

Political Bloggers and Civic Involvement: Why the Quebec Experience Matters

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Abstract

While many scholars have recently conducted quantitative and qualitative investigations of the structure and content of A-list politically-oriented weblogs, few have focused on the civic involvement of their authors which are often defined as opinion leaders. Based on data collected through a Web-based survey conducted in April 2008, this paper proposes a detailed socio-political portrait of 56 members of the Quebec political blogosphere. The Internet-savvy population of the Canadian province of Quebec, which is characterized by its linguistic, political and cultural specificity, constitutes a well-defined research environment enabling the production of highly-representative results. The description of Quebec-based bloggers' involvement in content dispersion and social Web-based networks as well as their participation in offline political activities will help to produce a detailed socio-political behavioural portrayal of the influential players within the Quebec political blogosphere. Additionally, this paper draws sharp contrasts with previous studies of Canadian and U.S.-based bloggers and argues for the production of more detailed analysis considering the specificities of North American political bloggers.

KEYWORDS: Political, communication, weblogs, Internet, Quebec

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, May 2nd-5th 2009, Chicago, Illinois.

Draft version. Do not cite without the authors permission.

Political weblogs, commonly known as blogs, are considered by many scholars as an increasingly influential component in the online and, ultimately, offline political and media landscapes in several national contexts, particularly since 2001 in the United States (Sweetser and Kaid, 2008: 72; Pirch, 2008: 276; Johnson and Kaye, 2004: 625; Singer, 2005: 177; Foot and Schneider, 2006: 36; Harp and Tremayne, 2007: 1; Wallsten, 2007b). For example, the ten most popular blogs during the 2004 U.S. Presidential elections were accessed more than 28 million times throughout the electoral campaign, a number directly rivalling the audience of the three most-watched U.S. cable news networks during the same time period (Ward and Cahill, 2007). More recently, approximately 20% of U.S. campaign-savvy Internet users got election-related information from weblogs during the 2006 U.S. Midterm elections (Rainie and Horrigan, 2006: iii; Hwang, Thorson *et al.*, 2007: 3), up from 9% of Internet users who reported periodically reading these communication channels to get political news items throughout the 2004 U.S. Presidential campaign (Adamic and Glance, 2005: 1). According to Sweetser and Kaye (2008: 72), they can be seen as “one of the key[s] in the growing popularity of blog reading”.

Political weblogs can be defined as publicly-available and low-cost single or multi-authored Web-based publication channels with limited to no external editorial oversight providing mix-media politically-oriented facts and opinions or, more broadly, “on-line commentary” often ideologically-driven or partisan in nature presented, updated as well as archived in reverse chronological order (Wallsten, 2005: 2; Sweetser and Kaid, 2008: 72; Hargittai, Gallo *et al.*, 2008: 72; Drezner and Farrell, 2008: 2) and regularly comprising content interactive features such as hyperlinks redirecting audience members to a wide range of digital material on Web-accessible resources¹ (Xenos, 2008: 490; Bar-Ilan, 2005: 297; Farrell, Lawrence *et al.* 2008: 6; Blumenthal, 2005: 655; McIntosh, 2005: 386; Sheagley, 2007: 3; Kerbel, 2007; Hinduja and Patchin, 2008: 129)

Several multidisciplinary investigations targeting specific facets of the political blogspace have been conducted in recent years in many national contexts such as Poland (Trammell, Tarkowski, *et al.*, 2006), Sweden (Kullin, 2005; 2006), the United Kingdom (Coleman and Wright, 2008; Ferguson and Griffiths, 2006; Jackson, 2006; Auty, 2005), Denmark (Klastrup and Pedersen, 2005), Spain and Portugal (Vielba, 2006), Germany (Albrecht, Lübcke *et al.*, 2007) and Canada (Small, 2008; Chu, 2007; Koop and Jansen, 2006; Braaten, 2005). Scholars have engaged in extensive quantitative as well as qualitative content analyses of primarily A-list political blogs (Wallsten, 2005; 2007a) as well as their readers’ input through feedback tools (Mishne and Glance, 2006) in order to fulfill a wide range of

1 According to (Kim, 2007: 8), hyperlinks can have an enhancing effect on the quality of the online conversation.

research objectives. A-list political blogs can be defined as high profile and very influential members of the political blogosphere that can be seen as opinion leaders because they are the recipients of a large number of inbound hyperlinks from other Web-based formal and informal communication channels, are periodically quoted by conventional media organizations, which can lead them to potentially influence to varying degrees their political coverage, and are consequently heavily trafficked “information hubs” (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005: 968-969; Herring, Kouper *et al.*, 2005: 1; Park and Thelwall, 2008: 860; Xenos, 2008: 488; Wallsten, 2006; Su, Wang *et al.*, 2005: 2; McKenna, 2007: 210; McKenna and Pole, 2008: 97; Bar-Ilan, 2005: 297; Woodly, 2008: 118; Perlmutter, 2008: 166; Kerbel, 2007: 11). It is important to point out that their scientific works only provide a partial and potentially unrepresentative or distorted characterization of the structure and the dynamic of the political blogspace because they do not consider a significantly large number of less read blogs (Wallsten, 2005: 1) that are maintained by “B-listers”, “new entrants” (Ackland and Shorish, 2007) as well as other nonelite or “less salient” individuals (Munger, 2008: 130; Kerbel, 2007: 2; Kim, 2007: 1; Trammell, Tarkowski *et al.*, 2006) who might have a certain influence on agenda formulation processes that ultimately shape online and offline public politically-oriented information exchanges and social interactions (Wallsten, 2007b).

While many scholars have opted for descriptive quantitative reviews detailing with great precision these publication platforms’ content as well as structure (Singer, 2005: 180-181; Su, Wang, 2005: 3; Herring, Kouper *et al.*, 2005; Chu, 2007: 10; Hinduja and Patchin, 2009: 129), others have integrated qualitative concerns in their investigations to study, for example, the political and partisan orientation of blog posts, bloggers’ self-introduction or positioning approaches and ultimately to provide an extensive assessment of the political communication, mobilization and persuasion strategies employed by these formal and informal political actors (Trammell, 2006: 402; Park, 2009: 250; Trammell, Williams *et al.*, 2006: 28; Sweetser, 2007: 427; Tremayne, Zhen *et al.*, 2006; McKenna, 2007: 109; Trammell and Kaye, 2007: 1257; Jiang and Argamon, 2009; Wallsten, 2008). For example, Trammell (2006: 403) analyzed politically-oriented declarations published by bloggers throughout the 2004 U.S. Presidential campaign to characterize their communication objectives, more precisely if they periodically used political attack-oriented or negative material. These analyses have contributed to the emergence of highly-detailed descriptive works on blogging practices and ultimately the development of extensive categorizations of weblog genres (Herring, Scheidt *et al.*, 2005: 162-163; Herring and Paolillo, 2006: 440; Hookway, 2008: 93; Marlow, 2006: 10; Schmidt, 2007; Park and Thelwall, 2008: 856; Albrecht, Lubcke *et al.*, 2007: 506). While blogs focusing on political matters can have different formats and serve

various communication, mobilization and persuasion purposes (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2007: 968; Herring et al., 2004: 3; Trammell, Williams *et al.*, 2006: 39), the majority of them are “filter blogs” due to their heavy usage of hyperlinks that can have a channelling effect on audience members’ Web media consumption behaviour by redirecting them to often politically-partisan Web-based digital resources directly or indirectly linked to their argumentation (Hookway, 2008: 93; Singer, 2005: 192; Herring *et al.*, 2005: 3; Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005: 972). Based on several authors’ work (Xenos, 2008: 501; Veenstra, Sayre *et al.*, 2008; Mutz, 2006: 127), it is possible to argue that these hyperlinks might be contributing to the emergence of transient “gated cybercommunities” (Tremayne, 2005: 28) characterized by their repetitive reinforcement, through “enclaved deliberation” processes for instance, of specific and often politically-homogenous attitudes and impressions among audience members. More broadly, hyperlinks can be seen as a gateway for Web users to penetrate the “public discourse, essentially becoming another way to participate in the political sphere” (Tremayne, Zheng *et al.*, 2006).

The frequent presence of hyperlinks in political blogs’ publications has led researchers to conduct studies comprising facets specifically aimed at mapping the blogspace both online as well as offline (Reese, Rutigliano *et al.*, 2007: 235; Tremayne, Zheng *et al.*, 2006; Lin and Halavais, 2006; Lin, Halavais *et al.*, 2007; Ackland, 2005; Bruns, 2007). For instance, many authors have employed different types of network analysis approaches through the consideration of hyperlinks connexions, which can have content dissemination and social interaction implications (Ali-Hasan and Adamic, 2007; Lento, Welser *et al.*, 2006), to provide a multidimensional characterization of the architecture of the political blogosphere (Marlow, 2004: 2; Schmidt, 2007; Adamic and Glance, 2005; Park, 2009: 265; Park and Thelwall, 2008: 863; Hargittai, Gallo *et al.*, 2008: 67). Adamic and Glance (2005: 4) found that 91% of hyperlinks originating from politically-oriented weblogs redirected Web users to members of the blogosphere with similar political allegiances, consequently illustrating the extremely polarized nature of the exchanges in the U.S. political blogosphere. In addition, their data revealed that conservative bloggers tended to use more hyperlinked content than their progressive counterpart, a conclusion subsequently upheld by Ackland’s work (2005: 10) (Park, 2009: 265; Adamic and Glance, 2005: 4-5). Reese, Rutigliano *et al.* (2007: 254-255) also studied the linking practices of six A-list U.S. political bloggers, but primarily focused on the types of resources quoted as well as their political affiliations. Others scholars investigated the geographical dispersion of individuals who are actively contributing to the U.S. blogosphere (Lin and Halavais, 2004; Lin and Halavais, 2006; Lin, Halavais *et al.*, 2007). For

example, Lin and Halavais' (2006) discovered that most "non-U.S." weblogs were based in Canada.

The Quebec political blogosphere and its members

This paper offers an in-depth look at the online as well as offline socio-political behavioural profile of members of the Quebec political blogosphere which can be seen as a nascent and growingly influential group of individuals in the political communication environment of Quebec, a Canadian province characterized by its linguistic, cultural, economic and political specificities (Fournier, 2001: 335; 2002: 44; Rocher, 2002: 81). Additionally, this analysis draws sharp contrasts with previous studies of Canadian and U.S.-based bloggers and argues for the production of more detailed analysis considering the specificities of North American political bloggers. While previous U.S. studies of A-list bloggers have been criticized due to their consideration of only a small fragment of the blogging population (Wallsten, 2005: 1), this investigation will be more representative due to the relatively small number of active political bloggers in Quebec which does not exceed 125 according to two unscientific surveys which will be detailed in a subsequent section. More specifically, this paper provides a detailed assessment of Quebec-based bloggers' involvement in Web-based content dispersion and social networks as well as their participation in offline formal and informal politically-oriented activities. It is important to note that few authors have published extensive socio-political characterizations of political bloggers. In fact, most of them have tried to indirectly characterize their attitudes and perceptions through quantitative and qualitative analyses of their publications which often reflect their individuality (Herring, Scheidt *et al.*, 2004; Thelwall and Stuart, 2007; Kaye, 2006: 130). Indeed, approximately 70% of the blogosphere is comprised of online diaries (Nardi, Schiano *et al.*, 2004: 3; Qian and Scott, 2007; Lawson-Borders and Kirk, 2005: 548; Hinduja and Patchin, 2008: 129), also known as "personal journals" (Herring, Scheidt *et al.*, 2005; Bar-Ilan, 2005: 299; Schmidt, 2007; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005) where individuals publish, anonymously or not, a wide range of mix-media content voluntarily or involuntarily divulging their personal feelings, thoughts as well as experiences (Qian and Scott, 2007; Hinduja and Patchin, 2008: 129; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Kaye, 2006).

First, Lenhart and Fox (2006) conducted a wide-ranging investigation of U.S. bloggers, but few aspects of their study were specifically aimed at politically-related matters. Nardi, Schiano *et al.* (2004: 2) focused on more specific U.S. geographical regions by surveying California and New York-based bloggers through ethnographical interviews combined with quantitative analyses of blog posts in order to build an extensive profile, but

dedicated few aspects of their work to political issues. Kullin (2005; 2006) developed a detailed socio-political characterization of the Swedish blogosphere through the circulation of a questionnaire among its members. Several papers focused specifically on political bloggers. For example, Wallsten (2008) conducted a preliminary analysis of U.S.-based political bloggers' identity, but without yielding extensive data enabling the production of a detailed socio-political portrait of the members of the U.S. blogosphere. McKenna (2007: 213) also conducted nine in-depth interviews with U.S.-based policy bloggers to determine their goals, motives as well as intentions. It is possible to argue that McKenna and Pole (2004: 115-116) did one of the most extensive surveys of the blogosphere by circulating a questionnaire among 28 "top" U.S. political bloggers asking them about their socio-demographical status, their blogging practices as well as their involvement in formal and informal political activities (Wallstein, 2005).

The scientific investigation of Canadian political blogosphere is still considered to be in its initial stages with only a handful of scholarly work published in recent years. For instance, Braaten (2005) investigated the structure of the Canadian blogosphere, but failed to dedicate an angle of his study to politically-oriented blogging activities. Small (2008: 106), on the other hand, surveyed the Canadian parliamentary blogosphere and, more broadly, politicians' use of this media platform. Chu (2007) studied the influence of Canadian bloggers' publications on the mainstream press. Finally, Koop and Jansen (2006) did a quantitative content analysis of Canadian political weblogs, but did not survey bloggers. While the majority of previous works has focused on English language weblogs mostly based in the United States (Trammell, Takowski *et al.*, 2006), this study deals with individuals maintaining Quebec-based French-language politically-oriented weblogs. As previously discussed, bloggers have been gaining significant traction on the media scene of several Western countries. Accordingly, it is possible to argue that the growing number of Quebec-based bloggers might eventually have a certain influence on conventional media organizations and, more importantly, on their increasing number of readers. The Quebec-based *Centre francophone d'informatisation des organisations* (CEFRIO) recently revealed in its *NETendance* survey (2008) that 26% of Quebec adult Web users have read at least one weblog and 8% of them authored at least one weblog. This large scale examination failed to look specifically at political bloggers' motives and intentions.

Rising status of politically-oriented weblogs

Recent studies have shown growing levels of distrust of conventional media organizations in Western democracies, including Canada (Johnson and Kaye, 2004: 624; Kaye, 2005: 76;

Jones, 2004: 60; Cohen, 2004: 611). Jones (2004: 61-62) argues that several factors are responsible for this decline of audience members' confidence in the media. First, their political coverage, which often revolves around strategy-oriented news frames, regularly features, for instance, polls, gaffes as well as communication and persuasion tactics used by political actors throughout electoral campaigns (Sweetser and Kaid, 2008: 69; Jones, 2004: 61-62; De Vreese, 2004: 192; Druckman, 2005: 467-468; De Vreese and Elenbaas, 2008: 285). This "horse race journalism", often said to have contributed to increased levels of political cynicism within the electorate throughout the last decades (Cappella, 2002: 235; Strombaek and Dimitrova, 2006: 135; Iyengar and Simon, 2000: 154; Jackson and Carsey, 2007: 181; Shah, Cho *et al.*, 2005; Sweetser and Kaid, 2008: 68; De Vreese and Elenbaas, 2008: 290; Crigler, Just *et al.*, 2002: 8), is usually preferred by conventional media organizations to in-depth analyses of specific political issues, more broadly known as "political substance" (Schulz, Zeh *et al.*, 2005: 60; Savigny, 2004). Secondly, conventional media's increasing tendency to provide interpretative coverage of political news comprising commentary and often partisan analysis rather than factual news reports has directly affected the public's perception of their reliability (Cappella, 2002: 235; Jones, 2004: 62). Finally, their content, which regularly features detailed renditions of political scandal and politicians' personal lives, has directly contributed to augment audience members' levels of distrust in their coverage and, more importantly, in formal political actors (Jones, 2004: 62; Savigny, 2004). According to a 2008 international survey, approximately 28% of all respondents from ten countries believed their distrust of specific news media platform has led them to seek other sources of information (The Media Center at the American Press Institute, 2008; Kushin, Yamamoto *et al.*, 2009).

While the news credibility of the Internet is hard to evaluate (Ruggiero and Winch, 2004), a growing proportion of individuals is increasingly relying on Web-based communication channels for political information and opinion. In fact, many scholars (Best and Krueger, 2005: 183; Benoit and Benoit, 2005: 231; Dimmick, Chen *et al.*, 2004: 21-22) believe that some political communication and persuasion platforms are now directly competing with their conventional counterparts. It is important to point out that the audience's lack of trust in conventional media organizations coincides with the emergence and growing credibility in recent years of alternative Web-based publishing platforms offering facts, opinions and analyses that are either ignored or underplayed in offline mass media channels and can sometimes directly question as well as influence conventional media's political news coverage (Jones, 2004: 65; Johnson and Kaye, 2004: 624; Kaye, 2005: 76; Abdulla, Garrison *et al.*, 2002: 8; Xie, 2007: 3; Wallsten, 2006; Mackay and Lowrey, 2008; Cassidy, 2007: 482;

Xenos, 2008: 487; Wallsten, 2005: 1). According to Spillman and his colleagues (2007), Web-based communication technologies are slowly “chipping away at [the conventional media’s] power base and forcing [it] to reconsider long-held beliefs about their gatekeeping capacities”.

Weblogs, considered by many scholars as low cost virtual “soapboxes” regularly comprising human interactive features (Trammell, Williams *et al.*, 2006; Kaye, 2005: 75; Xenos, 2008: 490; McKenna, 2007: 209; Koop and Jansen, 2006: 1; Wallsten, 2008; Francoli and Ward, 2008: 21), allow more members of the citizenry to actively participate in an independent fashion in Web-based politically-oriented mediated deliberation processes that were previously controlled by political elites such as political formations, interest groups and conventional media organizations (Xenos, 2008: 485; Delli Carpini, 2000: 347). It is important to point out that a growing number of formal journalistic organizations are launching weblogs in an attempt to reach audience members who are increasingly migrating to the Web for political information (Spillman, Demo *et al.*, 2007: 3). As previously illustrated, blogs have been playing an increasingly important role in the U.S. political and media landscapes in the last few years. In fact, Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) call elite bloggers who garner an audience the size of some small media outlets the “new influencers” (Trammell, Tarknowski *et al.*, 2006). For instance, the liberal-leaning collective weblog *DailyKos*² “had seven million reader-visits, topping the 5.7 million viewers for Fox News” Network in August 2004 (Ward and Cahill, 2007). Its audience could be compared to the one of several mid-size U.S. newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune*³ during the same time period (Graff, 2007). However, it is important to point out that they do not pose an “immediate financial challenge to US news organizations” (Lowrey and McKay, 2008: 65).

Research question and hypothesis

The study of the socio-political profile of citizen bloggers is required due the increasingly important role they play in public deliberation processes in many Western countries. They have proved to be an important mobilizing force in the United States as well as a watchdog of governmental and conventional media activities (Kaye, 2006: 128; Carlson, 2007: 268; Woodley, 2008: 121). For example, the coverage of political news by weblogs often influenced conventional media’s content in a gatewatching-oriented way during the 2004 U.S. Presidential election (Carlson, 2007: 268). As pointed out by Woodley (2008: 109-110), they are exerting a growing influence on agenda-setting processes that are guiding public

2 <http://www.dailykos.com/>, website accessed on Saturday, January 26th 2008 at 16h39.

3 <http://www.chicagotribune.com/>, website accessed on Tuesday, February 5th 2008 at 19h15.

deliberations. In order to evaluate the influence of the blogosphere on the Quebec political environment, this investigation will provide an in-depth look at the socio-political behavioural profile of political bloggers in order to better understand the structure of this community who might, based on previous research in many different national contexts, play an increasingly central role in political and media agenda setting processes. More specifically, it will provide a socio-demographical portrait of Quebec-based political bloggers and will define their political preferences and interests.

Building on previous conclusions frequently observed in other national contexts, this study proposes two hypotheses to questions linked to the study of political bloggers. First, it is anticipated that the emerging Quebec blogging community will contain highly politically-engaged and sophisticated individuals. Indeed, several scholars (Kavanaugh and Patterson, 2001: 499; Polat, 2005: 451; Jackson and Lilleker, 2007: 245) suggest that the early adopters of the World Wide Web can be defined as politically and technologically-savvy as well as civic-minded citizens actively seeking news and political content online while later adopters, who often “resist new technologies”, are more interested in non-political uses such as online shopping as well as recreational content (Jackson and Lilleker, 2007: 245). More importantly, early adopters must be seen as opinion leader in the online political scene (Jackson and Lilleker, 2007: 245; Shah and Scheufele, 2006: 3; Kavanaugh, Zin *et al.*, 2006), thus illustrating the importance to profile these individuals who could potentially have an increasingly important capacity to influence and ultimately shape a growing proportion of Quebec citizens’ public political opinion.

Secondly, it is anticipated that the Quebec-based political bloggers are more likely to be predominantly conservative. Indeed, Bowers and Stoller (2005) argue based on several exhaustive analyses of the U.S. political blogosphere that the conservative blogging community “was between two and three times as large as the progressive[, or liberal,] blogosphere” in 2003. Moreover, Ackland (2005: 10) determined that conservative bloggers in the U.S. blogosphere were “more active in their linking behaviour” than their progressive counterparts.

Method

This paper’s dataset, which comprises highly-detailed and diversified quantitative information on the socio-political profile of Quebec-based citizen political bloggers not professionally affiliated to formal partisan or media organizations, was collected through a publicly-available secure online survey available on the *Groupe de recherche en communication politique*’s (GRCP) website hosted by Université Laval’s Web servers from April 15th 2008 to

May 1st 2008 inclusively. The online questionnaire featured 58 questions unevenly distributed in seven sections of different sizes addressing specific themes such as bloggers' socio-demographics, their political profile, their weblogs' content, their blogging practices as well as their communication objectives and intentions. All the participants in the study were adults (eighteen years or older) residing in the province of Quebec, with the right to vote in Canada and who were actively contributing to at least one politically-oriented weblog which was updated at least once every week. While the size of the Quebec-based political blogging population was unknown at the time of the analysis due to a lack of comprehensive scientific quantitative investigations, it was possible to argue that there were less than 125 active Quebec-based political bloggers in April 2008. This estimate rests on two non scientific lists of political blogs available at "<http://www.tlmeb.com>" and "<http://www.topblogues.com>" which evaluate the weekly traffic in the Quebec blogosphere. The first site identified 65 active political bloggers while the second listed 121 individuals. It is important to point out that the 30 most-accessed political weblogs of both lists were relatively similar.

The strategy developed for the constitution of the research sample was twofold. First, a conventional reasoned choice approach was employed to select 22 A-list political bloggers. They were identified through the consideration of the two unscientific blog popularity indexes as well as following a content analysis of conventional media's coverage of the 2007 Quebec Provincial elections which often featured specific political bloggers. An email invitation to fill out the survey comprising a hyperlink to the online questionnaire was subsequently sent to the selected bloggers. Secondly, a snowball technique used in a viral dissemination approach (Jankowski and Van Selm, 2008: 6, Viégas, 2005; Scheidt, 2008: 61) was employed to informally circulate, through online and offline networks, invitations to complete the survey to individuals within the Quebec blogosphere. Many recent studies have demonstrated that the structure of online communication and persuasion channels favour the viral circulation of mix-media information (Wallsten, 2008: 2; Baumgartner, 2007: 320; Delli Carpini, 2000: 347; Jankowski and Van Selm, 2008: 6; Sweetser, 2008: 179). This viral diffusion was accomplished through two distinct communication channels. First, A-list bloggers who positively responded to the initial email request in the reasoned choice sampling phase were asked, through a second email, to forward the survey's web link to three other Quebec-based political bloggers they knew through their personal online or offline social network or their daily online media consumption diet. They were also invited to publicize the study by posting a web link on their blog redirecting their readers to the online questionnaire⁴. Secondly, an email was sent to four Quebec-based French-speaking journalists maintaining widely-read

4 It is important to point out that this method has been used previously by several scholars (Johnson, Kaye *et al.*, 2008).

weblogs to ask them to publicize the study. Two of them responded positively to the request and mentioned the study in both their online and offline reporting. It is important to point out that it was impossible to independently confirm what bloggers did with the hyperlinks during the two sampling phases of this study.

While the viral dissemination of survey invitations enabled a wider circulation within the political blogosphere, some authors have recently pointed out that it can generate selection effects with detrimental impacts on the validity of the results (Jankowski and Van Selm, 2008: 6). For instance, it can motivate individuals with a political or research agenda to fill out the questionnaire, therefore tainting the representativeness and, more importantly, the validity of the data collected (Jankowski and Van Selm, 2008: 6). Other sampling techniques have also been used throughout the last five years. Some authors have opted for primarily random selection processes (Bar-Ilan, 2005: 299; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; McKenna and Pole 2008: 99; Herring and Paollilo, 2006: 440). Bar-Ilan (2005: 299) chose blogs after “browsing blogspace for a while” while Huffaker and Calvert (2005) “randomly [...] selected weblogs” that were authored by teenagers. In fact, Wallsten (2005: 11) argues that there “is no way to generate a truly representative sample of political blogs”. Indeed, the absence of precise as well as exhaustive sampling bases of political blogs often determines the selection of non probabilistic sampling techniques. Babbie (1998) believes that the viral non probabilistic sampling strategies, which is primarily used in qualitative investigations similar to the one carried out in this study, is “appropriate for identifying special population who are difficult to locate by other means” (Scheidt, 2008: 61).

A total group of 56 bloggers ultimately filled out the online questionnaire during the two weeks recruitment period. More specifically, 16 out of the 22 A-list political bloggers contacted in the first sampling round answered the secure Web-based questionnaire. Additionally, 40 bloggers contacted during the viral dissemination phase, whether through direct or indirect social networks or through the online and offline conventional media coverage of the study, completed the survey. While the total number of respondents is relatively smaller than other studies such as Kullin’s (2006) 700 respondents and Braaten’s (2005) 631, the highly specialized nature of this project, which exclusively targets Quebec-based political bloggers who published content at least once a week, and the relative small size of the Quebec political blogosphere explain and, to a certain extent, warrant the size of the research sample.

Results

This socio-political behavioural profile of the Quebec political blogosphere has yielded many results showing that while certain of the traits of its membership are relatively similar to political blogging communities in other national contexts, its linguistic, political and cultural specificity can be seen as the source of sharp structural differences. First, the demographical analysis of Quebec-based political blog writers revealed they are predominantly men (89%) between 18 and 35 years old (54%), holding at least one college degree (54%), who are active members of the workforce (63%) and earn an annual personal income exceeding 25.000\$ (CAN) (64%). Additionally, 92.7% of the respondents identified French as their mother tongue. This profile upholds findings of a previous broader study conducted by the CEFRIO (2008) in March 2008 which indicated that the Quebec blogosphere was primarily populated by men (88%) aged between 18 and 34 (44%) who have completed at least one college degree (37%), are on the job market (50%) and have a personal revenue of at least 20.000\$ (CAN) per year. In comparison, 50% of U.S. A-list political bloggers held at least one bachelor's degree and 40% were the recipients of at least one advanced degree in 2004 (McKenna and Pole, 2004: 16). Other facets of the social profile of members of the Quebec political blogspace are relatively different from blogging communities in other national contexts. For example, many "North American" studies have demonstrated that the general blogging population is much more feminized (Pedersen and Macafee, 2007; Perseus, 2004: 4; Lenhart and Fox, 2006: 3). Indeed, Lenhart and Fox (2006: 3) determined that 46% of U.S. bloggers were women in 2006 while 56% were in 2004 (Perseus, 2004: 4). However, Pedersen and Macafee (2007) point out that North American A-list bloggers are for the most part men, leading them to argue that the blogosphere is an inherently sexist communicational environment where the public discourse is predominantly driven by male considerations (Tremayne, Zhen *et al.*, 2006; McKenna and Pole, 2004: 16). McKenna and Pole (2004: 16) also found that only 7% of the U.S. A-list political bloggers surveyed in 2004 were women in the United States.

The survey also found that the average age of Quebec-based political bloggers is 37. While they are generally older than the general population of U.S. bloggers, as demonstrated by Lenhart and Fox's survey (2006: ii) which found that 54% of U.S. bloggers were under the age of thirty (30) in 2006, they share the same age as U.S. A-list political bloggers as shown by McKenna and Pole's (2004: 16) study which revealed their average age to be 37. The analysis also showed that most of the Quebec-based blogging population resides in heavily urbanized and densely populated geographical locations. For example, 46% of bloggers live in Montreal and its immediate surroundings and 29% are located in the province's capital and

second largest city, Quebec City. This could be partially explained by the weaker development of the province's rural communication infrastructures which could potentially restrict Internet-related communication activities (Zamaria and Fletcher, 2008). These results are relatively similar to Lenhart and Fox's (2006: ii) findings in the U.S. context. Indeed, half of the U.S. bloggers were located in the peripheries of "urban areas" while approximately a third lived in "urban areas" such as cities and 13% were in "rural areas" in 2006.

Certain questions of the survey were aimed at determining the ideological composition of the Quebec political blogspace. The data indicated that 63% of the respondents subscribed to left-leaning political viewpoints such as progressivism, social-democratic positions, socialism, communism and anarchism while only 21.4% preferred right-leaning political ideologies like liberalism, conservatism as well as libertarianism. Finally, 3.6% of bloggers identified themselves as either greens or ecologists. These results constitute a very sharp distinction from the structure of the political blogosphere in the United States and reject the second research hypothesis of this paper. As previously indicated, Bowers and Stoller's (2005) study of the U.S. political blogspace showed that the conservative blogging community was, as of 2003, at least "two to three times as large" than its progressive counterpart. Several questions of the survey also addressed the specificity of Quebec's political context, such as the presence of strong nationalistic and sovereignty-oriented feelings within the French majority (Béland and Lecours, 2006). 66% of the respondents support the project of political sovereignty of Quebec from the Canadian Federation while only 21.4% oppose it; 13% refused to answer the question. Comparatively, support for Quebec's sovereignty among the general public has been varying in the last 5 years between 39 % and 54 % according to an unscientific poll in 2008 (Léger Marketing, 2008). This very strong interest for sovereignty among the Quebec-based blogging community could explain the overwhelming number of bloggers who identify themselves to left-leaning political ideologies. Traditionally, political parties with nationalistic values or supporting the sovereignty in Quebec (Parti québécois, Bloc québécois, Québec solidaire) have defended progressive social-democratic policy platforms and have therefore often rallied general support from left-to-center leaning voters in the province.

Although invitations to participate in the survey were sent to A-list bloggers of all political allegiances, it should be pointed out that this ideological portrait of the Quebec political blogosphere could have been heavily influenced by a possible selection effect directly linked to the methodological strategy in the sampling approaches. Indeed, the partial viral nature of the sampling strategy might have contributed to the larger circulation of the online survey in specific ideological social networks. Indeed, some bloggers might have

deployed greater efforts at transmitting the invitations to participate in the study within their personal social networks comprised of bloggers with relatively similar political preferences.

Online socio-political behavioural profile

The survey also investigated how Quebec's political bloggers used the Internet. The data indicates that Quebec-based political bloggers are characterized by their heavy use of the World Wide Web. Indeed, 25.5% of the respondents revealed spending approximately 20 hours online every week. 10.9% estimated their weekly Internet usage to about 25 hours and 7.3% were online 40 hours per week. Only 32.7% of all the participants, or 18 individuals, reported going online fifteen hours or less every week.

A detailed examination of the respondents' blogging practices was also conducted. The data reveals that most Quebec-based political bloggers are not really new members of the blogging community. Actually, 84% of those who participated in the study reported contributing to at least one blog for more than one year. 34% indicated that they had been blogging for at least three years and 14% for more than 5 years. Only 16% of respondent said they have been doing so for less than one year and 5% for less than three months. The dataset also shows that the respondents are very prolific and active bloggers. Indeed, 86% have contributed material on three weblogs or less, simultaneously or consecutively, since they first joined the Quebec political blogosphere. These statistics indicate that blogging might in fact be a growingly popular activity among the Quebec population. 38% of the respondents have written on at least one collective weblog which can be defined as a coproduction-oriented collaborative Web-based publication platform, or "community forum", where two or more bloggers can independently circulate mix-media material often focusing on specific topics or viewpoints (Herring *et al.*, 2005: 3; Nardi, Schiano *et al.*, 2004: 45; Reese, Rutigliano *et al.*, 2007: 242; Quiggin, 2006: 483). The publication, or posting, frequency of Quebec-based political bloggers was also evaluated. The individuals surveyed reported dedicating an average of 23.16 hours every week to blogging-related activities such as research, social interaction as well as publication. More specifically, 62.5% update their weblog with new material at least once every week while 32% do so three to five times and 5% publish every day. Comparatively, 13% of U.S. bloggers post fresh content at least "daily or more frequently" (Fox and Lenhart, 2006: 12).

77% of the individuals surveyed revealed the majority of their blog posts comprised directly or indirectly politically-oriented information. Interestingly, 50% reported adopting a highly partisan tone in their publications through, for instance, the promotion or defence of specific partisan political positions (25%), the attack or criticism of rival positions (27%) or

the support of like-minded or compatible political positions (10,7%). This reinforces the vision of political blogs as “explicit [and overtly] partisan sites intended to extend the message of a candidate or interest group [...]” (MacDougall, 2005: 579; Baum and Groeling, 2007: 4-5). Quebec-based bloggers are also extremely interested by local and regional political issues. Indeed, more than 68% of them focused on provincial, municipal or local political events or matters in their publications while 15% of blog writers preferred talking about international topics and 5% about Canadian federal issues. Finally, Quebec-based bloggers use a wide range of Web-based information resources to find inspiration for their political contributions. 93% of respondents post contributions based on stories developed in conventional media sources, 64% on other weblogs’ content and 52% on comments from their readers when there are retroaction tools available, thus reinforcing the role of weblogs as coproductive political communication and persuasion platforms. Comparatively, Reese, Rutigliano *et al.* (2007: 249) determined that 47.6% of U.S.-based A-list bloggers made reference to conventional media organizations’ online resources through web links they posted on their blogs. According to Wallsten (2005: 25; 2007), the U.S. political blogosphere can often be seen as a mere echo chamber for mainstream media message (McKenna and Pole, 2008: 98). Most U.S. research also indicates that few bloggers can be considered as independent news gatherers that are the source of original reporting because they lack the means to independently produce or access news sources (Johnson and Kaye 2004: 625; McKenna and Pole, 2008: 100). The data collected in this study tend to uphold the echo chamber and limited original reporting hypotheses raised in several U.S. recent scientific analyses (Johnson and Kaye 2004: 625; McKenna and Pole, 2008: 100; Lawson-Border and Kirk, 2005: 557; Perlmutter, 2008: 169; Haas, 2005: 390). It is important to point out that Quebec-based political bloggers are actively participating in Web-only informal politically-oriented activities. For example, 29.1% were engaged in online activities linked to a political formation and 30.9% in activities organized by informal political movement.

Finally, this paper assessed Quebec-based political bloggers’ presence on social networking sites (SNS) such as *MySpace*⁵ and *Facebook*⁶. Indeed, these online communication channels, which can be seen as online communication platforms enabling Web users to maintain a Web-based social network and to circulate a wide range of mix-media personal information (Ellison, Lampe *et al.*, 2009: 6), can contribute to the dissemination of potentially “parapolitical” (Dahlgren, 2005: 153; Bode, 2008: 7) digital material and the development of social links which can directly or indirectly shape Web

5 <http://www.myspace.com/>, website accessed on Sunday, April 13th 2008 at 11h48.

6 <http://www.facebook.com/>, website accessed on Sunday, April 13th 2008 at 11h47.

users' political preferences and opinions (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, Hargattai, 2007; Hargittai, 2007; Boyd, 2008). This survey revealed that 67.9% were present on an online social network site while only 18 individuals who participated in the study did not have an account on any Web-based social networking platform. While the impact of social networking platforms on the online political dynamic has been primarily studied by U.S. scholars (Sweetser and Larisky, 2008: 180-181; Williams and Gulati, 2008; Martin and Schmeisser, 2008: 4-5), more research is required to understand their effect on politically-oriented Web-based content dissemination and social relations.

Offline political participation

This paper also investigated the offline political and civic engagement of Quebec-based blog writers. First, the dataset showed that while respectively 36% and 32% of the respondents reported not being formally affiliated to any provincial or federal official political party, 88% and 84% voted during the 2007 Quebec provincial elections and the 2006 Canadian federal elections. The proportion of bloggers who voted is far higher than within the general population, which shows that bloggers are generally more engaged in formal political processes. According to the *Directeur Général des Élections du Québec*, 71.23% of Quebecers voted in the provincial election of 2007⁷ while only 63.9% casted a ballot during the 39th Canadian Federal election of 2006⁸ (Elections Canada, 2006). More specifically, 35.7% of the individuals surveyed revealed voting for the *Parti Québécois* (PQ), a political formation advocating Quebec's sovereignty, while 5.4% voted for the Green Party of Quebec and 16.1% for *Québec Solidaire* (QS), a left-leaning political organization, during the 2007 Provincial elections. 10.7% of the bloggers who participated in the study indicated that they voted for the *Action Démocratique du Québec* (ADQ), a right-leaning political party, and only 5.4% for the Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ), the political formation that ultimately formed the government. Comparatively, 33.08% of the Quebec electorate voted in 2007 for the Quebec Liberal Party, 30.84% for the *Action Démocratique du Québec*, 28.35% for the *Parti Québécois* and only 3.85% chose the Green Party of Quebec and 3.64% for *Québec Solidaire* (Directeur Général des Élections du Québec, 2007). These results clearly show that the Quebec-based political bloggers surveyed voted primarily for left-leaning political parties, thus upholding previous results on the political ideologies of bloggers.

⁷ http://www.monvote.qc.ca/en/presse_historique_taux.asp, website accessed on Thursday, January 7th 2009 at 11h59.

⁸

http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=gen&document=p4&dir=rep/re2/sta_2006&lang=e&textonly=false#p4_12, website accessed on Thursday, January 7th 2009 at 12h49.

In the 2006 Canadian Federal election, 41.1% of the respondents supported the *Bloc québécois* (BQ), a political formation pushing for Quebec's sovereignty, while 14.3 voted for the New Democratic Party, a left-leaning political organization. Only 12.5% of the bloggers surveyed voted for the Conservative Party of Canada and 1.8% for the Liberal Party of Canada. Again, these results demonstrated that Quebec political bloggers are more likely to support candidates and political organizations who have left-leaning political views. The actual results of the 2006 Federal Canadian election, where 42% of Quebec voters supported the Bloc québécois, 24.6% the Conservative Party of Canada, 20.8% the Liberal Party of Canada and 7.5% the socialist New Democratic Party (Elections Canada, 2006), reinforce the findings of this paper which indicate that the respondents differ ideologically from the rest of the population.

The data collected also shows that Quebec-based political bloggers are actively involved in a wide variety of informal, or alternative, real-world politically-oriented activities. For instance, 40% participated in real-world demonstrations. It showed that they are actively engaged in a wide range of formal (vote, financial contribution to political parties, party membership, etc.) as well as informal political activities (boycott, demonstrations, community activism, etc.). In fact, the data collected indicates that the respondents are more politically-active than the general population in Quebec. They could be described as politically hyper-active citizens, or "hyper-citizens".

Discussion

This paper provides the first in-depth sociological characterization of political bloggers in Quebec as well as in Canada. The data presented was produced through a Web-based secure survey among 56 active Quebec-based political bloggers selected through an innovative non probabilistic viral sampling method. The study aimed to verify two hypotheses on the socio-political behavioural profile of Quebec bloggers. The first hypothesis claims that Quebec-based blog writers in the emerging political blogosphere are highly politically-engaged and sophisticated individuals. The data collected by the survey showed that Quebec political bloggers engaged in a wide range of online as well as offline formal and informal political activities. Indeed, they can be defined as politically "hyper active", taking part in numerous forms of political and civic engagement ranging from voting to public demonstration and boycotts to Web-militancy and party membership. They are effectively "hyper-citizens".

Secondly, it was anticipated that Quebec-based political bloggers were more likely to be predominantly conservative. Indeed, the assumption was based on the results of an informal content survey of the press coverage dedicated to political blogs throughout the 2007

Quebec Provincial election which indicated that conservative bloggers were mentioned more frequently by reporters in their election coverage than progressive bloggers. Therefore, it was believed that there would be more Quebec-based conservative bloggers. In addition, several extensive analyses of the U.S. political blogosphere have previously shown that the conservative blogging community was much larger than its liberal counterpart. The actual ideological profile of Quebec's political blogosphere does not support the hypothesis. In fact, the data indicates that a majority of the respondents (63%) support left-leaning political viewpoints such as progressivism, social-democratic positions, socialism, communism and anarchism while 21.4% identified themselves to right-leaning political ideologies like liberalism, conservatism as well as libertarianism.

This paper also provides an overview of a handful of Canadian contributions that are slowly characterizing the structure of information dissemination and social relations as well as the effects of this evolving and gradually more vibrant aphysical public space. So far, very little scientific empirical as well as theoretical knowledge has been produced in Canada on political bloggers' motives, intentions and their contributions to the politically-oriented public debate. Also, few studies have evaluated their actual impact on political life, online and offline (Chu, 2007). While many studies have examined different facets of the political blogspace in the United States, the potential influence of Canadian political weblogs on online as well as offline political information production and consumption, electoral campaigning and policy making processes has yet been comprehensively evaluated with only several scholars as well as journalists looking at the issue in recent years (Small, 2008; Chu, 2007). In the mean time, a lot remains to be described, explained as well as understood about political weblogs and their authors. More quantitative and qualitative analyses of the Canadian political blogosphere should therefore be expected in the next few years. More specifically, these studies are likely to address many important research questions such as, for example, blogging practices, Canadian bloggers' levels of political sophistication as well as participation in online as well as offline formal and informal political activities and, more importantly, their effect on the overall Canadian civil society.

Finally, this paper shows the importance for future research in Canada as well as other national contexts such as the United States to consider the geographical, political, cultural, economic as well as linguistic specificity of blogging communities. As demonstrated previously in this paper, it can have direct impact on the understanding of the structure and dynamic within these groups of individuals who playing an increasingly important role on the media and political scenes of their respective countries.

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