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Civic Leadership Blogging

How to use weblogs as an
effective local leadership tool

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Introduction

“Effective local leadership is at the heart of our vision for sustainable communities... Councils have unique potential to bring people together and encourage them to work in partnership. That is why we place such importance upon councillors and officers working with others who have leadership roles in communities.” - Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, in the foreword to the January 2005 ODPM document, [Vibrant Local Leadership](#).

The main premise of this document is that a weblog in the hands of a local civic official can be an effective leadership tool. Elected representatives as well as Chief Executives and senior managers of local authorities and other community leaders can use blogs to leverage their leadership skills and activities in ways that aren't easily done otherwise.

A related premise is that blogging's potential in the world of civic leadership has been overshadowed by its reputation as a tool for personal diaries, for partisan politics, and as a mainstream media alternative.

The “Civic Leadership Blogging Project,” a UK Local e-Democracy effort led by NorthLincsNet of the North Lincolnshire Council, is a focused effort to look beyond blogging's current image and pilot ways it can be used for local civic leadership.

This document details what's been learned thus far – the why, what and how of civic leadership blogging.

"A good head and good heart are always a formidable combination. But when you add to that a literate tongue or pen, then you have something very special." - Nelson Mandela

1. Why keep a weblog

A weblog is primarily a publishing tool and in the hands of a leader, it's best thought of as a means to increase and extend your influence. Here are some of the reasons why to consider using a weblog to complement your overall communications strategy as a leader.

Leverage your leadership interactions that otherwise disappear

In the course of any leader's week, there are literally hundreds of interactions with colleagues, constituents, staff, media and other members of community. Whether these interactions are face-to-face, phone, electronic or paper-based, they comprise the bulk of how leaders exhibit their day-to-day influence. A phone call from a constituent, a conversation with a staff member at lunch, an email exchange with a colleague, an off-topic discussion at a team meeting – all likely evaporate into thin air, for all intents and purposes, as soon as they're concluded. Even most paper documents such as memos and reports are quickly relegated to the trash, the shredder, or the filing cabinet, never to be seen again.

With a weblog, leaders can select from among this never-ending parade of interactions the ones that they deem strategically significant, and give them a longer "shelf-life." With a posting to their blog, the story of the interaction gains immediate wider audience while making it significantly easier for that audience to pass the story around to others who they think should know about it.

Prospective civic leader bloggers frequently ask, "How much time is blogging going to require?" It's a fair question. Blogging feels like just another task when you first start out, and it does require some time commitment to work it into your week. But once you experience feedback from your blogging, that not only are others reading your blog but that it's starting to have influence, your attitude towards the task of blogging changes because it becomes strategic. *"I'm going to blog this because I know that she'll read it and pass it on to..."* *"When this group of people sees what I've blogged about this, then they're more likely to..."* You start to realise that your blog leverages your leadership strategies in time-effective ways.

Use a voice of authenticity to have a one-to-one conversation with an audience

A local government or organisation web site, in most cases, is a static collection of documents – information-rich but often perceived by site visitors as a dead brochure, its pages too often written by anonymous authors in an impersonal, public-relations style. A weblog, however, can bring a voice of authenticity to a web site, with a more personal and engaging tone that has wider appeal.

During the depression era of the 1930s, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt began using the mass communication medium of radio to address the American people about public issues in a series of what he called "Fireside Chats." The effectiveness of these addresses was in part due to FDR's ability to deliver them in an informal and relaxed tone, while making the listener feel as if he was talking directly to them. Likewise, the radio addresses by Winston Churchill during WW II. Although the issues are less weighty and the audiences vastly smaller, a weblog offers a civic leader the same opportunity – a one-to-one conversation with an audience of many.



Extend your presence with a selective window into your day

Broadcast media (radio and television) has an advantage over the written word in that it can report news and other events “live.” This real-time element makes many news stories more compelling to the public. Leaders who blog learn that by giving their blog visitors a selective, near real-time window into parts of their workday, they make their blogs more compelling to read and therefore more influential.

Provide another way for people to interact with you

A weblog is primarily a software publishing tool, one that gives its author a platform where ownership is not in question. But most weblog platforms allow a “comment” feature to be turned on, thereby creating a means for public interaction with blog visitors. A blog also stimulates private email responses, either via a “contact me” form on a web page or via a publicly posted email address. Much of the private email can be answered via a weblog post, as explained later in this document in the section titled “Answer your email with your blog.”

Convey your message directly to citizens instead depending on media institutions

Local government is frequently at odds with local media in how it gets portrayed. This is exacerbated by the fact that politicians and journalists are rated equally low by the public when it comes to ethical standards. So rather than relying on the media to convey one’s message to a mistrusting public, a weblog offers local public officials a chance to communicate with the public directly.

Make public life more real to the public

Much of what goes on in the day-to-day life of a public servant goes unreported. Conflicts and partisan political maneuvering tend to get the media coverage, while doing “the work of the people” often gets ignored. A blog allows public officials to give the public a more realistic view of their day-to-day work.

“The skill of writing is to create a context in which other people can think.” - Edwin Schlossberg

2. What to Blog

New bloggers often are at a loss on what to write about. Experienced bloggers often fall into a pattern of blogging on a narrow range of subjects. Here's a list of types of posts that can help keep your range broad... and thus make your blog more interesting for your audience to read and for you to write.

Illustrate your values, mission, goals and strategies

Most of us find it difficult to remember the organisational mission/purpose/values statements that are plastered on our walls and web sites, even ones that we helped write. What makes them come alive are real-life examples. Blogs provide a convenient way to tell short stories that indirectly convey your values and illustrate the overall direction of your organisation, your current individual focus, and the strategies being deployed to get there.

10 February

It's the small things that count

A local charity recently strung a banner across the High Street. Apparently there are rules on this subject and the charity had placed the banner in the wrong place. Along came the heavy hand of the Council to impose the rules. After all, you can't have anyone stringing a banner across the High Street - it could be a cause of accidents.

Alerted to the impending crisis by the President of the charity I placed a call to the local highways office to seek a compromise. Armed with a promise from the charity to move the banner as soon as possible and to forward a copy of their permission for banner stringing in the appropriate place, a compromise was quickly agreed.

The charity keep their banner, so long as it moves to the correct location, and the County Council don't cause themselves great embarrassment despite simply doing their job. It's not an issue of great political importance, but it is just the sort of community issue that touches many lives and is at the heart of the Councillor's role.

23:54:15 - andrewcrisp | 1 comment | [permalink for this item](#) | [Trackback \(0\)](#)

In this post by Andrew Crisp, Surrey County Councillor, his short story tells much about his values and his beliefs about the mission of a councillor.

Provide recognition to an employee, a colleague, an organisation or business in the community

Effective leaders typically have many ways to acknowledge the contributions of people in an organisation or organisations in the community.

Formal types of recognition have some duration to them, i.e, they last beyond the moment of acknowledgement because others keep finding out about it. For example,

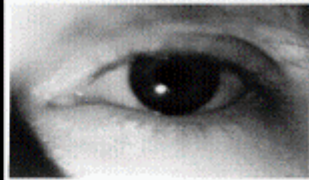
- the employee of the month who gets written up in the organisation newsletter has their story seen by others over the course of an entire month;
- a volunteer who receives a plaque at the annual meeting gets to hang it on a wall where others can comment on it in the months and years ahead;
- the non-profit organisation who gets an official recognition at a city council meeting gets written up in the local newspaper and hears about it from others who weren't at the meeting.

But good leaders know that these formal kinds of recognition are few and far between. Therefore the informal forms of recognition – the verbal pat on the back, the thanks on the phone, the email kudos – are often more important for acknowledging people and organisations. And the spontaneity of these makes the acknowledgement feel more authentic and more personal to the recipient.

18 February

That word "Manager"

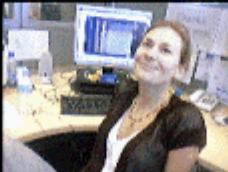
That word "Manager" floating at the top of the screen next to my name keeps giving me funny looks



It is there, quite rightly, to distinguish me from the elected members who are also participating in this civic blogging project.

Prospective employers don't read this but - I don't see myself as a great Manager. I think I have the ability to enthuse, inspire and lead a team - I often get positive comments on how motivated everyone appears - but this is only part of what's required. Managing people also means dealing with day-to-day management stuff, which I admit I find harder.

I am working on it! I still have a great book by Dr Stephen R Covey called [the seven habits of highly effective people](#) - which I will finish reading one day, if ever I find the key to the locked, glass-fronted bookcase where it resides.



I was thinking about this because I received an email from Sacha who did brilliant work on Bristol's econsultations last year. Sacha returned home to Australia when her work visa expired. She was a delight to manage and work with - such a positive "can do" attitude.

Being the Manager of 'good people' is very satisfying and I feel I have been very lucky. So far 90% has been pure treacle.

12:48:42 - [stephenhilton](#) | [No comments](#) | [permalink for this item](#) | [Trackback \(0\)](#)

Stephen Hilton, Communications Manager for Bristol, posted this short story about a former employee, triggered by a recent email from her.

One of the most effective ways to acknowledge someone informally is to tell *someone else* a story about them. Why? Because it has a better chance to spread around, just like the formal recognitions described above. A positive remark directly to the person being acknowledged generally goes no further because to

most people it would feel like bragging to tell someone else. But if the positive remark is made to someone else, then the recipient is very likely to repeat the story to others.

A blog post recognising an employee, a colleague, an organisation or business in the community is an effective way to accomplish the informal form of recognition with the impact of the formal. Others see the post and mention it ; some pass around its URL/PermaLink via email to others, thereby widening its impact; and the search engines store the content of it indefinitely, thereby providing opportunities for serendipitous acknowledgement far into the future.

28 January

Organ Donation

Mark Morris, leader of the Lib Dem Group on Lewisham Council and occasional contributor to the comments boxes on [my other blog](#), has asked me to let you know about [how easy it is to become an organ donor](#).

According to [UK Transplant](#):

In the UK between 1 April 2003 and 31 March 2004:

* The highest number of organ transplants ever recorded - 2,867 - were carried out, thanks to the generosity of 1,244 donors



Andrew Brown, Lewisham Councillor, blogged about organ donation at the request of a fellow councillor.

Tech tips: include a recent photo; insert photos of people being recognised, preferably; insert the logos of organisations being recognised and link to their web sites.

Leverage your media diet

"Media diet" refers the range of content one regularly consumes from a variety of media: newspapers, magazines, newsletters, TV and radio shows, websites and weblogs, etc. As a civic leader, you can select items from your media diet and blog those you think your readers might find interesting.

In the not-too-distant past, many leaders would photocopy important articles and hand them to colleagues and staff members. More recently, emailing the text of the article or the link to it is more common.

But blogging the media item (and linking to it, of course) and then adding your own commentary on it gives it additional "shelf life" and makes it seem less like email spam. The link encourages your readers to deepen/widen their understanding about an issue... and as a public official, one thing you want to encourage is a more involved, more informed citizenry. Also, the author/publisher of the original piece will likely appreciate the link, and it encourages the search engine spiders to keep returning to your blog.

Child Poverty in Durham and the North East

Read in the [Northern Echo](#) today that the North East has one of the worst levels of child poverty in the UK (and that the UK is one of the worst in the industrial world). One in three children in the region are being brought up in poverty compared to a UK average of one in four. Places such as Grangetown on Teesside see over 60% of children living in poverty. In County Durham several areas have figures of over 40%. Hopefully this is an issue that will see increased political interest over the coming months.

For more info visit the [End Child Poverty](#) website

13:33:19 - paulleake | No comments | [permalink for this item](#) | [Trackback \(0\)](#)

Durham Councillor Paul Leake used a link to an article in a local newspaper about poverty to heighten awareness of local conditions.

If your media diet includes other bloggers, it's acceptable to attach a comment to their post. But it's generally more interesting (and there's more of an incentive) to write in your own blog about what you read and then link to the blog post that you're writing about. That's how the blogosphere works. It helps widen your audience, as you'll likely get others doing the same to your blog, thereby steering readers to you.

Chronicle a decision or a current, unresolved problem

If you have an important decision to make or are facing a difficult problem that's not likely to be resolved any time soon, use your blog to chronicle the way you're dealing with these situations. Using your blog in this manner is a way to become better informed about an issue prior to a policy decision. Writing about what you're experiencing and learning deepens and clarifies your understanding. Just stringing a few sentences together as you attempt to describe the problem can often trigger ideas.

Blogging before a policy decision increases the likelihood that others will contribute suggestions and ideas about it because they sense that you're learning and willing to be influenced. They may offer some insights based on similar experiences.

27 January

Jesus Green speaks out about violence

Residents of Jesus Green came to the meeting of Full Council tonight & protested about the crime they have been suffering recently. I was alarmed that 15 - 20 people have had their windows shot through, probably by airguns, in the last 8 weeks, as well as a high number of assaults.

Councillors looked concerned, but the answers given were slippery. Later in the meeting Council Leader Helal Abbas interpreted the lack of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders issued meant that there wasn't much anti-social behaviour. Having talked to the Government's Anti-Social Behaviour Department, they consider that success against crime means more ASBOs and ABCs for smaller offences.


I think the deputation helped to raise awareness in the Council and presented a positive outlook on the problems, including increasing youth provision.

00:50:07 - [louisealexander](#) | 1 comment | [permalink for this item](#) | [Trackback \(0\)](#)

31 January

Best bet for a safer neighbourhood.

This evening I went to my first meeting of [Jesus Hospital Estate Residents Association](#). I'm fairly well briefed by now on the violence that's happening on this hitherto quiet estate.



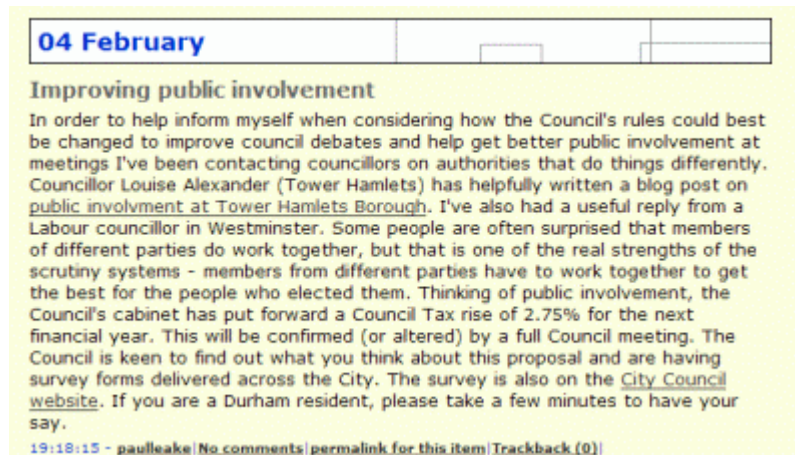
I fed back to the residents the effects of their deputation to Council and results of the Local Area Partnership meeting. People are trying to understand how the mechanism works, how the Local Authority can be so ineffectual against crime & violence and how the Local Area Partnership is evolving. I tried to explain the benefits of decentralising an increasingly bureaucratic service and how to influence the new forms of community policing which is the best bet for a safer neighbourhood.

23:52:52 - [louisealexander](#) | 1 comment | [permalink for this item](#) | [Trackback \(0\)](#)

Tower Hamlets Councillor Louise Alexander posted about how residents of troubled housing complex appeared at a council meeting... and then an update a few days later.

Blogging publicly about how you go about becoming better informed gives the public and your colleagues a better idea about how you approach complex issues. And that can strengthen your potential influence on the issue. The archived blog posts show your efforts to understand the problem. And it increases the likelihood that people who disagree with your decision might appreciate the thoroughness of your approach to it.

Blogging about a problem/upcoming decision as you go along brings the issue alive for those who are marginally interested. Many citizens may not care about an issue that doesn't immediately affect them but observing how a local leader struggles with it can ignite their interest.



Durham Councillor Paul Leake blogged on how he was getting better informed about a process for public involvement at council meetings.

Lastly, the archive of your blog posts provides a convenient way to refer back to your thinking about an issue, a problem, a decision. When the day comes that you find yourself changing your position on an issue and having to explain yourself, it adds credibility to be able to point to those weblog postings where your thinking at the time is detailed. It can make your new position seem less like "spin" to your readers and can minimise the impact of a "flip-flop" charge by your opponents.

Teach about a service, program, department

Government web sites usually provide an overwhelming amount of information on the services, programs and departments that serve the public. This is usually in static form: HTML pages, PDF documents, pages of internal and external links.

But people still like to learn from other people. The demand for teachers (at all levels) is not diminishing in this age of information ubiquity. And a weblog post, written in the conversational tone of a personable teacher, can be the next best thing to a face-to-face conversation where the information is conveyed. (It also offers some things that a F2F conversation doesn't typically offer, namely links for the interested reader who wants to go deeper, and a record of the information that can be referred back to at one's leisure.)

So use your blog to teach. Help citizens see what their tax dollars are being spent on and the benefits accruing from it. Wrap your message around a recent story involving the names of people involved, if possible. Use photos and images to attract attention as well as to inform. And link, link, link – to web pages on your own organisation's web site as well as to other sites so people can easily go deeper if they want.

In the future when you need to revisit some aspect of the service, program, or department, you don't need to repeat yourself. Just link to your own original post and expand from there.

21 March

Influencing Change

To understand Community Empowerment Networks, you need to understand the CPAGs ([Community Plan Action Groups](#)). One third of the Tower Hamlets, the CPAGs constitute the delivery teams of the borough (the Council, Health Service, Police). The Community Empowerment Networks ([CENs](#)) role is to provide a voice for the multifaceted Voluntary Sector in this scenario of big hitters.

Still confused? You are not alone. It can take many meetings to realise what is going on here ... however transparent the meetings, the structure of the Partnership is so complex that it cannot be transparent. What this masks is that the large forces of the CPAG players commission extra work from the Neighbourhood Renewal budget. It is often the same people who carry out this work.

Partly this springs from a realisation that cycles of grant applications and grant giving waste both the time of the organisation that gives the grants and those who spend many moons filling in application forms, with little hope of success. If the grant giver could directly commission projects from trusted providers, surely this would be more equitable.

I'm sure you don't have to be Einstein to see how this could favour cronyism. This view is becoming increasingly widely adopted, [for example in the recent local conference](#).

Now I am certainly not levelling this accusation at the CENs. I think it's part of their responsibility to ensure this doesn't happen. They have issued a compact for dealings with the voluntary sector and my contribution to the conference with the CEN is that they should ensure this is taken up throughout the Tower Hamlets Partnership. The Lib Dems will be lobbying for the Tower Hamlets Partnership to implement the compact throughout and give the voluntary sector equal weight.

22:19:47 - [louisealexander](#) | [No comments](#) | [permalink for this item](#) | [Trackback \(0\)](#)

Tower Hamlets Councillor Louise Alexander blogged about Community Plan Action Groups.

Point to changes/additions to your website

Web site visitors typically don't mouse around a site looking for anything that's new since the last time they visited. But they will expect your blog to constantly updated. Therefore, your weblog can be an effective conversational kiosk, alerting people to other parts of your local authority's web site that have recently changed. Let your staff and colleagues know you're willing to do this.

Reveal aspects of your non-work life

Citizens don't often get to experience their civic leaders in roles other than their public one. There's seldom an appropriate venue for a leader to do this with an audience of any size. But a weblog allows you to tell a story from your non-work life -- family, friends, hobbies, leisure time -- with no other purpose than to put a human face under your bureaucratic hat.

You simply want to convey that you're not any different than the public you serve. You're a taxpayer, a family person, a user of the parks, a community volunteer, etc. You have a personal stake in the overall health and vibrancy of the community you live and work in, just like they do. The more people see you as they see themselves, it increases the likelihood they'll treat you with civility and respect.

28 January

A new experience - putting milk in the fridge!

The only clean place in my flat is the fridge. It's the first time I ever bought a fridge. I have owned a fridge before - the one that came with the flat. But it whistled, consumed vast quantities of electricity and was scabby on the outside. So that one doesn't count.



Having decided I needed a new fridge, plus a new oven (the inherited one only worked as a grill), plus a new washing machine (the old one leaked smelly water on the floor), plus a new boiler (the old one was temperamental & clapped out), it was only a short step from there to redoing the whole kitchen. The old kitchen units were wooden and very 70s. The new ones are bright, IKEA's best!

It's a very tight space, my kitchen. No joy to put in new plumbing, I can assure

Tower Hamlets Councillor Louise Alexander's famous "refridgerator manifesto" blog post.

A civic leader blog is not a place for mentioning your personal problems, nor for deep, personal reflections, either. A non-work blog post should never be revealing to the point of causing any discomfort for readers. Composing weblog posts is typically done when you're alone and able to be reflective but don't let that lull you into mistaking your civic blog for a journal or diary.

Teach about the complexities of an issue

In age of media sound-bites, issues often get reduced to simplistic either/or characterisations for the public. Leaders more often must take the time to understand the complexities, the shades of grey of an issue where others see only black and white. A blog offers an opportunity for a leader to share some of their deeper understanding with the public. A series of posts, each embedded with a recent story that illustrates one aspect of the issue, can provide a palatable way for a leader to teach about the issue.

10 March

Are we there yet?

Woking that is. And the answer is nearly.

It's been almost 40 years, so a few more days won't make much difference.

In the late 1960s plans were made to redraw administrative boundaries and Kingston upon Thames was taken out of Surrey and in to Greater London. County Hall was in Kingston at the time and has remained there ever since.

The Council soon decided that if a financial case could be made which wouldn't have a negative impact on local tax payers they should move County Hall back in to the County of Surrey. Roll on 30 years or so and a new start began in the search for a site for a new County Hall.

Thirty plus sites later and Brewery Road, Woking was identified as the best option. A new County Hall was included in a financial package with the majority of the Council's office portfolio in a 30 year deal with a private sector partner.

On Tuesday the full council debated the merits of the deal. Some Councillors described the financial deal as marginal and they are right. The option to move is the best financial deal, but over the 30 year period the savings are around £1 million per year. In an annual budget of just over £1 billion, £1 million can only be described as marginal. However, we make many decisions each day of our lives which can at best be described as marginal. Almost every time you drive a car many of the decisions that ensure your safety are marginal.

Another Councillor suggested that with the advent of the web and services such

Surrey County Councillor Andrew Crisp blogged on the pros and cons of building a new county hall.

3. How to blog effectively

“Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people.” - William Butler Yeats

Once you understand why blogging can be an important leadership tool, you'll increasingly have more than enough ideas on what you can blog about. But there's a bit of craft involved in knowing how to blog effectively. In this section, we explain the how.

Tell stories

Why do we go to more movies than lectures and seminars? Stories. Who are the best lecturers? Those who fill their presentations with stories. Storytelling as an organisational and leadership strategy is currently undergoing a bit of a boom. Magazine articles, books, workshops and whole conferences are now devoted to the subject. Why?

“Leadership is essentially a task of persuasion -- of winning people’s minds and hearts. Typically it proceeds inductively by argument from one or more examples towards a more general conclusion about the goals and assumptions we should adopt towards the matter in question. Storytelling is thus inherently suited to the task of leadership.” – From The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative, by Stephen Denning.

We all have a knack for telling stories in an informal social setting. "Hey, guess what happened to me today?" we say to our family members and friends. Listen to the conversations at parties and you'll hear a constant stream of storytelling. So the idea is to use storytelling in your blog in much the same way that you use it in informal social settings – but towards a leadership or management goal, such as:

A Storytelling Catalogue – S. Dennin

Sparking action

Communicating who you are

Communicating who the company is – branding

Transmitting values

Fostering collaboration

Taming the grapevine

Sharing knowledge

Leading people into the future

Denning says it's a myth that "The effective use of storytelling in organisations involves crafting and performing a “well- made story,” with a hero or heroine, a plot, a turning point and a resolution." There

are levels of complexities to stories and certain elements need to be included, depending on your purpose. But even the smallest incident is more compelling reading when framed with a short, simple story, for example:

"I ran into a citizen in the hallway yesterday and she asked..."

"My colleague, [name/link] handed me the latest issue of [periodical/link] this morning and suggested I read the article on...."

"On my way home from work last night, I passed the park where..."

Most leadership storytelling strategies are focused on the why and how of oral, performance-oriented storytelling where tone, voice inflection and gestures come into play. That makes sense whenever there's a face-to-face audience available, or if the storytelling is to be broadcast.

But written storytelling via a weblog can be an effective, alternative delivery method. And it has some advantages over oral storytelling:

- Your audience-of-many is always available
- A blog post (via its PermaLink) can get easily passed around via the web and email
- The PermaLink of the blog post never dies. If your story turns out to have longlasting impact, it's web address can be linked to indefinitely

Weblog storytelling tips:

- The real names of people involved can help to make the story. Include them, with their permission.
- Frame your story with time/date, such as "yesterday..." "earlier this morning..." "last Tuesday..."
- Describe the place, or at least name it. If you don't have the time or skill to "set the scene," it can help to use a photo.
- There's hardly a blog post that can't include some elements of storytelling. Imagine yourself talking to a colleague or friend about what it is you're blogging and then bring that tone to your post.

Link, link, link

Master the art of quickly adding relevant links to your posts. Why?

- It allows your readers to easily go deeper and broader.
- Search engine spiders come back more frequently when they see links in your posts, as their algorithms depend on them.
- Those you link to generally appreciate it and are more likely to link back.

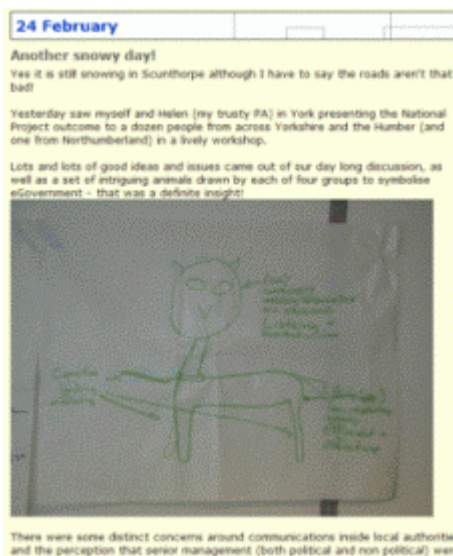
Insert photos

Most of us have a slice of vanity in our emotional makeup and having our photo appear in a civic leader's blog is a little ego boost. The word-of-mouth factor then comes into play – a blog post with a photo increases the likelihood that its PermaLink will get passed around via email and linked to in other blogs, as well as mentioned verbally, e.g., "Hey, I saw your photo in whatshisname's blog this week..."



Roy Taylor, Director of Community Services in Kingston on Thames, included this photo of his staff who accompanied him on a recent trip.

Photos can also be instructional. Use them to illustrate a situation or a problem, with or without people in the shot.



NorthLincsNet's Isobel Harding blogged this photo of a sketch drawn on poster paper at a recent meeting.

Also, it's often easier to take a photo of a flyer, poster, map, or other visually-oriented document and put it into your blog than to obtain the original digital document that was used to create it and upload it to your blog.

Digital cameras and camera-equipped mobile phones make it considerably simpler and more cost-effective these days to include photos in your blog. Get in the habit of taking a camera with you everywhere and looking for opportunities to capture information and people that are relevant to your civic leader weblog.

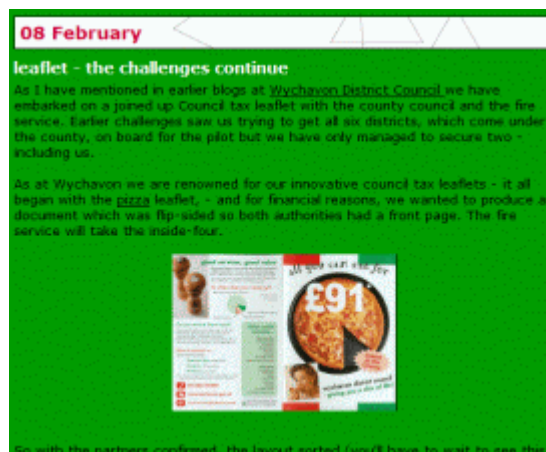
Expect to be reluctant – shy, even – to use your camera to take photos of people. It initially feels awkward, that you're intruding on people when you don't know them very well. It's surprisingly hard to overcome this but once you start getting feedback on your photos, it'll spur you on to get over your shyness to do what needs to be done!

When approached about a photo, people often make comments about how they're not suited for it – their clothing or hair or how they always take terrible photos. It's often enough to just say something like, "Well, this is just for my blog, not a fashion magazine" in a light-hearted tone and they'll go along with it. Or tell them they can see the shot after you take it and approve/reject it. But never be insistent. You don't want a paparazzi reputation.

Photos also help to "set the scene" for your storytelling. And as images, they break up text-heavy posts.

Insert relevant images

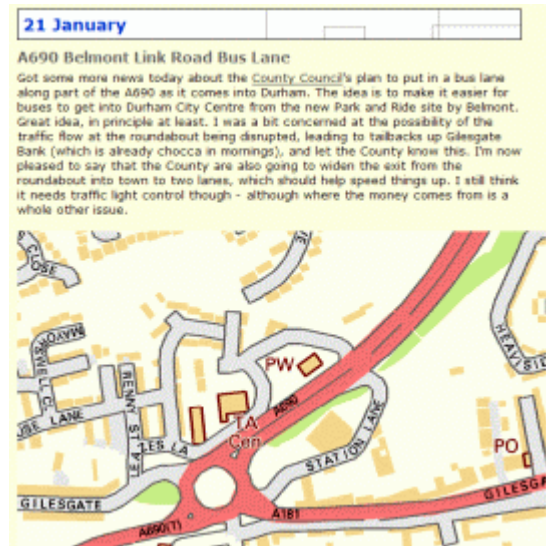
The general public is one of the audiences for your civic blog and the media culture they live in is heavily visual. If your blog is 99% text, you're likely to have trouble getting them to be regular visitors to your site. Print-based newspapers, newsletter, and magazines all have a long history of using page-design, headlines and graphics to draw the attention of readers' eyes and to make it easier for them to read once they start reading. Weblogs' simple format tends to encourage a blog author to just write and post, without giving much thought to visual appeal.



Anna-Marie Darroch, communications officer for the Wychavon District Council in Worcestershire, included this council tax "pizza" leaflet image in her blog post

The content and writing style of a text-heavy post might be compelling enough to engage the reader all the way through. But more often that not, a civic leader doesn't have the time or talent to make most of their public policy posts compelling enough for the average citizen to at least be tempted to give it a

glimpse. So it's helpful to use freely available images on the internet to both give the reader a visual cue as to what the post is about, and to break up the text/paragraphs so that the post isn't so overwhelming.



Durham Councillor Paul Leake included a map in a blog post about a planned bus lane.

Most likely candidates for images are:

- The logos and banners of organisations that you're mentioning in your blog post.
- Clip art
- Images that help explain the content, such as maps and diagrams

Post short and frequent vs. long and infrequent

Long (more than a screenful), text-heavy posts to your blog where you need the space to explain are perfectly appropriate. Use the blog software's "extended entry" feature, if it has it, to only display the first paragraph or two. This gives people the option to read on if they're interested and makes skipping to the next post in chronological order easier.

But beware of falling into the trap of thinking that you always have to have long, substantive posts. It'll likely discourage you from posting frequently. Short, frequent posts help you maintain your audience. And they develop your blogging discipline.

Answer email with a blog

As leaders who blog, you can expect that you'll increasingly be contacted via email and phone by individual citizens, colleagues, potential collaborators, and of course, detractors. As a novice blogger, you'll likely appreciate this attention for the most part because it can mean that your blog audience is growing. But there may come a time when the volume of email (and associated phone calls) generated by the interest in your weblog starts to feel more burdensome than exhilarating.

Part of the problem is that when people contact you individually (email or phone), the natural expectation is that you'll respond to them individually. It seems like the polite/professional thing to do.

But your blog gives you an option that you didn't have before: the ability to respond to an individual so that all your readers can hear/read it. You leverage your response so that it has the potential to benefit the most.

You've probably done something very similar to this already when giving a speech. Someone near the front of the room raises their hand and asks you a question. You start to answer their question and someone towards the back of the room shouts out, "CAN YOU REPEAT THE QUESTION?!"

You respond with "Oh, I'm sorry, certainly. The question from this gentleman here in the blue suit in row two was..." as you face the audience. Then you turn back to the questioner and, looking them in the eye, start with your response to them, with occasional glances at the audience. You're having a one-one conversation with the questioner while dozens/hundreds/thousands listen to it. Your blog can work much the same way.

When you get an email or a voicemail, ask yourself: "Could my weblog audience benefit from my reply to this person?" Instead of replying with a return email or phone call, consider FIRST posting a note to your weblog. "I got an email yesterday from a citizen who was wondering why the Council.... Others might be interested in my response so I'm posting it here."

THEN you respond to the individual who made the initial contact with something like, "Great question. I've blogged my response in case others might be interested [PermaLink here]. I'd like to edit the post, however, to include your name and organisation with link to its website. May I have your permission to do that?"

People will likely appreciate the attention you're giving them, whether or not they let you use their name.

Promote discussion via a blog

While a blog is primarily a publishing tool for you, it can also be used for interaction with your readers. At the most basic level, it means having an email address (a "mailto") listed on the sidebar of your blog. It's preferable, however, to have a link to a "contact me" form on a separate web page.



The image shows a web form titled "Your feedback - tell us what you think" with a "Feedback" link. The form includes a disclaimer: "This is the area to tell us how you think about our services and to suggest improvements. But, before you do, please take a few moments to let us know how we can contact you so that we can get back to you if possible." Below this is a note: "Please note: if you want to comment on the website or send us any information for possible inclusion, or report a community safety problem, or make a complaint, click on one of the links on the left of this page." The form fields are: "Your name:" (text box), "Address:" (text box), "Postcode:" (text box), "Telephone:" (text box), "Your email address:" (text box), "I am a (select from list):" (radio buttons for "Yes" and "No"), and "Your suggestions:" (large text area). A "Send feedback" button is at the bottom.

Lewisham Council's Contact/Feedback form

This prevents spam bots from harvesting your email address. And people are more inclined to use a form rather than a "mailto." You can then include a link to this page in the body of your blog posts occasionally, e.g., "If you have suggestions on this issue, [Contact Me](#)." When you get email responses, resist the temptation to reply via private email and use your blog instead, as described above.

Most weblog platforms allow you to switch on a comment tool which enables people to attach comments in message board fashion to individual weblog posts. The number of posts attached is represented by a numeral at the end of the blog post, typically next to your name and the PermaLink, e.g., Comments (3). Subsequent visitors can click on the numeral to read the attached comments of others.

Hansard Society Blogging Project

I have been asked to make the keynote speech at a Hansard workshop on Blogging. I am suitably honoured!

I note two other speakers are from Minnesota in the USA. Are public blogs in Minnesota special? Or is this just a chance factor of organization?

Any suggestions as to what I should say about blogging in the UK Parliament? Or blogging in general?

Posted on February 14, 2005 at 02:37 AM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(14\)](#)

MP Clive Soley's blog post about his presentation generated 14 comments.

The advantage to enabling comments via attachment to a blog post is that the interaction occurs in a group and is immediate. It's a simple way to convene an instant town meeting on a single subject, any time of the night or day. It helps to present your blog as a listening post and not just a soapbox.

Some cautions regarding weblog comments:

- If you don't participate in the discussion threads that develop, your readers might be offended, as if you invited them to your house for a roundtable discussion but then don't show up to participate. One way around this is to only turn on comments for those posts in which you intend to fully participate... and state this in your blog post, e.g., "I'm interested in discussing this issue you for the next 10 days or so. I'll turn on the comment feature and join you in message thread."
- Just like in face-to-face venues, you might get comments you don't like or ones you aren't sure how to handle. Comments can be ignored, of course, and even deleted. But if this becomes a pattern, then you leave yourself open to criticism that you can't take the heat.
- The weblog software should provide email notification for comments, i.e., anytime one gets attached, you should get an email alert. It should also provide comment spam prevention, since spammers use automated techniques to add URL's to weblog comments as a means of raising their profile in search engine results.

Give notice if you stop blogging

Your readers will likely feel disrespected if you stop blogging without an explanation. If you're traveling and don't plan to blog, consider the safety implications on whether you want to reveal that your residence will be unoccupied. But at least let your readers to not expect anything from you for the duration of your absence. Likewise, if you're expecting to be too busy to devote any time to blogging for an upcoming period of time.

If you're thinking of quitting blogging altogether, consider taking a break from it for a period of weeks before making the decision. You need not reveal your indecision but it's important to let your readers know that you won't be blogging for a defined period of time. Also, consider talking to a weblog coach and some of your colleagues about your blogging situation during this break to see if they have some feedback on what could be done differently with your approach to blogging.

If you do decide to pack in your blog, it's just polite to say thanks for the memories and au revoir.

4. How to promote a blog

Without the oxygen of serendipitous feedback, your motivation for blogging will gradually die. You need to know others are visiting and better yet, you need to know it's having some influence. So as soon as you launch your weblog, it's important to work on promoting it. Some strategies to consider:

Create your own blogroll; ask to be on the blogrolls of others

When you follow one or more blogs, and start blogging occasionally about what you're reading on those blogs, consider adding them to your blogroll. A blogroll is a list of links to other weblogs, typically ones that you like and frequently follow. You can add and edit these links manually on your blog's sidebar or use a service like blogrolling.com.



Kingston Councillor Mary Reid's blogroll

Once you add a weblog to your blogroll, consider asking the blogs you follow to add your blog to theirs. If they don't know you or your blog very well, they may want to hold off on adding yours till they've had a chance to get to know your blog.

Ask your local government authority to link to your blog

If you're an elected official, ask your local authority to put a link to your weblog from one or more pages on their site. They may have to post a disclaimer with it, as your blog may occasionally contain political posts.

If you're a government employee, a link to your blog from your department's web page is a must, as it's part of your job. It's better yet if the blog is "embedded" right into the site.

Ask media and civic organisations to link to your blog

Many media and civic organisations have directories of relevant links on their web sites. As a civic leader, you'd be a natural addition to these directories. Contact them and ask to be included.

Include your weblog in your email signature file, on business card

An email signature file typically contains your street address, phone numbers, and organisation web site address. Add your weblog to this, including the word "weblog" and its web address/URL.

Mary Reid
Councillor for Chessington North and Hook ward
Executive member for Young People's Services
Member e-champion
Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames

Phone me on: 020 8397 1396
Email me on: mary_reid@councillors.kingston.gov.uk
Read my blog on: <http://www.readmyday.co.uk/blogs/maryreid>
Write to me at: 126 Clayton Road, Hook, Chessington KT9 1NJ

If you're an elected official, you may need to include a disclaimer at the end of your sig file.

Include your blog address in communications with the media

Whenever you write a letter to the editor, author a column, or have any reason to communicate with the media, be sure to include your weblog, either by working it into to the body of the text or by attaching it at the end with your name.

Invite media coverage of your blog

Even if you already have a web site, the addition of a weblog to it is news. Let your media contacts know about it.

5. Cautions to consider when blogging

A weblog is a communications tool, typically without an editor. So a few cautions are in order.

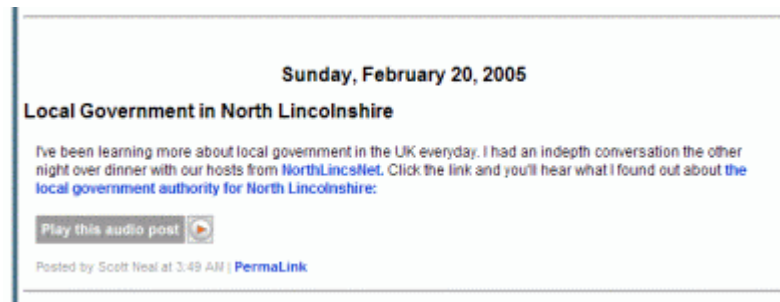
- Never post something in a blog that you wouldn't say to a media reporter. As mentioned above, composing weblog posts is typically done when you're alone and able to be reflective but don't let that lull you into mistaking your civic blog for a journal or diary where "the truth" as you see is put down in writing. Never lie, but be selective with your truths.

- Blog posts can be deleted and edited but the original text gets out on the internet very quickly via RSS feeds and search engine spiders. So it's best to keep your posts in draft mode until you're certain that they're ready for prime time.
- Be sure to reveal any conflicts of interest in a post. For example, if you're welcoming a new business to your city and you sit on the board of directors of that company, include that in your post.
- Realise that your blog will be read very closely by your political opponents.
- If your blog becomes popular, it's easy to devote too much time to blogging at the expense of more important areas of both your professional and personal life.

6. Multimedia & mobile blogging

Weblogs have been primarily a text and image communications environment. But now audio and video are making their way onto the scene. And mobile phones are now a viable composition platform, not just computers.

- Audioblogging is adding an MP3 file of your voice to your blog, rather than typed text. It's typically done by establishing an account with a service that automatically adds an MP3 of a phone call from you soon after you hang up. It's particularly advantageous for those who feel more comfortable in front of a microphone than a keyboard. If you're a hunt-and-peck typist, audioblogging is for you. You'll still need to add a bit of text to your blog post that contains the audio so site visitors know what the audio is about.



While traveling in the UK, City Manager Scott Neal (Eden Prairie, Minnesota) posted an audioblog about the North Lincolnshire Council

- Podcasting (AKA blogcasting) means that others can automatically subscribe to your audioblog posts via RSS feeds and have those audio files automatically downloaded to their iPods and similar devices so that they can listen to them at their leisure.
- Moblogging (mobile blogging) refers to the process of adding content to your blog while you're out and about – away from your PC – typically via mobile phone. You can now use your mobile phone to add audio, photos, and even video clips right to your weblog.
- Vlogging (videoblogging) is adding video to your blog. It's practice is starting to become more popular with the advent of software that turns your computer screen into a teleprompter and makes it easy to add video effects, titles and graphics.

7. Tech skills checklist

Successful blogging presumes a few tech-related skills that need to be acquired before or soon after blogging begins:

- Right clicking an item with a mouse to access additional choices from a menu
- Having two or more browser windows open at a time and knowing how to quickly jump back and forth between them
- Use of keyboard shortcuts, primarily: Ctrl X (cut), Ctrl C (copy), Ctrl V (paste), Ctrl A (select all)
- Using Google or similar search engine to do web searches
- Using the bookmark/favorite feature of a browser
- Knowing some basic tech lingo: clipboard, alt text, URL/web address, status bar, up/download
- Capturing/saving an image found on a web page
- Use an image/photo editing tool to resize photo and other images

8. Blogging Checklists

Use the two checklists on the following pages to track the types of blog posts you make over the course of twelve weeks, and to assess the skills you're using. See Sections 2-3 of this document for explanation terms used.

What to Blog	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Illustrate your values, mission, goals and strategies												
Provide recognition: employee, colleague, organisation, business												
Leverage your media diet												
Chronicle a decision or a current, unresolved problem												
Teach about a service, programme, department												
Point to changes/additions to your organisation's website												
Reveal aspects of your non-work life												
Teach about the complexities of an issue												
Extoll the virtues of your political party; criticise opponents												

How to blog effectively	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Use storytelling												
Link to other websites; link to your own permalinks												
Insert photos												
Insert relevant images												
Post short and frequent vs. long and infrequent												
Answer email with your blog												
Promote discussion/interaction via your blog												
Alert others when blogging about them												
Read/blog about other bloggers												