

GUIDE TO BLOGGING

By Tom Miller

There are a plethora of technological buzzwords that people with an interest in politics can now expect to come by. Post Obama, this is hardly unexpected, but the sheer volume of them, along with the complimentary misunderstanding, can often be extremely beguiling. One of the most ubiquitous is 'blog', a short word for 'web log'.

The author of this piece is in the blessed position of being a constituency campaigner, as I am sure many readers are. I have found that many in my constituency have difficulty understanding social media such as [facebook](#), utilities such as blogs, and the purposes they can effectively play in winning for Labour. Some of them have suggested to me that it is their age which forms a barrier to understanding how all of this works, which is understandable. At school, (thanks to this fine Labour government) I was taught lots about using computers and IT. Outside of IT lessons, pretty much all of my projects would at the very least be computer typed. As I progressed through University, I found that I was simply unable to empathise with those who never had the benefit of Google, online research tools, or even, yes, Wikipedia.

However, even after considering these things, I still have difficulty in understanding why age has to be such a barrier. Many of the people about whom I write are retirees with time resources verging on the limitless. There are plenty of examples of good blogs written by older people; for example, I would urge you to read Harry Barnes's blog at www.threescoreyearsandten.blogspot.com. He even references his age in the address!

The fact is that blogging is simple, and if your intentions are correct, effective.

What exactly is a blog?

In short, a blog is an open diary, recorded as a web page. Typically a blog allows readers to leave comments on items the blogger writes about. There is some consensus to the effect that this is an essential dividing line between a blog and a general website.

Just as in diaries, many bloggers simply record the events of their day. Others turn to more substantive matters, and cover current affairs, politics, economics, philosophy, or science.

Some bloggers jurgitate gossip and cause mischief. The best bloggers tend to do more than one of the above.

What can I do with one?

Reach people. Running a blog will not get thousands of people to come to your constituency meeting, or vote for your PPC in the upcoming general election. But it might well affect a few.

Quite a few MPs run blogs, [Tom Watson](#), [Tom Harris](#), [Kerry McCarthy](#) and [Paul Flynn](#) being good examples.

For some Parliamentary candidates, a website laid out in a blog format has been the way they have chosen to do things. Here, Putney's [Stuart King](#) and [Chuka Umunna](#) of Streatham provide fine examples. The same applies to local Parties, and even University Labour Clubs, of which [BULS](#) is probably the best blogging example.

In this respect, blogs are great for hooking in people who are already interested, but too lazy to do anything other than search the internet. If Joe/Jane blogs wants to find his/her MP, this makes it easy to do.

What blogging will *not* do is *increase the amount of people* who want to write to the MP *in the first place*. Do not expect armies of inspired and politicised constituents.

Blogging is even more useful to activists than to MPs. Firstly, once you've built some contacts with other bloggers, and you read/write blogs frequently, you will be 'plugged in' to campaigns and events which are starting to roll. You will have a source of political news at your fingertips, and possibly find yourself with knowledge about the wheelie bin policies of councils hundreds of miles away.

More importantly, you'll almost inevitably end up meeting people who are extremely useful for the purposes of getting things done, not to mention friendship. My decision to start a blog a few years ago has ended up with me working for LabourList, I suppose that this can be regarded as a testament to blogs as social tools.

How do I set one up? Is it free?

Easily, and yes.

There are several main providers of free blogging platforms. The main two are [Blogger](#), which is owned by Google, and [Wordpress](#). Other platforms available include [LiveJournal](#), [TypePad](#) and [Vox](#). Some newspapers now have their own [functionality](#). For those who have a web server and a usable URL, [Movable Type](#) software can be installed, which runs blogs directly from your computer directly onto the internet, rather than through a web connection. This will however almost inevitably cost money, and can be difficult to actually do.

Which should I use?

Well, that depends what you want to get out of it. All of the platforms above are useful for politics and can be found among the content at [Bloggers4Labour](#). They all provide the same basic service; the ability to publish articles (or 'posts') to the web.

They do however have different advantages and drawbacks.

Wordpress is what you would use if you wanted to build something that looked very much like a professional website. Chuka Ummuna's blog-style [website](#) for Streatham CLP is a good example of this. It looks good and comes with many useful features as options. The drawback is that it can be difficult to customize to your tastes, though there are a massive range of free to use templates available, most of which are easily found through google. Wordpress also allows users to do nifty things such as build a front page, and takes well to

users choosing their own web address; Wordpress even provide a service whereby they buy a chosen domain name on your behalf! If you don't want to do this, you can still use a standard Wordpress address for free. Helpfully, Wordpress provides [tutorials](#) for beginners.

Blogger, probably the most well known of the platforms, has significant advantages for new users. Many Labour bloggers who now use Wordpress initially started out with Blogger. For a start, you can sign in if you have a Gmail address, so you won't need to register afresh. More substantively, blogger offers a range of easy to use templates, which are extremely adaptable in terms of available features, as well as being simple as pie to lay out. The downside with this is that blogger can have a tendency to experience glitches (normally when new users try to put too much stuff in their blog template, or insert big things into small sidebars). Blogger can also look very generic without customisation, due to the small range of templates bloggers have to start with, and the large number of users. Millions of blogger users do nothing to the appearance of their blog, which ends up with a lot of them looking the same. This makes them less likely to be noticed or remembered by readers.

Blogs hosted on Blogger are given a 'www.xyz.blogspot.com' style web address free of charge, leading many to erroneously call them 'blogspot'.

LiveJournal brings its own internal culture. Users are able to join 'communities' around common interests. Facebook users might find this familiar, as it can be a little like joining a 'group'. However, the social-networking crossover inherent in this has meant that LJ users tend to be younger people. The fact that blogs are effectively diaries, but that these are accessible through communities, means that gossip and examples of bizarre behaviour spread quickly.

These aspects of LiveJournal are considered by many to be a disadvantage. Livejournal also suffers from the problem of abundant basic templates. All of the templates are rather busy, containing 'avatars' (small pictures represent the user) and 'emoticons' (small images displaying the mood of the user). There is limited customisation.

Vox is a relatively new platform, launched in 2006. It is slimmed down and extremely easy to use, but looks as good as Wordpress and the better Blogger hosted blogs. Vox gives users access to fantastic privacy controls that let you decide exactly who would like to be able to read each individual post. This is much more sophisticated than any of the other platforms. Like LiveJournal, Vox allows users user to join communities around shared interests. The interface of the site users log into is heavily concentrated around building a social network, which should be of interest to people seeking to involve themselves in online politics.

The interface of the website is specially attuned to incorporating bits of technology you might find useful, such as YouTube, the photo hosting services [Flickr](#) and [Photobucket](#), and similar sites. Importantly, the sites are customisable, but on the downside, there is a rather annoying menu bar at the top which is a fixture, and, like LiveJournal, intrusive icons.

Though it may seem like the platforms above are very different from each other, they all perform the basic functionality required to run a successful political blog; which you choose to opt for is largely a matter of personal taste.

How to run a blog

Once you've chosen a platform, you will be led through a step-by-step process in setting up your blog, and providing initial customisations. This will be done through the actual website you are signing up to. So will your editing if you choose, though you should be aware that there are various programs available as browser add-ons or as desktop software that allow you to edit you blog if you don't wish to do it directly though, say, www.blogger.com.

In terms of content, there are quite a few tips worth following:

Some blogging tips...

1. Be yourself, but remember that unless anonymous, you're accountable for what you say. People will only be interested if you can show some originality, but at the same time, anything you say will effectively be recorded forever, even if you delete it.
2. Blog about subjects that interest you.
3. *Be patient in building up traffic.* It is quite common for a new blog to have to wait a month before getting a comment. Blogging should be something you enjoy, so don't give up or tail off.
4. Make sure people can actually read your blog! It needs to have a reasonable font size, and contrast which makes type visible. Too many bright colours can be distracting for readers.
5. Join aggregator services such as [Bloggers4Labour](#), as well as less noted aggregation and blog rating services such as [Wikio](#), or [Technoranki](#).
6. Don't libel or slander anyone. For the law, a blog might as well be a newspaper.
7. Post often, but don't feel that you have to post every day.
8. Use a 'feed' such as [RSS](#) or [Atom](#). Make sure that the feed is valid and the dates correct. It also makes sense to provide a link to the feed itself on you page, as this will help people subscribe. [FeedBurner](#) can use your feed to provide email updates to anyone interested.
9. Read blogs. Leave comments. Intelligent ones, where possible!
10. It is best to allow comments. Many blogs are criticised as being 'websites but not blogs' when they do not. Blogging might be a diary on the internet, but it's on the internet for a reason. There are legitimate reasons to not allow comments, such as racism or abusive language, but these can also be solved with a comments policy.

11. Be civil, and stick to netiquette (more on that below).
12. Read widely. If we all only read what we agreed, there would never be any persuasion.
13. Try to blog about things that most other people wouldn't have seen. This means reading widely, and outside of the mainstream media (MSM) where possible.
14. Don't be afraid to write personal posts.
15. Use [Google Blog Search](#), and if you like, [Google Alerts](#).
16. Don't self-promote too obviously! Nobody appreciates off topic comments about how they should visit your blog. Some bloggers regard it as acceptable to ask to exchange links, but others will take offence. In any event, do not be offended by refusal.
17. If you're blogging anonymously, guard your identity; be careful to set up free email addresses, and don't set up your own domain name yourself!
18. If you use someone else's content, or wish to link to it, make sure that you credit the person who runs the blog you saw it on with a 'hat tip' link. If you do link to them, try to actually include some content of your own... say what you think!
19. If you're going to write about politics, remember that nobody objects to a little light relief! Make sure you take part in [memes](#), when they spring up.
20. Make sure you track your progress in terms of who is visiting your blog, and who. [Technorati](#) is useful for finding out who is linking to you. Many blogs enable a feature called 'backlinks' under posts which lets you check this, but trying to keep an eye on this for each of your 1,000 posts would be tiresome. Both [Google Analytics](#) and [Sitemeter](#) are useful for measuring traffic to your blog, and telling who has visited, when, and why (this is also useful for identifying the sources of abusive comments).

Netiquette

As well as bearing in mind the tips above about content, it is also important that a few conventions are obeyed. Just like anywhere else, the internet has unspoken rules and conventions ('[netiquette](#)') which are almost always followed. Good table manners make for satisfying meals. There are some widely recognised rules for bloggers:

1. Act in a courteous and civil fashion, especially in debate.
2. Avoid SHOUTING: keep capitals to a minimum. The same goes for **bold type**.
3. As above, make sure you attribute work and inspirations. It's also a very good idea to check that any materials you replicate are not copyright protected.
4. Keep to comments policies where they exist.

5. If you change a blog post, anyone interested will be able to tell by using Google's 'cache' feature, or even more comprehensively, the [Wayback Machine](#). If you make an important change, it is important to be open, or your decision may be represented as dishonesty.
6. Try to answer comments!
7. Stay away from nasty personal attacks. If you don't like something, politely disagree, or move on and find something you do.
8. If you have accidentally repeated comments, or made an obvious typographical error, apologise.

Technology

One can blog with a minimum of knowledge about web based technology. There are however a couple of features that it's definitely worth understanding.

- **Browsers** - Most people writing and reading blogs will probably use [Mozilla Firefox](#), [Opera](#), [Safari](#) or [Chrome](#). Unlike Internet Explorer, these accurately interpret the HTML code on which the internet is based. This means that blogs look like they are supposed to! Most of the time these browsers are also faster, more secure, and comparatively free of pop-up adverts. They are, of course, free to download.
- **'Feeds': RSS, Atom** - Feeds are a skeleton of the content of some websites, most prominently those laid out in a blog style. It is possible to read blogs simply by reading their 'feed', thus avoiding taking time to load all of the things which make the website look nice. Feeds are generally in either RSS or Atom format, both of which can be viewed from web browsers. Feeds are an example of *dynamic content*; they constantly move and change. It is possible to 'subscribe to them', which essentially means keeping an eye on any changes to their content. In this sense, you can 'subscribe' through the news function of the Windows Vista desktop, [Google reader](#), or through Mozilla Firefox, allowing you to read any new content immediately as the blog updates. Some services such as [FeedBurner](#) use innovative methods of delivery; FeedBurner for example allows users to sign up for email updates based on changing feed content. Feeds are also used for aggregation.
- **Aggregation** - Aggregation is a way of collecting content together in one place as it is published. A quick trip to [Bloggers4Labour](#) provides a good example; see how the posts from different bloggers are brought together in the middle of the page? One can also aggregate news from one source using RSS; witness for example the side of the Compass Youth [blog](#), which aggregates Compass's news feed.
- **Pingbacks** - A 'pingback' is a process whereby pages which link to your blog effectively tell your blog that they have done so.

- **Technorati** - [Technorati](#) is a blog-based search engine that allows bloggers to find out who links to them, and how widely their blog is respected by other bloggers, based on Technorati's 'authority' rating.
- **Google Blog Search** - [Google Blog Search](#) allows users to find out whether any given subject has been blogged about, and exactly where this has taken place. It is also more helpful than normal Google searches for finding blogs in a general sense.
- **Google Alerts** - [This](#) is a way of getting Google to email you whenever a media or blog development on a given subject takes place.
- **Social Bookmarking** – [This](#) allows users to share content which may include your blog through social media platforms such as [Digg](#). [AddThis](#) provides a helpful button to enable this functionality.

Time to start your Labour supporting blog!

You have now read a brief introduction to the platforms available, the best ways to catch and maintain numbers of site visitors, how other net users expect you to act, and a few tips on some useful technology for effective blogging. Hopefully the assimilation of this information has not been too burdensome. Remember, a lot more will be learned through experience. However, with the fundamentals in place, you can't go wrong!

This guide should now have provided you with enough basic information to get you started on your Labour supporting blog. What better time than now?

Grab yourself a platform and get blogging!