

# Blogs, politics and ethics

the case of Beppe Grillo \*

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## Abstract

The emergence of blogs as new media has recently lead the attention of the public opinion. In particular, it seems that blogs may stimulate topics in ethics and politics often ignored by the broadcasting media agendas. Blogs may be used as a vehicle to alternative point of views, sometimes identified with citizen journalism. In this paper, I examine the special case of Beppe Grillo's blog. In 2005, Beppe Grillo, former a comic actor, started a blog as an "experiment of direct democracy", about topics such as alternative energy sources, freedom of speech, new technologies for the quality of life and a wailing wall for generic despairs. Less than a year later, Grillo's blog is one of the 20 most read blogs in the world, and his ideas were even put into the official agenda of some political parties in Italy. Furthermore, his blog has started to get real: some Italian bars publish daily printed copies of some blog's pages as dazebao, and there are over 80 groups of fans arose around the world, using the Meetup system. How information and computing ethics relate each other through blogs? In this paper I propose a framework for analysis of a new political dimation of blogs as ICTs in the globalization process.

## 1 What is a blog?

Some data:

- In June 2006 Technorati, a web hub, tracked 35 million blogs.
- Only 5% of these blogs is active.
- Only 13% is updated at least once a week.

History in brief:

- Weblogs were updated collection of links.
- Blogs came in 1990s. First index in 1999.
- in 2003 the word 'blog' entered OAE Dictionary.

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## 1.1 Blogs as new media

Blogs are not bound to specific topics as high-tech news, gossips or boyfriend problems. Some most popular blogs are used as self-made ethical and political journals, sometimes organized in groups, called *blogospheres*.

## 1.2 Blogs and citizen journalism

Ethical and political blogs really realized that “the former audience joined the party” (Gilmor 2004), i.e. the core of the so-called ‘citizen journalism’?

‘Citizen journalism’ has at least four different meanings:

1. people send amateur photographs or small videos on a major event – e.g. taken via a mobile – to a news organization;
2. people participate in conversation about a specific topic, sometimes along with professional journalists;
3. people on site report daily life experience where mainstream media cannot – e.g. Zeyad ‘Healing Iraq’ blog in 2003;
4. people cover a specific topic or event under an unusual or unique point of view. They are often actively engaged in the topic – e.g. Linux activists on the SCO Group claiming patent on the Linux kernel.

## 2 Blogs and new texts

New texts are not only blogs, but:

1. wikis;
2. web forums;
3. blogs.

Push media follow the broadcasting model, i.e. contents are pushed to users, considered as consumers.

Pull media is the reverse of push media, i.e. publishing of off-the-shelf contents that people choose. Nevertheless, this reverse does not capture the novelty of new texts.

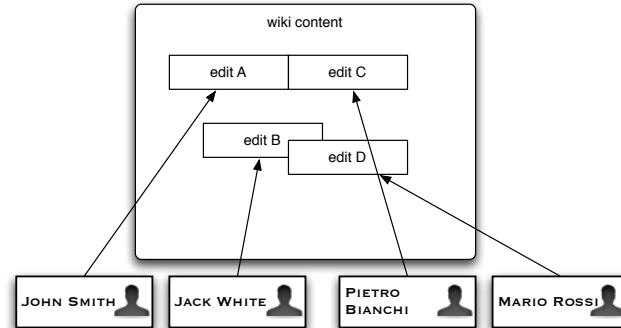
### 2.1 Narrow casting and personal media

New texts share the environment: Internet and the web. Every net-connected computer is a node. Metcalfe’s Law says that the value of a communication network is the square of the number of nodes. Communication is no longer one-to-many (push media model) or many-to-one (pull media model) but the *narrow casting model*: few-to-few. People browse, cut, copy, paste, comment, mix and publish hand-made contents.

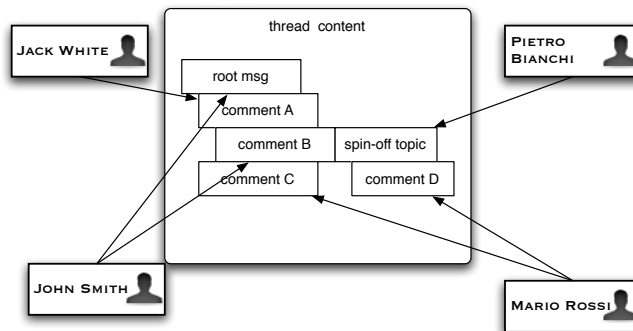
People browse, cut, copy, paste, comment, mix and publish hand-made contents. Personalization implies membership in a community. What really change between a grouping of wikis, web forums and blogs is **authoriality**.

## 2.2 An integrative framework

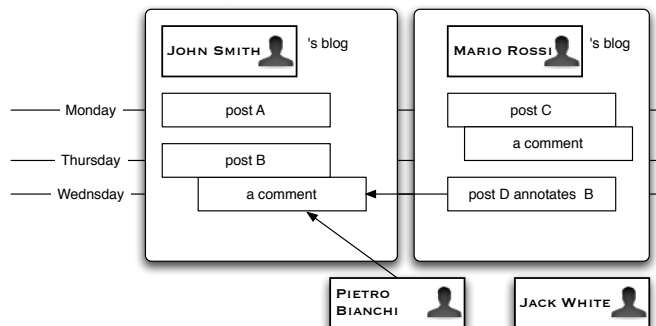
Wikis (as Wikipedia) have multiple editors but no authorship (write many, read many).



Thread systems (as BBS, mailing lists, web forums and web groups) organize contents by the topic (write one, read many).



In blogs there is clearly an author – maybe collective – who writes posts. Posts are ordered chronologically. Sometimes authors let people comment in their blogs, sometimes people prefer to post a comment in their own blog (write yours, read and comment the others).



### 3 Grillo's blog

- opened 26 January 2005;
- in June 2005, Technorati rated Grillo's one of the most read worldwide;
- in 2005 *Time* elected Grillo 'European hero';
- 8 June 2006 the Italian president of the Council Romano Prodi received the political proposals discussed in the blog.

The 'change the message' ethical imperative.

We are overload by news that let us understand nothing about what happens. We should act by night. I went out by night with a big pencil and I wrote over a political poster... The day after people were coming and laughing: the poster message turned against itself. Write over, do not graffiti. Change the message.

Vitaliano (2006:203)

A blog explicitly thought to influence politics.

I have a blog that makes me work: people write, a discussion thread starts about a topic I choose. A person who can publish nothing may have 50,000 people reading with a blog. This is a new form of communication. Moveon.org follows the same principle: one million people send an e-mail message to the White House and they change a law.

Vitaliano (2006:223-4)

Final evaluation: Grillo's experiment of direct democracy seems to me closer to the best traditional opinion journalism – like a columnis, more than to citizen journalism, i.e. self-made amateur news *à la* Gilmor.

### 4 Conclusion

Ethics and politics in ICT today: net *and* paper. In 12 June 2006 *The Guardian* announced that news are published following net time, not daily time as before. The trend is **news media osmosis**: the press go towards on line rules, and ICT blogging towards paper.

Blogspheres follow the Power 'Long Tail' Law: without publication space boundaries, narrow or special interests may be represented unlike in the push media model, but the head may be reached only by few (20%) net hubs.

#### 4.1 Blog evolution

- **level 0: publication.** A blog is started, even tracked by a net hub (e.g. Technorati) but not maintained – i.e. no posts.
- **level 1: maintenance.** A blog is started and kept alive – i.e. at least one post a week.
- **level 2: active reading.** A blog is commented and/or annotated by others – i.e. it enters the blogosphere.
- **level 3: top blog.** The blog reach the top levels of reading, entering the head of the long tail.
- **level 4: blog gets real.** The blog get the attention of push media, a print version is published and meetups are formed.

Beppe Grillo's is one of the few blog that reached level 4 evolution.