

WEB LOGS, aka BLOGS

Beginners' Kaffee Klatch
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The word blog — it works as both a noun and verb — is short for **Web log**. It was coined in 1997 to describe a website where you could post daily journals about whatever you liked — mostly critiquing and linking to other articles online that may have sparked your interest. Unlike a big media outlet, bloggers focus their efforts on narrow topics, often rising to become de facto watchdogs and self-proclaimed experts. Blogs can be about anything: politics, computing, baseball, haiku, car repair. There are even blogs about blogs!

Blogs are no big deal, right? But it turns out some people actually have interesting thoughts on a regular basis, and a few of the better blogs began drawing sizable audiences. Blogs multiplied and evolved, slowly becoming conduits for legitimate news and serious thought. In 1999 a few companies began offering free make-your-own-blog software, which turbocharged the phenomenon. By 2002, Pyra Labs, which makes software for creating blogs, claimed 970,000 users.

Most of America gave blogs little attention, until December 2002, when bloggers staged a dramatic show of force. The occasion was Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party, during which Trent Lott made what sounded like a nostalgic reference to Thurmond's past segregationist leanings. The mainstream press largely glossed over the incident, but when regular journalists buried the lead, bloggers dug it right back up. That story got ignored for three, four, five days by big papers and the TV networks, but blogs kept it alive.

Mainstream America wasn't listening, but Washington insiders and media honchos read blogs. Three days after the party, the story was on Meet the Press. Four days afterward, Lott made an official apology. After two weeks, Lott was out as Senate majority leader, and blogs had drawn their first blood. Web journalists like Matt Drudge (www.drudgereport.com) had already demonstrated a certain crude effectiveness, but this was something different: bloggers were offering reasoned, forceful arguments that carried weight with the forces inside the beltway.

Blogs act like a lens, focusing attention on an issue until it catches fire, but they can also break stories. On April 21, 2004, a blogger named Russ Kick posted photographs of coffins containing the bodies of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan and of Columbia astronauts. The military zealously guards images of service members in

coffins, but Kick pried the photos free with a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. By April 23 the images had gone from Kick's blog, www.thememoryhole.org, to the front page of newspapers across the country. Kick's blog site was soon getting upwards of 4 million hits a day.

What makes blogs so effective? They're free. Blogs are fresh and often seem to be miles ahead of the mainstream news. Bloggers put up new stuff every day, all day, and there are thousands of them. How are you going to keep anything secret from a thousand Russ Kicks? Blogs are becoming known as the voice of the little guy.

And the little guy is a lot smarter than big media might have us think. Blogs showcase some of the smartest, sharpest writing being published. Bloggers are unconstrained by traditional journalistic conventions. Accusations of media bias are thick these days and Americans are tired of it. Blogs don't pretend to be neutral: they're gleefully, unabashedly biased, and that makes them a lot more fun. Because they are not trying to sell magazines or newspapers, they can afford to assail their readers. They don't have the pressure of an advertising executive telling them to lay off.

In a way, blogs represent everything the Web was always supposed to be: a mass medium controlled by the masses, in which getting heard depends solely on having something to say and the moxie to say it.

How to Find Your Kind of Blog

To navigate the blogosphere, you need the right tools. Here are several sites that make it easy to find, organize and keep tabs on your favorite bloggers:

www.Kinja.com. Launched April 1, 2004, this is one of the best ways to sample and automatically subscribe to a wide range of blogs. The site tracks more than 50,000 blogs, divided into 23 categories, from movies to politics to baseball. Click on a subject and up pops a listing of short excerpts from current postings, with the most recent ones listed first. See a blog you like? Simply click on the + button to have it added to your digest, which reads like a personalized online newspaper of new posts from your favorite blogs.

www.Bloglines.com This site lets you organize your blogs in much the same way that your browser sorts its favorites. After creating a free account, you choose the blogs you want to track. There are more than 100,000 from which to pick, including headlines from such mainstream sites as www.NYTimes.com, www.Slate.com and Yahoo. Each time you log in, the site informs you of how many new postings there

are in your favorite blogs and lets you skim headlines. Click on a headline to read the full post.

www.Feedster.com. Regular search engines have trouble keeping pace with the constantly spewing bloggers. Enter Feedster, a search engine dedicated to indexing and finding the particular blogs you are after. Scanning more than 500,000 sources, it presents you with either the most recent posts or the most commented-on blogs (determined by analyzing how many other sites or blogs link to it), whichever you choose. Feedster also lets you save a customized search on, say, petunias and check back hourly or daily to see what the latest postings have to say about them.

www.Technorati.com. Because blogs tend to be updated more frequently than regular websites, they are a great way to find out what people are talking about online at any given moment. Technorati taps into this phenomenon by listing the top 10 current events, books and general news that people are blogging about.

www.Blogdex.net. Created by the M.I.T. Media Laboratory, Blogdex presents the most contagious, or fastest spreading, ideas in the Web-log community. If bloggers are pointing en masse to a posting about, say, the immigration situation, chances are it will come up high in the ranking.

www.Waypath.com. According to the site's About page, Waypath is a site "run by two guys in their spare time." Despite humble origins and slow performance, Waypath is worth a look. Type in a few search terms and click Waypath It! to whisk your browser to a page containing a list of blogs that mention your words.

Blogs wouldn't be such a democratic medium if they weren't so easy to set up. The most popular service, Blogger (www.blogger.com), owned by Google, boasts features like push-button photo-blogging. Microsoft (www.spaces.msn.com) has its own blogging service.