

Blog Campaigning

Does blogging win votes?

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By

Espen Skoland

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This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the dissertation contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due references is made in the dissertation.

Espen Skoland

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Abstract

A growing number of political parties and candidates contesting in contemporary campaigns are including a blog in their overall campaign strategy. As the number of blogs has skyrocketed and the political grassroots movements have taken to the Internet, political parties and candidates have shown their interest in the new medium by slowly reaching out to the new segment of voters that make up the blogosphere. The question is: Can campaigning via blogs help politicians shape public opinion and impact voting behaviour?

This paper examines how political parties and candidates use the blog as an electioneering instrument in political campaigns and considers how the use of blogs can affect the outcome of an election. By evaluating existing literature on the topic and actively engaging with political blog communities, the author questions whether a blog can play an integral role in securing a party's or candidate's victory in an election, and reviews ways to measure the impact of blogs on an election outcome.

Data retrieved by the current study strongly suggests that a campaign, in some cases, can successfully exploit the presence of the web and community blogs, and in doing so, even impact the outcome of a specific election race. The study supports findings by existing scholars that there are aspects of blogging that can help politicians improve their campaign, influence the political agenda and affect the direction of a particular election race. However, so far few campaigns have embraced the full potential of blogs.

The paper argues that current literature has not yet managed to develop proper methods to measure and identify how electioneering via blogs impacts voter decisions directly. Further research therefore needs to thoroughly explore the aspects that make blogs a useful electioneering tool, test the medium's ability to swing voters and systematically test how audiences value the information they retrieve from the medium compared to the information they retrieve from traditional mainstream media.

Chapter 1

Introduction

“We’re entering a different era of political communication, and no one is an expert at it yet. The velocity of change is extraordinary. Everyone is experimenting online, because we don’t know yet what will work” (Rosenberg in Mussenden 2007)

The landscape of political communication is changing rapidly. “Technology has changed the way people interact with one another” (Simmons 2005, p.1) and “the creation of an electronic media has revolutionized the way information is gathered and transmitted” (Simmons 2005, p.1). Since 2004, the world has experienced an enormous growth in online political activity. The emergence of social media and social networking sites has given room for a new political era. People can now engage in political activities via a computer as long as they have access to the Internet. This new form of political engagement has created a new and attractive market of voters for politicians to target. In an effort to optimize their reach to this new segment of voters, a growing number of politicians have started embracing some of the technologies that have emerged from the social media scene, including them in their overall political strategy.

One of the latest and fastest growing technological developments to emerge from the social media scene that has been adapted by political parties and candidates in their overall communication strategy is the *weblog* – more often referred to as the *blog*. In the 2004 U.S. presidential election blogs were for the first time added by political candidates to their bag of campaign tricks (Lawson-Border & Kirk 2005, p. 1, Trammell 2005, p. 2). Few claimed then that the tool had a significant impact on the election. Three years later, facing the 2008 U.S. presidential election, “political bloggers say that their trade is becoming more influential than standard election techniques” (*The University Daily Kansan News* 14 February 2007). Even experts claim blogs play a larger part in the political campaigning process than traditional ways of informing the public. According to new-media expert Sean Mussenden (2007) of Media General News Service, this

election's (the 2008 U.S. presidential election) candidates are helping redefine online politics:

“Candidates are speaking directly to voters through text and video blogs displayed on their increasingly sophisticated Web pages. They also are lobbying influential political bloggers for endorsements -- and in some cases putting them on the payroll” (Mussenden 2007).

But just how effective has this new online communication instrument become as a campaign tool?

Julie Barko Germany, deputy director of the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet, claimed recently that: “The race to the White House in 2008 will be all about how candidates talk to people online” (in Havenstein 2007). Joe Trippi, who ran Howard Dean's presidential campaign in 2004 and was the most profiled of the online-oriented campaign managers during the campaign, told Agence France-Presse that:

“The Web will be playing a bigger role than ever in the 2008 campaign, so much so that for the first time, it will actually change the outcome of the election” (in Zablitz 2007).

Trippi's statement might be sensational, even simplistic. But it raises an interesting question: What impact does an online communication tool like a blog have on the democratic election process?

In an effort to reach a better understanding of this issue, this paper will analyse the following research questions:

- **How do political parties and candidates use blogs?**
- **Does electioneering via blogs influence political campaigns?**
- **How do we measure the impact blogs have on the outcome of an election?**

To answer these questions the paper will examine how political parties and candidates have used blogs as a campaigning instrument in elections to date, locate situations where

blogs might have helped a campaign produce an upset election outcome, and debate how we can measure a blog's ability to affect voting decisions.

1.1 The purpose and importance of the study

Due to the rapidly changing landscape of online communication and the fact that the phenomenon of blogging is relatively novel, there exists little academic research to date on political blogs and the politics of blogging (Bahnisch in Bruns & Jacobs 2006, p. 139, Lawson-Borders & Kirk 2005, p. 551). Bahnisch (in Bruns & Jacobs 2006, p. 146) argues that "further research is urgently needed, particularly in mapping the reach and influence of blogs, and also in a more rigorous and empirically informed analysis of conversations and power relations internal to the blogosphere and their relationship to their envioning contexts". The purpose of this study is therefore to increase our understanding of the potential influence and role blogs can play in future election campaigns especially when it comes to affecting voting behaviour.

By comparing studies of political parties' and candidates' use of blogs in election campaigns from 2004 to 2007, the paper aims to locate different aspects of blogging that have changed the direction of an election campaign and/or helped a campaign produce an upset election outcome. Since research on the topic to date is limited, this study will produce new data and information never before considered. Reflections and thoughts of leading bloggers on their role in the direction of a campaign will supplement the data that already exist on the topic and hopefully bring to light new dimensions not yet considered. The paper will argue that there is enough evidence to support a hypothesis claiming that blogs can have an impact on political campaigns; however, current literature has not yet managed to develop proper ways to measure and identify how electioneering via blogs affect voting decisions.

1.2 Outline of the Study

Before going into a discussion about the findings of the study and the conclusions that can be drawn from them, the paper will present a brief outline of the methodology used to approach the research problems. The paper will further introduce the reader to the world of blogs and the factors that make the blog a valuable electioneering instrument for

political campaigns. A brief outline of earlier attempts to measure the impact of web campaigns on voting behaviour will place the potential impact of blogs in a theoretical perspective. A review of the existing academic literature will further examine how blogs have been used by political campaigns to date and discuss the impact they might have had on specific elections. Finally new data will be compared to the previous literature in an attempt to generate new ideas about how we can measure the impact of blogs on a campaign and the outcome of an election.

Chapter 2

Data & Methodology

“Determining the impact of the blog may prove to be difficult at best because it is not immediately obvious how one would show impact” (Simmons 2005, p. 1).

2.1 Methodology

During the course of the twentieth century, numerous attempts have been made to explain the effects of the mass media on the political process (Stockwell 2005, p. 114). The findings that have emerged from these studies are exceedingly inconclusive. So inconclusive, claims Larry M. Bartels (1993, p. 267), that the state of research in the “media effects” area is “one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science”. Over time theorists have gone from claiming that the media have a strong, almost hypodermic effect (Lasswell 1927) that can shape opinions and beliefs (McQuail in Stockwell 2005, p. 114), to suggesting that the media have only a minimal effect on citizens because they can not deliver political messages with any predictable effect (Lazarsfeld in Stockwell 2005, p. 115). In more recent times theorists have again been claiming that the media have a “relatively strong” effect on public opinion because they have the power to set the agenda and affect what people talk about (McCombs and Shaw in Stockwell 2005, p. 15). However, these are just a few examples of the work that have been done over time. Today we are still debating what effects the media have on the political process. If anything, we have come to realize the complexity of the issue itself, and that there is no simple answer to the question. Perhaps Berelson says it best when he muses about his own findings over the years and claims that: “some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effects” (in Diamond & Bates 1984, p. 347). It is therefore not with the intention of revolutionising the area of “media effects” studies that this paper goes on to look at one of the newest and more exciting technologies within the area. Rather the intention is to explore new perspectives that can

help us understand the opportunities that lie within the complexities of the modern media sphere for political campaigns to produce desirable effects on the political process.

Few scholars have so far attempted to identify how effective political messages can be communicated via blogs. The reason might be that many do not yet understand how the universe of blogs works. The author of this study believes that in order to understand how politicians can utilise blogs as a means to optimise successful electioneering, it is not just necessary to understand the nature and strategies of political campaigning, but also the cultural and sociological aspects that define the medium as a new communication phenomenon. This study therefore bases its findings mainly on ethnographic research and can be seen as a methodological critique seeking to test findings of previous studies exploring the subject. Unconventional methods and data gathering techniques have consequently been employed by the researcher in an attempt to view the subject from a new perspective.

2.2 The data gathering process

During an eight month research period, stretching from August 2006 to April 2007, the author actively searched blogs and online publications in an effort to locate theoretical views and statements spoken by authoritative bloggers and experts on online communication reflecting on how blogs impact on political campaigns. The research period was especially interesting because of two major political campaigns commencing at the time: The 2006 U.S. midterm election was held in November 2006, and in December 2006, the research saw the 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign kick off as one of the earliest presidential campaigns ever to be launched.

To help locate data the study employed a simple word search on *Google Alerts*¹; a search engine searching specific words or word combinations in online newspapers and blogs. The word combinations searched for were ‘*political blogging*’ and ‘*blogging as a campaign tool*’.

The author did not rely on conventional ethnographic research techniques such as informal interviews. Instead, to engage in conversations with bloggers, the author explicitly created a blog, BlogCampaigning (<http://blogcampaigning.com>), that reflected

¹ <http://www.google.com/alerts/faq.html?hl=en>

on the subject of the research and encouraged bloggers to discuss its content. The aim was to involve the subjects of the study in a constant dialogue. All the data collected during the research process was therefore channelled through the blog in an attempt to produce response and to test the significance of the material. This form of retrieving data is often referred to as *action research*:

“[...] a process of research in which the application of findings and an evaluation of their impact on practice become part of a *cycle of research*. This process, further, has become associated with a trend towards involving those affected by the research in the design and implementation of the research - to encourage them to participate as collaborators in the research rather than being subjects of it (Denscombe 2003, p. 57).

Action research is seen as “a strategy for social research rather than a specific method” and “does not specify any constraints when it comes to the means for data collection that might be adopted by the researcher” (Denscombe 2003, p. 58). The advantage of using action research is that it allows for the researcher to involve himself in the study and learn more about different aspects of the phenomenon and the objects being studied. As a consequence, structured self-reflection becomes a key part of the research process (Denscombe 2003, p. 58).

The author marketed the blog by submitting comments on other blogs sharing topics similar to the research and by linking to these blogs and their posts in daily entries. Additionally, specific individuals holding an authoritative status within political blog communities were notified of the blog’s existence. This active marketing process gradually increased the blog’s readership and incoming links. From August 2006 when the blog was launched, to the end of April 2007 when the research was ended, the blog had received 5,704 hits (not unique), 112 comments and ranked 193,562 on Technorati’s blog ranking list with 27 incoming links from 23 different blogs.

A result of the author’s effort to enhance the blog’s visibility by engaging with political blog communities was that it made the research and writing process more reflexive. The active engagement with other bloggers allowed for the author to gain a better understanding of political blogs and their context within the democratic election process. A similar research technique has also been employed in a previous study of

blogs. In 2004 Schiano et al. (2004, p. 1144) conducted an ethnographic study aiming to understand blogs as a forum of personal expression from a blogger's point of view. The team used conversational interviews to understand bloggers' thoughts and habits, and in an attempt to better familiarise themselves with blogging, the team created a class blog within which they discussed their own research (Schiano et al. 2004, p. 1144). The difference and strength of the research-blog employed by the current study was that it encouraged feedback from other bloggers and therefore allowed for the researcher to engage with the subjects of the study in their natural settings. This technique represents a unique and innovative attempt to gain insight into the world of politics experienced by bloggers.

2.3 Limitations

As the study is not quantitative but bases its conclusion on qualitative data, it does not claim any further generalisation value. The data discussed in the paper aims only to test existing findings on the subject and explore new ideas for how we can develop ways to measure how electioneering via blogs impacts voting behaviour. The sum of the opinions presented by authoritative bloggers and online communication experts is not the final answer to the research problems; rather these opinions illuminate the issue from a new perspective. What the study does present of value is a better understanding of the aspects that makes the blog a useful electioneering tool and the measuring methods we need to develop in order to identify how campaigning via blogs affects voting behaviour.

Chapter 3

The medium that is revolutionising political campaigning

New technologies started to change the nature of political campaigns already in the 1960s, when computers for the first time were used to assist candidates with database management (Stockwell 2005, p. 231). “Computers now power most of the political technologies in use today” (Stockwell 2005, p. 62), assisting campaigns “automate fund-raising, control campaign finances, manage the phone system for opinion polling then analyse the results, produce direct mail, ensure most effective bookings for advertising, organise volunteers, carry out research on opponents and their policies and even provide assistance in telephone marketing to key voters” (Shannon in Stockwell 2005, p. 62). The creation of the Internet in the early 1990s brought a whole new paradigm to the technological advantages of the computer (Stockwell 2005, p. 231) allowing campaigns to interact with voters in a way never before experienced: “the first major technological advance since the telephone to allow real reciprocity in a two-way flow of information” (Stockwell 2005, p. 231).

Margolis (in Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 3) claims that the Internet was first used for campaign purposes in the 1992 U.S. presidential race, but it was not until the 1996 election that voters experienced concerted cyber-campaigning with Bob Dole and Bill Clinton both running high profile websites. The 1996 election therefore marked the start of a new era for cyber-campaigning. More and more campaigns started investing time and money on online technologies, and it did not take long before websites became a standard part of every political campaign’s communication strategy. However, as with every technological invention, it took time to understand how the website could optimise a campaign’s message management. Overall, the early web campaigns were accused of recycling offline content to an online environment, not taking advantage of the interactive capabilities that the web presented (Stone in Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 4).

“Sites typically comprised a photograph, some biographical information, a policy or position statement and contact details that sometimes incorporated an email address” (Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 4).

The first indication of the medium’s power to influence an election outcome came with the surprise victory of independent candidate Jesse Ventura in the 1998 Minnesota gubernatorial race (Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 4).

“Ventura’s use of the web and email was widely credited with enlarging his support base, particularly among younger voters and thereby delivering him the crucial extra votes needed to win office” (Fineman in Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 4).

John McCain’s success in raising money from online donations through his website in the Republican presidential primaries of 2000 gave him widespread coverage in mainstream media, and provided a further boost for Internet campaigning (Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 4). But for most commentators it was the emergence of Howard Dean in 2003 and his innovative use of social networking sites, in particular the blog, that really signalled the coming age of the Internet campaign (Hindman 2005, Wolf 2004, Williams and Weinburg 2004 in Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 5).

This chapter will further look at how blogs have merged into the landscape of political communication and identify some aspects necessary to comprehend to understand the medium’s role in the modern election campaign. The chapter will answer questions such as: What is a blog? How did blogs enter the political arena? Why can a blog serve as a useful communication instrument for political campaigns? And how can blogs influence politics?

3.1 What is a blog?

A *blog*, short for *weblog*, is: “a user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order” (Wikipedia 2007a, see also Stanyer 2006, p. 1, Blood in Williams et al. 2005, p. 2, Schiano et al. 2004, p. 1, Gill 2004, p. 1). Most blogs represent the personality of the author and are “intended for general public consumption” (Bytowninternet 2007). A blog is not necessarily text based. We also find examples of *photo-blogs*, *video-blogs* and *audio-blogs*. Common to them all

is that they tend to provide commentaries or news on particular subjects (Wikipedia 2007a).

There are several reasons why the medium has become an interesting communication tool for politicians. First, blogs, contrary to mainstream media, “offer an unmanaged space for attitude expression that is not controlled by gatekeepers of various kinds” (Stanyer 2006, p. 405). Second, blogs are interactive. Most blogs allow visitors to respond to the author’s message (Stanyer 2006, p. 405). Blogs can therefore be used as vehicles for two-way communication where the author can create a dialogue with readers internally on the blog (Simmons 2005, pp. 2-3). Third, blogs connect with other blogs through so-called hyperlinks forming an overall universe of blogs, often referred to as the ‘*blogosphere*’ (Stanyer 2006, p. 406). Sroka (2007, p. 7) claims that linking is what renders blogs and the connection amongst them into what essentially is a very large conversation, turning the blogosphere into something more than a bunch of individuals ranting into cyberspace. This conversation occurs because most bloggers maintain a “blogroll” on their site – “a list of blogs that they frequently read or especially admire, with clickable links to the general URLs (web addresses) of those blogs” (Drezner & Farrell 2004, p. 7) - and because bloggers deliberately link to each other through entries or so-called *blog posts* discussing whatever topics interest them (Drezner & Farrell 2004, p. 7). Posts commenting on posts are a key form of information exchange in the blogosphere (Drezner & Farrell 2004, p. 7).

The conversations and the public sphere created by this linking system present a new arena where politicians target messages, spread information, receive feedback and actively engage with potential supporters. Consequently, understanding the nature and structures within the blogosphere becomes a necessity for anyone intending to understand how blogs may impact politics or how politicians may influence blog audiences.

3.2 The blogosphere

Simmons (2005, p. 4) argues that the dynamics of the blogosphere can best be understood through “an estimation of the number of blogs as well as an analysis of the factors that influence a blog’s popularity and interactions between blogs”. This chapter

will therefore present a brief history of the creation and expansion of blogs, and review the internal structures that define power relations within the blogosphere.

Drezner and Farrell (2004, p. 5) are far from exaggerating when they claim that “the blogosphere has grown at an astronomical rate”. When Jorn Barger in 1997 coined the term ‘blog’ on his Robot Wisdom website only a handful of the kind were known to exist (Blood 2000). One and a half years later, in the beginning of 1999, only 23 blogs were known to be in existence (Blood 2000). A few months later the numbers started increasing rapidly.

“This rapid growth continued steadily until July 1999 when Pitas, the first free build-your-own-weblog tool launched, and suddenly there were hundreds. In August, Pyra released Blogger, and Groksoup launched, and with the ease that these web-based tools provided, the bandwagon-jumping turned into an explosion” (Blood 2000).

A heavy growth has continued ever since.

The medium’s popularity today can be reflected in Technorati’s (www.technorati.com) latest state of blogging report. Technorati is according to Simmons (2005, p. 4) “the self-proclaimed ‘authority on what’s going on in the world of weblogs’”. The report, released in October 2006, states that the number of blogs had increased from less than 200,000 in March 2003 to over 57 million by October 2006 (Sifry 2006). Technorati’s founder and CEO David Sifry (in Johnson 2006) reported the same month that 175,000 blogs were created every single day - “about two every second of every day”. Three months later, by January 2, 2007, Technorati pegged the number of active blogs at around 63.2 million (Dalton 2007). The numbers had again grown to approximately 70 million by April 2007 (Sifry 2007) when the current study was about to be completed.

“Technorati is now tracking over 70 million weblogs, and we’re seeing about 120,000 new weblogs being created worldwide each day. That’s about 1.4 blogs created every second of every day” (Sifry 2007).

So what do these numbers tell us about the impact blogs have on politics and the possibility politicians have to influence bloggers?

Lawson-Border and Kirk (2005, p. 549) argue that the sheer number of blog sites is a measurement of the blogosphere's importance. The current study on the other hand argues that this is not necessarily so. With the size of the blogosphere it is obvious that all blogs are not equally active nor are they equally valued as authorities. Weighing up the blogosphere's importance in light of its scale might therefore portray a misleading image of its effective size. A survey conducted by the Perseus Development Company in 2003 found that 2.72 million blogs, 66.0 percent of all 4.12 million surveyed blogs, had not been updated in two months and were therefore considered "abandoned" (Henning 2003). Of these 2.72 million abandoned blogs, 1.09 million had been posted on only once and had not been touched since (Henning 2003). Similar, a study by Gartner Inc "calculated the total number of abandoned blogs at more than 200 million" (Dalton 2007) by the end of 2006. It might therefore be plausible to assume that the number of dying blogs will continue to grow in the future. Gartner Inc forecasted in their study that "the total number of active blogs would peak at 100 million in 2007 before dropping back and levelling off at around 30 million" (Dalton 2007). How then do we know which of the active blogs are perceived to have an influence on other blogs and the political environment outside the blogosphere?

An obvious approach to the question would be to examine how different directories and search engines rank blog authority – by authority meaning influence and popularity. Some sites measure authority by traffic, like Britblog.com (www.britblog.com), "which monitors the hit rate of all blogs that subscribe to it" (Stanyer 2006, p. 409). Other sites count the number of blogs that link back to a specific blog. There are two ways of doing this; one, used by sites like Technorati, is to count the number of any incoming links that a blog receives from other blogs (Gill 2004, Drezner & Farrell 2004, p. 8); another is to count only links from blogs that are constant - links that do not appear in an entry, but are constantly viewable on a blogroll. Some would argue that constant links are more important than links found within daily entries "as they may lead to a quite significant increase in readership" (Drezner & Farrell 2004, p. 8). However, there are several complications with all the measurement methods. Erin

Simmons (2005, p. 5) points out some of these complications in her Senior Honour thesis:

“Measuring the daily traffic of a blog offers one measure of its popularity but alone may be too crude to understand the dynamics of the system. Additionally, measures of traffic do not distinguish users so one user may visit the same site ten times or ten users might visit the site once and the effect would appear the same. If we measure the number of unique inbound links to a particular blog, we may be able to ascertain the popularity of the blog relative to other blogs. More inbound links implies greater popularity in the blogosphere. But this measure is also imperfect as it implies that all links are equal when they are clearly not. For example, if I have a weblog and MSNBC.com and my next-door neighbor both link to my weblog, it would be wrong to assume that both links are equally important. Links from more popular sites will bring more traffic to my blog” (Simmons 2005, p. 5).

Simmons (2005, p. 5) therefore argues that a blog’s authority can best be measured through a combination of the different methods.

However, despite the complications surrounding the different measuring methods, studies have found that in general the blogosphere can be seen as “an iceberg”, where a small group of blogs receive the vast amount of readership and incoming links (Drezner & Farrell 2004, Gill 2004, Herring et al. 2004). “The skewed distribution of weblog influence makes it easy for observers to extract information or analysis from blogs”, claim Drezner and Farrell (2004, p. 4), but it also makes it hard for newly established blogs to achieve authority on a topic or within a community where other blogs already have established a hierarchy: “Political parties, therefore, are competing to dominate in their narrow sphere of blog interest” argues Jackson (2006, p. 295). This might limit their political influence and potential outreach.

In summation, the paper has so far explored the key characteristics that make a blog an interesting tool for political parties and candidates to utilize for electioneering purposes, reviewed the structures of the medium that make up the universe of blogs that political parties and candidates now strived to reach, and identified power relations within the blogosphere. Before moving on to discuss how politicians actually use blogs and the effects they have on campaigns and elections, the paper will take a brief halt to look at how blogs attracted the attention of political campaign strategists, how bloggers

have changed campaign communication, and what types of blogs we find in a political campaign today.

3.3 Blogs in campaigns

Whilst political campaign blogs are only a few years of age, it is likely that politicians and campaign strategists started developing an interest in the medium in the beginning of the 21st century when a substantial online blog community rose to prominence in the United States (Bahnisch in Bruns & Jacobs 2006, p. 140). Political commentator blogs started gaining a widespread audience in 2001 and 2002 with Andrew Sullivan's *The Daily Dish* on the right, and Markos Moulitsas' *Daily Kos* on the left (Bahnisch in Bruns & Jacobs 2006, p. 140). Assisted by the Iraq War and the U.S. presidential primaries and general election in 2004, the subsequent years saw the mainstreaming of the political blogosphere (Bahnisch in Bruns & Jacobs 2006, p. 141). The 2004 U.S. presidential election became the first election ever to see a campaign use a blog as an integral part of the campaign (Rice 2004, p. 1, Williams et al. 2005, p. 178).

Coggins (n.d.) argues that we can distinguish between three types of blogs found within political campaigns. These are: *Official Candidate Blogs*; "written and kept by politicians and their staff. These blogs are primarily used to report news, events and other information about a specific candidate's campaign trail" (Coggins n.d.); *Candidate Supporter Blogs*, "unofficial' campaign blogs written and kept for particular candidates by individual or group supporters who are not officially part of that candidate's staff. Like Official Candidate Blogs, these blogs also contain news, events and other relevant information" (Coggins n.d.); and *Political Commentary and News Blogs*, which "do not typically support a particular candidate, even though specific bloggers/authors may have personal biases. The main purpose of these blogs is journalistic in nature: providing news and commentaries regarding different candidates' issues, events and platforms. These may be written and kept by individuals or by groups" (Coggins n.d.).

Although Coggins' categories were coined in relation to the 2004 U.S. presidential election, they still remain useful as the main types of campaign blogs to play a role in elections. We should, however, add two new types of blogs to Coggins' categories: *Official Party Blogs* and *Party Supporter Blogs*. *Official Party Blogs* basically

serve the same functions as *Official Candidate Blogs*. Examples of party blogs are the U.S. Democratic Party's official blog, *Kicking Ass* (<http://www.democrats.org/blog.html>), and the official blog of the Republican National Committee (<http://www.gop.com/Blog/>). Surprisingly, few political parties in other western democracies have embraced blogs. The Germany Socialist party uses a platform or blog, *Roteblogs* (<http://www.roteblogs.de/>), to encourage members to set up their own blogs in support of the party (Abold & Heltsche 2006, p. 6). In the UK we have lately seen the development of *Party Supporter Blogs*, like *LabourHome* (<http://www.labourhome.org/>) and *ConservativeHome* (<http://conservativehome.blogs.com/>), which have no official ties to the party they represent and basically serve the same functions as *Candidate Supporter Blogs*.

However, blogs are used in much more complex ways by campaigns today than they were in the 2004 election. Today, as opposed to the 2004 election, almost every campaign put elite bloggers on their campaign payroll (Armstrong 2007a, Glover 2006), "paying bloggers to write, develop Web sites, connect with energetic allies on the Internet, respond to online critics, and advise their employers about how to behave in the blogosphere" (Glover 2006). Bloggers have therefore, particularly in the U.S., become strategic advisors for campaigns. This might not come as a surprise considering the fact that the blogosphere today is 100 times as big as it was during the 2004 U.S. presidential election (Armstrong 2007a) and has a potential to reach a much larger audience. When blogs mainly relied on text to get their message across in the 2004 election, they have now become multimedia content producers. The creation of new social network sites such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *MySpace*, etc. has made it easier for campaigns to embed videos, images and text and link to platforms that give them the potential to reach a much larger audience than before (Armstrong 2007a). Blogs therefore provide an arena and an environment that are constantly changing, so it is important to look at how previous literature has assessed the medium's impact on campaigns and elections.

Chapter 4

Literature Review

“There is no doubt that, increasingly, a perception exists that blogs are heavily involved in the political sphere, as participants in agenda setting, in launching critiques of public policies, in interfacing with election campaigns, in influencing political debate and events and in sparking activism” (Bahnisch in Bruns and Jacobs 2003, p. 139).

Whilst this paper will focus mainly on the use and impact of what here is defined as *candidate blogs* or *party blogs*, it is essential that we also know of the existence and role of the other types of campaign blogs as well. Supporter blogs and political commentator blogs serve as important contributors, resources and springboards for official campaign blogs, and not surprisingly, many of the bloggers that today are engaged by official campaigns have a background from either a supporter blog or a political commentary blog.

There are two ways of addressing the impact of campaign blogs on political campaigns; one is to examine how the nature of blogs and the structures within the blogosphere potentially present an opportunity for politicians to influence voter decisions; another is to locate specific circumstances where blogs helped a campaign swing voters and produce an upset election outcome. This chapter will analyse how scholars to date have addressed these approaches.

The chapter will be divided into four sections; the first reviewing previous attempts to measure how web based campaigns have affected voting behaviour; the second examining how previous literature perceives the potential impact of blogs on the election process; the third examining how campaigns have utilized the medium as an electioneering tool to date; and the fourth discussing if, and how, the uses of blogs have impacted the direction of a campaign or the outcome of an election.

4.1 Measuring effects: Does web-campaigning win votes?

Studies attempting to measure the effects of web based campaigning are limited and the evidence that has emerged is mixed (Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 5).

Conducting one of the earliest analyses of the effects of web-campaigning D'Alessio found that websites had a strong effect on votes during the 1996 U.S. congressional election (Gibson & McAllister 2005, pp. 5-6). D'Alessio found that "a website provided a candidate with an additional 9,300 votes, after controlling for party affiliation and incumbency" (Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 5). However, sceptical of his own findings D'Alessio (1997, p. 498) argued that: "it seems very unlikely that each candidate's web site inspired 9,300 (on the average) additional people to vote for that candidate". He argues that it is more likely that (1) "Use of a web site may be an indication of the candidate's use of any of a wide variety of alternative methods of campaigning. That is, posting a Web site is one element of an entire suite of strategies employed by the candidate, the sum of whose payoffs is subsumed under the main effect for having a Web site in this analysis", (2) "The Web site might not have induced people to change their votes (or convert) but instead may have inspired a number of people to vote who otherwise would not have", and (3) "rather than the establishment of a Web site (or associated activities) leading to extra votes, instead candidates may establish Web sites in part as a result of opinion poll position" (D'Alessio 1997, p. 498).

The impact of web-campaigning has also been explained by a general growth in the audience seeking news and information online (Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 6). Several reports suggest that the number of people seeking news on the Internet, particularly when it comes to information about political campaigns, has grown significantly in the last few years (Williams et al. 2005, p. 177). A multivariate analysis performed by Farnsworth and Owen found that online news and information had a significant effect on people's voter decisions in the 2000 U.S. presidential election (in Gibson & McAlister 2005, p. 7). Bimber and David came to the opposite view when they applied a more sophisticated multivariate analysis to the 2000 U.S. presidential election. The authors examined the impact of candidate websites on individuals' levels of knowledge, positive or negative feelings and voting behaviour and found that "most

people were not affected by what they viewed online, particularly in terms of being mobilised to vote” (Gibson & McAllister 2005, pp. 7-8).

Analysing the 2001 and 2004 Australian federal election, Gibson and McAllister (2005, p. 16) found support for a hypothesis suggesting that the use of websites has a strong effect on people’s voting decision.

“Our results reveal support for the proposition that a web campaign is an integral part of securing victory in an election” (Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 16).

Gibson and McAllister found that:

“Candidates who maintained a web page increased their first preference vote by just over 4 percent, net of individual and party resources, party membership and other aspects of campaigning” (Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 13).

The study concluded that the importance of having a website was only superseded by incumbency and party membership. However, Gibson and McAllister (2005, p. 17) argue that as the use of the web and email in campaigns becomes more mainstream one might see this effect become less profound.

It is clear that studies focusing on the effects of the web on the political process are in the same inconclusive state as Bartels (1993) and Berelson (in Diamond & Bates 1984) find the research in the “media effects” area to be. Some studies have found that electioneering via the Internet has “minimal effects” on people’s voting behaviour; other have found it to have “strong effects”. Some are sceptical of their own findings while some see the effects become less profound as the Internet becomes a more mainstream electioneering tool. Perhaps it is D’Alessio’s (1997) alternative explanations that so far give us the most comprehensive idea of the impact the Internet has on the political process. Even so, the inconclusive state of research on the subject clearly demonstrates an urgent need for more research to be carried out in the near future. Today the web plays a crucial part in any political campaign. We therefore need to ask which aspects about blogs can impact voter decisions, and whether previous attempts of identifying the relationship between web-campaigning and voter decisions also can be used to test the

impact of blogs on contemporary elections. Furthermore, we need to ask which aspects of blogs, not before considered, can have an impact on political campaigns and help change the outcome of an election.

4.2 The potential impact of blogs

Most scholars see the introduction of blogs to the political sphere as a major asset for political campaigns. Nigel Jackson (2006), for instance, argues that there are several aspects about blogs that might impact elections. First of all, bloggers present “a potential alternative to traditional media as gatekeepers of information and news” (Jackson 2006, p. 295). Bloggers have on several occasions proved that they can break major news stories (Jackson 2006, p. 295). For instance, it was bloggers that created the storm of protest that led to the resignation of Senate majority leader Trent Lott for comments he made on Senator Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday party in December 2002, supporting Thurmond’s segregationist stance in the presidential election in 1948 (Jackson 2006, p. 295). The event was broadcast and reported in the mainstream press, but while bloggers denounced the remarks vigorously, it took the mainstream media almost a week to devote significant coverage to Lott’s comments (Drezner & Farrell 2004, p. 3). Bloggers were also credited for creating the media storm that led to CBS reporter Dan Rather’s resignation in 2004 (Jackson 2006, p. 295) after he presented false documents critical of President George W Bush’s service in the United States National Guard during a *60 Minutes* report in the lead up to the election (Eberhart 2005). Blogs questioned the authenticity of the documents within hours and the content soon spread to the mass media (Eberhart 2005, Pein 2005). Jackson (2006, p. 295) claims, therefore, that: “the impact of weblogs appears to be helping to set the political or news agenda”. Similar, Sroka (2007, p. 9) reports that the vast majority of the academic literature “has pinned the blogosphere’s potential for influence on its ability to sway, guide, and, generally, shape the way the media sees and frames political events”. Furthermore, Jackson (2006, p. 296), supported by Drezner and Farrell (2004), argues that it appears blogs have the capability of ‘influencing the influencers’. “The impact of political blogs is not so much who is producing them, rather it is whether they attract influential visitors”, claims Jackson (2006, p. 296). Studies have found that a high percentage of visitors to political blogs are

opinion makers: political reporters, politicians and policy makers (Bloom in Jackson 2006, p. 296, Drezner & Farrell 2004, p. 4), and because certain opinion-makers take blogs seriously, the medium can have a wide impact on the political agenda (Drezner & Farrell 2004, p. 22). However, blogs also have a potential to influence voters that goes beyond their ability to occasionally set the news agenda (Jackson 2006, p. 296). What also strikes Jackson (2006, p. 296) is that bloggers are ‘techno-activists’ (coined by Kahn & Keller in Jackson 2006, p. 296), “so that their community is often ‘political’ in nature”. This, he claims, opens up the possibility of mobilizing this community. But what is even more important, is that blogs are unique in the way that they enable political actors to communicate at two different levels at the same time:

“First, they can narrowcast to a very small number of key opinion formers to influence the political agenda. Second, they can broadcast to as many people as possible to try and influence their individual opinion. Potentially, political parties and candidates can reach a range of voters who visit the blogosphere” (Jackson 2006, p. 296).

Abold and Heltsche (2006, p. 1) argue that blogs can make a successful contribution to political campaigns because they combine two main elements of political communication, namely openness and interactivity. Blogs consequently meet the growing demand for authentic and personal communication expected by the post-modern voter as they not only provide valuable information, but also enforce political discussions with citizens (Abold & Heltsche 2006, p. 1). A more technical feature that makes blogs a potentially effective campaigning tool is, according to Abold and Heltsche (2006, p. 2), the high rank of blog articles in Internet search engines. Blog articles rank high in search engines because of their linking system. Most of the search engines’ algorithms work in the way that they rank pages higher if the sites that link to that page use a consistent *anchor text* (Wikipedia 2007b) – “the text a user clicks when clicking a link on a web page” (Wikipedia 2007c). However, several recent sources claim that search engines, in particular *Google*, are working hard to change their algorithm after bloggers in the election battles of 2004 and 2006 organised so called ‘Google Bombing campaigns’ (see Easter 2007, Cutts 2007, Wikipedia 2007b) - attempts to intentionally influence the

ranking of pages and articles in order to drive as many voters as possible toward the most damning, non-partisan article written on a candidate (Bowers 2006a).

Nonetheless, it is one thing to discuss the potential influence blogs may have on political campaigns, but looking at how political parties and candidates actually use the medium might give a different perspective of the mediums' capabilities as an electioneering tool.

4.3 The uses of blogs in political campaigns

“One of the key questions that should concern any study of the potential affect of blogs on politics and policy development are how politicians themselves are utilizing the new communications technologies” (Sroka 2007, p. 22).

Academic literature examining uses of blogs in political campaigns has mainly focused on the 2004 U.S. presidential election as this was the first campaign ever to see a political candidate use a blog as an integral part of a campaign (Rice 2004, p. 1, Williams et al. 2005, p. 178).

The candidate leading the technological revolution was Howard Dean (Trammell 2005, p. 2). Dean and his campaign team were especially open to new strategies. In planning the campaign, the team looked at previous Internet successes to create a new model of online communication that was genuine in its ability to reach out to supporters (Rice 2004, p. 6). Dean therefore created an official campaign blog, *Blog for America*, developed a massive email list of supporters and embraced online forums and tools as means to organize events and rallies (Rice 2004, pp. 5-6). The idea behind his strategy was to allow for volunteers to take a key role in the development and processes of the campaign (Rice 2004, pp. 5-6). Nonetheless, Dean never achieved his final goal of becoming the 44th president to govern the United States. Whether his campaign was successful or not has therefore been the topic of numerous debates. Yet, some scholars argue that Dean's online campaign strategies in many ways made him a successful candidate. Rice (2004, p. 6), for instance, argues that Dean's success can be measured by his ability to use the web to raise more funds than any other Democratic candidate, recruit more than 500 000 supporters and propel him to frontrunner status. Several scholars also

argue that Dean's online presence made a significant impact on the political agenda (see Rice 2004, Trammell 2005, Williams et al. 2005).

“[...] the media noticed Dean's Internet success and wrote extensively about his use of technology, creating even a bigger buzz and generating plenty of earned media that none of the other Democratic candidates were receiving” (Rice 2004, p. 6).

In fact, Trammell (2005, pp. 2-3) argues, the buzz became so loud that the other candidates followed suit and integrated a blog to their campaign toolkit. As a result, more than half of the primary candidates ended up operating a campaign blog during the 2004 election (Williams et al. 2005, p. 180).

However, as many would have expected when a technological innovation suddenly becomes a central part of a campaign's message management machinery without the campaign getting the chance to explore the innovation's usability, audiences experienced a huge variation in the way candidates expressed themselves through their blogs. Bloom and Kerbel argue that candidates mainly used their blog for three functions during the campaign: “diffusing information to internal audiences; building up a volunteer base; agenda setting of the mainstream media” (in Jackson 2006, p. 196). Blogs were either “written by the candidate himself or herself, ghostwritten for the candidate, or authored and identified by another member of the campaign staff” (Trammell in Connors 2005, p. 5). Only some of the campaigns invited voters to comment on their blog. Most often the blogs were only used for one-way communication purposes, spreading information from the campaign to prospective voters (see Rice 2004). In general this is to say that most blogs did not present any new features that were not already presented on their campaign website.

Not surprisingly many studies argue that the candidate that made the most of his blog was the only candidate that was properly prepared for a campaign that focused on Internet outreach, namely Howard Dean. Williams et al. (2005, p. 180) found that Dean used his blog more actively than any of the other candidates when it came to voter outreach. He included more features on his blog than any other candidate “by letting visitors comment on blog posts and subscribe to the blog through syndication (RSS, XML). He also categorized the blogposts by subject and posted “trackback” data

showing the context and links to other (noncampaign-related) discussions of particular blog posts” (Williams et al. 2005, p. 180). Additionally, Dean embraced unofficial campaign blogs by creating a blogroll linking to numerous unofficial supporter blogs (Rice 2004, p. 13). Dean used his blog to transmit a stream of information concerning the campaign, including “information of upcoming events, review of events, campaign updates, volunteer activities, open-thread dialog, fundraising goals and returns, reviews of debates and press coverage, and pictures”, argues Rice (2004, pp. 12-13). Readers were constantly encouraged to post their own comments and promote entries and links to other blogs that referenced the campaign (Rice 2004, pp. 12-13). These findings were also supported by Kerbel and Bloom (2005, p. 1), which by analysing the content of 3,066 unique posts encompassing every entry in the Dean blog from March 15, 2003 through January 27, 2004, found that the campaign used the blog to encourage its audience to discuss media coverage of the campaign and “facilitate discourse about Dean’s positions on issues and public policy in general”. Kerbel and Bloom (2005, p. 11) also found that Dean’s team used the blog’s interactive capabilities to engage bloggers in tactical exercises such as: “writing letters to undecided voters, canvassing, and organizing campaign events”, and that the blog played a significant role in the campaign’s largely successful fundraising effort (Dean raised over 40 million dollars for his campaign) (Kerbel & Bloom 2005, pp. 11-14).

“Giving money became a cathartic experience for bloggers who felt attached to the Dean campaign through their membership in the virtual community that the blog created. [...] Campaign officials encouraged this giving by playing up goals and benchmarks” (Kerbel & Bloom 2005, p. 14).

In conclusion, the previous literature argues that through his blog, Dean, more than any other candidate, invited supporters and volunteers to play a key role in the campaign process. Perhaps his efforts are best summed up in a *Slate* article published November 2003:

“The metaphor of choice for Howard Dean's Internet-fueled campaign is "open-source politics": a two-way campaign in which the supporters openly collaborate with the campaign to improve it,

and in which the contributions of the "group mind" prove smarter than that of any lone individual" (Suellentrop 2003).

Most of the other candidates running for presidency in 2004 chose not to make their blog as active and open as Dean did. Wesley Clark's blog offered a fairly high degree of interactivity: "thanks to his hiring of a well-known blogger, Cameron Barrett, early in his campaign", argues Conners (2005, p. 5). Otherwise, Rice (2004) found that the other campaign blogs were used more as conventional news wires and websites than blogs. For example: neither of the selected candidates, Bush and Kerry, used their blog as a major opportunity for fundraising (Williams et al. 2005, p. 181). Bush did not allow his readers to submit comments on his blog (Rice 2004, pp. 21-22), while Kerry experienced huge problems with spam posting and had to close down his comment section for parts of the campaign (Rice 2004, p. 18).

Although more limited in numbers, a few studies have been conducted on politicians' use of campaign blogs after the 2004 presidential election. A paper by Joan Conners (2005, p. 7) discussing technological developments within the U.S. Senate campaign websites in 2004, found that only 26.3 percent of the candidates included a blog in their campaign toolkit during the senatorial race. Conners found that:

"Some blogs appeared to be little more than campaign calendars of events, or abbreviated press releases, while others summarized campaign events or attempted to motivate voters to take action (donate, register to vote, attend events, etc.). Many provided links to news coverage of the campaign or one's opponents" (Conners 2005, p. 8).

A study conducted by The Bivings Group in an effort to assess the role of the Internet in the 2006 U.S. senatorial election found that in the beginning of the campaign only 23 percent (of the 77 candidates explored by the report) included a blog in their campaign repertoire (*Internet's Role in Political Campaigns* 2006). However, after revisiting the data from the study after the campaign was over, The Bivings Group found that more candidates had added blogs to their campaign toolkit during the campaign.

“In our original study, 23% of the candidates had blogs on their websites. After the shrinking of the candidate pool (many candidates dropped out after losing their primaries) and the addition of a few new blogs, this number has increased to 41%. 31% of incumbents now have blogs and 50% of challengers offer blogs on their sites” (Telling 2006a).

Representing The Bivings Group, Erin Telling stated on the company’s official blog, *The Bivings Report* (<http://www.bivingsreport.com/>), that the report found that most campaigns used their blog to present the same top-down material found in press releases and candidate websites (Telling 2006a).

“A few [...] blogs stand out from the political norm: Ned Lamont’s blog is particularly robust, and actually resembles a “real” blog. The quality of Lamont’s blog has been largely credited with his defeat of incumbent Joe Lieberman in Connecticut’s primary. Jean Hay Bright’s blog appears to be sincere in content, but it lacks comments, links, and a blogroll. John Spencer’s blog has the opposite problem: it allows comments and offers Web 2.0 features, but the content is nothing more than candidate press releases. Of these new blogs, those of Mark Kennedy, and Joe Lieberman are probably the worst, as they don’t publish comments and lack personal content. The remaining blogs, (Cantwell, Casey, Ensign, McGavick, Menendez, and Stabenow) followed this vein, and while not terrible, are really nothing to speak of. In my opinion, bad and phony blogging looks worse than choosing not to blog. With this in mind, my advice to candidates would be to only pursue a campaign blog if they have the time and good intentions to offer constituents unique and interesting material. A blog full of press releases and opponent attacks is not going to impress anyone” (Telling 2006a).

The uses of blogs in election campaigns have also been the subject of studies outside the U.S. And while it must be pointed out that a cross country comparison might prove difficult because of the variations among the different political systems, it can still be useful to explore how parties and candidates outside the U.S. have embraced the new trend.

The general election in Germany 2005 was the first of its kind to see party organisations and political candidates use blogs to establish contact with voters (Abold & Heltsche 2006, p. 1). Abold and Heltsche (2005, pp. 7-8) found that during the election over 100 blogs were run by politicians and parties at a state or federal level. However, many of these were short lived. The vast majority of the blogs lacked interconnectedness

and interactivity (Adamic & Glance in Abold & Heltsche 2006, p. 13). As a consequence they “missed the opportunity to develop a cross-blog dialogue” (Abold & Heltsche 2006, p. 13). A similar study of the British general election in 2005 showed that party blogs were “essentially used as one-way communication channels which added colour to party web sites” (Jackson 2006, p. 292).

On a final note, before moving on to discuss how the candidates’ use of blogs might have impacted voter decisions, it could be useful to briefly delve into a very recent and unique study looking at how candidates themselves perceive the usefulness and effects of the blog as a communication tool. The study, conducted by Sroka (2007), found that:

“[...] offices on Capitol Hill are less optimistic about a congressional blogs’ effectiveness in reaching the media than its potential to communicate with the blogosphere-at-large or even political opponents” (Sroka 2007, p. 25).

Explaining the findings, Sroka (2007, p. 25) argues that this might suggest that “Congressional offices feel they already have other effective means to communicate with the media and thus do not need blogs to do so”. Sroka (2007, p. 25) also suggests that the findings might mean that offices are trying to utilize blogs and have found them useful as a tool to reach out to bloggers or voters in general.

This section has looked at how political candidates and parties have utilized blogs in political campaigns. Judged by the literature discussing the subject it looks as if few parties or candidates have managed to fully embrace the features that make the blog a useful and successful campaigning instrument. The paper will therefore further explore what, if any, impact the previous literature argues that the tool have had on specific campaigns or elections from 2004 to 2007.

4.4 The impact of blogs

Lawson-Border and Kirk (2005, p. 548) claim that blogging did not have a significant impact on the outcome of the 2004 U.S. presidential election. They do, however, argue that the effectiveness of blogs was demonstrated in the election campaign, and that an emerging application of the tool paved the way for future campaign communication. But it was political commentator blogs, not campaign blogs that achieved this:

“Freed from the economic pressures, bloggers opened doors and created pockets of public opinion that pressured the mainstream into assessing the validity of stories the dominant parties and candidates might be tempted to suppress” (Lawson-Border & Kirk 2005, p. 550).

The problem with many of the campaigns was that they, as with the introduction of any new media, used the tool without knowing what specific communication function it could serve (Lawson-Border & Kirk 2005, p. 557).

“Some campaigns used them because it is considered hip, whereas others used them strategically or not at all” (Lawson-Border & Kirk 2005, p. 557).

Rice (2004, p. 4), on the other hand, claims that the Internet and emerging technologies made a “profound impact” on the presidential campaign.

“Online campaigning has revolutionized political communication, grassroots activism, supporter outreach, and fundraising. Ten years ago, the Internet was barely used in politics; today it is an innovative, informative, interactive, and a creative tool that transformed Presidential campaigning” (Rice 2004, p. 4).

Gill (2004, p. 4) claims that given the fact that people during the election were increasingly using the Internet to retrieve political content, it was no surprise most of the candidates included blogs on their website. A Pew Internet and American Life Project survey of the 2004 Internet users found that “40 percent of those online sought material related to the election” (in Williams et al. 2005, pp. 177-178). Even more interestingly the survey found that Internet users were not using the Internet merely to reinforce

political opinion, “rather, Internet users who seek political material are more aware of arguments in support and opposition to their preferred candidates” (Williams et al. 2005, p. 178). Should we therefore assume that blogs at least have the capability to influence the decisions of some of these potential voters?

In an effort to assess the impact of campaign blogs in the 2006 U.S. senatorial election Erin Telling (2006b) of The Bivings Group compared the number of winning and losing candidates who included a blog in their campaign. It turned out that of the 26 candidates including a campaign blog, 13 ended up winning and 13 ended up losing the race in which they competed (Telling 2006b). Telling, clearly assuming that the effect of blogs can be measured by a simple quantification of a winning-losing dichotomy, stated that: “This factor surprised me because I expected the Internet would play a more effectual role in this cycle's elections” (Telling 2006b). In a commentary to the report she further stated:

“At any rate, Democratic candidate blogs, which tend to be a bit more well-developed than their republican counterparts, fared slightly better in this year's elections than Republican candidate blogs. Democratic candidates with blogs had a record of 11-5, while Republicans were 3-8. In the six races where both Republican and Democratic candidates had blogs (VA, PA, CT, WA, NV, UT), Republicans won 2 races and Democrats won 2 races, and Joe Lieberman, an independent, won the race in Connecticut. Overall, the average margin of victory or loss by candidates with blogs was 20%. This figure was significantly smaller in 2-blog races, where the margin of victory/loss was just 5%. I believe that these results indicate that there are many factors that contribute to a campaign victory. The presence of a campaign blog or aggressive campaign Web strategy may contribute to the outcome of the election, but will not be the deciding factor” (Telling 2006b).

During the German general election in 2005, Abold and Heltsche looked at the attention of voters toward campaign blogs as an indicator for success of blog based campaigning. They conducted a two-wave survey among users of online campaign sources, recruiting respondents by posting a link to the survey in political oriented Internet forums (Abold & Heltsche 2006, p. 13). Their findings suggest that political party blogs lacked originality and did therefore not manage to strike the right tone to inspire voters (Abold & Heltsche 2006, p. 18). Only 17 percent of the respondents agreed

to the statement: “Weblogs have an effect on public opinion”. 20 percent of the respondents believed that blogs were important within political campaigns (Abold & Heltsche 2006, p. 18). Not surprisingly, active blog users – users that regularly read and comment in all kinds of political blogs – rated the importance of blogs significantly higher than all the other respondents (Abold & Heltsche 2006, p. 18). In conclusion, Abold and Heltsche (2006, p. 18) stated that “voters perceive weblogs not as an effective way to influence the outcome of an election”.

Similar, a study of the use of blogs in the British general election in 2005 found that the impact of blogs was fairly limited. The study suggested, however, that some blogs might have had a PR value, helping candidates raise their profile during the campaign (Jackson 2006, p. 300). Some of the smaller parties claimed that their blog helped them put the Party higher up on search engines on a range of issues, which again helped make the parties more visible on the web (Jackson 2006, p. 300).

In conclusion the previous literature reveals that there is still a huge gap in the research focusing on how blogs impact the outcome of an election. So far little has been said about the immediate or direct effects of blogging on a particular campaign race or the outcome of an election. Less has been said about how we can actually measure this relationship. In an effort to generate a better understanding of this relationship, the paper will further present new data that views the subject from a blogger’s perspective.

Chapter 5

Findings

“[...] David Winston, Republican pollster, once said [...] there will come a time when we no longer talk about online strategies and offline strategies, but rather strategies with online and offline components. I suggest that that day has arrived, maybe not universally, but certainly noticeably” (Rosenblatt in *Personal Democracy Forum* 8 November 2006).

This study developed the following three interrelated research questions in an effort to better understand how online communication tools such as blogs impact the democratic election process: *How do political parties and candidates use blogs; does electioneering via blogs influence political campaigns; and how do we measure the impact blogs have on the outcome of an election?*

The following chapter will analyse the subject from a new and original perspective. Employing innovative data gathering techniques, the study has located views and statements spoken by prominent bloggers, political commentators and online communication experts reflecting on what impact campaigning via blogs have on political elections. Findings to emerge from this research will now be presented and debated.

The chapter will be divided into three sections. Each section will review the most common topics discussed among the subjects of the study in the period that the research commenced, linking to the research problems defined for the study. The first section will review how bloggers, political commentators and online communication experts perceived the role of blogs during the 2006 U.S. midterm election – According to them; *what impact did blogs have on the election; did we see any specific moments where blogs played a significant role in changing the direction of the campaign or the outcome of an election; and, did the candidates manage to embrace the aspects of blogs that make the medium useful and successful?* The second section will look at how voters used blogs to retrieve information about candidates during the 2006 campaign and will review how people so far have interacted with websites run by the contestants in the 2008 presidential

race. It will further analyse what this can tell us about the impact blogs have on people's voting behaviour. The third, and last section, will review how bloggers themselves have attempted to measure successful electioneering via blogs, and discuss what this can teach us about what we need to test in future studies assessing the impact of blogs on political elections.

5.1 Blogs' impact on Election 2006

When Erin Telling (2006b) of The Bivings Group, as mentioned in the previous chapter, attempted to assess the impact of blogs on the 2006 U.S. senatorial election by comparing the number of candidates operating an official campaign blog (26) that won (13) and lost (13) their respective races, she clearly chose an easy approach to an extremely complex and debatable subject.

Data retrieved by the current study finds that there is a huge variety in opinions regarding what impact, and degree of impact, blogs had on the 2006 election. An interesting finding to emerge from the study, however, is that most of the statements discussing whether blogs had, or did not have, a role either in changing the direction of a campaign or the outcome of an election was concentrated around: *one specific incident that took place during the campaign; two particular races; and the role of a new activist group that engaged with campaigns via blogs*. The following section will in turn analyse these occurrences and present the data that discusses how blogs affected them.

5.1.1 The moment: 'Macaca' - One word that changed political campaigning

The study finds that when identifying a specific incident where blogs, during the 2006 U.S. senatorial race, played a crucial part in changing the direction of a campaign and maybe even the outcome of the election, most bloggers, online communication experts and political commentators point to the incident where Virginia Republican Senator George Allen was captured on film, twice referring to a volunteer with his Democratic Senate challenger Jim Webb, as 'macaca' during a campaign speech (*Larvatus Prodeo* 24 August 2006, *Media Matters* 16 August 2006). 'Macaca' is, according to most news publications reporting on the incident, a racially derogatory word used as a slang term for blacks (Craig & Shear 2006, see also Rainie 2007, p. 16, *Media*

Matters 16 August 2006), dating back to the “[f]lemish approximation of the Bantu word for monkey” (*Media Matters* 16 August 2006). The campaign worker Allen referred to was of Indian descent (Craig & Shear 2006). But Allen has, according to reports, claimed that he had no knowledge about the word’s real meaning and that no racial slur was intended (*Media Matters*, 16 August 2006, Craig & Shear 2006). What Allen claims he really meant to say was “mohawk”, referring to the campaign worker’s haircut (Craig & Shear 2006).

However, regardless of what Allen intended to say, the incident resulted in a gigantic public relations disaster for his campaign. The video was put up on the popular video-sharing network YouTube and received massive attention from mainstream media (Delany 2006a). Not long after the news had reached the general public, Allen had his poll lead cut from 20 points to 3 over his resurgent Democratic challenger Webb (*Larvatus Prodeo* 24 August 2006). Webb eventually won the race with fewer than 9,000 votes out of the 2.37 million ballot casts (Barakat 2006).

Many political commentators, journalists and bloggers have claimed that it was bloggers that made ‘macaca’ into the scandal that helped sink George Allen (see Bacon Jr. et al. 2006, Delany 2006a). Mark Matthews wrote in an *ABC7News* article August 22, 2006, that:

“- If you're just getting up to speed on blogging, get ready because blogging has gone visual, and it's reshaping the political landscape. Political candidates beware. Every misstep on the campaign trail can now be recorded and played out to the entire world, by anyone [...] And when it comes to political video clips, YouTube is having a big impact. Senator George Allen of Virginia knows all about YouTube, but too late” (Matthews 2006).

In a recent comment to a blog post discussing technologies that will impact the 2008 election, prominent blogger and Senior Vice President of the Bivings Group, a Washington, DC-based Internet communications firm, Todd Zeigler (2007), even claimed that YouTube in 2006 had cost the Republicans the Senate. When asked by the author of the current study why and how YouTube cost the Republicans the Senate, Zeigler replied:

“George Allen lost his race in VA by around 10,000 votes. He was well ahead before the infamous macaca video starting spreading on YouTube. Conrad Burns also lost a close race in part due to comments he made that were posted to YouTube...Saying YouTube cost the Republicans the Senate is a bit simplistic, sure. But there is some truth there ...” (Zeigler 2007),

Montana Senator Conrad Burns, which Zeigler are referring to, was also captured on video, “dozing off during Senate business was viewed and widely debated by his constituents” (Rainie 2007, p. 16). So was also Republican Sue Kelly of New York, “fleeing reporters rather than answer their questions about her views on Mark Foley’s activities with congressional pages” (Rainie 2007, p. 16). All of the three candidates lost their races (Rainie 2007, p. 16). But it was the incident of Senator Allen referring to ‘macaca’ that received the most attention from the national media.

Clearly taking the same stance as Zeigler, John Henke, new media director for the Republican Communication Office in the Senate and contributor to the *Quand blog*, states:

“Make no mistake, without the netroots [term used for the liberal blogosphere], Webb would not have won. He may not even have been close. It was a long-cultivated activism/outreach/media-hounding New Media campaign that brought Webb to the attention of the institutional Democrats, sold him to the activists and shaped the narratives of both Webb and Allen for the media” (Henke 2006).

More moderate in his claim, Personal Democracy Forum blogger and Executive Director of the Internet Advocacy Centre, Alan Rosenblatt, states that while it is simplistic to say that YouTube caused Allen’s and Burns’ defeat, it is clear that it caused the sparks that “set a fire in the offline press that burned away enough voter support from these Senators to shift the outcome in favor of their Democratic opponents” (in *Personal Democracy Forum* 8 November 2006).

Looking into the Webb campaign’s handling of the incident, we might find that even Rosenblatt’s statement is a little simplistic and not that clear after all. Jessica Vanden Berg, Webb’s campaign manager, argues that ‘macaca’ had an impact because the Webb campaign *made it one* through well planned and executed strategies stressing both the necessity of blogger outreach and media management (Delany 2006a). Webb’s

team published the ‘macaca’ video on YouTube and contacted bloggers only after they had pitched the story to a Washington Post reporter (Delany 2006a), and they never published the clip on Webb’s official campaign blog, *webbforsenate.org/blog*.

“According to Vanden Berg, they [the Webb team] chose to post the video on YouTube because it was free (simple enough). But before they tossed it out to the public to see, they’d already pitched the story to a *Washington Post* reporter, who wrote it online on Monday [the video was captured on a Friday]. Only after the *Post* story appeared and the issue had been properly framed did the Webb folks send an email to their supporter list and to friendly bloggers. The fact that the video was on YouTube made it particularly easy to distribute, since bloggers could insert it directly into their pages, but it was the campaign’s promotional work that spread the word. And as the story developed, they constantly worked reporters and bloggers behind the scenes to shape the public discussion” (Delany 2006a).

Vanden Berg claims that the video had its most significant effect when the mainstream media picked it up, and that the polls did not shift as a direct result of the ‘macaca’ moment (Delaney 2006a). Rather, ‘macaca’ “did contribute to an overall impression of George Allen as a boor and possibly a racist”, and “opened the door to other stories that portrayed him in a bad light” (Delany 2006a).

Based on Vanden Berg’s statement it might be reasonable to draw a similar conclusion about the role blogs and YouTube played in Senator Allen’s defeat to what Drezner and Farrell (2004, p. 3) stated in regards to Trent Lott’s resignation as Senate Majority leader in 2003:

“Most political analysts credited “bloggers” with converting Lott’s gaffe into a full-blown scandal. In the language of social science, weblogs – also called blogs – were not a causal variable in explaining Lott’s downfall, but they were an important intervening variable” (Drezner & Farrell 2004, p. 3)

There is little doubt that it was a smart move to publish the ‘macaca’ video in an accessible and (thanks to YouTube) easily-spread medium (see Delaney 2006a). Blogs might have contributed to keep the momentum in the online conversation about ‘macaca’ going. They might also have helped spread the video virally and even draw further

attention from mainstream media. But it was the hard work that Webb's team put in to making the story go viral that essentially sparked what now is political history.

5.1.2 Lamont and the netroots – The importance of blogger outreach

The study further finds that a remarkably low number of blog posts and news articles explicitly discussed how official campaign blogs affected the direction of the campaign or the outcome of the election in the research period. The limited data that actually discusses this topic supports what has been concluded in previous studies: *that the candidates with the best developed blog have a better chance of receiving positive attention from the blog community in general than candidates operating a poorly developed blog or not having a blog at all* (see Rice 2004, Williams et al. 2005). This can most clearly be seen in a comparison of some strategic choices made by Howard Dean's campaign in 2004 (see Rice 2004, pp. 5-6, Kerbel & Bloom 2005) and Ned Lamont's campaign in 2006. Following Dean's example from the 2004 presidential race, Lamont developed a thorough online strategy in cooperation with highly experienced bloggers that would help him reach out to a large base of energetic blog-activists across the country, often referred to as the *netroots* (Lehmann 2006). Lamont was found in a study conducted by the The Bivings Group of the 2006 contestants' blog performances to have the best developed campaign blog of the senatorial candidates (see Telling 2006a), and became the most famous candidate in the blogosphere throughout the campaign (Melber 2006a, Bacon Jr. et al. 2006).

Lamont became a success among Democratic voters and defeated his Democratic challenger, Joe Lieberman, in the primary election. After the election Tom Swan, Lamont's campaign manager, argued that bloggers had helped introduce Lamont to a broader audience. They had also "helped established a narrative within the campaign and assisted in generating volunteers and a large number of small donors" (Swan in Lehmann 2006). Richard Edelman (2006), President and CEO of the global PR firm Edelman, correspondingly wrote on his personal blog that the blogosphere had been a key asset for Lamont's campaign "discussing his views, magnifying the impact of his ad campaign and speeches". He also argues that liberal blogs like *Daily Kos* (www.dailykos.com) had helped push stories about the campaign into the mainstream media (Edelman 2006).

However, running as an independent candidate in the general election, Lieberman defeated Lamont. In a comment about the result, one of the Lieberman campaign's senior advisors, former Clinton White House counsel Lenny Davis, claimed that the victory "proved the blogosphere is all wind and very little sail" (in Melber 2006a). For two reasons this is a fairly unconsidered claim to make. (1) The outcome of a single race would explain little about the blogosphere's influence on the 2006 election in general. (2) The two elections to which Davis is referring, the primary and general elections in Connecticut, have entirely different electorates and therefore different approaches are required. The primary election was a close race among two Democratic contestants. Lamont received 52 percent of the votes, Lieberman 48 percent (Klein 2006). The general election was an unusual three-way race, which Lieberman won because he received a large amount of the Republican votes. The Republicans ran a soft candidate, Alan Schlesinger, and it is therefore plausible to assume that many of the Republican registered voters supported Lieberman to avoid Lamont getting elected. Exit polls from the general election reveal that 70 percent of the registered Republicans voted for Lieberman; 8 percent voted for Lamont and 21 percent voted for Schlesinger. Of the registered Democrats 33 percent voted Lieberman, 65 percent voted Lamont and two percent voted Schlesinger (*MSNBC* 12 November 2006). Overall Lieberman received 50 percent of the votes, Lamont 40 percent and Schlesinger 10 percent (*CNN.com* n.d.). It is therefore plausible to assume that the progressive blogosphere might have had more impact on the outcome of the primary election than on the general election in Connecticut 2006.

Other non-quantifiable factors should also be taken into consideration when assessing the impact of blogs on the 2006 election. Blogger Joel Silberman brings this to light in his writings in the liberal blog, *FireDogLake* (www.firedoglake.com/), November 7, 2006:

"While Ned Lamont may have lost his race to be the Senator from Connecticut all Democrats who are winning tonight owe him a debt of gratitude for being the first candidate to make Iraq the center of this electoral season. And it was the blogosphere that fueled that conversation turning it into a referendum on accountability and the need for checks and balances on a President run amok" (Silberman 2006).

Ari Melber (2006b) clearly agrees with Silberman and argues in an article in *The Huffington Post* November 8, 2006, that the impact of blogs and bloggers went far beyond wins and losses. Melber (2006b) further argues that the impact of bloggers should be more generally assessed by the netroots' effort to provide "crucial, early support" for many of the Democratic candidates who were elected to Congress. More importantly, he argues, the netroots provided crucial support for many of the Democratic candidates not supported by the Beltway establishment. In a blog post published in the online version of *The Nation* the same day, Melber writes:

"Many of the bloggers' picks were aggressive Democrats in long-shot districts who were neglected by the Beltway establishment. There is no doubt that bloggers leveraged money and political buzz to make races more competitive and put Republicans on the defensive, but it was simply not the decisive factor in the elections" (Melber 2006a).

MyDD (www.mydd.com) blogger Chris Bowers, often quoted as an unofficial spokesperson for the netroots movement, seems to have an even stronger belief in the impact bloggers had on the outcome of the 2006 election. Bowers had this to say about the liberal blogosphere's effort to restore a Democratic Congress not long after the victory had been claimed:

"When the nation woke up today, it was told that the balance of the Senate rested in two key races: Montana and Virginia [...] Both campaigns were driven heavily by small donors, blogs, and volunteer activism for nearly an entire year. Given this, it should be obvious who put Democrats over the top in the Senate: the netroots and the progressive movement [...] We brought in the message that the war in Iraq was not a good idea [...] We brought in the hundreds of thousands of new activists for campaigns and we took over tens of thousands of vacated party offices and precinct captainships around the nation. We looked for a candidate to run in every single race in the entire region" (Bowers 2006b).

Time.com claims that of the 19 Democratic candidates handpicked by the netroots, eight won their race (Bacon Jr. et al. 2006). According to Bacon Jr. et al. (2006) "This improves on the blogs' record from 2004, when Daily Kos picked out 16 campaigns to

strongly support and raise money for, all of which lost”. It should be noted that ActBlue, the online fundraising organisation for the netroots movement, only presents 17 candidates on its official list over the 2005-2006 netroots candidates (<http://actblue.com/page/netrootscandidates>). Seven of these won their race. However, what is important to remember is the fact that the netroots’ candidates competed in hard to win seats and yet they won five House and two Senate seats and took a further seven into the marginal category (see Bowers 2006c). Chris Bowers (2006c) of *MyDD* claims that:

There isn't a single one of these races that was top tier when we picked them. We were trying to expand the battlefield. Even when we didn't win, we left a strong, local netroots scene in place for future challenges. The netroots page was an astounding success, and it will be significantly responsible for our new majorities” (Bowers 2006c).

Yet, none of the 20 Republican candidates that were supported by the netroots’ counterpart *the rightroots* won their race (Bowers 2006c).

It should briefly be mentioned that the high voter turnout and the unusually high interest in the election 2006 among Democrat listed voters, have been used as variables to explain the impact of blogging on the 2006 election. “Democrats wooed more voters than GOP for the first time in the midterm since the ’90, reported *MSNBC* November, 7, 2006. Bowers (2006d) claims that data from Pew Internet and American Life Project that measures voter enthusiasm by partisan identification, proves that the netroots can do more than just communicate to a group of bloggers: they can actually achieve the swing.

“Consider one of the great complaints lodged against the netroots and the blogosphere: we preach to the choir instead of trying to reach the swing. Well, when looking at voter enthusiasm this election cycle, it doesn't appear that preaching to the choir, and getting the choir excited, appears to be all that bad of an idea” (Bowers 2006d).

These are the figures in which Bowers (2006d) bases his claim on (from *November Turnout May Be High* 2006):

Given a lot of thought to [the] election:

2006: Dems 59%, Reps 48%

2002: Dems 46%, Reps 47%

1998: Dems 40%, Reps 50%

1994: Dems 40%, Reps 50%

More enthusiastic about voting than previous cycles:

2006: Dems 51%, Reps 33%

2002: Dems 40%, Reps 44%

1998: Dems 38%, Reps 42%

1994: Dems 30%, Reps 45%

The figures clearly show that there is a much higher enthusiasm among Democrats than Republican voters, and that the divide has increased in recent years.

In regards to these numbers, Bowers argues:

“It does not at all strike me as coincidental that the increase in Democratic voter enthusiasm took place concurrently with the rise of progressive media. I'd like to see someone try to explain how Democratic leaders have done a much better job firing up the base in 2005-2006 than they did in previous election cycles, especially since we have been frequently told by many in the Democratic leadership that we have to target swing voters instead of the base [...] The difference in Democratic excitement is not because of anything the leadership has done, but rather is the result of the rapid rise of progressive media. At the heart of progressive media, with the largest audience and the widest reach, is the progressive blogosphere. No one has been accused of needlessly preaching to the choir more than the blogosphere, but considering the vastly different levels of excitement among our base, I guess it wasn't such a bad idea to finally have someone doing that after all” (Bowers 2006d)

Bowers's (2006d) explanation to how the progressive blogosphere has been able to reach the swing is by expanding the playing field. However, there are one important variable that Bowers (2006d) is not taking into consideration when he reviews the numbers presented by Pew Internet and American Life Project (*November Turnout May Be High* 2006); the anger and resentment against the Bush administration among Democratic voters.

Pew Internet and American Life Project states in the summary of their report that:

“Two clear factors underlie Democratic engagement this year: anger about the current political leadership and optimism about the party's chances. Across every question about politics and government, Democrats express high levels of dissatisfaction, especially with President Bush. Fully 77% of Democratic voters very strongly disapprove of the job Bush is doing as president, and nearly two-thirds (63%) say they consider their vote this fall as a vote against Bush” (*November Turnout May Be High* 2006).

“...when asked whether they are "angry," "frustrated," or "basically content" with government these days, 28% of Democratic voters say they are angry. This is up from 20% in 2004 and just 11% in 2000. More important, in 2000 there was no partisan divide in feelings of anger toward government, while today four times as many Democrats as Republicans say they are angry at government” (*November Turnout May Be High* 2006).

Explaining the impact of blogs directly by the increase in voter turnout or the high interest in the election, might overstate the impact of blogs on the election outcome. Still, the netroots might have helped fuel the resentment against the Bush administration and therefore acted as an intervening variable to the high voter turnout.

The case of Lamont vs. Lieberman and the role of the liberal blogosphere during the 2006 election clearly points out the complexity of the topic that we are dealing with. Though few bloggers, communication experts, and even political commentators claim that blogs or the netroots did not have an impact on the 2006 election, there is no obvious conclusion about what degree of impact blogs did have on this race. We need to have in mind that the war in Iraq most likely would have become a major issue in the campaign even without the blogosphere's effort to make it so. There are other medium in which people channelled their arguments in regards to this issue. Attempting to locate other aspects where blogs may have influenced the campaign, the paper will therefore look further at more general opinions dealing with the question of what impact blogs had on the 2006 election.

5.1.3 Statements and opinions

In a series of blog entries published not long after the election, focusing on how technology and the Internet is changing democracy in America, *Personal Democracy*

Forum (<http://www.personaldemocracy.com/>) asked a distinguished group of technologists, politicians, bloggers and journalists to respond to the following questions: “Was the role of technology in politics different in 2006 than in 2004? How did new technology most affect Election 2006, and do you see any lessons for 2008?” (*Personal Democracy Forum* 8 November 2006). In regards to what impact blogs had on the election, some of the respondents argue that blog communities helped shape the overall discussion among candidates during the campaign. This corresponds both to what was said in regards to the Lamont vs. Lieberman race and what has been found in previous studies on the subject.

Previous Internet advisor to the Howard Dean campaign, Dave Weinberger, points to the fact that while it was groundbreaking for candidates to have blogs in 2004, it was in 2006 seen as a normal thing (in *Personal Democracy Forum* 8 November 2006). This might indicate the growing influence blogs have on the political arena in general. Todd Zeigler argues, however, that the candidates’ use of blogs during the election could overall be rated as ‘poor’, and that politicians have yet to realize the medium’s full potential (in *Personal Democracy Forum* 8 November 2006).

“The real sea change will occur when the candidates themselves realize that the web is about building a community of supporters, having a conversation with them and giving them the tools they need to advocate on your behalf. Some realized that in 2006. Many more will in 2008 and beyond” (Zeigler in *Personal Democracy Forum* 8 November 2006).

Danah Boyd, social media researcher with *Yahoo*, on the other hand, argues that other than creating an echo chamber, “discussing the ins and outs of the different candidates and issues”, bloggers had little, if any, impact on the election (in *Personal Democracy Forum* 8 November 2006). Boyd believes that the only thing blogs demonstrated during the election was that they can discuss the less newsworthy news and only in a few incidents turn this news into “properly newsworthy news” (in *Personal Democracy Forum* 8 November 2006). She doubts this had any impact on the election other than creating some scandals.

When asked by *PBS* mid September 2006: “What effect, if any, will blogs have on the mid-term elections?”, Arianna Huffington, founder of the popular news blog *The Huffington Post* (www.huffingtonpost.com/), replied:

“They’re already having an effect – bloggers played a large role in Ned Lamont’s primary victory over Joe Lieberman, building buzz, shifting the conventional wisdom, and doing some great research and reporting. Bloggers were also a key element in George Allen’s “Macaca” comment being spread far and wide, which has led to challenger Jim Webb now running neck and neck with him. And we also see that Hilary has hired a blog adviser. There’s no more mainstream than Hilary Clinton, so the fact that she’s done this is indicative of the influence blogs now have” (Huffington in *PBS* 15 September 2006).

In response to the same question, Andrew Sullivan, founder of the popular commentator blog, *The Daily Fish* (http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/), replied: “Not that much, I think. We can help frame the debate, but we’re not ground-operators, nor, in my mind, should we be” (in *PBS* 15 September 2006).

Colin Delany of *e.politics* supports what many before him has recognised: that blogs do influence elections because they have the capability of influencing the influencers, or as he puts it: “it’s the wider firestorm of attention through the mainstream media, particularly television, radio and newspapers, that shifts the course of campaigns, but blogs and online video can provide the initial spark of information” (Delany 2006b). This was indeed the lesson from the 2006 election, Delaney (2006b) argues. John Henke (2006) of *The QuandO* blog correspondingly argues that one of the greatest lessons from the 2006 election is that blogs were an effective component of what he refers to as the *Triangle* - A term coined by Peter Daou, Hilary Clinton’s current blog advisor, stating that: “without the participation of the media and the political establishment, the netroots (blogs) alone cannot generate the critical mass necessary to alter or create conventional wisdom” (Daou 2005) - Daou’s definition of influence.

“The New Media is but one constituent aspect of the new political landscape - their efforts are best seen as a vital, but not sufficient, component of successful campaigns. Direct mail, GOTV efforts and campaign ads are vital to any serious national campaign, and they can be *individually* effective, whether or not the campaign is ultimately successful. The same is true of blogs and new

media outreach. In an opportunity cost sense, the Leftosphere was *very* effective in this election cycle (2006). They didn't win every race, but they made significant contributions to individual races (Webb in Virginia, Tester in Montana), to the national anti-Republican mood, and to the media climate. Most of their successes won't be readily apparent to the general public (that was certainly true in my own campaign experience), while other successes are subtle and loosely connected — e.g., the media is frequently captured by narratives established in the blogs (Henke 2006).

Ari Melber (2006c) additionally claims that: “Unlike in 2004 Democratic Party leaders now say they listen to the netroots”, supporting Henke’s claim that bloggers were an effective component of what Daou (2006) refers to as the Triangle. Melber made the claim after bloggers from *MyDD*, *FireDogLake*, *AmericaBlog* and *Daily Kos* met with former president Bill Clinton during the 2006 campaign to talk politics and strategy (Melber 2006c).

Yet, despite what seems to be a widely held belief in the ability of political blogs to impact elections, it seems that very few, especially bloggers, believe political candidates do a good job on their official campaign blogs. Senior Vice President of The Bivings Group, Todd Zeigler (2006a), commented in the company’s blog during the 2006 campaign that he found most campaigns’ blogs to be “horrible”, and that operating a campaign blog that is poorly developed serves against its purpose.

“Ultimately, it’s better to have no blog than a really bad one. People see through this stuff [...] A blog strategy isn’t going to be successful if it operates in a vacuum. The blogosphere is interconnected, and you are going to be most successful if you engage fully in the greater world. Its also important to remember that you can have a blog outreach strategy without having your own blog [...] In summary, I think a blog is only going to be truly successful if a campaign is willing to invest the time needed to create a good strategy that leads to compelling content and smart outreach to the blogosphere. And is willing to give up a bit of control. If they can’t do that, it is probably best to not create a blog and focus on other tactics” (Zeigler 2006a).

After taking part in an panel debate at the Dole Institute of Politics discussing the impact blogging has made and will make on politics, founder of *MyDD* (www.mydd.com), Jerome Armstrong (2007b), correspondingly concluded that one thing that became

evident during the debate was that none of the participants expected much from the 2008 presidential candidates in regards to either their campaign blogs or their blogging.

“There is an expectation of blogger outreach, and interacting with the existing blog communities, but a campaign is just not going to be able to compete with community blogs that have been longer standing and represent a more authentic interaction. Dean’s Blog for America was the first successful campaign blog, and maybe the last [...] I just don’t see interesting blogging happening within a campaign [...]” (Armstrong 2007b).

Armstrong’s point is that blogging on behalf of a candidate is not compelling for an audience: “If a candidate wants to use this medium to reach people, they are going to have to figure out how to do it themselves” (Armstrong 2007b).

The data discussed in this section clearly shows that many regard blogs to be most effective when used as strategic interventions to affect the agenda in the mainstream media. Especially Henke (2006), referring to Daou’s *Triangle theory*, makes a relevant claim when he states that blogs alone might not have the power to generate the critical mass necessary to alter or create conventional wisdom. Blogs are most effective when they can establish narratives that are captured by the mainstream media and the political establishment. Blogs did not win every race in the 2006 election. They did, however, as Henke (2006) claims, make “significant contributions to individual races, [...] to the national anti-Republican mood, and to the media climate”. But, as relevant as these statements might be, we are still left speculating about how campaign blogs are affecting voter decisions directly as they are used today. The subsequent section will therefore look at how voters use blogs and the Internet in general and discuss what this can teach us about how the medium is influencing their decisions at the ballot box.

5.2 How does the web affect people’s voting decision?

Quite a few relevant studies focusing on audiences’ use of blogs and the Internet in general, both in the 2006 midterm election and in the 2008 presidential campaign, were released and commented on in blogs and news articles during the research period of this study.

The following section will examine these studies and look at how voters use blogs and websites to retrieve political information and engage in political activities during campaigns and elections. The surveys that will be discussed, all which are American based, are:

- A survey conducted by Pew Internet and American Life Project released January 2007, focusing on the Internet's role in the 2006 midterm election. The study is based on a random sample of 2,562 adults, aged 18 and older (Rainie 2007).
- A survey conducted by Performics released February 2007, aiming to assess the role of the Internet in the 2008 U.S. presidential election (2008). The survey is based on a telephone survey among a random sample of 1,014 adults (*Performics* 2007).
- A survey conducted by Burst Media released March 2007, looking at the Internet's role in the 2008 U.S. presidential election (*Burst Media* 2007)
- A survey conducted by the Scripps Survey Research Centre of Ohio University released August 2006, briefly describing how Americans read blogs. The survey is based on a random sample of 1,010 U.S. adult residents (Hargrove & Stempel 2006)
- A survey of prospective voters' opinions of campaign websites in the 2008 U.S. presidential election conducted by Gomez Inc. April 2007, using a demographically representative sample of the U.S. population (*Gomez Inc.* 2007).

5.2.1 How do voters read and use the Internet in relation to elections?

Pew Internet and American Life Project found that the number of Americans citing the Internet as the source of most of their political news and information had doubled since the last midterm election (2002). According to the study: "31% of Americans – more than 60 million people – used the internet for political purposes in campaign 2006" (Rainie 2007, p. 9). As many as 15 percent of all American adults said the Internet was their primary source for campaign news during the election compared to 7 percent in 2002 and 18 percent in the 2004 presidential election (Rainie 2007).

Performics stated in a media release dated February 21, 2007, that they had found that “42 percent of Americans say the Internet will play an important role in deciding who they will vote for” in the 2008 presidential election (*Performics* 2007). Not surprisingly Performics found that reliance on the Internet for political information is very strongly related to age (*Performics* 2007). The respondents citing that they used the Internet for political information were from 88 percent among 18-34 year olds to 25 percent among Americans 65 and older.

Data presented in this section indicates that especially younger voters have a fairly strong reliance on what they read online. They also confirm that more voters are taking to the web to retrieve information about candidates and elections.

5.2.2 How do voters value the information they retrieve from the Internet compared to other mediums?

Not surprisingly Pew Internet and American Life Project found that television still outranked other media when it comes to where people retrieve their news about elections (Rainie 2007):

“Fully 69% of all Americans said they went to the television for most of their news about the campaign – twice the proportion of those who cited newspapers (34%), four times the proportion who singled out radio (17%) and the internet (15%)” (Rainie 2007, p. 7).

“Even for internet users (not the public as a whole), television and newspapers outpace the internet as a campaign source. Among America’s 136 million adult internet users 66% say television was their main source of political news in 2006 and another 31% cite newspapers. That compares with the 22% of internet users who cite the internet itself as their main source of campaign news” (Rainie 2007, p. 7).

The Performics survey, focusing on the Internet’s role in the 2008 campaign, supports these findings: stating that television news, talk shows, news radio and local and national newspapers still are the primary means for people searching information about campaigns and candidates (*Performics* 2007).

On the contrary, TechPresident (All 2007) and MediaPost Publications (O’Malley 2007) reported April 10-11, 2007, that a most recent released survey by Burst Media

(2007) looking at the Internet's role in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, had found that voters are relying on the web more than any medium to research candidates and their positions. Burst Media (2007) states that:

“One-quarter (25.0%) of likely voters cite the Internet as the best place to learn about a candidate's position on election issues or to research general election issues. Other election resources include; television (21.3%), newspapers (17.3%), radio (6.9%), magazines (4.4%), and pamphlets/ brochures/direct mail (3.3%)” (*Burst Media* 2007).

But Burst Media are contradictory in regards to the sample used in the survey. In one paragraph the study states that it surveyed “2,100 online users who are likely to vote in the 2008 Presidential election”, while it in another paragraph states that it surveyed “2,100 likely voters about their use of candidate and issue advocacy group's websites, and their actions when confronted with a candidate or issue advocacy group's online advertisement” (*Burst Media* 2007). The author of the current study sent several emails to Burst Media in an attempt to clarify the methodology used in the study without getting any response. Without knowing whether the study used a random sample or only surveyed online users, a generalization will have little value. We will therefore have to assume that the study based its findings on a population of online users. Comparing the data from the Burst Media survey to the data from the surveys conducted by Pew Internet and American Life Project and Performics, this seems to be a relevant assumption to make.

The data presented in this section is interesting. While we not surprisingly find that voters in general rely more on the information they retrieve from traditional media than what they view online, we find, by comparing the data retrieved by Pew Internet and American Life Project to the data retrieved by Burst Media, that *online users* seem to rely more on the information they retrieve from the Internet in the 2008 campaign than they did in the 2006 election.

5.2.3 How do voters read and use blogs in relation to elections?

Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 20 percent of the 60 million Americans that said they retrieved information about the 2006 election from the Internet stated that they got news and information about the campaign from blogs (Rainie 2007, p. 15). The report states:

“Those with relatively high levels of education and high levels of household income were particularly drawn to blogs as were campaign internet users in their 30s and their 50s. Blogs held special force with those who used the internet to get political news and information from places outside their communities” (Rainie 2007, p. 15).

A more general survey conducted by Scripps Survey Research Centre of Ohio University found that: “nearly a quarter of young adults say they read blogs at least once a week, compared to just 3 percent of people 65 or older” (Hargrove & Stempel 2006). When asked: “How many days each week do you get news from a blog on the Internet?”, “[e]ighty-eight percent of respondents said they never use blogs to get news, 7 percent said they read blogs four days a week or less and 5 percent said they read them five days a week or more” (Hargrove & Stempel 2006).

The data presented in this section shows that the number of voters visiting blogs during an election is not exceedingly high. It clearly makes it evident, however, that it is young educated adults that are the main demographic group that retrieves information about politics from blog.

5.2.4 How do voters read and use websites in relation to elections?

Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 20 percent of the 60 million Americans that said they retrieved information about the 2006 election from the Internet also stated that they got news and information about the campaign from websites created by candidates (Rainie 2007, p. 15). The report states:

“These sites were disproportionately used by civically-engaged young voters and voters who felt that the internet is a good source of information that is unavailable elsewhere. They were also important to people who see the internet as a place to get local perspectives” (Rainie 2007, p. 15).

21 percent of campaign Internet users, or 13 percent of the entire adult population, stated that they viewed videos online about the campaign (Rainie 2007, p. 17).

20 percent of the respondents surveyed by Burst Media stated that they had already visited a presidential candidate's website contesting in the 2008 race; one quarter of the respondents stated that they had clicked on a candidate's or advocacy group's online advertisement; and nearly half of the respondents, 50.7 percent, stated that they would watch a video clip on a candidate's website, featuring the candidate discussing his or her positions on election issues (*Burst Media* 2007). Interestingly, the study further found that nearly one-third, 29.8 percent of the respondents, had visited the website of a candidate or issue advocacy group that they did not or were unsure they would support. Among the respondents who visited a candidate's or group's site they did not support – “three out of five, 58.8 percent, did so to learn more about the candidate's or organisation's position on issues, while 47.7 percent wanted to learn more about the candidate's or group's strategy/plans/tactics and 25.8 percent visited to send comments to the group or candidate”(Burst Media 2007).

A Performics survey overwhelmingly found that as many as 72 percent of the respondents who visit a candidate's website say they are primarily looking for the candidate's stance on specific issues.

Gomez Inc. even found that: “Many Web-savvy voters believe the candidate with the best performing website will win the Oval Office” (*Gomez Inc.* 2007). According to Gomez Inc., nearly half of the participants in the nationwide survey stated that they plan to visit at least one of the 2008 presidential candidates' websites during the campaign (*Gomez Inc.* 2007).

The data presented in this section shows that the number of voters visiting campaign websites during an election is not exceedingly high, but increasing. It becomes evident that the voters that do visit candidate websites are a very interesting group for campaigns to target. Many of these voters are actively seeking information about the candidates and seem to be quite open to persuasion and new ideas.

5.2.5 How do voters engage in online activities in regards to elections?

For the first time in their politics and Internet focused surveys, Pew Internet and American Life Project asked respondents whether they had created and shared political content during the election. They found that:

- 8% of campaign internet users posted their own political commentary to a newsgroup, website or blog.
- 13% of them forwarded or posted someone else's political commentary.
- 1% of them created political audio or video recordings.
- 8% of them forwarded or posted someone else's political audio or video recordings (Rainie 2007, p. 17).

“In all, 23% of campaign internet users (or 11% of internet users and 7% of the entire U.S. population) had done at least one of those things” (Rainie 2007, p. 17).

This, according to Pew Internet and American Life Project, translates into about 14 million people who were using the web's interactive functions to contribute to political discussions and activities during the 2006 election (Rainie 2007, p. ii). These are quite significant numbers, which clearly show that the web has viral potential.

Based on what the studies have found it seems blogs clearly are an asset for candidates and political parties. A significant number of voters seem to rely on online sources when it comes to researching candidates. It is clear that people are willingly visiting the candidate's sites and engaging in political discussions and activities online. We can therefore argue that candidates not operating a blog are missing out on a prime opportunity to put a positive and personal spin on their campaign. We can also argue that as a growing segment of the voter population is relying on online sources in researching candidates and elections, a blog might serve as a useful channel for targeting this specific voter segment.

5.3 How can we measure the impact of blogs?

During the period that the research took place, few bloggers, online communication experts or political commentators explicitly discussed technical aspects regarding how we actually can measure the impact of campaign blogs on political

elections. The only reflection that explicitly dealt with this subject was produced by Todd Zeigler, Senior Vice President of the Bivings Group, on the company's blog, *The Bivings Report* (<http://www.bivingsreport.com/>). Discussing the performances of the 2006 contestants' official campaign blogs, Zeigler (2006b) raised the following question: "How influential/successful are the campaign blogs?"

In an extension to his own question, Zeigler writes:

"How many people are reading them? How many people are linking to them? How well networked are they? Are they working? These questions are pretty much impossible to answer in an academically defensible way: we'd need access to the logs of all the campaign blogs to answer adequately. We're left picking through anecdotes" (Zeigler 2006b).

Zeigler validly raises a relevant point about the complexity surrounding some of the metrical factors that can explain the reach of the content produced on blogs. But it is what he further says that interestingly shows that there are other simpler, non quantitative factors, which also can tell us something about efforts politicians' dedicate to making their blog successful. In an attempt to somehow answer his first question – "how influential/successful are the campaign blogs" – Zeigler (2006b) decides to use the search engine Technorati (www.technorati.com/) to look at aspects that can tell us something about how effective the medium is when used as a campaign tool.

The first aspect Zeigler looks at is how the candidates' campaign blogs ranked in the search engine. The paper has earlier mentioned that Technorati ranks the blogs in its database by the number of incoming links. Zeigler (2006b) assumes that links are the most effective way we have to measure the influence of a blog. The two next aspects Zeigler examines are how the main campaign sites rank in the search engine and how many links they attract. While these aspects can give us an indication of how much attention the candidates receive from the blogosphere in general, they will unfortunately not teach us much about the influence of the candidates' blog itself, Zeigler (2006b) argues. The last two aspects examined by Zeigler (2006b) are whether the candidates are doing a good job of actually getting their blog content in the search engine, and whether the candidates have bothered to actually claim their blog in the search engine. Zeigler

(2006b) argues that these measurements might give us an indication of how serious candidates are about their blog.

Based on his methodology Zeigler found that:

- “Only 44% of the blogs we looked at had been indexed by Technorati in the last 15 days. And many of these blogs that had been indexed weren't being done so regularly. Seems a lot of campaigns are unfamiliar with pinging.
- Only 18% of the campaigns have claimed their blog on Technorati.
- Generally speaking, these campaign blogs are not linked to that much by other blogs. It was surprising” (Zeigler 2006b).

He concludes that:

- (1) “Campaigns haven’t mastered some of the technical aspects of blog promotion

This is evidenced by the fact that most of these blogs aren't getting indexed regularly by blog search engines and most campaigns haven't claimed their blog on Technorati. If people can't find your posts, they aren't going to link to them.

- (2) Campaigns aren’t networking effectively with other bloggers

I know lots of candidates have conference calls with bloggers. And I also know you can't judge the effectiveness of blog outreach efforts based solely on the results above. However, a lot of blogging is building online relationships one blogger at a time. You exchange emails with other bloggers. You link to them. You comment on their blogs. You add them to your blogroll. Given the results shown above, I can't imagine that most of the campaign blogs are doing a good job at building these sorts of relationship. I suspect a lot of them are operating in a bit of a vacuum.

- (3) Campaigns aren’t producing compelling content

Any successful blogger you talk to will say you earn links by creating good content. Write something great and people will find it and link to it. Click through on the blogs above yourself and see what you think about the content” (Zeigler 2006b).

None of the academic studies reviewed earlier in this paper have considered any of these aspects in the same way as Zeigler does. It should also be noted that many blogs and newspapers are in fact using measurements such as incoming blog links, daily hit rates provided by search engines like *Alexa* (www.alexa.com) and the number of friends

on social media platforms like *MySpace* (www.myspace.com) and *Facebook* (www.facebook.com), as indicators for which of the contestants in the 2008 presidential race that are doing best on blogger outreach (see Easter 2007). There is no reason why future studies should not use measurements like these to test the correlation between online campaigning and electoral success. However, by measuring a blog's reach and incoming links we still do not examine the correlation between voters that read a candidate's blog and people that vote for the candidate operating the blog. We also have to take into account that the aspects Zeigler examines can be proxies for a campaign's overall level of preparedness and organisation. In his analyses of the effects websites had on people's voting decision during the 1996 U.S. congressional election, D'Alessio (1997) (discussed in chapter 4) found that "the more sophisticated and better resourced candidates were more likely to operate websites" (Gibson & McAllister 2005, p. 6). It might also be plausible to assume that campaigns operating a blog in a modern election campaign are more professional and overall better prepared than the average campaign.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This study set out to broaden our understanding of the potential influence and role blogs can play in contemporary election campaigns. Questioning whether blogs can have an impact on the political election process, the paper has tried to locate different aspects about the medium that can influence a political campaign or people's voter decisions more directly. Simultaneously, the paper has worked to locate specific incidents or situations where blogs have helped change the direction of a political campaign or helped swing voters to produce an upset outcome of an election. The data presented in the study reflects only what we can learn from the specific incidents that have been discussed throughout this paper. No generalisations or future predictions can be drawn from the data other than the surveys located as a part of the research.

Joe Trippi, Howard Dean's former campaign manager, told Agence France-Presse earlier this year that: "The Web will be playing a bigger role than ever in the 2008 campaign, so much so that for the first time, it will actually change the outcome of the election" (in Zablitz 2007). Trippi implies that the Internet has gained a stronger position in the political campaign as a growing number of Americans are becoming part of online communities and that moments like 'Macaca' are bound to spring up again in the 2008 presidential race (Zablitz 2007). As the current study has found, these are relevant claims to make. However, in saying that the web will change the outcome of the election for the first time, Trippi indirectly implies that the Internet to date not has had a profound impact on the outcome of a major election.

Data retrieved by the current study strongly suggests that it has already been demonstrated that a campaign, in some cases, can successfully exploit the presence of the web and community blogs, and in doing so, even impact the outcome of a specific election race. The race between Senator George Allen vs. Jim Webb in the 2006 U.S. senatorial election stands as a great example of this. Data to emerge from the current study shows that Webb's campaign cleverly utilized the strategic advantages that the

Internet and blogs present and effectively managed to create a negative impression of Senator George Allen that drove away enough voter support to cause the incumbent Senator's defeat. But we can not claim that the Internet or blogs directly caused Allen's defeat. As the data discussing the 'Macaca' incident shows, the Internet can at best serve as an important intervening variable in a campaign's electoral success. To turn the web into a tool that can optimize a campaign's electioneering effort, a campaign has to actively involve itself with online communities and develop message management strategies that combine online and offline strategies. The campaign, argues Stockwell, "cannot afford to just put up a website (or a blog for that matter) and hope for the best". To build strong relationships with constituencies, campaigns have to take advantage of the speed and mass interactivity that the web offers (Stockwell 2005, p. 132). Interestingly, but not unexpectedly, the study confirms what previous studies have concluded: that most campaigns are failing to realize this. While most bloggers are engaging in a vibrant conversation within the overall universe of blogs, the average campaign utilizing a blog for electioneering purposes seems to be operating within a vacuum, using the medium as a traditional one-way, top-down communication channel. Bloggers therefore regard campaigns' blogs and blogging as a poor effort.

Several recent surveys located by the current study show, however, that voters in general rely more on what they read on the Internet in relation to politicians and elections than ever before (see *Gomez Inc. 2007*, *Performics 2007*, *Rainie 2007*, *Burst Media 2007*). This clearly indicates that there is a growing potential for politicians to reach voters via blogs, and that the message communicated via blogs might have a stronger effect on voter decisions than so far expected. Bloggers are expecting candidates to reach out to the blog community (Armstrong 2007b). Politicians deciding not to develop a blogger outreach strategy, or not including a blog in their overall campaign strategy, will therefore miss out on a prime opportunity to put a positive and personal spin on the message that a growing number of voters access online.

Previous research has found that: "campaigns that use opinion research to understand the citizenry's frame of mind and employ the campaign machinery to conduct a two-way discussion with the citizenry that strives for even-handedness and an equality of power can have a remarkable and on-going effect" (Stockwell 2005, p. 17). This might

explain why we have such high expectations about the usefulness and effect of blogs in political campaigns. The blog clearly breathes a fresh breath into the political arena, as its nature fosters a process of deliberative democracy, a process that is “acknowledging the power inherent in the citizen’s active engagement in the political process” (Cohen in Stockwell 2005, p. 16). Perhaps many see the blog to be a channel that can guarantee more people free speech and the potential to participate in a process of deliberative democracy that for so many years now has occurred primarily in the mass media giants (Stockwell 2005, p. 17), where participation is limited to the political and financial elite (Stockwell 2005, p. 18). It is therefore important that we continue to explore the effectiveness of the medium, especially compared to traditional mainstream media.

Future studies clearly need to learn more about how many of the people that read, link to or interact with a candidate’s blog, actually go on to vote for that specific candidate. They need to learn more about how voters value the information they retrieve on blogs in comparison to the information they retrieve from other media: Which medium’s information do they find most appealing, which do they find most trustworthy, and which medium’s content has the most effect on their decision at the ballot box. But more importantly, future studies need to learn more about the persuasive elements that make the blog successful. Which elements of the blog make a person want to act or react to vote? Is it the fact that a blog allows readers to participate in a deliberative process? Is it the experience of taking part in something, helping a candidate or a party reach a goal via their blog? Is it the pleasure of freely lashing out against the parties or candidates you do not like, trashing their blogs with spam? Or is it the experience of being positioned on the political spectrum by someone else, other bloggers that share your view or regard you as an opponent? These are the aspects that will not only teach us more about the effectiveness of blogs when used as a campaign tool, they will also help us learn more about how citizens can decentralize the (political) “power that arises from the centralised role of broadcast media in mass society” (Stockwell 2005, pp. 17-18) and create a more deliberative democratic process.

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