Political Blogs and participatory democracy: Evidence from Portugal and Spain

Irene Ramos Vielba  iramosvi@indiana.edu
Postdoctoral Visiting Scholar (2004-06 academic years)
Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, Indiana University, Bloomington.

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**Blogs** are the latest and most sophisticated listening post of modern democracy (Coleman, Stephen, 2004).

The blogosphere is becoming so big and blogging so ubiquitous that if you want to get to know someone, instead of asking about his or her favorite books, music, movies, or social causes, you soon may be able to just ask, “What type of blogger are you?” (Pack, Thomas, Information Today, November 2004).

The main goal of this paper is to contribute to the debate about the possibility that blogs promote mechanisms of electronic democracy, incorporating evidence from political blogs in Portugal and Spain.

**Introduction**

It is an undeniable fact that blogs have turned into a widespread phenomenon of influence, not only in virtual space, but also in the physical world. Beyond the hype surrounding blogs, their role as text-based forms of interactive computer-mediated communication, usually claimed to be interlinked, can imply new and complex opportunities to build online communities, where participants produce, share, exchange, and discuss information or different kinds of knowledge. But do they signify a step forward in participatory democracy online?

Weblogs represent a new way of networking (Gupta and Lindsay, 2004), a new way for people to create, access and share information, both formal and informal, from unconventional sources in a free and easy manner. Links to primary materials allow the audience to contrast opinions and to broaden knowledge often through a conversational style\(^1\) among bloggers who post their ideas and the internet audience who can send their comments and opinions about these ideas.

\(^1\) Nonetheless, according to Herring et. al. (2005) “the conversational nature of blogging has yet to be empirically investigated” (p.1)
Journalism and politics are the two most frequently mentioned areas allegedly affected by blogs as individuals -- physically distanced -- interact in a common arena. The participants act to filter information, drawing attention to certain topics to the detriment of others, provoking discussions and spreading resulting opinions. The sustained increase in the blog rate and the variety of free convenient tools available to aspiring bloggers (free software, blogging services, blog aggregators, blog browsers) multiply the effect. In fact, influence on US politics and on the policymakers’ decision process have been recently illustrated with some examples by Drezner and Farrell (2004), and according to the New York Times, the commentary of bloggers helped shape the 2004 race (NYT, 11/2/2004).

The open sharing of information spaces brings a widespread expectation of the democratic potential new interactive media can develop, where the free flow of ideas contributes to promote public deliberation and civic participation in democracy. The incorporation of fresh links in communication and politics can encourage new forms of connections among citizens, and between the political process and the grassroots. In this sense, blogs have transformative potential by promoting goals of transparency and accountability, allowing internet users to not only to obtain information and thoughts about policy making and political actors’ behavior from alternative voices, but also to exchange, comment and distribute the outcomes of their interactions. Blogging, therefore, could help to strengthen political representation through new channels of communication and pursue wider opportunities for democratic engagement.

These specific characteristics have brought to the fore blogging opportunities for e-democracy, reinvigorating the pre-existing academic debate about the real impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on political participation. The activity of bloggers serves to make the workings of government public and it also makes politicians or government officials realize that they must increasingly rely on the inputs of everyday knowledge and the involvement from citizens.

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2 This kind of influence could be reflected in two different directions. The first one would be the increasing number of journalists and politicians who become bloggers. The second one would refer to the regular people who use blogs for journalist or political purposes.

3 Drezner and Farrell’s (2004) analysis, focused on foreign policy, considers that the way blogs contribute to mold reality and agendas is serving “as a conduit through which ordinary and not-ordinary citizens express their views on international relations”. Therefore, “blogs are becoming more influential because they affect the content of international media coverage”. “Blogs may even provide experts analysis and summaries of foreign-language texts, such as newspaper articles and government studies, that reporters and pundits would not otherwise access or understand” (p. 34 and 36)
To date, there is little empirical analysis of the effects of blogging in European countries. In 2004 the Hansard Society's *E-Democracy Programme* took a qualitative approach to determine the practical effects of blogging in UK politics, and they identified some interesting practices and potentials which are believed to "have (or will have) a significant impact on political engagement and political processes" (Hansard Society, 2004, p. 23). For instance, blogs are recognized as "an opportunity for alternative informal voices to enter into the political debate". Blogging also "become a credible addition to the array of the new media tools available to elected representatives interested in stepping up interaction with their constituents". Blogging becomes, as well, "an example of a new media resource that can increase the transparency and accessibility of parliamentarians and their work" (p. 24). This paper builds on this qualitative work, analyzing solid empirical evidence from political blogs in two Southwestern European nations, Portugal and Spain, to consider the effects that blogs are creating in the political arena of these countries. Toward this end, this paper wrestles with the following questions: What can experiences from different social contexts add to the discussion? Which political actors are getting involved in blogging? Are political blogs really promoting political participation? Are they creating an authentic public sphere for deliberation and engaging citizens in collective action?

The main goal of this paper then is to use analysis of data from political blogs in Portugal and Spain to contribute to the current debate about the potential value of weblogs to advance e-democracy mechanisms. While blogs clearly represent an innovative way to generate more fluent communication in society, if they are not met with an enthusiastic level of public response, and political participation remains low among citizens, blogs might serve as isolated acts of self-expression instead of enhancing democratic potential.

This study will first recap academic discussion about blogs’ democratic potential and their possible contribution to the democratic process and political participation. The next section will analyze the main characteristics of the blogosphere in Portugal and Spain. Finally, some examples of political blogs from these two countries will be examined. On the basis of the evidence gathered, the main conclusion is that such democratic potential has not yet been satisfactorily achieved in either Portugal or Spain.
**Contribution to the democratic process**

Analyses of the possible effects that the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) can develop in the political arena, more specifically in the improvement of participatory democracy, seem to have moved beyond the phase of polarization between merely optimistic or pessimistic positions to embrace complexity, in which the hypothetical future technological society would not necessarily lead to a utopia based on the opportunities generated from an egalitarian access to the electronic resources. Neither would that society lead to a dystopia where both the tendency to social imbalance and abuses of power increase, precisely because of the unequal distribution and use of the ICTs. On the contrary, in the most recent studies about these issues a certain consensus seems to predominate. There is some agreement on the complex interactions that appear as a result of the reciprocal influence between the technological and the social spheres. Therefore, the incorporation of new technologies into diverse social action implies a non-linear dynamic process. For that reason it is not possible to obtain either a clearly positive or negative result. The different practices and reflections merely indicate an evolution in progress with some important aspects that are both positive and negative.

Among the negative elements associated with ICTs are doubts about their effective capacity to integrate marginalized social sectors, since the elite with expertise in new technologies tend to reap the most benefits. There is also the issue that the people who use the new technologies to participate in politics are mainly those who had already been interested in the political process. However, this does not rule out the possibility of attracting new audiences. Another explanation for the Internet’s limitations in promoting active citizenship is offered by Griffiths (2004a and 2004b) when she characterizes—as Gerodimos (2004) does— the cyberculture, in its current adult stage, as consumerist, competitive and individualist. That is, the new medium is mainly used for entertainment, trade, and consumerism, generating a demand for immediacy, what is far from the values linked to democratic participation and mobilization, which require reflection to be part of the public deliberative process. The new shows on television, together with the

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4 A good example of this view is Roman Gerodimos’ article (2004) about the interactions between “cyberculture and civil culture”, and their effects in democracy. This author defends that the technology and the human entities mutually influence in a continuous interaction cycle which leaves traces in both spaces: the virtual and the social one.
modern techniques in publicity, and the proliferation of the spectators' votes' format, illustrate, in Griffiths' opinion, the media rhetoric which creates a quasi-democratic fiction of self service:

These interactive protocols can have a negative impact on democratic practice, by association, because they train young audiences especially (for example, many of those who are entering the first-time voter cohort) to expect something different, sexier, more interactive and immediate from the online civic portals and from the political behaviour, both of fellow e-citizens and e-representatives. One can see these media entertainments as a force in the commodification of democratic practices (Griffiths, 2004a:9)

In fact, Griffiths considers these effects a crucial factor in the increase of cynicism about democracy and citizens’ distrust of the robustness of the political processes as well. In her view, the virtues of technology as the answer to the problems of democracy have been exaggerated. For instance, governmental websites are not so popular among internet users, since few visit these kinds of websites. Furthermore, governmental websites focus on providing information and services to citizens, which feeds a trend toward consumerist views of citizen-government relations, in which citizens are mainly treated as absorbers of information and individual clients. Griffiths extends this point, describing how an unwanted perverse effect can ensue when simple government-client relations are encouraged.

So, at the same time as government requires certain new abilities of citizens using these sites (such as high literacy, IT proficiency, research skills, and so on) it could be said that it is also downgrading the political literacies necessary for a healthy democracy (capacity to use argument, acknowledge and manage different perspectives in a civil manner, lobby and mobilise) (Griffiths, 2004a: 13)

In addition, even though interactions between the public institutions and the citizens are essential for democratic development, experiments in e-democracy\(^5\), however, have obtained poor results in some pilot programs and consultations online, taking into account what e-democracy implies:

E-democracy connotes an environment of “electronically –mediated information flows” to achieve the ideals of democratic governance and improve democratic practices through active political participation and civic engagement (van Koert, 2002) in a public sphere where effective deliberation takes place by empowered, political aware, and interested citizens (Hibbing &Theiss-Morse, 2002; Malina, Macintosh & Davenport, 2001) (Robbin et. al., 2004: 435)

\(^5\) Robbin et. al. (2004) revise thoroughly the concepts of e-government and e-democracy in the specialized literature.
Positive effects deriving from the presence of ICTs in the political arena include, among others, a stimulus to egalitarian access to information, strengthening participative debate, creating an efficient and effective channel for the government to spread information of public interest, or exchanging emails directly with citizens. Not only do the increased possibilities of getting information become crucial to shaping opinions on common interest issues, but also, according to Jacobs (2005), Internet activism contributes to revitalizing civil society, since the Internet becomes a new platform for monitoring, deliberating, mobilizing, or generating changes. In that sense, political participation through the Internet can be seen as an alternative space to traditional media, and as a vehicle for dissident voices. Following a similar argument, Gerodimos (2004) finds recent examples—such as the war in Iraq, the anti-globalization movement, the polarization in and towards the USA, or controversial matters in national politics—that reveal how parts of the world population are concerned about public issues, and are able to dedicate both time and resources to defending their own ideas. The difference lies in the fact that this process is driven through technological highways now, instead of through traditional forms of participation.

If democracy implies public and egalitarian access to common resources, all the initiatives devoted to making communication resources available to the public and creating collective deliberative spaces should assist in reaching these ideals. However, according to Blumler and Coleman (2001), “providing balanced and trusted accounts of public deliberation is crucial if there is to be confidence in the electronic civic commons both by citizens and representatives”. In addition to this, Blumler and Coleman point out that “the principle of a civic commons in cyberspace needs first to be accepted and institutionally armed with sufficient powers, freedom and resources to find its feet practically” (p. 18). Nothing of this seems to be happening in the blogosphere yet, but this does not prevent its democratic potential from being developed. In Coleman’s most recent contribution to e-democracy research (Hansard Society, 2004), he finds three democratizing characteristics in the blogosphere:

Firstly, it provides a bridge between the private, subjective sphere of self-expression and the socially-fragile civic sphere in which publics can form and act ... Secondly, blogs allow people –

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6 In Kavanaugh et. al. (forthcoming 2005) is possible to check how widespread these ideas have been among the authors who have worked on this issue, especially during the last decade.
7 Coleman’s afterword section in the Hansard Society 2004 article regarding political blogs is called: “Blogs as listening post rather than soapboxes” (2004, p. 26-30)
indeed, expect them – to express incomplete thoughts … Thirdly, blogs lower the threshold of entry to the global debate for traditionally unheard or marginalised voices, particularly from poorer parts of the world which are too often represented by others, without being given a chance to present their own accounts (p. 28).

But at the same time, Coleman also admits that this democratic potential “is likely to be realized through techniques of aggregation rather than simply via millions of unique acts of self-expression” (Ibid, p. 28).

The assessment of the blog phenomenon and its contribution to political participation is not unanimous. Much like analyzing the effects of ICTs in the political field, the analysis of the blogosphere, in particular, provokes different interpretations which could be summarized as follows. On the one hand, the blogosphere undoubtedly can help citizens improve their knowledge about the democratic system, and, in this way, promote participation and mobilization through generating virtual communities with common interests. Blogs can suggest alternative agendas for the democratic debate, influence the implementation of public policies, or serve as an instrument for political marketing. Despite this, the blogosphere is also associated with narcissistic practices and insubstantial, apolitical discussions. In this view, though the blogosphere creates an external appearance of democratic deliberation, it, in fact, cuts into time for civic deliberation. Another threat to blogs’ democratic potential is disinformation linked to blogs. This can be either intentional manipulation to serve certain aims, insufficient information, or omissions. The contents usually exchanged in the blogosphere also generate feelings of incredulity with these feelings sometimes related to “magical thinking”.

Nevertheless, the blog boom has motivated a wide variety of political actors to enter the blogosphere, creating good examples of how the Internet has been increasingly explored as an innovative way to generate more fluent communication between political institutions and civil society. However, the key question is if these proposals are meeting with a positive response among citizens in terms of political engagement and if blogs are being used for e-dialogue about politics.

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8 Magical thinking is a term used by historians of religion to describe one kind of non-scientific causal reasoning. According to James George Frazer, magical thinking depends on two laws: the law of similarity (an effect resembles its cause), and the law of contagion (things which were once in physical contact maintain a connection even after physical contact has been broken). Others have described these two laws as examples of "analogical reasoning" (rather than logical reasoning). Source: answer.com.
To situate these issues in a specific context, the remainder of this paper offers an empirical examination of blogging activity in Portugal and Spain. In terms of time orientation, the analysis will focus on present and recent past experiences, taking into account that this is basically a dynamic process, not a static one, where the shape of blogs is still in evolution. Since multiple interactions between ICTs and society happen, the two spheres shape each other mutually. That is, they are interrelated in a reciprocal complex manner. Then IT is not the unique catalyst or enabler of social change as utopianism assumed. For all these reasons, it is necessary to collect direct evidence. The study will be therefore empirically anchored, based on observations of a real situation. This is why specific social, institutional, and cultural contexts will be observed in the concrete study area of Portugal and Spain.

The Portuguese blogosphere

In 2004 Portuguese appeared to be the third most widespread language in the blogosphere. Although much of this impact can be attributed to bloggers in Brazil, there has been an exponential growth of blog activity in Portugal as well where more than five millions blogs have already been tracked.

Even when not exclusively related to the Portuguese blogosphere, there are some aspects that have been extensively highlighted by scholars and observers. This is seen, for example, in the great emphasis on the idea that the blogosphere is conceived as a privileged space for freedom of expression, without restrictions (at least in theory): “The world of the blogosphere is born, a space where the freedom to write and the exchange of opinions seem to be total, everything can be said and published” (Rodrigues, 2004: 1) “Weblogs have become alternative spaces for communication, where each participant can aspire to have the ‘voice’ that had been promised” (Santos and Pinto, 2004: 3). Another frequent assertion is that blogs have generated virtual communities with common interests. At the same time, the ups and downs in participation (number of visits and entries) have been generally associated with the existence of

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11 This kind of statement is constantly stressed in the literature, for instance at Canavilhas, Correia, Santos & Pinto, and Rodrigues respective 2004 works.

12 This statement is supported by both Canavilhas and Rodrigues 2004 contributions. It is also drawn as a conclusion on the study about the Portuguese blogs’ practices: [http://blog.lisbonlab.com/estudos/blogues-experiencia-portuguesa/](http://blog.lisbonlab.com/estudos/blogues-experiencia-portuguesa/)
important socio-political events. This would mean that the dynamic behind the blogosphere would be intrinsically linked to significant social occurrences. It cannot be denied that both bloggers and readers keep more active during those periods, but according to the Baptista 2004 empirical analysis, that is not necessarily the main motivation for people to go into the blogosphere. Their involvement is also associated with their own needs, motivations, and interests. Sometimes, for instance, it is not the nature of the themes, but the possibility of gaining some visibility that pushes participation forward. Quite differently, Canavilhas (2004) believes that the Portuguese blogosphere works as an immediate mirror of society, since any social convulsion or political event has an instant effect on the number of visits and edited posts.

The description of the average Portuguese blog user, according to the results obtained in the Baptista 2004 study, indicates that teachers, journalists, and students are the keenest followers of this phenomenon. Consultants, lawyers, and architects represent other professions among which blogs get a majority support. All of them appear to be predominantly between 25 and 39 years old. This reveals, in the authors’ opinion, a tendency for individuals with a certain public consciousness. Males devote themselves to blogs more than females do, which is probably associated with the gender gap in Internet use.

There is no single list of Portuguese blogs, but it is well-known that 2003 was a key year for blogs development in this country. Some elements need to be considered in relation to this. Recent statistics have shown that at that time, far less than 50 per cent of Portuguese homes had internet access, and almost 70 per cent of the population had never used the Internet. Additionally, the broadband penetration rate in Portugal was lower than the average in the European Union. Under those conditions, it is essential to consider the role of the Internet in Portuguese society. According to Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE) 2003, data pointed out that, in fact, only 21.7% of Portuguese homes had internet access at that time. Meanwhile, according to the results of the Survey on ICT Usage by the Portuguese Population, led by UMIC –Innovation and Knowledge Society Unit-, 46% of the Portuguese population declared having one or more computers at home by September 2003, what it was considered to be an improvement. Recent statistics have shown that at the end of the third quarter of 2005 there were nearly 1.428 million internet access service customers in Portugal (from a total population of 10 millions) http://www.icp.pt/template12.jsp?categoryId=175642

13 There are multiple examples corroborating this kind of connection such the nomination of the Portuguese Prime Minister for the presidency of the European Commission in July 2004 or, the posterior call for parliamentary elections in the country.
14 Santos and Pinto 2004 notice the importance of these figures by Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE) 2003. Data pointed out that, in fact, only 21.7% of Portuguese homes had internet access at that time. Meanwhile, according to the results of the Survey on ICT Usage by the Portuguese Population, led by UMIC –Innovation and Knowledge Society Unit-, 46% of the Portuguese population declared having one or more computers at home by September 2003, what it was considered to be an improvement. Recent statistics have shown that at the end of the third quarter of 2005 there were nearly 1.428 million internet access service customers in Portugal (from a total population of 10 millions) http://www.icp.pt/template12.jsp?categoryId=175642
circumstances, what made blogs begin to take off in 2003 was a set of conjoined but unplanned efforts that took place at different levels that contributed to their diffusion. The traditional media became an important element in that process, since editorials and news coverage helped to expand the blogosphere visibility among citizens. The Portuguese parliament’s announcement that it was creating a new space for legislators to blog reinforced the importance of the emerging phenomenon.

From the next parliamentary term onwards, members of the Portuguese Assembly (Assembleia da República - AR) will have the option to create and host blogs as part of AR’s website. The proposal was approved unanimously shortly after Portugal’s State of the Union debate took place on 6/7/03. According to its promoters, the blogging proposal will take advantage of AR’s infrastructure and allows each member of the Assembly to inform the public about their parliamentary activity. Plans are already being mooted for the creation of a style guide for the blogs. With this new development, Portugal takes the lead of a new global development in eDemocracy.

The earlier general enthusiasm for that initiative, however, has turned into a negligible impact over time. As Correira (2004) and, Santos and Pinto (2004) noted in their articles, only three deputies have taken part in this project until now, and all three are members of the same socialist party. This proposal has not met with a positive level of response in terms of political participation either, which remains low in society. Some different idiosyncratic experiences have also taken place at Portuguese universities regarding blogs. Universidade do Minho pioneered the integration of blogs into collective work on the journalism and communication teaching sphere in Portugal, where blogs became a tool for interaction between professors and students as well. Universidade do Porto followed similar steps creating a blog as a support instrument in radio courses. But probably the most noticeable spot happened in September 2003 when Universidade do Minho was the venue for the first national weblog meeting, which attracted great media and public attention towards it.

One of the features present in the Portuguese blogosphere from the beginning is the discussion online between right and left wing groups. This ideological dichotomy, according to Canavilhas (2004), has led to a strongly divided political blogosphere, where confrontation about polemic issues has become

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constant and visible. Santos and Pinto (2004) have also identified Portuguese blogs covering politics with the presence of a “ferocious intellectual debate between opposing sides” (p. 6). Maybe there is a suitable correspondence between this description and one of the main characteristics of the Portuguese blogs in Rodrigues’ (2004) opinion, which is the existence of a large majority of blogs centered on opinions instead of informative ones.

**Portuguese cases**

Table 1. Selected Portuguese political blogs cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>José Pacheco Pereira</td>
<td><a href="http://www.abrupto.blogspot.com">http://www.abrupto.blogspot.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jornalismo e Comunicação</td>
<td><a href="http://www.webjornal.blogspot.com">http://www.webjornal.blogspot.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogue Social Português</td>
<td><a href="http://blogosocialportugues.blogspot.com">http://blogosocialportugues.blogspot.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana Gomes, Vital Moreira, Vicente J Silva</td>
<td><a href="http://www.causa-nossa.blogspot.com">http://www.causa-nossa.blogspot.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paulo Gorjão</td>
<td><a href="http://bloguitica.blogspot.com">http://bloguitica.blogspot.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jorge Ferreira</td>
<td><a href="http://www.tomarpartido.weblog.com.pt">http://www.tomarpartido.weblog.com.pt</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paulo Querido</td>
<td><a href="http://pauloquerido.net/">http://pauloquerido.net/</a></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The selection of cases will provide a general overview in order to illustrate how the political blogosphere operates in Portugal. The samples, which include two well-known institutional blogs (Assembleia da República and Universidade do Minho) as well as popular individual and group blogs, widely mentioned in the literature, bring valuable information about which types of actors are involved and to what extent they are involved (Table 1).

The Spanish blogosphere

The first difficulty in analyzing the blogosphere in Spain arises from insufficient and scattered information about its evolution, performance, and current importance. Nonetheless, a big increase in the number of blogs in Spain has been detected in the two last years. According to data from Terra, in June 2005 “the service of MSN Blogs in Spain counted one million users”, and Blogómetro has counted one million eighty thousand blogs as of a similar date. That means that if both figures were added the result would be quite significant, but prudence is highly recommended. According to Almeida’s (somewhat ironic) comments in his blog “Mangas Verdes”:

> The data from MSN and Blogómetro places the Spanish blogosphere among the top first positions on the international rankings. I believe that if the rest of the publication systems (Blogalia, Blogia, Bitacorae, Blogger, Typead, Movable Type, WordPress…) are also considered the result could be outrageous. And, if the rest of the Hispanic blogosphere is added, we would be speaking of the latin-blogger power on the crest of a wave of the international blogger movement. This is only a perception based on the data, but it will necessary to wait for the specialists to finish their work. (Blog Mangas Verdes, 2005)

Different causes can explain that increase in number. The first cause is the logical repercussion in Spain of an international tendency toward creating greater virtual space. Furthermore, the spread of the universal blog phenomenon has implied the appearance of blog services in different languages besides English. Spanish has become one of them, and Spanish internet users have benefited.

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18 Tricas-García y Merelo-Guervós (2004) consider that “the Spanish blogosphere is part of the global blogosphere, and is roughly defined as the set of blogs (or, sometimes, blog-looking web pages) that are written in Spanish (in any part of the world) or in any other of the official languages in Spain (Catalan, Basque, Galician)” (p.430).

19 http://actualidad.terra.es/nacional/articulo/msn_espana_servicio_blogs_cuenta_377814.htm

20 http://www.proyectoisla.com/mangasverdes/?p=931
A different cause would be the rapid increase in Internet connections in Spanish homes. According to data from Fundación Auna (2005) in the “Annual Report about the Information Society in Spain”, Internet users cover 34.2% of the population, that is more than fourteen million, and the number of ADSL\textsuperscript{21} lines has gone up to two and a half million. The cost of those lines has also diminished because of competition, even when there is still much room for improvement. And the number of cable lines is about eight hundred thousand. These figures paint an eloquent picture of the rapid expansion of ICT use in Spain.

Nevertheless, these may not be the only reasons for the growth of blogging. In the Spanish case other specific motives, such as recent political and social polemics, should be taken into account since they could have contributed to the acceleration in this participative phenomenon. Blogs have been seen as an alternative medium to express opinions and ideas, as well as a way to offer information outside official governmental institutions and the big media. Among others, in the last years some the controversial events have been: the Prestige oil spill close to the Spanish coast, the fight against the regulations that restrict the access to virtual information\textsuperscript{22}, the Iraq war, the March 11 terrorist attack in Madrid, the aftermath, and the general elections in 2004.

According to Xeni Jardin\textsuperscript{23}, “a recent decision by top newspaper El País to restrict online content access to paying users further boosted the popularity of Spanish blogs, where articles were excerpted and debate proliferated”. The reason behind that idea is that some blogs act as press reviewers, commenting, cross-referencing, and linking to the main news and columns in different newspapers. Sometimes blogs are the only way to access those articles without a subscription.

It is obvious then that there are some general factors outside of the blogosphere itself that have influenced it, such as government control over communication infrastructures, the expansion of broadband, regulation of the Internet, or audiences’ familiarity with the electronic media. Taking into

\textsuperscript{21} Short for asymmetric digital subscriber line, a new technology that allows more data to be sent over existing copper telephone lines.

\textsuperscript{22} Ley 34/2002 de Servicios de la Sociedad de la Información y de Comercio Electrónico. (Law of Services of the Society of Information and Electronic Commerce)

consideration the situation described above, this part of the study focuses on the democratic potential of blogs in Spain.

**Spanish cases**

Table 2. Selected Spanish political blogs cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The deputy:</th>
<th>The regional candidates:</th>
<th>The electronic newspapers' readers:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The regional candidates:</td>
<td>The electronic newspapers' readers:</td>
<td>The social activism:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>María San Gil (PP)</td>
<td>Libertad Digital <a href="http://blogs.libertaddigital.com/">http://blogs.libertaddigital.com/</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The opinion column by the political journalist: Victoria Prego <a href="http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/prego.html">http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/prego.html</a></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>The social activism:</td>
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The selection of blogs should help demonstrate their impact in the public debate and political participation in Spain. These blogs include an institutional emphasis with individual politicians at both national and regional institutional levels, including a congressman, two regional candidates, and the vice president of a regional government as well as blogs associated with mass media outlets and journalists and an NGO. The principal aim is to check their influence on the citizens’ democratic mobilization. Therefore, the contents should include political issues in order to examine the relationship between political blogs and political engagement. The selection of political actors will consider the use of blogs by individual politicians at both national and regional institutional levels - that involves a congressman, two regional candidates, and the vice president of a regional government. Together with them, different electronic mass media using, promoting and hosting blogs in different ways will be also analyzed, since online political journalism, and readers’ replies become quite relevant to this field. Last but not least, a social NGO case in Spain is incorporated as an example of a different kind of activism promoted through blogs. All of them contribute a variety of perspectives and blogging experiences run by different kinds of political actors, some of which called some media attention in the past (Table 2).

Findings and discussion

The year 2003 is considered to mark the explosion of the Portuguese blogs, since at that time they were promoted in different areas, for instance to teach journalism at university (Universidade do Minho and Universidade do Porto). That year the first national weblog meeting took place at Universidade do Minho to analyze the increasing phenomenon and the prospect of social and academic impacts. The Assembleia da República also launched a unique initiative to host members of parliament’s blogs in 2003. This particular proposal, however, has not met with an enthusiastic response either among the representatives or the grassroots. In fact, the number of Portuguese politicians writing blogs is minimal.

In Canavilhas’ (2004) opinion, the politicians have been totally ignoring the blogosphere, despite its growing importance, only with the exception of some cases that have shown certain interest in getting

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24 The II Encontro de Weblogs was held at the Universidade da Beira Interior (Covilhã), on October 14 and 15, 2005. For the complete program and a summary of the main conclusions: http://2encontrodeweblogs.blogspot.com/

involved. Therefore, the scarcity of parliamentarians using the Assembleia da República’s host service represents a clear example of this situation. Nonetheless, there is a considerable number of blogs focusing on political issues. Some of them are like-minded group blogs, which have proliferated lately. These group blogs usually center their activity in some kind of ideological debate. Apparently the blogosphere is generally believed to be related to an alternative and privileged space for freedom of speech. This idea encourages more people to participate. And it is true, in a sense, that blogs welcome the possibility of citizens expressing their own thoughts with hardly restrictions, and under less pressure. But this does not automatically transform the blogosphere into an ideal new public agora, not only because of the differences in access, but especially because, apart from the mere enjoyment of engaging in fierce polemics, it does not seem to be generating fruitful discussions. Political confrontation, strength of group ties, and self-assertiveness appear to occupy the foreground of the blogging experiences, reducing the democratic debate to a virtual tennis court image. Additionally, blog audiences seem to reach peaks when important sociopolitical issues happen. This could suggest a particular sequence of events, or certain connection between socially relevant developments and a general public need for information and involvement that the blogosphere can help satisfy, especially in such critical moments.

Table 3 summarizes the results obtained in the selected Portuguese political blog cases. Effectively, most of them began their activity in 2003, and they maintain an archive with a collection of historical records relating to their former entries. These Portuguese bloggers usually keep daily, or almost daily, posting. In the group blogs such daily aim is easier for their members to get accomplished. It is not always possible for the audience, however, to send direct comments back. In fact, this option sometimes is openly accessible, but some other times it is totally missing, and only the author’s email is available instead. Not only are filters applied in the latter occasions, but also readers’ comments are not even published, with the exception of some sporadic discretionary selected replies under the title: “Correio dos leitores” [readers’ emails]. Furthermore, the number of return comments remains remarkably low in many of the cases, independently of the facilities offered for participation. Blogrolls appear to become common features, though not always present. Both left and right wings primarily promote opinion blogs.
Table 3: Summary of results Portuguese political blog cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Currently active (</strong>)**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active from</strong></td>
<td>05/04</td>
<td>10/05</td>
<td>12/04</td>
<td>07/05</td>
<td>01/03</td>
<td>05/02</td>
<td>11/03</td>
<td>06/03</td>
<td>11/03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Daily posts</strong></td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>almost daily</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>almost daily</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct comments possible</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>apparently</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No Filters</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of comments back</strong></td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low / moderate</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content: mainly political issues</strong></td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blogroll</strong></td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opinion vs. information</strong></td>
<td>op / info</td>
<td>op</td>
<td>op</td>
<td>op</td>
<td>info</td>
<td>opinion</td>
<td>opinion</td>
<td>opinion</td>
<td>opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideology</strong></td>
<td>left</td>
<td>left</td>
<td>left</td>
<td>center-right</td>
<td>( )</td>
<td>left</td>
<td>left</td>
<td>left</td>
<td>right?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) Revised on 10/24/2005

2. The individual academic-politician: José Pacheco Pereira [http://www.abrupto.blogspot.com](http://www.abrupto.blogspot.com)
Some of the main implications of this study regarding the second country included in it can be seen in Table 4. The blogosphere in Spain, especially the use of political blogs, has developed later (2004 and 2005), and – bearing some similarities to Portugal in this point - in a not very sophisticated manner. The blogosphere is a phenomenon that is still in evolution there. In fact, it is being explored in different fields – in politics, for instance, in electronic media, or by some NGOs - at the same time that it is becoming widespread. However, there is much more interest in the “blog label”, because of the connotations of technological modernity, and the openness associated with it, than in assuming the “true blog spirit”, which involves spontaneity and, exchange of opinions in bigger proportions than in current practices. The existence of an interlinked blogosphere appears to be missing from Spain, at least in our case studies. On the contrary, none of them include a blogroll, that is, a collection of links to other blogs. When electronic newspapers keep a space for their readers’ blogs, they only offer links to the ones previously accepted as part of the system they host, but not to any other external one. This fact seems to corroborate a general tendency that Herring et al. (2004) have already detected. According to their work, 48.8% of the currently active weblogs contain no links to others blog at all. And for Blood (2002), that a blog links to other blogs is a requirement in order to be characterized as such. One further step in the analysis will imply a selection of A-list blogs (the most visited ones) all over the political spectrum to track the possible interlinking from one blog to another.

The use of blogs among individual politicians is also very limited in Spain yet, in both the number of cases, and the results. It is possible to affirm, then, that no real dialogue with the citizens is established through blogs. Some applications in political marketing and in journalistic marketing as well have been observed. Blogs have been also incorporated as an element for electoral campaigns. Nevertheless, since multiple editorial filters are quite frequent, either from the bloggers themselves, or from the websites where blogs are published, this fact distorts an open flow or opinions. The most immediate effect is that political participation is not truly being encouraged. Blogs can stimulate certain groups or individuals towards political participation, but their impact is not clearly identifiable. Nor is there any influence on decision making in public policy, or political agenda, despite an increasing interaction between blogs and both the traditional and the electronic media.
### Table 4. Summary of results Spanish political blog cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Currently active (*)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active from</td>
<td>08/04</td>
<td>03/05</td>
<td>03/05</td>
<td>05/05</td>
<td>03/05</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily posts</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>almost daily</td>
<td>some of them</td>
<td>some of them</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct comments possible</td>
<td>X / --</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Filters</td>
<td>X / --</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of comments back</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content: mainly political issues</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogroll</td>
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<td>--</td>
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<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion vs. information</td>
<td>opinion</td>
<td>opinion</td>
<td>opinion</td>
<td>opinion</td>
<td>opinion</td>
<td>opinion</td>
<td>opinion</td>
<td>information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>left</td>
<td>right</td>
<td>center-right</td>
<td>left</td>
<td>center-right</td>
<td>strong right</td>
<td>strong right</td>
<td>right</td>
<td>left</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) Revised on 10/20/2005

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1. **Deputy**: Carlos González Serna (PSOE) [http://cgonzalez.blogspot.com/](http://cgonzalez.blogspot.com/)
3. **Regional candidate**: Juan José Ibarretxe (PNV) [http://www.ibarretxe.com/bitacora](http://www.ibarretxe.com/bitacora)
In spite of the facts that both countries are located in the same geographical area, and they share some common tendencies in terms of ICT development, there are also some intrinsic characteristics in each particular country. Even though the samples of blogs and blog hosting in this study are not inclusive of the whole national political blogospheres, they exemplify major current tendencies in the two countries. They also provide some crucial empirical evidence that address the initial questions. In the analyzed blogs there is some degree of exchange of both opinions and information (in fact, more the former than the latter) about current issues of especial interest to some social groups, but this is far from a resolute step forward towards a participative and constructive democratic debate. In addition, a component of social reinforcement is encouraged in a sense, since blogs tend to bring together like-minded individuals, who strengthen their ideological beliefs. Some of the interactions observed to date could indicate that political blogs are promoting political participation on a small scale, but they are definitely not creating an authentic public sphere for deliberation and engaging citizens in collective action. Their increasing presence does not translate into a significant trend toward social and political transformation. In sum, to some extent it is possible to affirm that the Portuguese and the Spanish blogospheres mean a kind of safety valve for both individual speech in the Internet and personal involvement in political issues, but it is not generating satisfactory outcomes in terms of its democratic potential, which it has not been fully developed so far. Some maturity could be expected in the near future, but not likely a significant change.

**Acknowledgement:** I would like to thank Christina Courtright and James Damico for their inestimable help in accomplishing this paper. Their comments, reviews, and suggestions have highly contributed to the final work.

**Final note:** All the quotations from the literature originally in Spanish or Portuguese have been directly translated by the author of this paper.
References


