

Part III: Future Research on Public Sector Blogging

Directions for Future Research

Blogging Research Overview

The evolution of the Web 2.0 phenomenon will be of intense research interest as it takes shape over the next decade. As Paul Saffo, founder and director of the Institute for the Future, noted: "In the early stage of any revolution, power goes to the people, but as it matures, those in power grab it back. That's what happened with the Internet" (opinion cited in Kornblum, 2006, n.p.).

Specifically, as the blogging trend develops, there will be ample opportunities for research into how this phenomenon impacts a wide variety of communications and practices. One example of such is Wyld (2006), who examined the state of blogging among college and university presidents and chancellors. From an organizational communications and management perspective, there will be opportunities for research into how blogging impacts the effectiveness of both private and public sector executives in areas such as communications effectiveness and knowledge management. There will be specific opportunities for communications researchers to examine the use of blogging, both versus and in tandem with other means of communications, with audiences internal to and outside of the organization. In the public sector realm, there will be opportunities to examine specifically how public executives use blogs in ways similar to and in contrast with leaders in for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

Further, in the specific case of elected officials, there will be opportunities to study officeholders' use of blogging as a means of staying in touch with their constituencies, looking at the overall trends of the practice and, through case study approaches, at best practice leaders and innovators. With elected officeholders, there will be opportunities to examine the subjects about which they blog and the frequencies of their blogging activities, as well as the interest and

feedback generated by such. There also will be opportunities to examine elected officials' use of campaign blogs versus official office blogs, which are of necessity distinct and different. There will be opportunities to measure the "outcomes" of blogging for public officials in terms of outcome measures such as their popularity ranking in polls, effectiveness ratings, and, ultimately, their ability to be re-elected. In both public and private enterprises, there will be opportunities to map and measure the viral nature of blogging to understand how leaders can influence others in their organizations not only to engage in blogging, but also to make use of tools such as RSS and podcasting. Finally, it has been predicted that best practices for organizational blogs will evolve over time (Payne, 2003). This will be an area of intense interest, as there will be a ready audience for practical answers to the questions of highly placed officials who will want to know how and why they should engage in this new medium. In short, because this is a communications practice and technology in its infancy, there will be vast opportunities for important and interesting research to be carried out over the next decade.

The ROI of Blogging

What is the return on investment, or ROI, of blogging for public sector executives and organizations? Holloway (2007) observed that even from a corporate perspective, blogging's ROI is "less straightforward" than the ROI of traditional marketing techniques, which, he added, is quite "un-straightforward." However, it has been demonstrated that a well-formatted, frequently updated, and informative blog will:

- Generate buzz and interest
- Encourage repeat visits to the blog and associated websites
- Increase page ranks with the major search engines

For public sector organizations and lead officials, the ROI calculation from blogging can be even more indirect and incalculable. With a for-profit company, blogging can be seen as producing direct, tangible results (i.e., increased traffic to the corporate website, RSS and other subscriptions to updates of the site and the associated executive blogs) and making indirect improvements in corporate image and/or personal reputations, company and brand awareness, and even product sales and service utilization levels. Even with a nonprofit organization, many of the same visibility and awareness measures could be applied, with contributions and fund-raising serving as the proxy for sales results. In the public sector, bright lines can be drawn between blogging metrics for the campaign blogs of officials and the blogs they use as they administer their area or agency. Lenhart and Fox (2006) suggest using what they term “on-blog” and “off-blog” metrics for assessing the amount of attention being garnered by a blog. The former category includes the number of comments made on a specific blog post and the postings made on the blog’s tagboard (which is a general space that is available for viewers to comment on the entire blog or website). Off-blog metrics may include all mentions of the blog outside of the blog itself, including:

- News articles or stories regarding the blog in any media outlet (or on another blog or website)
- E-mails about the blog and the forwarding of blog posts
- Conversations about the blog

While campaign blogs have an ultimate metric for success (election), blogs used in public administration have less defined ROI metrics. Certainly, discussions about ROI must always include “soft” aspects like:

- Did blogging bring personal satisfaction to the official?
- Did blogging enable the official to get insightful comments and timely feedback from constituents?
- Did blogging contribute to the official’s decisions to remain (or retire) from office?

Insights on these soft metrics can be garnered only through intensive surveys and/or interviews with the blogging public officials, with comparisons to be

drawn from their non-blogging brethren in similar positions. Through such research, the specific factors that may motivate an official to begin a blog could be delineated and, conversely, the factors that may lead one to blog less frequently or to discontinue the blog entirely. Finally, consider the case of the British city of Ampthill, where (as noted in Table 5 on page 24) the current mayor, Penny Foster, is continuing to blog, following the lead of her direct predecessor, Mark Smith. As instances of “successor blogging” occur, it will be interesting to investigate both the motivations behind the official’s continuing the practice and the expectations and reactions of citizens and public workers.

Blogging Behavior Research

Going forward, it will also be interesting to see applied, analytical research conducted on the blogging behaviors of public officials. Such longitudinal research could examine the blogging behaviors of public officials in quantifiable terms, such as:

- Frequency of their posting activities
- Average number of days between posts
- Topics covered in posts (personal, travel, news, and issues)
- Comments allowed (yes/no) and number of comments
- Number of links to the blog posts of the official
- Amount (if any) of video/audio content posted
- Official versus personal blogging activities

It would be interesting to then compare the blogging behaviors of public officials at similar levels of government (for example, congresspersons, state legislators, and mayors) and among different ranks of public officials. One could develop a variety of hypotheses that seek to study the blogging behaviors of the public official in relation to characteristics such as:

- Rank of the official
- Size of the constituency population
- Demographic characteristics of the population
- Internet usage and blogging behaviors of the population

Finally, over time, it will be interesting to compare both the penetration of blogging in general and the blogging behaviors and perceptions of public officials with comparable groups. Since this is a global phenomenon, one can envision research projects comparing blogging between different countries (for example, members of Parliament in the United Kingdom with members of the U.S. Congress; mayors of cities of comparable size in the U.S. with those in other countries). Other projects could compare the blogging penetration and blogging activities of top officials in the public versus private sectors. For instance, in comparing members of Congress and Fortune 500 CEOs, which group blogs more, who blogs more often, who uses trackbacks and pings, and who responds to readers' comments?

As can be seen, many interesting studies on blogging and the use of other Web 2.0 forums and tools can be conducted in the coming years by university researchers, consulting firms, and independent researchers, such as the Pew Internet & American Life Project. What will emerge from their work will be snapshots that will evolve into a mosaic of how these new tools are being used to foster better communication and new methods of online engagement between public officials and the governed, who are themselves increasingly living online lives. Such research will provide critical feedback for those making personal decisions on whether to engage in blogging and help in setting blog strategies for both their organization and themselves.

We also will see research on how blogs and other Web 2.0 tools are being increasingly integrated into organizational homepages, as the line between what is a blog and what is a homepage quickly begins to blur. As the penetration of text, audio, and video blogging elements increases, we may well see the distinction between blog and homepage disappear, resulting in one site.

Payne (2003) foresees that best practices for corporate, executive, and public official blogs will evolve over time. She believes that the innate tension between legal and business concerns and the desire of the blogger to be authentic will prevent business blogs from truly matching the freewheeling, raw, and personal style of individual blogs. Thus the challenge will be to keep the freshness and authenticity of blogging while maintaining corporate propriety.

Peter Fader of the Wharton School of Business predicts that a rating system for blogs will soon emerge. In the marketplace of ideas, Fader sees the blogging community self-policing credible versus non-credible blogs and bloggers based on a system operating much like the eBay community's rating system for buyer and sellers (op. cited in Knowledge@Wharton, 2005).