



# TIME

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## Meet Joe Blog

**Why are more and more people getting their news from amateur websites called blogs? Because they're fast, funny and totally biased**

By LEV GROSSMAN; ANITA HAMILTON

A few years ago, Mathew Gross, 32, was a free-lance writer living in tiny Moab, Utah. Rob Malda, 28, was an underperforming undergraduate at a small Christian college in Michigan. Denis Dutton, 60, was a professor of philosophy in faraway Christchurch, New Zealand. Today they are some of the most influential media personalities in the world. You can be one too.

Gross, Malda and Dutton aren't rich or famous or even conspicuously good-looking. What they have in common is that they all edit blogs: amateur websites that provide news, information and, above all, opinions to rapidly growing and devoted audiences drawn by nothing more than a shared interest or two and the sheer magnetism of the editor's personality. Over the past five years, blogs have gone from an obscure and, frankly, somewhat nerdy fad to a genuine alternative to mainstream news outlets, a shadow media empire that is rivaling networks and newspapers in power and influence. Which raises the question: Who are these folks anyway? And what exactly are they doing to the established pantheon of American media?

Not that long ago, blogs were one of those annoying buzz words that you could safely get away with ignoring. The word blog — it works as both noun and verb — is short for Web log. It was coined in 1997 to describe a website where you could post daily scribbles, journal-style, about whatever you like — mostly critiquing and linking to other articles online that may have sparked your thinking. 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, sex, baseball, haiku, car repair. There are blogs about blogs.

Big whoop, 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 couldn't have cared less. Until December 2002, that is, 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 bury the lead, bloggers dig it right back up. "That story got ignored for three, four, five days by big papers and the TV networks while blogs kept it alive," says Joshua Micah Marshall, creator of [talkingpointsmemo.com](http://talkingpointsmemo.com), one of a handful of blogs that stuck with the Lott story.

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 ([drudgereport.com](http://drudgereport.com)) had already demonstrated a certain crude effectiveness — witness l'affaire Lewinsky — but this was something different: bloggers were offering reasoned, forceful arguments that carried weight with the powers that be.

Blogs act like a lens, focusing attention on an issue until it catches fire, but they can also break stories. On April 21, a 34-year-old blogger and writer from Arizona 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. "I read the news constantly," says Kick, "and when I see a story about the government refusing to release public documents, I automatically file an FOIA request for them." By April 23 the images had gone from Kick's blog, [thememoryhole.org](http://thememoryhole.org), to the front page of newspapers across the country. Kick was soon getting upwards of 4 million hits a day.

What makes blogs so effective? They're free. They catch people at work, at their desks, when they're alert and thinking and making decisions. 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 have voice and personality. They're human. They come to us not from some mediagenic anchorbot on an air-conditioned sound stage, but from an individual. They represent — no, they are — the voice of the little guy.

And the little guy is a lot smarter than big media might have you think. Blogs showcase some of the smartest, sharpest writing being published. Bloggers are unconstrained by such journalistic conventions as good taste, accountability and objectivity — and that can be a good thing. Accusations of media bias are thick on the ground 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 we're not trying to sell magazines or papers, we can afford to assail our readers," says Andrew Sullivan, a contributor to TIME and the editor of [andrewsullivan.com](http://andrewsullivan.com). "I don't have the pressure of an advertising executive telling me to lay off. It's incredibly liberating."

Some bloggers earn their bias the hard way — in the trenches. Military bloggers, or milbloggers in Net patois, post vivid accounts of their tours of Baghdad, in prose covered in fresh flop sweat and powder burns, illustrated with digital photos. "Jason," a National Guardsman whose blog is called [justanotherSoldier.com](http://justanotherSoldier.com), wrote about wandering through one of Saddam Hussein's empty palaces. And Iraqis have blogs: a Baghdad blogger who goes by Salam Pax ( [dear\\_raed.blogspot.com](http://dear_raed.blogspot.com)) has parlayed his blog into a book and a movie deal. Vietnam was the first war to be televised; blogs bring Iraq another scary step closer to our living rooms.

But blogs are about much more than war and politics. In 1997 Malda went looking for a "site that mixed the latest word about a new sci-fi movie with news about open-source software. I was looking for a site that didn't exist," Malda says, "so I built it." Malda and a handful of co-editors run [slashdot.org](http://slashdot.org) full time, and he estimates that 300,000 to 500,000 people read the site daily. Six years ago, a philosophy professor in New Zealand named Denis Dutton started the blog Arts & Letters Daily ([artsandlettersdaily.com](http://artsandlettersdaily.com)) to create a website "where people could go daily for a dose of intellectual stimulation." Now the site draws more than 100,000 readers a month. Compare that with, say, the New York Review of Books, which has a circulation of 115,000. The tail is beginning to wag the blog.

Blogs are inverting the cozy media hierarchies of yore. Some bloggers are getting press credentials for this summer's Republican Convention. Three years ago, a 25-year-old Chicagoan named Jessa Crispin started a blog for serious readers called [bookslut.com](http://bookslut.com). "We give books a better chance," she says. "The New York Times Book Review is so boring. We take each book at face value. There's no politics behind it." Crispin's apartment is overflowing with free books from publishers desperate for a mention. As for the Times, it's scrutinizing the blogging phenomenon for its own purposes. In January the Gray Lady started up Times on the Trail, a campaign-news website with some decidedly bloglike features; it takes the bold step of linking to articles by competing newspapers, for example. "The Times cannot ignore this. I don't think any big media can ignore this," says Len Aparcar, editor in chief of the New York Times on the Web.

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.

Unfortunately, there's a downside to this populist sentiment — that is, innocent casualties bloodied by a medium that trades in rumor, gossip and speculation without accountability. Case in point: Alexandra Polier, better known as the Kerry intern. Rumors of Polier's alleged affair with presidential candidate Senator John Kerry eventually spilled into the

blogosphere earlier this year. After Drudge headlined it in February, the blabbing bloggers soon had the attention of tabloid journalists, radio talk-show hosts and cable news anchors. Trouble is, the case was exceedingly thin, and both Kerry and Polier vehemently deny it. Yet the Internet smolders with it to this day.

Some wonder if the backbiting tide won't recede as blogs grow up. The trend now is for more prominent sites to be commercialized. A Manhattan entrepreneur named Nick Denton runs a small stable of bloggers as a business by selling advertising on their sites. So far they aren't showing detectible signs of editorial corruption by their corporate masters — two of Denton's blogs, [gawker.com](http://gawker.com) and [wonkette.com](http://wonkette.com), are among the most corrosively witty sites on the Web — but they've lost their amateur status forever.

We may be in the golden age of blogging, a quirky Camelot moment in Internet history when some guy in his underwear with too much free time can take down a Washington politician. It will be interesting to see what role blogs play in the upcoming election. Blogs can be a great way of communicating, but they can keep people apart too. If I read only those of my choice, precisely tuned to my political biases and you read only yours, we could end up a nation of political solipsists, vacuum sealed in our private feedback loops, never exposed to new arguments, never having to listen to a single word we disagree with.

Howard Dean's campaign blog, run by Mathew Gross, may be the perfect example of both the potential and the pitfalls of high-profile blogging. At its peak, [blogforamerica.com](http://blogforamerica.com) drew 100,000 visitors a day, yet the candidate was beaten badly in the primaries. Still, the Dean model isn't going away. When another political blogger, who goes by the nom de blog Atrios, set up a fund-raising link on his site for Kerry, he raised \$25,000 in five days.

You can't blog your way into the White House, at least not yet, but blogs are America thinking out loud, talking to itself, and heaven help the candidate who isn't listening.

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