

**Politics for Consumption:  
How war bloggers feed the spectacle**

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Digital Dissent Panel

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In 2003 and 2004, in the months after the US invaded Iraq, a proliferation of and war blogs sprang up: soldiers' blogs, anti-war activists' blogs, liberal and conservative political pundits blogging about the war, independent journalists blogs, Arabists and Middle East specialists blogging about the war, and Iraqis themselves, blogging about the impact of invasion, their attitudes toward their former dictator and their newfound liberator or – as time went on – their newfound oppressor – and their hopes and dreams for their country.

The proliferation of blogs and the rapid expansion of the blogosphere – Technorati is now tracking over 108.6 million blogs – was not limited to sites about the war or about politics, of course. Far from it. But Web 2.0, and the newfound accessibility of blogging software seemed to offer all these different people a way of telling their versions of the war, and of contesting the mainstream media's account of the most significant imperial invasion of the new century. And as such, the development was widely heralded – in the mainstream press and in the blogosphere itself -- as the diverse expression of a newfound media democracy that might break the hegemonic role of the mainstream, corporate owned, monopolistic US reporting on the war in which the narrative was tightly controlled by the dovetailing interests of the political administration commanding it and a corporate elite that was profiting handsomely from it.

But did it? Did the proliferation of websites result in a more challenging, more democratic, more informed political debate about the ongoing occupation in the United States? More importantly still, give the costs of the occupation – well over 650,000 Iraqi lives, 4.2million Iraqis displaced, 3,857 US soldiers dead, not to mention the regional implications of deadly, complex, and avoidable civil war – did it translate into collective political action, or even provide a context in which to figure out what effective political action in the heart of Empire might could be? Or did all the blogging simply reiterate and amplify the war as spectacle, as expression commodified for consumption as an end in itself. (Society of the Spectacle, 42)

In the course of our research the Rethinking Media and Democracy Project, we read and analyzed the blogs of over 65 bloggers who blogged about the invasion and/or the occupation, and conducted in-depth interviews with ten of them “political”. In a series of questions, we asked them to describe their blogging, why they did it, and the impact they believed them to have, within the blogosphere, on the mainstream media, and in the offline world.

Overwhelmingly, whether from the right or the left, from the belly of the imperial beast or the heart of Babylon burning, from inside the military or from the anti-occupation movement, they told us through their blogs and in conversation, that they were blogging out of dissatisfaction with the mainstream media. They were doing it because the mainstream or corporate media wasn't telling the real story – or the “truth” -- about the war. Many North American bloggers on the right said the mainstream media wasn't telling enough of the positive stories about the US military's work in Baghdad. Many on the Left said the mainstream media wasn't telling us just how awful the occupation was. Iraqis (who held a range of different positions on the occupation and on the former regime, but who generally became more pessimistic as the occupation went on into 2004 and 2005) said they wanted to tell their own story to the public behind their invaders. Some of the more sophisticated academic types told us that perhaps the mainstream media was doing an ok job reporting on stories, but their framing was all wrong, it was contextless, it was superficial, and they were trying to contribute to correcting it.

We found that they often understood their blogging in terms of two very different types of politics, and two different models of democracy. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri sketch these contrasting types when they glossing Debord's “spectacle” to describe the depoliticization of day-to-day life that it effects in contemporary society:

In the society of the spectacle, what was once imagined as the public sphere, the open terrain of political exchange and participation, completely evaporates. The spectacle destroys any collective form of sociality – individualizing social actors in their separate automobiles and in front of separate video screens – and at the same time imposes a new mass sociality, a new uniformity of thought and action.

In this society, “Political discourse is an articulated sales pitch, and political participation is reduced to selecting among consumable images.” A public sphere in which politics is an activity in which people participate together, exchanging, dialoguing, debating, and creating the best possible way of living together is contrasted with a sphere in which once political communities are atomized, individuals isolated. The very activities that were constitutive of political practice are abstracted from day-to-day practice, commodified and projected for consumption.

The bloggers we read and spoke with often articulated implicit models of democracy that correspond to these two types of politics -- models we might describe in shorthand as town hall democracy and mega-store democracy.

In the mega-store model, democracy is equated with a proliferation of voices, and broad range and diversity of opinions are displayed. In this model, bloggers emphasized the wide range of different choices online, and the unlimited freedom of expression that blogging allowed for as ends in themselves:

“I think the main value is it brings more voices to the table. Like by comparison to corporate media where they pretend that there’s maybe two sides to every argument, which is ridiculous.” (Dahr Jamail, Iraq Dispatches)

Bloggers, journalists, and casual readers are free to browse and consume and enjoy the one(s) they like. And the end goal is less demanding than earnest political debate. As one blogger described her experience of the blogosphere: “You have a lot of people wagging their tongues and spouting off. It might be totally down a rabbit hole, making no sense at all or be very poorly expressed or be incredibly well expressed but a complete line of BS,” said one of our interviewees. “But it’s what you get with a democracy. It’s messy, it’s not always fun, but frankly it is fairly entertaining.” There is little here in the way of hope that blog posts will impact either the mainstream media or the offline world – whether by effecting a shift in government policy, or helping to provoke a movement into action. Political practise is abstracted and reduced to (broad)casting political opinion and sentiment out into the ether – opinion that is commodified for consumption as entertainment, or in the case of some of the bloggers we interviewed, for the purposes of professional advancement.

Blogging, and the proliferation of commentary on the web helps to cultivate a sense of remove and of disengagement from the political crises of the day, and even more so from the kinds of organizing, struggle and social movements that might meet those crises – and ironically, this distancing takes place as the technology it relies on transcends the actual geographical distances and boundaries that might, in an earlier era, allowed North Americans to be blissfully unaware of the war going on the other side of the planet. It really does recall Debord’s description of the society of the spectacle “which eliminates geographical distance” as it “reproduces distance internally as spectacular separation” (Society of the Spectacle, 167).

Despite the plethora of voices it encourages, the mega-mart model arguably encourages the “echochamber” in the blogosphere—a reiteration of mainstream media reports in blog posts, the majority of which do not contribute many new “facts” or analysis to a conversation – a conversation which anyway is unimportant. Only posting is important. “The “echochamber” effect allows readers to gravitate to blogs that suit their pre-conceived political views, and filter most other things out. One of the bloggers we interviewed described “the kind of blogging where people are just reinforcing their prejudices and their ideologies and echoing each other, attacking the enemy.” By reposting links to mainstream and alternative articles, op-eds, and video clips as well as other blog posts, they reaffirm their own political and social identity, branding themselves, and marshal their diversity (or at least, their vast number) into “a new uniformity.”

But many bloggers we interviewed disputed the megagmart model of democracy and instead saw in the blogosphere the emergence of a -- potentially international -- “town hall”: a public forum in which judgments and opinions are rigorously debated.

These bloggers, scattered across the political spectrum, describe their work as participation in a conversation. As one contributor to a prominent US military blog put it, “When you’ve got people who take the time to be almost relentlessly informed on issues and then are willing to debate those issues in the public forum, you’ve got some sort of community. And I think there’s a lot of people out there with the same view as mine: I want to look at what I think, and I want to know what other smart people think about that. And I want to take their views about that and use it to shape mine.”

And a left wing anti-war, anti-imperialist blogger on the other end of the spectrum – and an editor of ZNet, which many of you will be familiar with -- told us that blogging has changed his awareness of “how one might try to impact a political conversation... It is [an] accumulation of little things, little comments, that come from a consistent perspective and a chance to have an on-going conversation with lots of people.”

This model of democracy has little in common with shopping; rather, it involves engaged dialogue, debate, and a collective and sustained search for “truth.”

Bloggers who view democracy as a conversation tended to believe that even by “merely” by commenting (albeit in thoughtful and original ways) they can help impact public perception by fact checking and reframing government, corporate, and attendant mainstream media spin. Indeed, in spite of the fact that they cite, repost and link to it almost constantly, bloggers show little deference for traditional mainstream media. As our military blogger put it, the mainstream media “used to be priests on high dispensing their knowledge to the unwashed masses.” But now “we fact check the crap out of them. And if they’re lying, it’s going to come out.” Mainstream media, in the words of another blogger, are “watching their back a little more because they know they’re going to get caught out if they do anything egregious.”

Still, the question remains: so what? Is fact-checking, debating and reframing enough? Who reads? Who hears? And then, most importantly, who cares and does anything? Does online debate, no matter how earnest and how engaged, really translate into what Hardt and Negri term the “constituent activity” proper to militant activity (and what I think Debord referred to as “practical thought”)? For those of us who were part of the anti-war movement that has fizzled since the invasion of Iraq, and especially for those of us who were media activists, bloggers, or independent journalists – at the same time as Web 2.0 exploded and war blogs proliferated – it’s a bruising, humbling and still perplexing question. As the war drums roll again, this time with contested claims about Iranian intervention in Iraq, will the robust blogosphere “fact-check the crap out” out of Bush administration claims about Iranian weapons supplies, and about its relationships to the insurgencies in Iraq, the regime in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Islamist and Arab movements around the world? And even if it does, will this democratic online media production mobilize enough public protest in the United States and around the world not only to be heard (or to project a large enough spectacle to convince people it is worth consuming) but to effect a shift in foreign policy...this time?

Much has been made of the fear that online activism is supplanting offline political action. Yet our research suggests that bloggers who view media democracy on the town hall model are also likely to be engaged in offline political activism. Our survey of 157 bloggers and independent viral video producers shows that online activity may even be helping to increase offline political engagement. (Survey results indicated that that 52% of those surveyed agree that, “My online political activity has caused me to take action in my local community (e.g., protest, boycott, etc.)” Since becoming active online, 29.3% of those we surveyed say they are “more active in ‘offline’ political activities,” and 63.1% “spend about the same amount of time in ‘offline’ political activities.” 59.5% say that, “My online participation in political forums has led me to join at least one political gathering or protest.”) So I am not arguing that online activity is siphoning individuals out of corporeal activism and organizing.

Moreover, several of the bloggers we spoke with were very clear that they viewed blogging as part of a process of mobilizing political activity and opposition offline. As one blogger on a far-left site put it, “I try not to view myself or my blog as part of the blogosphere per se but as reaching out to PEOPLE. [...] I’m attempting to influence people – I’m not just attempting to influence them when they’re online, I’m attempting to influence them for their entire lives.”

But the question is, can you do this by posting to your blog? Most seem to assume (or simply to hope) that by or putting “the facts” or “the truth” out there, or by arriving at it in the course of online discussion or collaborative fact-checking, that they will mobilize their audience to some kind [oppositional/protest] of action.

We recently encountered the correlate of this belief when we went to see Brian De Palma’s new film *Redacted*, based on the rape and murder of a fourteen year-old Iraqi girl and her family by US soldiers in Haditha in 2006. DePalma constructed the film to appear to be cut together from fragments of online and independent media sources: a French indy doc about a checkpoint, soldiers’ emails home, a video made by one of the soldiers, blog posts from military wives and anti-war activists. In the question and answer period after the screening, DePalma said he made it out of the conviction that the mainstream media is not showing the US public about the war in Iraq, because if Americans saw what was really going on they would be out in the streets protesting in the millions. But his own method highlights an obvious problem with that assumption. He claimed that he gathered all the research for the film online, which suggests that it is as just as available to a great majority of other US Americans as it is to him. The reality is that people DO read plenty of stories and see plenty of images that describe life in occupied Iraq in agonizing detail. But so what? Do they get angry? Does it seem unjust to them? And if so, do they mobilize, organize, for the kind of struggle that can force a government to back down, to withdraw troops, to stop torturing, or contracting to private militias, or rewriting oil laws to privatize the occupied country’s resources? In most cases, obviously, people don’t.

Now I am not arguing that what is posted and circulated in the blogosphere never makes any difference, particularly to the mainstream media. It does. In my experience,

journalists do watch and read blogs, carefully selected, to figure out who the experts are, what expert opinion is saying, to figure out what the “people on the ground” are saying, to search for guests and novelty, sometimes for context and depth. And sometimes a well-researched blog report can cause a splash – and some discomfort within the US administration or the military.

For example, bloggers’ attention to reports that the US military had used illegal phosphorus weapons during the November 2004 siege of Fallujah, and on-the-ground reporting by blogger/journalist Dahr Jamail of Iraq Dispatches, pushed the story to prominence in the UK Independent. The reports forced the Pentagon to admit that white phosphorus had in fact been used in Fallujah. “All the information came from bloggers, came from people doing things like finding government documents, finding instances where soldiers admitted in filed manuals that they used it and what it looked like, and that the call sign was Whiskey P,” said a blogger who helped investigate the story.

Zeyad of Healing Iraq blogged about the fact that his cousin and cousin’s friend had been forced to dive into a river in Samarra at gunpoint by US soldiers. The friend drowned to death. Zeyad’s posts were noticed by New York Times journalists, who investigated the story. Ultimately the attention to case forced the military to investigate. “I don’t really remember how the investigation ended,” Zeyad told me, “but I think that two of them were imprisoned for six months, and the other two were reprimanded or something like that.”

But often this doesn’t happen, and even when it does, the ramifications are minimal – the kind of minor admissions and negligible administrative punishments and regulations that are all a government needs to do to save face, in the absence of an powerful, militant social movement. A blogger we interviewed made this point in a post title “What makes a scandal scandalous”, posted on May 7, 2004, about a week and a half after the first photos of the US soldiers torturing detainees at Abu Ghraib prison were released:

Journalists sometimes believe that if some explosive piece of information were to reach the public, that something would happen. Or that if it were to reach the media, they'd break the story and something would happen. But there's plenty of explosive information reaching the media all the time. They don't bother to pick it up and often when they do, there's no reaction from the public.

I suppose if I understood scandals better, I'd set about trying to make scandals out of the many scandalous events that go on constantly.

In the deluge of information and image circulating, how to create a scandal? This is a question that many online media producers and journalists struggle with, whatever their political tendencies. On a day to day basis, like bloggers most of us operate on faith – hoping, believing in spite of all evidence, that we are contributing something worthwhile to the deluge of media and communication that will move people to greater political awareness, understanding and action, both online and off. But my growing sense is that

the answer to the question not only “how to make a scandal” but “how to create the political context and the social movements which will force government administrations and institutions respond to the scandal” is not to be found in the realm of online media. Jennifer Dean makes a convincing argument for this in her discussion of “communicative capitalism”<sup>1</sup> in which both townhall democracy and the marketplace converge (and which Megan referenced earlier).

With Dean, I suspect that for media democracy to be of any genuine political value offline, a politicization process for those who will receive and respond to the message has to take place in a context of genuine political struggle. Blogging may be able to contribute in small ways to that politicization process through “that accumulation of little things, little comments” that help to reframe narratives of war and power, but it is far from sufficient.

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<sup>1</sup> Communicative capitalism designates that form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technologies.<sup>1</sup> Ideals of access, inclusion, discussion, and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications, and interconnections of global telecommunications. But instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world’s peoples.