Blog for America and Civic Involvement

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Web logs (blogs) were an integral component of the 2004 presidential campaign and are a new medium for civic engagement. Arguably, the most important campaign blog was Blog for America, which served as a nerve center for Governor Howard Dean's insurgent presidential campaign. The authors offer an initial assessment of the community that developed around Blog for America and its orientation toward civic engagement, based on an original content analysis of 3,066 unique posts encompassing every entry in the Dean blog from March 15, 2003, through January 27, 2004. The guiding hypothesis is that blog discussion centered on a set of system-affirming topics absent from or unusual in political coverage on television, particularly substantive policy debate and community action. The authors find Blog for America to be an example of how the Internet is emerging as a vehicle for enhanced civic involvement with the potential to counteract the negative effects of television on the political process.

Keywords: *blog; bloggers; Internet; civic engagement; framing; Howard Dean; campaigns*

> The passion we demonstrate for politics is making waves. The Dean people are pioneers in this regard, but by next cycle all campaigns will be "working" the blogs. By becoming engaged in the political process, we will help shape it. Indeed, do any of you think Dean would be where he is without the power of the weblog? The other candidates, thanks to their techno-ignorance, have ceded this entire territory to Dean. You better believe no one will make that mistake in future campaigns.
>
> *—Daily Kos Web log, cited in Blog for America, June 4, 2003*

Such was the self-affirming and self-confident nature of discourse on Blog for America, the Web log (blog) that for the better part of 2003 was the engine behind Howard Dean's improbable run for the presidency. Like most blogs, it combined personal ruminations on a wide range of subjects with links to other corners of the Web (Blood 2002). To its regular contributors, though, the blog

was not so much a Web site as a complex, palpable, but elusive entity, what Jones refers to as a computer-mediated or cyber community (Jones 1998). It gave the campaign a virtual presence easily mistaken for something tangible, as if a campaign staffed by tens of thousands of ordinary people existed around the clock through a series of organic conversations available at the click of a mouse.

We purport to offer an analysis of those conversations for the purpose of understanding the nature of discourse on Blog for America and what it says about civic engagement online. In so doing, we approach the Dean blog as we would approach any mass medium, with the intention of drawing parallels and distinctions between the messages on Blog for America and campaign messages typically found in the mainstream press. We propose that there are interesting thematic similarities between the two, particularly in terms of how Dean bloggers framed the election discussion and that as the candidate became more successful, blog discourse became more conventional. Nonetheless, we contend that the purpose of blog discussion of such things as campaign horse race and strategy differed in intent and effect from similar frames in conventional media in that bloggers attended to the contest and ensuing tactical matters as a call to action to promote their candidate. Through this, and through attention to substantive issues widely ignored by the mainstream press, participation in Blog for America was system affirming in a way that conventional media are not.

For instance, consider that there is something self-conscious and self-referential about the above Blog for America posting, with one blog citing another blog about the importance of blogs in general and their blog in particular. Structurally, this resembles the long-standing tendency of mainstream news reporters, especially on television, to cite themselves and their importance to political news in political news (Kerbel 1998). But in purpose and effect, there is something critically different about this quote and others like it that populated Blog for America during the eleven months leading up to the Dean campaign's magnificent flameout in the Iowa caucuses. Mainstream reporter self-references communicated a studied coolness that spoke to the importance of the reporter at the expense of the viewer in a television-centered political system, whereas blog postings—even blog postings about blog postings—worked to energize readers for participation in the political process by assuring them that their work is meaningful and valuable and that they are not alone in their efforts.

This difference is in keeping with the best hopes for the Internet as a medium that would promote democratic engagement (Grossman 1995), an expectation that predates the era of blogs[1] and that was unlikely to come to fruition as long as the Internet was predominantly a forum, as it was initially, for conventional news outlets to offer their wares online (Singer and Gonzalez-Velez 2003).[2] Yet even in the preblog era, Hill and Hughes (1997) found that people employing USENET bulletin boards for political discussion exhibited the characteristics of distinct political communities, with shared norms and a shared identity, albeit in

a disorganized fashion[3] that did not lend itself to political action so much as venting. Blog for America may be understood as an advanced, organized descendant of bulletin boards, offering functionality that facilitates political activity and built around a political cause that demanded it. Its users aspired to venting *and* action.

Some research suggests that, unlike traditional media, informational use of the Internet of the sort evidenced by Blog for America offers a new forum for civic engagement to people already inclined toward political involvement (Uslaner 2004) and increases civic participation, mobilization, and engagement (Castells 2001; Shah et al. 2001) in a manner that enhances the trust and social connections that Putnam (2000) famously calls social capital. This is tempered, to be sure, by the fact that most people do not use the Internet for political purposes (Tewksbury 2003) and by the conservative tendencies of elite interests to dominate the new medium in the service of business as usual (Bimber 1998; Davis 1999).[4] Even at its peak, Blog for America boasted a small core of regular users when compared to nonpolitical Internet traffic and served to promote a presidential candidate through the performance of routine campaign activities. Nonetheless, these activities were performed by ordinary volunteers, many of whom acknowledged on the blog that they had never before engaged in political action,[5] and their behavior helped propel their candidate to the threshold of his party's presidential nomination.

Contrast these effects with mainstream media, where political coverage centers on strategic and horse-race news frames, is negative in tone, and has been linked to public cynicism about and disengagement from politics (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Farnsworth and Lichter 2003; Patterson 1993, 2002). In a television-centered environment, would-be participants become spectators to a political show with which they may become intimately familiar but from which they are cynically detached (Hart 1998). Blog for America postings are a portal to an entirely different world, where people feel engaged in politics and policy, are motivated to take action in the name of a political cause, and believe those actions will make a difference.

Methodology

Blogs take numerous forms, and there is an ongoing debate among bloggers about the elements necessary for a Web site to call itself a blog (Barrett 2002). At their least interactive, they are vehicles for the one-way communication of ideas by the person or persons who run the blog. At their most interactive, they permit anyone to initiate topics for discussion and express their thoughts about what others have said. Blog for America was structured to be highly interactive and to facilitate feedback and participation among its readers. The blog was organized by posts, which are similar to brief articles or journal entries. Each post has a distinct headline and an option for blog readers to write comments, which could be

accessed through a link to a pop-up screen. Posts were placed exclusively by the Internet team at Dean for America for use and comment by the general public. The string of comments trailing each post is called a thread. It was not uncommon for comments on threads to number in the hundreds. We use the term *blogger* to mean the campaign operatives responsible for writing posts and anyone in the general public who posted to a thread.

We analyzed the content of each post for each day of the Dean campaign from the blog's inception (under its original name, the Dean Call for Action Blog) on March 15, 2003, through January 27, 2004, the day Howard Dean finished a distant second to John Kerry in the New Hampshire primary, effectively ending his bid for the presidency. During this period, Blog for America hosted 3,066 unique posts. Individual posts were examined and data were aggregated on a daily basis to provide a running account of daily blog discussions.

We analyzed the topic, subject, and attribution of each post. Topics are the theme of the post; we looked for topics that parallel the prevailing topics in mainstream political news: issues, the horse race, and media coverage of the campaign. We also included topics of particular interest to the Blog for America community: grassroots campaign efforts, blog coverage of the campaign, and discussion about the blog community itself. Subjects are the individual or group about which the post refers. The attribution of posts considers whether the post is an original essay by a member of the Dean Internet team, a comment from the candidate or his campaign manager, a campaign press release, a comment from another blog, or an excerpt from a newspaper, television, or magazine story.

Many posts contained multiple subject and topic references. Collectively, blog postings contained 6,335 references to distinct subjects, encompassing Howard Dean and his rivals, elite campaign supporters, grassroots supporters, campaign staff, reporters, and bloggers. There were 10,093 unique topic references.

The overwhelming share of blog posts (82 percent) were original essays written by the campaign Internet team. Another 9 percent were campaign press releases, detailing policy positions or statements by Governor Dean about campaign events. Two percent were posts by the candidate or his campaign manager, often made to rally supporters; another 2 percent were reposts from noncampaign blogs. Five percent were reprints of or excerpts from mainstream political coverage. These posts offered readers a rundown of television, newspaper, and magazine stories about the campaign, the candidate, and issues of importance to the blog community. They invariably included links to the original source, giving bloggers quick and direct access to relevant mainstream news.

Our coding approach is designed to assess the most basic elements of blog communication to determine where Dean bloggers focused their attention, how the content of their discussions paralleled traditional media coverage of campaigns, and how the interests of the Blog for America community changed over

time. It is not meant to provide an exhaustive analysis of the Dean blog, but we believe it supplies the framework for a thorough examination of blog content. The content analysis does not consider the threads associated with each post. However, although we did not approach them systematically, we make reference to these posts in our discussion.

Analysis and Discussion

As Howard Dean rose in prominence in the 2004 Democratic primary campaign, activity on Blog for America grew in scope and intensity. On March 15, 2003, Dean campaign manager Joe Trippi inaugurated the blog with a post explaining its purpose:

> This is the place where we at the campaign can let people know when, where, and how you can help. We are going to need as much support from the netroots and grassroots as we can possibly get. Please check back here regularly.[6]

Trippi's plea was one of seventeen posts to Blog for America during March, when Howard Dean was beginning to establish himself as an outspoken opponent of the Bush administration and a voice for disaffected Democrats. In short order, people began checking back, and as Dean surged, posts to the blog grew accordingly. The number of posts shot up to 140 in May and 306 in July, peaking at 393 in August and tailing off slightly before a final flurry of activity leading up to the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary (see Figure 1).

The pattern of blog postings parallels the growth in campaign "membership," which Dean for America tracked through the number of people subscribing to the campaign's e-mail list. The campaign grew by 116,000 members between July 31 and August 31, and by 100,000 members between August 31 and September 30, then flattened out at 442,000 members and took another three months to add an additional 100,000 members. Combined, these patterns indicate that the rapid growth of the Dean campaign was ending around the time he was acknowledged in the mainstream press as the presidential front-runner. One explanation for this phenomenon is that Dean had maximized his appeal to his base and had harvested the "low-hanging fruit" of potential core supporters. But another explanation is that a campaign heavily dependent on the Internet for membership support had hit the boundaries of the "digital divide" between those with high-speed Internet access and those without. This explanation would allow for the possibility that the Dean campaign could have continued its exponential growth had more people had access to the online community built around Blog for America, and it holds open the possibility for greater online participation in future campaigns as Internet access penetrates further into American life.
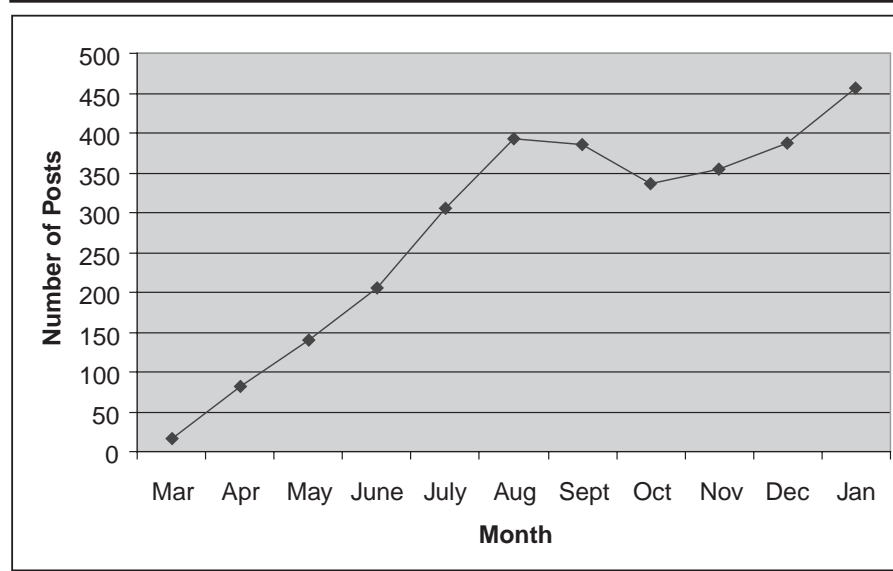
Figure 1
Total Number of Posts on Blog for America, March 2003 to January 2004

It also presupposes that if more people had been exposed to the virtual community centered on Blog for America, they would have been drawn to participate in the campaign. As activity increased, the blog became far more than simply a place for the one-way dissemination of information about how readers could help campaign headquarters. Figure 2 displays the frequency over time of discussion topics on Blog for America, grouped into four categories: policy posts, process posts, media posts, and community posts. With the exception of community posts, which has no direct corollary, these categories loosely mirror prevalent topics in mainstream media political coverage. Policy posts cover discussion of domestic and foreign policy issues as they relate to the presidential campaign. Process posts address the process of running for president and include discussions of the campaign horse race, political strategy, and tactical maneuvers. Media posts emphasize the role and importance of the medium in the campaign. Community posts discuss the blog community in particular and the Dean for America campaign community in general.

Policy posts. Much like mainstream political coverage, issues were among the least discussed items on Blog for America, although unlike mainstream coverage, the amount of discussion about issues increased as the campaign progressed and the horse race intensified. This is the opposite dynamic to what Kerbel (1998) found at ABC News during the 1992 election, when in a deliberate effort to compensate for admittedly inferior issue coverage, the network instituted a format designed to carve out newscast time for substantive reporting—then abandoned it in the face of an irresistible flood of horse-race news leading up to
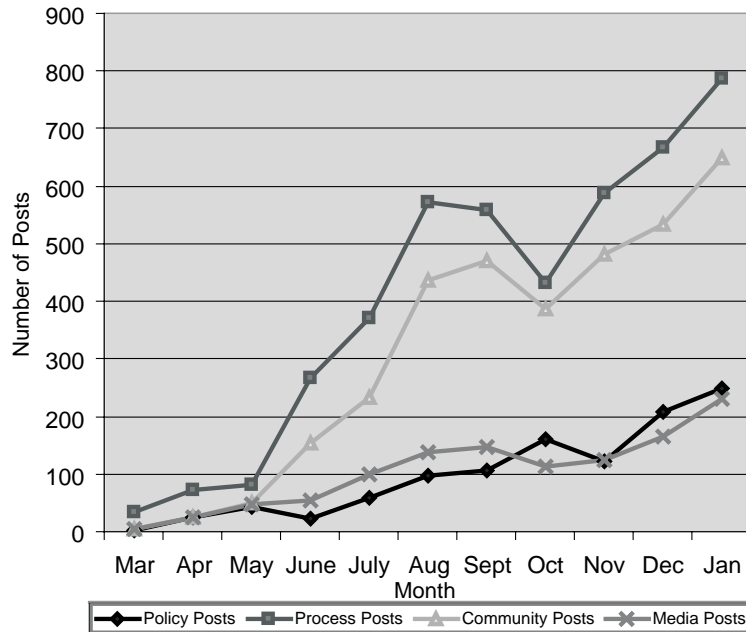
Figure 2.
Topics of Posts on Blog for America, March 2003 to January 2004

Election Day. Instead, Dean bloggers demonstrated an increased appetite for policy discussion that grew along with their interest in other topics.

Furthermore, policy discussion was well rounded and contextualized in terms of Dean's approach to foreign and domestic concerns, encompassing a wide range of topics that, if replicated in mainstream media, would go a long way to silencing critics who find political issue coverage lacking in sufficient attention or meaningful context (Iyengar 1991; Patterson 1993; Rosen 1996). Figure 3 indicates that the most prevalent issue topics—the Iraq war and the economy—were the most prominent issues in the campaign but that health care, terrorism, the environment, education, race, and civil unions all received a measurable amount of attention.

Some issue threads were campaign position papers that were released to the blog at the same time that they were released to the press. Like the one below, they ended with a link to the details of the policy and provided an opportunity for bloggers to comment on Dean's position in particular or on the issue in general:

Governor Dean today condemned racial disparities in the nation's health care system and explained that, as president, he would launch a multi-pronged attack to
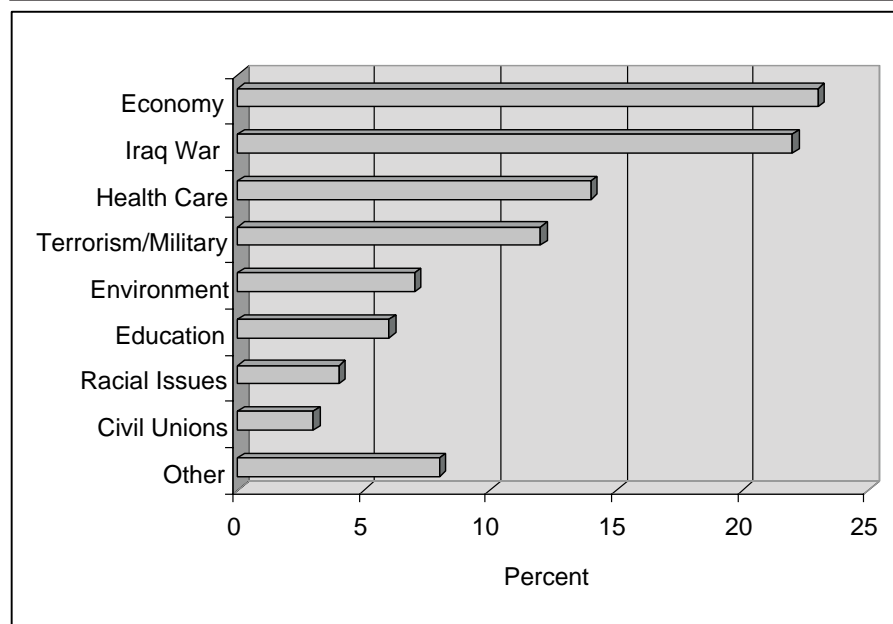
Figure 3
Issue Topics in Blog for America Posts, March 2003 to January 2004

ensure that all Americans—regardless of race, geography, gender, or income—would have access to quality health care. . . . He explained that his health care initiatives includes [*sic*] a six-point plan for addressing the issue of racial disparities in health care access and coverage.[7]

But issue discussion was not primarily a one-way recitation of the candidate's positions. Some issue matters were presented in the context of political action, as in the case of this item on education policy:

This week millions of American children return to school, where they will face chaos and confusion caused by the Bush Administration's "No Child Left Behind" education law. President Bush signed the law with great fanfare, but he has never committed the federal money needed for real reform. It is estimated that local taxpayers would need to spend $85 billion trying to comply with No Child Left Behind, but the federal government provides less than one-seventh of that amount. . . . Governor Dean asks that for your action today, you sign [the following] petition and we will deliver it to Congress.[8]

A link to an online petition followed the entry. And some entries directed bloggers to watch and talk about a Dean policy address:

> MSNBC is covering Howard Dean's address, "Fulfilling the Promise of America: Meeting the Security Challenges of the New Century" live on television now. Coverage may also be available on CNN, Fox News and CSPAN. Use this thread to discuss live coverage of the speech.[9]

Blog for America offered a steadily increasing supply of campaign issue content as the campaign progressed and took advantage of the blog format to facilitate discourse about Dean's positions in particular and public policy in general. To be sure, such discussions were not always informed or on point, but the Dean campaign utilized the blog to encourage discussion of substantive material at a level of detail critics find missing from mainstream news reporting.

Process and media posts. When the topic was the campaign contest, however, the Dean blog had two things in common with mainstream coverage, at least superficially: process posts were the most common posts found on Blog for America from March through January, and in talking about the campaign process, bloggers favored topics that invoked their medium. Mirroring television's hunger for a campaign storyline, Dean bloggers discussed horse-race and strategy matters more often than any other topic. The presence of process threads is also an indicator of the success of the campaign, taking off in number with respect to other topics between May and August, as Dean began to surge ahead of his Democratic rivals (see Figure 2). And, in a manner not unlike journalists who make media coverage the focus of their stories, bloggers were inclined to talk about online activities, Web tools, and the blog itself.

However, a close look at the content of these threads reveals places where the picture of the campaign deviates from the elements of the mainstream horse-race story, which is largely built around an analysis of polls, endorsements, traditional fundraising success, staff moves, debate performances, and campaign ads. Collectively, these six traditional items comprised 16 percent of the 4,426 unique references to the campaign process appearing in blog posts, placing it third overall among nine distinct process topics.

More interesting is the content of the remaining eight topics, all of which either address tactical matters or invoke online campaigning. In fact, where mainstream media tend to find news in the strategic machinations of poll rankings, endorsements, debate outcomes, and the like, the Dean blog, owing to its interactive capabilities, was more fixed on engaging bloggers in tactical maneuvers such as writing letters to undecided voters, canvassing, and organizing campaign events. Four of these eight—organizing campaign events, arranging or reporting on activity at Dean "meetups," distributing Dean flyers or canvassing neighborhoods looking for Dean supporters, and writing letters to undecided voters—constituted the core tactics of the Dean campaign and collectively accounted for 28 percent of the process references displayed in Figure 4. An
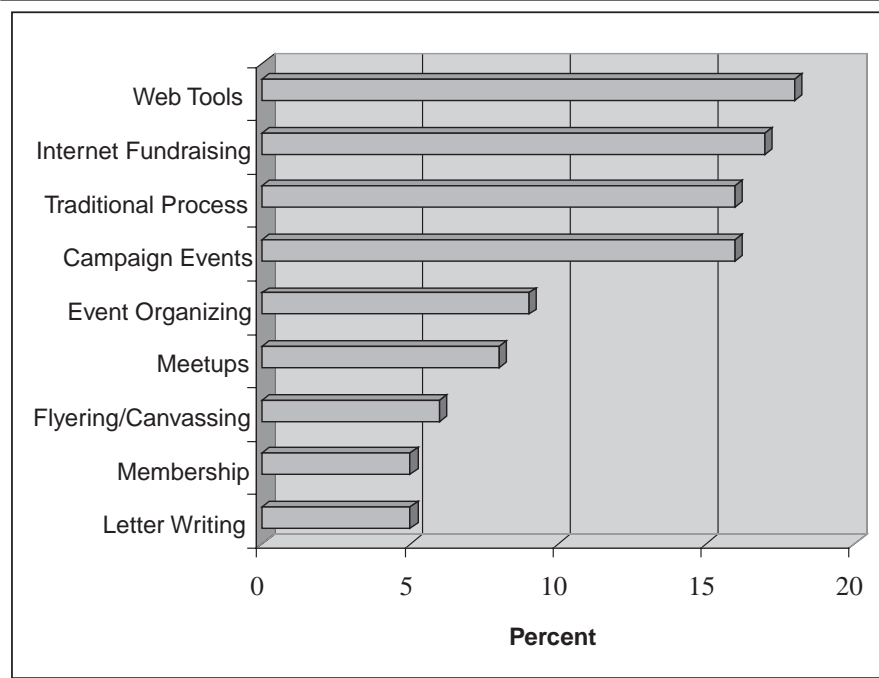
Figure 4
Process Topics in Blog for America Posts, March 2003 to January 2004

additional 16 percent of process items were devoted to discussion of what happened at campaign events.

These activities—and the large number of posts about them—reflect how the Dean campaign leveraged a large pool of engaged supporters through the ability to communicate instantly and interactively to perform what amounts to old-fashioned retail politics on a mass scale. Many events were creative. There were "Dean Visibility Days" during which people would plan, execute, and blog about innovative ways to get press for the campaign by showing up en masse with Dean posters and t-shirts at events such as state fairs and ball games. Supporters could organize fundraising house parties on specified evenings when they could hook into a conference call with the candidate (one such event in September was dubbed the "Doctor's House Call," a play on Dr. Dean's medical background). "Get local" events were blog-organized person-to-person initiatives designed to increase campaign membership.

"Meetups" were the blog name for monthly in-person gatherings arranged through the Internet service meetup.com at the initiative of the Dean campaign. Intended as an apolitical vehicle for facilitating real-world gatherings among people with similar interests, meetup.com appeared on the Dean campaign's radar in early 2003 as Dean supporters took the initiative to find each other and

organize get-togethers though the meetup Web site. When the blog began promoting meetups—a direct link to meetup.com appeared at the top of Blog for America—the number of meetings and attendees soared.

Dean headquarters loosely coordinated meetup activities, although individual groups had the freedom to develop their own initiatives. One of the more interesting meetup activities devised at Dean headquarters was to have meetup participants pen handwritten letters to undecided voters in Iowa and New Hampshire (then to blog about the experience after the fact). Five percent of process posts were devoted to recruiting people to attend meetups and discussing the experience (invariably positive) of attending a meetup event.

By their nature, these tactical matters are participatory, and their presence in blog discussion served as a call to action to core supporters to get off the computer and go into their communities on behalf of their candidate. To observe the high-tech discussion of such low-tech activities is to stand at the juncture of twenty-first-century technology and nineteenth-century local politics. Dean for America was the first Internet-driven campaign, but it used technology in the service of the politics of a much earlier time.

This applies as well to the many references to "Web tools," which constitute the most frequent type of process post. Web tools were devices created by the Dean Web team to facilitate grassroots campaigning. There was a Web tool that permitted anyone to customize and print their own Dean poster, another that enabled people to plan and advertise local events, and one that notified personal electronic devices when there was an important announcement from the campaign. "Howard Dean TV" permitted subscribers to watch select videos of the candidate's speeches on their computers. The common thread among Web tools is that they were interactive, utilizing technology to keep a disparate group of self-selected Dean supporters connected to the campaign.

Then, of course, there was Internet fundraising, the activity that got the mainstream press and mainstream Democrats to notice Dean for America. If Internet fundraising was the great invention of the Dean campaign (and the campaign demonstrated that it is possible to raise tens of millions of dollars from small contributors over the Internet), the blog was at the heart of the effort. It is difficult to imagine the Dean fundraising juggernaut functioning without Blog for America, as the large number of Internet fundraising posts attests.[10]

The effort, like Dean's other tactical initiatives, combined high-tech tools with low-tech techniques:

On June 28, [2003,] top Dean staffers met in the storage closet that served as the Internet team's office. They decided to make an . . . online appeal by announcing that the campaign had raised $6 million but wanted $500,000 more for a show of strength. To encourage giving, they wanted a distinctive image to measure contributions for the Web site . . . Larry Biddle, Mr. Dean's deputy finance director and

a New York Yankees fan, suggested a slugger holding a baseball bat and pointing to the outfield fence a la Babe Ruth. Nicco Mele, the campaign's new Webmaster, launched the appeal at 3 a.m. on Sunday June 29.

A gusher ensued—$303,000 on that Sunday alone. At one point, the campaign's blog crashed as supporters egged each other on. "Wow! Keep on giving? We'll need it to defeat Bush's corporate money machine," posted one supporter.[11]

Such refrains echoed through the blog for the rest of the campaign. Bloggers would post comments about how headquarters should "put up a bat," begging the campaign to ask them for money. When the campaign responded—sometimes with a breathless post that "a bat is coming"—ordinary citizens would empty their pockets in an exhilarating quest to meet and exceed the goal. Giving money became a cathartic experience for bloggers who felt attached to the Dean campaign through their membership in the virtual community. Like a thermometer, the slugger's bat turned red as fundraising amounts were posted on the blog, and as the red ink on the bat inched closer to the top, people would post tearful, emotional comments (sometimes echoed by the campaign staff) about how their collective efforts were going to restore responsible politics to America. Officials at every other campaign scratched their heads in wonder at the Deaniacs who demanded that headquarters ask for more of their money.

Giving money was such an important shared experience on the blog that other money-giving customs evolved spontaneously in reaction to online and offline events. Bloggers constantly battled "trolls," who were instigators from other campaigns or mischief makers who enjoyed posting negative comments about Dean or his supporters. To undermine their initiatives, bloggers developed the idea of giving money each time someone posted an incendiary comment. The rationale was that if trolls recognized that instead of starting fights among Dean supporters they were helping to raise money for the candidate, they would realize it was in their interest to disappear from the blog. Over time, bloggers developed a special language about these efforts, talking about helping to meet the "troll goal" of money raised in reaction to negative provocation. Similarly, bloggers would routinely announce that they were giving money in response to a negative comment about Dean made by a public official, a reporter, or one of Dean's opponents. The rationale was "don't get mad—give cash."

Campaign officials encouraged this giving by playing up goals and benchmarks. Note that one of the recurring process topics is membership numbers, which entailed discussion of the number of people who had signed up for the Dean e-mail list. The blog was number happy, pointing to evidence of their swelling ranks as validation of their success and effectiveness and, in turn, as a validation of their community. Attention was given to the number of people who had endorsed the candidate, the number of people signed up to attend meetups, poll figures showing Dean surging, the number of posters downloaded from the

Dean Web site, and of course fundraising numbers, all presented by the Dean Internet team in a manner that would appear to be a brazenly hard sell if not for the fact that Dean bloggers experienced it as exciting and fun. During one turn of the bat in late September, bloggers were treated to a series of posts designed to keep their wallets open:

> Press on! Nothing is slowing down here: the contributions are still coming, the threads are popping, the country is changing, and the bat is swelling: $14,190,322 through 179,200 contributions. Keep it up![12]

> Call your friends, call your family, call everyone you know! Tell them to make an online donation to take our country back! Burlington Headquarters is bouncing with reporters and cameras, as the bat surges to $14,506,281 through 183,859 contributions.[13]

> At midnight Eastern/11 PM Central your bat stands at $14,754,387 through 187,397 contributions. All of you in on Central Time, now is your moment— push that bat! [Campaign Manager Joe] Trippi just walked in about an hour ago, and he's absolutely amazed at what you have all done. We'll be here until 3 AM Eastern blogging as each time zone reaches midnight. Let's keep it going—you are making history![14]

Bloggers responded by contributing at a feverish pace, then posting to the blog about their exhilaration. It was, after all, "their" bat, and giving money was a communal experience.

By the time Dean headquarters came up with the idea of a bat, the blog had already become accustomed to talk about fundraising. Starting in May, as Figure 5 indicates, fundraising posts shot up from being an afterthought to becoming one of the most frequently discussed process items on the blog. Notice, as well, how discussion of traditional process items rises steadily as the campaign becomes more successful and eventually becomes more prevalent than discussion of original campaign tools such as meetups and local event organizing. Just as the fundraising posts from the September drive have the feel of a sales pitch, the Dean campaign in the last months of 2003 had grown to emphasize conventional matters as the candidate became the front-runner for the Democratic nomination and a once quixotic goal was within reach.

Those running the blog began to behave like they were on a high-stakes winning campaign by pressing hard for money, talking up polls and endorsements, and acting more like an ordinary campaign behind the trappings of innovation than an innovative campaign willing to take big risks. Notwithstanding issues involving the digital divide, it may not be a coincidence that the Dean blog trended toward a more conventional form of politics at the same time that membership growth in the campaign had flattened out. Dean had arrived, but the
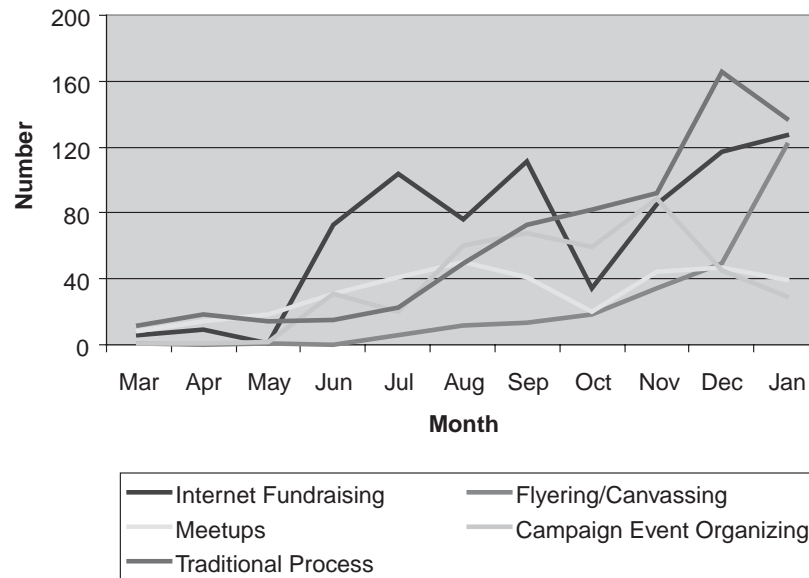
Figure 5
Number of Posts about Select Process Activities on Blog for America, March 2003 to January 2004

vehicle that he rode to front-runner status had become a less risky version of its earlier self.

Community posts. At no time, however, did Blog for America cease to be a community, even if it was a community in a virtual sense, and the topic of community played a prominent role in blog discussion. Figure 2 demonstrates how the growth of community posts tracked with process posts, shooting up in May and, following a late summer decline, growing sharply as the primaries approached. Figure 6 explains what these community discussions entailed.

Almost half of the discussions were self-references invoking the online community, self-conscious comments about the experience of having an intimate connection to strangers on a blog. So strong was the phenomenon of blogging for a cause and so powerful was the experience of being connected to like-minded others that bloggers regularly used the blog to sort out, understand, and validate the intoxicating effects of the medium. Posts of this nature brimmed with references to the "grassroots" and the "netroots" and exhibited a sense of pride that stemmed from belonging to something important, echoing Governor Dean's signature phrase to his supporters, "You have the power." This post from Joe Trippi, on the occasion of the campaign's successful June fundraising drive, is typical:
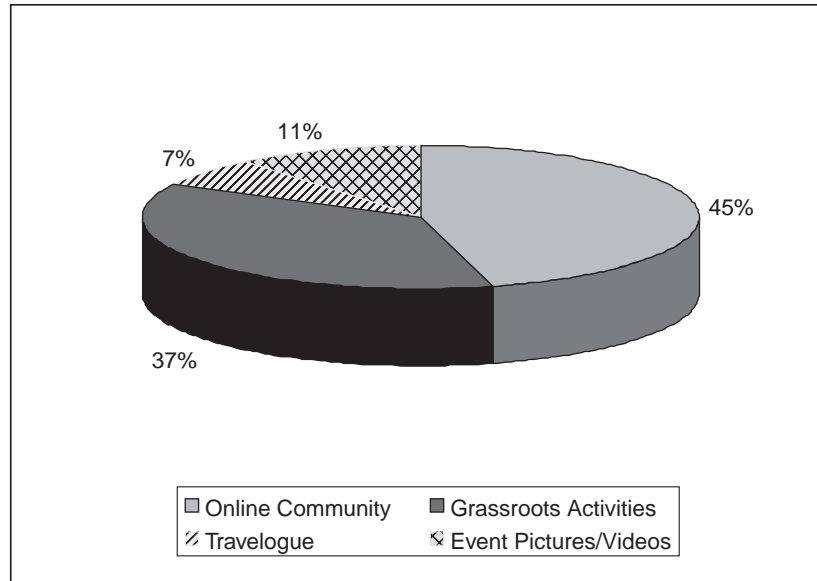
Figure 6
Community Topics on Blog for America, March 2003 to January 2004

> As Governor Dean said in his announcement speech, "We are the great grassroots campaign of the modern era, built from mouse-pads, shoe leather and hope." For months you have helped us build that grassroots campaign—a campaign that seeks to build a new politics of meaning for our country and a new kind of campaign powered by people. No one really seemed to notice until today. Your efforts today were amazing and in my view historic. There is simply no precedent for this kind of response over the Internet—in contributions and support this early in the process—for any other candidate I can think of from either party.[15]

These sentiments were echoed continually in blog posts and in the responses to them by Dean supporters. On occasion, they were repeated in testimonial posts, where ordinary citizens working for the Dean campaign were invited to blog about their experiences. Comments like the following were typical:

> On December 8th in New York, I had the good fortune of hearing Howard Dean outline his vision of restoring the nation's long-lost sense of community. I doubt that even the good doctor realizes to what extent his prescription has already been realized within our own movement. Our task now is to move our community offline and into the real world and to reach out to our brothers and sisters who are on the other side of the "Digital Divide."[16]

Thirty-seven percent of community comments like these came in the context of discussion about the grassroots activities we addressed earlier. As bloggers

discussed tactics, they engaged heavily in reinforcing the importance of what they were doing. To this end, discussions about process, while goal oriented, were exercises in affirmation. If you consider for a moment the magnitude of what Dean bloggers were trying to do, it makes sense that tactical planning and group validation would work together. Bloggers, through their writing, experienced themselves as soldiers in a critically important cause that was extraordinarily difficult to achieve. As they were not seasoned activists, bloggers used these discussions to keep their spirits high and as a source of nourishment and comfort in the face of the brutality that so often defines the campaign process.

This dynamic also explains the frequent "travelogue" posts that appeared on the blog, which may appear hokey and amateurish to anyone not engaged in campaign combat but that provided supporters with an emotional link to their candidate on a mundane level that made him accessible to them. Kate O'Connor traveled with Governor Dean and filed regular posts on their experiences waiting at airports, sitting in traffic, and attending events. In all, O'Connor submitted 122 blog entries between June 5 and the New Hampshire primary, with titles such as "From the Airport in Detroit, Michigan," "From the Road: Interstate 495 in Massachusetts," and "It's 3:30 a.m.—Is Anybody Out There?" The governor's diet was a frequent theme. O'Connor dutifully reported on Dean's intake of cookies and other sweets, and bloggers (demonstrating a high degree of ownership of the campaign and the candidate) obliged by posting their ongoing concern that Dean was not maintaining a balanced diet and needed to eat more vegetables.

Periodically, these and other posts contained pictures or video links of campaign events. Moving and still images appeared frequently enough on the blog that better than one in ten community posts contained them. Like the travelogue posts, many of these images are repetitive: Governor Dean speaking to a crowd, Governor Dean shaking hands at a rope line, Governor Dean posing for pictures with supporters. To the uninitiated, it would be impossible to distinguish a picture of Governor Dean posing with supporters in Denver from a picture of Governor Dean posing with supporters in Des Moines or to understand why so many versions of the same image found their way on the blog. But, to bloggers, these images—like Kate O'Connor's posts from the road—made the virtual campaign real and helped seal the cyberconnection between what bloggers were experiencing at their computers and what was happening in the world.

Subjects of posts. As one might expect for a blog built around a political candidate, Howard Dean was the subject of great attention among bloggers. Perhaps more noteworthy is that Dean was not the most widely discussed subject of blog discussion. In keeping with the inclusive and self-referential nature of the blog dialogue, that honor went to the bloggers themselves. As Figure 7 attests, grassroots supporters were the subject of 35 percent of blog posts, 7 percentage points more than Howard Dean. The remaining posts focused on political opponents (21 percent) and a smattering of other figures. Interestingly, elite
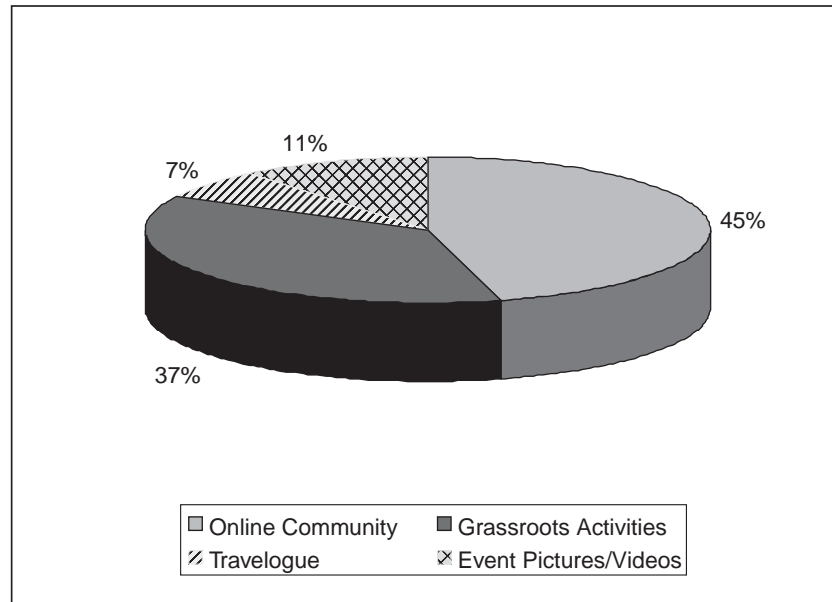
Figure 7
Subject of Posts on Blog for America, March 2003 to January 2004

supporters were the subject of only 4 percent of blog posts, which were typically single-post mentions of endorsements of Dean by public figures. Between the elite and the grassroots, it was clear that blogger interest and affection was with the latter. Campaign personnel received twice as much attention as elite supporters, another indication of the high level of interest in and ownership of the campaign by the grassroots.

It is also noteworthy that from the early days of the campaign, bloggers saw themselves engaged in a battle against President Bush. The reality of the campaign in spring 2003 was that Dean was a long-shot candidate for his party's nomination running against better known and better financed Democrats. The rhetoric of the campaign from the start was that Howard Dean was going to "take back" the Democratic Party and the White House for supporters who held the power to make it happen.

There is no doubt which of these themes was paramount on the blog. Almost half the posts that mentioned a presidential candidate were about President Bush, and an additional 7 percent were about Vice President Cheney (see Figure 8). The Democrats who stood in the way of Dean taking on Bush received honorable mention. The candidates perceived to pose the biggest threat to Dean garnered the most notice among the Democratic challengers, but the number of references to them was tiny in comparison to the references to Bush: 12 percent for John Kerry (who was regarded as Dean's main competitor in New
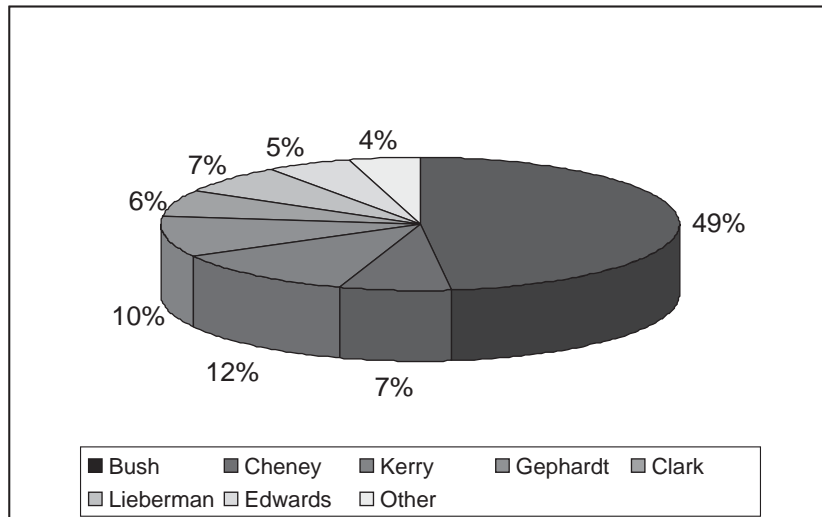
Figure 8
Candidate Subjects of Blog for America Posts, March 2003 to January 2004

Hampshire), 10 percent for Richard Gephardt (Dean's main competitor in Iowa), and 6 percent for Wesley Clark (who entered the contest late).

This phenomenon started early, as Figure 9 attests. In May, mention of President Bush already exceeded mention of any of Dean's Democratic opponents. After Dean's unexpected online fundraising success to close the second quarter of 2003, references to the president took off. Flush with a sense that, as Joe Trippi said, they were making history, Dean bloggers were running against the incumbent well before Dean started to look like a contender.

This effect could be regarded as a reflection of self-confidence among bloggers that their efforts would come to fruition (it was not uncommon for supporters posting to threads in summer and fall 2003 to lapse into discussion of Dean's inauguration or to speculate about whom he would choose for his cabinet). It could be seen as a form of myopia that develops in a closed community among people who spend time exchanging virtual messages with like-minded others. It could reflect the human tendency to exaggerate one's importance and discount the words of detractors as motivated by meanness or partisanship. It could speak to the need to believe in one's ultimate victory when facing a difficult and uncertain task. It could be a product of being deeply invested in an exhilarating experience. Or it could be a combination of these factors, for they are not mutually exclusive.

Whatever the reason or reasons why Dean bloggers saw themselves as being on a mission against George Bush when they were still riding a long-shot horse, there was a group dynamic in play that speaks to the ability of the Internet
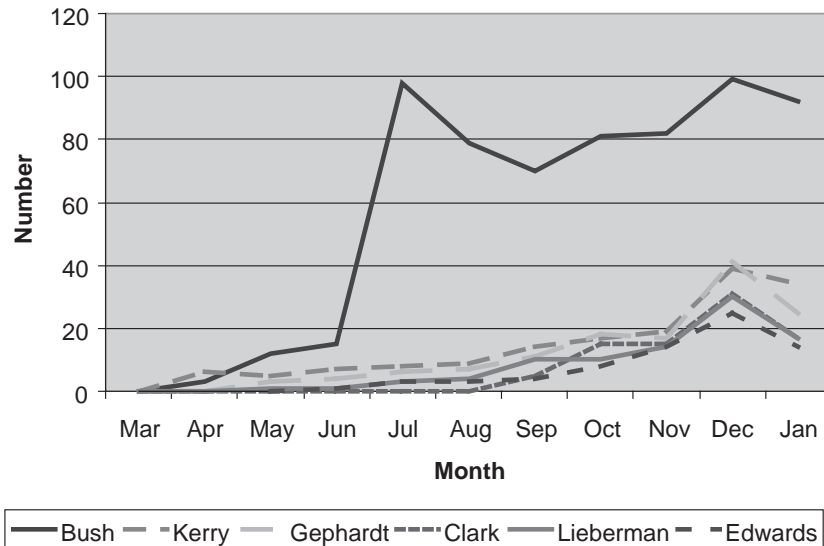
Figure 9
Number of Posts about Presidential Candidates on Blog for America, March 2003 to January 2004

community to pull ordinary people to political action. Alternately informative, cheesy, silly, self-absorbed, innovative, and brilliantly effective, Blog for America turned tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of people into political activists and united them in collective action that extended beyond cyberspace to inter-personal activities. This is something mainstream journalism could never accomplish.

Partisanship and Advocacy: Blogs versus Mainstream Media

At the outset of this article, we said we were going to approach Blog for America as we would approach any mass medium to compare and contrast blog content with mainstream political coverage. We find the contrasts striking, as Blog for America addressed themes that are prevalent in conventional coverage without the cynical bent of television and print political news. But these system-affirming results probably would not have been possible if the Dean blog had not been an advocacy forum, if the purpose of blog postings was not expressly to motivate people to action. Had Dean bloggers needed to pay attention to balance and objectivity, or like commercial media needed to reach the widest possible audience, it is easy to imagine how blog postings might have acquired an entirely

different voice. Under the circumstances, how readily can we treat Blog for America as a mass medium?

There is little doubt that Blog for America is emblematic of the sort of vehicle available to online readers. The blogosphere is a highly fragmented place where people naturally and often aggressively divide into ideological camps in a manner that resembles the narrowcasting of cable television on steroids. If the Internet is still the Wild West of mass media, blogs are a territory where essentially anything goes, as people are free to post the most trivial, ridiculous, and fantastic ideas in frank language that would never be permitted on network television. Blog for America certainly fits this profile.

But consider that all journalism has a point of view and that the mid-twentieth-century standard of "objective" reporting neither accurately reflects news coverage throughout history nor captures the essence of postmodern reporting. When these factors are taken into consideration, the discourse on Blog for America fits comfortably with historic and recent characteristics of American journalism.

The advocacy role of the campaign blog is a throwback to the partisan press of the nineteenth century, whose sharp rhetoric in the pursuit of political agendas mirrors discourse on Blog for America (and partisan noncampaign blogs of the Left and Right). A key purpose of the party press was to boost interest in campaigns during a period of expanding voter rights to mobilize voters to go to the polls (Kaplan 2002; Pasley 2001). As a vehicle for the already converted that did not need for economic purposes to find a wide audience, partisan papers whipped up the passions of the faithful and the would-be faithful with colorful, creative prose and one-sided, exaggerated rhetoric. They may not have advanced informed or balanced discourse, but they did serve an important democratic purpose by engaging and inspiring readers in a manner parallel to Blog for America and today's leading partisan blogs.

Objectivity as a standard for coverage came later, was a largely imperfect response to the necessities of mass marketing, and has been called into question in recent years as journalists engage in more interpretive reporting during an era of intense competition (West 2001). A piece that appeared in *Mother Jones* at the height of the 2004 campaign, when writers and journalists of all stripes were trying to fathom the emerging blog phenomenon, traces changes in the campaign narrative over the past generation that fueled a departure from the mid-twentieth-century journalism of ideas most closely associated with objective reporting in favor of clubbier inside-baseball reporting:

> The modern American idea of journalism as objectivity, with news and editorial pages strictly separated, emerged in the Progressive Era with books like Walter Lippmann's classic *Public Opinion*. For most of the last century, this idea anointed political journalists as a mandarin class of insiders with serious responsibilities;

access was everything. At some point during the Reagan years, this mandarinate lost interest in politics as a contest of beliefs and policies with some bearing on the experience of people unlike themselves. Instead, elite Washington reporters turned their coverage into an account of a closed system, an intricate process, in which perceptions were the only real things and the journalists themselves were intimately involved. The machinations of Michael Deaver and Roger Ailes, followed by Lee Atwater and James Carville, became the central drama. We've grown so familiar with this approach today that you can open *The New York Times* and be unsurprised to find its chief political correspondent, Adam Nagourney, writing about polls and campaign strategies day after day.[17]

This journalism of process and personality shares with blogs a self-referential point of view, the tendency to personalize political stories, and, at times, a snarky, self-satisfied quality. In these respects, bloggers are taking their cues from political reporters while freely abandoning the need to hold on to the semblance of objectivity still claimed by the mainstream press. And because bloggers reside outside the campaign bubble, they willingly train their sharp eyes on matters that do not fit the mainstream campaign narrative, such as the range of policy issues raised on the Dean blog. Their views are one sided, but this is known to all in advance.

In the tradition of the party press, blogs are a high-tech throwback to an earlier time. In their determination to bring about what bloggers (of all ideological persuasions) believe to be positive social outcomes, their objectives are not far removed from some of the prescriptions for media reform advanced by the public journalism movement of the 1990s (Rosen 1996), even if bloggers assume a partisanship in their advocacy that reformers did not anticipate.

The same positive role for partisanship is found in the community-building function of Blog for America, both in the affirmative emotional responses evident in its threads and in the manner in which advanced technology was used to motivate and coordinate old-style retail political action. Without deeply felt partisanship—without the cause—it is hard to imagine large numbers of people taking political action as a result of their participation on the blog or expressing the efficacy that participation generated. It is noteworthy that the Blog for America community survived after Dean's presidential campaign imploded because the Dean organization made a quick, elegant pivot and became an advocacy group for progressive candidates for local office. The cause was redefined, and the community survived, even though in a matter of weeks in early 2004, the campaign of a famous figure for the highest political office had become an interest group dedicated to promoting the low-level electoral prospects of a field of unknowns. That community continues today under the same name—Blog for America—even though the umbrella organization that created it morphed from Dean for America into Democracy for America.

This suggests that the system-affirming effects of a partisan blog need not be dependent on a single individual (Dean himself left the organization he founded to chair the Democratic National Committee) or even on a political campaign. But it does require a cause about which people feel strongly. These are passionate, partisan times, perfectly suited to a vehicle such as the Dean blog, and in such times, the blog makes a valuable contribution to political discourse and system efficacy. It is hard to visualize today's version of the blog sustaining itself during a less divisive or turbulent period. However, it is also difficult to imagine a more placid time supporting quasi-partisan vehicles such as Fox News or the mainstream media's self-referential process reporting. The emergence of Blog for America at this moment in history is not coincidental and is a welcome development.

However, it is not at all clear that every cause or, for that matter, every candidate could become the center of gravity for a virtual community like the one that developed around Howard Dean. Indeed, other 2004 presidential candidates had blogs, but that did not mean their blogs became a center of idea sharing, organizing, motivating, or galvanizing a national effort around the candidate, at least to the extent that the Dean blog became an almost living entity. It is tempting to attribute the success of Blog for America to the charismatic appeal of the candidate to his followers, and certainly that would have to be considered as a factor in drawing people to the Dean community. However, to build and sustain that community, the Dean campaign had to relinquish a fair degree of control over the daily operation of its campaign and permit grassroots supporters to be empowered with more than just rhetoric.

This type of decentralized decision making—Joe Trippi called it "open-source campaigning" in a reference to a communal model of software development—is anathema to traditional campaign managers used to regimented, structured campaigns, which explains why politicians have been slow to take advantage of the interpersonal capabilities of the Internet (Stromer-Galley 2000).[18] Following Dean's failure as a candidate, it is reasonable to ask whether campaign professionals with a predisposition against relinquishing control would be willing to take the same risks that Trippi did in nurturing the Dean blog. As a third-tier candidate with few resources, Dean had little to lose by doing things unconventionally, and as we noted, discussion on the Dean blog became more conventional as the candidate started playing for keeps. For blogs like Blog for America to become routine, future campaign managers will have to weigh the obvious benefits of cultivating a loyal, active following against the potential loss of message control inherent in a decentralized campaign structure where anyone can participate.

What is clear is that without some degree of decentralization, blog communities cannot thrive. It is the nature of the technology to buck centralized control, and it is the thing that generates feelings of empowerment. Of course, campaigns

will be less concerned about these social goods than whether establishing a "living" blog will help or hinder a candidate's electoral prospects. The potential benefits for political discourse and the political system will follow from these self-interested decisions. It remains to be seen as the technology matures and further penetrates society whether the benefits of the Dean blog will be replicated in some future versions of Blog for America.

Notes

1. Ten years ago, Grossman (1995) foresaw the new media facilitating the growth of direct democracy, or an "electronic republic" built on "keypad democracy."
2. Singer and Gonzalez-Velez (2003) saw the two-way flow of information on the Internet as a means for renewed political discourse but documented that as recently as the 2000 election cycle, newspaper editors regarded the Internet more in keeping with their role as information providers than as a tool for opinion mobilization, which they felt was not in keeping with their role.
3. Only Left-leaning discussion groups were disorderly. Hill and Hughes (1997) found Right-leaning discussions to be organized.
4. Bimber (1998) posits that rather than reinventing the nature of community, the Internet will contribute to what he calls "accelerated pluralism," perpetuating the trend toward interest-group politics that began in the pre-Internet era.
5. It was common on Blog for America for people to post that they had never before engaged in political activity besides voting, that they were ordinary people and not "activists," or that they had been previously politically inactive.
6. "Welcome to the Dean Call for Action Blog," Blog for America, Mar. 15, 2003, posted by Joe Trippi.
7. "Governor Dean Announces Plan to Curb Racial Disparities in Health Care," Blog for America, Oct. 27, 2003, posted by Joe Rospars.
8. "Action for Day 4: Sign the Petition for 'No School Board Left Standing,'" Blog for America, Sept. 4, 2003, posted by Zephyr Teachout.
9. "Dean on C-SPAN Now," Blog for America, Dec. 15, 2003, posted by Mathew Gross.
10. For coding purposes, we treat Internet fundraising as a distinct activity from traditional direct-mail and corporate fundraising. We justify this distinction by observing that traditional media treated the two separately, tracking for horse-race purposes the fundraising figures of the presidential candidates but treating Dean's impressive online fundraising efforts as a novelty and curiosity. On the blog, there were 56 references to offline fundraising and 743 references to Internet fundraising.
11. Jeanne Cummings, "Behind Dean's Surge," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 14, 2003.
12. "Eight Hours to Go: Now Is the Time," Blog for America, Sept. 30, 2003, posted by Mark Sundeen.
13. "Three More Hours: The Surge Continues," Blog for America, Sept. 30, 2003, posted by Mark Sundeen.
14. "Central Time Zone: One Hour to Go!" Blog for America, Oct. 1, 2003, posted by Mark Sundeen.
15. "$7 Million and a $700,000 Day!," Blog for America, June 30, 2003, posted by Joe Trippi.
16. "Guest Blogger: Connie I: Dean Post!" Blog for America, Jan. 30, 2004, posted by guest writer.
17. George Packer, "The Revolution Will Not Be Blogged," *Mother Jones*, May/June 2004.

18. Stromer-Galley (2000) contends that campaign personnel preferred to use the Internet more as Web sites where information could be disseminated, retaining control over the campaign and limiting grassroots interaction by controlling the medium.

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