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Blogosphere and Democracy in Portugal: The Results of a Web Survey

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Abstract

In this paper we present the results of a web survey regarding opinion and intervention bloggers in Portugal. The study has three main goals: (1) to characterize bloggers according to their social position, political activities, values and social orientations; (2) to analyse the relationship between online and offline participation, and how different types of participation relate to different values and beliefs; (3) finally, to discuss new dynamics within the public sphere and the impact of the internet on democracy.

The results show that bloggers are socially quite homogeneous, combining online and offline activism, notwithstanding the diversity of their values. Four types of political action were found: residual, associative and protest, associative and party-member, and cumulative. Each one corresponds to a different set of values and beliefs.

In the conclusion, the impact of the new media on public sphere renewal is discussed, in particular the opportunities that the internet creates for the expansion of democracy and the support it gives to socio-political autonomy and the construction of societal projects on individuals, with a special focus on collective action.

Keywords: blogosphere, societal project, public sphere, engagement

The Internet and Public Sphere:
Social Conditions, Participation and Political Culture

The internet is usually seen as a new field of political participation and collective action in a globalized world. This text aims to explore the possibilities and the uses of blogs as a political tool, identifying different groups and strategies of participation. Even if it does not cover all aspects of the internet as a political tool, the objective here is to put forward a series of hypotheses through a specific case-study in a democratic context, using a particular methodology. It is assumed that the use of the internet as a tool of collective action and participation depends on the general context and the groups involved. This last decade has been prolific in examples of its usage both in authoritarian and democratic situations.

For this reason, part of our political future will be played out in this arena. The analysis of future trends depends significantly on current paths dependencies; by this we mean that a projection of the future is based on knowledge of present structures and action patterns. Thus, our primary objective here is to perceive and map out different groups involved in internet action.

The internet is a means of communication and its importance in advancing new forms of power and influence also impacts on the public sphere. Therefore, a debate on the public sphere in a globalized context is needed in order to structure the main dimensions of a study of the internet.

The different information, interaction and discussion modalities that the internet could constitute a renewal of the public sphere and its mediation features; for these reasons the concept of the public sphere has been revisited. For Habermas, the public sphere constitutes "the realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, 1964, 1974: 49), where individuals criticize the state on the basis of the public use of reason.

Castells points that, though idealized, the Habermasian concept of the public sphere has the heuristic capacity to represent the "contradictory relationships between the conflictive interests of social actors, the social construction of cultural meaning and the institutions of the state" (Castells, 2008: 80). For this author, public sphere organization is presently carried out through the media, especially the bidirectional forms like the internet, which constitutes an important means of mediated interaction. The permeability of the public sphere by social movements and forms of action makes

the internet a new space of citizenship widely linked to the socio-political projects of those who use it. In the Network Society, citizenship is associated with technological mediation and autonomy, since political innovation reinforces the likelihood of the strategies of participation and debate being modified. This new space of activity is, therefore, a global forum that brings together distant populations with similar concerns. It is a tool that allows the development of personal autonomy and, in this particular case-study, the development of projects of sociopolitical autonomy (Cardoso *et al*, 2005).

The concept of "digital divide" helps to translate a specific topic of research, since it addresses the issues of inequality unequal access to ICT and the dominating technologies. It is not only computer availability and an internet connection that are important but also the cognitive resources that allow sufficient control of cyberspace symbols, thus revealing a digital gap that has implications for the political system. Norris (2001) proposes three types of gap: global (between countries), social (within countries) and democratic (related with mobilization and participation in public life). Hence, she argues that internet "digital technologies have the capacity to strengthen the institutions of civic society mediating between citizens and the state, especially the power of insurgents" (*idem*: 19).

There are many issues to be discussed in relation to the real possibilities that the internet offers as a means of communication in the development of an interactive public sphere that relates to the 'Habermasian' principles of equality and inclusion. Therefore it is important to characterize users and their degree of involvement in different political spheres, as well as to observe the impact of information and communication technologies at an institutional level. A second dimension of study is the relationship between online and offline participation.

These new processes of participation are also linked to different forms of political culture (as a symbolic dimension), which is helpful when sketching conflicting processes and oppositions in the study of groups in the public sphere. Although this new form is dependent on a new technological support, it is also an expression of various social changes: increasing educational levels and technical and scientific occupations, social policies resulting in the development of citizenship with a greater knowledge of social and political problems, more autonomous individuals, and greater awareness of the political role and power of civil society organizations at the expense of state powers (Viegas and Faria, 2009; Inglehart, 1990; Cabral and Silva, 2007). Some authors argue

that this is particularly significant in a social class where cultural capital predominates, e.g. that of professionals and managers. Blogs, by their individual and free character, have become one of the means of expressing these forms of political and social mobilization – and they constitute the object of study here.

In recent years, the internet and blogs have gained importance as a means of communication in the public sphere. In scientific discourse, blogs and similar forms of expression are associated with the renewal of the public sphere due to the lack of organizational constraints in the construction and circulation of opinions. This allows the free communication and dissemination of ideas, with bi-directionality playing a major role (Keren, 2006; Tremayne, 2007). Blogs have become, in a short time, a space for public discussion, opinion sharing and disclosure, without mass media coverage and with citizens being both receivers and producers of information/messages in a non-formalized context. Blogs can therefore be considered an expression of their producers' socio-political projects.

The blogosphere is generated through a network of posts and comments, whose name derives from a clear analogy with Habermas' public sphere. This network has special features when compared with other discourse networks/domains rooted in the public sphere, since its texts are written and allow for a reconstruction of the flow of ideas and arguments between different actors (Treymane, 2007). Their importance and impact on the public sphere results from the manifestation of a particular *habitus* as the incorporation of an objective position in social space, which involves certain principles of vision and division (Bourdieu, 1977). Blogs have become a form of appropriation and individual participation over the internet and can be used by multiple pressure groups to assert their interests.

If we take into account the aspects surveyed, we can raise the following questions for the Portuguese context: what social conditions are bloggers associated with? How do they occupy this new arena of civic and political life? What relationship can we find between online and offline participation? What symbolic cleavages exist between them, and how do these cleavages express conflict and division?

Three main dimensions result from the literature reviewed: social conditions, symbolic and ideological identities, and participation. The objective is, therefore, to present the main data from the web survey, with an analysis of bloggers in context through their divisions and action strategies.

Research Design and Strategy

The subjects were all individuals with an opinion and intervention blog, on various topics such as politics, environmental issues, social issues and even local matters, given their preponderance in recent decades[1]. The strategy we followed involved the design and application of a web survey in order to reach a wide range of bloggers. The main objective was to collect enough data to allow statistical treatment of the information on the dimensions specified above.

The difficulties in gathering data with this technique are primarily related to three factors: (1) the inability to establish face-to-face contact with the bloggers that answer the survey, which usually contributes to a higher rate of non-responses; (2) the fact that interaction was only possible by e-mail; (3) the absence of any list that allowed the construction of a representative sample. Nevertheless, the web survey is considered a useful tool because of: (1) its ability to cover diversity in a wide range of individuals; (2) the possibility of using various statistical tools to analyze and interpret the collected data, e.g., multivariate and cluster analysis (which is fundamental to the reconstitution of general patterns and groups).

During the "field work", i.e., during the process of contacting these agents, a database containing the blog addresses and the bloggers' e-mails contacts was created. About 880 blog addresses were collected, of which 550 contained the contacts of their producers. For 604 emails, 209 answers were obtained (about a third of the total). Standard procedures were followed in the selection and collection of contacts to achieve a systematic and consistent sample. The blog rolls allowed for the compilation of the blog universe and the contact details, thus also allowing us to get answers from the whole country. Data collection took place between January and February 2009.

The following points will explain how the analysis of the dimensions stated above was carried out.

Social Conditions

In 2008 a national survey pointed out that bloggers represented 2.5% of the 33% of the Portuguese population that used the internet (Rebelo *et al*, 2008). According to the data collected it can be ascertained that bloggers are predominantly male (80.7%)

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[1] We defined 13 sets of blogs: environment/nature, culture and communication, social, human and minority rights, economics, education and higher education, family, humor, foreign policy, local politics, national politics, religion, society and current events, and personal life.

and, despite the age range of between 16 and 70 years, it is in the 26-45 age group that we find the highest concentration (this age group represents about 56% of all participants). As age increases, the number of bloggers decreases. Among this group, high educational and professional resources stand out: over 90% of the people are professionals with a college degree and cultural capital seems to dominate (Machado *et al*, 2003).

Table 1 – Social Conditions

Sex	n	%
Male	167	80.7
Female	40	19.3
Age		
16-25	34	16.5
26-35	63	30.6
36-45	52	25.2
46-55	34	16.5
56-65	19	9.2
66-70	4	1.9
Main Regions		
Lisbon-Setubal	106	51.5
Oporto-Braga	36	17.5
Other mainland regions	49	23.8
Madeira and Azores	11	5.3
Other countries	4	1.9
Education		
Secondary diploma	15	7.2
Bachelor's degree	112	53.8
Master's degree	52	25.0
PhD	29	13.9
Social Class		
Entrepreneurs	6	3.4
Independent professionals	50	27.9
Executives	8	4.5
Professionals and managers	107	59.8
Routine employees	7	3.9
Industrial workers	1	0.6

Although the individuals are spread across the country, they prevail in urban and metropolitan areas, with two territorial axes standing out: Lisbon-Setubal, which covers more than 50% of the sample, and Oporto-Braga, with 17.5% in total. There are some exceptional cases that write from abroad.

Overall, bloggers are quite homogeneous, mostly male, young, adult and professional, even if working in different territorial situations. Context matters since blogging is concentrated in large urban centers and may be linked to forms of political culture typical of these areas (Cabral and Silva, 2007). But to discuss a question and give an opinion in a blog is primarily due to features associated with social class and cultural capital.

Political and Civic Participation

The following analysis tries to perceive how the internet is used as a space for participation and debate, and to understand the relationship between this sphere of communication and political and civic participation in general. More specifically, it focuses on general patterns of participation.

Political and civic participation consists of the "activities carried out by citizens, which, to a greater or lesser degree, are directly aimed at influencing the choice of the rulers and the decisions that they take" (Verba and Nie, 1972: 2; Viegas and Faria, 2009), i.e., it refers to citizens who try to influence their representatives and involves several types of activity.

In a superficial analysis, the high degree of blogger participation should be noted when compared to the national civic engagement, which is very low: signing petitions (both on paper and online), contact with political actors, consumer action, and civic associations are all above 50%. The internet is a central tool in the activities of these agents, since they combine, for example, the use of blogs with the signing of petitions electronically. This involves almost 90% of respondents.

Table 2 – Political and Civic Participation

Type of Participation (average)	Participation	%
Political party (1.12)	Political party affiliation	40.4
	Working for a political party or civic movement	38.9
	Participating in donations	34
Association membership (2.13)	Member of a professional association	40.4
	Member of a civic association	50
	Working in an association	55.3
	Contact with a politician	70.2
Protest and new forms of political action (2.02)	Consumption (boycotting or buying)	57
	Hard copy petition	52.4
	Internet petition	87.6
	Illegal practices	9.8

Three types of participation can be found[2]: political party (1.12), associative membership (2.13), and protest and new forms of political action (2.02). Within this framework, high political and civic participation is very clear, as well as certain specific elements, including the significance of associative practices of protest and boycott. Party participation is less significant compared to the other types but it is certainly important to mention it due to its institutional bias.

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[2] The explained variance of/in the factorial analysis was 53.45%. Each dimension had the following results: Party – 20.58%; Associative – 16.81%; Protest and New Forms – 16.06%. Based on the dimensions identified, an index was constructed by counting the practices set out in the factorial analysis. Cronbach's alpha for each index was, respectively: 0.726, 0.635 and 0.555.

From this data a participation typology was drawn up in order to show different forms of political action. Four types were obtained, combining different types of participation: (1) residual involvement (36.4%) – the largest group, with, on average, the lowest levels of participation; (2) associative and protest (33.5%) – combining participation in associations with new forms, i.e., it has associative and protest involvement with a low incidence of party participation; (3) associative-party involvement (15.8%) – combining party and association participation, with a lower prevalence of protest activities; (4) cumulative involvement (14.4%) – a combination of various types of participation with high levels.

Table 3 – Political Action

	Party Participation (0-3)	Association Participation (0-4)	Protest and New Forms of Political Action (0-4)	Total (0-11)
Residual (n=76 – 36.4%)	0.46	0.97	1.14	2.58
Associative and protest (n=70 – 33.5%)	0.51	2.53	2.69	5.73
Associative and partisan (n=33 – 15.8%)	2.55	3.27	1.42	7.24
Cumulative (n=30 – 14.4%)	2.67	2.97	3.37	9.00

The heterogeneity of political participation shows distinct modes of political mobilization. Blogs emerge as an important space for the civic activity of an elite group.

In the next chapter the analysis will focus on the ideological cleavages that exist.

Values and Political Culture: Ideological Cleavages

From a general perspective, the objective here is also to examine the sociopolitical values of these individuals. Values can be considered as a "set of multifaceted ideological dimensions, symbolic and cultural traits, which function as common and socially heterogeneous resources available (...) values are an expression of organized systems of preferences" structuring the view of realities, processes and situations (Almeida, 1990; Almeida, Costa and Machado, 2006). In this sense, political culture and values are a product of socio-cultural and historical context, relationally produced and reflecting socialization. Briefly, they are a pattern of beliefs, explanations, values, attitudes and plans of action related with politics (Vala, Viegas and Heimer, 1990).

Cleavages will be analyzed through the following variables: orientation towards inequality, and action's orientation (Casanova, 2009), orientation towards the state and private sector, religion, and political positioning.

In terms of political positioning 53.5% are positioned towards the left, 32% towards the right, while 14.5% did not reveal any political position, i.e. any political identity associated with the left and right dichotomy. With regard to religion, the main difference arises between Catholics (practicing and non-practicing) and atheists/agnostics.

Table 4 – Values and Orientations

	N	%
Political Position		
Left	107	53.5
Right	64	32
No political positioning	29	14.5
Religion		
Catholic (practicing)	36	17.9
Catholic (non-practicing)	52	25.9
Other religion	13	6.5
Atheist/agnostic	100	49.8
Private Entepreneurship		
Agreement	109	58.6
Disagreement	77	41.4
Government/State Redistribution		
Agreement	157	79.7
Disagreement	40	20.3
Orientation towards Inequality		
Egalitarian	153	73.6
Non-egalitarian	47	22.6
Action's Orientation		
Proactive	174	83.3
Non-proactive	28	13.4

When guidelines addressing the functions of the state are dealt with, 80% agree with the redistribution of income by the government. About 60% also agree with a private-initiative redistributive function. Thus, the majority of respondents are favorable to redistributive functions for both the state and private enterprise.

Respondents are mainly egalitarian (73.6%), which means that they believe in the possibility of reducing inequalities. But this aspect seems linked to proactive action (83.3%), i.e., related with a belief in the ability of individuals to change their living conditions through their own action.

Below, we will present an integrated analysis of these variables, using multivariate analysis in order to establish profiles and understand the plurality of dispositional characteristics and their relationship with political action. In other words, to understand how different repertoires of action associate with different beliefs and societal projects.

Mapping the Field: Participation and Societal Projects

Following the above summary of the main features of these agents, it is now important to understand if there are different groups. Since social conditions do not significantly differentiate the agents, participation and values, with a measure of institutional trust, will be the focus of the analysis. Multivariate procedures were used, allowing the analysis of a great number of variables, which is ideal for a perception of different trends in group formation. An integrated analysis revealed two main dimensions[3]:

Table 5 – Multiple Correspondence Analysis: Patterns of Involvement and Societal Projects

Dimension 1 – Societal Project	<0	>0
Political positioning	Left	Right; no political positioning
Orientation towards inequality	Egalitarian	Non-egalitarian
Action's Orientation	Non-proactive	Proactive
Religion	Atheist	Practicing Catholic; non-practicing Catholic; other
Orientation towards the state	Favorable	Unfavorable
Orientation towards private initiative	Unfavorable	Favorable
Dimension 2 – Engagement		
Political action	Residual; associative	Cumulative; associative and partisan
Institutional trust	< Institutional trust	> Institutional trust

The first dimension, termed societal projects, is defined as a set of general orientations and preferences towards society (Casanova, 2009). We can find two groups: the first comprises individuals who reflect dispositions associated with the political left: egalitarian, non-proactive (though many are proactive), atheist, pro-state intervention in the resolution of social inequalities, but not so favorable to the private sector. The second group associates itself with the right: non-egalitarian, more proactive, Catholic and especially open to solutions through private enterprise.

The second dimension is associated with the different forms of political action and institutional trust, referred to here as engagement. The forms of political action with a greater institutional bias (associative-partisan and cumulative) are linked with greater institutional trust, while lower institutional trust is associated with protest activities. Engagement is, therefore, the set of practices with an impact on society and is an important piece of citizenship.

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[3] Eigenvalues: Dimension 1 – 2.637; Dimension 2 – 1.527; n = 209

Figure 1: Map of Bloggers' Grouping
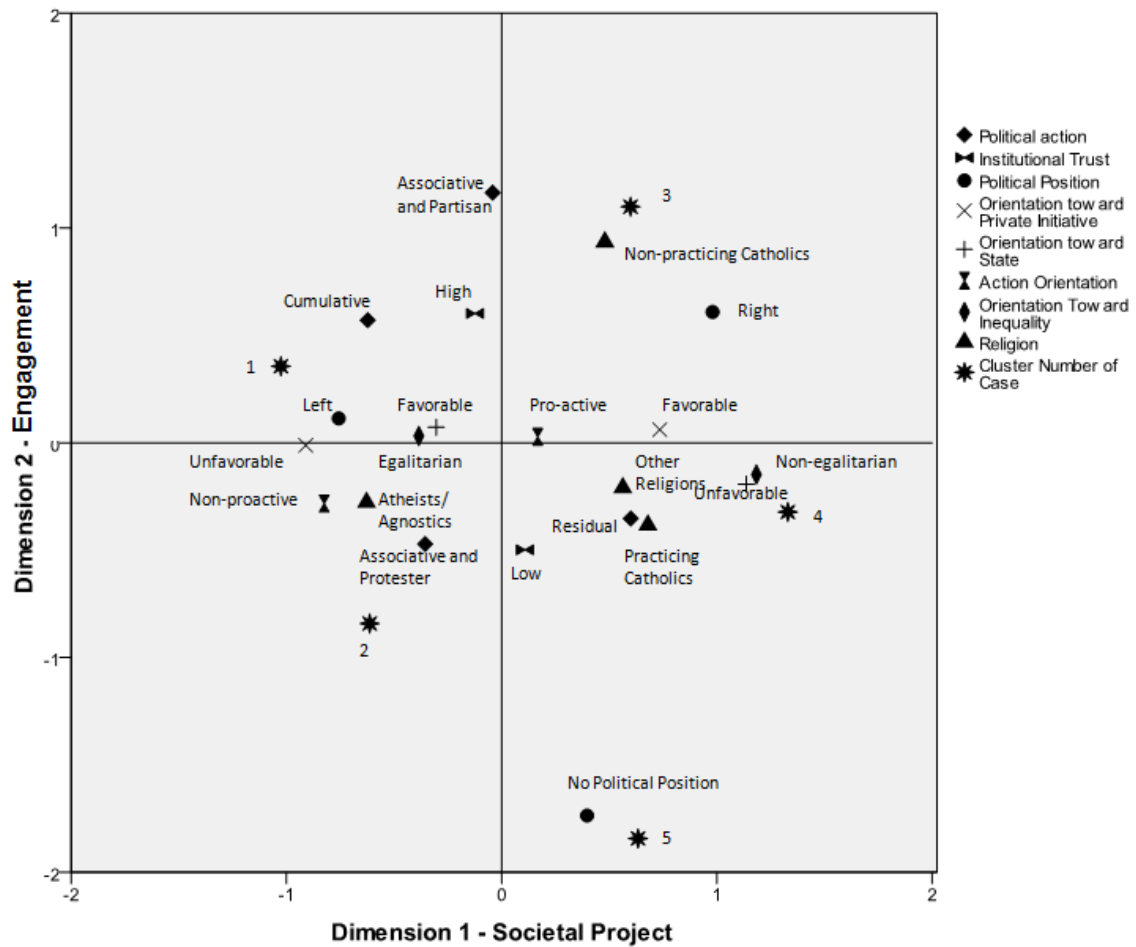
A cluster analysis (K-means) was used to provide a statistical analysis of the groups, on the basis of the resultant object scores from the multivariate analysis. Five groups can be traced within the combination/conjugation of these two dimensions: two of them more associated with the left and two associated with the right (each one of them with a different involvement), plus one with no political position. The following table helps to summarize the main features of each group.

It should be noted that each type of political action is associated with specific societal projects. Cumulative action, carried out through multiple vehicles of participation, is mainly associated with leftist, proactive, egalitarian and pro-state orientations; the associative and party member position is closer to the right, proactive, egalitarian, favorable to a combination of state and private initiative, and Catholic, though non-practicing. Associative and protest action has a similar profile to the first leftwing group, but a less proactive orientation; residual action, with a pronounced non-institutional character, is associated with both atheists and Catholics, non-egalitarian and proactive orientations, and the favoring of private enterprise exclusively. The final

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profile, which does not project any political preference, reflects low institutional trust and residual/protest political action. Thus, this latter group shows signs of political disaffection (Magalhães, 2005).

Table 6 – Cluster Analysis

		1 (n = 61)	2 (n = 42)	3 (n = 52)	4 (n = 20)	5 (n =34)
Political Action	Cumulative	**29.5**	2.4	19.2	0	2.9
	Associative and partisan	24.6	0	**32.7**	0	2.9
	Associative and protest	**31.1**	**64.3**	15.4	**40**	23.5
	Residual	14.8	**33.3**	**32.7**	**60**	**70.6**
Institutional Trust	High	**68.3**	11.9	**63.5**	20	20.6
	Low	31.7	**88.1**	36.5	**80**	**79.4**
Political Position	Left	**98.4**	**78**	23.5	0	11.1
	Right	1.6	2.4	**76.5**	0	**85.2**
	No political position	0	19.5	0	**100**	3.7
Religion	Practicing Catholic	6.6	17.5	17.3	**35.3**	32.3
	Non-practicing Catholic	11.5	2.5	**71.2**	11.8	16.1
	Other religion	1.6	7.5	5.8	11.8	12.9
	Atheist/agnostic	**80.3**	**72.5**	5.8	**41.2**	**38.7**
Orientation toward Private Initiative	Favorable	14.5	32.3	**89.8**	**82.4**	**97.1**
	Unfavorable	**85.5**	**67.7**	10.2	17.6	2.9
Orientation toward State	Favorable	**96.7**	**94.7**	**82**	**64.7**	34.4
	Unfavorable	3.3	5.3	18	35.3	**65.6**
Orientation toward Inequality	Egalitarian	**94.9**	**95.2**	**79.6**	**66.7**	18.8
	Non-egalitarian	5.1	4.8	20.4	<u>33.3</u>	**81.3**
Action's Orientation	Pro-active	**73.7**	**80.5**	**96.1**	**94.7**	**94.1**
	Non-proactive	<u>26.3</u>	19.5	3.9	5.3	5.9

The argument here is that, given the social conditions involved, it is possible to retain a picture of different elites and their forms of political action. Societal projects and political action are linked, and each group represents a particular set of interests and constitutes specific forms of mobilization towards power and a set of interests.

Table 7 – Cluster Summary

	Participation	Societal Project
1	High institutional trust, all forms of political action, even if cumulative is particularly salient in this group	Left-wing, atheist/agnostic, egalitarian, statist, against private initiative, proactive (some of them are non-proactive)
2	Low institutional trust, particularly forms that involved protest, but also associative action	Left-wing, atheist/agnostic, egalitarian, statist, against private initiative (less non-proactive)
3	High institutional trust, residual or associative and partisan participation	Right-wing, non-practicing Catholic, favorable to private and state initiative, egalitarian and proactive
4	Residual action with low institutional trust	Right-wing, Catholic or atheist, favorable to private initiative and against state redistribution, non-egalitarian and proactive
5	Residual or associative and protest participation? with low institutional trust	No political position, Catholic or atheist, favorable to private initiative and state redistribution, proactive and egalitarian

Conclusion

It is now important to retain and summarize the main results presented so that we can discuss the range of issues set out initially, evaluating the three main dimensions.

Bloggers have quite a homogenous sociographic profile, dominated by professionals with a higher education, which means that public discussions are dependent, in part, on cognitive resources. It is the political culture differences that reveal the ideological diversity, despite their social similarity. There is intense political participation, with no barrier between offline and online participation and, thus, a combination of them. Their civic and political participation combines multiple channels of intervention: in particular, the high involvement in the partisan and associative sphere is joined with protest participation, with the internet allowing an enlargement of political action across time and space.

The social space of bloggers is structured around two dimensions: engagement and societal projects. Through blogs, these agents are able both to develop personal autonomy projects and present societal projects, each one an expression of the different groups found above: different forms and strategies of action in society, associated with different ideological orientations.

Major assertions could be made about inequality, elites and power. This strict social selectivity is a consequence of patterns of inequality and power in Portugal, as differences in school attainment lead to a lack of skills in civic and political action among a great part of the population, creating a gap between groups – the overlap of class inequality also corresponds to political inequality and therefore to different capacities to influence political institutions. It also reveals how new forms of power emerge, despite the diversity of interests in each group. Bloggers are an elite group with active participation, which reinforces the statement on how participation involves cognitive and literacy resources that enable the understanding and discussion of public matters.

This does not minimize the possibility of discussing the expansion and renovation of the public sphere, as initially discussed, i.e., as a mediating body between civil society and the state. Even if there is a low incidence of bloggers among the population, they are broadly distributed across the country. Also to be noted are the regular use of blogs and the diversity of the subjects addressed, as well as the expansion

of spheres of information and the public exchange of ideas, which are possibly unprecedented.

It could also be assumed that a part of the internet and blogs are also independent of the mass media. They allow the exploration of issues at the local level, discussing and advancing arguments that do not arise on television or in other media, though they are important for certain populations. This might lead to the development of local public spheres addressing these particular issues. The interactivity and flexibility that the internet and blogs provide go beyond the dependency on unidirectional media.

In conclusion, in terms of the future, notwithstanding the virtues for democracy, enthusiasm for a possible renewal of the public sphere through these media and the desirability of a participatory democracy is perhaps premature. The enlargement of the public sphere provided by these new forms of the media is for those who already participate and have the resources for an informed public discussion.

The impact of blogging and the internet on the public sphere must be further examined. It will, indeed, constitute an important path towards democratic renewal, at least at an elite level, and introduce new topics that have not hitherto been taken into account. Complementary analyses are necessary, with different methodologies, in order to improve this study. The main contribution of this paper is that it identifies the principal patterns of action and cleavage regarding internet action, demystifying homogeneous forms of action through the internet.

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