

Introduction:

The Rise and Influence of the Political Blogging A-list

While the technology behind blogs has been around since the early 1990s, blogging became increasingly popular in the late 1990s with the introduction of freely available and user-friendly software like *Blogger*, *LiveJournal*, and *Weblogger*.¹ Since then, the number of blogs has grown exponentially. According to one study, two new blogs are created every second.² While estimates of the overall number of blogs differ widely, research indicates that the fastest-growing category — political blogs³ — currently stands at around 1.3 million.⁴

The 1.3 million political bloggers, of whom the vast majority are ordinary people with a passion for politics, use their blogs to report original news from events they've personally witnessed, analyze and comment on the reporting by mainstream news media, and champion their own political causes. Political bloggers often encourage their readers to support particular political candidates and parties, by featuring political ads, soliciting campaign contributions, circulating online petitions, and posting information about upcoming rallies and votes.⁵ Simply put, political bloggers use their blogs to express their political beliefs, interact with like-minded individuals, inform their readers, and influence the political world around them.⁶

The incredible growth in political blog writing is mirrored in the number of people who read them. While an impressive 44% of all Americans have read political blogs,⁷ tens of millions do so daily. Studies show that political blog readers spend more time reading blogs than do readers of any other kind of blog (five blogs a day, up to 10 hours a week)⁸ with many political blog enthusiasts spending several hours daily in the blogosphere.⁹

The influence of political blogs reaches far beyond their immediate readership. Political blog readers tend to be politically active individuals who engage others in online and interactive conversations about what they've read, thereby serving as opinion-leaders for countless other people.¹⁰

Even more significant than the sheer number of people who read and are influenced by political blogs is the importance people attach to them. Studies have found that political blog readers consider such blogs more trustworthy sources of information than they do any other mainstream news media, including online and offline newspapers, television, and radio. Political blogs are considered more trustworthy because they provide access to a broader spectrum of issues than is available in the mainstream news media; cover those issues in greater depth, with more independence and points of view; and present them in a manner that's more understandable and relevant to readers.¹¹

The Stature and Influence of the Political Blogging A-List

While more than a million people have political blogs, a select few wield enormous influence within the political blogosphere and in politics. Various referred to as the “political blogging A-list,”¹² the “influentials,”¹³ or even the “kings and queens of blogland,”¹⁴ these bloggers attract the majority of political blog readers, set the agenda for the many smaller blogs, are widely read by mainstream journalists and, as I describe in the next section, exert a strong impact on politics.

Political blog readership isn't evenly distributed as the top blogs attract most of the readers. One study revealed that the top 10 blogs account for 48% of readers.¹⁵ The 20 bloggers featured in this book, all of whom belong to the political blogging A-list, have a combined daily audience of 2–3 million readers.

The top blogs aren't only read by a large and ever growing audience; they also influence what the rest of the political blogosphere blogs about. This becomes clear when one considers how political bloggers link to one another. If there were no agenda-setters in the political blogosphere, all political blogs would have roughly the same number of incoming links from other blogs. Yet, research shows, a few top blogs receive the bulk of incoming links. A study of more than 400 political blogs found that, while the top 12 blogs attracted 20% of all incoming blog links, the top 50 blogs attracted 50% of all such links.¹⁶

The influence of the top blogs goes beyond the mass of smaller blogs. Mainstream journalists — political reporters and columnists in particular — regularly read political blogs, often several blogs daily. They do so to gather ideas for future stories, hear what's being said in the political blogosphere about their reporting, and to gauge public reactions to major news events.¹⁷

But journalists don't just read any political blog they happen to encounter. Like political blog readers, their reading is also focused on a few top blogs. A study of 140 journalists employed by national and local news organizations in the U.S. found that the ten most widely read blogs

accounted for 54% of those mentioned. Among journalists working for national news organizations, this bias was even more pronounced: the ten most widely read blogs accounted for almost 75% of those mentioned.¹⁸

Journalists' blog reading behavior is quite logical. Since the top blogs attract the majority of political blog readers, and set the agenda for countless smaller blogs, journalists only need to read these blogs to get a relatively accurate impression of public (and blogger) opinion with respect to certain issues.

The Political Blogging A-list's Impact on Politics

Most impressively, there are many examples of how top political bloggers have had an impact on politics, either indirectly through their influence on mainstream journalists or directly through their blogging.

The first and most widely cited incident of political blogger influence has become known as the Trent Lott affair (or Lottgate).¹⁹ On December 5, 2002, a large number of political dignitaries were gathered in the Dirksen Senate Office Building to celebrate Senator Strom Thurmond's (R-SC) one-hundred birthday. Many of Thurmond's Republican colleagues spoke, praising the Senate's longest-serving member for his many accomplishments over a long career. But one of Thurmond's colleagues, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-MS), went one step further. During his remarks, Lott said that his home state of Mississippi was proud to have voted for Thurmond when, in 1948, he'd run for president as a third-party candidate on a segregationist platform: "I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years."

Although Lott's controversial remarks were broadcast live on *C-SPAN*, they elicited no reactions among the many mainstream journalists who covered the event. In fact, none of the major television networks mentioned his remarks on the prime-time news shows that evening, nor did the major newspapers the next day.

It was only after Lott's remarks were heavily criticized by several top conservative and liberal bloggers, who also called for his resignation, that the mainstream news media began to take notice. On December 10, or fully five days after the event, the *New York Times* covered the story for the first time, and each of the nightly network news shows discussed Lott's remarks.

As the story continued to grow, and more political bloggers and mainstream journalists started to cover it, insisting that Lott be held accountable for his remarks, both the White House and other Republican senators began to distance themselves from Lott who, under considerable party pressure,

resigned his position as Senate Majority Leader on December 20. The political blogging A-list's ability to force the story into the mainstream news, which ultimately forced Lott to relinquish his leadership position, led one noted observer to call the Trent Lott affair "the Internet's first scalp."²⁰

The Trent Lott affair is only one of many examples of the power of the political blogging A-list to effect political change through its influence on the mainstream news media. Even more impressively, it also has the power to do so directly through its blogging.

In 2005, President Bush nominated White House Counsel Harriet Miers to replace retiring Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. However, shortly after the Oval Office ceremony, top conservative bloggers began to challenge her suitability as a Supreme Court Justice, questioning her allegiance to core conservative principles. The attacks were so strong that Bush, a little more than three weeks later, withdrew her nomination. When Bush subsequently nominated Appeals Court Justice Samuel Alito instead, the Republican National Committee held a series of meetings with top conservative bloggers to ensure that this time, they would stand united behind the White House's chosen nominee. The meetings featured various White House officials, including Deputy Chief of Staff and trusted Bush advisor Karl Rove, as well as several prominent senators.²¹

Two years later, in 2007, the top liberal blog *Talking Points Memo* broke the story of how the Department of Justice, under the leadership of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, had fired eight US district attorneys for what appeared to be politically motivated reasons. *Talking Point Memo's* extensive coverage of the story caught the attention of the House Judiciary Committee which decided to hold hearings, ultimately leading to Gonzales' resignation.²²

More recently, during the 2008 presidential election, another top liberal blog, *The Huffington Post*, posted a video from a San Francisco fundraiser in which then-senator Barack Obama said that Pennsylvania voters, who would be voting in the upcoming primaries, were "bitter" people who "cling to guns or religion." The public response to Obama's remarks was so strong that he was subsequently forced to apologize for them.²³

The political blogging A-list has also had a direct impact on recent election campaigns. The support of Ned Lamont among several top liberal bloggers, notably Jane Hamsher of *Firedoglake*, is widely credited with helping him win over Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) during the 2006 Democratic senatorial primaries, although Lieberman defeated Lamont during the general election later that year while running as an Independent. More generally, the political mobilization and fundraising efforts of top liberal bloggers is widely credited with ensuring the Democratic takeover of Congress in 2006, making possible a number of crucial wins, including those in Montana, Ohio and Virginia.²⁴

The Political Establishment Takes Notice

The considerable power of the top political bloggers hasn't gone unnoticed by the political establishment which has begun to treat them as legitimate journalists in their own right and employ them as campaign consultants. In 2004, and again in 2008, dozens of top liberal and conservative bloggers were granted press passes, alongside their mainstream journalism counterparts, to cover the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. These bloggers are now regularly issued press passes to White House press conferences, and space is made available to them in the press galleries of Congress and local state legislatures. In some instances, they have even been granted special press status. The White House, presidential candidates, members of Congress, governors, and mayors have all convened press conferences and engaged in conference calls attended exclusively by top political bloggers.²⁵

Major political figures have begun to meet with the political blogging A-list on its own turf. In 2007, all of the Democratic presidential candidates attended and addressed the Yearly Kos Convention in Chicago, a gathering of more than 1,400 top liberal bloggers, leading one observer to refer to the event as the "Democrats' other national convention."²⁶

Political candidates for office have also begun to use top political bloggers as campaign consultants. During the 2008 presidential election, several of the candidates, including Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and Mitt Romney, hired political bloggers to advise them on how to create productive relationships with the political blogosphere, and did so as early in the election as other types of campaign consultants.²⁷

Both the Democratic and Republican parties have held strategy sessions with top political bloggers. The Democratic Party organized a series of meetings where liberal bloggers would advise local press secretaries on how to cultivate relationships with the political blogosphere, and the Republican Party brought local party aids to Capitol Hill to meet with conservative bloggers.²⁸

The Heritage Foundation, a major conservative think tank, hosts a weekly meeting in which top conservative bloggers discuss politics with Republican politicians and conservative journalists. Similarly, prominent Democratic politicians, including President Obama and former President Clinton, have met privately with top liberal bloggers on several occasions. As Obama put it, "If you take these blogs seriously, they'll take you seriously."²⁹

Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, the political blogging A-list has become so powerful that it has compelled major political figures to join them as guest-bloggers. Among the many politicians who've guest-blogged at top blogs are President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.³⁰

How to Become a Successful Political Blogger

Having read about the stature and influence of the political blogging A-list, it may seem impossible for an ordinary political blogger to break through the mass of bloggers out there and have his or her own voice heard. But it's not only possible; there is much one can do to make it happen.

In the chapters to follow, 20 of the world's top political bloggers, including Arianna Huffington of *The Huffington Post*, the most widely read political blog, explain what they've done to become so successful, and what others can do to emulate their success. The chapters are organized in order of the bloggers' overall daily readership, from highest to lowest, beginning with Arianna Huffington herself. These bloggers aren't only part of the political blogging A-list, they represent the entire political spectrum — from the far-left to the far-right — making their insights applicable to people of all political persuasions. Their advice should be of value to you regardless of whether you recently started blogging, you've been blogging for some time, or you've merely toyed with the idea of creating a blog.

Half of these bloggers had only limited journalistic experience and no high-powered political contacts when they first started blogging. They worked as actors, film producers, investment bankers, models, and record company owners, among many other professions. This reinforces a point that the bloggers repeatedly stressed to me: passion, determination, and sheer hard work are three of the keys to any successful political blog.

During the course of our conversations, these bloggers touched upon many more topics than what makes for a successful political blogger. They also discussed what inspired them to start blogging in the first place; what their overarching goals are and what they do to further those goals; and recounted personal anecdotes about their blogging experiences that they've never revealed before. So, even if you've no intention of starting your own blog, but are among the millions of people who enjoy reading political blogs every day, I'm confident that you'll discover much new and exciting information about some of your favorite bloggers.