Bloggers around the world produce material for local, national, and international audiences, yet they are developing in ways that are distinct from the U.S. model. Through case studies of blogs written in English, Chinese, Arab, French, Russian, and Hebrew, this book explores the way blogging is being conceptualized in different cultural contexts. The authors move beyond the most highly trafficked sites to shed light on larger developments taking place online, calling into question assumptions that form the foundation of much of what we read on blogging and, by extension, on global amateur or do-it-yourself media. This book suggests a more nuanced approach to understanding how blogospheres serve communication needs, how they exist in relation to one another, where they exist apart as well as where they overlap, and how they interact with other forms of communication in the larger media landscape.

"*International Blogging* is a timely and important contribution to contemporary debates over the role of blogging in public life, and the international spread of digital culture. The case studies are not only captivating, but provide unique access to the content and context of blogging in other national contexts. By showcasing the voices from other countries and other languages, this book enriches our view of the diversity of online participation and expression." —MIZUKO ITO, RESEARCH SCIENTIST, INSTITUTE FOR MULTIMEDIA LITERACY, SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

"Blogging has usually been examined in the context of its origins in the U.S. This volume includes an impressive and incisive collection of case studies from around the world that show a much broader view of the way blogging has affected different cultures around the world. Blogging is not just a technological, social, political, economic, or cultural phenomenon, but one that combines all of these contexts—and as this volume illustrates, the activity takes on different nuance, impact, and potential in different parts of the world." —HOWARD RHEINGOLD, AUTHOR OF *SMART MOBS* AND *THE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY*

"Anyone who is working for greater human rights and more democratic practices among the world's communities would do well to read this book, as its esteemed international contributors effectively map the emerging online communication landscape and the influence of both new and old sources of power within it." —LYNN SCHOFIELD CLARK, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND DIRECTOR, ESTLOW INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR JOURNALISM AND NEW MEDIA

Digital Formations

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INTERNATIONAL BLOGGING

Identity, Politics, and Networked Publics

RUSSELL
ECHCHAIBI

Peter Lang

INTERNATIONAL
BLOGGING

IDENTITY,

POLITICS,

AND NETWORKED

PUBLICS

ADRIENNE RUSSELL ● NABIL ECHCHAIBI

Blogs AS Public Property Media

Defining the Roles and Assessing the Influence of Political Blogging in Israel

CARMEL L. VAISMAN

Recently, researchers have been engaged in mapping emerging relationships between the mass media, the political sphere, and the blogosphere (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Lowrey, 2006; Robinson, 2006). Among these efforts, studies of American blogs engaged in random acts of journalism have been conceptualized as a form of participatory journalism (Caroll, 2004; Gallo, 2004; Gill, 2004). Indeed, this view was supported by a report that 34 percent of American bloggers see their blog as a form of journalism rather than as a personal diary (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006).

An additional approach seeks to understand the influence of American blogs in relation to their impact on national mass media practices and politicians. For example, anecdotal evidence has been used to assess the role of blogs in the resignations of Dan Rather of CBS and Eason Jordan of CNN (Johnson, 2006; Lowrey, 2006) or uncovering the Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair and the resignation of Senator Trent Lott (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Gill, 2004; Johnson, 2006), following facts uncovered by bloggers. Further, there is evidence of an increasing number of politicians who interact with their voters directly as bloggers and as blog readers (Adamic & Glance, 2005). Despite increasing blog readership, these analyses suggest that while such blog influence is due to successful interaction with national mainstream mass media, it has only a short-term impact.

Accordingly, a number of key questions remain open: What are the media roles and functions performed by blogs? Is it possible that blogs will achieve an independent media status?

With these studies and questions in mind, this chapter presents an analysis of political blogging in Israel. Such a case study of the roles and impact of blogs is insightful because Israeli political blogs have limited interaction with national mainstream mass media.

This chapter is informed by participant observations and anecdotal evidence from the Israeli blogosphere conducted by the author as an active participant-observer during the years 2003–2007. The case study presented analyzes three leading political blogs in the Hebrew-language blogosphere, along with observations about the small English-language Israeli-based blogosphere. Data collection included structured interviews with founders of these blogs as well as analysis of the blogging efforts undertaken by a few members of the Israeli parliament (the Knesset). My goal has been to examine and to assess the roles and the influence of these blogging efforts.

A Brief History of the Israeli Blogosphere

Israel was an early adopter and a hotbed of cutting-edge technologies and Internet applications, such as instant messaging (ICQ), Firewall (CheckPoint), disk-on-key technology and so forth. In 2006, 3.9 million Israeli residents were connected to the Internet (52% of the population); 72 percent of the Jewish households were connected, 94 percent of them by fast cable or ADSL connection (Koren-Diner, 2006). And yet, the evolution and popularization of the Hebrew blogosphere remain underdeveloped and consist of as few as 50,000 active blogs.[2] This may be one reason why blog-related issues have not yet been surveyed as a nationwide phenomenon. The blog phenomenon formally emerged in the Israeli Web-sphere in August 2001 with the creation of *Isra-blog*, a Hebrew blog-hosting Web site that remains the largest popular blog-hosting Web site in Israel today. Before 2001, Internet-savvy practitioners were already writing English-language blogs on international Web sites or opened scattered personal blogs in Hebrew on private domains. As a result, when *Isra-blog* was founded it was populated largely by adolescents.

In March 2003, the desire to function according to the American blogging model led a group of Net veterans to create *Notes*, a Hebrew blog-hosting Web site that one can join only when invited or reviewed and approved by the founders. The idea was to attract local elites from various fields to blog by creating a "lab experiment" of the desired genre. At present *Notes* hosts 182 blogs.

In 2005, the second popular Hebrew blog-hosting Web site, *Tapuz's Blogosphere*, evolved from active online communities and forums. During 2006, two bloggers vol-

untarily translated the Wordpress[3] template into Hebrew, enabling the populariza-
tion of independent blogs in Hebrew. This resulted in the creation of a third
Hebrew blog-hosting Web site, *Blogli,* that is Wordpress-based. In addition, *Kipa*
[skullcap], a Web portal for the online religious community hosts 30 blogs by writ-
ers invited from this community.

Isra-blog and *Tapuz's Blogosphere* currently contain 85 percent of the Hebrew
blog corpus. In August 2006, *Isra-blog* reported 74 percent of its bloggers were under
the age of 17 and *Tapuz's Blogosphere* reported 51 percent were under the age of 20.
Recently, *The Marker* financial magazine created a social network including blog-
ging options that is gradually attracting additional audiences from the business com-
munity to the blogosphere.

Most blogs were produced as personal diaries or fictional literature genres over
the course of the first few years of the Israeli blogosphere. *Israelis in the Dark*, writ-
ten by Ofer Landa—a self-proclaimed right-wing Orthodox Jew and computer
engineer—was the first politically oriented blog. In February 2003, Landa sent a stri-
dent email to each of the 120 members of the Knesset blaming them personally for
the disintegration of the Israeli social infrastructure. Landa posted the letter on his
blog and called for other bloggers to take similar action.

Landa's initiative was met with cynicism that turned into enthusiasm when
seven personal responses were received from leading Knesset members, including
one phone call asking for Landa's policy suggestions. A few other bloggers showed
support by emailing Landa's blog link to Knesset members who had not yet respond-
ed to the letter. As a result of this extraordinary initiative, one Knesset member,
Avshalom Vilan of the Meretz Party (left-wing)[4] subscribed to Landa's blog. Landa
created the first direct contact between bloggers and politicians, establishing a suc-
cessful model for blogger activism that was later adopted by *Black Labor,* one of the
blogs analyzed in this chapter. Ehud Yatom of Likud party (moderate right-wing),
the first Knesset member who attempted to blog, was in fact inspired by this
interaction.

Local popular aggregation indexes, *Politinet* and *Shama*, that reflect the daily
agenda of the Hebrew blogosphere, list approximately 250 bloggers who often
write about political and social issues within their personal blog. An examination
of the popular topics addressed shows Hebrew bloggers relate mainly to local polit-
ical, economical, and social issues. Much less attention is addressed to security or
matters related to the Occupied Territories, topics covered extensively by national
and international mass media. These submissions react to mass media stories and
rarely present original ones.

The Hebrew blogosphere is a closed homogenous community. The majority of
those leaving comments on blogs are fellow bloggers. The entire phenomenon has
little resonance outside the blogosphere. Since online writing represents both writ-

ing and speech, it is hard to measure and debate if political posts on blogs are like mass media opinion columns or conversations with friends that preach to us, hoping to experience catharsis.

Landa's attempts to engage in direct blogger-politician dialogue were unique until last year, following the 2006 elections, when the Israeli blogosphere witnessed the creation of three blogs divorced from the personal journal genre whose sole purpose was to involve other bloggers in a continuous political agenda: *Peer Pressure*, written by two journalists, offered a counter reading of news and events that sought to expose the faults of the social and political system; *Black Labor,* written by 30 journalists and activists, sought to create an active online community of Labor Party voters; and *KnessetWatch* offered participants an opportunity to engage in participatory legislative critique.

Although any form of blogging could be conceptualized as political in the general sense, I restricted myself in this study to blogs that could be compared with American political blogs from a mass media perspective, while conforming to traditional definitions of online political participation (Norris, 2001): that is, they involve a degree of congregation, a particular contact with the political sphere or protest politics. *Peer Pressure* and *Black Labor* are considered by bloggers and computer and Internet media channels as the leading political blogs in Israel and are often cited as the only examples of serious blogging in the Hebrew language.

The Depolitization of the Israeli Blogosphere

Although Israel is a vibrant country offering various news-making opportunities, on both national and international levels, and despite the fact that a number of leading journalists and political activists blog extensively, blog-related news have appeared to date on the main news pages only in dysfunctional social contexts or as cases of personal voyeurism, as when bloggers commit suicide or stir the community by discussing their pedophilic or extremely racist inclinations. One explanation for this phenomenon is the fact that adolescent girls dominate the statistical profile of the Israeli blogger (Vaisman, 2006).

Since the majority of Israeli bloggers exist as individual youth discourse clusters that seldom address issues of the collective, they have little reason to interact with the national mass media, other than when the latter spotlights the activities of Israeli children and youth. In this regard, it is worth noting the claim that the statistical majority of blogs in the United States, too, is dominated by adolescent girls (Herring, Kouper et al., 2004), a fact that has not interfered with the attention directed to other blog genres.

On the other hand, some of the most well-known bloggers in the United States are also employed as professional journalists and are referred to as j-bloggers

(Robinson, 2006). Surely the acceptance of the blog as a journalism genre and some of its influence stems from the professional identity of these practitioners. Furthermore, in Israel, some personal journals have received media attention in entertainment sections, and various such bloggers have been recruited as journalists. Given this situation, ignoring political blogs is all the more evident. Such limited interaction between Israeli j-bloggers and political bloggers with national mainstream mass media has to be understood in the context of the Israeli media ecology.

Israel has its own model of media ecology, one that is neither authoritarian nor conforms to the social responsibility model; rather it is a mixture of the two (Caspi & Limor, 1999). In its early days, the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA) adopted the state-owned public media model of the BBC, while the press was an organ of political parties, a workers cooperative, or a family business. During its first 30 years, Israeli media followed the state's political leadership, supporting the struggle for independence amidst neighboring hostile countries and accepting, willingly, tight censorship for national security's sake. From a functional point of view, the media institution was founded at the same time as other state institutions and "grew up" with them, taking an active part in shaping the political reality (ibid.).

Israeli mass media also identified with the economic policies of the political leadership. With origins in East Europe, the immigrant-leaders who founded and developed the society that became the state of Israel applied a socialist ideology. Americanization and globalization trends infiltrated Israeli society gradually. Indeed, it was only in the 1990s that commercial television channels began broadcasting and soon after portions of the print press were purchased by international media corporations. While the IBA continues to broadcast alongside commercial media, it is deeply politicized and much less popular with audiences (ibid.).

In 2002, state intervention stopped media corporations' monopoly of media channels. They did so by tendering broadcast licenses to parties linked to national business corporations. The fears of opponents of this policy have been realized as corporate interests have interfered with broadcast content when it did not suit their commercial interests (Drub-Heishtein, 2006). At present, competition between media organizations in Israel is fierce and violent. As a result, power struggles often take precedence over the public's right to know (Kanti, 2007).

These circumstances may explain why the national mass media ignore political bloggers as a factor in the Israeli media ecology. Media corporations interpret blogging solely as an informal style of personal columns, as is the case of "blogs" contributed by leading journalists on their newspaper's Web sites. Indeed, the few political journalists who blog independently either recycle their printed stories or choose to blog about any topic other than their professional niche. Ironically, the j-bloggers who often comment on political issues are technology or culture media professionals.

The national mass media was forced to relate to an anonymous j-blogger nick-named Velvet Underground in 2006 who published institutional gossip and behind-the-scenes stories about the local media industry. Velvet Underground turned out to be the vice editor of an entertainment magazine famous for her cinema critiques. She continues blogging under her real name, reaching beyond her professional niche and often addresses key political issues. Here, too, there is almost no mass media follow-ups on her political stories.

On a few occasions, the mass media reprinted stories that appeared on Velvet's blog or on *Peer Pressure* without giving them proper, professional credit. In an online public debate about this matter, one journalist spoke in defense of his media organization in explaining its policy against crediting blogs: "A blog isn't a profes-sional source and a journalist who blogs isn't acting within his profession at the time. It is as ridiculous as crediting rumors and private conversations." This view suggests a third explanation why political blogs are ignored or, at best, mentioned as social initiatives: Blogs are perceived as an expression of the writer's identity as if it is a form of interpersonal interaction within a virtual community representing the pub-lic sphere. In this view, a blog is no different than a forum. As such, blogs serve as the contemporary version of the nineteenth-century give-and-take exchanges that took place in European cafés and through which public opinion was formed and reported by journalists (Tarde, [1898]1969). Such an interpretation neutralizes and depoliticizes blogger authorship.

As a result of this situation, political blogging in Israel is normally considered to be a facet of Internet culture and as such covered solely by computer and Internet media channels. Indeed, *Peer Pressure* was the only political blog to receive any media coverage outside computer and Internet media channels. However, the coverage was depoliticized. For instance, though *YNet*[5] rewarded *Peer Pressure's* in-depth cover-age that led to an organized blogger protest against the Omnibus spending law[6] as "one of the best social initiatives of the year," it placed the story in the less popular social involvement channel.

A fourth and final explanation for ignoring political blogs has to do with the political orientation of Hebrew-language bloggers. Although political blogs in the United States are almost equally divided between liberal and conservative points of view (Adamic & Glance, 2005), blogs responsible for the key journalistic success stories are conservative ones such as *Andrew Sullivan* or *Powerline* that target left-wing media organizations and support the Republican administration.

In Israel it is interesting to note that given the profound institutional changes within Israeli media organizations over the last decade, they seem to take a right-wing stand on economic policies, backing recent trends of privatization led by the current administration. In contrast, the vast majority of Israeli bloggers who com-ment on political issues promote a left-wing socialist agenda regarding security as

well as social and economic matters. This finding was empirically backed during the 2006 elections when bloggers surveyed the blogosphere and in one post reported how politically identified bloggers voted. This strong tendency may explain the fact that political bloggers' initiatives are neither encouraged nor extensively covered by mainstream media in Israel.

Blogging as an Ideal Type of Journalism

Anecdotal evidence gathered reveals that blogging is often portrayed as an ideal type of journalism in regard to journalistic ethics. In a debate over blog-branded content on *Peer Pressure*, authors and many other commentators stressed the importance of blogger independence, stating that they embrace the ideal journalism ethic that in their view has disappeared in media organizations. However, several other j-bloggers argued that only the involvement of advertisers will enable the blog genre to have substantial influence and to attract more audiences.

Here, there seems to be agreement between political bloggers and media researchers in Israel that entertainment has overshadowed all other media roles, turning commercial interests into professional norms. Bloggers contend that this transformation has left the more serious, professional journalistic endeavors to bloggers who are free of special interests. Though the blogs examined in this study are considered important and valued by both bloggers and mass media practitioners covering online activity, they are different from American political blogs; they suffer from relatively low readership and rare media coverage. None of these blogs is involved in gathering news stories or checking facts, rather they engage in correlation and mobilization practices generally associated with media roles in the functional theory media literature.

Peer Pressure is written by Yair Tarchitsky and Yoav Ribak, two editors of *Haaretz,* a daily newspaper. The authors promote a left-wing socialist agenda through cumulative counter readings of news and events as well as exposés on faults of the social system that provide, according to the authors, more complete analyses than the fragmented interpretations presented by the mass media. Their most noted activity was leading an organized blogger campaign to cancel the Israeli Omnibus Spending Law. *Peer Pressure* is one of the political j-blogs that resemble the American model. However, this j-blog, like other personal journals kept by Israeli journalists differs from its American counterparts in that it is engaged in correlation and mobilization rather than solely media surveillance. The following is the opening statement of the *YNet Social Gaps* forum written by the authors of *Peer Pressure*, who also manage the forum:

> As journalists, we feel the mass media does not handle properly issues that fall between politics and economics. Fair distribution of resources and workers' rights have become bad words and social issues are reported superficially or from the wrong perspective. We decided to create a blog where we can write freely about the issues we find important and believe should be on the public agenda [. . . [

Examination of the blog's contents reveals that *Peer Pressure* authors do not compete with mass media over news stories, rather their activities seem to advance what they consider to be good journalism. Such activity is less about information gathering and more about "correlation"; that is, the way information is presented and interpreted for dual purposes: to educate and to mobilize. Involving personal stories of deprived workers or segments of society neglected by the government, their original stories may seem important but are seldom considered to be newsworthy according to newly transformed mass media norms referred to previously. In an interview, Yair Tarchitsky of *Peer Pressure* noted:

> The media do not change things. They report events and interpret them superficially. We do not present news in the blog. We would rather explain things people already know. The blog has a different rhythm. It is free of time limitations or frame manipulations, so we can bring in-depth stories, continuously. Nobody can say these are not worth publishing, since a similar story already exists. [. . .] On a couple of occasions we stumbled across exclusive pieces of information but we decided to leak them to the media. Gossip and scandals only draw attention away from our goal.

At the heart of the arguments and actions by *Peer Pressure* authors is their concern about the profound commercialization of the media and their hegemonic practices, disguised as professional journalistic norms. Accordingly, j-bloggers are not trying to change media organizations, rather they are involved in creation of an independent alternative medium. Thus, while "breaking news" has taken on a meaning of breaking the routine, the objective of *Peer Pressure*'s correlation practices (in terms of the role of the media) is to deconstruct "routine." For example, their online campaign to cancel the Omnibus Spending Law stemmed from a series of correlative postings tying sporadic events into one context and deconstructing the meaning of this extremely complex, seemingly mundane law into concrete daily actions that affect the entirety of society. In doing so, they redefined "routine" as a serious problem. While initially the intent was to be educative, the correlative approach evolved into spontaneous mobilization. This process could have been framed as its own news story.

An additional example is the blog *KnessetWatch*, whose purpose is to engage in participatory legislative critique. Hoping to advance a vibrant public debate, it summarizes and explains the meaning and context of new legislative proposals whose source is the official Knesset Web site. The author, Dubi Kanengisser, a graduate student in political science and Web veteran, invites all readers to participate

in the game of legislative criticism and occasionally emails the link to relevant politicians. In doing so, *KnessetWatch* offers a practice important in a democracy that should be performed by mainstream mass media, in their role as "watchdog" of the legislative process. In a posting on his personal blog, Kanengisser wrote the following about *KnessetWatch*:

> I think the principle of *KnessetWatch* is important and belongs in the mainstream mass media [where it will attract] more exposure than my 50 entries [. . .] Newspapers should have legislation critics, though they might receive instructions to be cynical and mock the proposals, and if so this would miss the point. But at least there would be a public debate over legislation, exactly like there is over a stupid new TV show [. . .]

In terms of blogs' media roles, legislative critiques and the public debate about legislation could also become correlation practices if they result in latent mobilization. This would happen if explanation and discussion of the implications of a legislative proposal lead to initiation of direct contact between bloggers and politicians. Kanengisser's statement reveals a concern for the traditional roles of the mass media being overshadowed by the role of entertainment. In response, his blog establishes a genre that in the former view of journalism ideally belongs in a newspaper. Interestingly, in our interview, he admitted that he hopes the blog will evolve into a mainstream newspaper column or at least inspire such a column.

Inspired both by Landa's email initiative and the American Web site *Democratic Underground*, *Black Labor* is an online attempt to organize Labor Party voters in order to establish direct email contact with Party representatives in the Knesset, followed by publication of such correspondence on the blog. The origins of the blog are in Labor Party voters' anger and disappointment immediately after the 2006 elections when the Party's leader, elected on his record for social activism, chose to become Defense Minister, an act interpreted as abandonment of this agenda. Led by activist Itay Asher and blogger Yohai Eilam, 30 high-profile bloggers joined the initiative, including a number of journalists and the nephew of the Labor Party leader. Blog readers were invited to propose pragmatic topics and email their proposed letters, regardless of political affiliation.

Since the blog usually calls for action from people who are already able to define the problem, it seems that *Black Labor*'s main interest is mobilization. By combining features of mass media and activism, it demonstrates how a blog can serve simultaneously as a publication and as a congregation; that is, as a site for meeting in a community space. Indeed, many of the *Black Labor* group are j-bloggers who have their own separate personal blogs in which they often write political and social critique. However, the founder and leader of the blog group, Itay Asher, regards blogs mainly as a mobilization tool and means of congregating. In the interview, he challenged the influence attributed to commentaries and other correlation practices:

People blog their opinions on events. Everyone wants to be a Joel Marcus or Doron Rosenblum [columnists for *Haaretz*], but most don't have the talent, nor are they read by people other than a small community of bloggers. [. . .] Even if it's a good interpretation it has no influence. Also, I can't quantify the influence of an article by Marcus [. . .] the key to having an influence via the web is networking, organizing, connecting people.

Asher represents a pragmatic action-oriented view of blogs as gathering spaces with an inherent communality that is potentially political by nature, using networking as a synonym for unionizing. Though links to a blog are normally interpreted as recommendations or a sign of friendship, Asher refers to bloggers linked with *Black Labor* as "our supporters." However, by offering a critical model for participatory journalism, *Black Labor*'s blogging style blurs direct contact with politicians with journalistic professional norms, as stated by Asher:

Politicians have no real information on how we expect them to act on our behalf. The media pretend to know our will, but they don't. We must communicate directly. We need to watch them personally between elections so they keep to their campaign promises. [. . .] Political discourse in the media is mere gossip. For instance, I asked Ami Ayalon to state five things he intends to do as Defense Minister, while journalists asked him about his strained relationship with the current minister or about his childhood. It's like a soap opera; there are no reports on practical actions.

Asher feels the media have failed in their most fundamental role as watchdog of democracy, trading professional journalism norms for entertainment and scandals that sell newspapers. Therefore, he thinks citizens should demand accountability from politicians in an alternative way. His critique also addresses the notion of "good news," claiming the media do not cover all aspects of life in a creative manner, only public affairs that go wrong. *Black Labor* sees itself as an alternative, fulfilling the gatekeeper role of participatory journalism. However, blogs' gatekeeping and mediation practices reach beyond normative media discourse. In the case of *Black Labor*, blogs can act as surrogate representatives of Labor party online institutions. For example, since the Labor Party Web site is rarely updated and lacks basic information for potential new members, *Black Labor* has published such data several times and interacted with citizens requesting information about the Party online. Another result of blurring political activism with media roles, this particular form of gatekeeping, too, confuses some bloggers as to the purpose of this blog.

Interestingly, soon after completion of the field portion of this research, *Black Labor* relocated to a Wordpress-based template. This suggests that it has outgrown its grassroots nature and has declared that it wants to function as a Web site, although it continues to share blog characteristics. Furthermore, a survey circulated sought to ascertain group members' views of *Black Labor*'s purposes as a com-

munity of activists or as a media center. Further research should follow the evolving crystallization of this unique blend of grassroots activism and participatory journalism in Israel.

Assessing Israeli Blogosphere's Influence

The research of blogs cited previously measured American blogs' impact on national mass media practices and on the national political agenda. Just as these studies were conducted largely through anecdotal evidence and traffic indicators, the findings presented applied the same indicators to assess the influence of Israeli political blogs, while pointing to possible opportunities for long-term impact.

Measuring influence within the blogosphere has used comments, trackbacks, subscribers, and links from other blogs as blog traffic indicators. This approach has been compared to measuring academic influence by counting citations within a field of study (Gill, 2004). *Technorati* has been found to be the most comprehensive tool available for measuring the number of links to a blog (ibid.), however it does not cover the major Israeli blog-hosting Web sites. This obstacle was resolved by blog authors sharing their administrative tool links. In addition, since not all links are created equal, influence cannot be considered to be solely a matter of traffic. Therefore, complementary measurements of influence were applied including mass media coverage and politicians' responsiveness.

Table 7.1. Influence indicators of the blogs examined*

Blog	Months online	Posts	Comments	Trackbacks & Permalinks	Total visitors	Media	Subscribers**
KnessetWatch	8	46	209	35	3,062	1	8
Peer Pressure	11	108	1,758	367	34,343	7	191
Black Labor	9	374	1,801	379	22,379	4	30

*From date of creation until end of March 2007.
**Does not include many RSS subscribers who cannot be accounted for.

As seen in Table 7.1, *Peer Pressure* attracted the highest blog traffic although its authors were much less active than *Black Labor*. *Peer Pressure* is also the only Hebrew political blog that attracts readers and commentators outside the blogosphere. This may be due to the mass media coverage it has received. *KnessetWatch* is noted for low activity indicators. In this case, there seems to be a correlation between the activity of the author and the readers, with the former being discouraged by the readers' low traffic. Kanengisser admitted in the interview that only two other bloggers emailed him suggesting legislation to be reviewed, but none came through when asked to author the posts themselves.

KnessetWatch appears on the relatively new hosting Web site *Blogli,* while *Peer Pressure* and *Black Labor* appear on the popular *Isra-blog* Web site. The communal aspect of the *Isra-blog* host Web site may explain the many trackbacks that represent debates within the blogosphere, while *KnessetWatch* has failed to generate such a debate record. I found at least two possible opportunities for cooperation between *KnessetWatch* and *Black Labor* that were missed although the blogs are linked to one another, for example, by directing a legislation critique into an inquiry email.

Black Labor and *Peer Pressure* members have cooperated in crafting their blogging activities: Tarchitsky of *Peer Pressure* used his personal contact with Labor Party members and their assistants to draw their attention to *Black Labor,* while *Black Labor* bloggers actively promoted the anti-Omnibus Spending Law campaign. The bloggers occasionally coordinated action by telephone, and some symbolic action materialized when one *Black Labor* blogger took anti-Omnibus Spending Law posters to a national social action convention attended by party members and activists. Though linked and supported by fellow bloggers, Kanengisser of *KnessetWatch* did not actively tap into this backstage blogging network.

American success stories prove the importance of links and trackbacks as indicators for networking and cooperation between blogs in impact-building and sustaining a story. Almost all blog-originated stories made their impact only after being linked to and debated on several leading blogs. However, overall, all three political Hebrew blogs suffer from relatively low readership and traffic. This suggests that new engagement opportunities online will not necessarily attract people who have little interest in politics (Davis, 1999).

In 1999, Davis (ibid.) claimed that politicians show low rates of online responsiveness. This is a situation that had the potential to improve with introduction of blogging. *Black Labor* had high responsiveness from politicians and showed that it had the ability to affect the political agenda in the short term. *Peer Pressure* attracted more media coverage and may have had a possible impact on professional peers and the public opinion, suggesting that it may have the capability to induce change over the long run. In general, it is hard to determine which of these influence models is more significant.

Fourteen out of the nineteen targeted Labor Party Knesset members regularly answer *Black Labor* emails and address their concerns. Most have their assistants follow the blog on a regular basis. However, aside from having the ability to create a "watchdog" environment, there were no unmitigated success stories. So far, only one concrete parliamentary success has been linked to the *Black Labor* group: Blogged personal testimonies of Israeli Post Authority contract workers led to three mass media items on their poor working conditions, one of which was a prime-time televised report. While a special parliamentary debate on the matter was called, it is difficult to know if it was the mass media coverage or emails sent to Labor

Party Knesset member Shelly Yechimovich by *Black Labor* bloggers that were responsible. The mass media coverage ignored *Black Labor's* role in the story, and some bloggers complained the story was constructed as a single news event, ignoring the habitual national problem of the working conditions of all contract workers. Yet, they admitted that this was a good start as the first and so far the only political success story that started on a blog in Israel.

Though *Peer Pressure's* campaign against the Omnibus Spending Law attracted more media coverage and blog links, only slight changes were introduced to the law. Tarchitsky stated in the interview that he has no idea if the Knesset member advancing the changes even heard of the campaign, since the law was severely criticized by other Knesset members. However, *Peer Pressure* explained the meaning of this seemingly routine law to each and every citizen in a way un-precedented by the media and helped raise public awareness about similar routines, at least among its readers: Authors received emails from readers, including fellow journalists, in appreciation for their assistance in improving their understanding of the actual consequences of developments and events. The authors testified that their status as journalists rose in the eyes of their peers. Further, they felt that being read by peers might affect media coverage in the long run, an effect that they value more than direct coverage of their blog topics. In contrast, *KnessetWatch* attracted neither media nor politician attention. Kanengisser related that though he had emailed a link to a Knesset member occasionally, he had not yet received an answer.

The influence indicators reviewed correlate with characteristics of the blogger's identity, including perceived status and imagined representation. Knesset members responded to j-bloggers, party members, or a perceived organized group. They also responded to angry or emotional emails concerning burning issues, while ignoring the formal logical claims concerning legislative routines of a non-networked blogger.

Close Encounters of the Unmediated Kind: Politicians as Bloggers

The increasing significance of the American blogosphere noted may also be due to the growing number of American politicians becoming bloggers or interacting with bloggers online, especially prior to elections. The following is an account of Knesset members' attempts at blogging and summarizes their view of the roles of blogging and the political significance of the Israeli blogosphere.

In general, Israeli politicians have little awareness of Internet technologies as an infrastructure for mass media. Exceptional in this regard is Likud party member Michael Eitan who was the first politician to promote information technology policies. Indeed, long before the term *Web log* was coined, he managed a

frequently updated professional Web site that is still active. Ehud Yatom of the Likud Party (moderate right-wing) was the first Knesset member to attempt blogging. In reply to one of Landa's queries in 2003, Yatom explained that he did not report some of his activities to the public because of a lack of mass media interest. A second blogger who commented on this blog-email correspondence suggested to Yatom that he also blog in order to address the public directly about such issues. And, indeed, Yatom did ask bloggers to help his assistant create such a blog. On February 23, 2004 the blog was created by Yatom's assistant using the popular *Isra-blog* software.

The blog's heading stated its purpose as "expressing Yatom's opinions without mass media mediation." Direct dialogue with the public, however, proved dysfunctional: Bloggers ignored the content of the first post and chose to express their harsh and even rude criticism of Yatom over a national security scandal he had been involved in a number of years before. Yatom's assistant closed the blog immediately. The affair was picked up by all computer and Internet media channels. Yatom told the press he hadn't backed off because of the comments, but because he hadn't authorized the blog to begin with. His assistant resigned following the incident.

A few bloggers called on Yatom to reopen his blog, including one blogger who had posted harsh comments on the blog. He cited the email he sent to Yatom in his personal blog: "I admit my comment was irrelevant and ugly, however this affair would have faded rapidly and you would have had the opportunity to be the first politician to blog and strengthen your relationship with both your voters and your opponents" (transcripts of *Boles Shikmim* deleted blog).

Israeli political discourse, as reflected in the media, is notoriously fierce and overtly confrontational. Research has offered evidence of its resemblance to the oral tradition of Talmudic text argumentation that uses the adversarial format to maximize mutual comprehension and ultimately enhance sociability (Blondheim, Blum-Kulka, & Hacohen, 2002). The response cited above exposes the blogger's latent assumption that sociability would ultimately be enhanced despite his rude attack, stressing the importance of the mere existence of a direct dialogic channel with politicians over its ephemeral confrontational content.

In 2005, Shaul Yahalom of the Mafdal Party (Orthodox right-wing) was invited to blog by the *Kipa* religious community portal. Yahalom's choice of blog location resulted mainly in closed discourse within the religious community. He did not respond to the comments received, either directly or in his next post. He stopped blogging when he failed to be re-elected to the Knesset.

During 2005, Roman Bronfman of Democratic Choice and Dov Chanin of Chadash, both extreme left-wing parties, created Wordpress-based blogs. Both politicians were working with new media consultant Guy West, one of the founders of *Indymedia*. Bronfman's blog created a small active community but ceased to

update when he decided to withdraw from the elections. Chanin's blog is still online; however it is rarely updated and has not managed to engage in a vibrant dialogue, though many bloggers list it on their blog roll.

Table 7. 2. Traffic on Knesset members′ blogs

Politician	Political orientation	Months online	Posts	Comments	Blog links & trackbacks*
Shaul Yahalom	Religious right-wing	12	25	349	2
Roman Bronfman & team	Extreme left-wing	6	41	295	67
Dov Chanin & friends	Extreme left-wing	11	176	202	130
Arie Eldad	Extreme right-wing	2	10	251	4
Shelly Yechimowich	Moderate left-wing	2	9	No option	1

*Shows only independent blogs due to Technorati limitations.

Since both politicians have very similar political views and their blogs were produced, updated, and managed similarly by the same advisor, the only variable that explains the deviation between the two as seen in Table 7.2 is their personal writing style and responsiveness to their readers. Bronfman himself was highly involved and interested in the blog and his staff responded to comments on regular basis; Chanin did so only in the very beginning. A large portion of the posts on Chanin's blog are recycled mass media articles and many of the posts contain no comments.

On October 12, 2005, Bronfman posted: "I fired my publicity agent. Anyone who blogs for the Democratic Choice Party should blog for himself. The blog is a literary genre like a journal. I told my spokesperson that blogs should be written in the first person."

A handful of politicians attempted to use blogs as a propaganda tool before the elections of February 2006. Most blogs appeared within party Web sites, had no options for comments, and were updated by writers who misinterpreted the informal blogging style for a gossip column genre and were therefore ignored by most bloggers. Only Shelly Yachimovich of the Labor Party, an ex-journalist, was "excused" by the bloggers since she updated her page personally.

Bloggers' conversations about these blogs made it clear that they have no reason to visit a blog that is merely a cosmetic change of format for propaganda.

Bloggers expect the blog to either provide direct communication or, at the very least, be updated directly by the politician. Without either of these proximity indicators, a blog has no added value over a personal column, a paid ad in the mass media, or an informational Web site, even if it is technically referred to as a blog.

Owners of the *Isra-blog* Web site invited politicians to blog during the 2006 election campaign. The only current Knesset member to create a blog was Professor Arie Eldad of the Ichud Leumi Party (extreme right-wing). Eldad had a genuine talent for writing and the patience to respond to most commentators. He seemed to enjoy every minute of blog engagement and exploited all the possibilities of the medium. Therefore he was embraced by bloggers, despite his perceived extreme opinions. As seen in Table 7.2, his blog shows high traffic during the short time he blogged.

Content and blogosphere connectivity were enhanced when Israeli politicians allowed comments and responded to them in their blogs, and they also gained an indicator of proximity. In contrast, only 43 percent of American blogs included comments when first sampled; consequently, comments were not a defining feature of blogs (Herring, Scheidt, et al. 2004). American bloggers think that while comments are not a requirement, they do enhance content dramatically (Arrington, 2006).[7]

Several bloggers expressed relief from anxiety due to their sense of proximity to the politicians as a result of Eldad and Yahalom's personal blogging and/or responsiveness. This is noteworthy since these politicians are perceived as having extremist political views. However, overall, all Israeli politicians' blogs show low traffic indicators, lower than even non-politician political blogs. This is a trend that undermines the blogosphere's chances to serve as a political arena in the next elections.

By April 2006, two months after the last elections, none of the above politicians was updating his or her blog. In March 2007, shortly after the field research was completed, two leaders of mainstream parties started routine blogging: Likud Party leader and former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and leader of the left-wing Meretz Party, Yossi Beilin. While Netanyahu blogs in a carefully edited speech-style of rhetoric on a private domain and ignores readers' comments, Beilin blogs in a personal journal style within the new *The Marker* social network and often responds to comments. Further research should consider comparing Netanyahu and Beilin's distinctive blogging practices as they unfold, to determine whether the role of personal interaction is indeed crucial for a blog's political value, from the politician's perspective.

Being Good Neighbors: The Blogosphere as a Dialogic Space

Given the focus on economic and social issues, the majority of routine political writing in Hebrew concerns internal politics. I maintain, however, that the discursive term "the Israeli blogosphere" consists not only of Hebrew-language blogs but also of English-language blogs written by Israelis. In fact, these blogs represent the Israeli blogosphere for non-Hebrew readers.

Before mid-2006, these blogs were difficult to track since they appeared on various international platforms. During the war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, a voluntary aggregation index of Israelis blogging in English was created and continues to be updated.[8] Linking and aggregation is a grassroots gatekeeping mechanism creating discursive fields that result in inclusion and status conferral. Thus, while the index currently lists feeds from 169 blogs, these do not seem to represent the majority of Israeli bloggers in the English language as the vast majority of these blogs present a left-wing agenda. Indeed, a few bloggers I've spoken to have concluded that they are a minority among the right-wing extremists blogging from settlements in the Occupied Territories, to which the voluntary aggregator refuses to link.

These 169 blogs enjoy participation in blogosphere discourse both on the Israeli and the international level. For example, 2,666 international blogs in various languages link to the most popular English-language Israeli blog, belonging to j-blogger Lisa Goldman.[9] Although English-language Israeli blogs were not included in the corpus of this research, a review of the Israeli blogosphere would not be complete without a brief overview of their activity:

> English-language, Israeli blogs address foreign policy and Palestinian authority-related issues much more than they do internal economic or social issues.
> Whereas the most valued political bloggers in Hebrew are male, some of the most influential English-language bloggers are female.
> Most bloggers perceive the purpose of their blog as a window into everyday life in Israel.

It is through this extreme subjectivity that these blogs exercise a form of communion with possible political implications. While Hebrew-language political posts circulate within a small circle of readers, the daily experiences and conversations of English-language Israeli bloggers attract much more attention, open dialogues, shape opinions, and offer alternative narratives to Israel's mass media image. Their political importance does not lie in the content of their posts, but in the mere fact they are blogging in the context of the international blogosphere. Israel is engaged

in a historical dispute with its Middle East neighbors. Even when there are formal peace treaties between Israel and some of its neighboring countries, the majority of the populations in these societies is misinformed due to biased coverage in the national mass media and may be hateful to Israelis both offline and online. Yet, one could argue that the Internet presents an unmediated opportunity for the sides to meet and discuss. Blogging contributes to this opportunity by allowing people to share continuously from the depths of their life experiences and personality.

Further, since blogs are personal spaces, people from both sides literally visit each other's forbidden territory. The Israeli-Lebanese war of 2006 inspired some Israelis and Lebanese to author blogs together. Beyond symbolizing and merely engaging in an online dialogue, this was an act of mutual creation, shared space, authorship, and responsibility. As a shared space, such a blog becomes binding; "it is like moving in together," as one Israeli blogger noted in an informal conversation. Anecdotal evidence shows that bloggers were able to translate this metaphor into friendships that reshaped opinions. Such friendships between j-bloggers and political activists in Middle East countries may turn out to be valuable networking resources for their countries.

The metaphor of space has become an actual geographic space on several occasions. For example, over the last two years several bloggers from countries such as Iran and Lebanon have visited their blogger friends in Israel using foreign passports. While most of these visits have been conducted in a discrete manner, at least two such visits were covered extensively by mainstream mass media, including a televised item. This demonstrates that blogs not only expand mass media coverage and break its framing but also invite us to engage in transformative personal interaction beyond being merely informed.

The latest initiative in which I am an active participant-observer is *Good Neighbors*,[10] a group blog coauthored by leading bloggers from various Middle East countries who are attempting to reside in and create a community in mutual space. This construct alone is politically valuable regardless of the contents of the blog.

Discussion and Conclusions

To date, research that has focused on changes in the mass media attribute their decreasing credibility to political and economic constraints (Baldasty, 1992; Mosco, 1996), conformity to hegemonic ideologies (Bennett, Gressett, & Haltom, 1985) or abandonment of public discourse to superficial entertainment (Postman, 1985). While hopes were expressed that the net would offer alternative media models, initial research suggests that offline media reproduced themselves online (Mansell, 2004; McChesney, 1998). Bloggers may be in a position to undermine this process,

acting as independent volunteers free of production costs, interests, or popularity concerns.

The ideology of public journalism sees its task as not only informing citizens, but also enhancing meaningful public discussion and participation (Rosen, 1991). In the United States, what seemed to be the emergence of a new postmodern practice of journalism is gradually being abandoned by j-bloggers as they conform to mainstream journalism norms (Robinson, 2006). However, in Israel, leading political blogs seem to be seeking to attain an ideal model of serious, truly independent journalism. In doing so, they retrieve traditional facets ideally performed by media practitioners and re-establish pre-commercialization genres in new media contexts. Such efforts are historic, at least in the local context. Thus, while American bloggers make news and uncover scandals, Israeli political bloggers attack political routines through correlation and occasionally mobilization. In doing so, Israeli political bloggers try to take up a task neglected by the mass media.

This practice resonates in part with the role of public property media. Like public property media, Hebrew political bloggers voluntarily represent worthy causes and practices that should exist in the mass media, regardless of popularity concerns. Ironically, the Internet and its blogs are public property media in the most direct sense. Therefore, we should expect blogging to perform everything people perceive as necessary or worthy but cannot realize due to institutional, commercial, and other constraints. Such potential alone points to the political significance of blogging as a practice, regardless of blog content.

Furthermore, blogs are blurring the boundaries between publishing media and public space. Therefore, bloggers most realize the potential of blogging when their practice moves between the metaphors of media and political participation; for example, correlation overlaps mobilization when posts generate and engage in networked dialogues. Most Israeli politicians, however, seem confused by these overlapping dimensions. Their blogging is propagandistic, as if it were another mass medium, ignoring its dialogic aspects. However, interestingly, some have related to dialogic attempts of other bloggers as voices of citizens rather than as fellow authors or semi-journalists.

The short experience of Israeli politicians with the Hebrew blogosphere indicates too small a readership on a national scale to justify an investment in personal blogging. This kind of personal, informal interaction seems to attract and perhaps benefit politicians with extreme views who seek to soften their image and to relate to the public in a friendly manner. However, blogging seems of less value and may even prove to be a dysfunctional burden for a mainstream politician, maintaining the importance of gatekeeping mechanisms versus the Israeli fierce political discourse and conversation norms.

Alternatively, interacting with organized bloggers, in a group setting such as *Black Labor*, could provide such a mechanism for politicians who want to interact directly with the online public without making a commitment to invest in establishing and maintaining a personal blog. Bloggers should be reminded, however, that being independent doesn't equal being neutral. At least in the case of *Black Labor*, the blurred nature of the blog might result in a clash between the watchdog role and the gatekeeping model which is similar to the historical party-owned newspaper. In this case we see that the bloggers' group is often torn between "barking" at party members and representing the party online.

While American mass media might pick up a single blog story and enhance it, the absence of attention or credit from Israeli mass media sheds light on the blurred features of mass media and interpersonal communication within blogs. The importance of community networking and personal dialogue in their online form suggests that the key to understanding the blog's role is not necessarily within mass media frameworks and may even be anecdotal to them. Thus, while a single mass media item might have an immediate impact, it seems the blogosphere as a media space involves cooperation between many Internet sites that link, literally, the *Web* of a story.

In regard to mass media practices, Israeli blogs are unable to compete with mainstream journalists and do not attempt to do so. Indeed, the blurring of the boundary between practices of mass media and political participation suggests a model that may enable the Israeli blogosphere to become an independent, possibly influential player, without requiring the help of the mass media. The Hebrew blogosphere seems to be evolving slowly and may still resemble its American counterpart. However, readership and the perceived status of blogging must increase dramatically before this may happen. Further ethnographic research on the blogosphere, I believe, may indicate that the modes of action and experience blogs facilitate, rather than the content of blogs, are key indicators in measuring their political influence.

Notes

1. All interviews and Hebrew-language blogs were translated by the author.
2. Blogs not updated for over two months were considered inactive. Data were received from blog-hosting Web site owners, while independent blogs were traced through *Technorati*. Active blogs form 20 percent of the overall quantity of existing blogs (according to data supplied by *Isra-blog* and *Tapuz's blogosphere* Web sites owners).
3. http://www.wordpress.com
4. In terms of the Israeli political context, the right-wing is conservative in terms of security matters but liberal in terms of social and economic affairs, while the left-wing seeks security amelioration and has a tradition of socialist views of social-economic issues.

5. The most popular Israeli online newspaper run by the popular *Yedioth Ahronoth* daily newspaper.

6. The Omnibus Spending Law is a unique legislative arrangement allowing economic officials the power to conduct vast reforms such as budget cuts and privatization. The law was necessary in 1985 to stabilize an economic crisis; however, its critics claim it is unnecessary and even harmful at this point in time.

7. The writer thought blogs are conversation and suggested that a blog without a *comments* option is not a blog. However, he added a poll to his post on *Techcrunch*, and bloggers voted otherwise.

8. http://english.webster.co.il

9. http://ontheface.blogware.com

10. http://gnblog.com

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