

To Blog or Not to Blog

Are state officials missing the blogwagon?

By Freeman Smith

During the 2004 election you probably noticed a new word popping up again and again. If you don't spend much time on the Internet you might not even know what it means. Or, you may think you know but would cringe at the thought of explaining it to someone else. From candidate Web sites to grassroots activists to media watchdogs, "blogs" took the Internet by storm last year. And the trend shows no signs of dwindling.

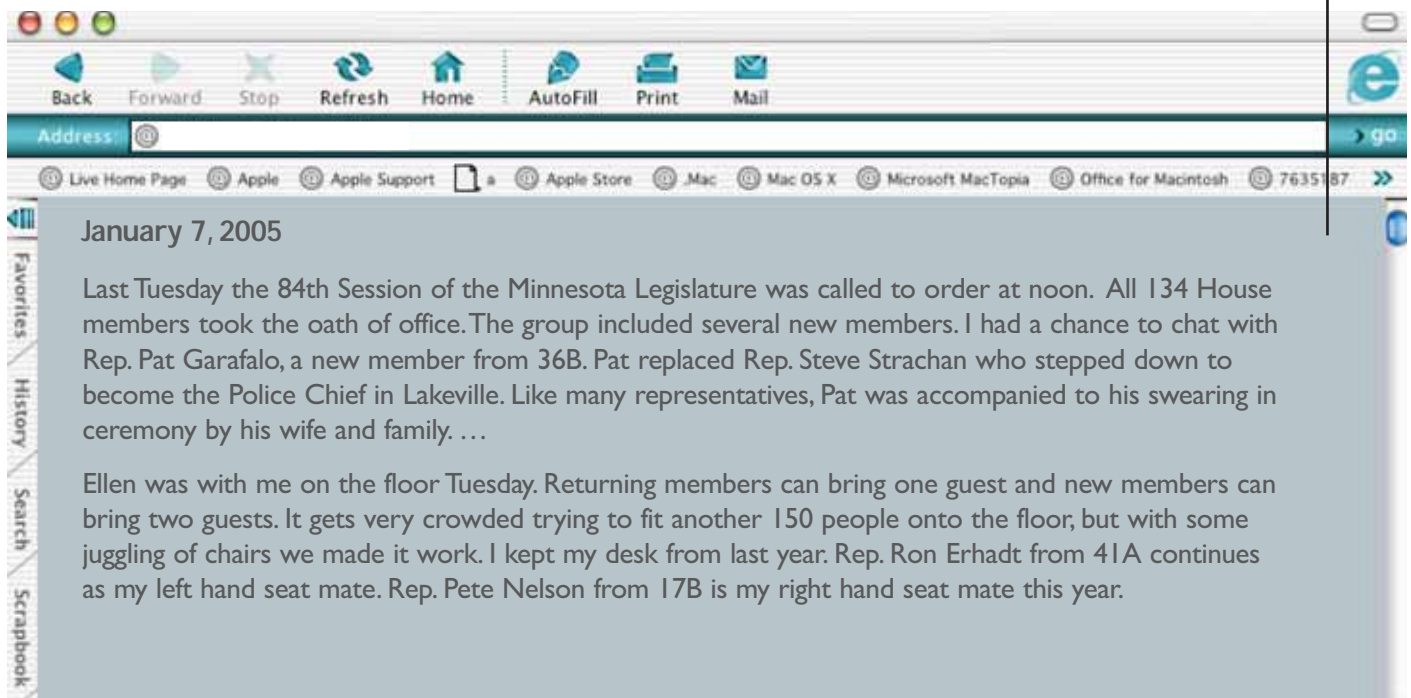
Named by Merriam-Webster as the most searched for term on its Web site during 2004, blog is short for "Web log." A blog is a Web site that serves as an online journal and enables the author to upload entries easily and quickly. An author's post to a blog site resembles a diary entry and can



include thoughts, stories, ideas, pictures, links and comments from readers.

While blogging has become popular among journalists, critics and pundits—almost anyone with an opinion—the trend has been slow to catch on in state government. Although several campaign Web sites would qualify as blogs, very few state officials have jumped on the bandwagon.

Minnesota Rep. Ray Cox is the exception. When Cox sits down at his computer he's not just checking his e-mail and visiting Web sites like everybody else. He's also reporting to his constituents through his blog. On January 7, for example, he described the first day of the new legislative session:





Written in an informal, personal tone, Cox's entry is more than just an account of his day. He also gives constituents a detailed account of the inner workings of the Legislature they might not get otherwise.

Utah Representative and CSG Toll Fellow Steve Urquhart also has a blog. "Right away I realized this would be an incredible tool for communicating with constituents," Urquhart told *State News*. "Politicians can really start a revolution with this. With blogging, the public can be closer to government than ever before."

Cox and Urquhart are on the vanguard. A search of various directories reveals very few blogs dealing with state government and even fewer that are authored by actual officials. The reason for the scarcity could be that blogging is just too new or it could be that officials are afraid of exposing their flanks. Urquhart said it was intimidating at first. "It's kind of like jumping off a high dive. It's a great idea while you're climbing up but once you get to the edge and look down, it can be a knee-knocking experience."

The Battle of the Blogs

After winning his first election in 2002 against David Bly by a margin of only 46 votes, Cox was excited about making the transition from private citizen to elected official and saw the blog as a way to communicate with his constituents. He created his first blog post in December 2002. "I liked the blog format as a way to get information out to my constituents and for my constituents to give me feedback," he said.

In a June 30, 2003 post, he wrote:

Two years and hundreds of posts later, Cox won re-election in 2004 by nearly 600 votes against the same opponent, in what could be called the battle of the blogs. Bly, a teacher, started his own blog and effectively used it to launch hard-hitting attacks against Cox. His August 22, 2004 post reads:

The lengthy post goes on to question several of Cox's positions and can still be viewed online at www.davidbly.com/2004_08_01_archive.html. Even after the election, Bly was still updating his blog. His more recent December 12, 2004 post takes information directly from Cox's blog and uses it to question his statements and results.

The potential pitfalls are obvious to anyone in the political realm: The more information available about one's positions, ideas and activities, the more ammunition one's opponent has to attack. Which all begs the question, will blogs ever catch on among public officials?

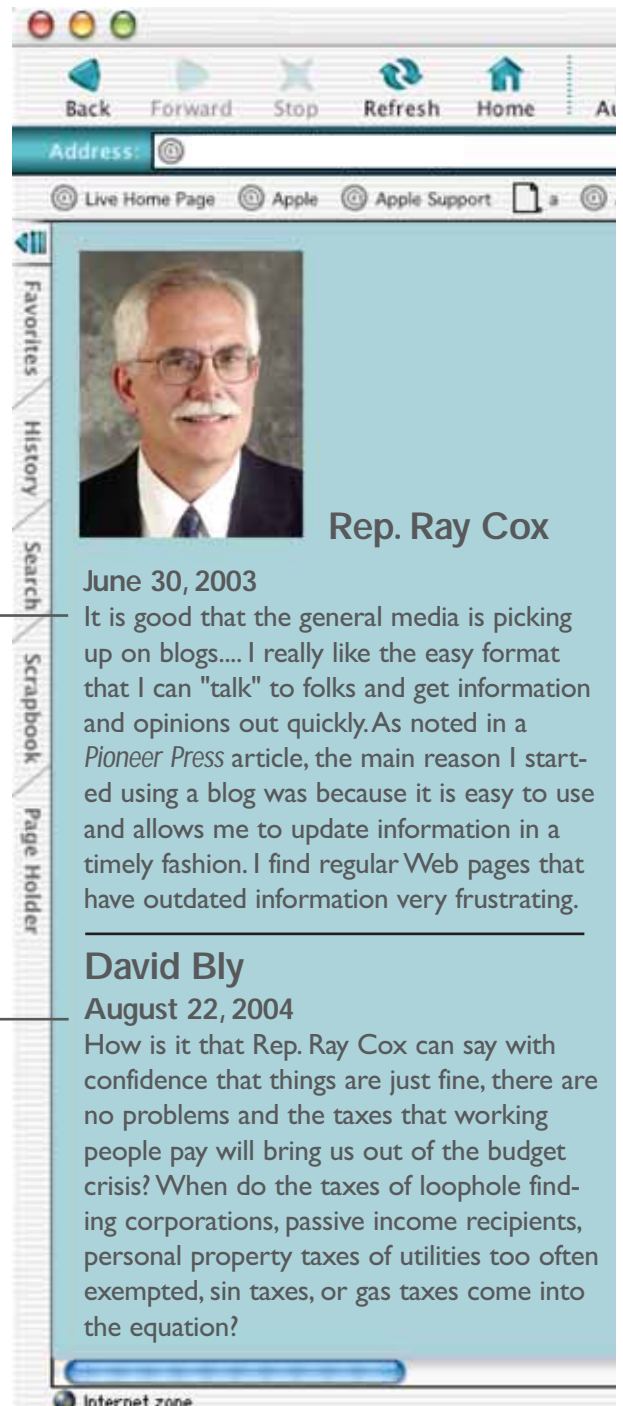
Northfield, Minnesota: Blogosphere

If Griff Wigley has anything to say about it, the answer is yes.

Wigley taught Rep. Ray Cox everything he knows about blogging. He worked with David Bly as well. His consult-

"The most important characteristic to bring to a Web log is a voice of authenticity. In this age of PR-speak and spin, authenticity in politics is almost newsworthy."

—Griff Wigley



ing company, Wigley and Associates, specializes in helping public officials and business leaders learn how to blog. In fact, he's helped turn Northfield, Minnesota into a blogosphere: in addition to Cox and a half dozen nonprofit organizations in Northfield, City Planning Commissioner Betsey Buckeit, Police Chief Gary Smith, school board member Diane Cirkesena, and County Commissioner Jessica Peterson all have working Web logs. He's also working on a book called *Leadership Blogging* and has been invited to the United Kingdom to help British officials explore the potential of blogging in the "Civic Leadership Weblog Project."

After his razor-thin victory in 2002, Cox got together with Wigley, who provided the technical expertise necessary to get the blog up and running. Wigley plays the role of coach now and continues to make sure Cox's entries adhere to blog-style. "The most important characteristic to bring to a Web log is a voice of authenticity. In this age of PR-speak and spin, authenticity in politics is almost newsworthy," Wigley said. He believes the most important characteristic of a blog is that it be written by the person claiming to be the author. "If it's not, people see right through it and won't read it." In addition to authenticity, Wigley also said it's important that entries tell a good story in a concise and real-time fashion.

One of the innate characteristics of a good blog is that it puts the author out a limb. The stream-of-consciousness writing style combined with the frequent updates runs contrary to the type of controlled and strategic political communications that have become the norm. Blogs could very well represent exactly what voters are looking for in terms of candor and directness but they also open the author up to criticism and political attacks.

Potential or Peril?

The wisdom, practicality and effectiveness of blogs as tools for state officials is positioned to be a front burner issue for the near future. As blogs gather momentum in other areas of life, people will want the same from their leaders. A recent *Fortune* magazine article, "Why There's No Escaping the Blog," says that 23,000 new Web logs are created every day. "Each blog adds to an inescapable trend fueled by the Internet: the democratization of power and opinion. Blogs are just the latest tool that makes it harder for corporations and other institutions to control and dictate their message. An amateur media is springing up, and the smart are adapting."

The virtues of providing timely and interesting information to the public versus the interests of political self-preservation will continue to be at the forefront of the debate for politicians and state officials. Oxford University Professor Stephen Coleman identifies the challenge in The Hansard Society's report, *Political Blogs—Craze or Convention?*

Politicians live in a world of certainty and tribal loyalty which is at odds with the blogging ethos of open-mindedness and knowledge-sharing. As long as politicians are expected to be never in doubt and ever faithful to catechismic party messages, their blogging efforts are always likely to look more like simulation than authentic self-expression. However many jokes they tell or safe

State Government Blogs

Rep. Ray Cox

www.raycox.net

David Fletcher's Government and Technology Web Log

radio.weblogs.com/01/10120

Rep. Steven Urquhart

www.steveu.com

Start Your Own Blog

Blogger

www.blogger.com

ModBlog

www.modblog.com

Tips

About.com

weblogs.about.com/cs/blogcreatetools/a/beginblog.htm

Wigley & Associates

www.wigleyandassociates.com

Find a Blog

Technorati

www.technorati.com

Blogdigger

www.blogdigger.com

vulnerabilities they expose, the public will never relax in their company and will be ever suspicious that today's "spontaneous" blog entry was yesterday's faxed "message" from the party HQ. Blogging politicians are always going to be seen as a little bit like those old Communist apparatchiks who had to sit in the front row at rock concerts and pretend to swing to the beat.

But Coleman concludes by making the important distinction that once politicians start viewing blogs as listening posts versus soap boxes, enormous potential opens up. "Blogs are the latest and most sophisticated listening posts of modern democracy. If sitting at home and voting anonymously ... is not what democracy needs, blogging is a source of nourishment for a kind of democracy in which everyone's account counts."

After the 2004 presidential campaign, "blog" is the latest buzzword. Blogs played a key role in exposing the forged documents that Dan Rather put on the air and they were used to spread faulty Election Day exit poll data that led some people to believe that John Kerry was on his way to the White House. Businesses want to know how blogs can help their bottom line, journalists want to know how they fit into the blogosphere and public officials want to know if they should be blogging.

As with any new media, time will answer these questions. Rep. Ray Cox thinks his blog makes him a better public servant. Judging by his re-election, increased margin of victory, and the feedback he gets from readers, his constituents agree. And Rep. Steve Urquhart is similarly undeterred. "My parents are in their 80s and when I told them about blogging the first thing they said was that someone is going to use it against me. But it's a full disclosure proposition and I think, in the end, voters will look at the whole record."

—Freeman Smith is a communications specialist at The Council of State Governments.