

On Political ePunditry

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Abstract

The concept of ePunditry is developed as a lens through which to view the important phenomenon of political blogging. Three conceptual frameworks were selected for their relevance to the idea of computer-enhanced commentary: the information society thesis, the notion of the fifth estate and its relationship with the fourth, and the increasingly celebrated ideal of deliberative democracy. The empirical content of the inquiry comprised interviews with twenty-seven political bloggers, ranging from prominent British figures such as Guido Fawkes and Iain Dale to lesser-known practitioners located as far afield as Lebanon and Trinidad. The article evaluates their responses in light of the conceptual frameworks. It deduces that, while not giving rise to a knowledge class or a fifth estate, the new forms of punditry have made a significant contribution to a technologically-enabled democratic politics. The conclusion is that ePunditry represents a useful construct for journalism studies.

Keywords

ePunditry; Opinion; Information Society; Fifth Estate; Deliberative Democracy

Introduction

The figure of the “ePundit” has been introduced elsewhere, and assigned a preliminary overview. Defined as “opinion-making primarily distributed online, and where the ePundit takes full advantage of the networked, user-driven platforms of Web 2.0 technologies” (Forrest & Duff 2016), the idea of ePunditry was offered as a new lens through which to view the important technical and cultural phenomenon of blogging. This essay seeks to build upon that foundation in several ways. First, it seeks to sharpen the characterisation of ePunditry, specifically its *political* variant, by embedding it inside a select range of pertinent conceptual frameworks. I shall ask how these frameworks can shed light upon, and themselves be illuminated by, a conception of the political blogger as ePundit. Secondly, an international assortment of ePundits has been interviewed to explore how they conceive their role and its significance, where possible mapping responses onto the frameworks or else showing how they diverge. Finally, an attempt is made to draw some general conclusions from a synthesis of the primary and secondary data. It is hoped that ePunditry might thus become established as a serviceable new category for journalism studies, especially the emergent subfield of digital journalism studies (Franklin & Eldridge 2017).

Conceptual Frameworks for ePunditry

There already exists an extensive body of academic work on political blogging (e.g. Hyun 2012; Jones & Himelboim 2010; Lowrey 2006; Reese *et al.* 2007; Singer 2007; Wall 2015; Wallsten 2008). Instead of comprehensively reviewing this literature, the intention in the present section is to approach the subject from three specific angles. The label “ePundit” by definition makes salient certain aspects of blogging, namely the ways in which it purports to involve superior knowledge—ergo “punditry”—and also the manner in which it utilises digital affordances—hence the “e” prefix—to do so. Several interesting discourses and debates, what can be called conceptual frameworks, suggest themselves as particularly relevant to that profile. I begin by inserting ePunditry inside the broad socio-technical context of the “information society thesis”, with its trademark themes of post-industrialism, computerisation and the rise of a “knowledge class”. ePunditry is then located within the putative ongoing confrontation between an established “fourth estate” and an insurgent, electronic “fifth estate”. Finally, the section posits “deliberative democracy” as a political ideal to which the disputations of ePundits might be expected to contribute. Drawing where available on prior literature, I generate a series of suppositions and postulates which can then be brought to bear upon a fresh sample of empirical data.

The Information Society Thesis

Blogging is a conspicuous manifestation of the information age. It came into being at the turn of the millennium as an energetic new application of the internet’s potential. Requiring only a computer, a connection and a comment, the practice was hailed as of major historic

significance. In *Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation That's Changing Your World*, for example, American political blogger Hugh Hewitt compares the rise of the blogosphere to the Protestant Reformation; “because”, he explains, “the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries share a dramatic element in common—the birth of a revolution in communication technology” (Hewitt 2005, 47). Thus the internet, and blogging in particular, are destined to have a political, economic and cultural impact on the same epic scale as the printing press.

This familiar story is, of course, wide open to charges of hyperbole and technological determinism. To really understand political blogging, it is more useful to try to place it within the learned tradition known as the “information society thesis”. Stated in general terms, the thesis maintains that industrial nations are undergoing a metamorphosis, sometimes referred to as “information revolution” after the pattern of the industrial revolution, into post-industrial, information-based societies (e.g. Duff 2012; Lyon 1988; Webster 2014). There are many variants, but the classic formulation of the information society thesis is that of the late journalist-turned-sociologist Daniel Bell. “His original interpretation”, Schement and Curtis wrote (1995, 5), “remains the dominant context for thinking about information and society”. Since this accolade still holds true, I will concentrate here mainly on Bell.

“What is clear”, Bell declared in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1999 [1973], 133), “is that if an industrial society is defined as a goods-producing society—if manufacture is central in shaping the character of its labor force—then the United States is no longer an industrial society”. Schooled in the western sociological tradition, Bell recognised the significance of economic structure for the nature of any society. He marshalled statistical proofs of a relentless decline in “blue-collar” manufacturing industries and their replacement by service industries, particularly “white-collar” scientific, technical and professional services. The service-producing sector at the time of writing already accounted for 64% of US gross national product and was expanding rapidly (Bell 1999 [1973], 132).

Bell then revealed the factor at the centre of the socioeconomic transformation. Pre-industrial countries relied on manual labour and industrial ones on steam power, but post-industrial society has a new base. “What counts”, he stated (1999 [1973], 127), “is not raw muscle power, or energy, but information”. Of course, all organisations depend on information, but what is unprecedented is the axial role of one particular form of information, namely, “theoretical knowledge”. By this Bell meant large-scale research and development, what is now called “big science”. Industrialisation, he said, had been led by scientifically-illiterate “talented tinkers” like Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell, but post-industrial developments are the outcome of the systematic application of advances in theoretical fields such as nuclear physics (Bell 1999 [1973], 20-2). Bell even postulated the rise of a new “knowledge class” composed of scientific personnel and other functionaries of the vastly-expanded higher education system underpinning post-industrial nations (1999 [1973], 213); like many of his generation, he liked to think that the capitalist class was withering away.

In later work, notably his seminal article, “The Social Framework of the Information Society”, Bell assigned information technology a more prominent role in the paradigm shift. He wrote presciently, if guardedly, of what the third millennium could expect to witness:

In the coming century, the emergence of a new social framework based on telecommunications may be decisive for the way in which economic and social exchanges are conducted, the way knowledge is created and retrieved and the character of the occupations and work in

which men engage. This revolution in the organization and processing of information and knowledge, in which the computer plays a central role, has as its context the development of what I have called the postindustrial society. (Bell 1980, 500-1)

Bell was now happy to adopt the newer buzzword “information society”, citing a recently published report according to which over half the US work force would soon be in information industries, as well as breakthroughs in information theory, cybernetics and numerous other “intellectual technologies”. By thus contextualising the phenomenal impact of computer-telecommunications, he was able to craft a grand narrative that avoided the reductionism endemic in popular eulogies of the information age.

In his widely-cited trilogy *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, Manuel Castells continues this sophisticated approach. “The information technology revolution”, he asserts at the start of the first volume, *Rise of the Network Society* (2000, 5), “because of its pervasiveness throughout the whole realm of human activity, will be my entry point in analyzing the complexity of the new economy, society, and culture in the making”. While the basic sociological structure of his theory owes much to Bell’s, Castells extends its scope dramatically. He traces information technology’s transformation of time itself into “timeless time”, and of fixed places into the “space of flows”. The societal effects of the new “techno-economic paradigm” are also mapped across the whole world, developing countries and newly-industrialised ones alongside economic leaders like Japan and the United States (Castells 2000, 21). As a result, inevitably, his information age is more conflicted than Bell’s, a downside that he explores in volumes two and three and which has always been a minor key in the literature (e.g. May 2002; Wyatt *et al.* 2000). Nevertheless, Castells retains the optimism at the core of Bell’s original thesis, the sense that, in the long run, a better society is probably coming.

There do not appear to have been any attempts to situate political bloggers in this resilient scholarly tradition. While useful work has been accomplished in positioning them as “a nascent occupational community” (Lowrey & Mackay 2008, 67), their eligibility as “information workers” *par excellence* has escaped notice. But engaging entirely in the business of information, broadly conceived—and certainly not deploying steam or muscle power—they seem to belong very much at the heart of post-industrial society. Literally born digital, political blogging exploits many of the capabilities of the “new social framework based on telecommunications”, such as immediacy, interactivity, anonymity and deterritoriality. Posting around the clock from anywhere, bloggers today exemplify the space of flows and timeless time enabled by a globally-wired web 2.0 world. Therefore, whether wearing a white collar, or, as per stereotype, pyjamas, they could be portrayed as the vanguard of the new era, as personifications of the positivity of the information society thesis. Indeed, with their “pushbutton” punditry—the free dispensing of instant political opinions to anyone who will listen—they could even be construed as the knowledge class upon which Bell pinned his millenarian hopes. It will be instructive to ascertain to what extent, if any, contemporary ePundits actually live up to this potent script.

The Fourth Estate vs the Fifth Estate

ePunditry is evidently a creature of the information age, but should it also be dignified as a constituent element of what has become known as a “fifth estate”, rival to the old “fourth estate”? It is always good to have an excuse to recall the famous origin of the term “fourth estate”. It was allegedly first heard during a 1787 debate on the introduction of press coverage of the British house of commons. The author Thomas Carlyle credited it to distinguished Tory parliamentarian Edmund Burke, who he alleges had “said there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters’ Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all”. After the “lords spiritual” (clergy), “lords temporal” (nobility) and the house of commons, the press was the fourth estate of government; while unofficial, it was, in Burke’s opinion and that of many since, the most important.

As for “fifth estate”, this newer descriptor has been ascribed to a remarkable array of entities, reflecting widely differing perceptions of where (too much) social power lies, including broadcasting, the public relations industry, trade unions and even organised crime. However, I am concerned here only with its increasingly-prevalent technological sense, of which William H. Dutton has provided the most authoritative theoretical account. He writes:

In the twenty-first century, a new institution is emerging with some characteristics similar to the Fourth Estate, but with sufficiently distinctive and important features to warrant its recognition as a new Fifth Estate. This is being built on the growing use of the Internet and related information and communication technologies (ICTs) in ways that are allowing “networked individuals” to reconfigure access to alternative sources of information, people and other resources. Such “networks of networks” enable the networked individuals to move across, undermine and go beyond the boundaries of existing institutions, thereby opening new ways of increasing the accountability of politicians, the press, experts and other loci of power and influence. (Dutton 2009, 2)

Referencing Castells, he claims (2009, 3) that the fifth estate exercises “‘communicative power’—the use of ICTs to form networks that can then lead to real world power-shifts”. Dutton (2009, 9) acknowledges that for its part the fourth estate “has sometimes criticized the Internet for eroding the quality of the public’s information environment and undermining the integrative role of the media in society”. However, his response (2009, 9) is that, on the one hand, traditional media are not themselves above reproach, and, on the other, the fifth estate “in part complements, or even helps to sustain, the Fourth Estate”. Dutton (2009, 11) rejects the accusation that the fifth estate is “a space over-occupied by an ill-informed, ill-disciplined ‘cult of the amateur’”. He cites Salam Pax, the so-called “Baghdad blogger”, whose truthful posts served as an effective antidote to news blackouts and media misinformation during the invasion of Iraq. In the eyes of Dutton and his colleagues, the relationship between the fifth and fourth estates is thus essentially “symbiotic” (Newman *et al.* 2012, 13). A similar view has been presented in other works, notably Stephen Cooper’s monograph *Watching the Watchdog: Bloggers as the Fifth Estate* (2006).

It is important, however, to register a distinction between news and opinion. The blogger, such as Salam Pax, who supplies new factual information, perhaps otherwise unreported, is very different from the blogger, much more common at least in the West, who merely opines about what he or she has seen or read in the news. Insofar as the distinction holds, ePunditry must be categorised as commentary rather than news work. The political blogger *qua* ePundit is

precisely that, a pundit, not an information-provider. Consequently, ePunditry is vulnerable to the charge levelled at the commentary genre as a whole: supplying nothing more substantial than “the dribble of opinion” (Marr 2004, 370), it is parasitical on real journalism rather than symbiotic with it. This clearly has major implications for how political blogging should be assessed normatively. “If”, one observer concludes (Scott 2007, 51), “bloggers represent an expansion of punditry more than a resurgence of muckraking, then this may be a trend neither revolutionary nor welcome”.

However, the division between the fourth estate and blogging seems to be narrowing. Reviewing the film *The Fifth Estate*, Brian McNair (2013, 773) claims that “the status gap between the two platforms [has] closed, and is now virtually non-existent”. Journalists themselves have taken to blogging en masse. So-called “j-blogs”, as Susan Robinson astutely notes (2006, 65), represent essentially “an attempt to recapture journalism authority”. For their own part, political bloggers have long been turning into journalists. There is irony here. While they once claimed to constitute, in Oliver Burkeman’s words (2005), a “fully-fledged alternative wing of the opinion industry”, and even to be replacing the fourth estate, they have in many cases been quick to accept newspaper columns. One wonders indeed whether most of them have not harboured from the beginning a desire to enter mainstream media by the back door. Moreover, recent research by Vos *et al.* (2012, 861) arrives at the verdict that political bloggers, espousing much of the “doxa” of traditional journalism, “appear as new agents in the journalistic field, rather than as an autonomous force”. It remains to be seen whether the interviews conducted for the present study offer any support for the idea of a genuine fifth estate.

Deliberative Democracy: Renewing the Political Public Sphere

Finally, ePunditry, the expression and exchanging of political opinions, would appear to be conducive to deliberative democracy. The leading idea behind this political model is simple enough. The standard form of democracy in industrial democracies has been representative, i.e. periodic popular election of political professionals to parliaments or congresses, where important decisions are then taken or ratified. This system has long been considered a practical necessity for large populations, but it involves a regression from the original Greek city-state model of an entire citizenry assembling daily in the “agora” to decide policy. Of course, says conventional wisdom, such a scenario would be logistically impossible once numbers pass a certain point; Plato memorably reckoned optimal size as the number of citizens who could simultaneously hear a single orator’s speech (Mattelart 2003, 445).

Information and communication technologies would seem to fundamentally change this equation. Using their unique capabilities democracy can now be restored to its pristine condition. Digital democracy equals, or at least approximates, direct democracy; the citizenry is electronically empowered to say yeah or nay, not once every few years but every day. Integral to the new model is the supposition of a mature civil society composed of a reflecting, associating public; without such, pushbutton voting runs the risk of short-circuits, leading to unthought-out decisions, the “instant democracy” feared by exponents of representative government from the American Founders onwards (Bell 1995, 8). It is natural to hypothesise in such a context that ePunditry brings precisely what is needed, an array of new voices that both extend and deepen the national political conversation. The dispersed, informal and accessible

communications medium of the internet, with its mainly-textual engagement and unlimited banks of information ready-at-hand, supplies the perfect space for deliberation and debate, a process ePundits seem geared to lead.

Many thus want to see cyberspace as a new Habermasian public sphere, that is, “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed”, where “private individuals assemble to form a public body [and] confer in an unrestricted fashion about matters of general interest” (Habermas 2004 [1964], 350). A prominent early example was Howard Rheingold (1994), who made Habermas’s work the philosophical basis of his optimistic vision of democratic “virtual communities”. More recently, Yochai Benkler has heralded the “emergence of the networked public sphere”, wherein citizens “no longer need be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects”. “It is in this sense”, Benkler deduces (2006, 272), “that the Internet democratizes”. Zizi Papacharassi (2004) deems cyberspace a “virtual public sphere”. And referencing political bloggers specifically, Cooper (2006, 301-3; see also Barlow 2007, 2-5; Coleman & Blumler 2009, 86-9) has argued that the blogosphere enhances the Habermasian public sphere and brings closer deliberative democracy’s benchmark of the “ideal speech situation”.

The philosopher himself, however, has been markedly less evangelical. In a major essay on the topic, “Political Communication in Media Society”, Habermas (2009, 143) accepts that “given the revolution in electronic communication, the deliberative paradigm is well suited to relating [its] strong normative ideas to present-day social complexity”. He also acknowledges the fourth estate’s limitations as a site of the public sphere. Whereas in face-to-face deliberation the hearer is also the speaker, in mass media the situation is, he suggests, more like a theatre, the audience passively watching the actors. “To be sure”, he notes (Habermas 2009, 156-7), “the actors perform for the public; but the latter can only offer blanket applause or express their disapproval at the end of an act or of the performance—they can’t talk back”. Nevertheless, Habermas still strongly endorses the mainstream media, particularly the quality press, as an essential and enduring democratic institution. There is no evidence in his prolific writings that he sees political bloggers as the missing link in an evolution to deliberative democracy. In his magnum opus *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas conceded that “the Internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers”. “However”, he proceeded, “computer-mediated communication in the web can claim unequivocal democratic merits only for a special context”:

It can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion. In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tends instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics. Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication when news groups crystallize around the focal points of the quality press, for example, national newspapers and political magazines. (Habermas 1996, 423)

No doubt some will continue to believe that cyberspace, and especially its political blogosphere, are poised to deliver deliberative democracy. Perhaps they will have to jettison Habermas if he continues disappointing them in this respect, keeping stubbornly to the line, as in one of his most recent outputs, that “the digital revolution represents *just* a further step in the

communicative networking and mobilization of civil society” (Habermas 2015, 47, italics added). On the other hand, rather than Habermas’s being out of touch, perhaps they are themselves being unrealistic about the intrinsic democratic potential of the net. We will find out which side of this argument too is strengthened by the new fieldwork reported below.

Empirical Methodology

The empirical phase of the inquiry comprised interviews with a wide range of political bloggers. It is time now to tighten up the category. A terminological study (Garden 2011, 495) reassures us that “defining blog is not a fool’s errand”. Blogs will therefore be understood here in the standard way as websites containing regularly-updated commentary intended for public consumption. In terms of subject domain, I shall follow Vos *et al.* (2012, 854), for whom “political blogs were defined as blogs that appear on websites where a majority of the coverage, links, discussion, and postings revolve around the political arena”. Interviewing was chosen as an appropriate technique for a qualitative inquiry seeking to elucidate the nature of political blogging. It is acknowledged that the testimony of politicians and others who interact with bloggers, as well as additional investigative methods, would be required for watertight conclusions.

To generate a sample, two approaches were followed. A list was produced of the most visited political blogs, using rankings from three different sources, namely Alexa.com, Compete.com and Quantcast.com. Each site’s metrics for determining popularity is different, but at point of use they largely overlapped as regards blogs appearing in the top rankings. In addition, tacit knowledge of the British and international blogosphere was exploited. Then, proceeding heuristically, an attempt was made to achieve a reasonable spectrum of geography, political affiliation and gender. In political blogging research, it is common to use a combination of such methods to arrive at interview samples (e.g. Gabriel 2016, 1625; Pole 2010, 18).

Sixty-seven subjects were approached: 38 British “solo” bloggers, 10 British “collective” website editors, 5 US bloggers, 8 European bloggers, as well as 6 British, US and Canadian journalists active in blogging. There were 27 responses. Geographical breakdown of the informants was as follows: England 14, Scotland 4, United States 3, Germany 3, Norway 1, Lebanon 1, Trinidad and Tobago 1. Politically, the right was represented by blogs such as “Guido Fawkes” and “Conservative Home”, the centre by Liberal Democrat blog “Mark Reckons”, and the left by the likes of “America Blog” and “The Void”. There were also several Scottish Nationalists, for example, “The Ancient Order of Moridura”, and neutrals, such as “PoliticalBetting” and “Number Cruncher Politic”s. In the end, the gender split probably roughly reflects the domain as a whole: 6 females, 21 males. The interviews were conducted between January and September 2015. Various modes were used: 3 face-to-face; 9 by telephone; 12 by Skype; 2 by Skype messenger; and 1 by email. Interviews ranged in duration from 18 to 110 minutes, averaging 47. Full details are provided in the table.

The sessions were semi-structured, comprising a set of straightforward questions relating to the activity of political blogging, particularly as regards its dimension as a digital form of opinion-making or punditry. They included questions about what prompted the subjects to become bloggers, what their daily routine is like, how their offline and online lives interact, how they see their role in society, and any major changes that they might have experienced. Interviewees were at all points encouraged to develop their thoughts in any direction and to any

extent they wished. My underlying agenda was, however, firm: to elicit responses that might identify to what extent ePunditry corresponds with the conceptual frameworks introduced above, namely the information society, the fifth estate and deliberative democracy. Thus, as well as structuring the literature review, these acted as the main categories by which primary data was “coded”.

[Insert Table here]

Field Results and Discussion

“People introduce me as a blogger like it is a category that means something”, opined Andrew Tickell (“Lallands Peat Worrier”), an eminent Scottish politico-legal blogger. “Essentially I am a loudmouth with a keyboard and an internet connection”. The first impression conveyed by the sample is that blogging is indeed an activity of the “information society”. The technology might not now be classed as leading-edge, but it is certainly “e”. Microcomputing and telecommunications in synergistic combination have evidently given people like Tickell a completely new platform for the expression of their opinions. The coming of post-industrial society has thus brought with it a new and dynamic mode of punditry—ePunditry. This can be read as a fulfilment of the emancipatory promise built into the information society thesis. It is more difficult, however, to station the activity in the “information economy” as classically conceived. The ePunditry reported here does not seem to add up to a solid occupational category: it is not unified in any way, it has no professional code, it involves no *sui generis* training. Some practitioners deploy transferable competences from their offline occupations, such as John Cockburn (“What Can I Do About It?”), who confirmed that his “drafting skills” were learned in the British civil service. Most in the autodidactic world of cyberspace appear to operate simply by trial-and-error, by just doing it. Mark Thompson, software developer by trade, blogging at “Mark Reckons”, commented:

I spotted a correlation between the safety of an MP’s [member of UK Parliament] seat and the likelihood of their being involved in the expenses scandal. None in the mainstream media had spotted this, and it got picked up immediately; Polly Toynbee [newspaper columnist] linked to it from the *Guardian*. [Then] the BBC contacted me to talk about my “methodology”, which was crazy because I was just a bloke in my bedroom in my pants!

Such responses fit more or less exactly the stereotype of the amateur in his pyjamas; several in the sample are retirees as well. For the vast majority, the new avocation, or rather hobby, is anything but lucrative. “I earn no money from my blog and never have, [even] after writing 584,000 words”, admitted European commentator Jon Worth (“Jon Worth”). A few, of course, have distinguished themselves and been able to go “professional”, at least in the sense of full-time. Paul Staines (“Guido Fawkes”) and Iain Dale (“Iain Dale”) are living proofs that political blogging can sustain a proper career; but they are a small minority, at least in this sample. Frankly, the group as a whole seemed more like the “talented tinkers” Bell claimed to have disappeared with the industrial era, than a novel, scientifically-informed “knowledge class”.

That is not quite the whole story, however. An intriguing, less familiar subspecies emerged in the fieldwork: pollster-type ePundits. These use political polls and other data to engage in psephological predictions. Matt Singh, for example, made enough money with his forecasts to go independent; his now highly-prominent site “Number Cruncher Politics” re-educates politicians and others who, as he delicately put it, “confuse hope with expectation”. “When we put a poll out on a Saturday night”, reported Adam Drummond of “Opinium”, another such, “there is a whole community of people who go nuts and tweet about it”. These cases are the closest approximation in the sample to the knowledge class postulated by Bell. Of course, pollsterism has a long history, but it has found a new lease of life and a new modality in cyberspace. In the era of algorithmic reasoning and big data, this and other forms of quantitative ePunditry are likely to become more influential. They will stand out precisely because they are not, as are the majority of political bloggers, purveyors of intuitive judgements, i.e. secretors of Marr’s “dribble of opinion”. It is a punditry anchored in hard information.

In most cases, the nearest the sample came to an occupational base was, predictably, journalism. A significant proportion were involved in political journalism prior to becoming bloggers, including Anderson, Dale, Hill, Mudge and Staines, or blogged as part of their journalistic routines, such as Chakelian and Stacey. Others, such as Doherty, Green and Worth, had cut their teeth on student papers. For all these individuals, political blogging was a natural development. Some of the more senior among them also corroborated the standard narrative of an initial period of war between the fourth estate and the blogging insurgents, followed by a more recent phase of rapprochement. “I very much came across [a negative attitude] at the beginning”, Staines confirmed:

I was looked down upon. The mainstream media very much disliked being in our company. In my case, I was pointing the camera at them, and we were covering the media. That has changed now. We have a column in the *Sun on Sunday*. We have sold a lot of front pages. Nowadays, we are recognised much more readily, and you can’t really say you are an outsider when you are on first-name terms with cabinet ministers. We are the heaviest drinkers in Westminster, even with the SNP [Scottish National Party]!

“There was a feeling that bloggers didn’t want to get into journalism and saw themselves as an alternative to it”, Dale explained. But, he continued, “the mainstream [media] ate up most of the political blogging. There are still [independent] political blogs out there, but in terms of mass readership they are very few”. Mike Smithson, who has rejected commercial offers for his successful site PoliticalBetting, agreed that “in terms of independent bloggers there aren’t that many anymore, [because] they have been sucked into larger organisations”. This is true not only of the paradigmatic Anglophone world, but of the European continent too. “The integration between online opinion places and traditional media is fairly tight”, affirmed Bente Kalsnes (“Bente Kalsnes”), referencing her home country of Norway. “There is still scepticism when it comes to integrating more citizen-based media”, she added, “but social media and traditional media are becoming much more intertwined”.

So the current picture is as supposed: journalists blogging—“J-blogging”—and bloggers “B-journalising”. Logically, then, the very term “blogosphere” must be in doubt, and it had indeed become incongruous to many of the informants. “I haven’t heard that mentioned for

about five years; I think the blogosphere and the mainstream media have almost merged now”, Thompson commented. Staines was chronologically specific: “the journalist/blogger distinction disappeared in 2012, and we have dropped the word ‘blog’ from the [order-order.com] masthead”. Henry Hill, among a stable of writers at “Conservative Home”, confessed that he was “not entirely sure why we are being called a blog”, noting the compelling institutional fact that “the Orwell prize [a British competition for political writing] has abolished its blog section”. “The idea”, he ventured, “that blogging is going to fundamentally challenge traditional media has turned out not to be true”.

It may be too early, however, to entirely canonise this perspective; to some extent, it could be just a dominant or first-world narrative. Some of the less famous bloggers continue to talk in dichotomous terms that connote an ongoing sense of betrayal. For example, Hannah Mudge (“We Mixed Our Drinks”), an activist in the world of “Christian feminism”, commented:

Many would say that the golden age of political blogging is long gone. The atmosphere was very much bloggers speaking truth to power, calling out the media. It has been done to death. [The blogosphere has] also become more corporate, going into partnership with brands and businesses, plugging products. [It] is quite off-putting. Political blogging can seem quite cliquish even to new bloggers.

Thus the commentariat has expanded with the inclusion of the ePundits, but remains a hierarchy. “Blogging gives me a secondary level of importance compared to a columnist”, estimated Worth. Moreover, primeval conflicts can still erupt. The Scottish independence referendum, for example, occasioned a resurgence of verbal hostilities between a largely “unionist” press and a cadre of articulate nationalist bloggers, including interviewees Kelly (“Scot Goes Pop”), Curran (“The Ancient Order of Moridura”) and Tickell (“Lallands Peat Worrier”). “The behaviour of the British press towards the cybernats was extreme, it was imbalanced”, Curran claimed. “One person I knew was going through a hard time in their personal life and they [reporters] door-stepped them; and Wings [Wings over Scotland, another popular pro-independence blog] was crucified by them”. Tickell elaborated:

The mainstream columnists are boring, because they have been doing it for far too long. You can guess what they will say. [They are also] very top-down, earnest and ignorant. [They are] dinosaurs. What is interesting about Wings is that the press tried to destroy him, [but] he successfully sued *The Scotsman* for defamation.

Hence, it would seem to be erroneous to infer that even in 2017 ePundits are not *essentially* a separate species. Organisational habitats are quite different, even at blogging collectives. “I have never met my editor in person!”, confided Jon Green of “America Blog”. In terms of the “bottom line” too, the default is still in most cases binary: journalist paid, blogger unpaid. And as regards consciousness itself, there is still a palpable divide. Those who work for newspapers, even if they also blog, emphatically self-identify as journalists. “I don’t divide my time into blogging *or* reporting: I see myself as a political reporter for the *FT*”, Kiran Stacey commented. “I see myself as a political journalist”, concurred Anoosh Chakelian, of *New Statesman* online platform, “The Stagers”. “I will go to Westminster and stuff, but I wouldn’t do that if I were sitting at home all day. You can’t be just an armchair commentator”.

The ePundit, by contrast, is a wilder political animal. “We don’t have to consult with any higher editor to write a story; we [at “Truthdig”] just do it”, Kasia Anderson remarked. Especially in the solo blogs, there is no imperative to go through procedures, to verify. Worth recalled discovering that a Polish member of the European Parliament had 19 assistants, and immediately publishing the explosive fact. “A journalist wouldn’t have done it that way”, he commented. “They would have to get an answer [from the politician concerned]”. “I am trying to convince [people] to do more research and more reading”, stated Joey Ayoub, a Lebanese blogger operating “Hummus For Thought”. “The blog is the medium that leads to this result”, he explained. “If you have a good style of writing and you back it up with facts, people will believe you more easily than they would the mainstream media”.

Jane Carnall (“Edinburgh Eye”) expressed the point philosophically:

I think the value of bloggers as ePundits is that we are independent. It is *you*, it is what you think, and that is something we didn’t do before the software allowed us. All you need is an opinion; George Orwell would have loved blogs. The dominant narrative is always [too] powerful.

Blogging is “a little bit snarky, a little bit unedited, a little bit political, unlike a normal newspaper”, said a former editor who subsequently blogged at Kosmopolito; and, for better or worse, it “has defined how we talk online”. Michael Greenwell (“Michael Greenwell”), a British blogger, went as far as to claim that “there is still a lot to [propaganda-model theorist, Noam] Chomsky: you will only hire the journalist if you are convinced they will say what you want them to say”. Thus there is still a measure of autonomy and anti-establishmentarianism, especially in the outer rings of the blogosphere. However, taking the evidence as a whole ePundits cannot be said to amount to another *estate*. They are rather, most of the foregoing data indicates, an additional band of individuals and collectives operating informally and sometimes collusively around the mass media, and particularly the press. ePundits populate the *banlieues* of the fourth estate, rather than an independent fifth estate.

Another theme that emerged with great clarity from the primary data was the massive impact of social networks, especially Twitter. This trend is central to the latest phase of informatisation, to the rise of Castells’s “network society”. “Blogging is seen as a bit last century, I suppose”, Dale reckoned, “overtaken by Twitter”. Microblogging was indeed redeeming information technology’s promise in a way that blogging never had. Dale developed his point:

I absolutely love Twitter; it has usurped blogging to a large degree. It is because of the spontaneity and the instantaneous nature. I think that Twitter is something that is here to stay, and I think that blogging has been eclipsed.

Staines was characteristically even more definite. “Five years ago”, he stated, “there were about 2000 political blogs that were regularly updated, now it isn’t even 200. Twitter has killed it. People who used to blog, now just tweet”. The trend is equally evident in the European theatre. “In Scandinavia less people are blogging about politics; social media, especially Twitter, has taken over”, reported Kalsnes. In Germany, “Twitter reflects the political discussions and they are more wide-ranging than the blogosphere has ever been”, according to Ronny Patz (“Polscieu”). “The idea that people are now taking their conversations and their content to

social media like FB [Facebook] and Twitter makes sense”, observed Kevin Rothrock, who blogs at “Global Voices” and “A Good Treaty”:

They have more control on the interaction there. I like it because it feels like those spaces are designed for interaction. Blogging was more an amateur form of journalism and now we are looking at something different.

Yet, again, it is not correct to speak of full supersession. The evidence here suggests rather that blogging is now finding its permanent, limited niche, as most media eventually do, in an expanding information universe. That role is long-form, in principle potentially endless, commentary, an affordance that Twitter cannot and does not want to offer. Several of the respondents pinpointed this. “People [on Twitter] didn’t want to pursue complex arguments; [so] I would say, read my blog”, according to Curran. Or as Patz summarised with a helpful metaphor, “the long-form writing [on blogs] is the anchor for the short-form discussion on Twitter”.

Even though their claim to be its fifth estate lacks foundations, this does not entail that political bloggers do not constitute a net contribution (in two senses of “net”) to democracy. There remains a strong sense that “mass media are splendid in representation but horrid for participation” (Bardoel 1996, 294). The question of ePundits’ intrinsic *political* value, as distinct from their roles in the new techno-economic paradigm or the media landscape, can be answered primarily in terms of extensionality, of the greater range of opinions. Many ePundits—as I am seeking to style political bloggers—are bona fide new players in the political game. It is often an external crisis that prompts these outsiders into involvement. For Carnall, and no doubt innumerable others, 9/11 was the trigger. For Rhoda Bharath, bravely blogging political dissent as “Eternal Pantomime”, it was the imposition of a state of emergency in Trinidad and Tobago. Hers was an unequivocal demonstration that blogging, as Habermas advised, “can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion”.

Whatever propelled these diverse individuals into politics, there can be little doubt that their interventions have made, to adopt an early slogan from information theory, a “difference that makes a difference”. The following battery of political impact-statements, assuming their accuracy, lends weight to such a claim:

I have had people call me and say you need to be careful. I have had excerpts of my blog quoted in parliament. [It is] making an impact on the decision-makers. One of the features of an active democracy is that no one should think twice about questioning the leadership. (Rhoda Bharath, Trinidad and Tobago)

I write posts about junior ministers that most people have never heard of, or obscure DWP [Department of Work and Pensions] reports. [My posts] have caused companies to withdraw from the scheme [Workfare]. (Johnny Void, England)

There are numerous things that I can point to where certain small things have changed as a result of stuff I have been able to dig up. The Brussels EU [European Union]

environment is now more transparent when it comes to communications, as a result of people blogging. (Jon Worth, Germany)

The online sphere is the breeding ground for ideas. It opens “policy windows” and changes the agenda. Sites like AB [America Blog] are changing the way Americans are talking about marriage equality [for example], and that has been a discursive shift that is driven by the blogosphere. (Jon Green, United States)

It is arguable, too, that ePundits have also made the nature of politics more participatory. Their typically irreverent approach, using tools such as humour, suggests such. “What we are trying to do is to make [politics] accessible and not feel like it is your homework”, as Staines put it. “We want it to be fun”. Of course, irreverence can become uncomfortable. Bypassing the niceties of official debate and even the rough-and-ready protocols of tabloid journalism, they can seem occasionally to sink into a form of digital populism, even McCarthyism. From the exposing of US Senate majority leader Trent Lott to the hounding of Silicon Valley chief executive Brendan Eich, they have sometimes exacted a forbiddingly high price for impolitic asides and actions (Rosen 2004; Sullivan 2014). “It is pretty obvious that we are right of centre, but now we have taken down quite a few Conservative MPs”, Fawkes exulted.

We have caused the resignation of more Conservative MPs than [those of] any other party. We will go after everyone. And it is in our nature. If you knew the atmosphere here, when we get someone in the crosshairs, we are all excited and looking forward to it. We are on our moral high-horse, but it is more like fancy dress!

Questions might be asked about their qualifications for this inquisitorial office. Yet none of the other players in politics has ever had much in the way of qualifications either. It is an unwritten rule of newspaper opinion-writing that columnists do *not* have to be experts. “If they were”, as Stephen Glover (2000, 292) once observed, “they wouldn’t be columnists”. They are “auto-authorized” (Bro 2012, 441), just the same as bloggers. Moreover, politicians themselves are no better in this respect. Well-documented cases—economic ignoramus Winston Churchill as chancellor of the exchequer, cartographically-challenged George W. Bush as global leader—prove that even mature democracies are far from a Platonic republic of knowledgeable governance. So political bloggers *as pundits* are really no different from other political species. They might be regarded as, in Worth’s words, “the lowest form of [political] pond life”. However, if he is sincere when he says “I will never write about something that I can’t add more knowledge to”, and if for the most part ePundits endeavour to write things that are “a. true and b. not being widely (or at all) said” (Alex Doherty), then it seems unfair to single their kind out for patronising criticism. Indeed, it is precisely representative democracy’s epistemological elitism, its conceit that professional politicians always know best, that deliberative democracy begs to contest.

Thus we can agree with Jacobs and Townsley (2011, 6) that “coming to grips with the space of opinion requires more than an automatic denunciation of those opinion formats that deviate too far from the normative ideals of democratic theory”. They were referring to broadcast talk-show “jocks” in the context of representative democracy, but their point holds for ePundits in their varied attempts to foster a more direct democratic politics. In other words, there is enough

evidence even in this modest sample to bolster a case for political blogging as a positive contribution to the Habermasian goal. The blogosphere has indeed “reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers”. Injecting a punk energy into civil society, it has vastly extended the network of public spaces in which uncompromised political disputation can occur. To be sure, ePundits do not attain the “ideal speech situation”, but taken in the round I would suggest that they have brought the advent of deliberative democracy a little closer.

Conclusion

Blogging is a major phenomenon that has already commanded a copious body of academic research. This essay has endeavoured to break new ground by bringing into focus three particular aspects of political blogging: its status as a manifestation of the “information society”, its claim to be a “fifth estate” and its role in the promotion of “deliberative democracy”. It has argued that, viewed from these angles, political blogging is usefully construed as “ePunditry”, the electronic expression and exchange of political opinions. The results of the fieldwork can be summarised as follows. ePunditry is a digitally-enabled, post-industrial activity which embodies some of the trends and hopes of the classic information society thesis. However, ePundits no longer appear particularly futuristic, nor to be the “knowledge class” for which Bell yearned. Indeed, political ePundits are aware that they are being superseded to some extent by the great social networks themselves, with blogs needing to adjust to a more modest residual role. The exception is the pollster-type, the practitioner of predictive ePunditry, which emerged as a fascinating subspecies, one that is flourishing in the current stage of big-data-driven informatisation. It is likely that other innovative forms of ePunditry will surface over the next decade or two.

Judged journalistically, ePundits once presented an alarming prospect. They were not merely competitors but meta-critics, Spiro Agnew-esque “nattering nabobs of negativism” (quoted in Nimmo & Combs 1992, 7) turned in on the press itself. However, the evidence, including my own, shows that there has been a gradual process of normalisation of relations. Political bloggers have more or less made their peace with the fourth estate, or even for a competent few—in the sample, tabloid columnist Guido Fawkes stands out—been co-opted into it. B-journalism (bloggers published in mainstream media) mirrors J-blogging (journalists publishing blogs). At the same time, there can be no doubt that ePundits have contributed to a diversification of the commentary world, often in a positive way, for example by adding original politico-legal commentary in Scotland or minute scrutiny of European Union institutions. ePunditry is thus a new form of mediated political communication and an additional presence in Jacobs and Townsley’s “space of opinion”. However, its exponents are and always have been largely dependent upon the fourth estate for information, environment and impact. The admittedly limited sample of data reported here indicates that they do *not* amount to a freestanding “fifth estate”. Perhaps that charming concept should now be laid to rest.

The final and perhaps most important conceptual framework within which ePundits can be assessed pertains to deliberative democracy. It has long been thought that bloggers have reinvigorated the political public sphere by fostering a culture of argumentation and debating: in so doing, it is claimed, they are a step in the direction of the web 2.0-resuscitated ideal of

deliberative democracy. This proposition receives some assistance from the empirical work conducted for the present study. Whether it be left- or right-wing solo or collective bloggers in the advanced democracies or new anti-establishment voices in authoritarian regimes, whatever the form or the context, the evidence seems to suggest that ePunditry has made the state of politics on the whole more active, more interactive, basically more *alive*. That is no mean achievement.

It is acknowledged that the sources used in this article feature a preponderance of Western, particularly English and Scottish, voices. Representation from developing countries was very slender, even though their voices might ultimately be far more politically significant than those of an Iain Dale or a Johnny Void. Future work should therefore focus on political bloggers in the mould of Joey Ayoub and Rhoda Bharath. However, perhaps a different lens will then be needed. It is arguable that their work is important mainly because it is closer to reporting than to punditry, that they indeed function as the missing fourth estate for their oppressed nations. So while “Political Blogging as ePunditry” is how to advance our understanding of political blogging in the first world—or so I have tried to show—“Political Blogging as iReporting”, or some variant thereof, might be a better way to address the phenomenon in the global East and South.

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