



UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

The Web: Blogs reshaping political news

By Gene J. Koprowski
United Press International
Published 6/16/2004 12:30 PM

A series by United Press International examining the global telecommunications phenomenon known as the World Wide Web.

--

CHICAGO, June 16 (UPI) -- Where else but on opinionjournal.com, the hilarious, biting blog produced by the editorial page of The Wall Street Journal, could you read commentary that describes Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., the presumed Democratic nominee for president, as a "haughty, French-looking caged hamster, who by the way served in Vietnam?"

That site and other blogs -- a contraction of Web logs -- are becoming increasingly popular and are transforming the way sophisticated, often satirical political commentary is being presented and consumed during this presidential election year.

Not quite pure news, not quite salacious rumors, blogs are something of both.

Operated by leading news organizations, such as Dow Jones, or independent opinion writers, including professors at elite universities as well as political candidates themselves, blogs often are the first places political news junkies are turning each day for a truncated-but-opinionated take on the day's doings.

Blogs can provide hyperlinks to important reports that have been posted by other news organizations on their Web sites, and original commentary on the meaning of the developments.

"It certainly isn't journalism, and it isn't quite gossip," Alex Halavais, an assistant professor of communications at the University of Buffalo, told United Press International. "But it is moving opinion leadership into the online world."

Rather than allow the New York Times, Washington Post, or Los Angeles Times to set the agenda for discussion on a particular day, the blogs pick and choose news stories -- often from the inside pages of smaller papers or magazines, or even other online sites, to shape their readers' view of the world.

One-time Democratic presidential front-runner Howard Dean ascended to national prominence largely on the strength of his blogs, and their cantankerous take on Bush administration policies.

"Dean is going to be pointed to for a long time as the pioneer of a new, interactive method for voters to speak to each other," said Paul Gronke, chairman of the political science department at Reed College, a leading liberal arts school, in Portland, Ore. "What I find fascinating is that his campaign has ended, but his blog is still alive -- the Blog for America," he told UPI.

Most of the information about the influence of blogs is qualitative -- anecdotal, based on what readers say about the sites. But before the Democratic primary season was completed this past spring, one software developer tested the reliability of blogs run by political candidates and gleaned some interesting results that may continue to play out in the fall.

"Blogs run by the campaign of President George W. Bush and Sen. Kerry were the most effective," said Joe Alwan, vice president of marketing at Empirix Inc., a Web applications software developer in Waltham, Mass. "They had a 100 percent reliability. The blog run by the campaign of (Sen. John Edwards, D-N.C.) had only a 50 percent

reliability," he told UPI.

Former Vermont Governor Dean maintained about a 98 percent reliability rate for his Web blogs, the study demonstrated.

Empirix tested the sites by sending electronic queries to them during a set period of time, and often received error messages saying, for example, the "Apache Web server was down" for Edwards, Alwan said.

This could have been interpreted as a signal to some Internet savvy voters that the candidate just did not care enough about reaching them online, in the way in which they wanted to be reached. The reaction is similar to the way customers become turned off if an e-commerce site is not working properly, said Pete Cruz, director of Web applications management for Empirix.

"The point is that blogs are now important in politics, and they need to make sure that their sites are working," Cruz told UPI. "For Edwards, the blog became a liability to his campaign. Users who visit expect performance. A lack of performance is more likely to alienate users."

Another interesting point: Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., did not have a blog on his site and did not perform well in any of the Democratic primaries, the Empirix survey concluded.

Technologists are planning to take a look at the blogs operating this summer at the Democratic National Convention and see how they fare.

Blogs have been evolving for a few years, though thousands apparently are being launched daily now.

Some individuals not on the pundit radar screen of magazines, such as The New Republic or The National Review, have placed blogs online and are making a name for themselves. They are even making some money, selling advertising on the sites.

One such would-be pundit site is the eponymous DanielDrezner.com, produced by an assistant professor of political science at the University of Chicago. His site's tag line is, "politics, economics, globalization, academia and pop culture ... all from an untenured perspective."

A recent posting mentioned the Sarbanes-Oxley law -- a federal measure intended to improve governance of corporations. The blog site said discussion of it was interesting, but not quite as thrilling as reading about the next role for actress Kristin Davis, who starred on HBO's now-ended "Sex and the City" series. The article also featured a link to a JPEG head shot of Davis.

The site also features blogads -- banner advertisements -- including one from a Web site called, RightWingStuff.com. One such ad hawks bumper stickers and other paraphernalia, calling the American Civil Liberties Union the "enemy of the state" and showing the letter "C" in the ACLU logo as a Soviet hammer and sickle.

Another aspiring pundit site is called the OneTrueBix.com. Located in Portland, Ore., it is produced by a local citizen who regularly attends city council meetings, zoning meetings and the like, and presents these routine events from an alternative perspective.

"The editor now has press credentials," Gronke said.

There are other local blogs in the Portland area and in other cities, too.

Wonkette.com emerged from obscurity and was picked up by a legitimate Web publisher. It is known throughout Washington, D.C., for its saucy view of politicians who take themselves too seriously.

The Wall Street Journal launched its blog, the Best of the Web, during the 2000 election campaign. The next year, editor-in-chief James Taranto began taking a byline on the column for his original commentary on the news.

"I think of it as a column in blog format," Taranto told UPI. "It refers to other things on

the Web, and comments on things that I've seen."

The site, which often is quite funny and insightful, posted a link the other day to an article in The New York Times describing John Kerry as a "caged hamster," as he was bursting to get out of the virtual cage that is the modern presidential campaign.

Taranto had some fun with that line, combining it with a running joke on his site that describes the senator as "haughty, and French-looking," and ridicules Kerry's continued allusions, on the campaign trail, to his four months of combat experience in Vietnam, by ending almost every reference to the senator with the snarky expression, "who by the way served in Vietnam."

The references to being "French-looking" apparently annoyed Kerry, who has French ancestry and who summered in France as a youth. But such reactions serve as a motivator for Taranto, a gleeful warrior of words.

"I thought the response was overwrought," Taranto said. "Nobody understood that we were just trying to be funny."

Taranto said other, more liberal writers have launched blogs specifically targeting him. Someone even bought a domain name -- with his name in it -- for a site. "It's flattering, really," he said.

Sometimes blogging -- as the process is called -- can get somewhat complicated, such as when bloggers reference items found other blogs, not just the mainstream media. For example, Taranto recently mentioned DemocraticUnderground.com. That site is a communal blog, which allows individual writers to have their comments posted, anonymously, if they wish, as long as the copy serves to make "conservatives look foolish," per the publisher's guidelines on the site. The site features text calling President Bush the "worst president" ever, and other such remarks, and seeks donations from readers to keep it online.

"Ultimately, it is up to the shopper to decide for themselves if they think the blog is legitimate or interesting or smart," Steve Davis, chairman of the newspaper journalism program at Syracuse University in Syracuse, N.Y., told UPI.

Left or right, fair and balanced -- or not -- blogs now compose a permanent part of the political landscape.

"I think blogs are here to stay," Taranto said.

--

Gene Koprowski covers telecommunications for UPI Science News. E-mail sciencemail@upi.com

Copyright © 2001-2004 United Press International



[Want to use this article? Click here for options!](#)

Copyright 2004 United Press International

Copyright © 2001-2004 United Press International. All rights reserved.

[Home](#) | [Products](#) | [Photos](#) | [About](#) | [Contact](#) | [Press](#) | [UPI Investigations](#) | [Terms](#)