

## ***CP Technique No. 37B: Blogging***

### ***The History and Evolution of Blogging***

Say, your 20-year old, adventure-seeking, niece goes on an extended trip through a number of South American countries.

- She is one of those young women who, even as a teenager, made daily notes in her diary about:
  - What was ***happening*** with her, and around her,
  - What she was ***thinking***,
  - But, even, (as teenagers would), what she was also thinking what ***other people*** were thinking, etc.
  - Including, what ***they*** were thinking that ***she*** was thinking . . .
- She not only has been the kind of person who did a lot of “thinking,” she has also always been eager to ***share*** her thinking with her friends. As a result, she did a lot of what we might call “***thinking aloud***.” The way she looked at it, her diary was just one of her many friends whom she wanted to know what was going on in her life and in her mind.

Diaries – for those who kept one – have for centuries been one of the most widely available, and most widely used, vehicles for this kind of “thinking aloud.”

Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and your niece’s South American adventure:

- Posting her diary entries ***on the internet*** – she realized – allows her to ***share*** her notes about her experiences and thoughts with friends and family back home . . . ***as she treks from one Andean village to another***. Wow! ***Any*** of her friends who care to go online and visit her postings can sort-of experience, vicariously, what ***she*** is experiencing . . . almost in “real time,” . . . as it is happening!
- And bingo, ***your niece has become a blogger***.

Just as online bulletin-boards evolved – from notes left on the refrigerator, and other physical on-the-wall bulletin-boards, via electronic bulletin-boards, -- “blogging” has undergone, and is still undergoing, an evolution that takes advantage of the internet’s unequaled communications potential.

- Blogs<sup>1</sup> have morphed from ***one-way*** communications vehicles, i.e. where the blogger broadcasting his/her ideas to many readers on a particular topic chosen by the blogger,

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<sup>1</sup> As to the origin of the word “blog,” the Word Origin Calendar has this to say: “blog – In 1997, using a new technology that allowed him to make daily changes to his home page on the World Wide Web, a journalist named Jorn Barger coined the term ‘weblog,’ on the model of a ship or airplane log. In 1999, Peter Merholz read the word as ‘we blog,’ and abbreviated it as ‘blog’ on his own site. The word has proliferated, just as the thing itself.”

into a vehicle that allows **two-way** communication -- more accurately – many-way communication on that blogger’s topic. Here’s how that works:

- An example of an early blog would be if your niece simply posts her diary entries on a website that allows her many friends back home to read them the moment she posts them. Via these postings, she tells them – among other things -- all about the fruits, vegetables, beautiful Llama sweaters, and other crafts that she sees in the village markets. ***That’s one-to-many one-way communication.***
- Next, she makes provisions on her blog that allow her friends not only to **read** what she has to say, but **to respond** to her postings **with their own comments and questions**. They remind her to take lots of pictures of those markets. Some may beg her to buy them one of those sweaters, provided she can find room in her luggage. ***That’s one-to-many and many-to-one two-way communication.***
- Next, she enhances her blog’s technical capabilities so that her friends’ comments and questions can be seen not only by her, but by **anyone** who logs on. Before you know it, some of her friends post **reactions to each other’s postings** – without necessarily involving your niece in the resulting discussion. One of her friends may take it upon herself to lecture those who asked your niece to bring back Llama sweaters that should come to their senses, reminding them that she is on foot, that she is hiking a great deal, that she has to carry her “luggage” which consists of a back-pack. Another one chimes in, pointing out that even in Peru they have post offices, that she could mail back that sweater, that – although she is hiking – there is no need to carry the stuff she buys all over the Andes. Yet another points out that they should all be grateful that your niece is taking the trouble to post her experiences almost daily, that asking her to buy Llama sweaters for them and mailing them back is an unfair imposition on her. ***Now we have true many-to-many discussion.***

This is pretty much how blogging has evolved. What may have started with an effort on a blogger’s part to share his/her thinking with others, has exploded into a whole new world of communication. And, sure enough they have a word for this new universe of millions of blogs: the “Blogosphere.”

### ***Blogging and You***

The emergence of blogging and the whole blogosphere, in our opinion is something **you cannot afford to ignore** for a couple of reasons:

- 1. If you’re managing an important project, program, or organization in the public arena:
  - You won’t ignore the blogosphere for long because your opponents are going to use it to torpedo whatever you are proposing. And, why is that so predictable?

- ***The blogosphere – combined with internet search engines – can be used to mobilize single-issue political campaigns overnight . . . on virtually *any* issue.***
- 2. If you're managing an important project, program, or organization in the public arena:
  - You need to develop your various publics' informed consent. ***That, in turn, requires you to create – as a minimum – an informed public.***
    - Creating an ***informed*** public – rather than the typical uninformed or misinformed public – requires you to ***communicate like crazy*** with a variety of different PAIs.
    - Things they need to know about you:
      - ***Who*** you are . . . including why your organization was created, when it was created, by whom . . . i.e. They don't know who you are if they don't know why, when, and how your mission was created, how that mission has evolved since then, and how the project at hand fits into that mission.
      - ***Why*** you're doing what you're doing . . . They don't know why you're doing what you're doing if they don't know what the problem is you're trying to prevent or solve, what your theories – i.e. models – are of all the relevant cause-and-effect relationships that are at the root of the problem and the possible alternative solutions.
      - ***How*** you're doing it, and why you are doing it that way . . . They don't know this unless they have a reasonable grasp of the problem-solving and decision-making process that you're using.
      - What you're ***thinking***. And, they don't know what you're thinking if you share only the final results of your thought process and not the ups and downs, false starts, and mistakes that invariably happen in honest problem-solving.
      - What you're thinking ***they're*** thinking . . . Unless they know what you're thinking about their concerns, their worries, their perceptions – even their misperceptions – they're not likely to believe that you really ***do*** care about them.
      - Etc.
    - Things you need to know about them:
      - Who they are.

- What their concerns are.
  - How your proposals will impact them.
  - How they feel about that, and what they think about it.
  - Etc.
- To pull off this kind of communication effectively without an oil sheik's budget requires you to do Citizen Participation that is "outside the box" (outside the box of mutually frustrating meetings and advisory committees).
  - The blogosphere certainly has the potential of facilitating not only two-way but "many-way" communication. Our client city that uses blogging tells of an example where, on a particular project of theirs, only ten PAIs posted comments in response to the city's posting, but *several thousand* people visited the blog! Try pulling off that kind of communication with meetings and advisory committees.

Although it is referred to by some people as being nothing more than "High-tech Gossip," it is real. It is particularly useful – just as gossip is – for people who want to criticize your project; it is a communications tool just made for hell-raisers. We are going to argue that – therefore – ***you can't afford to ignore the blogosphere.*** Although blogging is much easier to use by your opponents than it is by you, you need to consider blogging as one of the tools you may need to use. After all, what you need more than anything else is an informed public. As you can see, blogging has the potential for helping you create that informed public . . . especially when the folks who are working hard to create a misinformed public are using blogs to do so.

One great benefit of creating a blog is that – unlike a face-to-face discussion – it leaves tracks; the entire discussion is there for anyone to see . . . not just for the person who happens to log on a few hours after a posting, but even for the person who logs on a year later! This is not a minor point. If you are serious about ***listening*** to people – i.e. asking yourself every time someone gives you "input:" can I use this piece of information (this input) to improve my proposal – you need some method of recording what-all you have heard, who said it, when they said it, etc. because you will need to ***demonstrate***<sup>2</sup> that you listened by showing what you did with input that was substantive and useful, and what you did with "input" that was not news, or not substantive, or not useable.

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<sup>2</sup> If you simply say: "Thanks for your input; we incorporated it." People tend not to believe that you really listened; you have demonstrate that you listened. The main reason why people don't believe that you listened is because much of the "input" you get isn't input (i.e. news) for you at all. Most "input" is pseudo-input, issues that you already are aware of, issues that you already have considered and incorporated, and – thus – a re-stating of them by people as "input" won't make a difference. And, because them making their comments to you doesn't change what you're proposing demonstrates to them that you are not listening . . . not withstanding your assurances to the contrary . . .

### Threaded discussions

- Like with bulletin boards, each new topic that is introduced on a blog can become a “threaded” discussion – consisting of:
  - *a specific posting* by the blog’s author on a particular topic – or “thread,”
  - comments *on that original posting*,
  - comments *on the comments*,
  - comments on *those* comments, . . . etc.
- A discussion topic, thus, becomes a “thread” in the fabric of the larger discussion.
  - The people who came up with this term couldn’t have picked a more appropriate one. After all, any topic in the fabric of a discussion that involves many people leads to – and, thus, meshes with – countless other topics . . . exactly like a thread in a fabric meshes with – and, thus, immediately leads to – countless other threads. A discussion on any topic, especially a discussion involving many people, before you know it, tends to get off on a tangent . . . unless you keep to the “thread,” i.e. to the topic-at-hand.
  - To allow blog readers to stay with the thread – and, at the same time, give them the option of jumping to any of the many intersecting threads – *hyperlinks* can be placed into the threaded text.
- The beauty of hyperlinks, of course, is that one doesn’t have to stick to the topic-at-hand, one can not only jump to another thread, *one can also start a new thread* and invite people who want to go off on that particular tangent to join that discussion.
  - The Worldwide Web and hyper-linking allow us, in this instance, to have the cake and eat it too: We can go off on any tangent without messing up the original discussion group.

### Asynchronous vs. Synchronous Communication

Face-to-face meetings have their advantages . . . but they sure have a lot of disadvantages. One of the biggest disadvantage is that you have to “think on your feet.” How often have you thought of the *perfect* response – the response you *should* have given – a few hours *after* a face-to-face discussion. Maybe it was with your teen-age son, or with your spouse, . . . your boss, . . . a TV reporter, . . . a potentially affected interest? Well, *that’s the trouble with “synchronous” communication:*

- You’re on the spot; you have to think on your feet. As a result, what you say may not be as constructive as it would have been if you had time to think about it.
- The same is true for the person you’re talking with. What they say on the spot may be something they later on wish they could take back . . .

One of the advantages of blogs is that the conversation is asynchronous; all parties have the opportunity to think before they post a statement. The beauty of the kind of complex conversation blogging makes possible is that people can listen in on an ongoing discussion without participating – if that is what they want to do. The potential -- therefore -- exists, for blogs to be more thoughtful discussions than face-to-face discussions.

- Because the conversation in blogs is “asynchronous,” – *not live* -- it allows those people who feel they have something to contribute to the conversation, to join the conversation *when they're good and ready*. To the degree that people are likely to contribute more to a conversation if they have a chance to *think* before they speak, asynchronous conversations – such as blogs – have the potential to be more substantive and more constructive.

#### Issues to consider before creating a blog for your project

Blogging is a technique you should not rush into – in spite of the fact that blogging has great potential. It also has draw-backs.

For one thing, once created, you have to stay on top of your blog. You'll need to assign an internet-savvy person as the *blog's moderator*. (A client city of ours calls their blog moderator the “blogosphere geek” because there are a lot of highly technical issues to deal with.)

You need to *explain* to the blogosphere your reasons for having a moderated rather than an un-moderated blog; don't just put it out there.

#### Terms of Use

If you create a blog for your project, you'll need to establish “Terms of Use” that anyone who intends to post comments on your blog needs to agree to before you allow them to make a posting.

As with the moderator, you need to explain to your blogosphere why you have put certain criteria into your blog's “Term of Use;” don't just put them out there without justification.

They might include:

- Anonymous postings are out of the question. (Blogs that allow postings where there is no accountability for what is posted get trashed in short order and become useless.)
- Allowing people to post things to the organization's blog without first clearing them by the moderator, therefore, is out of the question. On the other hand, whenever the moderator decides *not* to post a submission, he/she needs to contact the person who submitted the comment and explain what his/her objections are to the proposed posting; if appropriate the moderator can suggest how his/her objections could be satisfied.
- To make people who want to make a posting accountable, they have to identify themselves to the blog moderator with name, address, phone number, e-mail address,

and a personal profile (e.g. retired history teacher, police officer, soldier in Irak, mother of three teen-agers, 55-year old government scientist, etc.) The blog moderator then allows them to pick a nick-name for use on the blog and, thus, allows them to retain their anonymity vis-à-vis other bloggers . . . but not from the moderator.

- Some Terms of Use require people who want to post comments on the blog to make their **personal profile information** accessible to anyone who wants to know what kind of person is behind a particular nick-name . . . but not necessarily their actual **identity**.
- Still other Terms of Use require people to make **their identity** available.
- To decide what policies are most appropriate in the Terms of Use for **your** blog, you need to ask yourself:
  - **What's the purpose of your blog?**
  - What requirements will best **further** that purpose?
  - What requirements would **interfere** with the accomplishment of that purpose? . . . i.e. Don't put constraints into the Terms of Use that are likely to discourage people to post legitimate comments. After all, the blog is probably an attempt on your part to create an informed public . . . not only about what you and your team are doing and thinking but also about **what the various PAIs are thinking**. Discouraging any of your PAIs to post their thoughts – including criticism – is **counterproductive** to creating a truly **informed** public. (Don't get seduced into thinking that the purpose of the blog – or any other CP Technique – is to make you and your project look good because, as you should know, that has nothing to do with consent-building. If making you and your project look good were the purpose, then, discouraging criticism would make sense.)
- Only postings that are reasonably relevant to the subject of the blog . . . i.e. relevant to the project at hand can be posted. This is not always as clear-cut as might appear because proposed projects can have complicated secondary, and even tertiary impacts.
  - The appropriateness of a posting might have to be negotiated with the blog moderator.
- The moderator will **not** allow postings that attack:
  - An individual, a group, a corporation, an institution, an agency, or an official.
- But, the moderator **may** allow postings that attack – within reason:
  - The behaviors, the positions, the actions, or the statements of an individual, a group, a corporation, an institution, an agency, or an official.

- Grammar and style
  - o Most blogosphere moderators take the approach that newspaper editors have historically taken with “Letters to the Editor.”
    - o Newspaper editors normally take the liberty to edit letters submitted by readers for grammar, style, and vocabulary.
    - o People generally have found this not only acceptable, but desirable. Misspelled words, ungrammatically constructed phrases, sentences, and paragraphs tend to interfere-with – rather than contribute to – effective communication. The same attitude can be taken in a blog’s “Terms of Use” . . . for the same reasons. Most blog moderators, however, are on somewhat thinner ice than newspaper editors on this issue.
    - o Here is why:
      - A newspaper, usually, is not a stake-holder – and, therefore, more neutral – on the issues that newspaper readers write letters to the “Letter to the Editor” section.
      - A blogosphere moderator, usually, is a stake-holder – and therefore, not neutral (or at least less neutral) – on the issues (i.e. the threads) the blog is all about.
    - o That is why moderators have to make absolutely sure that they don’t use their “Grammar and Style” editing function to twist people’s proposed postings in a self-serving direction. Provided a moderator is aware of this, and counter-acts the temptation, editing for grammar and style can be done ethically.
- Etiquette / netiquette / politeness:
  - o the moderator needs to consider:
    - o How can he/she be both even-handed and prevent reckless, mean-spirited postings?
    - o How can he/she help people who are truly upset register their frustration and yet be reasonably polite?
    - o Is it OK to allow postings of unsubstantiated claims or assertions?
  - o It’s for dealing with issues – all of which are sure to arise – that the moderator needs the phone numbers and e-mail addresses of bloggers. When an issue of this sort arises, it’s usually necessary – and sufficient – for the moderator to discuss his/her reservations about a particular posting.

Here’s an interesting observation – and piece of advice – from a blogosphere geek.

- He told us of a case where a person wanted to post a particular comment on the blog for a major project the city in question was proposing. There was a lot of controversy around the project; the city had a number of strongly opposed PAIs. In fact, the city's project blog was started in self-defense:
  - Opponents were using blogs very successfully in spreading misinformation about the project. The city was left with three choices:
    - 1. Should they ignore the blogs, even though they clearly created a more *un*-informed public?
    - 2. Should they try to respond to the misinformation with *other* CP Techniques, e.g. in the media?
    - 3. Should they try and post corrective information *on the blogs that were spreading the misinformation?*
  - They concluded that the best response was to create their own project-blog, one that would be brutally honest, one that would not sugar-coat the project and its impacts, one where people would discover they could reliably learn the full truth.
- A person proposed a particular comment the – the moderator felt – but not in the least constructive. It was so negative, it verged on being a personal attack.
- It was a borderline case. The moderator consulted with his supervisor, the city's communications director. Both felt that the "Terms of Use" gave them the wherewithal to rule the proposed posting in *or* out, . . . *truly a borderline case.*
- And, because the comment the person proposed to post to the blog *was* unnecessarily negative, the moderator and his supervisor used their discretion and ruled it out.
- But, and here is the interesting part, *the moderator and his supervisor decided – with the benefit of hindsight – that they had made a mistake, that they had not been entirely fair*, that in making this judgment call, they should have tipped in favor of this particular opponent rather than in favor of the city.
- They say that, with the benefit of hindsight, they wish that the posting in question – the one that they excluded – *would* be part of the blog. In spite of the fact that, at the time, it struck them as unnecessarily negative, what the person was trying to post *really should have been part of the blog* . . . people really *were* saying the kinds of things the proposed posting was saying. Seeing the larger picture of the project, its issues, and the blog's role in letting people see all the angles and issues – they felt – really *would have benefited from that negative posting as part of the picture*; it actually would have *enhanced* the city's credibility!
- Here is why:

- As the project was moving along, and as the various consent-building efforts were beginning to bear fruit, that same person was posting very constructive comments about the project and the people managing it.
- While that's gratifying for a team that's systematically working on developing its public's informed consent . . . it would have been great to let all those people who visit the blog -- but who know only what's on the blog -- to realize just how far that individual had moved: from a very negative position to a very positive position! People in their blogosphere did not realize the very same person who felt compelled to attack the project at the beginning of his involvement had – by becoming involved – come to the conclusion:
  - 1. There really *is* a serious problem, one that just has to be addressed.
  - 2. The city is *the right entity* to address it; that, in fact, it would be irresponsible if the city did not tackle it.
  - 3. That the city is going about it in a way that's *reasonable, sensible, and responsible*.
  - 4. That the city really *does* listen, that it *does* care, . . . even though it is *not* doing what he – originally – had proposed in his “input.”
- The lesson for moderators – this blogosphere moderator and his communications director say – is the following:
  - **1. Don't** use the “Terms of Use” to exclude postings that are hostile to your project.
  - **2. You, as moderator, have to live by the Terms of Use that you have created every bit as much as the people you make subscribe to them.**
  - **3.** If a proposed post meets the “Terms of Use,” post it. Period! . . . When in doubt, tip in favor of the person trying to post the comment.
  - Don't put criteria into the “Terms of Use” that would make you bristle if someone tried to impose them on you.

#### Professionalism of the Blogosphere moderator

Moderators have to exercise judgment both on the “relevance” issue and on the “attacking a PAI” versus “attacking a PAIs' behavior, action, position, etc.”

Some materials are clearly within the guidelines; others are clearly outside. But, there is a large gray area where moderators have to exercise their judgment. Although blog-moderating is a

little new for being called a “profession,” it promises to turn into an honest-to-goodness profession<sup>3</sup> because of the judgment that has to be used.

It is only human for moderators to be tempted to use “Terms of Use” criteria to block postings that they disagree with, or that embarrass the blog sponsor, the project at hand, or the team of professionals and public officials working on it. Professional blog moderators *profess* to be dedicated to creating a truly informed public and – therefore -- *not* to give in to that temptation!

### The Blog as a CP Technique

Because the blogosphere holds tremendous potential for inexpensive, yet effective, two-way communication – in fact, “many-way” communication – there is the danger that organizations will rush into it without enough forethought.

Remember the following core truths about public involvement:

- The most common serious error public agencies make in public involvement is to select the *tools* of public involvement before they have clarified the *objectives* of that involvement. Another way to explain this error:
  - People decide *how* they’re going to involve the public before they have figured out *whom* they need to involve and *why* they need to involve them.
  - Lesson: Don’t do that!
- Another fact: Virtually every CP Technique – i.e. public involvement tool – turns out to require much more effort if it’s going to be done well, than was initially thought.
  - Lesson: Don’t rush into *any* CP Technique. Instead, *rigorously examine your CP Needs, and then rummage through your tool-box to explore what the most appropriate CP Technique – or combination of techniques – are for your specific circumstances*

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<sup>3</sup> Real professions (such as medical doctors, nurses, referees, civil engineers, attorneys, architects, etc.) have issues of “professional ethics”. Professional ethics have to do with society’s expectations of behavior of people who “profess” to belong to a given “profession.” And, sure enough, a couple of “ethics” issues *are* being raised about what the blogosphere society (read: anybody with access to the internet) expects from blog moderators. They appear to include:

- *Even-handedness*: Moderators *must be open to* postings that are critical of the blog’s authors and not just to “friendly” postings.
- *Living by the Terms of Use*: Moderators should use *only* the criteria that are listed – and justified – in the Terms of Use, they must not use any additional – i.e. hidden, unlisted -- criteria for excluding materials except the ones listed in the Terms of Use.

