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foreword

"Why would anybody write a book about blogs?"

So asked a blogger on learning of my own project to write a book about political blogging in America today. His rationale was logical. There are solid reasons that the book form is not the right one with which to address the phenomenon of weblogging.

Books are too slow. Blogging is changing so fast that trying to document it in a book is like using a stylus and clay tablets to describe a horse race in progress. The long lead time for publishing books is daunting. My own book is taking two years. Surely everything I have to say will fall its freshness test.

Blogging is in its infancy. Its earliest forms, online at least, go back almost a decade, but as a mass participatory exercise, blogging is only a few years old. Isn't it foolhardy to predict the future of anything based on such early moments in its lifespan?

Blogging is all about interaction. Yes, there are monoblogs out there, blogs that consist solely of one individual discoursing without any comments or published feedback; but most blogs, and certainly the most successful, are communities of a kind, where people argue back and forth via posts and comments. The solo-authored book, on the other hand, is purely a conversation with oneself, regardless of responses we might get from friends, reviewers, and editors.

That said, there are valid reasons to write a book on blogs, and Suzanne Stefanac's *Dispatches from Blogistan: A travel guide for the modern blogger* is the best practical book on blogs I have read.

First, blogs are a phenomenon about which a lot of people know a little and a few people know a lot. Opinion surveys, such as those by the Pew Foundation and others, find tens of millions of people throughout the world blogging. At the same time, great numbers of Americans and others have no idea even what a blog is. There is a wide audience almost completely unfamiliar with the basics or intricacies of blogging at any level.

Next, the simplicity of starting up a blog and the ease with which one can create initial entries mask the real complexity of a sustained blogging effort. Each year millions of blogs are orphaned; their fathers and mothers give up on blogging, or move on to a different medium of online expression. The explanations for such a drop-off are many. The sheer workload of creating new entries every day, especially on political topics, exhausts those who are not so hardy or not so dedicated to their ideologies or causes. Furthermore, some of my students report, they don't blog because of the nastiness it invites into their computers, from spam to angry political opponents to sexual solicitors.

But I believe another reason people walk away from blogging is that they realize how much more they have to learn about creating a successful blog and don't know where or from whom they can obtain the secrets of the trade. Here, in *Dispatches from Blogistan*, Ms. Stefanac illuminates, point by point and step by step, nearly everything one could possibly want to know about the often undescribed and unelaborated details of becoming a blogger of influence. She defines every technical aspect of blogging, and explains the significance of everything from the "retag microformat" to providing "proper infrastructure for posts" to the legal ramifications and case law on blogging. Further, she also offers a short course in writing, self-publicity, and creating interesting and enlightening topics for one's blog readers. As a university professor, I can't bring myself to declare that Ms. Stefanac has compacted four years of English composition, design studies, public relations training, and rhetorical instruction into her several hundred readable pages, but *Dispatches* does serve as both an accessible textbook for the classroom and an at-home self-educator.

Dispatches also marks a turning point in the development of blogging as a phenomenon. Blogging has lent itself to hyperbole. Just think about all the claims and counter-claims made about blogs:

Everyone (from the Pope to every peasant in India) is going to blog.

Blogging will replace all other forms of media content creation.

Blogging is an expression of pure democracy.

At the same time, other people argue:

Participation in blogging is falling off, and many people are giving up on blogging.

Most people do not have the time, energy, interest, or ability to blog.

Blogging is chaotic anarchy, a cesspool of vicious ideologies and egomaniacs.

A squad of scholars, journalists, and bloggers could probably marshal evidence in favor of all of those exaggerations, pro-bloggers and anti-bloggers and mainstream media eager to over-promote or kick the feet out from under any new media phenomenon. But I hope that we are now entering a phase of blogging and thinking about blogging in which we no longer treat it as something amazing, weird, or apocalyptic, but instead study it soberly and thoughtfully as an important vehicle, venue, platform, medium, and metaphor for a new age of fractured, niched mass communication. *Dispatches from Blogistan* maps out this confusing territory, seemingly so strange and quirky but increasingly becoming part of many people's lives.

Dispatches is also an important marker in that it affirms that blogging is not something completely new, that it is not such a revolution in thought and action that we can put away all previous knowledge about human interactivity. For my entire career teaching political communication, I have taught my students the one master lesson of persuasion: *Successful mass communication is that which best approximates successful personal communication*. The presidential address on television that most effectively persuades at-home viewers to support a particular policy is the one that elicits reactions in focus groups like, "I felt he was talking to me personally." The best business, military, educational, and political leaders are those who, either by nature or by study, or both, find ways to speak to large audiences yet touch them individually with words and imagery. The personal nature of blogs, then, is quite old. Ancient Romans, classical Mayans, and medieval Saxons would have understood the principle of personal bonding that nourishes the best blogging. Today, my students tell me, the blogs they read the most are those created by bloggers they like and trust the most.

Finally, *Dispatches* demystifies blogging, not by claiming that nothing learned in school can help one with something so new, but by pointing out that the rules of good writing, good public relations, good research, good design and style, and good intellectual creativity have not changed over the thousands of years of human civilization. This is also a point of which educators will approve. One well-respected, extremely successful political consultant comes into my classes and tells students—all of whom yearn to be respected, successful political consultants—“If you want to learn how to create great images for political ads, study the films of John Ford and Renaissance painting. If you want to create effective music for those ads, take courses in music theory and classical composition. If you want to write great copy for those ads, read *Moby Dick* and the classics of literature.” I believe Ms. Stefanac is arguing the same here. To be a popular, respected, and successful blogger, or simply to design a more aesthetically and intellectually pleasing blog, there is indeed a large realm of new technical knowledge that one should learn. But there are also fundamentals of thinking, writing, and image-creating that are essential to one’s blog project, and these stretch from Homer and Aristotle to the present day.

In all, *Dispatches from Blogistan* should be part of the library—virtual or physical—of anyone who blogs, cares about blogging, or is even mildly interested in learning about one of the most controversial and powerful phenomena of the modern media age. Blog without this book at your own risk, or perhaps even your peril.

—David D. Perlmutter, Summer 2006

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blogs explode onto the scene

There’s no easy definition for the word *blog*. The Merriam-Webster dictionary, which named the neologism its Word of the Year in 2004, defines the term as an online personal journal that houses reflections, comments, and hyperlinks. It’s a tidy definition, and true enough, but it doesn’t really capture the fervor and breadth and flux of the phenomenon.

The numbers are boggling. The word *blog* wasn’t coined until 1999, and yet by late summer 2006, blog search engine Technorati (technorati.com) was reporting nearly fifty million blogs worldwide, with an average of one new blog launching every second, and more than a million new posts being uploaded each day. Over the course of the previous three years, the number of blogs had doubled every six months, and it continues to grow at an almost exponential rate.