

The Blogging Revolution? Eric Soucie

At the last minute, at 6 p.m. on Saturday evening, NEWSWEEK magazine killed a story that was destined to shake official Washington to its foundation: A White House intern carried on a sexual affair with the President of the United States! (Drudge)

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At 11:30 P.M. on January 17th, 1998, Matt Drudge, on his web site, *The Drudge Report* – a compilation of news articles written by him and with links to stories on other sites – broke the story of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. This story had been ‘spiked’ the night before by the national news magazine *Newsweek*, whose editors thought it was too provocative a story. This touched off the largest investigation into the executive branch by Congress since Iran-Contra, and quite possibly even Watergate. Unwittingly, Drudge had sparked the genesis of an entirely new form of media, the blogger. The information he had been privy to as an independent journalist, and his lack of reticence in publishing it, touched off an investigation that tarnished the last half of President Clinton’s second term and cost taxpayers millions of dollars. Only in the past two or three years, however, has this phenomenon, aided by new “Blogger” technology from Pyra Labs – which simplified the process of posting articles – really taken off. Now, bloggers are being held responsible for a plethora of earth-shattering political events: hounding Trent Lott for his racially insensitive remarks at Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday celebration; speeding the downfall of *New York Times* editor Howell Raines, known for his role in the Jayson Blair scandal; and more recently, highlighting Dan Rather’s lack of journalistic circumspection in dealing with the Bush National Guard memos.

I contend that the success of the ‘blogosphere’ – the name given to the seemingly limitless, inter-linkable online network cross-referencing and fact-checking of blogs

through one another – could not have been made possible without the disenchantment of everyday Americans with political coverage as usual. Network news, dubbed “corporate news” by many, and print journalism publications like big-time daily newspapers and weekly magazines have all piled up to create an environment where the average viewer, voter, reader, and listener are being shut out of the process. Joe Trippi (2004), campaign manager for Gov. Howard Dean’s failed bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004 – a campaign fueled largely by the internet – said it best, “The problem, again, is television. Just to be clear, I’m not talking about the device itself, which is great...The problem is *the way it fails to engage people*”(p. 37). The blogosphere, I argue, is currently one of the greatest forms of engaging people in civic participation since the pamphleteers and town meetings of late 18th-century New England. It also runs deeper than that. They have set up a transparent system where – as blogger Andrew Sullivan put it – “In [this] era of polarized debate, the truth has never been more available” (Sullivan, 2004, p.37). They have also been able to become, as print and television journalists already are or at least purport to be, watchdogs of the government, and on top of that, watchdogs of those print and television journalists.

The way the blogosphere is set up has made it a system in which free and open debate is the norm. Its very design has been integral to this. For example, when bloggers upload their posts – the term used to describe a blogger’s writing on any given issue – they typically are focusing in on a single news event, and in many cases, only one article. They will link to that article, and depending on their intentions, do anything from criticize it to praise it, adding their own experiential facts, or noting the discrepancies within it. Bloggers will do this, because in their minds, and in the minds of their readers,

established news organizations already have credibility. One example of this is for a blogger to quote from the *New York Times*, post their commentary on why they believe that article is either biased or factually incorrect, then post a link to an article from say, *The New York Post* or *Washington Times* that proves their criticism. This is often followed by subsequent links to and from other bloggers' posts. If one were to spend time clicking through the various linked posts of different bloggers on a single issue or even article, he or she could spend a good part of the day reading criticisms from various and sundry viewpoints. This is the beauty of the blogosphere. If one knows where to look, he or she is able to traverse countless blogs or just a few and find opinions to agree or disagree with, and then on top of that, link to others who hold similar or differing opinions.

Also, there are built-in commenting sections for each post on most blogs. Any reader can post comments there and be required to post little more than their comment and their name, or nickname if they so choose. The comment section allows for unprecedented participation of readers. Joe Trippi (2004) offered some insight into this phenomenon regarding the DeanForAmerica blog,

We couldn't see every hole and every flaw that they could see. For one thing, we were too close to it. There were any number of times one of those six hundred thousand [commenters] came up with something that should have been obvious to us. There were countless instances where we were trying to figure out our next move and someone on the internet came to our rescue. (pp. 146-147)

This is also the case with news blogs. Bloggers do not have the editorial and research staff that reporters at large newspapers and magazines have. Therefore, a commenter who knows what he or she is talking about can add needed additional information or give salient criticism to the blogger that wrote the original post, and all of their readers.

Bloggers will also link to other bloggers who have proven expertise in a certain field. For example, “The Volokh Conspiracy,” a blog where there are several contributing writers who are all either lawyers or law professors, is a place where conservatives can see legal analysis on the hot-button political issues of the day, such as defending the right of the Bush Administration to hold detainees, outlining the case against legalizing gay marriage, and like issues. One such contributor is Professor Orin Kerr (personal communication, November 13, 2004), a George Washington University Law School professor. When asked how he believes specialized professional bloggers like himself contribute to political discussion, he gave a twofold response. “First,” he said “reporters for major newspapers have to present things in a very simple and quick format, and in the course of doing that they often make major mistakes.” This view has also been espoused by journalists who have taken up freelance blogging, like Joshua Micah Marshall, who noted that a blog is “a forum for expanding on points that must be dealt with briefly in conventional article writing” (Palser, 2004). Kerr’s next point was that, “Second, and perhaps more importantly, reporters often don’t know enough about a topic to know who the real experts are in a particular area.” He noted that many who purport to be ‘experts’ “actually don’t know very much about the topic but feel unwilling to turn down an opportunity to be quoted in the *New York Times*.” Therefore, Kerr is justifying his position as an expert on legal matters in the blogosphere by saying both that the traditional media does not offer its consumers enough information, and when it does, it is often erroneous.

Other than law experts, many other professionals have taken to blogging. Military personnel have been one of the most important contributors on both sides of the debate

over the Bush Administration's foreign policy and how it exerts America's military force. Sgt. Hook (2004), a current soldier in the United States Army serving in Afghanistan, does much of his posting from inside Afghanistan itself and will muse on everything from the food he is being served in the mess hall to the international political considerations that sent him there. Recently, right before the elections in Afghanistan, he made this post:

Thought I'd check in quickly to let everyone know that all is well here in the Stan. We are, as you can imagine, in the throws of the mission with the Afghan Presidential elections on slate for tomorrow... It occurs to me that when Americans go to the polls next month to cast their vote, they'll not be fearful of suicide bombers, rocket attacks, IEDs along your route, or flat out threats by gun point. Neat.

With this, one gets a different perspective of the war in Afghanistan. While the mainstream media might be reporting about how the Governing Council is being run, the hunt for Osama along the Pakistan border or the reactions of politicians in the United States, military bloggers like Sgt. Hook give us the perspective of the men on the ground fighting for our country. While the traditional media, with their vast networks of foreign correspondents and international offices, we are able to see the big picture because they have the means to hire private security teams and pay entire production crews; bloggers like Sgt. Hook offer us a glimpse at the more personal side of war that we often miss in the 'big picture'.

There is an argument to be made that the role of the traditional media is being replaced by bloggers, and it is espoused by many who argue that the very transparency, fact-checking and responsive readership that blogs get makes them more democratic than traditional media. This view fails to see the bigger picture: that media outlets do not exist in a zero-sum environment. As Fareed Zakaria (2003), the foreign affairs editor for *Newsweek* magazine, notes in his book, *The Future of Freedom*, blogs do not signal the

end of traditional media. Instead, he argues, “the best blogs – and the best are very clever – have become guides to them, pointing to unusual sources and commenting on familiar ones” (p. 254) Zakaria also counters the widely held belief by bloggers themselves that blogging is a radically democratic phenomenon. He says that bloggers “are in fact a new Tocquevillean elite,” because “the wilder, bigger, and more chaotic [the web] becomes, the more people will need help navigating it” (p. 254).

As Alexis de Tocqueville, an 18th-century philosopher and champion of the American Revolution and the ideals of the Enlightenment, argued in his seminal work, *Democracy in America*:

It is the dissimilarities and inequalities among men which give rise to the notion of honor; as such differences become less, it grows feeble; and when they disappear, it will vanish too. (de Tocqueville, 1839, p. 136)

By honor, what Tocqueville meant was the esteem or glory a man would receive from his fellow men. He is, in effect, drawing a distinction between an elite democracy and a pluralistic democracy, saying that the American democracy would soon be able to do away with the European notion that some people were better than others, or more intelligent. For a time, Tocqueville’s ideal seemed to be ringing true. However, the rise of big journalism would change all of this. Publishing magnate and founder of *Time*, Henry Luce, once stated, “Show me a man who thinks he’s objective, and I’ll show you a man who’s deceiving himself” (Halberstam 1979, p. 59). As one of the media elites, Luce recognized that human beings were not machines, that they could not be completely dispassionate about the issues. After the 1952 presidential election in which *Time* magazine was criticized for vilifying Adlai Stevenson and lionizing Dwight Eisenhower, Luce responded, “Stevenson was not right for the country...therefore it was *Time*’s duty to explain why the country needed Ike. Any other form of objectivity would have been

unfair and uninvolved” (Halberstam, 1979, p. 59). This came to be known as the Luce brand of journalism, which in addition to informing readers, sought to persuade them as well.

Although Luce’s complete control over a media empire is inimical to the ground-up spirit of the blogosphere, his unapologetic attitude towards bias is something that bloggers have attempted to capitalize on. Very few bloggers pretend to be non-partisan or bipartisan because they don’t have a board, investors or public to answer to. They don’t need to broaden their appeal because it doesn’t directly affect their bottom line. Andrew Sullivan (2004), columnist for *The New Republic* and creator of the blog AndrewSullivan.com, argues that this is indeed a media revolution because, “In days gone by, you needed a small fortune to start up a simple magazine or newspaper. Now you need a laptop and a modem” (p. 37). However, we see partisan newspapers stretching back to the earliest days of our republic, right in the middle of our nation’s own Revolution. In New York alone – during the debates on the Constitution in 1787 – there was the *New York Journal*, which published the letters of “Cato,” the alias of a Democratic-Republican, and there was the *Daily Advertiser*, which published the letters of “Caesar,” a Federalist. These newspapers made no secret about their political affiliations.

Political affiliation is a sore subject when it comes to the traditional media. FOXNews purports to be “Fair and Balanced,” but it is blasted by the DNC and others for having a right-wing slant. CNN, before the rise of FOX, was the only 24-hour cable news network and was widely respected. However, many on the right point to Ted Turner’s contributions to the DNC and the Clinton campaign, in exchange for visits to the White

House's Lincoln Bedroom. These prove, they argue, that the man who founded and who still has direct control over that network is an unabashed partisan.

The favorite target of many on the right, however, is Dan Rather of CBS, who by chance, recently had a bad run-in with the right-wing of the blogosphere. Rather released a memo on CBS that supposedly went further in proving that George W. Bush was derelict in his duties as a member of the Texas Air National Guard. Minutes after the memo was posted on CBS.com, bloggers immediately began to look for flaws in it. The main sticking point was the fact that the document was supposed to have been written in the 1970s, long before Microsoft Word had ever been thought of. However, the "th" in the document was superscripted "th", which lead Kevin of WizbangBlog.com, whose career is in the graphic arts to attempt to prove the document was a forgery, because apparently the typewriters that were around at the time the document had ostensibly been made did not have a typeface on it that allowed for a superscript, while Microsoft Word does (Kevin, 2004).

In the past, Rather has drawn much criticism from the right for his supposed bias. Ever since the idea of a "liberal establishment media" was popularized during the Nixon years, Rather has been at the center of the firestorm. While Rather was a White House correspondent, President Nixon fielded a question from an ABC reporter during a press conference, and Rather spoke up, "Mr. President, Dan Rather, CBS News. Mr. President..." and the crowd in the room began to both jeer and applaud. The President asked Rather if he was running for something, to which Rather replied, "No, Mr. President, are you?" This sparked off a long spate of battles Rather would come to have with Republican politicians, including an interview during the Iran-Contra affair with

then Vice President George Bush. More recently, in 2001, Howard Kurtz, the media critic for the *Washington Post*, revealed that Rather had spoken at a fundraiser for the Travis County, Texas Democratic Party and helped them raise upward of \$20,000. So, it was with great glee that right-wing bloggers, and there were many, including one called *RatherBiased.com* – which attempts to expose Dan Rather’s supposed liberal bias – were able to chastise Rather for his irresponsibility in airing what was later found to be a forged memo. Even satirical liberal blogger *Wonkette* said, on the occasion of Rather’s retirement announcement, “We’ll mith you, Dan.”

This assault on Rather is a prime example of how the blogosphere continually tries to assert its role as a watchdog of the mainstream media. However, Chris Satullo, the editorial page editor of the *Philadelphia Enquirer* warned bloggers to be wary of “the Orwellians,” as he dubbed those who utilize blogging as a means of propaganda, or who have motives other than those they have made explicitly known. He notes that:

In the public forum, overuse has drained meaning from the cry of “Bias!” Often, all it denotes is: “What you reported does not conform to my assumptions.” Or worse: “What you reported, while true, does not advance my agenda.” (2004)

The “Bias!” argument is one of the most common arguments used. However, if CBS were to one day come out and admit that it does indeed have a liberal bias and FOXNews was to suddenly drop its “Fair & Balanced” slogan, would we be better off? Would the attacks against journalists like Rather continue?

Jay Rosen, the Director of the School of Journalism at New York University, who ‘fisked’ (a phenomenon I will explain later) Satullo’s article claims on his blog, *PressThink*, that “the war against Rather and crew would go on, but not on the grounds of bias. It would switch to the defeat of ‘CBS liberalism’ itself” (2004). Whether this would be the case or whether the right would instead claim victory remains to be seen.

However, we will undoubtedly continue to see claims of bias rise up from both sides of the blogosphere, as well as cries to defeat the liberal-dubbed ‘corporate, right-wing media establishment’ and cries from conservatives to put an end to the ‘east coast, liberal-elite media establishment.’

One feature unique to blogs that will remain a staple for the foreseeable future is ‘fisking’. Fisking is a method by which bloggers fact-check articles, government documents and speeches by politicians. The name is derived from a British war correspondent named Robert Fisk, who has in the past been accused of having a blatantly anti-American bias in his coverage as well as sloppy fact-checking. So, what bloggers do – in Fisk’s honor – is “to disprove [a document] loudly, point-by-point” (Welch, 2003, pp. 21-26). They will take an entire document, block-quote a chunk of text, then comment on that, using links to informational sites that either disprove facts put forth in that chunk of text or completely refute its premise from an editorial standpoint. The merits to this type of editing are mainly to prevent Professor Kerr’s first point, that reporters must present their information quickly and concisely and often make large factual errors. Bloggers are eager and enterprising beings. They will never pass up an opportunity to show up a seasoned journalist with only a few taps of their keyboard and a click of their mouse. To them, the fact that they are amateurs is something they wear as a badge of honor. They contrast this with the degrees and years of experience so many reporters have, and when they are able to disprove one of them, this is a real point of pride.

This brings up the question of whether bloggers, in addition to being watchdogs of the press, should receive any merit for their criticisms of professionals and life-long

civil servants in the government. One instance where this question came up was this past year in Iraq. A group of American civilian contractors had been captured, burned alive and hung from a bridge, where their burnt bodies were brutally displayed. There was immediate public outrage in America – and across the civilized world – over both the act of brutality and its display. However, Markos Moulitsas Zúniga, who runs the well-known liberal blog, *Daily Kos*, laid out a different sentiment:

I feel nothing over the death of mercenaries. They aren't in Iraq because of orders, or because they are there trying to help the people make Iraq a better place. They are there to wage war for profit. Screw them. (2004)

This comment immediately caused him to be removed from the DeanForAmerica blogroll – a list of links to bloggers who supported Howard Dean's candidacy for president – and was chastised by many right-wing bloggers like Charles of *Little Green Footballs* who said Kos “couldn't restrain his joy over the gruesome deaths of four of his fellow citizens yesterday” (2004). Although this post did spur a debate over what is acceptable in the blogosphere and clearly demonstrated how the blogosphere is self-policing in terms of what it will and will not allow in its public sphere, there was a larger issue at hand. Kos was second-guessing the Pentagon's decision to send private security forces into Iraq. Although Kos is former military and it would be expected that he would know a thing or two about combat, in his emotional and spontaneous reaction, he missed several logical points. As Deborah Avant pointed out in *Foreign Policy* magazine – a source that is not a part of the blogosphere, but employs writers with impressive credentials in international relations and defense studies – the idea that contractors value profits more than peace is a fallible argument because “employees of private military companies have rarely been accused of aggravating conflict intentionally to keep profits flowing” (2004, p. 22). Also, she argues that “military contractors can enhance the power

of individual states” like the United States, which is “managing the chaos in Iraq with fewer troops than it thought would be necessary by increasing its personnel pool” (p. 28).

There have, however, been several instances where the blogosphere has rightly second-guessed the government and been successful in effecting positive change. For example, there were reports in the beginning of the Iraq War that the Pentagon was not supplying enough body armor to our troops in Iraq. The mainstream media initially ignored this story. However, after bloggers who had family in the military, coupled with critics of the Bush Administration, and in particular, those who focus their ire upon Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, started to make noise about the issue, the larger news outlets paid more attention to the story. Once the Defense Department began to feel the public pressure, it issued a defensive press release through the “American Forces Press Service” – the official newspaper wire service of the American military. It stated:

The Army and Marines are rushing to get enough body armor into Iraq and Afghanistan by December for everyone who needs it, as fast as it comes off the assembly line. (Williams, 2003)

The Pentagon then ratcheted up its efforts, and now, has fully equipped our troops serving in Afghanistan and Iraq with the latest body armor.

Whether bloggers will serve as “muckrakers” in the future, effecting positive change, or whether they will be a continual thorn in the side of journalists and governments that are simply trying to do their respective jobs the best they can, remains to be seen. This type of journalism is not a new thing, as I have tried to show. What happened was that we seemed to lose the democratic spirit of the type that blogging engenders since shortly after the end of our country’s Revolution. Blogging has brought to the fore what is a purely democratic medium – the internet. The question now is whether or not bloggers will be able to rekindle that level of civic responsibility and

citizen participation in government and political discourse. Also, there is uncertainty as to whether bloggers will steal the spotlight from traditional media and supplant them as the main pipelines of information to the public. Then, if this were to happen, the question should be asked whether that would somehow make them less pure, more or less prone to mistakes, or even turn them into the mainstream media that they supplanted. What is certain though, is that bloggers are a force to be reckoned with, and they do not look like they are going away anytime soon.

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