

Three Case Studies from Switzerland: Politicians' Personal Communication on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Swiss politicians have increasingly turned to the Internet as a method to communicate with constituents and as a way to humanize their public personas. This case study examines the use of Internet communication by Moritz Leuenberger—one of Switzerland's Federal Councillors—and Christoph Blocher, a former Federal Councillor. This case evaluates the relative success and failure of their efforts, and provides a tentative assessment of how this method of political communication might contribute to democracy. It suggests that there are substantial benefits to deliberation, access to information, and the quality of voting decisions. However, the study also notes some of the caveats to these potential improvements, including the persistent presence of power relationships in the operation of the digital platform, and the persistent problem of the digital divide.

THE INTERNET & DEMOCRACY PROJECT

This case study is part of a series of studies produced by the Internet & Democracy Project, a research initiative at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, which investigates the impact of the Internet on civic engagement and democratic processes. More information on the Internet & Democracy Project can be found at: <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/idblog/>.

The project's initial case studies focused on three of the most frequently cited examples of the Internet's influence on democracy. The first case looked at the user-generated news site OhmyNews and its impact on the 2002 elections in South Korea. The second documented the role of technology in Ukraine's Orange Revolution. The third analyzed the network composition and content of the Iranian blogosphere. Fall 2008 saw the release of a new series of case studies, which broadened the scope of our research and examined some less well-known parts of the research landscape. In a pair of studies, we reviewed the role of networked technologies in the 2007 civic crises of Burma's Saffron Revolution and Kenya's post-election turmoil. Urs Gasser's three-part work will examine the role of technology in Swiss democracy. Another case study, set for publication in spring 2009, will expand our study of foreign blogs with an analysis of the Arabic language blogosphere. The authors wish to thank Anja-Lea Fischer and Sandra Cortesi for research assistance, and Herbert Burkert, John Palfrey, Bruce Eting, and Tim Hwang for comments on the cases.

This set of case studies was produced in association with the Research Center for Information Law at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland. The Center supports research initiatives to analyze and assess legal frameworks and provisions that are regulating the creation, distribution, access, and usage of information in economic, cultural, and political systems. It also works to explore the dynamic changes in information technologies and their impact on the legal system. More information about the Center is available online here: <http://www.fir.unisg.ch/>.

INTRODUCTION

Soon after the emergence of the Internet, politicians discovered its potential to inform and communicate with the general public, and made use of it in diverse forms, such as the common construction of a personal Web site or the occasional participation in political chats. The present case study seeks to shed some light on one of the more recent developments of such communication, namely the use of blogs by political leaders. While the use of blogs by politicians in Switzerland has not reached a particularly advanced developmental stage, it is remarkable that two of its most prominent and powerful politicians have recently launched an online presence that—as examined in more detail below—in both cases is shaped to a large degree by characteristics commonly associated with blogs (even if the second example is not actually called a “blog” by its producers):

- Moritz Leuenberger, one of seven Federal Councillors—Switzerland’s executive body—and Minister of Communications, launched a blog in Spring 2007 that not only features a comparatively lively discussion section, but has gained considerable mass media attention;
- Christoph Blocher, former Federal Councillor, launched a weekly interview with a journalist in late summer 2007 that is distributed via the Internet as well as some regional TV stations. The series started when Blocher was still in office as a federal councillor and has been continued even after he was voted out of parliament in the autumn of 2007 and became vice-president of Switzerland’s opposition party. Since its start, the series of interviews has gained an enormous amount of attention, not only in terms of visitors to the Web site, but also in coverage of Blocher’s statements in the mass media.

The present case study aims to use these examples and their Swiss context as anecdotal but substantive evidence for a broader tentative assessment of this form of communication. In part two of the case, we will describe the development of these initiatives up to today and tentatively characterize the information and communication exchanged within the socio-cultural setting of politicians’ blogs along

different dimensions, namely the subject matter of the politicians’ communications (person-oriented vs. issue-oriented), the degree of interactivity of the communication, and the granularity of the information exchanged (broad vs. targeted). Then, in the third section of the case, we will tentatively assess the potential impact of such information and communication on democratic processes. While such an assessment naturally depends on different conceptions of democracy and its main characteristics, we will focus on two benchmarks that seem commonly accepted and particularly useful for analyzing politicians’ blogs: First, the act of voting is still understood as a central feature of any democracy and it may therefore be asked in what sense political leaders’ blogs might contribute to enhancing its quality. Second, more recent theories of democracy stress the importance not only of the mere act of voting, but of a continuing exchange among and between citizens and politicians (deliberative democracy). With a view to both the act of voting and political deliberation, political leaders’ blogs could potentially be credited with remedying the estrangement of the public from political processes and thereby contribute to solving some of the perceived problems of modern democracy. Lastly, it should be clarified that a psychological investigation into the personal motivation that would lead politicians to start such a blog will not be included in this case study.

EVIDENCE FROM SWITZERLAND

While it should be noted that Switzerland’s experience with blogging politicians is not restricted to the initiatives examined here, Federal Councillor Moritz Leuenberger’s blog and former Federal Councillor Christoph Blocher’s weekly video interview are by far the most important—not only in view of the prominence and political status of their authors but also in terms of the attention they receive from other media. Furthermore, our focus on these two blogs is justified, as earlier research has identified significant differences between the political and democratic implications of blogging on the part of highly visible political leaders as compared to the blogs of politicians enjoying less prominence, such as back-benching members of parliament.¹ These commonalities should, however, not obscure the fact that both initiatives differ considerably in their settings, characteristics, and, possibly, their consequences for democracy. The latter holds true particularly in light of the

different roles of the two actors within the Swiss political system—i.e. a member of government (Leuenberger) and a leading politician of the opposition (Blocher).

FEDERAL COUNCILLOR MORITZ LEUENBERGER'S BLOG

On March 14, 2007, Federal Councillor Moritz Leuenberger, Swiss Minister of Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications, announced he would start writing a personal blog (<http://moritzleuenberger.blueblog.ch/>). In a press release from his department, Leuenberger cited the blog as an “experiment” with which he would—as a minister of communications—like to find out whether this means of expression is suitable for enhancing exchange with a politically interested audience, while such exchange previously could be conducted only by way of post and e-mail.² Leuenberger announced he would aim to write at least two entries a week if his agenda allowed him time to do so.

As of the date of publication of this case study, the blog consisted of 80 entries from Leuenberger, which accounts for a little bit more than one entry per week. However, while Leuenberger published new thoughts every two or three days at the beginning, intervals between publication of articles have gone up to seven or even fourteen days after about a year following the blog's launch. As regards comments, the blog provoked a reaction of 5,230 comments in total, accounting for about 74 comments per entry on average as of June 2008. However, figures have not remained at a constant level: While the first two entries received 574 and 175 comments respectively, the number of comments to more recent entries has gradually decreased until they reached their lowest level at 28. Currently, new entries generally spark between 40 and 100 reactions.

While the blog was initially only available in German—although Leuenberger encouraged users to leave comments in French as well as Italian³—the blog is now still written in German but is also translated into French. However, Leuenberger's entries are not translated into Italian, Switzerland's third official language.⁴ By far most reactions to Leuenberger's entries in the comments section of the blog are written in German; only a few people add to the discussion in French and even less in Italian.⁵ Leuenberger continues to write all blog entries on his own.

Yet, before their publication, entries are handed over to his staff and corrected for eventual “faux pas”—a procedure that has led to the elimination of various articles, according to Leuenberger.⁶ Direct communication on the blog is furthermore limited in that reader comments on the blog are not published immediately but are also first reviewed by a member of Leuenberger's staff before going online.

Between its launch in March 2007 and June 2008, Leuenberger's blog has been visited by 2,780 visitors per day. Apart from the summer period, these figures have apparently increased consistently. Altogether, more than one million people have visited the blog since July 2007.⁷ While these figures might not seem too impressive in absolute terms, they are remarkably high compared to other Swiss political blogs—hardly surprising in light of the political standing of its author. In 2007, the blog indeed had better viewership than most other political blogs on prominent Swiss Web pages (at least one exception is a blog with contributions from five prominent members of parliament and which is hosted by the daily newspaper 20 Minuten).⁸

While the status of Leuenberger's blog is, therefore, comparatively high with respect to the number of visitors, this holds true even more so for the blog's “authority.” Referring to the number of hyperlinks on other Web sites that point to Leuenberger's blog, figures from 2007 show Leuenberger's blog with 127 links, which is far ahead of other political blogs, such as the newspaper NZZ's blog with 23 or 20min.ch (the most successful blog in terms of numbers of visitors) with 2 links.⁹

Leuenberger's Posts

In his first entry, Leuenberger stated that the blog would not serve as a tool to spread news about initiatives of the government or important reports—as equal access to information would not be realized by such publication in the blog. Rather, he would potentially use the blog to explain decisions of the government as well as give insights about complex aspects of political questions. After 16 months of its existence, one can roughly distinguish three different types of entries that go partly beyond Leuenberger's initial announcements:

First, Leuenberger has addressed a number of issues in his blog that are related to his political work as Minister of Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications;

often he begins an entry by relating a certain aspect of his current political work—such as a meeting or parliamentary debate he attended or an interview or speech he gave—and then goes on to express his own opinion on the question at issue or gives additional anecdotal information. However, not all of Leuenberger's entries are elicited by some development “outside” of the blog, but in many cases he explicitly addresses comments to earlier posts and gives his opinion or answer to questions raised in those comments.¹⁰ Rather than explaining decisions or offering insights or new information concerning the work of his ministry, he mostly expresses general political thoughts related to the area of authority of his ministry.¹¹ To name but a few examples, he has posted blog entries on topics such as hybrid cars, motorcycle racing in Switzerland, bio-fuel, the quality of television programs, and biodiversity.

Second, consistent with the tradition of the Swiss political system, where the elected members of the Federal Council not only serve as ministers of their respective departments, but have to take overall governmental responsibility as a Councillor (principle of collegiality¹²), Leuenberger raises issues in his blog that are not exclusively or even primarily related to his own department. For example, there is an entry related to a forthcoming public vote concerning the appropriateness of the government's distribution of information and/or opinion preceding a public vote as well as an entry related to CEO compensation.

Third, in his blog, Leuenberger mentions anecdotes and episodes from his daily life that do not have any major political component. For instance, in one entry, Leuenberger provided the recipe of a meal he particularly enjoyed or his comment on a certain incident where someone else paid the parking fee for his car.

In general, the blog posts are not extremely time sensitive or based on issues whose underlying facts change rapidly. Rather, Leuenberger sums up (political) developments in certain fields and offers, more fundamentally, his thoughts on the issues that are discussed in the media and by the public.

Comments and Discussion

According to Leuenberger's official Web site, the purpose of the blog is, as mentioned, to establish a platform for discussion of topics Leuenberger is concerned with and

that he estimates to be of interest to the greater public. He explicitly invites people to engage in the discussion and to publish their questions, suggestions and thoughts in the comments section of the blog.

Judging by the number of responses he sparks through his blog posts, Leuenberger does very well compared to other political blogs; apparently, there is no other blog by a single prominent Swiss politician that has so many active readers. While it is completely normal that initial figures should decline as novelty diminishes, the blog still succeeds after more than 16 months to engage 40 to 100 readers per post, which apparently is a comparatively high number not only in Switzerland but also more generally.¹³

The most intense discussions seem to have developed around environmental topics where many participants actively engage not only in reacting to Leuenberger's posts, but also in lively discussions among themselves. In contrast to some of the experiences which other prominent executive politicians abroad initially reported,¹⁴ the discussions on Leuenberger's blog seem to have been shaped from the blog's beginnings to a considerable degree by an orderly presentation and even the development of rather detailed arguments concerning environmental questions—although the exchange of polemical or aggressive statements has not been avoided altogether, leading to some (but less than in other blogs) meta-discussions among the participants about the style of discussion that is appropriate for the blog. Many participants apparently take quite some time to develop and present comparatively long and structured posts that sometimes amount to more than 500 words.¹⁵ According to the names, monikers, or pseudonyms that users provide with their comments, quite a few of them are regular participants; most of them can arguably be associated with left-oriented positions with respect to the environmental questions discussed—which should not come as a surprise given Leuenberger's left-wing political stance. However, there are also some participants that present more conservative or liberal¹⁶ points of view, with whom there is regularly heated confrontation, without seeing a complete collapse of orderly discussion. Different individuals will participate in the discussion depending on the subject of Leuenberger's post—be it related to environmental policy or cultural matters.

Leuenberger appears happy with the development of the discussions on the blog, points to the “inspiring, enrich-

ing and amusing” character of the comments, and claims that a community has developed around his blog—albeit a heterogeneous community both in terms of participation and political views.¹⁷ Leuenberger claims to still read every single comment (as initially announced) and to have gained new perspectives on issues and even been persuaded by, or at least grappled with, the arguments presented by readers. Apparently, he has also included some of the comments in a book he recently published. On many occasions, Leuenberger picks up a thought or opinion expressed as comment to one of his previous blog posts and answers in the form of a new blog entry. He indicates, however, that he is not able to respond to every single comment due to lack of time.

At one point, Leuenberger considered—in light of the numerous questions asked in the blog—to introduce a specific section of the blog for such questions that would be answered either by Leuenberger or his staff; the idea, however, has not been realized. Moreover, in contrast to other executive branch politicians’ blogs,¹⁸ there seems to be no moderation or other influential function performed by Leuenberger’s staff (going beyond the screening of every post before publication).

With regard to “netiquette” on his blog, Leuenberger claims that only a few of the posts have had to be removed because they contained racist or clearly false statements that, it was feared, might result in the dispersion of rumors. Apparently, there have been no complaints on the part of readers for failure to publish their contributions. Furthermore, Leuenberger presents himself as open to the habits of the blogging community that depart significantly from the usual form of political discourse in Switzerland, especially with regard to personal formalities: In one of the earliest posts Leuenberger left it to the individual participants as to whether they wished to address him formally or informally and declared that he would not feel insulted if someone addressed him informally—an extremely unusual attitude for a Federal Councillor in Switzerland.

Reactions

The impact of Leuenberger’s blog is not limited to the Internet community as expressed by the number of visitors mentioned before. Rather, as a recent study has shown, of all political blogs (including non-Swiss blogs) Leuenberger’s is the one most frequently cited by Swiss

print media: As of June 2007, the blog has been cited or mentioned 42 times with the second most popular blog (NZZ votum) not reaching half of that figure.¹⁹ This is all the more remarkable as the period of examination of that study covers seven years and Leuenberger’s blog was only in existence during the last 2½ months of that period of time. With respect to their content, these references have, at least initially, been characterized by criticism and sceptical irony, expressing a certain doubt about the value and necessity of a politician’s blog, rather than focusing on the content of the blog.²⁰ Some doubt has been expressed as to the appropriateness of Leuenberger writing the blog during his working hours; his fellow Federal Councillor Pascal Couchepin was cited in the media as saying that he did not have time for such activities.²¹ Leuenberger contradicts these voices by pointing out that communication to the public is also part of his work.

Leuenberger opines that many journalists see the blog as unwelcome competition to their work and therefore report on it in a biased, ironical, and sometimes even manipulative manner—even if they now refer mainly to the contents of the blog (and not its overall usefulness).²² Leuenberger believes the blog’s public perception is mainly shaped by these references in the mass media. Despite all criticism, Leuenberger estimates that other politicians will launch similar online initiatives, not least because of the attention the blog has received in the media.

FORMER FEDERAL COUNCILLOR CHRISTOPH BLOCHER’S WEEKLY INTERVIEW

In mid-September 2007, the first issue of a weekly interview with Christoph Blocher, at that time federal councillor and arguably Switzerland’s most renowned and controversial politician, was broadcast via television and the Internet. The series was started five weeks before the general parliamentary elections in Switzerland—its producers denied that the timing was on purpose, but contended that neither Blocher nor his party had exerted any influence with regard to the timing.

The interview with Blocher is always conducted by the same journalist, Matthias Ackeret, who also wrote a book about Blocher and his principles of leadership. It lasts for approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The choice to implement

an interview-format distinguishes this initiative significantly from the Internet appearances of other countries' statesmen, such as German Chancellor Merkel's video blog, which usually takes the form of a monologue. However, interactivity is still significantly limited in that the Internet presence of the interview does not—in contrast to Leuenberger's blog—allow for discussion.

The interview is produced and financed by the relatively small regional television station "Tele Schaffhausen," whose editor and owner, Norbert Neuninger, apparently had the initial idea for such a series.²³ From its beginnings, the interview was not only broadcast by this television station (and partly also by other regional television stations), but has always been made available via the Internet virtually at the same time that it was broadcast on television (<http://www.teleblocher.ch>). Moreover, all episodes remain accessible on the Internet as of the date of this publication.

Though it was not clear at the beginning how long the series would last, most believed that it would continue at least until December 2007, when Blocher would have to run for a new four-year term in the Federal Council.²⁴ After a clear victory in the parliamentary elections for Blocher's party, for whom he served and arguably still does serve as *spiritus rector*, he was—in what could be called a small earth-shattering event in Swiss politics—not re-elected into the Federal Council in December 2007. Still, the weekly interview series continued to be broadcast, and it has continued to this day. Currently, Blocher serves as vice-president of his party. Even though he does not hold office in government or parliament, Blocher is still one of the most renowned figures in Swiss politics.

From the beginning, the interview received considerable attention from the general public. Since the regional television broadcast could not be viewed in all parts of Switzerland, many people visited the Internet site. While in October 2007 approximately 10,000 to 30,000 users watched the interview via the Internet,²⁵ figures increased in the following months and as of April 2008 have reached 20,000 to 60,000 visitors per interview.²⁶ The fact that Blocher was voted out of office in December 2007 only had a negative influence on visitor statistics momentarily. According to Ackeret, the interview series will continue until the end of 2008.

The interview is created with a minimum of technical effort as the conversation is recorded by only one camera and without editing.²⁷ According to its editor, one episode costs Tele Schaffhausen around CHF 1,500 (approximately \$1200); the interviewer, Ackeret, receives CHF 500 (approximately \$400) per episode in compensation, while Blocher does not receive any money nor does he pay anything to cover the costs of the interview. While it was apparently planned in the beginning to cover the cost of the interview through the contributions of sponsors on the Internet,²⁸ this has yet to happen. The location of the interview differs from episode to episode, yet it is generally conducted on locations associated with Blocher, be it his (former) office as Federal Councillor in Bern, his home near Zurich, or a castle he owns in the Swiss mountains.

The Interview

According to the series editor, Neuninger, the purpose of the interviews is to accompany a politician over a longer period of time to enable the observation of how his guiding principles, as outlined in Ackeret's book, are applied in everyday politics.²⁹ Similarly, Ackeret sees the main attraction of the interview in its ability to shed light on the most controversial politician of Switzerland in a time of political change.

Ackeret claims to be solely responsible for the questions he asks of Blocher in the interview, and that Blocher has no influence whatsoever in the formulation of questions. Moreover, as one observer of the broadcast noted, Blocher does even not want to be told the questions in advance but rather prefers to answer spontaneously while the camera is rolling.³⁰

Ackeret's questions cover a considerable range of topics and generally start with references to events that have received media attention during the week preceding the interview. However, most questions are related to current developments with Blocher's political work.³¹ Blocher is one of the central figures in contemporary Swiss politics, especially in the last year when his party "won" in the parliamentary elections with a campaign mainly focused on him. That same year, Blocher was voted out of office by the parliament, which led his party to drop out of government and claim to join the opposition. These developments were accompanied by heated debates that to a large extent focused on the person and activities of Blocher. It comes, therefore,

as little surprise that the interviews with Blocher gave him ample opportunity to present his own view on these controversies and, in the process, comment on political friends and (more often) foes. Yet, especially after Blocher was voted out of government, the topics that Ackeret has chosen have not been confined to the debates centered around Blocher's person but also cover political issues and debates of general interest. Still, Ackeret always takes current developments or political discussions as a starting point for his questions.

The style of the interview is less controversial than "critical-friendly," as Ackeret acknowledges himself. He claims that his aim is not to annoy Blocher while still addressing every topic he thinks may be interesting for the public, even if it may be awkward or unpleasant for the interviewee to respond to. On the other hand, Ackeret acknowledges that the interview could also present an opportunity for unconventional PR work for Blocher.³² This also manifests in the fact that the series is conducted as a sequence of questions and answers rather than as a controversial discussion.

Ackeret has received proposals for questions from the public and claims to be receptive to such suggestions and has even included some of them in the interviews (his e-mail address is published on the front page of the Tele Blocher Web site).

Reactions

Right from its original launch, Blocher's weekly interview has received tremendous attention. Most initial reactions, be it from traditional mass media or various public personalities in Switzerland,³³ did not respond to the content or certain political statements made by Blocher in these interviews; rather, they addressed the concept of the series as such—an apparent novelty in Switzerland.

Much of the initial criticism related to the fact that the series started only a couple of weeks before the national elections which take place every four years, with Blocher being the "figurehead" of his party and at the center of his party's election campaign. The interview, it was argued, would constitute just one further break with Swiss political traditions on the part of the Swiss People's Party in that Federal Councillors—that formerly were seen as "statesmen" in a position somehow detached from the everyday arguments among the various political parties—would now be heav-

ily included in the parties' election campaigns.³⁴ Therefore, Blocher's interview was seen as political campaigning and was even called a "revolution in election campaigning"—in this particular case, however, it was meant without any negative connotation.³⁵

More fundamentally, the interview series was also accused of being a political advertisement. To name but a few examples—while statements published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, one of Switzerland's most prestigious newspapers, drew analogies to state television in the former German Democratic Republic, the president of Switzerland's Christian Democratic Party, Christophe Darbellay, was cited comparing the interview to Berlusconi's practices in controlling the media in Italy.³⁶ Haldimann, editor-in-chief of Switzerland's state television, expressed the opinion on his blog that the interview's broadcast via regional TV stations would violate various provisions of the Swiss Telecommunications Act.³⁷ Beyond such legal arguments, allegations of political propaganda were also voiced with respect to the style of the interview. These voices argued that Ackeret would only feed Blocher keywords without conducting a confrontational interview. However, public criticism decreased after the initial agitation and more positive statements have come to be voiced. For example, the authenticity of the interview was praised in that it was conducted without providing Blocher with an opportunity to prepare his answers, and that Ackeret had been able to elicit interesting information from Blocher that otherwise would not have become public.³⁸

Nonetheless, the initial criticism led to a formal investigation by the Federal Agency for Communication into the interview's legality under Swiss regulation of radio and television. That investigation, however, was only concerned with the interview's broadcast on the part of regional TV stations, not with its availability on the Internet, and it is therefore of minor importance for the present case study. It is relevant, however, as it shows that legal restrictions on political communication can potentially be overcome by communicating not via TV stations but via the Internet—since nothing says that the Internet cannot reach the same size audience or deliver a comparable user experience, as the example of Blocher's interview shows; this at least holds true until the (Swiss) regulation of radio and television is adapted to the new means of broadcast enabled by broadband Internet.³⁹

Beyond such discussions about the legality, legitimacy, and style of the interview series, after the initial brouhaha most recent references to the interview series in Swiss mass media do not refer to the concept of the interview as such, but to political statements made by Blocher in the interview. Yet, not only the content of such references is remarkable, but the sheer quantity: Arguably, as one journalist notes, the interview has become one of Switzerland's most cited broadcast programs.⁴⁰ Ackeret feels that other journalists nowadays treat the interview as a regular press conference and use the information revealed therein for their own reporting. Indeed, different media have referred to the interview as a source of new information both in terms of facts and in terms of Blocher's opinions on various subjects. To name but one example that combines both categories: A recent political issue in Switzerland concerned the question of whether the immunity of Toni Brunner, a member of parliament and current president of the Swiss People's Party, should be terminated as he might have violated the confidentiality of his office by transferring a report of a parliamentary commission to the department of (former) Federal Councillor Blocher in the autumn of 2007. In one of the interviews, Blocher confirmed the fact that his department had indeed received such a report from Brunner but expressed the opinion that the transfer did not violate confidentiality rules. These statements appeared in many Swiss mass media and clearly constituted new information relevant to the general public.⁴¹ One can hardly say that the media attention on Blocher has generally diminished after Blocher was voted out of office. Instead, he continues to enjoy significant visibility in mass media generally, and the interviews also receive considerable coverage.

TENTATIVE ASSESSMENT

Presumably blogs represent an attractive means of communication from the viewpoint of prominent politicians, since both Leuenberger and Blocher pursue their online initiatives without any legal obligation or even the expectation on the part of the general public that they do so. We turn now to an examination of the potential benefits of this form of communication for democratic processes in general. We will tentatively assess the contribution of the two specific initiatives examined above—and, by extension, the potential of similar initiatives as well—within the set-

ting of an advanced democracy, primarily against the backdrop of two benchmarks crucial in any democracy, namely their contribution to deliberation, i.e. to public discourse as a further legitimizing factor for political actions beyond elections, and to the quality of voters' electoral decisions themselves.

The phenomenon of blogs in general has not yet reached a stable socio-cultural state, this holds true even more so for political leaders' blogs in particular. Therefore, the following assessment may only be of a tentative nature: Since both initiatives were only first started in 2007, the future will have to reveal whether they represent the beginning of a lasting tradition, what characteristics will eventually prevail, and what long-term consequences such political information and communication is likely to bring about—or whether communication by prominent politicians in these forms is a mere caprice of the current zeitgeist. The present stage can, however, be used to identify likely developments and trends, as well as portray anecdotal evidence from the Swiss environment.

Contribution to Deliberation

While the traditional theory of democracy emphasizes voting as the central institution for assessing the legitimacy of a certain democracy and its government, deliberative democracy theorists argue that legitimate lawmaking and government can only arise from the public deliberation of the citizenry.⁴² While this case study is not the right place for a detailed description of all facets of the different schools of deliberative democracy and their interrelations, the basic principle is straightforward: Deliberation is understood as a rational discourse in which the pros and cons of certain political positions are argumentatively clarified. It necessitates an area in social life—the so-called public sphere—where people can get together and freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action. While political theorists have conceptualised the preconditions and functions of such a public sphere in great detail and with somewhat different emphases, the concepts generally contain two distinct aspects of the public sphere: First, citizens' general access to information, opinions and institutions, and second, citizens' opportunities to add authority to their opinions. The Internet is generally credited with the potential to contribute to the public sphere—and, accordingly, to demo-

cratic deliberation also—in light of the different characteristics of this technological innovation, such as increased transparency and greater access to distributed information, or the enhanced interactivity of discourse which may take place in this sphere.⁴³ Politicians' blogs, in particular, as one form of Internet communication, may contribute to these concepts not in view of their constituting a technological innovation beyond these general characteristics of Internet communication, but rather as a socio-cultural and cyber-cultural phenomenon with distinct characteristics that have been developed within the “blogosphere.” In the following sections, we will discuss the likely implications of such communication on the part of prominent politicians in light of the two aspects of political deliberation mentioned above, namely access to information and the enhanced opportunity for public participation.

Access to Information

Citizen access to politically relevant information is a central characteristic of a functioning public sphere and, therefore, of deliberative democracy.⁴⁴ As mentioned above, the Internet can contribute to an increased and direct flow of information from politicians to the general public, as the costs of transmitting messages are significantly lowered (compared, for example, to printing and sending statements by mail).⁴⁵ The direct character of the flow of information is particularly exhibited by the ability to avoid the scrutiny of information filtering institutions, such as the mass media, that are thought to undermine the public sphere.⁴⁶

As to the character of the information distributed on the Internet by politicians, investigation into the Swiss experience—as well as reports of experiences in other countries⁴⁷—have shown that blogs are used to a considerable degree for the communication of what may be called “human touch”-related information: That is, insights into the politician's daily business or anecdotal evidence about incidents or opinions not directly linked to legislative or other political issues. This form of communication is not likely to be covered by traditional fora of political discourse, for instance in the mass media, and therefore qualitatively augment the kind of information available to the general public; Leuenberger in particular has revealed such information in his blog. However, from the point of view of deliberative democracy, such information may seem of less relevance, as its publicity does not add significantly to

potential political discourse among the general public or between the general public and its political representatives. It may, nevertheless, exert some influence on democratic processes in terms of citizens' voting decisions.

However, the blogs examined do not restrict themselves to such information. Most notably, they are used to distribute the opinions of the respective politicians on various political questions raised by current events. Yet, even if the borders between such “opinions” on the one hand and “factual statements” on the other may be blurred in political communication, one can observe that the blogs are not primarily used to reveal new facts related to the office or institution the politician belongs to, such as ministries or parties: While at least a few fact-specific statements that Blocher revealed in the interview found their way into traditional mass media,⁴⁸ Leuenberger is even more cautious in this respect—evidently in order to avoid practices that would violate equal access to information.⁴⁹ He, therefore, uses the blog as a means of personal, rather than institutional communication. This seems appropriate from a normative point of view as it prevents pseudo-personalization of an institution.

When trying to assess the value of these opinions and occasional factual statements distributed in the politicians' blog for deliberative democracy, it is of course true that the direct perception of the information on the part of the general public is seriously limited: Even though both Leuenberger's blog and Blocher's interviews are visited by high numbers of individuals compared to the digital initiatives of other politicians, the figures of 2,750 visitors on average per blog post (Leuenberger) or 20,000-60,000 per interview (Blocher) are very low compared to the potential electorate of about 4 million people in Switzerland, let alone its total population of more than 7 million people. Moreover, it is not likely that such blogs will have the same reach as mass media anytime in the near future. Even if one acknowledges that only a fraction of the Swiss population is genuinely interested in politics, it is clear that not everyone who is generally interested takes the trouble to maintain a constant watch over politicians' public statements. However, the blogs' potential contribution to deliberative democracy is not limited to such direct perception on the part of the general public—but the perception of the blogs may be leveraged by other media, not least of all classic mass media (TV or the printed press). As one recent

study has shown, Leuenberger's blog is the most cited political blog in Swiss print media, even though it was only in existence during a fraction of the whole period of that study (however, the study does not reveal in what manner Leuenberger was cited).⁵⁰ Blocher's interview series has quickly developed into one of the most cited media events. Against this backdrop, the exclusion of certain portions of the population from these blogs by phenomena such as the digital divide may seem less dramatic, even if it does, of course, mean that the theoretical ideals of a functioning public sphere are not achieved. Furthermore, even if the high normative standards of the concept of deliberative democracy may—in light of such phenomena—not (yet) be met completely, the blogs are likely to at least improve the situation. Their direct reach is significantly larger than with previous means of direct communication, such as press conferences that are generally held before a much more limited audience.

The success of the blogs examined may also be measured by yet another characteristic related to mass media coverage: Mass media coverage of statements by Blocher and Leuenberger may not only serve as a leveraging tool for the distribution of the information but also as an indicator of the information's relevance for a broader public and, potentially, for deliberative processes. In this regard, it seems crucial that both initiatives are placed within institutional settings that prevent the politician's Internet presence from merely representing a political advertisement. In Blocher's case, the moderator has a free hand with regard to the questions he poses to Blocher and Blocher himself is not presented with an opportunity to prepare for the interview. The possibility for the public to leave comments on Leuenberger's blog posts means that the blog posts are subject to public discourse, including public criticism. However, the contribution of a politician's blog to deliberation is likely to be more restricted if neither comments are allowed nor other factors are present to prevent the politician from using his or her Internet presence primarily to advertise himself or herself. In this regard, the video blog of Angela Merkel,⁵¹ the acting Chancellor of Germany, may serve as an instructive example: It represents a mere (one-sided) video speech with no input on the part of either an interviewer or the general public. As other research has indicated, the video blog indeed enjoys a high number of visitors, but in its current form could hardly ever launch

a political debate⁵²—in other words, it does not greatly contribute to deliberative democracy. However, the risks for a politician connected with such institutional settings—i.e. the relinquishment of complete control over the communication—lead to a trade-off between the potential contribution of a blog to deliberation and the likelihood that politicians will be willing to participate in this form of communication.

Altogether, prominent politicians' blogs may serve deliberative democracy in revealing politicians' attitudes and opinions on various political subjects that may enter public deliberation thereafter—either in the blog itself or in other media of political discourse. The blog may best be used as a means of personal communication and may—insofar as the politician represents a political institution—supplement, rather than substitute, institutional communication. The contribution of the blog to deliberation increases if the blog is placed in an institutional setting that prevents the information distributed from merely taking the form of personal promotion of the politician. However, these observations should of course not conceal the fact that greater access to information, as enabled by online media, has so far not been proved to directly lead to an increase in political participation, or greater civic engagement on a general basis.⁵³

Platform of Deliberation

In the initial euphoria surrounding the emergence of the Internet, "cyberoptimists" claimed that the Internet's new possibilities for information exchange would revolutionize democracy since everyone could (and potentially would) enter political discourse without incurring significant costs. However, the development of political communication on the Internet has presented a more antiseptic reality in that the existence of the mere technological feasibility and institutional structures do not necessarily entail their widespread adoption by the public: Although there are many different political discussions on the Internet, they are generally conducted by a specialized minority.⁵⁴ Such findings hold true also for Leuenberger's blog (while the interview with Blocher does, as mentioned above, not allow direct reactions at all) which indeed elicits a considerable amount of active discussion, but still only from a very small crowd compared to the whole population, the potential electorate, or even the consumers of traditional mass media.

Furthermore, old barriers to such exchange have partly been replaced by new ones, as the debate about the digital divide shows.⁵⁵

However, it would likewise be false to dismiss political communication in the Internet as mere “white noise” lacking any relevance for deliberative democracy. On the contrary, both the Internet in general and politicians’ blogs in particular may contribute to deliberation considerably. The main benefit of Internet discussions in general lies in the fact that the Internet presents some significantly advanced possibilities for people who are already interested in participating in political discourse, but may now do so more easily. The Internet’s tools for interaction do not generally establish the possibility for a lively exchange of ideas and thoughts, but its characteristics permit the formation of particularly interested and specialized discussion groups: Persons interested in a certain discussion can gather irrespective of geographical distances, and have the time and room for extensive exchange, as Leuenberger’s blog shows with respect to individuals particularly interested in environmental issues. Furthermore, in light of the possibilities of more or less anonymous discourse, one can also expect a higher rate of participation in that shyness or fear of accountability for one’s statements do not prevent one from taking part in the discussion; however, such anonymity can also draw trolls or other destructive participants to the discussion. However, in the case of Leuenberger’s blog, destructive behaviour does not seem to be preponderant considering the claim that only a few blog comments have had to be removed and that participants generally seem to be happy with the level of discussion. Arguably, this situation may in part be due to the general perception of high legitimacy that the Swiss population associates with the Swiss democratic system and its Federal Councillors.⁵⁶ A further benefit of Internet communication for political deliberation in general is that the discussions led on the Internet usually remain accessible even after they have been terminated. Finally, concerns as to the prospect that the advent of online discussions would lead to a fragmentation of political discourse and render it confusing and incomprehensible⁵⁷ have so far not proved true. On the contrary, the new methods of communication are perceived as having given a specialized and interested audience additional possibilities to inform themselves or enter discussions without displacing classic information-filtering and aggregating institutions, such as the mass media.

While these new possibilities of online discourse may be realized through different discussion formats on the Internet, the current blog format with the inclusion of a comments feature seems to possess several characteristics that make it particularly favourable to political deliberation in comparison to other institutions such as online fora and chats with politicians. Political fora in many cases did not feature the participation of politicians and therefore primarily represented a discussion among citizens. Blogging might change the landscape since it is particularly attractive for politicians: Blogging allows them to take considerable influence in the shaping of the discussion as well as to form a group of supporters and keep in direct touch with the opinions and temperaments of the general public. However, one should not forget that blogging is also associated with considerable risks from the point of view of the politician that would decrease his or her potential willingness to engage in online discussion. These risks consist primarily of accountability for statements as well as the failure to bridge between the socio-cultures of the political sphere and the “blogosphere,” thereby risking the alienation of one or, worse, even both of them. As compared with the tradition of politicians’ chats on the Internet, blogging provides the additional potential benefit to deliberative democracy in that it permits asynchronous communication to take place and renders the geographical location of the participants irrelevant (as the Internet generally does); thus, citizens may participate at a time that suits them as well as devote more time to their contributions, which can increase the level of the discussion. Furthermore, the experience with politicians’ chats so far has shown that deliberation is constrained by the limited possibility for discussion among participants (and not only with the politician) and the lack of iterative processes which hinders participants in getting back to a point previously raised⁵⁸ Finally, the moderator of a chat has the ability to choose questions that suit the interests and needs of the politician⁵⁹—a form of interference often more invasive than the practice of pre-screening blog comments for insulting or false statements. In light of these issues, politicians’ blogs seem to combine the benefits of both fora and chats: As in chats, a politician has the possibility to extensively lay out his positions and concerns as well as raise personal issues. As in fora, citizens have time and space to add their own contributions and may discuss among themselves without time constraints. Deliberation can also be fostered by the high expectations concerning topic choice, originality, spontaneity and interactivity that

are currently held by the public at large with respect to political blogs.

Despite all the benefits of politicians' blogging in view of deliberative democracy, the experience of Leuenberger's blog has shown, that there still remain obstacles to the realization of ideal deliberation as set out in political theory, even if a politician is generally willing to enter such discourse:

First, as mentioned above, the blogging politician holds a comparatively high amount of power over shaping the discussion in that he dictates the topics and structure of the blog. While this possibility is naturally attractive for the blogging politician—as he or she will favor a form of communication that centers around his or her personality and opinions⁶⁰—it may constitute a drawback from the point of view of deliberative democracy since rational and issue-focused deliberation is hindered. The absence of power relations as a precondition of the public sphere (*a la* Habermas) is, therefore, not completely realized—political fora may do better in this regard with a general lack of participation on the part of politicians as the “price”. However, as could be seen in the blog of Leuenberger, participants do not slavishly stick to the topics proposed by the different blog posts. In a recent blog post, for example, Leuenberger reflects on his blog and its development, but most comments deal with a discussion of environmental policy that apparently was provoked by current developments and earlier discussions in the blog—but obviously not by the actual post they are formally connected with.⁶¹ The flip side of the coin connected to this, of course, is that discussion may become less transparent and traceable.

Second, ideal deliberation may also be impeded through the influence of the politician's environment, again resulting in the preconditions of the public sphere not being met in so far as they demand the absence of power relations. This is true for the practices of *ex ante* or *ex post* screening of blog comments, which will, however, be of no major concern if exercised cautiously and focused essentially on preventing the blog from being spammed by trolls.⁶² However, such influence may go even further. Apparently, concerns in this regard have not been raised in connection with Leuenberger's blog, but they have been voiced on other political leaders' blogs. For instance, it was discovered that on the blog of Margot Wallström, vice-president of the

European Commission, one of its most active participants who voiced strong agreement with the Commission's opinions was in fact a member of Wallström's blog team acting under a pseudonym. Furthermore, after his unmasking he acted as an official moderator—which may well be necessary from a practical point of view given the politician's time constraints but may raise concerns with regard to his influence on the discussion.⁶³ Leuenberger's blog tends to do have less guidance since no official moderator is present (apart from the preliminary review of all blog comments by Leuenberger's staff).

Third, while the theory of deliberative democracy demands transparency with respect to the effects of the deliberation and their embeddedness in the political process, such information is largely missing with respect to politicians' blogs. This may decrease the authority of the discussion's results. What is rendered visible in the case of Leuenberger's blog is essentially his claims that he would read every blog post and has gained some insights from several blog comments, as well as the inclusion of some of the comments in a recent book. Yet, it is not clear how the discussion is evaluated and whether (and to what extent) citizens' engagement brings about effective political consequences.

Fourth, as may be seen from the interview series with Blocher, facilitating deliberation may—in light of the missing comments function—not be the primary aim of a blogging politician. In this regard, the assumptions of recent research seem to be confirmed by the Swiss experience: Politicians that are—in light of their official position or claim to be a leading politician—mainly interested in widespread distribution of their messages will be less concerned about engaging in intense communication with individual citizens.⁶⁴ However, in light of the highly controversial status of Blocher as a public figure, one could also expect that a potential comments function would largely attract citizens critical of Blocher, and rational discourse would not develop in any way. Moreover, the lack of a comment function does not necessarily prevent the blog from indirectly contributing to political deliberation if other safeguards are taken to make the information contained relevant from the point of view of deliberative democracy.

Fifth, the concerns voiced towards the Internet in general as a means of political communication do of course also apply to blogs. In particular, general admission for all of

the public as a precondition of the public sphere is currently not completely realized in light of the digital divide.

In conclusion, both the Internet in general and politicians' blogs in particular may contribute considerably to political deliberation. Blogs may be especially effective in light of their ability to facilitate asynchronous communication and allow the constant participation of the politician. One should, however, not expect that the normative ideal will be realized as such, even if a politician is generally willing to enter into such discourse. The discussion in Leuenberger's blog arguably does fulfill a number of criteria that have been recognized by scholars: exhibiting two-directional communication; covering topics of shared interest; and being motivated by a mutually shared commitment to rational and focused discourse.⁶⁵ However, the discussions are still dominated by a few individuals, are too amorphous, fragmented, and specific, and lack visible impacts—therefore falling short of the Habermasian ideal of rational accord.

Quality of Voting Decisions

The perceived alienation between politicians and citizens may be alleviated not only through the realization of—or at least the increase of—deliberative democracy, but also through institutions that bring politicians “closer” to the general public. With such an increase in transparency, the accuracy of citizens' voting decisions may increase, as they may more adequately express their preferences when voting, while the act of voting traditionally is believed to establish the backbone of a democracy's legitimacy.

The Internet in general may serve as a tool to improve the level of communication on the part of politicians with common citizens as opposed to political elites, mass media and organized components of the civil society. Blogs in particular may contribute to such endeavours by illuminating politicians' opinions on certain political issues, as outlined above in connection with deliberative democracy, but also through the “human touch”-components of communication: They give the politician the opportunity to shed light on his or her personal qualities and daily work, thereby rendering the politician more comprehensible and plausible as a personality. In this regard, it has been argued that blogging is not just a self-publishing phenomenon, but also a form of self-expression or confession that takes out the

barriers between the public and private sector.⁶⁶ Moreover, the social culture developed in the blogosphere may also serve as a tool to at least partly overcome hierarchical differences—which can be seen, for example, in the colloquial style of communication that takes place on Leuenberger's blog. Altogether, the blogging politician is likely to be perceived as a more open, citizen-friendly and innovative person. Furthermore, especially a video-blog, given the current state of the law (in Switzerland), can potentially serve as a tool to get around legal restrictions on political communication that apply to broadcasts via television. While this aspect of Internet communication seems to indicate that it may serve not only to increase the quality of public perception of the politician, but potentially also to distort it, the characteristics of blogs and the blogosphere arguably provide some check on politician's ability to present an inaccurate or glossed picture of himself or herself:

First, as experiences in other countries have shown, the online community reacts negatively if politicians use the Internet solely or even partially as a platform for classic one-to-many-communication and political advertisement.⁶⁷ As mentioned above, both initiatives examined in this case study are shaped by institutional settings that prevent them from being perceived mainly as such advertisements. These settings may, therefore, not only serve as a tool to ensure a potential contribution to deliberative democracy, but may also improve the adequacy of the general public's perception of the politician.

Second and related to the first point, politicians may have difficulties in adapting to the communication habits developed in the blogosphere, as controversies over *ex ante* or *ex post* examination of blog comments have shown. From a more general point of view, it has been argued that “[t]he problem facing politicians who blog is that they are professionally implicated in the very culture that blogging seeks to transcend. Politicians live in a world of certainty and tribal loyalty which is at odds with the blogging ethos of open-mindedness and knowledge-sharing. As long as politicians are expected to be never in doubt and ever faithful to catechismic party messages, their blogging efforts are always likely to look more like simulation than authentic self-expression. However many jokes they tell or safe vulnerabilities they expose, the public will never relax in their company and will be ever suspicious that today's “spontaneous” blog entry was yesterday's faxed “message” from the

party HQ. Blogging politicians are always going to be seen as a little bit like those old Communist apparatchiks who had to sit in the front row at rock concerts and pretend to swing to the beat.”⁶⁸ In other words, blogging politicians should expect to be confronted with a particularly critical audience.

Third, politicians are not free to tell what they like, as they may be held accountable in light of the permanent availability of the information contained in the blog. Thus, citizens can compare the politician’s statements with his deeds on a long-term basis. One has to warn, however, against overly ambitious expectations with respect to the increased accountability of politicians. Politicians will naturally take the permanent availability of the information into account when distributing it on the Internet and will therefore be cautious about the information they make available. It is of little surprise in this regard, that Leuenberger has apparently not been held accountable for statements he published on his blog, nor has any other Swiss politician been held responsible for statements given via the Internet.

To conclude, if a prominent politician is willing to enter communication via a blog, it holds significant potential to increase the quality of his or her public perception and, therefore, also of the citizens’ voting decisions.

CONCLUSION

This case study started with the aim of assessing the contribution of leading politicians’ blogs to democratic processes. In doing so, we relied on anecdotal but substantive evidence of two prominent initiatives that were recently launched in Switzerland—namely, the blog of Federal Councillor Moritz Leuenberger and a video blog in the form of a weekly interview with Christoph Blocher, former Federal Councillor and current vice-president of the Swiss People’s Party. We have to be cautious about broader generalization of our conclusions for two reasons: First, the development of the socio-technological phenomenon of politician blogs has not yet reached a stable state and it is, therefore, not clear whether the characteristics of the current examples of such blogs will prevail in the future—this relates both to the characteristics of the politician’s entries as well as of the discourse potentially allowed within the blog. Second, the subjects of the study were developed in and shaped by the customs of the Swiss democratic and

political system which differ from those found in other countries in several respects. Of particular relevance for the potential consequences of leading politicians’ blogs for democratic processes are Switzerland’s comparatively small population as well as the widespread availability of Internet access and skills. Moreover, communication and discourse between politicians and the general public benefits from the Swiss democratic system of semi-direct democracy and the political custom of concordance—Switzerland’s democracy has even been characterized as the “conversational form of government” par excellence. Against this backdrop, one should be careful about generalizing the Swiss experience. However, the example of Switzerland, a democracy with a comparatively well developed exchange between politicians and citizens, may serve to show the potential contribution of such blogs to democratic processes—even if the actual experience cannot be transferred to other democracies as such. With these caveats in mind, the study’s conclusion is threefold:

First, if prominent politicians choose to start their own blog—why they would do so is, as mentioned above, not the primary subject of this case study—one can expect a potentially significant contribution to the aims of deliberative democracy. Then again, such blogs are a means to provide the general public with additional, mainly personal (rather than institutional) and opinionated information as to current political issues that may reach citizens either directly or by means of a leveraged distribution via mass media; the contribution to potential deliberation is increased if institutional settings (or the politician’s self-restraint) prevent the blog from representing a mere platform for personal advertisement. Furthermore, such deliberation may even take part within the blog itself—and here, the format may create possibilities for online discourse that go beyond those of other online tools such as fora and chats with politicians. Leuenberger’s blog has shown that a blog can indeed facilitate iterative processes of political discourse between an interested audience and the respective politician. Polemical contributions and destructive behaviour was relatively low, which arguably is not only a consequence of pre-moderation of comments (which was fairly limited) but may also have profited from the general perception of high legitimacy which the Swiss democratic system enjoys as well as the high public acceptance of its Federal Councillors. Despite this clear contribution of politicians’ blogs to deliberative democracy, such blogs

are still not likely to fully meet the high normative standards that this concept demands: The preconditions of the public sphere, as identified by theorists of deliberative democracy, are currently not fulfilled. First, digital divides still persist, namely with regard to usage skills, inhibiting general admission to the discussion. Second, actual and, in all probability, potential participation on such blogs as well as public visibility is far too low to render the results of the discourse normatively binding or even convincing for the general public. Third, the institutional settings of blogs pull the citizens to some degree into the role of an audience for the self-presentation of the politician, especially if comments are not allowed; in other words, power relations are not absent in the blog setting, as the ideals of deliberation theory would demand. Fourth, it is currently not revealed through the medium whether and, if so, what influence the discourse has on effective political action: Although discussions are archived online (and transparent in this regard), the extent to which the discourse's results are evaluated and how they are dealt with by the politician in question is generally not made public.

In addition to this contribution to the public sphere and deliberative democracy, politicians' blogs are also likely to be beneficial to democratic processes in yet another way: Both through the distribution of personal and opinionated political information and by their "human touch" components (including a potential dialogue), blogs improve the quality of a politician's public perception and potentially the citizens' voting decisions as well (irrespective of a potential contribution to deliberation).

Against this backdrop, it seems crucial to understand, thirdly, that politicians' blogs serve not as a competitive but a complimentary means to traditional fora of political discourse. Blogs can improve democratic processes in certain regards, where the traditional means of political communication have shortcomings—for example, they potentially allow more people to actively participate in political discourse. On the other hand, there are apparent problems with this form of communication. For example, traditional media can do better with regard to the broad perception of political communication and its orienting function. Limits are present not only with respect to the perception of such communication on the part of citizens, but also the supply of such communication on the part of politicians: Even if blogs are likely to grow in numbers in the

future, it currently seems improbable that every prominent politician would, to some degree, follow the examples of Leuenberger or Blocher, as such communication bears not only potential but also considerable risks from the point of view of the politician—especially increased accountability for statements made on the blog or the possibility of failure to bridge between the socio-cultures of the political sphere and the "blogosphere," risking the alienation of one or even both of them.

Altogether, neither "cyberutopians" nor "cyberpessimists" are likely to be proved right with respect to politicians' blogs: These blogs are clearly more than mere white noise, but we cannot expect these instruments to be used to completely heal the alleged wounds which current democracies suffer from with respect to public perceptions of legitimacy.

ENDNOTES

¹ While political leaders already have access to different channels for the distribution of information, especially via mass media, blogs are a means for less prominent politicians to gain publicity, potential mass media-coverage and, accordingly, potential popularity, which is especially important in times of elections. See Christopher Coenen, *Weblogs als Mittel der Kommunikation zwischen Politik und Bürgern – Neue Chancen für E-Demokratie?* (2005), pp. 3 et seq., p. 12, available at http://www.soz.uni-frankfurt.de/K.G/B5_2005_Coenen.pdf.

² Press Release, Departement für Umwelt, Verkehr, Energie und Kommunikation, Moritz Leuenberger bloggt (March 14, 2007), <http://www.uvek.admin.ch/dokumentation/00474/00492/index.html?lang=de&msg-id=11447>. Leuenberger claims to have been inspired to start his own blog by a friend of his that left Switzerland and uses a blog to keep in touch with his home country. Apparently, the blog Leuenberger refers to is the "Auswandererblog" (an expatriate's blog) by Ruedi Baumann, former president of the Swiss Green Party (<http://auswandererblog.blueblog.ch/>); see Leuenbergers blog entry of April 19, 2007 (<http://moritzleuenberger.blueblog.ch/gesellschaft-demokratie-verantwortung/was-zaehlt.html>).

³ Press Release, Departement für Umwelt, Verkehr, Energie und Kommunikation, Moritz Leuenberger bloggt (March 14, 2007), <http://www.uvek.admin.ch/dokumentation/00474/00492/index.html?lang=de&msg-id=11447>.

⁴ A fact that sometimes has evoked criticism, see, e.g. the comment at: <http://moritzleuenberger.blueblog.ch/medien-und-informationsgesellschaft/in-eigener-sache-bemerkungen-zum-blog.html#comments>.

⁵ Thus, this distribution reflects the distribution of speakers within each of the three linguistic communities in the Swiss population.

⁶ Leuenberger bloggt Blocher souverän ab, *Sonntagszeitung*, 20 September 2007.

⁷ According to Leuenberger: Moritz Leuenberger, *In eigener Sache* (Bemerkungen zum Blog), (June 30, 2008), <http://moritzleuenberger.blueblog.ch/medien-und-informationsgesellschaft/in-eigener-sache-bemerkungen-zum-blog.html>.

⁸ Leuenberger bloggt Blocher souverän ab, *Sonntagszeitung*, 20 September 2007.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Blog posts have so far not been sparked by discussions on other blogs, however, which conforms to Leuenberger's statement that he does not represent a typical blogger since he does not visit many other blogs or engage in discussions conducted on other blogs.

¹¹ The fact that Leuenberger does not see his blog primarily as a means to provide insights or new information concerning the work of his ministry, but to offer his own thoughts and comments on current issues, is revealed also by his answer when asked how he would compare his blog posts to his speeches. Rather than referring to content-related aspects, he mostly refers to the speed of production which is much higher for his blog posts than for his speeches.

¹² This principle refers to the Federal Council as a "collegium" of equals that commonly share ultimate responsibility, rather than a number of ministers with distinct responsibilities.

¹³ For somewhat dated figures in the UK and Germany, see Coenen, *op. cit.*, pp. 14 et seq.

¹⁴ Apparently, discussions within the blog of Margot Wallström, vice-president of the European Commission, was initially shaped by much meta-discussion about the style of discussion which was appropriate in the blog; see Coenen, *op. cit.*, p. 22 et seq.

¹⁵ Moritz Leuenberger, *Der Leuen hinkt* (July 8, 2008), <http://moritzleuenberger.blueblog.ch/diverses/der-leuen-hinkt.html>.

¹⁶ "Liberal" in the traditional sense of *laissez faire*.

¹⁷ Moritz Leuenberger, *In eigener Sache* (Bemerkungen zum Blog), (June 30, 2008), <http://moritzleuenberger.blueblog.ch/medien-und-informationsgesellschaft/in-eigener-sache-bemerkungen-zum-blog.html>.

¹⁸ See Coenen, *op. cit.*, pp. 22 et seq., as to the blog of Wallström.

¹⁹ Sarah Genner, *Politik 2.0 – sind Blogs Motoren oder Bedrohung für die Demokratie?*, Diploma thesis, Zurich 2007, p 77, available at <http://politikblogs.wordpress.com/2007/11/23/die-abschlussarbeit-20-beta/>.

²⁰ See, e.g. Als Interview kaschierte Politwerbung, *Tages Anzeiger*, 18 September 2007.

²¹ Leuenberger bloggt Blocher souverän ab, *Sonntagszeitung*, 20 September 2007.

²² Interview with Moritz Leuenberger, available at: <http://www.uvek.admin.ch/dokumentation/interviews/00349/index.html?lang=de>.

²³ See Lieber Norbert Neining, *Sonntagszeitung*, 23 September 2007.

²⁴ Christoph Blocher über sein TV und die Affäre, *SonntagsBlick*, 16 September 2007.

²⁵ Nur noch wenige zeigen "Blocher-TV," *Tages Anzeiger*, 24 October 2007.

²⁶ Daar dä da?, *SonntagsBlick*, 27 April 2008.

²⁷ Interview with Matthias Ackeret.

²⁸ Press Release, Departement für Umwelt, Verkehr, Energie und Kommunikation, Kein Aufsichtsverfahren in Sachen "Blocher-TV" (Oct. 26, 2007), <http://www.uvek.admin.ch/dokumentation/00474/00492/index.html?lang=de&msg-id=15305>.

²⁹ Ein Fall für den Presserat?, *Tages Anzeiger*, 20 September 2007.

³⁰ Daar dä da?, *SonntagsBlick*, 27 April 2008.

³¹ See, as an example, the interview referring to a TV debate he conducted with his successor, Federal Councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, available at <http://www.teleblocher.ch>.

www.teleblocher.ch.

³² Interview with Matthias Ackeret.

³³ Broadcast via the mass media or directly in the internet.

³⁴ See, for example, Als Interview kaschierte Politwerbung, *Tages Anzeiger*, 18 September 2007.

³⁵ Christoph Blocher über sein TV und die Affäre, *SonntagsBlick*, 16 September 2007.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ <http://cr.blog.sf.tv/p71.html>.

³⁸ Daar dä da?, *SonntagsBlick*, 27 April 2008.

³⁹ As to substance of the legal controversy, one has to distinguish two aspects: First, political campaigning in television is restricted in that political advertisements are forbidden and so is the sponsoring of programs with a political content. The examination by the Agency for Communication exclusively focused on this question and in the end the agency gave green light: Second, according to Swiss telecommunications law, television programs have to be matter-of-fact ("sachgerecht"), and concessionary television stations have to depict the diversity of facts and opinions adequately ("Vielfaltsgebot"). As apparently no complaint has been raised, the competent authority, the Independent Authority for Complaints in Radio and Television Matters ("Unabhängige Beschwerdeinstanz für Radio und Fernsehen," "UBI") has not decided on the legality of the interview series being distributed via regional TV stations.

⁴⁰ Daar dä da?, *SonntagsBlick*, 27 April 2008.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Toni Brunner droht ein Prozess, *St. Galler Tagblatt*, 20 June 2008.

⁴² For an overview of deliberative democracy, see e.g. ITA (Institut für Technikfolgenabschätzung der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften), *Europeans have a Say: Online Debates and Consultations in the EU*, Vienna, 2005.

⁴³ For a somewhat critical assessment, however, see Zizi Papacharissi, *The virtual sphere 2.0 - The internet, the public sphere, and beyond*, in: Andrew Chadwick/Philip N. Howard, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, New York, 2009, pp. 230 et seq.

⁴⁴ As to the increased importance within the setting of a direct democracy, such as Switzerland, see Justin Reedy and Chris Wells, *Information, the internet, and direct democracy*, in: Andrew Chadwick/Philip N. Howard, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, New York, 2009, pp. 168 et seq.

⁴⁵ Given that access to the internet and usage skills are widespread.

⁴⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, 1990, p. 268.

⁴⁷ Coenen, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁴⁸ See, the controversy with Toni Brunner mentioned above in Section 3.2.2.

⁴⁹ <http://moritzleuenberger.blueblog.ch/default/die-co2-abgabe-dreht-sich-immer-noch-in-einer-warteschlaufe.html>.

⁵⁰ Genner, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁵¹ <http://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/Webs/BK/DE/Aktuelles/VideoPodcast/video-podcast.html>.

⁵² Genner, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁵³ Papacharissi, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

⁵⁴ See Papacharissi, op. cit., p. 235.

⁵⁵ For example, Leuenberger perceives a difference between the participants in his blog and the audience at a “physical” meeting in that the participants in online discussions would generally dispose of highly developed online-skills, especially with regard to locating and making use of information available on the internet.

⁵⁶ As compared to the situation elsewhere, such as the EU: See Coenen, op. cit., p. 22 (concerning the (initially) aggressive behavior on Wallström's blog).

⁵⁷ See Papacharissi, op. cit., p. 235.

⁵⁸ Coenen, op. cit., p. 9.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Furthermore, blogs are attractive from the point of view of the politician in that they allow him to tighten the network between his sympathizers and establish an online network of contact persons. See, e.g., Leuenberger's statement that a (heterogenous) online community had developed around his blog (<http://moritzleuenberger.blueblog.ch/p82.html>).

⁶¹ <http://moritzleuenberger.blueblog.ch/medien-und-informationsgesellschaft/ineigener-sache-bemerkungen-zum-blog.html>.

⁶² However, they still bear the potential for conflict between the habits of the blogosphere and those of the political sphere.

⁶³ Coenen, op. cit., p. 23.

⁶⁴ Coenen, op. cit., p. 12.

⁶⁵ Papacharissi, op. cit., p. 235.

⁶⁶ Ross Ferguson & Milica Howell, Political Blogs – Craze or Convention?, p. 14, available at: <http://www.hansard-society.org.uk/blogs/downloads/archive/2007/07/27/political-blogs-craze-or-convention-july-2004.aspx>.

⁶⁷ Matthias Paetzolt, Demokratie “reloaded”? Das demokratische Potential politischer Weblogs in Deutschland, Diploma thesis, 2007, p. 33, available at <http://static.twoday.net/DerGanzNormaleWahnsinn/files/Diplomarbeit-Matthias-Paetzolt.pdf>.

⁶⁸ S. Coleman, Blogs as listening posts rather than soapboxes, in: Ferguson & Howell, op. cit., pp. 27 et seq.

⁶⁹ By former Federal Councillor Kurt Furgler.