

REVIEW ESSAY

*Blog: Understanding the Information
Reformation That's Changing Your World*

by Hugh Hewitt

Nelson Books (2005). 225 pp. \$19.99

REVIEWED BY MARCEL PACATTE

Blogger Hugh Hewitt spends a lot of time bragging about the feathers in the caps of his cohorts. You may recall the new media successes that resulted in the early departures of Trent Lott, Howell Raines, and Dan Rather. If you don't know who Hewitt is, or don't know what a blog is, fear not. He tells you. Many times. He spends a lot of time tracing the short but intense history of blogging, jamming his book with a litany of horn-honking mentions of his site, his insight, sites he likes, insight he likes, and incites he liked. And he spends a lot of time—a lot—on an exposition of the Protestant Reformation: Luther, piggybacking on the rise of the printing press, used a new medium to challenge a corrupted-beyond-redemption authority. Bloggers, Hewitt states, are using a new medium to challenge the authority of a corrupt hierarchy of media elite, changing the ways news is disseminated. He is pedantic, he is strident, he is annoying. And he is right.

The meteor has hit. Dinosaur journalism has lifted its head from its leaf-chewing, but has yet to grasp that the party is over. Hewitt delights in tapping the practitioners of dinosaur journalism—and their camp followers—on the shoulder to point out that the end is nigh, or that the end of the status quo is nigh.

We know this. What we don't know for sure—and what Hewitt spends too little time exploring in this tract that reads more like a script for his radio show than it does a book—is what this meteor means for the future of newspapers and network news. Newspapers won't go away because of blogs any more than the Catholic Church went away as a result of Luther's hectoring. But newspapers will, like the Church, be altered. Hewitt's book, a declaration of victory of sorts, perhaps

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comes a little too soon, which is emblematic of the genre he represents. Newspapers used to be known for serving up history in a hurry. Now they hopelessly lumber toward their single main deadline of the day as bloggers update their news and comment in real time. The advent of blogging has given the chattering class a new venue from which to serve up history—dizzily, almost before it happens. Instantaneous comment now comes in a way that was beyond even television and radio. Blogging has shaped the course of events in a way that responsible newspapers and broadcast outlets were never meant to do. That is not to say that those who write blogs are irresponsible; they are not. Most bloggers are not journalists, and blogs are not newspapers. Much has been said about a newspaper and the public trust it carries. A blog, in contrast, carries a private trust. It is an extremely personal extension of the person who writes it and creates a very intimate relationship with its reader.

This is a logical progression of news delivery. The personality journalism that saw its rise with Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson has metastasized to the point that the personality is the journalism. Reporter Dan Rather's now famous, "No, Mr. President, are you?" retort to Nixon during Watergate trapped him in his fate. Although Rather's fatuous decline and fall took more than thirty years to play out, the instant he became the story instead of someone covering the story—in that exchange with Nixon—everything changed. It was a seminal moment in the minds of consumers of news: the realization that these guys were not always in it for the objectivity, despite what we had been led to believe by their pious professions to the contrary. Rather was not the sole problem; that gives him too much credit and credence. He was merely the front man for the increasingly visible bankruptcy of the old way. Conventional journalism was as irrelevant as he was by the time he slid into the anchor's chair at CBS.

This is why blogs, and the opinions contained therein, are so popular and have caught on so quickly. The networks and the major metropolitan dailies had set the agenda without question for so long because they were the only game in town. No longer. Blogging has had a splintering effect on journalism, with each reader empowered as an editor or an ombudsman, watching over each reporter to ensure that no transgression is attempted. Or that if it is, it is retracted or rectified. The difference is that before blogs, news consumers had to take their Adam Clymers and Dan Rathers or not take anything. Now, the Internet offers dozens of legitimate outlets for news and a place

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to go with complaints that will not get lost or ignored; it is not just a one-way exchange anymore.

But all of this is prologue. The nut of Hewitt's book is this: for the longest time, no one could figure out how to make money by purveying news on the Internet. Now they have, and they are. So how is the money being made? Advertising. It's the marriage of the new media mechanism of talking to people with the old-style means of turning a buck. Blogs have ads, newspaper web sites have ads, and advertisers reach readers. Once advertisers realized that there was a market online, they started to advertise. One of the things that took so long was that advertising online is different from advertising in a newspaper or on a television network. A portion of Hewitt's book serves as inducement for people to start their own blogs as much as a way to make money as a means of communicating a message to readers.

"If you care about anything in media, then you must care about the blogosphere," Hewitt writes. Again, this is true. But the blog isn't the beginning and end of online media, nor are domestic bloggers the beginning and end of the blogosphere. Unexplored in Hewitt's book is how blogging is revolutionizing delivery of information worldwide. Blogs and web sites like Instapundit.com provide links to "good" news from Iraq not to mention that of the Bush administration, the military, and the State Department, just in case you're suspicious of the doom-and-gloom filter from the *New York Times* and other MSM ("mainstream media," another bit of jargon minted in the realm of blogging). Other examples of this vocal revolution include columnist Andrew Sullivan's site and others giving broadcast to a lonely voice rising out of Iran, pleading through posts online that the world not ignore what is happening in that country, and Justanothersoldier.com, which has frank and well-written musings from a reservist serving in Iraq. Blogging on an international scale also propagates the worst fears about media bias: a University of Notre Dame student studying abroad wrote on his blog of being in St. Peter's Square in Rome for Easter services when accosted and cajoled by a reporter for CNN who was scanning the crowd for one thing: an American who would bad-mouth the dying Pope.

Yes, as Hewitt contends, the old way has much to fear. Although newspapers have web sites that can be updated with the frequency of blogs, and their popularity is undeniable—a recent story noted that the *New York Times* has more readers of its online edition than it has of its so-

called “dead tree” edition, the competition from thousands of individual bloggers is too intense for the Gulliverian institutions laboring along like battleships. Newspapers and television news may change—indeed, they will have to change—but they won’t go away. And woe to the newspaper that charges for its content: the *New York Times* decision to begin charging for its op-ed content this fall has already led to threats from bloggers to discontinue mention of its op-ed pieces (the lifeblood of many blogs is the “link,” a recommendation to travel to another site to read more in-depth about a topic). There will always be a place to get news for free. And, what’s more, as Hewitt would be quick to point out, people may be reading the *New York Times* online, but they also are empowered to question it unlike ever before, via the watchdog bloggers. It’s the Protestant Reformation meets Huey Long: every man nailing ninety-five theses to the cathedral door. ■