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It's a Little Too Cozy in the Blogosphere

By Jennifer Howard
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It was a cool idea, a fresh kind of media democracy for a new-media world. Thanks to the miracle of blogging technology, any smart kid in Boise or Brooklyn could set up his own Web site and weigh in on everything from regime change in Iraq to snarky book reviews. He didn't need a publisher, a journalism degree or an old-boy network, just a computer, an Internet connection and an opinion (and bloggers have plenty of those). Part reporter, part gadfly, part cheeky upstart, bloggers seemed to scorn the insider mentality of brand-name pundits, and they were often a lot more fun to read -- and more insightful.

Note the past tense. A year ago, I barely knew what blogs were. Within a few months, they'd become a staple of my daily media diet. Now I can't live without them, but already I'm feeling betrayed -- and a little bored.

What began as the ultimate outsider activity -- a way to break the newspaper and TV stranglehold on the gathering and dissemination of information -- is turning into the same insider's game played by the old establishment media the bloggerati love to critique. The more blogs you read and the more often you read them, the more obvious it is: They've fallen in love with themselves, each other and the beauty of what they're creating. The cult of media celebrity hasn't been broken by the Internet's democratic tendencies; it's just found new enabling technology.

The problem's built into the medium itself. Blogs are set up to be personal forums for someone's opinions. That's the point, the liberating thing about them. Bloggers don't have to get their copy past an editor, and they can sound off at any length -- no word limits in cyberspace. They're products of a seismic cultural shift that makes someone's hangover as newsworthy as the arrival of a Harry Potter novel. The sassier the voice, the more successful the blog is likely to be. In a Google universe, success is defined by hits: the number of visits a Web page gets. The more blogs link to each other, the more hits they all get; enough hits and a cyberstar is born. (Okay, color me envious: I don't even know if Google can find my Web site, not that anyone's looking.)

Take my daily blog circuit. It's heavy on sites with a literary slant, but the same tendencies crop up on blogs that focus on politics or almost any other subject. My personal hit parade includes Bookslut (www.bookslut.com/blog/), whose proprietor is based in Chicago; Maud Newton (maudnewton.com/blog/), put together by a thirtyish fiction writer in Brooklyn; Old Hag (oldhag.blogspot.com/), run by a writer in Baltimore; Moorish Girl (moorishgirl.com), which comes out of L.A.; and bloggers' darling The Minor Fall, The Major Lift, or TMFTML (www.popfactor.com/tmftml/) as it's known in the blogosphere. (Bloggers are even more acronym-happy than Washington think tankers.) I've been told that the guy behind TMFTML works in New York publishing. Despite his proximity to the corridors of literary power, he's about as anti-establishment as they come, judging by his almost-daily assaults on the New York Times, the New York Observer and other hubs of the media matrix. A typical slam, this one from Oct. 28: "Either There Are No Editors at the Times or They've Made a Conscious Decision to Kill Us with Alessandra Stanley's Bad Writing." Funny? Yes. Mean? You bet.

Read regularly, sites like these give me a pretty good idea of what's floating around the literary zeitgeist any given day or week. They link to everything from Britain's Guardian newspaper to small literary journals I rarely see to Webzines and blogs I'd have no other way of knowing about. On Nov. 7, for instance, Bookslut linked to an interview with novelist Vendela Vida that ran on identitytheory.com, which bills itself as "a literary website, sort of" and

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which I'd never heard of. Vida is married to Dave Eggers, author of the annoyingly influential postmodern memoir "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius," and she has a new book out. So I was a little curious to hear what she has to say, and to know how it came across to other readers; Bookslut obligingly linked to some reactions on other literary blogs.

Part of blogs' usefulness as a cultural barometer is that they don't automatically buy what the establishment says about Vida or Eggers or any other overhyped phenomenon, literary or otherwise. Bloggers know what they like and what they don't like, and they aren't afraid to tell you why. And they get to use bad words that will never see print inside a family newspaper. But to get to the good stuff, you have to wade through more and more self-congratulation and mutual admiration. Call it blogrolling. Here are a few examples from a typical recent week in the blogosphere (links not included):

From TMFTML, Oct. 30: "As you might imagine, we're fans of Evelyn Waugh (even in spite of the horrible assault on the sensibilities that is "Brideshead Revisited"). It's the writer's centennial, and pint-sized polemicist Maud Newton collects all the coverage in one place. The inexplicably prominent Brooklyn blogger also reaches back into her own past to reveal a heartwarming tale of intellectual precocity. Well done, little one." Little one? That was about the nine millionth reference to Newton's stature he's made in the last six months. Or maybe he's channeling Yoda.

From Maud Newton, Nov. 6: "We'd have guessed [the Old Hag] was a Sauvignon Blanc girl, and if she'd just come for a visit we'd share a bottle and try to figure out a way to steal her smarts." Alcohol's a perennially popular blogging topic. Not that I disapprove.

From Moorish Girl, Nov. 7: "If I lived a hundred years I couldn't be as funny or witty as the Old Hag." Sweet, but what exactly have I learned?

From the Old Hag, who gives us blogrolling in a nutshell with this Nov. 7 post: "We'd also like to take a moment to draw your attention to some new blogs of note. If you look at our links list, you'll see Chica (whom we TOTALLY discovered, and now she's all Gawkered and Terry'd and does Choire EVER LINK TO ME?). . . ."

Note the offhand references and the verbing of names -- the Old Hag assumes that not only do you read blogs, you're on a first-name basis with the hip dudes and dudettes who run them. What, you've never heard of Chica, Terry and Choire? Let me introduce you, in order, to the up-and-coming blogger behind Cup of Chicha (www.nchicha.com/cupofchicha/); Wall Street Journal drama critic Terry Teachout, who moonlights as a blogger with his site About Last Night (www.artsjournal.com/aboutlastnight/); and ur-New York media blog Gawker.com and its editor, Choire Sicha, who maintains his own blog at www.choiresicha.com. I only know this because I've been reading these sites long enough to get a feel for the usual suspects. Otherwise I'd have no clue either. And I'm not sure why I should want to.

Maybe the back-scratching started as revolutionary solidarity. Now it's a popularity contest in which the value of information is confused with the cool quotient of the person spreading it. Late-night TV has Jay and Dave and Conan; the blogosphere has TMFTML and Old Hag and Choire, only unlike the gods of late night, the gods of the blogosphere really, really like each other -- and say so every chance they get.

They're not so nice to the less popular kids, often establishment-media types who get flogged out of all proportion to their op-ed offenses. The last few months, it's been all the rage to paste Laura Miller, a critic with regular gigs for Salon.com and the New York Times. One of the kinder comments, this one from Cup of Chicha: "From the way she writes about contemporary short stories, it feels obvious she doesn't read them." Even if you're not a fan of Miller's, the attacks can get so nasty it starts to feel like bloggers pick on her not because they think she's a lousy critic but because she gets to sound off every other week in the New York Times.

If the ad hominem tactics made for a better read, I might not mind so much. Sure, it can be fun in a sick sort of way, like watching a bar fight while you nurse a beer in the corner. But more and more it gets in the way of what makes blogs useful to someone like me, and that's information. After making my daily e-rounds, I feel more plugged into what's going on -- and ever more burned out on cronyism and negativity. Even if you rely on blogs for idiosyncratic takes on the news, even if you enjoy seeing sacred cows slaughtered, even if you believe, as I do, that the world needs the kind of Zorro-like cultural commentary they're so good at, you start to wonder: Is this getting a little *too* personal?

Maybe that's the point. In the blogosphere, everybody gets to be a critic.

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