Introduction:
Blogs, politics and power: a special issue of Public Choice

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Abstract There is good reason to believe that blogs are changing politics, but we don't know exactly how. Nor do we know whether the normative consequences of blogs for politics are likely to be good or bad. In this special issue, we and our co-authors undertake the first sustained effort to map the empirical and normative consequences of blogs for politics. We begin by setting out basic information about blogs, and some anecdotal evidence suggesting that they are indeed politically important. We go on to identify the key empirical and normative questions that blogs raise, and discuss the dearth of relevant data in the existing literature. We conclude by summarizing how the authors of the articles gathered in this special issue help fill this gap.

Keywords Blogs · Blogging · US politics · Internet · WWW

According to Merriam-Webster, the most requested online definition of 2004 was 'blog'—a word that had yet to officially enter the dictionary (BBC News 2004). That same year, *Time* magazine announced its first "Blog of the Year." Blogs appear to be a staple of political commentary, legal analysis, celebrity gossip, and high school angst. At the same time, blogs have generated a backlash. In December 2003, *Editor & Publisher* declared them to be "the most hyped online development" on its website—and the word "hyped" was not meant kindly (Chin 2003). In a *Mother Jones* cover story entitled "The Revolution Will Not Be Blogged," journalist and writer George Packer (2004) flat out declared, "I hate blogs"—even though he also admitted, "I gorge myself on these hundreds of pieces of commentary like so much candy." By 2006, many media commentators had claimed that the blogosphere was already past its prime as a cultural, business and political phenomenon (Chaudhry 2006; Gross 2006), or was being assimilated into the traditional political system (Glover and Essl 2006).

Despite continued skepticism, blogs are demonstrably changing politics and the media over the longer term, even if they are not transforming them as fundamentally as some of

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their evangelists have predicted. In this special issue, we and our co-authors seek to map the ways in which blogs are indeed changing media and politics, providing an agenda for future research and inquiry.

A better understanding of the mechanisms through which blogs do or do not affect politics would not only provide a better basis for social scientific research on blogs. It would also help clarify major unresolved public debates. Are blogs indeed important to politics? If they are important, do they have a beneficial or harmful effect? In this introductory article, we first discuss definitional issues and the extent to our knowledge of how blogs and the blogosphere work. We then turn to major controversies surrounding the effectiveness and the desirability of blogs. Finally, we discuss how the the articles in this special issue both map out the extent of our existing knowledge regarding blogs, and shows how this knowledge helps to clarify debates surrounding the political impact of blogging.

1 Facts, figures and definitions

What are blogs? The term is a contraction of "weblog"; we define a blog here as a web page with minimal to no external editing, providing on-line commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources. The blogosphere—which refers to the universe of weblogs and bloggers—has grown at an astronomical rate. In 1999 the number of blogs was estimated at under fifty. The growth of the blogosphere was spurred dramatically in 1999 when Pyra Labs developed user-friendly software and made it freely available to online users; at the end of 2000, estimates ranged into the thousands (Mead 2000). The years 2000 through 2006 saw exponential growth, which is now apparently tapering slightly; the blog tracking service Technorati estimates that there are some seventy million blogs in existence as of May 2007.

As the blogosphere has grown, a variety of organizations and individuals adopted the form (Welch 2003). As of 2007, almost every political magazine or opinion journal—from *The Nation* to the *Economist* to *The American Spectator*—either sponsor individual bloggers or have developed their own house blogs. Most newspapers have blogs as well—including the *New York Times, Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor* and *Financial Times*. Weblogs are hosted at the web sites of all cable news outlets (see further (Welch 2003), American Press Institute n.d.). Political campaigns at the federal, state and local level use blogs to organize and motivate their supporters. Businesses increasingly use blogs for promotional campaigns, and track blogs to measure customer satisfaction and monitor trends. Although other social technologies and networks have emerged, including Wiki, podcasts, MySpace, Flickr, and the YouTube phenomenon, bloggers have to date simply incorporated many of these new technologies into their own online activities (cf. http://www.bloggingheads.tv). While the underlying technologies are certain to change and evolve, the decentralized interactive exchange of opinions and information that blogs exemplify is becoming a basic element of social interaction.

2 Do blogs affect politics?

Those who say that blogs are substantially changing politics can (and do) point to a plethora of success-stories, some of which have assumed the force of foundational myths for political bloggers. In late December 2002, Trent Lott resigned his position as Senate Majority Leader in the wake of inflammatory comments he made two weeks before at Strom Thrumond's 100th birthday party. Although the event was broadcast on C-SPAN and reported in

the mainstream press, it took almost a week before the media devoted significant coverage to Lott's comments. When the incident became fodder for intense online commentary it prodded renewed media attention which converted Lott's gaffe into a full-blown scandal leading to his resignation as Senate Majority Leader.[1] The *Economist* (2002), in its post-mortem on the Lott affair, concluded:

> The mainstream media was initially blind to his [Lott's] remarks perhaps because it is used to such comments. But the "blogosphere"—websites of opinion and news, first known as weblogs—denounced the remarks vigorously, and would not let up, finally forcing others to take notice.

Most political analysts credited bloggers with assisting in Lott's downfall (Podhoretz 2002). In the language of social science, blogs were not a causal variable in explaining Lott's downfall, but they were an important intervening variable (Bloom 2003; Scott 2004).

Blogs have also played an important role in several media scandals (Glaser 2004). In 2004, the blogosphere challenged the documents that formed the foundation for a *60 Minutes II* story on President Bush's National Guard service. Allegations about the authenticity of those documents that were first made in the blogosphere soon reappeared in the mainstream media. Both supporters and critics of the role of bloggers in public discourse agree that the blogs who covered the issue played a pivotal role in the scandal that followed (Last 2004 and Levin 2004; see Pein 2005 for a more critical take). In the independent review panel commissioned by CBS, the executive producer of the program, "acknowledged that the bloggers and other matters... had shaken his confidence" in the twenty-four hours following the airing of the story (Thornburgh and Biccardi 2005, p. 172). The growth of the blogosphere has triggered (perhaps unjustified) concern about the economic viability of media companies for the future. Surveys of blog readers show that they view blogs as more credible than traditional media outlets (Johnson and Kaye 2004).

Blogs have done more than simply nail the scalps of politicians and media figures to the wall. They have also played a highly important role in shaping campaign tactics and strategy. In 2004, Howard Dean rose to prominence in part because of his adroit use of the blogosphere as a tool for rallying activists (Graf and Darr 2004; Kerbel and Bloom 2005). Dean's initial success in using his blog to raising money and garner media attention during the 2004 Democratic presidential primary led other politicians to copy the idea, so that the campaign blog diffused throughout American politics (Cone 2003). Both parties offered press credentials to some bloggers, allowing them to cover their 2004 nominating conventions. According to some accounts, conservative weblogs played a key role in highlighting the charges made by some Swift Boat veterans that John Kerry had exaggerated his service record. In the spring of 2004, liberal weblogs posted repeatedly about the gaps in President Bush's National Guard service record. Also in 2004, a campaign by bloggers forced Sinclair Communications to back down from their plan to broadcast a documentary attacking John Kerry on the eve of the election (Ammori 2004).

By the 2006 electoral cycle, candidates at all levels of politics were reaching out to prominent and influential bloggers. This was particularly true on the left side of the political spectrum, in which the "netroots"—a rough coalescence of liberal bloggers and online activists—targeted specific campaigns (Armstrong and and Zúniga 2006; Farrell 2006). Bloggers helped cause Senator Joseph Lieberman lose the 2006 Democratic

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[1] However, Lott's story also illustrates some of the limits of blogs' power; he returned to office as Senate Minority Whip in the wake of the Republican 2006 election debacle, despite renewed opposition from bloggers on both left and right.

primary to Ned Lamont. In the general election, the evidence suggests that they were a
key factor in several close races in the House of Representatives (Perlstein 2006). Bloggers
used various tactics to accomplish this goal. They exhorted candidates in comparatively safe
districts to donate excess campaign funds to more vulnerable candidates. They "google-
bombed" the opposition—hyperlinking to negative stories so they appear prominently in
Google searches. On election day, bloggers across the political spectrum reported on polling
problems and voter intimidation. After the election results were clear, Senate majority leader
Harry Reid posted a diary entry on Daily Kos asserting, "Without the netroots, Democrats
would not be in the position we are in today. It is as simple as that" (Reid 2006). Heavy-
weight presidential candidates for the 2008 election hired "blog consultants" just as early as
other campaign consultants (Glover and Essl 2006).

Blogs increasingly affect legal outcomes too (Solum 2006; Berman 2006; Balkin 2006).
There is evidence to suggest that law clerks are likely to read prominent legal blogs, and that
legal bloggers know this, and may craft their posts so as to influence decisions in prominent
cases (confidential communication from former law clerk). Libertarian bloggers took the
lead in a successful campaign to get an inmate removed from death row in Mississippi be-
cause of improper sentencing (Balko 2006). Blogs have functioned as an important conduit
for information provision to Senators in confirmation hearing for Supreme Court justices
(Ammori 2004). The blogosphere has also found common cause in opposing Federal Elec-
tions Commission regulation restricting blog activity during election seasons.

Blogs do not just influence politics; they can also influence policy outcomes. Two recent
examples serve to illustrate a broader phenomenon. First, there is evidence that blogs played
an important role in helping defeat George W. Bush's proposed Social Security reforms,
which were intended to be the landmark achievement of his second term in office (Glover
and Essl 2006). Many Democrats would have opposed the plan regardless, but bloggers with
policy expertise developed the talking points that were used to torpedo any legislative ac-
tion. When Senator Barbara Boxer made reference to a Republican memorandum on Social
Security in a speech in February 2005, a photograph revealed that she (or a staffer) had
downloaded her briefing materials from the weblog of Berkeley economics professor Brad
DeLong.

Left-of-center blogs also helped to prevent Democrats who might otherwise have been
tempted towards a bipartisan solution from defecting. Most prominently, Joshua Micah Mar-
shall's *Talking Points Memo* blog played a key role in singling out and chastening prominent
Democrats such as representative Harold Ford and Joseph Lieberman. Ford, who had pre-
viously been a prominent and vociferous Democratic supporter of the proposed alternative
to social security, private accounts, reversed direction abruptly a few days after having been
singled out by Marshall's blog as "Dean" of the "Fainthearted Faction" of Democrats who
were soft on social security.[2] By helping to prevent defections among Democrats, and by en-
couraging moderate Republicans to disavow Bush's plans, Marshall and others made Social
Security a far more difficult sell for Republican leaders, who had counted on their ability to
peel off Democratic defectors who would give them political cover (Woodly, this issue).

Blogs played a similar role in more recent controversies over Congressional earmarks.
The *Porkbusters* campaign, set up by a group of right wing and libertarian blogs, sought to
minimize the extent to which members of the House and Senate could insert earmarks into
bills that provided funding for their home districts or states, or favored causes. This cam-
paign quickly attracted support across the political spectrum of blogs. *Porkbusters* together

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[2]See http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/004292.php and http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/
archives/004310.php for further information.

with the left-of-center *TPM Muckraker* blog, sought to help promote one key initiative aimed at making earmarks more difficult, the "Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act," which was intended to provide a unified database of federal funding that would make it easier to identify and eliminate useless earmarks.

By September 2006, two unnamed Senators had placed a "secret hold" on the bill, blocked Senate action. Bloggers encouraged readers to identify the responsible senators. They and their readers began phoning each senator's office individually and asking whether the Senator in question had blocked the bill. Senate majority leader Bill Frist then called upon "all members, when asked by the blog community, to instruct their staff to answer whether or not they have a hold." This pressure led to the eventual outing of senators Ted Stevens and Robert Byrd—two senators notorious for ladling out federal pork to their home districts. Those senators removed their holds on the legislation, ensuring its unanimous passage through both houses of Congress within a week.

The blogosphere has affected foreign affairs as well as domestic policy. Blog activism also helped trigger a letter-writing campaign to Congress that impeded an arms sale from a Spanish firm to Hugo Chavez's regime in Venezuela (Institute for World Politics 2006). Intelligence analysts became so enamored of the blogosphere's structure that they advocated for the creation of a classified blogosphere to integrate disparate strands of intelligence data (Andrus, Burton 2005, 2005; Simon and Hart 2006). Despite the inherent tension between the culture of blogs and the culture of intelligence, such efforts got off the ground in 2006.

Blogs have also achieved some political and policy prominence outside the US (Drezner and Farrell 2004). Democracy advocates in both Iran and Iraq have adopted blogging as a technique for registering dissent. The nascent French blogosphere played an important role in mobilizing the "No" campaign for the June 2005 referendum rejecting the proposed European Union constitution, and became an arena of public debate in the run-up to the French presidential elections. In 2006 the Sudanese government ordered UN special envoy Jan Pronk out of the country because of blunt comments he made about the military situation in Darfur—on his personal blog.

All this suggests that blogs do sometimes matter in quite important ways for politics, in the US and elsewhere. Yet there is still room for debate on the question of *when* blogs actually have political power. This is more complicated than much of the popular commentary on blogs would lead one to imagine. Bloggers have often failed miserably when they have tried to shape political outcomes. Moreover, some estimates of blog readership suggest that they have much smaller audiences than commonly believed. Comscore Media Metrix, a standard source for measuring online readership, reported in April 2005 that only one political blog—the Daily Kos with 212,000 unique monthly visitors—exceeded the minimal threshold of 150,000 unique monthly visitors required for statistical significance in its research. In contrast, the *New York Times* had 29.8 million visitors in April 2005 (Bialik 2005). For every public survey that suggests a healthy fraction of Americans read blogs, there is a marketing survey showing that fewer than 5% of respondents read even a single blog once a week (Schadler and Golvin 2005).

Even when blogs are read, they are not necessarily trusted—particularly outside the United States. A recent poll discovered that across ten countries, blogs were the least trusted source of news (BBC/Reuters/Media Center 2006). Independent confirmation of the causal mechanisms through which the blogosphere allegedly influences politics are hard to find. Some independent analyses of examples of blog influence—including the Trent Lott affair—have suggested that blogs may be more important as reactors to the media than independent agenda setters (Scott 2004). It is certainly possible that in many instances where blogs claim to have had a political impact, they were merely epiphenomenal. The accumulation of circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that blogs have significant consequences for politics.

However, it doesn't help us understand when blogs are likely to have consequences, or why. Concentrating solely on the instances in which blogs have succeeded in changing politics provides a biased and highly unreliable means of estimating their overall influence.

In all of these cases, blogs were not the only causal factor in determining the equilibrium outcome. At a minimum, however, there is strong evidence that politicians *perceive* that blogs are a powerful force in American politics. The top five political blogs attract a combined 1.5 million unique visits per day, suggesting that they have far more readers than established opinion magazines such as the *New Republic, American Prospect*, and *Weekly Standard* combined.[3] In July 2004, White House Internet Director Jimmy Orr (2004) stated: "Bloggers are very instrumental. They are important. They can lead the news. And they've been underestimated." In an arena where perception is power, the blogosphere has accumulated significant amounts of political sway.

In conclusion, if we are to move beyond battling anecdotes, we need better arguments about *why* and *how* blogs have significant consequences, in the US and elsewhere. Do blogs directly shape the political behaviors and understandings of mass publics? Or do they instead indirectly shape politics, through their effects on the discourse and behavior of elites? Or do they, as some skeptics argue, have no real independent impact on politics?

3 Are blogs *good* for politics?

There is an ongoing normative debate over whether weblogs have had a positive or negative impact on the state of political discourse and media coverage. During the height of the 2004 election campaign, Alan Wolfe argued that, "the way we argue now has been shaped by cable news and Weblogs; it's all 'gotcha' commentary and attributions of bad faith. No emotion can be too angry and no exaggeration too incredible" (Wolfe 2004). Two years later, David Brooks (2006) bemoaned the decline in public intellectual output, declaring, "instead of books, we have blogs." In 2006, the deputy editor of the *Wall Street Journal* complained that blogs were allowing people with "weird thoughts" to "self-medicate," leading to an explosion of "uninhibited, bat-out-of-hell hyperbole" (Henninger 2006).

These laments echo the warnings that a series of prominent scholars have provided on the Internet's corrosive effect on the body politic. In 2000, Putnam (2000, p. 173) warned about the emergence of "cyberapartheid" and "cyberbalkanization", observing: "The political culture of the Internet, at least in its early stages, is astringently libertarian, and in some respects cyberspace represents a Hobbesian state of nature, not a Lockean one." Other social analysts have sounded similar alarms (Castells 1996; Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 1997; Bimber 1998; Shapiro and Leone 1999). Sunstein (2001, p. 49) echoed Putnam's warning a year later when he suggested that:

> New technologies, emphatically including the Internet, are dramatically increasing people's ability to hear echoes of their own voices and to wall themselves off from others.

Blogs could represent the most recent example of cyberapartheid (Teachout 2005). Many bloggers themselves have expressed concern about the phenomenon, which they call "cocooning." In a study of cross-linkages between prominent political bloggers on the left and right of the political spectrum, Adamic and Glance (2005) concluded that cross-ideological exchanges form only a small portion of the overall universe of links.

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[3]Although note that unique visitor counts aren't necessarily good measures of actual readership.

However, the extent to which cyberbalkanization is a serious problem remains open to dispute. Is the blogosphere necessarily more politically segmented than other political spaces? Yale law professor (and blogger) (Balkin 2004) argues that because blogs are partly defined by their hyperlinks and because bloggers systematically comment on each other, greater segregation is unlikely:

> [M]ost bloggers who write about political subjects cannot avoid addressing (and, more importantly, linking to) arguments made by people with different views. The reason is that much of the blogosphere is devoted to criticizing what other people have to say. It's hard to argue with what the folks at National Review Online or Salon are saying unless you go read their articles, and, in writing a post about them, you will almost always either quote or link to the article, or both. Ditto for people who criticize Glenn Reynolds, Andrew Sullivan, or Kos, or Atrios. If you don't like what Glenn said about Iraq, you quote a bit of his posting, link to it, and then make fun of him. These links are the most important way that people travel on the Web from one view to its opposite. (And linking also produces a good check on criticism because you can actually go and read what the person being criticized has said.) ...

The Horrigan et al. (2004) study of the 2004 election supports Balkin's contention. It concluded that Internet users—including blog readers—had greater overall exposure than others to political arguments, including those that challenge their candidate's preferences and their positions on some key issues.

Research is unlikely to resolve normative disputes over cyberbalkanization to the extent that these arguments reflect divergences in underlying understandings of how democracy should work. It can, however, help make these debates more focused by providing a common body of factual information to help orient argument. Such a body of factual information is sorely lacking today—there is a plethora of arguments made on the basis of anecdotes, but little substantive data.

4 Providing foundations for our understanding of blogs

As discussed in the previous two sections there are vigorous debates over the positive and normative implications of the blogosphere for politics. What is sorely lacking is real evidence and nuanced hypotheses that might both clarify the terms of these debates and potentially help resolve them. At present, scholarly research has little to add—not because this research is too theoretical, but because it is very nearly non-existent. What little academic work there is on blogs is highly variable in quality, and says little about their political role.[4] The popular books on weblogs provide little insight either. They range from how-to manuals (Blood 2002; Stone 2002) through cultural analyses Kline and Bernstein (2005) to quick-and-dirty publications that assemble blog posts with little detached analysis (O'Brien 2004). The most prominent books covering this topic are written from explicitly partisan perspectives (Hewitt 2005; Anderson 2005; Reynolds 2006; Armstrong and and Zúniga 2006). This does not by any means automatically vitiate these

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[4]There is a body of serious research on blogs conducted by computer scientists interested in computer-supported creative work. See, for example, Herring et al. (2004) and Nardi et al. (2007). However, while insightful in many ways, this work is only indirectly relevant to political scientific and political theoretic debates.

analyses, but it does mean that many of their assertions are intended less to evaluate the facts on the ground than to change them.

The lack of rigorous analysis has deleteriously affected the public debates over the blogosphere, leading to an emphasis on poorly informed speculation and a dearth of grounded argument. Despite their increasing political importance, the political power and purpose of the blogosphere remain poorly understood. Simply put, we know very little about exactly how blogs affect politics, because there is a dearth of serious thinking on the topic. There is a dim awareness that blogs "matter"—but little effort to explain how, why, and when they matter.

In this special issue, we and our co-contributors seek to address this gap in our knowledge. We bring together a diverse group of scholars from multiple disciplines to examine different aspects of the relationship between blogs and politics through more rigorous analysis. Specifically, many of our contributors seek to apply the tools of social science to study the blogosphere. Because blogs are such a new phenomenon, they are a rich source of study to derive both descriptive and causal inferences (King et al. 1994). Their wealth of codified information allows scholars to map out political conversations as they happen, and thus, for example, to begin to answer important pre-existing questions about the circumstances, structure and form of political discourse (Hopkins and King 2007). Does discussion in the blogosphere approximate democratic deliberation in any meaningful way? Are political bloggers so balkanized that they only link to those who agree with their own political opinions? Does the blogosphere replicate preexisting political inequalities at the global or national level? Debates about the Internet's effect on politics have raged for the past decade—the blogosphere provides a rich data source from which to draw.

Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell provide an introduction to the US political blogosphere and the circumstances under which political blogs are likely to have consequences. Using data on links between bloggers and participant observation, they argue that there is a high degree of disparity in the relative visibility of blogs, leading some blogs to become elite blogs that attract attention from both other bloggers and political elites such as journalists who are interested in reading blogs. Norms of link exchange mean that these elite blogs can serve as filters between the blogosphere and its readers, allowing "interesting" points of view or information to reframe political issues for elite readers.

Ethan Zuckerman sets out the strengths and limits of our available data on the international blogosphere. He marshals quantitative and qualitative data to suggest that we may be seeing a decline in international connections between blogs, and an increase in the importance of national blogospheres (and limited transnational blogospheres based on language or geographic proximity). Zuckerman also provides a skeptical take on claims that blogs may serve as a valuable substitute for mainstream media in providing information on underreported parts of the world.

Laura McKenna and Antoinette Pole take a different perspective, using a survey to establish how bloggers themselves describe their activities as bloggers and political actors. They find that political bloggers tend to view themselves as watchdogs keeping the mainstream media honest, but also engage in other activities, including political fundraising, asking their readers to contact elected officials and raising money for philanthropic causes. McKenna and Pole also provide important information on the demography of bloggers, confirming the general belief that political bloggers tend to be overwhelmingly white, male, and well-educated.

Eszter Hargittai, Jason Gallo and Matthew Kaine provide an empirical analysis of links between political blogs, addressing the question of whether or not the blogosphere is leading to increased polarization and lack of exchange between people with diverse political

opinions. They supplement quantitative data with content analysis, finding that there is a high degree of insularity among bloggers of differing political opinions. However, only a relatively small minority of bloggers never linked to bloggers of divergent political opinions during the short period that was studied, and a considerable number of cross-ideological links involved substantive debate rather than knee-jerk dismissals.

Rebecca MacKinnon examines the key question of whether blogs can aid in the democratization of non-democratic regimes, drawing on evidence from debates over blogs in China. MacKinnon finds that there is little evidence of blogs serving as a means for democratic activism, and substantial evidence of censorship by Chinese authorities and by e-commerce firms seeking to please the government. However, she argues that blogs may further democratization in a more subtle way. Along with other forms of electronically mediated communication, they are leading to the gradual establishment of a form of civil society, outside the control of the state, which may, in time help ease a transition to a less illiberal political system.

Cass Sunstein devotes his essay to extending his argument about the Internet's effect on political polarization and balkanization to the blogosphere. Sunstein argues that the blogosphere doesn't resemble a Hayekian price system that allows the collation of dispersed items of information, instead suggesting that it is difficult to tell truth from falsehood. Sunstein also adopts a guardedly skeptical perspective on the blogosphere's potential as a forum of deliberation. He finds both theoretical reason and empirical evidence to suggest that blogs are likely to lead to increased cocooning and polarization.

Deva Woodly is more optimistic about the potential for blogs to provide a forum for democratic debate. She uses a comparison between blogs and more traditional media to highlight the dialogic quality of blogs, arguing that the use of hyperlinks allows bloggers to connect both to evidence to support their arguments and to various points of view. While Woodly suggests that blogs are highly unlikely to usher in a democratic revolution, she suggests that they do have real political consequences in that they may foster debate, provide information, and allow leaders to organize collective action more successfully.

Summing up, Michael Munger applies the concept of "truthiness" to both the blogosphere and mediasphere. Although the term has its origins in comedy, both mainstream media outlets and prominent bloggers have at different times embraced the concept—that there is an essential truth hidden beneath a web of inconvenient facts. Munger claims, *contra* Sunstein, that the blogosphere is indeed a Hayekian spontaneous order, and that under certain conditions it may have "nice" statistical properties, creating a central tendency towards truth. However, truth for one group may appear to be truthiness to another, leading to the mere replication of existing opinion, rather than its aggregation into a more accurate overall understanding of the issues being debated.

5 Closing thoughts

The authors in this special issue provide a wide variety of arguments concerning blogs, and a mix of qualitative and quantitative evidence to support these arguments. This in itself is an advance—it is only through careful consideration of empirical evidence that we can come to reasoned judgments about the *actual* internal dynamics of blogs and their external effects on politics. We expect that there will be many further studies over the short to medium term which will build upon, and, where necessary, revise the claims that we and our fellow authors lay out. Nonetheless, we have collectively constructed a roadmap which will help lay out the directions of future research. Where might this roadmap lead us?

First, and most obviously, it suggests the need for sustained data-gathering efforts. Ethan Zuckerman's article provides a highly valuable overview of the strengths and limitations of available data sources, what we know and what we don't. However, as Zuckerman also makes clear, this data is also sometimes frustratingly difficult to analyze and has many important gaps. Furthermore, the proper exploitation of this data requires skills and expert knowledge of a kind that social scientists frequently don't have—the ability to write and understand scripts and other automated tools to gather and collate data, as well as the ability to recognize the limits of these tools. Hargittai, Gallo and Kaine show how both quantitative analysis of link-data and qualitative analysis can be combined to reach conclusions that would be impossible to reach relying on the link data alone.

Second, it should lead to the careful consideration of the relevant causal mechanisms through which blogs may affect politics, which the available statistical data, valuable though it is, has difficulty in elucidating. The articles that most directly address these issues use process tracing (George and Bennett 2005) and other qualitative methods of argument rather than formal modeling, or statistical methods of inference. We suspect that this emphasis on qualitative methods is entirely appropriate for many aspects of blogs. Statistics can surely use statistical techniques to uncover valuable information about the blogosphere, and indeed the ways in which bloggers behave as political actors, as the article by McKenna and Pole shows. However, again these methods must be supplemented by the kinds of process tracing employed in the articles by Farrell and Drezner, and by MacKinnon if we are to reach some understanding of the more subtle causal relationships between blogging and politics.

Third, the articles in this special issue show how evidence gathered from blogs can shed light on important issues for political science and public choice. MacKinnon shows how blogs and other forms of electronically mediated communication can form a kind of nascent civil society, contradicting the claims of Putnam and others that the Internet is weakening civic bonds. Instead, it would appear that the Internet might be providing the kind of civic space in China that Perez-Diaz (1993) describes as having characterized Spain, easing that country's transition from authoritarian rule. McKenna and Pole investigate the effects of blogging on political action (Barnes and Kaase 1974), providing a study that lays out important claims and hypotheses about blogging as a behavior.

Drezner and Farrell examine the relationship between blogs and mainstream media, complicating traditional arguments about media's influence on political actors. They build upon the work of Robert Sugden to show how coordination games intersect with the kinds of skewed statistical distributions that have recently become an important focus of inquiry in the social sciences and elsewhere.

Their arguments also have relevance for public choice. Scholars such as Ulrich Witt (1992) have sought to theorize the circumstances under which actors may influence information networks and spread specific patterns of taste in society, or under which informal conventions may provide a basis for social order (Lewis 1969; Josselin and Marciano 1995). As Drezner and Farrell show, the blogosphere provides an excellent test case for understanding the circumstances under which (a) some actors may become key information brokers and (b) social conventions may allow a wide variety of actors to coordinate on solutions to common problems concerning the distribution of information. Munger and Sunstein's articles address the even more important Hayekian question of whether spontaneous order can guide towards collectively beneficial outcomes; while they disagree on the answer to this question, they map out the outlines of an important future debate.

Hargittai, Gallo and Kaine show how link data and analysis can be used to map out the political conversations that take place between bloggers, and to gauge the kinds of arguments that are employed. This potentially opens up a major new research approach analysis

of political communication—using data from blogs to map out the ways in which political dialogue actually occurs. This is a quite extraordinary source of data with many potential uses. For example, as Sunstein, Woodly, and Munger discuss further, it has direct implications for arguments about political deliberation that preoccupy political theorists and legal scholars.

Finally, the empirical data and causal mechanisms discussed in this special issue help us understand better what is at stake in public debates over the role of blogs, and how these debates might be resolved. By tracing how blogs do influence politics, we can begin to discern when they are, or are not, likely to have political consequences. Drezner and Farrell provide evidence and arguments suggesting that blogs are most likely to have consequences in the US political system when they succeed in framing issues for other, more influential actors in the media and politics. They also suggest that small blogs are unlikely to have a major political impact unless their stories or points of view are picked up by elite bloggers. MacKinnon shows how blogs may shape outcomes in non-democratic regimes indirectly rather than directly, empowering a broad group of social actors who aren't at all necessarily united by a set of cohesive political goals, and thus creating an arena of interactions that is difficult for the state to control.

The contributors to this special issue also provide evidence and arguments that help us begin to answer the normative question of whether or not blogs are *good* for politics. Hargittai, Gallo and Kaine show that the blogosphere is riven by partisanship—but that there is a significant amount of debate back and forth across partisan lines. Sunstein and Woodly provide differing accounts of the extent to which blogs can provide a genuine "public sphere," Sunstein focusing on the degree to which blogs may lead to distorted information, while Woodly concentrates more on how blogs may provide citizens with new democratic competencies. Munger provides some arguments regarding the possibility conditions under which the blogosphere is likely to produce the benign consequences that Woodly discusses, or the less salubrious outcomes that Sunstein fears. By providing evidence regarding the state of the blogosphere, and specifying more clearly the actual conditions under which we may expect one or the other normative consequence to come about, all these authors help clarify a murky and confused debate.

Thus, in conclusion, blogs are not only more than a passing fad; they are a major topic for research both because they affect politics in their own right, and as a means of approaching important questions for the social sciences more generally. In this special issue, we and our co-contributors seek to lay out the key debates about blogs and blogging, and to apply empirical evidence to these debates. We fully expect—and indeed look forward to—our arguments being tested, and as appropriate, revised over time, not least because the phenomenon under examination is changing so quickly. Our intention here is less to provide a definitive and final overview, than an initial mapping of the relevant terrain, to be filled in, and perhaps corrected by other researchers. Blogs and the blogosphere offer extraordinarily fertile terrain for the social sciences—and social scientists need to start debating their consequences and their meaning using the methodological and theoretical tools that are their comparative advantage.

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