

Abstract from master thesis “The Smiling Face of Power - about the breakthrough of the political blog in Denmark”

Pia Svejgaard Pedersen, marts 2006

All over the world the blog has been heralded for its transforming and democratic potential. This transforming potential has by others been pointed out to be a threat to democracy. However, very few has investigated if blogs in practice is a new democratic form of communication, or if it is more likely to be a new strategic form of political communication. Professionally, the field is complex, and there is no consensus about the alleged deliberative potential of the political blogs, and their impact on democracy. 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 (5%) engaged in blog activity.

The purpose of my thesis is to remedy this missing consensus. By analysing empirical findings, and literature that is related to the field, I investigate how the political journals on the internet has been used as a new strategic and personal communication tool, and what characterises this new type of political communication. Among these I explore whether it meets its possible democratic potential. I then expand my focus on the breakthrough of political blogs in Denmark in a wider context, where I use the politician's blogs from the electoral campaign of 2005 as a case.

I 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. I chose this approach based on my understanding of the blog as an ongoing practice, which might – or might not – encourage new communicative behaviours. With the critical discourse analysis as a starting point, I investigate the content of politicians blogs. I then connect the discourse analysis with my offer on what democratic it-strategies the political blogs connect to, and triangulate these data with my empirical findings.

In my theoretical framework, I have investigated what characterises the political weblog as dialogue that creates networks, and how these networks are used to spread strategic political communication. For this purpose I applied network- and diffusion theory to shed light on the agenda-setting processes in the blogosphere, and across the media. Furthermore I established a perspective on the blogs as a performative narrative of the self, where the purpose is to show how politicians use discourses from an intimate sphere to present themselves and their political presentation. For this purpose I applied sociological theory on interaction between humans, and perspectives from rhetorics.

The cultural and political actions of the politicians on their blogs are established in the intimate sphere. Compared to traditional political communication this means that the politicians are using the political blog to legitimise themselves as trustworthy in the eye of the public. The politicians use the blog as a tool for strategic communication, while they to a lesser degree take advantage of the interactive and deliberatively democratic potential of the media. As a consequence of this, these studies can not be seen as a solid proof of the blog functioning as a new democratic form of communicating. During the electoral campaign in

2005 the main part of the blogs were occupied with communicating to the public, and not with the public. On the other hand, the blog was an example of a new strategic form of communication and an example of exercising power through virtual networks, where the politicians exercise a more positively perceived power. The positive part is because the politician stages themselves as being open and listening to the input of the citizens. The political blog was furthermore used as a strategy in creating a cross media agenda, and among this first generation of blogging politicians, several of them found the blog to be successful.

My analysis furthermore unveils, that the politician's use of weblogs seemed to contain a paradox. The paradox is, that when politicians on their blogs express their political attitudes and paint them with their own personality, they risk reproducing anti-politics. Anti-politics does not create consensus, but instead polarises the political debate, and might be harmful for democracy. But the point is, that anti-politics on the discourse level of the blog can be good for the credibility of a politician, because it constructs the ethos argument of the politician as being honest, idealistic, and brave. What the analysis furthermore shows is, that astroturfing techniques, outsider strategies, and negative campaign on blogs are phenomenons that are hard to reveal in practice, and which are not uniteable with the deliberative and democratic ideals.

In practice the blogs of politicians during the electoral campaign of 2005 did not lead to any visible problems for democracy. This was due to the phenomenon of blogs – including the political blogs – being relatively unknown to the Danish population at large. According to the test samples of 115 Danes, 77% of them did not know what a blog was, and only 5% of them had read political blogs during the campaign. Even though the majority of the population has yet to embrace blog technology, the interest in the political personalities behind the publication tools is not lacking. Slightly more than half of the persons asked would be interested in reading the blogs of politicians, if they were made aware of their existence. The results thus indicates, that the readers of the political weblogs are not only motivated by a sense of information to establish a proper foundation for making a decision, but they also perceive the blogs of politicians as good entertainment during an electoral campaign.