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Blogging for Election: The Use and Function of Blogs as Communication Tool in a Danish Parliament Election Campaign

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INTRODUCTION

With all the recent buzz about weblogs in mainstream media, weblogs (referred to as "blogs") are becoming a natural part of the media ecology. Indeed, when the Danish election for Parliament in 2005 was hastily announced, and election-themed blogs emerged all over the place, it looked like blogs would come into play for the first time in a Danish election. During the short election campaign, 52 candidates engaged in blog activity, compared to only one candidate in the 2001 Danish election. This somewhat surprising assimilation of the blog genre was clearly inspired by the blogs of U.S. presidential candidates Kerry and Dean during the U.S. campaign in 2004. From a research point of view, a unique opportunity presented itself: In a political system so different from the American as the Danish, both culturally and structurally, how would the first generation of political blogs be used? And how would these blogs be received by a Danish audience?

This was the rationale behind our study of political weblogs in Denmark in 2005, which provides an initial look at the way blogs are being integrated into online personal political campaigns. We believe that a case study of how the blog is assimilated, used and received during a clearly defined period of time should be of interest to all researchers working within the area of internet communication studies. The entry of blogs into the political field is an important step in helping us understand what makes the use of blogs a success or failure *as a new form of online communication*. The use of political blogs might influence the development of the genre as such, and only by studying the actual patterns of use and the impact of the blogs may we come to understand what is the true potential of this new communicative practice. In this study, we have employed two general perspectives on the use of blogs: their possible use as a medium for social interaction between politicians and citizens, and their use as a new form of personal political communication.

THE BLOG AS A PERSONAL AND INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATIVE GENRE

The Blog as Personal Publishing

Why are blogs interesting as a new form of communication and why might they be attractive to politicians? To answer this question, we must understand what characterises the blog as communicational genre. It is common to describe the blog as an highly personal form of day-to-day communication (Herring, 2004; Blood, 2000; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Schwartz, 2004) which have become widely popular because the blog tool allows for instant and easy publication of personal experiences. As Miller & Shepherd write: “What many bloggers find most compelling about blogs is the ability to combine the immediately real and the genuinely personal” (2004, para 23). In addition, blog content often blurs the boundaries between everyday personal experiences and more public and professional musings, combining rhetorical genres such as that of the personal diary and the opinion column on current events or select topics. Blogs

by researchers or company workers, and independent blogs by journalists, provide good examples of this mix of genres.

However, discussions of the blog as genre still seem to hinge on a definition of primarily formal characteristics of the blog; that it is a webpage which is often updated, with posts that appear in reverse chronologic order, with a comment function, contains links, etc. (Herring, 2004; Walker, 2003; Blood, 2000). But as the genre continues to develop, it seems increasingly difficult to agree on a set of formal features that *all* blogs share. Some blogs do not implement comments, others do not use links, some are published in chronological order etc. We believe it is more fruitful to define blogs as a discursive practice, the content, form and style of which will increasingly draw on existing expectations and conventions for what you “usually do in a blog”.

The Blog as Dialogic Communication

While the blog is clearly, as this study also exemplifies, a genre chosen to represent a personal identity online, it has also drawn much attention in terms of research, as a form of “social software” which allows interaction between writer and readers. A blogger can build, maintain and participate in a community of other bloggers (the “blogosphere”) through the use of comment functions (which allow readers to comment on a post); links; blogrolls (linklists of other blogs); and trackback functions (display of blogposts from elsewhere, which have commented on posts of the blog at hand). The blog can therefore also be construed as a new form of interactive or *dialogic communication* which allows social interaction between the writer and the blog-users. However, blogs differ from other forms of earlier community software (such as listservs, chat or group web sites) by placing the blogowner and/or moderator as the dominant voice in discussions. This is due to the fact that the blog entries themselves visually and textually take up most of the blog-space (see also Herring et al, 2002, p. 10), while comments are mostly hidden. This means the blog can be read without having the comments interfere with the experience of reading the blog itself.

Generally, the blogger can choose to ignore, moderate or perhaps even delete comments at will, and the only person that can generally start a new thread of discussion is the blogger herself – by way of a new blog entry. Hence, a blog is very much a tool where interactivity with readers and fellow bloggers can be switched on or off, engaged in or not, depending on the inclinations of the blogowner. Nardi et al (2004), in their study of why people blog, mention that many informants “liked the interaction-at-one-remove” provided by blogs, and the possibility to post and share thoughts without the demand for feedback associated with other forms of community tools. Whether the blog becomes a “monologic” or “dialogic” means of communication is therefore essentially a question of what the blogowner chooses to do with it, and not a feature of the blog itself. Blogs are almost always personal, but the degree of social interaction taking place on – or through the blog - might vary from being non-existent to very intense.

THE POTENTIAL OF POLITICAL BLOGS AS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TOOL

Can blogs, with the possibilities of interaction they offer, encourage civic engagement in politics?

In recent years, a lot of writings have dealt with the ways in which the Internet enables new forms of political communication and the potential of a more engaged debate with active citizens. Most of the research on civic engagement online, however, is not limited to blogs alone, but relates to the internet in general, and not all researchers are positive regarding the form of engagement the internet furthers. Pippa Norris states that, in general, the audience for political party websites tends to be sympathisers, the politically committed or those with a developed interest in politics. In short, it is more likely to be those already active in politics who engage in online participation (Norris, 2001). Cass Sunstein (Sunstein, 2004) is even more skeptical of the potential of political communication online when he argues that the phenomenon of group polarization and filtering through websites or blogs is a serious danger to the democracy as they weaken the power of general interest intermediaries and let us avoid unfavourable topics and opinions.

In the blogosphere, the emergence of political blogs have been praised as the fifth political power. An experienced blogger, such as journalist Barbara O'Brien, claims that the political blog will become an established part of our media mix (O'Brien, 2004). However, it appears that this is still a claim which needs to be fully justified. Only few studies of the actual use of blogging as a political communication tool have been made. These include Alexis Rice's (2003), *The Use of Blogs in the 2004 Presidential Election*, which suggests that blogs are useful political communication tools that will become standard in campaigns. The empirical study by Cornfield, Carson, Kalis and Simon (2005), *Buzz, Blogs and Beyond: The Internet and the National Discourse in the Fall of 2004*, analyzes buzz in blogs and the influence in the public sphere, and demonstrates that political blogs can function as a guide to political discussions on the internet. Research from the Hansard Society shows that the use of blogging as a new media

resource can increase the transparency and accessibility of parliamentarians and their work (Ferguson & Howell, 2004). However, so far, empirical studies like these reveal little evidence of the democratic potential of blogs; moreover, few studies of the use of political blogs outside the U.S. have been undertaken to support or refute the belief in their democratic potential.

THE POLITICAL BLOG IN A DANISH CONTEXT

In order to understand the context in which a Danish political blog situates itself, a short explanation of the Danish Election System follows. The Danish Parliament is a multi-party parliament consisting of a number of bigger and smaller political parties (typically 7-10 parties). The government, headed by a prime-minister, typically consists of the biggest party in parliament in number of mandates, supported by one or more smaller parties. Due to the multi-party system, many different candidates will try to get elected for parliament, facing somewhat of a political dilemma. On one hand, politicians are forced to publicly adhere to party politics and political compromises, if they want to become part of a government coalition. On the other hand, the politician needs to draw attention to him- or herself as an individual with strong personal opinions in order to be elected for parliament in the first place. A personal political blog, run by one or more members of a political party, might therefore be very useful and easily manageable way to draw attention to individual political personalities and a useful supplement to the general party campaigns,

Elections for the Danish Parliament must be held every fourth year, but quite often an election is called for by the government several months or even years before. In a political system such as the Danish, this means that election campaign periods are typically rather short, ranging from a few weeks to a number of months. The campaigns are therefore often very intense, forcing the candidates to work around the clock for the duration of the campaign period. The 2005 election campaign was exceptionally short (3 weeks), which lent a certain narrative intensity to

the style and content of the blogs, in which the politicians often drew attention to the stress, excitement and work pressure they were feeling, giving readers an hitherto unknown insight into what happens “behind the scenes” during an hectic election campaign.

THE STUDY

For our study, we wanted to examine how the blogs were used during the three weeks the election campaign ran. We conducted a semi-qualitative survey about the conception, use and reception of election blogs, engaging with both the producers and the actual and potential readers of the blogs. We chose this approach based on our understanding of the blog as an ongoing practice, which might – or might not – encourage new communicative behaviours. It was the latter we wanted to study.

Out of the 947 political candidates running for parliament, 52 engaged in a blog-inspired communication on their website. We saved all 52 named “blogs” or “diaries” run by politicians from the day the election was announced to shortly after election day. Most blogs were hosted on the politician’s own website, a few were hosted by a blog service and a few hosted on a party website, but they were all saveable. After the election, we looked more closely at the concrete content of the entries posted in this period, in terms of thematical content and style, the length and frequency of the posts, as well as the use of comment-function and links. In addition, we looked at the use of “multimedia” content (such as images or video), and paratextual means of communication such as trackbacks, blogrolls and right and left side menus. <<explain what the right and left side menus do]

It turned out that we had a quite representative material to work with. The political blogs were written by member of all current political parties, except the extreme left- and rightwing parties; 65 % (34) of the political bloggers were men, and 31 % (16) were women; 4% (2 group weblogs) were written by both men and women.

All the politicians and/or webmasters behind the 52 websites were asked (via email) to do a online survey regarding the use of blogs and the effects of blogs. Twenty-eight blogs were represented in the survey (29 people responded: 6 webmasters, 23 politicians).

The survey opened with a few closed questions asking for numerical input such as “How many people visited your blog during the election campaign period,” This was followed by a number of questions asking people to agree or disagree with statements regarding the perception of the blog of as communicative genre. These were answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agreeing to strongly disagreeing. These included statements such as “The blog is a personal form of communication”, “The blog is an informal form of communication” etc. This was followed with a number of similar type question asking for their opinion on the blog as political instrument (asking them whether they agreed or disagreed that a blog could move votes, be agenda-setting etc). Finally, at the end of the survey, respondents could provide free form comments about their own experiences with the blog. All data were transferred into a database by Pia Svejgaard Pedersen, after which a number of cross-sectional data samples were drawn.

On parallel lines, both authors conducted a small number of phone interviews with randomly selected Danes in order to discover if the Danes actually did use the web to find out more about the political candidates of their choice, including reading their blogs. Participants were selected through the public phone registry, sampled by widely popular names, gender and geographically representation – the only specific criteria was that they were old enough to vote at the election. We contacted several more, but ended up with 115 interviews, conducted in weeks 7 to 12, 2005, after the election had taken place. All interviews were digitalised in order to allow for quantitative presentation and cross-sectional sampling of the answers. While our findings cannot be statistically generalised because of the size of the sample, they seem to concur with results from larger-scale study made for the Danish Workers Union newsletter A4 (Redington, 2005) and Pew/Internet American Life Project (Rainie, 2005).

We interviewed 56 men and 59 woman, ranging in age from 17 to 77 ; 40 % of them told us that they had used the internet to look up information about politics and politicians. However, blogs are still a rather unknown phenomena in Denmark: 77% of the 115 Danes we interviewed, did not know what a blog was and only 5% (6 people out of 115) actually read one or more political blogs during the election campaign period.

Unfortunately, within the scope of this article we cannot present all data extracted from our study, but these are accessible in two reports available on the project website (www.klastrup.dk/walgblog).

FINDINGS

The Blog as a New Mode of Expression

Our study of the Danish political blogs showed that if we were to apply a strict definition of what a blog is, not very many would fall into the category. Nevertheless, it is clear that all politicians see themselves as engaging in a blog-like communicative activity, either by naming their online diary or election campaign updates a “blog” or a “diary”, or by consciously engaging in a very personal style of writing which is markedly different from the writing on the rest of their website. This confirms our hypothesis that it might be more fruitful to discuss blogging as a *communication practice* rather than restricting ourselves to looking only at blogs which apply a number of formal features. Many of the blogs were launched as specific election blogs and many of the writers were new bloggers; although a handful had started blogging long before the election, 25% had established a blog only a few months before the election, and the rest were launched around the date of the announcement of the election. A positive finding was that the use of first-person nouns and signatures indicated that most politicians posted their own entries. This was confirmed by many of the answers we got in the survey. Small comments interspersed with the political content in the blog entries show that, this time, the experience of blogging was very

much an experience of finding the right *style* of communication and the politician discovering whether they were comfortable with it.

The experience of the blog as a personal means of expression was emphasised by the politicians in our survey. Of the 28 blogowners who answered our survey, 92% concurred in the statement that the blog was a personal “mode of address” (they “agreed” or “strongly agreed”). Other suggested characteristics which ranked high in their responses were that they saw the blog as an informal means of expression (73%) and as a form of communication with humour (65%).

Posting Frequency and Content

Our studies revealed that the content and frequency of posting in the blogs varied greatly. Some politicians posted only a few times during the three week election period, whereas others made a point of posting on a daily basis. Some politicians consequently tried to write in a more informal and personal style, drawing the readers’ attention to more mundane aspects of his/her life, such as activities with their family and spouses. Others struck a middle ground where they used personal experiences as the starting point of a general professional political comment. A minority used the blog primarily to post updates about their geographical whereabouts, and did not seem to make any formal communicative distinction between the blog and an impersonal online newsletter.

Our study showed that the political blog mixed three modes or genres of communication: political commentary, travelogue and personal diary. All blogs included personal diary writing, but 1/3 of the blogs primarily took the form of political commentary, while 2/3 of the blogs mainly took the form of travelogues.

Judging from the content, a common function of the Danish political blog was to cover the election campaign from the politician’s *own* point of view. The politicians either pointed to, expanded on or remediated activities offline, commented on or defended themselves against the attention they had attracted in other media, or engaged with a current “hot” topic. The blog was

thus intentionally used to extend the lifetime of a media story or a debate, or to legitimise the politician by pointing to interest in “old media”. In addition, a general discourse “behind the scenes during an election campaign” appeared in many blogs. These blogs revealed the politician’s “backstage” behavior on the political and private scene during the election campaign, for instance interspersing mundane details from the everyday life of the politician. In blogs by younger, unknown politicians the discourse “the making of a politician” would occasionally appear, explicitly or implicit thematising how they were trying to establish their political identity by speaking of their struggle to get elected and flaunting when they got media exposure elsewhere.

Impact

Whereas it was easy through the websites and survey to study how the politicians embraced the blog, it was more difficult to track how the public used the blogs. A quantitative measure of this would be the number of visitors to the blogs, and in our online survey, we asked the politicians to say how many visits their blogs have had. Looking through the answers, it unfortunately became clear that the relatively few concrete numbers they gave, were unreliable, because some did not track visits to the blog specifically, or seemed to confuse unique visitors and hits, while others did not have any tracking devices on their site. Nevertheless, the numbers and open comments we got from the respondents, seem to indicate that having a blog on their homepage increased the number of visits to the homepage, according to what 71% of the respondents told us. The number of visitors varied a great deal, from 39 to more than 500,000 visitors on the most popular blog (should be seen in relation to the fact, that the total population of Denmark is approx 5.4 million as of 2005).

Even if only six of the 115 Danes interviewed had consulted a blog, we see it as a significant finding that the very low readership of political blogs cannot be explained by lack of

access to the internet. Of all participants in our survey, 76% told us that they use the internet on a daily basis, and 91% had access to the internet at home. This finding is supported by a larger-scale 2005 study of 4000 respondents, which showed that approx 74% of the Danes have internet access from their homes (Rassing & Thulstrup, 2004, p. 68). Some of the answers we got indicated that it is not lack of interest which prevents people from reading election campaign material or political blogs online. Perhaps, blogs simply still need to be more known by the broader public, since 56 % of all the Danes interviewed told us that they would read the blog of a politician, if their attention were drawn to it. As is, 46% of the Danes in our study, who used the internet during the election campaign period, did in fact visit the personal homepage of a politician; and it might just have happened to be one or more of the 895 candidates who did not have a blog-like feature implemented on their website.

THE DANISH POLITICAL BLOG AS PERSONAL INTERACTIVE MODE OF COMMUNICATION

Are the Political Blogs Personal?

Our study has shown that, at least in a Danish context, there is no such thing as a definite political blog style. Politicians use the blog format very differently and still seem to be in a transitional period where they are learning how to use this form of communication genre in the most rewarding way. However, our study of the communicative style and content of the blogs, indicate that the Danish Politicians embrace the blog as communicational tool which allows them to communicate in a more personal way. It seems to function as a space which gives them a chance to speak out and rant at length when they are not allowed to do so - or cannot get through to - other media. In the survey it was striking that the Danish politicians and their webmasters were not obsessed with the number of visitors on their blogs and expressed genuine excitement about the genre. Blogging their political life might be part of a development towards more

openness and transparency of the political processes going on “behind the scenes”, a process in which they themselves consciously want to be a part.

Dialogic Communication on the Blogs

To which the degree did the imagined wish for openness engage readers and result in an outreach to the community of fellow (political) bloggers and party members? Out of the 52 blogs, only 16 (approx 1/3) had implemented a comment function, and of these, six had no comments at all by the end of the campaign period. Several politicians (20) without comment function in their blogs responded to our online survey, and several of these indicated that two main reasons why they did not implement a comment function was lack of resources, either in time needed to maintain a comment function (an increased demand of being “present” on the blog) or because of lack of knowledge of how to use the technology.

However, four blogs had between 44 and 850 comments, and the blogs that attracted these comments were written by the most famous politicians or appeared on a very large group-blog. The comments typically took the form of praise of the writer/website or overt criticism of the same. Furthermore, a meta-discussion on political form and content occasionally took place, mirroring an ongoing discussion in other Danish media during the election campaign. Nevertheless, comments were dominated by discussions of the bloggers’ styles and blog content. We have not tried to track or make contact with any commentators, but discussions about the usage of the web technology in the commentaries show that users of the commentary function were no strangers to the media. Hence, we suspect that those users who actively engaged with politicians were, like the blogging politicians, “early adopters” and not necessarily representative of the average Dane in their opinions and style of engagement.

Interaction with the Blogosphere

Very few politicians linked externally to other blogs or sites (less than ten had a blog-roll), and if they linked internally (from inside the blog), they most often linked to press coverage in other media rather than to other blogs, articles or background material. Only one politician implemented a track-back function and about 15% offered an RSS feed, which allowed readers to track updates of the blog at a central blog portal..The lack of implementation of these features might also be due to the fact that several of the new bloggers used the limited content management system their party website or webmaster provided.

The lack of engagement in using the comments and the interactive features of the blog therefore may have several reasons. They might simply have been discarded because of lack of time, insecurity as to the ramifications of employing them, or limited technological availability. However, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there was very little debate and interactivity in the Danish political blogosphere during the election period. The success (in terms of reported readership) of some of the political blogs were primarily not a result of dialogue with engaged citizens. A strong and well-known political profile, a personal style of communication and a position as early adopter seem to be the most important contributing factors to the appeal of the Danish political blogs, rather than the possibility of interactivity between blogwriter and bloggers.

DISCUSSION

The Future of the Danish Political Blog

Though not much interactivity took place on the blogs, the politicians themselves believe that blogs can have an impact both on voters and on the media as such. In the survey, 41 % of the politicians and their webmasters agreed on the statement “weblogs can be used to move votes”. More than 50% agree or strongly agree, that the political blog is an “attention-creating”

communication tool, and more than 50% think that it is possible to affect the agenda of the media through discussion and debate on the internet. Moreover 75 % think that it is possible to affect the political agenda through discussion and debate on the internet.

Disregarding whether the impact of the blog is currently weak or strong, our study strongly indicates, that the politicians have adopted this new genre. Twenty-five (89%) of our respondents plan to write a blog during the next election and many revealed that they took pleasure in the personal, humoristic and informal style of the blog

From the perspective of the Danish citizens and voters, blogs are still quite unknown. Open comments from the people we interviewed on the phone indicate that many seem to think that they get information enough about the politicians in other media, such as newspapers and television. However, more than 50% indicated that they would be interested in reading a blog written by a politician. But, without further studies it is difficult to tell what people really want to read on a politician's website. However, an interest in the more personal material might be considering as an illegitimate interest not be admitted to. Therefore, possible conflicts between what people say and what they actually do likely exist in a survey of this nature.

In this Danish election, the blogs were primarily tools of political marketing. They did not become examples of a liberating dialogic communication. The overall results of our survey suggest that the blog is a better tool for self-promotion than for dialogue. Even if the political blog in a Danish context might not be the ideal means of acquiring and engaging voters, it can be a very successfully communication tool from the perspective of the politician in order to tend to their (existing) political networks. They can frame stories to appear more trustworthy, in this case for instance the politician's personal explanation of how things really happened during a "live" debate on tv. They can thank their supporters, and appear interested in listening to their input. These strategies of priming and framing, that are usually employed by spin doctors, could,

also in a blog context, be applied as part of the attempt to represent the politician as a competent and reliable person.

CONCLUSION

Our understanding of the use of the political blog is anchored in the Danish multi-party-system and we believe, that the political blog will likely afford and serve different functions in different political systems. However, almost all political party systems depend on the successfulness of the (self-) representation of their candidates. Media trends travel across borders, and one example is the increased focus in Danish media on the individual in politics, which seems to be a result of the influence from the American political scene. The adoption of blogs in Denmark is also a testament to this tendency, of politicians giving the media or the public what they believe, “they” want, access to the (hu)man behind the political man/woman.

Only by continuing to follow the actual practices of use will we know if blogs can, in a national context, be used to bring the politician and the public closer together. In a Danish context, the genre seem to serve well as a decentralised campaign tool. Our study indicates that currently political blogs are a powerful means to represent the “personal face” of a candidate and to disseminate information about party organisation and activities.

Furthermore, it appears that the politicians in 2005 might primarily have conceived of the blog as a means of communication which, by virtue of the style associated with this genre, allowed them to communicate *to* the public in a personal and informal way, rather than as a means of communicating *with* the public or extending their network. Perhaps the political blogs will in time become be a space where the public go to meet the “real” politician, or perhaps the political blogs will in the long run lose interest with the public, as they loose their technological “hipness” and appear to be just another professionalised PR strategy. Whatever the future of the

political blog, it definitely seems as if it is here to stay as a new communicational practice, that will continue to evolve.

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