

Eric Boehlert Author of *LAPDOGS*

# bloggers on the bus

How the Internet Changed  
Politics and the Press



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## Praise for *Bloggers on the Bus*

“Boehlert finds engaging stories among his eccentric band of activists.”

—*Time* magazine

“Boehlert’s readable book captures the passion and quirkiness . . . of these characters.”

—*American Journalism Review*

## Praise for *Lapdogs*

“The performance of the press during the Bush years, especially in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, is so important that all serious attempts to assess it are worthy of attention . . . this is one of them.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Boehlert employs meticulous analytic and research skills to demonstrate the collapse of the fourth estate over the past six years.”

—*Chicago Reader*

“Boehlert takes the reader on a journey through Lexis-Nexis to show how the media obscured facts, spun news to favor Republicans and, in some cases, reported falsehoods.”

—*New York Observer*

“Read Eric Boehlert’s devastating book. Read it and weep, tear your hair, rend your garments, gnash your teeth.”

—*The American Prospect*

**ALSO BY ERIC BOEHLERT**

*Lapdogs: How the Press Rolled Over for Bush*



For Tracy

# INTRODUCTION

Chronicling the 1972 presidential campaign, Timothy Crouse's landmark book, *The Boys on the Bus*, exposed how the political press really functioned, and in the process he helped give birth to modern-day journalism. With a sharp eye for detail and an outsider's disdain for conformity, the young *Rolling Stone* writer explored how a handful of supremely confident, cigarette-smoking and bad-tie-wearing journalists who rode the back of campaign buses (and airplanes) were really the ones who framed the story—who set the agenda—for the unfolding White House race.

Dishing healthy doses of gossip and painting compelling character sketches, while also bluntly critiquing their campaign work, Crouse detailed the rise of “pack journalism” and the incestuous press culture that fueled it: “They all fed off the same pool report, the same daily handout, the same speech by the candidate; the whole pack was isolated in the same mobile village.”

For most readers who had never given much thought to the (mostly) male band of reporters behind the news, and who couldn't name more than one or two Beltway journalists, Crouse's insider account came as a revelation. Published at a time when political journalists didn't seek out celebrity status and didn't clog up untold hours of TV time listening to themselves talk, *The Boys on the Bus* introduced a new era in political reporting and ushered in the notion of journalists as newsmakers themselves. In fact, Crouse's book helped make media stars of a whole generation of influential insiders who for decades afterward maintained a

viselike grip on crafting Beltway conventional wisdom, insiders like David Broder of the *Washington Post*, Jack Germond of the *Baltimore Sun*, and the legendary reporter Johnny Apple of the *New York Times*.

Back in 1972 the key to getting the story right, to capturing the campaign, was being on the bus. "Because travel is the soul of this business," Apple told Crouse. "You gotta be there because you can't do it all by telephone."

But over time the bus morphed into a bubble as campaign operatives increasingly limited access to candidates, and even to senior aides, to the point where the bus riders became among the least well-informed about the day's unfolding developments. With the arrival of the Internet age, the bus looked more and more like a horse and buggy.

Describing a surreal scene of approaching antiquity during the 2008 campaign, as journalists filed dispatches from a Barack Obama rally, Howard Kurtz of the *Washington Post* wrote, "Before the Democratic nominee took the podium, the text of his speech arrived by BlackBerry. The address was carried by CNN, Fox and MSNBC. While he was still delivering his applause lines, an *Atlantic* blogger posted excerpts."

The outdated campaign bus had broken down. Worse, over the years not only had its media passengers slavishly maintained the same pack-driven approach that Crouse bemoaned decades earlier, but the political press had become increasingly unserious, with an almost nonstop devotion to campaign tactics, process, and trivia.

Fed up, liberal bloggers adopted the Internet as their bus. Fueled by high-speed cable modems, they didn't claim to be objective or to uncover the insider, tactical minutiae that the mainstream media obsessed over. But during the 2008 race, by communicating directly with their audience and deputizing their readers ("the people formerly known as the audience," as the blogger Jay Rosen put it), bloggers helped democratize the process by sapping the mainstream media of some of its previous, oracle-like control over the campaign narratives. The Internet, as Barack Obama demonstrated in 2008, offered a way for candidates to go around the traditional Beltway media and communicate directly with voters.

During the White House run, the blogs created user-generated content that periodically altered the course of the campaign. They forced two tele-



vised debates to be canceled, infuriating Fox News in the process. They vetted Sarah Palin better than the GOP had. They pushed back against shoddy journalism and unleashed blogswarms on offensive cable commentators who diminished Democratic candidates. And they bedeviled the Republican candidate, Sen. John McCain, at nearly every turn, using an array of online tools to confuse the slow-footed candidate whose Republican Party, still in love with AM talk radio, seemed oblivious to the political revolution unfolding online.

The recent rise of the liberal blogosphere, or the netroots, as it's also known, has unfolded at an extraordinary pace. "Already, the netroots are the most significant mass movement in U.S. politics since the rise of the Christian right more than two decades ago," marveled Jonathan Chait in the pages of the centrist *New Republic* magazine. "What they have accomplished in just a few years is astonishing." Indeed, by late 2008 the readership at the flagship liberal site Daily Kos was roughly equivalent to that of America's most-read newspaper, *USA Today*.

Bill Clinton cleared his calendar to host a private, two-hour lunch at his Harlem office with prominent liberal bloggers just prior to his wife's White House campaign push. And the Huffington Post's Sam Stein was called on to ask a question at Barack Obama's first presidential press conference in February 2009. A political and media transformation was unfolding in plain sight.

And yet there hasn't been enough serious public attention paid to the netroots phenomenon, which is why I decided to write *Bloggers on the Bus*. Inspired by Crouse's book, although I'm in no way comparing my work with his pioneering effort, I believe the uniquely twenty-first-century phenomenon of the netroots ought to be documented. I want to pull back the curtain a bit so readers can appreciate in more detail, and with a more nuanced understanding, the revolution taking place, as well as the unlikely participants leading it: students, housewives, attorneys, professors, musicians. A fan of the liberal blogosphere, I hoped the 2008 White House campaign would provide an illuminating backdrop to highlight the extraordinary gains of the netroots, as well as allow me to document the inevitable missteps and growing pains that all movements experience as they experience adolescence.

Along with detailing how the netroots influenced and altered the road to the White House, I want to shed more light on the people behind the blogosphere. So often depicted in the mainstream press as faceless, interchangeable parts ("Bloggers reacted angrily . . ."), I wanted to find out more about the people who reinvented all kinds of election and newsroom rules. Who were these amateur citizen journalists? Why did they blog? How did they amass so much power in such a short period and with so little money and resources behind them? How did this band of ragtag activists help elect a new Congress in 2006 and a new president in 2008?

For years those types of questions had continued to pile up, and I kept waiting for somebody in the press to answer them. Bloggers, forever obsessed with what's next and averse to look back even at the previous week, weren't going to devote much of their time to reflect on the larger netroots movement. Neither did journalists show much interest in netroots history. Over the years they had occasionally, and rather reluctantly, acknowledged liberal bloggers. But they showed almost no desire to detail, in depth, the blogosphere's rise or spotlight the new media stars it was producing. As a matter of fact, I was the first person to even ask some of the A-list bloggers profiled in this book for extended interviews about the rapid growth of the netroots and their own role in the online insurrection.

Back in 1994, when the emerging stars of right-wing talk radio helped Republicans gain control of Congress, AM hosts were toasted in the press as being wildly influential. They even scored a *Time* magazine cover feature. By contrast, when liberal bloggers helped Democrats win back the House in 2006, there was mostly radio silence from media elites. The same media indifference followed Obama's victory two years later; the press showed no interest in toasting the bloggers.

This silence was odd because traditionally there are few assignments journalists relish more than writing about other writers. Crouse's *The Boys on the Bus* had ushered in the era of political journalists as celebrities, which only intensified with each passing decade. NBC's week-long, flood-the-zone coverage of Tim Russert's death in 2008 simply confirmed that fact. Perhaps driven by feelings of competitive jealousy for the fresh generation of citizen journalists and their newfound clout, or maybe fueled

by contempt for the bloggers who so effectively critiqued the Beltway media's often shoddy work, the traditional press mostly kept its distance and chose not to shine a spotlight on the new writers and activists. That is, when the press wasn't being openly contemptuous of the bloggers. A *New York Times* writer once expressed his "half-sickening feeling" at the realization that the news agenda was being set by a "largely unpaid, T-shirt-clad army of bloggers."

Instead, the press clung to its outdated caricatures, portraying bloggers as polarizing, amateurish extremists, downplaying their concrete achievements, and reluctant to tell the personal stories behind the creation of the blogosphere, the unlikely professional odysseys bloggers often took before securing leadership positions within the vibrant political community. How reluctant? As of January 2009, the normally media-obsessed *Washington Post* still has not published, ever, a single feature profile of an A-list liberal blogger.

The media's indifference is even more baffling considering that the story of the blogosphere is a remarkably fertile and personal one, the kind journalists usually love to tell, and filled with an almost endless collection of unlikely biographies of online pioneers who rose from complete obscurity to the forefront of a game-changing media movement. If journalists had bothered to take the time, they would have discovered that the net-roots was occupied with all kinds of improbable actors, such as Chris Bowers, the former Temple University English professor who, in the early part of the decade, found himself habitually hunched over his laptop between classes, reading everything he could find online. Bored with the freshman composition and literary theory courses he was teaching and plagued by nightmares about returning to the classroom for another semester, the young bearded professor with wire-rim glasses and long hair tucked behind each ear started leaving reader comments on Daily Kos. That fledgling online site was launched in 2002 by an army vet named Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, who at the time was stuck at a Web-development firm helping corporate clients he despised. Often noisy, contentious, and brawling with his snide and argumentative attacks, Markos, as he is universally known online, quickly gave voice to the howls of protest on the Left during the Bush administration. At Daily Kos, Bowers fi-

nally found the community, and the political voice, he'd been searching for. "I just threw myself in politics," he told me.

Soon Bowers's life revolved around blogging. He loved the free Internet connection at work so much that he often slept on his office floor so he'd have an entire night's worth of uninterrupted blogging. In fact, he'd learned the hard way the importance of a solid online connection. In his Philadelphia apartment on Election Eve 2004, moments after he had hit the *send* button to post a long, detailed breakdown of the final campaign polling data on the landmark liberal site MyDD, he lost his cable and Internet connection. He hadn't paid his electricity bill, now \$145 overdue. His apartment lost power with disturbing regularity, actually.

He later developed a physical tic, shaking if he remained offline for more than two hours. If he didn't post anything for an eight-hour stretch during the day, Bowers's friends and family assumed something was wrong.

"I blog, therefore I am," he wrote.

In November 2006 an exhausted Bowers appeared in a YouTube clip that showed him slumped on a couch and staring into his friend Matt Stoller's video camera, explaining the harsh realities of being a political blogger: "If you have no children, no one to support, and no career ambitions, then you too can become a full-time progressive blogger, as long as you're willing to do nothing else in your entire life."

Bowers later amended the list to include other key job qualifications:

If you don't care about having a social life.

If you don't mind being viciously attacked dozens of times every day.

If you don't have a wide range of interests in life.

If you don't mind paying for your own health insurance.

If you don't like taking vacations.

If a one-bedroom apartment in West Philly is your idea of high living.

Did Democratic politicians and their consultants embrace every blogger idea and initiative? Hardly. But they paid attention. And compared to the wilderness years between 2001 and 2004, compared to how the liberal voice had been completely silenced at the turn of the decade, when the

Democratic Party retreated into an ineffectual fetal position, the rise of the blogs represented a huge achievement. And Bowers just had to be part of it.

That's how the progressive blogosphere was born. Creative people like Bowers were drawn to it because it represented a much-needed release valve for the pent-up political frustration so many Democrats and liberals had felt throughout the late 1990s and into this decade. For them, blogs represented small-scale places where people could stand up to the onslaught of conservative misinformation that had fueled Bill Clinton's impeachment, the Florida recount in 2000, and the rush to war with Iraq. It was where citizens could at least *try* to launch a new form of participatory democracy online. At first they just blogged in hopes of retaining their sanity as they watched the Bush Doctrine unfurl and liberals being attacked as unpatriotic while the government cut taxes on its most wealthy citizens and waged a costly, unprecedented war over nonexistent WMDs.

The liberal blogosphere, made up of lots of funny-sounding anchors—Firedoglake, Hullabaloo, FiveThirtyEight, the Field, AmericaBlog, Shakesville, Eschaton, Crooks and Liars, Suburban Guerrilla—represents perhaps the most unplanned, un-thought-through media and political movement in modern America. Liberal bloggers changed politics and the press in a way that no other left-leaning movement had done in decades. But it really did just happen.

Early on, the netroots movement was built with very little coordination and no money. There were no memos, no outlines, no projections, and certainly no budgets. No nothing. (Only later did coordination begin to surface.) It grew organically and grew out of a deep-seated frustration with the direction the country was taking. It became an accidental empire as bloggers served as a conduit to the grassroots. The bloggers talked to people who talked to people, and collectively they amassed real political power by raising hell together.

It was an accidental empire because the pent-up dissatisfaction among liberals just happened to peak at the exact moment the Internet knocked down barriers of entry for public discussion. It was accidental because the key players who helped bring the liberal blogosphere to life represented



the most unlikely cast of characters imaginable. Most brought with them no experience in politics or journalism. None of them ever dreamed that their online essays, posted in an effort to keep themselves sane, would ever represent career options, or that White House candidates would one day come courting.

Collectively, bloggers expanded well beyond the traditional role of journalist or commentator; they tossed aside the mantle of objectivity that the boys on the bus had worn for decades. Instead, bloggers raised money, trained leaders, forged vibrant online communities, picked candidates, fostered participation, forged coalitions among existing special interest groups, launched policy initiatives, produced original reporting, called bullshit out on the press, and occasionally, and out of sheer force of will, attached a spine to the Democratic Party, which for much of the decade had been too nervous, too spooked by the pro-war GOP, to acknowledge its proud progressive past. They literally kept the lights on during a very dark period. "Without the netroots, Democrats would not be in the position we are in today," U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid announced after the Party's sweeping congressional wins in 2006. "It's as simple as that."

Many of the bloggers wrote better, more succinctly and more passionately, than most high-paid newspaper columnists. They were more politically astute than TV's paid Beltway pundits, although they were rarely invited to be part of the televised round-table discussions, and they were just as powerful as labor leaders when it came to igniting key issues within the Democratic Party. They even put on better presidential debates: the blogger-sponsored candidate forum in 2007 turned out to be far more substantive than any of the cable television debates that followed.

Growth and influence came at an astonishing clip. Four years earlier, desperately trying to push Sen. John Kerry across the White House finish line, the nascent blogosphere represented the campaign oddity, the proverbial new kids with their newly minted press credentials and their laptops stuck up in the nosebleed section at the Democratic National Convention in Boston. By 2008 they starred as a main attraction. Camped out inside the bloggers-only Big Tent, a two-story, corporate-sponsored 8,000-foot pavilion just blocks from the Convention in downtown Den-

ver, hundreds of bloggers chilled on couches in the New Media Lounge, watched news updates on flat-screen TVs, and feasted on free WiFi, back massages, smoothies, and beer while CBS's Katie Couric came by with a camera crew to interview *them*.

Sure, arch enemy Bill O'Reilly still compared liberal bloggers to the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi Party. (Bloggers chuckled every time he did.) But O'Reilly was probably just angry that so many conservative bloggers, blinded by their pursuit of half-baked conspiracy theories over the years, had failed to emerge as a political force on their own. After all, the goose chases related to Barack Obama—he was born in Kenya!—took up months of the bloggers' time in 2008. There was simply nothing on the Right that matched the passion, or the proven results, of the liberal netroots.

Indeed, beginning on November 3, 2004, the day after Bush won reelection, the netroots became focused on electing a Democratic president. For four years the blogs worked toward that goal. "In their role as a central conduit of political information and opinion, they will calibrate, amplify, and disseminate the messages and themes that shape people's beliefs and bolster their convictions, providing the impetus for organizing, fundraising and GOTV [getting out the vote]," wrote the netroots guru Peter Daou. "And on November 4, 2008, eight long years of doing battle against the excesses of the Bush presidency will come to a triumphant conclusion."

A triumph, yes, but the White House campaign also revealed deep growing pains in the liberal blogosphere. The rupture emerged during the Democratic primary season, when the normally tightly knit community was torn apart by a venomous civil war between online supporters of Barack Obama and those of Hillary Clinton. The months-long showdown left deep, lasting scars, especially among some netroots veterans, who were aghast at the sexist language lobbed at Clinton from within the progressive community.

Flexing all kinds of new muscles built up between 2004 and 2008, the netroots did everything it could to get Obama and Democrats elected: Media Matters for America played the role of relentless watchdog; the Huffington Post built a gigantic bulletin board; the all-star think tank

sponsored by the Center for American Progress critiqued Republican policies; and ActBlue served as the money hub for candidates. A new generation of creative operatives enthralled by the historic possibilities of Obama's run was fostered and promoted. But Obama himself often failed to return the online love. Bloggers, even the majority of Obama supporters, had to wrestle with the nominee's standoffishness toward the netroots and its love of unambiguous progressive politics. Embracing the campaign rhetoric of bipartisan unity, Obama's team focused more on the revolutionary fund-raising and Facebook-style social-networking possibilities the Internet held, and less on the brand of scrappy liberal politics the blogosphere embraced.

That political disconnect prompted some painful introspection throughout the campaign and into Obama's early days as president. Had the blogosphere simply been cast aside by a new team of centrist Democrats? Had bloggers failed to secure a pledge from Obama that he'd govern as a liberal before showering him with support, before giving him the netroots endorsement, during the primary season?

It's impossible to know whether the 2008 campaign represented the netroots' pinnacle in terms of passion and influence, or if it has lasting power and this election season was just the first of many when liberal bloggers will forcefully help to shape the parameters of political debate. What is clear is that in 2008 bloggers took the campaign bus down a very different route.

## **BLOGGERS ON THE BUS**