

Why politicians should have blogs ?

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1. To get closer to their audience, their supporters

There are not many ways you can currently talk to a politician leader. You can probably listen to him doing a speech somewhere or on mainstream media, on TV, but interacting with him is difficult. He is usually not accessible, his diary looks terrible, when he walks in a market place he is always surrounded by many people. Difficult to get your message to him and even more difficult to start a discussion with him. When he starts blogging and of course if he leaves his comments open, anybody can post a note on his blog, react to his ideas, start their own discussions.

2. To create a permanent open debate with them

The reason why discussions on blogs are different is that they are public. It is like in a political meeting, if you can finally manage to get your voice heard and the politician is on stage, your question is public. It makes a big difference. If there are many people in the room, he has to answer. Here is another big difference to stay on this political conference questions analogy. Most of the time, there are so many people in the room that you are lucky to get the right to ask one question, he has to answer, but then it stops there, they move to another question and for sure, you had more things to say, many people in the room had also probably comments to make on the question you raised. You had an opportunity to start a discussion not only with the politician, but with the whole room, but it will not start because mainly of time. On blogs, there are no space or time issues, the discussion can run for ever and remains always public, so it gets more interesting. If the debate gets hot, the leader will have to come back on the comments and say something, otherwise just saying nothing can be seen as not having any answer or comment about it.

André Santini, one of the leaders of the central-right UDF party in France, has been using Emergent Democracy tools for a long time in France, forums, chats a chat example, sms and wikis with his team. Of course, André Santini also has a weblog André Santini's blog but looking at his Internet website and regional campaign website that I are quite institutional, the weblog is hidden in a submenu and André Santini does not post very regularly yet on it, without asking many questions to bloggers and readers. The result is a weblog with few comments for the time being and few discussions starting on it.

3. To test their ideas easily and quickly, to enrich them and get new ones

Blogging an idea for a political leader is a very fast way to get feedback. [Dominique Strauss-Kahn](#), former Ministry of Finance in France and one of the key leaders of the French Socialist Party (PS), posted a note on Arnold Schwarzenegger banning gay weddings in California recently and asked the French readers of his blog what they thought about it. DSK as we call him got more than one hundred comments on his blog bost from people in favor of gay weddings and people against it. They suggested him to read good press articles about it, expressed their views, started a discussion. By reading this for sure DSK's own ideas about it got richer, the feedback was immediate without any logistics involved. Of course one may argue that only the people using the Internet can react. That is right, but fortunately the penetration is getting higher and higher, we have more than twenty people on-line in France and France is one of the least Internet connected country in Europe (-Internet penetration in Nordic countries, anybody ?)

Nobody can pretend that they know everything one hundred people know about a subject, to get back to DSK's note example. The ideas get richer through permanent conversations and written comments even if these are against the original thoughts.

4. To switch the way they talk to people usually from institutional to more personal

Jean-François Copé who is the current French Government's spokesperson and right wing (UMP) candidate to the regional elections, started his blog by posting press releases. I could convince him to open the comments field and leave it open. He got flamed in the beginning quite strongly by bloggers and blog readers telling him he should not communicate this way. People do not want press releases on blogs. They want the politician's voice, exactly as if they were meeting him in person. They want his ideas, his feelings, his humour, his "Etats d'âme". It took some time, but Jean-François Copé and his team got it more and more, they started posting personal feelings, personal comments, and stopped posting institutional communication. This is very new. This is not about a political speech that has been reviewed by ten people, it is about what Jean-François Copé can actually write himself, directly, to the people who want to read him and start talking to him. You have to blog like you talk, otherwise it looks fake and bloggers notice it immediately. The worse thing that happened was that just one day before the regional elections Jean-François Copé abandoned his blog, the last note is a cemetery of the blog, with [more than 160 comments](#) from visitors making fun of him. This is of course terrible as his blog is still number one in Google for his name...

5. To better understand the criticism of the people against their ideas

Jean-François Copé's blog is the blog that got the highest number of opponents commenting. My take is that he is both a candidate at the Regional elections and the Government spokesperson which does not help him much. He has been very courageous to leave the comments of the sharper criticisms online. I cannot quote any other experiment that is close to this. Wait a second, Jean-François Copé is a well known political leader and he helps his opponents by leaving their notes on his own blog ! This is courageous, but it would actually be better if he would answer them more, I guess this is a question of investing more time into the weblog and it will come. This is all very new in France. Reading the opponents' voice is actually very interesting, to understand them and better reply.

6. To spread their ideas easily if they are supported by many people, in a decentralized way

André Santini has a section on his campaign site called "Your Weblogs" and André Santini points to blogging solutions to encourage his readers to start their own. This is of course a good way of having supporters blog appearing and talking about his campaign, linking to his blog notes. Unfortunately, listing the friends blogs in a list we call blogrolling is not yet used very much and there are very few people in France for the time being that dare to expose in public their ideas to support a candidate. It will change. We will probably see hundreds of supporters weblogs like Howard Dean had for his campaign, but we are not quite there yet. The politician leaders blogs will link into them and get a lot of audience from them.

7. To raise funds for their cause, party or campaign

I do not know of any experience in Europe of successful political funds raising on the Internet. André Santini has a page where he asks for donations but there is no online payment, it has to be done by paper cheque which is far from being online donations of course, mainly due to French law. This will change in the future.

Unfortunately, I do not know any major political funds raising that happened in Europe, very different to what happened with Howard Dean in the US.

8. To reach a younger audience and help young people get more interested in politics

The Internet is the medium of the young, not only of course, but it is mostly used in Europe by less than 35 years old people. The trend in politics is that less and less young people are actually interested by politics just looking at the higher abstention rate. Giving them an opportunity to start discussions and participate rather than listen to a speech or a TV show gets them more interested into politics. I believe the future candidates who will get it will gather many new votes from them.

9. To create around them network effects

Blogs spread the word bottom-up, not top-down like traditional media. Information spreads fast only if it is interesting, otherwise it stays dead. Information spreads by bloggers linking into it (and standard Internet sites of course) and sending their audience where it originated. The tools that measure these network effects are new kind of search engines that measure the number of links either to a page or to a site. I have been watching on a permanent manner what Technorati, one of these search engines, calls the cosmos of the French politicians blogs. Anybody can measure very fast how authoritative a politician is through his blog and how fast his ideas spread. Another way of measuring network effects of a politician of course is his rankings in Google on some search words (his name, his ideas, his political party, etc). I am not going to give a ranking here but what is interesting is that in a search on these politicians names, the blogs of their most authoritative supporters or opponents appear very often on the first page, sometimes before their own site or blog.

10. To become famous if you are an unknown politician, or to start a political action, even locally

Christophe Grébert blogs on monputeaux.com. He is a citizen of the city Puteaux, close to Paris. Christophe does not like the way the city mayor manages the city, spends the public money and says it on his blog, every day. He has been very successful doing that, with hundreds of inhabitants of Puteaux reading and commenting his blog everyday and many national newspapers that talked about his blog.

Christophe criticizes the city management so much that they have tried to stop him for months, the city mayor has even sent him threats over the phone that he recorded and blogged, of course. He has recently been stopped in the street by the Police Municipale (the local French Police) who tried to arrest him for his blogging. Fortunately for Christophe, the National Police arrived immediately as they found what was happening weird, and let him go.

Christophe was also finally sued by the City Mayor for his blogging, we do not know the outcome yet but I see no reason why he would lose this battle, he just expresses his views. His blogs gets more and more popular and I would not be surprised if Christophe would start getting more involved in local politics thanks to the audience and support his blog provided him with.

I am sure we will continue to see unknown people appear from nowhere, starting playing a significant role in local and one day national politics, as blogs get more and more popular. Blogs give a voice to people, to anybody, and the best news is that the Young people get more and more interested in Politics with them