Jay Ambrose: The bloggers strike

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The mighty have fallen at the New York Times, and, say the bloggers, they know who did the toppling. To the rhythm of some thumps on the chest, the bloggers pronounce that they themselves did the deed.

If they are right, we thereby have a signal of just what an extraordinary force blogging is, even a hint that the Internet might be a latter-day equal of the printing press in its society-changing potential.

Blog, blogging, blogger — new words for new times. In case you haven't been tuned into all of this, you should know the word "blog" derives from the phrase "Web log," which itself refers to personally established Internet sites where people can have their say about whatever it is that crosses their minds. At little cost and at a minimal investment in time, you can set one up and, presto, the world has access to you. The sites can be interactive, and they often include links to other sites, to other bloggers.

One of the several million bloggers of the moment is Andrew Sullivan, a very smart, highly educated, moderately conservative former editor of The New Republic whose much-read page (hundreds of thousands of "hits" monthly on andrewsullivan.com) has had much to say about the New York Times, hardly any of it complimentary. He decided Howell Raines, then executive editor, was using news space for left-leaning political ends, derided some the paper's least credible columnists and editorials and pounced on inaccuracies and lapses of judgment.

Sullivan has written — and other writers agree — that his hammering and the hammering of likeminded bloggers created an environment leaving little wiggle room for Raines and his managing editor, Gerald Boyd, after the Jayson Blair affair became known. The bloggers, after all, were not going to let the facts about the reporter's fabrications fade into oblivion, and meanwhile the blogging had underlined how many on the Times staff had lost confidence in Raines. One site, I've learned through reviewing articles on the subject, was devoted to comments by disenchanted Times staffers, their chorus of complaint becoming something that could not be ignored.

In the final analysis, it's impossible to know whether Raines and Boyd would have been invited to take a long walk on a short plank even in the absence of blogging. What is undeniable is that many thousands of Americans knew far more about deterioration at the Times than they would have without the bloggers and that this made the two editors' situation more difficult. What is also undeniable is that bloggers are having at newspapers and other power centers throughout the country and the world, and that this changes the political complexion of society, maybe drastically.

We are thus brought to the printing press analogy. A thoughtful 1999 piece by Kevin Maney in USA Today quoted historians to the effect that the printing press turned the world upside down. By allowing information to more easily be made permanent and easing its widespread distribution, the printing press contributed to the industrial revolution, the Protestant reformation and the growth of democracy, he writes. He poses the question of whether the Internet might be as significant over time. No one really knows, he concedes, and that is clearly the only intellectually respectable answer.

The evidence grows daily, however, that the Internet is a powerful democratizing, educational instrument that puts a library's wealth of information — and the equivalent of a personal printing press — in every home that has a PC and an Internet hookup. Bloggers are part of the story, but it doesn't stop there. You can read virtually every daily newspaper in America, and...
many in Europe and elsewhere in the world, on the Internet — and for free. You have encyclopedias there, and magazines and, yes, books: There is a site that offers many of the classics.

A frequently heard criticism is that you can't trust all you read on the Internet. My response is that you cannot trust all you read and otherwise encounter outside of the Internet, either. Both on the Internet and outside of it, you have to learn to discriminate; outside of it, for instance, you have to know the difference between a guy mouthing off in a saloon and a treatise by someone with a doctorate from Harvard. (You trust the guy in the saloon, right? Just kidding, Harvard, although bloggers may teach me differently someday.)

Not everything about the Internet is good, of course. There is some terrible trash to be found there. But it's not as if the printing press has not been used for trashy ends, too. My assessment is optimistic — that the Internet's overall impact will be to further the truth and that this instrument will prove personally empowering and liberating.

Hail, the bloggers.

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