

Blogs Gone Bad

The Darker Side of the Blogging Boom

There is no denying that blogs—the “web logs” that now supply so much information, gossip, humor, and commentary online—have already begun to exert a significant influence on American political and cultural life. The increasing importance of blogs as a source of news has been the subject of a great deal of controversy and speculation, and the role of blogs in last year’s presidential campaign has been widely recognized. And while it has been generally acknowledged that bloggers can lay claim to a number of scalps—including that of CBS News anchor Dan Rather—it is only rarely remarked that the blogging phenomenon sometimes claims as casualties the

bloggers themselves.

Perhaps as many as three dozen bloggers have lost their jobs because of things they posted online. Heather Armstrong, for instance, was working for a Web design company in Los Angeles in 2002 and maintaining a personal blog, on which she posted humorous and exaggerated stories involving people in her office. Eventually someone sent an anonymous tip to her bosses, who apparently did not share Armstrong’s sense of humor. She was fired.

More recently, Ellen Simonetti was fired last year from her job of eight years as a flight attendant at Delta Air Lines. Delta suspended Simonetti, without warning, after she posted on

her anonymous blog mildly provocative (but certainly not pornographic) pictures of herself in her flight attendant's uniform, telling her it was an "inappropriate" use of the Delta uniform. Simonetti says she "went home and got online and found plenty of pictures of male Delta Air Lines employees in uniform on the Web," so she sued the company for sex discrimination and was fired three weeks later.

Other bloggers have been fired explicitly for discussing their employment. In January, Google fired one of its employees for using his blog to tell stories about working for the company, and for posting information about company policies—including information comparing his pay and benefits at Google with what he received from his previous employer. A contractor working on Microsoft's campus was canned when he posted on his blog pictures of Apple computers being delivered to Microsoft's offices. And a Briton working for eleven years at Waterstone's booksellers was fired in January after making references on his blog to "Bastardstone's" and his "Evil Boss."

These stories don't arouse much pity. Surely these people should have known better than to let their professional lives and their personal hobbies intersect. Surely publicly describing your boss as "evil" is not a way to ingratiate yourself with your employer. What is most interesting about these stories, and several others, is the reaction from the fired bloggers. Some show contrition and admit they were

in the wrong; the fired Google blogger says he "can see where Google is coming from." Others, though, are outraged about their firing. Simonetti, for example, set up a new website for an "International Bloggers' Bill of Rights"; the website ludicrously compares firing bloggers to the Holocaust. (It is perhaps interesting to note that trend-following bioethicist Glenn McGee was among the first signatories.)

The fired British bookstore-blogger worked himself into a high dudgeon: "I am not a serf; I am not an indentured servant. I am a free man with the right of freedom of expression. The company does not own me, body and soul—conforming to their rules at work is to be expected, but in your own time and space? How can anyone be expected to go through their personal life in fear of saying the wrong thing? No one should.... That a book company thinks so little of the primacy of freedom of expression is alarming." This blogger's lament lends itself to an obvious rebuttal—that his freedom of expression is not a guarantee of continued employment from a company he publicly badmouths.

That isn't to say that terminated bloggers are always at fault or that employers can't be too ham-handed. Back in 2003, for instance, writer and public policy analyst Iain Murray was fired from his job at the Statistical Assessment Service for blogging during working hours. "I was somewhat surprised by this as my previous boss had been happy for myself and a for-

mer colleague to run blogs. They took up little work time, about as much as other employees take up with cigarette breaks, and were useful to get work-related ideas into shape for writing up for wider audiences. When my employer expressed his concern, I immediately offered to stop updating the blog forthwith. However, this was not enough and I was fired on the spot... It appears that my employer considered this serious misconduct, on a level with theft and sexual harassment, thereby justifying an immediate termination."

Firing bloggers also raises potential legal issues for employers, and the law varies from state to state. In some states, for example, a company cannot fire an employee for his or her political activity, so blogging about one's politics, even if it is inconsistent with the employer's politics, is not grounds for termination. The *Boston Globe* reports that in some cases, if the employee complains about unsuitable job conditions, they might be protected by the National Labor Relations Act or whistleblower laws. The *Christian Science Monitor* notes that "some states go out of their way to protect employees from getting fired for things they do outside the workplace. Depending on where they live, workers may smoke tobacco, drink alcohol, gamble, run for public office, or use marijuana for medicinal purposes—all without fear of a pink slip." And while union workers and government employees enjoy special protections in some states, most workers are "at will"

employees and can therefore be legally terminated for a wide range of reasons, including inappropriate blogging.

The notorious story of another fired blogger—"Washingtonienne," a Senate staffer who wrote about her numerous simultaneous affairs—illustrates another dark side of the age of blogging: the occasional injury to innocent (or sometimes not so innocent) bystanders. Washingtonienne did not publish the names of her lovers, although she mentioned that one of them was chief of staff at a federal agency. Other bloggers speculated about his identity, and one posted the photographs of a dozen "suspects." Of course, most of these men were falsely accused and unnecessarily embarrassed. Jeffrey Rosen, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, described the "peculiar anxiety of being falsely implicated in someone else's Internet exhibitionism." "In the age of blogs," Rosen argues, "all citizens, no matter how obscure, will have to adjust their behavior to the possibility that someone may be writing about them."

Bloggers who don't lose their jobs still sometimes find their lives ill affected by blogging. For some individuals, blogging becomes an obsession. "Such bloggers often feel compelled to write several times daily and feel anxious if they don't keep up," according to a hand-wringing *New York Times* article. "As they spend more time hunkered over their computers, they neglect family, friends and jobs."

Some bloggers can feel strained by the interactivity of blogs—the com-

ments and feedback from readers. Glenn Reynolds, the University of Tennessee law professor who writes the popular Instapundit blog, told *Wired News* last summer that he gets e-mails from people asking if he's alright if he hasn't posted in several hours. With his hundreds of thousands of readers every day, Reynolds sometimes says he feels like a "public utility." Another blogger, James Lileks, described the demands of the blogging routine: "This is an odd hobby. It's like having a train set, a gigantic train set in the basement, and in the morning you not only find a derailment, you find people streaming out of the tiny houses yelling at you."

And some finally succumb to "blog fatigue" and give up. Describing the wearying interaction that led him to quit blogging, Steven Den Beste said, "nearly every article I write draws anywhere from five to fifty letters containing corrections, disagreements, comments about things I 'left out' because 'I didn't know,' or other forms of kibitzing." Another blogger,

Andrew Sullivan, complained last May about his grueling schedule and wondered "what the half-life of a blogger is." (He seems to have found out: In February, he announced a hiatus from blogging.) A huge number of blogs—the majority, in fact—are abandoned within just a few months.

This doesn't mean that blogging must always be terribly demanding—it need not be if the blogger does not wish it to be—or that bloggers necessarily put themselves at personal risk. Rather, it suggests that blogging is not for everyone, and that as this new medium develops and comes fully into its own, those suited to take part will slowly separate themselves from those not made for the blogosphere, and this medium, too, will turn out to be only for those of a certain stripe. And in an age where everyone can try their hand at journalism and where private diaries are published for the world to see, it is also the case that every aspect of life can be put under the spotlight, often in ways that are deforming, perverse, and downright stupid.