

COLUMN ONE

Blogs can top the presses

Talking Points Memo drove the U.S. attorneys story, proof that Web writers with input from devoted readers can reshape journalism.

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New York — IN a third-floor Flower District walkup with bare wooden floors, plain white walls and an excitable toy poodle named Simon, six guys dressed mainly in T-shirts and jeans sit all day in front of computer screens at desks arranged around the oblong room's perimeter, pecking away at their keyboards and, bit by bit, at the media establishment.

The world headquarters of TPM Media is pretty much like any small newsroom, anywhere, except for the shirts. And the dog. And the quiet. Most newsrooms are notably noisy places, full of shrill phones and quacking reporters. Here there is mainly quiet, except for the clacking keyboards.

It's 20 or so blocks up town to the heart of the media establishment, the Midtown towers that house the big newspaper, magazine and book publishers. And yet it was here in a neighborhood of bodegas and floral wholesalers that, over the last two months, one of the biggest news stories in the country — the Bush administration's firing of a group of U.S. attorneys — was pieced together by the reporters of the blog Talking Points Memo.

The bloggers used the usual tools of good journalists everywhere — determination, insight, ingenuity — plus a powerful new force that was not available to reporters until blogging came along: the ability to communicate almost instantaneously with readers via the Internet and to deputize those readers as editorial researchers, in effect multiplying the reporting power by an order of magnitude.

In December, Josh Marshall, who owns and runs TPM, posted a short item linking to a news report in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette about the firing of the U.S. attorney for that state. Marshall later followed up, adding that several U.S. attorneys were apparently being replaced and asked his 100,000 or so daily readers to write in if they knew anything about U.S. attorneys being fired in their areas.

For the two months that followed, Talking Points Memo and one of its sister sites, TPM Muckraker, accumulated evidence from around the country on who the axed prosecutors were, and why politics might be behind the firings. The cause was taken up among Democrats in Congress. One senior Justice Department official has resigned, and Atty. Gen. Alberto R. Gonzales is now in the media crosshairs.

This isn't the first time Marshall and Talking Points have led coverage on national issues. In 2002, the site was the first to devote more than just passing mention to then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott's claim that the country would have been better off had the segregationist 1948 presidential campaign of Sen. Strom Thurmond succeeded. The subsequent furor cost Lott his leadership position.

Similarly, the TPM sites were leaders in chronicling the various scandals associated with Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

All of this from an enterprise whose annual budget probably wouldn't cover the janitorial costs incurred by a metropolitan daily newspaper.

"Hundreds of people out there send clips and other tips," Marshall said. "There is some real information out there, some real expertise. If you're not in politics and you know something, you're not going to call David Broder. With the blog, you develop an intimacy with people. Some of it is perceived, but some of it is real."

Marshall's use of his readers to gather information takes advantage of the interactivity that is at the heart of the Internet revolution. The amount of discourse between writers and readers on the Web makes traditional journalists look like hermetic monks.

Duncan Black, an economist who writes as Atrios on his website, Eschaton, receives hundreds of comments for almost anything he posts. Thursday morning, he posted a short note saying he would not be writing much that day as he was going to be traveling. Within the hour, 492 people posted comments on that. A political reporter at a metropolitan daily might not get that much reader response in a year.

"With Abramoff, I was getting a lot more tips than I could handle," Marshall said. "I thought if I hire two people, pay them, marry them with these tips, what could we do then?"

That led to the creation of TPM Muckraker, which has two full-time, salaried reporter-bloggers and is where many of the stories on the U.S. attorneys were originally published.

In much of its work, TPM exhibits a clearly identified political agenda. In this, it is no different from dozens of other blogs across the political spectrum. It distinguishes itself by mixing liberal opinion with original reporting by its own staff and actively seeking information from its readers.

This was most apparent in 2004-05 when Marshall turned the site's focus to President Bush's proposed privatization of Social Security. Marshall asked readers to survey their own members of Congress on the issue. This distributed reporting helped TPM compile rosters of where every member of Congress stood on the proposal, something no newspaper attempted. By making apparent the lack of enthusiasm for the plan, TPM helped kill it.

The Social Security campaign was straightforward political activism, with strict advocacy for a well-defined position.

"For me, that was sort of a little beyond my comfort zone," Marshall said. "But the underlying issue seemed important enough to do it. There are still a lot of lines I don't cross because of, for lack of a better word, the kind of institution we are. We do opinion journalism, we're not campaign adjuncts."

BLOGGING has famously unleashed the opinions of multitudes. There are, by very rough count, 60 million bloggers around the world today. Some projections have that number nearly doubling again this year. Depending on which side of a vitriolic divide you fall — that is, whether you think this

is good or bad — this represents either the end of civilization or the rise of true democracy.

There are blogs for baseball teams, for fast food, for God and for Satan; there are lots of blogs on politics and Hollywood and at least one that deals exclusively with pharmaceutical industry research. There are hundreds of blogs on Iraq and more than you would imagine in Mongolia.

Though the numbers and breadth of blogging are indeed astonishing, it's not at all clear what the numbers mean, if they mean anything at all. Much of what constitutes the phenomenon of blogging is apt to be inconsequential for the simple but powerful fact that nobody reads most of them. That is, aside from their authors, literally nobody.

Most of these blogs are the creations of individuals who have a passion to write, usually about a single subject, that subject often being themselves. Some of them are truly horrible and, thankfully, short-lived. The passion burns out.

Others, though, are remarkably good. There are sports blogs devoted to single teams that are far more acute in their analysis than mainstream media (MSM) covering the same sport. This is particularly true in baseball, where statistically driven analysis has been adopted wholesale in the blogosphere while the MSM has been slow to recognize its value.

The blogs that have captured the most attention are those that devote themselves mainly to politics and public affairs. These are almost always run by partisans of one side or the other. In that, they are nearly the opposite of the sort of coverage presented in traditional media, whose coverage at least attempts to be neutral on questions of policy.

This neutrality is a favorite target of bloggers who say that mainstream journalism objectivity disguises hidden biases of the form, if not the writer. The bloggers contend that these biases can render neutrality into bland, even neutered reporting that rewards those intent on manipulating it.

Many critiques from both sides of the blogging-MSM divide are accurate, if sometimes misplaced. The chief criticisms of blogging from defenders of the MSM are, one, the pajama charge — that is, bloggers are not professional journalists and don't do much reporting (thus the image of them sitting at home in their pajamas) — and, two, the incivility charge, that many bloggers use impolite language.

Most bloggers, in fact, are not journalists and do little if any reporting. But most bloggers don't claim to be journalists. They're bloggers. The incivility charge is true too. Many bloggers use bad language, but so occasionally does the New Yorker, and no one accuses it of lacking manners.

"I'm familiar with the critique," Marshall said. "I don't feel it has a great deal to do with us, what we are doing. There's a ton of stuff out there, and a lot of it is screechy and angry and undisciplined. I don't have a problem with it, but it's not stuff I'm particularly interested in reading.

"It's totally in the tradition of political pamphleteering. ... Individually, I think some of it isn't necessarily that pretty, but I think the whole thing altogether is a great thing."

Neither side in the blog-MSM debate seems to have great appreciation for what the other brings to the party. Simply put, while mainstream media does the heavy lifting of careful, day-to-day and occasional in-depth reporting, bloggers have revived political commentary, mainly through their exuberance.

IF the traditional media see their roles as delivering lectures on the news of the day, blogs are more of a backyard conversation, friendlier, more convivial. Bloggers publish in variable lengths at uncertain and unscheduled times. Blogs tend to be informal, cheap to produce, free to consume, fast, heavily referential, self-referential and vain because of it; profane, accident-prone yet self-correcting.

To say that traditional media were slow to appreciate the power of this form is to belabor the obvious. Even bloggers were slow to appreciate the import of what they were doing. The phenomenon appeared in its embryonic form in the mid-1990s. The term "blog," a mash-up of "Web log," was coined in 1997. By 1999, blogging software was widely available, and free, and the first political blogs appeared.

By that time, Marshall, a 38-year-old who has a PhD from Brown University in American colonial history, had become a freelance journalist, selling pieces mainly to small opinion journals. He wrote his first blog post in November 2000, commenting on the role of GOP lawyer Theodore Olson in Florida's Bush-Gore recount.

"It just seemed natural. I liked the informality of the writing. The freedom of it appealed to me," Marshall said. "It just looked like fun. I saw it as a loss leader for my journalism."

Once he started, however, he never stopped. He continued to freelance, but gradually moved more and more of his attention to the blog, living in near poverty as a result. When he needed money to do something for the blog, he asked his readers for it. Remarkably, they gave it to him.

His economic turning point came in 2003 when he received a phone call from a man named Henry Copeland, who had an idea for selling advertising on blogs. Copeland saw a way to aggregate blogs and broker advertising to them. Essentially, he created a remote back office and a revenue stream for the mainly sole proprietors who blogged.

"He had the concept of Blogads, which turned out to be the funding mechanism for what I was doing. Within six months it was supporting me," Marshall said.

It wasn't until Copeland came along that anyone seriously contemplated making a career as a blogger. Since then, advertising has grown to such an extent that dozens of blogs are now profitable enterprises. They are also major sources of information for thousands of readers.

Copeland said the relatively small world of left-of-center political blogs now receives an estimated 160 million page views a month, in the same ballpark as some major newspapers and far more than any opinion magazine.

This professionalization of the blogosphere has been abetted by mainstream media's increasing practice of hiring independent bloggers or deploying staffers to blog duty. No one in the blogosphere seems particularly worried about the competition.

Copeland, for one, doubts that the MSM will be able to stem the blogging tide, or even swim very far in it.

"We're big believers that the Internet's rule is 'the outside is the new inside.' That means that bloggers, with low overheads and nimble structures, can outmaneuver everyone else....

"A newspaper is a boat, a highly evolved mechanism designed and built to float in water. Blogs are bikes, built to cruise in another environment. Now, you can pull a bunch of planking off a boat and add wheels and pedals, but that won't make it as light and maneuverable as a bike."

