

Complicating the Political Scientist as Blogger

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ABSTRACT In our efforts to make blogging an acceptable component of an academic career in political science, we ought not tame the practice of blogging beyond recognition. Multiple models exist under which blogging can contribute to the discipline of political science and through which political scientists can contribute to the public sphere.

John Sides “The Political Scientist as Blogger,” on the developing relationship between blogging and the discipline of political science, was published in *PS* shortly before Sides’ blog, *The Monkey Cage*, won “Blog of the Year” from *This Week* magazine (Sides 2011, 267; *The Week* Editorial Staff 2011). The richly deserved award reflected the spotlight that *The Monkey Cage* has brought on the discipline of political science, and the degree to which the blog has served as a bridge between the discipline and the policy and journalistic communities. In the last decade numerous political scientists have taken to blogging in several venues, each with a slightly different approach to the relationship between discipline and medium. The success of *The Monkey Cage* indicates that traditional political science research has an important role to play even in the wild-and-woolly world of the blogosphere.

Sides’ article also contributes on the critically important question of the role that blogging can play in an academic career, arguing that having a blog need not weigh down a tenure or promotion case. Successful blogging requires developing a breadth of knowledge that can strengthen teaching and advisory roles. Blogging also creates a habit of writing that can persist during conventional research projects. Blog posts can undoubtedly serve as trial balloons for ideas not quite ready for the light of day, as blog posts create instant (by academic standards) feedback from multiple sources, including commenters and other bloggers. Although this feedback can often be useless and annoying, separating the wheat from the chaff can reveal some excellent critiques and good advice for the future of any research project. The blogosphere is sufficiently diverse that even relatively obscure discussions can find a community of sufficient size and expertise to offer good comments.

Still, Sides’ article left me with a sense of disquiet. Although I appreciate the effort to “just add blogging” to the discipline of political science, I worry that in making blogging safe, Sides gives away too much of what makes it interesting, influential, and fun. Specifically, I have two major objections to Sides’ characterization of blogging in political science. First, the article heralds an effort to discipline the political science blogosphere, establishing metrics for differentiating between “good” blogs that can contribute to (or at least should not be held against) a political science career, and “bad” blogs that do no one any good. In short, Sides’

article served both prescriptive and proscriptive purposes. Second, by emphasizing the “safe” elements of blogging, Sides has left winnings on the table; blogging could play a larger role in political science than he suggests.

DISCIPLINING THE UNDISCIPLINED

Certainly, Sides wants more political scientists to blog. Laying out the basics of how to create and maintain a blog is an important contribution, as is the advice about how to react to the inevitable comments that any semisuccessful blog attracts. Sides also hopes to erode the idea that political scientists should be “punished” for producing work of interest to policymakers and journalists (Yglesias 2010). Recently, “Bridging the Divide” is a much discussed topic among policy oriented political scientists (Drezner 2011). *The Monkey Cage* has played an important role in this endeavor, mostly by bringing the fruit of political science research to bear on major policy questions.

But here is the problem:

Writing regular blog posts is not necessarily easy. It takes time to find a voice and learn the kinds of topics and ideas that will appeal to a broader audience. One guideline should be obvious: avoid personal complaints about your life, commute, colleagues, discipline, and so on—topics that are perilous from a professional perspective anyway. Choose topics to which you can add value as a political scientist. This approach will distinguish your blog from other blogs about politics and from most pundits’ commentary. You can summarize your research or the work of other scholars, analyze data, and make simple graphs that are understandable to a lay audience. (Sides 2011, 267).

This passage has the whiff of an effort at discipline. Whereas the sources of “professional peril” are left anonymous, the inevitable implication is that some blogs are good, appropriate, and should not blot the tenure and promotion cases of their authors; other blogs are inappropriate and not quite “political science.” The question now invariably is to distinguish between the appropriate and inappropriate blogs. Appropriate blogs tackle topics that add value from political science training. Inappropriate blogs address such perilous concerns as personal complaints about children, cats, cars, and (oddly enough) the discipline of political science. The last is particularly problematic, as Sides seems to be suggesting that political scientists ought not comment about the state of the political science discipline on their political science blogs.

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Given the attacks that some critics have leveled against academic bloggers, a defensive effort at disciplining the political science blogosphere is understandable (Tribble 2005). We should appreciate that Sides' approach amounts to an effort to defuse certain lines of critique by distinguishing between safe and unsafe forms of blogging. In effect, this burns half of the blogosphere to save the other half. I have a personal interest in this question because I worry that my own blogging falls on the wrong side. *Lawyers, Guns and Money* was founded in 2004 by three political science graduate students at the University of Washington (Farley 2012). Although additional members have been added since 2004, five political scientists have written roughly 83% of 12,000 or so posts at *Lawyers, Guns and Money*. Traffic to the site reached one million visitors per year sometime around 2006 and last year exceeded

helpful difference? Jonathan Bernstein, unaffiliated scholar and author of a "Plain Blog about Politics" is oft-cited by *The Monkey Cage*, but he frequently writes about culture and baseball in addition to American electoral politics (Bernstein 2012).

Surely, lines must be drawn. A blog by a political scientist that focused solely on baseball statistics, or that is preoccupied with photographs of cats in amusing predicaments, should probably be excluded from the genus "political science blog." If we include or exclude blogs based on particular criteria, we need to be explicit about what are those criteria; what blogging is considered good for the discipline (and presumably good for the careers of the authors), and what blogging is considered embarrassing, problematic, and not the sort of thing you want to include in a tenure file. The cat and baseball blogs listed are easy cases; *Lawyers, Guns*

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two million. *Lawyers, Guns and Money* currently has between 5,000 and 8,000 subscribers (actual numbers are difficult to determine because of different counting methodology). These numbers are very roughly double those reported by Sides for *The Monkey Cage* (Sides 2011, 267) during a similar time period. Yet when he lists the major political science blogs, Sides made no mention of *Lawyers, Guns and Money* in "The Political Scientist as Blogger."

To be sure, it is difficult to criticize Sides on this omission without seeming petty and bitter, and "How could you possibly have ignored my blog!?" is a silly and unproductive question. An article titled "The Political Scientist as Blogger" surely cannot productively mention every political science blog. The exclusion of *Lawyers, Guns and Money* makes sense, however, if we understand Sides' effort as both prescriptive and proscriptive; including some blogs as decent and appropriate political science while implicitly excluding others as professionally problematic. Indeed, *Lawyers, Guns and Money* does not fit many of the criteria that Professor Sides sets forth for "political science blogging." Posts that synthesize the latest work in political theory and international relations are followed by posts that lament John Lackey's earned run average, or disparage Michael Bay's aptitude for filmmaking. Moreover, the approach to politics at *Lawyers, Guns and Money* is explicitly partisan. While the authors are trained political scientists, they use their training in service of charged, highly partisan arguments that are often frowned on in traditional political science. *Lawyers, Guns and Money* concentrates less on the transmission of academic research into the policy sphere and more on the direct application of research knowledge and skills to political and policy questions.

Thus, the exclusion of *Lawyers, Guns and Money* was tactful rather than accidental; a blog like *Lawyers, Guns and Money* is not discussed as a political science blog (although its authors clearly think of it as political science) because it is embarrassing to the kind of argument that Sides makes. What constitutes the difference between a political science blog and a blog about politics written by political scientists? Is this a distinction without a

and *Money, American Power* (Douglas 2012), and other highly partisan blogs are more difficult to categorize and threaten to test the boundaries (Douglas 2012). Unfortunately, Sides gives little insight as to where the boundary between "a political science blog" and "a blog about politics written by political scientists" lies.

WHAT THE MEDIUM MEANS FOR THE PROFESSION

Professor Sides ably discusses the professional positives of blogging for junior and senior faculty members. Blogging improves teaching, gives scholars the chance to test-drive research ideas, encourages a habit of writing, and publicizes both the scholar and the scholar's research. All of these activities enhance tenure and promotion cases, although Sides also notes that blogging can irritate senior colleagues and consume valuable writing and research time. Again, Sides promotes blogging, however, in an essentially defensive fashion; blogging can help improve earning tenure and promotion, but it is unlikely to have an independent positive impact on a blogger's career. In short, the blog itself is a means to multiple ends, and not an end in itself.

Sides' article surely represents a useful contribution to warn young (and not so young) scholars of the dangers of blogging. However, if the medium of blogging does all that Sides attributes to it, not to mention granting a higher profile to a department and helping "bridge the gap" between policymakers and the academy, then why is blogging not counted in the context of tenure and promotion decisions? A genuine appreciation of the role that blogging plays in an academic career would consider the merits of the medium, and in particular what the medium can offer than alternative venues cannot. Sides suggests a political science blog community that acts in *support* of the traditional pillars of an academic career, including teaching, but especially research. This idea is fine, but a different approach might examine how blogging might *replace* some of those traditional elements.

Here is an example: if you are reading this article in *PS*, the article has gone through a vetting and editing process that has probably lasted at least 18 months. This process undoubtedly improved

the quality of the article, but it also substantially delayed its entry into the debate. Had I simply posted this discussion as a blog response to Sides, it probably would have taken me three or four days to write and edit it. I would have included multiple hyperlinks, effectively “citing” not only Sides article but a plethora of different pieces on blogging and the academy. The article could have been viewed by some 4,000 regular visitors to *Lawyers, Guns and Money*, plus another 8,000 or so subscribers. Any one of these subscribers could have responded (helpfully or unhelpfully) in our comments section, likely generating a long debate both on the merits of the article and on the merits of the author. Sides could have responded within a day, and a multitude of other political science bloggers might have chimed in during the ensuing weeks.

Instead, I published the article here in *PS*, giving up all of that in return for a line on my CV with the “peer review” annotation. The delay of this article, the loss of all of the interactivity that the

the blogospheric and journalistic communities for good, traditional political science research. A replacement of the peer review system with some sort of “open blog” format would hardly solve all problems. For example, the authors of popular blogs such as *Lawyers, Guns and Money* and *The Monkey Cage* have the luxury of receiving feedback from many potential commenters, while excellent work at smaller blogs unfortunately may escape notice. But the peer-review system is hardly the only means to either (a) say something interesting or (b) influence the public policy debate.

To be sure, the metrics for evaluating the contribution that blogging could make to a tenure or promotion case remain murky. Measures such as traffic, links, and comments are all problematic often to the point of uselessness. The best we can offer, perhaps, is that each blog can be evaluated as part of an academic career, and no clear template for how blogging should fit into career progress exists. This proposal sounds frustratingly amorphous, but in most

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Internet provides, and the substantial reduction in the number of people likely to read the piece buy me a slightly improved chance at tenure and promotion. It is true, readers of this article will not be forced to skip over a long debate about the relative merit of Ivan Rodriguez’ defense versus Mike Piazza’s offense, but then the number of people who read *PS* cover-to-cover is likely small.

To say that this makes little sense is an understatement.

And so, rather than think in terms of how blogging, tweeting, and other forms of social media could accommodate themselves to the traditional profile of an academic career, let me suggest that we should, as a discipline, think in more radical terms. Effectively, our tenure and promotion system is built around an obsolete social and technological foundation, with career success built around posting a few articles in a few journals subscribed to by a few libraries and read by few people (Cosgrove 2011; Healy 2011). Rather than take the apologetic line that Sides advocates, we should think about blogging as a crowbar to pry open the tenure and promotion process. As Stephen Walt has argued,

What is also needed is a change in academic practice, including the criteria that are used to make key hiring and promotion decisions. The standards by which we assess scholarly value are not divinely ordained or established by natural law; they are in fact “socially constructed” by the discipline itself. In other words, we collectively decide what sorts of work to valorize and what sorts of achievement to reward. If university departments placed greater weight on teaching, on contributions to applied public policy, on public outreach, and on a more diverse range of publishing venues—including journals of opinion, trade publishers and maybe even blogs—then individual scholars would quickly adapt to these new incentives and we would attract a somewhat different group of scholars over time (Walt 2010).

This is not to say that the peer review system lacks merit, because it remains a relevant and important element of the academic project. *The Monkey Cage* has successfully exploited a hunger in

cases the arguments for and against tenure and promotion rely on fuzzy distinction between journals, publishers, and course evaluations, not to mention the always-important-but-never-concrete quality “will this person make a good colleague?” A more holistic approach to tenure and promotion (Young 2010) would remedy some of the problems of relying on the peer-review system, while also encouraging young scholars to “bridge the gap” by writing articles that people will actually read (Young 2010). An American Historical Association working group report on the field of public history suggested the adjustment of tenure standards to take into account public engagement (Working Group on Evaluating Public History Scholarship 2010).

CONCLUSION

With state legislatures displaying an increasing reluctance to underwrite political science research that their constituents neither understand nor care about, blogging could become an important avenue for public engagement. Thus, the practice of blogging touches on a core interest of the discipline of political science, even if we have not quite recognized that it is a core interest.

What we have not yet seen, but what I suspect may be coming, is the infection of the political science blogosphere with all of the dysfunction that marks the typical political science department. We should prepare for all of the endless skirmishes that characterize the borders between subdisciplines and methodologies to play out in the blogosphere. Such a development is probably inevitable, but is more likely when we define the contribution of political science blogging in terms of increasing the visibility of extant political science literature.

This is why I find Sides’ article so personally depressing. Blogging was a way out of the dysfunction of political science, and particularly of the ongoing and utterly unproductive methodological war between “quals” and “quants.” In a blog posts, political scientists could use their training to write something interesting

without worrying about the crushing expectations of methodological conformity. As *The Monkey Cage* brings political science to the blogosphere and helps build another bridge over the gap, it also brings all of the debates, arguments, and disputes of graduate school.

Blogging needs to come out of its defensive crouch. Professor Sides appreciates this, but he still concedes too much. Moreover, at the very least, an effort at prescription and proscription should make the line between acceptable and unacceptable clear. As a discipline, political science needs to ask whether there is any value to blogging, specifically, and to public engagement, more generally. If there is value, then we need to create career incentives for junior faculty to engage. A world in which only senior faculty feel safe blogging is necessarily impoverished. Similarly, we need to accept that the technological and social transformations that have accompanied the development of the Internet have the potential to revolutionize not just political science, but the entire academy. Pretending that nothing has changed does no one any good. ■

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