

Don't Blame the Messenger
by Brian Hunt

Who would have thought the simple act of writing something down in a way others could access it would be the latest and most-hyped version of our technological, if not our societal, salvation. Words on screens – even those called blogs – never seemed so, well, word-worthy.

For the purposes of this column, I'll skip the largely-academic arguments about whether or not blogs are real journalism, or whether that ever-expanding phenomenon known as traditional media is better or worse with their inevitable inclusion. I would say that, like most things, it's more about "and" and less about "or".

I'm sure it began simply enough, and it's interesting to see just how blogs have grown. I hear Steven Covey is right now working on the Ninth Habit of Highly Effective People, and he'll sell it as a user name and password to his blog.

To those of us in the word business, all this talk of words is really great. It is, of course, what blogs say that matters, and when some other thing is on the cover of every business magazine and news show, blogs can remain an important part of how we communicate and – for our purposes – how we build communities.

Here, we think a lot about economic development. Do our schools support our businesses? Is our transportation system adequate? How do we grow and attract the jobs that will support the way of living we enjoy in Portland – and in Oregon? There are many ideas, and it's in the sorting out of these where the best plans and implementations come from. These ideas more and more play out not just in meeting rooms throughout the region, to be reported on in print and on broadcast, but are the threads woven through the ever-expanding lists of locally-oriented blogs. And they are open to whoever is interested.

There was recently much publishing and blogging about the Burnside Bridgehead project, the role of public input, and whether or not the Portland Development Commission decided as they could have or even should have. That the blogging became at times personality driven and argumentative doesn't mean its contribution to the debate wasn't healthy. This is part of what public input is about, and blogs can be a great part of the mix.

In the free market of ideas, like other free markets, demand is met with supply. That the supply – in this case blogs – is so vast and varied really only points to an equally vast and varied demand. That range of ideas and how it coalesces within a community is important. And tools that ultimately can foster that will enrich those communities.

Here, as everywhere, there is discussion about the need and value of public input. It is the way we often frame public discussions. Ask many in the business community about Portland's utility-purchasing plans and you'll hear the complaint that city officials don't listen to business concerns. Ask about what should happen to improve education and you'll hear the cries of input and study. We are fortunate in many ways to have so many tools available with which to express our ideas and have other ideas expressed to us.

We, as people, are driven to communicate, and we are sometimes sadly also driven to surround ourselves with thoughts and opinions close to our own. And it's here that blogs get a bad rap. This so-called egocasting scenario is more about demand than supply.

Blogs, like any other source of information, can be abused in isolation. Blaming blogs for supporting a narrowing mindset misses the point – that is, the mind.

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