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# 11

## So You WANT To BLOG ...

There are two parts to publishing anything successfully: the act of publication itself and the critical reaction to the published work. Both parts matter. Peer reviewers, editors, and other gatekeepers can erect formidable barriers between the author and the printing press. Surmounting those barriers is an accomplishment in and of itself. How the intended audience reacts to the publication, however, is equally important. Is a journal article or university press book widely cited in the ensuing literature? Does a textbook become widely assigned? Does an op-ed move the policy agenda?

This distinction matters when thinking about how to write a “successful” political science weblog. Compared to all of the other publication venues discussed in this volume, blogs are unique. There are no editorial gatekeepers in blogging. Technical or economic barriers to entry are essentially zero; anyone with access to the Internet can create a blog, for free, in under 10 minutes.<sup>1</sup> The moment a political scientist sets up a blog, he or she has achieved the first component of success. The second component of success—positive audience reaction—is altogether trickier.

An academic political scientist who decides to blog must consider three audiences: colleagues, students, and everyone else. The key to success is to earn positive feedback from as many readers as possible while not triggering a negative reaction from the first two groups. If successful, a political scientist’s blog can serve as a valuable complement

to research, teaching, and service. An unsuccessful blog carries the risks of alienating other political scientists and confusing students.

This chapter will proceed in four sections. The next section briefly reviews the weblog phenomenon, and how it has penetrated the political science discipline in comparison to other academic fields. The second section reviews the different ways in which a blog can enhance one's professional career, focusing on research and service. The third section discusses the professional perils that come with maintaining an active weblog. The final section offers some practical advice on how to maximize the promise of blogs while minimizing the pitfalls.

### **BLOGGING 101**

For the uninitiated, a blog or weblog is defined as a web page that is subject to minimal to no external editing, provides online commentary, is periodically updated, and is presented in reverse chronological order with hyperlinks to other online sources (Farrell and Drezner 2008). Blogs can function as personal diaries, technical advice columns, sports chats, celebrity or business gossip,<sup>2</sup> political commentary, or all of the above. A blogger is an individual who maintains a weblog. A post is an individual entry in a weblog. The "blogosphere" refers to the universe of blogs, which forms a social network.

Blogs have penetrated the academy—though their prevalence and acceptance varies widely from discipline to discipline. They are most prominent in law, and have become a key resource for legal scholars, judges, and law clerks (Solum 2006; Berman 2006; Balkin 2006). Blog posts have been cited in court opinions and legal briefs, and there is evidence to suggest that law clerks read prominent legal blogs on a regular basis (Solum 2006; Balkin 2006). Legal bloggers know this, and may craft their posts to influence decisions in prominent cases. Blogs have also penetrated other social science disciplines, such as history, philosophy, and economics.

By one quantitative measure, political science falls into the middle of the pack in terms of social science blogging. One web site keeps an updated list of academic blogs.<sup>3</sup> As of March 2007, both history and economics have roughly 33% more blogs than political science. At the same time, political science blogs outnumber those in anthropology,

psychology, and sociology.<sup>4</sup> While weblogs have spread into political science, however, they have not necessarily spread far within elite institutions. As of March 2007, very few political scientists at top-20 departments maintained an active blog.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, numerous lawyers and economists at top-20 institutions run weblogs.

Despite the penetration of blogs into the academy, considerable controversy remains about whether blogging should be thought of as a scholarly activity (Boynnton 2005). Some academic bloggers take great pains to divorce their professional activities from their blogging output (Althouse 2006).<sup>6</sup> This chapter, however, focuses on blogging about political phenomenon.

### **THE PROMISE OF BLOGS**

Traditionally, academics divide their work output into teaching, research, and service. A similar triptych works when measuring blog success. Blogs have been used as an online component to facilitate teaching. They can allow professors to link to course-relevant articles, or allow their students to articulate their thoughts on salient topics. For example, Gary King has sponsored the Social Science Statistics blog, facilitating interaction among graduate students on ways to improve statistical techniques and presentation.<sup>7</sup> The real potential for blogs, however, is in the areas of research and service.

Blogging can facilitate conventional research programs in several ways. The simplest and most direct is when a blog acts as an online notebook for nascent ideas and research notes. A blog allows the writer to link and critique news stories, research monographs, and other online publications. Because blogs are archived, it is easy for authors to retrace their thoughts online. Most of these posts will not develop into anything substantive—as is the case with most ideas formulated by scholars.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the format permits one to play with ideas in a way that is ill-suited for other publishing formats. A blog functions like an intellectual fishing net, catching and preserving the embryonic ideas that merit further time and effort.<sup>9</sup>

The research benefits of a blog grow when connections are made with other social science blogs. This allows an exchange of views about

politics, policy, and political science with individuals that you might not have otherwise met—an “invisible college,” as Brad DeLong (2006) puts it: “People whose views and opinions I can react to, and who will react to my reasoned and well-thought-out opinions, and to my unreasoned and off-the-cuff ones as well.” Henry Farrell (2005) compares blogs to the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters, noting that the blogosphere “builds a space for serious conversation around and between the more considered articles and monographs that we write.”<sup>10</sup>

In political science, academic blogs have facilitated better scholarship by encouraging online interactions about research ideas. For example, political science bloggers have debated whether international relations theory is slighting the study of al-Qaeda;<sup>11</sup> the sources of the liberal democratic peace;<sup>12</sup> the role of the political scientist as a political actor;<sup>13</sup> and arranged online discussions of noteworthy books in political science.<sup>14</sup> Blogs can act as a substitute for the traditional practice of exchanges of letters in journals, and provide additional venues for book reviews.

Of course, these kinds of exchanges happen offline as well. The blog format, however, enhances and expands these interactions in two ways. First, the networked structure of the blogosphere facilitates the inclusion of more political scientists, more academic disciplines, and more informed citizens than other venues. Second, these interactions also happen much more quickly than in other formats. When presenting an idea on the blogosphere, there is instantaneous critical feedback. Even with the advent of online journal submissions, this quasi-peer review system is *much* quicker than would be the case with a journal or university press.<sup>15</sup>

Weblogs can also be viewed as a form of service. A blog allows a professor to interact with interested citizens beyond the ivory tower. Provided one can write in a reasonably jargon-free manner, a blog can attract readers from all walks of life. Indeed, citizens will tend to view an academic blogger they encounter online as more accessible than would be the case in a face-to-face interaction. This increases the likelihood of fruitful interaction. A blog is an accessible outlet for putting on

one's public intellectual hat. As Farrell (2005) observes, "Blogging democratizes the function of public intellectual. It's no longer necessary for an academic to lobby the editors of the *Washington Post's* op-ed page or the *New York Review of Books* in order to make his or her voice heard. Instead, he or she can start a blog and (with interesting arguments and a bit of luck and self-promotion) begin to have an impact on the public conversation." Survey evidence also suggests that political scientists use blogs as a form of political activism (McKenna 2007).

A successful weblog can also expand publication opportunities. Book publishers, magazine editors, and op-ed assistants all read weblogs. If a political scientist can demonstrate a deft writing style and a clear expertise about an issue on a blog, it sends a signal to these gatekeepers that they can display these qualities in other publishing venues. Blogging is not a substitute to other publications: done correctly, it is a powerful complement.

### **THE PERIL OF BLOGS**

Almost all of the benefits that come from maintaining a weblog require an audience willing to read it. In choosing to blog, political scientists face two problems: people will read their blog, or they will ignore their blog. Let us take the second problem first. It can be dispiriting to put effort into a blog and then find that it fails to garner any traffic. The distribution of links and traffic in the blogosphere is remarkable skewed, with a few blogs commanding the overwhelming share of links and hits (Farrell and Drezner 2008; Shirky 2003). Over time the "elite" blogs have become more and more entrenched, creating a barrier to embryonic political science blogs in building a significant reader base. Latecomers may therefore find it difficult to attract significant numbers of readers.

Even with these barriers, however, political scientists who adapt to the medium should—eventually—be able to attract readers in the hundreds or even thousands per day. This leads to the second potential problem—having your blog read and misinterpreted by colleagues and students. The simple fact is that most political scientists either do not or cannot write for a public audience (Borer 2006). Academics who publish only in peer-reviewed outlets will develop misperceptions about

political scientists who do publish in non-scholarly outlets. Because they take words seriously, they will assume that it takes the same length of time to craft a paragraph of blog text as it does to create a paragraph of scholarly text. This is simply not true. This misperception contributes to a massive overestimation of the effort devoted to blogging, and the opportunity costs in the form of lost scholarship.

In some ways, this problem is merely the latest manifestation of what happens when professors try to become public intellectuals. Political scientists currently look at blogs the way a previous generation of academics looked at television—as a guilty, tawdry pleasure that should not be talked about in respectable circles.<sup>16</sup> The problem is more acute now, however, because blogging creates new pathways to public recognition beyond the control of traditional academic gatekeepers. Any usurpation of scholarly authority is bound to upset those who benefit the most from the status quo.<sup>17</sup>

For example, in July 2005 a senior humanities professor wrote a pseudonymous essay (Tribble 2005a) in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on the academic job market, entitled “Bloggers Need Not Apply.” The title aptly summarized the argument. Three months later, this professor responded to the volumes of online criticism with another *Chronicle* essay (Tribble 2005b), observing, “As my original column made clear (and many amid the outcry reiterated) when it comes to blogging, ‘I just don’t get it.’ That’s right, I don’t. *Many in the tenured generation don’t, and they’ll be sitting on hiring committees for years to come.* (emphasis added)” Political scientists sympathetic to blogs have fretted about how a blog would impact a junior candidate’s chances for tenure. Michigan historian Juan Cole was allegedly rejected for an interdisciplinary chair at Yale because of hostility to some of the content on his blog (Liebowitz 2006).

Another potential problem is how students view a professor’s blog. If an academic blogger achieves any kind of public success, then that academic’s students are likely to peruse his or her blog. This is not automatically a bad thing, but academic bloggers often display more personal idiosyncrasies on their web page than they would ordinarily reveal in a classroom setting. This can be problematic because students

often overinterpret their interactions with professors. They might believe they have a more informal relationship with the professor—or view a blog post as signaling a message when none is intended.<sup>18</sup>

The seriousness of these pitfalls is a function of one's standing in the profession. Tenured professors have little to fear from the downside of blogging—unless they aspire to employment at an elite institution. For faculty comfortably ensconced at non-elite institutions, blogging can provide a new way to engage the scholarly and policy discourse of the day. For junior faculty and graduate students, the perils are greater and harder to avoid. The demographics of blogging suggest that, like Internet use more generally, it is skewed toward the young (Rainie 2005). Even if incoming graduate students are comfortable with the medium, however, they must be wary of their elders—who are clearly less comfortable.

## HOW TO SUCCEED AT BLOGGING

The way to publish a successful blog is to attract well-informed readers, while at the same time minimizing the misperceptions of colleagues who might read it. How can this be done? Ten pieces of advice to you, the novice blogger, from a five-year veteran:

1. *Imagine your audience.* Besides yourself, who do you want to read your blog? This is strictly a matter of personal choice, but it is a choice you need to make. Some blogs are intended to reach only their own specialty. Others are intended for a general political science audience. And yet others are intended for an even wider audience. While there are common keys to success for all weblogs, it helps to anticipate the target audience's expected background knowledge.
2. *Think small at first.* Do not expect that you will immediately adapt to the format. When you start your blog, it will not look pretty.<sup>19</sup> The good news is that there is a learning-by-doing curve in blogging, and you can adapt to the format over time. The point is, give your new blog a month or two of shakedown before trumpeting it to other political scientists.

3. *Write clearly and concisely.* We have been trained within an inch of our lives to write for other academics. To the lay person, academics come off as too long-winded, too afraid of emotive language, and too in love with their own jargon to be easily accessible (Borer 2006). Write as clearly and directly as possible.

Even if your intended audience is strictly other academics, there are ways in which crafting a blog post differs from writing for an offline format. One simple rule of thumb: readers will give up on long blocks of unindented prose online long before they get discouraged when reading a similar amount of text on paper. Paragraphs should be no longer than 100 words.<sup>20</sup>

4. *Link, link, link.* Many political scientists who try their hand at blogging mistakenly believe that blogs function as a place to dump rejected op-ed submissions. This overlooks a crucial component of the blogosphere—its networked, hyperlinked structure. As a general rule, try to link to at least one other web page when composing an individual blog post.

It also helps to link to other bloggers' perspectives on the topic of your post. Search out weblogs that focus on similar topics and read them on a regular basis. This serves several useful purposes. First, think of linking as the blog equivalent of a literature review—what are other's takes on a *New York Times* op-ed, for example? Second, reading other's opinions on a similar topic will often provide useful fodder for your own musings. Third, most bloggers want to know if others are talking about them. Various search engines and trackback features within blog software make it easy for other bloggers to find your blog.<sup>21</sup> This allows the possibility of an iterated online exchange of views. If you are really interested in attracting traffic, be sure to email popular bloggers when you have a post that targets their interests.<sup>22</sup>

5. *Remember—you are the editor.* The blogosphere's comparative advantages are speed in publishing and no external editors—but that does not mean that once you have posted something it is sacrosanct. In the hour after I initially post something, I will often



revise it to clean up typos, correct grammar, add relevant links, and bulk up my arguments with more detailed points or supporting facts. I also will update posts over the next day or so in response to feedback or new information. The best bloggers have well-honed internal editing systems—and they use them on a regular basis.

6. *Develop a thick skin.* As someone accustomed to having colleagues rip apart my academic work in workshops and conferences, I have always found the criticism of blog commenters far less damaging to my psyche. That said, the blogosphere is not for the faint of heart.<sup>23</sup> Many bloggers thrive on critiquing any and every post. Commenters can be even more abusive in their language. One category of commenters—referred to in blogging argot as “trolls”—will submit comments that have little to do with the original post. The more popular a blog becomes, the more this becomes a problem. The more you can filter out online rudeness in your own mind, the more productive you will be.
7. *Respect the boundaries.* Senior colleagues take discretion seriously, and episodes of professional misconduct involving weblogs have occurred.<sup>24</sup> One great fear of non-bloggers is that their interactions with you and with others will become fodder for your weblog. You need to reassure others that you blog in a prudent manner. Do not post about what is said at faculty meetings or after job talks. Do not regurgitate campus gossip or hearsay. If a colleague says something that you believe to be blog-worthy, ask him or her for permission to put it online. Do not post about your interactions with students, even if the interactions seem harmless to you. In general, do not post about individual students until and unless they are no longer your students. Be respectful of others. Your colleagues will respond to the tone of your blog—the more worried you are about their reaction, the more careful you should be.
8. *Expect and correct misinterpretations.* In conversation, people assess body language, voice intonation, and numerous other non-verbal cues to interpret the message. In print, editors can pick up phrases that might be misinterpreted. These cues and

checks are absent in weblogs. Because blogs are self-edited and instantaneously published, they tend to resemble email more than any other publishing format. One fact that has become clear from electronic mail is the ease with which misinterpretations arise and mushroom beyond control (Shapiro and Anderson 1985). When misinterpretations arise, be sure to respond quickly and clearly.

9. *Dilute the risk if necessary.* If you want the benefits of blogging but are concerned about how it could affect your academic standing, there are ways to reduce the risks. One possibility is to blog under an alias or pseudonym. Another is to form or join a group blog.<sup>25</sup> The downside to these approaches, of course, is that they also reduce some of the rewards that come with blogging.
10. *If it's not fun, then don't do it!* Done properly, a blog can be a great asset to a political scientist—but it is hardly a prerequisite for a successful career. If you try it out and feel it is not working for you, then stop blogging.

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## NOTES

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- 1 Popular web sites include Blogger, Wordpress, and LiveJournal.
  - 2 This chapter will not discuss political science blogs devoted to the job market, such as IR Rumor Mill, which consist of information about interview and hirings, as well as anonymous reactions to same. On the pluses and minuses of these sites, see Robert Axelrod's message to department chairs, reprinted at <http://irrumormill.blogspot.com/2007/04/robert-axelrod-on-academic-rumor-mills.html>, April 3, 2007.
  - 3 [www.academicblogs.org/wiki/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://www.academicblogs.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page).
  - 4 These raw numbers should be taken with a grain of salt, however, as they might simply reflect the relative sizes of different social science departments.
  - 5 Curiously, most of those who do are methodologists: Stanford's Simon Jackman (<http://jackman.stanford.edu/blog/>), Columbia's Andrew Gelman ([www.stat.columbia.edu/~gelman/blog/](http://www.stat.columbia.edu/~gelman/blog/)), and Harvard's Gary King ([www.iq.harvard.edu/blog/sss/](http://www.iq.harvard.edu/blog/sss/)). Other political science bloggers based at elite institutions, such as Princeton's John Ikenberry (<http://americaabroad.tpmcafe.com/>), Stanford's Joshua Cohen (<http://left2right.typepad.com/>), and Berkeley's Steve Weber (<http://steveweber.typepad.com/>) discontinued their blogs.
  - 6 For a political science example, *Perspectives on Politics* editor James Johnson maintains a photography blog at <http://politicstheoryphotography.blogspot.com/>.
  - 7 [www.iq.harvard.edu/blog/sss/](http://www.iq.harvard.edu/blog/sss/).
  - 8 As Jonathan Rauch (1993, 64) points out, "We can all have three new ideas every day before breakfast: the trouble is, they will almost always be bad ideas. The hard part is figuring out who has a good idea."
  - 9 Speaking from personal experience, I can think of at least three projects that had

- their origins in blog posts. See Drezner (2004; 2007b; 2008).
- 10 For a dissent, see Wolfe (2004).
  - 11 Marc Lynch, "Understanding Al Qaeda: the Irrelevance of IR Theory," November 11, 2005; Daniel Drezner, "Why Aren't IR Scholars Paying More Attention to Al Qaeda?" November 13, 2005. Accessed at [http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2005/11/understanding\\_a.html](http://abuaardvark.typepad.com/abuaardvark/2005/11/understanding_a.html).
  - 12 R. J. Rummel, "The Cato Institute gets it All Wrong," September 11, 2005. Accessed at <http://freedomspace.blogspot.com/2005/09/cato-institute-gets-it-all-wrong.html>. Erik Gartzke, "Reply to Rummel," September 15, 2005. Accessed at [www.danieldrezner.com/archives/002315.html](http://www.danieldrezner.com/archives/002315.html).
  - 13 Patrick Jackson and Stuart Kaufman, "Security Scholars for a Sensible Foreign Policy: A Study in Weberian Activism," *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (March 2007): 95–103; Patrick Jackson, "Weberian Activism," March 22, 2007. Accessed at <http://duckofminerva.blogspot.com/2007/03/piece-that-i-wrote-with-stuart-j.html>. Henry Farrell, "Scholarly Activism," March 27, 2007. Accessed at <http://crookedtimber.org/2007/03/27/scholarly-activism/>. Patrick Jackson, "Scholars and Politics," March 31, 2007. Accessed at <http://duckofminerva.blogspot.com/2007/03/scholars-and-politics.html>.
  - 14 "The Primacy of Politics? A Crooked Timber Seminar on Sheri Berman's New Book," November 2006. Accessed at [www.henryfarrell.net/berman.pdf](http://www.henryfarrell.net/berman.pdf).
  - 15 Speaking from personal experience, two weeks after I uploaded a draft version of *All Politics Is Global* (Drezner 2007a) to the blog, I received detailed margin comments from a top-tier economist.
  - 16 After I started blogging, some colleagues averred that they *never* read blogs—and yet, without fail, these same people came into my office on a regular basis to discuss a post of mine. See Drezner (2006).
  - 17 For one semi-serious acknowledgement of this fact, see Munger (2005).
  - 18 This last point extends to any authority relationship. One department chair told me about writing what he believed to be an innocuous post about working hard in order to get tenure. Afterwards, he discovered to his shock and horror that several of his junior faculty members individually believed that the post was directed at them specifically.
  - 19 This is one reason why the leading lights of our profession face a greater cognitive barrier to blogging. Someone who is already a prominent name in the field will attract immediate attention once they start blogging—not all of which will be positive. This is a daunting prospect for academics accustomed to offline respect and/or genuflection.
  - 20 For more online writing tips, go to [www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/](http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/).
  - 21 Two examples are Technorati and Google Blogsearch.
  - 22 Do *not* simply send an email announcing your new blog to popular bloggers—they get many emails like this a day, almost all of which are ignored.

- 23 In 2004, one prominent blogger explicitly compared me to “the business elite who dealt with Hitler.” See [www.danieldrezner.com/archives/001363.html](http://www.danieldrezner.com/archives/001363.html).
- 24 For one example of such misconduct, see Capriccioso (2005).
- 25 For three examples of group blogs that transcend disciplinary boundaries, see Crooked Timber ([www.crookedtimber.org](http://www.crookedtimber.org)), The Volokh Conspiracy (<http://volokh.com>), and Open University ([www.tnr.com/blog/openuniversity](http://www.tnr.com/blog/openuniversity)).