

TIME

FROM THE MAGAZINE

Sunday, Jun. 13, 2004

Meet Joe Blog

Why are more and more people getting their news from amateur websites called blogs? Because they're fast, funny and totally biased

By LEV GROSSMAN; ANITA HAMILTON

A few years ago, Mathew Gross, 32, was a free-lance writer living in tiny Moab, Utah. Rob Malda, 28, was an underperforming undergraduate at a small Christian college in Michigan. Denis Dutton, 60, was a professor of philosophy in faraway Christchurch, New Zealand. Today they are some of the most influential media personalities in the world. You can be one too.

Gross, Malda and Dutton aren't rich or famous or even conspicuously good-looking. What they have in common is that they all edit blogs: amateur websites that provide news, information and, above all, opinions to rapidly growing and devoted audiences drawn by nothing more than a shared interest or two and the sheer magnetism of the editor's personality. Over the past five years, blogs have gone from an obscure and, frankly, somewhat nerdy fad to a genuine alternative to mainstream news outlets, a shadow media empire that is rivaling networks and newspapers in power and influence. Which raises the question: Who are these folks anyway? And what exactly are they doing to the established pantheon of American media?

Not that long ago, blogs were one of those annoying buzz words that you could safely get away with ignoring. The word blog — it works as both noun and verb — is short for Web log. It was coined in 1997 to describe a website where you could post daily scribbles, journal-style, about whatever you like — mostly critiquing and linking to other articles online that may have sparked your thinking. Unlike a big media outlet, bloggers focus their efforts on narrow topics, often rising to become de facto watchdogs and self-proclaimed experts. Blogs can be about anything: politics, sex, baseball, haiku, car repair. There are blogs about blogs.

Big whoop, right? But it turns out some people actually have interesting thoughts on a regular basis, and a few of the better blogs began drawing sizable audiences. Blogs multiplied and evolved, slowly becoming conduits for legitimate news and serious thought. In 1999 a few companies began offering free make-your-own-blog software, which turbocharged the phenomenon. By 2002, Pyra Labs, which makes software for creating blogs, claimed 970,000 users.

Most of America couldn't have cared less. Until December 2002, that is, when bloggers staged a dramatic show of force. The occasion was Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party, during which Trent Lott made what sounded like a nostalgic reference to Thurmond's past segregationist leanings. The mainstream press largely glossed over the incident, but when regular journalists bury the lead, bloggers dig it right back up. "That

story got ignored for three, four, five days by big papers and the TV networks while blogs kept it alive," says Joshua Micah Marshall, creator of talkingpointsmemo.com, one of a handful of blogs that stuck with the Lott story.

Mainstream America wasn't listening, but Washington insiders and media honchos read blogs. Three days after the party, the story was on Meet the Press. Four days afterward, Lott made an official apology. After two weeks, Lott was out as Senate majority leader, and blogs had drawn their first blood. Web journalists like Matt Drudge (drudgereport.com) had already demonstrated a certain crude effectiveness — witness l'affaire Lewinsky — but this was something different: bloggers were offering reasoned, forceful arguments that carried weight with the powers that be.

Blogs act like a lens, focusing attention on an issue until it catches fire, but they can also break stories. On April 21, a 34-year-old blogger and writer from Arizona named Russ Kick posted photographs of coffins containing the bodies of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan and of Columbia astronauts. The military zealously guards images of service members in coffins, but Kick pried the photos free with a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. "I read the news constantly," says Kick, "and when I see a story about the government refusing to release public documents, I automatically file an FOIA request for them." By April 23 the images had gone from Kick's blog, thememoryhole.org, to the front page of newspapers across the country. Kick was soon getting upwards of 4 million hits a day.

What makes blogs so effective? They're free. They catch people at work, at their desks, when they're alert and thinking and making decisions. Blogs are fresh and often seem to be miles ahead of the mainstream news. Bloggers put up new stuff every day, all day, and there are thousands of them. How are you going to keep anything secret from a thousand Russ Kicks? Blogs have voice and personality. They're human. They come to us not from some mediagenic anchorbot on an air-conditioned sound stage, but from an individual. They represent — no, they are — the voice of the little guy.

And the little guy is a lot smarter than big media might have you think. Blogs showcase some of the smartest, sharpest writing being published. Bloggers are unconstrained by such journalistic conventions as good taste, accountability and objectivity — and that can be a good thing. Accusations of media bias are thick on the ground these days, and Americans are tired of it. Blogs don't pretend to be neutral: they're gleefully, unabashedly biased, and that makes them a lot more fun. "Because we're not trying to sell magazines or papers, we can afford to assail our readers," says Andrew Sullivan, a contributor to TIME and the editor of andrewsullivan.com. "I don't have the pressure of an advertising executive telling me to lay off. It's incredibly liberating."

Some bloggers earn their bias the hard way — in the trenches. Military bloggers, or milbloggers in Net patois, post vivid accounts of their tours of Baghdad, in prose covered in fresh flop sweat and powder burns, illustrated with digital photos. "Jason," a National Guardsman whose blog is called justanother soldier.com, wrote about wandering through one of Saddam Hussein's empty palaces. And Iraqis have blogs: a Baghdad blogger who goes by Salam Pax (dear_raed.blogspot.com) has parlayed his blog into a book and a movie deal. Vietnam was the first war to be televised; blogs bring Iraq another scary step closer to our living rooms.

But blogs are about much more than war and politics. In 1997 Malda went looking for a "site that mixed the latest word about a new sci-fi movie with news about open-source software. I was looking for a site that didn't exist," Malda says, "so I built it." Malda and a handful of co-editors run slashdot.org full time, and he estimates that 300,000 to 500,000 people read the site daily. Six years ago, a philosophy professor in New Zealand named Denis Dutton started the blog Arts & Letters Daily (artsandlettersdaily.com) to create a

website "where people could go daily for a dose of intellectual stimulation." Now the site draws more than 100,000 readers a month. Compare that with, say, the New York Review of Books, which has a circulation of 115,000. The tail is beginning to wag the blog.

Blogs are inverting the cozy media hierarchies of yore. Some bloggers are getting press credentials for this summer's Republican Convention. Three years ago, a 25-year-old Chicagoan named Jessa Crispin started a blog for serious readers called bookslut.com. "We give books a better chance," she says. "The New York Times Book Review is so boring. We take each book at face value. There's no politics behind it." Crispin's apartment is overflowing with free books from publishers desperate for a mention. As for the Times, it's scrutinizing the blogging phenomenon for its own purposes. In January the Gray Lady started up Times on the Trail, a campaign-news website with some decidedly bloglike features; it takes the bold step of linking to articles by competing newspapers, for example. "The Times cannot ignore this. I don't think any big media can ignore this," says Len Apcar, editor in chief of the New York Times on the Web.

In a way, blogs represent everything the Web was always supposed to be: a mass medium controlled by the masses, in which getting heard depends solely on having something to say and the moxie to say it.

Unfortunately, there's a downside to this populist sentiment — that is, innocent casualties bloodied by a medium that trades in rumor, gossip and speculation without accountability. Case in point: Alexandra Polier, better known as the Kerry intern. Rumors of Polier's alleged affair with presidential candidate Senator John Kerry eventually spilled into the blogosphere earlier this year. After Drudge headlined it in February, the blabbing bloggers soon had the attention of tabloid journalists, radio talk-show hosts and cable news anchors. Trouble is, the case was exceedingly thin, and both Kerry and Polier vehemently deny it. Yet the Internet smolders with it to this day.

Some wonder if the backbiting tide won't recede as blogs grow up. The trend now is for more prominent sites to be commercialized. A Manhattan entrepreneur named Nick Denton runs a small stable of bloggers as a business by selling advertising on their sites. So far they aren't showing detectible signs of editorial corruption by their corporate masters — two of Denton's blogs, gawker.com and wonkette.com, are among the most corrosively witty sites on the Web — but they've lost their amateur status forever.

We may be in the golden age of blogging, a quirky Camelot moment in Internet history when some guy in his underwear with too much free time can take down a Washington politician. It will be interesting to see what role blogs play in the upcoming election. Blogs can be a great way of communicating, but they can keep people apart too. If I read only those of my choice, precisely tuned to my political biases and you read only yours, we could end up a nation of political solipsists, vacuum sealed in our private feedback loops, never exposed to new arguments, never having to listen to a single word we disagree with.

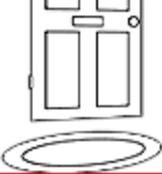
Howard Dean's campaign blog, run by Mathew Gross, may be the perfect example of both the potential and the pitfalls of high-profile blogging. At its peak, blogforamerica.com drew 100,000 visitors a day, yet the candidate was beaten badly in the primaries. Still, the Dean model isn't going away. When another political blogger, who goes by the nom de blog Atrios, set up a fund-raising link on his site for Kerry, he raised \$25,000 in five days.

You can't blog your way into the White House, at least not yet, but blogs are America thinking out loud, talking to itself, and heaven help the candidate who isn't listening.

With reporting by Maryanne Murray Buechner/New York and Leslie Whitaker/Chicago

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— With reporting by Maryanne Murray Buechner/New York and Leslie Whitaker/Chicago

Five Bloggers to Watch

For everything from shrewd political analysis to good old-fashioned gossip, Chris Taylor finds the blogs worth a visit

Drew Curtis / fark.com

ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FARK

Back when the air was still warm inside the dotcom bubble, registering a new Web address meant you harbored a foolproof scheme to make billions. But not Drew Curtis. In 1997 the programmer, based in Lexington, Ky., snapped up fark.com. Why fark? It's a nonsensical word Curtis says he sprinkled randomly in his conversations. By 1999 he had dreamed up a couple of equally random uses for his Web address. One was to create a database of different curries. The other was to use it as a venue for posting the odd pictures and news items he liked to gather and

THIS ISSUE



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ADVERTISEMENT

send to friends in endless, annoying e-mails.

Unfortunately for the world of Indian food, Curtis chose the latter. Now, with at least 5 million readers a month, Fark has become the No. 1 blog for weird and titillating links. It's a supremely simple setup. Every day Curtis posts 20 to 30 of his favorite curiosities with one-line descriptions and a small button to instantly tag the content — the labels range from INTERESTING to OBVIOUS to ASININE. Links to sites and stories you wouldn't want your boss to catch you looking at are helpfully marked "not safe for work."

The site pays for itself with advertising; his wife takes care of Fark's finances. Curtis starts blogging at 7:30 a.m. and is usually done by 9 a.m. The links are timed to appear throughout the day to give the impression that Curtis is hard at work. In fact, he says, "you'll find me in sports bars most of the day."

Fark is a must read at many media outlets, but Curtis doesn't care much about the veracity of news he posts. Earlier this year he linked to a fake story on the Hoosier Gazette, a humor website, about a man in a devil costume disrupting a screening of *The Passion of the Christ*. The Gazette later e-mailed Curtis excitedly to say the story had been spotted on a CNN ticker. Curtis' response? "Kick-ass, that's cool." As the tag line goes: "It's not news, it's Fark."

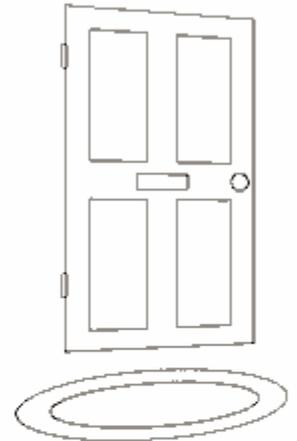
Cory Doctorow / boingboing.net

MR. WONDERFUL'S WEB DIRECTORY

Back in 1988, a group of San Francisco journalists launched **BOING BOING**, an irreverent underground magazine dedicated to pop culture and technology. Almost as an afterthought, they also began a website, for which they called on the services of a writer named Cory Doctorow. Don't bother searching newsstands for the magazine. It's long gone, but the blog boingboing.net — "A directory of wonderful things," as its slogan goes — is more popular than ever. And although it has four main contributors as well as a rotating guest blogger, Doctorow is commonly identified as its author. The reason? "I'm the one least capable of doing things in moderation," he admits.

That's an understatement. While blogging obsessively and free-lancing print articles, Doctorow (who is distantly related to novelist E.L. Doctorow) has also pumped out a novel a year for the past three years. Every morning he gets up before 6 o'clock, does what he calls a round trip of the Internet and starts commenting on whatever he finds interesting. "There are people for whom [BoingBoing] is their daily news sheet," says Doctorow. "It's nice to be the center of attention. But for me, the only reason to do it is to jot down things I think I'm going to find

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MUSIC: With its latest album, Wilco test-drives another new sound, a new lineup and a better mood

TELEVISION: Would you buy a used car from this man? An offbeat doc sees the many sides of a car-lot king

BOOKS: A biography of Dylan Thomas offers a portrait of the artist as a young, drunken, self-destructive man

useful later. It's entirely directed at myself."

So for Doctorow, a blog is many things: a searchable journal, a "magical commonplace book" and an exercise in brevity. He takes pride in being able to summarize a story in as few lines as possible. Just don't call BoingBoing a magazine anymore.

Glenn Reynolds / instapundit.com

BETTER THAN TETRIS

Glenn Reynolds found instant success with his blog in the most somber of circumstances. Instapundit started in August 2001 as a hands-on experiment and part of the Internet-law class Reynolds teaches at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. He figured he might get, at best, a couple of hundred readers. Then came 9/11. As Reynolds saw it, "TV pundits were doing such a terrible job that it turned a lot of people to the Internet." Instapundit was there to welcome them.

Reynolds quickly acquired rock-star status among Web surfers. Not only was he getting thousands of hits a day in the wake of the attacks, but Fox News's website asked him to write a column on the strength of his impassioned Sept. 11 rhetoric alone. A couple of years later, MSNBC offered him a second blog (glennreynolds.com) on its site. Meanwhile, Instapundit kept growing. It gets 120,000 visitors a day, which means more people are reading Reynolds than are watching many of those cable-news talking heads. In February, Wired magazine named Instapundit the world's most popular blog.

Reynolds is notorious within the blogging community for his prolific posting. On an average day, he might make 20 or 30 entries, many of them fairly lengthy and most sharply political, with a conservative bent. "People always ask me how I find the time," says Reynolds. "Basically, I'm a geek. I'm in front of the computer most of the day anyway. It's a substitute for Tetris."

Ana Marie Cox / wonkette.com

BORN TO BLOG

Nobody could accuse Ana Marie Cox of sticking to a job when she's not having fun. The author of Wonkette, the plugged-in must-read Washington gossip blog, has spent much of her career on the outs: being fired from American Prospect magazine (for "not being civil," according to the editor) and quitting book-publishing house Knopf (where she says she was reprimanded for reading at work). Says Nebraska-raised Cox, 31: "It's taken me 10 years to find the thing I was born to do."

MARKETPLACE



For Wonkette, work begins at 7 a.m. "I usually wake up and say, 'Time to make the funny,'" she says, "then stumble to Wonkette world headquarters [her spare bedroom in Arlington, Va.]" Here she writes her daily quota of 12 blog entries (enough to satisfy Wonkette publisher Nick Denton, who also owns New York City gossip blog [gawker.com](http://www.gawker.com)). The subject: whatever Capitol tittle-tattle amuses Cox most.

Funnier than the Drudge Report, snarkier than Lucianne Goldberg's scribblings, Wonkette won't fabricate, but she isn't afraid to satirize. She has doled out awards for "gayest-seeming Bushie" and speculated on the size of John Kerry's member. "I am proud to get hate mail from both liberals and conservatives," she says.

A richer compliment, in her view, is the one that came from Tina Brown. If she were starting out today, the former New Yorker editor told a panel of journalists recently, she would be Wonkette. That might seem strange, given that Cox skewers Brown's Washington Post column every week with a chart translating "Tina-speak" into English. But Cox speaks directly to political junkies in a way that magazine mavens can only dream about. Denton does not edit Wonkette, and Cox is hardly the kind to censor herself — especially not when she's having this much fun.

Rebecca Blood / rebeccablood.net

REBECCA'S HIP POCKET

Everything good in her life, Rebecca Blood will tell you, came from her blog. After she created Rebecca's Pocket in 1999, she got an invitation to speak at a conference called BlogTalk in Vienna. An essay she posted on the history of blogs led to *The Weblog Handbook*, a book that has been translated into four languages and is in its second printing. And when she met the first guy who linked to Rebecca's Pocket, she started dating him.

These days Rebecca's Pocket gets about 30,000 visitors a month. "Blogs become popular by word of mouth," says Blood. "We don't have an advertising budget. But if you're enthusiastic about what you write, that shows through."

So what is Blood enthusiastic about? Well, just about anything. Rebecca's Pocket is filled with rambling, free-associative entries on anything that pops into her mind: politics, culture, journalism, miscellaneous links and film reviews (Cold Mountain: "[I]f I don't cry at the big scene in a movie, something has gone terribly awry" she didn't cry).

But you won't find many personal secrets revealed here. Rebecca says she is a fairly private person who grew up "somewhere in the Midwest" and blogs from her home in San Francisco. "Most women's blogs tend to

be personal diaries." Not hers. Though she did make one exception last year when she and that guy who linked to her site got married. Chalk up one more good thing to come out of this pocket.

Blogs on a Roll

Even before anybody knew what blogs were, they were stirring things up

September 1997

Michigan college student Rob Malda starts slashdot.org, a daily dose of "news for nerds." With half a million visitors a day, it remains a must-read for technology reporters and sci-fi geeks everywhere

January 1998

A story about a White House intern named Monica Lewinsky is posted by Matt Drudge (drudgereport.com), creating a media frenzy. Much debate ensues about the legitimacy of online journalism, demonstrating the medium's power to steer news

Spring 1999

Eatonweb.com launches the first searchable directory of blogs, with about three dozen links. That summer several do-it-yourself blogging programs are released, making it a snap for non — Web experts to publish online. The blogosphere explodes

December 2002

Joshua Marshall's talkingpointsmemo.com and other blogs draw attention to politically incorrect remarks made by Senate majority leader Trent Lott that had been ignored by the mainstream press. Overtaken by charges that he is a racist, Lott resigns on Dec. 20

March 2003

With the start of the war in Iraq, war blogs proliferate, including one created by a 29-year-old architect living with his parents in Baghdad who calls himself Salam Pax (dear_raed.blogspot.com). His gripping insider accounts, written in English, quickly gain an international following

March 2003

Howard Dean's blogforamerica.com, the first ever official campaign blog for a presidential candidate, goes live on March 15. In June officials announce that the blog helped raise a staggering \$7.6 million, and Dean, then the front runner, wins praise for his Internet savvy. The notion of blogs, and blogging, catapults into public consciousness. Political candidates everywhere jump on the bandwagon

January 2004

The birth of the anti-blog: Columbia Journalism Review launches campaigndesk.org, proclaiming that since it will hold the website's

content to the highest journalistic standards, it is not really a blog. Not to be outdone, [NYTimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) launches its blog, Times on the Trail

February 2004

Political advertising on blogs proves to be a surprisingly effective fundraising tool. Kentucky Democrat Ben Chandler rides to victory in a special congressional election after his campaign manager buys \$2,000 worth of ads to run on several popular political blogs. The investment, then considered risky, nets \$80,000 in contributions

March 2004

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. The Washington Monthly hires Kevin Drum of the popular calpundit.com, transplants his blog onto its own website (washingtonmonthly.com) and renames it Political Animal. In a post announcing the move, Drum assures fans, "It will still be me doing the same thing I do here, unedited and unplugged"

How to Find Your Kind of Blog

To navigate the blogosphere, you need the right tools. Here are five sites that make it easy to find, organize and keep tabs on your favorite bloggers:

Kinja.com Launched April 1, this is one of the best ways to sample and automatically subscribe to a wide range of blogs. The site tracks more than 50,000 blogs, divided into 12 categories, from movies to politics to baseball. Click on a subject and up pops a listing of short excerpts from current postings, with the most recent ones listed first. See a blog you like? Simply click on the + button to have it added to your digest, which reads like a personalized online newspaper of new posts from your favorite blogs.

Bloglines.com This site lets you organize your blogs in much the same way that your browser sorts its bookmarks. After creating a free account, you choose the blogs you want to track. There are more than 100,000 to pick from, including headlines from such mainstream sites as NYTimes.com, Slate.com and Yahoo. Each time you log in, the site notifies you how many new postings there are in your favorite blogs and lets you skim headlines. Click on a headline to read the full post.

Feedster.com Regular search engines have trouble keeping pace with the constantly spewing bloggers. Enter Feedster, a search engine dedicated to indexing and finding the particular blogs you are after. Scanning more than 500,000 sources, it presents you with either the most recent posts or the most commented-on blogs (determined by analyzing how many other sites or blogs link to it), whichever you choose. Feedster also lets you save a customized search on, say, petunias and check back hourly or daily to see what the latest postings have to say about them.

[Technorati.com](#) Because blogs tend to be updated more frequently than regular websites, they are a great way to find out what people are talking about online at any given moment. Technorati taps into this phenomenon by listing the top 10 current events, books and general news that people are blogging about. Last Friday afternoon those included Ronald Reagan's legacy, the new David Sedaris book and the prisoner abuse in Iraq at Abu Ghraib.

[Blogdex.net](#) Created by the M.I.T. Media Laboratory, Blogdex presents the most contagious, or fastest spreading, ideas in the Web-log community. If bloggers are pointing en masse to your posting about, say, the situation in Iraq, chances are you'll come up high in the ranking. At press time, the most contagious information, according to Blogdex, was the death of singer Ray Charles and a list of "10 Super Foods You Should NEVER Eat!"

--By Anita Hamilton

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