

**Liberal Wieners, Right-Wing Nut Jobs:
Blogs and the 2004 Election**
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According to Merriam-Webster Inc., the most-looked-up word in 2004 was “blog,” which the dictionary defines as “a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments and often hyperlinks” (“Publisher”). From July on, the word got tens of thousands of hits. The large number of people looking up this word indicates a shift in the news landscape: a study found that blogs accounted for 21 percent of the news cycle this election (“Slant Point”). With a highly divisive political landscape, advanced technology, and a focus on certain voter groups, the role of these partisan sources increased greatly. From their beginnings as partisan analysis sites, blogs expanded to fundraising tools and multi-directional conversations.

This expansion, however, means that the role blogs played in the 2004 election will most likely not be repeated. The Federal Election Commission recently ruled on political blog advertisements and communication. The FEC chose not to call blogs political actors, instead seeing at least some as legitimate, credible journalists. An original draft of the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on Internet Communications (NPRM) counted blog links to campaign sites – particularly during fundraising pushes – as political contributions, subject to all other FEC guidelines (McCullagh). This development, decried by bloggers of all political leanings, would have stripped blogs of their newfound legitimacy and left them purely individual actors, necessarily separated from the game of tag known as the blogosphere.

The purpose of political blogs has always been that of any news source: to convey important information to the public at large. Due to the personal nature of blogs,

however, the journalist's bias or station's political prejudice quickly gets taken to an extreme. When the audience of a blog is generally politically similar to the blogger, any semblance of "fair and balanced" reporting is forgotten in the quest for quicker, more important, more accurate information. Political blogs give out not only news but opinion, and those opinions are disseminated so well that bloggers act not only as journalists and activists but as pundits. Blogs, due to their individual nature, cannot and will not replace the mainstream media (collective foe of bloggers everywhere) simply because no blog will ever be palatable enough to enough people to become universal must-reads.

It Came from the Internet

One of the first blogs to make a mark on the national landscape was the Drudge Report, a right-wing news site run by Matt Drudge. The site became known for getting anonymous news tips, where readers could tell Drudge any insider information they felt was newsworthy. This system was one of the first examples of moderator-reader interactivity, and it paid off for Drudge. His site was the first source to have information on then-President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky. Within days, the relatively little-known site had become famous.

The other main political action originating on the Internet was the growth of discussion groups and message boards. The original Usenet groups eventually expanded to Yahoo groups, fanlistings, and communities. These groups were more discussion-based than the partisan news sites such as the Drudge Report. Members of the community could post their opinions and ideas without any sort of agenda. These groups were important communities because for the first time, they allowed people with similar

political interests across the country to connect with one another. When these two aspects – partisan analysis and discussion – combined, blogs were born.

Besides news sites and discussion groups, politicians began to create campaign sites. However, these sites were often nothing more than summaries of politicians' platforms with occasional news updates. Of course, the sites usually had ways to donate to the campaign, but those methods were almost completely self-motivated and generally a small source of campaign funds. In fact, the two notable exceptions to this rule before the 2004 election were Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura's campaign and John McCain's 2000 presidential campaign, both of which raised substantial amounts of money online with their mainly grassroots campaigns. Still, campaign sites prior to the 2004 election cycle were mainly novelties to paint candidates as being in touch with modern technology (Cummings).

Internet technology improved from the days of Clinton, of course, but even in the election between Al Gore and George W. Bush in 2000, campaign sites had not advanced beyond basic platform positions of the candidates and occasional news updates. By late 2004, however, even congressional races had blogs. How did this proliferation occur? And what did it mean for the election? The answers can be found in Howard Dean's seminal Blog for America, but they can also be seen in the aftermath of Dean's campaign – the non-campaign-affiliated blogs that kept prominent positions afterward, the convention coverage by both parties, the campaigning and advertising done on blogs, the countdown to the election, and the immediate aftermath.

The Doctor is Online

No one blog had more of an effect on the presidential campaign than Howard Dean's election blog, Blog for America. Started in March of 2003, the blog followed the traditional blog format of posts heavy on links to news combined with analysis of that news. But since Dean was a presidential candidate when his blog started, the underlying message in all posts by him and his staff was the same: vote Dean. By creating a blog similar in content to other left-wing blogs, the Dean webstaff, led by Matthew Gross, were able to establish themselves as a credible blog as well as a campaign site. The morning news roundups had a general spread of stories and opinion pieces – all of which related to Dean's campaign talking points, the short phrases the campaign used to sum up its message. By giving supporters such a straightforward avenue of information, the Dean campaign gave unaffiliated Web surfers immediate access to Dean's platform, something previously impossible.

The Dean Web story, however, starts a bit earlier, with Dean campaign manager Joe Trippi consulting with the designers of Meetup.com and MoveOn.org. Meetup, a site that organizes gatherings for people with similar interests, decided to organize Meetups for Dean, John Kerry, and John Edwards after buzz about their campaigns grew. Many left-leaning blogs posted about these Meetups – one of the more popular sites, MyDD.com, posted about the Dean Meetup specifically, leading to more than 400 people signing up for the Dean Meetup where only about 150 people apiece signed up for Kerry's and Edward's. That initial interest led the Dean campaign to purchase its own Meetup advertising, giving it access to the contact information of the close to 8,000 people who attended Meetups for Dean (Cummings).

Many of those 8,000 people found Blog for America and began using the blog's comment feature to talk to the campaign and to each other. As in most blog comment sections, discussion ranged from comments on the post to links to other articles to general discussion. The Dean blog also had a large number of "trolls," posters who purposely try to disrupt the thread of conversation, usually by insulting Dean, other posters, their actions and plans. Whenever this happened, or whenever the campaign was attacked or facing trouble, one cry dominated the comment section of Blog for America: "Break out The Bat!"

The Bat was Dean's most effective fundraising tool. Similar to the large thermometers often used in public fundraisers, the Bat appeared when the Dean campaign wanted to raise a lot of money in a short period of time – as Federal Election Commission deadlines approached, when the campaign was being attacked, when the campaign got endorsements or breaks ("Thank You" bats), or once, memorably, when Dean bested George W. Bush's campaign at meal-fundraising. Dick Cheney held a \$250,000 lunch for a select number of supporters on July 28, 2003. When the Dean campaign got wind of the event, up went the Bat. Dean raised over \$500,000 in four days by posting a picture of himself eating a \$3 turkey sandwich and putting up the Bat. With its regular (and sometimes unscheduled) updates, the Bat was a real-time, interactive fundraising tool. As posters in the comment sections followed its progress and asked for more updates, Dean staffers did what they wanted. Eventually, commenters asked for – and got – individual bats. And the communication was used equally by the Dean campaign – on November 4, 2003, the campaign broke precedent once again. Having already raised over \$25 million, Dean posted a question to his supporters: should he forgo Federal Election Commission

matching funds in an attempt to have a bigger war chest later in the campaign? The Deaniacs said yes, and Dean stood by their decision.

Individual bats and fundraising votes were only part of the interactive technology the Dean campaign employed. Trippi hired a consultant from liberal activist site MoveOn.org to improve the blog. Soon features such as DeanSpace and Chat for America gave supporters new ways to connect. The focus on individuals and their contributions to the campaign – many posts featured individual supporters and their actions – left an expansive but dedicated group of individuals.

So, what did these individuals do after Dean dropped out of the presidential race, and, just as importantly, what did the blog do? In March of 2004, Dean for America became Democracy for America, a grassroots organization designed to promote progressive values. And they had a blog – Blog for America. By keeping the same blog, the Dean campaign was able to stay involved in the presidential campaign even after he was no longer running.

After the Dean blog proved itself a major fundraising and networking tool, the other candidates in the race scrambled to set up their own blogs. Kerry, Dick Gephardt, and Edwards all came up with their own versions of the Bat, with varying degrees of success. Since their bases were smaller, however, their drives were less successful. In addition, since their blogs were started later, Dean had a jumpstart on Internet supporters. His online base had always been bigger than the other candidates', and that was reflected in their blogs. The disparity was also reflected in Bush's blog and stayed part of the nominees' blogs throughout the campaign. Both Kerry and Bush's blogs were less feedback-centered than Dean's campaign blog; they presented talking points similar to

the way Dean pioneered, and they also had fundraising – most notably, when Kerry raised \$11 million the opening weekend of Michael Moore’s incendiary “Fahrenheit 9/11.” In addition, neither Kerry’s blog nor Bush’s had the staying power of Dean’s, as both have stopped posting. In fact, Bush’s blog is now completely offline – his campaign site, GeorgeWBush.com, now links to the Republican National Committee’s site. The archived posts of Kerry’s blog are still online, but nothing has been posted since Kerry’s concession speech. During Dean’s heyday, many commenters wondered what would happen to Blog for America if Dean won – would he have blogged from the White House? It appears that Bush does not plan on continuing his campaign’s blog – if a future candidate chooses to do so, blogs will doubtless evolve to include the bully pulpit of an elected official’s blog.

Of Ads, Analysis and Activism

Blog for America, while groundbreaking, was far from the only observer of the election, of course. Non-party-affiliated blogs from all sides of the political spectrum wrote copiously during the election cycle. Blogs such as DailyKos.com and Atrios.com on the left and BlogsforBush.com and Instapundit.com on the right followed standard blog posting behavior: newslinks and analysis, with plenty of discursive commentary. However, two new technological developments affected discussion blogs just as they affected campaign blogs: Meetup and advertising. Meetup’s importance to these blogs was the same as it was to campaign blogs; it gave them an opportunity to do something more than sit around discussing politics. The development of targeted advertising for blogs, however, was far more important.

Most of the original advertisements on the Internet were pop-ups or ads unrelated to the content of the site, both of which tend to be fairly ineffective forms of advertising. But during this election cycle, blogs began finding other ways to advertise. Many blogs began advertising for political causes they supported, and instead of pop-ups, they advertised along the sides of their posts. This system allowed for more and cheaper ads that their readers were more likely to visit. By further emphasizing the politics of a blog and by being a viable means of support, partisan ads on blogs were, in many senses, a positive development.

Another important activist development in blogs came from Blog for America in the form of the Dean Dozen, a collection of candidates for various races across the country who exemplified, in Dean's mind, Democratic values. Blog for America asked Dean's supporters to give money to these candidates, many of whom were running in close districts or states. Daily Kos came up with its own list, the Kos Dozen. Not all of these candidates won, but many of them did much better than expected, mainly due to the outpouring of support (and money) from blog readers outside their constituencies. By focusing readers' energy on specific races, Kos and Dean were able to effectively run national campaigns for local races.

Conventionpalooza

Television ratings for the Republican and Democratic conventions on the major networks were down this year, partly because there was less coverage, partly because more people watched cable, and partly because blogs were respected members of the media. Both parties granted several "big-name" blogs passes to the convention (and many "small-name" blogs got their readers to raise money to send them to the convention

anyway). The blogs tried to set up Tech Alley, similar to the Spin Alley seen after debates, to give themselves a place and purpose at the conventions. However, while the fact that they covered the conventions live was a boost in credibility, it did not necessitate automatic boosts in site hits or popularity. Still, bloggers' presence at the conventions (and, of course, in a segment on "The Daily Show") meant that they had gained a degree of respect.

Look What I Found: Blogs and the Mainstream Media

One of the major scandals that rocked the Kerry campaign was a series of attacks by a group called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. In TV ads – and also on their blog – Vietnam veterans claimed that Kerry's war medals were undeserved. A few months later, bloggers figured out that CBS' documents in a story on President Bush's military record were unreliable. The CBS story was broken on the right-wing blog Power Line and was quickly picked up by others, including LittleGreenFootballs.com and Slantpoint.com (Grossman). (This echo effect is common in the blog community, as humor blogger Adam Felber notes.) And several anti-Swift Boat sites sprang up as the scandal dominated the mainstream news cycles. By observing the media they use, bloggers were able to hold the media accountable in a way previously impossible.

Just as bloggers watched the media, they were also able to influence it through entertainment. In late spring, the humor animation site JibJab.com posted a new video, "This Land," a parody of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" sung by Kerry and Bush. The song poked fun at the candidates and their campaigns with lines like, "You're dumb as a doorknob/You got that Botox/But I still won three purple hearts!" (Spiridellis).

The video quickly became an Internet sensation – so much so, in fact, that the site’s creators debuted their next animation on “The Tonight Show.”

Another example of blogs affecting the mainstream media came when rapper Eminem promoted his new album by creating an online video for his song “Mosh,” an anti-Bush, anti-Iraq video. The video was created in collaboration with GNN.com and was quickly posted on many left-wing blogs. But bloggers and readers didn’t merely watch the video. That afternoon, the video appeared on MTV’s video request show “TRL” thanks to the many requests of the blogging faithful. Blogs had seemingly proven themselves an important political voice, and media commentators watched for what they would do as Election Day neared.

Election Spike

On Election Day, both blogs and the mainstream media outlets were prepared for any situations. Partisan blogs warned that the election would be long, arduous, contested, and (according to the left-leaning blogs, anyway) potentially dangerous to democracy. All day long, bloggers posted stories of individual voters, plans for the future depending on the outcome, and, of course, exit polls. Bloggers, just like other media makers, had access to all the exit polls and election projections of polling organizations. And they posted all of them. However, each exit poll came with a disclaimer that they were not entirely reliable. Blogs recognized that the information they were spreading was partially unreliable (and, after the election, some media sources took them to task for that). As the polls closed and states were called, blogs – along with TV, radio, and online news sources such as CNN.com – dutifully reported them, always spinning in one direction. As the night wore on, most bloggers stayed up.

Eventually, however, Kerry's blog posted his concession speech; Electoral-vote.com finished coloring in its map. The election was over, and, like other media sources, blogs were left struggling to find reason in the outcome. As analysis tools, left-leaning blogs especially tried rationale after rationale to explain Bush's victory, focusing more on that than on their activist roles. Eventually, however, liberal blogs accepted Kerry's defeat (partly through cathartic sites such as SorryEverybody.com, a site of pictures sent in by voters apologizing for Bush's win) and went back to activism, touting the still-not-decided Washington governor's race and several Louisiana runoff elections, as well as the challenges in Ohio, as areas where readers could get involved. The grassroots activists on both sides tried to continue their work – Howard Dean's Meetups continue on the first Wednesday of every month. But interest in blogs, while down since the election, has remained relatively high. Josh Marshall of TalkingPointsMemo wrote that he saw no downslide in activity at his site, although he expected it. Bloggers continue in their roles as analysts and activists, and while fundraising has diminished in importance (though the Washington gubernatorial election did mean an e-mail to Blog for America supporters), partisan advertising on blogs has continued.

Looking forward

What, then, will be the future of blogs? Utilized as biased news, analysis, organizing, and fundraising tools by all sides during the election, how will those roles change in a non-election year? In the months after the hype over the election has died down, blogs have become more heavily focused on analysis, using the talking points method of Blog for America – news stories used to back up partisan points. But the future is not all complacent posting. An oversaturated readership and overachieving blogs have

led to a bloated blogosphere, one that must find new ways of attracting readers to become more viable in the next electoral cycle. While there was no overarching goal for blogs this election, every media source wants a bigger audience. While blogs had 21 percent of the news cycle this election, they want more. For them to achieve that, however, bloggers must retool the way they work.

The future of blogs lies in the development of nonpartisan blogs and compartmentalized blogs. Currently, the biggest blogs on either side discuss anything and everything, from the war in Iraq to the economy to, occasionally, Atrios' cat. Not all readers read every post, and fewer still comment on every post, but the overload of information on every blog means that readers must search to find something they want to read. Current blog readers are willing to do this, but a more expanded audience will not want to. Even the Kerry campaign could not keep up with all the relevant political blogs, and so Kerry adviser Peter Daou created DaouReport.com, a summary of important posts on mainline blogs. By centralizing information in this way, Daou Report is establishing a sensible precedent for blogs – one-stop news and analysis shopping for people at any point on the political spectrum.

However, even the Daou Report has a gargantuan list of blogs that it scans daily. Blogging software is very democratizing in that anyone can create a blog. However, when everyone speaks, no one is necessarily listening. The blogroll (list of blogs the moderator or poster feels are worthwhile) at Blogs for Bush includes over 200 blogs. With so many blogs and a finite number of people currently interested in them, a hierarchy quickly emerges, with only a few sites at the top that most people view. To truly level the blogging field and ensure that blogs serve as analytical, relevant,

groundshaking political sources, blogs must examine their goals and purposes. The blogging revolution may not have been televised, but it was posted. And as long as bloggers continue to Meetup, donate, and write, they will remain a constant, but not necessarily credible, voice in American politics.

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