



*Have Blogs Replaced Newspapers,
And Should We Care?*

Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities Dialogue

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Intellectual Commons Room
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The Norman Lear

CENTERTAINMENT

Exploring Implications of the Convergence of Entertainment, Commerce, and Society

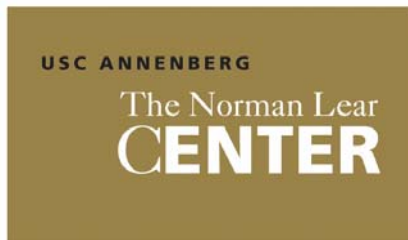
The Norman Lear Center

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field. For more information, please visit www.learcenter.org.

The Los Angeles Institute For The Humanities

The Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities was founded in 1998 to create an intellectual center by bringing together academics and writers, musicians and dancers, curators and critics, journalists and poets. The Institute's broad purpose is to stimulate a cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas. The biweekly lunches for fellows explore many of the social, scientific and cultural ideas of the day with a greater variety of experience and intellectual outlook gathered in one room than any given fellow is likely to experience in the course of his or her daily life.

The Institute aims to be international, urban and inclusive in its outlook, avoiding viewpoints predictably to the right or left. It seeks to integrate intellectual life with the active civic life of the city, as well as to reflect the diversity that is so palpably a hallmark of Southern California as it continues through the twenty-first century. For more information, please visit www.usc.edu/laih.



Participants

Kevin Roderick, founder, *LAObserved.com*

Kevin Drum, *WashingtonMonthly.com*'s Political Animal

Ana Marie Cox, novelist, *Time* magazine columnist, former *Wonkette*

Steve Ross, co-director, LA Institute For The Humanities; chairman, history department, USC

Marty Kaplan, director, Norman Lear Center, USC Annenberg; moderator

PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

Kevin Roderick

Kevin Roderick is a former writer and editor at the *LA Times*, and is now the founder of *LAObserved.com*, a "Weblog about Los Angeles media, news, politics, books and place." He is also the author of *Wilshire Boulevard: Grand Concourse of Los Angeles*.

Kevin Drum

Formerly the editor of the liberal blog, *CalPundit.com*, Kevin Drum is now the writer known as "Political Animal" on *WashingtonMonthly.com*; he is also the pioneer of the trend known as "Friday cat-blogging."

Ana Marie Cox

Ana Marie Cox is the original author of *Wonkette*, an often racy blog of Capitol Hill gossip, politics and policy. She is also the author of the novel *Dog Days*, a satire of Washington, D.C., as well as an essayist for *Time*.

Steve Ross

Steve Ross is co-director of the LA Institute For The Humanities. He is also chairman of the USC history department, where his current research focuses on how films shape ideas about class and power in the 20th century – especially what it means to be working class or middle class in America.

Martin Kaplan

Martin Kaplan is the director of the Norman Lear Center. A *summa cum laude* graduate of Harvard, a Marshall Scholar to Cambridge University, and a Stanford Ph.D., he has been an Aspen Institute program officer; a federal education staffer; a Vice President's chief speechwriter; a Washington journalist in print, television, and radio; a deputy Presidential campaign manager; a Disney Studios vice president of motion picture production; and a film and television writer and producer.

Have Blogs Replaced Newspapers, And Should We Care?

Steve Ross: Welcome. I'm Steve Ross. I'm chairman of the history department here, and also, the co-director of an organization that you probably have never heard of called the Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities at USC. It's a town-gown group: half our members are academics; half are from outside the University. But all are people throughout the city interested in issues speaking to the humanities; we have our meetings on campus twice a month.



**We figure that, by this time,
many of you in this room have
your own blogs.**



As part of a payback to the university, we've decided to create something called the Dialogue Series which is aimed specifically at undergraduates, and anyone else who would like to participate, the idea being that most of you are busy, and have plenty of events to go to. We're going to try to create programming of events once a semester that will be fun to go to, things that even though your professors may tell you about, you actually will want to attend because they seem interesting, not because you have to attend.

Today is the start of our series, a panel today entitled, "Have Newspapers Replaced Blogs, And Should We Care?" We figure that by this time, many of you in this room probably have your own blogs. What we want to do is have our panelists engage in a preliminary discussion for roughly an hour, maybe a little bit less. As soon as Ana Marie comes, she will join our group, and we will then throw it open to general audience interaction, you'll be able to ask whatever questions you want. Once we end the session, we will break, and you'll have a

chance to talk with the panelists, and have whatever is left in terms of our refreshments. There are books available if you would like to purchase them, and have them signed by the authors.

What I would like to do now is introduce our moderator, Marty Kaplan, who is both a friend and a colleague. Marty is a particularly appropriate person for an event that, again, as I say, we're gearing towards an undergraduate audience, because for those of you who have not decided what you want to do as a major, or even what you want to do when you get out of here, and you find yourself being pestered by your parents, saying, "What are you going to actually do with your life?" then this seminar is for you. If you happen to be majoring in something like English or History, and they're saying, "What are you ever going to do with something like that? Become a History professor?" And you've said, "No," we ask what else could you possibly do, and suggest that we might have some answers for you here today.

Marty is a case study of how you can have many different acts in your career at many different stages. He started off a Jersey boy, went to that place in Cambridge where he was a major in Molecular Biology, while at the same time also serving a stint as president of the Harvard Lampoon. But instead of pursuing a career in medicine, he went off to Stanford to get a Ph.D. in Modern Thought and Literature. From there, he went to work for the Aspen Institute, and then, on to Washington, D.C., where he became the chief speechwriter for Vice President Walter Mondale in 1984. He then served as Mondale's deputy campaign manager during his presidential bid.

Soon after, Marty was lured away from Washington, D.C. by Jeffrey Katzenberg and Michael Eisner, and wound up working at Disney for 12 years, both as a studio vice president in live action feature films, and as a writer and producer; during those years, he both wrote and produced *The Distinguished Gentleman*, and he also adapted Michael Frayne's play, *Noises Off*.

Marty eventually heard a higher calling than Katzenberg and Eisner, and he came to work as the associate dean of USC's Annenberg School of Communication, where he also serves as the

director and creative genius behind the Norman Lear Center, which studies the impact of entertainment on our society.

In his spare time, Marty writes for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *LA Times*, *Time* magazine, *U.S. News, & World Report*, and for those of your blogmeisters out there, you might have seen his blog on *The Huffington Post* Website. You can also hear Marty on "Marketplace" and "All Things Considered."

I'm delighted that Marty has agreed to serve as our moderator this afternoon. Please join me in welcoming Marty Kaplan.

Marty Kaplan: Thank you very much. If that convinces your parents of what you need it to, then let me know how I can convince mine.

This room is called the Intellectual Commons. I was reminded of that when I started Googling our topic, and came upon a talk given at Harvard a few weeks ago by an NYU Professor and blogger named Jay Rosen; it was called, "Bloggers Versus Journalists Is So Over." So given that, and because we are in the Intellectual Commons, I'd like to reframe our discussion today as "The Ecology of Information in the Attention Economy." So that's what we're doing, okay?

Steve Ross: I'm glad that's clear.

Marty Kaplan: We are very fortunate to have a dream panel. One is actually a phantom, a dream in that sense, and two are here in the flesh. Just to my right is a man who has worn hats both in the traditional media, and in the world of online media. He was a writer and editor at the *Los Angeles Times*, and subsequently created a blog called *LAObserved.com*. He also has a new-ish book out, which is available for purchase and signing called, *Wilshire Boulevard: Grand Concourse of Los Angeles*.

Though he's a local guy, his blog received more than 2 million visits in 2005. We're very lucky to have him. Please welcome Kevin Roderick. Thank you, Kevin.

We've got another blogger who is kind of local: he's based in Orange County. His previous blog was *CalPundit*. It was so successful that it and he were acquired, and he became "Political Animal" on the *Washington Monthly's* blog. So *WashingtonMonthly.com* is now where he blogs. For those of you who read his blog, you will know that the tradition of Friday cat-blogging is one of his great contributions to the culture, besides mixing it up politically across the board. Please welcome Kevin Drum.



By 2002, there were 15,000 blogs. Today, there are 27 million blogs, with 50,000 blog postings per hour, and 70,000 new blogs per day.



I will introduce our remaining panelist at the no-doubt dramatic moment when she arrives.

I looked up some numbers. Someone did a timetable, and said the first blog was in 1994. The blogger service that allows most people to become bloggers rolled out in 1999; in the year 2002, there were 15,000 blogs. So by 2002, there were 15,000 blogs. Today – and given the statistics that I gathered, by today, the facts were probably correct the day before yesterday, so add numbers to all of this – today, there are 27 million blogs. There are 50,000 blog postings per hour; there are 70,000 new blogs per day. And 62% of Internet users don't know what a blog is. So there's a certain discontinuity between the popularity of blogs, and our talking about them.

But there are different kinds of blogs: some blogs only have opinions; some blogs are content aggregators; some are somewhere in between. I'd like to start by asking, how many of you are readers of blogs? Okay.

A chunk, but not everybody. And how many of you are readers either online or in print of newspapers? Okay. More, I would guess. Okay. So Kevin, describe what people find when they go to *LAObserved.com*.

Kevin Roderick: First I'd like to ask, of those of you who read blogs, how many of you are mostly reading *MySpace* blogs? Okay, because that's a little bit of a different animal. At *LAObserved*, which is a blog that I started because I was a freelance journalist, had worked in offices at the *Los Angeles Times*, and at other magazines for about 25 years. I went freelance, and was working at home by myself, and I wanted to stay connected to the journalism community here in Los Angeles, and also have a place where I could find out what my colleagues, friends, and rivals were doing on a daily basis.

The site I was envisioning didn't exist, and I was already used to starting my day on the Web, so I thought I would just start that kind of Website. Mostly what I do at *LAObserved* is I scour the other media about Los Angeles, or the media that are in Los Angeles – the newspapers, the TV stations, the other Websites and the blogs, and I looked for things that are of interest to me, and I post them out there.

Sometimes I'll just post a link, and sometimes I'll post a little pundit to go with it. But it's really not any deeper than that. I think of my mission – if that's not too grand a term for what I'm doing – as just acting as a bit of a filter, and telling people "Here's what I think is either interesting or important in the news of Los Angeles today. And if that is of service to you, if it's useful to you, then I'm happy." It turns out that there were a lot of people looking for this sort of a service: it both provides them with a little bit of the beginnings of a community, and it filters out all the noise from the media that's out there.

Martin Kaplan: I get up pretty early, but even so, when I go to your blog, you have gotten up earlier.

Kevin Roderick: I like to make it look that way, let's put it that way.

Martin Kaplan: Do you just stay up late, and do tomorrow's news today?

Kevin Roderick: I am kind of a night person, not a real early morning person. So that is what I do. I stay up until the evening when the Websites of the big national media news sites like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* come up. And then, right around midnight is when the *LA Times* and *The Daily News* on the other Los Angeles sites come up. I do most of my filtering at night because then I don't have to get up early in the morning.

But – to cover myself a little – I don't like to advertise this because sometimes I'm still doing it at 3:00 a.m., not by design, just because sometimes, it takes longer than it otherwise should. So I don't advertise the hour at which I post on my front page. You have to dig a little bit to see what time I actually posted; it's a little bit of subterfuge on my part.

Martin Kaplan: By contrast, let's talk about you, Kevin, about your blog. For people who are not regular readers of it, how would you describe what it is you do? Where do you fit in the spectrum of the various kinds of blogs?

Kevin Drum: My blog is a little bit simpler, it's a little more of a common type of blog: it's a political blog. I blog from a moderate-liberal point of view. All politics, all the time: current events, politics. I can tell people that I've got pretty much the best job in the world because a magazine in Washington, which is way too busy trying to put out their magazine, or way too busy to actually pay any attention to what I do, pay me to walk down the street every morning, and get on my computer, and spout off my opinions about whatever I happened to feel like.

Martin Kaplan: Do you do that in pajamas?

Kevin Drum: No, I don't, but I could, if I wanted to. I do do it with my cats hanging around. I am cat-blogging news, and I think it's probably the best thing I've done for the blogosphere -- they prep me every morning for blogging. I'm not a morning person either. On the East Coast, it's

already noon by the time I wake up and can get anything on my blog. But I'll blog pretty continuously from the time I wake up until about noon. I don't even get dressed until between noon, I'm just on the computer continuously until then.

Martin Kaplan: I'll start with you, Kevin Drum: how much of what you do is taking in other media to see what you find interesting, and worth commenting on, and linking to?



I read 30, 40, 50, 100 other blogs a day. And it's real simple: whenever I find something that looks like it's interesting, I write about it.



Kevin Drum: Oh, it's almost all doing that. What I do is I read one newspaper a day for a forum, and that's the *LA Times*; I mainly do that because I need to have something sitting next to me while I eat breakfast. And then, I go to my computer, and I read *The New York Times*, I read *The Washington Post*, I read 30, 40, 50, 100 other blogs a day. And it's real simple: whenever I find something that looks like it's interesting, I write about it.

I don't do a lot of linking in the sense of just linking to something I think is interesting. There's a lot of blogs that do that, and they do it better than me, and faster than me. I only link to something if it's something I happened to be interested in that I feel like I want to comment on. But it's almost all from other media.

Martin Kaplan: Kevin, very nature of your blog is dependent on other media.

Kevin Drum: It is, in a large way, and certainly the way I started doing it. Although more and more, my blog is the mix between picking up something that I'm just linking to at another medium, and the mix of

that with original reporting done by me, or sent in to me by readers of the blog: it's changing quite a bit. And so, now, some days it's about – it's much closer to 50-50.

Martin Kaplan: So if there were no newspapers, there would be no "Political Animal" and no *LAObserved*. Is that right?

Kevin Drum: Probably not in a complete way, because I think if there were no newspapers, there would be a vacuum that would be filled by lots of other different creatures, some of them online, some of them broadcast, some of them magazines. I think that would just be too much of an information hole in society that needs to be filled, and there'd be ways to fill it.



I think if there were no newspapers, there would be a vacuum that would be filled by lots of other different creatures either online, in broadcast or in magazines.



But on the other hand, you're right in saying that: a lot of what blogs rely on is the work of journalists who are being paid to write stories for other people. And we come along, and are commenting on them, we are adding an inflection to them. In some cases, we're adding more information, or we're critiquing those stories. A lot of what I do involves pulling up a story, and pointing out who got there first, or what's been missed.

Martin Kaplan: And shining a spotlight, so that something that might have been missed gets read?

Kevin Drum: Sometimes, sometimes. And that's not so much my goal, but it's a way that people receive the blog: a lot of people find that they're learning about things that occur, things that appear in the less popular newspapers like the local newspaper in the South Bay area in Pasadena, that they wouldn't otherwise pick up on because they're not

being reported on the TV news, or the radio, and they're not otherwise showing up in the *Times*.

Martin Kaplan: So Kevin Drum, this morning, while you were reading the one paper with breakfast that you get in hard copy, you read an Op-Ed column by Max Boot.

Kevin Drum: I did, indeed.

Martin Kaplan: And you linked to it, quoted to it, and wrote a post, which concludes this way: "Given the reality that Boot thinks (a) the war is going very badly, and (b) Bush is clearly not willing to do the things he thinks are necessary to win, why continue to support it? Does he just enjoy watching people die pointlessly, or does he lack the guts to admit that Bush is an un-serious clown who ought to be impeached for war-time malfeasance? Inquiring minds want to know."

So my first question is, is that what a moderate-liberal on the blogosphere said?

Kevin Drum: Yes. And I'm sure you read the blogosphere enough yourself to know that the less moderate liberals would consider that just a piece of milquetoast, hardly worth reading in the morning. For me, that's a little more astute than what I usually write. But for the blogosphere... I was talking to Nick Goldberg a while back, he's the Op-Ed Editor of the *LA Times*. And we discussed my reputation as a relatively sober moderate blogger, and yet, even so, what I write on the blog could never make it onto the Op-Ed page of the *LA Times*. It would have to be rewritten to be much less partisan than it appears on the blog. Even my stuff, let alone stuff from other blogs, is more extreme to read...

Martin Kaplan: But do you...

Kevin Roderick: ...So far.

Kevin Drum: So far, yes.

Martin Kaplan: But do you think that readers of blogs know that? That they're engaged in a kind of implicit game wherein they understand that everyone exaggerates, and turns things into Molotov cocktails for the sake of fear? Or are readers sometimes unsuspectingly taking at face value what they see because their assumptions about news or commentary come from a media-like print?

Kevin Drum: I'm not sure about that.

Kevin Roderick: People who read blogs know what blogs are about. I mean, they know they're about opinion. They know they're about strident partisan opinion. They know what they're getting when they read blogs. And people who don't like that, read for a couple of days, and then just stop reading – it's too harsh for them. So the people who are reading blogs and enjoy blogs know exactly what they're getting: they want bomb-throwing, and that's what they get.

Kevin Drum: Although, I will say, as you pointed out, there's about 35 million blogs that *Technorati* is following now. And as the number increases...

Martin Kaplan: ...Gee, it went up in 27 minutes!

Kevin Drum: I'm just adjusting for the next day. But I think you're seeing the forum be refined. And within those 35 million or 27 million, whatever it is, I'm reading more and more blogs that are very nuanced, that are very well-written, that are not just bomb-throwing.

I think Kevin understates himself there because he writes a very smart blog. That's what it's known for, is being incisive, smart, and very

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moderate in tone compared to some of the other blogs. I think that's what you're seeing more and more of: as the forum matures, you're getting a smarter and more thoughtful mix.

Martin Kaplan: One of the things that blogging has done is to put other news media in a context that it didn't exist in before, so that people who read either online or in-print traditional journalism, now can also read almost in real-time critiques of that material. What's your role in that mix?

Kevin Roderick: I don't look at myself as primarily a media critic, although there are many blogs out there that function that way. And I guess to a degree, that's the way people use my postings. But that's not mostly what I'm doing. But I think that it's valuable to point out when the mainstream media is taking a certain tack on a story, or is missing something, something even as small as an item.

Yesterday morning, in Los Angeles, there was a candidate for the State Senate in one of the local districts who used to be a State Senator, and he died. And I confirmed it, and posted it a couple of hours after he died. It slowly started to filter onto AP, which had posted it as well. And by noon, I saw it show up on the Websites of six or seven other newspapers in California. But the *Los Angeles Times* didn't have anything about it until late in the afternoon, at the earliest. It was something that I pointed out on the blog because it showed how one of the advantages of being online is the speed with which you can update the news cycle. You can jump the news cycle – you can post breaking news, and you can post breaking opinion as well.

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Martin Kaplan: One of the topics that the blogosphere has made current is – and maybe it's tedious to repeat this – but who is a journalist? Kevin Drum, you were vice-president of marketing at a software company in Orange County. Did you one day then become a journalist by getting out your keyboard?

Kevin Drum: Yes, apparently I did. It's funny. Actually, I was a journalism major at Cal State, and I never used that degree for a single useful thing for about 25 years. And then, I starting blogging, and now suddenly, I'm a journalist again.



To me, a journalist is anybody who does journalism, regardless of where they work. If you do it regularly, pick up a phone, call people, and report it, then you're a journalist.



It does seem like a kind of stale question to me, but on the other hand, nobody's got a really good answer either, so you can keep talking about it forever. I mean, to me, a journalist is anybody who does journalism, regardless of where they work. If you do it regularly, if you pick up a phone, and call people, and you do that on a regular basis, and then you report what you've heard to a lot of people, then you're a journalist. I don't think it really matters where you do it.

Kevin Roderick: Oh, I agree. There are bloggers that do more journalism than the copy editors or the map drawers that newspapers employ. It is a tired discussion, I think. And being considered a journalist is not an official capacity, I believe it's a function. Ideally, there are standards that go with it. There are best practices that people who do it the right way should adhere to, but I have no problem considering most of the bloggers that I read as journalists.

Martin Kaplan: One of the catch phrases in the blogosphere is, "Let's hold a conference on blogger ethics." That's often used when there's an issue of journalistic ethics in the MSM – the mainstream media. The

mainstream media may have its faults, but one thing that it does have, at least in principle, is not only a set of best practices, but gatekeepers of various kinds: editors, and other hoops that a story needs to go through. You guys just push a button – does that change the playing field? I mean, do people value the same the kind of journalism that comes to them from these futile institutions with gatekeepers, as what you are writing with your cats crawling all over you?

Kevin Drum: Well, I did get an e-mail once from a journalism professor somewhere telling me that she pointed her students to my blog as a great example of what you could do in real journals – not a blog – but would I please stop writing about the cats? It just blew my reputation, and she couldn't send her kids to my site. So *WashingtonMonthly.com* hired me, and I did stop writing about the cats. What was the question again?

Martin Kaplan: Does it matter that there are these different sets of standards that apply to different forms of journalism?

Kevin Drum: Absolutely. I think it works in both ways: I believe the bloggers mock the mainstream media way too much. What reporters do is very, very hard – bloggers don't do it. They don't take up the phone and call people. What they do is they click a button, they go in some site where they excerpt a couple of paragraphs, and then make some comments on it. Well, that's easy to do: you don't need an editor to do that. We wouldn't exist without the mainstream media.

But it works in the other way, too, which is that I think there's a place for a medium that doesn't have gatekeepers, and that is more partisan,

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more extreme, and more lively, and doesn't have the standards, where you can talk about gossip, and rumors, and just put it out there, and see what people say. I think there is a place for that. And I think blogs stole that need. I wouldn't want to see newspapers doing that, I don't think they should do it, but I think blogs should do it, because there's a place for both.

Kevin Roderick: Well, it may be too late, because newspapers are doing that. Just before we came over here, I printed out a page of *The Guardian* and *The Times of London* who, just in the last couple of weeks, have jumped into blogging in a big way. *The Times of London* has a blog page where it looks like there's about two dozen bloggers, including the top editor of the paper who blogs about what he does during his day, and how the decisions are made at the paper. Their correspondent in Los Angeles, Chris Ayres, sends in a blog called *So LA*, he writes about things like getting his first speeding ticket on Mulholland Drive, and sneaking into Oscar parties, and that sort of thing. It looks like there's somebody that writes about parenting, there's somebody that writes about gardens, the Paris correspondent sends in a blog. And here at home, the *Los Angeles Times* has about a dozen blogs of its own now, ranging from their most popular blog about the Lakers, to a political-business columnist who blogs mostly about politics. There's a travel columnist, and a couple of Hollywood bloggers, as well.

What that tells me is that it's not a political movement, and it's not a cause, it's a forum of communication. And that forum has proven very popular with readers. It has places where it works really well, look at the kind of things that Kevin is doing. Op-Ed pages are already done better online than they are in print; the same thing goes for breaking news; movie reviews are done better online. And blogs are just another way of fitting in with that.

I think the place for blogs stood out the most and showed their work the most was after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. When the newspaper's printing presses were destroyed, there was a total hunger for information. And what the New Orleans paper did is it turned its Website into a blog, and started posting the latest new tidbit that came in at the top of the page, so that if someone was lucky enough to have access to power and a computer, or if relatives in another state who were trying to find out information about their loved ones, they could just look at *The*

New Orleans Times-Picayune Website, and look at the blog format. I just think it's a very useful forum – I view it as a forum rather than any kind of a movement.

Martin Kaplan: Let me see if I can either contest that, or get Kevin Drum to.

Kevin Roderick: Okay. Marcos Militias Zúni, who runs the blog *Daily Kos*, has a new book out called *Crashing the Gate*. At its core is the notion that Internet blogs in particular can create what he calls the "netroots to people-powered political movements." There are examples that he studies, like *Move On*, and so on. So when you say it's not a political movement, I would just ask Kevin Drum. Do you agree?



Blogging is a great vehicle political for organizing. But that's not 35 million blogs. It's like saying the telephone is a great tool for organizing, but that doesn't explain all telephones.



Kevin Drum: I mean, it's a lot of things. Marcos has certainly shown that it can be a political movement. He's built a blog that – what did it raise, \$1 million in the last elections for candidates? And this year, it will probably be more. In 2008, they'll probably double that again. So he's got a community of 500,000 people who raise millions of dollars for political candidates. Yes, that's a political movement.

Kevin Roderick: Oh, blogging is a great vehicle for political organizing and campaigning, no doubt. But that's not 35 million blogs. It's sort of like saying the telephone is a great vehicle and tool for political organizing as well, but that doesn't explain all of what telephones are about.

Kevin Drum: I do find that most of the attention that people, the newspapers, and the media pay is to political blogs: when they write about blogs, they almost always mean political blogs, even though they

don't actually say it, they just say blogs. Political blogs are a tenth of 1% of about 35 million. So you have to be careful – when you talk about blogs, are you talking solely about the kind of thing that I do and that Marcos does, or are you also including the tens of millions of people who write about their cats, and what they had for breakfast, and so forth.

Kevin Roderick: I think you need to take the broad view. *Technorati*, which ranks the Top 100 Blogs, has only three political blogs in their Top Ten.



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Martin Kaplan: Well, the phantom has arrived! Let me welcome her by introducing her. She used to write for 'zines. Do you remember 'zines? And then, she was hired by a company to give life to a Washington-based blog. And by writing it under a very clever title, *Wonkette*, with a very funny graphic of a girl in sort of cat-eye glasses...

Ana Marie Cox: ...A smutty librarian.

Martin Kaplan: ...A smutty librarian. And a certain snarky tone. And some might say an obsession with a sexual peccadillo, which I think here I should describe as the love that dare not speak its address. She parlayed it into a huge following, and now is also the author of a novel called *Dog Days*. Please welcome Ana Marie Cox.

Ana Marie Cox: Thank you.

Martin Kaplan: Well, the party's better now that you're here.

Ana Marie Cox: And I'm not even drunk yet!

Martin Kaplan: I'm going to ask you some questions, Ana Marie, because you're the fresh meat. And you won't have the benefit of the discussion that proceeded, but they'll know when I'm lying. Okay?

Ana Marie Cox: And they'll also know when I'm repeating someone. Is that okay?

Martin Kaplan: Exactly. I'm going to ask you to think back 20 minutes ago to when you were blogging as *Wonkette*, rather than being the author on a book tour...

Ana Marie Cox: Actually, now I'm a *Time* contributor.

Martin Kaplan: This was just announced yesterday or the day before.

Ana Marie Cox: Monday.

Martin Kaplan: Monday. A brand new essayist and blogger for *Time* magazine.

Martin Kaplan: Have you posted yet?

Ana Marie Cox: At *Time*?

Martin Kaplan: Yes.

Ana Marie Cox: I have my first essay in the print edition. It came out on the stands on Monday.

Martin Kaplan: Would you ever have called anything you did at *Wonkette* an essay?

Ana Marie Cox: No, but I have actually written full paragraphs and pages of things before, not the least of which in graduate school. So I'm familiar with long form.

Martin Kaplan: What's your first post about?

Ana Marie Cox: The first essay.

Martin Kaplan: First essay, sorry, yes.

Ana Marie Cox: The first essay, actually, is very closely related to my book. It's about what it's like to be the wife in Washington: you can be the husband and still be the wife. It's the person who's not the power figure; it's the person who, at parties, everyone's kind of gaze drifts to over your shoulder. They start looking around for someone else more important to talk to. I was the wife the first two years up in Washington.

Martin Kaplan: But then, he became Mr. Wonkette!

Ana Marie Cox: Then he became Mr. Wonkette. I would say he's not quite the wife, but he is Mr. Wonkette. *Wonkette* is functionally the thing that brought me, in the essay I call it the "career lottery." Suddenly, I become someone who, when people were gazing over the shoulder of the wives in the room, I was one of the people they would seek out.

I think that the secret to my success was to simply write about the Washington press corps as though they were as important as they think they are; I think I owe my entire career to the vanity and insecurity of the Washington press corp. They think they're doing amazing work. And I like to feed that delusion. It worked out very well for me. Then there was the novel, which they're not happy about.

Martin Kaplan: When you were posting daily for *Wonkette*, what was your media intake, and blog output routine?

Ana Marie Cox: I was very lucky. I had this really wonderful intern named Henry who did a little pre-digestive work on the day's news for me. So when I got up in the morning, and rolled out of bed, there was usually like a page or so of links to the most important stories of the day.

Martin Kaplan: He would send you an e-mail?

Ana Marie Cox: Yes, it was actually part of the blog, it's called "The Daily Briefing." That was very creative I thought. I think most bloggers would probably think there's no routine to it. I mean, you have a list of bookmarks. I can't believe I was able to process the amount of information I was taking in. But then, I just realized I wasn't processing it, really: I'd have a TV on playing the news channel, radio on maybe, RSS feeds scrolling at the top of the screen; I'd be reading 20 different blogs at once, having an IM chat, getting e-mail. That's why probably a lot of what I wrote doesn't make sense today.

What's weird is that I don't have that same routine anymore: I feel more informed. I actually feel like I have a better sense of what's going on in the world now that I don't know about...

Martin Kaplan: I think you've just given this panel the headline.

Ana Marie Cox: Well, I'm glad to be able to provide something.

Martin Kaplan: Are you reading fewer blogs?

Ana Marie Cox: I am. And I hadn't realized until I stopped reading blogs how little I enjoyed reading them. I'm reading them purely for pleasure

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now, and I realize how few of them are pleasurable. There are still that I feel like are necessary. I feel like I have to read *Daily Kos*. It's like it's part of the diet, the roughage. I feel the same way currently about *Red State* and *The Corner*, which most of you know is the opposite of *Kos*. And then, I guess I feel informed by some of the especially brute political blogs that are good at serving as a filter for all of that information out there, and can cue you into stories, little stories that will become big stories. I think I first read about the Dubai Ports deal on either *The Corner* or Michelle Malkin's blog. It was like a week later before I read about it in *The Times*.

I think those were very roundabout answers to your question.

Martin Kaplan: When people read *Wonkette*, what do you think they're looking for? To be amused?

Ana Marie Cox: I would hope that's what they're looking for because there's not a whole lot else there. I like to think that one of the things that made *Wonkette* not suck was that there's a certain amount of public awareness of the political universe beyond anal sex jokes that...

Martin Kaplan: ...There, she said it. I didn't.

Ana Marie Cox: I can't say that it wasn't the anal sex that brought them there. I think that it's amazingly a delicious combination of politics and *Brokeback Mountain* references. I think that *Wonkette* had a very specific kind of recipe that included lots of joking about sex of all kinds – I'm not a bigot – drinking and calling attention to the absurdities of our political process and our media: it turns out that those are some very rich veins to mine. And people enjoy the combination.

I think that it was always less of a gossip blog than people thought it was. There's not really that much factual information about the goings-on behind doors and underneath covers. But that's also probably what brought some people there because they thought they would find that.

Martin Kaplan: I want to try to bring together two strands of what we've talked about. A moment ago, Kevin Drum said that the blogosphere is too hard on the mainstream media. And you just mentioned *Red State*. Something happened this week of interest in the blogosphere: *The Washington Post's* Website, *WashingtonPost.com*, announced that it was hiring a new blogger, which was interpreted to be a way of giving balance to a columnist on the Website; he's a long-time journalist named Dan Froomkin, who is a well-read blogger about goings-on in national politics. The guy they hired is named Ben Domenech, who was at *Red State*. And since then, something of a firestorm has occurred: The people on the left have argued that it was an outrage to hire him because of the false equivalence between this guy, who is basically a political operative with no journalistic experience, and Dan Froomkin.

So what are your reactions to the controversy going on, and to *The Post's* hiring him. Does it matter?

Ana Marie Cox: Well, does it matter? I'm not sure if I can answer that question.

Martin Kaplan: Well then, Kevin Roderick will answer.

Ana Marie Cox: Okay. I have this question about the problem of equivalency.

Martin Kaplan: Good.

Ana Marie Cox: Which is that I think perhaps bloggers should not be the ones to drop charts about who is a journalist, and who is isn't. As a former blogger, I want to stick to a definition of journalist that has to do with the output that you produce, not the medium that you produce it in, and also, not who paid you to do it.

Although these are significant questions, I think that do we want to outside-the-mainstream-media investigation of anything, whether it be to document "60 Minutes" National Guard documents or to hurt Trent Lott... I think the fact that Domenech wasn't a real journalist in the

true sense of the word may be putting it on the same level as actually not grooming everyone to be a journalist, but actually, just creating a dialogue among people who do know what they're talking about.

Martin Kaplan: Is that a good thing?

Ana Marie Cox: Yes. I kind of think the professionalization of journalism is not necessarily great. I mean, this is a country that was founded on the idea that you could be a citizen journalist and a citizen politician. I think to make it too much of an area – you can't be a journalist unless you're working for an organization that has a bureau in Baghdad – is I think not necessarily a great thing for readers.



I think the professionalization of journalism is not necessarily great. This is a country that was founded on the idea that you could be a citizen journalist and a citizen politician.



Martin Kaplan: Can I coax some seething outrage from either Kevin on that notion?

Kevin Drum: Let me ask a question. How many people in this room before five minutes ago had ever heard of Ben Domenech?

Martin Kaplan: Two.

Kevin Drum: Ana Marie, you were saying a couple of minutes ago that now, you don't read blogs, and that you feel better informed. And I think this is exactly why. What happened yesterday, and today, and on Monday was this unbelievable firestorm on the blogosphere about the fact that *The Washington Post* could hire a right-wing blogger to write on their site. Now, can you believe that? I mean, can you think of anything in the whole world more trivial than the fact that *The Washington Post* hired a conservative blogger to write on their site? I

can't. And yet, it has consumed the whole blogosphere for the last two days.

Ana Marie Cox: Yes. Don't they have a president to bring down, or something?

Kevin Drum: So if you feel like you're better informed, it's because you're not wasting your neurons learning about Ben Domenech, and the fact that he blogs for *The Washington Post*. I think one of the things you might have blogged on *Wonkette* about the blogosphere is that there are very specific topics that really get them going. Every once in a while, like on the Dubai Port deal, they're ahead of the curve. But an awful lot of the time, they're not even on the curve. They're just off in their own dream land talking about stuff that nobody in the rest of the world cares about.

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Kevin Roderick: I think the importance of what it means to the newspaper is not very much, either. I think this is just a skirmish that, a year from now will be forgotten, as *The Washington Post* and other outlets add more and more voices that will speak through the forum of blogs; I think it isn't surprising that *The Post* would add a conservative blogger. Although why they didn't add other voices at the same time is worth debating.

Kevin Drum: But I think there was a good reason for them not to do that: the liberal blogosphere immediately jumped to the conclusion that Ben Domenech was hired as a counterpoint to Dan Froomkin. But there's zero evidence to suggest that was why they did it: maybe they did, but there's no evidence at all. And if they had hired both a liberal and a conservative blogger at the same time, that would have been as

good as saying that we are never going to hire another blogger again unless we hire them in pairs.

Ana Marie Cox: Right.

Kevin Drum: So I think they did the right thing, by hiring him now. Two weeks from now, or two months, or a year from now, if they want to hire another blogger who happens to be a liberal or a conservative, they can do it, but maybe I'll worry about the fact that their balance is slightly off.

Ana Marie Cox: And it still would have been a firestorm. I mean, bloggers still would have found a way to say that one of them was not as good a liberal, or as good a conservative, or had the wrong kind of credentials. I got caught in one of those things last year when I was on a panel as what people had determined as "the liberal blogger," though I'm apparently not a good enough liberal, and they wanted someone more serious.

Martin Kaplan: Was this at the National Press Club?

Ana Marie Cox: Yes. The National Press Club was outraged that it was me, Matt Yglesias, who is a serious liberal blogger, and Jeff Gannon, who is not serious about anything. But it was amazing the amount of import that bloggers found in that particular panel makeup.

Kevin Roderick: And they wouldn't have felt the same way if it was the *Washington Post* adding a conservative op-ed columnist, which shows you again the kind of growing and oversized feeling that comes with blogs these days.

Kevin Drum: Well, but you do – when *The New York Times* hired David Brooks, for example. And they said so, that was specifically to replace William Safire, who was their conservative Op-Ed guy; they were going to replace him with another conservative guy when he retired. And I think that for the blogosphere to get sort of caught up in that: we've got a slot for this kind, a slot for the Libertarian, and whatnot, what's the point?

Marty Kaplan: But what's contrarian about this line of thought is that at least on the liberal side of the blogosphere, and I think to some degree on the conservative side, there is the view that the power of the media is just about the most important thing there is to fight about.

Ana Marie Cox: Right.

Marty Kaplan: And that securing equity, and making sure that no one gets away with anything, and that your side is depicted appropriately, those are the highest stakes there are.

Ana Marie Cox: This is why the media loves covering blogs. I mean, it's a tribute to the larger version of what I, with my little blog...

Marty Kaplan: Because it confirms that delusion.

Ana Marie Cox: Yes, exactly, that's totally it. There are many different panels about what blogs mean for journalism.

Martin Kaplan: This one's about the ecology of information in the attention economies.

Ana Marie Cox: Yes. Of course, of course: I won't have to read from my prepared statement then. There's usually just a question of is mainstream media disappearing? What do blogging or these more niche, outsider forms of journalism mean for mainstream journalism? At least in the case of bloggers, we would be nothing without mainstream journalism. I mean, we'd have to leave the house, which no one wants to do.

Martin Kaplan: Get dressed.

Ana Marie Cox: Get dressed, wear pants... I mean, the work I had to do to get here! So I do think that the truth is in what they actually write about. Everyone may complain about mainstream media, but no one would know what to do without it.

Martin Kaplan: One of the things that the online world has that traditional media have not had, and are trying to figure out how to do, is interactivity, feedback, comments. And each of you has a kind of different history on that front. Kevin Drum, you've always had comments. Yes?

Kevin Drum: The first few months I didn't, just for technical reasons. But once I switched on to a platform that supported them, yes, I've had comments ever since.

Martin Kaplan: And what would be the number of comments sent regarding a piece that would be considered at the high end for you?

Kevin Drum: At the high end?

Martin Kaplan: Yes.

Kevin Drum: Oh, 400 or 500 at the high end. A typical post gets maybe 100 comments.

Martin Kaplan: And will you read them?

Kevin Drum: No, I usually read maybe the first 20 or 30.

Martin Kaplan: The sub-heads for a story.

Kevin Drum: For one thing, you just can't read that many. And after about 20 or 30, their conversations drifts off so far from the point of the post, and the vitriol starts to flow, and they're just not worth reading. So, no, I don't read them all.

Martin Kaplan: So to you, then, this much-vaunted notion that the blogosphere is a fabulous online interactive community – you could just as well have no comments and make the same difference.

Kevin Drum: Absolutely not. No, no, no, I would never give up my comments. I think comments are one of the things that make blogs what they are. You don't have to have comments, but the whole difference between blogs and print media, or for that matter, television – not so for call-in radio – is that there is interactivity. Comments are part of that, and links to other blogs.



I'll only get to the first 20 or 30 reader comments on my blog. There's only so much you can do: you can only spend so much time commenting before you don't have time to blog anymore.



Martin Kaplan: It's just that you're not part of that.

Kevin Drum: Oh, sure I am. But I'll only get in for the first 20 or 30. There's only so much you can do. You can only spend so much time commenting before you don't have any time to blog anymore.

Ana Marie Cox: Maybe we should put like a disclaimer saying, "I will only read to here."

Kevin Drum: Exactly. But I think the comments are important. And I think for one thing, if somebody links to something I read – kind of like that Max Boot commentary – if you link to that, and somebody clicks the link and reads it, there's more to it. They'll see stuff immediately right below it, with no extra effort – they don't have to put a link, they don't have to click, they don't have to do anything. All they to do is just scroll down, and they can read lots of other people telling me I'm an idiot, telling me why Max Boot is right, linking to other sites that have information that contradicts what I say.

Martin Kaplan: How has this turned out this way?

Ana Marie Cox: Well, I prefer to be more honest about the fact that I don't read comments, I guess. I didn't have comments because I am a control freak, and an opinionated, jerk.

Martin Kaplan: Are you thin-skinned?

Ana Marie Cox: No, I'm not. Well, perhaps, but I heal quickly: I don't mind people saying nasty things about me. I just don't really care what they think. Like what Kevin was saying, I think it's actually true of a lot of bloggers and this whole idea that they think the blogosphere is this some wonderful conversation is a little bit disingenuous: I think there's the blogosphere and the commentsphere. Like, there are people who are really into commenting, who have never had their own blogs, who might transition into having their own blogs that are like comment fiends. And there are places that have really raging comment area, like hit-and-run blogs. *Code* is one: there are people whose names you see over and over again way down at like number 300, they stay with that conversation: I don't know if those people leave the house either. I think, "What's happening in our economy with people out there that can hang around and do that?" I don't know.

Kevin Drum: They're bloggers without the initiative to sign up for a free blog account.

Martin Kaplan: Kevin Roderick, you don't have comments?

Kevin Roderick: Not anymore. I did for about the first year that I ran *LAObserved*, and I just found that well, I wasn't reading them that much, either, I wasn't getting anything out of them, personally, and they were taking up a lot of time. There was a lot of spam that was happening; there were a lot of skirmishes amongst the people in the commentsphere that I was called upon to either address, or to try to mediate. And I didn't want to do that. Also, I was getting complaints from readers that the comments were going off in such a different direction from the content of the site, that it was altering the way people viewed *LAObserved*, and it was turning people off.

I went on vacation one summer for a couple of weeks: I was going to be away from the blog literally for two weeks. So I turned them off so that the porn-spammers wouldn't take over in my absence. And when I got back, it felt so good to not have this additional burden. Because I do *LAObserved* by myself, as I admitted earlier, in the middle of the night, mostly. And it just relieved an additional burden that I didn't want to take on. I then got a lot of e-mails from people saying that they felt a lot better about the site, because of the fact that the comments weren't there.

But I don't think that this takes away the interactivity of the blog by not having comments. I hear from people all of the time in e-mail, in instant messaging, by telephone, and just people that I meet around town who are giving me reactions to what's on the blog. In some cases, it's very immediately feedback that often turns into a supplemental comment that I will write onto the blog, or some change in the coverage. So I still think it's an interactive medium, which is an important part of it, but it doesn't have to be exercised through comments, which are kind of like the people that call into talk radio.

Ana Marie Cox: I just want to add, I actually do think the blogosphere is interactive regarding the Comments Of The Week interactive portion of it. I think the conversations that I'm more interested in are the ones between posts, like when someone comments on someone else's post, or you get an e-mail. I think that's a slightly more civilized and more productive. I mean, there's room for a mosh pit in most social situations, but you don't have to dance.

Kevin Roderick: In the areas away from politics, there are blogs that I read specifically because of comments.

Ana Marie Cox: Right.

Kevin Roderick: But not political blogs, because the comments are very often...

Ana Marie Cox: But there are places like that are helpful, like gadget-oriented sites.

Kevin Roderick: Yes. Aficionado sites.

Ana Marie Cox: Yes.

Kevin Roderick: I like baseball blogs, where you see aficionados talking about something that they care a lot about, and know a lot about. The hosts have the time to go in, and actually shape what the tenure of that community is going to be. That's a big factor in making comments turn out well, I think. And there are some sites where the host is really, really good at that.

Martin Kaplan: Kevin, you wanted to add something?

Kevin Drum: Yes. I was going to say that too much of this sounds to me like what we're saying about commenters is the same thing that real journalists say about us. These guys on my site yell, they scream, they are rude. But you know what? This is what people feel about politics these days, and I think they deserve a platform.

Kevin Roderick: I think that they're not very representative, though.

Kevin Drum: It's like your Hyde Park Speakers' Corner, where you guys come out; it's called the blogosphere. And anybody can start a blog, it really can be done literally in five minutes. And it requires no technical skills, and it requires no cost.

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Kevin Roderick: I guess I don't think that should be a requirement for getting your voice heard on the blogosphere. If you want to do it in comments, why not?

Martin Kaplan: There was a Diane Keaton post on *The Huffington Post* not long ago which inspired a series of comments. And they were all directed to her as the author of the post. And then, at a certain point, around 20 or 30 posts, someone commented, "You moron. Do you think she's actually reading these?" And the tone changed from that point in the comments, which is a segue to changing the tone here. Let's take some questions. Andrew, would you raise your hand?

Andrew has a hand-held mike. The only reason we're going to ask you to use it is because we are filming this and that way, we can make sure that the people who see it in posterity can actually hear you. So we're going to open the conversation to you. If you have a speech, please disguise it as a question. Who would like to get in on the conversation? Yes, hang on a second. At the beginning, could you please just tell us your name and where you're from?

Sheldon: I'm Sheldon, I'm from LA. There's a whole new realm that hasn't been explored, about how, during this whole explosion of the blogosphere, Microsoft is using blogs to market its products. I was just wondering if somebody would care to comment about that?

Also, could you please give us some tech data? I agree with Kevin Roderick when he talked about filtering out this mass amount of information. So how do you feel about the future of the technology, people who are using technology to build out, sometimes even faster than anybody can blog about it?

Kevin Roderick: Well, we're talking about the same thing – about weeding through the tremendous amount of noise that's out there, and trying to pick out what's either relevant or interesting to people. I lean toward the human mind doing a better job of it than any technology I've heard about so far. And the sites that are out there that try to filter the news for me right now, like Google and Yahoo! don't do a very good job of it; they are not able to target what I'm

looking for at all. And RSS feeds don't even come close to it – I'm the one setting them up. So I don't see technology doing quite the same thing that we're talking about.

Martin Kaplan: If I could just piggy-back on that question: are newspaper editors doing a good job at guessing the kind of collection of information you want?

Kevin Roderick: Me, personally? No, not really. Because when I'm scanning through the newspapers in the Los Angeles area at night – incidentally, I should point out just for the purposes of disclosure, I often do so with a cat on my lap, too. I just don't write about it. But I might someday. I'm pulling out 10 or 15 things that interest me out of hundreds of stories. So, no, I don't think newspaper editors are doing a particularly good job of targeting me, but I also don't think they are doing a particularly good job targeting their readers, either.

Martin Kaplan: Do either of you want to weight in on this one?

Kevin Drum: Kevin, that list you had of the *Technorati* blog, you said only three of them are political blogs. How many of the rest were tech blogs?

Kevin Roderick: A couple of them were tech blogs, and then a couple of them were gadget blogs, like *In Gadget* and *Gizmo*.

Kevin Drum: There's a lot of tech blogs. That's really where the whole thing got started, not political blogging.

Kevin Roderick: I almost think that you had the first wave with the tech blog...

Ana Marie Cox: Tech blogs didn't think that media was very important, and political blogs wrote about media.

Kevin Roderick: ...Political blogs were the second wave. I think the next wave is going to be blogging itself, picking over information dissemination in micro-niche areas. I think next year, there's going to be a big growth in blogs about bird flu, and other kinds of flu-related things.

Ana Marie Cox: I think that *The Wall Street Journal* has a series of sort of quasi-blogs called the "newstrackers" of various sorts. The first one I started reading was the Katrina newstracker. I think that's the kind of thing that I picture; I think they have a bird flu one as well. I don't think it's automated, but it basically is just someone curating information that is very regularly quickly updated, and just sticks to one narrow, deep blog.

Martin Kaplan: Questions? Yes, Andrew. Could you bring to that gentleman?

Scott: My name's Scott. I live here in LA. Because I follow the local media quite a bit, I notice that when I hear the morning news or listen to a local radio station, they will essentially regurgitate what's in the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Daily News*. And if I go to the news or to Channel 9, they'll be reading *LA Observed* to get their leads for that evening. What other parts of the media are different from the bloggers' interdependence on the mainstream media to develop their context?

Kevin Roderick: Well, when I see the other TV stations copying what's in the *Times* that morning, that doesn't bother me because it's always been that way, there's a certain path that happens. You know, the Associated Press gets its stories the night before from the stories that were in the *Los Angeles Times* and the other newspapers. So then, the

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stories go out on the wires, and everybody just starts recycling those stories. They just take the *Times* staff writer's name off them and kind of rewrite them a little bit sometimes. So, that's never bothered me.

Martin Kaplan: That's high-end journalistic ethics.

Kevin Roderick: I actually think you're seeing Channel 9 and the other TV stations drawing from a broader reputation of sources, now that they are looking at blogs like mine, and blogs like yours, and others to find another way around just following what the *LA Times* says. Because I know that the news directors in those stations are always saying, "Let's not just do what was in the *LA Times* this morning. Let's go out and find something new and something original," but they all fall back on that story. Because they're not out there generating the stories. For the most part, the journalists are out there finding original stories, and the *LA Times* just happens to be the biggest newsroom in the city.

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CNN's "The Situation Room" has a segment on what bloggers are saying. And often, what the bloggers are saying is about a story in print that the bloggers are talking about.

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Martin Kaplan: CNN's "The Situation Room," that exciting three-hour show with Wolf Blitzer, has a segment on what bloggers are saying. And often, what the bloggers are saying is about a story in print that the bloggers are talking about...

Ana Marie Cox: Or a story on CNN.

Martin Kaplan: Or a story on CNN. Is that the cat swallowing its tail, so to speak?

Ana Marie Cox: I think it can be kind of humorous. There's some very, very sub-genre blog posts that I am blogging right now while my blog is on CNN. I've done it.

But I was going to say that I am obviously not shy about knocking bloggers for not leaving the house, and just relying on mainstream media. I do think, however, that everyone is looking to everyone else for inter-dependence. What allows that to be manageable is when people bring any kind of new information to the table: it can be a person at a TV station; it can be a person at the *LA Times*; it can be a blogger. And a blogger can often bring something that's either like a personal area of expertise, like they happen to know about antique lampshades from whenever that are seen on President Lincoln's grandmother's grave.

I don't know. I mean, like there's a kind of individual knowledge that bloggers have that you can't really expect a reporter to have because they're not obsessed with whatever the blogger's area of expertise is.

Martin Kaplan: So the collective intelligence of the audience is the tool that no individual has.

Kevin Roderick: Yes, absolutely.

Ana Marie Cox: Yes. I'm not sure if I really understood that, but I'll agree.

Martin Kaplan: It's alright – Kevin said yes.

Ana Marie Cox: I also think that reporters can go out and do their own kind of reporting as well, and talk to those experts.

Kevin Drum: I think I'll disagree here.

Martin Kaplan: Excellent.

Kevin Drum: Since nobody else will. We're talking about everybody depending on everybody else, and that's not the way it works:

everybody relies on big metro dailies. AP gets their stuff from big metro daily, and network news gets their stuff from big metro dailies. There is always one source of real serious daily reporting in the United States, and that's metro dailies.

With that finished, what was the original topic of our question?

Martin Kaplan: Have blogs replaced newspapers, and should we care?

Kevin Drum: I think we should care because I love blogs, and I spend eight hours a day, seven days a week writing my blog. But it's mostly about opinion. It's not reporting: there is serious reporting that goes on, but not on blogs. That's why I dislike the contempt that the blogosphere has for the mainstream media so much. Because if big metro dailies go away – and we all know from the issues what – they're losing classified ad lineage, their readership is declining, and they are losing their audience, we all know what's going on with them. But when they go away, I don't know who will replace them. I mean for serious, really serious reporting.

Ana Marie Cox: I'm not sure if I really disagree. I mean, I was just trying to say that bloggers sometimes have knowledge about a very specific thing that is a valid, something that can bring additive value to this interdependent mix. But I do think that you're right. I mean, yes, the most value you can have in any medium, and the only source for actual real news is the daily paper.

You asked a couple of questions ago, are newspapers doing a good job of curating the news? I would say that yes, but for me personally, not

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really. But it is kind of weird to think that everyone thinks, "Not for me personally."

Martin Kaplan: Which is why their circulation is going south.

Ana Marie Cox: Yes.

Kevin Drum: Kevin, when you said no, it was because you found 15 things out of 100 or 200 items that you liked. But that's just the way it is. I figured 15 out of 100 is not bad.

Kevin Roderick: Well, it really wasn't a complaint. But I do think that there's lots of evidence that newspapers editors are missing their target audience.

Ana Marie Cox: Right. And they're not doing so out of high-mindedness, either. It's not because they are doing stories on the importance of bird flu. It's because they're doing – I mean, I love to see stories about panda as much as anyone else, but...

Kevin Roderick: Yes. And I don't know what the perfect mix would be for a newspaper these days. But it's got to be carried out as much online as it's going to be in print. I interviewed the editor of the *LA Times* a couple of months ago, and we were talking about their dropping circulation: they've lost more readers in the last few years than any newspaper in the country. And he had already shifted his mindset, saying, "Oh, no, we're not losing readers at all. We're losing print circulation, but we're gaining readers to our Website." His shtick is that the *LA Times* actually has more readers now because they are bringing new people in to the Website.

But what they haven't figured out is a way to capture those people, make money off them, and also to make them loyal to the *LA Times* brand. That's why you see these things like the 10 blogs I was talking about, the Wikitorial that they tried last year where they let readers edit an editorial about the Iraq War. It didn't go well, but they'll be trying lots more things like that.

Right now, if anybody hasn't heard, the *LA Times* has in the center of its Website a camera pointed at two goldfish in its City Hall bureau: it's trying to make a point about the cleanliness of the LA River water, even though the aquarium water is kind of filtered. So it's not exactly showing the truth. But it's evidence that newspapers are stumbling in to the new media world in ways that they don't know quite where they're going to be yet.

Martin Kaplan: More questions? Yes, that gentleman right there.

Steve: I'm Steve, and I'm a teacher at USC. You're asking whether or not the blogosphere is taking over the mainstream media. But I was looking at Ana Marie, a blogger who now works for *Time*, and Kevin Drum, a blogger who now works for *WashingtonMonthly.com*. A moment ago, you were talking about a *Red State* blogger that now works for *The Washington Post*. So is the question pose-able in the reverse? Despite the 35 million blogs that now exist, when you measure the blogosphere in terms of traffic, is this a medium that's becoming mainstream?

Kevin Drum: Yes. I think so. There is the professionalization of the blogosphere as a sort of underlying story. Yes, there's Ana Marie and there's people like me who hired to do this. And there's also professional journalists who become bloggers, like the bloggers on the *LA Times* site, *The Washington Post* site. And then, there's a third category, which is people like Marcos that you were talking about, who are independent, but make enough money from their blog that they can actually make a living from just running it.

Martin Kaplan: And then, there's the 34 million others who are just doing it for some other reason.

Kevin Drum: Yes, exactly, but again, I'm from a political blogosphere. If you take a look at the top 10, 20, 30 blogs, my guess is that a few years from now, a couple of years from now, 70 or 80% of them are going to be, in one way or another, professional.

Kevin Roderick: I think so, too.

Ana Marie Cox: For me, personally, I always wanted to sell out. I mean, that was the goal from the very beginning. I don't think there's any dignity in being an employee. Ask my husband. I think that regarding the professionalization of the blogosphere, one thing to keep in mind is the idea that those people who are outside the mainstream and in the blogosphere, they're not there by choice. I would have loved to have been hired by *Time* five years ago! They wouldn't have returned a single call.

And I'd like to think that the voice I have is not that different: it just took some kind of gimmick, I guess. Like, the whole thing's a racket, journalism is such a racket: that is my main discovery in the past few years.



Opinion journalism is such a racket.



Kevin Drum: It's opinion journalism that's such a racket.

Ana Marie Cox: Opinion journalism is such a racket. I cannot believe what people get away with. But anyway, that's not a real answer to your question.

Martin Kaplan: Nathan?

Nathan Cornell: Yes, I'm Nathan Cornell. We may not be able to do without the hard news, but what about the opinion pages? What does the blogosphere think of those? The big opinion pages in the *Financial Times* and *The New York Times*, *LA Times*, *Washington Post*?

Martin Kaplan: I think that's one of the areas where the blogosphere wins hands down. I mean, the richness of opinion you can be exposed

to online makes it kind of pointless to read the Op-Ed pages of the newspapers. You get three or four stories a day, and you could go out and read much more interesting takes on things, deeper takes, as well as click on hot links that will take you to 20 or 30 other discussions by going around online. I just think that's one of the areas, like classified ads, where you're saying it's just much better done online than it is in print.

Ana Marie Cox: I mean, look at the huge phenomenal success that *Times Select* has been! Right? I mean, I think if you ask people to pay for someone else's opinion, wouldn't that be your embarrassment of riches, as it were?

Martin Kaplan: 500,000 I think, is the number of subscribers.

Ana Marie Cox: It's embarrassing. I mean, like, they're making more in podcasts! I mean, like, it's just a really humiliating experience I'm sure.

Martin Kaplan: This is the phenomenal experiment with *The New York Times*: it's charging people to read its Op-Ed column that's online. Their daily circulation is 1.7 million.

Ana Marie Cox: And they've only gotten like 500,000 people to their Op-Ed site, and it's cheap, too: the really embarrassing thing is it's only like – I can't remember how much it is a month, but you get it free to pay or you have a paid subscription. So anyway, so people are just refusing to pay to read what *The Times* Op-Ed people have to say.

Martin Kaplan: And many bloggers are refusing to link to it because of that wall.

Ana Marie Cox: Right, exactly. I also think that one of the reasons that's happening is that I can't think of any opinion columnist out there who is leading the conversation about national politics: that's the function they used to have. And when I look at the Op-Ed pages today, I see them catching up on what bloggers are saying. Like, I see them following a discussion, and not leading it.

Martin Kaplan: Question on this side? Yes.

Audience Participant #1: Yes, hi. It's news to me that places like the AP aren't writing in-depth stories, that they're just covering breaking news.

Kevin Roderick: The AP does have its own reporters, and it covers the breaking news in selected areas: they have big staffs in Washington, and in the state capitals around the world. But I can still remember before computers that at 12:00 at night in the *LA Times* newsroom, carbon copies of every story would be set aside, and somebody would come over from AP, pick them up, take them back to the bureau, and they would be entered in. That's how the AP gets its stories about things that happen in Los Angeles and other cities around the country. They do have a lot of people out covering breaking news around the world. But what they don't have is a whole lot of people on their domestic front, the feed for which is coming right out of their newspapers.

Martin Kaplan: Other questions? Wait for the mike. Right here in the front.

Audience Participant #2: If you look at what's happening online in the music industry and publishing in relationship to independent musicians compared to how centralized journalism is, is there a movement you see in journalism that is similar to what's happening in music?

Ana Marie Cox: I don't know – I used to know a lot more about how the economics of the industry works. Music can be done well pretty cheaply – it's hard to distribute well, but that's actually where online music industry is generally challenged. And if you print it, usually you can distribute online. But journalism is an expensive thing to do, to have real reporters on the ground doing original reporting. I don't know how you can decentralize it.

Martin Kaplan: I think, giving a looking ahead, at some point, one of these big new media companies like Google or Yahoo! is going to buy a mainstream outlet, and become a major journalism player. I don't know which - whether it's Yahoo! that's going to buy *The San Jose*

Mercury News, or something like that: I don't know what it's going to be. But that's going to happen, and I think more and more mainstream media outlets will be shutting down just out of business decisions.

I think if a lot more journalists get thrown out of work, you're going to see more and more of them starting up just new grassroots media efforts in little places around the country. Because we've been talking about the blogosphere and its role here in national politics: I think the place where the blogosphere is going to have its most impact is in a very hyper-local way.



Communities where citizen journalists writing blogs can be a very major force. You're starting to see it in places all around the country.



If you live in Gardena, you don't have any media. There is no TV or radio station that covers your community. I don't think there's even a newspaper there. And then, if you go up to Delano, or somewhere like that, there also isn't any media that's about your place. And that's where citizen journalists writing blogs can be a very major force. You're starting to see it in places all around the country. Jeff, did you have a question?

Jeff: I'm Jeff. You have the power with your sites to go back and change something that you posted in the past. So if you posted something that's wrong, do you go and change the original post?

Kevin Roderick: I think blogs have a big advantage over mainstream media in their ability to correct things. When I make a mistake about something, I will often hear about it in five minutes. And I can change it in two minutes, and I often do.

Martin Kaplan: Will you leave the trail of the original error when you fix it?

Kevin Roderick: Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't. I haven't worked out fully in my mind if there's a right way to do that, but it kind of depends on what it was – I don't like to have a long line in something that's struck out, but I will do that sometimes. I'll tend to leave it if it's been up a while. If I don't hear about the mistake for a couple of days, I will fix it then. But if it's something I hear about right away, well, then I'll just fix it before most of the people even see it. And I don't have lots of editors thinking about it, and lawyers getting involved, and talking about it. It's something that, well, if I've got it wrong I'll just fix it.

Martin Kaplan: Kevin Drum?

Kevin Drum: It depends on the mistake. Usually, I will fix it on the original post, and if it's something big, and especially if the post is more than a couple of hours old, I'll write a new post saying I got it wrong. Usually, I'll just fix it on the original post, either as an update at the bottom of the post, or sometimes, if the mistake turns out to filter through the entire gist of the post, I'll rewrite the post, and then just write an update saying, "This has been rewritten for blah, blah, blah," and leave it at that. But I always know that: I don't just rewrite posts without putting them up and telling people.

Martin Kaplan: And since *Wonkette* isn't factual, this question doesn't apply.

Ana Marie Cox: The fix can be made. But I think that in general, if there's a standard operating procedure in the blogosphere that's between all of this, you tend to strike out if it's been up for a while. And if it's something minor and has been quick, you don't have to necessarily do the strikeout transparency thing.

I do think that in the ideal world, you do a follow-up post saying, "I have corrected," especially if it falls below the fold. Like, if it's underneath where most people stopped reading, then I'd probably just do a new post noting that you've had to correct it.

Kevin Drum: I actually find it annoying when people sometimes will make a mistake, then leave the mistake throughout the entire post, and just write an update at the bottom. I just would rather have them fix it in the post when I get it wrong. For Nick Lehman, I fixed it in the text of the post, and then there was one line at the bottom: I didn't leave the mistake through the entire post, and count on people getting from the very bottom whatever that says.

Ana Marie Cox: A lot of the search engines should really have transparency and trails of things. I would say that the ideal thing to do is to leave your entire post up so that you can put it at the bottom, and you read the correction at the top.

Kevin Drum: Yes. I never put corrections at the top.

Martin Kaplan: Dave Ross?

Dave Ross: Well, we actually wrote a blog for this question: as we're getting lots more information, we're also getting less serious knowledge. In fact, Fox News is all about just hyping the hype, hyping the news, everyone's opinion is as good as anyone else's. And when I teach my undergraduates, they wanted to know how have I done anything? If everything is old dominion, how do I actually get knowledge for every bit of information that's out there?

Kevin Roderick: It's kind of funny, because usually within the first few questions that get asked to one of these blogger panels is, "How do we know that what you're saying is true?" People do seem to have an issue about that. My position on that is that, no, bloggers are not dumbing down society. In fact, it's working the other way. But you have to be a careful and smart reader of blogs. Because all blogs are really doing is making information more available to you. It's making more dumbed-down material available to you, and it's making more smart material available to you, much more than was available before.

It hasn't taken away anything that's available in thoughtful journals, but it has added many, in some cases brilliant voices, I think. But it's a big buyer-beware situation: you have to learn the writers whom you trust; you're not going to know when you first get to a blog whether it's a believable place. Just like you're not going to know that about other publications, or someone that you meet on the street. You're going to have to make that judgment based on your own assessment of what you hear from this person, this blogger.



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So my position is that, no, it's all a plus. And I've actually been surprised at the high level of writing that's out there among people who do not write for a living; there's just some awfully good people writing about things in the blogosphere.

Martin Kaplan: Ana Marie?

Ana Marie Cox: I think it's funny to say that the blogosphere and Fox could have the same impact. I mean, if they are both dumbing down America, I think Fox probably has a much bigger role. A lot more people watch Fox than read blogs, or read the kinds of blogs we keep talking about. But don't forget, we're basically talking about political blogs here.

I also think that to the extent that blogs problematize authority, or notions of what is a true story, I think that's probably a good thing, and an anecdote to Fox.

Martin Kaplan: Did you ever use "problematize" on *Wonkette*?

Ana Marie Cox: Probably not. I did use the word "jimmy," though.

Martin Kaplan: So this is the new time when you're...

Ana Marie Cox: This is my new period, I should have my glasses on. I don't think they'll let me use "problematize" in *Time* either, quite frankly, they have syllable issues.

Anyway, I do think, to repeat what Kevin was saying, that if people grow less trusting of information sources that seem to have authority... I think it's interesting you were saying can you trust a blog in the first five minutes you read if you don't know the publication or the person.

If a site is linked to a newspaper, there are all kinds of queues that you should trust. Like, if it's *The New York Times*, and it's printed in this font that you recognize as having certain writers' names, and a certain whole visual language that is a newspaper, people tend to kind of think that, well, what they're writing is probably true, then. But if it looks like a tabloid, if it looks like the *Star* or whatever, you have their other queues telling you that maybe you shouldn't trust this as much. Blogs have yet to develop that kind of thing: you have to actually read them in order to know where someone's coming from. And you might have to read not just that blog, but read blogs they're talking about and linking to it.

I also think that if people like to go outside the mainstream media, the one thing they are looking to find out is whether an item is true or not, that's probably a good thing. Did I make sense at all?

Kevin Roderick: We shouldn't underestimate the value of the hyperlink...

Ana Marie Cox: Yes.

Kevin Roderick: Which is the way that being online medium has this huge advantage over print, in that it can send you to the primary source all of the time very easily.

Kevin Drum: I would say that we shouldn't overestimate the value either. Unfortunately, I would guess that no more than 1% of my readers actually click on the links, which I find really unfortunate. I wish they clicked on more of them. Based on the comments and the e-mails that I get, I have the feeling that most people don't bother clicking through to stuff.

Kevin Roderick: To answer your question a little more directly though, I don't think blogs are dumbing down anything. I think that sort of betrays a sense of some past golden age when we all had this very high-minded conversation about politics: I don't think that ever existed. It might not have been on blogs, and it might not have been online, but the pioneers who produced the Constitution were a whole lot more vitriolic than any bloggers that we have today, and yet, we got a pretty great government out of it.

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So, no, I think that it's just a different medium with much the same levels we've had in the past. And you can get some good things out of it, too. I mean, you were talking about the individuals with knowledge, and there's a lot of lawyers who blog. And they will blog very specifically about their area of expertise. There are history professors, and sociology professors who will do the same. What I try to do, for example, I call policy light, which is...

Martin Kaplan: L-i-t-e?

Kevin Roderick: Well, yes, it can be policy wonkery. But honestly, it's for people who just aren't going to read a 5,000 piece in *The New Yorker*. But if I write a 500-word piece about single- parent health care, they

might read that, and they might learn one thing or two things. That's not great, but it's better than not doing anything, right?

Martin Kaplan: Bloggers, especially political bloggers, deputize their readers to become assistant journalists. I mean, Josh Marshall of the *Talking Points Memo* frequently will pick some issue and then say, "Please go call your member of Congress, and report back what they say to this question." In effect, using them as wire service bureaus.

There was a piece in the *Financial Times* not too long ago about blogs; Ana Marie, you were quoted in it. I just wanted to get everybody's comments on this: it was about what was happening in the mainstream

media because of the blogs. And you said, "There's always going to be a *New York Times*."

As a culture, we like to have a narrative that we kind of agree on. So, in a sense, despite these 27 million, or whatever fraction that's about politics, do these big metro dailies with *The New York Times* as their emblem, in the end, do those few they still control the master narrative, in the midst all of this diversity and combustibility of media?

Ana Marie Cox: Yes. I think I still believe this since the past two weeks; I have not greatly changed my mind. I mean, I think I overstated the case a little bit. However much bloggers and other media critics pick on these major news outlets, they are the baseline narrative for how we agree on what's happening in the world.

However, I do think we should trust that narrative less. I hope people do trust it less, but you have to start somewhere. Like, you have to have someplace to go where you're going to say, "All right, well do we agree or disagree that this is the basic flow?" And *The Times* is good for that basic flow, although maybe I could have chosen something else.

Martin Kaplan: Kevin Drum?

Kevin Drum: Well, certainly, there's always a narrative. I mean, it might come from *The New York Times*, or it might float up from somewhere through blogs, or in newsletters, or through call-in radio. But sure, there's always going to be something along those lines in any culture.

Martin Kaplan: Kevin?

Kevin Roderick: Well, I was thinking, and I guess part of me wants to say that that influence is lessened because of not just the growth of blogs, but also because of the growth of cable channels and Fox. And so, the degree to which *The New York Times* sets the agenda – the talk agenda in Washington each day I think is down from what it was before, from what it was 20 years ago when they really, really did set the agenda. I'm just not aware that there is a replacement come along that's setting a narrative for society at large. So I guess they're still very important.

I hope newspapers will always be there, and will be generating original reporting, in particular, investigative reporting that blogs just have not shown the willingness or the ability to do because it really does cost a lot of money. So I guess newspapers are still there, but I do think their influence is on the wane.

Martin Kaplan: On that note, I would like you to all join me in thanking the panelists. Thank you for an informative and insightful session! See you in the blogosphere!

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