

The New World of Blogs

by Tyler Cowen

Imagine a costless or very cheap printing press in the hands of each and every writer. Imagine a world where opinion and commentary bypass the elites and are unregulated by government. Well, we have entered this new world in the last few years. These virtual-reality printing presses, called “blogs,” are reshaping the world of publishing.

The word “blog” is a neologism, short for “weblog.” A weblog, quite simply, is a website that is updated on a regular basis, often every day. Think of a diary, or an op-ed page, but in cyberspace, and you come close to imagining what blogs are like. The end of this article offers some blog sites for you to visit.

It is disputed who wrote the first blog, but the first systematic, easy-to-use blogger software appeared in 1999. Since that time millions of new blogs have been started. No one knows for sure how many blogs are out there.

There are now blogs of every kind; politics blogs, law blogs, psychology blogs, literary blogs, and science blogs, among many other options. All the major presidential candidates, including George W. Bush, offer blogs for their supporters. Teenage girls write blogs to tell the world who attended their last party. Professors use blogs to report on academic conferences. Salam Pax provided a

daily firsthand account of the war in Iraq.

“Why are Weblogs popular?” asks one promoter of blogger software. “I think it’s because they have something to say. In a media world that’s otherwise leached of opinions and life, there’s so much life in them.”¹

Blogs have become very popular very quickly. The leading blogs draw several hundred thousand readers a day. Many readers now get their news from blogs before newspapers, or look to blogs as a substitute for op-ed pages. I use blogs to read reviews of new books, to follow the latest developments in science, and to feel the flavor of current political debates. Blogs, if you read the right ones, also offer a more intellectual and highbrow approach to the news. Would you ever, on cable television, hear a commenter analyze the economics of productivity and budget deficits, as does blogger Brad DeLong (www.j-bradford-delong.net/movable_type/)?

Blogs already have had an impact. They are widely credited with spurring the downfall of *New York Times* editor Howell Raines. It was bloggers who spotted and publicized the biases and discrepancies in various *Times* stories. Bloggers have been a major source of information about Iraq, both during the war and after. More generally, bloggers have outpaced major media on a number of ongoing stories, including the controversies over “weapons of mass destruction” and the development of the

Tyler Cowen (tcowen@gmu.edu) is Holbert C. Harris Professor of Economics at George Mason University.

Schwarzenegger candidacy. Blogs offer an immediacy and an attention to detail that newspapers and TV stations cannot always match.

No doubt, many blogs are terrible or just outright boring. The very virtue of blogs—free entry into the marketplace—means that quality filters will be weak. A bad blog might ramble on about the author’s love life, dog, or what traffic was like that day on the freeway. It is easy to visit blogs and come away disillusioned. But the best are innovative, readable, and sharp.

Some blogs offer up the writing of a single individual, while other “group blogs” put forth a collective effort. Some act like portals and point readers to the best of other blogs; www.instapundit.com is one of the best-known blogs of this kind. A good blogger has the skills both of a writer and an editor. Many blogs act as short, daily magazines, offering readers the best and most interesting news in a given area.

Bloggers provide you with a universe of experts on every imaginable topic. The Internet makes experts easier to find, and

BLOGGING FOR FREEDOM

Here are some of the major blogs reflecting a market-oriented and/or classical-liberal point of view:

- Virginia Postrel:** Author and former editor of *Reason* magazine, Postrel writes on public policy, the arts, and aesthetics, from a broadly libertarian point of view. Go to www.dynamist.com.
- The Mises blog:** This blog is published by the Mises Institute. It offers regular commentary on economic events, economic theory, and sometimes foreign policy. The point of view is strongly free market on policy and strongly Austrian on economic method. The address is www.mises.org/blog.asp.
- Lynne Kiesling:** Kiesling teaches at Northwestern and works with Vernon Smith at George Mason University. Her blog focuses on energy policy, communications, and infrastructure. See www.knowledgeproblem.com.
- Reason’s Hit and Run:** From the people who bring you *Reason* magazine, this blog covers politics, current affairs, and culture. Go to www.reason.com/hitandrun/.
- Arnold Kling:** Liberty Fund supports this blog, which focuses on market economics. Visit <http://econlog.econlib.org/>.
- Volokh Conspiracy:** This group blog, founded by Eugene Volokh and Sasha Volokh, started with a legal focus but has since branched out. The blog now also covers foreign policy, ideas in general, culture, and some economics. Conflict of interest disclaimer: I am one of the co-bloggers here. Visit www.volokh.com.
- MarginalRevolution:** Alex Tabarrok and I founded and write for this market-oriented economics blog. Our blog subtitle is “Small ideas for a much better world.” Visit our site, www.marginalrevolution.com.

blogs give those experts regular platforms. I commonly read experts on archaeology (www.cronaca.com), the hard sciences (www.futurepundit.com), and contemporary culture (www.2blowhards.com). There is always an expert who knows more than a mere journalist does, and now you can go right to the expert and bypass the journalist.

Efficient and Speedy

The “blogosphere,” as it is known, is an efficient and remarkably speedy means of processing and evaluating information. Once a new idea or fact has been posted on a blog, it is digested, analyzed, and evaluated within a matter of hours. Errors of fact or reasoning do not go unpunished. Furthermore the writer has the chance (obligation?) to respond to commentary and criticism. In these regards blogs are more efficient than newspapers. And many blogs offer a “comments” section, where readers can see how other readers have responded to the posted material.

In short, the blogosphere functions as a remarkably decentralized and powerful spontaneous order, to cite a concept from F. A. Hayek. No single person planned the evolution of blogs, but an entire intellectual architecture has arisen to serve millions.

Only rarely is blogging driven by financial incentives. If there is big money in blogging, few people if any have seen it. More likely, a blogger writes to communicate with others, to promote himself, simply for fun, or for some combination of the three. Blogs, however, may serve practical purposes. They have helped people find jobs, make friends, or keep families in touch.

Blogs bypass the biases and restrictions of major media sources. Many readers of *The Freeman* may feel that major newspapers and news stations do not adequately appre-

ciate the virtues of markets and human liberties. The same cannot be said about blogs. Blogs offer all sorts of political and intellectual points of view, but libertarians, conservatives, and market-oriented ideas are especially prominent in the blogosphere. According to most rankings, the top ten blogs include a number of classical-liberal and market-oriented writers. Perhaps the very nature of cyberspace is somehow conducive to a concern with freedom.

If you wish to find out about more blogs, look to the ones you already like. Most will offer a “blogroll” listing other favorite blogs of the writers. Or do a Google search; typing in “anthropology blog,” for instance, will bring you to anthropology blogs. The website www.technorati.com lists the most popular blogs at any point. Note that popular is not the same as best. See the box on page 17 for a sample of market-oriented blogs.²

New blogs start all the time, and old blogs become inactive. So the list offered in this article will go out of date. And given that blogs form part of a broader spontaneous order, we can expect the very nature of blogging to change over time.

But I should not stop at recommending blog reading. Do you wish to write your own blog? Try www.blogger.com, which is absolutely free. Another, www.typepad.com, offers better features and greater flexibility, although some versions involve a monthly fee.

In the meantime, whether or not you end up reading or writing blogs, take heart. The ideas of freedom have found a new and fertile venue. □

1. Cited in Matt Welch, “The New Age of Alternative Media,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October 2003, pp. 20–26. The Welch article also offers a useful history of early blogging and blogging software.

2. I wish to offer an apology to all my blogger friends who are not covered. The world of blogging, by the way, offers some very clear measures of popularity. It is easy to count how many people visit a blog, and how many people link to that blog.