

THE BLOGGING REVOLUTION

Breakthrough, hype — or both?

By Dan Kennedy

Is blogging the most revolutionary breakthrough in communications since Gutenberg, or the worst case of overhype since cold fusion? Actually, it's both. By making it easy for anyone to publish his or her thoughts to the world, blogging has ruptured the media landscape, giving millions of ordinary citizens a chance to write about their own lives and obsessions and to talk back to power. Yet traditional journalism remains crucial for informing us in an accurate, comprehensive and neutral manner. For all their flaws, only the mainstream media — or the “MSM,” as they are derisively known in blogspeak — have the money and the resources necessary to produce that kind of journalism.

As the former media critic for the *Boston Phoenix*, I've watched and documented how the Internet has changed the way we work. As recently as the mid-1990s, if I wanted to write about how, say, the *Washington Post* covered a story, I had to send an intern to Harvard Square and hope she would come back with a day-old copy. Now, not only is the *Post* instantly available online, but so is virtually every other paper, both in the United States and abroad. This is both a blessing and a curse: the Internet has made it easier for a media critic to do his job, but it has also instilled in readers an expectation that the critic will bring more to the table than would have been possible a decade ago.

The first blogs I read regularly were the [Drudge Report](#) and a site called MediaGossip.com, a compilation of media news put together by Jim Romenesko, a journalist at the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. (Call them proto-blogs: neither Drudge nor Romenesko appears to use blogging software, but, as with most blogs, their sites consist mainly of links and commentary.) Romenesko

eventually was hired by the Poynter Institute, and today his site — known simply as [Romenesko](#) — functions as a virtual water-cooler for professionals and media junkies. Thanks to Romenesko's willingness to link to my articles, I was able to develop a small national audience while I was at the *Phoenix* — again, something that wouldn't have been possible previously.

Over the past few years, hundreds if not thousands of people — some of them professional journalists, most of them amateurs — have started blogs to keep tabs on the media. This is a healthy development; the news media are imperfect instruments of democracy, and the more that people are watching us, the better. But rather than acting as alternatives to the mainstream, as some bloggers think they are, their most effective role is as a complement.

Perhaps the best example of this is the saga of CBS News and the phony documents regarding President Bush's National Guard service last September. It's true that, within days (make that hours), conservative blogs such as [Power Line](#) and [Little Green Footballs](#) showed the documents had most likely been produced on a computer, and not typed in the early 1970s, as CBS News had reported. But liberal blogs such as the [Daily Kos](#) produced evidence that seemed equally compelling — at least to my non-expert eyes — that the documents could *only* have been produced by a certain model of electric typewriter available more than 30 years ago. In the end, it took the mainstream media, led by the *Washington Post*, to do the kind of hard reporting necessary to reveal the truth. (I wrote about this for the *Phoenix* last fall and winter; click [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).)

Blogging turns out to be an ideal form for media criticism as well. At a weekly or even a daily paper, you are often overtaken by events. On a blog, you can keep updating as news warrants. By linking to the actual news reports you're critiquing, you offer a

new level of transparency. That is, your readers don't have to take your word for it that you're quoting accurately and within context — they can see for themselves. And if you make a mistake, you'll find out about it immediately — by private e-mail and in comments to your site. I've been blogging regularly since 2002, first for BostonPhoenix.com (my successor, Mark Jurkowitz, now writes the blog, called [Media Log](#)) and now, since this summer, for my own blog, [Media Nation](#).

There are so many media-related blogs online that it is nearly impossible to keep track of them all. I take comfort in something that Josh Marshall, who writes the indispensable [Talking Points Memo](#), once wrote — that he saw his role as watching the mainstream media, not reading other blogs. Nevertheless, for media-savvy blogs with a liberal perspective, I recommend Eric Alterman's [Altercation](#) and Bob Somerby's [Daily Howler](#). For a conservative point of view, take a look at James Taranto's [Best of the Web](#), part of the *Wall Street Journal's* online editorial page, [OpinionJournal](#). I also think highly of Jay Rosen's [PressThink](#). Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University, is a founder of the so-called public-journalism movement, which seeks to foster stronger connections between news organizations and their communities. PressThink's agenda is a natural extension of that.

What's next? Anyone who tries to predict the technological future is bound to be wrong. But podcasting — a form of do-it-yourself radio that's easily transferred to iPods and other MP3 players — could emerge as an alternative to commercial radio. (I wrote about podcasting for the *Phoenix* last December; click [here](#).) Christopher Lydon's new program, "[Open Source](#)," is attempting to combine blogging, podcasting and traditional radio in ways that strike me as interesting. Video blogging has been lurking in the background for a couple of years, but is probably several technical advances away from having much of an effect.

Still, we live in a highly compartmentalized culture, and all of us have our specialties. Empowering though blogging may be, ultimately it makes no more sense for the average citizen to produce her own media than it would be to grow her own food or refine her own gasoline.

The late social critic [Neil Postman](#) once said that the front page of the *New York Times* is essential because, for better or worse, it gives us a broadly accepted version of what is important in the world on any given day. At the moment that I'm writing this, [Technorati](#) claims to be tracking 15.9 million blogs. How will you decide what you need to know? How will you even decide how to decide? I'll take a *Times*, please.

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