

P R O L O G

Why Blogs?



“The Revolution Will Be Blogged”

—*AndrewSullivan.com*

IN OCTOBER 2003, THE WHITE HOUSE launched the Great Media Blitz to tell the story of U.S. success in Iraq. If you don't remember the Great Media Blitz, don't worry. Your memory is fine. It was the blitz that fizzled.

The Bush Administration had become annoyed with news from Iraq provided by regular news media channels and decided to go around them. “I'm mindful of the filter through which some news travels,” President Bush told an interviewer, “and sometimes you just have to go over the heads of the filter and speak directly to the people.”¹

But how did the White House go about speaking “directly to the people?” I noted on The Mahablog (www.mahablog.com) on October 13, 2003:

Did you notice that none of the usual White House suspects showed up for yesterday's Sunday morning news programs? In recent weeks, Condi and Colin and even Dick have been “interviewed” nearly every Sunday by

¹ Richard Wolffe and Rod Nordland, “Bush's News War,” *Newsweek*, October 19, 2003 (<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/3225672>).

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Tim and Wolf and George. And these “interviews” have been a great source of merriment, I must say.

But now the White House is supposed to be engaged in a PR blitz to sell the Iraq War. Why did they bypass the Sunday morning news programs? Isn't that a little weird?

Last week Dick preached to the choir at the Heritage Foundation and Condi spoke to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and Dubya his own self spoke to Air National Guard in New Hampshire. Some blitz.²

The White House embarked on a multi-pronged media offensive. First, President Bush and senior officials stopped giving interviews to the big national and international media establishments and instead called in local television reporters, who tend to be gentler questioners. Second, congressional allies and cabinet officials were dispatched to Baghdad so they could send home upbeat reports. And third, the President and his closest advisers fanned out around the country to speak to carefully vetted groups of ideological fellow travelers and adoring campaign contributors, presumably with favorable local news coverage in mind.

The result of the blitz was that, for most of us, the White House dropped out of the news entirely for a few days. I would never have known what they were up to if I hadn't been surfing the web to keep track of Bush Administration activities. And in spite of the blitz, news stories from Iraq did not become noticeably more positive. After a few days of blitzing, White House officials began to turn up on the Sunday morning talk shows again. The Great Media Blitz quietly was abandoned.

The blitz experiment reminds us that getting a message from a sender to a receiver requires a medium. And when a sender wants his message to reach millions of people, he needs a big, powerful medium. For the past few decades, those wishing to speak to the entire nation have relied on the mass media establishment—radio and television

² http://www.mahablog.com/2003.10.12_arch.html

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networks, major newspapers, and wire services—to carry their messages.

In the Great Media Blitz example, the White House took action because the people were not receiving the message about Iraq the White House wanted them to receive. Whether this message failure was caused by media bias or incompetence, or whether the fault was with the message itself, is a matter for someone else's book. For now, let's consider the real purpose of the Great Media Blitz, which was not to "speak directly to the people" (presidents can get network air time to address the nation nearly any time they want it, except maybe during the Super Bowl) but to gain tighter control of the news "message" coming out of Iraq.

In an essay you can find in the appendix to this book, Stirling Newberry describes how the "television age" of the late 20th century created a top-down form of mass communication. And this, in turn, changed the political landscape of America.

The power of media was that it could electrify the nation like a shock. For a nation that built its political and economic system on mobilizing people, the top-down media seemed like the answer—it could, for a short time, focus the entire attention of the nation on one problem, one social ill, and give it a face that could be remembered.

This media gradually forced a few specific forms of campaigning; it also forced the drive for absolute and total control over every aspect of message—one loose image, and the ship of state sinks . . . I remember the day the infamous tank picture came out in the Dukakis campaign, someone remarked "Great, we are working for snoopy the wonder beagle." From the Next President of The United States, to a joke, in moments.³

Top-down communication flows one way—from the top, down. We, the People, became passive recipients of the messages. And as

³ Stirling Newberry, "The Clark Sphere," <http://theclarksphere.com/archives/000249.html>.

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control of the message tightened, political discourse changed from being a means of debate to being a tool for manipulation. Radio and television in particular have been taken over by the designated spokespersons of powerful political factions, and their assignment is to inflame the audience against the opposing powerful political factions.

Political communication was once exemplified by the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Today it has dissolved into sound bytes and talking points and the same few partisan “pundits” yelling over each other.

Those at the top care only that we receive their message correctly so that we continue to support them. Polls and focus groups are less about finding out what We, the People, think, than about learning how to fine-tune messages so that We, the People, think as we are supposed to.

But while the powerful few have struggled to gain tighter control of mass media, a new medium for political dialogue has emerged—the Internet. This new medium cultures robust political dialogue among people across the nation and around the world. And leading this discussion—generating topics, presenting information, and facilitating new perspectives—are *bloggers*.

Political discussion on the Internet pre-dates the web. As soon as home computers came with modems, people with opinions got online and expressed them. But now we are on the threshold of something new—the web as a big, powerful, and easily accessible medium that is *outside* the top-down media establishment.

Politicians ignore it at their peril. And yet, some still ignore it.

Even some politicians who are supposed to be web savvy don't “get” the real power of the web. In January 2004 Max Fose, Internet adviser to Senator John McCain's 2000 presidential campaign, was asked by an interviewer what to expect on the web from the Bush campaign. “I think what you're going to see is the 800-pound gorilla come out of the closet once the Democratic nominee is chosen, and that 800-pound gorilla is going to be George Bush and his Internet campaign,” he said.

The Bush campaign has an email list that's the largest in politics. It's larger than MoveOn. It's larger than the Democratic National Committee's. It's larger than any of the Democratic candidate's. And they're going to

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use that to mobilize, to blog, to raise money, and everything the Bush campaign needs to do. They're going to use the Internet to make it happen more effectively and be able to track the results.⁴

Max Fose continued to rhapsodize about the advantages of email over direct mail, then continued,

Once the nominee is chosen on the other side, you're going to see the switch turned on, and the switch is going to be fund raising, and the means of activism—letters to the editor, calls to talk radio—and it's going to be a message sent out by the Bush campaign that isn't going to be filtered through the media. It's going directly to the inboxes of 6 million people.⁵

To be fair, Fose mentioned campaign blogs during the interview. But it was clear that, to him, an Internet campaign meant email linked to the candidates' web site, where email recipients could read the campaign's message and donate money. The message of the campaign goes one way—from the campaign managers to the supporters. Supporters are then expected to be walking billboards for the campaign message as well as ATM machines.

The official Bush-Cheney re-election campaign site (www.georgewbush.com) has a "blog" that reads like a string of press releases—the most recent post as I write begins, "The President and Mrs. Bush host a State dinner for the Nation's Governors at the White House." But a real blog is a *personal voice*—one writer expressing his thoughts to the world in his own unique style. I question whether announcements of state dinners written in a homogenous manner by a staff of writers is a blog at all.

Further, as of this writing the Bush-Cheney blog does not allow for public comments, which is a common feature of real blogs. Communication still flows only one way, from the campaign to the supporters. In

⁴ Interview by Christopher Lydon, "The Blogging of the President," Minnesota Public Radio, January 25, 2004 (www.mpr.org/bloggingthepresident).

⁵ *Ibid.*

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contrast, the election site blog of the Democratic nominee-presumptive Senator John Kerry (<http://www.johnkerry.com>) is commented upon quite robustly. The blog itself still seems a bit contrived, however.

On the other hand, the recent campaign by Governor Howard Dean made creative and extensive use of web resources, including blogs. Dean supporters were *not* passive recipients of Dean's message. Through the web, supporters played a tactical role in the campaign. Dean campaign managers learned that attempting centralized management of the web campaign created bottlenecks that slowed growth, so they stopped trying to micromanage the network and got out of its way. The result was a "smart mob" of dedicated supporters who organized themselves and gave the Dean campaign momentum.⁶

But did the smart mob contribute to the Dean campaign's eventual failure? Although a large turnout of Dean supporters showed up for the caucuses in Iowa, they failed to persuade non-wired Iowa voters to caucus for Dean. Postmortems of the Dean campaign are ongoing, but it is widely believed in the Blogosphere that Dean supporters were a little too self-directed and failed to stay on message. Others speculate that "Deaniacs" became so wrapped up in communicating with each other on the web that they forgot to reach out to the rest of the nation. And perhaps the fault was not mainly with the web, but with the candidate, or some other part of the campaign. Still, expect to see the Dean campaign's innovations studied and used in future campaigns.

It may be that in 2004 the Bush Administration, which by some accounts is so "on message" even cabinet meetings are scripted, will prevail in the election. However, I believe that by 2008 the web will have such an impact that a top-down, message-controlled presidential campaign will no longer be possible. Campaigns and their messages will originate not just with the parties, but also with the people. And by giving people a new way to engage in politics, the web could bring about a revitalization of democracy in America.

⁶ See Gary Wolf, "How the Internet Invented Howard Dean," *Wired*, January 2004.