

Politics has gone to the blogs!

By Bruce A. Love

*I*t's raw, it's informative, it's opinionated, it's instantaneous, it's provocative, and it's in your face. If you have an opinion to express, or a question to ask, jump into the fracas and try the latest forum we have to exercise our right of free speech. A new media has emerged that allows us to express opinions, discuss events, give firsthand accounts of breaking news, and, in general, just add our two cents on just about any given topic. Blogs (short for Web logs) are the modern day equivalent of the soapboxes of old.

*B*logging is an Internet-based communication forum that allows people to comment on just about anything. Blogs exist for every industry, interest, and hobby imaginable. Bloggers (those who blog) respond to the postings of others to express agreement, provide additional information supporting an opinion, answer questions, or refute the accuracy of posted blogs. The entire resulting textual (and pictorial) discussion and debate is indexed and forever recorded into the annals of cyberspace for future reference.

*B*loggers have made a significant impact on the news we read, hear, and see in other media outlets. Days before the mainstream media began to question the motives, sources, and circumstances surrounding the now infamous story reported by Dan Rather regarding George Bush's National Guard record, bloggers were pointing out inconsistencies and expressing doubts regarding the authenticity of documents used in the story. Blogging activity had reached such a feverish pitch that other medias could no longer ignore the demand for an investigation. At times, political blogs can become quite heated and colorful, but nothing that you wouldn't hear on the Pennsylvania State Senate floor (sorry about that Senator Jubelirer!)

*T*wo years prior to "Rathergate" (a blogging term), sustained blogging activity focused mainstream media attention on comments made by Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) when he seemingly endorsed segregationist rhetoric at Senator Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday celebration. That eventually led to his resignation from the post. Today, blogs are used by both pro-Kerry and pro-Bush bloggers to attack and debate the tactics used by the other side.

Not all blogs are the same. Some are extreme right-wing conservative forums while others favor ultra-left-wing liberal bloggers. Finding blogs that represent views from all sides of the political spectrum is more elusive. I found one web log for "undecideds," but there was nothing posted (go figure). Depending on the forums you visit, you will read about the alleged "cheat sheet" used by John Kerry during the first Presidential debate, or the "earpiece" used by George Bush in the second debate. As we discussed recently, don't believe everything you hear in cyberspace (or in some newspapers, radio talk shows, or television broadcasts for that matter).

*P*oliticians are discovering new uses for blogs. Howard Dean and Wesley Clark both used web logs to generate interest and awareness during their Presidential campaigns. The Democratic National Convention also recognized the power of blogs when they invited selected influential bloggers to attend the conference. Their hope, of course, was that bloggers would spread positive reports about the convention to others in the blogosphere.

*B*logs are not literary masterpieces. They are written by average citizens who aren't necessarily the most gifted writers. What they lack in style, however, they often make up for with passion and, in many cases, strong cases for their positions. Some critics have referred to bloggers as "armchair analysts in bathrobes." They charge that blogs are not true journalism, but merely a form of Op-Ed page. While it is true that bloggers often do not have the resources to investigate stories personally, many connect to other groups worldwide that are on the frontlines of breaking stories. If nothing else, the role of bloggers may be to ensure that the mainstream media maintains a "fair and balanced" perspective (or risk provoking the wrath of the bloggers).

*F*or an interesting experience, visit some of the popular blogs. In addition to reading the initiating posts, be sure to read some of the "comments" (there may be hundreds of responses to each posting). During this politically charged season, check out the following blogs to get divergent views on our Presidential candidates:

www.newrepublic.com

www.freerepublic.com

www.littlegreenfootballs.com

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