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Citizens as political participants: The myth of the active online audience?

Bakker, T.P.

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Chapter 4

What's journalism got to do with it? A content analysis of political citizen blogs^{*}

^{*} An earlier version of this chapter has been submitted for publication and is currently being revised (R&R).

Citizens have traditionally been dependent on professional news organizations for their political news. But this exclusive intermediary role of traditional media has come, ostensibly, under pressure with the advent of what commonly is called citizen journalism. Of course there have always been forms of audience participation in the news process, in the form of letters to the editor and calls to the newsroom. But free and easy-to-use digital tools have significantly lowered the threshold for participation. While the definition and boundaries of the journalistic profession have always been challenged, the Web seems to have definitely extended the conventional understanding of who can do journalistic work. What is this work like, and who are its actors? This is what we want to answer with a thorough content analysis of a representative sample of political blogs in the Netherlands.

Not only do news organizations call upon their audience to send in all sorts of user-generated content such as photos and videos (The Bivings Group, 2008; Domingo et al., 2008), but also citizens themselves have started news outlets by using weblogs. These activities of citizens on their blogs have often been greeted as brave acts of liberation from the dependency on professional journalists who are often accused of having become too detached from their public (see Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007; Deuze, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Haas, 2005).

The estimated amount of blogs worldwide surpassed 30 million in 2006 (Technorati, 2006) and 170 million mid 2011 (www.blogpulse.com). Worldwide surveys by blog tracking company Technorati showed that politics indeed is, besides personal topics and technology, one of the most popular topics to blog about (Technorati, 2008; 2009). Particularly in the US, blogs covering political affairs have boosted since the 2004 presidential elections (Perlmutter, 2008; Rainie, Cornfield & Corrigan, 2005). Their popularity and influence has steadily grown and has become particularly visible in the periods leading up to the 2008 and 2012 elections (Messner & Garrison, 2011; Wallsten, 2011; Wicks, Bradley, Blackburn, & Fields, 2011).

Weblogs have been ascribed various roles and functions, sometimes even performed at the same time (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008; Ekdale, Namkoong, Fung, & Perlmutter, 2010; McKenna & Pole, 2008). Of course, here we have to distinguish between Western democracies and countries with movements fighting for (more) political participation of the citizenry, for example in the 'Arab spring' of 2011 (Howard & Parks, 2012). Our study is located in the Netherlands, one of the world's oldest democracies. This is why

our search for what we already know about political bloggers and their activities is limited to evidence from Western democracies. There, one of the most typical uses of political blogs seems to be the one of an online *news aggregator* and to provide hyperlinks to other sites (Lowrey, 2006). But blogs have also been heralded as *platforms* for citizen journalists, where original and alternative information is published (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). A typical feature of political blogs is said to be the use of a *personal* and *opinionated* writing style, in contrast to traditional conventions in professional journalism (Lasica, 2003). Blogs sometimes seem to have explicit political agendas (McKenna, 2007) and try to politically mobilize their audience (McKenna & Pole, 2008). This is certainly much more the case in countries where blogging serves as an alternative to state-controlled media.

A DEMOCRATIC UTOPIA?

Jürgen Habermas' ideal of the *public sphere* is a public and egalitarian space for deliberation where matters of common concern can be discussed (Habermas, 1962). It is argued that the *blogosphere*, again in Western democracies, is closer to this ideal than ever before (Benkler, 2006): It "attenuates the power of the commercial mass-media owners and those who can pay them. It provides an avenue for substantially more diverse and politically mobilized communication than was feasible in a commercial mass media with a small number of speakers and a vast number of passive recipients" (p. 465). A greater diversity of standpoints in the public discourse thus could be the outcome once ordinary people have their say; information, otherwise uncovered, would be provided; and professional journalists would be stimulated to do a better job (e.g., Bowman & Willis, 2003; Bruns, 2008; Gillmor, 2004).

Critics, however, have expressed the fear that the extended participation of lay people endangers the central role of professional journalists as competent interpreters of public affairs and as agenda-setters of the public debate (e.g., Keen, 2007; Lemann, 2006; Sunstein, 2007). A more moderate standpoint acknowledges the potential of citizen media but argues that only a small – and rather elitist – part of the online population actually uses the Web for producing journalistic content or promoting political goals. But this small portion of the blogosphere seems to account for the majority of worldwide blog visits. From this view, the dominance of journalists and political elites in public discourse is far from fading (Drezner & Farrell, 2008; Hindman, 2009).

In this study, we will present the results of a large-scale and systematic content analysis of political blogs and their producers. Its purpose is to shed light into how justified the hopes and fears are and to contribute to a better understanding of the nature, the breadth and depth of political blogging.

EVIDENCE ON POLITICAL BLOGGING

WHO BLOGS?

Journalism has traditionally been dominated by white males, mostly in older age categories (e.g., Deuze, 2002; Van Zoonen, 1998; Weaver, Beamm, Brownlee, Voakes & Wilhoit, 2006). Blogging has raised hopes that it gives “anyone with the right talent and energy the ability to be heard far and wide on the Web” (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p. 8). A few content analyses and surveys have investigated forms of political blogging, defined as dealing with political events, actors, issues and processes. They show that the authors are in most cases still males. Women express more interest in blogging about private or hobby topics (Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005; Pedersen & Macafee, 2007). Also the most popular and famous political bloggers are mostly men (Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, & Jeong, 2007; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Further, it appears that most political bloggers hold an above-average educational degree and often are academics, businessmen, journalists or lawyers (Hindman, 2009; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Reese et al., 2006). In the previous chapters, it was already found that, in the Netherlands, people who participate politically on participatory platforms (such as blogs) feel more efficacious in politics, talk more about politics, have a higher interest, vote more often, and have better Internet skills.

These data suggest characteristics of political bloggers known from other forms of political participation. However, most of the available demographic data concerns either ‘hobby’ bloggers or ‘elite’ bloggers. Very little is known about the group of political citizen bloggers: those people who were expected to enter the public and political debate now that it is possible more than ever (Gillmor, 2004).

THE CONTENT OF POLITICAL BLOGS

ORIGINAL CONTENT AND TOPICS. Most blogs on politics seem to heavily use and link to material that was originally published in mainstream news media (Lee & Jeong, 2007; Messner & Distaso, 2008; Wallsten, 2007). McKenna and Pole (2008) reported that more than 90% of political bloggers indicate that an important activity is to provide readers with hyperlinks to interesting newspaper articles. Nonetheless, Carpenter (2008) found that citizen sites and blogs used more 'unofficial' sources than online newspapers did. Little is known about the topics that bloggers cover. Although the content of specific blog 'genres' such as policy blogs and war blogs have been described (McKenna, 2007; Tremayne et al., 2006), an overall view of what the political topics are that bloggers cover is missing.

INTENTIONS. Do bloggers see themselves as media or political watchdogs or as a 'Fifth Estate' (Cooper, 2006), closely monitoring the performance of politicians and mainstream media? A survey among political bloggers by McKenna and Pole (2008) showed that 80% of their sample wants to inform about failings and bias of mainstream news media.

Other studies have shown that blogs often want to be a platform where individuals can unrestrictedly voice their personal political messages, promote their own goals without being filtered by professional news organizations and organize and try to mobilize their visitors (e.g., Kahn & Kellner, 2005; McKenna, 2007; Pirch, 2008). But also simply expressing one's very personal opinion is common on weblogs (e.g., Herring et al., 2005; Papacharissi, 2007; Reese et al., 2007; Tremayne, Zheng, Lee & Jeong, 2006; Wall, 2005). Carpenter (2008) compared online newspapers and citizen journalism sites and found that citizen outlets contained significantly more opinion.

THE USE OF INTERACTIVITY AND HYPERLINKS. Although blogs are viewed as having more communicative and interactive potential than traditional news media, the actual use of such options is not very widespread (e.g., Herring et al., 2005; Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmohl & Sapp, 2006). However, the use of the comment feature, providing contact details and hyperlinking, seems more common on political blogs than on non-political blogs (McKenna & Pole, 2008; Xenos, 2008). Political bloggers provide their readers both with links to mainstream news media and to less popular and alternative information outlets (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; McKenna & Pole, 2008; Tremayne et al., 2006).

In sum, first and foremost, the majority of our evidence on blogging about politics is exploratory in nature and is based on small convenience or

purposive samples. Second, most empirical studies have primarily focused on non-political blogs or on political blogs that rank high on the blog hit parades, attract thousands of daily visitors and, perhaps most importantly, receive considerable attention also from the mainstream media. Although such studies provide valuable insights into the potential of these new information channels, they tell us little about the vast amount of blogs that fall outside this 'elite' category and do not contribute to our knowledge of blogs by 'regular' citizens (see also Wallsten, 2005).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

More reliably than before, this study wants to investigate the contribution of blogs to the public sphere. Is it true that considerably more people now participate in the political discourse that were silent in the past? That blogs address issues and topics that had been neglected before? And do bloggers themselves intend to complement or even substitute traditional media and journalists? For these purposes, we study the Dutch political blogosphere. The Netherlands had an Internet penetration of 90% in 2009 and 94% in 2011 (CBS, 2011) and is a digital front-runner compared to other European countries (Löf & Seybert, 2009). This situation, combined with the long tradition of the Netherlands as a democracy, would lend itself for a diverse and lively online blogosphere. In detail, we formulate the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the *demographic composition* of political bloggers?

RQ2: What are the *topics* political bloggers write about?

RQ3: How *original and authentic* is the content on political blogs? More specifically, we ask: How much information on blogs is based on own experience and research as opposed to relying on mainstream media?

RQ4: What are the *intentions* of political bloggers?

RQ5: How often are weblogs a platform for *interactivity and discussion*?

RQ6: Which different types of political blogs can be identified?

METHOD

In order to answer our research questions, a quantitative content analysis of political blogs in the Netherlands was conducted.

SAMPLING PROCEDURES

It is safe to assume there are hundreds of active political blogs in the Netherlands¹. However, drawing a representative sample from such an intangible online area like the Web or the blogosphere has proven to be hard if not impossible because of the dynamic nature of online content and the decentralized organization of the Web (McMillan, 2000; Li & Walejko, 2008). Taking into account the methodological issues and using a multi-step approach, we drew a sample from the broadest scope of political blogs possible. By using a diversity of sampling conditions in two phases, we aimed at approximating a probability sample to overcome the problems with generalizability typically associated with purposive and convenience samples (Riffe et al., 2005).

The first phase comprised multiple searches with a list of keywords (see Appendix A) in the five most authoritative and largest blog databases (Google Blog Search, Technorati, Blogpulse, Truthlaidbear and Icerocket). The list of blogs was purged from duplicate blogs, non-Dutch blogs, spam blogs and abandoned ones (blogs not updated in the last month).

The second phase of creating our sample was separating ‘political blogs’ from non-political blogs. Although political blogs have been under scrutiny in several content analyses in recent years, a common definition of what makes them ‘political’ does not seem to have emerged. This is also a problem of proportion: How much politics, however defined, makes a blog ‘political’? Most blogs seem to cover more than one topic, and political events, actors, issues or processes may just be one of them.

We chose a practical solution: For a *blog* to be considered political it should meet one of two criteria. The first of them is that the blog ‘advertises’ itself explicitly as focusing on politics. This was checked for in the header, byline, or the ‘About’ section of the blog. But because many blogs are not that explicit about their intentions, the other criterion for inclusion was that out of the five most recent *blog posts*, at least two had to be a political post. A blog post is a *political* post if it contains ‘political content’ at least once. We chose a conservative definition of political content, based on the concept of institutional politics: “any text where local, national, foreign or supranational politicians, political parties, political institutions or governmental policy is mentioned.”

After taking the steps as described above, a total of 162 blogs was included in the final analysis. Because blogs differ in size and some contain

more than a thousand entries, from every blog the ten most recent political blog posts were archived. In order to yield substantial information from the blog posts, posts without text (i.e., only a photo or movie) were excluded. The blog pages and posts were downloaded in PDF and .PNG format, which allowed us to preserve both the original layout of the websites and their hyperlinks. All material was archived at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research in July 2009.

To analyze general blog characteristics and blogger details, the weblog served as the unit of analysis. This included the front page and all other pages (e.g., *Contact*, *About me*, *Mission statement*, *Background information*). The individual blog posts were the unit of analysis for coding the content of blog posts.

MEASURES

WHO BLOGS? The coded blogger characteristics were age-category, gender, education, profession and ethnic origin of the blogger. When information was not available but answers could clearly be deduced from the blog (i.e., talking about recent retirement categorizes a blogger in the age-category 61-70). To determine to what extent bloggers stayed anonymous, we coded the presence of the real name of the blogger, a recognizable photo of the blogger, plus the possibilities to get in touch with the blogger (e-mail, comments, Twitter, et cetera). If the blog was authored by more than one blogger, the personal characteristics of the lead blogger were analyzed, if available. The complete codebook with coding categories and instructions is available upon request from the authors.

To assess what type of content was produced, for every blog ten individual political blog posts were analyzed.

TOPIC. To determine the political topic or subject of a blog post, coders were asked to determine the central topic of the post and assign the post to one of the following categories: Economy and finance; Justice, law and legal; Social affairs; Health care; Traffic and infrastructure; Nature and environment; Education; Foreign policy and foreign countries; Integration and religion; Art and culture. It was also possible to assign the category 'Political process' in case the topic was subordinate to the focus on the political process or actor, which for example is the case during campaigns or personal conflicts between political actors. For example: if a blog post discussed a personal or ideological conflict between two political parties, which concerned a policy

decision on health care, then 'Political process' was coded, not 'Health'. In some cases 'Non-political topic' could be coded, as the inclusion criterion for blog posts was that political actors or issues were 'mentioned'. In case a political actor was only mentioned as an example, or if a political actor was discussed unrelated to any political topic, than Non-political topic was coded. Coders were allowed to code also a second or third topic if more topics were featured. Per topic it was also assessed which political 'level' was involved: local, domestic or international politics.

ORIGINAL CONTENT. Coders noted whether the blogger relied primarily on news or information from other news media for their blog posts. This was measured by coding the first three hyperlinks from every post and indicating if they referred to mainstream news sources or not. Second, by looking at explicit source references and layout changes, coders indicated if posts consisted primarily (50% or more) of content that was taken from external websites, such as mainstream news sites. Coders further checked whether the blog posts contained journalistic research features, such as interviews (conducted by the blogger), direct or indirect quotes from other people about a political topic; segments of text that were based on or accompanied by some form of research documentation or descriptions of events the blogger said to have physically attended and that related to a political topic.

INTENTIONS. To find out to what extent blogs serve as political or media watchdogs, every post was checked for the presence of criticism of politics or of news media. If the post contained political criticism, it was also checked if that criticism was targeted towards specific individuals ('ad hominem') or towards groups, organizations or politics 'in general'. Further, coders assessed whether the blogger in his posts explicitly tried to politically mobilize his visitors, for example by calling for political action, convincing the reader vote for certain parties or to sign petitions. To gauge the extent of personal and opinionated content on blogs, for every blog it was indicated whether it was written in first-person ("I think that...", "He told me...") and whether it contained personal opinion about one of the political topics, by coding the presence of personal evaluations and the use of evaluative words.

INTERACTIVITY AND HYPERLINKS. The degree of interactivity was measured by checking the availability and actual use (amount of comments, unique comments and participation of the blog author) of the comments function on the blog. Second, the presence of contact options (e-mail, social network profile, Twitter, instant messaging, postal address, Contact form, phone,

guestbook and discussion forum) was coded. To measure the degree of interactivity by using hyperlinks to external websites, the presence and nature (link to mainstream media or not) of external links in the blog posts were coded.

CODING PROCEDURES AND RELIABILITY. Apart from the researchers, three extra coders participated in a pilot coding procedure. Because of the lengthy codebook and exploratory nature of the study, coders were trained five days full-time. The first author and two of the extra coders from the pilot study conducted the final analysis. Both from the blog posts and the blog pages, 10% was selected for the final reliability tests. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Krippendorff's alpha. Intercoder reliability scores for manifest blog elements (e.g., presence of multimedia, number of comments, presence of first-person) was good and varied between $\alpha = .79$ and $\alpha = 1.00$; scores for 'latent' content that required interpretation from the coders, ranged between $\alpha = .52$ and $\alpha = .74^2$. Although Krippendorff's alpha is a conservative measure, we will take lower scores into account in our results section.

RESULTS

WHO BLOGS?

The majority of political blogs (88%, $n = 102$) from which the number of authors could be identified ($n = 116$) is single-authored. Around 37% of all bloggers does not write more than one blog post per week, while 17% blogs once per day or even more. At the time the blogs were archived, 65% of the blogs had been online for at least a year and 28% more than three years.

The demographic composition (RQ1) of the bloggers reveals that from the 112 lead bloggers that provided gender-information, 85% is male (see Table 1). Regarding bloggers whose age was mentioned or could be deducted ($n = 75$), we find that half of them are between 41 and 60 years old. Looking at bloggers of whom both age and gender is known ($n = 75$), we find that 24% of this group is a male person in the age category 41-50, followed by almost 19% of male bloggers in the group 51-60 years old.

Around half (53%) of the bloggers seems to use their real names, 39% displays a recognizable photo of himself or herself and almost everybody (97%) offers one or more options to get in touch (e-mail address, contact form etc.). It is uncommon to report information about one's education, profession

or ethnic background. Of the 36 bloggers that reported their level of education, all except two said they had finished some form of higher education.

Table 1 Gender and age of political bloggers

Characteristics	%	n
Gender		
Male	85	95
Female	15	17
Age-category		
10-20	3	2
21-30	21	16
31-40	15	11
41-50	32	24
51-60	19	14
61-70	9	7
71-80	1	1

Note. Totals do not add up to 162 because not for all bloggers age or gender could be determined.

THE CONTENT OF BLOGS

TOPIC. A wide variety of political topics are discussed on blogs about institutional politics (Table 2). Popular topic categories are economy and finance, traffic and infrastructure and foreign policy and foreign countries (RQ2). However, the main focus of most blog posts is the political process – not topic-related: conflicts between political actors, internal party politics, campaigning, elections, the political system and the functioning of democracy. In those posts, political issues (e.g., financial crisis, environmental policies) are merely used for illustration. Most political topics deal with the Dutch national (domestic) level. However, blog posts about traffic and infrastructure or political issues about art and culture are mostly discussed on the local political level.

Table 2 Topics on political blogs

	% of topics in all posts	Most popular topic (aggregated on blog level)	Dominant political level
Political process	35	50	Domestic
Economy and finance	13	12	Domestic
Traffic and infrastructure	8	9	Local
Foreign policy & foreign countries	9	8	International
Nature and environment	5	5	Domestic
Integration and religion	7	5	Domestic
Justice, law and legal	7	4	Domestic
Social affairs	6	3	Domestic
Health care	3	2	Domestic
Art and culture	2	1	Local
Other political subject	.2	1	
Education	1	0	Domestic
Non-political	4	0	

Note. The total number of blog posts is n=1,620, the total number of coded topics n=1,804.

ORIGINAL CONTENT. Our findings show that political blogs heavily rely on external information sources by using content from mainstream news media or providing hyperlinks to other sites, while not publishing much content of their own (Table 3). This seems true even if we take the comparatively lower intercoder reliability scores in this case into account (see endnote 2). It seems to be unusual for bloggers to engage in journalistic research activities: conducting interviews, quoting others, describing events or experiences or adding documents, links to databases or to party websites (RQ3). The small share of blogs that did regularly engage in journalistic activities usually focused on *local* political issues.

More than half (54%) of the blogs contained at least one post out of ten that consisted of more than 50% 'external' content: information that was – in

most cases – copied from mainstream news media (RQ3). A fifth of all blogs used this type of content in at least half of their blog posts. Analyses of the use and nature of hyperlinks shows a mixed pattern, showing that some bloggers (17%) did not use hyperlinks at all, some bloggers direct most of their links to mainstream news media sites (34%), while 49% of the bloggers direct the majority of their links to non-mainstream news sites.

INTENTIONS. Bloggers express political criticism, either directed at specific politicians (*ad hominem*) or in more general terms (RQ4). Most bloggers criticize politics at least once in ten posts, and a smaller group even does this in most cases (Table 3). Surprisingly, attacking or criticizing *media* is not common. Also, blogs rarely contain explicit politically mobilizing information, such as calling upon visitors to vote for certain parties, to sign online petitions or to attend demonstrations. The majority of bloggers primarily writes in the first person singular or plural (I, me, ours), and in almost all cases a personal opinion on the political issue(s) of the blog post was expressed. Again, this seems to hold even though intercoder reliability was not as high in this case as otherwise.

Table 3 Original content and intentions on political blogs

	Mean scores (0-10)	At least in 1 out of 10 posts (%)	In 5 or more posts (%)
<i>Original content</i>			
Experience	0.94	40	6
Documentation	1.23	45	7
Interview	0.05	4	0
Quoting	0.40	24	1
> 50% of post not-original	2.23	54	20
<i>Intentions</i>			
Political criticism, ad hominem	1.92	65	12
Political criticism, general/group	2.80	76	24
Media criticism	0.34	26	0
Political mobilization	0.36	18	2
First person	4.70	79	53
Personal opinion	6.34	90	70

Note. N = 162.

INTERACTIVITY. Analysis of the interactive and communication features (RQ5) shows that providing contact details and hyperlinking (see above) is very common. Providing an e-mail address (41%) was the most popular, followed by contact form (16%) and Twitter (16%).

Surprisingly, the most typical interactive blog feature – the comment option – was rarely used. Although the option was enabled on 91% of all blogs, the actual presence of comments was low: 62% of all coded posts had no comments and only 14% received five comments or more; 62% of all blogs did not receive a single comment in the ten blog posts that were analyzed, respectively. In 41% of all blog posts where there were comments, the blogger himself was one of the participants.

CHARACTERIZING POLITICAL BLOGGERS: LOCAL ACTIVISTS, COLUMNISTS AND FILTER BLOGGERS. So far, our findings have provided some general characteristics of

political blogs: journalistic research activities are not very common; blogs are personal and contain opinionated content; political criticism is common but media criticism is not. This does not exclude that underneath this general pattern, we find specific groups of bloggers. To discern political blogger types (RQ6), a Ward's linkage cluster analysis (see Appendix B) of the main blog characteristics was performed. Three almost equally-sized clusters were identified, for which the means are shown in Table 4.

The blogs in the first cluster (n=53) are characterized by a focus on domestic (national) politics. More often than on average, they contain criticisms of politicians, politics in general and of mainstream media. The style is also more personal and opinionated. We label this group "columnists." The second cluster of blogs (n=50) is also opinionated, but is further characterized by a focus on local rather than national politics. These blogs also include more material of their own, such as describing the authors' experiences and or quoting other people, and they link more to non-mainstream sites than the blogs in other clusters. Blogs in this cluster also contain more mobilizing attempts, so we label their authors "local activists." The blogs in the third cluster (n=59) focus more often on international politics and do not perform much own research or contain a personal or opinionated style. These blogs rather provide readers with hyperlinks to other mainstream media and, more than others, publish content from other sites on their own blogs. These are labeled "filter bloggers," using the terminology from blog literature.

Table 4 Values blog variables per cluster

	Cluster 1 (n=53)		Cluster 2 (n=50)		Cluster 3 (n=59)		Total (N=162)	
	"Columnist"		"Local activists"		"Filter blogger"		All <i>bloggers</i>	
	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE
Local politics	1.1	0.28	5.9	0.57	1.0	0.21	2.5	0.28
Domestic politics	8.3	0.48	4.0	0.56	4.4	0.43	5.5	0.32
International politics	3.8	0.43	2.1	0.41	6.3	0.42	4.2	0.28
Links to non-mainstream media	3.4	0.52	8.5	1.00	4.9	0.63	5.5	0.45
Links to mainstream media	4.0	0.67	3.1	0.53	5.1	0.65	4.1	0.37
Quotes	0.2	0.07	0.9	0.18	0.1	0.05	0.4	0.07
Interviews	0.0	0.00	0.2	0.07	0.0	0.00	0.0	0.02
Experiences	0.4	0.09	2.2	0.35	0.4	0.11	0.9	0.13
Documentation	0.7	0.17	1.9	0.3	1.2	0.23	1.2	0.14
Mobilization	0.1	0.06	0.9	0.28	0.1	0.04	0.4	0.09
Media criticism	0.6	0.11	0.2	0.09	0.2	0.06	0.3	0.05
Political criticism (ad hominem)	3.6	0.34	1.4	0.22	0.8	0.15	1.9	0.17
Political criticism (general)	4.7	0.38	2.8	0.33	1.1	0.18	2.8	0.21
Use of first-person	6.3	0.45	5.9	0.45	2.3	0.37	4.7	0.28
Personal opinion	8.8	0.20	6.4	0.46	4.0	0.45	6.3	0.27
Using external content	0.6	0.13	1.5	0.31	4.4	0.51	2.2	0.25
Post frequency (logged)	1.8	0.15	1.8	0.16	2.5	0.20	2.0	0.10

Note. The mean values for the variables in each cluster that are higher than the overall mean, are highlighted in bold. The theoretical range for all variables is 0-10, except for local, domestic and international politics and non-mainstream and mainstream links (0-30) and post frequency (1-∞).

DISCUSSION

Hopes that political blogs may give hitherto silent citizens a voice and may supplement or even substitute traditional journalism have been attenuated already somewhat whenever they were investigated empirically. Our study has confirmed and extended this evidence in a large-scale and representative content analysis of political blogs in The Netherlands. Yes, in most cases political bloggers are men, with a dominance of people between forty and

sixty years old – in this respect closely resembling the dominance of older men found in professional journalism in the Netherlands (Deuze, 2002).

We further saw that most political bloggers indeed use an opinionated and personal publication style and make ample use of links to other websites. Most bloggers do not produce much original content, but instead rely on information from mainstream media. But underneath this general picture, we have identified three types of political citizen bloggers, with the group of “local activists” the closest to typical journalistic activities: They are more active in gathering and providing original information than the other groups, such as quoting other people or reporting on experiences. However, this is true only for a third of the bloggers in our sample.

Our findings strongly confirm that traditional journalism is far from being replaced by a mass of voluntary amateur reporters, coming from all strata of society. Neither, and reassuringly, do fears seem justified that political bloggers engage in anonymous digital scolding and that political blogs on a large scale shamelessly steal content without crediting the original source. Many bloggers use their real name, offer contact options and use hyperlinks to refer to their sources. A large number of those hyperlinks direct users to the websites of mainstream news media.

Our findings clearly suggest that political blogs do not seem to replace traditional outlets, but rather have a complementary function. They lard original media content with their own comments and opinion – not unimportant because it may serve as a safety valve. To put it cynically: People chatting about politics may not be dangerous for established political structures.

How can we explain the both disappointingly low and fairly conventional political participation in blogs – at least compared to the hopes that authors like Gillmor (2004) expressed? One major reason comes to mind: People are cost-benefit conscious – as in the uses-and-gratifications approach to communication behavior (e.g., Blumler & Katz, 1974). As long as they believe that the political system is working sufficiently well and that professional communication channels do their job well enough, there is no urgent need to spend hours on finding new information and trying to get the authorities to do something. Typically, a functioning representative democracy and a professional journalist should take care of public affairs. An exception, of course, could be those citizens for whom participation in politics always was fascinating and rewarding. But for a cost-benefit conscious audience, the

mere availability of technical devices to participate in the public discourse is not that important, for them technological determinism does not work. New technology may lower the threshold that in former times typing a letter to the editor, finding an envelope, buying a stamp and walking by a mailbox may have symbolized. But as long as an urgent incentive is missing, even lower thresholds may not make people participate (see also Schudson, 1999).

Of course, there are caveats in our study: We defined politics as involving political functionaries, organizations, institutions, and processes. This is actually a wider definition than it may seem at first sight. Environmental issues, arts, culture, animals, traffic, uncivilized behavior – juts to name a few topics – become immediately political in our analysis, once a politician, a party or the government is called into action or criticized for not doing anything.

And maybe political citizen journalism is still in its infancy and will develop soon to be the mass movement – also in Western democracies – that Gillmor (2004) dreamed of. But even today, the technical threshold for participation is already very low. Internet penetration in a country such as the Netherlands could hardly be higher (94% in 2011), and other popular platforms (Twitter, Facebook) are not widely used for political purposes as well (Kruikemeier, Van Noort, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2011; see also chapter 2).

In the next chapter, we will take another specific look at political citizen bloggers. By combining the findings from this content analysis with survey data about bloggers' habits, beliefs and practices, we aim at providing a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon of political blogging by citizens.

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APPENDIX A

List of Keywords for Initial Sampling of Political Blogs

The keyword list was composed by selecting popular and often-recurring keywords in a purposive sample of political blogs, supplemented by keywords that the researchers expected to lead to political blogs. For all nouns, both the single and plural form were used.

Keywords

- politics; politician; citizen, government; Political party; elections; the law; democracy
- mayor; bench of Mayor and Aldermen; alderman (governor/administrator in a city);
- minister, secretary of state, prime minister, president; Upper chamber, Lower House, European Union; European Parliament; United Nations
- the names of all Dutch national political parties: CDA, GroenLinks, PvdA, SP, D66, VVD, ChristenUnie, Partij voor de Dieren, Trots op Nederland, SGP, PVV

APPENDIX B

Ward's linkage cluster analysis of political blogs

no. of clusters	Duda-Hart values		Cluster sizes (n)					
	Je(2)/Je(1)	pseudo-T ²	1	2	3	4	5	6
2	0.8693	15.19	103	59				
3	0.8315	9.73	53	50	59			
4	0.8162	9.46	53	44	6	59		
5	0.7917	4.99	53	28	16	6	59	
6	0.6676	2.94	53	28	16	6	25	34

Note. Possible cluster solutions, N=162. The solutions with the most distinct clustering have relatively large Je(2)/Je(1) values and smaller pseudo-T-squared values. Using this rule of thumb, while at the same time maintaining an interpretable number of cases per cluster, a three-factor solution was deemed most appropriate.

NOTES

¹ After entering the generic search term 'politiek' [politics] in Technorati (result: 650 blogs containing the search term) and Google Blog Search (result: 269,500 blog posts containing 'politiek'), it may safely be assumed that there are at least hundreds of Dutch blogs in the realm of politics.

² The software ReCal was used to calculate reliability measures (Freelon, 2010). The following alpha scores were obtained: number of authors .95; age, .62; gender .97; education .89, real name .93; photo of blogger .82; contact form .97; e-mail .98; forum 1.0; phone number 1.0; guestbook .85; instant messaging .92; comments allowed .98; number of comments 1.0; number of commenters .95; participation of author in comments .79; documentation .59; experience .57; media criticism .59; political criticism ad-hominem .74; political criticism general .64; interview 1.0; hyperlinks .94; mobilization .69; original content .71; personal opinion .52; personal style .79; topic .69. To calculate the intercoder reliability of topic, only the first coded topic was used. Possible coder disagreements could therefore also have occurred because coders used a different order of topics in blog posts that contained more than one topic.