

The Blogosphere:

How a Once-Humble Medium Came to Drive Elite Media Discourse and Influence Public Policy and Elections

Joel David Bloom

University of Oregon
Oregon Survey Research Laboratory
5245 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-5245

University of Oregon
Political Science Department
1284 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-1284

jbloom@uoregon.edu
(541) 346-0891

<http://www.uoregon.edu/~jbloom>

Abstract: In December of 2002, Senator Trent Lott (R-MS) resigned his position of Senate Majority Leader under pressure from the media, his own caucus and the White House. This pressure was the result of comments Lott made at a birthday party for retiring Senator Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party in which Lott seemed to wax nostalgic about segregation. But that's not the whole story. Coming on a busy news day, the story was pushed aside by other news and not initially covered by the mainstream media. Kept alive, promoted, linked and sourced, among on-line "bloggers" – writers of weblogs, or frequently updated web sites with links and commentary – the mainstream media eventually came on board too. In this paper I use the Lott incident as an example of growing blogger influence in American politics and political communication.

Prepared for presentation at the 2nd Annual Pre-APSA Conference on Political Communication: "Mass Communication and Civic Engagement," and at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 2003, in Philadelphia, PA. This paper represents very preliminary research on the topic and will be revised and expanded upon. Please check with author for updates before citing.

Prologue: A Cautionary Tale

If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?

More to the point, if one of the most powerful public officials in the most powerful nation in the world makes a racist comment in front of a room full of other public officials and political reporters and a nationwide audience of C-SPAN viewers and no one notices it, is it news?

On Thursday, December 5th, 2002 Senator Trent Lott (R-MS), who had just been reinstated as Senate Majority Leader after Republican victories in the elections the previous month, addressed a gathering at former Senator Strom Thurmond's (R-SC) 100th birthday party. Thurmond had just retired from his Senate seat, which he had held for 50 years, making him not only the oldest, but also the longest-serving Senator in US history.

While his political image had long since been rehabilitated, Thurmond rose to prominence in 1948 when, as governor of South Carolina, he led a Southern walkout at the Democratic National Convention in protest of the passage of a strong civil rights plank and Harry Truman's candidacy. Thurmond and a number of other Southern politicians formed their own splinter party, known officially as the "States' Rights Democrats" and popularly as the "Dixiecrats." In Alabama Thurmond was simply listed on the ballot as "Democrat;" Truman did not appear on the ballot at all.¹

The party's *raison detre* was opposition to integration and civil rights for the region's Blacks, a message that resonated with the South's white-only electorate. Thurmond won the popular and electoral vote in four states – Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina – then went on to win a South Carolina Senate seat in 1954. During his early decades in the Senate he distinguished himself only for filibustering civil rights acts in 1957 and 1964, and for his leadership in penning and signing the "Southern Manifesto" decrying the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* as well as any federal involvement in the affairs of the South, and for becoming one of the first Southern Democrats to bolt to the Republican party over Lyndon Johnson's support of civil rights.

By the 1970s Thurmond saw the writing on the wall and by all accounts never made an issue of race in public again (the notion that he had publicly repudiated his past positions, however, is an inside-the-beltway urban legend – it never happened). Thurmond became a constituent-service machine for his last three decades in the Senate, easily winning re-election each time without further distinguishing himself with a legislative record.

Lott was one of a number of politicians who spoke in praise of Thurmond at the party, including his predecessor as Majority Leader, Bob Dole (R-KS). Dole gracefully referred to Thurmond's younger days as a time when "America had yet to honor the promise of equal opportunity for all of our citizens."²

¹ Margaret C. Thompson, ed. *Presidential Elections Since 1789*. 1983. Washington: CQ Press.

² Dan Goodgame And Karen Tumulty, "Tripped Up By History: G.O.P. leader Trent Lott's remarks on race raise a storm and a hot question: Have Republicans really outgrown their past?" *TIME*, December 23, 2002 (published 12/16). <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/artset?curlid=1101021223-399922&cookie=2|1061425435|9D08F1A665E32ECFC290DE3C506C336D>

Lott began with general praise of Thurmond's career and longevity, but then said with a smile:

I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president we voted for him. [Whoops, whistles from audience] We're proud of it. [Applause]³

Then his face turned deadly serious as he continued:

And if the rest of the country had of followed our lead we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either. ⁴

These comments were greeted by an audible gasp of shock from the audience – it appeared that the Senate Majority leader had, in 2002, not only endorsed Thurmond's segregationist platform of 1948, but expressed the opinion that the racial progress since then was a “problem.” But no prime time news show mentioned the story and the following morning no newspaper did either.

But the next morning, Friday, December 6th, 2002, the following paragraph appeared in ABC News' daily on-line column, *The Note*:

Here is what Senator Trent Lott, Republican of Mississippi, said yesterday at Senator Strom Thurmond's birthday party, according to ABC NEWS' O'Keefe. “I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had of followed our lead we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either.”⁵

The paragraph could not have been less prominently placed. It was about halfway through the column (page four of eight, as printed), with no subject header, among several items on Mary Landrieu's (D-LA) Senate runoff election.

Despite the poor placement, that item, appearing only online, started a snowball rolling down hill. Trent Lott stepped down as Majority Leader on December 20th, exactly two weeks after its posting on *The Note* under pressure from the Washington press corps, the Senate Republican Caucus, and even the White House. While the mainstream media were late to the story, online pontificators known colloquially as “bloggers” spread the word and kept the story alive until the Washington press corps could no longer ignore it. As Dan Goodgame and Karen Tumulty wrote in *Time*:

The papers did not make note of his comments until days after he had made them. But the stillness was broken by the hum of Internet “bloggers” who were posting their outrage and compiling rap sheets of Lott's earlier comments.⁶

Bloggers?

Bloggers are simply people who write weblogs, or blogs. As Torill Mortensen and Jill Walker put it, “Weblogs, or *blogs* as they are affectionately termed, are frequently

³ Notations of audience reaction from Brooke Gladstone, “Blogging Lott.” National Public Radio, December 20, 2002. http://www.wnyc.org/onthemedial/transcripts/transcripts_122002_blog.html

⁴ Mark Halperin, Elizabeth Wilner, and Marc Ambinder, “Man Bites Dog: And This Time the GOP is the Man.” *The Note*, ABC News. December 6th, 2002. http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/DailyNews/TheNote_Dec6.html

⁵ Halperin, op. cit.

⁶ Goodgame and Tumulty, op. cit.

updated websites, usually personal, with commentary and links.”⁷ In recent years, blogs of all kinds have proliferated, including those that focus on political events; it is these political blogs that will be the subject of this paper.

Blog history is so short that people who started blogging in 1999 are considered old-timers and the earliest practitioners of the form from the bygone days of the mid-1990s, are grizzled pioneers, the focus of awe and adulation. While sociology has already begun to produce a literature on blog culture and computer and network science studies the patterns of diffusion of information among blogs,⁸ political science has yet to take much notice of this phenomenon despite its tremendous political potential demonstrated most forcibly by the ouster of Trent Lott.

Before going into more specifics on the characteristics of the “Blogosphere,” that part of the internet inhabited by bloggers, a more detailed chronological account of the Trent Lott story will serve to introduce the reader both to the world of blogs and some of its most influential inhabitants.

Thursday, December 5

- Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott spoke at a party honoring outgoing Senator Strom Thurmond on his 100th birthday.

Friday, December 6

- ABC Producer Ed O’Keefe, present at the party, ran a story on the incident in a 4:30 AM broadcast, but network executives apparently stopped it from being included in the more popular “Good Morning America” (or any other ABC venue except for *The Note*).⁹
- At 10:54 AM (EST) journalist Tim Noah posted the quotation on *Chatterbox*, his weblog for *Slate* magazine, along with a quote from Thumond’s 1948 campaign.¹⁰
- At 11:09 AM journalist Joe Conason uploaded a rare second post of the day to his column on *Salon.com*, titled “Trent Lott waxes nostalgic about the segregationist era”:

If there remain any Democratic voters in Louisiana, of any color, who wonder why they should bother to vote in the special Senate runoff there, perhaps they ought to consider yesterday’s remarks by Trent Lott – whose power will be much enhanced if Democratic Sen. Mary Landrieu is defeated.¹¹

⁷ Torill Mortensen and Jill Walker. 2002 “Blogging Thoughts: Personal Publication as an Online Research Tool,” in Andrew Morrison, ed., *Researching ICTs in Context*. Oslo: Intermedia. A more complete discussion of the definitions and usage of the word appears later in this paper. [http://www.intermedia.uio.no/konferanser/skikt-02/docs/Researching ICTs in context-Ch11-Mortensen-Walker.pdf](http://www.intermedia.uio.no/konferanser/skikt-02/docs/Researching%20ICTs%20in%20context-Ch11-Mortensen-Walker.pdf)

⁸ See, for example, MIT’s “Blogdex,” (<http://blogdex.net>) and the “BlogMatrix” (<http://www.blogmatrix.com/>)

⁹ Arianna Huffington, “In Praise of Making a Stink,” December 20, 2002. *Salon.com*, <http://www.salon.com/news/col/huff/2002/12/20/stink/index.html?x>

¹⁰ Timothy Noah, “Blurting Out Conviction of the Week: Trent Lott. What’s a Little Segregationism Among Friends?” December 6, 2002. *Slate.com*. <http://slate.msn.com/?id=2075151>

¹¹ Joe Conason, *Joe Conason’s Journal*, December 6, 2002, *Salon.com*. <http://www.salon.com/politics/conason/2002/12/06/bush/index.html>

- At 1:21 PM, blogger “Atrios” joined the fray on his blog, *Eschaton*, reminding readers just exactly what Strom Thurmond stood for during his 1948 presidential run, and offering his own suggestions as to which “problems” Lott might have been referring to.¹²
- At 3:20 PM, blogger Joshua Micah Marshall weighed in on his blog, *Talking Points Memo*, with the following recollection:

“Thurmond ran as the presidential candidate on the “States-Rights Democrat” or “Dixiecrat” ticket – a candidacy that was based *exclusively and explicitly upon the preservation of legalized segregation and opposition to voting rights and civil rights for blacks.*”¹³
- At 4:00 PM CNN aired an extensive interview of Lott by Jonathan Karl for *Inside Politics*, but *Karl did not ask him about his statement at Thurmond’s party.*¹⁴
- At 5:11 PM, *Tapped*, an anonymous blog at *The American Prospect*, quoted the story from *The Note* and opined:

What about the *national* media? **Tom Daschle** complains after **Rush Limbaugh** has been comparing him to the Devil for a year, and the Beltway media is all over the story making Daschle look like a pathetic whiner. **Trent Lott**, soon to be the Senate’s majority leader, is caught on tape reminiscing fondly about a segregationist presidential campaign, and we hear nothing (although, since **The Note** is read widely, that might change). What gives?¹⁵
- Atrios, Conason, Noah, Marshall and Tapped are all liberal bloggers, but by 9:15 PM, conservative University of Tennessee Law Professor and blogger, Glenn Reynolds, posted an entry on his own blog, *Instapundit*, agreeing that “TRENT LOTT DESERVES THE SHIT he’s getting from [Atrios](#) and [Josh Marshall](#).”¹⁶
- At some point in the day, Lott’s spokesman, Ron Bonjean, issued a brief statement: “Senator Lott’s remarks were intended to pay tribute to a remarkable man who led a remarkable life. To read anything more into these comments is wrong.”¹⁷

As blogger Bob Somerby, of *The Daily Howler*, put it a few days later, “By Friday at noon, everyone in the Washington press corps knew about Lott’s odd remarks.”¹⁸ While this may have been a bit of an exaggeration it is almost certainly true that the same could have been said about “Friday at 9:00.”

¹² Atrios, *Eschaton*, December 6 2002.

http://atrios.blogspot.com/2002_12_01_atrios_archive.html#90023494

¹³ Joshua Micah Marshall, *Talking Points Memo*, December 6, 2002.

<http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/dec0201.html>

¹⁴ CNN, *Inside Politics*, December 6, 2002. <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0212/06/ip.00.html>

¹⁵ “The Revisionism Continues,” *Tapped/ The American Prospect*, December 6, 2002.

<http://www.prospect.org/weblog/archives/2002/12/index.html>

¹⁶ Glenn Reynolds, *Instapundit*, December 6, 2002.

http://www.instapundit.com/archives/week_2002_12_01.php

¹⁷ Thomas Byrnes Edsall, “Lott Decried For Part Of Salute to Thurmond” GOP Senate Leader Hails Colleague’s Run As Segregationist.” *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2002, p. A6.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A20730-2002Dec6¬Found=true>

¹⁸ Bob Somerby, *The Daily Howler*, December 9, 2002. <http://www.dailyhowler.com/dh120902.shtml>

Saturday, December 7

- The *Washington Post*'s Thomas Byrnes Edsall picked up the story, with the headline "Lott Decried For Part Of Salute to Thurmond: GOP Senate Leader Hails Colleague's Run As Segregationist." The article pulled no punches, adding disapproving quotes from African American Congressman John Lewis (D-GA) and Republican strategist and journalist William Kristol, as well as an approving comment by Gordon Baum, CEO of the white supremacist "Council of Conservative Citizens."¹⁹ However, its placement on page A6 of the Post's Saturday edition drew little attention from the mainstream press, which seemed to accept Bonjean's explanation.

Things really got going from there, although still largely not in the mainstream media.

- Blogger, author, and *New York Times* technology columnist, Virginia Postrel's blog, *The Scene*, put it this way later the same day:
OUT, OUT DAMNED LOTT: [Trent Lott must go](#). He's a disgrace to the South, to the Republican Party, to the U.S. Senate, and to the United States of America.²⁰
- CNN's Mark Shields made the Lott quotation the subject of his Capitol Gang "Outrage of the Week," with the following remark: "To his credit, Strom Thurmond changed dramatically. Why, then, does Trent Lott romanticize an era of hate when black Americans were truly oppressed?"²¹ Bob Novak responded that Lott was joking.

Sunday, December 8

- Lott faced tough questioning on NBC's *Meet the Press* and CNN's *Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer*,²² but ABC, CBS and Fox skipped the story.
- National Public Radio ran a fluff piece on Thurmond's birthday party that featured a Lott quote that suited the feel-good nature of the NPR story but ignored the controversy:

Somebody once said, and I'm not quite sure where I got this, but I heard it, and I loved it, and it applies to Strom Thurmond: "Youth is a gift of nature. Age is a work of art." This, ladies and gentlemen, is a work of art.²³

¹⁹ Edsall, op. cit.

²⁰ Virginia Postrel, *The Scene*, December 7, 2002.

<http://www.dynamist.com/weblog/archives/2002/dec02.html> Note that each underlined word in "Trent Lott must go" is a link to another blog or to the Washington Post article.

²¹ CNN Capitol Gang, December 7, 2002 at 7:00 PM.

<http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0212/07/cg.00.html>

Gang member Bob Novak's response was "I think Trent Lott was kidding, Mark."

²² Somerby, op. cit.

²³ Somerby, op. cit.

Monday, December 9

- Former Bush speechwriter and conservative Republican strategist, David Frum, stopped short of demanding Lott's resignation, but used strong words in his on-line journal for *The National Review*, demanding a real retraction and apology, with a specific repudiation of segregation (1:15 AM).²⁴
- As *Newsweek* hit the newsstands its readers had to look pretty carefully not to miss the only reference to Lott's quote, which appeared without comment on their "Perspectives" page.²⁵ *Time* and *US News* neglected to do even that much.
- Perhaps the strongest words from any on-line conservative came from Jonah Goldberg at 9:57 AM in *The National Review's* "The Corner" column:

His remarks – saying that we'd be better off if Strom Thurmond had won the 1948 election as a Dixiecrat – at Thurmond's 100th birthday party were incandescently idiotic according to any criteria (See, David Frum's excellent [piece](#) for the details). On the facts, Lott's comments were dumb. Morally, they were indefensible. Politically, they served to confirm the suspicions of millions of blacks and liberal whites about what is in the hearts of conservatives and Republicans while earning him nothing but a smile from a 100 year-old man.²⁶

- Lott made his first attempt to apologize personally for the remarks: "A poor choice of words conveyed to some the impression that I embrace the discarded policies of the past. Nothing could be further from the truth, and I apologize to anyone who was offended by my statement."²⁷
- At 11:16 PM, Conservative journalist and blogger, Andrew Sullivan, joined the fray in his independent *Daily Dish* blog, using strong words as well:

TRENT LOTT MUST GO: After his [disgusting remarks](#) at Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party, it seems to me that the Republican Party has a simple choice. Either they get rid of Lott as majority leader; or they should come out formally as a party that regrets desegregation and civil rights for African-Americans. Why are the Republican commentators so silent about this? And the liberals?²⁸

²⁴David Frum, "Moments of Truth." *David Frum's Journal*, December 9, 2002.

<http://nationalreview.com/frum/diary120902.asp>

²⁵ "Perspectives," *Newsweek*, December 16th, 2002 (published 12/9), p. 23.

²⁶ Jonah Goldberg, "Trent Lott's Blunder." *The National Review Online*, *The Corner*, December 9, 2002. http://www.nationalreview.com/thecorner/02_12_08_corner-archive.asp#001595

²⁷ Robert A. George, "Vacant Lott: The GOP and the Ghosts of Mississippi," *National Review Online*. December 10, 2002. <http://www.nationalreview.com/george/george121002.asp>

Quoted in *Kausfiles*, Mickey Kaus, December 10, 2002. <http://slate.msn.com/id/2075188/>

²⁸ Andrew Sullivan, *The Daily Dish*. December 9, 2002.

http://www.andrewsullivan.com/index.php?dish_inc=archives/2002_12_08_dish_archive.html

By the end of the day Monday, it was still unclear whether the story had largely played itself out with barely a mention in the nation's daily newspapers, news weeklies, and network television. But Sullivan's complaints that both liberal and conservative commentators were largely ignoring the story would soon be answered, in part because Lott's first public apology was a fairly clear-cut news event.

Tuesday, December 10

- *The New York Times* addressed the issue for the first time, but buried it on page A28. The article placed Lott's Monday apology in context:

Earlier in the day, Mr. Lott had issued a statement that stopped short of an apology, saying his comments were made in the spirit of "a lighthearted celebration." His later expression of contrition came after a reporter pointed out to his office that former Vice President Al Gore had called on him to apologize. Mr. Lott's spokesman said the apology was not in response to Mr. Gore but came solely "out of personal concern for this misunderstanding."²⁹

- Howard Kurtz's daily online media column (or blog?) for *The Washington Post, Media Notes*, focused on the Lott story. Kurtz was particularly harsh on the mainstream media:

Trent Lott must go!

That, at least, is the consensus of online pundits.

What, you weren't aware that the Senate majority leader was in hot water for appearing to embrace the segregationist cause?

Perhaps that's because, until this morning, most major newspapers hadn't done squat on the story.

Which is hard to understand for this reason: There were cameras rolling. It's on tape. It was on C-SPAN, for crying out loud.

If a Democrat had made this kind of inflammatory comment, it would be the buzz of talk radio and the Wall Street Journal editorial page would be calling for tarring and feathering. But Lott seems to be getting something of a pass.

When Lott finally apologized yesterday, the big papers jumped on the story. But why did they wait so long?³⁰

Kurtz might well have asked himself the same question. He went on to discuss the important role that both liberal and conservative bloggers had played in bringing the issue to public attention and keeping it there, specifically citing Andrew Sullivan, Joshua Marshall, David Frum, Virginia Postrel, and *Tapped*.

By this time the story was too big for the mainstream press to ignore. As a report from Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting, (FAIR), a liberal media watchdog organization, put it:

²⁹ Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Under Fire, Lott Apologizes for His Comments at Thurmond's Party," *The New York Times* Late Edition Final, Section A, Page 28, Column 1.

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30915FE3C5E0C738DDAB0994DA404482>

³⁰ Howard Kurtz, "Why so Late on Lott?" *Media Notes/ The Washington Post*, December 10, 2002.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A34186-2002Dec10?language=printer>

Finally, on December 10, all three network nightly news shows weighed in, along with ABC's Nightline; that morning had seen the first **New York Times** coverage of the story, and the first wave of scolding editorials (**Washington Post**; **New Orleans Times-Picayune**; **Bangor Daily News**). [The report also mentions a *Wall Street Journal* editorial from the same day.]³¹

The feeding frenzy was on. Lott made additional attempts to apologize on December 12th, and 13th. The following Monday (the 16th) the story was now on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek* (but not *US News*). That evening, Lott made a surprising appearance on Black Entertainment Television in which he expressed genuine contrition for his statement:

I'm now trying to find a way to deal with the understandable hurt that I have caused....I obviously made a mistake, and I'm going to do everything I can to admit that and deal with it and correct it. And that's what I hope the people will give me a chance to do.³²

Lott managed to frighten conservatives by expressing support for affirmative action (as long as it didn't involve "quotas and timetables") while simultaneously offending Blacks and liberals by saying that his past hires of African Americans *constituted* affirmative action. Lott's appearance was widely ridiculed by political commentators and late-night comics alike, and only made matters worse for him. Stories leaked that the Republican Caucus in the Senate would be meeting to consider whether to retain Lott as their leader.

Once Republican support (including by many accounts, from the White House) converged around Tennesseean Bill Frist as a replacement, Lott reluctantly stepped down as Majority Leader Friday, December 20th, while retaining his Senate seat from Mississippi.³³ It was two weeks to the day since the story first appeared on-line on *The Note*.

A Bit of Context: A Busy News Day

Did the mainstream media drop the ball on this story? Probably, but they did have some excuses. As David Frum pointed out, the same morning that *The Note* broke the story, December 6th, Secretary of the Treasury, Paul O'Neill and chief economic advisor Larry Lindsay resigned at 10:05 AM under pressure from the White House.³⁴ That alone was a very big political story. On top of that, Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA) faced a very close runoff election on Saturday the 7th that would help determine the extent to which President Bush would be able to carry out his agenda in the Congress for the 2003-2004 session. On top of that was the now constant drumbeat heading towards war in Iraq. Because the story broke on a Friday that was a heavy

³¹ "Media Play Catch-up on Lott's Latest Endorsement of Racism: Coverage mostly omits senator's history of support for segregation," Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting Media Advisory, December 11, 2002. <http://www.fair.org/press-releases/lott-advisory.html>

³² "A Contrite Lott Tells BET He's Changed," CNN, December 16th, 2002. <http://www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/12/16/lott.controversy/>

³³ Helen Dewar and Mike Allen, "Lott Steps Down as GOP Leader: Southern Senator Will Serve Out Term," *The Washington Post*, December 20, 2002. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A17080-2002Dec20¬Found=true>

³⁴ Frum, op. cit.

news day there was an excellent chance that it would not get much notice heading into the weekend, and would thus fade away.

Blog Triumphalism

So why didn't it just fade away? A lot of people thought the bloggers had a lot to do with it, starting with Howard Kurtz's column noted earlier.

When *TIME* finally got to the story on the 16th, they gave bloggers some credit, as quoted above. Blog expert Mark Glaser, writing for the *Online Journalism Review*, went even farther:

Most major media outlets ignored the remark but online journalists, especially Webloggers such as Josh Marshall, Andrew Sullivan, and David Frum posted scathing attacks on Lott (with the latter two being conservatives)....

Now the mainstream media must swallow its pride, follow the Internet on the story, and even give credit where it's due. The Post's Howard Kurtz spends two online [Media Notes columns](#) giving praise. [Time magazine gave credit](#) to the "hum of Internet bloggers who were posting their outrage and compiling rap sheets of Lott's earlier comments." And [John Podhoretz writes](#) in the New York Post that the new medium of blogging is maturing before our eyes (under the screaming headline: "The Internet's First Scalp").³⁵

Writing in *Wired* Magazine, Noah Shachtman was similarly maximalist:

It's safe to assume that, before he flushed his reputation down the toilet, Trent Lott had absolutely no idea what a blog was.

He may have a clue now. Internet opinion pages like Instapundit, run by University of Tennessee law professor Glenn Reynolds, and Talking Points Memo, from leftie political columnist Josh Marshall – were among the first to latch on to ABCNews.com's brief item on Lott's racist comments during Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday bash.

And they kept focusing on Lott's hateful past -- until the national press corps finally had to take notice.³⁶

Conservative *New York Post* columnist John Podhoretz put it similarly in an NPR interview, while misstating the chronology a bit:

Well the most important figure in this story is probably Josh Marshall who runs a blog called talkingpointsmemo.com. The Lott story broke on a Friday, and over the weekend, Marshall highlighted it; other people saw it there; another blogger named Atrios then ran with it as well. Dug up some very interesting stuff and horrifying stuff about the Mississippi Democratic Party's record that belied Trent Lott's claim that support for Strom Thurmond was largely about defense issues in 1948, and I think most importantly for, for the viability of this story, conservative bloggers led by Andrew Sullivan whose blog is at andrewsullivan.com, by David Frum who has a blog on the National Review web site, and others leapt on the story; demanded Lott's

³⁵ Mark Glaser, "Trent Lot Gets Bloggered....Weblogs Credited for Lott Brouhaha," *Online Journalism Review*, December 17, 2002. <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/glaser/p1040145065.php>.

³⁶ Noah Shachtman, "Blogs Make the Headlines," *Wired*, December 23, 2002. <http://www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,56978,00.html>

resignation; said that the Republican Party and the conservative movement were at a crucial crossroads -- moral, spiritual and political crossroads -- and had they not gone as passionately and ardently with the story and with the, this moral demand, I'm not sure that it would have had the legs that it had.³⁷

Arianna Huffington put it colorfully:

No fewer than a dozen reporters were present when Lott waxed nostalgic about Jim Crow at Strom Thurmond's birthday bash, but only one, ABC News producer Ed O'Keefe, thought it newsworthy. His bosses didn't share his enthusiasm however, and, after running the story on a 4:30 a.m. broadcast, didn't use it on either "Good Morning America" or "World News Tonight." The rest of the major media outlets also initially reacted with a collective shrug.

Thank God for the Internet. It was in cyberspace that scores of bloggers – including Josh Marshall of talkingpointsmemo.com, Glenn Reynolds of instapundit.com, Mickey Klaus [sic] of klausfiles.com, [sic] and Andrew Sullivan of andrewsullivan.com – continued hammering away at the story, and eventually succeeded in moving it out of the shadows into the political spotlight.³⁸

Of course no one will ever know for certain that the story would have faded away without the buzz created in the Blogosphere, or whether blogs influenced coverage. One thing is certain, though – blogs gained for the first time the attention of a great many reporters, editors, publishers and public officials who had not previously paid them any mind or even known of their existence. Influential bloggers like those mentioned repeatedly above became highly sought-after media stars and saw their readership skyrocket. The previously obscure and eccentric world of blogging had come into its own as a real player in American political media.

Some Statistics on the Blogosphere

No one knows exactly how many bloggers are out there; there is no single clearinghouse for blogs and existential debates about what really is or is not a blog take up a great deal of space and emotional energy in the Blogosphere. For example, can Eric Alterman's site, *Altercation* on MSNBC really be a blog if it doesn't have archives? (<http://www.msnbc.com/news/752664.asp>) How about sites like *The Daily Howler* (<http://www.thedailyhowler.com>), *Joe Conason's Journal* at *Salon.com* (http://dir.salon.com/topics/joe_conason/index.html), Howard Kurtz's influential *Media Notes* for *The Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/politics/onlineextra/medianotes/>) or even ABC's *The Note* (<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/TheNote/TheNote.html>) that have separate daily entries that are rarely updated? Are these blogs or just daily online journals with links? The fact is that these sites are updated far more frequently than many other sites that more closely resemble the stereotypical blog – with the most recent postings on the top, and later postings further down, with date and time stamps.

For our purposes we will go with a broad definition of blogs that includes *any site that is available exclusively online, is updated frequently, and includes large numbers of links to the content it cites*. This largely fits the definition found at

³⁷ John Podhoretz, in interview with Brooke Gladstone, op. cit.

³⁸ Huffington, op. cit. Huffington gives (or rather attempts to give) Mickey Kaus too much credit – he didn't weigh in on the topic until the 10th by which time the story was already well on the way.

Internet.com's Webopedia: “Short for **Web log**, a blog is a Web page that serves as a publicly-accessible personal journal for an individual. Typically updated daily, blogs often reflect the personality of the author.”³⁹

Blogcount estimates between 2.4 million and 2.9 million blogs as of June 23, 2003, but concedes that this count is simultaneously too high (in that it includes inactive blogs) and too low (in that it misses many independent blogs or those in smaller web domains). Based on “management reports of active weblogs centrally hosted,” they produce the following table:

Table 1: The Blogcount.com Estimate (Number of Blogs.)

	Registered	Active	As of
LiveJournal [1]	1,121,464	526,535	23 June 2003
Blogger [2]	1,500,000	705,000	9 June 2003
DiaryLand [3]	850,000	400,000	March 2003
Totals	3,471,464	1,631,535	

Source: Blogcount⁴⁰

Melissa Stock of Jupiter Research reports a number of statistics about the blogosphere, including separate looks at bloggers and blog readers:⁴¹

Bloggers:

- 2 percent of the online community has created a blog
- 57 percent have a household income below \$60,000 per year
- Blogging is split evenly among the genders
- 70 percent of bloggers having an online tenure of more than 5 years

Blog readers:

- 4 percent of the online community read them
- 60 percent male
- 61 percent in homes where the total income is more than \$60,000 per year
- 73 percent of blog readers have been online for more than 5 years

Greenspan also presents data from a “BlogCensus” conducted by [the The National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education \(NITL\)](#), which finds that of the 655,631 weblogs in the study, the majority are in English (53%), followed by Portugese (8%), Polish (7%), Farsi (4%), French (2%), and a number of others with 1% or less.⁴²

Obviously these numbers say nothing about the influence or importance of blogs. 4% of web users (calling it an “online community” might be jumping the gun a bit) may seem like a small number, for example, but it might be understated if some respondents are reading online content without realizing some of it is blogs.

³⁹ *Webopedia, Internet.com*. May 19, 2003. <http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/b/blog.html>

⁴⁰ Phil Wolf, “The Blogcount.com Estimate: 2.4-2.9 million weblogs,” June 23, 2003. <http://www.dijest.com/bc/>

⁴¹ Robyn Greenspan, “Blogging by the Numbers.” July 23, 2003. Jupitermedia. As of now I can’t find information as to Greenspan’s methodology. http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/applications/article/0,,1301_2238831,00.html

⁴² Greenspan, op. cit.

Because of the rapid diffusion of information online, information originally posted on one blog can quickly be found cited on numerous additional blogs, especially if the original blog is widely read. Conversely, even an obscure blog will draw thousands of hits if it is linked to from one of the “biggies” like Talking Points Memo or Instapundit. As one example, Tony Woodlief of *Sand In The Gears* told me, “I get about 350 unique visits a day, although when Instapundit links something I’ve written I get 10,000+.”⁴³

But there is another, perhaps far more important, type of diffusion. While only 4% of web users knowingly read blogs, far higher percentages of political reporters, politicians and policymakers do. While no data exist on the topic, it is probably safe to say (especially since the Lott story broke) that far higher percentages of people in these groups read blogs. Howard Kurtz’s Media Notes for *The Washington Post* (themselves a type of blog) regularly refer to the most influential bloggers, especially Glenn Reynolds, Virginia Postrel, Joshua Marshall, Dan Kennedy (*MediaLog* at the *Boston Phoenix*, <http://www.bostonphoenix.com/medialog/index.asp>) and others. And Kurtz’s column and his weekly CNN show, *Reliable Sources* (which also occasionally features bloggers as guests) are very influential, especially among the Washington press corps and circles of power. As Kennedy put it:

The one thing I could point to personally [of MediaLog having a broad impact] was what happened when CNN’s Eason Jordan wrote that New York Times op-ed about the really questionable deals CNN had made with the Iraqi government over the years in order to maintain access. I jumped on him and kicked him around pretty hard. Because Howard Kurtz reads my blog, he had me on “Reliable Sources” the following weekend along with Jordan. So in that particular case, it seemed that I had an impact.⁴⁴

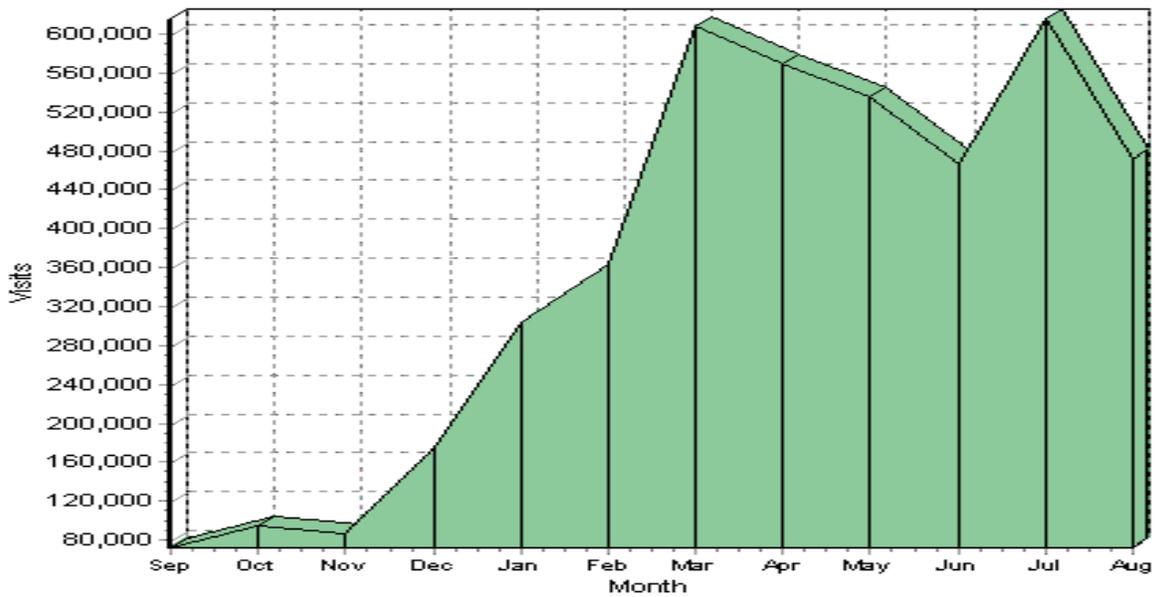
Thanks to counters like Site Meter (<http://www.sitemeter.com>), highly accurate and specific data exist on sites that use them. For example, Atrios (<http://atrios.blogspot.com>) currently averages 21,681 visits per day. Glenn Reynolds (<http://www.instapundit.com>) draws even more readers to his site, averaging a whopping 75,989 daily. (To get regularly updated information on traffic, simply go to the bottom of the respective sites and click on the Sitemeter icon.)

Visitors at the blogs involved in the Lott situation saw a huge increase in readership as a direct result of the publicity generated by that story. Sitemeter data show Atrios drawing “only” around 90,000 visits each month through November, 2002, increasing to 160,000 in December, 290,000 in January, peaking at 600,000 in March, then staying relatively constant. (See Figure 1, below. Keep in mind that these refer to numbers of site visits, not total number of “unique visitors,” since many readers check in frequently.)

⁴³ Tony Woodlief, personal e-mail, November 8, 2002. *Sand in the Gears* (<http://www.tonywoodlief.com>) fell into the “inactive blog” category a few months ago due to awkwardness that some of his positions caused him at work, a common problem in the Blogosphere.

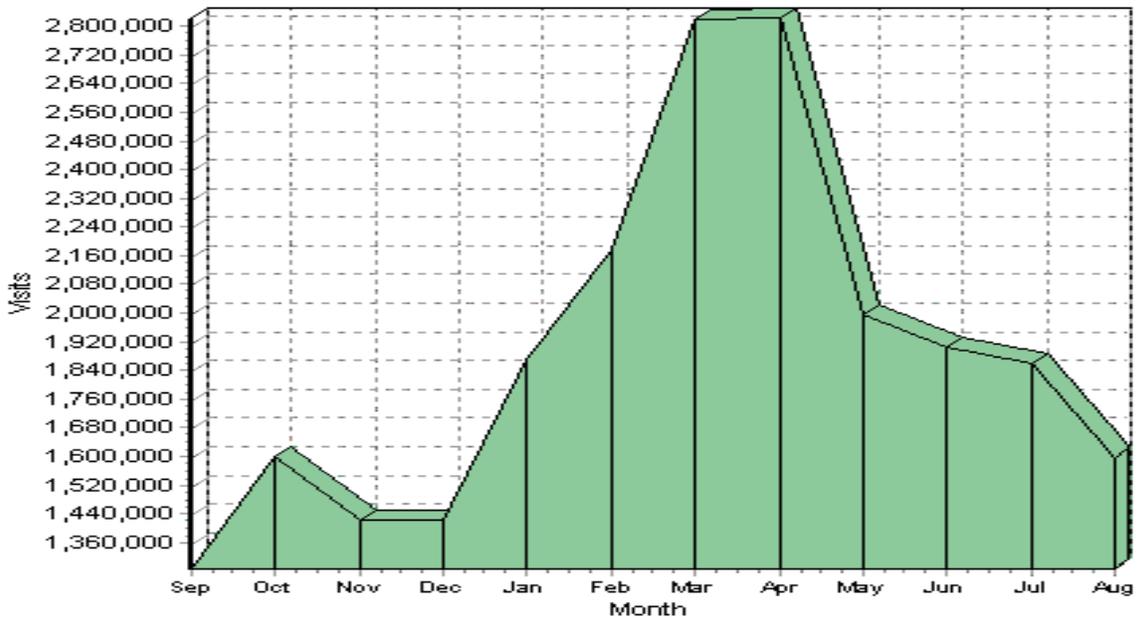
⁴⁴ Dan Kennedy, personal e-mail to the author, August 5, 2003.

Figure 1. Site Visits by Month, Atrios (September 2002-August 2003)



Source: Sitemeter.com

Figure 2: Site Visits by Month, InstaPundit (September 2002-August 2003)



Source: Sitemeter.com

InstaPundit, the top conservative blogger and probably the top blogger overall, shows movement of a different type. InstaPundit was already the most popular political blog prior to the Lott story, drawing 1,400,000 site visits in both November and December. But the lead-up to the war in Iraq, followed by the war itself, saw a steady increase to an incredible 2,800,000 site visits each in the months of March and April, followed by a rapid drop-off after the end of active hostilities. (See Figure 2, above.) InstaPundit also uses a counter from Extreme Tracking (<http://extremetracking.com>) that allows a comparison between total site visits and “unique” visitors. InstaPundit averages 32,153 unique visitors each day (compared to 75,989 total visits) and 870,034 unique visitors each month (compared to an average of roughly 1,700,000 total visits during the last few months. Joshua Marshall’s *Talking Points Memo*, probably the top liberal blog, increased from 73,629 unique visitors and 187,877 site visits in October, 2002 to 141,660 and 379,311 respectively in January. Unique visitors were up to 235,000 in July, 2003. (Marshall reports his numbers sporadically on his site rather than using onscreen counters like Sitemeter.) While Marshall’s numbers are less than a third of Reynolds’, they still represent very large numbers of individual readers.

With a readership the size of Reynolds’, Marshall’s or even Atrios’ one need not even make arguments about diffusion to argue for their influence. A lot of people read these sites. Reynolds in particular has numbers rivaling the biggest newspapers in the country. When you factor in the fact that only a percentage of newspaper readers will read a particular story or even a particular section, while far higher percentages of visitors to blogs are reading, or at least skimming, the content there, these large blogs might arguably rival the influence of a lot of newspapers.

Assuming that blogs are not a passing fad, the numbers, the frequent references to them from mainstream media sources, and the circumstantial evidence provided by the Lott case all suggest strongly that blogs are an increasingly important force in political communication. The lack of systematic social-scientific analysis of blogs and politics thus suggests a very important avenue of future research. The fact that most of the Democratic presidential candidates for 2004 (most notably Howard Dean) have their own blogs suggests another set of research questions related to the importance of both candidate and non-candidate blogs in campaign strategy, conduct, fundraising, and success.

“Google Loves Blogs”

Another reason for the growing influence of blogs is purely mechanical. As John Hiler wrote in *Microcontent News*:

whether or not people even know what a weblog is, blogs are *already* having a massive impact on the lives of almost all web users. This is due to a quirk in the way the world's most popular search engine works. Unbeknownst to most, weblogs have a significant impact on Google search results. With over "150 million search queries per day" [1], that means that weblogs are influencing over a billion Google searches a week.⁴⁵

As Hiler explains, “Google Loves Weblogs” first of all because “Google Loves the Links in Weblogs.” As Google’s Press Kit puts it:

⁴⁵ John Hiler, “How Weblogs Influence a Billion Google Searches a Week,” *Microcontent News*, February 26, 2003. <http://www.microcontentnews.com/articles/googleblogs.htm>

In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves "important" weigh more heavily and help to make other pages "important."⁴⁶

Jill Walker goes a bit further:

Search engines like Google interpret links to a web page as objective, peer-endorsed and machine-readable signs of value. Links have become the currency of the Web. With this economic value they also have power, affecting accessibility and knowledge on the Web.⁴⁷

Hiler's second reason that "Google Loves Weblogs" is that "Google Loves Fresh Content:"

In [roughly August of last year](#), Google started indexing frequently updated sites much more often. The primary reason for this was to increase Google's access to articles from news sites, like CNN and the New York Times....But Google didn't stop there. Its insatiable appetite for fresh content spilled over to any frequently updated websites, including Weblogs.⁴⁸

Because of the serendipitous coincident that Google favors web content that has lots of links and is updated frequently, content in blogs tends to appear in Google searches more readily than content in more traditional web sites. The apparent match made in heaven between Google and blogs was consummated on February 22, 2003 when Google purchased Pyra Labs, the parent company of Blogger, the most popular blogging software and domain.⁴⁹ The impact of this acquisition remains to be seen.

Conclusion

If journalism is the first draft of history, blogs might just be the first draft of journalism. The rapid-fire, spontaneous nature of blogs (typos and all) makes them at once fascinating, immensely valuable as an early source of breaking stories, and frustrating in that much of what appears in blogs ends up being clarified or corrected later. As blogger and author Eric Alterman regularly reminds us, we can all benefit from the services of editors, and the lack of such services can make blogs frustrating reads at times, especially the more amateurish ones.

On the other hand, bloggers are generally very willing to update their sites with these clarifications, corrections, or just new information. And unlike newspapers, blogs can place the corrections right alongside the erroneous material.

⁴⁶ "Google searches more sites more quickly, delivering the most relevant results," Google.

<http://www.google.com/technology/index.html> (Thanks to Hiler, op. cit. for the reference.)

⁴⁷ Jill Walker, "Links and Power: The Political Economy of Linking on the Web." Presented at the ACM Hypertext Conference, Baltimore, June 2002. <http://cmc.uib.no/jill/txt/linksandpower.html>

⁴⁸ Hiler, op. cit.

⁴⁹ Leander Kahney, "Why Did Google Want Blogger?" *Wired*, February 22, 2003.

<http://www.wired.com/news/technology/0,1282,57754,00.html>

As author Kurt Anderson has noted, weblogs are in many ways reminiscent of the diaries kept by many literate people, famous or otherwise, during the 19th Century.⁵⁰ And even some of the top bloggers are pretty humble as to the influence of their online work.

Media critic Bob Somerby of *The Daily Howler (TDH)*, for example, believes that “the Internet is especially well-suited to press criticism, because the press tends to keep press criticism out of the mainstream press.”⁵¹ On the other hand, he doesn’t believe his blog has been particularly influential, much to his frustration:

I have been amazed by the total lack of influence TDH has had. The press corps tells it they [sic] way they choose, and knowledge of facts plays little role in their narrations. TDH was widely read during Campaign 2000, and many journalists therefore knew how bogus many of the Gore stories were. Despite that, they all kept their mouths shut, finally beginning to bleat out small admissions in the summer of 2002. When blogs do succeed in moving some story forward, it is because the story involved is one the press corps (or some part of the press corps) likes.⁵²

Blogger (and print journalist) Dan Kennedy, sees blogging and journalism going hand in hand:

The best and most influential blogs – the Daily Howler, Talking Points, Altercation, and a few others – succeed not because they are something radically new, but because the people who produce them know how to do good journalism.⁵³

Blogger (and print journalist) Andrew Sullivan, agrees:

But will bloggers actually deeply undermine editorial and corporate power in the media? So far I think the answer is no. Blogs aren't replacing mainstream media; they're infiltrating, supplementing, and buttressing it. Look at two blogs, [kausfiles](#) and [altercation](#). They're housed by *Slate* and MSNBC. Same with [Joe Conason's](#) at *Salon*. Does this weaken or strengthen their reach and power?⁵⁴

But Kennedy thinks the current hype about blogs is overblown and believes his own print columns in *The Boston Phoenix* have more impact than his blog (I suspect that if he hooked up with Site Meter he might be surprised):

I honestly believe that blogging is greatly overrated. I like it because it's fun, it allows me to talk back to the news instantly, and there are maybe a few dozen people who will actually read what I write. But it pales in comparison to the print work that I do.⁵⁵

That’s a far cry from the “blog triumphalism” expressed in the wake of Trent Lott’s resignation. Only time will tell who is getting it right.

⁵⁰ Kurt Anderson, “Are Weblogs Changing Our Culture?” *Slate Magazine*, September 3, 2002. <http://slate.msn.com/id/2070360/entry/2070363/>

⁵¹ Bob Somerby, person e-mail to the author, August 5, 2003.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Dan Kennedy, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Andrew Sullivan, “Are Weblogs Changing Our Culture?” *Slate Magazine*, September 4, 2002. <http://slate.msn.com/id/2070360/entry/2070447/>

⁵⁵ Dan Kennedy, op. cit.