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

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Chapter 5

Political citizen bloggers: Who, how and why?*

* An earlier version is currently under review.

Because of the low threshold for citizens to be active on the Internet, more participatory forms of journalism have been hoped for (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). Using weblogs, Twitter and social networks, ordinary citizens are now able to engage in public discussions, express their opinions on political issues and publish information that is not covered in mainstream media. Particularly weblogs are considered to have substantial impact on the realm of politics (Feld & Wilcox, 2008; Hewitt, 2005; Kline & Burnstein, 2005). Despite the enthusiasm about political citizen journalism and political blogs, “academic research has yet to fully unpack the notion of blogging as a journalistic practice” (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2011, p. 587). While many argue that blogs have much political influence and create a challenge for professional journalism, large-scale content analyses demonstrate that most bloggers publish personal opinions (e.g., Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005; Papacharissi, 2007). However, it has also been argued that blogs are an alternative form of journalism (Matheson, 2004). In general, not much is known yet about who is blogging, how people blog and why people blog about politics.

What do we really know about the characteristics of bloggers? A somewhat dated but large-scale PEW study revealed that bloggers are evenly split with regard to gender and that they are young and racially diverse (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). But when it comes to blogging about ‘external events’, mostly related to politics and current affairs, Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, and Wright (2004) concluded from a large-scale content analysis that men are more likely to blog than women. Similarly, Cenite, Detenber, Koh, Lim, and Soon (2009) found that ‘non-personal’ bloggers are more often men, better educated and older than ‘personal’ bloggers. Also most of the so-called political A-list bloggers seem to be older white men with a high education (Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, & Jeong, 2007; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005), in this respect not differing much from professional journalists and political pundits in most Western countries (Deuze, 2002; Hindman, 2009).

Despite the seemingly skewed distribution in terms of sociodemographic characteristics, blogging has blurred the boundaries between producer and audience, or between amateur and professional. Therefore, blogging practices have often been compared to or discussed in light of ‘traditional’ journalism. Sure, the key characteristics of blogs and bloggers obviously are their personal and opinionated tone (Domingo & Heinonen, 2005; Rodzvilla,

2002) and their reliance on mainstream media as sources instead of providing original information (Kenix, 2009; Lee & Jeong, 2007; Messner & Distaso, 2008; Wallsten, 2007). However, although formal ethic codes are often absent (Perlmutter & Schoen, 2007), self-imposed rules and norms can be found among bloggers (Kuhn, 2007; Viégas, 2005) while also valuing general principles such as telling the truth and crediting sources (Cenite et al., 2009). Despite these observations, little is known about political bloggers' main information sources and their identification with the term citizen journalist.

REASONS FOR KEEPING A POLITICAL BLOG

The ability to voice political¹ support or criticism has been named as an important reason to blog (Ekdale, Namkoong, Fung, & Perlmutter, 2010; Feld & Wilcox, 2008; Gillmor, 2004; Macias, Hilyard, & Freimuth, 2009; McKenna, 2007). Before the Internet citizens were highly dependent on mainstream media and professional journalists to get heard, but with blogs everyone has the ability to express his or her political support or criticism. McKenna (2007) showed that indeed some political blogs in the U.S. are clearly positioning themselves as 'policy blogs' and try to bring certain politic areas and policy recommendations to the attention of political actors and the public. Blogging for political reasons has not only received much attention during U.S. election periods (Perlmutter, 2008), but also for example in countries with less democratic regimes (Loewenstein, 2008).

Other bloggers seem to be driven by a combination of political and journalistic reasons. Following the public and citizen journalism movements, these blogs aim at providing either criticism or even an alternative to mainstream media (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008). Ultimately, having better mainstream media or more diverse alternatives would be beneficial for society. In this vein, Ekdale et al. (2010) reported that popular political bloggers found it important to 'to provide an alternative perspective to the mainstream media.' A popular category of blogs are the so-called media watchblogs (Glaser, 2004). Scott (2007), in a content analysis of four popular U.S. political blogs, found that they rarely did original reporting or function as alternative sources, but rather were actually "activist media pundits." Particularly in the U.S., such blogs are found to be able to influence mainstream media (Hayes, 2008; Perlmutter, 2008). Despite the various examples of famous political blogs whose aim it is to correct, complement or

compete with mainstream media, it has been noted that relatively little is known about the prominence of such motives among ordinary citizens who blog about politics (Kenix, 2009). Therefore, this will be the focus of this study.

Besides strictly political reasons, citizens certainly have personal reasons. Studies that have tapped into the reasons for blogging, for example found that people look for communication and interaction with their audience (e.g., Baker & Moore, 2010; Huang, Shen, Lin, & Chang, 2007; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Schwartz, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002), blog to express feelings and emotions (Huang et al., 2007; Liu, Liao, & Zeng, 2007; Nardi et al, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002) or to ‘think by writing’ or document one’s ideas (Nardi et al., 2004; Liu et al., 2007). For example, studying blogs in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, Macias et al. (2009) found that besides expressing political opinions, communication was a key motivation, because blogs enabled them to call for help or look for missing persons. Also Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2011) found political blogging can be personal. They found that perceiving one’s blog as ‘journalistic’ positively predicted the motivation to express oneself (e.g., creative expression, documenting personal experiences).

THE AIMS OF THIS STUDY

All in all, we could see that the evidence about political blogging by ordinary citizens is scarce, to say the least (see also Ekdale et al., 2010; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2011; Wallsten, 2008). Further, most studies had to rely on very small (convenience) samples or secondary data, and in most cases only took into account U.S. or English-language blogs. In this study, we take a comprehensive approach and describe and explain political citizen bloggers’ characteristics, practices, perceptions and reasons. Our study is exploratory in nature, given the voids in the research on this topic. Using original survey data from a comparatively large group of political citizen bloggers, our study therefore aims to shed light on the main characteristics and the practices and perceptions of ordinary citizens who blog about politics.

The following research questions emerge from our analysis of the literature and guide our study:

RQ1. What are the characteristics of political bloggers in terms of sociodemographics, news media use, and political attitudes and participation?

RQ2. What are the blog practices of bloggers? More specifically, we are interested in their blog frequency, their blogging experience, the importance of political posts, the geographic level of politics they focus on and their main information sources.

RQ3. What roles do political bloggers ascribe to? Do they perceive themselves as engaged citizens, as citizen journalists or even as journalists?

RQ4. Do bloggers perceive their blogs to be effective in terms of influencing politics, media or their personal lives?

RQ5. What reasons for blogging do political bloggers have?

METHOD

FIELDWORK

In April 2011, 102 bloggers were invited by e-mail to fill out an online questionnaire. The bloggers were identified based on the list of blogs that were part of a content analysis conducted in 2009 (see chapter 4). This method was chosen because the extensive blog sampling process from this study would maximize the chances that the invited bloggers were part of our target group: ordinary citizens who regularly blog about politics². After three reminders in the following three months, 71 bloggers filled out the survey, yielding a response rate of 70%. Four respondents did not finish the survey, but provided sufficient central questions to be included in the study.

The Netherlands as a research area for political blogs is relevant from various perspectives. First, The Netherlands has the highest Internet access rate (94%) in the European Union (Seybert, 2011), thus allowing virtually everyone to start a blog. Second, the increase in political and societal polarization has turned The Netherlands into fertile ground for political discussion (Boomkens, 2010; Oosterwaal & Torenvlied, 2010). Third, even up until today there is ongoing debate about the strained and undefined relationship between bloggers and citizen journalists on the one hand and mainstream media on the other (e.g., Bardoel, 2010; Costera Meijer & Arendsen, 2010; Pleijter, 2011). Additionally, focusing on the Dutch situation addresses the critical observation that most blog studies are carried out in a U.S. setting or of English language blogs (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008; Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmohl, & Sapp, 2006), while blogging practices outside the U.S. may be different (Pedersen, 2007).

MEASURES

SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS. The following sociodemographics were recorded: gender; age (in years), education (7 categories, dummy-coded to low and high); occupation (high school student/student; freelancer; in employment; self-employed; (temporarily) unemployed; retired; disabled; also dummy-coded to employed versus non-employed) and the professional sector they worked in (Craft; Finances; Communication, PR and market research; Retail and wholesale; Health industry; Industry; ICT; Journalism; Legal; Logistics and transport; Education & training; Research (R&D) and Science; Politics and public administration; Tourism and catering).

POLITICAL VARIABLES. Political cynicism was measured with two items ($\alpha = .80$), asking respondents to which extent they agreed (7-point scale, ranging between completely disagree and completely agree, reverse-coded) with the following statements: (1) Regardless of who forms the government, in general I am satisfied with the way democracy works in the Netherlands; (2) In general, I am satisfied with the way politics works in my municipality. Political orientation was measured on an 11-point scale with the statement: "When political orientation is concerned, people usually talk about 'left' and 'right'. Could you indicate on the scale below where you would position yourself?" Party preference was measured by asking which political party respondents would vote for if elections would be held the next day. Political participation was measured by asking how often (Never; Max. once per year; A few times per year; Around once per month; More than once per month) people engaged in the following activities: Sending letters to the media; Speaking or commenting at municipality meetings; Write articles for a local paper; Hand out political flyers; Participate in demonstration; Organize petitions or gather signatures; Attend political lectures, debates or manifestations; Contact politics or government for expressing criticism or support; Sign digital petitions or signature lists. Two index scales were formed: one with the number of total and one with the number of offline activities the respondent engaged in at least once per year.

NEWS MEDIA AND PARTICIPATORY MEDIA USE. News use was measured with an 8 point-scale (0-7 days per week), by asking respondents how often they: read newspapers; watched TV news and current affairs; listened to radio news; read or watched news on the Internet.

The use of participatory media was measured, using the same 8-point scale, with five consumption activities (Reading political tweets; Reading comments about politics; Reading forums about politics; Following political activities on social network sites; Reading personal blogs about politics) and four participation activities (Writing political tweets; Writing comments about politics; Participating on forums about politics; Participating in political activities on social network sites).

BLOGGING PRACTICES. Respondents were asked which percentage of their blog posts they considered to contain political content (0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100%) and on which geographical level of politics they focused: local/regional politics; national politics or international politics. We further asked them how often they blogged, including maintenance and research (Less than once per month; Once per month; Once every two weeks; Once a week; 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 days per week) and whether they blogged completely alone, mainly alone but with occasional contributions from others or in a group. The latter two categories were collapsed into one category to differentiate between purely single-authored blogs and blogs written by more than one person.

EFFECTIVENESS. To shed light on the perceived effectiveness of blogging (RQ4), we asked respondents how often (never; seldom; regularly; often) their blog: affected local politics; affected national politics; led to relevant contacts; led to speaking and writing invitations; was cited or used by other media; was cited or used by other blogs.

REASONS. To answer RQ5, we measured the reasons people have for blogging. Respondents were presented with two batteries of items (based on previous research) and, using a 7-point scale, asked how important and applicable they were. The first battery of items was based on the variety of reasons for blogging that has been suggested in existing blogging literature. The second battery, based on Deuze (2002), gauged how important a set of specifically traditional journalistic goals were (see Appendix B).

Besides the specific reasons, we gauged the intrinsic motivation to blog – i.e., the perceived enjoyment – compared to the extrinsic motivation – i.e., the perceived usefulness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Using a 7-point scale, respondents were asked to rate two statements: “I blog because it actually leads to something/delivers results” (extrinsic) and “I blog because I find the act of writing blog articles a pleasant activity” (intrinsic).

ROLE PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES. We asked which of the following roles applied (0=no, 1=yes) to them: journalist; citizen journalist; columnists; public

diary writer; political commentator; engaged citizen; other (namely...). We further asked what the main information sources were for their political blog posts (more answers allowed): Own knowledge and experiences; Family, friends and colleagues; News media; Personal blogs from others; Personal contacts with official and politicians; Other sources (open question).

RESULTS

CHARACTERISTICS OF BLOGGERS

For our first research question (RQ1), we examined the characteristics of political bloggers. Political bloggers are in most cases male (85%), fall into older age categories (55% is between 41 and 60 years old, $M = 48.6$, $SD = 13.1$) and have followed some form of higher education (88%). They are dispersed over a variety of professional groups, with training and education (20%), journalism (18%), politics (12%) and research and academia (8%) as the most popular categories. Most bloggers are (self-)employed (79%), the rest is dispersed over the categories retired, student, unemployed or disabled.

On average, bloggers lean somewhat to the political left ($M = 4.3$ on a 1-11 scale, $SD = 2.8$), with 21% placing themselves on the very left end of the spectrum. This tendency is reflected in their party choice, with green party GroenLinks ranking as the most popular one (25% would vote for this party if elections would be held the next day) and socialist party SP as the third most important (14%). Social-liberal party D66 is the second most popular (20%). On average, political bloggers are not very cynical about politics ($M = 3.9$ on a 7-point scale, $SD = 1.8$).

Political bloggers are avid news consumers (Table 1), with online news being the number-one source (on average six days per week). Also the passive use of 'participatory' platforms is relatively frequent.

In order to bring the absolute numbers into perspective, we compared the results with comparative survey data from December 2009 gathered amongst a large and representative sample of the Dutch population (see chapter 2). The means and percentages are shown in the last two columns (Table 1). Comparing the means using t-tests reveals that political bloggers are significantly more avid news consumers (except for radio and television news) and users of participatory media. Further, they are less cynical about

politics than non-bloggers and they lean more to the political left than the rest of the population.

Concerning bloggers' offline political participation – such as participating in demonstrations or signing petitions – we find that, on average, they participate in three of the seven activities. Only ten percent indicated not to engage in any of the activities. If the two online political activities (contacting politicians online; signing digital petitions or signature lists) were included, only one respondent indicated that he or she did not participate at all.

Table 1 Political and media characteristics Dutch political bloggers

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mpop</i> ^a	<i>SDpop</i>
Political variables ^b				
Political orientation	4.3	2.8	5.9	2.2
Political cynicism	3.9	1.8	4.2	1.3
News consumption ^c				
Newspaper	4.3	2.5	3.0	2.8
Radio news	3.4	3.0	3.3	2.7
TV news (current affairs and news broadcasts)	4.6	2.4	4.1	2.5
Online news	6.0	2.0	2.6	2.8
Participatory platforms				
	% ^d		% ^d	
Reading political tweets	60		0,8	
Reading comments about politics	90		8	
Reading forums about politics	60		3	
Following political activities on social network sites	58		2	
Reading personal blogs about politics	82		1	
Writing political tweets	57		0,3	
Writing comments about politics	70		0,9	
Participating on forums about politics	42		0,5	
Participating in political activities on social network sites	57		0,7	

Note: N=67.

^a For the figures in this column, respondents that had indicated to blog about politics were excluded. N = 2,057. ^b Political orientation is measured with a scale from 1-11 and political cynicism with a 1-7 scale. ^c News consumption is measured in days per week. ^d % saying at least once a week.

BLOGGING PRACTICES

With regard to blogging practices (RQ2), we find that most bloggers have quite some experience with blogging, with an average of almost six years of

blog experience ($M = 5.8$, $SD = 3.4$), with 18 percent even blogging nine years or more. Blogging is primarily done on one's own (75%). Only some bloggers sometimes get contributions from others (14%) or are active in a group blog (11%). Blogging frequency varies a lot, with one third being very active (34% blogs between five and seven days per week) and around one third being not so active (31% blogs less than once a week). While two thirds of the blogs do not receive more than 5,000 visitors per month, 11% indicates to have more than 10,000 monthly visitors, with two blogs receiving 130,000 and 200,000 visitors respectively. Domestic politics is the type of politics most blogs focus on (51%), followed by local/regional politics (30%) and international politics (19%).

News media are the most important information source for bloggers (91%), followed by bloggers' own knowledge and experiences (64%). But also a third of the bloggers (34%) indicates that personal contacts with officials and politicians are an important information source.

ROLE PERCEPTIONS AND EFFECTIVENESS

With regard to role perceptions (RQ3), we find that a fifth of the bloggers says the description *citizen journalist* applies to them (20%). Around 23% of the bloggers indicates that the role *journalist* applies, but only two thirds of these bloggers, when asked about their profession, in the survey indicate that they really work in journalism. Most bloggers indicate that the description *engaged citizen* applies to them (61%).

Asked about the perceived effectiveness of their blog (RQ4), many bloggers indicate that their content is picked up by other blogs or that it leads to relevant personal contacts (Table 2). However, only a small percentage of the bloggers thinks that their blog affects local or national politics on a regular basis.

Table 2 Perceived effectiveness of blogging

My blog...	%	SD
Is cited or used by other blogs	61	.49
Leads to relevant contacts	56	.50
Leads to speaking and writing invitations	32	.47
Is cited or used by other media	27	.45
Affects local politics	27	.45
Affect national politics	15	.36

Note. N=71. The percentages reported are the respondents saying *regularly* or *often*.

REASONS

Overall, we see that all reasons to blog (RQ5) received relatively high scores (Table 3): Almost all reasons obtain a score that is above the mean of the scale (3.0). Further, the results suggest that covering subjects/topics that receive too little attention from mainstream media is a very important reason for blogging, as well as stirring discussion and critically examining public officials and businesses. Blogging to give other people a chance to express their views, or blogging for entertainment, are deemed least important. However, even for these last categories 28% and 33% of the respondents finds these goals “(very) important”.

Table 3 Mean scores of specific blogging reasons

	M	SD	% im- portant
Cover subjects that get too little attention from mainstream media	3.9	1.07	73
Initiate and develop discussions	3.9	.91	72
Be an adversary of public officials and businesses	3.8	1.03	76
Provide analysis and interpretation	3.7	1.02	67
Organize and archive my ideas and thoughts by writing	3.7	1.10	69
Trying to affect public opinion	3.6	1.22	68
Have an influence on the public/political agenda	3.6	1.17	63
Criticize specific political policies	3.5	1.17	61
Signal unbalanced media coverage	3.5	1.13	55
Develop intellectual/cultural interests of the public	3.4	1.14	55
Signal mistakes in the media	3.3	1.07	49
Investigate claims of the government	3.3	1.13	54
Stand up for the disadvantaged	3.3	1.29	54
Inform others about the things I do	3.3	1.19	52
Get news to the public quickly	3.2	1.21	42
Criticize certain political parties or ideologies	3.1	1.34	45
Signaling new trends	3.1	1.25	49
Working feelings and thoughts out of my system	3.0	1.26	41
Get in touch with other people	2.9	1.08	31
Support specific political policies	2.9	1.32	41
Support certain political parties or ideologies	2.8	1.40	35
Provide entertainment	2.8	1.24	33
Give people a chance to express their views	2.6	1.28	28

Note. All questions were measured with 1-5 scales. The percentage in the last column is the percentage of respondents answering “important” or “very important”. Number of respondents varies between 67 and 71 because some surveys were not fully completed.

Factor analysis (principal axis factoring with varimax rotation) shows that seven general ‘blogging reasons’ can be identified (see Appendix for factor matrix): support and criticize politics (3 items, $\alpha = .80$); influence public and public opinion (3 items, $\alpha = .67$); serve as a platform for (disadvantaged) others (2 items; $\alpha = .66$); research and scrutinize politics (2 items, $\alpha = .68$);

inform the audience (1 item); signal mistakes in the media (1); organize and archive my ideas and thoughts by writing (1 item). The mean scores of the blogging reasons are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4 Mean scores of general blogging reasons

	M	SD
Organize and archive my ideas and thoughts by writing	3.69	1.10
Influence public and public opinion	3.59	0.87
Research and scrutinize politics	3.55	0.94
Signal mistakes in the media	3.32	1.07
Inform the audience	3.25	1.19
Support and criticize politics	2.95	1.14
Serve as a platform for (disadvantaged) others	2.92	1.11

Note. Ranges are between 1 and 5. Number of respondents varies between 67 and 71 because some surveys were not fully completed.

The wide variety of important blogging reasons is also reflected in the answers to the open-ended question, which preceded the closed-ended ones and asked what the respondents' reasons for blogging were. Moreover, the answers provide more detail on the primary causes, on the translation of blogging reasons into blogging practice and sometimes even on the perceived effectiveness. For example, one critical blogger reported:

“Through my blog(s) I try to keep alert (mainly) local politics. And it works. (...) From the responses and comments from local politicians it appears they actually take into account my commentary. (...) My influence sometimes reaches so far that politicians run into troubles.”

Another blogger indicated to blog to inform his readers about politics and stated “I started blogging to give signals to society about corruption, place-hunting and political lies from our representatives from the city, province and country”, and another responded “As a volunteer in my neighborhood, I cover, on a daily basis, local news and experiences as a service to local residents”. For many, blogging is a way of release, or as one respondent stated: “[my blog is a] safety valve for a voice crying in the wilderness”. Various respondents found it important to blog because in this way they could supplement or correct mainstream media. One respondent stated:

“Information about Venezuela can only be found sporadically in the media, and in the case there actually was news coverage, I thought it was not reflected properly. Of course one can start complaining, but if you don’t come into action, you don’t have the right to complain.”

Some bloggers keep a blog to inform other people about their work or professional expertise in order to gain publicity and attention, while others seem to keep a blog for more personal reasons (“lay ideas down in writing” or “writing exercise”).

In addition, we compared the mean scores of the intrinsic ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.66$) and extrinsic motivation items ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.78$). This difference is significantly different ($t(65)=4.68$, $p = .001$) and thus reveals that bloggers are, although both scores are relatively high, more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated.

Is there a pattern of who blogs why? We briefly explore whether certain sociodemographic (age, gender, education and employment) and political characteristics (cynicism, orientation and political participation) are able to predict the importance bloggers ascribe to certain blogging reasons. Therefore, regression analyses were performed using the specific blogging reasons as dependent variables. As the results show (Table 5), some results stand out. For example, bloggers who do not have a paid job and bloggers with a higher education are more likely to try to influence the public and public opinion, although the effect is marginally significant. Bloggers with little education are more likely to use their blog as a platform for others, such as disadvantaged groups in society. Further, being more politically active (e.g., signing petitions, demonstrating) positively impacts the intensity of all blogging reasons.

Table 5 Predictors of blogging reasons

	Support & criticize pol.	Influence public opinion	Serve as platform	Research & scrutinize pol.	Inform others	Signal mistakes in the media	Organize & archive ideas and thoughts
Gender	.07	.20	.41	.33	.79*	.52	.31
Age	.00	.00	.03*	.00	.01	.01	-.02
Education (dummy)	-.59	0.65*	-1.44***	-.36	-.74	-.67	.00
Employed (dummy)	-.45	-.44 [†]	-.08	-.11	.04	-.11	.29
Political orientation	.02	.10**	.04	.10*	.02	.05	-.05
Political cynicism	.13 [†]	-.04	.03	.11	-.14 [†]	.08	.01
Political participation	.22***	.13**	.11*	.10*	.16**	.09 [†]	.15
<i>Adj. R²</i>	.262	.235	.265	.064	.131	.52	.86*
<i>F</i>	4.30***	3.86**	4.35***	1.64	2.39*	1.32	1.87 [†]

Note: Entries are unstandardized B coefficients

[†] p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01 ***p < .001.

DISCUSSION

In recent years, various content analyses and surveys have tempered hopeful expectations with regard to political citizen journalism: the majority of citizens does not seem to participate (see also Chapter 2), active bloggers are mostly ‘usual suspects,’ content is often derived from mainstream media (see also Chapter 4) and other information is not always newsworthy. By directly surveying ordinary citizens who blog about politics, our study has aimed at expanding our understanding of the contents of the contemporary political blogosphere and the motives of its producers.

We, too, have to conclude that the initial expectations regarding the diversity and quality of contributions of political citizen journalism to the realm of politics and mainstream media have been somewhat unrealistic. Not many bloggers themselves consider their blog to be journalism. Our data seem to reflect the observation that most content is derived from mainstream media, that only a few blogs attract a substantial audience and that most bloggers do not think that their blog affects politics and media.

Rather, our results seem to suggest that many bloggers keep a weblog for other, mostly private and personal, reasons. For example, more or less 'intrinsic motivations,' such as organizing and archiving ideas by writing and working feelings out of their system, were deemed quite important by many. This observation is corroborated by the significant difference between the scores of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations questions. Furthermore, dissociation from the journalistic profession combined with the ambitious goal to exert influence in the political and media realm, could be a sign that political citizen bloggers should not be classified as citizen *journalists* but rather be labeled as political activists or critical citizens.

Of course, it should be stressed that despite the dominance of bloggers with the same sociodemographic profile as professional journalists (older, men, high education, left-leaning; see Herman, Vergeer, & Pleijter, 2011), a substantial share does not seem to be the 'usual suspects'. Most significantly, a quarter of our sample indicated not to have a job, but categorizes himself or herself as retired, student, disabled or unemployed: groups of people who traditionally did not have easy and open access to the public discourse. Of course, it could be that even these participants belong to the same relatively small group that writes letters-to-the-editor. However, not only is a small share of such reader-submitted contributions actually published, also letters that score higher with regard to writing quality and originality, and letters that follow the mainstream news agenda, are more likely to be published (Nielsen, 2010), and it has been found that older male letter writers are overrepresented (e.g., Cooper, Knotts, & Haspel, 2009; Nielsen, 2010). These observations, combined with the increased options for actual interactive debate (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011), could mean at least more people and probably also a somewhat more diverse array of citizens are now expressing themselves publicly.

These figures, together with bloggers' goal to critically express themselves with regard to politics and media, suggest that blogs may serve an important function for specific groups of people – who perhaps feel misrepresented or underrepresented in the public debate – as an outlet for personal and political expression. Also, their goals and role perceptions rather seem to suggest that political blogging is a form of political participation instead of (citizen) journalism.

Blogging thus can be considered as a possible alternative means of political engagement (Bennet, 2008; Gillmor, 2004) and a platform for

discourse on well-known mainstream media topics. Given the notion that political blogs offer the opportunity to ventilate political opinions, future studies should examine how blogging reasons evolve over time (see Ekdale et al., 2010) and whether political blogging may serve as a driver for changes in levels of political trust and efficacy, or whether blogging is rather a *result* of changes in these levels. It is, for example, interesting that political bloggers, although critical, are less politically cynical than the rest of the population. Also systematic comparisons between bloggers (or political users of other participatory media) and non-bloggers with respect to public opinion would yield relevant insights into how representative and diverse the population of political bloggers is. Overall, this would further our understanding of the actual relevance of political blogs to public discourse.

Once, it has been feared that the profession of journalism would be endangered or even wiped out by an army of voluntary citizens that would start their own news outlets. However, as of yet most citizens do not seem to be willing to invest the time and energy, or probably do not possess the skills, motivations and information resources, to overthrow the journalistic profession. Although journalism may have various enemies in the form of financial constraints, commercial pressure and increasing competition from new online outlets, political citizen journalism does not seem to be one of them.

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APPENDIX

First battery of reasons for blogging

Below you will find a list of possible motivations to blog. These are derived from other studies. Could you please indicate how important these are for you? Answer categories: Very unimportant; Unimportant; Neutral; Important; Very important.

- To signal mistakes in the media
- To signal unbalanced media coverage
- To cover subjects that get too little attention by mainstream media
- To support certain political parties or ideologies
- To support specific political policies
- To try and affect public opinion
- To criticize specific political policies
- To criticize certain political parties or ideologies
- To get in touch with other people
- To try and inspire discussions
- To inform others about the things I do
- To write feelings and thoughts out of my system
- To organize and archive my ideas and thoughts by writing

Second battery of reasons for blogging

Please indicate how important you find the goals listed below for you as a blogger. Answer categories: Unimportant; Not really important; Neutral; Important; Very important.

- Provide analysis and interpretation
- Get news to the public quickly
- Be an adversary of public officials and businesses
- Give people a chance to express their views
- Investigate claims of the government
- Signal new trends
- Develop intellectual/cultural interests of the public
- Stand up for the disadvantaged
- Provide entertainment
- Have an influence on politics and the public

Table A1 Factor loadings for principal axis factoring with varimax rotation of blogging reasons

	Factor						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Support certain political parties or ideologies	0.83	0.09	0.04	0.10	0.09	-0.04	0.14
Support specific political policies	0.69	-0.04	0.03	0.00	0.14	0.20	0.07
Criticize certain political parties or ideologies	0.69	0.11	0.17	0.33	-0.12	0.15	0.06
Have an influence on the public/political agenda	0.65	0.59	0.06	0.11	0.11	0.08	-0.19
Criticize specific political policies	0.47	-0.08	0.16	0.41	-0.12	0.31	0.05
Trying to affect public opinion	0.38	0.70	-0.16	0.08	0.09	0.28	-0.13
Develop intellectual/cultural interests of the public	-0.14	0.67	0.09	0.00	0.06	0.07	0.26
Provide analysis and interpretation	-0.05	0.62	-0.28	0.13	0.02	-0.16	0.20
Initiate develop discussions	0.17	0.53	0.19	0.19	0.07	0.10	0.04
Give people a chance to express their views	0.10	-0.14	0.69	0.26	-0.04	0.18	-0.11
Stand up for the disadvantaged	0.30	0.15	0.63	0.06	0.02	0.28	0.01
Working feelings and thoughts out of my system	0.17	0.14	0.56	0.03	0.12	-0.05	0.25
Get news to the public quickly	-0.06	-0.11	0.56	0.03	0.36	0.10	-0.25
Provide entertainment	-0.07	0.00	0.48	-0.14	0.02	-0.10	0.11
Be an adversary of public officials and businesses	0.20	0.11	-0.09	0.76	0.07	0.02	-0.02
Investigate claims of the government	0.04	0.13	0.06	0.67	-0.02	0.08	0.05
Inform others about the things I do	0.16	0.00	0.00	-0.02	0.64	0.16	0.25
Signaling new trends	-0.09	0.29	0.21	-0.01	0.43	-0.08	-0.06
Get in touch with other people	0.21	0.29	0.20	0.03	0.42	0.02	0.14
Cover subjects that get too little attention by mainstream media	0.14	0.10	0.08	0.07	0.17	0.66	0.02
Signal mistakes in the media	0.18	0.12	0.12	0.51	-0.45	0.54	0.08
Signal unbalanced media coverage	0.38	0.08	0.05	0.38	-0.37	0.45	0.19
Organize and archive my ideas and thoughts by writing	0.19	0.25	0.10	0.09	0.21	0.09	0.77

Note. Factor loadings > .60 are in boldface. Rotation converged in 16 iterations.

NOTES

¹ For this study, a broad definition of ‘politics’ was employed, as to avoid including only blogs that dealt with conventional or institutional forms of politics. Political blog content was therefore defined as “any text where local, national, foreign or supranational politicians, political parties, political institutions and governmental policy are mentioned”.

² The blogs were selected by entering an extensive set of politically related keywords in the five largest blog search engines. This sample was then purged from abandoned, foreign and non-political blogs. A blog was considered political if either the blog advertised itself explicitly as focusing on politics (see the definition in the first endnote) or at least two out of the five most recent blog posts were political.