

I want to talk today about the rise of the blogosphere in the United States of America and then try and apply some of those lessons to the UK. It is clear that there are parallels between the rise of the blogosphere in both countries but there are also some key differences.

I lived in the US during the recent election, first as a Fulbright Scholar and then as working for the Center for American Progress.

CAP – as it is known in Washington DC – is run by John Podesta, who headed Barack Obama’s “transition” from the election until his inauguration and was previously chief of staff to Bill Clinton. He is one of the best connected and brightest men in the US capital.

His vision when he set up CAP in 2004 was to put half their resources (now around \$25 million) into communication and advocacy. This included creating a blog called Think Progress, which I’ll return to in a moment.

But it was that crucial year, 2004 and its election cycle that saw the development of popularised blogging as a political force.

It was during the Bush vs. Kerry contest that bloggers first consistently created news that received widespread attention, began building large audiences, and – most importantly – started to organise and link to similarly-minded sites and stories.

The Argument – a superb book by Matt Bai about the “battle to remake Democratic politics” – charts the rise of the blogosphere’s first two stars.

First there was Jerome Armstrong, an environmentalist and member of the Peace Corps who coined the phrase “netroots” and is described today by many as the “blogfather”. He set up the MyDD blog in 2001. Initially this stood for My Due Diligence although the tag-line has since changed to My Direct Democracy for People-Powered Politics. It was regarded as the first major liberal blog.

Second is Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, a protégé of Armstrong who founded the Daily Kos. As an army veteran, Moulitsas started his blog for, in his words, "personal therapy" to get his frustrations with the Bush administration off his chest. He provided a voice of anti Iraq war progressivism, but also created the first popular example of what could be called a Web 2.0 blog.

The success of The Daily Kos was due to the site's unique, innovative model which empowered individuals to create their own diaries within the main site. Cumulatively, these separate and independent bloggers formed a community around a common ideology and shared interests, and in turn, have generated a huge amount of traffic to the site. Visitors are drawn not only to the front page postings but also to ‘recommended diarists’ that are given mass approval by the site's community members. It is perhaps a true embodiment of the democratizing power of the internet

Both Jerome and Markos worked for the Howard Dean campaign and were early critics of John Kerry with, as we now know, some justification.

Following the 2004 election, the Center for American Progress – where I worked – set up a new blog called Think Progress. In contrast to the Daily Kos and other established liberal blogs like Talking Points Memo, they shied away from opinion pieces and established themselves as the first ‘rapid response research blog.’

In the words of their editor, Faiz Shakir:

We saw an opportunity to use our think tank resources and research skills to carry out analysis in areas where the media was failing, publicising moments of hypocrisy and fact-checking misstatements by conservatives.

The netroots first significant achievement came during the 2006 mid-term elections when along with MoveOn – the online progressive advocacy group – they backed anti-war candidate Ned Lamont against Senator Joe Lieberman in the Democratic primary in Connecticut and won. Sadly though, Lieberman stood in the subsequent Senate race as an independent and beat Lamont handsomely.

The 2008 election, however, demonstrated the power that progressive bloggers have attained in a different way: influence rather than a form of patronage.

By breaking stories of national prominence, bloggers began to drive the political narrative on a daily basis. Also, during this election cycle, traditional journalistic outlets began operating their own blogs, while prominent bloggers began doing original reporting.

The Huffington Post broke new ground by enlisting readers to become roving reporters – or citizen journalists. This resulted in one of the most prominent stories of the campaign when a blogger, Mayhill Fowler, recorded Barack Obama making a speech at a private fundraising event in San Francisco. Speaking about people from small towns in Pennsylvania and the Midwest, Obama said:

It's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.

This was Obama's biggest stumble and used relentlessly by Hilary Clinton during the closing chapter of their intense fight for the Democratic nomination.

Because the pace of activity was so ferocious during the campaign, bloggers were better positioned than print journalists to be the first to report stories. The campaign teams were forced to read and react to blogs in order to stay in the loop and avoid missing all the key breaking stories that might cause them joy or pain.

Bloggers were able to drive a political debate when they joined together in linking to certain stories, quickly transforming them into common public knowledge. Network TV outlets would quote these blog posts, and campaigns were forced to respond directly to the postings. By the time the evening news aired each night, there were many more iterations of a story than in previous campaigns. TV shows like Countdown with Keith Olbermann on MSNBC or leading publications

like Politico got many story ideas from the progressive blogosphere.

Consider the case of John McCain forgetting how many houses he owned. In previous campaigns, that would have been a one-day print media story. But the blogosphere kept finding new angles to discuss the story, for instance, debating how many homes McCain really owned and why his wealth was an important policy story.

Similarly, bloggers reminded readers of John McCain's candid admissions that US troops could be in Iraq for 100 years and that the economy was not something he understood well.

By the time of the election in November 2008, Think Progress was receiving over 1.7 million unique visitors while Talking Points Memo and The Daily Kos were at similar levels. But Think Progress' has become more highly regarded in terms of its influence.

Excluding Huffington Post, which gets much of its traffic from its entertainment pages, Think Progress is now described by Technorati as the most influential liberal blog using metrics that look at incoming links and ability to drive the conversation.

Since the election, Think Progress and others have shifted their focus. Rather than behaving like tub thumpers for the Obama administration they have turned their fire on the opponents of healthcare reform and on those who deny the existence of man-made climate change.

So what about the UK? What lessons can we draw?

There are similarities and differences.

First, a similarity. The nascent blogosphere has been dominated in the UK by supporters of the main opposition party. Guido Fawkes, Iain Dale, and Conservative Home are still setting much of the agenda.

And – not least to avoid Guido’s cross-hairs – I want to praise this triumvirate today. Much as I disagree with many of their political views.

Guido has to be in the running for 2009 blogger of the year for his focus on expenses and smeargate. It is testament to his success that the left’s attempt to emulate him (Red Rag) ended in such utter failure.

Iain Dale is the place to get the inside scoop on Westminster and he has a growing media empire publishing Total Politics magazine and presenting LBC radio.

Tim Montgomerie along with Jonathan Isaby has created perhaps the most developed British community blog in Conservative Home. It is a must read every day which appears to set the agenda for the right more than CCHQ. In the last few weeks alone, Montgomerie pre-empted and supported the reversal of Cameron’s “cast iron” pledge for a Lisbon treaty while also opposing the touted move towards all women’s primaries. Although I disagree with many of his positions, he is probably the most reasoned thinker on the right at the moment and an extremely nice man to boot.

But unlike in America, where the right wing blogosphere has failed to capitalize on the inevitable disappointments of Obama’s presidency,

there is a left wing blogosphere waiting to take off.

Just recently, Tim Montgomerie wrote – with a touch of complacency I might add - about the greatest potential enemies of the “next Conservative Government”. First was Labour and the Lib Dems; second the public sector unions; but third he placed the left netroots. He said:

We haven't yet seen the web really take off as a political force in Britain but the Left in the widest sense will probably rebuild online. With Labour close to bankruptcy we will see a huge number of very cheap but very popular internet-based campaigns - national and very local - against Tory spending cuts. These campaigns could hurt the Conservatives but they could also hurt the Labour Party in the medium term as it is dragged to the radical left by purist internet activists.

I'm not sure how pur any of us are but I think Tim is right about the threat and I'll flesh out in a moment where I think it will come from – regardless of the election outcome.

But I don't think there is anything inevitable about the demise of the right wing blogosphere if the Conservatives were to win the election. As in the US, bloggers can still have influence and success if they are on the same side as the Government of the day – they just need to shift their fire. To that extent, the worst of the blog wars may still be yet to come.

There are many people and blogs on the left that I could mention but I want to focus on three who I think will set the agenda over the coming period.

First, Sunny Hundal and his Liberal Conspiracy blog, which is more than anything the voice of the disaffected liberal-left. His team of bloggers, with their focused outrage and clear values will continue to be a thorn in the side for whoever forms the Government. They are currently ranked third behind Guido and Iain Dale by wikio as the most important political blog in the UK.

Second, is Alex Smith who has turned Labour List around since its early days of controversy. It is not fashionable to say so, but Derek Draper deserves credit for creating a Labour equivalent to the rival Conservative Home. What he planned to do alongside it in the form of Red Rag was disgraceful and misunderstood the values of the left which means that we should never stoop so low and certainly never expect an audience to follow if we chose to do so.

But Alex with scant resources has rebuilt Labour List's reputation and it is now the main forum for internal Labour debate. Whenever it happens, a leadership election will put Labour List on the map for the right reasons.

Third is Sunder Katwala and Next Left. As an Observer leader writer and head of the world's oldest think tank, the Fabian Society, Sunder is uniquely well placed to support and advise the rest of the left-wing blogosphere. But his research skills also help him to break key stories – most recently by showing that none of the Tories' top 10 bloggers believe the theory that man-made global warming is an established fact.

I hope that Left Foot Forward will complement these three blogs and

many others who are doing such superb work. In March, the Fabian Society published a book called *The Change We Need* which was edited by myself and an academic at the University of East Anglia, Nick Anstead. We distilled lessons for Britain from Obama's victory in a range of different areas. Here's what we said about blogging:

First, blogging is more effective as a campaigning tool when it is used for 'rapid response research' – reacting quickly to statements, speeches and policies by conservatives, and publicising moments of hypocrisy, especially where the mainstream media reaction has been poor.

Second, bloggers can usefully exist outside the mainstream structures of a political party or campaign, giving them free license to go on the attack in a way that might diminish the reputation of politicians. This approach also gives the 'blogosphere' free reign to attack conservative positions by otherwise progressive politicians, as Obama himself found out in relation to intelligence surveillance legislation.

Left Foot Forward fits firmly into that space. We provide what we – perhaps a bit pompously – call “evidence-based blogging” and tend to avoid gossip and opinion.

And although I am a committed Labour party activist, Left Foot Forward is not a Labour party blog and has contributors from the Green party and Liberal Democrats. We have even published an article by the self-titled “progressive conservative” Jonty Olliff-Cooper.

We are a space for progressives of all stripes and although much of our fire is aimed at the Conservative party and their irresponsible positions in relation to the economy and Europe, we have also taken the Government to task over the renewal of Trident, its support of nuclear power, its timidity on drugs, and many other issues. Over the next few weeks we will also scrutinize its pre-Budget report.

Like Think Progress, we want to be judged not just on the size of our audience – after all we are wonky and will attract fewer readers than some of the more scurrilous sites – but we also want to be judged on influence – incoming links and ability to shape the news agenda.

But it's worth here reflecting on another key difference between the UK and US.

The US has no national newspaper market and no bias restrictions in its broadcast media. This has created a space in the US for genuine news creation from the blogosphere.

In the UK, by comparison, it is much more competitive and the Guardian, Sky and BBC, particularly, have huge resources geared towards breaking stories. The Guardian – annoyingly for us – also send reporters to all the most boring public meetings in Westminster to ensure that they never miss a trick!

But what we can do is probe and provide some of the deeper analysis that gets missed.

We can also move beyond the views of the main political parties and

provide a response or rebuttal to the views of some of the key influencers on the right. Columnists like Melanie Philips and Simon Heffer; pressure groups like Migration Watch and the TaxPayers' Alliance; and the right-wing blogs themselves are all our target in a way that might seem parochial to the mainstream media.

For example, on Friday Shamik Das – the Assistant Editor of Left Foot Forward – took apart the assertions in the TaxPayers' Alliance's new anti-EU attack ad which is being shown in cinemas nationwide. We showed that their claim that the EU cost £2000 per person was based on a flawed analysis that looked only at costs and not at benefits and conflates finger in the air estimates of things like the impact of the EU on increased food prices and the cost to individual Brits of VAT fraud, which apparently is the fault of EU officials rather than criminals. The true net contribution, by the way is £15, and if the inflation of 13,000% shocks you then why not complain to the Advertising Standards Agency as we have suggested on our site.

But back to the topic today.

Before I wrap up I want to briefly discuss three areas where I think there is potential for growth in the British blogosphere. This is inevitably guess work and much reflects where the US has already got to.

First, video. This, I think, will come in two forms. Blogs like Think Progress frequently post short extracts from CNN or Fox News of conservative politicians going on TV to make false claims about the Obama administrative or to pedal particular myths. The same is true in the UK. We frequently hear George Osborne and others talking about

Britain's debt crisis. For the record, Britain has a record deficit but its debt to GDP ratio is still way below historic levels and on course to flatten out at a sustainable rate. We simply do not have a debt crisis.

At the moment, if we want to highlight this we will publish a story with the transcript but it is much more effective if you can show the clip with the interviewee making the claim in their own words. There are concerns about copyright but the law is, in my view, untested. I hope that Left Foot Forward will start offering this service by the start of 2009 as many others may do.

Next is original video content. There is already some of this taking place. I mentioned the TPA's anti-EU video, Guido Fawkes produces Guy News, and bloggers on the left like Gav Trait have produced their own videos. My guess is that videos from the right and left, that have nothing to do with party headquarters, will take off as the election approaches.

Second, is the absorption of twitter into blogging platforms. There are already messy ways in which collective tweets of an event – such as this – can be amalgamated into a website using hashtags. Other sites such as Conservative Home and Labour List contain their site's tweets on the main page. Part of the appeal of twitter is its organic nature but this also means that quality control is lacking. Sites like tweetminster, which now appears on the Independent's politics page, are starting to distill this information but there is clearly further to go.

Finally, there is uncharted territory for link ups between online campaigning groups and blogs. As with MoveOn and the netroots in the Connecticut race four years ago, new groups like 38 degrees in the UK

and traditional campaigners like Greenpeace, Oxfam, and many trade unions can link up with the blogs. We can provide the underlying analysis for their campaigns and in turn report their successes.

So in conclusion, in the UK we're at the start of a journey. The right wing blogosphere has not yet been tested and – with the emergence of several key players over the last year or two – we now have a proper fight on our hands.

Both left and right have diversified. Different websites offer different products so everyone – whether a political obsessive or novice; old-timer or first-time-voter – can find the blog that's right for them.

And finally, while we have much to learn from the US who are about five years ahead of us we must be mindful of the differences between the two countries and cultures.