

2003 Issue No. 07 — New Media Technologies

Weblogs, warblogs, the public sphere, and bubbles

By Garry Thompson

Introduction

Weblogs and the public sphere, part 1

Warblogging, the weblog frenzy that has accompanied the latest Iraq war, has put blogging in the news as never before. It's perhaps an even bigger boost to the genre than the Trent Lott affair. Are warblogs something really new? Or are they just another wrinkle? (O'Reilly)

Blogging—the keeping of weblogs, an electronic genre combining features of news portal, personal journal, and selective index to the world wide web—has made a place for itself as a means of gathering information about and commenting on public and private events. The two examples cited in the O'Reilly conference announcement above, the short-lived scandal in the US over Sen. Trent Lott's nostalgia for segregation, and the flurry of writings in support of or against the second US war against Iraq, demonstrate its potential for modifying and influencing mainstream news coverage.

Since it came to public awareness in the mid-1990s, the Internet has tantalized those interested in communications and media with its potential for realizing Habermas' public sphere.

By “public sphere,” we mean first of all a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public. They are then acting neither as business or professional people conducting their private affairs, nor as legal associates subject to the legal regulations of a state bureaucracy and obligated to obedience. (p. 398)

The term public sphere appears as a kind of buzzword or godterm, inviting nearuniversal approval because of its flexibility in fitting into different (positive) contexts. The public sphere developed in the context of the Enlightenment, changing significantly with the development of democracy along with mass media; subsequent change is all around us with further developments in electronic technology. Habermas distinguishes between “mere opinions” and “public opinion”: the latter requires “a public that engages in rational discussion” (p. 399). Established news organizations are commonly the dominant sources for information needed for the public sphere to flourish; they are, however, almost exclusively one-way channels, and given the social organizations of contemporary Western society too few venues exist for the equivalent of 18th-century coffee-houses and salons.

Weblogs are one type of web text that offer more open participation in an electronic public sphere. In contrast to print and broadcast media, they allow or encourage two-way communication. Much

of what has been observed about the democratic potential of web texts generally applies to weblogs as well. Some of the early research on the text-based Internet (e.g., MUDs, e-mail, chat, IRC) points to characteristics that also apply to weblogs, particularly those which have comment features or which are collectively authored. Weblogs are commonly pseudonymous, with different degrees of disguise ranging from complete concealment to open secret, to persona, to actual professional name—as is common in text-based communications. Depending on the venue, the writers' personae may be highly performative, with irony, satire, sarcasm, and invective commonly present, particularly in communal weblogs such as Fark.com and Metafilter. Patricia Wallace's observation that "The Internet is an identity laboratory" (p. 48) is well illustrated in such cases.

Some features of weblogs are consistent with observations about other Internet texts. They are ephemeral and responsive to what's happening at the moment (faster than print and other media); they offer two-way interaction; they promote group identification and community. This so-called virtual community, however, has good and bad dimensions: it often promotes what Habermas calls "mere opinion" rather than "public opinion" (p. 399). (Regardless of whether the persona is identified by name or pseudonym, weblog audiences have to judge how they contribute to the dialogue on public issues—increasingly the case with mainstream news media as well, as indicated by the conservative tilt in US news media such as Fox News.) Features of group dynamics such as polarization and flaming, particularly on political subjects, are amply represented both across weblogs which refer to each other and within forums on news-oriented websites.

Weblogs are *virtually local*. That is, they are generally written by individuals, giving a singular perspective on their subjects and they attract a specific set of regular readers and those linking to them, making up a virtual community. There are often local references and photos as well but the weblogs themselves are accessible worldwide.

Weblogs as a genre illustrate how new technological capabilities interact with social conditions and institutions to enable new types of media. At this point it is unclear whether they will serve as a counter to media convergence and consolidation, allowing underrepresented and marginalized positions to be represented or whether they will serve to reinforce dominant ideology by multiplying its point sources. If we read selectively, concentrating on weblogs that adopt a serious, responsible tone, we can find aspects of the utopian public sphere invoked by Habermas. If, however, we read more broadly among weblogs, we are likely to find not a public sphere but a lot of bubbles isolating writers by ideology.

Weblogs and the public sphere, part 2

The Internet is open to all (at least all with the electronic resources), and the search results from almost any term or phrase among the three billion indexed on Google reinforce the appearance of electronic democracy. However, with the Internet's increased commercialization beginning in the mid-90s, most audiences experience the Internet as a bifurcation between mostly text-based e-mail, chat, listservs and forums, and mostly hypertext, partly pictorial websites, many of which offer content from established commercial institutions.

Weblogs offer an intermediate form between these. Commonly they incorporate design features resembling those of better-known informational websites--use of tables, layers, or frames to separate content; use of color, images, differing fonts, and other textual design to create visual interest; links as reference points. However, they frequently provide an individualized voice and perspective not evident in news websites, they are sometimes attentive to aspects of news coverage and events absent from mainstream media coverage and their greater political specificity can build audience identification and loyalty. Weblogs use permalinks to refer readers to other weblogs, commonly those which feature related ideological perspectives. Of particular

importance to weblogs is their capacity to facilitate two-way communication through comment features or, more significantly, collective authorship.

A few books and journalistic articles have appeared in the last few years about weblogs but, to adapt T. S. Eliot's phrase, these often get the meaning but miss the experience. Reading around in the best of weblog entries combines something of the feel of first-rate, on the scene reporting, crisp autobiography, intimate personal journals, acute social commentary, beat coffeehouses circa 1956; however, "best" is open to wide subjectivity and most readers' first reactions when browsing weblogs randomly is to say, "What is all this crap?" Weblog authors do not have to deal with editors: all aspects from design to content to fact-checking are done by the author. The result is content which can be highly imaginative and which can be dubious in both accuracy and taste.

The development and form of weblogs supports the libertarian view of the Internet as best left unregulated (except for the structural form of regulation which is code). (See Warnick, esp. pp. 19-61.) There are an estimated half million weblogs— although numbers are necessarily imprecise and subject to fluctuation since most weblogs start up, run a few weeks or months and then become inactive as their authors stop posting. Several books and articles describing weblogs for the general public appeared in 2002, including Bausch, Haughey, and Hourihan's *We Blog* and Rebecca Blood's *The Weblog Handbook*. The term weblog derives from the early function of logging websites, beginning with Jorn Barger's *Robotwisdom* in Dec. 1997 (Blood, p. 3); the phenomenon intensified in 1999 with early bloghosts such as Pitas and Blogger and with articles in mainstream print media. Descriptions for the general public start with generic conventions-- new entries at the top with frequent updates, links to other sites usually in a layer or frame at the side, and generally a personal tone. Attempts to define weblogs by content are readily defeated but defining them by form is as pointless as defining novels by page count and layout.

A representative reaction to this mainstreaming of weblogs (in this case, to Hourihan's article adapted from *We Blog* for O'Reilly) might be that of Stavros, whose comments accentuate the sense of distinction bloggers feel between their genre or medium and mainstream publishing:

How tedious is this, how perfunctory and lacking of any sense of the mad, wild spirit of creativity that is tearing through the souls of (fill in the names or pseudonyms of your favorite bloggers here)? Sorry, Meg, but this piece strikes me as soulless, by-the-numbers, and regrettably keen to dumb things down as much as possible, custom-designed for Big Media to understand and quote it. Calculated to be Just what the Market Wants. My ungracious guess is that it's just what the publishing industry would like to read, before the Blogroots-related book comes out. Antithetical to the spirit of what so many of us, you included, I thought, were doing... (Emptybottle)

Weblogs are indexed—among other places, by the MIT Media Laboratory's Blogdex, allowing researchers and other curious folk to examine traffic between weblogs and outside to websites and news items referenced. Weblogs link to each other, providing an objective if imprecise means of forming a canon or pecking-order.

Weblogs exist somewhere on a spectrum between electronic journals which treat the writer's own life and times and journalistic sites which adopt a pose of relative objectivity familiar from other media. The central defining characteristic of weblogs, however, is links to other sites, regardless of whether link density is high ("filters" or pure references to locations by topic) or low ("blogs" or personal journals with a few references). Beyond this it is risky to generalize: Cameron Marlow, Blogdex's creator, notes that "For every generalisation you make, there are a thousand new weblogs to undermine your theory". (Lane)

At their best, weblogs can offer not only the quality of interchange and public discourse anticipated in early discussions of the Internet but also can have significant influence on mainstream coverage of news events. We can trace these qualities through two sets of news

events in late 2002 and early 2003, the brief but intense scandal in the United States over remarks made by then-majority leader Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.) at the birthday celebration for the retiring (now late) 98-year-old Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.), and the various weblogs offering commentary leading up to and into the second Gulf War.

Weblogs and public events, part 1: the Trent Lott affair

Media critics, liberal, conservative, and otherwise, have attacked mainstream media for blurring supposedly objective reporting and political views because of ideological or commercial bias. The expectation that there can be such a thing as objective reporting is an ideal created and sustained through the professionalization of journalism. Beginning in the 20th century, however, news media in the US tended to avoid explicit political positions in news coverage (in the US, the reversion by Fox News and talk radio to explicit conservative positions has been a counter-trend). By contrast with the still-current ideal of objectivity, weblogs generally offer little pretense about their politics. Several political weblogs not only offer incisive comment on public affairs but in some instances have begun an avalanche of critical commentary with repercussions on mainstream coverage and public affairs.

Sen. Trent Lott, who until December 2002 was the Republicans' leader in the US Senate, offered a birthday toast to the retiring Sen. Strom Thurmond. As a fellow Southerner, Lott reflected on the 98-year-old Thurmond's political history, which included a third-party presidential candidacy as a "Dixiecrat" opposed to integration and equal rights for blacks and whites. Initially Lott's Dec. 5 tribute passed without much notice until weblogs began to point out its implications, drawing attention from mainstream news media. Among the first of these was Joshua Micah Marshall:

"I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had of followed our lead we wouldn't of had all these problems over all these years, either".

Oh, what could have been!!! Just another example of the hubris now reigning among Capitol Hill Republicans. (Marshall)

This entry was followed closely by Atrios on the website, Eschaton, which not only reproduced Lott's comment but added documentation in the form of a ballot from 1948 and some of the Dixiecrat party's platform language. (As shown by websites such as The Smoking Gun, The Memory Hole, and other examples, the web is very well suited for reproducing visual documentation in this fashion.

While sites from the political left were the first to offer comment, they were quickly followed by political conservatives Glenn Reynolds of Instapundit and Andrew Sullivan, among others. Instapundit posted comments (mostly references to Atrios, Josh Marshall, and press coverage) on Dec. 6 and Dec. 7, 2002.

Andrew Sullivan, from Dec. 9, 2002:

TRENT LOTT MUST GO: After his disgusting remarks at Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party, it seems to me that the Republican Party has a simple choice. Either they get rid of Lott as majority leader; or they should come out formally as a party that regrets desegregation and civil rights for African- Americans. Why are the Republican commentators so silent about this? And the liberals? (Josh Marshall, to his credit, states the obvious. And Bill Kristol, to his great credit, expressed disbelief.) And where's the New York Times? (Sullivan)

While Sullivan and Instapundit are well known among bloggers, the general public, even the general on-line public, is less likely to encounter them—so wider attention came as the on-line

journals, Salon (which at that time still offered free access to some of its content) and Slate, covered the controversy in its early stages. Joe Conason, who keeps a journal on Salon, referenced the speech the day after. On Dec. 9, Conason commented angrily on the absence of coverage in mainstream news outlets such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, and NPR. Slate's house weblogger, Mickey Kaus, weighed in with comments Dec. 10 on Lott's attempts at damage control and Dec. 13 on other bloggers and the possibility of "triumphalism":

The only downside I can see to Lott relinquishing his leadership post is the revival of "blogger triumphalism" that will follow. Though blogs (e.g. Atrios, Josh Marshall, Tim Noah, Sullivan, and Instapundit) took the lead in blasting Lott -- while the NYT's Guilty Southern Liberal Howell Raines, hilariously, was asleep at the switch when a real 60's-style civil rights controversy came along -- wouldn't Lott eventually have gotten into big trouble for his remarks even if the Web didn't exist. (Kaus)

News coverage multiplied, to some extent, a few days after the firestorm began as the result of signals from the White House that it would not be averse to Lott's stepping down as Senate majority leader (though not as senator). Compared to weblogs, mainstream news reporting was necessarily slower—for example, Time's Karen Tumulty wrote on Lott's segregationist past on Dec. 12. While it is impossible to quantify or trace precisely the effects that weblogs had in this case, they seem to have served to alert enough mainstream reporters to the significance of Lott's statement to allow for a crossover into mass media. From that point, political forces seized on the opportunity to remove an inconvenient figure from Republican political leadership.

Weblogs and public events, part 2: war coverage

Tracing news coverage about the Lott affair is much simpler and more straightforward than with coverage of the Iraq war. Firstly, the time frame is much more limited, ranging from the Dec. 5 birthday party until Lott's resignation as majority leader on Dec. 20. By contrast, discussions about war against Iraq began almost as early as the 9/11 attacks and were certainly in the news as early as March 2002 (see, for example, Borger). And war in the Middle East is intrinsically more important than a controversial statement by a US senator. The corpus of texts is therefore much larger than in the Lott affair. Weblogs proved significant as venues for organization (mostly antiwar) and for war support and the satisfaction of venting (both pro- and antiwar). Numerically those publications that came to be known as warblogs probably included more supporters of the US war than opponents. (Note that use of the term warblogs by no means indicates support of the war.)

Warblogs can be categorized roughly as follows: participant or observer blogs; prowar commentary / filter blogs; antiwar commentary / filter blogs; weblogs on other aspects such as military strategy or media observation. Some of these functions may overlap.

Observer weblogs include those written in the field, whether by those in the (US) armed forces, embedded reporters, Iraqis or others. These would include L. T. Smash mentioned above, reporters such as Christopher Allbritton or Kevin Sites, and Salam Pax of Where is Raed? Allbritton opens his weblog with a cheery, informal greeting:

Hi there! Thanks for stopping in. I'm Christopher Allbritton, former AP and New York Daily News reporter. Last summer I went stumbling around Iraqi Kurdistan, the northern part of Iraq outside Saddam's direct control, looking for stories. (Some might call it "looking for trouble".) Well, I've made it back. (Albritton)

CNN reporter Kevin Sites' blog continued until the fighting started on March 21 (Sites). The pseudonymous Salam Pax posted from Baghdad up until Mar. 24, provoking questions about whether his weblog was genuinely from Iraq or not

(BoingBoing). A comment sent to weblogger Paul Boutin testifies to Salam Pax's existence (Boutin). Posts were interrupted from that date until May 7, when several posts were copied from e-mail into his blog. A sample:

If you are reading this it means that things have gone as I hope and either Diana or my cousin has posted to the blog. One of the funniest things was talking to my boss in Beirut after the war (Thuraya should make an ad saying: "Operation Iraqi Freedom, brought to you in association with Thuraya phones") and him telling me that someone called Diana Moon is bugging us about a certain Salam Pax. I can't even remember telling her where I work. Diana you are the wise oracle of Gotham. [Note: I didn't bug nobody. I sent him one email. Evil Boss Unit is undoubtedly a sexist]. Today while going thru Karada street I saw a sign saying "Send and receive e-mail. Affordable prices" I am checking out the place tomorrow. If the price really is affordable I might be able to update the blog every week or two.

Let me tell you one thing first. War sucks big time. Don't let yourself ever be talked into having one waged in the name of your freedom. Somehow when the bombs start dropping or you hear the sound of machine guns at the end of your street you don't think about your "imminent liberation" anymore.

But I am sounding now like the Taxi drivers I have fights with whenever I get into one.

Besides asking for outrageous fares (you can't blame them gas prices have gone up 10 times, if you can get it) but they start grumbling and mumbling and at a point they would say something like "well it wasn't like the mess it is now when we had saddam". This is usually my cue for going into rage-mode. We Iraqis seem to have very short memories, or we simply block the bad times out. (Salam Pax)

Pro-war weblogs are probably the most numerous category. Some of these include Little Green Footballs, Daddy Warblogs, and others. (To save space, only three entries from the first of these is cited below.)

Little Green Footballs referenced news reports in such a way as to disparage non-Fox-News-style presentation:

Idiot Alert

By the way, we have an infestation of idiots over here, pathetically trying to get someone's attention. THRILL at the accusations of racism! MARVEL at their boneheaded support of terrorists! HURL at their sanctimonious impersonations of ... yes! ... God, Jesus, and H. Goering!

Why is the loony left so lame?

UPDATE: Ah, I see where they're coming from; these foul-mouthed freaks are fans of Atrios. by Charles at 01:44 PM PST

Peace Creeps Plan Manhattan Die-In

If Iraqi terror cells are in this country planning an attack in response to the Iraq War, their most tempting target would have to be Manhattan; the symbolic value of striking the US again in our center of power makes the jihadis salivate.

And at this most dangerous time, infantile, selfish "peace activists" backed by Communists and radical Islamists are planning massive disruptions in Manhattan

tomorrow, including a “die-in” intended to shut down Rockefeller Center.

by Charles at 10:17 AM PST |

Winning Big

If the Wolf Blitzers and Peter Jenningses and Aaron Browns are driving you nuts with their turn-on-a-dime defeatism (did I really hear Blitzer use the word “quagmire” yesterday?), Ralph Peters brings it back to the real world: Winning Big. (Little Green Footballs)

The Atrios reference above is to a consistently antiwar weblog:

Whores

Meet the Press Today

MS. MITCHELL: And I think, as well, that frankly we in the media did not cover the anti-war movement as it was moving along on the Internet. We weren't focused on that. And now, brilliantly, the Pentagon has accomplished the fact with embedding that we're watching the war unfold in slices, if you will, maybe not getting the big picture, but trying to.

MR. RUSSERT: But real time.

MS. MITCHELL: But real time. And so this anti-war debate seems harder to get a handle on. It becomes less “relevant”. Not that it is less relevant, but it is less dramatic. And I think we have to be careful about balancing that, frankly.

MR. RUSSERT: And when we see pictures tonight of American men being executed, Michael Elliot, it's very difficult to have any tolerance for people who are saying, “Wait a minute,” although that is what America is all about.

-Atrios, 6:06 PM (Atrios)

Thumbs Up is Thumbs Down

The Agonist informs us that in the Arab world, the thumbs up sign is not a good thing. So, all the tales of Iraqis greeting our soldiers with that sign may or may not be a good sign...

-Atrios, 12:35 PM

Agonist reference above:

12:31 EST Ok, so it is safe to say, per my Arab and Persian readers that the thumbs up is a big no-no in the Arab and Persian countries. So, next assignment: can anyone find photos on mainstream media sites that show Iraqis happy to see us and greeting us with the thumbs up? (Agonist)

With so many warblogs, pro and con, an index is useful: one such is accessible at Warblogs:cc,

conceived of and created by Christopher Allbritton, George Paine, Sean-Paul Kelley and Mike Hudack. It's designed to provide you with a birds-eye view of Gulf War Redux, the American government and civil liberties issues in the United States. Despite the neutral language, the material cited is consistently antiwar. (Warblogs: cc)

Antiwar sites were used significantly to exchange news about demonstrations leading up to and into hostilities. As with opposition to the war in the West generally, these tended to be more nuanced than the pro-war sites (i.e., some oppose war generally, some oppose American imperialism, some object to the use of war for political gains, some concede justification for some intervention but argue that inspections should be given time to work, and so on).

Mainstream news organizations, particularly in print, gave some attention to the role of the Internet (not particularly to weblogs) in their coverage. Howard Kurtz, the media critic for the Washington Post, is representative:

Just as television replaced the week-old movie newsreels of World War II, the Internet made its mark on this war. . . . There were dozens of war "blogs," or one-person online journals -- the authors ranging from L.T. Smash, the pseudonym for a military officer in the field, to Iraqi dissident Kanan Makiya. The most opinionated war bloggers criticized the mainstream media's coverage, providing an hour-by-hour check on those who once had the megaphone to themselves. (Kurtz)

Adam Pasick speculated that weblogs might gain a foothold in the public consciousness during the second Iraq war. However, early on at least, contrary to some of the anticipatory news coverage, weblogs seem not to have had the level of influence anticipated. The Pew Internet and American Life project issued a report on April 1 which indicated that only 4% of US Internet users read weblogs for news about the war

Weblogs contributed significantly to discussions about the war for some. Those who had a personal or professional stake in staying informed were able to use the Internet's status as a pull-medium to gather news reports and images more or less on demand. As the Pew Internet report indicates, however, most in the US and probably most worldwide continued to rely on television as their chief source, indicating a continuation of the one-way flow of information that characterizes the modern public sphere. (Comments and forums may be more intense because of the pent-up desire to vent at mainstream media.) The Internet was used to supplement television and other reports: "77% of online Americans have used the Internet in connection with the war"—for information, to read and voice opinions, to send emails in relation to the war, etc. A smaller proportion use "email to mobilize others and gain support for their views". (Pew, p. 2)

There were, however, exceptions to Internet news on demand. The Arab news organization Al Jazeera underwent denial-of-service and hacking attacks on its website and the leftist site Yellowtimes.org was briefly dropped by its ISP for carrying photographs of US prisoners of war.

Since the official conclusion of hostilities, weblogs have served a few disgruntled US soldiers as a venue for griping about their extended period of service in Iraq. (See for example A Minute Longer [<http://www.rooba.net/will/>] or A Soldier's Paradise [<http://soldiersparadise.blogspot.com/>], though to be sure these are not primarily "gripes," and blogs kept by US soldiers are generally supportive of military aims). Like other observer/participant warblogs, these serve to give prose and sometimes pictorial accounts of what it's like on the ground—rather like the embedded journalists' perspectives during combat. Because the army has tighter institutional control and ideological influence, soldiers' warblogs generally have not been a source of opposition to the war and subsequent occupation.

Conclusion

Internet texts such as chat and forums are potentially much more open to audience response than print or broadcast media—though they can in fact be filtered intentionally by webmasters or other "Leviathans," (vide Wallace 69 ff.) and ideologically by association with the typical content of the website. The latter feature is responsible for the preponderance of right-wing comments by those

who post to Free Republic, Newsmax, and Instapundit, and of liberal comments on Tom Paine, the Smirking Chimp, the Daily Kos, and so on. (Cross-overs tend to be labeled as trolls, i.e., provocateurs interested in starting a flame war.) Weblogs offer satisfaction to their audiences by reinforcing ideological perspectives as can be seen from the examples above from Little Green Footballs and Atrios. Those who draw information from mainstream media are likely to encounter positions somewhat at odds with their own (even if they are only represented as straw men for a commentator's attacks) whereas, if audiences gravitate to web sites which offer only coherent reinforcement of existing ideological positions, theirs seem natural and right.

The degree of symbiosis between more public-sphere-oriented weblogs and news media suggests that they will prove not to be so revolutionary a change as once thought. However, they do shift the dynamics of news presentation considerably: the sort of news consumer who used to hit the newspaper racks like Holly Hunter's character in *Broadcast News*, the confirmed news junky, who a decade ago might have juggled television, radio, and print sources of information, is now able to supplement or supplant mainstream sources with on-line sources, including weblogs as well as institutional feeds and advocacy sites. Because of the Internet's status as new media, instead of a few prized news sources, more capable of being kept under ideological if not social and political control, there are now hundreds of likely feeds from millions of potential sources.

The result appears to be a further fragmenting and specialization of the public sphere so that for the most part we will have separate zones of discourse with relatively little cross-over—not a positive development for an idealized public sphere. Audiences that relay largely or exclusively on mainstream media will be affected only indirectly. However, there will be issues that cut across the fragmentation and specialization such as a racist political statement or the outbreak of war in the Middle East. Because such issues highlight contradictions within reigning or dominant political forces, they give weblogs a powerful and compelling attraction for those who will not be compliant or silent.

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