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Blogs as Public Forums for Agency Policymaking

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Though government agencies are increasing their online presence, it might be expected that their main uses would be for public relations purposes. To investigate this expectation, we examine agency-sponsored blog sites (referred to as agency-based blogs) created by top officials in five federal agencies – The Department of Health and Human



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Services (DHHS), Department of State, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) – and corresponding to each of these, two non-agency sponsored blogs (referred to as agency-related blogs.) The ways these blogs are used, the differences in uses between the agency-based blogs and the agency-related blogs, and the links and interactions among them offer clues as to how the blogosphere links citizens and governmental officials. Based on analysis of postings and comments during the two months of October 2007 and March 2008, we find that agency-based blogs elicit more controversy than expected. Moderator roles and comment policies for the two types of blogs do not differ appreciably. Agency-related blogs have more posts and comments, and lengthier posts than agency-based blogs, but agency-based blogs often have a

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larger number of people authoring posts. We find some evidence of mutual interests in overlapping topics and cross-references to public issues in each of the five policy realms. Finally, we conclude that agency-based blogs exhibit some of the characteristics associated with Habermas' conception of an independent and pluralistic public sphere with genuine exchanges about important policy issues.

Introduction

Almost anyone with an Internet connection can establish their own blog, express their views, comment on the views of others, and build a new online community. We explore the uses of these new tools to create sites for robust conversations about federal agency policies and administration. We examine agency-based blog sites created by top officials in five federal agencies and corresponding to each of these, two agency-related blogs. The ways these blogs are used, the differences in uses between the agency-based blogs and the agency-related blogs, and the links and interactions among them, may offer clues to how the blogosphere is emerging to link citizens and governmental officials. We are particularly interested in determining the degree to which agency-based blogs and agency-related blogs constitute a public sphere for creating "considered public opinions" (Habermas 2006, 416) about policy and management issues surrounding the work of federal agencies.

Do bloggers in general, and those who are directly engaged in policy conversations with public officials, constitute what may be the latest incarnation of the public sphere, "which mediates between society and the state" (Habermas 1964, 50) and within which public opinion is formed? Cass Sunstein was skeptical of this interpretation of blogs, voicing concern that blogs function as "information cocoons and echo chambers" (2008, 95). This is supported by research findings that on political blogs those with similar viewpoints and ideologies converse, with moderate viewpoints typically absent (Walker 2007). Also sustaining the view that political blogs play a limited role in policy discourse are findings that political blogs are seldom used to encourage dialogue or political action (Wallsten 2007), and that political blogs have few readers and primarily inform readers about specialized information (McKenna and Pole 2008). Research also points to a "selectively interconnected" (Herring, et al 2005) blogosphere with the majority of blogs linking to those with similar ideological views (Hargaittai 2008).

But there are hints in this research that blogs represent genuine conversation. Walker (2007), for example, found that something of an information community has emerged on blogs, with commenters referring to, quoting from, and asking questions. Similarly, Hargaittai et al (2008, 85) found some blogs linked to blogs with opposing viewpoints.



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Everyday conversation among citizens and “wild flows” of political messages lead to learning and to “considered political opinions.”

How closely do these exchanges resemble ordinary political conversation? This question is important because Habermas argues that such everyday conversation among citizens and “wild flows” of political messages (2006, 415) lead to learning and to “considered political opinions” (416). The key for Habermas is the plurality of these flows of information and their independence from political and commercial media sources. Do political blogs provide a forum where independent-minded conversations can occur?

Our data on the website traffic of agency-based blogs and agency-related blogs allow us to examine some of the implications of Habermas’ argument. Do agency-based blogs operate differently from agency-related ones? Are agency blogs as likely to operate independently and pluralistically as agency-related blogs? Additionally, are there conversations across agency-based and agency-related blogs, raising the possibility that an online federal presence opens new avenues for the formation of informed policy opinion for citizens and agency officials?

We compare the content of agency-based and agency-related blogs to answer some of these questions. First, we can determine whether agency-based blog postings focus on policy issues and on public relations topics, avoid controversy, and serve to reinforce an agency’s “message.” Blogs by government agents, loathe to relinquish policy leadership, may act to try to influence the course of discussion. Baumgartner and Jones (1993), for example, note the efforts of dominant members of policy communities to divert attention away from controversy. Based on the same logic, comments on agency-based blogs might be more highly controlled and heavily moderated than on agency-related blogs, and might exhibit lower levels of disagreement with original posts. We might also expect that the number and diversity of bloggers will be greater on agency-related blogs than on agency-based blogs, reflecting more open and autonomous conversations and a plurality of information sources. Finally, we can examine the degree of linkage between blogs. Will we see conversations across blogs, between governmental and non-governmental blogs, or will the blogs act as cocoons, with conversations among like-minded participants? While these questions do not address all the issues raised about blogs as public policy forums, they do allow us to consider some of them.

Methodology and Research Design

To answer these questions, we compared the content and links offered on agency-based blogs versus agency-related blogs. To identify agency-based blogs we searched the Office of Citizen Services web portal at the General Services Administration (USA.gov), which identifies active and archived federal

government agency blogs. We also searched agency websites. We selected five agencies that have active, official agency blogs¹, three at the level of the Office of Secretary for cabinet-level departments, including State, DHHS, and DHS, and two blogs from a sub-cabinet level agency, the FAA and the EPA. In order to identify two related blogs for each agency, we utilized an online snowball technique, using links found from respondents to agency-based blogs, from the “Beltway Blogroll” site formerly hosted by the *National Journal*, Google Blog Search (<http://www.blogsearch.google.com>), and links from websites identified from the first three searches.²

We reviewed and coded the content of all the postings and responses or comments for two month-long periods, October 2007 and March 2008. We collected data on participants, frequency of exchanges, topics covered, and interconnectedness of the blogs. We coded each comment for agreement or disagreement with the post and the length of posts and comments.

Topical Focus of Blogs

We first examined each blog to identify the kinds of topics covered and discussed. We coded each blog posting by topic area: policy statements (including statements defending policy), agency management, public relations (self-promoting or self-congratulatory postings about the blogger or the agency), or “other” (religion, the economy and the Bush presidency). A comparison of fifteen blogs in Table One illustrates the differences in blog posts by topic. Because the patterns of responses are virtually the same each month, we have combined the months. The first tendency to note is that all of the blogs are engaged in policy issues. These sites are not, as many blogs are, places for personal observations or political rants, though to be sure there is some of this on each blog. We also note that two of the agency-related blogs, FAA Follies and CDC Chatter, focused heavily on management issues such as personnel, contracting, budgets, or leadership. These two blogs were established as sites for employees, and it is not surprising that administrative rather than policy issues are most covered. Other agency-related sites do focus on policy discussion.

¹ When we began this research there were few official blogs. As of January 20, 2009, however, the GSA website http://www.usa.gov/Topics/Reference_Shelf/News/blog.shtml listed 39 federal government blogs, including 30 for departments and independent agencies.

² The blogs included were **DHHS** : Secretary’s Blog, CDC Chatter and Effect Measure; **FAA Blogs**: Focus FAA, FAA Follies and Jet Whine; **State Blogs**: Dipnote, Whirled View and Informed Comment; **DHS Blogs**: Leadership Journal, The Northeast Intelligence Network, and Homeland Security Watch; **EPA Blogs**: Flow of River, Sierra Club and Climate Progress. Flow of the River was replaced by Greenversations shortly after the study ended.

Table One
Blog Posts by Category

	Months Combined						Blog total
	Policy	Mgt	PR	Other	NC		
DHHS Blogs							
Secty's Blog	6 43%	0	8 57%	0	0	14	100%
CDC Chatter	3 9%	21 66%	0	8 25%	0	32	100%
Effect Measure	68 59%	5 4%	1 1%	39 34%	1 1%	115	100%
FAA Blogs							
Focus FAA	27 77%	4 11%	4 11%	0	0	35	100%
FAA Follies	26 62%	8 19%	1 2%	7 17%	0	42	100%
Jet Whine	6 22%	2 7%	5 12%	14 52%	0	27	100%
State Blogs:							
Dipnote	17 46%	4 11%	13 35%	3 8%	0	37	100%
Whirled View	33 50%	9 14%	0	24 67%	0	66	100%
Informed Comment	37 93%	0	0	3 8%	0	40	100%
DHS Blogs:							
Leadership Jnl	14 67%	2 10%	5 24%	0	0	21	100%
NEIN	27 82%	0	2 6%	3 9%	1 3%	33	100%
Homeland Security Watch	22 79%	4 14%	0	2 7%	0	28	100%
EPA Blogs							
Flow of River	8 32%	11 44%	5 20%	1 4%	0	25	100%
Sierra Club	14 78%	2 11%	0	2 11%	0	18	100%
Climate Progress	169 83%	3 1%	7 3%	33 16%	0	203	100%

We expected less controversial topics and more emphasis on public relations on the agency-based blogs, indicating less independence from existing agency policy. However, this expectation was not supported. Most of the agency-based blogs did raise controversial policy issues for discussion, though typically defending agency positions. They were also more likely to offer public relations postings than agency-related blogs, but as Table One indicates in only one case was this the most common blog topic.

We also examined the role of moderators, expecting that agency-based blogs would have the more restrictive editing and monitoring policies. However, this was not the case. In fact, agency-related blogs had more restrictive policies overall. It's conceivable that the much higher level of comment on some of the agency-related blogs prompted more restrictive policies in some cases. As such, the assumption that agency-based blogs would adopt more restrictive and controlling comment policies is not justified. This relative lack of editing and monitoring could be interpreted as establishing a space in which unencumbered public discussion could occur.

Number and Diversity of Postings and Comments

We also expected to find that agency-related blogs would generate a larger number of posts and comments, and attract a larger and more diverse set of respondents. We based this expectation on the idea that the views expressed in posts and comments would be less pluralistic on the agency-based blogs than on the agency-related blogs. It was generally, though not always, true that the number of postings and comments was larger for the agency-related blogs, suggesting more active and open exchanges. However, it was rarely true that agency-based blogs had the fewest postings and comments. The difficulty of drawing a sample of agency-related blogs makes generalization impossible, but it appears that agency-based bloggers were generally active and that their posts generated comments.

Table Two
Number of Postings and Comments

	October 2007		March 2008	
	Postings (unique posters)	Comments (unique commenters/ anon comments) ³	Postings (unique posters)	Comments (unique commenters)
DHHS				
Secretary's Blog	10 (1)	100 (77/0)	4 (1)	27 (24/0)
CDC Chatter	19 (2/anon) ⁴	280 (3/277) ⁶	13 (anon)	0 (na) ⁷
Effect Measure	58 (1) ⁵	578 (199/25)	57 (1)	768 (207/1)
FAA				
Focus FAA	13 (13)	16 (16/0)	22 (22)	13 (13/0)
FAA Follies	23 (5)	460 (219/0)	19 (4)	322 (142/0)
Jet Whine	11 (1)	22 (16/0)	16 (3)	97 (51/3)

³ The number of comments reflects multiple comments by unique, identifiable commenters and by unidentifiable anonymous commenters.

⁴ Two unique posters could be identified, all others were anonymous.

⁵ The posts in Effect Measure are by "Revere," which is composed of a team of several public health scientists and practitioners.

⁶ CDC Chatter's commenters were, with only a handful of exceptions, anonymous, so the number of individuals could not be determined. Other sites used screennames that could be observed across sites. Many anonymous commenters make an accurate count impossible.

⁷ Inexplicably, in March, 2008 CDC Chatter postings generated no comments at all. This pattern was seen in December though March, but comments resumed in April.

Table Two (Continued)
Number of Postings and Comments

State Blogs						
Dipnote	21	(17)	350	(253/1)	16	(11)
Whirled View	39	(4)	49	(21/0)	27	(5)
Informed Comment	27	(6)	122	(42/24)	13	(5)
DHS Blogs						
Leadership Jnl	12	(4)	108	(23/81)	9	(4)
NEIN	23	(1)	135	(18/10)	10	(1)
Homeland Security Watch	13	(1)	19	(7/0)	15	(1)
EPA Blogs						
Flow of River	14	(4)	6	(6/0)	11	(4)
Sierra Club	9	(1)	55	(17/30)	9	(1)
Climate Progress	118	(5)	595	(151/7)	85	(7)

We found that the levels of disagreement were actually higher for the agency-based postings than the agency-related postings for three of the five agencies.

The number of unique individuals initiating postings also varied by blog, but again, no clear pattern emerges. Though we might have expected agency-based blogs to have fewer posters, corresponding with a less open, more controlled online forum, there was often a larger number of agency-based bloggers than agency-related blog posters in the group. The number of unique commenters also differs by blog, but again the agency-based blogs rarely exhibit the fewest number of comments or unique commenters. The diversity of the participants proved to be impossible to gauge. Most commenters and even some of the posters could not be identified with regard to their backgrounds or professions. Most commenters use pseudonyms or blog anonymously.

Level of Disagreement between Posts and Comments

We coded each comment for agreement or disagreement with the initial posting to establish an overall percentage of disagreement between the post and the comments that followed. We expected that the levels of disagreement would be lower on the agency-based blogs, in line with the thinking that governmental blogs would be less controversial and raise fewer challenges to public opinion. However, we found that the levels of disagreement were actually higher for the agency-based postings than the agency-related postings for three of the five agencies. This is clearly the case for DHHS-related blogs. The level of controversy was also significantly higher on the official Dipnote blog than on the two agency-related blogs. Both State Department related blogs generated few comments and seemed targeted to audiences that agreed with the blog's orientation. The DHS blog, Leadership Journal, also generated much higher

levels of negative comment than the Northeast Intelligence Network (NEIN) blog, and there were absolutely no opposing posts on the Homeland Security Watch blog. In contrast, the FAA-related blogs created more disagreement than the agency-based blog, and there were higher levels of controversy in the agency-related EPA blogs than in the agency-based blog, but still notable levels overall.

Table Three
Level of Disagreement between Post and Comments

	October 2007	March 2008
DHHS		
Secretary's Blog	41%	26%
CDC Chatter	36%	(na)
Effect Measure	18%	20%
FAA		
Focus FAA	13%	15%
FAA Follies	53%	26%
Jet Whine	16%	18%
State Blogs:		
Dipnote	26%	21%
Whirled View	3%	0%
Informed Comment	1%	7%
DHS Blogs:		
Leadership Journal	28%	58%
NEIN	3%	12%
Homeland Security Watch	0%	0%
EPA Blogs		
Flow of River	33%	17.1%
Sierra Club	44.4%	28.6%
Climate Progress	26.2%	28.8%

What this finding suggests is that some agency-based blogs are engaging in true dialogues. That is, disagreement levels indicate that like-minded individuals are not just trading comforting comments, as appears to be the case in the two agency-based blogs with very low disagreement levels. Instead, participants challenge one another when governmental actors participate in such exchanges, opening up the possibility that officials can learn about public opinion first hand. And again, this finding suggests that the new governmental blogs are operating as part of the public sphere, and could be contributing to informed opinion in several quarters.

We also expected that the agency-related blogs would have lengthier

discussions, measured by word count, since we assumed they would exhibit more controversial exchanges. While we were incorrect about the levels of disagreement, we were correct about the length of discussions. The postings on the agency-related blogs were, on average, longer. A t-test analysis of the lengths of the agency-based and agency-related blog postings found statistically significant differences ($p=.025$). However, the differences between the length of comments on the agency-based and agency-related blogs were not significant ($p=.27$).

Linkages among Blogs

Finally, the findings suggest that blogs were not closely linked to one another, affirming the findings of previous research that blogs are isolated. The blogs we examined are quite specialized, and we saw less overlap in the content, linked sources, and individuals than we expected.

The content of the blogs overlapped less than we predicted. In the DHHS-related blogs, the CDC Chatter posted on a number of personnel issues and charges of political interference. The agency-based blog did not take note of these issues, but Effect Measure, another agency-related blog, did. The blogs associated with the FAA appeared to be more closely linked with regard to content. The agency-based blog and FAA Follies several times commented on the same media story or official FAA statement, or in one case, a controversial posting by a prominent FAA official who was praised on the official site, but excoriated at FAA Follies. Although topics on the three State Department blogs were quite similar, the agency-based blog was less polemical, while the agency-related blogs often argued a particular position. Each of these blogs has a unique character and aims to engage a specific audience. The DHS blogs cover a broad range of topics with less overlap than seen on FAA or State.

Even when the topics are similar, the approach to the topic varies by blog. EPA's Flow of the River was less focused on the controversial questions of the day; however, Climate Progress ran at least three postings about the EPA, its policies, regulations and leadership each month. The Sierra Club, with relatively few posts overall, ran two posts explicitly criticizing EPA leadership in the spring.

Overall, we found very few live links among blogs associated with one agency. Evaluating the number of live links and references to one another's blogs among the agency-based and agency-related blogs did not demonstrate a strong pattern of inter-blog linkage. However, when considering links or references to other blogs outside the study sites, we see a different and more linked pattern especially, but not exclusively, for the agency-related blogs. In


some cases, for the agency-based DHHS and State blogs, the commenters show more linkages than the original posts. This latter finding may indicate that despite our efforts we did not identify the most likely agency-related blogs, but it does show that the blogs represent different policy communities with different reference groups. Our ability to spot commenters and posters who participate on multiple blogs was limited due to inconsistent screen names, and only a handful of the hundreds of commenters we tracked appeared in multiple blogs.

Conclusions

The most restrictive policies were more often found at agency-related blogs, though this may reflect higher levels of traffic on some of these sites.

We encountered a number of surprises in these findings. We did not expect that agency-based blogs, most of which are relatively new, would be as open to controversy and would elicit as much disagreement as we uncovered. We were not surprised at the extent to which agency-based blogs focused on large policy issues, but we did not expect that they would do so in controversial ways. Rather than containing conflict, intentionally or unintentionally, they are inviting it. And while we found that agency-based blogs were used for public relations, this was seldom the most common use of postings. We also found little, if any, differences in policies regarding comments. In fact, the most restrictive policies were more often found on agency-related blogs, though this may reflect a way to regulate the higher levels on some of these sites. We were correct in predicting that agency-related blogs would have more posts and comments, and longer posts, than the agency-based ones. But we found that agency-based blogs often had a larger number of different individuals posting to the site. Although we did not find concrete evidence that the blogs in each of our five policy realms function as well-linked policy communities, we do find some evidence of mutual interests in overlapping topics and cross references to public issues. Overall, we did not find a restrictive approach to blogging on agency-based sites.

We posed questions earlier about whether blogging, and particularly the rise of agency-based blogs, are contributing to the development of opinion in the public sphere. We asked whether these agency-based blogs and other agency-related blogs offered the kind of ongoing, independent and pluralistic information exchanges that Habermas and other advocates of deliberative democracy suggest offer the best platforms for generating informed public opinion. Based on these questions we have sought to determine if agency-based blogs were in fact as pluralistic and independent as agency-related blogs concerned with similar government and policy issues. While their mission statements suggest they see themselves in this light, research about political blogging suggested caution in crediting this view. In fact, however, we found agency-based blogs exhibiting some of the characteristics we would associate with independent and pluralistic sources.



It is too simple, and premature, to suggest that government-sponsored blogs are merely public relations organs. Nor is it reasonable to suggest that they offer insider views and criticisms of the most conflict-ridden public policy issues. But at least some of them offer genuine exchange about important policy issues. Whether these exchanges have led to informed opinion and lessons for officials about the public's policy concerns are further questions to be explored.

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Appendix One

Agency-Sponsored/Non-Agency Sponsored Blogs

FAA

Agency Sponsored

Your Two Cents <http://employees.faa.gov/news/focusfaa/opinion/>

Non-Agency Sponsored

FAA Follies <http://www.faafollies.com/>

JetWhine <http://www.jetwhine.com/>

DHS

Agency Sponsored

Leadership Journal Department of Homeland Security

<http://www.dhs.gov/journal/leadership/>

Non-Agency Sponsored

Northeast Intelligence Network <http://www.HomelandSecurityUS.com>

Homeland Security Watch <http://www.hlswatch.com/>

State

Agency Sponsored

Dipnote US Department of State <http://blogs.state.gov/>

Non-Agency Sponsored

Informed Comment: Global Affairs <http://www.icga.blogspot.com/>

Whirled View (the only non-agency blog to be linked from State's official blog)

DHHS

Agency Sponsored

Secretary Mike Leavitt's Blog <http://secretarysblog.hhs.gov/>

Non-Agency Sponsored

CDC Chatter <http://www.cdcchatter.net/>

Effect Measure <http://scienceblogs.com/effectmeasure/>

EPA

Agency Sponsored

Flow of the River by Deputy Secretary Marcus Peacock

<http://www.epa.gov/flowoftheriver/> (archived)

Non-agency Sponsored

Taking the Initiative by Carl Pope, Sierra Club Director

<http://sierraclub.typepad.com/carlpope/>

Climate Progress: An Insiders view of climate science, politics and solutions

<http://climateprogress.org/>

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