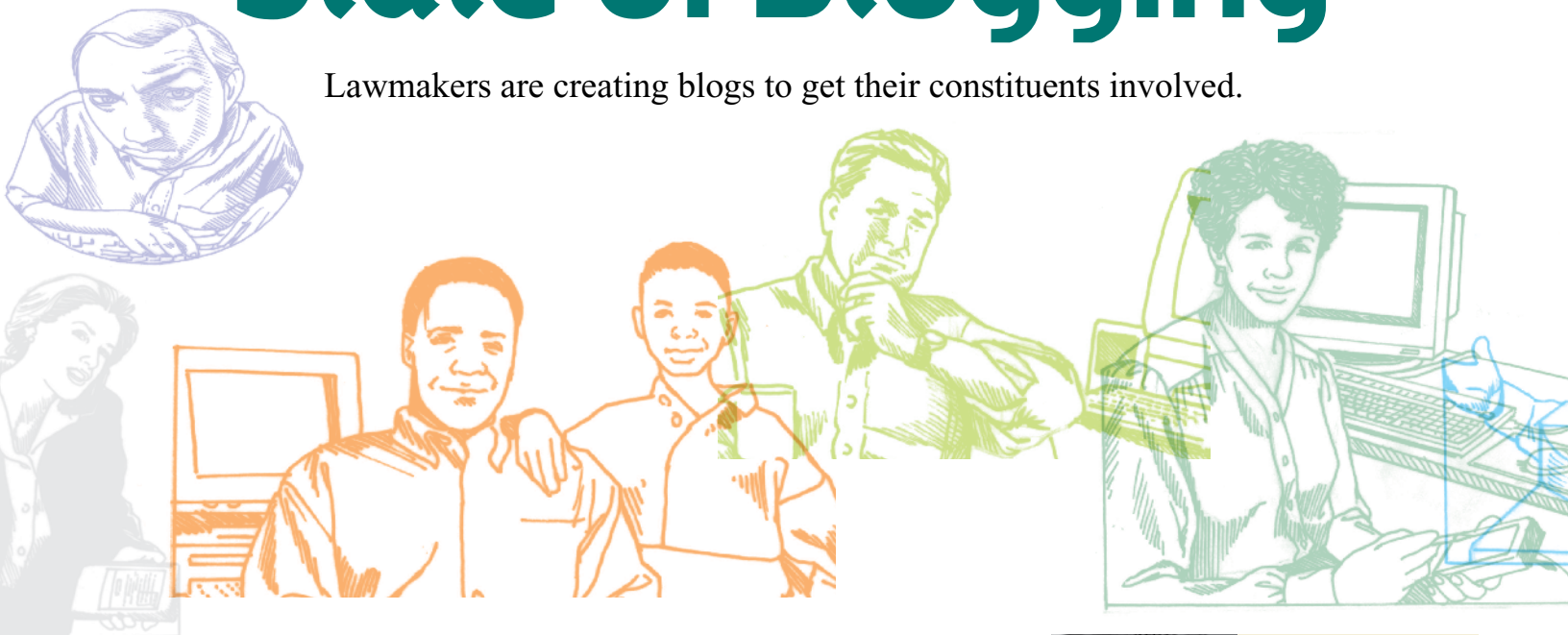


State of Blogging

Lawmakers are creating blogs to get their constituents involved.



BY NANCY MANN JACKSON

In some places, legislators are “Very Big Deals” and regularly quoted in the local media, says Virginia Delegate Kristen Amundson. But as a representative for the suburbs of Washington, D.C., her local media has bigger fish to fry.

“Voters are never going to read about me in *The Washington Post*,” Amundson says. “So if I believe that communication with voters is part of my job, and I do, then blogging has to be part of that effort.”

But even legislators who are featured in the local news find that maintaining a blog offers a more authentic way to communicate with their constituents beyond the filter of the media. “With all the complaints about media bias from the left and the right, [blogging] gives me an opportunity to speak directly to the constituent and encourages voters to get more involved in the legislative process,” says Georgia Representative Steve Davis.

Increasing numbers of legislators are launching blogs to make their voices heard and create ongoing conversations with their constituents.

“I started my blog as a way for my con-

Nancy Mann Jackson is a free-lance writer from Florence, Ala.



DELEGATE
KRISTEN AMUNDSON
VIRGINIA

stituents to read what was going on inside the Georgia General Assembly as it happens,” Davis says. He’s also aware that people are becoming more technologically savvy and wanted to be out front in reaching constituents online.

Engaging citizens in government is reshaping the way government works. The interactive tools offered by Web 2.0, the new incarnation of the Internet, make it easy for government executives to engage their constituents, and a growing number of lawmakers are making blogs part of their strategies for connecting with citizens. Still, the practice is fairly uncommon.

“We’re at the early stages by any measure,” says David Wyld, author of *The Blogging Revolution: Government in the Age of Web 2.0*, a report published by IBM’s Center for the Business of Government.

But in five to 10 years, says Wyld, who is a professor of management at Southeastern Louisiana University, “blogging and other



REPRESENTATIVE
STEVE DAVIS
GEORGIA

interactive Web tools will just be part of the ratcheted-up expectations people have for their governments.”

WHY BLOG?

For most lawmakers who take the time to blog, the exercise is more than simply creating an online journal. The most effective blogs encourage readers to join the discussion. They are undertaken by officials who aim to elicit constituents’ ideas so they may lead a government that is genuinely “of the people.”

“Blogging is simply another way to communicate with constituents,” says Utah Representative Stephen Urquhart. “It’s tough to draw much of a crowd to reason with me on most issues. People are too busy to do things on my timetable. But on my blog, I can reason with many people every day on a variety of issues.

“People like that I make my reasoning public, so they can provide feedback,” Urquhart



TIPS FOR BLOGGING



- ◆ **Define yourself and your purpose.** Know (and maybe post) the reasons you are starting your blog, what you hope to do with it, and who you hope will read it.
- ◆ **Do it yourself.** Never have someone else write your blog; you must be the author to make it authentic and interesting to your audience.
- ◆ **Commit time to it.** Be prepared not only to post regularly but also to respond to comments. If you know you'll be unavailable for a period of time, invite a guest blogger to fill in.
- ◆ **Be regular.** If you don't regularly post interesting, updated material to your blog, your readership will fade away.
- ◆ **Be generous.** Don't just fill your blog with information about yourself and your accomplishments; also highlight special people in your district, spotlight your area, provide praise for others and point out people in need of special help.
- ◆ **Have a "hard hide."** You can't have a thin skin and be a successful blogger; expect both positive and negative comments.
- ◆ **Spell check and proofread.** Spelling and grammatical errors can generate bad publicity and detract from your message.
- ◆ **Control yourself.** Although it is great to be honest and open in your blog, don't go to an extreme.
- ◆ **Consider multimedia.** Master blogging first then consider recording and producing your own audio/video content to offer as posts or podcasts on your blog. Seek out free links to use for going multimedia.
- ◆ **Keep learning.** Spend some time each day reading other people's blogs. Subscribe to your favorites. Check out the top-ranked blogs according to Technorati or ComScore, and benchmark the best of the best.

Source: *The Blogging Revolution: Government in the Age of Web 2.0*, by David Wyld, Southeastern Louisiana University.



REPRESENTATIVE
STEPHEN URQUHART
UTAH

says. "It validates their time, knowing that the interaction is available for inspection by others and that it has permanence."

According to Wyld, blogging is growing as a tool for promoting not only online engagement of citizens and public servants, but also offline engagement. "Research shows that the people who are engaged online are more civically involved offline," he says. "If you can promote engagement online, there will be improved engagement offline, too."

Urquhart finds this to be true: "People often approach me to discuss issues they read about on my blog," he says. "Blogging does build bridges."

GETTING STARTED

When a public official makes the decision to start getting connected with his constituents by blogging, what does he need to do and what does he need to know? Not much, according to Wyld. He recommends using the widely available (and often free) blog-



REPRESENTATIVE
STACEY CAMPFIELD
TENNESSEE

ging software and hosting services that offer an easy, step-by-step solution to creating a blog. These include Blogger (www.blogger.com), Live Journal (www.livejournal.com), TypePad (www.typepad.com) and WordPress (www.wordpress.org).

With one of these easy-to-use programs, "all you basically have to do is make a series of decisions regarding the basic format and structure of your blog," Wyld says. "It begins with naming the blog, and then progresses to items such as the screen layout, archiving options, and whether to allow readers to provide feedback."

Although generating feedback and community discussion is often a primary goal of a blog, handling comments can be tricky. Because of the anonymity of the Internet, some people use the medium to make vicious or profane comments. Because he blogs about "hot issues" that draw intense opinions from readers, Tennessee Representative Stacey Campfield "got a lot of foul language" in

the comments section of his blog.

He now uses HaloScan, a free blog commenting and trackback system, to moderate comments, and recommends that other legislators have a comment policy for their blogs. Amundson and her blogging partner, Delegate Bob Brink, include these simple guidelines on their site: “We hope you will comment on our postings. We do ask you to follow a few simple rules. Please understand that any comments that include profanity, personal attacks, or other inappropriate language will be removed from the site.”

D. Wes Sullenger argues, however, in the *Richmond Law Review* that a legislator’s blog hosted on a government-owned network server is a public forum as defined by the Constitution, and must not stifle free speech. That’s why many legislators choose to blog from a home computer that doesn’t use network space owned by the government.

Regardless of how they are managed, advocates for blogging say that allowing comments remains important: “Without comments, a blog is just a glorified press release,” says Professor Mike Cornfield of George Washington University.

DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

Finding time to maintain a blog can be challenging, but advocates say managing time wisely and delegating tasks make blogging doable.

“The hardest part is finding time to keep it updated,” Georgia’s Davis says. “I have a wife and kids, so dividing time between my family, my job and the legislature can be a difficult task.” When he’s really pressed for time, Davis enlists help with research and fact finding.

Colorado House Speaker Andrew Romanoff includes blogging in his official schedule to ensure that it gets done. “Schedule time to blog and respond to email, and force yourself to take that time so you don’t get behind,” he says.

Learning how to maintain the blog on a limited time schedule is vital, according to



Amundson. “Make sure you are both a good writer and a fast one,” she says. “If it takes you three days to respond to a constituent’s letter, don’t blog.” Amundson gets around the time issue by co-blogging with Brink: “It isn’t always a possibility [to blog with a partner], but Bob and I find we can share the work,” she says.

ENJOYING SUCCESSES

For Campfield and others, any resistance to open government is motivation to keep blogging, to keep communicating with constituents about the legislative process and their points of view. “Public officials need to go to the people, not the other way around,” Utah’s Urquhart says. “Blogs make things easy for more and more of our constituents. People appreciate officials who are accessible. Blogging shows that an official is willing to be very public about the work at hand.”

Not only does blogging give citizens insight into the legislative process and the issues, it also allows them to learn more about their legislators. Blogging can build relationships and even aid in reelection efforts.

“We have press releases, speeches and all manner of communication with constituents,” says Alaska Representative Bob Lynn. “But the blog is not just legislative; it also includes my personal take on current events and issues,

and it allows people to get to know me better as a person. It’s rewarding to be able to communicate not only the facts as I see them but also my feelings and beliefs about something.”

When citizens know their legislator better, they are more apt to communicate. “After starting my blog, the number of emails I received increased dramatically,” Romanoff says. “I now receive approximately 1,000 emails per week.”

Input from their constituents sometimes sparks ideas. When one writer on his blog complained about the light sentence for an official’s misuse of campaign funds, Campfield sponsored a bill to require stiffer penalties for campaign finance scandals.

“The Internet’s way of exposing things is completely changing the way government operates,” Campfield says. “The more points of view you have, the better.”

In addition to engaging more citizens in government, blogging can also help officials do their jobs better. “There is a benefit to the exercise itself,” Wyld says. “If you go through the act of writing about your positions, it gives you the chance to get your thoughts together and it can be therapeutic.”

Not only do blogging legislators have opportunities to work through their ideas while blogging about the issues, but their openness allows readers to understand their thought processes and sometimes even influence them. Davis says writing a blog gives him “the opportunity to let constituents know how and why I will vote a certain way on a piece of legislation. And it gives me the opportunity to hear from opposing viewpoints to broaden my understanding of the issues.”

Sounds like governing for the people, by the people.



HOUSE SPEAKER
ANDREW ROMANOFF
COLORADO



REPRESENTATIVE
BOB LYNN
ALASKA