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Digital Communication and Politics in Aragon. A two-way communication formula for the interaction between politicians and citizens

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Abstract: This research presents blogs as an innovative and rich tool for political communication. Blogs can facilitate two-way communication and true interaction between citizens and politicians. The article analyses in depth the content, uses, and characteristics of five weblogs written by Aragonese politicians. Although the study detects some weaknesses in the current political use of blogs, it encourages political parties to use blogs and other online resources, not only during electoral campaigns to improve the reputation of political leaders but also continuously and particularly in situations of special interest for the citizenship. The study shows that the use of blogs by Aragonese politicians is no longer just a transitory phenomenon and has become a reality. The article also demonstrates that politicians use blogs mostly as a pre-electoral tool and to a much lesser extent as an element of communication to promote democracy. It has been observed that politicians' blogs are used as a tool to overcome situations of crisis and to compensate negative opinions caused by questionable acts.

Keywords: Blogs; Internet; Communication; Aragon; Political Parties.

Summary: 1. Introduction and justification. 2. Framework and context: the digitalization of political communication. 2.1. Theoretical framework. 2.2. Object of study. 2.2.1. Object and political context. 2.2.2. Object and socio-technological context. 2.2.3. Legal framework. 3. Methodology, objectives, and hypothesis. 3.1 Objectives. 3.2. Hypothesis. 3.3. Description of methodology. 4. Analysis. 5. Results and Conclusions. 6. References. 7. Notes.

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1. Introduction and justification

New technologies have been incorporated into our lives. They have become an everyday tool for citizens. It is increasingly clear that in these first years of the 21st century we are witnessing the profound transformation of the processes of acquisition and transmission of knowledge (Parra et al: 2008: 63). Internet has revolutionised everyday life for most people. Simultaneously, these changes are forcing us to redefine communication paradigms. Internet has become a key player in political communication. Recently, the focus is on the blogs and the social networks created thanks to the Internet. In fact, in early 2009 there existed in Spain more than 4.7 million internet users, according to official data from Red.es. The unstoppable advance of information and communication technologies "has impacted communication in a way comparable only to the impact made by Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1455" (Masip, 2003). To some experts, "it is the farewell to paper, the transition from lead to light. And there will be no turning back" (De Pablos, 2009).

These changes involve transformations in the modes of communication of all individuals, both at personal and corporate levels. With the facilities provided by computer systems, a massive social network is being formed by millions of small networks. The hallmarks of this revolution are based on the protagonist media role played by audiences (Orihuela, 2005). All seems to indicate that this will lead to a change in the current unidirectional and mediated conception of politics. Furthermore, as Elaine Díaz Rodríguez (2009: 951) affirms, currently there are enduring aspects introduced by the blog format at the moment of its emergence and they constitute a step forward in the evolution of the web as it was initially understood. The blogs have an extremely simple structure based on predefined templates, time reduction for publishing information, and the ability to insert comments, among others. But the real contribution of blogs lies on the virtual conversation from many to many, on the interaction between users "that transcends geographical barriers, and on the principle of collaborative writing, where what was said by the author may be as important as the opinion of readers" (Elaine Díaz-Rodríguez, 2009: 954).

In this way, blogs have proven to be one of the protagonists of this whole paradigmatic change that communication has been experiencing since the popularisation of the Internet. Given the success of blogs as a tool for modern digital communication, this article aims to present the most relevant findings of a study aimed to determine the extent to which blogs were used in politics, in this case in a specific region like the Autonomous Community of Aragon. The methodology designed for this research, a model to analyse the content and formal aspects of blogs, can be applicable

to other territories.

2. Framework and context: the digitization of political communication

Two different disciplines from the world of communication serve to frame this study. On the one hand, the study is part of the field of Political Communication, and everything that involves communication with electoral purposes. On the other hand, this study has its foundations in the academic area of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), specifically the Internet and, within it, the blogs. María José Canel (2006: 39) narrows the field of political communication to the activity of certain persons and institutions (politicians, communicators, journalists and citizens), in which, as a result of the interaction, there is an exchange of messages with which the design and implementation of political decisions is articulated in the community. This view does not limit the scope of the study to the political activity that results from law, but includes the social and cultural spheres and also conceives a political message, which can be sent not only by those holding power, but also by any member of society.

2.1. Theoretical framework

Thus, this article is based on the understanding of the relationship between politicians and citizens as a relationship of interaction that involves a circular conception of the communication process, which goes beyond the classical and traditional linear view of sender-message-receiver, to jump to a higher stage in which, thanks to permanent feedback and dynamism of the new communication formulas and formats, the protagonists have the possibility to be constantly generating messages and meanings.

As Pérez Ariza (2006) argues, the ICT "provide hitherto unknown quality, volume and precision to the message, through the focus on the final recipient of the new channels and the adequacy of the existing channels, as well as the direct involvement of that same user in a feedback possibility, so far unknown".

This conception of political communication not only takes into account the person in power. This is the key factor of change that the use of the Internet has become for political communication, with blogs as its greatest exponent, since one of its main features is the possibility that the ordinary citizen can interact with a politician, with a possibility of feedback as easy as clicking the computer's keyboard. Internet is one of the few tools that enable the transmission of opinions hierarchically located at the same level as those emitted by politicians.

Thus, according to authors such as J. Del Rey Morató (2008: 108), J. L. Dader and E. Campos (2006: 132) or the proposal of M. J. Canel (2006), inspired by the work of Denton and Woodward [1], to fully understand what political communication is we should bear in mind that it has three characteristics. First, political communication has a short-term aim, since it seeks to obtain immediate results, such as a winning a legislature. Secondly, it is strategic communication, since politicians seek to achieve a goal and to achieve so they develop a specific plan. Political communication has a clear persuasive element, since the intention of the politician is to influence beliefs, values, and above all attitudes. This is because politicians' ultimate goal is to make citizens go to the polls and vote for them. Finally, in third place, it involves a mediated communication (Canel, 2006: 40), i.e. to reach the receiver, the message passes through the media's filter. Well, this is the idea that can start to be questioned today thanks to blogs and the rise of the so-called Journalism 2.0, due to the use of the Internet, and in particular due to the use of tools such as blogs, which become a direct communication channel between an individual or organization and its various audiences.

James E. Grunig and T. Hunt (1984: 30) have argued that in the context of communication management in organizations, i.e. the different relationship patterns that can exist between an organization-whether a company or institution- and its public, there is an interaction of bidirectionality between sender and receiver. Such communication can be asymmetric, when feedback is received from the public but only to achieve a better persuasion of it, or symmetrical, when the aim is the mutual understanding between the organization and its publics. In the case of traditional political communication, communication is asymmetric, since there is a difference of hierarchy between sender and receiver. But there are cases in which communication cannot even be defined as bidirectional, since sometimes political communication is totally unidirectional, receiving feedback only once every four years, in the Spanish case, through the vote. Public communication is understood and practiced as a dialogue: it is horizontally exercised from citizens for citizens. The web has provided the architecture for a two-way and symmetrical communication model that contrasts sharply with the unidirectional and asymmetric model of the traditional media (Orihuela, 2005).

The majority of experts consider that with a proper political use of the blog and following the principles proposed by numerous authors such as José Luis Orihuela, Juan Varela and Octavio Rojas, the classical and linear theories can be overcome. They also see in the blogs a tool that allows the existence of a real feedback, which puts the transmitter and the receiver at the same hierarchical level. For its part, for the political class the major benefit of the blogs is escaping the sometimes unwanted media filters that work as mediator between politicians and citizens. Politicians are happy to escape the filters and the sometimes dreaded gatekeepers [2]. Digital technologies have been consolidated in recent years in all professional fields of media. To begin with, they have replaced the analogue tools employed until a little more than a decade ago for the research, production and dissemination of information. Also, digital technologies have multiplied the consumer platforms that are in the hands of the public, thanks to computers, PDAs, mobile phones and various home automation devices (Salaverría & García-Avilés, 2008: 32).

It is necessary to note that in very few cases the electoral messages reach the citizen in the exact form in which the parties planned; instead they must pass through the media's filters. In fact, one could say that the campaign exists only because there are some media that, through their criteria of news selection and prioritization, transmit the parties' message to the public. Thus, the extent to what the contents of the debates, advertisements, and the electoral

programme are known depends on the media's coverage of the materials provided by politicians and what is often of interest to journalists is not political propaganda, but news with an "unmasking mission". Therefore, if political communication aims, according to Newman and Perloff, "to direct public opinion, institute their own ideologies, win elections and gain approval for certain laws and policies", the possibility to reach their audiences without having to go through the media filters will be of paramount importance to achieve its purposes (Canel, 2006: 77-82).

All politicians who were interviewed for this research agree with these understandings, and 100% of them, including those who have been in power, believe that the possibility to inform citizens of their political projects and ideas without recurring to the traditional media is one of the most important advantages of blogs. As stated by Senator José María Mur, "while in a blog the politician says what he thinks, in a medium the politician can be censured" [3]. Traditionally, the journalists (or rather the multimedia groups) were the ones who turned something into news [4]. However, today the barrier of the 'gatekeeper' can be avoided and information published on the Internet will have more chances of having major impacts of visualization than information from any newspaper [5].

As Ralph Negrine (1996: 147) maintains, communication is a discipline inherent to politics, and one can argue that this is because it is doubly necessary; in the first place it is necessary to make decisions, since an exchange of views is necessary among those involved. Secondly, communication is also necessary to guarantee the public policies connect with the citizen: it is necessary that the public knows the strategies to be adopted. Communication is needed to legitimize the political authority. Or as Concha Mateos (2003) affirms, politicians are aware that "they must be in the media, [and that] there is an increasing number of people and entities that want to be in the media and that the filters become more difficult to pass", and "it is necessary to maintain a steady pace of organizational innovation and adaptation to the historical environment".

New technologies have substantially altered the relationships between people and their relations with the information. In the future we will see how these changes unfold at all levels, including the political sphere, although some such authors as Dhalberg consider that the new media are merely new tools for the elite to continue dominating the public space. But there are plenty of professionals who think that new media will increase the ability of citizens to participate in politics (Dhalberg, 2007: 243). As for the effects, there are studies that show that the networks in internet have positive impacts on people's assessments of candidates. For example, the use of blogs, as long as the tools that enable feedback are not disabled [6], significantly influences politician's credibility through this new proximity. In fact, the effects of using these new technologies as electoral weapons on the international scene could be observed in the last US presidential elections [7] (Escolar, 2006: 118). Following these recent events, and other that occurred previously in Spain [8], one can assume that the politicians who employ more and better the communicative power of the Internet, and specifically of blogs, will have greater chances of success, above all because these tools lend transparency to the institutions that use them. This leads to a major level of credibility from the citizens, which makes the satisfaction of voters higher, because they see that they are actually exercising democracy, which legitimates the politician twice as much.

According to Rojas (2007: 18-20), it is not an exaggeration to say that in order to understand what is happening today in the world is necessary to understand and even be part of the "conversation" that is taking place in the blogosphere, since it is a genuine revolution that involves the media, commercial companies, politicians and individuals. Blogs are probably the first medium born in the web, and although they have been compared to diaries, in the beginning the basis of the blogs was the cyclic publication of small comments that included links to other websites. The different notations made in the blogs contain, in addition to its permanent address, the date and time they were published, the headline, and the body that often includes links and one of the most important features of blogs, the system of comments. The comments are what allow readers to participate in the process with their opinions.

This system is what differentiates this tool from a traditional website, and if one wants to use the possibility of feedback offered by the Internet it is essential to have the option enabled (the free blogs are given the option to disable the comments), because if it is disabled (many politicians do it), this leads readers to believe that there is some fear of transparency. This part of the blog is vital if one wants to carry out a two-way symmetrical communication. The bloggers are increasingly organized; both in Spain and abroad, the different political bloggers are organized into communities. This is practical because blogs with similar content associate and this promotes mutual visits. The first of these networks was created by David de Ugarte, a network consultant and technician. There is a large number of blogs associated with different networks [9], but still, the audience is not very relevant today. Despite the number of visits, the blogs do have an influence on the media, because some blogs are followed by journalists. According to experts such as Daniel Rodríguez, the blogs themselves are not relevant yet because they still need a lot of echo from the traditional media [10], however, other experts like Enrique Dans are more optimistic [11].

2.2. Object of study

2.2.1. Object and political context

Aragon's politics has its two main pillars in the General Council of Aragón, which after the approval of the last Statute of Autonomy was renamed Government of Aragon, and its own autonomous parliament, the *Cortes de Aragon* (Courts of Aragon). The Government of Aragon represents the executive power and is the principal organ of self-government of this Autonomous Community, which adopted its contemporary form during the Spanish Transition, collecting the historical heritage of the former Kingdom of Aragon. Members of the General Council of Aragón are elected by the Courts of Aragon, who in turn elect the president who will become the leader of the government. After the recent elections held on 27 May, 2007, this position is occupied by Marcelino Iglesias Ricou, who belongs to the Spanish Socialist Labour Party (PSOE). His term ends in May 2011, when regional and municipal elections will take place. The Courts of Aragon are formed by representatives elected in regional elections, which take place every four years. At

present the County Council consists of thirteen members: nine (69%) from the PSOE-Aragón, and four (31%) from the Aragonist Party (*PAR*).

Aragon's electoral roll has 996,787 people, of a total population of 1,277,471, being the main stakeholders of political communication all citizens over 18 years of age because they all have the right to vote. Aragon is one of the Spanish communities that have changed its president more often. Moreover, in the last ten years it has been ruled by political coalition. It is important to highlight that this is a region where there has never been absolute majorities but a plural panorama, with a broad ideological spectrum, in comparison to other communities such as Castilla-La Mancha and Valencia, where there are only two or three groups represented.

In this autonomous community the PSOE is generally the most voted party, although it has had the help of a coalition to govern, leaving the Popular Party (PP) relegated to second place, probably due to the public opinion regarding the water policy (National Hydrological Plan) that historically has never been popular in Aragon. The regionalist and nationalist vote is around 20% of the total.

2.2.2. Object and socio-technological context

In Aragon, the percentage of households with computers is still about 60%, and of these 70% have internet access [12]. The numbers are much smaller in rural areas, where only 32.3% of households have Internet access. To give a figure about consumers' trust in the Internet, only 30% of the Aragonese population shop online, so that the benefits of the use of blogs by politicians would be framed in this particular sector of the population, which is much smaller of course than other more conventional forms of communication.

However, everything appears to indicate that these figures are constantly increasing, and thus from this study one can deduce that the political sector would benefit from starting to use these tools as soon as possible. Moreover, it is also necessary to note that besides the ubiquitous feedback the blogs have specific advantages that regular websites do not have.

This advantage is the priority that blogs have in search engines. For example, since some time ago the Google search engine indexes more generously the content generated by blogs. When we use one of these search engines, among the top results are usually direct links to blogs, after them are links to sites where users make comments, and only after them are the official sites. This illustrates the importance of blogs over other tools within the Internet.

2.2.3. Legal framework

Aragon's politics are governed by the Electoral Law of the Autonomous Community of Aragon (Ley 2/1987 of 16 February) and by the Organic Law of the General Electoral System. The part relating to political communication within the 1987 Law is contained in the Title V of the Electoral Procedures, and in concrete in Chapters II (Presentation and proclamation of candidates: articles 18 to 20), III (Electoral campaign, articles 21 and 22), and IV (Use of state-owned media for electoral campaigns: articles 3 to 25) [13]. It is also important to mention the Statute of Autonomy of Aragon [14]. The text entered into force on 23 April, 2007. None of these articles mentions the use of new communication tools that emerged in the Internet, like the blogs.

3. Methodology, objectives and hypothesis

3.1. Objectives

This research tries to establish a number of factors related to the digital communication carried out by politicians, particularly through the use of Internet blogs. The investigation started with the following objectives:

1. The use of blogs as a communication tool in politics in Aragon. It aims to understand the use of Internet blogs by Aragonese politicians, i.e. whether politicians give blogs relevance and whether this use is widespread in the most representative political parties.
2. The management style of the blog as a channel of everyday communication. The question is whether blogs are used constantly or only at crucial moments (of pre-campaign).
3. What are the best and worst uses of the blog when comparing them against each other, and which one has more participation of Internet users.

3.2. Hypothesis

As Dader and Campos (2006:132) remind us, the existence of web pages, the accessibility of politicians' emails addresses, and the presence of many of them on the web through their blogs opens the door to the exchange of messages with citizens and creates the hope of an electronic democracy or a cyber-democracy, in line with the aspirations of a supposedly "more deliberative democracy".

But at the same time, there exist in the collective consciousness of Aragonese communication researchers the idea that the use of blogs among politicians is not yet widespread. Similarly, politicians do not see in the blogs a tool for transparent and regular communication, but instead politicians use these technologies primarily at specific moments like

the pre-campaign period or other difficult situations to carry out public communication, like being part of the opposition or not a relevant party for the media. For Del Rey Morató (2008: 108), “politicians do not always understand the scope of this new technology and never manage to turn it into a political novelty”. At the same time, according to the classical materialist theories, it is estimated that the internet blogs owned by parties with more financial resources are more elaborate, especially those owned by parties in power.

3.3. Description of methodology

To get an accurate picture of the current use of blogs by Aragonese politicians, two different types of research were conducted: Firstly, an analysis and description of the different Aragonese political blogs and, secondly, a series of structured interviews to experts in both political communication and the Internet, to complement the first analysis.

The analysis started with the evaluation of the general state of Aragonese politicians' blogs, and this was followed by the analytical and systematic observation technique, taking as object of study the most representative political blogs in this autonomous community. For this purpose, a model of analysis was structured based on the parameters proposed by Octavio I. Rojas, Julio Alonso, José Luis Antúnez, José Luis Orihuela, and Juan Varela (Rojas et al, 2007: 68). Their guidelines were modified by eliminating irrelevant parts for this study, and adding some specific issues which are essential for the analysis of the peculiarities of political blogs.

We performed a thorough analysis not only of the content but also of the formal aspect of the blogs, which also emits a great deal of information. Thus, the study -following the analyses of other authors such as J. L. Dader and E. Campos; J. L. Orihuela; O. Islas; G. López- was performed following a table of contents, which analyses the blogs primarily through descriptive answers to a set of over thirty questions. Subsequently these responses were coded on a scale from 1 to 10 to make a better comparison between different blogs.

GUIDELINES FOR THE ANALYSIS OF BLOGS	
1. Identity of the author.	1. Who writes the blog, or at least, who seems to write it? 2. Is the author a person or group? 3. Is the blog a personal or professional project? 4. Emotional elements: Is the politician presented humanly and friendly? 5. Are there biographical details? 6. Social Element: Is the politician presented as someone who can connect with a majority of middle-class voters? 7. Professional elements: is the author presented as a skilled, intelligent, active, educated person? 8. Is the presentation of the blog formal or informal? 9. Type of photograph appearing in the profile: nonverbal communication. 10. Are there more pictures of the author throughout the blog? 11. Is the blog using its own domain or a free hosting service or the party's web hosting service?
2. Design.	12. What does the visual design of the blog suggest about its purpose; is it simple and personal, or corporative? 13. Is the visual value of the subject part of the criteria for publishing? 14. Is it easy to navigate? Are there extra content to help in searches; indexes, archives?
3. Editorial content.	15. Is it a thematic blog? 16. In what genre could it be included? 17. Is the content informative, educational, entertainment, remarkably persuasive, or all at once? 18. How good is the writing? What is the tone used?
4. Age and update rate.	19. When was the blog created? 20. Was the creation of the blog caused by a political milestone like the beginning of the elections? 21. How often is it updated? 22. What is revealed by the navigation through all the archives of the blog? 23. Has the blog changed over time? 24. Is it updated more at elections time?
5. Links Policy.	25. Are links typically included in posts? 26. Are there frequently repeated links to the same sites? 27. What are the sites most frequently cited as a source? 28. What seems to be the purpose of the blog: the provision of links to other websites or the creation of own content?
6. Blogroll	29. What kinds of sites are listed on the blogroll? 30. Only corporate websites of its political party? 31. Does the blogroll indicate the kind of community the author seeks to identify with?
7. Debates and comments.	33. Is this a debate-oriented blog? 34. Are the comments disabled? And if not... 35. What activity is detected in the comments? 36. Is it always the same people commenting? 37. What kinds of comments are made by readers?

9. Audience. 38. Based on the previous, how would you describe the audience of the blog?

As for the interviews, consisted of a series of structured questions made to professionals of different profiles. On the one hand, professionals from the world of politics in Aragon and, on the other hand, experts in the world of communication in the two facets of relevance to the subject of study: Internet communication and political communication. Thus, we have interviewed deputies and councillors from different Aragonese political parties such as Chesús Yuste (*Chunta Aragonesista* – Aragonist Council), José María Mur (Aragonese Party), and Abel Sancho Tomás (Popular Party).

We also interviewed professionals not directly connected with politics, like Antonio Ibáñez, a journalist in *El Periódico de Aragón* (Aragon's Newspaper) and a professor at San Jorge University (Zaragoza), expert in electoral communication in the context of Aragon. The study also took into consideration the views of experts in Internet communication, like Octavio Rojas, who is not only a renowned blogger, but has also published books about the Internet and blogs, and Gabriel del Molino, director of the company 'Camyna', which is dedicated to new technologies, and expert in communication and positioning via Internet.






Although similar questions were established to facilitate data comparison, each interview was different because the questions were adapted to the profile of the interviewee in order to take better advantage of their expertise.

4. Analysis

For the present study we analysed some of the most relevant political blogs from the most representative parties in the Aragonese landscape. In particular, we took into account the blogs of Domingo Buesa from the Popular Party (PP), Ricardo Caveró from the Spanish Socialist Labour Party (PSOE), María Herrero from the Aragonese Party (PAR), and Chesús Bernal from the Aragonese Council (CHA). The latter has two blogs: one quite personal about Ireland, and another one exclusively political, which was chosen for the investigation. At the end we also examined the blog started in May 2009 by Juan Alberto Belloch, Mayor of Zaragoza.

The selection criteria within each party is based on the scarcity of Aragonese politicians who work with this type of tool, so that blogs analysed are those that are more active, in comparison to those written by fellow party members.

The following table is a summary of the most relevant concepts, in a comparative and schematic manner. For an extension of the detailed analysis of each politician individually and in comparison to each other please refer to the appendix section.

Summary of the comparative analysis of the different blogs analysed					
Questions	María Herrero (PAR)	Domingo Buesa (PP)	Ricardo Caveró (PSOE)	Chesús Bernal (CHA)	Juan Alberto Belloch
1. Author's identity shown in the blog					
Who writes the blog?	María Herrero.	Domingo Buesa.	Ricardo Caveró.	Chesús Bernal.	J.A. Belloch.
-Author: individual or group.	Individual.	Individual, then group.	Individual.	Individual.	Individual.
-Personal or professional project.	Personal 70% Professional 30%	Personal 30% Professional 70%.	Personal 40% Professional 60%.	Personal 30% Professional 70%.	Professional 100%.
-Emotional elements: friendliness.	9/10	4/10	3/10	3/10	1/10
-Biographical Details.	9/10	4/10	3/10	3/10	0/10
-Social elements: Connection with the citizen.	10/10	4/10	5/10	5/10	0/10
-Professional element.	6/10	7/10	8/10	7/10	8/10
-Formal or informal.	40% formal. Use of corporative colours	100% formal. Corporative.	20% formal. Little corporative.	70% formal. Corporative.	100% formal. No corporative.
-Type of photograph: non-verbal communication.					
-More photographs of the author throughout the blog.	Yes.	No.	No.	No.	No.

-Domain: own, free, party's?	Free, Blogia.	Own, paid.	Own, paid.	Free, Wordpress.	Paid and own, in Wordpress.
2. Design of the interface					
-Is the visual value of the subject part of the criteria for publishing?	0%.	0%.	10%.	0%.	0%.
-Easy navigation? Extraordinary Contents.	9/10	10/10	10/10	10/10	8/10
3. Editorial Content					
-Is it a thematic blog?	Miscellaneous.	Politics, culture and folklore.	Politics and technology.	Politics.	Politics.
-Character? Informative, educative, entertainment, persuasive?	All	"Constructive Political opposition".	All	Politics, information, crime-reporting.	Informative, opinion. (9/1)
-Quality of the writing? Tone.	Friendly, informal.	Formal.	Friendly, formal.	Formal.	Formal.
4. Age and updating frequency					
-Launch date.	October 2006	December 2005	November 2005	July 2006	March 2009
-Cause: Political momentum? e.g. elections?	No	Yes: first comment was about apolitical campaign.	No	Yes: negotiation of the Statute of Aragon.	Yes: Justification need.
-Updating Frequency:	11.5 times per month	10.5 times per month	8.2 times per month	7.7 times per month	6 times per month (one month old).
-Changes, evolution:	No	No	Yes	Yes	Recent Launch
-Updated more often during elections?	Yes. 24 entries on elections month.	Yes. 17 days elections month.	No. 8 days on elections month.	Yes. 19 days on elections month.	Recent Launch
5. Links Policy					
-Inclusion of links:	2/10	5/10	6/10	4/10	2/10
6. Direct-access links in the blogroll					
-Type of sites listed in the blogroll?	Varied, not only corporative.	Political and corporative.	Varied, also from other parties.	Political and corporative.	No blogroll included.
7. Comments, debates: the conversation					
-Oriented to debate?	0/10	8/10	10/10	8/10	8/10
-Comments enabled?	Disabled	Enabled	Enabled	Enabled	Enabled
-Mail available.	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

In the analysis of the general panorama of Aragon's political blogosphere, we can observe a greater abundance of blogs written by ordinary people or groups of citizens interested in politics, than blogs written by the politicians themselves. However, there are a few of the latter that are very much considered by scholars and have been taken into account in this study. This is the case of Domingo Buesa's blog, which is named in Rojas's book (2007). In fact according to the interview with Octavio Rojas, blogs ceased to be a phenomenon long ago, to become a reality that is here to stay, in all subject areas. Perhaps this is why new political blogs are progressively being launched, being one of the last blogs Juan Alberto Belloch's, which was started on 5 March, 2009.

So far, the cases of politicians using blogs are still a small part of the total: the political landscape of Aragon shows a difficulty in the use of new technologies for the exercise of democracy.

A clear example of the misunderstanding of what these tools represent for the political profession is the vast number of blogs that were opened around the 2007 elections and were closed in less than two months. From this we can draw two conclusions. First, politicians do think that the use of blogs and Internet can be relevant in the polls. On the other hand, they do not see the Internet as a long-term communication tool with potential, at least for now. The use of these tools by contemporary Aragonese politicians is not generally oriented to brand-building through dialogue, although it is true that there are some signs that lead us to believe they are going in the right direction.

It is possible to anticipate that the recent historical episode of the election of the new U.S. president, along with other milestones of the past (September 11 and the power of messages from mobile devices to call people together, etc.), will have a positive impact on the conception of these new tools. There are already some people who say that if Roosevelt was the radio president and Kennedy was the television president, then Obama is already the Internet president. The video of "Yes, we can", designed specifically for the Web, was seen by 14 million people, and received 80,000 comments. Barack Obama is on Internet networks since 2004. Additionally, 90% of his campaign budget was collected in small amounts through the web. Thus, comparing the Internet presence of the U.S. President with other international

leaders at the time before the elections, Obama's presence exceeded the sum of the following five leaders [15].

5. Results and Conclusions

The global picture of the blogs is going through a good moment; there are over 133 million blogs worldwide. In Spain, 31% of Internet users claims to have one (Ritoré, 2009). This new format has been adapted to daily life as in their day e-mail and e-chat did it, so that anyone can create content and throw it to the web. At first, the contents were read by the social spheres closest to the author, like family and friends, but today many blogs have gone beyond the personal realm and managed to become, as the expert José Antonio Ritoré defines them, "true specialised micro-media".

Recently, some companies started to pay attention to this format, but the ways to exploit this new tool are still unknown to the large majority of entrepreneurs. As for politics, it follows the trends of the business world, and so gradually exclusively political blogs have been created, not only by individuals but also by professional politicians. The Web is probably the only medium in which the public chooses content freely among infinite possibilities. The voters of tomorrow are today's children and youth who already spend more time online than watching television. Currently they are still a minority, but probably within two decades the Spanish citizens who use the Internet as a source of information and entertainment will be more than those who prefer other media.

Based on the results of this study it can be argued that although there are already certain blogs that have gained the interest of the general public and experts, in Aragon there is still a long way to go in terms of political communication in general, but especially in the use of new technologies, whose development will be positive for both the political class and citizens alike, because this new tool has a communication potential of great power. The Aragonese political community is not only not taking advantage of the communicative potential of blogs, but neither of the Internet in general, and in cases where they are starting to take advantage of these tools, the communication is not bidirectional, but on the contrary, politicians are missing out the great opportunity offered by blogs: the ability to listen to its main stakeholders: the voters. As a result of this research it is necessary to remember that:

1) This study confirms that by and large in the Autonomous Community of Aragon the voices of politicians are not yet present on the Internet. The politicians who have decided to open blogs are still a minority and many of them took this decision before the last election, and closed them shortly after [16].

2) The use of blogs, provided the tools that enable feedback are not disabled [17], increases politicians' credibility through this new proximity.

3) A vast majority of the blogs surveyed tend to be updated more often on pre-campaign and campaign season, and are abandoned in non-election periods. Experts in communication like Gabriel del Molino [18] maintain that there is a "lack of awareness" among politicians, as "they continue to believe that citizens only follow politicians when they are campaigning; the important thing is to take them seriously and consistently, and not just at election time".

4) Most political bloggers open their blogs at important times for their parties and when they are interested in disengaging from the Fourth Power, and its gatekeepers. Thus, as Chesús Yuste [19] stated, he and other members of the Aragonist Council opened their blogs as part of a strategy by the deputies and councillors of the same party to end what they saw as their party's "isolation from the mainstream press". Another example comes from some councillors from the PP, including Abel Sancho Tomás, who said that the opening of his blog was motivated by the difficulty to communicate his political project publicly, because he was member of the "opposition at all levels" [20].

5) The trend in Aragon is that politicians in power have less presence in the blogosphere. Thus, according to this observation, and as Professor Antonio Ibáñez maintains, it is outstanding "the lack of importance the PSOE [Spanish Socialist Labour Party] of Aragon and the PAR [Aragonese Party] give to blogging". This fact has been observed and verified throughout this study: there are very few blogs of these two political parties.

6) The peculiarities of the Autonomous Community of Aragon regarding the distribution of the population (the long distances between the large cities and the enormity of the rural population) make the Internet especially necessary in this region to provide proper information to all citizens who are not reached by other media. At the same time, the distribution of the population can also make Internet access more complicated for a part of the Aragonese population due to various technical problems.

The Spanish administration is gradually advancing towards this future and a clear example is the fundamental change in the *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (Official State Gazette). From 1st January 2009 the printed version of the gazette disappeared and is only available online. This is probably the most important step that has been taken towards an e-Government in Spain. Moreover, in 2009 the Spanish Government approved the development of the *Ley de Acceso Electrónico de los Ciudadanos a los Servicios Públicos* (Law for Citizens' Electronic Access to Public Services), which marks the 31st December 2010 as the deadline for all public administrations to offer their services electronically.

In a world in which we can connect to the Internet from an airplane (American Airlines offers quality Wi-Fi in certain routes from New York), Aragonese politicians have no choice but to face the change and make use of the new tools with the same seriousness they give to other media. Perhaps the decision to open or not a blog is not the most important thing, but it is to join the conversation that returns power to the people and permits and improves open collaboration, which will be a benefit to all, both individuals and organizations. In short, we can say, by way of conclusion, that:

1) The use of blogs by Aragonese politicians is not as remarkable as one might imagine, given the international situation in this regard. In fact, Internet use with political-democratic character in general is way behind the international average and at an enormous distance from the United States.

2) However, the use of blogs is no longer a simple phenomenon, and is already a reality that more and more people and politicians are benefitting from.

3) The political party in power at the moment is the one with the smaller number of blogs online. It can be concluded that this situation will remain stable in the future, with the exception of the electoral period, because blogs in Aragón today are largely used as pre-election communication tools, and to a much lesser extent as communication tool to promote democracy.

4) It has been observed that political blogs are used as tools to help to overcome crises or patches. This could be the case of Juan Alberto Belloch, who according to some experts opened his blog to counterbalance negative opinions caused by certain questionable acts committed.

Several authors and experts on the matter agree that *blogs* are not a mere anecdote, and that their continuity will be felt in the business and personal world of the future. Following the completion of this research project we recommend the political class to start using blogs and other tools offered by the Internet to foster communication.

Moreover, while there are still many organizations that are only beginning to consider whether to open a blog or not, there are some people who predict traditional blogs will be supersede [21], in view of the rise of new tools such as microblogging (Twitter) and more so of social networks, especially Facebook and *Tuenti*. Thus, new lines of research now have an open field in which to specialise, with new formats and new users to seduce. Perhaps in the coming years we can find political figures registered on Facebook, as part of the move towards transparency in political communication through digital media.

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7. Notes

[1] Gary Woodward and Robert Denton have studied for more than two decades the social influence of rhetoric, from historical and content viewpoints, and have delved into the concept of persuasion from a political context, but also from advertising and social viewpoints. They have concluded that persuasion is an interactive process, since it requires participants that are attentive, involved, and sensitive to the effects of persuasion, among others.

[2] The term 'gatekeeper' was coined in its communicative-scientific sense in 1947 by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), considered the father of Social Psychology. This term refers to journalists' selection of the different news that arrive to the newsroom with the aim of filtering the different news: publishing some and dismissing others.

[3] Data taken from the authors' interview to José María Mur, Senator designated by the Autonomous Community of Aragon, and member of the Aragonese Party (PAR). The interview was held on 15 April, 2009.

[4] The term 'gatekeeping' (different from 'gatekeeper') does not refer to the filter as an agent, but to the news filtering process through journalists' decisions about which sources to use, the genre, the length of the news item, the place it occupies in the programme, etc.

[5] For example, the case of YouTube, a tool with which Internet users can watch a video of something that just happened, which breaks the barrier of journalistic self-censorship. <http://www.youtube.com>.

[6] This refers to the public comments and the type of moderation/control/filter they are subjected to, as this possibility may be disabled or programmed to be visible only after the author has authorised them.

[7] Obama's victory has shown that the audience of the main blogs exceeds that of many traditional media. Moreover, it has also been confirmed that the influence of new tools on politics and political communication is not sensed, but that its obviousness was increased in the recent U.S. presidential elections. During his election campaign Obama made a systematic use of new technologies, and his fund raising strategy was entirely based on the Internet, the power of social networks and blogs.

[8] The first manifestations of online political communication in Spain occurred as early as 1999. However, it was not until the 2000 election campaign when the parties incorporated a number of elements characteristic of a cyber-campaign. For instance, Joaquín Almunia participated in a chat organized by *El País* newspaper, while the Popular Party also developed a range of online content that, according to experts like Javier del Rey Morató, were the best examples of the potential use of the Internet during those elections. In the 2003 municipal elections this phenomenon was further developed, and the websites of the various institutions offered information regarding the right to vote. It is also worth highlighting certain historical episodes, like the events of 13 March, 2004, in Madrid when citizens were summoned to demonstrate outside the headquarters of the PP via messages sent from mobile phones and the Internet (*El País*, 14 November, 2002).

[9] Aggregators of these websites provided some data indicating that they had more than 3,000 visits a day (March 2009).

[10] Some authors, like Francisco Gómez Antón, maintain the impossibility of any approach to the exercise of direct democracy even despite the technical advances, due to the "poor preparation, lack of interest and political apathy of most citizens, which is so many sometimes reflected in levels of abstention" (cf. Gómez Antón, F. (2002): *Cómoreconocersiesunademocracia lo que se tienedelante* (How to recognize whether it is a democracy what we have in front of us). Third Edition. Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias. p. 20).

[11] It is interesting to mention Howard Dean's 2004 campaign for governor of Vermont, which set the precedent on the use of Internet with his digital platform "Dean for America". Joe Trippi, his campaign manager, said the influence of the Internet in American politics could be compared with the use of television in the campaign of Kennedy and Nixon in 1960. His blog (<http://www.blog.deanforamerica.com>) mobilised thousands of people who spread his message among the community of internet users. Dick Morris also affirms that the media's era of domination in politics -from 1968 to 2004 - is giving way to the new reality of the participatory democracy of the grassroots movements, via the Internet (cf. Del Rey Morató, J. (2007): *Comunicación política, Internet y campañas electorales. De la teledemocracia a la ciberdemocracia* (Political Communication, Internet and election campaigns. From tele-democracy to cyber-democracy). Madrid, Tecnos. p. 304).

[12] Data taken from the article by María José Crespo Roig published in the Society section of *Aragón Digital* (03/01/2009).

[13] In this regard we should also take into account the following Spanish legislation: 54/1978 Law of Political Parties (of 4 December); the Law on Financing of Political Parties, Organic Law 3/1987 of 2 July; and the Law of the General Election System, Organic Law 5/1985, of 19 June.

[14] The current legislation related to the Autonomous States is contained in: 1) Title VIII of the Spanish Constitution, 2) Organic Laws approving of the Autonomous States, 3) Organic Law (8/1890) of Financing of the Autonomous Communities (amended on several occasions), and 4) the Organic Law (29/1990) of the Inter-territorial Compensation Fund.

[15] Article of Adolfo Corujo and Luis Arroyo, in *Público* newspaper (15 November, 2008).

[16] In this respect Morató Javier del Rey argues that politicians in general do not value the relevance Internet can have in their campaigns. In the same line, Eric Schmidt, President and Director of Google, argues that many politicians do not understand very well the reality of the Internet, "in part because of the age, and what they learn about the Internet is through their personal or children". Thus, Schmidt asks: "If television created the current generation of politicians, what will the Internet do to the next generation of politicians?" Available at *Financial Times*: http://www.ft.com/cms/s/06abcbe-5345-11db-99c5-0000779e2340, dwp_uuid=ad870, (04 November, 2006).

[17] At this point we refer to public comments, and the type of moderation they are subjected to, as this possibility may be disabled or programmed to be visible only after it has been approved by the author.

[18] Data from the authors' interview to Gabriel del Molino, an expert in communication and positioning via social networks and blogs, blogger and director of *Camyna*, a company dedicated to new technologies.

[19] Data from the authors' interview to Chesús Yuste, Aragonese deputy from the Aragonist Council in the Courts of Aragon, on April 16, 2009.

[20] Data from the authors' interview to Abel Sancho Tomás, town councillor of the Popular Party in Teruel, on 7 April, 2009.

[21] *Wired* magazine, which is for some a key reference for information on new trends, believes strongly in these new tools. There are many ways to approach virtual socialization, and the most popular tools currently are Facebook, Flickr, Myspace, Youtube, MyOB, Digg, Linked In, and Twitter.

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