

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WERE WIKIS

Joshua Levy

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Two years ago I showed up in an English as a Second Language class in the Bronx to teach the students, most of whom were from the Dominican Republic, how to blog. In my first lesson I handed out printouts describing how to set up an account on a website called Blogger.com. I then launched into an idealistic rant that began: “Social technology is a new, powerful way to organize and be involved in your community. You can form groups at the click of a mouse; you can write about social and political issues and connect to other bloggers.”

I asked for questions.

“It is very expensive to call my family back home,” said Ivelisse, a woman in her mid-40s. “Can this make it cheaper?”

“I call my mother every day,” said Andy, a man in his early 20s who would soon become the savviest of the group. “Maybe this is easier?”

While I was lecturing about *communities* and *social issues*, my students were worrying about how to pay for expensive calls to the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Pakistan. They wanted results, not high-minded optimism.

We had wildly different notions of what constitutes “communications technology.” While I had been indoctrinated in the marvels of a wiki world—Utopian ideas about technology-assisted self-organizing and activism—my students understood social technology on a much more personal level.

My students were not newcomers to new media. Several of my students used the Spanish-language networking site MiGente.com, and others used MySpace and Flickr. They all e-mailed religiously (it was the cheapest way to stay in touch with their families), and many of them were in danger of developing carpal tunnel syndrome from their constant text messaging. While some students accessed the Internet online at school or at a library, perhaps half the class had a desktop computer with Internet access at home. The tools for broader civic engagement were there, but not necessarily the interest.

Ontogeny Recapitulates Phylogeny

After going through the process of setting up blogging accounts, I explained hyperlinks. “Hyperlinks are the bread and butter of writing online,” I said. “They connect you to the world, and the world to you.” I asked the students to write blog posts about particular issues like music, food, history, and immigration, and instructed them to link to other bloggers who also wrote about these things. Linking turned out to be an empowering act. Because the students immediately searched for terms they knew—*merengue* being the first hot topic—they discovered that buried in the Web’s overwhelming morass of text, images, and video were real people blogging every day about issues and topics they were also interested in, like children and *platanos*.

That same spring, beginning in March 2006, hundreds of thousands of immigrants and their supporters protested rising anti-immigrant sentiment across the country. My students suddenly found themselves in a position to comment on those events in the semi-public space of their blogs. We were experiencing, on a microcosmic level, the birth of the Web itself. They were discovering kindred spirits and linking to them, and in the process creating something new: an online community. These networked, connective acts comprised a small-scale model of the actions and feelings that fueled the birth of the Web in the first place. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.

The Dream of Web-Induced Political Consciousness.

One day Andy complained that while he understood why it was important that we learn about the Web, he didn't see how this would make it any easier to keep in touch with his family. Others agreed with him.

It was a profound moment for me. While I had been talking about the significance of connecting to new people all over the world, many of these students wanted to connect to specific people in specific places. I could see that this and other anxieties were getting in the way of the web-induced political consciousness I was trying so hard to impress upon my students.

After that class, many students simply went through the motions.

On one of the last days of the semester I set up a camera outside the leafy campus and interviewed about half the students, asking for their response to the project. Most gave me bland responses like "It was a fun project," "You get to write about things that you find interesting," "It's fun to connect to other people using the Web," etc. I felt that very few, if any, of them had been touched by the Web in the way I had been hoping. I walked away that day depressed about the ability of the web to help people outside of the elite world of the well-connected to self-organize, to gain political consciousness, to do something.

Joining the Conversation

The course was a very brief time to try to accomplish very big things. It made me realize that even if we get more computers into our schools and extend Internet access to all citizens, only part of the problem will be solved. If we really want to think of the Web as an engine of political change, we must pair the goal of universal accessibility with education to ensure that citizens become web literate and that they learn about the intrinsic social possibilities of the Internet.

As with other types of education, there are structural barriers to making this happen. Education isn't free. Travel is becoming increasingly expensive. Working single mothers have little time to feed their children, much less log onto Facebook and create activist groups. With a few, superhuman exceptions, young men working two jobs are often too tired to blog about community affairs or presidential politics.

When we talk about how online participation is changing our politics—and it really is—we all too often forget about those who are being left behind. For most Americans, the Web is becoming as typical and unremarkable as the analog phone. We need to ensure that this becomes true for more and more people across income barriers so that political consciousness—that special dream of mine—will follow. For me, it won't be adequate to use words like “revolution” or “people-powered democracy” until my students can join the conversation.

About the Author

Joshua Levy is a writer and web strategist whose work explores the intersections of technology, politics, and activism. He is Associate Editor of techPresident and Personal Democracy Forum, and his analysis and work at techPresident.com has been featured in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Huffington Post*, *Salon*, NPR, ABC News, ADL Politics, the CBC, Sky News, and XM Radio, among others.