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Welcome to the

BLOG SPHERE

Colorado
political junkies
are invading
cyberspace.

BY JOSHUA ZAFFOS

News

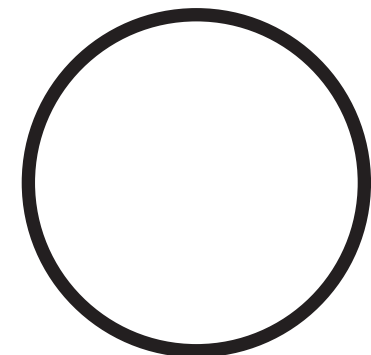
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Right now, somewhere in our fair city of Fort Collins, Stygius is watching over Colorado, America and the world. When he senses injustice, inequality or indifference, Stygius addresses the wrongs of the universe—with just his fingertips. His name is Latin and means “hellish” or “infernal;” literally referring to Styx, the principal river of the underworld in Greek mythology. Stygius offers no alter-ego to his minions.

Not quite a morbid Northern Colorado superhero, Stygius is a blogger; that is, he maintains a weblog, or personal journal, on the Internet. Think of a desktop version of Batman. Along with millions of others, he is part of a network of online media vigilantes paying critical heed to the events of our world and then sharing his insight via the Web.

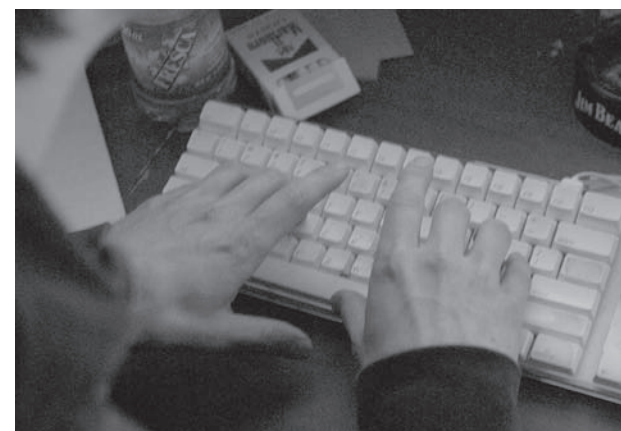
The website Technorati, which is the self-proclaimed “authority on what’s going on in the world of weblogs,” now counts more than 10 million sites in the “blogosphere,” and they expound on everything from the hottest Russian tennis stars to families’ summer vacations to the upcoming projects from Dreamworks to the political and personal fetishes of elected officials. About 32 million Americans—one of every six citizens—now read blogs. And 11 million Americans—one of every seventeen people—have their own weblog.

If you don’t know about the blogosphere, you’re not necessarily a technophobic dinosaur. Two years ago, there were only 100,000 blogs, but an explosion occurred at least partly due to the political fury of Web nerds during the 2004 elections in the United States.

Stygius is among those carrying that torch: He focuses on national and international issues. Lately, he has directed an insistent cyber-spotlight on John Bolton, President Bush’s nominee for U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. Scores of Internet surfers may come across Stygius’ blog each day and be influenced by his words.

Other bloggers are now turning their attention to state and regional politics. A mix of Colorado activists and political junkies, many clandestinely typing from their living rooms, has joined the blogosphere. Few are Ph.D. professors, established journalists or anything other than concerned citizens. Many are liberals who feel disillusioned with politics and the media, yet energized by the boundless opportunities of cyberspace. The question is whether bloggers in the Centennial State will decide—or even nudge—political races and elections.

**Do bloggers
have the
power to
change
Colorado’s
political
landscape?**



CHATTER, NOT BUZZ

A preliminary study released this May by the Pew Internet and American Life Project examined what, if any, role blogs played during the last election. In the blogosphere, the very importance of these websites are debated almost as much as the mysterious bulge in George W. Bush's back during the first presidential debate or the peculiar font on the president's military records.

From the Wonkette, a snarky political blog, which *New York Times Magazine* writer Matthew Klam compared to "a fairly drunk housewife stuck in front of CNN, growing hornier as the day goes on":

"Bulge" My Ass

October 8, 2004

We prefer that any talk about being "wired" and "mystery bulges" also involve tight parachute pants and, uhm, disco balls, which is sort of why we delayed posting anything about that totally credible theory that Bush wore an earpiece during last week's debate. Yes, we've seen the pictures. But we also watched the debate. If Bush was listening to some kind of radio signal, it was between stations.

The Wonkette is among the class of "A-list" liberal blogs with hundreds of thousands of readers, millions of site visits; others include daily Kos, Talking Points Memo, and Eschaton, which is written by an economics professor under the alias of Atrios. Most function as "filter" blogs, where a webmaster submits links to news stories and personalized insight that simplifies bulky political issues. The successful ones resonate with Web surfers, who can post their own harrumphs and hurrahs.

"What you have in blogs," says Alan Franklin of the Denver-based ProgressNow.org blog, "is the journalism and the commentary, kind of like Fox News Channel."

The dichotomy is worth noting. Liberal blogs generally have few direct ties to the Democratic Party or mainstream media outlets. In an April issue of the magazine, *In These Times*, Digby, who writes on the progressive blog Hullabaloo, says the group generally consists of "citizen bloggers," who work in non-political occupations for a living and blog for reasons of personal interest." On the other hand, Franklin and Digby contend that conservative bloggers have a clear channel—ahem—to Republican officials, Fox News and conservative talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh.

The Pew study shows that A-list right-wing blogs like Instapundit and Little

Green Footballs stoked the "buzz" started by Swift Boat Veterans for Truth over John Kerry's military service and effectively invalidated claims by Dan Rather and CBS's *60 Minutes* about President Bush's forged National Guard records. However, the report says the liberal blogs' attention to the president's bulge generated more "chatter" than "buzz," which is to say the story never received tough scrutiny from the mainstream media.

Still, liberal sites have had their share of breakthroughs. Most notably, in 2002, Talking Points Memo wrote relentlessly on then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott's ties to white supremacist groups. Major media outlets eventually picked up the story, and Lott was forced to resign from his leadership position.

Regardless, the Pew study concludes that all blogs' political influence might be exaggerated. Citizen bloggers already got that message last July after three-dozen A-list names received press credentials for the Democratic National Convention in Boston. The recognition seemed to announce their arrival as bona fide members of the media—until they found their seats in the nosebleed section of the Fleet Center.

GANG OF FOUR

Scroll back through the archives to November 2, 2004 on ProgressNow.org's blog, and you'll read an entry that succinctly captured the disappointed feeling among Dems on election night:

Rocky's live tracking

Posted by Alan - at 07:26 PM

Check it out—not fake numbers anymore... It's going to be a long night, and I'm resisting the temptation to switch from coffee to booze—

President Bush's victory in the general election was enough to drive most progressives to heavy drinking, but something interesting happened in Colorado. State Attorney General Ken Salazar won a U.S. Senate seat previously held by a Republican; his brother John grabbed a U.S. House seat for the Dems, too. Most impressively, Democrats captured both chambers of the state legislature for the first time since 1962.

Seven months after surviving the electoral hangover, ProgressNow.org blogmeister Alan Franklin has a decidedly less grim outlook.

"What you have in blogs is the journalism and the commentary, kind of like Fox News Channel."

— Alan Franklin, ProgressNow.org

"Last November, Democrats and progressives were crying in their Cheerios, but not here," says Franklin. "Colorado is leading the way."

It's suddenly a glorious moment to be a Democrat in Colorado. Following a successful legislative session, the party is hoping to engineer reform to the state's taxpayer bill of rights (TABOR) through a November ballot initiative. Dems are eager to prove the 2004 results weren't an aberration by shoring up greater control of the state Capitol. For 2006, they have plans for the governor's mansion and congressional seats in District 7, an up-for-grabs race left open by Republican Rep. Bob Beauprez, who's running for governor, and District 4, which includes Northern Colorado, where Rep. Marilyn Musgrave is considered vulnerable by her own party.

Citizen blogger Colorado Luis is among the observers who recognized the true muscle behind the state Democrats' electoral upset:

Reason to Believe

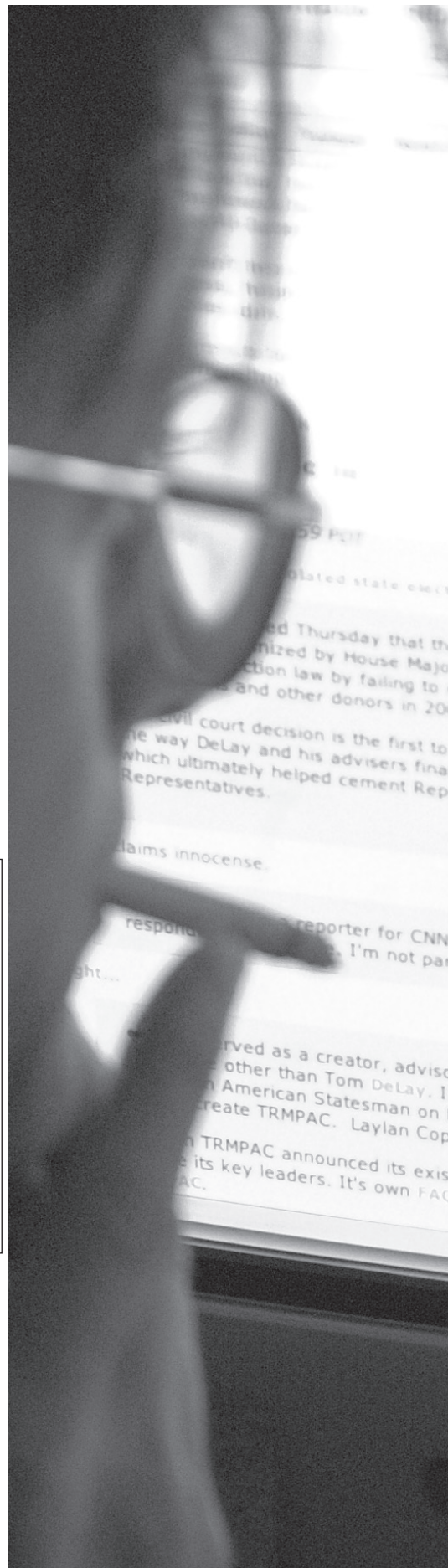
Thursday, November 04, 2004 at 07:10 AM

...Also, props must be given to four wealthy progressives who opened their pocketbooks to finance the campaign to take back the state legislature -- Tim Gill, Pat Stryker, Jared Polis and Rutt Bridges. You know we've done something right when Republicans whine that big money has been allowed to influence an election... The next step is to fuse the efforts of these large donors with the energy of groups like MoveOn and Democracy for America to get lots of small donors, and more people on the ground, involved in these important local elections.

Colorado Luis started his blog in August 2003, he says via email, because "there is a real lack of Chicano/Latino opinion available in the print media, and most Chicanos who are given access to that forum are conservative."

But he has few illusions about any effect his blog had, or will have, on Colorado politics and elections.

"I basically just like having my own forum for my views," Colorado Luis responds, "and I don't particularly care how many people read the site."



The stoicism seems appropriate considering the greater influence wielded by the "Gang of Four"—Gill, Stryker (who lives in Fort Collins), Polis and Bridges. The millionaire progressives also forked up money for the pointed attack ads portraying Musgrave pickpocketing a soldier on a battlefield and a corpse in a funeral home. Those TV spots didn't necessarily win over reluctant Republican supporters and even angered some Democrats. And Musgrave weathered the storm. But as Stuart Steers writes in the May issue of the Denver glossy magazine 5280, the campaign was the sign of "a group with money, strategy and an unapologetic, down-and-dirty fearlessness."

The last sentence of Colorado Luis' November 4 post (excerpted above) shows he recognizes an outlet for this progressive bravado on the Internet, despite his modest aspirations for his own site.

Groups like MoveOn turned out millions of dollars for candidates and mobilized activists. Democratic candidate Howard Dean relied heavily on "netroots" to launch his presidential campaign and raise \$40 million. A-list progressive blogs raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for candidates across the country. These avenues of fundraising and activism are now being built in Colorado.

ProgressNow.org, formerly the Rocky Mountain Progressive Network, is revamping its website and hopes to set up an "electronic advocacy platform" for members and other Democratic activists sometime this summer. The group's executive director, Michael Huttner, is a close associate of the Gang of Four. Deputy Director Bobby Clark was a major player in Dean's run for president. Maria Handley, Ken Salazar's deputy campaign manager, is outreach director for ProgressNow.org.

Alan Franklin continues to maintain the group's blog; the entire website gets up to 4,000 different visitors every day. Franklin also wakes at four every morning to send out a digest of news from around the state and the country to hundreds of email inboxes.

The state Democratic Party also has its own blog, DemNotes, but First Vice-chair Dan Slater, a Cañon City attorney, says it's still developing from an electronic newsletter for activists into "more of a discussion forum."

CYBER-JUNKIES

The blogs that will change things are those that have new information and can force a story to either surface or stay relevant," says Alva Adams. "Blogs that act as investigative news sources—but that also remain responsible—will continue to influence and generate discussion. If a blog becomes a trusted source for information, then there is a role for them in the public consciousness because it forces the mainstream media to pay attention."

Adams, James Peabody and Jesse McDonald run the nonpartisan political insiders' blog Colorado Pols under aliases—the names are actually those of three Colorado men involved in a fraudulent gubernatorial election in 1904. The trio maintains their anonymity, says Adams by email, to get the "true inside scoop" on state politics and because "if you don't know who's doing it, you don't know how to color your impression of what you read."

After coming online last December, the blog became a must-read for state legislators and officials, including Gov. Bill Owens, during the past legislative session. Lawmakers even checked the site during floor debates. Colorado Pols tackles the

issues and lives of politicians with a verve usually directed towards Britney, Jessica and Paris.

The site has distanced itself from progressive support groups, conservative mouthpieces and citizen bloggers by jumping on stories, feeding the rumor mill and tormenting politicians on both sides of the aisle (check out their comparison of Democrat Rep. Angie Paccione's hairstyle with Pam Grier a la *Foxy Brown*). The blog was first to report the gubernatorial candidacies of former Denver University President Marc Holtzman and current U.S. Rep. Bob Beauprez, both Republicans.

"More often than not in Colorado politics," says Adams, "we have the story first."

Colorado Pols even dropped a political bomb in late February:

Joel Hefley to Retire?

Posted by Colorado Pols on February 23, 2005 at 08:20 AM

We've been speculating here for weeks that Congressman Joel Hefley may be planning a surprise move, and it looks like he may be moving in that direction after all.

Hefley is telling a small number of friends and confidants that he plans to retire and make 2006 his final year in Congress, finishing with an even 20 years in the House. ...

Hefley's 5th district is solidly conservative, meaning Republicans won't likely have to sweat losing the seat. ...

There was talk that Hefley wasn't yet ready to make his plans public, so his office may issue the standard company line on this one.

The ingenious prediction that the congressman's office would deny the charge confirmed the blog's reputation when Hefley's staffers did just that.

Colorado Pols also posts a Governor Line, a gaming board with odds on who will be the state's next governor (Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper, who hasn't even announced his candidacy, and Beauprez are holding strong at 3-1).

The buzz—or is it chatter?—over who are the masterminds behind Colorado Pols combined with the juicy yet critical news and commentary bring up to 40,000 political junkies to the blog each month. That type of site traffic has inspired localized spinoffs, including the Fort Collins Insider, which lacks the guts and balance of Colorado Pols. Launched in April to represent "as diverse a community as they come," the blog's report card on the city's council members shows little political objectivism: Conservative teacher's pet Mayor Pro Tem Karen Weitkunat got an "A+" and the council's only true progressive, David Roy, received a "C-" for his "pro-environment" views.

VIRTUAL RESPECT

Where does the success of a nonpartisan political insiders' site leave the corps of progressive bloggers in Colorado? A test of their sphere of influence could come this fall in the lead-up to the ballot battle over Referendum C, which would relax TABOR and loosen state budget constrictions.

"I think Coloradans have started to come of age with respect to blogs since the '04 elections—at least on the progressive side," says Slater of the state Democratic Party. "National blogs were

"I basically just like having my own forum for my views, and I don't particularly care how many people read the site."

— Colorado Luis

more important in '04 than local blogs, in my limited experience. However, blogs have really come on since then."

Slater's optimism might reflect his party's ascendancy and even greater aspirations. Liberal citizen bloggers without ties to the Democrats like Colorado Luis aren't convinced they'll have much influence on politics or elections in Colorado. That's why, even though politicians admit to regularly visiting Colorado Luis, the blogger's posts range from lengthy remarks on the so-called nuclear option, to outlaw filibusters in the U.S. Senate, to ten random songs in his iPod.

"The influence of blogs will be measured in their impact on how they shape a broader debate," Stygius writes in an email. "I don't think they do that yet (in Colorado)."

His blog has been online since July 2004 and he confesses to starting it as "a form of procrastination."

Other progressive Colorado citizen bloggers who focus more on state issues share a similar skepticism about the power their weblogs could have.

MakesMeRalph is yet another anonymous blogger, based in or around Boulder and an avid fan of the University of Colorado football team. His email states that he started his site about a year ago because of "dissatisfaction with the local media, which is abysmal."

Despite his response to that perceived void, MakesMeRalph writes that "Political blogs don't mobilize anyone, they aren't taken seriously by political professionals and, for the most part, they are simply blather. I don't think blogs have any power to change the course of elections. Not even the big boys like Kos."

As a citizen blogger who refuses to share his identity for fear of getting "Ward Churchilled," his political aspirations are a little more flippant.

"My real hope is that MakesMeRalph will be successful in changing...the state song to Hank Williams: 'If God doesn't live in Colorado, I bet that's where He spends most of His time.'"

Even from the perch atop the political-blog food chain, Adams of Colorado Pols doesn't expect blogs, nonpartisan and otherwise, to influence elections, including the vote on TABOR.

"The details of TABOR are too intricate and too boring to make it an active topic of discussion," says Adams. "Blogs aren't increasing the TABOR discussion; they are just making it possible."

But then again, aren't blogs supposed to be able to simplify complex ideas and provide insight that makes readers want to learn more and take action? Aren't blogs poised to raise the profile of news that otherwise flies over people's heads? People who might like seeing what someone else of similar heritage is playing in his iPod? People who share a deep love for the CU Buffs? Couldn't there be someone out there right now, sitting in front of a computer and punching keys that could help dismantle TABOR or elect the next governor of Colorado?

Maybe, but it's easy to see why bloggers would only suffer delusions of grandeur and influence late, late at night while listening to an old Hank Williams tune. 🐾

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