

The Kid with All the News about the TV News



Andrew Council for The New York Times

Brian Stelter, a college student and the blogger behind TVNewser, a must-read in the television news world.

By [JULIE BOSMAN](#)

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TOWSON, Md. — When people in the television news business want to find out what’s going on in their industry, they turn to a blog called TVNewser. But while the executives obsessively checking TVNewser are mostly high powered and highly paid, the person who creates it is not: he is Brian Stelter, a baby-faced 21-year-old at Towson University here, a few miles north of Baltimore.

“I’ve heard people joke that when TVNewser is dormant, the kid had a final or a big family dinner that he couldn’t get out of,” said [Brian Williams](#), the NBC news anchor and a TVNewser devotee. “People from entry level to high and mighty check in on it.”

When his postings dropped off last month after his girlfriend dumped him, Mr. Stelter found himself fielding complaints from powerful network executives about when he was going to get over his romantic travails and get back on track. “I was dealing with drama,” he said.

Mr. Stelter’s blog (tvnewser.com), a seven-day-a-week, almost 24-hour-a-day newsfeed of gossip, anonymous tips, newspaper article links and program ratings, has become a virtual bulletin board for the industry.

It is read religiously by network presidents, media executives, producers and publicists, not for any stinging commentary from Mr. Stelter, whose style is usually described as earnest, but because it provides a quick snapshot of the industry on any given day. Habitues include Mr. Williams and Jonathan Klein, the president of CNN’s domestic operations, who long ago offered up his cellphone number to Mr. Stelter.

“The whole industry pays attention to his blog,” said Jeffrey W. Schneider, a senior vice president of ABC News. “It would not surprise me if I refreshed my browser 30 to 40 times a day.”

In April Mr. Stelter attended the White House Correspondents’ Dinner as a guest of MSNBC.

“He was quite a celebrity,” said Jeremy Gaines, a spokesman for MSNBC. “Literally two tables over was [George Clooney](#), and at our table was TVNewser, and people were waiting in line to see him.”

Perhaps this is what the techno-geeks had in mind when they invented the Internet — a device to squash not only time and space, but also social class and professional hierarchies, putting an unprepossessing Maryland college student with several term papers due in a position to command the attention and grudging respect of some of society’s most famous and powerful personalities.

Or maybe it just worked out that way.

Mr. Stelter chronicles the gossipy New York-Hollywood television industry from the tiny, leafy campus at Towson, where he is a senior majoring in mass communication (he has a 3.5 grade-point average) and the editor of the student newspaper. He started the blog in 2004 on a whim during winter break, and not long after he was hired by a journalism Web site to keep it going. These days, by 9 a.m. he is awake and blogging, sometimes in class, courtesy of a campuswide [Wi-Fi](#) connection, as well as from his apartment, the student union and his cluttered desk in a corner of the newspaper office.

Mr. Stelter has earned the grudging trust of many of his readers, who e-mail him hundreds of tips a day that often translate into scoops, like the early warning that [Peter Jennings](#), the former ABC News anchor, was near death or, more recently, the discovery of a Photoshopped publicity shot of [Katie Couric](#), the “[CBS Evening News](#)” anchor, that made her appear a dress size or two smaller.

How much does television care about Mr. Stelter’s little blog?

“The biggest TV executives, the men and women who run the top networks, look at this kid’s Web site all the time,” said Joe Scarborough, the host of the talk show “Scarborough Country” on MSNBC. “And the genius of it is that everybody thinks they own him. Everybody says: ‘Oh, I’ve got a great relationship with Brian. Let me leak it to him.’ ”

Mr. Klein, certainly one of the most powerful figures in the business, telephoned Mr. Stelter one Sunday during Hurricane Dennis in the summer of 2005 to make sure he was tuned in to a report by Rick Sanchez. “He was saying: ‘Are you watching this? Isn’t this great?’ ” Mr. Stelter said. (He promptly blogged about it, writing, “CNN correspondent Rick Sanchez may become the star of this storm.”)

One evening in March 2005 Mr. Klein interrupted a bedtime-story session with his children to give a quote to Mr. Stelter. But the two have also had the occasional clash. After Mr. Klein admonished employees during an editorial meeting last year for leaking stories — presumably to Mr. Stelter — notes of the meeting were promptly leaked to TVNewser.

The network publicists generally know his class schedule — afternoons on Tuesdays and Thursdays — and barrage him with material, which they often expect him to post within minutes. While recording a radio segment for one of his classes — Mass Communication 381 — he turned his cellphone off for 15 minutes, then turned it back on to find one nagging voice mail message from an ABC publicist and another from CNN.

Mr. Stelter originally started the blog under the name Cablenewser. He concealed his identity so that his growing audience would take him seriously. "People thought I was a bald, disgruntled 40-something executive," he said. "I think I'm balding, but that's it."

In July 2004 he was hired by [Mediabistro.com](http://mediabistro.com), a journalism Web site that runs a number of popular blogs. (Mr. Stelter declined to disclose his salary, but he has said before that it is more than enough to cover his college expenses.) Since then his audience has expanded substantially — the site had 821,000 page views in October 2006, up from 150,000 in July 2004. In September, thanks to Ms. Couric's premiere at CBS, TVNewser had record traffic of 1.2 million page views.

Growing up in Damascus, Md., Mr. Stelter watched the news addictively. He recalls watching Mr. Williams, who was then at MSNBC, reporting on the crash of T.W.A. Flight 800, the death of [Diana, Princess of Wales](#), and the revelation that President [Bill Clinton](#) was entangled with [Monica Lewinsky](#). Meanwhile, Mr. Stelter practiced his "newscaster voice" and harbored anchor-size ambitions of his own.

"I always thought I would be the person who sat in the chair for 12 hours," Mr. Stelter said. "Then I realized there are only three people who do that job."

He finally got to meet Mr. Williams last year when he came to New York to attend a memorial service for Mr. Jennings. Mr. Williams invited him to sit in on his broadcast's 2:30 p.m. editorial meeting, and the two talked privately for a half-hour.

"I've always regarded him as the De Niro character in 'The King of Comedy,'" Mr. Williams said, invoking the 1983 film whose lead character, Rupert Pupkin, is a talentless comic who stalks his talk-show idol. "He has kind of a Rupert Pupkinesque double life."

In the industry Mr. Stelter is generally thought of as a reliable reporter, despite his youth and inexperience. "He seems to be a trustworthy guy, a trustworthy source of information," said Jeff Greenfield, a CNN commentator. "And the fact that he can barely vote and drink shouldn't really bother anybody."

Mr. Stelter's relationship with the reporters who cover the industry is more strained. The Television Critics Association, an industry group, will not accept him as a member because he is a blogger. And there are some who feel his influence is out of proportion. "He kind of dominates the conversation in this business, just because he posts everything," said Michael Learmonth, a reporter for Variety, a trade publication.

But before long Mr. Stelter may shed his label as boy blogger. Next spring he graduates from Towson, and his contract with Mediabistro, where he is considered a full-time employee, ends in May. While he said he hasn't received any firm job offers in the industry, several television executives have urged him to call when he starts job hunting.

In the meantime, Mr. Stelter's blogging schedule may hit some snags in the coming months. For one thing, he has a new girlfriend. And a planned trip to China in January is causing some distress. "I'm really worried about how I'm going to find an Internet connection," he said.

But taking time off is unthinkable. "My audience won't put up with that," Mr. Stelter said. "TV news is always on."