Hypercitizens from a Distinct Society: Characterizing Quebec’s Political Bloggers’ Online and Offline Political Involvement

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ABSTRACT

While many, mostly American, scholars have recently conducted quantitative and qualitative investigations of the structure and content of political blogs, few have focused on the political involvement of their authors. Based on data collected through an online survey conducted in April 2008, this paper proposes the first detailed account of the sociopolitical profile of 56 members of the Quebec political blogosphere. The description of these bloggers’ involvement in content dispersion and online social networks as well as their participation in offline political activities helps to better understand the particularities of an emergent community of active citizens. Additionally, the research draws contrasts with previous studies of the U.S. political blogosphere and argues for the production of more detailed analysis considering the specificities of different communities of North American political bloggers.

Keywords: Bloggers, Blogs, Canada, Online Survey, Political Blogs, Political Communication, Quebec, Social Media, Web 2.0, Weblogs

INTRODUCTION

Weblogs have been an increasingly influential component in the online political mediascape in the United States particularly since 2001 (Sweetser & Kaid, 2008, p. 72) accessed more than 28 million times throughout the electoral campaign, a number directly rivaling the audience of the three most-watched U.S. cable news networks during the same time period (Ward & Cahill, 2007). More recently, approximately 20% of U.S. campaign-savvy netizens got election-related information and commentary from weblogs during the 2006 U.S. Midterm elections (Rainie & Horrigan, 2006), up from 9% of Internet users who reported periodically accessing these communication channels for political news throughout the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign (Adamic & Glance, 2005). According to Sweetser and Kaid (2008), political blogs are “one of the key[s] in the growing popularity of blog reading” (p. 72).
Political blogs can be defined as publicly available and low-cost single or multi-authored Web-based publication channels with limited to no external editorial oversight when not affiliated to formal organizations providing mixed-media politically-oriented facts and opinions often ideologically-driven or partisan in nature, which are presented, updated as well as archived in reverse chronological order (Drezner & Farrell, 2008; Hargittai et al., 2008). Several multidisciplinary investigations targeting specific facets of the political blogspace have been conducted in recent years in many Western-style democratic national contexts such as Poland (e.g., Trammell et al., 2006), Sweden (e.g., Kullin, 2006), the United Kingdom (e.g., Coleman & Wright, 2008), Denmark (e.g., Klastrup & Pedersen, 2005), Germany (Albrecht et al., 2007) and Canada (e.g., Koop & Jansen, 2006, 2009). Social scientists have engaged in extensive content analyses of mostly highly-influential, or “A-list,” political blogs (Wallsten, 2005, 2007) as well as their readers’ input through feedback tools (Mishne & Glance, 2006). However, these scientific contributions only provide a partial and potentially distorted characterization of the structure and dynamics of the political blogosphere because they do not consider a large number of less read blogs that are maintained by “B-listers,” newcomers and other non-elite or “less salient” politically-interested individuals and organizations who might have a certain influence on public agenda-setting and discourse-structuring processes (Ackland & Shorish, 2009; Munger, 2008; Wallsten, 2007).

While some scholars have opted for descriptive quantitative reviews detailing with great precision these publication platforms’ content as well as structure (Singer, 2005; Herring et al., 2005), others have integrated qualitative concerns in their investigations to study, for example, the political and partisan orientation of blog posts (Koop & Jansen, 2006, 2009), bloggers’ self-introduction or positioning approaches, and ultimately to provide an extensive assessment of the political communication, mobilization and persuasion strategies employed by these formal and informal political actors (Trammell, 2006; Trammell et al., 2006). These analyses have contributed to the availability of data on blogging practices and ultimately the development of extensive categorizations of weblog genres (Herring et al., 2005; Hookway, 2008).

While political blogs can have different formats and serve various communication, mobilization and persuasion purposes (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2007; Trammell et al., 2006), the majority of the highly-influential blogs are called “filter blogs” due to their heavy usage of hyperlinks (Herring et al., 2005). Filter blogs can have channeling effects on audience members’ Web media consumption behaviour by redirecting users to politically-partisan Web-based digital resources directly or indirectly linked to their argumentation, thus altering users’ perception of the blogs immediate political context. It is possible to argue that these hyperlinks might be contributing to the emergence of transient “gated cybercommunities” (Tremayne, 2005, p. 28) characterized by their repetitive reinforcement of specific and often politically-homogenous attitudes and perspectives among audience members (Veenstra et al., 2008).

While many scholars, primarily based in the United States, have recently conducted quantitative and qualitative investigations of the structure and content of A-list political weblogs, few have focused on the political involvement of their authors which are often defined as opinion leaders. Based on data collected through a Web-based survey conducted in April 2008, this paper proposes the first investigation of the Quebec political blogosphere. The Internet-savvy population of the Canadian province of Quebec constitutes a well-defined research context due to its political, linguistic and cultural specificity, thus enabling the production of highly-representative results. The description of these bloggers’ involvement in politically-oriented content dispersion and community-building initiatives as well as their participation in offline political activities helps to better understand the structure and practices of an emergent community of politically-savvy
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