The Hope of the Web

Crashing the Gate:
Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics
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1.

When, less than a decade ago, the Internet emerged as a force in most of our lives, one of the questions people often asked was: Would it prove, like TV, to be a medium primarily for distraction and disengagement? Or would its two-way nature allow it to be a potent instrument for rebuilding connections among people and organizations, possibly even renewing a sense of community? The answer is still not clear—more people use the Web to look at unfashioned women and lose money at poker than for any other purposes. But if you were going to make a case for the Web having an invigorating political effect, you could do worse than point your browser to dailylkos.com, which was launched in 2002 by Markos Moulitsas Zinga.

The site, which draws more than half a million visits each day, has emerged as a meeting place for a great many ordinary people (i.e., not only politicians, journalists, academic experts, issue advocates, or big donors) who want to revive the Democratic Party. Obscured with developing strategies for defeating Republicans, the site was much involved with the campaign of Howard Dean for the presidential nomination and carrying on hisafortnight-long run in the Iraq war. Its sophisticated technological structure, assembled by Moulitsas, has allowed for a variety of ways to raise money for favored politicians, rekindle debate issues, harass lazy or ideologically biased journalists and commentators, and even help break stories that the mainstream media managed to overlook. In doing so, it has explicitly tried to chart a new future for the Democrats—the subject of the book under review—and implicitly suggested new possibilities for the American political system that might help it break free of the grip of big money. It also raises large questions about the future of journalism. In my view, nothing more interesting has happened in American politics for many years.

The birth of the new movement led by Daily Kos came in 2003 with the unexpected emergence of Howard Dean as a presidential candidate. Since that

The proper method for figuring out Internet traffic is a matter of heated dispute. Should you count a new visitor whenever he or she logs on to a site? Or should you tally the number of different pages that they click on within a site? What if, like many of the readers of Daily Kos, you return three or four times a day? In a recent New York Times Magazine article, Markos Moulitsas claimed a million different people a week stop by his site, which seems high enough for him to make an annual income that he estimates at between $70,000 and $80,000, much of it from the ads that appear on his site.

very few people—certainly not presidential candidates with an eye to getting elected—were willing to challenge the White House directly. In that situation, Howard Dean’s forthrightness, especially his willingness to strongly oppose the war in Iraq, united many people who might otherwise be wavering. And it had succeeded in shifting sentiment.

But it’s also important to realize that Dean wasn’t particularly liberal. In his years as governor of Vermont he’d earned a reputation as a moderate in social and fiscal policy, addressing health care for children, for instance, but frustrating local activists by refusing to take up a more comprehensive medical plan. Bernie Sanders, the former mayor of Burlington who is now the only independent member of the House of Representatives, is a Vermont liberal. Dean isn’t what mattered in Dean’s case was his open manner and his willingness to risk making clear statements about Iraq. In their book, Armstrong and Moulitsas—who are widely known on the Internet by their shorthand names Jeronimo and Markos—retell the story of the campaign’s early days, especially Dean’s speech to the California Democratic Party in March 2003. He followed the well-known candidates, who trimmed and targeted

The crowd, a few thousand of the party diehards, was getting a close look at the men seeking the Democratic nod, and not liking what it saw. And then Howard Dean walked on stage.

“What I want to know is what in the world so many Democrats are doing supporting the President’s unilateral intervention in Iraq?”

That brought loud cheers from the delegates.

“I want my country back! We want our country back! I’m tired of being divided! I don’t want to deal to the fundamentalist preachers anymore! I want America to look like America, where we are all included… We have a dream. We can only reach the dream if we are all together—black and white, gay and straight, man and woman, America! The Democratic Party!”

The crowd, they write, “was on its feet, the convention hall shaking from audience pandemonium, the speech serving as a liberation of sorts.” Party activists “weren’t alone in the fight. Not anymore. They had a champion and his name was Howard Dean. The call to arms by Dean was ideologically agnostic, purely partisan.” And in that partisanship, it launched a movement that outlasted his ill-fated campaign and is still gathering strength.

What wasn’t clear at the time was that the Dean campaign also launched the Internet era in American politics. Previously, even if people became excited about a candidate in the primaries, there wasn’t all that much they could do to help. They might find a mailing address and send a check, or work the primary campaign to teach their state so they could take part in the campaign and then vote. But Dean’s young campaign staff opened a new channel through their site Dailykos.com, which featured the then still fresh idea of a blog. Every few hours—sometimes every few minutes—staffers would file news from the campaign on its Web site: charity and informal bulletins about how many people were gathering for a rally, short profiles of particular volunteers, digital pictures of clever signs supporters hung from highway overpasses or stuck on their front yards. The staff also built a populist political Web site designed to bring together groups of people with similar interests, to enable supporters in particular states to more easily organize monthly meetings in church basements and high school gyms, where volunteers could, for example, write individual letters to every Democrat in Iowa and New Hampshire urging a vote for Dean. Most important of all, they pioneered on-line money-raising. Every time something unusual happened (when some pundit would disparage the “kiddie corps” running the Dean show, say), the Web site was sure to be hot on the home page—a picture of a baseball bat, empty like a United Way thermometer in front of a town hall, where they would fill with red as the contributions would come in from people taking a few minutes to read the blog from their home or office computers. The supporters of the Dean campaign had come to believe they could make more money than their opponents in the early primaries and caucuses, and for the first time in recent political history, they did. In the 2004 ads, and $50 and $75 contributions from across a large base of his artificians. Suddenly ten thousand people with passion and $100 tickets could match a big PAC or a patio full of Hollywood stars.

The reason the Dean campaign collapsed in Iowa, the authors argue persuasively, was largely that this new kind of campaign was being threatened by a powerful force, from rich donors used to the highbrow power of the “advisers” and “media advisors” unhappier at seeing their conventional wisdom ignored. Jerome Armstrong, I say to the story of the series of TV ads that helped to turn the polls against Dean; they were sponsored by a mysterious new group called Americans for Jobs and Healthcare, and they showed, among other things, the face of Osama bin Laden in order to argue that “Howard Dean would be the most dangerous threat to foreign policy.” A few months later when mandatory financial reports finally emerged, it turned out that the group had been financed by supporters of John Kerry in one of the most cleverly and organized and the “disgraced, cor- rupt former New Jersey senator Robert Torricelli.” All in all, the backers of the ad had given more than $8.7 million to the Democratic Party in the previous few years. Dean made plenty of political gaffes on his own but he was almost eliminated by powerful Democrats.

What is striking, however, is that most of his supporters didn’t desert the Democrats at all. Instead, when the Dean campaign Web site went dark a great many shifted over to Daily Kos and they started to volunteer for John Kerry—not with the same affection they’d felt for Dean, but with much dedication. I spent the week before the general election in Columbus, Ohio, and virtually everyone I talked to was out knocking on doors for Kerry had begun the year supporting either Dean or Daily Kos without hesitation. In the end, Kerry’s surrender (at least...
race for chairman of the Democratic Party, a post that had in recent years been seen as a stepping stone to the presidency. Among his competitors were veterans of the relevant party committees who would turn yet another victory of the inbred and centrist world of Democratic Party politics.

On May 4, 2006, Jerome, on his widely followed MyDD blog (where Kos had begun his blogging career by posting commentaries), started his campaign to unseat Dean in the race for chairman of the Democratic National Committee. According to "Crashing the Gate," he turned his Gusman扁car around in midair while on a tour to a Democratic caucus where he was a chief backer of the ad linking Dean and Obama. When Dean eventually won, he said, "This party's strength does not come from consultants down. It comes from the grassroots up." In essence, this new force had lost the primary, but made it clear that it could continue to participate in the party by first breaking through and get inside the heretofore closed world of the party," Kos and Jerome wrote. "We won't be the last.

Crashing the Gate concentrates on the tactics for a new Democratic strategy. This first, shifting focus away from single-issue advocacy groups, like the abortion rights movement, environmentalists, and labor unions, toward a more direct Democratic Party itself. Such groups have long been the main constituency of many Washington Democrats, sources for both money and volunteers, and as a result, they have been able to impose on the party their own orthodoxy approaches to important issues. It is true that such groups as NARAL—the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League—and the Sierra Club join pro-Democratic electoral coalitions such as ACT UP and MoveOn.org. But as the authors point out, that giving prominence to such groups seems to conflict Republican stereotypes ("the huggers") worse, the activists concerned with single issues cannot reliably deliver electoral victories. Often their efforts are simply counterproductive. In May 2006, for instance, NARAL endorsed Rhode Island Republican Senator Lincoln Chafee for reelection to fill the seat he said he was pro-choice. On the other hand, as Jerome and Kos point out, they have voted for the militantly anti-choice Bill Frist Senate majority leader, and helped with the Bush administration on the crucial vote on a filibuster against Supreme Court nominee Samuel A. Alito.

By contrast, Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic leader in the Senate, says he is personally against abortion—but he has still resisted many of the federal judges appointed to obfuscate the Bush administration has proposed during his tenure. (Reid will be the keynote speaker when the Kos community, who sometimes call themselves "Kosnads," hold their first convention in which they will physically meet this June in Las Vegas.) Kos Reid is the argument that even if Democrats break with some of their past positions in order to reach new voters—Dean's stand against gun control, for example, which was roundly rejected by the voters, or the recent clinic closings, which have been roundly rejected by many of the voters, or the recent clinic closings, which are generally roundly rejected by many of the voters. Kos characterized his group as liberal in character, but not liberal in policy, as liberal in character, but not liberal in policy.

Kos and Jerome write that the one-on-one campaign has been a success. They claim in "Crashing the Gate," that Kos picked a dozen Democratic challengers, most in quixotic races against heavy favorites like Tom DeLay, to raise money for in 2004, and all of them lost. But as he points out, it took practical work for the Republican right to build up its strength after the Goldwater disaster of 1964. And indeed, in the eight months since Kerry's defeat, Web activists have adopted the new approaches in special elections with some successes. One example came during last August's election for a seat in Ohio's 2nd District, a Republican stronghold since 1974, which Bush carried in 2004 with 64 percent of the vote. Normally the Democrats would barely have bothered contesting this seat, but Paul Hackett, a political novice recently returned from a tour as a Marine Corps major in Iraq, launched just the kind of动员 cam-

The website is http://www.earthlink.net/skolos. April 27, 2006

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the on-line activists—that's why the number of hits on the Web sites rises as elections approach. The issues aren't secondary, exactly, but there's a clear consensus that worrying about the fine points of policy is an empty exercise without real power that, indeed, power comes from party unity.

It's threats to that party unity that really anger the Web activists. Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman, for instance, faces a primary challenge that was first given real prominence on Daily Kos and allied Web sites. Not because he isn't liberal on issues such as Social Security, but because he doesn't behave like a Democrat—he seems happy to go on the Sunday talk shows and praise the President for starting the Iraq war. It's no wonder Democrats for being weak on national security. In a photo widely circulated on the Web, he was the first on his feet applauding the President's Iraq policy during this year's State of the Union address. Lieberman may well survive the primary challenge he faces from Ned Lamont, a high-tech entrepreneur and former newspaper editor who opposes the Iraq war, but it seems possible that if he is strongly challenged, this will affect his positions in the years to come.

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What gives Kos and Jerome credibility is less their solid and straightforward book than the Web community they've helped to inspire and wield. It includes a series of literally interlinked sites, ranging from the enormous if somewhat predictable, such as MoveOn.org, partially financed by George Soros, to the tiny and tightly focused. A few are expert blogs on particular topics: the University of Michigan professor Juan Cole, for instance, gives detailed accounts of the day's events in Iraq at his Informed Consent site, JuanCole.com. Others derive from more traditional journalism: Josh Marshall at Talking Points Memo (www.talkingpointsmemo.com) employs a cadre of full-time reporters to uncover and explain the latest developments in the Republican congressional scandal. Others are more traditional blogs (if "traditional" can be applied to a medium four or five years old). These include Eschaton (www.atiore.blogspot.com) and Firedoglake (www.firedoglake.com), where bloggers offer their take, hour by hour, on a wide range of news events as they happen over the course of the day. Bigger and better-funded sites such as the Huffington Post (www.huffingtonpost.com) feature a variety of well-known journalists with partisan commentary on the issues of the moment. The site called Crooks and Liars (www.crooksandliars.com) presents selected video footage from newscasts and talk shows. Each of these sites, and the hundreds of others they link to, has its own personality; if there are qualities that unite them, they include skepticism about government claims and a tone of critical humor about the pretensions of the Bush administration.

At the center of this world, however, is Daily Kos, which because of its particular architecture, and the open spirit of its founder, has become an exemplar in Web-style democracy. Kos himself posts a few blog entries every day, but each year he hires five assistant editors who can post comments of their own on his front page. Many of these have become household names (often with pseudonyms) in the blogging world—Meteor Blades or Armando are far more widely read than, say, The New Republic's TRB, despite that magazine's hundred-year head start. (As a measure of comparative fortunes, The New Republic announced last month that its circulation had dropped 40 percent in the last thirty years.) But anyone who joins Daily Kos—a free and painless process—is allowed to post "diaries"—really mini-essays—about particular topical issues. As I write this, on a Monday morning in late February, there are dozens of new diaries posted within the last hour on such subjects as the End of Medicaid Is Beginning" by checklists, or "Dangers Pored by IRS Scarey" by redlimi, or "Time for a Port Pilot" by Alphaliberal. The site, which is a flood of information (and misinformation), the site allows members to read the diaries and then, by clicking a button, "recommend" them. They think that it's important. The ones with the most recommendations appear at the top of the page—at the moment, for instance, "McCain: 100% Wrong on Everything" is the most widely recommended. Members can do more than read and diaries—they can also comment on them, and hundreds of people do, rebuiting or correcting or adding to press accounts. The technology works remarkably smoothly, and it changes regularly as Kos site developers develop new modules. When we consider Kos's own Web site and its numerous links to other blogs, we see something like an expanding hive of communication, a collective intelligence. And the results can be impressive. A writer with the pen name (mouse name) Jerome à Paris, for instance, organized dozens of other Kossacks interested in energy policy to write an energy plan that I find far more comprehensive and thorough than anything the think tanks have produced. It's been read and reshaped by thousands of readers; it will serve as a useful model should the Democrats retake Congress and have the ability to move legislation.

The blogs began as purely reactive and bloggers still spend much of their energy responding to the "mainstream media." But a kind of proto-journalism is emerging, and becoming steadily more sophisticated. If you want to understand what's going on with the ins and outs of Scooter Libby's defense in the Flamentgate trial, for instance, the place to go is Firedoglake.

Some of the discourse is less edifying of course. There is much familiar and often tiresome ranting at the Bush administration, at intelligent design advocates, at Fox News. Much of that disappears when there are specific factual issues to be addressed. For instance, when commentators become experts at monitoring the regular press and television for signs of rightward bias, and they respond to media. When The Washington Post kept repeating the GOP's charge that disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff gave money to Democrats as well as to Republicans, on-line activists assembled data and organized an overwhelming response, showing that Abramoff gave much more money to Republi- cans. This finding was soon picked up by the press and television and much less well heard about Abramoff's even-handedness was now being portrayed by conservative champions of bias (as Michael Massing demonstrated in his recent essays on press coverage of Iraq) now that it had lost its closer scrutiny on the Internet. Since the liberalites of the blogosphere are better organized, this is starting to have a balance of an old-fashioned media game. It's now three times the number of hits received by the one-times the number of hits received by the one-times the number of hits received by the one-time the right-wing "blogosphere," where his biggest competitor is probably a site called Political Research. Since the Internet is a limitless virtual archive, it can quickly track down almost anything any journalist or politi- cal commentator may have said in the last decade. Even when people try to make things disappear, someone in that huge throng of readers probably has a copy. When Josh Marshall, editor of Talking Points Memo, went on the attack against Social Security privatization, he made good use of quotes from the reports in local newspapers of congressmen speaking at their district small-town forums. He showed that polls were making reassuring statements to voters in their districts and then voting the other way on Capitol Hill. He also helped track down photos of President Bush and Jack Abramoff.

One testimony to the power of Daily Kos is the list of dignitaries who come to visit. Democratic superstars like Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama have posted diaries (and have gotten to the site even when it was closed) (as praise). But the national attention it has been getting is not the most interesting part of the entire process. What is most striking is how the people are learning to use the technology to connect with on-the-ground reality. As mid-term elections approach, with the Republicans weakened for the first time for at least twelve years, the diaries on the Web increasingly become vehicles for raising money or re-creating volunteers. Political accounts of their efforts to revitalize local Democratic precinct headquarters and offer each other tips on how to build mailing lists. The blog user from Capitol Hill, who has helped track down photos of President Bush and Jack Abramoff.

The Democratic Party organization has spent millions on a campaign on the momentum it built up in the 1960s and early 1970s, and that momentum has been running out. But the Web sites linked to Daily Kos and their millions of users have given the Democrats a new charge. It would be premature to say that the Web has given the Democrats a new charge. It would be premature to say that the Web has given the Democrats a new charge. It would be premature to say that the Web has given the Democrats a new charge. It would be premature to say that the Web has given the Democrats a new charge. It would be premature to say that the Web has given the Democrats a new charge. It would be premature to say that the Web has given the Democrats a new charge. It would be premature to say that the Web has given the Democrats a new charge. It would be premature to say that the Web has given the Democrats a new charge.


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