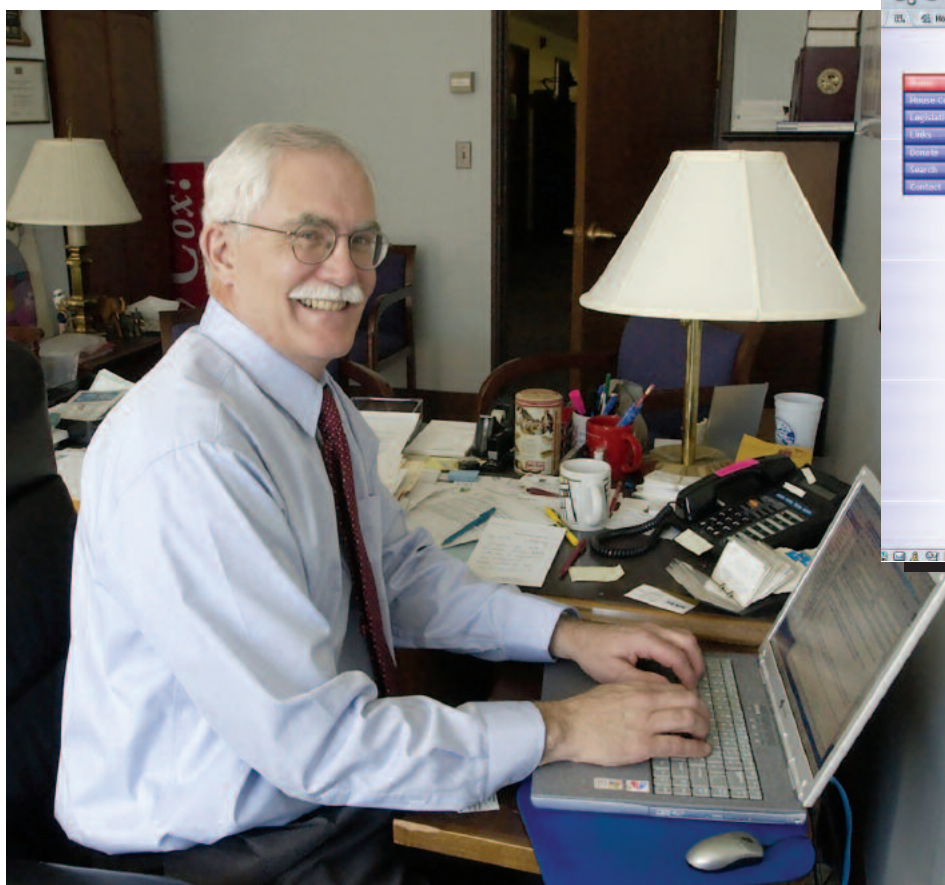


# I BLOG, YOU BLOG, WE ALL BLOG

State lawmakers are beginning to see the advantages of having a blog to record their views on issues and their experiences at the statehouse.

By Pam Greenberg



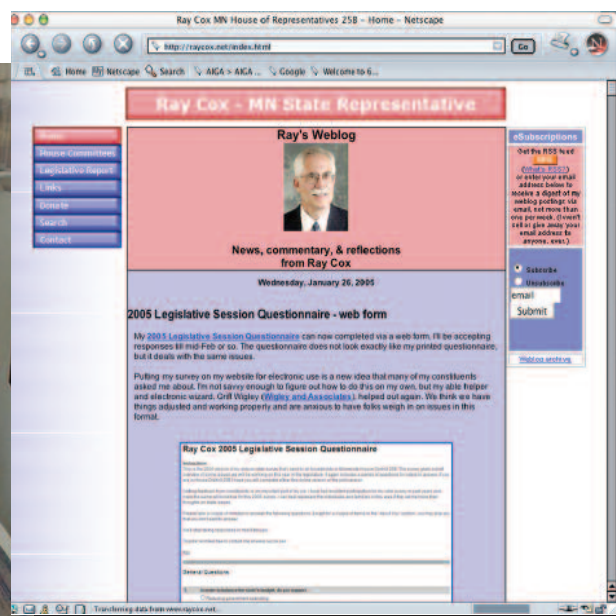
Minnesota Representative Ray Cox has turned into an accomplished “blogger” with his Web log journal that keeps him in touch with constituents.

Representative Ray Cox does not consider himself particularly computer savvy. In 2002, he had just won election to the Minnesota House by 20 votes in a very competitive race—his district leans Democrat and he’s a Republican. He wanted a way to reach out and interact with his constituents, so he did what few others would have done in that

situation—he started a blog.

Blogs—short for “Web logs”—are online public journals documenting a person’s daily thoughts, experiences and positions on issues. Cox, who didn’t use the Internet much and thought most Web pages were cold and impersonal, heard about blogs from a friend who, after a bit of coaxing, got him up and running.

He had expected his opponents might use his blog entries against him in the 2004 elec-



tion, and indeed, “they were pretty brutal,” Cox says. He won reelection, however, by 600 votes, which he considers a huge margin in his district. “In this kind of race it’s even more important to use the blog to get the information out to voters, and to get it to them in a timely fashion.”

Blogs first appeared about a decade ago, but they gained prominence in the 2004 presidential elections as a vehicle for candidates and pundits reporting on the elections. Howard Dean used the Internet, and his Blog for America, to raise more money than any other Democratic candidate. Blogs are said to have influenced the stock market on election day, based on their (inaccurate) reporting of early exit poll results. The power of blogs also became evident when blogs exposed CBS News’ false reporting about President Bush’s National Guard documents.

According to a Pew Internet and American Life Project survey, 32 million Americans

*Pam Greenberg tracks legislative information technology issues for NCSL.*

were blog readers by the end of 2004. The survey also found that 62 percent of Internet users were not quite sure what the term “blog” means. But that’s changing: Blog readership grew 58 percent just during 2004. Seven percent of users—some 8 million people—have created their own blog. And there is some evidence that those who read and write blogs may be more politically influential than average citizens.

State lawmakers are beginning to see the advantages of having a blog to record their views on issues and their experiences at the statehouse. Although there’s no official count of the number of state legislators with blogs, the Minnesota House may be able to claim more than any other state. Several House members were among the first in the

nation to have blogs, including Representative Cox, who has been making weekly or more frequent entries since he started his blog in December 2002.

Representative Stephen Urquhart of Utah, who started his blog in late 2004, like Cox, considered how it might affect his chances at reelection. “This site does create a record that any future political opponent can pick through to find choice nuggets. But I think fully informed voters do just fine. I’m going to lay out my thinking in great detail and invite voters to inspect it and elect me if they like it or throw me to the curb if they don’t. I don’t plan on fooling anyone ... on this site, you get Urquhart.”

Urquhart’s main purpose in maintaining a blog is to provide people friendly access to Utah government, to give them the “inside scoop” on the issues, and to get feedback from them. But blogs also can give legislators a chance for their voice to be heard on issues the media doesn’t cover. When the Deseret News published an article about potential conflicts of interest by legislators, claiming that “not one” of the nine private practice attorneys in the Utah Legislature had filed

## TECHNOLOGY HELPS TRACK BLOGS

Because blogs are updated so frequently, it can be time-consuming to visit favorite Web pages repeatedly to check for new blog entries. An Internet program called an RSS (Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary) aggregator or news reader can make it easy for blog readers. The program checks Web pages automatically for new content and displays the headlines of new entries.

Several state legislatures also are beginning to use RSS to provide legislators and citizens with notices about hearings, legislative news, bill status, or new publications or Web content. For example, Utah provides bill status and committee news feeds (users select bills or committees they wish to track). The Legislative Reference Bureaus in Hawaii and Wisconsin provide RSS feeds for new publications. The Louisiana House sends out news updates via RSS. The Texas Legislature provides feeds for bill text, fiscal notes, bill analyses, and schedules and calendars.



REPRESENTATIVE  
**STEPHEN URQUHART**  
UTAH

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## BLOGS REACH INFLUENTIALS

Those who wish to reach the people who influence everyone else must look to the Internet, says a study by the George Washington University's Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet. The study, "Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign," found that Americans who are politically active via the Internet are almost seven times more likely than the average American to serve as opinion leaders among friends, relatives and colleagues. Far more of these people read or post comments on political blogs than the average citizen does. These "online political citizens" also are more likely to write or call a politician; attend a political rally, speech or organized protest; attend a public meeting on town or school affairs; or write a letter to the editor or call a live radio or TV show to express their opinion. They are also more likely than average citizens to donate money to political candidates.

disclosure forms that listed clients by name, he used his blog to rebut the claim and to list the names again in his blog, "for all the world to see."

Blogs also serve as a forum for legislators to express their point of view at other times when they might not be given a voice. Maryland Delegate Sandy Rosenberg's blog relates an argument he wished he could have made on the floor in response to a fellow legislator's comment on a medical malpractice bill.

There are numerous blogs that cover local politics or statehouse activities, such as the Blog for Iowa ("the official weblog of Democracy for Iowa, an Iowa grassroots progressive group"); The Buckeye Institute Blog ("Up to the Minute Analysis of Ohio Public Policy"); Colorado Pols ("Colorado Politics, News, and Inside Information; The Hall Monitor, the Vermont Press Bureau's coverage of the State House; and Utah Policymaker ("a political blog written by elected officials and opinion leaders"). There are also innumerable blogs by individuals commenting on political or legislative activities, ranging from insightful, informative and uplifting to juvenile, cynical or downright malicious.

Some commentators speculate about whether blogs increase political partisanship and polarization. New York Times columnist Alan Wolf considers blogs to be "all 'gotcha' commentary and attributions of bad faith" with "no emotion...[that is] too angry and no exaggeration too incredible." Daniel Drezner, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago who has explored blogs and their influence on politics, notes that some partisan bloggers focus on political events that reinforce their own opinions and ignore those that might undermine them. But Drezner and Henry Timber, co-authors of a recent paper, "The Power and Politics of Blogs," also note that blogging is "politically important in large part because it affects mainstream media, and helps set the terms of political debate..."

Urquhart also lauds the broader "universe of thought" that blogs open up for readers. "Though government keeps getting bigger and more complex, technology increasingly allows my constituents to inform themselves, contact me, monitor my votes, and support me or throw me out of office. And they can do all this by themselves—without relying on the traditional information filters of media and political consultants or interest groups."

Assemblywoman Loni Hancock of Califor-



ASSEMBLYWOMAN  
**LONI HANCOCK**  
CALIFORNIA

nia established her blog to communicate with constituents on major issues addressing her district, such as casino gambling, funding for reconstruction of the Bay Bridge, and public financing of elections. Hancock receives feedback on many of her blog entries, and highlights blog responses and news articles she feels are particularly relevant. Representative Cox also emphasizes that he receives feedback from constituents on all sides of the issues.

The Internet has created many new ways of communicating, creating opportunities for lawmakers and citizens to feel their voices are being heard. Just what effect political blogs will have on civic participation

## SEE FOR YOURSELF

Take a look at the blogs mentioned in this article.

Representative Stephen Urquhart, Utah  
[www.steveu.com](http://www.steveu.com)

Delegate Sandy Rosenberg, Maryland  
<http://delsandy.com>

Representative Ray Cox, Minnesota  
<http://raycox.net>

Assemblywoman Loni Hancock, California  
<http://lonihancock.blogspot.com>

Blog for Iowa  
[www.blogforiowa.com](http://www.blogforiowa.com)

The Buckeye Institute Blog  
[www.buckeyeinstitute.org](http://www.buckeyeinstitute.org)

Colorado Pols  
<http://coloradopoliticalnews.blogspot.com>

The Hall Monitor  
[www.rutlandherald.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?category=LEGISLATURE02](http://www.rutlandherald.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?category=LEGISLATURE02)

Utah Policymaker  
[www.utahpolicymaker.com](http://www.utahpolicymaker.com)

Links to other state legislators' blogs are listed on the NCSL Web site at [www.ncsl.org/programs/lis/nalit/blogs.htm](http://www.ncsl.org/programs/lis/nalit/blogs.htm)

and just how many state legislators will take advantage of this new medium is unclear.

But to some, like Robin Cook, former leader of the British House of Commons, the outlook is optimistic: "There is a connection waiting to be made between the decline in democratic participation and the explosion in new ways of communicating. We need not accept the paradox that gives us more ways than ever to speak, and leaves the public with a wider feeling than ever before that their voices are not being heard.

The new technologies can strengthen our democracy, by giving us greater opportunities than ever before for better transparency and a more responsive relationship between government and electors."