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9 Feb

My life as a blog: 12 of the best sites

Blogs used to be a minority interest, but technology expert Charles Arthur finds their appeal has grown massively. Here he picks the cream of the crop

07 February 2005

WHISKEY JAR

Address: www.billmon.org

Written by: 'billmon', an American former journalist

Minimalist but compelling observations on what has happened, styled as two conflicting quotes without commentary. A report of George Bush's inauguration and "theme of tyranny and terrorism" (quoting the Melbourne Herald Sun) is contrasted with a passage from Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four: "The face of Emmanuel Goldstein, the Enemy of the People had flashed on to the screen... the sight or even the thought of Goldstein produced fear and anger automatically." Something of a coffee-break blog for the reader, but it belies a great breadth of reading by its author, a former journalist who prefers to remain anonymous. "He understands the art of arranging fragments into a bigger story," says author (and blogger) Andrew Brown.

BOING BOING

Address: www.boingboing.net

Written by: Cory Doctorow, science-fiction author and journalist for magazines like 'Wired'

A Canadian based in the UK but often travelling (so was pulled up by American Airlines, which found him suspicious). He links to things technical (ways to make phone calls over the net), non-technical (Johnny Ramone's gravestone) and just...random stuff. At times an excess of "geek factor", because people this linked tend to be fascinated by technology for its own sake. But his status means he's a clearing house for many of the interesting trends being argued about, such as "digital rights" software. (Will your CD play in every player? Will the song you bought from iTunes play if you don't have an iPod?) Think of it as the future we'll be living in about five years from now.

INSTAPUNDIT

Address: www.instupundit.com

Written by: Glenn Reynolds, law professor at the University of Tennessee

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Mo Mowlam



MP turned agony aunt discusses one-woman show

Gorgeous Georgian



House likely to appeal to arts and history lovers

Harry Hill



Big-collared comic gees up for *Hooves* tour

Robert Fisk

There will be no Middle East peace without justice

Questions please

... for the veteran crooner Engelbert Humperdinck

Philip Hensher

An idiotic law that could silence free speech

Mystery source

Could George Bush Snr really be Deep Throat?

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TOP STORIES

Blair finally apologises for bomb convictions

Britain's exit from ERM on Black Wednesday cost £4bn

Blair predicts fall in immigrants after

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SUB TV

Professor Reynolds holds forth on anything and everything, linking all over the web. The "geek factor" is low - he's not a technologist. "What kind of geek am I?" he asks rhetorically before going on to muse about how much he liked the old Addams Family TV show: "Gomez - a lawyer married to a striking brunette with morbid interests - was one of my role models. And here I am, a law professor married to a striking brunette with morbid interests..." Reynolds inspired so many other people to start up their own blogs that he's sometimes known as the "Blogfather", because he showed you don't have to be writing about computers to do it.

crackdown

Eta car bomb explodes in Madrid hours before visit by royals

Growing death toll as Iraqi insurgents target state officials

Britain accused over CIA's secret torture flights

SCRIPTING NEWS

Address: www.scripting.com

Written by: Dave Winer, software programmer

Winer was the first person to start writing what is now known as a blog; he wrote one of the earliest programs to make it possible. He's also the father of "RSS", a system that lets you read abstracts of blogs without having to visit the actual pages. Grouchy, opinionated, anti-Bush, Winer is a longtime smoker who quit, and his blog is a mix of tiny personal observations and larger industry ones about how the media and bloggers can co-exist. The geek factor is high (he writes software, after all) but the news level is too. The noise he made online and offline about what he sees as the importance of bloggers was crucial to their acceptance first by the Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean and then the Republicans at their convention.

JOHN ROBB'S WEBLOG

Address: jrobb.mindplex.org/

Written by: John Robb, analyst and speaker on "the intersection of terrorism, infrastructure and markets".

Bitty grabs of information from all over: Chechen terrorist networks inside Russia; the 2ft of snow outside his window; US forces in Iraq. Outside defence and terrorism, it's quite random and American; you won't hear this stuff on Today, which is part of the attraction. Widely read. Robb is strongest on topics he specialises in, which is "global guerillas" (also dealt with in his more specialised blog at www.globalguerillas.com, from which he sometimes cross-posts). Overall, a dispassionate view of how the "war on terror" is being prosecuted, by someone who knows where the public information (some of which the military would prefer not to be public) is online.

BORIS JOHNSON MP

Address: www.boris-johnson.com

Written by: Boris Johnson, MP for Henley-on-Thames

Yes, this really is the blog of the tousle-haired Conservative MP. It's a bit bumbling on the surface, but that disguises an honesty, keen organisation and depth that put many rivals into the shade; rather like the man himself, in fact. A recent post reads: "Clear choice at the next election: unlimited and uncontrolled immigration under Mr Blair, limited and controlled immigration with the Conservatives. Any views on election strategies would be welcomed." And readers have provided their own taunting strategies: "How about love and peace as a political standpoint... No, bugger it, that would be silly. Let's just focus on keeping the Croats out." Even so, a useful insight into the subtle ambition within the party.

GUY FAWKES'S BLOG OF PLOTS, RUMOURS AND CONSPIRACY

Address: 5thnovember.blogspot.com/

Written by: someone who knows plenty of Westminster gossip, and whose wife works for a big City bank

Much more insider-y than Boris Johnson, by "the only person ever to enter

Parliament with honest intentions, ie to blow it up". News level is high, and it claims to have been the source of useful material for The Guardian diary (on the matter of David Blunkett retaining his grace-and-favour house post-resignation) and unafraid to keep poking Ruth Kelly in the Opus Dei. Called Tony Blair's ambition rather accurately some weeks before the famous heart operation: "He'll go on and on as long as he can. Blair is too vain to leave with things in a mess and his place in history uncertain." Has the feel of something a parliamentary sketch writer with time on his hands would write.

IN PASSING

Address: www.inpassing.org/

Written by: a female student at the Univ of California, Berkeley

This one's about comments and conversations heard in passing. Yes, really. It's like having a microphone appear randomly in a large American city (except it's Berkeley, California, "a rather unusual town", as the author puts it). Going all the way back to March 2000, it's a strangely compelling experience, like a film or book whose plot you can't quite grasp. There's no news, no geekiness and no links to other sites, yet In Passing draws a huge, devoted fan base whose members talk among themselves about every little overheard pearl. An aspiring writer might trawl it for authentic West Coast speech. Perfection could be attained if we had a British version; perhaps the next Alan Bennett could start a blog of conversations overheard in Yorkshire bus shelters.

KOTTKE'S REMAINDERED LINKS

Address: www.kottke.org/remainder/

Written by: Jason Kottke, web designer based in New York

You know how there's just the right amount of news to fit into every newspaper each day? Well, there's always a surplus on the web. Remaindered links is where they go, alongside Kottke's "home of fine hypertext products". Sometimes hilarious, often thought-provoking, sometimes plain interesting, these are remnants of places that Kottke has gone to during the day but often hasn't found time to include in the parent blog (kottke.org). The news value is variable (do you care about the films he's added to his blog? How about "people's faces before and after using meth[amphetamine]"?) as is the geek factor. But read enough of these, and you'll find someone who knows much more about something you're deeply interested in.

LONDON UNDERGROUND TUBE DIARY

Address: london-underground.blogspot.com/

Written by: "Annie Mole", Tube lore expert

Completely unofficial, and so not quite the inside scoop you might wish for (as it's written by people who use the Tube, rather than any of its staff). But plenty of promise as it grows in popularity. "Things I'd like to see on the Tube: a penalty ticket inspector who isn't a sadist; a Photo-Me booth you can fit more than a mouse into; a District Line train that doesn't stop between every stop." Also full of "Tube rules" (how to sit, how to dress, how to ignore the weirdo in the carriage). Sprawling (so you'll need to wait for the page to load) and enjoyable, and written by someone who - gasp - is not afraid to ring up, say, the people who devised an advertising campaign based around the Underground and ask them why.

GALLEYCAT

Address: www.mediabistro.com/galleycat/

Written by: Natalie Chicha, based in New York

A blog about books and publishing. Though its editor is based in New York, there's plenty of British-oriented bloggery. It perhaps lacks some of the spite that one really wishes for in a blog, but there's always time. Or perhaps the publishing business is too nice for spite. One of the growing number of truly commercial blogs, with job adverts and special features, including "what to expect from your agent and your editor" and "four-week course for copy editors". Sure, it's American, but in the absence (again) of a biting British version, one must make do. Possibly all the British publishing world is too busy, but more likely they haven't caught on to what blogs can do to raise the profile of the industry, or

speed up the passage of gossip and thus money.

MEMEPOOL

Address: memepool.com/

Written by: Joshua Schachter and Jeffrey Smith, computer graduates from Carnegie-Mellon University in the US

Less a blog, more something stitched together from pieces all over the web. A typical entry contains: a link to a support group for women who have affairs; and another link to a cheated wives' online forum. Collected together as "A support group for women who cheat, and one for the women who hate them, and who read their journals, and out them." Or: "From toilet seats to coathangers to lightmeters, you can always find something to amuse you at Unusual Museums of the Internet." With, of course, the links to museums for toilet seats, coat hangers and light metres. Zany and unpredictable.

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