



(GWU.edu, 2001)

Parking Lott

The role of Web logs in the fall of Sen. Trent Lott

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INTRODUCTION

“I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We’re proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn’t have had all these problems over all these years, either.”

-- Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.), then incoming Senate majority leader, at then-Sen. Strom Thurmond’s (R-S.C.) 100th birthday party, Dec. 5, 2002

In early November 2002, Republicans and President Bush scored major victories in the mid-term elections, gaining several seats in the House of Representatives and seizing a narrow control of the Senate, which had just recently been narrowly controlled by Democrats. Senate Minority Leader, and Majority-Leader-in-waiting, Trent Lott of Mississippi, vowed to move swiftly on a conservative agenda.

But something happened on the way to Lott’s return to power. He found himself in trouble over comments he made, quoted above, regarding Sen. Strom Thurmond’s 1948 presidential candidacy, in which the South Carolinian ran as a Dixiecrat in support of racial segregation. The political firestorm escalated despite Lott’s issuing of apology after apology; he even appeared on Black Entertainment Television, where he endorsed affirmative action. (Hotline, 17 Dec. 2002) Liberals and conservatives alike berated him and his actions, and eventually even President Bush said that his comments “do not reflect the spirit of our country.” (CNN.com, 13 Dec. 2002) Under increasing pressure, Lott on Dec. 20 announced that he would not seek to be named majority leader once his party took official control of the Senate in January 2003. Sen. Bill Frist of Tennessee was eventually named in his stead.

The question is why Lott’s comments became a major news story despite barely being reported in the establishment press for several days after he spoke. Lott made his

fateful remarks on a Thursday at Thurmond's birthday party, which was broadcast live on C-SPAN; by the following Monday, only three major U.S. newspapers had mentioned them. For one, *Washington Post*, the tale merited only a Page A6 mention – and the reporter had to fight to gain even that.

All this time, however, things were churning in the land of the Web logs. “Blogs” are online commentaries or diaries, usually featuring links to other Internet pages. Some focus on politics – and many of the most prominent of these, including left-leaning Joshua Micah Marshall's *TalkingPointsMemo.com* and right-leaning Glenn Reynold's *Instapundit.com*, tracked Lott's case from almost the beginning. To what degree were these Web logs, and other online media such as *The Note* and *The Hotline*, responsible for turning this into a national story?

By chronicling the events of Dec. 5 to 12, 2002, this paper will argue that online media played a significant role in Lott's eventual downfall by keeping the story of his comments percolating while the mainstream media largely ignored it. It can be seen as the second major political story to be spurred by the Internet, following Matt Drudge's scoop of the Monica Lewinsky affair in January 1998. The greater question, however, is what this portends in terms of online media's future development. Is it, as Drudge argues in *The Drudge Manifesto*, a sign that the mainstream media will be unable to dominate cyberjournalism and will be superceded by smaller, independent writers such as Matt Drudge himself? Or is it merely an isolated, Web-borne incident?

BACKGROUND, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

A major error “in how we think about the media is to treat them as though they were separate from, rather than an integral part, of society. To have an impact, coverage must resonate with themes [already] of general interest. The interests of the American public are already heavily invested in sex, crime, and the ephemera of politics.”

-- Joel Smith, Duke University sociology professor (Wright 2001)

As cyberjournalism is a relatively new development, academic discourse surrounding it is still in development. The Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet's *The Virtual Trail: Political Journalism on the Internet* summarizes the brief history of online media, including discussion of Web sites political journalists visit most for news.

The birth of political news online came in fall 1987 with the launch of the *Presidential Campaign Hotline*, a collection of political news and insider gossip that was “the first online political community of reporters and political operatives.” (IDPI 2002, 5) It began on a CompuServe bulletin board and still exists as *The Hotline*, a very expensive (about \$4,500 per year) part of the *National Journal's* already expensive Web site. (IDPI 2002, 5-6, 30) Initially, *The Hotline* was distributed mainly by fax, “but by the early 1990s, journalists who could afford the subscription fee were routinely downloading *Hotline* to start their day. Now they click to the Web site.” (IDPI 2002, 6)

In due time, mainstream media found their way online; CNN.com debuted in August 1995, for example. (CNN.com 1996) Independent outlets were also forming, most prominently *DrudgeReport.com*, which famously broke the Monica Lewinsky/Bill Clinton story after *Newsweek* put it on hold. Matt Drudge was soon a household name.

Today, however, online journalistic innovation has “an insider’ thrust to it, suggesting the political story of the Web will have more to do with ‘niches’ than mass

audiences.” (IDPI 2002, 12) In the vein of the expensive *Hotline*, CBSNews.com produces a free news digest called *Washington Wrap*, while WashingtonPost.com counters with the free *Media Notes* and the independent *PoliticalWire.com* summarizes and links to the day’s top political stories. The most expansive of these, however, is *The Note*, another free daily dose of political news. *The Note*, run by ABCNews.com, adds “a dash of attitude more commonly found on webzines like *Slate*.... The daily digest was originally an internal memo circulated to news staff and a few close sources before it began running [online] in early 2002.” (IDPI 2002, 32) The Web sites run by CBS News and NBC News have countered with their own *Note*-like rundowns.

Already mentioned above is the fairly recent proliferation of Web logs or “blogs” (the phrase is also spelled as one word, “weblog”), a term Jorn Barger coined in December 1997. (Blood 2002, 7) Early blogs “were link-driven sites. Each was a mixture in unique proportions of links, commentary, and personal thoughts and essays.” (Blood 2002, 8) David Winer, founder and chief executive officer of Userland Software, is credited with writing the first regular, widely followed blog, *ScriptingNews.com*, which focuses on business, technology and other Web logs. He began the site in early 1997 but had actually been blogging since 1995. (Lasica 2002, 179)

By January 1999, 23 known blogs existed, according to a site that tracked them at the time. (Blood 2002, 7) Computer professionals ran most of them, since “the sites had to be built by hand, one block of code at a time.” (Mead 2002, 49) In the summer of 1999, the free build-your-own-blog tools Pitas and Blogger were launched, democratizing the medium. (Blood 2002, 8) The result: blog proliferation and diversification. “There are now almost a million registered users of a popular blogging software.” (Jurkowitz 2002)

Naturally, certain bloggers rose to the top as they gained readership and respect. Most blogs feature a list of other “recommended” blogs, making it easy to click from one site to the next. Bloggers also post snippets of one another’s commentary, along with criticism, support or added insight.

One blog “genre” that has emerged consists of political commentary or journalism, although some question whether blogs “count” as journalism. Sometimes these blogs are a mere regurgitation of the day’s conventional wisdom; at other times, they feature highly original commentary or reporting. (IPDI 2002, 12) Many print newspaper and magazines now feature blogs on their Web sites (see www.ms magazine.com/blog or www.syracuse.com/weblogs/orangejuice), although the blogs chronicled in this paper are independent from mainstream media outlets. In any case, this paper assumes that blogs can become a form of journalism, in terms of their ability to inform and shape readers’ opinions.

From a theoretical perspective, opposing ideas of the Internet’s role in cyberjournalism are outlined in Richard Davis’ *The Web of Politics: The Internet’s Impact on the American Political System* and Matt Drudge’s *The Drudge Manifesto*.

Davis (1999) argues that the mainstream media institutions that dominate print and television news will also come to control the Internet’s news content because of the inherent advantage of the institutionalized media outlets in terms of reliability and resources, and also because of the trends so far in the technological age (the idea being that history repeats itself) and because of what we have seen thus far in the Internet era. “News organizations bring to the Internet a status of long-term recognition as reliable news providers, both nationally and locally,” Davis writes. “In the competition for

customers, that reputation will greatly benefit a *New York Times* or even a regional daily newspaper over unknown newcomers.” (43) Additionally, institutionalized media outlets “already possess the requisite newsgathering apparatus.” (42-43)

Drudge (2000), conversely, sees the kings of all media frightened by the Web’s potential, predicting that independent journalists will rise above the increasingly homogenous media. He writes, “[i]n this post satellite-dish era — when individuals can broadcast their wet dreams with neither a license nor a handbook of regulations issued by Government — The Elites, fearing loss of power, see chaos and anarchy. I see only sunshine.” (22)

Drudge is concerned with what he views as the media’s dangerous relationship to the political, social and business elites. He quotes the International Federation of Journalists: “ ‘We are now seeing the dominance of a handful of companies controlling information, and how information reaches people.... Unless action is taken to ensure journalistic independence, we face a dangerous threat.’ ” (150) That threat can take the form of homogeneous coverage that inadequately reflects the marketplace of ideas. Further, many journalists are connected to political and other actors in a three-degrees-of-separation kind of way. Drudge uses the example of Rita Braver (then of CBS), whose husband, Bob Barnett, is “book agent and lawyer” to Hillary Clinton and others. Braver, he says, is just another of the “reporters who marry lawyers who work for clients who have sex with presidents, among others....” (42) These factors, Drudge believes, can dampen mainstream journalists’ credibility and give writers such as him a leg up.

A third theory that must be taken into account is agenda-setting or the idea that the media seizes on issues that then become important in the eyes of the public;

conversely, issues the media ignore are largely also ignored by the public. (Recently, some have suggested that the media not only tell the public what to think about but what to *think* as well.) Two examples of this are top stories from the summer of 2001: the Chandra Levy disappearance and shark attacks. The media so intensely covered Levy and her affair with then-Rep. Gary Condit (D-Calif.) that a majority of the public thought he was behind her disappearance despite there being no evidence to support such a claim. (Wright 2001) The media covered the shark attacks as if they were unprecedented, but experts said again and again that the rate of attacks was no higher than in previous years. However, since the media were suddenly paying attention to such things, it became a big story. (Interestingly, many news stations aired interviews with the aforementioned experts, noted that these attacks were nothing new and then went right back to the wall-to-wall, hyperventilating coverage of them.) The repetitive nature of these reports, especially those on cable news channels, demonstrates McCombs and Shaw's findings that the number of times media repeat a story influences its agenda-setting ability. Education and political interest level also are factors; people will be more influenced by a story if it is seen as relevant to their lives, they found. (1972, 176-87)

These examples demonstrate the two-step model of agenda setting developed by Behr and Iyengar (1985): Real world cues (a shark attack, a presidential speech) trigger television media coverage, which in turn promotes issue relevance for the masses. Real world cues can also proceed directly to issue relevance. However, agenda-setting is "unidimensional"; that is, coverage increases public concern, but public concern does not boost coverage. (Owen 2003)

Perception of an issue also depends on how the press “frames” a story, using “subtle alterations in the statement or presentation of judgment and choice problems; [Framing is] the manner in which media present issues and events.” (Owen 2003) Frames may influence the content of a story; additionally, reporting the news from a particular angle highlights certain issues over others. (Owen 2003) Returning to one of the above examples, the media framed the Levy disappearance as being all but directly tied to then-Rep. Condit. Images of police searching for Levy’s body were intercut with those of Condit at congressional meetings, implicitly linking the two. Condit was also portrayed as a scoundrel who slept around and hid items in trash cans; he even declined to confirm his affair to police at first. Some of the blame for this coverage is Condit’s, but he was nonetheless framed as the villain, which contributed to the public’s perception of him. (Wright 2001)

A related concept is priming, through which TV news influences how the public judges political actors. “Priming temporarily activates and enhances the accessibility of concepts and considerations in memory... People look for accessible cues, shortcuts that will help them sort through the information to which they choose to pay attention.” (Owen 2003) Priming during the Condit affair may have caused voters to link him to Bill Clinton by reactivating notions of sleazy Democratic politicians preying on interns.

In the case of Trent Lott, however, where rampant “blogging” eventually spurred a hot mainstream issue, the question at hand is not agenda setting by the media onto the mass public; rather it is agenda setting by certain members of the media onto others.

WHILE THE PRESS SLEPT: DECEMBER 6-9, 2002

“Now that Trent Lott is becoming Senate majority leader, does he see any political train wrecks ahead?”

-- Inadvertently prophetic host Judy Woodruff on CNN’s Inside Politics Dec. 6, 2002, the day after the senator made his Thurmond comments but before they had become a story. Lott was interviewed on the program but was not asked about his statement.

The early days of the Lott controversy were marked by an odd disconnect between online journalists/bloggers and mainstream print and television professionals. Perhaps this is most apparent when one considers that the morning after Strom Thurmond’s birthday party, the *Washington Post* ran a front-page, 1,000-word article on the festivities but did not even mention Lott’s comments. (Leibovich 2002) News of the comments appeared in no major publications that Friday, according to Lexis-Nexis. Television was not any better: in an interview on CNN’s *Inside Politics* that same Friday, reporter Jonathan Karl did not ask Lott about what he had said. Later, Karl said that he had been unaware of the comments at the time. (Kurtz, 16 Dec. 2002) Lott, however, made the following ironic comment during the interview, speaking of just-fired Treasury secretary Paul O’Neill, who had been criticized for verbal gaffes: “He’s very plainspoken and an interesting guy, to say the least. So, when you speak too plainly, sometimes, in a position [of power], you can get into a little bit of trouble.” (CNN 2002)

While mainstream outlets dropped the ball, Internet journalists ran with it. ABC’s *The Note*, which goes online around noon, mentioned Lott’s comments about halfway down its marathon Dec. 6 report and quoted Wade Henderson of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights: “This was an offensive and blatant attempt to rewrite the history of the last 50 years...Lott betrayed his role as the majority leader of all Americans.” *The Note* also “noted” that Democratic strategist Donna Brazile was

outraged, and it questioned the lack of coverage in neighboring Louisiana newspapers, where the next day Sen. Mary Landrieu faced a stiff challenge from Republican Suzanne Terrell in a runoff election. *The Hotline* quoted *The Note's* comments in its "People" section under the headline "Lott Proud of Dixiecrat Role."

By Friday afternoon, as Jonathan Karl said nothing during his Lott interview, two prominent left-leaning bloggers had jumped on the issue. The blogger Atrios wrote at 1:21 p.m., "Since political correctness is the scourge of society, I won't mention that the problems Lott is referring to are the Civil and Voting Rights acts." (Atrios 2002) Meanwhile, Josh Marshall cited Lott's comments at 3:20 p.m. as "just another example of the hubris now reigning among Capitol Hill Republicans." (6 Dec. 2002) Later that evening, Atrios unearthed and posted "what Sen. Lott was proud of in 1948 Mississippi": the official Democratic Party sample ballot, which warned that voting for President Truman would make the "vicious...anti-poll-tax, anti-lynching and anti-segregation proposals become the law of the land and our way of life in the South will be gone forever. If you fail to vote, you are in fact casting a vote for Truman and his vicious anti-Southern program." And at 5:55 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 7, Marshall criticized CNN for ignoring Lott's comments while reporting on another senator's allegedly expensive haircut instead: "On *Inside Politics* the John Kerry hair story made the cut, not the Trent Lott segregation story." Atrios chimed in later on Saturday, calling Jonathan Karl a "little bastard" for not asking Lott about his comments. (7 Dec. 2002) All in all, of 12 updates Atrios posted to his blog that Saturday, seven concerned Lott.

At this point, other bloggers were getting into the mix, notably the right-leaning Glenn Reynolds, a Tennessee law professor who runs the very frequently updated

Instapundit.com, possibly the most high-profile blog. Friday night, about eight hours after Atrios' initial comments and six hours after Marshall's, Reynolds wrote that Lott's comments proved that he "shouldn't be majority leader for the Republicans, to begin with. And that's just to begin with. It's a sentiment as evil and loony as wishing that Gus Hall had been elected." (6 Dec. 2002) And as the weekend continued into Sunday, it seemed bloggers far and wide were piling on. It is impossible to document or count all of them, but Reynolds referenced comments by at least eight other bloggers in the 12 updates he posted on Lott through the weekend. Other well-known blogs that began bashing Lott included conservative Andrew Sullivan's *Daily Dish*: "The Republican Party has a simple choice: Either they get rid of Lott as majority leader, or they should come out formally as a party that regrets desegregation..." (8 Dec. 2002); and the liberal *Daily Kos*: "I'm sure GOP moderates like [Sens.] Collins and Chaffee are brimming with pride. This is their leader, not some fringe lunatic." (7 Dec. 2002)

It is apparent that the controversy over Lott's comments was becoming a hot topic on the Internet the weekend of Dec. 7-8, 2002. Strangely, this was still not the case offline. On Saturday, Dec. 7, *The Washington Post* ran a short piece on Page A6 regarding the nascent controversy (Edsall, 2002), in which a Lott spokesman said that the remarks paid tribute "to a remarkable man who led a remarkable life. To read anything more into these comments is wrong." But no other major newspaper covered the story that day, according to Lexis-Nexis. That afternoon, the comments merited only a brief mention on CNN's *Capital Gang*, when host Mark Shields called them his "outrage of the week" and asked why Lott romanticizes "an era of hate, when black Americans were truly oppressed?" His conservative colleague Bob Novak's reply: "I think Trent Lott was

kidding, Mark.” (Atrios, 7 Dec. 2002). The next day, Dec. 8, found no Lott coverage in any major newspaper whatsoever, according to Lexis-Nexis, and the comments were only briefly mentioned on NBC’s *Meet the Press*, where Jesse Jackson phoned in to complain (Bazinet 2002), and *Washington Post* writer David Broder said the remarks merely had a “bad resonance.” (Marshall, 9 Dec. 2002) Even on Monday, Dec. 9, only two major U.S. papers ran stories, the *New York Daily News* and *Chicago Tribune*.

The bloggers were well aware of this dichotomy as the weekend progressed. On Dec. 8, the blog at *ArmedLiberal.com* (2002) was noting that the likes of the *L.A. Times*, *N.Y. Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *CNN.com* had not even mentioned the story. “Why isn’t every reporter, at every press conference, asking Lott or his spokesman what the Senate leader meant...?” Virginia Postrel asked. (Reynolds 2002) “Where’s the *New York Times*? [Editor] Howell Raines is so intent on finding Bull Connor [at the Augusta National Golf Club] that when Bull Connor emerges as the soul of the Republican Senate majority leader, he doesn’t notice it. And where’s the president?” Andrew Sullivan said. (8 Dec. 2002) “The real question is why this incident is still being treated as no more than a minor embarrassment or a simple gaffe,” wrote Josh Marshall. (9 Dec. 2002) “So will the *Washington Post* be the only news outlet to report this?” commented *Daily Kos* (7 Dec. 2002). “Seems the blogosphere is way ahead on this one,” wrote Reynolds on *Instapundit*. (8 Dec. 2002) “Where’s every body else?”

Largely ignoring the story, as it turns out—even on Monday, Dec. 9, after things had been percolating online all weekend. The archived version of *The Note* was unavailable for this day, but *The Hotline* ran a blurb about the Rev. Jesse Jackson calling for Lott to “step down,” from an item that the *Chicago Tribune* had run that morning.

Howard Kurtz' *Media Notes* feature did not mention the Lott story at all. The story received some play on CNN's *Inside Politics*, but it was two-thirds of the way into the program and was in the context of an interview between Judy Woodruff and Al Gore, who at the time was making a media tour while deciding whether to run for president in 2004: "Al Gore today is accusing incoming Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of making a racist comment," Woodruff intoned. *IP* featured a brief video clip of Lott's remarks and then snippets of dialogue with Gore, who said that "he should withdraw those comments, or else the United States Senate should undertake a censure." (CNN, 9 Dec. 2003) Woodruff went on to note the Rev. Jackson's call for Lott to resign, as well as Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle declining to criticize his colleague: "There are a lot of times when he and I go to the microphone and would like to say things we meant to say differently, and I'm sure this was one of those cases for him, as well."

Hence, it was not just the mainstream press giving Lott a pass; it was major politicians as well. Up to that point, the most prominent condemnations had come from Gore, Jackson and Bill Kristol of the *Weekly Standard*. *The Hotline* also noted (10 Dec. 2002) that, oddly, conservatives at the time seemed to be more critical of the comments than Democrats. Determining why, however, runs beyond the scope of this paper.

Then, Monday evening, Lott released an apology (following an earlier statement that was more "clarification"): "A poor choice of words conveyed to some the impression that I embrace the discarded policies of the past. Nothing could be further from the truth, and I apologize to anyone who was offended by my statement." (*Hotline*, 10 Dec. 2002) At this moment, it seems the tide turned, and by the next morning, Lott was no longer getting a "press pass." Rather his story was front and center.

HITTING CRITICAL MASS: DECEMBER 10-12 AND BEYOND

“Recent comments by Sen. Lott do not reflect the spirit of our country. He has apologized, and rightly so. Every day our nation was segregated was a day that America was unfaithful to our founding ideals. And the founding ideals of our country and, in fact, the founding ideals of the political party I represent was, and remains today, the equal dignity and equal rights of every American.”

-- President George W. Bush, Dec. 12, 2002, before a mixed-race audience in Philadelphia (CNN.com)

The explosion in mainstream coverage five days after Trent Lott’s comments is evidenced by the Dec. 10 morning *Hotline*, which featured more than 30 snippets from newspapers and political actors responding to the increasing furor. This can be compared to only two citations in the Dec. 9 edition. Do Republicans “want a person who speaks so carelessly speaking for their party?” asked a *Savannah Morning News* editorial. “It’s hard to see how [Lott] can find a way to keep the moral authority needed to keep his leadership post,” read the Mobile, Ala., *Register*. “I’d much rather – and I think most Mississippians would much rather – stand with Trent Lott than with Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton and Al Gore,” said Mississippi Republican Party Chairman Jim Herring.

This surge is reflected in a Lexis-Nexis search that found articles or opinions regarding Lott in 12 major U.S. papers Dec. 10, up from just two the day before. The *Washington Post* ran a story on the apology on page A13, but *WashingtonPost.com*, interestingly, had it as a lead story, perhaps reflecting the Web’s lead on the tale. Howard Kurtz went from not even mentioning Lott in his Dec. 9 *Media Notes* to running it as the lead item on the 10th (“Why So Late on Lott?” asked his headline – a question he himself needed to answer). (2002) *The Note* made Lott its second-lead story, noting that “Robert George in the *New York Post* goes so far as to suggest that Bush and [Karl] Rove should consider trying to force Lott out.” (ABCNews.com, 10 Dec. 2002). *The New York Times*

finally got in on the act with a page A28 story that noted Lott had made similar comments in 1980, which only added more fuel to the fire. Drudge reported the same tidbit. *Nightline* had a segment on it. And *Inside Politics*, which airs at 4 p.m. EST, spent a large amount of time on Lott, moving right to his story following a brief update on Iraq and war protests. “Call it belated outrage,” intoned Jonathan Karl. “Five days after Trent Lott’s controversial comments, Democratic leaders on Capitol Hill went on the offensive, declaring Lott’s apology insufficient.” (CNN, 10 Dec. 2002)

It is fascinating that as soon as this became a major story, some politicians who had earlier stayed silent or dismissed Lott’s comments suddenly had a lot to say. Talk about agenda-setting. Sen. Tom Daschle went from seeming to understand his colleague’s predicament to calling his words “offensive to those who believe in freedom and equality in America.” (*Hotline*, 10 Dec. 2002) Meanwhile, Republicans began to wonder if President Bush would make a formal statement, and if so, what he would say.

The story steamrolled into Wednesday, Dec. 11, with the *Hotline* listing more than 50 comments from journalistic and political sources, while 40-plus articles, editorials or letters on the topic appeared in editions of 21 major U.S. newspapers, according to Lexis-Nexis (28 U.S. daily papers are in the “major” category). *The Note* led with the story: “Six days and three written statements after his remarks at Strom Thurmond’s birthday party, Sen. Lott’s PR problem has escalated from a slow burn to a modest forest fire.” *The Note*, however, went on to claim that “we don’t hear a widespread drumbeat...most of the print coverage of the criticism we see this morning focuses on the [Congressional Black Caucus] – which, again, probably will serve to rally some of the senator’s supporters.” (ABCNews.com, 11 Dec. 2002) According to *The*

Hotline's rampant quotes, however, there were many others critical, although a handful continued to support Lott.

Let us not forget the bloggers, who continued to push the story, and were now calling even more fervently for Lott to step down and for Bush to publicly repudiate him. One blogger, Oliver Willis, even put together a sample campaign ad the Democrats could use against Republicans based on Lott's comments. Others, all quoted on Glenn Reynold's *Instapundit.com*, called his apologies "weak," "inadequate," and "unconvincing." (11 Dec. 2002) Josh Marshall, who Andrew Sullivan wrote was "beginning to own this story," had two scoops on the 11th. He unearthed the fact that in 1981, Lott had signed onto a lawsuit defending the racist and homophobic Bob Jones University. "[R]acial discrimination does not always violate public policy," Lott had said at the time. This simply added more fuel to the fire. Later in the day, Marshall got his hands on a partial transcript of a taped Larry King/Trent Lott dialogue and posted it a half hour before King's CNN show aired. At around the same time, the Associated Press reported on the Bob Jones lawsuit—without crediting Marshall. His reply on his blog:

Next time the AP rips off a story we broke at 11 a.m. and runs it as their own story at 5 p.m. maybe they could toss in a little attribution? I know it's their rep and all but do they have to be so slimy. *Dow Jones Newswire* caught wind of the Bob Jones amicus brief from the story [Talking Points Memo] broke too. But they were classy enough to say we'd broken the story.

(AP said the "old court filing surfaced on a day when Lott tried to quell criticism." *Dow Jones Newswire* said "A congressional aide also circulated to reporters a copy of the brief unearthed by columnist Joshua Micah Marshall.") (2002)

By 9:30 p.m., this new tidbit was a lead item on FoxNews.com. And there was rampant speculation in the blogosphere (and in print as well, per *The Hotline*) about Lott's future as Senate Republican leader. Details about Lott's involvement with the far-right (Josh Marshall even called them a "white supremacist group") Council of

Conservative Citizens began to emerge, along with other reports about his past. Lott, meanwhile, was spinning as hard as he could, appearing on conservative Sean Hannity's radio show, and explaining that by "all these problems over the years" he meant not desegregation, but a need for "strong national defense and economic development and balanced budgets and opportunity." (Hotline, 12 Dec. 2002) Glenn Reynolds quotes a reader who wrote in to say he didn't buy that: "So that's why the Dixiecrats split from the Dems. The man [Truman] who dropped the Bomb on Japan wasn't hawkish enough." (Reynolds, 12 Dec. 2002)

Additionally, numerous Web logs and other sites Dec. 11 flagged the following comment from an unnamed White House official: "We need this like a hole in the head.... Lott's an embarrassment." (ABCNews.com, 11 Dec. 2002) "Mr. President, we're waiting for you to say something," Andrew Sullivan intoned.

The next day, the wait for Sullivan and many others was over as Bush used an already-arranged speech in Philadelphia to lambaste Lott, calling any suggestion that segregation is acceptable "offensive" and "wrong." Sullivan's reaction: "I cannot see how Lott can survive now...[he] must now resign. He has no other choice." (12 Dec. 2002) Meanwhile, Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe criticized Bush for waiting a week to speak out. (Hotline, 13 Dec. 2002)

Lott made several more grasps at saving himself, including a televised press conference (which Sullivan called a "bumptious, smug, self-congratulatory self-defense" [13 Dec. 2002]) and an appearance on Black Entertainment Television. But the damage was done; the story would not go away; and with Bush deciding he would not intervene to save this "albatross to his party," (Hotline, 17 Dec. 2002) Lott stepped down Dec. 20.

DISCUSSION: 'WE CAN LIGHT FIRES AND KEEP THEM GOING'

Bloggers "have become increasingly influential in the newsgathering process. Their sites shape coverage and drive debate in a way not unlike talk radio. But never before have they owned a story like they did the Trent Lott saga. That was a milestone for Web pundits; if Lott is forced to cede his leadership post, it will be in part because the writers on political Web sites kept after him."

-- Kevin Canfield, The Hartford Courant, Dec. 17, 2002

Before discussing the impact of Web journalism on Trent Lott's comments becoming a major story, reasons why the mainstream press initially ignored it must be explored. As the Lexis-Nexis searches demonstrated, there was no substantial offline reporting on the incident until Dec. 10, five days after Sen. Thurmond's birthday party.

There are four possible reasons why the press missed the boat: few journalists heard the comments live, and those who were present focused on the birthday angle; a fear of being seen as liberally biased; the prominence of other political stories in the same time frame; and the sometimes close relations between politicians and journalists.

Although the birthday party was broadcast live on C-SPAN for anyone with cable to view, "only" a dozen reporters were present, and none were necessarily major players. (Kurtz, 16 Dec. 2002) As *Baltimore Sun* reporter Julie Hirschfield Davis told Howard Kurtz, there was so much "tongue-in-cheek" talk at the party "that a lot of us probably tuned out remarks that we might have been more careful listening to if it hadn't been such a jubilant atmosphere. Most people were writing this as a featury 100th-birthday bash."

(16 Dec. 2002) As for *Washington Post* writer Mark Leibovich, who penned the aforementioned 1,000-word front-pager about the party but didn't mention the comments: "I wanted to use it but it seemed too parenthetical, given that the story was about Strom.... I feel badly about it in retrospect. I kick myself." (Kurtz, 16 Dec. 2002)

Or, as the *Christian Science Monitor* put it, given the nature of the party, Lott's comments caught "the press off-guard." (Hotline, 17 Dec. 2002) So off-guard, in fact, that when CNN's Jonathan Karl sat down to chat with Lott the following day, he hadn't even heard of the comments, having not attended the party. "At the time of the Lott interview," he told Kurtz, "no major newspaper, including *The New York Times*, had reported on the remarks." (16 Dec. 2002) Indeed, the *Times* would say nothing for days.

A second factor could have been that some journalists, fearful of being labeled liberal, downplayed or did not mention the comments. Often when a negative story about a conservative hits the news, right-wing pundits blame the "liberal" media. Some claim the media have been afraid to criticize President Bush too much for fear of critical retribution, especially since Sept. 11, 2001, though that is difficult to measure. One could even claim this as anecdotal evidence of a lack of liberal press bias. As Kurtz, always balanced in his political criticism, put it, "If a Democrat had made this kind of inflammatory comment, it would be the buzz of talk radio and the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page would be calling for tarring and feathering." (10 Dec. 2002) The story the *Washington Post* ran Dec. 7 on Page A6 almost did not make it: Reporter Thomas Edsall resisted "an editor's suggestion that it be treated as an item. 'I sent a note saying that it would demean the story to put it in the political column.' " he told Kurtz (10 Dec. 2002)

Several bloggers pointed out that the essentially irrelevant John Kerry haircut story got more play than Lott's comments at first. On Fox News' *Hannity and Colmes*, Al Gore questioned the existence of a liberal media and instead posited that a conservative media may be the problem, the argument being that since conservatives such as Rupert Murdoch own many media outlets, their message is what gets across rather than the

trending-liberal writers who do the actual reporting. Blogger Atrios, meanwhile, took on a sarcastic tone: “If there’s an issue for the ‘liberal media’ to pounce on, this is it. Too bad the liberal media is long-dead.” (7 Dec. 2002) Media scholar Lance Bennett, among others, contends that the press generally is not ideologically biased in its professional output: Most “individual journalists would have trouble getting consistent ideological slants past editors and owners throughout the entire news industry.” (2002, 27) Bennett, however, argues that Fox News uses a “conservative tint” as a “marketing strategy.”

A third factor is that other major political stories in the same news cycle kept Lott’s comments out of the spotlight. The morning of Dec. 6, Treasury secretary Paul O’Neill and his assistant were ousted, and chattering began immediately as to replacements. There was also mounting speculation over Al Gore’s presidential plans and the run-up to and aftermath of Democratic Sen. Mary Landrieu’s narrow victory in the Dec. 7 Louisiana runoff. Many of these stories got more play in such places as *Inside Politics* and *The Note* immediately after Lott’s comments.

Interestingly, at least two conservative bloggers wondered if Lott’s comments contributed to Landrieu’s 52 percent to 48 percent win over Republican challenger Suzanne Terrell. *Instapundit* quoted a reader’s e-mail message that brought up this point, and Andrew Sullivan concurred: “Is it entirely coincidence that the day after [sic] Trent Lott lamented the end of legal racial segregation in this country that some Southern blacks turned out in unusually high numbers to deny Lott another Senate seat to add to his majority?” (9 Dec. 2002) However, this argument is undermined by the following *Note* item on Dec. 6: “There is no mention of Lott’s comments in the Louisiana papers we checked.” (ABCNews.com) It unlikely that many Louisianans had heard of the story

if it was not widely reported until three days after the election. (That is, unless an awful lot of Louisiana voters read *Talking Points Memo* and *Instapundit*.)

Fourth, Matt Drudge's concern for the close connections between journalists and sources could have been a factor. Andrew Sullivan summarized this argument nicely:

One thought I have is that the media bigwigs really do operate socially in Washington and find it hard to pounce on people they know, like, respect or need as a source. That's one reason I try hard to remain pretty socially reclusive in Washington, D.C.; and why I think occasional periods away from town actually helps you be a better journalist. The way in which people like David Broder or Bob Novak simply brushed this one aside is a sign, I think, less of their craven politics than of their D.C. socialization. (10 Dec. 2002)

Additionally, as Josh Marshall noted in *The Guardian*, "This was a story that the (established) press in D.C. was very well suited to miss, because even for people who wish it were otherwise, it's been understood... that you've got various conservative Republicans who go in for this kind of stuff." (Burkeman 2002) Similarly, Democrats in the "clubby" Senate may have been unwilling to go after one of their own with so much venom.

That is, of course, until it became a major story. And this was thanks to *The Note* for bringing it up, *The Hotline* for repeating it, and the "blogosphere" for not letting up until the "bigwigs" finally took notice. This seemed to really occur when the senator issued his apology the evening of Dec. 9 (along with the revelation about Lott's 1980 comments); without prominent bloggers beating the drums and the story in the *Washington Post*, it is unlikely that he even would have needed to say anything. Although some in the media pointed to other factors leading to the news explosion, such as conservative criticism (much of it blog-borne, of course), Gore's criticism on CNN, the *Post* story or comments from the Congressional Black Caucus, several realized right away what had occurred. "According to a number of observers," wrote the *Boston*

Globe's Mark Jurkowitz, "the events following [Lott's] remarks about Strom Thurmond's 1948 presidential bid put the swelling ranks of online 'bloggers' on the media map." (2002) In a *New York Post* column, conservative John Podhoretz lauded blogs, saying "there's nothing more exciting than watching a new medium mature before your eyes." Meanwhile, Arianna Huffington wrote, "Thank God for the Internet. [Bloggers are] truly free of the dependence on access, and the need to play nice with the powers that be." (Jurkowitz 2002) Drudge would certainly drink to that.

Although Reynolds, among others, downplayed the role of blogs in the story, telling the *Globe* that "I think you can exaggerate the role of blogs in this. I think it's probably the case that it would have been a scandal no matter what," (Jurkowitz 2002) the pattern outlined in the earlier chronology indicates that blogs and other Internet resources were all but certainly an important contributor. This becomes all the more apparent after examining a 2002 study conducted by the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet of 271 political journalists, many of them located in Washington, D.C. Of that sample, more than 70 percent spend at least an hour a day reading or searching Web sites; when asked how often they read political coverage online, with 1 being "never" and 5 being "very often," 77 percent answered with either a 4 or a 5. Most significantly, when asked to name their three favorite sites to use in covering campaigns, the *National Journal* and its *Hotline* ranked second, only behind the Center for Responsive Politics, which tracks money in politics. The *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and CNN Web sites also ranked highly, as did ABCNews.com's, primarily because of *The Note* even though that feature had only existed for a short period of time before the survey was conducted. (IDPI 2002, 29-33) Although the specific question asked in

the survey regarded Web sites to go to for campaign information, it is likely that similar replies would have been given for political sites in general.

And since *The Hotline* is now a “must-read” for journalists (IDPI 2002, 39) -- about 8,300 of them subscribe (IDPI 2002, 39) -- it is not a stretch to believe that many prominent (and less prominent) ones head there for their daily dose. Compounding this, Craig Crawford, executive publisher of *The Hotline*, says he scans prominent blogs daily “to catch a whiff of the Washington zeitgeist” (although for the record, he thinks blogging’s impact may be “‘overhyped’”), so blogs’ content can in turn affect *The Hotline*. Furthermore, “blogs are becoming standard reading material for other journalists.” (Jurkowitz 2002) As Josh Marshall put it, “There’s a portion of what some of these blogs do that is the public version of *the reporters on the bus* sort of hashing things out...there is an insidery aspect of this.” (emphasis added) (Jurkowitz 2002)

It is only appropriate that Marshall use the phrase “the reporters on the bus,” which is almost identical to the title of Timothy Crause’s book regarding reporters during the 1972 presidential election, *The Boys on the Bus*. In this book, Crause described and coined the term “pack journalism,” and we seem to be witnessing an online version of it here, complemented by a healthy dose of agenda setting. After all, with thousands of journalists going online for news, reading *The Note*, *The Hotline*, and blogs, and seeing the same Lott story repeated over and over again, it is not a stretch to believe that some microcosmic agenda setting took effect (which, arguably, in the journalistic world takes the form of pack journalism). And certainly any journalists afraid of being saddled with the “liberal bias” label felt better once they saw so many conservatives bashing Lott. So, enter pack journalism, which Bennett (2003) described as the reporters’ social world,

where they spend large amounts of time together (on a campaign bus, for instance), gossiping, eating, sleeping, drinking, and waiting. “As a result of such intimate social contact, reporters tend to develop a sense of solidarity.... They do not have to collaborate formally in order to end up reporting things the same way.... The use of formulas becomes easily rationalized and accepted with the social support of the group.” Even a sociologist posing as a journalist succumbed to pack pressure in one study. (2003, 175-6)

Bennett elaborates: “Although the pack generally feeds on the handouts offered by spin doctors and political handlers, it can also turn on the unprepared or vulnerable politician. Cases of the pack devouring its political prey are legendary,” from Nixon and Watergate to Gary Hart’s affair and Clinton’s many problems. Indeed, “what is often mistaken for a critical, independent press is a phenomenon popularly known as the ‘feeding frenzy.’ When politicians become caught up in personal crises, scandals, or power struggles, the news media may descend like a pack of hungry dogs.” (2003, 176)

In the Internet age, even if separated by distance, the pack is larger than ever before – essentially, any one journalist can read what any other journalist has published at any given time. According to IDPI, this was something journalists cited frequently – “that the immediate availability of political news and reporters’ fixation on it has exacerbated” pack journalism. (2002, 11) Says the *National Journal’s* James Barnes, who covers national politics, “I read *The Hotline* and it has real value, but my concern about this kind of insider news written for a thousand insiders is that it leads to a homogeneous result and a group think.” The same goes for *The Note*, according to some. (2002, 11)

Others agreed: “I think [the Web] increases the velocity,” according to the *Washington Post’s* Dan Balz. “The problem is, we all get so inundated with information

that we don't get out and do our own reporting." Said Jo Mannies of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: "My one caution and concern is that reporters may try to model their coverage or approach to what they're reading online.... That's bad, and can lead to too much copycat stuff." Meanwhile, Adam Nagourney of *The New York Times* tries to stay away. "I think [the Web] has made [pack journalism] 100 times worse. That's why I don't read *Hotline*. The whole world's homogenized. Thirty years ago, you never would know what's going on in 25 newspapers. Now you can go on the Web and look at all of them. So I do think it reinforces conventional wisdom." (IDPI 2002, 40)

Not everyone agrees, however. "I always thought [pack journalism] was something of a phony issue," Carl Leubsdorf, the *Dallas Morning News*' bureau chief, told IDPI. With the Web, "the playing field has been leveled some...it is not quite as exclusive." (2002, 11) Leubsdorf, however, appears to be a lone voice.

Still, much credit must go out to *The Hotline*, *The Note*, and varied blogs. "The Internet gives you the opportunity to speak loud enough to have your voice heard if somebody wants to listen. It also gives all the more authority to those who are respected, trusted voices," said a co-founder of *The Hotline*. (IDPI 40) And certain bloggers are becoming more and more respected, including Josh Marshall, who wrote Dec. 13, "I'd certainly like to think that [*Talking Points Memo*] played some role in keeping this story alive while the bigs were ignoring. But I'm certain that the Web generally – and particularly a lot of different Web logs – kept this story in front of people and forced attention to it long enough that it became impossible to ignore." (2002)

Andrew Sullivan perhaps put it most precisely, and accurately: "We can't replace the big media. But we can light fires and keep them going." (13 Dec. 2002)

CONCLUSION

“Few things strike more fear in the heart of a politician than a news story that has gotten out of control.”

– *Lance Bennett in News: The Politics of Illusion (2003, 145)*

A close examination of the journalistic timeline following Sen. Trent Lott’s comments about then-Sen. Strom Thurmond’s 1948 presidential campaign, combined with studies regarding journalists’ use of the Internet, strongly suggests that online coverage and criticism of the senator pushed the story’s momentum until it broke out into the open following Lott’s apology Monday, Dec. 9. The apology, which may not have even been necessary were it not for rampant blogging all weekend by prominent, diverse online journalists such as Glenn Reynolds, Josh Marshall, and Andrew Sullivan, gave the mainstream media a hook with which to push the story into the headlines (otherwise, the press would have been forced to use five-day-old news as its lead, or simply lead with Al Gore’s criticism of Lott). The Lott story then became a front-burner issue both online and off, with more and more of the senator’s questionable past unearthed (some by bloggers), drawing scathing criticism from politicians of all stripes, including the president, and eventually forcing Lott to resign as majority leader.

Although Matt Drudge (2000) may be overly idealistic in his belief that nimble, independent writers will come to dominate the Web world, the Lott story exemplifies the caveat needed to Richard Davis’ theory in *The Web of Politics*, in which he maintains that the mainstream media will fully dominate online journalism. He writes that occurrences such as Drudge breaking the Monica Lewinsky story “are and will remain rarities...these supposed news sites depend on stories coming to them rather than engaging in active newsgathering.” (1999, 43) But he is too dismissive of the likes of Drudge. Because, as

Jim Hall explained in *Online Journalism: A Critical Primer*, “The [Lewinsky] story would have eventually broken without Drudge, but his intervention clearly accelerated the news cycle.... Drudge ensured that the Clinton scandals received a coverage that they would not necessarily have received in either the traditional media or on the Web.” (2001, 129-30) Certainly this must be considered.

Indeed *The Hotline, Note*, blogs and other sources can create an expanded agenda-setting model in the Internet age, for certain events: Online pack-style coverage leads to agenda-setting of journalists (and some politicians), which leads to mainstream pack journalism, and the identical stories thereby generated lead to agenda-setting of the public (and more politicians). In the midst of all this, priming may occur: in this case, the activation of a southern-conservatives-as-bigots stereotype, fairly or not.

Not every issue trumpeted by bloggers and other Web sites will become a big story. For instance, Josh Marshall last fall pushed time and again a North Dakota voting controversy that nonetheless gained little traction outside that state. The events of last December by no means portend an upheaval of the journalistic world order. But they do demonstrate that, given the right conditions, the boys on the bus can become a cyberpack of journalists, piling on to a story until the rest of the world is forced to take notice.

Just ask Trent Lott.

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