
Articles

Political blogs on Fiji: A ‘cybernet democracy’ case study

ABSTRACT

Political blogging in politically unstable and repressive countries has been seen as a form of cybernet democracy. This research article examines this claim in post-coup Fiji in the wake of the 2006 military takeover, details the author’s experiences with blogging, comments on the Fiji blogosphere in a climate of conflict, and attempts an analysis of the overall pro and anti-government blog landscape that involves more than 70 political blogs. Unlike earlier published research on Fiji blogs, it is an ‘insider’ view, written by an academic who is also a blog publisher—publishing *Fiji As It Was, Is and Can Be (FAIW)*

Keywords: blogging, censorship, conflict reporting, cybernet democracy, Fiji coups, freedom of expression

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INTERNET PENETRATION’—by websites, emails, satellite phones, mobile phones and text messages—has occurred in a number of politically disturbed countries, and was used by dissident groups in Serbia in 1999 and later in Burma, Iran, the Philippines, and Ukraine. In a more democratic setting, it was also used during Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008. But information *specific* to blogs is limited and unhelpful in assessing their value as instruments of democracy in countries undergoing political instability or turmoil like Fiji. Political blogging is too recent to have generated a sufficient and reliable literature.

On Fiji, Sophie Foster (2007) and Hannah Harborow (2006) have written descriptive accounts of Fiji blogging in the period immediately following the

2006 coup (2006-2007). Both authors, one an associate editor of *The Fiji Times*, the other a Suva-based human rights advocate, saw blogs as expressions of democracy in the face of censorship and repression by Fiji's military-led government. Whether this is an appropriate description depends, of course, on how one defines democracy in Fiji. One further commentator in this early period was Chris Hammond-Thrasher, a Canadian IT specialist working at the University of the South Pacific in Suva. He was less convinced Fiji's anti-government blogs were pro-democracy. On one blog, *Why Fiji is Crying*, he wrote: 'The result of these posts on *WFC* is a heady mix of uttering threats, inciting violence against innocent civilians, hate crime, and quite frankly, terrorism.' (Hammond-Thrasher, 2007).

Ongoing and more recent *commentaries* on blogging, censorship and media freedom have been published online by University of the South Pacific journalism academic Shailendra Singh (eg., Singh, 2010).

Fiji's political blogosphere is a place of secrets. Most blogs do not reveal the identity of the publishers, authors or readers. Those commenting on postings are anonymous or use pseudonyms, and some do not comment because they are afraid of detection, especially, I would surmise, if they are using an internet café or an office computer. For many blog sites, the researcher does not even know whether their publishers are located in Fiji or overseas, and too often there is no way of checking the reliability of sources or postings. Rumour and speculation abound, most particularly on Fiji's anti-government blogs. This is often wrong. A link to Fiji's 72 known political blogs is provided later in the article.

All that can be attempted here, therefore, is to discuss something about this author's own blogging experiences and the characteristics of Fiji blogs; offer tentative ideas on the likely influence of blogs on Fiji's political present and future, and offer the author's opinions on the relationship between blogs and democracy. Unlike earlier published research on Fiji blogs, it is an 'insider' view, written by a blog publisher, with all the up and downsides implicit in this involvement.

My blog experiences

This author started a blog because of deep concern about uninformed, inaccurate and biased commentary in the mainstream media, in both New Zealand and Fiji. The blog content evolved from its early focus on media

bias, to the present greater weight on comment and analysis. In the last month or so the blog has eased discussion away from what was and is in Fiji, towards what needs to be done to ensure positive outcomes.

From the first posting in early January 2009, it seemed important to inform readers of the political stance of each posting, hence the use of +, - and o symbols placed before headings. Many postings also included background material to allow readers to place single events in their wider context, and the sources of most postings are referenced by hyper links within postings. In these respects—disclosure of political leanings, inclusion of background material, and reference to sources—this author's blog differs from most others. The identity of the publisher is also known.

The obvious attraction of blogs is that they can be set up relatively easily and at no cost by anyone with little more than basic computer skills. There can be little doubt this is a factor in producing the extraordinarily large number of Fiji blogs. All readers need is access to a networked computer, with some degree of protection from government intrusions.

What initiates may not realise, however, is just how many hours are needed to refine, and continually improve the blog appearance to make it more attractive to readers; to market it to potential readers, to research items, and write them up for publication. In this case, blogging has been an immense learning curve that typically involves at least five hours work a day, and often much more. Many blogs are probably short-lived or publish infrequently because of the time involved. Only those driven by a sense of mission or managed by an editorial team that shares the work survive the long haul. And the Fiji crisis is the long haul, and is likely to continue until elections in 2014.

This paper does not explore technical and marketing aspects of blogging except to say that, after blog content and 'atmosphere', they are very relevant to any consideration of their effectiveness because they influence who and how many people visit a blog site, what comments they leave behind, and how they use this information later.

Two blogs compared

It is instructive to compare two blogs—*Coupfourpointfive (Coup4.5)* coup-fourpointfive.blogspot.com and this author's blog, *Fiji As It Was, Is and Can Be (FAIW)* —on which comparable data can be obtained. *FAIW* crosbiew.blogspot.com is mildly pro-government. Its primary sources, to which

comment and interpretation are added, are the mainstream media and other blogs. One or more posting is made nearly every day. The blog strives for fairness and balance but many posts reflect a personal assessment of the political situation.

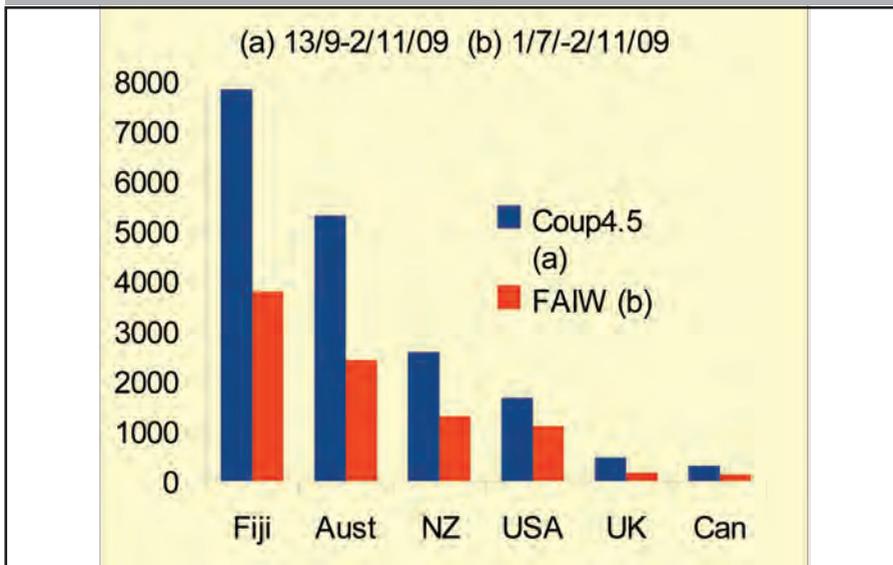
By comparison, *Coup4.5* (originally Auckland-based and now based in Fiji), a far more popular blog than *FAIW* with which a number of comparisons will be made, is anti-government. It is published by a team that includes journalists. Its main sources are from ‘reliable sources’ inside Fiji; many postings concern rumour and speculation about well-known individuals; it has far more readers and fewer postings than *FAIW*¹, and much reliance is placed on headings and an introductory sentence to convey intent. Most postings are reasonably argued.

Blog technology provides their editors with information on the number of new and old readers, their country location, the number and recency of visitor ‘hits’ and the number of new and old hits for each day. It is also possible to know which postings readers view or merely click and pass over, but this technology has not been found very reliable with *FAIW*.

The following graphs quantify some elements of the two blogs:

Coup4.5 has a far larger readership, with a staggering 60,000 visitors in

Graph 1: Reader locations: Numbers, 2009

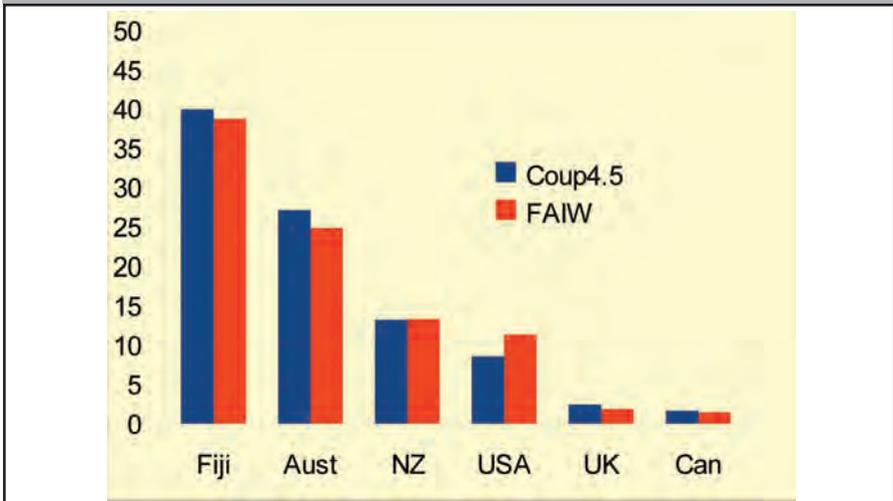


November 2009 compared with *FLAW*'s 30,000 for a longer period, but the geographic distributions were broadly similar (Graphs 1 and 2). Nearly 40 percent of readers lived in Fiji; 27 to 24 percent in Australia, 13 percent in New Zealand, 10 and 13 percent in North America, and about 2 percent each in Britain. In the Pacific Islands, numbers were generally very small and visits infrequent (Graph 3). Vanuatu was a clear leader for *Coup4.5*, probably due to the presence of USP's Emalus Campus and Fiji lawyers including Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi. The prominence of Tuvalu in *FAIW* was similarly influenced: a former USP colleague lives there. These small and idiosyncratic numbers suggest blogs had no influence on Pacific Island Forum (PIF) outcomes during 2009 when Fiji was suspended from Forum membership. *Coup4.5* had no 'visit' from Niue when that country held the Forum chairmanship, and *FAIW* had only one solitary visit, despite the Premier being a personal friend.

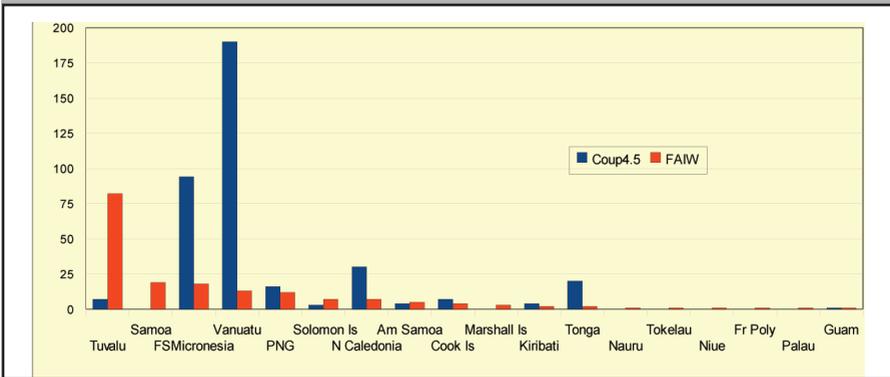
Table 1 and Graphs 4-5 show the number of visitors for each day of the week. This information is important because it tells blog editors when best to publish their more important posts and how visits respond to new political events. It gives an indication of the use of office compared with home computers.² On the other hand, this information also can inform government on when best to block blog access.

Wide daily fluctuations are seen on the three blogs for a nine week period from September to November 2009 (Graph 4). The averaged most popular

Graph 2: Reader locations: Percentages



Graph 3: Blog comparisons: Number of Pacific Island visitors



days were Monday to Wednesday and the least popular Friday through Sunday (Table 1).

Graph 5, showing daily access for a typical week, confirms this general pattern and hints at the drop in users starting on the second Wednesday (25 November 2009) when government blocking recommenced. Surprisingly, most earlier blocks came at the weekends when fewer people would be accessing their work—but not their home computers. Subtracting ‘new visitors’ from ‘views’ gives some idea of casual or first visitors compared with regular visitors.

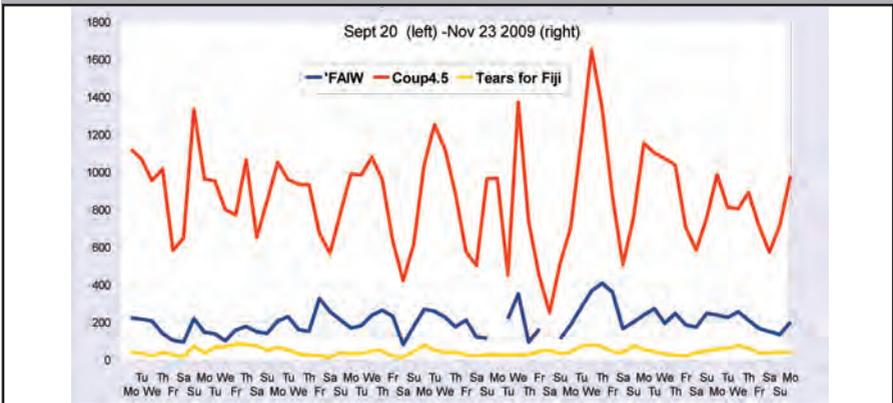
How FAIW readers select which blogs to read

How people perceive and select which blogs to read is instructive because it

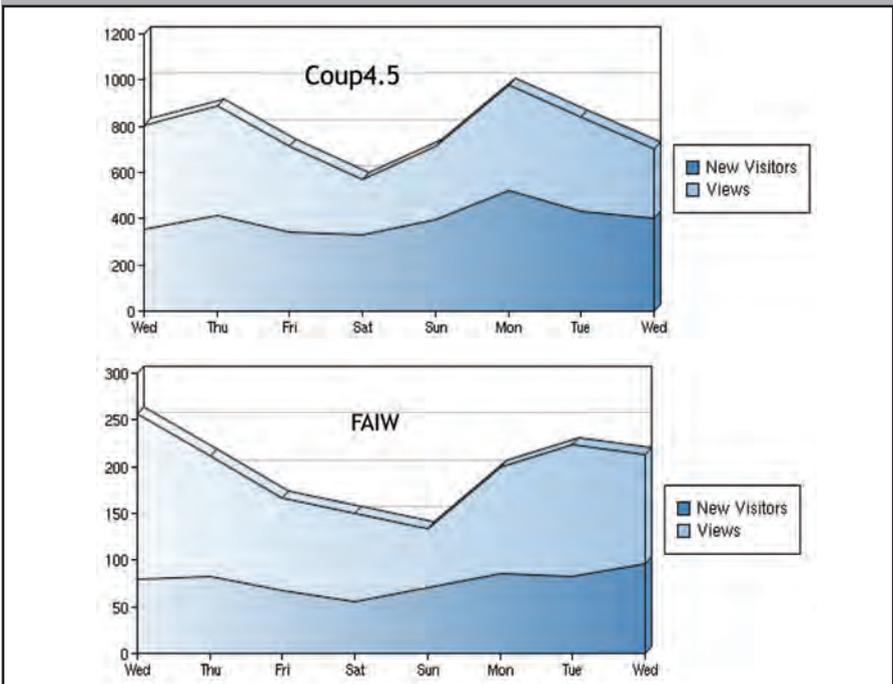
Table 1: Daily and new blog visits (Monday - Friday), 2009

	Coup 4.5			FAIW		
	Total visits	Rank	New visits %	Total visits	Rank	New visits %
Monday	8970	2	54.6	4300	1	44
Tuesday	8741	4	54.8	4166	4	47.8
Wednesday	9782	1	51.7	4233	3	47.7
Thursday	8856	3	52.9	4268	2	46.6
Friday	5967	6	53.8	3700	5	45.1
Saturday	7649	5	56.8	2896	7	47.3
Sunday	4705	7	60.4	3542	6	47
Average			55	3872		46.5

Graph 4: Daily visits: Three blogs



Graph 5: Daily visits: 18-25 November, 2009



reveals something about them and their possible influence on political outcomes. Readers were asked several questions to help with this paper. While far from representative, most people commenting were from Fiji, and their

responses provide useful insights. This is what some wrote. Contrary configurations are, of course, likely for those reading the more extreme anti-government blogs.

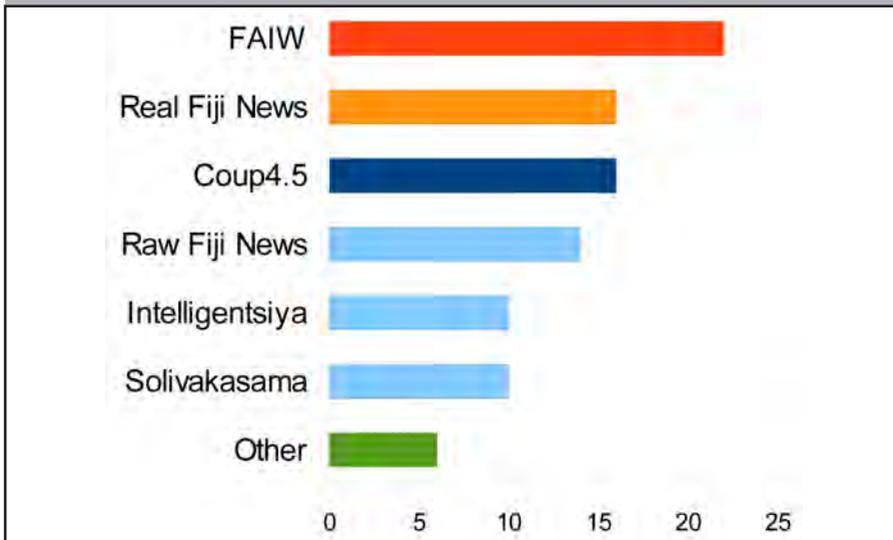
I very rarely go to other blogs because as you have correctly deduced, one tends to remain with those who show some measure of thought process along the lines of own's own thinking. Brief dashes are made now and then into extreme anti-government blogs ...

I read all the usual: *Coupfourpointfive*, *Michael Field*, *Real Fiji News* (when it was regular). I used to regularly read *Raw News Fiji* but found it 'too hateful'. *FijiGirl* has a list of blogs on her site and I often consulted that list.

I only access you, *Café Pacific* and *Coup4.5* generally. You and David Robie [*Café Pacific*] are sane and reasoned, *Coup4.5* is moderately sane but still intolerant of dissenting comment and prone to exaggeration or outright lies.

Graph 6 showed most people read across the political blog spectrum, but mainly more from the pro-coup, neutral and moderate blogs. *Raw Fiji News* and *Intelligentsiya* answers probably included 'brief dashes'. These results support the view that people mainly read the blogs with which they agree.³ In other words, in this context, they do little for democratic discourse.

Graph 6: Blogs read reasonably regularly, 2009

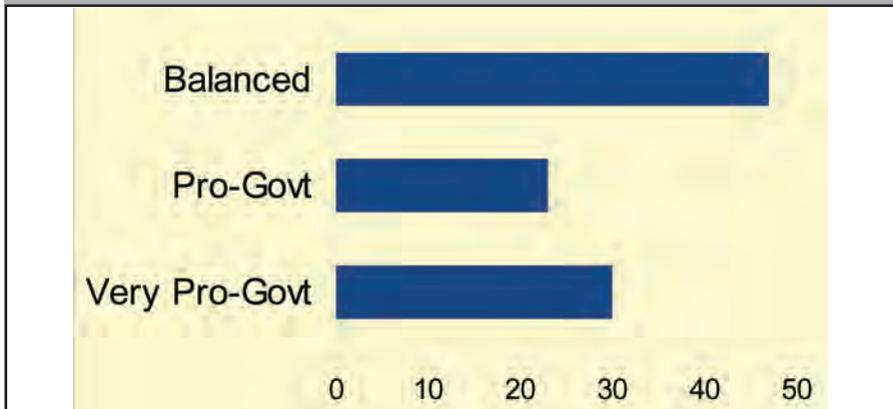


Graph 7 records how readers saw the *FAIW* blog. Most saw it as balanced or pro-government but a disappointing 30 percent thought it very pro-government. Both results added support to other information that most of the readers who commented were not unrepresentative of Fiji's political middle ground. They may not be happy with the Bainimarama coup but for the moment they were prepared to give the regime the benefit of the doubt.

Do blogs influence opinions?

The next graph (Graph 8) is of special interest to the supposed role of blogs in democratic engagement. It asked whether the *FAIW* blog had influenced their opinions. The general answer was no, or only a little. The 'Yes. More anti-government' responses were probably from more 'brief dashes'. The

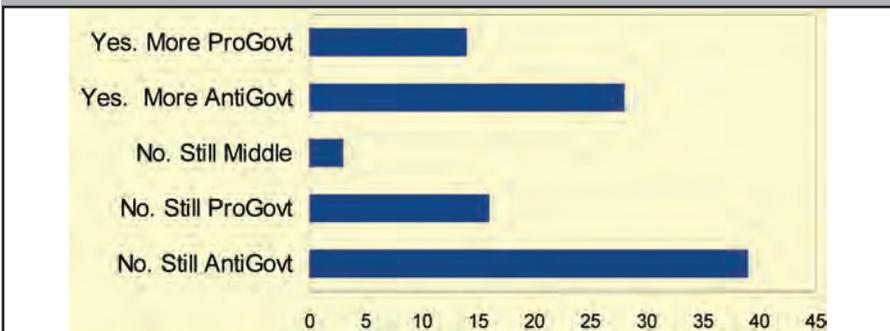
Graph 7: Description of FAIW (%)



result adds further weight to the contention that most people read views that support their own, which is not a very reassuring conclusion for democracy or for dialogue across the current political divide.

A further question sought to discover why so few readers commented on posts. Most thought this was due to readers agreeing with the postings, having nothing to add, or thinking their comments would make no difference. A small number did not comment because they disagreed. None of these answers support the view that blogs foster discussion, and if they do not it is hard to argue they are effective instruments of democracy. A few thought people were afraid of detection, although this number may have increased since.⁴

Graph 8: Has FAIW changed your opinions? (%)



This leads to my first point and first question. Most blog readers read those blogs that most convey their own opinions, venturing only occasionally across what might be called ‘the party divide’ to see how extreme and unreasonable their opponents are.

If this is the case, with so many postings on the anti-government blogs unsubstantiated and libellous in a normal media situation; with almost all blog comments made anonymously, with so many rude and personal comments, and the rare contrary comment denounced so vigorously with no attempt at reason or persuasion, it is difficult to see how mental horizons can be expanded, or dialogue re-introduced in Fiji, or democracy as being well served. For most readers, therefore, blogs merely confirm their pre-dispositions. Anti-government blogs give succour to their supporters, provide some sense of power in a frustratingly powerless situation, and allow expression of pent up feeling and hidden prejudices.

This is not saying such approaches are unreasonable in the circumstances. Government errors and insensitivity have nurtured them. But this is not helping the Fiji situation, or healing the many wounds that need to be healed before national reconciliation and democracy, of the old or new variety, can be restored or introduced. Fiji is a small country. All of the key players know each other at home and abroad, and many on both sides are related to each other. Only reasoned dissent, of which there is little, can help democracy.

Political polling on blogs

In a further attempt to solicit readers’ opinions on a selection of political issues, a companion blog to FAIW was launched, *Public Polls on Fiji’s*

Political Situation www.pffps.blogspot.com and ran eight polls (Table 2) with provision for comments on why pollsters had voted the way they did. The response was disappointing. Few voted and even fewer made comments, but interestingly the results corresponded closely to similar questions polled earlier by the Fiji news website *Fiji Live* www.fijilive.com. This suggests that reasonably indicative political polling may be possible in some politically unstable situations, if more people were convinced their anonymity is assured. Most pollsters lived in Fiji but Indo-Fijians were very under-represented and ethnic Others over-represented. The results shown in Table 2 speak for themselves.

Most respondents supported electoral change, the abolition of the Alternative vote; the abolition (or reduction) of communal seats; equal sized electorates and the principles of the People’s Charter, the President’s Political Dialogue Forum, and the inclusion of the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) and Fiji Labour Party in the Forum. Most disagreed with a short-lived attempt to impose Christianity (New Methodism) on the multi-religious police force.

The Fiji blogosphere

In January 2010 there were 72 blogs about Fiji, of which 42 were active or possibly active. Fifty-three were anti—19 extremely so; 15 were more or less ‘neutral’, and three were pro-government. Only David Robie’s *Café Pacific*

Table 2: Answers on political polls (%)

	Yes	No	Undecided
Need for electoral reform	89.9	8.2	2
Race-based communal electorates	4.6 / 27.3 *	59	9.1
Equal sized electorates	81.5	11.1	7.4
Alternate vote	2.4	90.5	7.1
Agree principles People's Charter	84	12	4
Presidential Political Dialogue Forum	85.2	14.8	-
Invite SDL/FLP to PPDF	70.8	16.7	12.5
Agree police Christian parades	4.2	87.5	8.3

Note: * 4.6% Retain; 27.3% Reduce. Respondent ethnicity %: Fijian 33, Indo-Fijian 11, Rotuman 6, Other 50. Location %: Fiji 63, Australia/NZ 28, Other Pacific2, Elsewhere 7.

was truly neutral (Table 3).⁵ Seven were probably located in Fiji. Of these, one was pro-government; four had ceased publication, and two were anti-government blogs which were still active. Some blogs contained a mix of social, community and political opinion, but one of these, *Matavuvale*, had a large dedicated anti-government political page, in which at least one former SDL politician made regular comments. Three anti-government blogs were largely composed of cleverly altered photos and cartoons.⁶ In addition, both pro and anti-government comment is to be found on Twitter, Facebook and other internet social networks that can also serve as forward and backward links to and from blogs.⁷

A major purpose of the pro-government blogs seems to be to attack the anti-government blogs. Anti-government blogs claim they are produced by members of the military. The most active, *Fiji Freedom Fighters*, was first published in July 2009 (soon after a similar blog, *IGFiji*, stopped publication because of dissatisfaction with the government). It claims to represent the 'Common People'. *Loyal Fijian* claims to be 'by Fijians for Fijians' and not associated with any organisation. *FFF* provides political links to *Fiji Today*, a 'reasonable' anti-government blog and *FAIW*, a pro- to neutral blog.

All the anti-government blogs demand early elections and a 'return to democracy' (although some concede pre-coup democracy was not perfect). For some, the demand for elections is based on the illegality of the government (most especially since the Abrogation of the 1997 Constitution in June 2009). For others, the abuse of human rights and restrictions on the media seem to take precedence. These latter blogs are generally well reasoned, if one accepts their initial premise, and the impression is they involve people of all races.

For the overwhelming majority of anti-government blogs, however, the bloggers would appear to be ethnic Fijians concerned with Bainimarama's assumed assault on ethnic Fijian rights and culture, and his very definite attack on ethnic patronage and privilege. Religion and racism are common elements. These tend to be the more angry blogs, where threats and personal abuse, often in Fijian, are commonly made by readers commenting on posts. *Michael Field's* blog shares some of these characteristics but it is more anti-Bainimarama than anti-anything else.

No anti-government blog has anything positive to say about the Bainimarama government and none has any suggestions on how to move 'Fiji forward' other than the call for elections and the lifting of the Public

Table 3: Tentative Blog Categories, 2009 (n=72)

1. Pro	2. Pro to Neutral	3. Neutral	4. Neutral to Anti	5. Anti	6. Very Anti
4	3	1	11	34	19
Real Fiji News	Stuck in Fiji Mud	Cafe Pacific	Coupfourpointfive	[Sample]	Intelligensiya
FijiFreedomFighters	Fiji As It Was Is and Can Be		FijiCoup	Fiji Today	Solivakasamablog
IGFiji (x)	Loyal Fijian		VictorLal	LuveiViti	Michael Field
WhyFijiisCryingNot (x)			GlobalVoicesOnline	Msvakaivosavosa	DiscombobulatedBubu
			FijiToday	FijiCoup2006	FijiDemocracyMovement
			Yellowbucket	PacificFreedomForum	Na Dina (Fiji Truth)
			WhaleOil.Gotcha	FijiDemocracyNow	RawFijiNews
			FijiBoard of Exiles?	IllegalCoup2006	FijiGirl
				CorruptionFighterFiji	SolivakasamaWortwide
			Mainly social	FijiNews	TearsforFiji
			Babasiga	Solivakasama	TeeJayforaFreeFiji
			WotNews	RealFijianNews	ThingsImThinkinBout
			FijiVoices	HydenCreek	Party social/community
				TredesAbuse	Matavuvale
				JokesOnTheJunta (x)	No longer published
				FijiUnUncensored (x)	FijiMurderingSoldiers (x)
				FijiNewsUncensored	FreeMyFiji?
				FijiBlogDump	ResistFranksCoup (x)
					FijiShameList (x)
					WhyFijiisCrying
					Itaukei (x)

Note: x = ceased publication

Emergency Regulations. Most seem to relish Fiji's economic difficulties. They are not places for discussion and debate.

Several anti-government blogs have been used to publicise or organise protests in Fiji in the events surrounding the cancellation of the Methodist Church's annual conference, when some wrote of direct confrontation with the military, and at other times advocated attacks on tourists.⁸ In Australia, former Suva lawyer Tui Savu uses his *Fiji Democracy Now* blog to organise marches and public meetings, and calls to the Australian government to impose economic sanctions.

Meetings and addresses by anti-government speakers have also been organised in New Zealand on *Luvei Viti's* blog and *Fiji Coup 2006*. While such actions may be expressions of democracy, they are occasional; mostly from overseas blogs with demands addressed to overseas governments. A far greater use is made of these blogs as places to vent frustration, helplessness, and anger, with like-minded people. In the absence of open public debate and discussion in Fiji, and with no political letters to editors, the blog has become the only avenue available to express such feeling. Whether this psychological outlet is a vehicle of democracy is yet to be seen.

A common feature of most blogs is that they provide internet links to other blogs, but almost always only to those of similar persuasions. Considered graphically, there is an 'inner circle' of regular blogs with links to each others, and an 'outer circle' with less frequent posts but with links to the 'inner circle' blogs. This characteristic adds further support to my claim that most bloggers and their readers only want to read views that correspond with their own. Links on FAIW to anti-government blogs were removed because the blogs, or comments on the blogs, too often contained foul language and personal insults.

***FAIW* readers' perceptions of some blogs**

One reader described *FAIW* as 'read by nice people perplexed by events in Fiji but perhaps prepared to give the regime a go so long as it meets its promise to deliver a multiracial future'. *Coup4.5* was described by the same reader as run by 'moderate anti-coup types who either supported Qarase or can never accept ... an "illegal" regime. [Adding] Not always well serviced given their trusting nature'. Of *Café Pacific*, he praised 'the admirable David Robie's determination to play a straight bat'.

Another reader said: ‘*Raw Fiji News* was once read by most people, especially when [leading media and constitutional lawyer and former journalist] Richard Naidu and the gang at Munro Leys [law firm] were fingered by Frank [Bainimarama] as the instigators. But as the weeks turned into months and into years and whoever runs it erupted in frustration. Now a stream of misinformation and outright incitement to revolution.’ *Solivakasama* editors were described as ‘ostensibly pro-democracy crusaders but with acute grievances against the regime for loss of position and earnings. Now riddled with vitriol and lies and with no credibility whatsoever’. One reader uses it as ‘a litmus test only of extremism but [says] at times there is some useful, scurrilous gossip which does not crop up elsewhere’.

Security, anonymity and censorship

Three questions arise in connection with blog security. Firstly, how anonymous are blog publishers and blog users? Secondly, how effectively can the Fiji government block blog sites? Thirdly, why does government block blogs, and is it in their ‘best interests’ to do so?

The identity of blog publishers and readers can be traced through their internet service provider (ISP) address but only if the provider agrees. Both identities can also, of course, be found if their computers are confiscated and inspected.⁹ But if bloggers and users take reasonable care, the government would need to go to extraordinary lengths to learn their identity. The presumed identification of publishers in 2007 and a rumoured identification in 2010¹⁰ were probably due to human and not cybernet information. Security is a blog reader concern, and perhaps a major reason why relatively few ethnic Fijian and Indo-Fijians comment on *FLAW* postings. Even those living overseas have family in Fiji.

The Fiji government can block access to overseas blog sites, and close Fiji-based blog sites, and it has done so, intermittently, since 2007 but bloggers can also circumvent closures and blockages by a number of strategies, such as opening a new blog (unless the whole domain is blocked); opening a new domain (Blogspot, Wordpress and countless others); social networking on Facebook, etc.; using overseas-based proxy servers, or, as a last expensive resort, by using a satellite phone to overseas-based websites. In other words, government cannot sustain a blockade against ‘undesirable’ blog sites without threatening all internet communication, and this it is unlikely to do.

Government blocks blogs and censors the mainstream media because it sees them as hostile. At this stage of the post-coup cycle it sees contrary or questioning opinion at the best as an unhelpful distraction, and more probably as a rallying point for opposition, as it rushes to complete a massive restructuring programme prior to elections in 2014. Its suspicion is not without cause. During two weeks in November 2009 when blog blocking resumed, there were two bomb threats in Suva, rumours of organised unrest, and one blog site wrote of ‘divine intervention’ that would result in elections *this* year. The result is that the participatory tap is turned off and will only be turned on again when government is assured of the results it seeks. This author is not alone in believing that the government has made a very important tactical error in this regard.

In May 2007, Chris Hammond-Thrasher advanced four reasons why blocking of blogs may harm the government. He thought libellous personal attacks on government personnel were best tackled, openly, in court; ‘tampering with FINTEL, Fiji’s pivotal internet service provider through which all internet traffic flows, would dampen high-tech investment in Fiji.’ (This is now even more important with the global ICT call centre Mindpearl setting up business in Fiji); information warfare theory, where the battle is for minds and legitimacy, showed that ‘one’s own actions can be more damaging than an enemy attack’; and lastly, for reasons mentioned above, blocking blog sites would prove ineffective, and produce negative outcomes (Hammond-Thrasher, 2007a).

At the same time, Hammond-Thrasher warned anti-government bloggers who advocate violence. The lifting of the state of emergency in 2007, he wrote, saw anti-government blogs ‘increasingly threatening the interim regime with violence— often cloaked in racial overtones (that seemed) to have crossed the legal boundary from libel, slander, and defamation into the realm of inciting violence and uttering personal threats.’ If interpreted as terrorism, the US could force US-based Blogspot, Wordpress, Yahoo and others to disclose blogger identities, as in fact Yahoo did for Chinese authorities in 2007.¹¹

In another posting (19 June 2007) , he cites a 2007 report in *Scoop* by NZ journalist Michael Field: ‘A Fiji internet blog has called for attacks on tourists and has provided recipes for making Molotov cocktails and bombs. Fiji’s military, which staged a coup in December, has been trying to close down blogs but one of the oldest, *Why Fiji’s Crying (WFC)*, has survived and in its latest set of postings calls for guerrilla war.’

More recently, several blogs (*Luveiviti*, *Dicombobulatedbubu*, *Realfijinewsxanga*, and *Raw Fiji News*) have published posts or comments that have called for direct and if need be violent action against the Fiji regime. The most explicit was by Oracle on *RawFijiNews*:

The Bible provides evidence that God wreaked death upon the Earth through the floods and through plagues to rid the Earth of those who were exploiting what He provided for all mankind. We need to take our cue from the Bible. Frank and his supporters are usurpers who are inflicting great damage on their fellow countrymen. They need to be executed—that is the only solution to the problem we have.¹²

Hammond-Thrasher’s warning about the government’s loss of legitimacy for blocking blogs is borne out by the following examples of similar comment on *FAIW*, made after the Public Emergency Regulations (PER) were re-imposed in June 2009:

Government has now deliberately embarked on a path that is only likely to cause further rumour-mongering and division in society. As you’ve written several times, dialogue is the only way to stop this country becoming more polarised.

This escalation of the PER doesn’t bode well for the dissemination of the ideas and the goodwill that will be essential in the next few years if the aims of the ‘roadmap’ are to be achieved.

In sum, the general opinion seems to be that blocking blogs heightens frustration, encourages rumour, prevents reasoned discussion, denies the government feedback, alienates the undecided, provides ammunition for the foreign media, and plays into the hands of opponents in Fiji and overseas. The fact that government has had the wherewithal to block blogs for the past three years, and has only done so intermittently, suggests it is not unaware of the negative consequences.

Blog influences

Kylie Anderson (2007, p. 214) wrote on what she called “‘much ado’” about the relationship between the internet and politics, particularly in relation to the areas of internet blogging and e-democracy,’ citing an editorial in *Fiji Daily Post* (2007) that talked about the emergence of ‘our new generation

of liberalised cyber democrats' and their contribution to democratic governance.

Much ado may indeed be an apt choice of words for the influence of blogs depends on who reads them, where these readers are, what is written, and what readers 'do' with what they read.

The evidence accumulated or deduced strongly suggests that the readers' most popular blog is the one that best expresses their own opinions. If this is the case, the influence of blogs like *FAIW* in Fiji will be on the uncommitted, government supporters, those close to the government, and government itself, and there is some evidence to suppose so. Anti-government blogs will have a contrary orientation and influence.

One Fiji reader wrote:

From time to time there is feedback in real time from real people who give a hint of what they have read, what they think of it and who might have posted it. This might be acknowledged or not depending upon the person speaking and where they sit in the perceived Scheme of Things. This is of pre-eminent importance. Because we all choose in one way or another to watch our backs. The Fijian art of *liu muri* is alive and well and all over the place.

The same reader wrote:

All manner of people read blogs, even some very unlikely and exalted ones! It is done to try to gauge public opinion, for light relief from censorship and also, most importantly, as a form of catharsis in a relatively safe place. People known to me include professional people of all kinds, politicians, and ordinary people who want to have an idea of what is being said in cyberspace and where the situation may go next.

Blogs thus seen are one of many communication channels, generally easily accessed, and widely discussed and circulated in Fiji through well-established coconut wireless airwaves.

The intended influence of anti-government blogs in Fiji is bluntly expressed: to bring down the Government, one way or another. The more moderate ones hope; the less moderate write of protest marches, strikes, rebellion in the armed forces, Molotov cocktails, assassination, God's wrath, and revenge. I have no doubt their postings sustain hopes for the government's

overthrow but I fear they do nothing to make the government more willing to engage its opponents in dialogue.

Some blog material was used earlier by the Fiji media but this ceased since media censorship was imposed soon after the Abrogation of the Constitution and the Emergency Regulations in April 2009. Fiji-based blogs ceased to advocate 'disruptions' soon after the cancellation of the Methodist church's annual conference. They apparently had no direct influence on events.

As previously stated, I doubt pro or anti-government blogs have any direct influence in Forum countries. Most blog visits in the US, Canada and the UK will be due to Fiji expatriates and have doubtful influence. The anti-government blogs in Australia and New Zealand keep expatriate communities, especially the ethnic Fijian communities, informed, and in Wellington, Canberra, Sydney and Cairns they have organized meetings for visiting speakers and protests about which both governments would be informed. They also influence the media because, as one of my readers put it rather unkindly, 'journalists have been persuaded by the legal/media/human rights cabal in Suva that the blogs are avenues to the truth'.

FLAW has some support in Australia and New Zealand from former Fiji citizens and residents (one has even written to John Key suggesting he reads it). I know it is read in a number of New Zealand government departments but there is no indication that it has had any influence on policies.

In sum, everything points to the blogs' greatest influence being an indirect one. Blogs alert the printed media, radio and television to rumours and developments in Fiji, of people with some expertise who can be interviewed, and new stories that can be independently developed. No doubt some of these stories influence government and public opinion, but it is doubtful that anything has caused them to change or substantially moderate policies or opinions.¹³ Mind-set on the Fiji situation had set in long before the political blogs became popular. The main contribution of the mainstream media has been to reinforce prior opinions. Independent media outlets such as *Pacific Scoop* and David Robie's blog *CaféPacific* could play a greater role but what this is depends on the influence of their readership.

Finally, do bloggers influence each other? Here the answer must be yes, but mainly within circles of alike blogs. In the case of *FAIW*, this author is influenced more by critical comments on his blog than by personal attacks on other blogs where he has been called, among other things, a 'Pakeha know-all

who should take an IQ test'. Attempts to reason within comments on other blogs have not been successful.

Tools of democracy?

In much of the debate on Fiji Bainimarama has been charged with removing a 'democratically elected government' and in attacking legal, constitutional, traditional, institutional and civic structures that kept this government in power.

More recently it has been conceded that the electoral system was not perfect, the media and judiciary not always impartial, and the government not always without blame. Some of those demanding a 'return to democracy' were not too keen on democracy when it produced electoral outcomes they did not like, and some have been deprived of the benefits they or their relatives enjoyed under the 'old' democracy. Others, the legalists, argue against the forceable removal of government, whatever the cause, even though its undemocratic features could only be removed by force. Still others say there can be no democracy without social justice and this was lacking under the ousted government. *FAIW* is of that persuasion.

Conclusion

This article has sought to avoid a political standpoint but in asking whether Fiji blogs represent cybernet democracy the question cannot be further avoided. Blogs which are racist, elitist, personally insulting, intolerant, negative, full of recriminations and short of ideas on where to go next, cannot be a forces for democracy.¹⁴ Democracy assumes respect for those of different views, equality of opportunity, inclusion, and protection for the underprivileged. A fully developed democracy practises social justice. Bainimarama's government is undemocratic; it does not tolerate opposition, and is not beyond reproach, but it is not racist, it helps the underprivileged, and it has a plan for the future that, if successful, will result in a more truly democratic and just Fiji. The anti-government blogs have no such forward-looking plan: they seek to turn Fiji back to the very imperfect democracy it was.

Erik Larson (2007, p. 214) writing on the media and democracy in Fiji in 2007 claimed the news media could fulfil four democracy-enabling functions: 1) to provide a forum for diverse views; 2) to be a means of informing government of public opinion; 3) to provide a 'news' overview for

the public; and 4) to act as a watchdog on government. To provide a forum, he wrote, the media needed to be ‘neutral and open to a range of contributors’.

Using Larson’s yardstick, blogs at both ends of the political spectrum fail miserably on the first condition, where their contribution could be most useful. As for the second condition, the government knows what its opponents think, and doesn’t want to hear more. On the third condition, the news the anti-government blogs provide is hardly an overview, and the quality has deteriorated since the imposition of the Public Emergency Regulations in June 2009. As for the last condition, their effect is mixed. The best that can be said is that they have helped to keep the Fiji government on its toes. Less flatteringly, they have helped to keep the doors closed to dialogue. Few blogs have come even close to serving these functions.

The pity of all this is that Fiji’s anti-government blogs had—and still have—a huge potential. They could have been vehicles for reasoned complaint and discussion. They could have influenced Government, and helped to resolve the current situation. They could have helped ease international tensions. Instead, the anti-government blogs, hailed by coup opponents as advocates of democracy, are little more than agents of uncritical dissent that at this point in time looks to be leading neither to the imperfect democracy of yesterday nor the promised democracy of tomorrow. Cybernet resistance, yes; cybernet democracy, no way.

Blogs mentioned in the text

(A full list of known blogs is provided in the author’s Fiji directory at: www.mediafire.com/?nmtck3rgork).

Café Pacific	cafepacific.blogspot.com
Coup Four Point Five	coupfourpointfive.blogspot.com
Discombobulatedbubu	discombobulatedbubu.blogspot.com
Fiji As It Was, Is and Can Be	crosbiew.blogspot.com
Fiji Democracy Now	fjidademocracynow.com
Fiji Freedom Fighters	freedomfighters
Fiji Girl	fjigirl.wordpress.com
Intelligentsiya	intelligentsiya.blogspot.com
Luveiviti	luveiviti.blogspot.com
Loyal Fijian	loyalfijian.blogspot.com
Michael Field	michaelfield.org/FijiWatch
Political Polls on Fiji’s Political Situation	ppfps.blogspot.com

RawFijiNews
RealFijianNews
Solivakasama
Why Fiji's Crying

rawfiji.news.wordpress.com
realfijiannews.wordpress.com
solivakasama.wordpress.com
whyfijiscrying.wordpress.com

Notes

1. Contrary to expectations, the number of postings a day had no relationship to the number of daily visits, and it could be that too frequent postings lead to superficial reading.
2. Personal computer ownership in 2004 was 5.19 per 100 population, a low figure compared with developed countries. *IndexMundi*. www.indexmundi.com/fiji/personal-computers.html
3. A later poll, however, conducted in mid-January 2010, and answered by 78 of an estimated 900 blog visitors during the poll period, showed only 45 percent of *FAIW* readers were pro-government while 37 percent were anti-government and 19 percent were undecided. Pollster composition also differed from the earlier poll: 43 percent were Europeans, 23 percent Fijian, 21 percent Indian and 10 percent ethnic Other—Part-Europeans, Rotuman, Chinese, Pacific Islanders, and others. Slightly more than one-third (38 percent) lived in Fiji. The result highlights the danger of drawing conclusions from small poll numbers. But it could actually reflect a 'real' increase in visits by anti-government readers, which could be seen as a favourable development, and/or an actual change in the overall composition of readership.
4. More people are now (January 2010) commenting than three months ago. This could be due to a technical adjustment that allows unimpeded access and instant publication of comments, and the high quality of comments that invites others to comment also. I have only had to delete one comment, for foul language and personal attacks, and several readers have joined me in condemning off-colour commentaries. Those commenting, however, are still mainly pro-government to neutral. Europeans and others not living in Fiji are probably somewhat over-represented.
5. The author's working blog directory is at: www.mediafire.com/?nmtck3rgork
6. *Fijisilenced*, *Fijishamelist*, *Jokesonthejunta*, all of which have now ceased publication, but the sites are still accessible. A recently revived (April 2010) mildly anti-government blog, *Namuamua Journal*, namuamua.blogspot.com, is devoted to clever political satire
7. Two New Zealand websites, *Pacific Scoop* and *IndianNewsLink*, though not strictly blogs, serve as sources for blog information and as outlets for some of their postings.
8. 'The result of these posts on WFC (*WhyisFijiCrying*) is a heady mix of uttering threats, inciting violence against innocent civilians, hate crime, and quite frankly, terrorism. Based on the WFC's stated goal of destabilising the economy by driving tourists away, the authors of these posts may actually have no intention of having anyone carrying out these acts—the threat is sufficient. However, the fact remains that the act of publishing these posts violates several criminal laws in many countries

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around the world, including the United States.’ Hammond-Thrasher, 2007 (June 22) The *WFC* Wordpress site is now closed.

9. This is what happened to 15 senior Suva City Council workers in January 2010. *Fiji Times*. <http://fjtimes.com.fj/story.aspx?id=137125>

10.) *Intelligentsiya* (14 May 2007), Hammond-Thrasher (19 June 2007), and Comment on *FAIW* posting that *Fiji Today* editors had been identified and interviewed by the military.

11. Reported and unreported ICT News, 19 June 2007. <http://dfiji.blogspot.com/2007/06/reported-and-unreported-ict-news.htm>

<http://dfiji.blogspot.com/2008/09/from-traditional-hackers-to-paccert.html>

12. www.rawfiji.news.wordpress.com For reactions, see ‘Comments’ at the bottom of this *FAIW* post: <http://crosbiew.blogspot.com/2009/11/appeal-for-your-help-sos.html>

13. This, of course, is merely an opinion. Blogs could have been instrumental in NZ Foreign Minister Murray McCully’s new (January 2010) approach towards diplomatic relations with Fiji, and the insidious and cumulative influence of blogs may only be apparent over time.

14. There was a suggestion in November 2009 that government blocking of blog access (and its failure to do so since 2007) was due to a rumour that ‘a political party’ was about to ‘do something’. If this was the case, and the threat was real, anti-government blogs played a role, not in promoting democracy as we know it in New Zealand, but in chipping away at the supposed weak spots of government: hence the blogs’ anti-Indian sentiment, attacks on the Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, the hints at Al Qaeda involvement, the stories of impending revolt within the army as ethnic Fiji officers were supposedly about to return to their ‘roots’, and the stories of a collapsing economy.

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