

THE USE OF BLOGS IN THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Blogs, short for *Weblogs*, are a frequently updated Internet journal that has become a growing Internet subculture. This once techie phenomenon has now become an invaluable tool in the 2004 presidential election, adding another innovative Internet component to campaign communications.

While blogs have received much attention, they were actually one of the earliest publishing practices on the Internet. Blogs were relatively unknown until recently with increased publicity and the availability of easy-to-use, free blog publishing tools. Blogs enable Internet users to publish and connect to a worldwide audience. Today, there are an estimated two million “bloggers” globally, and that figure is growing steadily.¹

One of the first mainstream blogs was “The Drudge Report,” which focused on news and political gossip.² Blogger Matt Drudge proved with his coverage of “Monicagate,” among other stories, that an individual blog can provide a direct and unfiltered source of news.

While blogs generally follow a similar format, they come in many varieties and subject matters including: politics, technology, current events, culture, entertainment, and specific hobbies and interests. Blogs are an interactive dialog. Internet users can read a blog and then submit their own comments. Blogs entries are dated, with the newest ones posted on top of the page. Most blogs are postings of thoughts, opinions, and links to related news articles, other blogs, and websites. While the use of blogs in political campaigns, organizations, and businesses has become increasingly popular, allowing these institutions to communicate informally, the majority of blogs are published by individuals.

¹ Butcher, Mike. “Bloggers' Aim to Make an Impact in the Real World” *The Irish Times*, August 8, 2003, p. 53.

² Kahney, Leander. “The Web the Way It Was.” *Wired News*. February 23, 2000.

<http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,34006,00.html>

Blogs have already become a power tool in the Democratic presidential nomination battle. Currently, four of the nine Democratic presidential candidates have an official blog.³ The use of blogs has brought supporters together to form a new online community and reinvented campaign fundraising, shifting it from a few big donors to countless small donors. Blogs create a new communication dimension by giving a candidate their own a virtual and interactive community and giving candidates an instant forum using unfiltered communications to share their views.

Additionally, many candidates' grassroots supporters have created their own blogs to show their support, devoting their time and energy to promoting their favorite candidate. Other blogs have popped up as commentary and opinions about the presidential candidates and there are plenty of negative blogs against presidential candidates. The Democratic National Committee (DNC) has even started a blog (<http://www.democrats.org/blog/>) called "Kicking Ass: Dailey Dispatches from the DNC." The blog's "About This Blog" section explains the DNC's rationale for using this new type of informal communication tool:

Blogs are popping up all over politics. Most of the Democratic candidates for president have added them to their websites.

Why? What's so different about blogs that so many people have turned to them as a source of news and community? Is this just another Internet fad (remember push media?) that will be nothing but a fond memory in a few years?

We don't think so. One of the most common complaints about politicians and political parties is that there's no real communication between those of us in Washington and the rest of America.

We put out press releases, email newsletters, fundraising appeals, form letters, and advertisements. You write letters, volunteer, and donate.

³ The Democratic candidates are Carol Moseley Braun, Wesley Clark, Howard Dean, John Edwards, Dick Gephardt, John Kerry, Dennis Kucinich, Joe Lieberman, and Al Sharpton.

But where's the frank, one-on-one communication? Blogs make that possible. On Kicking Ass, you're going to meet real people at the DNC and hear our real thoughts. And we're going to listen to you.⁴

In the 2004 presidential campaign, the leading candidate in the blogging revolution is former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, who, through a network of websites and blogs, created a dedicated Internet following that helped him lead all Democratic candidates in fundraising over the past two quarters.

Dean was the first Presidential candidate to create a blog (<http://www.blogforamerica.com>) as part of his Internet communication strategy in March 2003.⁵ The Dean campaign also created <http://www.gendeanblog.com>, a blog targeting younger voters. Dean's blog started out earlier this year with 3,000 daily readers, but by September 2003 that number jumped to 30,000 visitors per day.⁶ The blog contains campaign links, featured sites, blog links, and information about events. It offers a campaign diary and an opportunity for supporters to share their views on the blog. With each blog entry, readers can post their own comments, send the entry to a friend, and link to other blogs that reference the entry (a feature called Trackback). Dean's site adheres to the formula of many popular blogs, with many insightful updates from the campaign trail from the candidate himself, as well as contributions from campaign staff and volunteers. The blog also has influential bloggers as guest contributors to his site. While many other candidates distance themselves from unofficial campaign blogs, Dean has embraced them and his site links to numerous unofficial blogs. Dean also successfully used his blog to increase online fundraising. Before the third quarter fundraising filing, Dean's blog provided updates on fundraising totals and encouraged blog readers to donate to the campaign.

⁴ "About This Blog" Kicking Ass: Dailey Dispatches from the DNC. <http://www.democrats.org/blog/about/index.html>

⁵ The first official Dean blog was started on March 14, 2003 and was located at <http://www.deancalltoaction.blogspot.com>

⁶ Weiss, Joanna. "Political Player: The Chief 'Blogger: A Hired Gun Who Muses With Fingertips." *The Boston Globe*, September 7, 2003. <http://www.boston.com>

On an online discussion with Dean's campaign manager Joe Trippi, one individual asked the question, "Is it true your campaign chooses what goes up on the blog or is it really open for free discussion?" Trippi noted:

It is open for free discussion. I have seen a lot of comments on other blogs that we monitor it and take some stuff down, but that is just not true. On occasion we take down profanity and things that are just too over the top. In fact now we have so many comments that I am sure that there is stuff that someone has posted that we haven't even seen yet. In the early days we had a guy that would come on and say "Howard Dean sucks" for pages. We would take it down because you would have to scroll forever to see anything interesting. Even now some stuff gets by us, but we try to let everyone post. Negative comments that are challenging or questioning Dean are left up all the time, it is only when they are super obnoxious that we have taken it down - and that happens very rarely.⁷

Many other candidates have taken note of Dean's online success and the publicity generated by his blog. Now other Democratic candidates have rushed to create their own official blogs.

Wesley Clark, John Edwards, and John Kerry have all recently launched official campaign blogs.

Wesley Clark, the newest Democratic candidate, had a lot of help before entering the race by the "draft Clark" Internet movement. On September 27, 2003, Clark started an official blog (<http://blog.clark04.com/>). The first posting noted that the blog would have postings from Clark's "BlogTeam," which includes staff at the campaign's Little Rock, Arkansas, headquarters; Clark's son, Wes Clark, Jr.; and guest bloggers and influential bloggers.⁸ The blog allows for open threads and comments, creating an interactive virtual community. The blog also lists unofficial pro-Clark websites, blogs, and Yahoo groups.

John Edwards' blog (<http://share.johnedwards2004.com>) describes itself as "a community designed to encourage supporters of Senator Edwards to communicate with one another and

⁷ Online Discussion with Joe Trippi Washingtonpost.com. August 27, 2003. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>

⁸ Information about the "BlogTeam" can be found at <http://blog.clark04.com/about/>

express their opinions about today's important issues.”⁹ Users of the Edwards blog are encouraged to create an account that enables them to post links and rate comments, but comments may be posted without an account. The blog, started in August 2003, is more campaign-controlled and less free spirited than the Dean blog. For example, the blog is designed more like the Edwards website and less like a traditional blog. Also, there are no links to any unofficial Edwards blogs or websites, but there is a section for state supporters in the official blog.

Some visitors to the Edwards site are growing frustrated with the blog’s style and controlled atmosphere. One user, identified as “Drack26,” posted the following comment: “What is going on with the blog. My previous comment was deleted. I think this blog is too hard to get around. I'd like to see comments posted chronologically. I'd like to see an open thread. That would lead to more discussion about the campaign and ideas and bring supporters together.”¹⁰ Another anonymous individual replied to Drack26’s posting by saying, “Yes we need an open thread. The Dean website has it...why can't we?”¹¹

In mid October 2003, Edwards redesigned his blog and addressed some of these concerns including; creating links to grassroots pro-Edwards blogs and websites, allowing open threads, having a comment counter, thus making the blog user-friendlier. While it is great that Edwards revamp his blog, it is puzzling why the blog was so restrictive and non-user friendly in the first place, when it was started less than two months earlier.

⁹ “What is the John Edwards Blog?” John Edwards for President Blog.

<http://share.johnedwards2004.com/links.pl?op=fag>

¹⁰ Drack26. “I also wonder...” Edwards for President Blog, September 28, 2003, 7:30pm

<http://share.johnedwards2004.com/>

¹¹ anonymous. “Re: I also wonder...” Edwards for President Blog, September 28, 2003, 7:42pm.

<http://share.johnedwards2004.com/>

John Kerry began his official blog (<http://blog.johnkerry.com/>) in August 2003. The blog, entitled “We Will Beat Bush: *Daily Updates From The Campaign Trail*,” is more interactive and operates in a less controlled environment than the Edwards blog. Kerry takes the Dean blog’s style and creates a very interactive and user-friendly blog. The blog links to “Unofficial Kerry Sites,” including several blogs, Yahoo groups, and websites.

Joe Lieberman’s campaign does not have an official blog, but does post a “Joe and Hadassah Campaign Diary.” While this conveys some blog ideals, such as posting daily activities and opinions of the Liebermans’, it is not a blog and does not create an interactive communication forum.

Bob Graham, who ended his campaign on October 6, 2003, had an official blog (<http://www.grahamforpresident.com/blog/>), which started in August 2003. When Graham ended his campaign, he posted a message on his website thanking his supporters and directed them to share their comments on his blog. Graham had the same message posted on his blog and additional postings from campaign staff, volunteers, and his daughter, reflecting on the end of the campaign. Hundreds of comments were posted from supporters noting their disappointment that Graham was leaving the race.

Matthew Klein, who started a grassroots Graham blog, noted in a posting at the end of the campaign, “Back in June, I started up an independent Weblog, the BobWire, to spread the word about a great candidate and great American, Bob Graham. I was later thrilled to have the

opportunity to meet and communicate with the rest of you here, on the official blog, and review why the Senator should be our next president.”¹²

Dick Gephardt, Carol Moseley Braun, Dennis Kucinich, and Al Sharpton do not have official campaign blogs, but many have unofficial blogs created by their supporters. None of these candidates' official websites link to unofficial blogs. Without an official blog, these campaigns lack the ability to create an interactive dialog by directly communicating with supporters.

The unofficial Kucinich blog (<http://www.denniskucinich.us>) looks very official. It has messages posted by Kucinich and links to sections of his official website, but in small type on the bottom of the site it notes: “This site is produced by friends of Dennis Kucinich and is not the official campaign site.”

While many Democratic candidates have embraced blogs, Republican President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney's re-election website has taken a more cautious approach to this new communication technology. When the Bush-Cheney site launched in August 2003, it did not feature a blog. Instead, the website featured a newswire that allowed bloggers to place a news feed box on their website that instantly posts news items from the Bush website onto their blogs.¹³

On October 6, 2003, the campaign launched an official blog (<http://www.georgewbush.com/blog/>). The site noted on its launching posting that the blog offered “the latest news and views from outside the Washington ‘Beltway’ and from Bush-Cheney '04.” The posting went on to say: “Each morning we will update you on the day's top

¹² Klein, Matthew. “The Best President That Never Was,” Blog Graham: Bob Graham's Official Weblog. October 6, 2003, 10:25pm. <http://www.grahamforpresident.com/blog/>

¹³ Newswire feature found at <http://www.georgewbush.com/WStuff/newsfeed.aspx>

stories as well as give you a quick summary of what Bush-Cheney '04 has planned for the day. We'll also help you follow President Bush and Vice President Cheney. We will regularly deliver breaking news notices of when President Bush, and members of his team will appear on TV and action alerts to guide your efforts to help re-elect President Bush and Vice President Cheney."¹⁴

While it is great the Bush-Cheney campaign has embraced blogging, the site is more of a newswire than a blog. For example, the blog does not allow for comments, a key element of most blogs. And while many Democratic candidates provide links on their blogs to grassroots supporters' sites, the Bush-Cheney blog does not.

One article reviewing the Bush-Cheney's blog noted that "[a]lthough weblogs are often used as an opportunity for writers to post interesting links and opinions, many regard the Bush-Cheney weblog as a series of tacked-together press releases made to look like a weblog."¹⁵

Conclusion

Thanks to the innovation of the Dean campaign, blogs are a useful political communication tool that will become a standard not only in presidential campaigns, but in state and local elections as well. But for a blog to be successful, it must provide a user-friendly, interactive atmosphere, something not all campaigns have fully embraced. Ultimately, a blog is only part of creating a true online community. While other candidates have joined the Dean "Blogwagon," some these campaigns have forgotten that a blog is only one component of a successful online strategy. While others campaigns have not adapted to use of blogs and have failed to benefit from this new and innovative campaign communication tool.

¹⁴ "Official Bush-Cheney '04 Blog Now Online," Official Bush-Cheney '04 Blog, October 6, 2003, 7:15pm. http://www.georgewbush.com/blog/archives/2003_10.html#000013

¹⁵ "George W. Bush Weblog Launches," *Internet Magazine*, October 8, 2003. <http://www.internet-magazine.com/news/view.asp?id=3752>

Chart 1: Overview of blog usage for 2004 Democrat and Republican Presidential Candidates

Candidates	Use of officials blog(s)
Democrats	
Carol Moseley Braun	No blog
Wesley Clark	http://blog.clark04.com/
Howard Dean	http://www.blogforamerica.com and http://www.gendeanblog.com
John Edwards	http://share.johnedwards2004.com
Dick Gephardt	No blog
John Kerry	http://blog.johnkerry.com/
Dennis Kucinich	No blog
Joe Lieberman	No blog
Al Sharpton	No blog
Republicans	
George W. Bush	http://www.georgewbush.com/blog/