

## Political debate on weblogs: a virtual public sphere for deliberation?

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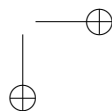
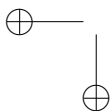
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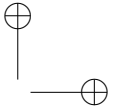
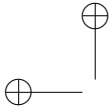
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**T**HE debate about the power of the internet to transform political systems and democratic practices has been the subject of academic research and debate over the past two decades, both among sociology of media scholars and, more specifically, political communication researchers. Undergone a brief period marked by some disenchantment, from 7-8 years on that the idealism associated with the Internet has resurfaced with an added impetus, spurred by the emergence of a broad set of tools that include a range of activities available to the public communication nowadays. Crucially, it became the design of a new conceptualization of the dimensions of political participation online, in close connection with a phase in the history of the internet known as Web 2.0. This has been introduced as the second generation of Web tools, with participatory and interactive features. Along with the most popular modes of communication are the social spaces, which include YouTube, Facebook and the growing blogosphere, that among other modality are united by a common trait: the integration of the ordinary individual in the process of producing and distributing content. Is this multimodal communicative space that is the new global public sphere (Castells, 2008).

This article focuses on the analysis of a specific technology platform, whilst continuing to consider it has embedded within the ideology of the new information technologies, with which it shares both the virtues, promises and also weaknesses. Thus, we take as object of analysis the blogosphere, that in mid-2007 already had more than 70 million blogs and that is doubling in size every six months (Castells, 2008), in order to question its potential technological uses with either its political emphasis - in a normative model of deliberative democracy type.

We hypothesize, as a starting point, that the blogosphere, due to its characteristics of openness, interactivity and participation, constitutes a particular form of public sphere in a discursive space, with a political density, in which



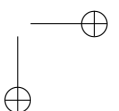
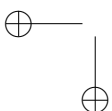


practices of deliberation can take place. In order to do this, we evaluated the debate about the identification of the blogosphere with the notion of public sphere, as part of any academic discourse and ideology of the new media, which to some extent, promote the appropriation of ICT for political purposes, and assigns the spaces created on the Internet's reputation and an environment marked by the spirit of participation. Secondly, we evaluate the suitability of the potential uses of blogs and the normative principles of deliberation - with reference to the normative requirements of deliberative model and patterns of interaction between authors, reviewers and readers of blogs. Is it possible, from this moment, to confront the conditions for the existence of deliberation to the critical points of the generalized use of the blogosphere - that give it real existence. With this approach, we can review the initial assumption in two ways: by identifying the basic elements of a framework of analysis to assess the existence of deliberative practices in the blogosphere, and by summarizing the results of empirical studies conducted on this subject. Therefore, we will be able to evaluate the promises and limitations of these spaces, in a non-deterministic approach of technology, and explore its potential as a factor in strengthening the public sphere.

### **From blogosphere to the concept of public sphere**

In essence, the easiness of use and creation of new communication channels has sparked an explosion of *grassroots* and other phenomena of participation, presented as with spontaneous origin on the anonymous basis of society. This new enthusiasm for the Internet was properly noted by *Time Magazine*, when in 2006 designated "You" as Person of the Year, alluding to the public use of Web 2.0, through which citizens meet and design a new digital democracy (Grossman, 2006). The U.S. presidential election in 2008 showed, in turn, the influence of social networks, which were recognized as important vehicles of information and political mobilization (Castells, 2009). Recent developments in the Islamic world, where the central role of new communication technologies was emphasized also accounted for consistency to this process.

The appropriation of information technologies for political purposes came to deepen the already rich debate on the role and effects of methods of com-



munication via the Internet in politics and, more specifically, in democratic practices. In this context, the *blogging* has been in the areas of online activity that has gained more importance with the revival of interest in the political potential of the Internet. If it is true that sites designated as *weblogs* – that from now on we will refer as blogs - have existed since the earliest days of the Internet, even in the 1980s (at that time with a very technical role and practice of cataloging changes on a website) it is true that recent technological developments have added greater flexibility and usability of communication to this tool. First, the easiness of communication through blogs - among other tools - significantly lowered the costs associated with various types of political participation. In essence, through them, in a simple and intuitive way, anyone can publish regularly their points of view, it is possible to add interactive features to comment, update, and link to other sites. Consequently, the easiness of administration of online content by ordinary users has enhanced the reputation of an environment marked by a spirit of participation, in which everyone has something to say.

The term "blogosphere" has been first used in 2002 (by William Quick, science fiction author) to describe the network of blogs and their interconnections. It became a common word in the following years, and today it refers to forms with a sense of community and a real existence with undeniable political relevance. In a recent report by *Techonorati* (2009) the year 2009 is referred as the year of revolutions and elections were organized by blogs, bloggers and blogging at levels never seen before. However, it is noted that, among the several online activities, and the great illusions the came with them, blogging is more sensitive to the hype - because of the interactivity, the apparent commonality, the easiness use of political content, the association of the blogosphere ideals of public sphere will be easy to suggest, but, as the idea of public sphere, difficult to implement.

However, it is clear that the idea of the functioning of the Internet as public sphere precedes the emergence of Web 2.0 phase and the blogosphere. In the early years of utopias connected to the Internet (90's), the classic work of Habermas (1991) has been used as a theoretical foundation to the claims about the Internet and its potential to support new forms of community and the public sphere. This is particularly noticeable in the work of the earliest and most influential thinkers of this period the Internet, Howard Rheingold, who is associated with the idea of "virtual community". In the 1994 book,

*Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World*, draws parallels between the Habermas idea of public sphere and online communication with a clear interpretation: there is an intimate connection between the informal conversations, such as those taking place in communities and virtual communities, and the willingness of large social groups to govern themselves without monarchs or dictators. This connection shares the same sociopolitical metaphor associated with the idea of cyberspace, because it occurs in a sort of virtual space that has been designated by experts as the public sphere (Rheingold, 1994).

Rheingold's ideas about the virtual public sphere served as inspiration for much of the theoretical work developed in subsequent years. More recently, the more enthusiasts readings continue to sustain that online communication meet the requirements to meet the basic requirements of Habermas's normative theory about the democratic public sphere: a universal media, described as anti-hierarchical, offering non-coercive communication, freedom of expression, unrestricted agenda and communication outside traditional political institutions. In this area, an influential author is Aaron Barlow, who believes that blogs will promote the rebirth of the most genuine public sphere in a way similar to their inspiring version, to redeem the kind of debate and journalism practiced in the United States before appearance of the commercial news media in the nineteenth century. Barlow (2007) wrote in an early landmark studies on this subject that in the Tocqueville's view, the dimension of *grassroots* journalism in 1830 was an end in itself, while it was the ways of expression of popular feelings. He understood very well that a vibrant local press served as a cornerstone of democracy, and that its loss would be a loss for people. Today, the rise of blogs is the return to the kind of journalism that Tocqueville observed. Thus, parallelism can simply be draw: behind its technological manifestations can be assumed that there is little new in the blogosphere. The blogs will carry the debate (debate that might be suffocated, but public debate, yet) for a new forum, but there is nothing revolutionary in what blogs are doing (Barlow, 2008).

## Deliberation in the blogosphere

If, as we have seen, new technologies are now regarded with great optimism, and to the Internet are assigned high expectations for political participation, a problem remains however unclear in discussions of electronic democracy: we still do not understand clearly how the Internet and other forms of electronic communication may contribute to the formation of a new type of public sphere - and thus to a new kind of democracy (Bohman, 2004). It is within this framework that the growing importance of the blogosphere has lend consistency to the idea of a new deliberative space, made possible because "new advances in information technologies have defined the Internet as a new 'public sphere' for deliberative democracy (Maynor, 2007). In this rhetoric it is essential the concept of cyberspace, understood as a space for sharing collective, which allows public interaction and information sharing, and thereby provides the basis for revitalizing the public sphere and democracy. We are thus lead to the notion of virtual public sphere, the central concept from which draw any theoretical and empirical work around a digital model of deliberative democracy (Dahlberg, 2001). It is with this background that we propose to discuss the adequacy of either the potential or the practices of communication in the blogosphere to the normative principles of deliberation. A discussion from the perspective of the concept of public sphere, as is this theoretical and normative framework which supports the generality of discourse associated with the various forms of digital democracy.

In its ideal model, public sphere is the space of deliberation in which rational consensus is the plan pursued by all genuine discourse. In other words: it is through deliberation that the purpose of the public sphere becomes obvious. Deliberation comes in this regard as the decisive factor for an assessment of the blogosphere as a new form of public sphere. We know that most of the definitions of deliberation assume as a starting point the distinction of forms of *deliberative discourse* in relation to other forms of discourse - *non-deliberative*. As shown by Michael Schudson (1997), not any conversation contributes to the construction of political judgments. Thus, the author establish a distinction between 1) *social conversation*, which has no set agenda or specific purpose, which tends to happen when people think similarly, and that deals with issues such as personal experiences, shared beliefs and modes of relationship and perception of the others and 2) *oriented conversation to solve*

*problems*, and this way gives rise to a public discussion, which brings together people with different views and values, also interested and informed, and guided by an very precise goal - the common good. This kind of discussion would be the only one that is able to lead citizens to deliberative processes aimed at decision-making and participation of citizens in the development of standards and law. In short, and as Chambers writes, not every conversation is discursive." Discursive conversations are only approaching ideal conditions of discourse, from a defined set of rules of procedures (Chambers, 1995). In turn, a speech (a discourse) can be understood in the Sunstein definition's when it is both stated and received as a contribution to public deliberation about some issue (Sunstein, 1993).

But, what preconditions must occur in order to make possible deliberation? As a starting up condition, the *ability* of individuals to discuss public issues together is an essential element for the development of public opinion and to promote civic engagement. Consequently, in its strictest but also more general terms, a discourse must conform to the *rationality* and public debate should have the purpose of obtain a rational consensus (Elster, 1997). In turn, for deliberation to occur, public debate must take place between a *heterogeneous* group of people with divergent perspectives: what makes the deliberative opinion is not the mere fact of been built after careful analysis, supported by evidence and arguments, but also for having been achieved taking into account the opinions of other opposites (Price at all, quoted by Witschge, 2004).

Taking this as background, on the discourse and opinion, there are four critical issues to be mentioned in relation to practices of deliberation, whose assessment will contribute to discuss the potential uses of deliberative political blogs, and to identify both their strengths and their weaknesses.

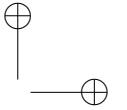
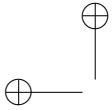
The first point has to do with the conceptualization of deliberation that political theorists do in some different forms. For some, it is unquestionable that the nature of deliberation is to help individuals to redefine their views, and eventually to identify common goals and means for the complex situations of social life. In this perspective, many theorists of deliberation are often detracted the polarization of political debate, since it will promote crystallization of the views, reducing the tolerance for opposing views and hindering the development of consensus. Despite the fact that the majority support this position it is not a unanimous one; others sustain that not even an ideal deliberative procedure will produce consensus (Cohen, 1997), or even deny that such

a consensus (or common good) should be the goal of deliberation (Young, 2001). As we shall see, this is a critical point, as the polarization is one of the most recurrently characteristics associated with the blogosphere.

A second issue concerns the possibility to consider blogs as promoters of political participation. There is no doubt that high levels of political participation are seen as a positive element in a vibrant democracy. Among others, Macedo (1999) argue that more participation and civic involvement are factors favorable to a more agile, more legitimate and therefore to an increase in the quality of citizenship practices. We know, however, that understanding the concept of participation in the deliberation implies going beyond the logic of the procedures and take into account a communication approach that is not reducible to a simple quantitative assessment of argumentative exchanges but also seek to assess the quality of these discursive exchanges.

The third aspect is linked to the previous one and relies on the fact that unlike traditional media, blogs make available to ordinary individuals (not elite) a relatively cheap and affordable medium to express their opinions. Consequently, the variety of blogs on politics will result, at least potentially, in a higher variety of ideological agendas in the blogosphere, compared to traditional media. However, the question to be discussed refers to the type of participation discourse that occurs there - that is, it is important to consider the uses of this technology in terms of the normative standards of the notion of public sphere. In other words: the variety of blogs and participants in the blogs provide discursive views generating a real exchange, or the views of various participants reinforce each other, around a single perspective? Or, at the end, they assume a non-political or anti-democratic discourse?

In these respect, we plan to add one last factor: blogs are a essentially interactive medium in the way they allow readers to leave comments, feedback and answers to each other, but also forging links to other blogs, linking their readers (and commentators) to a whole network of other players, and enabling the creation of complex forms of dissemination of ideas and debate - including that to which the literature describes as *cross-linking*, ie the existence of links that cross blogs with different ideological orientation. However, it is also noted here that the structures of interactive blogs depend, of course, on the communicative behavior of the actors who operate in them: in this case, the *authors* of blogs and their *readers*, whose default behavior must be considered.

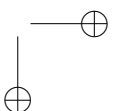
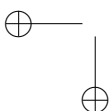


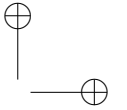
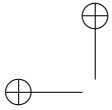
## Deliberation 2.0

From literature review, some important trends can be drawn about the potential and uses of blogs. One of the prominent authors in this field is Cass Sunstein, who carried out an assessment of the normative content and uses promoted by information technology. With regard specifically to the subject of this article, Sunstein (2008) believes that blogosphere increases the amount of available information and perspectives, a great virtue, especially for people with open minds and curious. He notes the presence of blogs in real social networks, with multiple connections, and not just segregated communities. However, he points out an important study carried on a sample of 1400 political blogs, that showed that 91% of the links were directed to sites ideologically similar (*like-minded*), and only 25% of the connections are involved with crossing ideological genuine and substantive discussion (Sunstein, 2008).

It is in this sense that concepts such as *fragmentation* and *polarization*, on the basis of a self-regulation mechanism that encourages users to organize contents and to structure the uses in order to produce and consume information in line with their most basic preferences. The screening is inevitable as how to avoid overload, to impose some order in relation to an incommensurable number of information sources. Many people take the opportunity to devote attention to the views they find most enjoyable. There's a natural human tendency to choose entertainment and news that do not disrupt our pre-established vision of the world. As a result, if the common variables in the blogosphere act as a model for thinking how people use blogs, is it reasonable to conclude that the levels of discourse are mostly sustained from partial views. To this extent, Sunstein clearly states that it is a gross exaggeration to conclude blogs as an incarnation of deliberative ideals (Sunstein, 2008).

Other researchers have offered an apparently opposite view. Mainly represented by Benkler and Shaw (2010), also consider that internet has increased the range of options available and thus provides users with a growing capacity to participate and, consequently, develop democratic practices. More specifically, in the blogosphere, they argue that blogs enable the public and enhance deliberative democracy. However, instead of fragmentation, they see diversity, and while acknowledging a certain level of homophily of primary groups (ie, the propensity to join the blogging blogs or sites with a partisan or ideological orientation similar to theirs), they consider that the key question for a set of

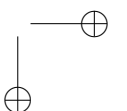
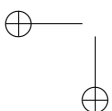




democratic theories is who has the opportunity to be heard by everyone and the ability to structure with a sufficient level of coherence around an issue, to make it a credible theme to the political agenda of society. Benkler and Shaw also suggests opportunities for the study of discursive practices using qualitative methods, to capture factors as the opportunities that offer support for production and broadcast content, to mobilize for action and further aspects of the content and style.

Stated the framework of this discussion, let us start by identifying the features most frequently described by literature about political *bloggers*. We can begin with the follow: blog authors do not justify the rules that follow the structure of their blogs, or that control the content they produce - which reflect, for the better or for the worse, their opinion - or the views expressed in comments by readers and, finally, and choose links to other blogs and sources of information in accordance with purely personal criteria. Of these elements, it is possible to extract an important observation for this article. And here, as is said above, it is common the homophily.

On their side, *readers* also tend to choose blogs whose authors have criteria similar to their own about what is important, and who observe events and themes with a closest interpretive lens. One explanation for this trend results from the fact that blog readers have an high level of interest and attention for political issues, so when looking for information they do so motivated by a desire to reassert pre-existing views. Indeed, having knowledge on political affairs has resulted in the prior existence of a significant number of consolidated information, and as a result, a greater resistance to changes of attitude. So, reading a blog obey to a pattern of behavior marked by selective exposure: readers look blogs arguments with which they agree or will tend to accept. As a result, it is expect to find in the blog readers two outstanding characteristics: the homophily shared with the authors of the blogs, we have described above, must be supplemented by substantial levels of polarization, caused by the cumulative effect of a high consumption of information with little ideological heterogeneity (Lawrence et al., 2010).

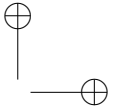
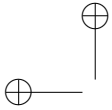


## Blogs and deliberative practices: a hard link

Sunstein (2007) stated not many years ago that we know very little about the blogosphere - the empirical analysis is in its early stages.

We believe, however, that is possible to synthesize the broad outlines of an analytical framework that consists of four angles of approach, as the minimum model for an evaluation of the role of political blogs in relation to practices of deliberation. The first line of analysis refers to an assessment of the quality of deliberative discourse, essentially following the coding categories drawn from a discourse ethics - considering and quantifying the application of a rule set as open *participation*, *justification* of assertions, consider the *common* good, *respect* for other participants and a *constructive* attitude. The remaining three analytical perspectives are largely complementary, interdependent and instrumental in relation to the first: it means finding patterns of homophily (in both *posts* and comment boxes at each entrance); the existence of ideological *cross-linking*; and, finally, the nature of that *cross-linking* (does it supports homophily or debate?).

However from the empirical studies conducted withdraw some traits that were presented throughout this paper: in general the various communities organized in the blogosphere are not structured around the discursive construction of a consensus, nor accept divergent views - on the contrary, silence dissenting voices and encourage the emergence of small groups of like-minded individuals. According to Sunstein, this process can lead to a cyber-balkanization of the Internet, splintering on group focused individuals with the same views, exposed to the same information, confirming the views that are previously owned. As a result, the majority of work undertaken include three aspects: the existence of patterns of homophily between political blogs, the tendency for blogs with the same ideological inclinations intersect each other, a tendency for readers to read blogs aligned with their ideological and party preferences, and even the existence of patterns of polarization - the tendency of evolution from moderate to extreme views. Despite living in an era that celebrates diversity, and despite the blogs are an excellent tool for intellectual debate, the truth is that the analysis of the blogosphere reveals, in its most common traits, great ideological homogeneity and low - or none - conversation (Freese, 2009).

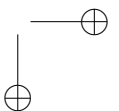
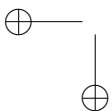


These observations come into the wider debate about the discursive – or deliberative - potential of online conversation forms, where dialogue and difference are central to the deliberative model (Dahlberg, 2001). However, understood in the perspective described above, blogs are not the space of debate among individuals with different points of view, instead, are serving another purpose - rather than opportunities to review and, where appropriate, for change of perspective of authors and readers, blogs reinforce views, leading them towards a political polarization that grows over time. In the limit, these forms of interaction may be considered forms of conversation in a private sphere, and thus do not provide the conditions for inclusiveness and publicity required by deliberation (Bohman, 1996). Comes also in this sense Habermas (2006), pessimistic about the potential of deliberative discourse in the blogosphere. If he welcomes the role of blogs in public debate, as they have the "parasitic function" to criticize and correct the *mainstream* media, he believes that Internet tends to fragment the debate, and so gives rise to a vast number of isolated public issues.

## Conclusion

Under the described conditions, the concept of deliberation does not apply to the type of communication widespread in political blogs. On another level, other concept could take its place: we refer to the concept of participation. Understood as a bridge concept, writing a political blog would be taken as a form of political participation, with indelible touch to political discourse and, in its most refined, with deliberation – and by this way it gets the credibility of a form of engagement with political significance. If it is true that blogosphere instigate political participation and opportunities for involvement, a closer look will show that this will be possible at the expense of some easing of the concepts of participation and involvement in digital interactions. Indeed, participants in the blogosphere are motivated by a desire to participate and by a desire to exchange views - but not change their opinion or seek different opinions.

On the other hand, concealed by the very idea of participation is often a mythical idea of civil society - where, however, not all ideas are democratic, or at least a valuable contribution to democracy. Deliberation in its full sense



is an activity of high demand and consequently, people consider it uncomfortable and usually avoid it (Witschge, 2004), in online and offline environments at the same way. Thus, if the designated Web 2.0 can provide real avenues for those wishing to conduct deliberative processes, it is known that this is really unusual across the blogosphere. Indeed, if the discourse in the blogosphere suffers from lack of diversity or avoids the adversarial debate, this will happen not because of blogs, but the characteristics of society itself.

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