H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David D. Perlmutter. *Blogwars: The New Political Battleground.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. xxv + 246 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-530557-9.

Reviewed by Gerry Lanosga (Indiana University)

Published on Jhistory (July, 2009)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker (Salve Regina University)

Personal or Politicized: Blogging and Politics

Entering the debate over blogs and their meaning is fraught with risk. For starters, the world of blogs, by its very nature, is a moving target–constantly changing, never quite settling. Moreover, partisans in the fray often seem hopelessly polarized. Political communication researcher David D. Perlmutter, a blogger himself, is perhaps more aware of these realities than most. His book, *Blogwars,* deftly handles the challenges, embracing the chance to make one of the first scholarly passes at the realm of political blogging.

Perlmutter acknowledges up front that he is a fan of, and optimist about, blogs and the role that they can play in democracy, but he is cautious not to overstate the case. Neither a triumphalist nor a naysayer, he strives to analyze blogging in its proper contexts. Historians and other scholars will particularly appreciate his long view as he steers around the simplistic argument about whether blogs are really revolutionary or not. In fact, Perlmutter suggests, they do not have to be one or another. To argue, as he does, that blogs are having a significant impact on politics does not require that one agree they are overthrowing everything that came before.

That said, blogs do represent a clear break from past constraints dictating that mass media content could be produced only by industries. Now, any motivated individual with access to a networked computer can be both creator and consumer of content. Perlmutter contends that political blogs are changing the practice of politics in America not by accident or fad, but by tapping the true power of interactivity to establish personal connections with readers and to form online political communities.

The result is an online environment that allows for spirited battles–thus Perlmutterâs title–over political offices, ideas, and issues. âWar,â he writes, âpervades the political bloglandsâ (p. 47). But where some critics are pessimistic about Balkanization of audiences, Perlmutter argues that the intense partisan grouping afforded by blogs is a good thing: âIt is a socially useful war of ideas that, despite its more distasteful projections, is improving rather than detracting from democracy in Americaâ (p. 47).

Perlmutter lays out this argument in a nicely crafted preface, five chapters, and an âafterpost.â His evidence is mainly a series of case studies of different blogs and episodes–which he calls âblogthroughsâ–that brought blogs to prominence in the political and public mind. He cites the oft-mentioned examples of Senator Trent Lottâs resignation as Senate majority leader and Dan Ratherâs botched investigation of President George W. Bushâs National Guard service–two cases in which political bloggers exerted a significant influence–but also makes the case that bloggers are more likely to exercise political influence on the local level.

In chapter 1, Perlmutter provides an overview of political blogs and readers, and explores the paradox of how the blogosphere can be filled with aggressive partisanship and yet also serve to build bridges. As he tells it, his interest in blogs dates to 1996 when he was studying presidential Web sites and, as an afterthought, began looking at personal political sites. âMany were raucous and crude,â he writes, âbut they offered a new form of public affairs media, a private news bulletin sent from one individual to, potentially, the whole world. *Personalized mass political communication* was finally possibleâ (p. 3).

As he points out, such communication had been largely the province of elites for thousands of years up to this point. People who in previous eras would not have had any political capital can now âwrite memos to the powerful that instantly become public documentsâ (p. 5). That capability has prompted many online enthusiasts to declare a revolution, but Perlmutter finds the evidence mixed for wholesale changes in the way we think about and practice politics.

On the one hand, political content on blogs is not radically new, blogs can be viewed as just another medium for a rather old impulse toward political expression, and blogs are not forcing the abandonment of other means of political communication. On the other hand, there are some groundbreaking characteristics of blogs: namely, a hyperlinking structure that is nonlinear with endless feedback potential, and the ability to enable ordinary people to engage in mass communication. It is not a complete revolution, Perlmutter acknowledges, but it is a significant development that has âturned the traditional dynamics of the media producer-media consumer relationship on its headâ (p. 12).

The fact that politicians frequently court bloggers and sometimes become bloggers themselves is testament to the impact of blogs. Also telling is the sometimes intense âblowbackâ against blogs from mainstream media organizations. Perlmutter rightly puts this in the context of previous media ârevolutionsâ that met resistance from existing media. With radio as with blogs, for instance, the arrivistes were criticized and degraded: âNew media tend to generate fulminations among the elites of the old, and professional status is often a key point of contention. In each case, including radio, the rude innovator eventually became part of the mainstream; so will blogsâ (pp. 34-35).

As for concerns about Balkanization raised by such authors as Cass Sunstein and Robert Putnam, Perlmutter contends there is no evidence that today is more partisan than other eras. Moreover, he asserts, partisanship can bring groups together as well as divide people into groups: âThe âdividing usâ argument often fails to take into account that a centripetal force can also be centrifugalâ (p. 39).

In the remaining chapters, Perlmutter sketches the early uses of the Internet in politics, the ascendance of blogs in the last decade, and the significant roles bloggers have come to play as both external observers of politics and internal political professionals (sometimes becoming politicians themselves). For politicians, blogs can be used to bypass the traditional media to establish personal connections with voters–Perlmutter calls it âpolbloggingâ and draws parallels to the ancient Roman notion of *commilito*, the personal bond among soldiers and their leaders. Earlier politicians, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt with his fireside chats, recognized the power of these personal connections, Perlmutter writes, and blogs represent the perfect venue for establishing them.

Perlmutter believes political blogs (or âbloglike formsâ) are here to stay and that they will stimulate citizen participation in politics. And bloggers, he points out, are no longer just a virtual influence. Recounting a meeting of bloggers with President Bush in the White House, he writes: âBloggers had literally entered the corridors of power. I believe they will never be shut out againâ (p. 211).

While Perlmutterâs argument and evidence are generally sound, there are naturally difficulties that arise in an analysis of an evolving new medium. Writing in early 2008, for instance, Perlmutter predicted this âblogization of politicsâ would continue in the impending presidential election (p. 106). He was not necessarily off the mark, but one wonders how he would retool his work in light of President Barack Obamaâs successful use of newer social media tools, such as Facebook and Twitter. In addi-

tion, where Perlmutter sees politiciansâ use of blogs as a potentially positive way to connect with people, critics might see it as co-optation and dominance by elite voices in a medium touted for its potential benefits for populist political participation. Incursions of commercialization also raise concerns in this regard, but Perlmutter does not address that issue.

Another difficulty that can bedevil this kind of research is the transient quality of new media. Some blogs are here one day and gone the next. For instance, Perlmutter lauds independent blogger Christopher Frankonisâs investigative work in Portland, Oregon, but does not seem to be aware that Frankonis abandoned his blog in 2005, partly because of financial reasons. The blog is cited as a prime example filling a void left by âthe corporate press,â but its disappearance raises questions about the viability of such reporting by bloggers (p. 124). Likewise, Perlmutter extols a blog called Democracy for Virginia. That, too, has been out of business since 2005 (Perlmutterâs timeline is slightly off here–a bill noisily opposed by Democracy for Virginia was introduced in 2004, not 2005).

Examples like this do not defeat Perlmutterâs well-argued case, but they do moderate it somewhat. In fairness, he acknowledges as much in the preface: âMuch information will be dated by the time you read this book. But that is the point. A bloggerâs work is never done, nor, I hope, is that of a student of blogsâ (p. xxii). Perlmutter, in fact, tempers his argument with a number of caveats throughout the book. He reminds readers, for instance, that the online environment is still in its childhood. He is well aware, as well, that political bloggers are a minority, and so-called A-list bloggers–those who regularly command large audiences and attention from media and policymakers–a tiny one. He knows that the majority of political bloggers tend to be upper income, white, and male–not, in other words, very representative of the general population (though they also tend to serve as *influentials* or opinion leaders who have an extra-proportional effect on others). He knows that there are issues of inequality that contravene our hopes for an inclusive online public sphere. He knows that blogs are so many and so varied that âa basic rule of discussing blogs is that everything one says about blogs is true and at the same time falseâ (p. xxii). And, finally, he knows that no one really knows where blogs will go from here. He calls *Blogwars* his âfirst extended post in what I hope will be a long thread of speculative conversation about a fast-moving phenomenon whose direction, development, and destinations are unknown and probably unknowableâ (p. xxiii).

Despite the criticisms and caveats, this is, after all, a very good first extended post. It is a measured and meaty look at new media and political participation that is worthwhile for multiple audiences–scholars, students, journalists, new media practitioners, political professionals, the voting public. Perlmutter makes a good case that blogs matter and that they are not a flash in the pan. In the end, he argues that the important thing is that new technologies, such as blogs, offer the *potential* for ordinary people to have big political impacts: âWith luck, wit and skill, a blogger can capture the nationâs attention.... There is something very hopeful, and very American, about the possibility of such bootstrap success in the global marketplace of ideasâ (p. 204).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory

Citation: Gerry Lanosga. Review of Perlmutter, David D., *Blogwars: The New Political Battleground.* Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. July, 2009.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24953

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.