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by Peter Daou

[THE TRIANGLE: Limits of Blog Power](#)

"Rightwing bloggers will do everything in their power to prevent another Katrina triangle, where the confluence of blogs, media, and Democratic leadership exposes the real Bush and shatters the conventional wisdom about his ability to lead."

Background: Democrats & The Netroots

I spent a turbulent 2004 bunkered in John Kerry's D.C. war room, at the nexus of blogs, media, and the Washington political establishment. Despite Dean/Trippi's paradigm-shifting work with the netroots, the tension between the online community and the Democrat establishment was – and still is – palpable. One of the first comments that greeted me at the Kerry campaign was, "I wouldn't know a blog if it hit me in the head."

This was the first general election with blogs as a nascent political force. Assigned with heading the campaign's blog outreach, I had to improvise my way through the election, trying to reconcile two distinct worldviews. I felt the disconnect keenly. I alternated between informal conversations with a small blogger brain trust - Kos, Atrios, Digby, Steve Soto, Bill of Liberal Oasis, Dave Johnson, among others - and meetings with Beltway stalwarts such as Bob Shrum, Tad Devine, and Joe Lockhart. I attended communications strategy sessions where veteran consultants presented one set of ideas, then plunged into Democratic Underground's forums to read thousands of impassioned arguments to the contrary. I studied opposition research memos and matched them against posts on Free Republic, Crush Kerry, and Little Green Footballs. I prepared daily blog reports, trying to convey the mindset of the netroots, the jargon, things as small and blog-centric as the distinction between a Kossack and a Freeper.

My challenge was to bring the energy, ideas, and attitude of the netroots into the heart of the campaign, and provide tools, information and support to the online community. I ran into two big obstacles, one of which was the tremendous amount of money being raised online. Not surprisingly, the Internet was perceived as a source of cash, not as a research or communications tool. I joined the campaign motivated by the prospect of hundreds of thousands of ready and able online activists working together to probe every angle of an issue, explore every line of an argument, act as a massive oppo research team and real-time focus group, carrying a unified and disciplined message online and offline. This was an untapped resource that hadn't existed in previous presidential elections and I hoped the campaign would harness it, but the prodigious fundraising capabilities of the Internet sucked up all the online oxygen.

The second obstacle, and the more serious one, was the unwillingness of Democratic strategists to heed BC04 campaign manager Ken Mehlman's prediction that the party that dominated the Internet



would win the election. I had faith in the collective wisdom of the netroots – I believed that if the Kerry campaign truly internalized the confrontational disposition of the netroots, Kerry would win, just as I knew that if Bush channeled the fire of the rightwing blogs, Kerry could lose. And I made my case as forcefully as I could. Many in the campaign understood the new political reality, including John Kerry himself, who was very attentive to what bloggers were saying. But the natural antagonism of the old guard toward the new was an institutional problem and the marginalization of the netroots as a communications force, as well as the hyper-focus on Internet fundraising, hindered the online-offline alliance.

Post-Election Question

After Kerry's loss, lots of cyber-ink was spilled analyzing the role of the netroots in the 2004 election. There were legitimate questions. Was it wrong – or too idealistic – to think that the Democratic establishment and the online activist community could work together to win elections? Were the election post-mortems predicting the rise of the blogger class and the demise of the consultancy class correct? Would Kerry have won if the disharmony between the campaign and the netroots with respect to strategy and message had been addressed?

After a year of my life spent at the intersection of pre-blog and post-blog political thinking, and with Bush getting the second term he craved, one question has preoccupied me since last November: What is the scope of netroots power? Put differently: **How influential are bloggers?**

It's a difficult question to answer. First, there's no consensus on metrics. Second, blogs serve many purposes, some of which are more social than political. Third, the use of the Internet in political campaigns cuts across so many areas that it's easy to confuse netroots influence in the communications and messaging realm with other Internet-based political applications such as organizing and fundraising. Fourth, 'influence' is a hazy term.

It might be easier to approach the question by setting a more specific, and admittedly somewhat arbitrary, definition of political influence: *the capacity to alter or create conventional wisdom*. And a working definition of "conventional wisdom" is *a widely held belief on which most people act*. Finally, by "people" I mean all Americans, regardless of ideology or political participation.

The Triangle

Looking at the political landscape, one proposition seems unambiguous: blog power on both the right and left is a function of the relationship of the netroots to the media and the political establishment. Forming a triangle of blogs, media, and the political establishment is an essential step in creating the kind of sea change we've seen in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Simply put, *without the participation of the media and the political establishment, the netroots alone cannot generate the critical mass necessary to alter or create conventional wisdom*. This is partly a factor of audience size, but it's also a matter, frankly, of trust and legitimacy. Despite the astronomical growth of the netroots (see [Bowers and Stoller](#) for hard numbers), and the slow and steady encroachment of bloggers on the hallowed turf of Washington's opinion-makers, it is still the Russerts and Broders and Gergens and Finemans, the WSJ, WaPo and NYT editorial pages, the cable nets, Stewart and Letterman and Leno, and senior elected officials, who play a pivotal role in shaping people's political views. That is not to say that blogs can't be the first to draw attention to an issue, as they often do, but the half-life of an online buzz can be measured in days and weeks, and even when a story has enough netroots momentum to float around for months, it will have little effect on the wider public discourse without the other sides of the triangle in place. Witness the Plame case, an obsession of left-leaning bloggers long before the media and the political establishment got on board and turned it into a political liability for Rove and Bush.

One possible objection to this 'triangle' formulation is the success of [Paul Hackett](#). Bloggers who focus their attention on the local level - presumably believing that the netroots can change the course of local elections without the active participation of the media and political establishment - could say that Hackett's success undermines my argument. I'll say this in response: there's no doubt that bloggers played a critical role, but it's hard to deny that the triangle of netroots, media, and party establishment was in place for Hackett: the press ultimately did get involved, and the party establishment was part of the story by default since Hackett ran as a Democrat. You can argue, as bloggers like Bob Brigham did, that the party establishment didn't play enough of a role, but that's not to say it wasn't part of the story.

The power of the triangle has been demonstrated again and again: Josh Marshall and social security,

Steve Clemons and the Bolton nomination (the recess appointment was emblematic of Bolton's defeat, not his victory), rightwing bloggers and Eason Jordan, rightwing bloggers and Dick Durbin, progressive bloggers and Jeff Gannon, and so on. In each of these cases, and to varying degrees, bloggers, the media, and senior elected officials played a role in pushing a story and influencing public perceptions. To understand what happens when the online community is on its own, look no further than electronic voting. The progressive netroots has been hammering away at this for years, but the media and the political establishment is largely mute. Traction = Zero. The conventional wisdom puts it squarely in the realm of conspiracy theories.

Should we conclude, then, that the inability of bloggers on the left and right to alter or create conventional wisdom means that they have negligible political clout? If the netroots can't change CW without the mass media and the political establishment, and if the mass media and the political establishment can change CW without the netroots (which seems undeniable), then **isn't the blog world a relatively powerless echo chamber?** The answer, of course, is no.

Bloggers can exert disproportionate pressure on the media and on politicians. Reporters, pundits, and politicians read blogs, and, more importantly, they care what bloggers say about them because they know *other* reporters, pundits, and politicians are reading the same blogs. It's a virtuous circle for the netroots and a source of political power. The netroots can also bring the force of sheer numbers to bear on a non-compliant politician, reporter, or media outlet. Nobody wants a flood of complaints from thousands of angry activists. And further, bloggers can raise money, fact-check, and help break stories and/or keep them in circulation long enough for the media and political establishment to pick them up.

Consequently, bloggers, though unable to change conventional wisdom on their own, are able to use these proficiencies and resources to persuade the media and political establishment to join them in pushing a particular story or issue.

Blog Strategies, Left and Right

Working within the triangle construct (netroots + media + party establishment = CW), bloggers and netroots activists on the left and right have very different strategic imperatives.

With a well-developed echo chamber and superior top-down discipline, the right has a much easier time forming the triangle. Fox News, talk radio, Drudge, a well-trained and highly visible punditocracy, and a lily-livered press corps takes care of the media side of the triangle. Iron-clad party loyalty – with rare exceptions – and a willingness of Republican officials to jump on the Limbaugh-Hannity *bandwagon du jour* takes care of the party establishment side of the triangle. The rightwing netroots, therefore, is already working within the triangle on most issues. Their primary strategic aim is to prevent the left from forming its own triangle, as occurred with Katrina. It's a defensive posture, with the goal being the preservation of the status quo. Which explains why the right is profoundly hostile to dissent and why the pretense to libertarianism is common: "independent thinkers" don't like to be seen as defending the powers that be.

The triangle construct also explains rightwing bloggers' relentless attacks on the "MSM" and on [anyone who contends](#) that the media is conservative. In a nation dominated by shrill rightwing voices, with all branches of government in the hands of Republicans, and an ineffectual press corps, the "liberal media" myth is so absurd that it requires no rebuttal. But the right desperately needs to keep the media from doing what they did in the aftermath of Katrina: tell the unvarnished truth. They need to block the left from building the kind of triangle that Katrina generated, where outspoken left-leaning bloggers are joined by leading Democrats and reporters who have no choice but to describe the catastrophic results of Bush's dismal leadership. The result in Katrina's case is a major political crisis and a dramatic shift in public perceptions, a body blow to the long-standing conventional wisdom of Bush as a "resolute leader" and a protector.

Whereas rightwing bloggers can rely on their leadership and the rightwing noise machine to build the triangle, left-leaning bloggers face the challenge of a mass media consumed by the shop-worn narrative of Bush the popular, plain-spoken leader, and a Democratic Party incapacitated (for the most part) by the focus-grouped fear of turning off "swing voters" by attacking Bush. For the progressive netroots, the past half-decade has been a Sisyphean loop of scandal after scandal melting away as the media and party establishment remain disengaged.

It would seem reasonable to conclude, then, that the best strategy for the progressive netroots is to go after the media and Democratic Party leaders and spend less time and energy attacking the Bush

administration. If the netroots alone can't change the political landscape without the participation of the media and Democratic establishment, then there's no point wasting precious online space blasting away at Republicans while the other sides of the triangle stand idly by. Indeed, blog powerhouses like Kos and Josh Marshall have taken an aggressive stance toward Democratic politicians they see as selling out core Democratic Party principles. Kos's willingness to attack the DLC is mocked on the right, but it is precisely the right's fear that Kos will "close the triangle" that causes them to protest so loudly. Similarly, when Atrios, Digby, Oliver Willis, and so many other progressive bloggers attack the media, they are leveraging whatever power they have to compel the media to assume a role as the third side of their triangle.

Bloggers & the Bush Legacy

Setting aside 2006 congressional prospects and the remote hope for progressives that Bush will be impeached, the grand political battle of the next three years is over Bush's legacy.

For rightwing bloggers who have fiercely defended one of the most controversial and polarizing presidents in our history, their fortunes will rise or fall with his approval ratings. The blind allegiance to Bush and the furious assault on his detractors will be vindicated if he leaves office with popular support.

Rightwing bloggers will thus do everything in their power to prevent another Katrina triangle, where the confluence of blogs, media, and Democratic leadership exposes the real Bush and shatters the conventional wisdom about his ability to lead. And they will struggle mightily to boost his poll numbers, whether it means ignoring the reality of the Iraq fiasco or the terrifying implications of the bungled federal response to Katrina.

For progressive bloggers who see a president presiding over the collapse of America's credibility, the urgent work ahead is to cement the post-Katrina impression of Bush as a failed president. Whether or not they succeed depends to a large extent on their ability to compel the media and Democratic establishment to stand with them and speak the truth.

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