

"This [issue of young people not voting] is something that is just as bad as the difference in ethnic groups or minorities not voting." . . .

Although the solution to the new generation gap in voting participation in the United States is going to be difficult to find, the consequences for the present are readily apparent. Major issues that affect young adults are not even making it onto the public agenda, and young people's opinions on the issues are not being faithfully represented through the political process. Who votes does matter. . . .

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## BRIAN ANDERSON

From *South Park Conservatives*

*Readers do not have to be fans of South Park to understand Brian Anderson's commentary on the influence of "new media" on politics today. As Anderson explains in his introduction, "The new media have nourished a fiercely anti-liberal comedic spirit, whose anarchic, vulgar archetype is Comedy Central's brilliant cartoon series South Park, depicting the adventures of four foulmouthed fourth-graders." Nowhere is this spirit more evident, notes Anderson, than in the "blogosphere" where bloggers of every political persuasion—but especially conservative ones—say what's on their minds. Anderson discusses the Drudge Report and RealClearPolitics as examples of blogs that offer strong opinions along with links to other more obscure web sites. The blogosphere has challenged the old traditional media establishment, Anderson observes, and its audience is young. Far from reinforcing extreme views without challenge, the blogosphere offers a sometimes humorous, sometimes irreverent, but always genuine exchange of opinion.*

AS CBS NEWS CAN TELL YOU, the rise of the Internet—something that really took off only twelve years ago, with the invention of the Netscape web browser—is the latest and perhaps most explosive change that is shaking liberal media dominance. It's hard to overstate the impact that news and opinion websites like the Drudge Report, FrontPage, NewsMax, and Dow Jones's OpinionJournal are having on politics and culture, as are current-event weblogs, or blogs—individual or group web diaries—like andrewsullivan.com, InstaPundit, Kausfiles, Power Line . . . , PoliPundit, and "The Corner" department of National Review Online,

where the editors and writers argue, joke around, and call attention to articles elsewhere on the web. For simplicity's sake, let's refer to this whole universe of web-based discussion as the "blogosphere," though some apply that recently minted (post-September 11) term only to blogs proper.

While there are influential left-of-center sites—Joshua Micah Marshall's lively Talking Points Memo and liberal webzines Slate and Salon (both featuring blogs) come quickly to mind—the blogosphere currently leans right, albeit idiosyncratically, reflecting in part the hard-to-pigeon-hole politics of some leading bloggers. Like talk radio and FOX News, the right-leaning sites fill a market void. "Many bloggers felt shut out by institutions that have adopted—explicitly or implicitly—a left-wing orthodoxy," says Erin O'Connor, whose blog, Critical Mass, exposes campus PC gobbledygook.

The orthodox Left's blame-America-first response to September 11 gave a powerful rightward tilt to the blogosphere. "There were damned few noble responses to that cursed day from the 'progressive' part of the political spectrum," avers Los Angeles-based blogger and journalist Matt Welch, "so untold thousands of people just started blogs, in anger." Welch, who considers himself an "Economist-style" conservative liberal, was among them. "I was pushed into blogging on September 16, 2001, in direct response to reading five days' worth of outrageous bullshit in the media from people like Noam Chomsky and Robert Jensen."

It's easy for frustrated citizens like Welch to get their ideas circulating on the Internet. Start-up and maintenance costs for a blog are small—less than \$200 a year, thanks to easy-to-use technology invented by Pyra Labs in the late 1990s—and printing and mailing costs are of course nonexistent. Few blogs make a lot of money, though—or any—since some advertisers remain leery of the web, and no one seems willing to pay to read anything on it. Advertisers are starting to wake up to the web's power, however. The top sites can now charge anywhere from \$300 to a couple of thousand bucks for a weeklong ad.

The absence of remuneration hasn't dampened the medium's scorching rate of growth. In 1999, there were fewer than one hundred blogs proper (web diaries, that is). Five years later, the number has rocketed to more than four million and, according to some estimates, will soon reach ten million. "There are more bloggers *writing* . . . than people reading *USA Today* (whose circulation is 2.6 million)," web journalist Ed Driscoll points out. Observes the *Dallas News's* Rod Dreher, "It makes every man and woman a publisher and is the most democratic form of journalism yet devised." Many call the bloggers "citizen journalists."

Most blogs are indulgences, of zero interest to the general public and

read only by family members and friends; most aren't political. But add the leading political blogs to the news and opinion websites that have proliferated since the late 1990s, and you really do have a brand-new media sphere—one that already is rivaling print, radio, and television for "mindshare," as *Wired* magazine calls it.

The Internet's most powerful effect has been to expand vastly the range of opinion—especially right-of-center opinion—at everyone's fingertips. "The Internet helps break up the traditional cultural gatekeepers' power to determine (a) what's important and (b) the range of acceptable opinion," says former *Reason* editor and libertarian blogger Virginia Postrel. Instapundit's Glenn Reynolds, a hawkish law professor at the University of Tennessee, agrees: "The main role of the Internet and blogosphere is to call the judgment of elites about what is news into question."

The Drudge Report is a perfect case in point. Six years after the fedora-wearing, latter-day Walter Winchell Matt Drudge broke the Monica-Lewinsky story, his news and gossip site has become an essential daily visit for political junkies, journalists, media types, and—with more than three billion visits to the site a year—seemingly anyone with an Internet connection. The site features newsworthy items investigated and written by Drudge, but it's primarily an editorial filter, linking to stories on other small and large news and opinion sites—a filter that crucially exhibits no bias against the Right. (Drudge, a registered Republican, calls himself "a pro-life conservative who doesn't want the government to tax me.")

Drudge enthusiast and cultural critic Camille Paglia observes that the site's constantly updated cornucopia of information, culled from a vast number of global sources and e-mailed tips from across the political spectrum, points up by contrast "the process of censorship that's going on, the filtering of the news by established news organizations." Basically a two-man operation, Drudge now nets an estimated \$70,000 a month, according to *Business 2.0*.

RealClearPolitics, founded in 2000 by former Chicago options trader John McIntyre and friend Tom Bevan, a onetime ad executive, is an equally useful site for cutting through the liberal news fog. Every morning, RealClearPolitics links to the leading political editorials and news articles of the day, wherever they originate and whatever their political perspective. With your first few cups of coffee, you can read in one place—to take one typical day's samplings—a William Safire *New York Times* column, an Australian journalist eviscerating the United Nations for corruption, editorials from smaller-market daily papers like the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Seattle Times*, top blogger commentaries, *U.S. News & World Report* wiseman Michael Barone analyzing America's voting dynamics,

articles from the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *Weekly Standard*, and McIntyre and Bevan's own informed musings.

And that's before you even get to the eye-poppingly comprehensive national and state polling data, transcripts of speeches, special interviews, think-tank reports, video feeds, and other raw information that the site gathers and organizes with luminous rationality. "The real value of what we do," Bevan says, "is to provide a daily political crib sheet—if you only have five minutes, you can still check in and get a quick snapshot of what is happening—as well as a kind of political almanac, in which you can spend as much time as you want reading and investigating issues and data." RealClearPolitics was the place to go to keep abreast of the 2004 election, a fact to which several of the nation's leading political analysts attested. "It's one of the first things I get to every morning," said Barone. Similarly, Charlie Cook of the *National Journal* said: "Not a day goes by that I don't click on RealClearPolitics at least once, the presidential poll charts, graphs and moving averages are great." "RealClearPolitics is the first website I check every morning," declared *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. "It's an invaluable tool for anybody interested in politics or public affairs." . . .

The web's interconnectivity—the fact that bloggers and news/opinion sites readily link to one another and comment on one another's postings, forming a kind of twenty-first-century electronic agora—amplifies and extends the influence of any site that catches the heavy hitters' attention. I can attest to this effect firsthand. On several occasions, online versions of magazine essays I've written have been linked on a bunch of heavily trafficked sites. The number of readers reached easily quintupled the twenty thousand or so subscribers to the print publications. Small wonder conservative print magazines like the *American Spectator* and the *New Criterion* are using the web so extensively these days.

The large numbers of readers these sites attract isn't the only significant boost for the conservative cause; it's also *who* those readers are. Just as FOX News is pulling in a younger viewership who will reshape the politics of the future, so these conservative sites are proving particularly popular with younger people, 72 percent of whom are now online in the United States, according to an Online Publishers Association survey. "They think, 'If it's not on the web, it doesn't exist,'" says Goldberg. FrontPage's web traffic shoots up dramatically during the school year, as lots of college students log on. "Half of our online audience is under forty-five," says NewsMax chief and 1990s Clinton foe Chris Ruddy. "Younger readers are coming in." *City Journal's* web readership skews significantly younger than its print subscribers, our in-house survey found.

A Pew poll found that 20 percent of young adults now use the Internet as a top source for political information—and the percentage is rising every year.

Equally important, the blogosphere's citizen journalists draw the attention of many who work in the broader mediasphere (as we've already noted with regard to RealClearPolitics). Prominent political journalists and editors at ABC News (which has started its own inside-baseball political blog, *The Note*), CNN, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *Time*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and other major press and broadcast outlets have publicly stated that consulting political blogs and Internet sites has become a normal part of their workday. For CNN political analyst Jeff Greenfield, the blogosphere provides "access to a whole bunch of things that if you just read the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and watched broadcast networks and CNN you're not going to get." . . .

Despite Al Gore's much-derided claim that he fathered the Internet, liberals have tended to distrust the wild and unregulated blogosphere. The *Boston Globe's* Alex Beam gives an oft-heard liberal response: "Welcome to Blogistan, the Internet-based journalistic medium where no thought goes unpublished, no long-out-of-print book goes unhawked, and no fellow 'blogger,' no matter how outré, goes unpraised." Veteran *Washington Post* reporter David Broder even blames the shoddy journalistic ethics evident in the mainstream media of late on the bloggers! "When the Internet opened the door to scores of 'journalists' who had no allegiance at all to the skeptical and self-disciplined ethic of professional news gathering, the bars were already down in many old-line media organizations," he wrote with disgust. "This is how it happened that old pros such as Dan Rather and former *New York Times* editor Howell Raines got caught up in this fevered atmosphere and let their standards slip." And of course, as we saw in our introduction, you had the former executive vice president of CBS News (and now head of CNN's news group), Jonathan Klein, dismissing the blogger "sitting in his living room in his pajamas writing." The pajama people get the editor of the *Argus Leader* spitting bile: "True believers of one stripe or another, no longer content to merely bore spouses and neighbors with their nutty opinions, can now spew forth on their own blogs. . . . If Hitler were alive today, he'd have his own blog." In other words: How dare the peasants!

Such elitist contempt toward Internet publishing is diminishing on the Left these days, though, especially after Howard Dean (or better, his tech-savvy campaign boss Joe Trippi) showed during the Democratic presidential primaries just how much money and interest a left-wing

candidate could raise via the web. Bloggers also received press passes to the 2004 Democratic and Republican conventions—a historic first.

Nonetheless, liberal unease about the Internet remains. In his 2001 book *Republic.com*, legal theorist Cass Sunstein argued that the increasing influence of the web's political sites could lead to a kind of cyber-balkanization (I'm indebted here to Drezner and Farrell's excellent discussion of this problem). "New technologies, emphatically including the Internet, are dramatically increasing people's ability to hear echoes of their own voices and to wall themselves off from others," Sunstein noted. "In a system in which each person can 'customize' his own communications universe, there is a risk that people will make choices that generate too little information, at least to the extent that individual choices are not made with reference to their social benefits." In an article headlined "People Getting News They Want—Not the News They Need," the *Los Angeles Times's* David Shaw struck a similar note, complaining about the "intellectually lazy" people who now get their news from the Internet, where their views find "reinforcement and validation," instead of seeking out the unbiased reporting of the traditional news media. "[W]hat Matt Drudge calls news is very different from what, say, Walter Cronkite called news," Shaw opined sourly.

Worries about such virtual cocooning may be exactly contrary to the truth. Blogger and Yale law prof Jack Balkin gives one explanation why. "[Most] bloggers who write about political subjects cannot avoid addressing (and, more importantly, linking to) arguments made by people with different views," he points out. "The reason is that much of the blogosphere is devoted to criticizing what other people have to say. It's hard to argue with what the folks at National Review Online or Salon are saying unless you go read their articles, and, in writing a post about them, you will almost always either quote or link to the article or both." NRO and the New Republic website have occasionally run an "Opinion Dual" in which writers from each camp debate major issues, with their back-and-forth appearing simultaneously on both sites.

At *City Journal*, the Internet has brought us numerous new readers who don't share our politics. Before we started posting our articles on the web, we'd get the occasional letter from an angry liberal who'd come across us in a library or from a newspaper mention or excerpt. Now that we've entered the blogosphere era, we get bombarded with e-letters from the Left, especially when an ecumenical site like Arts & Letters Daily or RealClearPolitics links to us. Most of the left-wing letter writers curse us out. Others make thoughtful criticisms. And a few say, "Wow, you've changed my mind." How is that cyber-balkanization? Isn't it just democratic debate in action?