



## Blogging On

*Anyone with a computer and a connection can try to make one with the rest of the world*

By Lisa O'Donnell

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Stephen Charles blogging at home in Clemmons.

(Journal Photo By Ted Richardson)

Bryan Gates' musings are available for millions to read. Somewhat fewer than that take him up on the offer.

Gates, 38, writes an online journal, more commonly known as a Web log or blog. That makes Gates a blogger.

Blogs are one of the biggest trends on the Internet. Anyone with a computer and a little technical know-how can have their own blog and add their voice to the world's chorus in a matter of minutes.

Blogs first came to national prominence in 1998 when Matt Drudge of the Drudge Report broke the news about Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky.

Most recently, blogs were instrumental in bringing to light Trent Lott's racially charged remarks at a dinner honoring Strom Thurmond. Lott was eventually forced to resign his post as senate majority leader.

A blog is a Web page with dated entries. They are best read by scrolling to the bottom and reading up. Most blogs allow readers to post comments.

Services such as [Blogger](#) and [Livejournal](#) are available to help people publish their blogs on the Web without having to write computer codes. This makes blogs easier to set up and maintain than personal Web sites.

These services allow bloggers to maintain control over the design and content of their blogs. And the content runs the gamut - from serious issues such as the war in Iraq to niche topics such as Aboriginal myths and legends to personal musings.

One popular blog in Great Britain chronicles the life of a London call girl. [George W. Bush's campaign team has a blog](#), as does [presidential hopeful Howard Dean](#).

Scores of celebrities blog, including Al Roker, William Shatner, Flea the bassist for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, entertainer RuPaul, Gene Simmons and Barbra Streisand.

Local bloggers can also claim their place in the blogosphere.

Gates is a lawyer whose blog, [I Respectfully Dissent, includes random thoughts and commentaries on issues that pique his interest](#).

He started blogging in July.

"I thought it would be something to do," Gates said. "I'm always having these opinions and thoughts about things when I'm taking a shower, and I think, 'Well, I'll write a letter to the editor.' But I never got around to doing that."

Gates reads a few blogs regularly and decided to give it a try.

Many of Gates' postings are on legal topics. He might read about an unusual case in the newspaper and offer some legal insight.

Most recently, he has posted his thoughts about Darryl Hunt and Pete Rose. He will also post funny photographs and comics.

"I try not to comment on the greatest controversy of the day. I'd hate to be one more, 'Me, too' out there," Gates said. "Really, it's whatever I happen to be thinking about at the time."

While it's difficult to pinpoint how many blogs are on the Internet, [Blo.gs., a blog directory](#), tracks more than 1.1 million. Some of these blogs may be inactive.

A couple of factors fueled the blogging boom, said Ananda Mitra, an associate professor of communication at Wake Forest University.

High-speed modems have become more affordable and people have begun to fully realize that they could use the Internet as a forum to be heard.

"What has happened over many, many years is that individuals have not felt their voice in the public sphere," Mitra said. "In order to gain their voice, they needed access to media, such as print publications, TV and movies. All of a sudden, this is made available at an affordable price and easy technology becomes available where anyone could gain a voice. You didn't have to share your voice with others, and you had a distinct possibility that others would hear your voice."

Setting up his blog was a cinch for Gates. He used to have a personal Web site but updating it could be a hassle. With blogging, updating his blog is almost as easy as writing an e-mail, he said.

Stephen Charles started blogging about three years ago. On [Stephenomenal, Charles will wax about whatever catches his fancy](#). Recent posts have included a haiku, a link to an anti-Hummer Web site and his thoughts on an Anita Baker concert. He also posts some photographs and artwork.

Charles, 37, is a graphic artist and Web developer for a local university. He updates his blog anywhere from several times a week to three times a day.

"It's like a Web space for my thoughts, for my ramblings," Charles said. "It's like an online diary but it's not detailed. It's about 10 percent of what I want the world to know. It's a virtual me, but it's not all of me."

Blogging gives him a chance to share his sense of humor and sharpen his writing skills, Charles said.

Mitra said that bloggers can be broken into two basic camps - bloggers such as celebrities and politicians who are trying to promote themselves, and individual bloggers interested in sharing their lives and thoughts with friends, family and random visitors from cyber space.

"Far more interesting is the individual blogger," Mitra said. "Housewives, students who do have something to say. Maybe it's as mundane as what they did the entire day. That is empowering."

Matt Thompson, an online reporter for the Poynter Institute, a training center for journalists, agreed.

"Blogs indulge people's desire to express themselves to the world," he said.

The audience for individual blogs can be minimal. Gates said a few of his friends read his blog. His blog is listed on [North State Blogs, a directory of blogs with North Carolina connections](#). Occasionally, his blog will pop up as a result of an odd pairing of words in a Google search.

"Sometimes, people will be looking for pictures of beastiality. Sometimes those combinations will come up, they'll click on the page and be disappointed," Gates said.

On a good day, Charles' blog will get 30 hits.

First Amendment protection extends to bloggers. Last June, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that bloggers are not libel for information that they republish on their sites. That means bloggers can continue the popular practice of posting e-mails and articles without being held responsible.

The ruling came from a North Carolina case. Robert Smith of Asheville said he overheard Ellen Batzel say she was the descendent of a Nazi politician. Smith, who noted that Batzel had several European paintings in her house, shared his suspicions that the paintings were Nazi looted goods in an e-mail to Ton Creners, who operates a company that searches for stolen paintings. Creners posted Smith's e-mail to his listserve. That posting was discovered by Batzel, who sued Creners and Smith for defamation.

People who read blogs for news should question their authenticity, Mitra said. While blogs such as [AndrewSullivan.com](#) and [TalkingPointsMemo.com](#) are well-established, others, including those that surfaced in Iraq after the outbreak of the war may be of questionable origins.

"When a story breaks on CNN, chances are people trust it. They feel it is authentic. The speaker is recognized," he said. "What changes on the Internet with the individual speaker is that there is the opportunity for deception. Trust is called into question. When looking at blogs, you have to take it with the presumption that the author is not who he claims to be."

Thompson said blogs police themselves. When one blog makes a false claim, others are quick to debunk it.

Blogs are filling an information void that readers say they aren't getting in mainstream media.

[Camilo Ramirez, a blogger](#), has a list of about 300 blogs that he occasionally reads. They include blogs on politics, computers and literature.

Ramire likes the variety he gets from blogs. Readers can get perspectives from bloggers in Poland, Argentina and Iraq.

"The most interesting thing is that you can get a perspective that you cannot get in any other way," Ramirez said. "It's not editors deciding what you get. You're creating your own landscape."

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