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The Birth of the Blogosphere

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THE BIRTH OF THE BLOGOSPHERE

BY GLENN HARLAN REYNOLDS

We live today in a post-blogospheric media age. The blogosphere hasn't disappeared by any means, but it no longer plays the central role that it played from roughly 2002 to 2008. This is partly the result of natural media evolution but also the result of very deliberate action on the part of some big players in government and tech. The blogosphere's successors, such as Facebook and Twitter, lack its independence, its decentralization, and its free-flowing nature. On the other hand—very much against the wishes of their creators—those entities have nonetheless empowered ordinary citizens to push back against government- and media-initiated disinformation (to the extent that there's a difference anymore) in a way that remains within the finest tradition of the classical blogosphere.

I'll talk about that, and about where we go from here, later on. But first, how it started, or at least how it started for me.

I was lucky enough to be an early player in the blogosphere's development. I'd call my blog, *InstaPundit*, which started on August 8, 2001, a "late first-wave" blog. I came after people like Mickey Kaus (whose *Kausfiles* was the first blog I ever read), Andrew Sullivan, Josh Marshall, Virginia Postrel, Joanne Jacobs, and Rebecca Blood. But not much after. At the time, the term "weblog," later shortened to "blog," had not yet achieved wide popularity. *Slate* magazine used the term "me-zine," comparing them to the celebrated 1990s indie "zine" phenomenon (independent, quirky magazines published on actual paper).

I taught internet law, which meant I was always looking for ways to keep my hand in online. By the summer of 2001, I had decided to do something new. I had been active with music sites, including a chain of internet "radio stations" on the late, lamented, MP3.com site, and also produced some online bands. For a while, my brother Jonathan and I played a sort of game in which we'd come up with a band name, decide what genre the band went with, then write and record some songs and release an album on the MP3.com site, which made that very easy. (They even made it easy to sell CDs.) So, for example, the Nebraska Guitar Militia, which we decided was an alt-country band. We gave it a fictional backstory of being from Whiteclay, Nebraska, a tiny town that revolves around selling beer to the Indians at the reservation just across the line in South Dakota, and wrote some songs ("The Town that Booze Built," "Waves of Grain"—a lot of alcohol references. Though another song, "Reckoning," predicted a Hillary Clinton/Donald Trump confrontation, which wasn't bad for 2000). Another band was Mobius Dick, which came from an old math joke ("What's non-orientable and lives under the sea? Mobius Dick!"). That name naturally meant a techno/EDM band, and the Dick actually did tolerably well, with our *Embrace the Machine* becoming the best-selling CD on the MP3.com site for three weeks in 2000. The title track even got written up in *Salon*, back when that outlet was readable. Other Mobius Dick albums included *Got Dick?*, *Indistinguishable from Magic?*, and *Upload Your Mind*.

I had also run a site, RaveRights.com, aimed at defending electronic music promoters from the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), which was prosecuting rave promoters under the federal so-called crack house law, which criminalizes owning or operating a building for the purpose of taking drugs. (The DEA took the position that *no one* would go to raves for the music, so they *must* be there for the drugs.) That site was quickly replaced by the Electronic Music Defense Fund, a nonprofit funded by musician Moby, but I did work with the ACLU on a friend-of-the-court brief in a New Orleans case, where I explained the nature and background and audience of electronic music.

But, in part because of teaching internet law, I was always looking for something new to do. I still remember following a link from *Slate* to Mickey Kaus's then-new blog *Kausfiles*. I was struck by how seamless it was—one second you were on an expensive site funded by Microsoft (back when Microsoft was still cool!), then with a single click you were on an independent journalism site funded by an individual—and it looked every bit as slick and professional. Still, my RaveRights experience involved web design and maintenance using a program called DreamWeaver, which wasn't very user-friendly, to put it mildly, and that didn't make me want to start a new site.

Then *Slate* was taken in by a minor hoax involving "monkeyfishing," in which Cajuns allegedly caught wild monkeys living on an island in the Mississippi Delta using baited hooks cast into the trees. That lead to the creation of a short-lived blog of journalistic criticism called *Monkeyfishing*, and when I followed a link to the blog it was "powered by Blogger" and hosted on Blogger's own site, Blogspot. An ad invited me to start my own blog in fifteen minutes, and that's literally how long it took to set up the initial version of *InstaPundit*. Instead of composing stuff in an unfriendly piece of software and then uploading to a server, the Blogger/Blogspot combination meant I could compose and publish on the web. At the time, in the summer of 2001, that was revolutionary.

I had been a regular and prominent commentator on *Slate*'s then-excellent discussion board, *The Fray*, for quite some time, and the *Slate* editors were quick to include *InstaPundit* in their "Me-Zine Central" directory, at which time I thought I had really made it. I remember by late August I was talking with a colleague about my traffic, at the time around two- to three-hundred visits per day, and we both thought that was a lot.

Links from *Slate*, Virginia Postrel, and James Taranto's *Best of the Web* feature at *The Wall Street Journal* boosted traffic, and by September 10, 2001, I had reached the heady heights of more than 1,500 visits per day. The next day was September 11, 2001, and everything changed.

I was at the doctor's for a nasty sinus infection when the towers collapsed. I got to my office shortly afterward and posted the following:

> **TOM CLANCY WAS RIGHT:** And we're living one of his scenarios right now. Not much is known for sure, but it's obvious that the United States is the target of a major terrorist assault. There's a lot of bloviation on the cable news channels, most of which will turn out to be wrong or misleading later. Here, for your consideration, are a few points to be taken from past experience:
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> **The Fog of War:** Nobody knows much right now. Many things that we think we know are likely to be wrong.
>
> **Overreaction Is the Terrorist's Friend:** Even in major cases like this, the terrorist's real weapon is fear and hysteria. Overreacting will play into their hands.
>
> **It's Not Just Terrorists Who Take Advantage:** Someone will propose new "Antiterrorism" legislation. It will be full of things off of bureaucrats' wish lists. They will be things that wouldn't have prevented these attacks even if they had been in place yesterday. Many of them will be civil-liberties disasters. Some of them will actually promote the kind of ill-feeling that breeds terrorism. That's what happened in 1996. Let's not let it happen again.
>
> **Only One Antiterrorism Method Works:** That's punishing those behind it. The actual terrorists are hard to reach. But terrorism of this scale is always backed by governments. If they're punished severely—and that means **severely**, not a bombed aspirin-factory but something that puts those behind it in the crosshairs—this kind of thing won't happen again. That was the lesson of the Libyan bombing.
>
> **"Increased Security" Won't Work.** When you try to defend everything, you defend nothing. Airport security is a joke because it's spread so thin that it can't possibly stop people who are really serious. You can't prevent terrorism by defensive measures; at most you can stop a few amateurs who can barely function. Note that the increased measures after TWA 800 (which wasn't terrorism anyway, we're told)

> didn't prevent what appear to be coordinated hijackings. (Archie Bunker's plan, in which each passenger is issued a gun on embarking, would have worked better). Deterrence works here, just as everywhere else. But you have to be serious about it.

I think these observations have held up pretty well, alas, but they came at a time when most regular media was paralyzed. Many media sites actually dropped off the internet due to traffic, while the cable TV channels simply ran the same footage of airplanes hitting the towers over and over again while "experts" bleated nonsense. (As in every crisis, a major theme was that Americans would have to "grow up" and surrender freedoms to government.) I then started posting news as I could find it, along with correspondence from knowledgeable readers. I had intended to maintain as much normality as possible and still teach my afternoon constitutional law class, but it soon became apparent that that would be pointless, so I just kept blogging.

James Taranto of *The Wall Street Journal* linked my site again that day as a good place to go for news and information, and my traffic jumped to a then-inconceivable 5,500+ visits. And the post-9/11 era saw a very real, and not entirely welcome, change in the blog. In its first month or so it had been much more of a tech and pop culture blog. Afterward, it became what was known as a "warblog," one devoting much attention to the war in Afghanistan, and later in Iraq, among other places. And it paid more attention to politics than I had in the early days. If you look at my archives, you can see a horizontal line that I drew across the page at 10:57 a.m. that morning, to mark my post World Trade Center-attack writings. The line was more significant than I knew. Before that line were items on conservatives opposing the drug war, Greenpeace opposing biotech corn, another biotech piece by China blogger Andrea See, and Andrew Sullivan on the Left's PC opposition to a genomic-diversity research project in Britain. Afterward it was about bombs falling in Kabul, people who had friends and family at the World Trade Center, a report from Flight 93 by journalist Dennis Roddy, and some great (blogged) words by Virginia Postrel:

> Get these "greatest generation" pundits off TV, starting with David McCullough. Maybe it's nostalgia for the days of internment and rationing, but these guys are way too ready to concede defeat by handing over our liberties in pursuit of an impossible level of safety. Resilience and basic bravery, not a rush to precaution, are called for. The way ordinary Americans can stand up to terrorism is by making sure we retain the right to live normally and by continuing to value the products of normal life.

She was right, and the blogosphere was mostly sounding the same tone in general. Don't get carried away, and don't turn it into a national security war on ordinary people. Sadly, that's not how things went, as we created a massive and—at best—useless "Homeland Security" apparatus.

Not everything was about warblogging, of course. There were posts featuring recipes—my Thanksgiving Leg of Lamb and Lamb and Guinness Stew were popular, as was my cold poached salmon recipe, which I reverse-engineered from a meal at a great little bistro on the Upper West Side. And I increasingly blogged about fitness, tracking my growing interest in lifting heavy as I discovered the work of Mark Rippetoe. And I wrote a lot about longevity research and nanotechnology. In the earliest days of *InstaPundit*, posts tended to be longer—multiple-paragraph takes like mini op-eds. (I think my subconscious model was the "Notebook" section at the front of *The New Republic*, which back then was still an interesting and eclectic magazine of opinion.) Later on, there were more short and pithy one-line posts: a link and an observation, in some ways anticipating Twitter style. My favorite posts, in the days before the blog had comments, were where I updated repeatedly, integrating and responding to reader comments in a long series of updates. Now that there are comments (added during my PJ Media affiliation because they were then thought to boost traffic and search-engine interest), I don't do that as often.

My trademark "Heh" and "Indeed" lines appeared for a purely aesthetic reason. I hate to leave a hanging block quote. But sometimes I'd have a quote where I didn't really want to add anything significant of my own, either because it said everything already, or because I didn't want to detract from its impact. Thus, the one-word "heh," or "indeed"—or, occasionally, the double-barreled "heh, indeed." It fit a surprisingly large range of subjects.

After September 11, traffic skyrocketed, and I was soon at 25,000 then 50,000 visits a day—so many, that at one point, since I didn't have a public counter, I gave the password to *National Review*'s Jonah Goldberg so that he

could independently verify my then-hard-to-believe numbers. (In recent years I've averaged roughly ten times that many.)

But it was 2002 that was, as I declared in a column for the late, lamented, TechCentralStation site, "the year of the blog." Blogs were suddenly everywhere, sparking articles in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the *American Journalism Review*, and news and business publications everywhere. There were blog conferences and programs at Yale, UCLA, the National Press Club, and elsewhere.

For me, 2002 was the best, or at least the most enjoyable, of the glory years. Though blogs tended to lean right then, lots of lefty blogs came into the scene, and everyone was friendly and collegial to a degree that's inconceivable today. (I remember Dave Kopel and I having a civil discussion of "assault weapon" bans with folks in the comment section of *The Daily Kos*. Like I said, inconceivable today.) What used to be called "netiquette," back when the internet was a fairly small and genteel club, still ruled. That changed after the 2002 election, when the Democrats, who thought they were sure to recapture the Senate, didn't do so; by mid-2003, when things started gearing up for the 2004 election, the first beginnings of today's polarized and decidedly non-genteel internet started to appear in earnest.

If 2002 was my best year, 2004 was probably the blogosphere's most influential year. The CBS show *60 Minutes* broadcast a claim that leaked documents from George W. Bush's Vietnam-era Air National Guard days demonstrated that he'd used that service to avoid being sent to Vietnam. Bloggers, however, quickly demonstrated that these documents, allegedly from the IBM Selectric typewriter era, had been created using default fonts from Microsoft Word. Though the Big Media didn't want to cover that, bloggers shamed its members into it—that was back when Big Media was still capable of shame—and John Kerry's bid to Vietnam-vet his way into the White House failed.

This was the blogosphere's peak of influence. (Though in 2002, bloggers on the Left and Right had combined to force Trent Lott to resign as Senate majority leader.) But in 2005, the Corporate Press realized that if it agreed to a story and stuck to it regardless of people pointing out its errors, it could make it largely stick with the public. The story was that President Bush had bungled his handling of Hurricane Katrina. Though even Democrat Donna Brazile later admitted that Bush had done everything anyone could have expected (and journalism professor W. Joseph Campbell put the Katrina narrative in his collection of "Media Myths"), the storyline of Bush being disconnected and incompetent stuck. From that time on, the prospect of *shaming* the press into changing a story, or covering one it was determined to ignore, became increasingly dim.

I also made a change. In 2005, I became affiliated with *PJ Media*, then known as *Pajamas Media*, in response to a remark by CNN President Jonathan Klein disparaging "bloggers in their pajamas." I had some equity, and the original business model was an ad network for independent bloggers tied together with a central website and original reporting. The original plan was to combine the best of left and right bloggers, but that proved unsustainable as things became more polarized. While at *Pajamas*, my wife Helen Smith and I did a podcast, *The Glenn and Helen Show*, which was highly successful by the standards of the day, with heavy traffic and high-profile guests. Later *Pajamas* started PJTV, and I hosted a TV show, mostly from a rather expensive TV studio they put in my basement, for quite a few years. In the mid-2010s, *InstaPundit* became a group blog, as I noticed that I really enjoyed the work of the guest bloggers I brought in when I was on vacation, and started asking them to stay around. *PJ Media* was sold to Salem Media, and I no longer own any of it, though Salem still handles my advertising.

Meanwhile, in the background, the blogosphere's true undoing was arising. Mark Zuckerberg's FaceMash changed its name to The Facebook, later shortened to Facebook, in February 2004. Over the next several years, the walled gardens of the likes of Facebook and Twitter drew in many people who had previously read and published blogs. The allure was seductive: less hassle and overhead, easier access to an audience, improved ability to actually connect with people you knew. And for a while, there wasn't much of a downside. Unsurprisingly, plenty of people left the blogosphere behind.

Then, starting in the mid-2010s, these walled gardens started slamming the gates shut. From being free-speech zones, they became increasingly Orwellian patches overseen by "fact checkers" who made up facts, and "Trust and

Safety Councils" whom no reasonable person could trust, and from whom no criticism of the dominant narrative was safe. I strongly suspect that this was not an accident, but a recognition by what hippies used to call The Establishment that uncontrolled media were a threat to their hegemony. There were other things going on, too, including changes in the digital ad market, but even those changes, I suspect, were meant to play a role.

This trend accelerated after the 2016 election, and then again in the wake of the Covid narrative, when all sorts of entirely truthful information was suppressed in the name of "safety." Likewise, the Hunter Biden laptop story was shut down, even though it was true, to the point that Twitter was blocking the sharing of URLs linking to the story even in direct messages. (I left my weekly column at *USA Today*, and switched to writing one at the *New York Post*, after my column on Hunter Biden's laptop was spiked.)

But now there's some pushback. Elon Musk bought Twitter, now X, and although its politicized staff has tried to fight a rear-guard action against his free-speech campaign, the platform is much different than it was. This has forced Facebook and other platforms to relax the censorship somewhat. Substack, a free-speech platform that functions almost like a blog-hosting site, but with subscription and revenue features, has attracted a large number of independent writers, including some old-time bloggers—Andrew Sullivan and Virginia Postrel have moved there, and I have a Substack site where I publish a lengthy essay every week—and people like Bari Weiss who have left Big Media platforms to escape censorship and groupthink.

And, of course, blogs are still around. I'm still there after more than twenty years. Old-time blogs like *Powerline*, *The Volokh Conspiracy*, and even James Lileks's *The Bleat* are still publishing regularly. Joanne Jacobs is still publishing daily about education. Mickey Kaus still runs *Kausfiles*, though he's mostly tweeting. And science fiction author and long-time blogger Bill Quick—who coined the term "blogosphere"—is still blogging at his *Daily Pundit* site.

So, which lessons do I draw from all of this? I mean besides, *what a long, strange trip it's been*?

First, the rise of a new technology can really shake things up. People say that the internet reshaped journalism, but journalism on the web in 2001 looked a lot like journalism everywhere else in 1991. It was mostly institutional news outlets ranging from traditional newspaper sites to webzines like *Slate* and *Salon*. Other than Matt Drudge's *Drudge Report*, and maybe *Slashdot*, there weren't many major non-institutional news sites. It was the invention of blogging platforms, which made self-publishing much, much easier than it was before, that really brought forth the masses.

Second, it flourished because it was *fun*. One of the reasons why left- and right-leaning bloggers got along in the early days was because our mutual joy in being involved in this new thing created a camaraderie that dwarfed our differences, at least for a while. And many people got involved because being a publisher, or a reporter, or a pundit—previously available only to those with powerful institutional resources behind them—was now within the reach of pretty much anybody. A.J. Liebling said that freedom of the press belongs to the man who owns one. Once the blog revolution struck, that was everybody.

Third, the empire always strikes back. The response to all this freedom, much of which was used to point out Establishment lies and spin, was for the Establishment to push back in numerous ways. The rise of platforms that kept people away from the independent blogosphere and within the walls of "curated" content overseen by corporate censors (censors who often operated directly at government behest) was one way. The rise of various campaigns against "misinformation" was another.

But fourth, you can't stop the signal. Despite all the efforts to censor unwelcome messages, the truth gets out. Things that were derided as Russian propaganda, censored, and even led their propounders to face career-ending consequences, are now accepted as truth.

That doesn't mean that the censorship was futile, exactly. It almost certainly swung the 2020 election, for example. It was expensive, though, and the fallout has been an enormous loss of trust in institutions that were previously highly regarded. Over time, it's a losing game for the Establishment, and the cracks are already beginning to show.

So, what's next? Well, as I said, you can't stop the signal. And I aim to misbehave.