

NewsBank InfoWeb

Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles Times (CA)

September 26, 2004

THE MEDIA

Blogging Sells, and Sells Out

Author: Billmon; Billmon is the author of Whiskey Bar, online at www.billmon.org.
Editorial Pages Desk

Edition: Home Edition

Section: Opinion

Page: M-6

Index Terms:
Opinion

Estimated printed pages: 4

Article Text:

By most accounts, blogs -- web logs to the uninitiated -- scored a major coup last week when CBS News admitted that it couldn't vouch for the authenticity of memos supposedly written by George W. Bush's commander in the Texas Air National Guard. The conservative bloggers who led the charge against the CBS story were hailed as giant slayers. And yet it's the blogging phenomenon itself that may need the last rites.

That may seem a strange thing to say, given the flattering coverage of blogs triggered by the CBS affair. But the media's infatuation has a distinct odor of the deathbed about it -- not for the blogosphere, which has a commercially bright future, but for the idea of blogging as a grass-roots challenge to the increasingly sanitized "content" peddled by the Time Warner-Capital

Cities-Disney-General Electric-Viacom-Tribune media oligopoly.

Count me among the mourners. For almost two years, I blogged the political scene, first as a guest writer

on the popular Daily Kos site, and then on my own blog, Whiskey Bar. During that time, I was able to indulge my passion for long-form writing -- a relative rarity in the blogging world, which leans toward snippy one-liners and news nuggets -- and to mix satirical humor with serious analysis, all without the worries of deadlines, editors and advertisers.

It was intoxicating while it lasted, as was the sense of community I found with my readers. At the peak of Whiskey Bar's popularity, I could count on receiving 100 or more comments about each post -- articulate, querulous and sometimes profane voices from the Internet hinterland.

Recently, however, I've watched the commercialization of this culture of dissent with growing unease. When I recently decided to take a long break from blogging, it was for a mix of personal and philosophical reasons. But the direction the blogosphere is going makes me wonder whether I'll ever go back.

Even as it collectively achieves celebrity status for its anti-establishment views, blogging is already being domesticated by its success. What began as a spontaneous eruption of populist creativity is on the verge of being absorbed by the media-industrial complex it claims to despise.

In the process, a charmed circle of bloggers -- those glib enough and ideologically safe enough to fit within the conventional media punditocracy -- is gaining larger audiences and greater influence. But the passion and energy that made blogging such a potent alternative to the corporate-owned media are in danger of being lost, or driven back to the outer fringes of the Internet.

There's ample precedent for this. America has always had a knack for absorbing, and taming, its cultural revolutionaries. The rise and long, sad fall of rock 'n' roll is probably the most egregious example, while the music industry's colonization of rap is a more recent one.

When I say blogging is headed for a kind of commercialized senility, I'm talking primarily about political blogs -- those that have, or claim to have, something to say about government, economics, foreign policy, etc. Not surprisingly, these are the blogs most likely to show up on the media's radar screen.

Media exposure, in turn, is intensifying an existing trend toward a "winner take all" concentration of audience share. Even before blogs hit the big time, Web stats showed the blogosphere to be a surprisingly unequal place, with a relative handful of blogs -- say, the top several hundred -- accounting for the lion's share of all page hits.

But as long as blogs remained on the commercial fringes, the playing field at least was relatively level. Audience was largely a function of reputation -- for the frequency or quality or ideological appeal of the blogger's posts. Costs were low, and few bloggers were trying to make a living at it, so money wasn't an issue. It may not have been egalitarian, but it wasn't strictly hierarchical, either.

That world of inspired amateurs still exists, but it's rapidly being overshadowed by the blogosphere's potential for niche marketing. Ad dollars are flowing into the blogosphere. And naturally, most are going to the A-list blogs. As media steer readers toward the top blogs, the temptation to sell out to the highest bidder could become irresistible, and the possibility of making it in the marketplace as an independent blogger increasingly theoretical.

I should have seen the writing on the wall earlier this year when the World Economic Forum, the ferociously trend-following CEO club, sponsored a panel session on blogging at its annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland. The discussion quickly turned to the commercial possibilities of blogging, leading one advertising executive to wonder why the big media companies didn't swoop down and buy up the popular blogs while they were still cheap.

At the time, the idea of buying a blog struck me as funny, like trying to buy a conversation. Now, having seen blogs I admired mutate into glorified billboards, and having witnessed the emergence of the "sponsored" blog (in which the blogger is literally an employee of, or contractor to, a corporate owner), I can see who's likely to have the last laugh.

As blogs commercialize, they are tied ever closer to the mainstream media and its increasingly frivolous news agenda. The political blogosphere already has a bad habit of chasing the scandal du jour. This election season, that's meant a laser-like focus on such profound matters as the mysteries of Bush's National Guard service or whether John Kerry deserved his Vietnam War medals.

Meanwhile, more unsettling (and important) stories -- like the Abu Ghraib prison scandal or the great Iraq weapons-of-mass-destruction snipe hunt -- quietly disappear down the media memory hole. And bloggers either can't, or won't, dig them back out again. As the convergence with big media continues, I suspect there will be progressively less interest in trying.

To be sure, there are still plenty of bloggers out there putting the 1st Amendment through its paces, their only compensation the satisfaction of speaking the truth to power. But it's going to become more difficult for those voices to reach a broad audience. If the mainstream media are true to past form, they will treat the A-list blogs -- commercialized, domesticated -- as if they are the entire blogosphere, while studiously ignoring the more eccentric, subversive currents swirling deeper down. Not the most glorious ending for a would-be revolution, but also not a surprising one. Bloggers aren't the first, and won't be the last, rebellious critics to try to storm the castle, only to be invited to come inside and make themselves at home.

Caption:

PHOTO: (no caption)

PHOTOGRAPHER: JENNIFER HEWITSON For The Times

Copyright 2004 Los Angeles Times

Record Number: 000058048

Article Bookmark(OpenURL Compliant):[Los Angeles Times \(CA\) : THE MEDIABlogging Sells, and Sells Out](http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:LATB&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=1055D773C3D2CAB5&svc_dat=InfoWeb:current&req_dat=0D0F9A1261961D4A)

http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:LATB

[&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=1055D773C3D2CAB5&svc_dat=InfoWeb:current&req_dat=0D0F9A1261961D4A](http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:LATB&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=1055D773C3D2CAB5&svc_dat=InfoWeb:current&req_dat=0D0F9A1261961D4A)