

Why America Needs Bloggers

Jay Rosen wrote in his blog Pressthink (<http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink>):

Presidential campaigns had drifted out of alignment with most Americans. The ritual no longer seemed like something the country did for itself every four years, but what a professional cadre did, and sold back to the country as “politics.”¹⁰

I can remember when the party national conventions actually chose the presidential nominee. No, really. Delegates came to the conventions pledged to a candidate but free to change their minds. Representatives

of the contenders roared into the convention halls, and they wheeled and dealed and politicked, sometimes in back rooms and sometimes in front of cameras, until somebody got enough delegates to bag the nomination. It was a hoot to watch, I can tell you.

Then came reforms of the 1970s and 1980s, and today delegates come to the conventions locked into the candidate chosen by state primaries. The reforms were supposed to make the nominating process more “democratic.” Instead, a small cadre of party insiders and their professional hired help learned how to manipulate the primary process to return a desired outcome.

Politics has become just another kind of marketing. And the party bosses—we don’t call them bosses any more, of course, but that’s what they are—choose the product, and marketing experts create the packaging and advertising to sell the product. Those at the top of the power pyramid use print and broadcast media, television in particular, to persuade a carefully focus-grouped public to support their candidate. Thus in the 2000 general election campaign, writes Rosen, “two almost identical campaigns, reading from the same data about the same issues, shouting at the same undecided voters in the same toss up-states, tried to ride slightly different catchwords into the White House.”¹¹

Political consultant Dick Morris calls this the “Media Age” style of campaign. “From 1972 to 1999 or 2000 we had what I see as the Media Age in American politics, which empowered guys like me who do television commercials, fundraisers, fat-cat donors, special interests and a handful of people who became the new political elite.”¹²

Today, Morris continues, “the media is losing its power in politics, and the Internet is gaining it.”

It’s more accurate, I think, to say the web is creating a means for people to re-engage in the political process. To be sure, blogs have not dislodged the political elite. In the contest for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination, the web advanced two candidates—Gov. Howard Dean and Gen. Wesley Clark—who seemed promising at first but who faded as actual primary votes were cast. Yet, although the web didn’t produce a nominee, the Dean campaign in particular showed what was *possible*. Through the web, the Dean campaign raised \$45

million, which for a time caused the “old” media to sit up and take notice.

According to former Dean campaign manager Joe Trippi, broadcast politics fails the American people because it suppresses serious debate of issues in favor of politics as entertainment.

It's a system that frankly back in the 1960s we had the Nixon-Kennedy debate and everybody should have understood then; it took about five to ten years to realize that was the moment when television was going to change everything in America's politics. What no one could've predicted was that it would have become a race for money, a race to buy a one-way communications tool that would take the American people essentially out of the process. It was no longer about average Americans, it was about, "How do I find a rich guy to write me a \$2,000 check and then how do I take that money and buy television with it?"¹³

As I write, journalists and bloggers both are dissecting and analyzing the Dean campaign to determine how it failed, and also how it succeeded. Some argue that Governor Dean had flaws as a candidate that were unrelated to the web campaign. Others have pointed out that Dean's mostly young and technologically savvy volunteers did not connect well with the voters of Iowa and Vermont.

Still, as Scott Rosenberg wrote in *Salon*:

Dean's campaign cannot be simply written off as a burst dot-com bubble. However few delegates the candidate ultimately wins, he long ago changed history. He taught his fellow Democrats, in Trippi's words, "how to be an opposition party"—and he forced his party to face the gulf between its leaders in Congress, who'd mostly supported Bush's Iraq war, and its voters, who largely didn't. He filled that "vacuum of debate" with a clamor that could not be ignored.¹⁴