

Bloggging for Change

By Rebecca MacKinnon

For regularly updated resources and discussion of blogging and participatory media tools, visit my blog at: www.Rconversation.com.

WHAT IS A BLOG?

Definition by the online peer-produced encyclopedia, Wikipedia.

(visit: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog> for more detailed explanation of blog features, plus relevant links)

"A weblog, or simply a blog, is a web application which contains periodic, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common webpage. Such a Web site would typically be accessible to any Internet user. Part of the reason "blog" was coined and commonly accepted into use is the fact that in saying "blog," confusion with server log is avoided.

Blogs run from individual diaries to arms of political campaigns, media programs and corporations, and from one occasional author to having large communities of writers. The totality of weblogs or blog-related webs is usually called the blogosphere.

The format of weblogs varies, from simple bullet lists of hyperlinks, to article summaries with user-provided comments and ratings. Individual weblog entries are almost always date and time-stamped, with the newest post at the top of the page. Because links are so important to weblogs, most blogs have a way of archiving older entries and generating a static address for individual entries; this static link is referred to as a permalink. The latest headlines, with hyperlinks and summaries, are offered in weblogs in the RSS XML-format, to be read with a RSS feedreader.

A weblog is often run through a content management system or CMS."

EXAMPLES OF ACTIVIST/NON-PROFIT BLOGS:

Info-Commons blog at <http://www.info-commons.org/blog>

The screenshot shows the Mozilla Firefox browser window displaying the Info-Commons blog homepage. The browser's address bar shows the URL <http://www.info-commons.org/blog/>. The page features a header with the Info-Commons logo and the tagline "info-commons.org: an online publication advocating access to ideas". The main content area is titled "commons-blog" and includes a date "November 08, 2004". The primary article is "More Maps of the U.S. Presidential Election Results", which discusses various maps of the 2004 U.S. Presidential election results, such as the "dominant graphic image" and "Purple America". The article text is partially visible, mentioning the complexity of national politics and the balance of electoral votes. To the right of the article is a sidebar with an "XML" link, a "CALENDAR" for November 2004, an "ABOUT" section, and a "CONTACT" section with the editor's name, Frederick Emrich, and email address editor@info-commons.org. The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the system tray with the time 5:52 PM and 100% zoom level.

Public Knowledge blog at www.publicknowledge.org

The screenshot shows the Mozilla Firefox browser window displaying the Public Knowledge blog homepage. The browser's address bar shows the URL <http://www.publicknowledge.org/>. The page features a header with the Public Knowledge logo and navigation links for "Take Action", "Donate", "Sign Up", and "Login". The main content area is titled "Public Knowledge" and includes a navigation menu with "Home", "About", "Issues", "News & Analysis", "Resources", and "Press Room". The primary article is "Take Action" with the sub-heading "Join Our Fax Brigade" and the text "Stop the Senate from Rewriting Copyright Law. Before You Become a Criminal!". The article text is partially visible, mentioning the recording industry and Hollywood. To the right of the article is a sidebar with "Resource Rooms" (Policymakers, Artists, Press), "Essentials" (Why these issues matter, What is copyright?, What is the public domain?), "Hot Issues" (MPAA v. Alleged File Traders, The Intellectual Property Protection Act), and "Upcoming Events" (Gigi B. Sohn at Communications Law 2004, November 18, New York, NY, Patent &...). The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the system tray with the time 5:48 PM and 100% zoom level.

Desertlight Journal (on domestic violence awareness) at:
<http://desertlightjournal.blog-city.com/>

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the Desertlight Journal website. The browser's address bar shows the URL: <http://weblogs.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1>. The page has a blue header with the title "DESERTLIGHT JOURNAL" and a subtitle "Domestic Violence Resources for the Whole Community". Below the header, there are several sections. On the left, there is a sidebar with "FULL AWARENESS RESOURCES" and "DISINFORMATION SITES". The main content area features a post from 11-05-04 titled "OFFLINE" with a text update and a "read more" link. Below it is a post from 11-04-04 titled "EMPTY SHOES: A WAY TO REMEMBER DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS" with a text update and a "read more" link. On the right, there is a sidebar with "INFORMATION" and "ERIN PIZZBY".

Examples of other blogs:

political blogs:

Instapundit – leans Republican. (300,000 readers per day) www.Instapundit.com

Daily Kos – very liberal Democrat (800,000 per day) www.dailykos.com

“Milblogs”: GI’s blogging from the field:

Sargeant Hook: <http://www.sgthook.com/>

Mudville Gazette: <http://www.mudvillegazette.com/>

General blogs by “influential” people who have been blogging for years:

Joi Ito: <http://joi.ito.com>

Dave Winer: www.scripting.com

International blogs:

“Healing Iraq” by an opinionated Iraqi dentist <http://healingiraq.blogspot.com/>

“Hoder” the Iranian dissident blogger: <http://hoder.com/weblog/>

My blogs:

North Korea zone: www.NKzone.org

Personal notebook: www.RConversation.com

WHAT BLOGS CAN DO FOR YOU AND YOUR ORGANIZATION THAT ORDINARY WEBSITES CAN'T:

- Handy blogging tools and blog-hosting services enable small groups (or individual activists) with little or no funding to set up a professional-looking site in under an hour without needing to pay web design or other technical professionals.
- Blog-tools enable non-technical people in your organization to update blogs – from the office, home, or field - without the help of webmasters, web-designers or other “tech” people.
- Blogs help you to build your “information community” with like-minded individuals and organizations by cross-linking to their sites.
- “Google juice:” The traffic generated by cross-linking creates much higher Google-search rankings for blogs than for all but the most popular websites.
- If you enable visitors to leave comments to your entries, blogs allow you to easily interact with the people who visit your site, enabling them to participate in a discussion about what you do, thus encouraging their participation or support for your activities.
- The easy way in which weblog content can be syndicated and read in newsreader programs (like My Yahoo! or Bloglines) enables you to get your information out there on a more equal footing than ever before.
- Password-protected blogs can be used for internal communications and knowledge management within an organization, or between funders and grantees. (More effective in some instances than email listservs.)

ELEMENTS OF A GOOD BLOG:

- **Message:** You must know what message or messages you want to communicate and why.
- **Desire and need:** You must have a desire – and the need – to do a better job at communicating. (In other words, if you are totally happy with the way in which you communicate your message to your colleagues, funders, constituencies, and the public, then there is no need to have a blog!)
- **A clear goal:** Know what you want to accomplish with your blog. It may evolve over time to accomplish things you hadn't expected, but without a clear focus at the beginning you won't develop traffic because people who visit the site will see it has no focus.
- **An audience:** This may just be your funders, your members, or the people in your immediate community – or it may be a global community of people who share concern for your issue. But you need to have some idea who you are speaking to. (If your blog is public you'll gain audience from unexpected places, but you must at least start out knowing that you have something to communicate to SOMEBODY who is interested in hearing about it.)
- **Commitment:** You need at least one person in your organization who is committed to updating the blog regularly with clear, interesting writing and useful links. The material may be pre-existing, it may or may not be a full-time job, but the blog will not succeed without somebody's committed efforts.

RESOURCE LINKS:

A CONSTANTLY-UPDATED RESOURCE PAGE: <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/xdev/cgi-bin/wiki.pl?BlogWiki> (or go to www.RConversation.com and click on the 1st link at the top right).

BASIC HOW-TO'S:

- Blogging for Nonprofits: <http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org/section/466.html>
- How to increase your blog's readership:
http://wolves.typepad.com/wolves/2004/04/getting_noticed.html

Blogging tools:

- (for a more complete list see: <http://www.lights.com/weblogs/tools.html> and <http://www.globeofblogs.com/?x=tools>)
- For a very detailed breakdown of blog tool features see:
<http://www.asymptomatic.net/blogbreakdown.htm>

Incomplete list of some popular tools:

1. Easy "Hosted" blog tools (on the blog-service provider's server, so you don't need to have your own server-space or know how to install programs on it).

Blogger: <http://www.blogger.com>

Typepad: <http://www.typepad.com>

Blog-City: <http://www.blog-city.com>

Blogware: <http://blog.blogware.com/blog> (via re-sellers listed on their site)

2. "Community-oriented" blogging tools:

Livejournal: <http://livejournal.com>

Xanga: <http://xanga.com>

Diaryland: <http://diaryland.com>

Journalspace: <http://journalspace.com>

3. For "Advanced users" or those who have IT professionals working with or for them:

Movable Type: <http://www.movabletype.org/>

Manila: <http://manila.userland.com>

RadioUserland: <http://radio.userland.com>

ExpressionEngine: <http://www.pmachine.com>

pMachine Free and Pro: <http://www.pmachine.com>

4. "Open-souce" tools:

Bloxsom: <http://www.bloxsom.com>

Wordpress: <http://wordpress.org>

Scoop: <http://scoop.kuro5hin.org/>