

Web of Influence

Every day, millions of online diarists, or “bloggers,” share their opinions with a global audience. Drawing upon the content of the international media and the World Wide Web, they weave together an elaborate network with agenda-setting power on issues ranging from human rights in China to the U.S. occupation of Iraq. What began as a hobby is evolving into a new medium that is changing the landscape for journalists and policymakers alike. | **By Daniel W. Drezner and Henry Farrell**

It was March 21, 2003—two days after the United States began its “shock and awe” campaign against Iraq—and the story dominating TV networks was the rumor (later proven false) that Saddam Hussein’s infamous cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid (“Chemical Ali”), had been killed in an airstrike. But, for thousands of other people around the world who switched on their computers rather than their television sets, the lead story was the sudden and worrisome disappearance of Salam Pax.

Otherwise known as the “Baghdad Blogger,” Salam Pax was the pseudonym for a 29-year-old Iraqi architect whose online diary, featuring wry and candid observations about life in wartime, trans-

formed him into a cult figure. It turned out that technical difficulties, not U.S. cruise missiles or Baathist Party thugs, were responsible for the three-day Salam Pax blackout. In the months that followed, his readership grew to millions, as his accounts were quoted in the *New York Times*, BBC, and Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper. If the first Gulf War introduced the world to the “CNN effect,” then the second Gulf War was blogging’s coming out party. Salam Pax was the most famous blogger during that conflict (he later signed a book and movie deal), but myriad other online diarists, including U.S. military personnel, emerged to offer real-time analysis and commentary.

Blogs (short for “weblogs”) are periodically updated journals, providing online commentary with minimal or no external editing. They are usually presented as a set of “posts,” individual entries of news or commentary, in reverse chronological order. The posts often include hyperlinks to other sites, enabling commentators to draw upon the content of

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the entire World Wide Web. Blogs can function as personal diaries, political analysis, advice columns on romance, computers, money, or all of the above. Their number has grown at an astronomical rate. In 1999, the total number of blogs was estimated to be around 50; five years later, the estimates range from 2.4 million to 4.1 million. The Perseus Development Corporation, a consulting firm that studies Internet trends, estimates that by 2005 more than 10 million blogs will have been created. Media institutions have adopted the form as well, with many television networks, newspapers, and opinion journals now hosting blogs on their Web sites, sometimes featuring dispatches from their own correspondents, other times hiring full-time online columnists.

Blogs are already influencing U.S. politics. The top five political blogs together attract over half a million visitors per day. Jimmy Orr, the White House Internet director, recently characterized the “blogosphere” (the all-encompassing term to describe the universe of weblogs) as instrumental, important, and underestimated in its influence. Nobody knows that better than Trent Lott, who in December 2002 resigned as U.S. Senate majority leader in the wake of inflammatory comments he made at Sen. Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday party. Initially, Lott’s remarks received little attention in the mainstream media. But the incident was the subject of intense online commentary, prodding renewed media attention that converted Lott’s gaffe into a full-blown scandal.

Political scandals are one thing, but can the blogosphere influence global politics as well? Compared to other actors in world affairs—governments, international organizations, multinational corporations, and even non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—blogs do not appear to be very powerful or visible. Even the most popular blog garners only a fraction of the Web traffic that major media outlets attract. According to the 2003 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press Internet Survey, only 4 percent of online Americans refer to blogs for information and opinions. The blogosphere has no central organization, and its participants have little ideological consensus. Indeed, an October 2003 survey of the blogosphere conducted by Perseus concluded that



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HORACIO CARDO FOR FP

“the typical blog is written by a teenage girl who uses it twice a month to update her friends and classmates on happenings in her life.” Blogging is almost exclusively a part-time, voluntary activity. The median income generated by a weblog is zero dollars. How then can a collection of decentralized, contrarian, and nonprofit Web sites possibly influence world politics?

Blogs are becoming more influential because they affect the content of international media coverage. Journalism professor Todd Gitlin once noted that media frame reality through “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed

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of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters.” Increasingly, journalists and pundits take their cues about “what matters” in the world from weblogs. For salient topics in global affairs, the blogosphere functions as a rare combination of distributed expertise, real-time collective response to breaking news, and public-opinion barometer. What’s more, a hierarchical structure has taken shape within the primordial chaos of cyberspace. A few elite blogs have emerged as aggregators of information and analysis, enabling media commentators to extract meaningful analysis and rely on blogs to help them interpret and predict political developments.

Under specific circumstances—when key weblogs focus on a new or neglected issue—blogs can act as a focal point for the mainstream media and exert formidable agenda-setting power. Blogs have ignited national debates on such topics as racial profiling at airports and have kept the media focused on scandals as diverse as the exposure of CIA agent Valerie Plame’s identity to bribery allegations at the United Nations. Although the blogosphere remains cluttered with the teenage angst of high school students, blogs increasingly serve as a conduit through which ordinary and not-so-ordinary citizens express their views on international relations and influence a policymaker’s decision making.

THE TIES THAT BIND

University of Michigan history Professor Juan Cole had a lot to say about the war on terror and the war in Iraq. Problem was, not many people were listening. Despite an impressive résumé (he’s fluent in three Middle Eastern languages), Cole had little success publishing opinion pieces in the mainstream media, even after September 11, 2001. His writings on the Muslim world might have remained confined to academic journals had he not begun a weblog called “Informed Comment” as a hobby in 2002. Cole’s language proficiency allowed him to monitor news reports and editorials throughout the region. “This was something I could not have been able to do in 1990, or even 1995,” he told a Detroit newspaper, referring to the surge of Middle Eastern publications on the Internet. “I could get a level of texture and detail that you could never get from the Western press.”

Fellow bloggers took an interest in his writings, especially because he expressed a skepticism about the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq that stood apart from the often optimistic mainstream media coverage following the successful overthrow of the Baathist regime. Writing in the summer of 2003, Cole noted: “The Sunni Arabs north, east and west of Baghdad from all accounts hate the U.S. and hate U.S. troops being there. This hatred is the key recruiting tool for the resistance, and it is not lessened by U.S. troops storming towns. I wish [the counterinsurgency operation] well; maybe it will work, militarily. Politically, I don’t think it addresses the real problems, of winning hearts and minds.”

As a prominent expert on the modern history of Shiite Islam, Cole became widely read among bloggers—and ultimately journalists—following the outbreak of Iraqi Shiite unrest in early 2004. With his blog attracting 250,000 readers per month, Cole began appearing on media outlets such as National Public Radio (NPR) and CNN to provide expert commentary. He also testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. “As a result of my weblog, the *Middle East Journal* invited me to contribute for the Fall 2003 issue,” he recalls. “When the Senate staff of the Foreign Relations Committee did a literature search on Moktada al-Sadr and his movement, mine was the only article that came up. Senate staff and some of the senators themselves read it and were eager to have my views on the situation.”



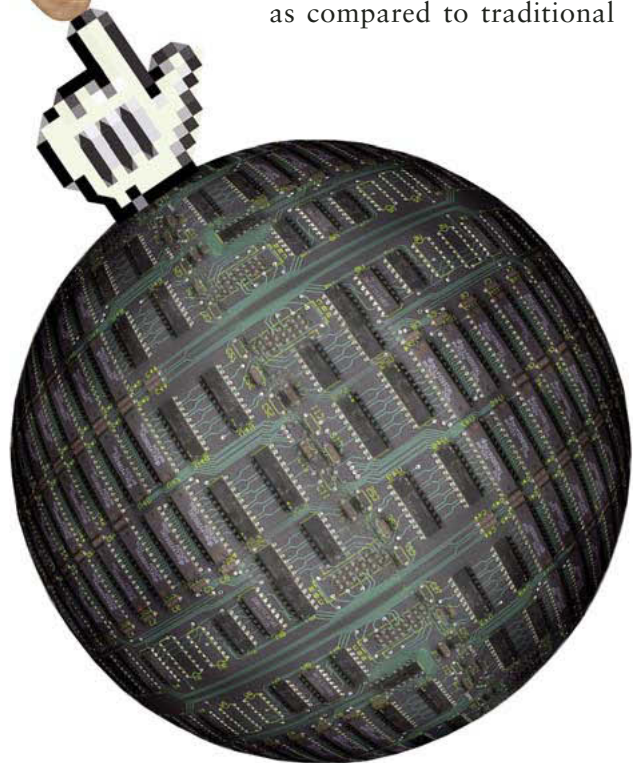
Cole's transformation into a public intellectual embodies many of the dynamics that have heightened the impact of the blogosphere. He wanted to publicize his expertise, and he did so by attracting attention from elite members of the blogosphere. As Cole made waves within the virtual world, others in the real world began to take notice.

Most bloggers desire a wide readership, and conventional wisdom suggests that the most reliable way to gain Web traffic is through a link on another weblog. A blog that is linked to by multiple other sites will accumulate an ever increasing readership as more bloggers discover the site and create hyperlinks on their respective Web pages. Thus, in the blogosphere, the rich (measured in the number of links) get richer, while the poor remain poor. This dynamic creates a skewed distribution where there are a very few highly ranked blogs with many incoming links, followed by a steep falloff and a very long list of medium- to low-ranked bloggers with few or no incoming links. One study by Clay Shirky, an associate professor at New York University, found that the Internet's top dozen bloggers (less than 3 percent of the total examined) accounted for approximately 20 percent of the incoming links. Some link-deprived blogs may become rich over time as top bloggers link to them, which helps explain why new bloggers are not discouraged.

Consequently, even as the blogosphere continues to expand, only a few blogs are likely to emerge as focal points. These prominent blogs serve as a mechanism for filtering interesting blog posts from mundane ones. When less renowned bloggers write posts with new information or a new slant, they will contact one or more of the large focal point blogs to publicize their posts. In this manner, poor

blogs function as fire alarms for rich blogs, alerting them to new information and links. This self-perpetuating, symbiotic relationship allows interesting arguments and information to make their way to the top of the blogosphere.

The skewed network of the blogosphere makes it less time-consuming for outside observers to acquire information. The media only need to look at elite blogs to obtain a summary of the distribution of opinions on a given political issue. The mainstream political media can therefore act as a conduit between the blogosphere and politically powerful actors. The comparative advantage of blogs in political discourse, as compared to traditional



media, is their low cost of real-time publication. Bloggers can post their immediate reactions to important political events before other forms of media can respond. Speed also helps bloggers overcome their own inaccuracies. When confronted with a factual error, they can quickly correct or update their post. Through these interactions, the blogosphere distills complex issues into key themes, providing cues for how the media should frame and report a foreign-policy question.

Small surprise, then, that a growing number of media leaders—editors, publishers, reporters, and columnists—consume political blogs. *New York Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller said in a November 2003 interview, “Sometimes I read something

Around the World in Blogs

Plenty of bloggers discuss international affairs, but a few, in addition to those mentioned in this article, stand out from the crowd. Jeff Jarvis's "BuzzMachine" is the single best source for information on the global expansion of the blogosphere. University of California, Berkeley, economist Brad DeLong ("Brad DeLong's Semi-Daily Journal") is perhaps the most influential economics blogger, while Tyler Cowen and Alex Tabarrok comment on microeconomic theory and the globalization of culture at "Marginal Revolution." The group weblog "Oxblog" has won serious media attention for its campaign promoting an assertive U.S. foreign policy supporting human rights and democracy.

Blog coverage varies throughout the world. Although Salam Pax paved the way for Iraqi bloggers, he has stopped blogging himself, and only around 70 Iraqi blogs have picked up where he left off. Among the more prominent: "Iraq: The Model" and "Baghdad Burning," which respectively support and oppose the U.S. military intervention. Western Europe has a sizeable number of blogs, especially in Britain, with the right-wing "Edge of England's Sword" and the pro-war leftist "Harry's Place." "Sluggie O'Toole" covers the Northern Ireland beat, while "A Fistful of Euros" seeks to provide an overview of Western European politics. Elsewhere, "BlogAfrica" syndicates blogs from across that continent, while "Living in China" offers an expatriate perspective on Chinese politics and society. Last is the blog of Japanese tech entrepreneur and venture capitalist Joi Ito ("Joi Ito's Web"). He reportedly visits 190 blogs regularly and averages five hours a day reading and writing blogs.

For direct links to all of these blogs, visit www.foreignpolicy.com.

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on a blog that makes me feel we screwed up." Howard Kurtz, one of the most prominent media commentators in the United States, regularly quotes elite bloggers in his "Media Notes Extra" feature for the *Washington Post's* Web site. Many influential foreign affairs columnists, including Paul Krugman and Fareed Zakaria, have said that blogs form a part of their information-gathering activities.

For the mainstream media—which almost by definition suffer a deficit of specialized, detailed knowledge—blogs can also serve as repositories of expertise. And for readers worldwide, blogs can act as the "man on the street," supplying unfiltered eyewitness accounts about foreign countries. This facet is an especially valuable service, given the decline in the number of foreign correspondents since the 1990s. Blogs may even provide expert analysis and summaries of foreign-language texts, such as newspaper articles and government studies, that reporters and pundits would not otherwise access or understand.

Even foreign-policy novices leave their mark on the debate. David Nishimura, an art historian and vintage pen dealer, emerged as an unlikely commentator on the Iraq war through his blog, "Cronaca," which he describes as a "compilation of news concerning art, archaeology, history, and whatever else catches the chronicler's eye, with the odd bit of opinion and commentary thrown in." In the month after the fall of Hussein's regime in April 2003, there was much public hand-wringing about reports that more than 170,000 priceless antiques and treasures had been looted from the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad. In response to these newspaper accounts, a number of historians and archaeologists scorned the U.S. Defense Department for failing to protect the museum. Nishimura, however, scrutinized the various media reports and found several inconsistencies. He noted that the 170,000 number was flat-out wrong; that the actual losses, though serious, were much smaller than initial reports suggested; and that museum officials might have been complicit in the looting. "Smart money still seems to be on the involvement of Ba'athists and/or museum employees," he wrote. "The extent to which these categories overlap has been danced around so far, but until everything has been properly sorted out, it might be wise to remember how other totalitarian states have coopted cultural institutions, enlisting the past to remake the future." Prominent right-of-center bloggers, such as Glenn Reynolds, Andrew Sullivan, and Virginia Postrel, cited Nishimura's analy-

tell offline media what we want. When blog readers made it clear we wanted to know more about Trent Lott's racist comments, mainstream media picked up the ball and dug deeper into the story.... What sort of effort would it take to choose an important issue—say the Sudanese government's involvement in Darfur—

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and get enough momentum in the blogosphere that CNN was forced to bring a camera crew to the region?"

In all of these instances, bloggers relied on established media outlets for much of their information. However, blogs also functioned as a feedback mechanism for the mainstream media. In this way, the blogosphere serves both as an amplifier and as a remixer of media coverage. For the traditional media—and ultimately, policymakers—this makes the blogosphere difficult to ignore as a filter through which the public considers foreign-policy questions.

RAGE INSIDE THE MACHINE

Blogs are beginning to emerge in countries where there are few other outlets for political expression. But can blogs affect politics in regimes where there is no thriving independent media sector?

Under certain circumstances, they can. For starters, blogs can become an alternative source of news and commentary in countries where traditional media are under the thumb of the state. Blogs are more difficult to control than television or newspapers, especially under regimes that are tolerant of some degree of free expression. However, they are vulnerable to state censorship. A sufficiently determined government can stop blogs it doesn't like by restricting access to the Internet, or setting an example for others by punishing unauthorized political expression, as is currently the case in Saudi Arabia and China. The government may use filtering technologies to limit access to foreign blogs. And, if there isn't a reliable technological infrastructure, individuals will be shut out from the blogosphere. For

instance, chronic power shortages and telecommunications problems make it difficult for Iraqis to write or read blogs.

Faced with various domestic obstacles, bloggers inside these countries (or expatriates) can try to influence foreign blogs and the media through indirect effects at home. Political scientists Margaret Keck of Johns Hopkins University and Kathryn Sikkink of the University of Minnesota note that activists who are unable to change conditions in their own countries can leverage their power by taking their case to transnational networks of advocates, who in turn publicize abuses and lobby their governments. Keck and Sikkink call this a “boomerang

effect,” because repression at home can lead to international pressure against the regime from abroad. Blogs can potentially play a role in the formation of such transnational networks.

Iran is a good example. The Iranian blogosphere has exploded. According to the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education's Blog Census, Farsi is the fourth most widely used language among blogs worldwide. One service provider alone (“Persian Blog”) hosts some 60,000 active blogs. The weblogs allow young secular and religious Iranians to interact, partially taking the place of reformist newspapers that have been censored or shut down. Government efforts to impose filters on the Internet have been sporadic and only partially successful. Some reformist politicians have embraced blogs, including the president, who celebrated the number of Iranian bloggers at the World Summit on the Information Society, and Vice President Muhammad Ali Abtahi, who is a blogger himself. Elite Iranian blogs such as “Editor: Myself” have established links with the English-speaking blogosphere. When Sina Motallebi, a prominent Iranian blogger, was imprisoned for “undermining national security through ‘cultural activity,’” prominent Iranian bloggers were able to join forces with well-known English-language bloggers including Jeff Jarvis (“BuzzMachine”), Dan Gillmor (“Silicon Valley”), and Patrick Belton (“OxBlog”) to create an online coalition that attracted media coverage, leading to Motallebi's release.

An international protest campaign also secured the freedom of Chinese blogger Liu Di, a 23-year-old psychology student who offended authorities with her satirical comments about the Communist Party. Yet,

even as Di was released, two individuals who had circulated online petitions on her behalf were arrested. Such is life in China, where an estimated 300,000 bloggers (out of 80 million regular Internet users) uneasily coexist with the government. Bloggers in China have perfected the art of self-censorship, because a single offensive post can affect an entire online community—as when Internet censors temporarily shut down leading blog sites such as Blogcn.com in 2003. Frank Yu, a Program Manager at Microsoft Research Asia’s Advanced Technology Center in Beijing, described this mind-set as he profiled a day in the life of a fictional Chinese blogger he dubbed “John X”: “After reading over his new posting, he checks it for any politically sensitive terms which may cause the government to block his site.... Although he is not concerned as much about being shut down, he does not want all the writers that share the host server with him to get locked out as well. Living in China, we learn to pick the battles that we feel strongly about and let the host of other indignities pass through quiet compliance.” Text messaging is a much safer medium for the online Chinese community. Some bloggers, however, do manage to push the envelope, as when Shanghai-based Microsoft employee Wang Jianshuo offered candid, firsthand accounts (including photos) of the SARS and Avian Flu outbreaks.

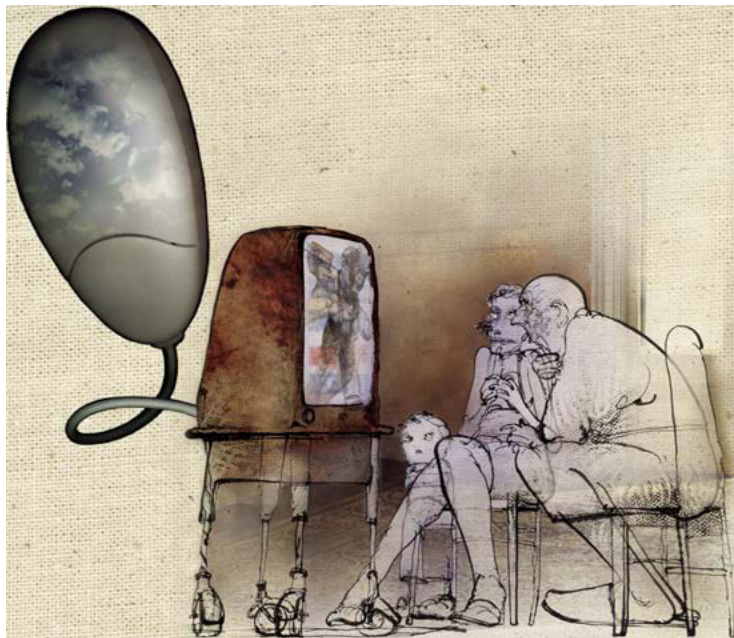
North Korea is perhaps the most blog-unfriendly nation. Only political elites and foreigners are allowed access to the Internet. As might be expected, there are no blogs within North Korea, nor any easy way for ordinary North Koreans to access foreign blogs. However, even in that country, blogs may have an impact. A former CNN journalist, Rebecca MacKinnon, has set up “NKZone,” a blog that has rapidly become a focal point for North Korea news and discussion. As MacKinnon notes, this blog can aggregate information in a way that ordi-

nary journalism cannot. North Korea rarely allows journalists to enter the country, and when it does, it assigns government minders to watch them constantly. However, non-journalists can and do enter the country. “NKZone” gathers information from a wide variety of sources, including tourists, diplomats, NGOs, and academics with direct experience of life in North Korea, and the blog organizes it for easy consumption. It has already been cited in such prominent publications as the *Asian Wall Street Journal* and the *Sunday Times* of London as a source for information about North Korea.

BLOGO ERGO SUM

The growing clout of bloggers has transformed some into “blog triumphalists.” To hear them tell it, blogging is the single most transformative media technology since the invention of the printing press. Rallying cries, such as “the revolution will be blogged,” reflect the belief that blogs might even supplant traditional journalism. But, as the editor of the Washington, D.C.-based blog “Wonkette,” Ana Marie Cox, has wryly observed, “A revolution requires that people leave their house.”

There remain formidable obstacles to the influence of blogs. All bloggers, even those at the top of the hierarchy, have limited resources at their disposal. For the moment, they are largely dependent upon traditional media for sources of information. Furthermore, bloggers have become victims of their own success: As more mainstream media outlets hire bloggers to provide content, they become more integrated into politics as usual. Inevitably, blogs will lose some of their novelty and immediacy as they start being co-opted by the very institutions they purport to critique, as when both major U.S. political parties decided to credential some bloggers as journalists for their 2004 nominating conventions.



Bloggers, even those in free societies, must confront the same issues of censorship that plague traditional media. South Korea recently blocked access to many foreign blogs, apparently because they had linked to footage of Islamic militants in Iraq beheading a South Korean. In the United States, the Pentagon invoked national security to shut down blogs written by troops stationed in Iraq. Military officials claimed that such blogs might inadvertently reveal sensitive information. But Michael O’Hanlon, a defense specialist at the Brookings Institution, told NPR that he believes “it has much less to do with operational security and classified secrets, and more to do with American politics and how the war is seen by a public that is getting increasingly shaky about the overall venture.”

One should also bear in mind that the blogosphere, mirroring global civil society as a whole, remains dominated by the developed world—a fact only heightened by claims of a digital divide. And though elite bloggers are ideologically diverse, they’re

demographically similar. Middle-class white males are overrepresented in the upper echelons of the blogosphere. Reflecting those demographics, an analysis conducted by Harvard University’s Ethan Zuckerman found that the blogosphere, like the mainstream media, tends to ignore large parts of the world.

Nevertheless, as more Web diarists come online, the blogosphere’s influence will more likely grow than collapse. Ultimately, the greatest advantage of the blogosphere is its accessibility. A recent poll commissioned by the public relations firm Edelman revealed that Americans and Europeans trust the opinions of “average people” more than most authorities. Most bloggers are ordinary citizens, reading and reacting to those experts, and to the media. As Andrew Sullivan has observed in the online magazine *Slate*, “We’re writing for free for anybody just because we love it.... That’s a refreshing spur to write stuff that actually matters, because you can, and say things you believe in without too many worries.” **FP**

[Want to Know More?]

A lengthier treatment of the effect of blogs on politics can be found in the authors’ paper “**The Power and Politics of Blogs**,” presented at the 2004 American Political Science Association (APSA) annual meeting and available at APSA’s Web site. For other studies of blog networks (all available online), see Clay Shirky’s “**Power Laws, Weblogs, and Inequality**,” the Perseus Development Corporation’s “**Bloggging Iceberg**,” and Eytan Adar, Li Zhang, Lada A. Adamic, and Rajan M. Lukose’s “**Implicit Structure and the Dynamics of Blogspace**,” presented at the 13th International World Wide Web Conference, May 18, 2004.

For general primers on weblogs as a medium, Rebecca Blood’s *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog* (Cambridge: Perseus, 2002) is a good first start, and Dan Gillmor’s *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People* (Sebastopol: O’Reilly Media Inc., 2004) is a good place to finish. Rebecca MacKinnon’s essay “**The World-Wide Conversation: Online Participatory Media and International News**,” available on the Web site of the Berkman Center for Internet & Society, offers interesting insights about blogs as international information aggregators. Several Web sites, including **Technorati**, **TTLB Blogosphere Ecosystem**, and **Blogstreet**, are devoted to tracking and ranking blogs.

More broadly, there is significant debate about the Internet’s effect on world politics. Ronald J. Deibert argues that the Internet enhances the influence of global civil society in “**International Plug ‘n Play? Citizen Activism, the Internet, and Global Public Policy**” (*International Studies Perspectives*, July 2000). Drezner addresses the limits of the Internet in “**The Global Governance of the Internet: Bringing the State Back In**” (*Political Science Quarterly*, Fall 2004). Shanti Kalathil examines the impact of the Internet on authoritarian societies in “**Dot Com for Dictators**” (*FOREIGN POLICY*, March/April 2003).

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