ABSTRACT

The Net’s uses are now diverse, covering many aspects of commercial, public and private life. The idea that it transforms all activities in the same or equivalent ways is no longer tenable. This paper examines a particular form of online activity—weblogging, and how it has allowed for specific new forms of popular political communication in the context of the Second Gulf War. After describing the basics of weblogging, the paper discusses Western media coverage of the war and then shows how ‘warbloggers’ positioned themselves vis-à-vis media coverage and propaganda, creating commentaries that frequently combined media and political criticism. While bloggers of every political hue offered a range of perspectives and personal styles, some general tendencies are evident in warblogging discourse. The piece ends by questioning the significance of warblogging in terms of its potential contribution to democratic communication.

FROM BLOG TO BLOGOSPHERE

A considerable body of literature has arisen to describe how the Internet fosters new kinds of communication. As many have noted, the basic infrastructure institutes “costless reproduction, instantaneous dissemination and radical decentralisation” (Poster 1997: 205), arguably making for new types of interaction, or at least allowing the modification of extant practices and institutions. Who communicates, to whom, how frequently, about what and in what form, are potentially open to reconfiguration through online digital technologies. A great deal of popular online communication can be described as being peer-to-peer, in the sense that it allows groups of users to interact with each other largely without the mediation of institutional hierarchies that control message flows. Initiatives such as Usenet, email discussion lists, filesharing, open source software and open publishing have made the most of the Net’s promise in this regard.

Weblogging is the most prominent recent addition to online peer-to-peer fora. A weblog or ‘blog’ is an online diary maintained either by an individual or a group of individuals who may post time-stamped messages onto a particular web page in chronological order.² At first, this may appear to amount to little more than highly personalised vanity publishing, an offshoot of the personal webpage. And indeed, one of the hallmarks of blogs is the individualistic and exhibitionistic styles that they allow, as authors (except the minority that, for some reason or another, blog under the auspices of an organisation) are at liberty to fashion posts in any way that they want to. However, Joanne Jacobs (2003) notes that the kind of expressivity involved is not the same as the ‘static’ portrayal and assertion of self offered by personal websites. Rather, blogging thrives on interaction among peers and their reactions to other media sources. It is about responding to and being responded to, articulating one’s opinions about themes of shared concern in a way that encourages personal responses to feed off each other.

Much blogging takes the form of commentary on other blogs, online articles and offline media. Weblogging software, such as ‘Blogger’, not only automates most aspects of the publishing process, but also includes features which enhance possibilities for mutual feedback. Perhaps most important are comment systems that allow readers to post responses to any given post (and the author to respond in turn). New posts are also issued with permalinks, or stable URLs, so that other bloggers can
discuss them and link to them in their own blog posts without fear that the URL will cease to work when the linked-to post makes the transition from the given blog’s home page to its archives. As well as providing ‘deep links’ to specific articles and posts, bloggers also display lists of links to the home pages of their favourite blogs and media sources in the side bars of their pages. Being included in other bloggers’ ‘blogrolls’ (as these lists are called) is a welcome sign that one’s voice is carrying. Finally, news aggregators collate metadata about recent blog posts and threads under various topic categories, allowing readers to be alerted to new material that may be of interest.

The collective infrastructure of blogging is a realm of cross-referral that results in a considerably more social and complex activity than simply individual posturing or disclaiming about a given topic. Bloggers join intertextual conversations, taking content and cues from ‘outside’ sources, while their consequent output becomes potential input for peers. Hence, the activity blurs the distinction between media producer and media consumer. While some readers have no interest in production, the main prerequisite for those who do aspire to be successful bloggers is that they are active media consumers, in order that they can provide interesting links and commentaries on current topics and others’ published perspectives on them. The corollary of this interdependence is that the dominant discursive mode of blogs is discussion, rather than monological expression of opinion. Interlocutors may not be involved in face-to-face dialogue, but articulation of a position or idea is almost always performed with reference to the enunciations of others. This patchwork of discussion is known by practitioners as the ‘blogosphere’.

Of course, different bloggers tend to focus on different topics and themes, or (sometimes eccentric) combinations of them. Science fiction fans may blog that topic and link to each other, while techies share insights about the latest developments in all things digital. However, the most prominent single use of blogs is to cover and comment upon current affairs. According to Catherine Seipp, a weblog is basically ‘a Web journal that comments on the news—often by criticizing the media and usually in rudely clever tones—with links back to stories that back up the commentary with evidence’ (2002: 42). To be even more specific, while weblogging became more common in the late 1990s when the first software packages became widely available, in the West, it surged towards true popularity after the events of September 11, 2001, leading to, in the words of John Naughton (2003a??**), an ‘astonishing proliferation of public discussion’.

**MEDIATING THE SECOND GULF WAR**

The blogging of the Second Gulf War is the latest installment in the unfolding history of what has become known ‘warblogging’, i.e. weblog discussion (often more than robust) of the ‘War on Terror’. Quite unsurprisingly, it brought the blogosphere to a new level of intensity, with warbloggers reporting increases in page views and numerous new blogs appearing before, during and after the conflict. Rainie et al. (2003) report that 4% of online U.S. citizens used weblogs to seek information and opinion about the war in the first week of conflict. This is a modest proportion. However, the significance perhaps lies in the fact that warblogging is largely a manifestation of popular political culture. According to the same report, the numbers...
of people viewing of blogs were roughly equivalent to those of people logging onto
the websites of groups explicitly supporting or opposing the war. In other words,
while still dwarfed by online usage of mainstream media sites, blogging emerged as a
major Web forum for citizens’ enquiry into the controversies of war. Indeed,
warbloggers carved out a unique space for themselves, providing forms of
commentary that were largely unavailable in other professional and organisational
media, and which used media reports and governmental sources as raw material for
popular critical activities. Thus, bloggers took leads not only from events, but the
ways that the events were represented by others, meaning that their responses to the
war were simultaneously responses to media coverage that they experienced as media
consumers. It is to the broader media framework surrounding the conflict that we now
turn, before describing how bloggers found their niche in it.

Scholars (most notably Knightley, 1989) have observed general patterns in the media
reporting of war, especially the propaganda efforts that arguably lead to continual
obfuscation of the truth, as governments party to the conflict attempt to manipulate
information in order to garner the support of the public, and sometimes to deliberately
mislead adversaries. If news, in the most basic terms, is timely information sought by
members of a social group about events and issues that influence their fortunes, then
war has something of a special relationship with it. The risks entailed by conflict
amplify public demand for news, but uncertainty about the reliability of information
vexes the same compulsion. Modern organised news services date back to the Thirty
Years War of the early Seventeenth Century, when the rise in public demand for
information enabled compilation of the first English-language newspapers from
collated postmasters’ reports (Thompson 1999: 120).

However, differences in the scope and form of war reporting have also been apparent
when different conflicts are analysed. These differences relate to governmental
exigencies of the moment and the state of the media, as well as the nature of the given
conflict (e.g. how geography and ‘conditions on the ground’ influence reporters’
access). Knightley argues that compared to many others, the Vietnam War was well-
reported because of lack of censorship and the freedom of reporters to move around
the war zone (1989: 423). However, by the time of the First Gulf War, the U.S.
government had put an end to roving war reporting, and hence reduced the risk of
correspondents covering events that may influence public opinion negatively.
Journalists were denied direct access to troops and the war zone, and were instead
organised into pools that were taken to sites selected by the military. Similarly, they
were allowed to interview military personnel only with minders present (Kellner,
1992: 80). Official briefings were the main source of information for journalists. The
relative lack of on-the-ground reporting, combined with widespread media uptake of
videos of successful ‘surgical’ bombing strikes (that were mostly released by the U.S.
Defense Department) made for a ‘video game’ media aesthetic that was high on
sanitised techno-violence and short on contextualisation (Kellner, 1992: 157-63). The
War became the first to be covered through 24-hour rolling TV news.

Rolling coverage exemplifies broader changes in the economics of news. General
conditions constraining media organisations are an influence on war reporting.
According to Virgil Hawkins (2002), TV reporting of international conflicts has
changed under commercial pressures. On the one side, news value has become
increasingly imbricated with entertainment value as private channels are driven by the
need to achieve high ratings. On the other, they have to control costs in order to remain competitive. The penchant for rolling and breaking news that followed GW1 has caused channels to prioritise investment in technology over investment in foreign correspondents. In order to remain competitive, they must be able to attain quickly and then maintain, a flow of images and commentary from any site of interest. Rather than being area specialists, most of the new generation of foreign correspondents are required to move from place to place—often between countries and continents—as breaking news dictates. Furthermore, once in situ, the limited background knowledge, combined with time constraints and the need to control the costs of newsgathering, may encourage them to depend upon official sources of information to supplement images captured. Governments simultaneously add a pull factor by providing the material infrastructure for organised briefings, while employing media professionals to anticipate media needs and craft messages that promote governmental framing of events (Knightley 2002: 167-8).

Such influences have arguably changed the grammar of war coverage. The speeding up of news cycles means that there is less time for fact-checking and consulting with diverse sources, leading to more speculative styles based upon watching events unfold and predicting their course from circumstantial cues (Docherty, 2003). There is also a direct tension between quick turn-around times and researching socio-political background (Canon, 2001). Hence, in the reporting of war, ‘colour’ reporting has come to take precedence over context as the focus of mainstream journalism (Knightley, 2002: 169). Numerous critical studies emphasise that spectacle and simplistic moral framing have become considerably more common than discourses about structural causes and consequences (Philo, 2002).

During the Second Gulf War, the U.S. government shut down most forms of communication with the media except formal briefings given by the White House, the Pentagon and the Central Command of ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ in Dohar, Qatar (Allen and De Young, 2003). The Dohar centre provided state-of-the-art press conference facilities far from the war zone. The major difference from the First Gulf War was that selected members of the Western media were invited to accompany troops on their operations. The so-called ‘embedded journalists’, who were given the honorary rank of major, were able to report from the war zone regularly. This provided first-hand experience of army engagement unavailable to journalists in GW1. However, although it entailed a small risk that viewers may get to see disturbing scenes, the strategy proved to be another way for the U.S. government to control the kind of information coming from the conflict. The camaraderie built up between troops and their media guests was clear in many a breathless report about present, nearby or recent action.

If the First Gulf War was the video game war, then the Second was its reality TV cousin. Or, perhaps, with its combination of front-line action and analysis of military strategy, it came closer to sports programming. As John Naughton (2003a) observes, TV viewers were ‘fed a constant diet of football-type commentary about the campaign, complete with panels and pundit-babble’. This is as true of the Australian context as of the British context of which Naughton writes. With the commencement of hostilities on March 19, current affairs shows (including the ABC’s 7.30 Report) swiftly averted attention from the case for war to its execution. Rolling news provided the backbone of most TV coverage, with most Australian channels alternating their
own programming with live feeds from continuous news services. According to Jamie Doward (2003), some critics went so far as to suggest that ‘the 24-hour news channels are little more than purveyors of ‘war porn’ for the way they broadcast relentless images shown without context or explanation’. James Der Derian, Principal Investigator of the InfoTechWarPeace Project, concluded that ‘Once again, the image won out over the word’ as field reporters largely narrated pictures, while ‘Supporting the troops became the method and mantra of avoiding any analysis or value judgements on whether force was justified, under what circumstances, and with what potential consequences, intended or not’ (2003). Mark Steel (2003) made the further claim that the U.S. government exploited the transilience of rolling news by fudging awkward issues (such as the Baghdad market bombing) until they ceased to be newsworthy, while throwing suggestions about possible finds of weapons of mass destruction into the rapidly changing mix without being subject to ongoing pressure to explain.

These are not, strictly speaking, issues of deliberate bias towards one party or another, so much as they indicate a mainstream media largely unwilling or unable to undertake sustained investigation of the more controversial aspects of the war. There certainly was patriotic bias. Fox News has achieved a drastic rise in ratings with its gung ho support for the U.S.-led War on Terror (Knightley, 2002: 170). During the conflict, Fox referred to its studio set as a ‘war room’ and its journalists openly admonished critics of military action (Der Derian). However, we must await the content analyses to determine exactly which news providers were biased and how. The more pervasive reality was the relative lack of contestation of the ‘War on Terror’ moral framing offered by the ‘coalition of the willing’. Heavy media reliance on official sources meant that the Bush administration’s othering techniques, such as creating analogies between terrorism and the Hussein regime (including depictions of Iraqi soldiers in urban conflict as terrorists) and suspicions of evil machinations, achieved a mantric force. A final irony to note was how the U.S. administration took the unusual step of criticising Arabic satellite station Al-Jazeera for showing images of U.S. prisoners and dead U.S. soldiers: a spectacle too far.¹

**BLOGGING THE WAR**

During the war, blogging, which had previously gained little attention outside of IT journalism, finally became a topic of wider media interest. It is, however, very hard to know where to start when mapping bloggers’ commentaries on the war, because of the vast volume of material, and the panoply of positions expressed and topics covered. This diversity must be acknowledged as being integral to the blogosphere. During the war, some bloggers capitalised on the uniqueness or relative novelty of the perspective they could offer. There were those who had some kind of privileged access to what was going on: military personnel on-the-ground (e.g. Lt. Smash) or their relatives (notably Sgt. Stryker, which was run by the mother of a soldier), or journalists in Iraq who blogged on a part-time basis as private citizens (e.g. Kevin Sites, until his employer, CNN, asked him to cease). Others, such as academics (media theorist and critic of GW1, Douglas Kellner, ran one at: ***********) and former military, had no such access to events, but brought some kind of expertise to opinion pieces and commentaries derived from media sources. Then there were those who spoke as activists or private citizens expressing opinion or providing updates. Other than a few journalists (such as the BBC’s Gulf correspondents, who all blogged
for Auntie), there were few bloggers who were constrained by speaking on behalf of an institution.

According to Steven Levy (2002), ‘The blog format lends itself to a new kind of reporting: on-the-spot recording of events, instantly beamed to the Net’. At least one freelance U.S. journalist, Christopher Allbritton used a weblog as his sole means of reporting from Iraq (during the latter part of the conflict) as a deliberate alternative to mainstream media coverage (**URL). However, the most famous eye-witness blogger, and the only Iraqi known to have blogged the war in English, was Baghdad translator Salam Pax. In the early stages, he sent regular reports of the bombing of Baghdad. One theme of his writing was the juxtaposition of what he and his relatives saw with what was on Iraqi and Arab media. For Western readers, his first-hand accounts gave a unique insight into the circumstances of Baghdad civilians: ‘We heard only three explosions… You can see columns of smoke all over the city… People are doing what all of us are doing - sitting in their homes hoping that a bomb doesn't fall on them and keeping their doors shut.’ Some of his reports put an eye-witness angle on some of the more controversial issues in the media, such as the extent to which the bombing hit civilians. For example, on Sunday 23 March he explained that, after touring bomb sites with his cousin, he came to the conclusion that ‘1) the attacks are precise. 2) they are attacking targets which are just too close to civilian areas in Baghdad.’

Reportage has by no means been Pax’s only mode. In the run-up to and the aftermath of the war, he has given biting critiques of the powers that be, both the U.S. and the Ba’athists. The following post combines an attempt to contextualise the conflict, with the kind of personalised, ironic tone and robust indictment that is common in political blogging:

The whole region is a cesspool. dictatorships are all around the arab region. Turkey and Iran fair just as bad as the rest of the lot. But the benevolent western eye looks at Iraq only.
Thank you for your keen interest in the human rights situation in my country,
thank you turning a blind eye for thirty years,
thank you for providing the support for my government to send 2 million Iraqis to war with Iran and getting them killed,
thank you for not minding the development of chemical weapons by a nut case when you knew he was a nut case,
thank you for not minding that members of the Iraqi communist party get acid baths (you don't think that this was used for the first time in Kuwait do you?, the government used these baths since the late 70's),
thank you for ignoring all human rights organizations when it came to the plight of the Iraqi people,
thank you for keeping sanctions which you knew only weakened the people and had no effect on the government.
Thank you for knowing all this and not minding.
For all your efforts I salute you with a hearty FUCK YOU

(Tuesday, December 03, 2002)
Pax’s blog is unusual, in that, at least during the war period, it did not provide many hyperlinks. Rebecca Blood identifies three main blogging styles: the open diary, news and annotated links format and the ‘notebook’, extended essay or editorial format (cited in Jacobs, 2003). Pax’s blog seemed most often to combine elements of the diary and editorial styles. Australian blogger, John Quiggin (an economist at the University of Queensland) argues that some of the analysis given by Australian warbloggers was equal to or better than that to be found in the opinion pages of major newspapers (7.30 report, 2/04/2003 **\(\text{**}\)). Many blogger think pieces reflect the often idiosyncratic beliefs of their authors, bringing unique perspectives to the issues and resulting in complex, thought-out stances. For instance, libertarian objectivist Arthur Silber combines political theory, historical case studies and reflection on current policy in an attempt to explain why he is for war in Iraq, but not in the way it is being conducted. The post, ‘Where I Stand Now: Not This War, Not This Way’ (http://coldfury.com/reason/comments.php?id=P378_0_1_0) transcends the simplistic binary of supporting or opposing the war by scrutinising a range of factors involved (from dealings with the UN and financial costs to the ethics of foreign intervention) in terms of political and moral first principles that the author holds dear. This style of commentary expresses a commitment to discussing underlying principles and historical context, a sentiment Jim Henley expresses when he promises (the day after hostilities began) to ‘write about the war and US foreign policy from what I hope will be a somewhat longer view’, a longer view, that is, than those warbloggers only concerned with breaking military news (www.highclearing.com/archivesuo/week_2003_03_16.html).

While some were content with straightforward updates on the action, even bloggers who supported military intervention, rather than letting the official framing speak for itself, tended to debate the case for war and think through justifications and consequences. However, on the whole, this was done not in long opinion pieces, but through reacting to other media sources. In contrast to Levy’s belief that blogs may ground a new style of reporting, for Emilie Bell (2003) they ‘don’t tell us anything new; they edit what already exists.’ This is certainly true of most warblogs. While bloggers covered any personally interesting aspect of the war, one salient theme was mediation itself. Many bloggers have a critical awareness of mediation processes and their own roles in them. They make take issue with a politician’s or commentator’s substantive stance on the war, but attention to how points of view are communicated is often a component, with critiques of political spin or journalistic bias being most common. Of course, there are bloggers who are not much into critiques of communication flows, but given the urge to hunt for truth, especially in a war situation, it seems that, collectively, bloggers perform a sociology of knowledge: they address and evaluate the conditions of knowledge production, often attempting to realise democratic free speech ideals in their own deliberative practices.

An indication of this culture lies in some of the names given to weblogs, including The Agonist, Counterspin Central, Unqualified Offerings, The Agora, The Agitator. The latter, for example, criticises the sanitisation of war by the media: their penchant for everything but blood:
What War Looks Like

One thing we’ve never been shy about on this site is facilitating information flow. Even really ugly information. That's why you got links to the WTC jumpers, and to the Danny Pearl video.

What's odd about the war at hand (and Gulf War I, for that matter) is that we're watching the whole thing on TV and, yet, we've really seen none of what makes war war. We've seen fantastic fireworks displays, and brave troops, and some rubble, and Geraldo making an ass of himself. But for all the embedded journalists, on-scene cameras, and firsthand reports, the images we so far associate with this war are bloodless.

The danger I think is that we develop a deluded sense of war as this sometimes bad but mostly sterile engagement where adventurous media correspondents report from the back of Humvees, the good guys are entirely good, the bad guys entirely bad, and when our troops die, they die looking like their military photos. And that makes selling the next war all the easier.

So if you can stomach it, click here. Then follow the links to al-Jazeera, Yellow Times and elsewhere.

http://www.theagitator.com/archives/005261.php#005261
Monday, March 24, 2003

Critiques of the information flows surrounding the war took many forms, though they were mainly aimed at the U.S. and Iraqi governments and the media on both sides (depending on the given blogger’s interests/politics). For example, John Quiggin observed the cycle of Pentagon announcements and retractions, and noted the way that its case for war rested on the linguistic invocation of objects and agents that were generally not present to allow confirmation/disconfirmation of the claims (Saddam, WMDs, The Republican Guard)—a rhetoric which he sees as an extension of the broader rhetoric of hauntingly absent agents (such as Bin Laden and Al Qaeda) in the war on terror story (http://www.johnquiggin.blogspot.com/2003_03_30_johnquiggin_archive.html).

In such an environment of incomplete or withheld information, some rumour bordered on conspiracy theory, such as speculations that oil or profit was the hidden motive for U.S. aggression, or that evidence about weapon’s of mass destruction was fabricated (e.g. Henley, March 16).

As Seipp (43) notes, news-oriented blogs regularly point out ‘logical flaws, incorrect facts and occasionally the self-important approach of the reporter’. This could be a routine matter of upbraiding a writer for misleading word choice (see Henley, March 30) or for errors of fact (e.g. ‘Fisk’s record of perfection continues’ http://www.snappingturtle.net/flit/archives/2003_04.html). Bloggers often isolate magnify and unpack fallacies. One of Christopher Allbritton’s preoccupations is deconstructing the rhetoric of G.W. Bush. In a post-war entry he seizes upon Bush’s recent comment (made in the presence of U.N. Secretary General, Kofi Annan) that ‘The larger point is, and the fundamental question is, did Saddam Hussein have a weapons program? And the answer is, absolutely. And we gave him a chance to allow
the inspectors in, and he wouldn’t let them in.’ Allbritton makes the rebuttal with relish, reminding readers of Hans Blix’s existence, and then delights in referring to other witty media refutations. However, he puts most of his energy into admonishing both the U.S. news corps, most of whom failed to pick up on the comment, and White House Press Secretaries who serve to obfuscate any critique by explaining that the President meant something else by the words (http://www.back-to-iraq.com/ July 15, 2003).

Of course, supporters of the war played an equivalent game, often critiquing what they saw as political correctness, liberal bias, or bias towards Hussein or the ‘Arab’ case. In line with the U.S. government, some also critiqued Arab media such as Al-Jazeera (see for example www.littlegreenfootball.com/weblog; conversely http://abuaardvark.blogspot.com/ seems to specialise in defending the Arab media). Bloggers even coined the term ‘fisking’ to refer to rebuttals of anything written by Robert Fisk, Middle East Correspondent of the Independent (London) and vociferous opponent of the war. Andrew Sullivan, one of the most prolific and acerbic of the prominent right-wingers rechristened the BBC the Baghdad Broadcasting Corporation for their apparent bias towards the Iraqi government. He also satirically conferred ‘awards’ to journalists for various kinds of anti-war bias in reporting (AndrewSullivan.com, see early April).

Indeed, irony is one of the supreme figures of the blogosphere, as personalised commentary on re-mediated content often involves a kind of comparison between other ways of representing something and the given author’s spin on it. The achievement of irony is often a product of the blogger’s research skill in finding and referring to online counterexamples that recontextualise, and usually contradict, an opposing position. Along these lines, one blogger inveighs against ‘the Chickenhawk brigades’ who rant about ‘Saddam's brutal regime’, by noting that the US included Uzbekistan in its coalition of the willing, and then quoting directly from a US State Department assessment of the country which shows it to exemplify qualities antithetical to those used to legitimate Operation Iraqi Freedom: ‘Uzbekistan does not have a free press, and it does not have a democracy. Political opponents have been driven from office. Many have fled, and others have been arrested. Some have been murdered in detention. The police force and the intelligence service use torture as a routine investigation technique’ (http://www.dailykos.com/archives/002116.html#002116 author’s emphasis).

Although most blogging is writing, visual irony is also regularly used to pithy effect. ‘Hesiod’ shows an old photo of a beaming Donald Rumsfeld shaking hands with Saddam Hussein, which he interprets as ‘Rumsfeld expressing his heartfelt, and sincere concern for the plight of the Iraqi people’ (http://counterspin.blogspot.com/2003_07_27_counterspin_archive.html). To a more disturbing end, Gene Healy shows a photo of 12-year old Ali Ismail Abbas, who lost both his limbs and his family in a bombing raid, which providing a link that congratulates Sony for applying to trademark ‘Shock and Awe’ for a video game title (http://www.affbrainwash.com/genehealy/archives/005593.php).
THE INEVITABLE QUESTION

It would be all too easy to suggest a simple binary contrast between blog coverage and mainstream media coverage of the Second Gulf War, with the former (especially TV) favouring spectacle and official discourses, the latter deliberation, critique and unbridled personal perspectives. While the distinction may hold at the broadest level, it is important to note that most warblogging, as a popular activity, depends upon the re-mediation of mainstream media content. The personal slants that together amount to a new form of public discussion depend upon the existence of a professional media with privileged access to physical events and primary sources. Bloggers seize upon the narratives that such a media creates and circulates, rather than creating an altogether alternative sphere of news and views (*REF to work in press).

The inevitable question, then, is ‘so what’? Why should anyone care that a few million people conduct their discussion of current affairs on the Web, rather than / as well as, around the water cooler? One response is that blogging is part of a personal publishing revolution of the kind that noted IT columnist Dan Gillmor believes is leading to the emergence of the “we media” (Hammersley 2002). This involves the social redistribution of the task of news production, with the potential that digital technologies (especially mobile ones) will ultimately allow citizens to cover and publish online about important events that they experience, thus enhancing democracy. In this scenario, Salam Pax—who it must be said, only achieved star status because of the novelty of what he did—is a sign of things to come.

As a counter to such enthusiasm, it is chastening to remember how almost every new media technology, including radio, TV and the telephone has been seen as the saviour of democratic communication at some time or another. A more nuanced approach is offered by Phil Agre (1998), who acknowledges that the Net may sustain a wide range of genres that fit into people’s lives in a variety of ways, but still notes that differences in media may have a significant impact upon the politics of communication when made meaningful by actual use. There is still a fundamental sense in which ‘anybody with a computer and some basic skills (admittedly with significant fixed costs of both production and consumption) can create content for the Internet, but hardly anyone can create content for television, but hardly anyone can create content for television (and only under a great mass of constraints)” (96). And it is important to think through such popular access to media production if we accept that ‘broad access to the means of collective cognition’ is a core democratic value (95).

In the case of blogging, this also means thinking through the relationship between bloggers and the professional media. As shown by Kim and Weaver’s meta-analysis, democratic theory is more applied to Internet research than any other theory (except general ‘uses and gratifications’ approaches) (2002). However, much work on digital democracy all too easily lapses into technoutopian ‘direct democracy’ discourses (Graham and Hearn, 2001). The suggestion is that digital communication between citizens will significantly reduce the influence of all kinds of intermediaries (journalists, political parties, politicians) who currently shape democratic processes (Jankowski and Selm, 2000: 151). Rather than adopting this logic of substitution, it may be more apt to think of bloggers as new intermediaries, who add their influence into the existing messy mix of voices and actors that constitute democratic milieux. In
their analysis of Web news, Burnett and Marshall refer to Christopher Lasch’s paradoxical observation that ‘What democracy requires is public debate, and not information. Of course, it needs information, too, but the kind of information it needs can be generated only by vigorous popular debate’ (quoted in Burnett and Marshall, 2003: 160). Like many, I still believe that there is something to be said for the role of the Fourth Estate in democracy—with its professional standards in newsgathering and fact-checking—for both providing information and catalysing debate. As McChesney notes, the self-publication activities of part-time amateur online elites are no neat substitute for professionally trained and resourced journalists (1999: 176). But when the news media fall asleep at the wheel, or structural influences (such as the current economics of news production) detract from its watchdog role, the popular scrutiny of current affairs and communication flows by bloggers, especially in the politically charged context of war, has invigorated public debate. Although it is uncertain what overall influence the blogosphere has had upon politicians, the formation of public opinion, or the course of the war, it is at least clear that it is allowing citizens voices to carry in ways that they have not before.

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2 Space permits only a brief thumbnail sketch of weblogging as a general activity. Further elaboration may be found in The Weblog Handbook, which is written by seasoned blogger Rebecca Blood (2002).

3 Some use the term warblog to refer only to ‘hawkish’ blogs that support the War on Terror. However, it is now becoming used to refer to any weblog that provides consistent commentary on post-9/11 international current affairs.