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The Revolution Will Not Be Blogged

To see beyond their own little world and get a sense of what's really going on, journalists and readers need to get out of their pajamas.

George Packer

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First, a confession: I hate blogs. I'm also addicted to them. Hours dissolve into nothing when I suit up and dematerialize into the political blogosphere, first visiting one of the larger, nearer online opinion diaries — [talkingpointsmemo.com](#), [andrewsullivan.com](#), [kausfiles.com](#) — then beaming myself outward along rays of pixelated light to dozens of satellites and lesser stars, [Calpundit](#), [InstaPundit](#), [OxBlog](#), each one radiant with links to other galaxies — online newspapers and magazines with deep, deep archives, think-tank websites, hundred-page electronic reports in PDF — until I'm light-years from the point of departure and can rescue myself only by summoning the will to disconnect from the whole artificial universe. With a jolt, I land in front of my computer. Before long I'll venture forth again to see what's new out there — because the blogosphere changes from instant to instant.

My private habit (and others') has emerged as the journalistic signature of the 2004 campaign. Although only 13 percent of Americans regularly get their campaign news from the Internet — still far less than from local, cable, and network TV news — nonetheless a whole industry of analysts has risen up to declare 2004 the dawn of a new political era. Part of the mystique of blogs is their protean quality: They work both sides of the divide between politics and media, further blurring the already fuzzy distinctions between reporter, pundit, political operative, activist, and citizen. The universe of blogs includes those of both major parties; candidates' campaign websites (most famously, Howard Dean's, which became the hottest organizing tool since direct mail — until it turned into an online echo chamber that failed to deliver actual votes); the blogs of more traditional journalists on the websites of news organizations such as *The New York Times*, *The New Republic*, and *ABC*; and the proliferation of one-man electronic soapboxing by the known and the obscure alike.

In other words, the blog documents, comments, and participates. Nothing new here: Theodore H. White grew so close to John F. Kennedy that he ended up writing campaign speeches for the Democratic nominee even as he reported *The Making of the President 1960*. Somewhere out there in the infinite spaces of the Internet floats a site called [bloggingofthepresident.com](#), whose homepage declares: "[The Blogging of the President](#) (or BOP) is dedicated to the great writer Theodore H. White, whose documentary series of books, *The Making of the President*, inspired generations of journalists.... We believe that the story of how America chooses its leader is fundamental to how America conceives of itself, and something about this story changed in 2004. Somehow, HTML and 'blogs' are now pillars of the republic; indeed, a whole new way of doing politics seems emergent and

potentially dominant."

BOP then quotes the proclamation, originally made in *Wired*, of Stanford law professor Lawrence Lessig: "When they write the account of the 2004 campaign, it will include at least one word that has never appeared in any presidential history: blog. Whether or not it elects the next president, the blog may be the first innovation from the Internet to make a real difference in election politics."

These are large claims — and the thought that the republic is perched atop "[Kicking Ass: Daily Dispatches From the DNC](#)," let alone such pillars of salt as [wonkette.com](#), frankly makes me nervous. Yet I have to face the fact that blogs are emergent, potentially dominant, and making a real difference in my election year. For a political junkie, they're pure and uncut. If blogs are to our age what White's campaign books were to the dramatic years 1960 to 1972, how is the story changing in 2004?

The constellation of opinion called the blogosphere consists, like the stars themselves, partly of gases. This is what makes blogs addictive — that is, both pleasurable and destructive: They're so easy to consume, and so endlessly available. Their second-by-second proliferation means that far more is written than needs to be said about any one thing. To change metaphors for a moment (and to deepen the shame), I gorge myself on these hundreds of pieces of commentary like so much candy into a bloated — yet nervous, sugar-jangled — stupor. Those hours of out-of-body drift leave me with few, if any, tangible thoughts. Blog prose is written in headline form to imitate informal speech, with short emphatic sentences and frequent use of boldface and italics. The entries, sometimes updated hourly, are little spasms of assertion, usually too brief for an argument ever to stand a chance of developing layers of meaning or ramifying into qualification and complication. There's a constant sense that someone (almost always the blogger) is winning and someone else is losing. Everything that happens in the blogosphere — every point, rebuttal, gloat, jeer, or "fisk" (dismemberment of a piece of text with close analytical reading) — is a knockout punch. A curious thing about this rarefied world is that bloggers are almost unfailingly contemptuous toward everyone except one another. They are also nearly without exception men (this form of combat seems too naked for more than a very few women). I imagine them in neat blue shirts, the glow from the screen reflected in their glasses as they sit up at 3:48 a.m. triumphantly tapping out their third rejoinder to the *WaPo*'s press commentary on Tim Russert's on-air recap of the Wisconsin primary.

All of this meta-comment by very bright young men who never leave their rooms is the latest, somewhat debased, manifestation of the old art of political pamphleteering, a lost form in this country through much of the 20th century. The modern American idea of journalism as objectivity, with news and editorial pages strictly separated, emerged in the Progressive Era with books like Walter Lippmann's classic *Public Opinion*. For most of the last century, this idea anointed political journalists as a mandarin class of insiders with serious responsibilities; access was everything. At some point during the Reagan years, this mandarin class lost interest in politics as a contest of beliefs and policies with some bearing on the experience of people unlike themselves. Instead, elite Washington reporters turned their coverage into an account of a closed system, an intricate process, in which perceptions were the only real things and the journalists themselves were intimately involved. The machinations of Michael Deaver and Roger Ailes, followed by Lee Atwater and James Carville, became the central drama. We've grown so familiar with this approach that today you can open the *New York Times* and be unsurprised to find its chief political correspondent, Adam Nagourney, writing about polls and campaign strategies day after day.

Blogs came along to feed off this fascination with the interior mechanics of politics. Many bloggers emerged from the ranks of the press itself; unlike the elite press corps, though, anyone with a computer and an Internet connection can blog. This is potentially the most radical innovation of the form: It opens up political journalism to a vast marketplace of competitors, reminiscent of earlier ages of pamphleteering. It also restores unvarnished opinion, for better and worse, to a central place in political writing. Insult and invective were the stock-in-trade of the English political essayists of the 18th century, and of their American counterparts during the early years of the republic (when bimbo eruptions made their first appearance in press coverage of presidential campaigns). The explosion of blogs has blown a needed hole in the sealed rooms of the major editorial pages and the Sunday talk shows. It has also affected political reporting, by forcing Washington journalists accustomed to the caution of the mainstream to follow less traveled tributaries — for example, the examination of President Bush's National Guard service was partly pushed along by evidence laid out for reporters by Calpundit.

And yet, if blogs are "a new way of doing politics," there is also something peculiarly stale and tired about them — not the form, but the content. The campaign of 2004 is important not just for the arrival of blogs. Thanks to September 11, this happens to be one of those rare years when a real election will take place. By "real," I mean an election in which the stakes are genuinely high, the differences between the candidates far-reaching, the consequences for the country and the world potentially huge. 1932 was a real election year; so were 1968 and 1980. We haven't had one since Reagan trounced Carter. Especially during the Clinton years, with the Cold War over and the economy flush, politics grew more and more into a spectacle of personalities and gossip-mongering, a trend both reflected and furthered by the political journalism of those years. Until recently, Frank Rich, a former drama critic, wrote an op-ed column for the Times largely devoted to reviewing politics as entertainment.

Campaign coverage in 2004 still belongs to that era — nowhere more than in the blogosphere, where the claustrophobic effect of the echo chamber and the hall of mirrors is at its most intense, where the reverberations of trivialities last far longer than in print or on TV. This new pillar of the republic turns out to be an inadequate mode for capturing a real election.

So far this year, bloggers have been remarkably unadept at predicting events (as have reporters, who occupy a different part of the same habitat). Most of them failed to foresee Dean's rise, Dean's fall, Kerry's resurgence, Bush's slippage. Above all, they didn't grasp the intensity of feeling among Democratic primary voters — the resentments still glowing hot from Florida 2000, the overwhelming interest in economic and domestic issues, the personal antipathy toward Bush, the resurgence of activism, the longing for a win. The blogosphere was often caught surprised by these passions and the electoral turns they caused. Rather than imitating or reproducing external reality, it exists alongside, detached, self-encased, in a stance of ironic or combative appraisal. Theodore H. White's books, as well as the magazine form of nonfiction narrative known as New Journalism that was as characteristic of the '60s as blogs are of this decade, gave readers the sense — illusory, of course — that they were watching a coherent story unfold from a front row (or even backstage) seat. The Making of the President turned politics into the stuff of high novelistic drama, with larger-than-life actors and passionate ideological conflict played out in halls of power and city streets. The style of thickly descriptive storytelling, based on heavy reporting, immersed readers in the arc of an election year, achieving a sense of unity between the protagonists and the spectators, so that the campaign seemed to involve the whole of American society in the theatrics.

Blogs, by contrast, are atomized, fragmentary, and of the instant. They lack the continuity, reach, and depth to turn an election into a story. When one of the best of the bloggers, Joshua Micah Marshall of talkingpointsmemo.com, brought his laptop to New Hampshire and tried to cover the race in the more traditional manner, the results were less than satisfying; his posts failed to convey the atmosphere of those remarkable days between Iowa and the first primary. Marshall couldn't turn his gift for parsing the news of the moment to the more patient task of turning reportage into scenes and characters so that the candidates and the voters take life online. He didn't function as a reporter; there was, as there often is with blogs, too much description of where he was sitting, what he was thinking, who'd just walked into the room, as if the enclosed space in which bloggers carry out their work had followed Marshall to New Hampshire and kept him encased in its bubble. He might as well have been writing from his apartment in Washington. But the failure wasn't personal; this particular branch of the Fourth Estate just doesn't lend itself to sustained narrative and analysis. Blogs remain private, written in the language and tone of knowingness, insider shorthand, instant mastery. Read them enough and any subject will go dead.

I went to New Hampshire the weekend before the primary because, for all the millions of words written in both blogs and conventional journalism, I suspected that I'd been missing something. It was true: I felt at once that something more interesting than the usual quadrennial spectacle was going on. There were large crowds everywhere, with a strong current of excitement — not just because the horse race was then wide open, but because its outcome so obviously matters. The issues, not the personalities, filled those rooms. In 2004 the public seems to have rediscovered politics. But I had to go to New Hampshire to find out. I blame my addiction.

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