for Bell, information, knowledge and creativity are best understood as the new raw materials of the post-industrial economy. However, they are materials that themselves are constantly changing and growing and are best seen as dynamic properties in some sort of transformative process or processes in the whole of society.

The importance of this shift or transformation is noted by Kumar who points out that “the new society is now defined, and named, by its novel methods of acquiring, processing and distributing information.” Not surprisingly, the computer serves as the “central symbol and analytical engine of change” at the center of Bell’s account (Kumar, 1995: 8). John Naisbitt, writing after Bell, puts it more bluntly: “computer technology is to the information age what mechanization was to the industrial revolution” (Naisbitt, 1984: 22). The revolutionary aspect of this shift, according to Bell, is the convergence of telecommunication with the computer, and its reach and penetration into virtually all aspects of society. Today, we can see how Bell’s thesis has manifested itself in businesses and in the home. Moreover, this penetration has even reached the personal level in the form of laptops equipped with WiFi and personal communication devices such as Blackberries and Treos that allow cell phone users to utilize high-speed over-the-air connections to access the internet. Naisbitt points out how the computer has now become intrinsically linked with satellites, television, the telephone (both land and cell lines), and cable (both traditional coaxial and fiber optic) (Naisbitt, 1984: 57).

Building on Bell’s original thesis, other post-industrial theorists such as Manuel Castells have argued that it is best to think of today’s society in terms of the networked nature of information. In his three volume treatise on the subject, *The Rise of the Network*

Society (2000), Castells argues that “one of the key features of the informational society is the networking logic of its basic structure, which explains the use of the concept of ‘network society’....Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power and culture” (Castells, 2000: 21, 500). Not surprisingly, the advent and development of the Internet serves as Castells exemplar of the network society (Castells, 2001).

Despite beginning at the “unlikely intersection of big science, military research, and libertarian culture” by the 1990s the Internet was essentially privatized and its technical, open architecture allowed the networking of disparate computer networks spread around the world. Moreover, the development of easy to use browsers such as Mosaic and later Netscape and their free distribution meant that the World Wide Web could be navigated by anyone who had a connection to the internet (Castells, 2001: 16-7). This last point is an important one and is one that I plan on returning to in the final section, but it is worth noting here that in analyzing its creation and development we can discern certain underlying values that permeate the internet and govern its practices and uses. These values, such as individual liberty, independent and autonomous thinking and of sharing and cooperation, are in many ways foundational to the way the internet serves as a privatized, public forum that links distant people and communities throughout the world (Castells, 2001: 24). In my view, the emergence and practice of blogging is one of the areas in which these values are perhaps most on display.

Blogging in its most basic form is a type of online publishing best characterized as an interactive diary. This new form of social interaction allows users to post their views for others to see and offers them the opportunity to engage in an online dialogue or conversation. These posts can then be linked to other blogs or sites creating the potential for far-reaching discussions available to anyone who can get online. The upshot of blogs as a communication medium is that users can engage in this new form of public space in a “massively distributed but completely connected conversation covering every imaginable topic of interest” (Marlow, 2004). While blogs do indeed cover almost every conceivable topic, for our purposes here I am most interested in the

rise and proliferation of political blogs such as the Daily Kos, MyDD, Instapundit, and Powerline (Brady: 2005: 4).¹ In many ways, these four blogs represent the most popular blogs from each side of the political spectrum. The Daily Kos, run by Markos Moulitsas and MyDD, run by Jerome Armstrong are more or less left-leaning and are firmly viewed as supporting Democrats. Instapundit, run by University of Tennessee law professor Glenn Reynolds and Powerline, written by John H. Hinderaker and Scott W. Johnson have a decidedly right-leaning ideology and are usually identified with republican causes and candidates.

While the format of these and other blogs vary widely, there are some common features that contribute to blogging's essentially deliberative nature. The basic layout of a blog consists in a title banner containing various links, mostly administrative in nature; a side bar on the right or left featuring links to other blogs (blogrole) or news sites and/or advertising; and the main posting area that is usually ordered reverse-chronologically (Brady, 2005: 7). In the main posting area the author of the blog or a guest blogger will usually post a paragraph or two on a particular topic or issue and invite visitors to post their own comments, which are typically compiled on a separate page that consists of all comments about that particular post. Users can also tag items, which is usually a keyword or term to both help viewers quickly ascertain what the post is about and to serve as a mark for search engines like Google. Permalinks can also be utilized to point readers to the specific entry after it has moved from the front page into the archives. Finally, blog entries often include links to other blogger's entries or news stories on similar subjects in the form of highlighted hyperlinks that creates a seamless "virtual conversation" between individual bloggers and their audiences.

Even though blogging itself has been around for over ten years, political blogs have only recently gained in popularity. Beginning in 2001, political blogging began to catch on as a way to supplement or even bypass the mainstream media's agenda setting domination of the political landscape. In 2002 blogs were instrumental in bringing down then Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott whose comments about Senator and one-time Presidential Candidate Strom Thurmond were spread and publicized in the on-line

¹ Daily Kos: <http://dailykos.com>; MyDD: <http://mydd.com>; Instapundit: <http://instapundit.com>; and Powerline: <http://powerlineblog.com>

community well before the mainstream media covered the story.² Blogs have also provided another viewpoint of the Iraq war and were involved in debunking Dan Rather's 2004 now retracted story of President George W. Bush's military service.³ The presidential election in 2004 seemed to serve as a watershed event for political bloggers as both their number and influence began to grow and eventually lead to their acceptance in the mainstream media. Many television outlets and popular newspapers began to cover blogs even as many reporters themselves began to produce their own blogs.⁴ Politicians have now also jumped into the blogosphere and many maintain and update their own blogs and most have a MySpace page.⁵

It is the social dynamic and deliberative nature of blogs that is my chief concern in this paper. The blogosphere, like every other social system, has its own order and hierarchy governed by norms such as solidarity, trust, civility and reciprocity. As described by Moulitsas and Armstrong, their blogs were founded with the goal of reaching those committed citizens who had been disaffected by the traditional corporate media.

Both of us started our blogs because we wanted a voice in our nation's politics. We had hundreds, then thousands, of readers, as we somehow tapped into a greater need for strong progressive voices—voices that had been shut out of the corporate media outlets. And the online medium allowed a level of participation nonexistent in traditional media. It wasn't us talking down to our readers it was all of us collectively having a conversation (Armstrong and Moulitsas, 2006: xv).

The conversational nature of blogging, then, offers deliberative democrats real hope that a new pervasive medium can be utilized to further political ends. In the next section I will outline the theoretical parameters of deliberative democracy.

Section 2 – An Ideal Model of Deliberative Democracy

² http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/week_2002_12_01.php

³ See Salam Pax's now defunct blog Where Is Raed? (http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/) and Charles Johnson's Little Green Footballs (<http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/?entry=12526&only>).

⁴ <http://www.cyberjournalist.net/cyberjournalists.php>

⁵ The blog Think Progress has a running scorecard of each of the 2008 Presidential candidates use of the internet in several key categories including whether or not they maintain blogs or have a MySpace page. See <http://thinkprogress.org/nettrends08> for further information.

Theories of deliberative democracy differ from traditional approaches to democracy by focusing not on the mere aggregation of interests, as is the case in normative models of liberal democracy. In its most essential form, liberal politics is primarily about the resolution of sometimes conflicting predetermined preferences under the auspices of a neutral framework of a just constitution. A primary principle in liberal politics is the promotion of individual rights and freedoms to protect individuals from not only the government, but each other. In what may surprise some, the principles of democracy did not figure highly in traditional accounts of liberal politics, and only began to be seen as necessary in the late nineteenth-century in the writing of John Stuart Mill (Dryzek, 2000: 9). Mill believed that public debate could be an effective tool against the tyranny of the majority, but only if it was based on reason and rationality (Mill, 1974). Considered in this manner, democracy in liberal politics is, as Joshua Cohen points out, a *derivative* ideal that helps support the values of equality and fairness (Cohen, 1989: 17). Put simply, democracy is not an intrinsic part of liberal politics even though it is now commonly associated with it. It is rather best viewed as an instrumental part of liberal politics whose value is solely derived from the good that it helps to bring about, e.g., the prevention of the tyranny of the majority as in the case of Mill.

Despite its instrumental value to liberal politics and its widely accepted fusion with today's versions of liberal politics (as in the common phrase liberal democracy), these models stress only preference reconciliation and aggregation *prior* to political interaction (Dryzek, 2000: 10. Also see Miller, 1992 and Warren 1992). Alternatively, models of deliberative democracy focus more on the processes leading up to issues democratically settled in a search for legitimization and authenticity (Benhabib, 1996: 69 and Cunningham, 2002:161). Democratic authenticity, according to Dryzek, is

...the degree to which democratic control is engaged through communication that encourages reflection upon preferences without coercion.... This condition is met to the degree that domination via the exercise of power, manipulation, indoctrination, propaganda, deception, expressions of mere self-interest, threats, and the imposition of ideological conformity are all absent (Dryzek, 2000: 8).

For deliberative democrats, then, the processes of arriving at democratically agreed principles become a central focus. Taken in this manner, it is essential in the

deliberative processes that citizens communicate with each other in a free and fair manner in seeking to arrive at collective decisions. It follows that these processes need some kind of just institutional framework, like the kind provided by an agreed upon constitution, and a set of norms that can at once promote the free and fair discussion of ideas *and* constrain the effects of narrow self-interest and domination that may arise. In order to establish this kind of framework and the set of concomitant norms that support it, some writers have suggested using the idea of public reason to filter the kinds of acceptable political arguments from those that are unacceptable (Dryzek, 2000: 11). Thus, in traditional models of deliberative democracy, as a requirement for participation, citizens are asked to adhere to the norms of public reason, meaning that they must give and take reasons that others can accept. Put another way, citizens must justify laws and policies to each other on the basis of mutually acceptable reasons. It follows, then, that the aim of deliberative democracy is to arrive at some kind of reasoned consensus, which is then transformed into public policies.

A main weakness of this approach concerns what it means to ensure that political decisions are grounded in principles that everyone can reasonably accept and how to go about doing this. The most well known response to this dilemma has been laid out by John Rawls (1996 and 1999), who suggests that individuals who engage in the deliberative forums of the state must “bracket off” their comprehensive identities – identities based on any kind of religious or moral doctrine – and instead embrace a political identity based on notions of reasonableness, which in turn requires a fairly high level of autonomy.

Rawls places the idea of public reason, which specifies at the most fundamental level the “basic moral and political values that are to determine a constitutional democratic government’s relation to its citizens and their relation to one another” at the center of his overall project (Rawls, 1999: 132). For Rawls, given that the justification of the use of public power must be in terms of public reason, each individual must engage in the public domain *qua* citizen prepared to give and take public reasons “according to what they consider the most reasonable conception of political justice” (Rawls, 1999: 136). In this way, individuals uphold the criterion of reciprocity and the terms of fair cooperation

and, by doing so, are deemed to be “reasonable” in Rawls's scheme. Put another way, *qua* citizen, reasonable individuals only propose those policies that they sincerely believe reasonable others can accept. For their part, they accept the reasons that others have offered under the understanding that the others have done the same. Following the legal enactment of the issues' resolution, all parties agree to abide by the outcome whether or not it is in accordance with their respective beliefs (Rawls, 1999: 137). Of course *qua* individual they are also moved by non-public reasons connected to their non-public conceptions of the good. However, according to Rawls, they have a moral duty to uphold the political principles and treat others with the necessary degree of civility and reciprocity that supports the idea of public reason (Rawls, 1999: 136). There may be a problem of stability because of the possible conflict between public reason and reasons of the good. However, for Rawls the political principles of justice are such that individuals can accept them from within their own reasonable conception of the good.

One of the key aspects of Rawls's theory is his belief that asking deliberators to uphold the idea of public reason is beneficial to both citizen and state as people are brought out of their narrowly held comprehensive identities and asked to participate in the common project of public reason and justification. To support this, he points out that there are likely to be certain educative effects of deliberation as individuals and groups are exposed to other reasonable comprehensive identities (Rawls, 1999: 154). In the end, the deliberative process will help citizens not only decide which course of action to take, but will also help them to decide if this or that particular course of action is worthy of pursuing, which in turn, may cause them to re-evaluate their own preferences.

This last point, that engaging in the deliberative community may bring about the transformation of an agent's preferences, is an essential aspect of deliberative democracy and one that I believe makes the kind of deliberation found in blogosphere promising as a new medium of communication. What is important in requiring individuals to engage in public reasoning is its potential to take narrow self-interested preferences and transform them into ones that are broader in application or outlook (Cohen, 1989: 24). If participants are required to give reasons that others can accept,

then they must make an attempt to discover just what those reasons are even if they lie far outside of their own identity and experiences. In attempting to discover these kinds of reasons, individuals will sometimes have to look beyond themselves and accept what Rawls terms “the fact of reasonable pluralism”, which means the existence of incompatible but equally legitimate ways of life (Rawls, 1999: 131-2). Likewise, when on the receiving end of deliberative conversations agents must be prepared to accept the reasons of others, even if they do not line up with their own thoughts on the matter. Because of the ideals of reasonableness, civility and reciprocity, those engaging in the deliberative processes will have to be open and fair to viewpoints that may be far removed from their own.

For deliberative democrats, this kind of give-and-take is best viewed as instrumental to the higher value of individual autonomy. In its most simple form, autonomy consists of two parts (Kymlicka, 2002: 215). First individuals lead their lives from the inside, evaluating and making choices to satisfy their needs. In this sense autonomy requires individuals to look inward and apply some kind of critical reflection in an effort to discover for themselves what their preferences are (Dagger, 1997: 13-4). Second, these choices are not fixed and individuals may wish to revise them should they so desire. In this manner, autonomous individuals are able to shop in a kind of cultural marketplace, picking and choosing this or that way of life according to their own critical reflections of what they value. It is important to note, however, that there are aspects of this process that are influenced and mediated by external factors such as the degree that we ourselves allow others to influence our preferences or the extent of state interference in our choices.⁶ And of course the extent that our engagement in the deliberative process affects our autonomy and transforms our preferences may also be dependent on the medium in which we are engaging with others, something that I will touch on in the next section.

We can summarize the main points of deliberative democracy in the following way:

⁶ For more on this point please see Chapter 3 from my *Republicanism in the Modern World* (2003).

DD1. Deliberative Democracy is not about the mere aggregation of fixed preferences.

DD2. The methods and nature of deliberative procedures and forums must be free and fair and governed by a just constitution.

DD3. A chief aim of the deliberative process is the legitimization and authenticity of public policies and/or ideals.

DD4. Deliberation must be governed by the idea of public reason, which asks participants to give and take reasons that others can accept.

DD5. Engaging in the deliberative community is likely to contribute to individuals' personal autonomy and may have a transformative effect on their preferences.

So much for the ideal model of deliberative democracy. In the next, and final, section I will apply this ideal framework to blogging to see if it can live up to its initial promise as a new form of deliberative democracy.

Section 3 - Blogging for Democracy

Taken in its most simple form, there may be evidence that, at least prima facie, blogging may be consistent with point DD1 of the above summary of deliberative democracy. The act of blogging itself may be seen an essentially conversational exercise, the aim of which is not about the mere aggregation of preferences in some kind of E-voting system. To be sure, it is not hard to find voting or polls in the blogosphere on this or that issue, but these exercises are not viewed as the ultimate end product of blogging but rather as interesting topics to discuss.⁷ As I pointed out in Section 1, evidence of the essentially deliberative nature of blogging can be seen in the apt characterization of blogging by Armstrong and Moulitsas as essentially a “collective conversation” among members of a virtual political community. In other words, blogging is focused on carrying out virtual conversations and debates about public policies in the hope of positively shaping their resolution. These sentiments tie back into my earlier discussion of the information society. Some theorists believe that as we move more and more into the information society, virtual communities will began to replicate, and ultimately

⁷ For an interesting take on online polling compared to more traditional polls see Pollster.com's blog (http://www.pollster.com/mystery_pollster/numbers_guy_rating_the_pollste.php).

replace some of the more traditional aspects and practices of fixed communities (Castells, 2001: 37). The thought is that these new communities will at worst offer us new avenues of cooperation and social interaction, and at best will fundamentally transform the way in which we relate to others in our private lives. A prime example of this is found in the proliferation of social networking websites such as MySpace and Facebook.⁸

A more pressing problem here is the potential for the cyberbalkanization of the blogosphere, which is the isolation of individuals within groups that share their values and beliefs. Robert Putnam describes the problem this way:

The Internet enables us to confine our communication to people who share precisely our interests. . . . That powerful specialization is one of the medium's great attractions, but also one of its subtler threats to bridging social capital. . . . Real-world interactions often force us to deal with diversity, whereas the virtual world may be more homogenous, not necessarily in demographic terms, but in terms of interest and outlook (Putnam, 2000: 177-8).

Many blogs seem to have a self-reinforcing function where like minded users simply help each other solidify their fixed preferences by cutting themselves off from any meaningful critique of their own beliefs and values. Described by Cass Sunstein (2001) as a kind of “echo-chamber,” many bloggers maintain that they do not want to engage in critical kinds of exchanges on-line, but instead use blogs to seek out and interact with likeminded individuals. Moreover, the same technology that allows users to access an infinite number of debates and news-sources also allows them to ignore and filter out those that may be critical of their own viewpoints (Harmon, 2004). The upshot here is that the fragmentation and polarization of on-line communities undermines the deliberative credentials of blogs as they may be more about monologue than discussion. What makes this a potential deal-breaker for deliberative democrats is that it seems only to reinforce fixed preferences, a key reason that they reject more traditional versions of aggregative democracy (see DD1 and DD5 above).

⁸ Many will argue that these “virtual” communities are, by their very nature, impoverished. This is an important question and one I plan to take up in a separate paper. For more on this see Castells (2001) pp. 117-9 and Putnam (2000) chapter nine.

Another problem focuses on whether or not the methods and procedures of blogging can be considered to be free and fair.⁹ On the one side, blogging itself is an activity that anyone with access to the internet can engage in, no matter where they are located in the world. Put simply, there are no residency requirements to participate in blogging debates. Another potential strength of blogging is that those wishing to participate in online debates can do so more or less at a time of their choosing and are not constrained by opening and closing hours. This satisfies a key complaint among some critics of deliberative democracy that traditional deliberative forums such as the town meeting do not take account of the time pressures of modern life (Cunningham, 2002: 180-3). The internet is open 24/7, and thus those with busy schedules or non-traditional working hours can participate in blogging at their leisure and according to their own availability. Blogging also allows participants to engage with ease in multiple debates, no matter what their ideological affiliation might be. For example, republicans are not banned from participating in democratic leaning blogs and vice versa. Of course, one important issue here is the existence of internet trolls who purposively post inflammatory messages on blogs in the hope of eliciting a response. These types of posts bring into question whether or not the type of debates found on blogs are consistent with the idea of public reason, an issue that I will take up below. For now, however, it is enough to point out that most of the more popular mainstream blogs are freely open to all regardless of political, religious, or moral beliefs.

On the other side, however, a key issue here is whether or not access to the internet is widely available so that all who wish to participate in blogging can actually do so. At issue is the so-called digital divide, which separates those with both the access and knowledge to utilize the internet from those with little or no access and/or the inability to effectively use it. At stake is a kind of cyberapartheid that sees the marginalization of

⁹ This issue raises questions surrounding computer mediated practices. Importantly, some might ask whether or not the act of blogging itself is something that can be considered “practice neutral” insofar as it does not negatively impact users’ ability to effectively communicate their reasons and ideas. While I think that this is certainly an important question, it is not one that I will take up in this paper. This is because normative models of deliberative democracy also face these types of questions since it might be said that asking citizens to publicly state reasons in an open forum might too raise questions of practice neutrality. It follows that no one practice can claim to be completely neutral, and what must be hoped for is a range of practices and forums that can offer participants a choice of which kind of communication and forum they feel most comfortable participating in.

those segments of the population who, for whatever reason, do not or cannot, participate in these kinds of deliberative forums. The upshot is an untraversable chasm between the techno elites and the have-nots or cannots that will only widen if positive steps are not taken to address it (Castells, 2001: 247 and Putnam, 2000: 175). This is a key issue, and if it cannot be satisfactorily resolved could effectively rule out blogging as a meaningful deliberative forum since participation in it may not be equally available to all. For Cohen, participants in deliberative democracy must be “substantively equal in that the existing distribution of power and resources does not shape their chances to contribute to deliberation, nor does that distribution play an authoritative role in their deliberation” (Cohen, 1997: 23). According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) about 60 percent all households in the US have internet access.¹⁰ Despite a steady march toward more internet penetration, statistics also point to an ethnic digital divide that sees Whites (50.4%) and Asians-Americans (49.4%) having roughly twice the amount of internet access than African-Americans (23.5%) or Hispanics (23.7%). Other factors such as education, income, and age also point to a sharp digital divide between the internet “haves” and “have-nots” (Castells, 2001: 249).¹¹ However, the ITU statistics also show a lessening of the gap between those with and those without internet access. The hope for deliberative democrats is that this divide continues to shrink so that blogs and other types of online forums can be considered truly “free and fair.”

If internet access can be effectively extended—meaning users have easy access and a competent levels of knowledge and abilities—to all who wish to use it, and of course this is a big “if”, then blogging offers the possibility that it can be used to legitimate and authenticate public policies. There can be no doubt that blogs have become major political players. In the 2004 election, bloggers were instrumental in carrying forward the insurgent candidacy of Democrat Howard Dean.¹² Other online groups such as

¹⁰ This statistic is disputed by the Nielsen/Netratings who believe that number to be closer to 75 percent. See http://www.netratings.com/pr/pr_040318.pdf for further information.

¹¹ Of course these statistic only reflect the current situation in the US. Many critics will point out that internet access in industrialized countries is atypical, and that there is a entrenched global digital divide. See the report by the International Telecommunication Union for world-wide statistics at <http://www.itu.int/wsis/tunis/newsroom/stats/>.

¹² For an excellent account of bloggers in the 2004 election see “Fear and Laptops on the Campaign Trail” by Matthew Klam (New York Times Magazine, September 26, 2004).

MoveOn.org demonstrated that they were effective at raising money and countering other, more traditional political organizations. In the 2004 election cycle, MoveOn.org PAC raised around \$11 million dollars from over 300,000 donors.¹³ The trend continued in the 2006 mid-term elections with blogs playing an even more important role in not only issue identification and grassroots networking, but in raising millions of dollars.¹⁴ The blogs DailyKos.com, MyDD.com, and Swing State Project collectively raised approximately \$1.5 million dollars on behalf of several “netroots” candidates, almost half of whom won their election.¹⁵ On some level, the fact that blogs have been successful in raising money for candidates is counter-intuitive to certain deliberative democratic ideals. Cohen believes that for a true deliberative democratic community to flourish campaigns must be publicly financed (Cohen, 1997: 31-2). However, in the absence of publicly financed political campaigns, raising money from myriad sources seems to be one of the more demonstrably effective uses of blogs. In returning to our deliberative model, it is unclear whether this function of blogs serves the goal of helping to legitimize and authenticate public policy. In some ways, it may, as Cohen suggests, contribute to inequality and domination, two conditions that would invalidate claims of legitimacy and authenticity.

Related to this question is the fourth principle of the deliberative model, the idea of public reason. For deliberative democrats, the kinds arguments put forward must first pass through a kind of virtual filter. Ideally, participants only give and take reasons that they sincerely believe that others can accept. As I mentioned earlier, these are reasons that are not based on any kind of comprehensive religious or moral value, but rather are political in nature. For many deliberative democrats, this requirement is an essential aspect in the quest for legitimacy and authenticity and in large part helps to limit the scope of what is acceptable public discourse. Moreover, it is this point that deliberative democrats point to in their effort to transform fixed preferences into ones that are able to be molded and modified in the course of debates. In order to move away from the mere aggregation of preferences, deliberative democrats believe that participants must be

¹³ <http://www.moveon.org/about.html>

¹⁴ See the Center for the Study of American Government at Johns Hopkins University's blog Campaigns Online for a detailed account of blogs and the 2006 elections at CampaignsOnline.org.

¹⁵ <http://www.actblue.com/page/netrootscandidates>

willing to accept that their own reasons and beliefs may not be good reasons and beliefs for everyone and be willing to modify them.

I think that it is not presently clear whether or not blogging as a deliberative forum is one where the idea of public reason has taken root and serves as the kind of filter intended by deliberative democrats. There are many instances where blogs have been places where engaging debates have taken place with participants from a great plurality of values and ideals. There are of course certain problems such as trolls who come into forums simply to disrupt and inflame others with “drive by” shots of extreme opinions or posts. At times the language of blogging can be said to lie outside of the norms of civility (the words idiot, cretin, stupid, and of course other more obscene uses of language regularly appear on many blogs). However, despite these difficulties, there may be more hope for blogs in meeting the requirements of the idea of public reason since not all versions of deliberative democracy have the same strict interpretation of this ideal. For example, Gutmann and Thompson (1996) have a more open standard than Rawls in that they maintain that arguments should not be confined to what is in the common interests of all. Rather, these writers believe that deliberators must only endeavor to make their arguments intelligible to those others who may hold fundamentally different views from their own. Another example is Habermas’s theory of communicative action, the aim of which is to strive to reach agreements over the facts and norms of the social world in an effort to achieve some kind of reliable level of mutual understanding among participants (Habermas, 1984 and 1990). Even Rawls has modified his position by introducing what he has termed the “wide view of public political culture” which contains a proviso that states that individuals may bring in their own reasonable comprehensive doctrines into the public sphere “provided that in due course public reasons, given by a reasonable political conception, are presented sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are introduced to support” (Rawls, 1999: 152-6; also see Rawls, 1996: li-iii). In other words, Rawls believes that reasonable individuals should make every effort to embrace public reasoning based on political ideals. However, comprehensive ideals may be introduced insofar as they are backed up by political ideals and, at some point, these ideals begin to merge with political values. The upshot of these moves seems to be an enlargement of the

potential reasons that individuals must give and take. It seems plausible, then, that blogging may be able to meet these less strict requirements of the type of reasons and arguments acceptable in deliberative forums. Although it is difficult currently to view blogging in this manner, there is reason to think that it is at least possible.

This is based on an understanding of the nature of the internet itself as an mechanism of transformation. As I argued earlier, blogging as a deliberative enterprise is best understood in the context of the shift from the industrial to the information society. Within this context, the internet is an exemplar of the kind of new mechanism for social organization and transformation. For Castells, there are three overriding conditions of the internet that point to its transformative power: 1) its open and decentralized networking architecture that is multi-directional in its distribution; 2) its open and fluid communication protocols; and 3) its open, cooperative and collective governance embedded in the norms of user practices (Castells, 2001: 28-9). These conditions point to the development of unique virtual communities with two common features and shared values (Castells: 2001: 54-5). The first is the value of horizontal and free communication that unleashes the potential for knowledge creation through online collaboration. Sometimes referred to as Web 2.0, this shift can be seen in the increasing popularity of wikis and folksonomies (tagging).¹⁶ It can also be seen in the recent surge of “citizen journalists” who collectively combine their knowledge and expertise to challenge the traditional managers of public information, the mainstream media. Indeed, many blogs such as Raw Story, the Drudge Report, Powerline, Crooks and Liars and Huffington Post are classified as news aggregators that act as news sources while also providing space for blogging.¹⁷ As mentioned earlier, one of blogging's main strengths is in the utilization of unique and dynamic knowledge bases and networks to confront, expose and sometimes debunk political or news events or stories. To be sure, there are important unanswered questions regarding the accuracy or reliability of these types of collaborative efforts, as I argue below, but my sense is that there is the potential for these problems to be self-correcting through the processes of contestation and deliberation. In other words, while inaccuracies are commonplace on

¹⁶ <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>

¹⁷ Raw Story: <http://rawstory.com>; Drudge Report: <http://drudgereport.com>; Powerline: <http://powerlineblog.com>; Huffingtonpost: <http://huffingtonpost.com>; and Crooks and Liars: <http://crooksandliars.com>.

the internet, the contestatory nature of these communities has the potential to self-correct through collection interaction.

For example, there was a recent post on the Drudge Report that Michael Ware, a CNN reporter based in Baghdad had heckled Senator John McCain at a press conference.¹⁸ Ware, a frequent target of right-leaning blogs for his allegedly biased reporting in Iraq, became the subject of several blog posts on websites such as Powerline¹⁹ and Instapundit²⁰. It was not until left-leaning blogs such as Raw Story²¹ and DailyKos²² released video footage of the incident that proved that Ware nor anyone else had heckling Senator McCain. Some hours later, some blogs apologized to Ware and retracted their initial statements, although to this date Drudge has not.²³ This story eventually found its way back to CNN, and Ware was forced to make several statements throughout the news cycle denying the claims.²⁴ It is this kind of self-correcting feature of blogs that at least opens up the possibility that through the deliberative processes, accuracy and truth, if there is such a thing, have a chance of surfacing. Through the horizontal and free communication of the blogosphere, the potential for valuable exercises in collaboration can be found within acts of deliberation and contestation.

The second feature and shared value of these virtual communities is “self-directing networking,” which means that users can find their own destination on the internet or make one themselves easily should they so desire. This can be seen in the recent proliferation of easy, do-it-yourself blog sites such as blogger.com that allow any user to make a blog. Alternatively, many users are able to make their own blogs by using their access to web space through their online service provider. This positive and creative exercise of self-expression can be seen as a manifestation of individuals’ capacity for autonomous action. Seen in the context of the information society, this idea connects to what Alfino and Pierce (1997 and 2001) term the autonomy theory of information, an

¹⁸ http://www.drudgereportarchives.com/data/2007/04/01/20070401_175303_flash.htm

¹⁹ <http://powerlineblog.com/archives/017227.php>

²⁰ <http://instapundit.com/archives2/003803.php>

²¹ http://rawstory.com/news/2007/Blogs_accuse_CNN_reporter_of_disrupting_0404.html

²² <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2007/4/1/21274/39372>

²³ <http://instapundit.com/archives2/2007/04/01-week/>

²⁴ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSGc5Vkh_1g

approach that views the value of information relative to its enhancement of individual autonomy. Individual autonomy is generally taken to be the capacity to exist as an independent moral agent and to live one's life according to reasons and motives chosen from within. As mentioned above, for some theorists like Rawls, autonomy plays a crucial role in the development of reasonableness, an essential aspect of traditional deliberative democratic models as seen in point DD5 above.

The basis of the autonomy theory of information is a conceptualization that builds on Claude Shannon's definition of information as the resolution of uncertainty (Shannon, 1948) Taken in this manner, then, "specific pieces of information carry more or less information depending on how much uncertainty they resolve" (Alfino and Pierce, 2001). As agents encounter more complex information and heightened levels of uncertainty, they must acquire certain necessary skills to process and evaluate it which may lead to shifts in understanding. In this manner, the autonomy theory of information connects to the type of skills and values associated with Kantian or Millian individualism promoted by liberal political philosophers as being essential to the acquisition of an individual's self-direction (Rawls, 1996 and Kymlicka 2002). It follows that individual autonomy is not only important to individuals, it is important to the communities that they constitute. In other words, there is an intimate connection between individuals being self-governing, which what is meant by personal autonomy, and communities being self-governing in a democratic sense (Alfino and Pierce, 2001). Thus, information plays a crucial role in the development of individuals' autonomy, just as it plays a crucial role in the development and maintenance of democratic self-government.

There are, however, three main problems with the autonomy theory of information characterized by what I call the three Vs: Value, Volume, and Velocity. First of all, with the advent of this new kind of internet based virtual political community, the value of information is often unreliable. Even though there is the real potential for inaccurate or misleading information to be corrected as pointed out earlier, there may be issues that fall through the cracks or are not corrected in a timely manner. Of course there are other accuracy problems perhaps best demonstrated by the popular website Wikipedia, a "free encyclopedia that anyone can edit," no matter their level of knowledge or

expertise about this or that particular entry.²⁵ For Larry Sanger, a chief architect of Wikipedia, the accuracy problems became so acute that he disassociated himself from it to found a rival portal, Citizendium (short for Citizen Compendium) that features a level of “expert” editors to review entries and filter out inaccuracies.²⁶

If the reliability of information found on blogs and the internet can be overcome, users are still faced with the second of the three “Vs”, problems of information overload due to the enormous volume of information found on blogs, and the internet generally (Edmund and Morris, 2000). Alternatively described by Shenk (1997) as “data smog,” the thought is that after a point users are unable to process the volume of information much like when individuals are confronted with noise overload: “a rate too high for the receiver to process efficiently without distraction, stress, increasing errors and other costs making information poorer” (Edmund and Morris, 2000: 19. Also see Klapp, 1986: 98-9). For example, in the above mentioned controversy involving the Drudge Report and CNN reporter Michael Ware, ten hours after the counter-story appeared on DailyKos.com there were ninety comments, an amount not uncommon in the blogosphere.²⁷ The question of overload is whether or not a user could usefully digest the volume of comments on this and the myriad other blogs covering the story to develop an autonomous point of view. While Edmund and Morris (2000: 23-25) point out that there are studies that suggest that these problems can be overcome by a combination of better personal information management and the use of technology, it is yet to be seen what affect, if any, these measures might have on personal autonomy.

The third challenge to the autonomy theory of information is the rate of velocity that information comes at users. The increasingly competitive nature of interaction in today’s social world points to a kind of information race where users must not only consume larger and larger quantities of information, but process it faster and faster to

²⁵ <http://wikipedia.com>. For critiques of Wikipedia see Simon Waldman’s “Who Knows?” (<http://technology.guardian.co.uk/online/news/0,12597,1335892,00.html>) Oct. 26, 2004; Frank Ahrens’ “Death by Wikipedia: The Kenneth Lay Chronicles (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/08/AR2006070800135.html>) July 8, 2006; and Cass Sunstein’s “A Brave New Wikiworld (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/23/AR2007022301596.html>) Feb. 24, 2007.

²⁶ http://en.citizendium.org/wiki/Main_Page

²⁷ <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2007/4/1/21274/39372>

stay ahead of others (Gleick, 2000). This quest for immediacy and of instantaneity seems to be somewhat incompatible with one of the basic tenants of personal autonomy, the need for agents to step back and reflect on their life choices. And, as I pointed out above, because there is an intimate connection between personal autonomy and deliberative democracy there is likely to be a political knock on effect. Described by Paul Virilio as a “dictatorship of speed” this problem can lend itself to a “loss of orientation” and a “disturbance in the perception of what reality is” (Virilio, 1995). Problems associated with the high rate of speed of information will likely be compounded by both the sometimes unreliable nature of information and its increasing volume. It follows, then, that taken together the three “Vs” present a real problem for not only the autonomy theory of information, but blogging as an exercise of deliberative democracy.

Conclusion

So where does that leave us? If my arguments are sound, then despite some initial prima facie promise, blogging as is currently practiced fails to satisfy several key criteria of deliberative democracy. We can summarize my argument in this way:

DD1. Deliberative Democracy is not about the mere aggregation of fixed preferences.

- Despite what some see as its “conversational” nature, there is some evidence to suggest that blogging lends itself to the cyberbalkanization of the internet, where individuals bed-down in self-reinforcing groups and are not willing to subject their values and ideals to the kind of critique necessary overcome the static nature of their fixed preferences.

DD2. The methods and nature of deliberative procedures and forums must be free and fair and governed by a just constitution.

- Although lessening, there is still a considerable digital divide between those who have easy access to the internet and those who do not or cannot do so.
- This may be especially so for certain ethnic groups.

- There is hope, however, that this gap will continue to close and that eventually blogging will satisfy this point.

DD3. A chief aim of the deliberative process is the legitimization and authenticity of public policies and/or ideals.

- There does seem to be some evidence that blogging does currently operate along these lines. A key determinant here would be whether or not the practices of blogging can overcome points DD1 and DD2 in satisfying fully this point.

DD4. Deliberation must be governed by the idea of public reason, which asks participants to give and take reasons that others can accept.

- There is mixed evidence about whether or not blogging satisfies the idea of public reason. This is due to varying levels of strictness in the kinds of reasons that are acceptable for participants to justify their arguments in deliberative forums.

DD5. Engaging in the deliberative community is likely to contribute to individuals' personal autonomy and may have a transformative effect on their preferences.

- Again, there is mixed evidence about whether or not blogging satisfies this condition. On the one hand, the self-directed networking aspect of blogging may well point to a positive contribution to individuals' autonomy. On the other hand, problems associated with the autonomy theory of information in the form of the three "Vs" call into question any potential positive contribution to individuals' autonomy.

While these points seem to indicate that blogging is not, at least not yet, a viable new form of deliberative democracy, it may not matter to the many bloggers who populate the blogosphere. They will point to its contribution to liberal democratic practices taken as a whole, and argue that it is at the very least another way in which citizens can cooperatively attempt to influence public policy and the electoral process. They will also argue that blogging has also opened up new public space, a positive development in the quest for democratic self-government.

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