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Into the Blogosphere–The New Information Revolution

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Tuesday, February 15, 2005

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Until late last week, Jordan was CNN's senior news chief. All that changed when reports came out of Davos, Switzerland and the World Economic Forum, attributing nearly unbelievable comments to the news executive. As reported, Jordan had claimed that American soldiers had targeted certain reporters and journalists in Iraq to be killed.

Within hours, "blogs" had jumped on the story, tracking down the actual substance of the comments and catching Jordan in a web of unsustainable denials. By last Friday, the executive simply resigned, explaining that he had "decided to resign in an effort to prevent CNN from being unfairly tarnished by the controversy over conflicting accounts of my most recent remarks regarding the alarming number of journalists killed in Iraq."

Eason Jordan seemed genuinely perplexed as he attempted to deal with the controversy surrounding his comments. Perhaps he should have called Dan Rather, whose downfall was a direct result of information distributed in the blogosphere. Better yet, he should ask Hugh Hewitt, a world-class blogger whose new book, *Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation That's Changing Your World*, is the single best resource for understanding this new and powerful information revolution.

As Hewitt explains, blog is shorthand for "weblog." Just as the word log refers to a written record of events and analysis, a blog is simply "a diary of sorts maintained on the internet by one or more regular contributors." Hewitt dates the first blog to about 1999. Now, there are more than four million blogs—with several thousand new blogs added each day.

Hewitt's book reads like an adventure narrative, tracing the development of the "blogosphere" [as the information world of blogs is known] from its earliest stages to the radical revolution it has wrought in the way news is disseminated and controlled.

While most revolutions promise to put power in the hands of the people, this information revolution has actually succeeded in democratizing the news and information process. The old information world—identified by Hewitt as "MSM" or "mainstream media"—is in the process of being supplanted by an army of seemingly innumerable bloggers whose ability to get on a story and force major media attention has the political world spinning and news executives biting their nails.

The blogs are now able to force the attention of mainstream media. As Hewitt argues, the major media are often guilty of the journalistic sin of ignoring the obvious. Generally given to the liberal bias characteristic of the cultural elite, the media gatekeepers of the old world of MSM were once able to bury stories and to keep information out of the hands of their captive audiences. No more.

As Hewitt tells the story, the blogs allow interested parties to focus on the details of a story and track down what the mainstream media have chosen to ignore. When the media elite demonstrates its reflex of self protection, the bloggers

quickly go into action—forcing the story and revealing media bias. Before long, a “blog swarm” forms. This, Hewitt explains, “is an early indicator of an opinion storm brewing, which, when it breaks, will fundamentally alter the general public’s understanding of a person, place, product, or phenomenon.”

Senator Trent Lott was one of the first to experience a blog swarm. When, at an event honoring the late senator Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday, Lott appeared to endorse Thurmond’s 1948 political platform [on which Thurmond had run for president as a States’ Rights Democrat], an event largely ignored by the major media exploded in the blogosphere. Before long, bloggers had tracked the story back to earlier comments made by Lott and his previous associations with segregationist politics. The rest, as they say, is history. Senator Lott resigned as Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate, and politicians of both parties took a quick lesson in the information revolution.

Next to feel the heat was Howell Raines, editor of The New York Times. The scandal concerning former reporter Jayson Blair gave bloggers just the opportunity they had been seeking—and Howell Raines was brought down under a tidal wave of criticism, with his liberal “hyper-bias” and journalistic elitism crashing down around him.

Important as the cases of Trent Lott and Howell Raines were, however, all that was prologue. The big eruption of the blogosphere occurred in 2004, when Senator John Kerry and Dan Rather found themselves directly in the path of a blogging hurricane.

With Kerry, trouble first erupted when his longstanding claim to have been in Cambodia on Christmas Eve 1968—against the law and against the claims of President Richard M. Nixon—emerged as a campaign issue in the 2004 presidential race. Comments Kerry had made as far back as June 30, 1971 on The Dick Cavett Show came back to haunt the Democratic candidate.

On The Dick Cavett Show, Kerry had appeared against Navy veteran John O’Neill, who accused Kerry of being “the type of person who lives and survives only on the war weariness and fears of the American people.” O’Neill accused Kerry of lying and of misrepresenting his fellow troops—slandering young Americans as he pandered to the anti-war movement. “Never in the course of human events have so many been libeled by so few,” O’Neill asserted.

All that would have remained a footnote in the history of the 1970s had Kerry not run for president and had John O’Neill not reemerged, this time as the leader of “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” [www.SwiftVets.com].

Kerry’s comments from 1971 were compared to later testimony he had given before Congress and were then countered with testimony of other soldiers and sailors who proved convincingly that Kerry could not have been in Cambodia as claimed—on Christmas Eve or at any time during his service in Vietnam.

When Kerry continued to defend his statements—and when other recent statements were uncovered and cited in the blogosphere—Kerry was forced into full retreat. More importantly, the mainstream media were forced to cover the story.

The media elite had labeled the Swift Vets as “fanatics,” but the documentation provided in the blogosphere forced the old media to take the charges seriously. As Hugh Hewitt explains, the bloggers “provide[d] the oxygen, and the Swift Vets raised awareness of many issues connected to Kerry, the most damaging of which was Kerry’s record of Walter Mitty-like fables about himself.”

But if Kerry’s troubles were serious, Dan Rather’s crisis was terminal. When 60 Minutes 2 ran a broadcast on September 8, 2004, alleging that President George W. Bush had received privileged treatment during his service in the Air National Guard—and attempted to document those claims with memos allegedly written by Bush’s superior, Lt. Col. Jerry Killian in 1973—the blogosphere emerged as one of the most powerful forces in American life.

Just hours after the CBS story ran, bloggers began to recognize that the alleged memos looked suspiciously like documents produced by new word processing technologies—technologies both unknown and unavailable in 1972.

A blog swarm of international proportions soon emerged, but Rather continued to defend the story, to assert the authenticity of the documents, and to put his entire journalistic reputation on the line. That turned out to be a colossal mistake.

“Each day that Dan Rather stood by the authenticity of the documents was another day of deserved abuse within the blogosphere,” Hewitt recalls. Worse, “most people came to see Rather as Rather had seen his original adversary President Nixon, during Watergate: caught in a cover-up, desperate for an exit that never appeared.” In the end, Dan Rather was brought down by “Rathergate.” As Hewitt concludes, “Detailed studies will go on for years, with books and seminars devoted to the particulars, but there is no changing the meta-message that CBS rushed to run a story that was ridiculously and transparently a fraud because it wanted so badly to believe it wasn’t.”

Just how big is this new information revolution? Hewitt argues persuasively that we should see the emergence of the blogosphere in terms of Gutenberg’s invention of movable type. Gutenberg’s invention completely transformed the economic, political, and religious life of Europe—and soon of the entire world. As Hewitt explains, Gutenberg made the Reformation possible, with Martin Luther’s writings quickly distributed all over Europe, completely beyond the control of the Roman Catholic church and its information gatekeepers.

As Hugh Hewitt sees it, leaders in every field should take note of this development. Bloggers can create, and bloggers can destroy. Businesses, political campaigns, and personal reputations can be constructed and deconstructed on the Web, and a negative “blog swarm” can mean destruction for an individual, organization, corporation, or cause that is running from the truth.

The blogosphere is here to stay. Hugh Hewitt’s new book is an indispensable guide to the development, operation, and meaning of this new “information reformation.” He writes as an insider and as the author of one of the most influential blogs of our times [www.HughHewitt.com]. Furthermore, as listeners to his daily national radio program know, Hewitt brings deep Christian conviction, a background in law and politics, and an incredibly agile and honest mind to every subject he covers.

Those who underestimate the power of the blogosphere do so at their own peril. Just ask Eason Jordan. If you want to know what all this means—and you should—ask Hugh Hewitt.

