

# Euro political blogs lagging behind U.S.

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Blogging in America has been transformed into a political watchdog post shaking up today's political and journalistic worlds; however, the same effect hasn't made a significant stir in European affairs.

A panel of American and British media professionals discussed reasons behind the blogosphere phenomenon in the U.S. vs. its small influence in Europe Wednesday at the Hudson Institute in Washington.

Last year Blog tracking site Technorati reported nearly 24 million blogs existed and new blogs were being created at a rate of 80,000 a day.

American bloggers account for a large chunk of those creating blogs and reading them, as Helen Szamuely, of the independent think tank The Bruges Group, says Americans make up half of readers of British blogs.

"Blogs give voice to those who think they don't have a voice," said the Heritage Foundation Director of the Center for Media and Public Policy Mark Tapscott. "Everybody in America think they don't have a voice."

According to panelists, the growing popularity of political blogs in the United States stemmed from conservative Americans critical of the American news media for being left-leaning and its partisan reporting in the face objectivity.

But conservative bloggers aren't the only ones making a ruckus. Noam Scheiber, a senior editor from the New Republic, noted that liberal bloggers have also had an effect as seen with the Florida recount vote in

2000.

Panelists also said blogs have become part of the U.S. political media landscape, providing a cheaper and easier way for political parties and campaigns to reach voters, which varies greatly from European elections.

"Bloggers have had a dramatic impact on the political campaign," said the Institute's John O'Sullivan, moderator for the panel discussion. He noted the impact of blogs on the Democrat presidential candidate John Kerry and the Swift Boats controversy and the mobilization of supporters via Internet and blog for the Howard Dean base.

Moreover, Gerard Baker, U.S. editor of The Times of London, says that a technology factor could also explain the gap between American and European bloggers and readers, saying that more Americans penetrate the Internet for alternative views.

And unlike the United State's two-party system and its media-driven political campaigns, an abundant of Euro-media organizations already reflect a number of ideologies and political parties in place. At times, they take on the same responsibilities as political bloggers in the states; and some news organizations already provide blogs including Guardian Unlimited.

Much of the dislike for media's political coverage in America is not reflected in Europe, where, as Szamuely says, "politics is dead, if not on life support."

Still, for many in Europe, blogs are "personal not political," and even some distrust blogging because it is an American concept, says Szamuely, who also co-runs the Euro-skeptic blog "EU Referendum" on blogspot.com. She says blogs could counter anti-Americanism in the mainstream media.

"Blogs in Europe are not taken as seriously, not even by the people who write them," she said.

Rather, she says blogs will prove to be important when there is a referendum on the European Constitution. And because the European Union remains a difficult subject for citizens to comprehend and a daunting task for journalists to explain, bloggers will be valuable, she said.

However, Europe is not void of political blogs, and the beginnings of an effective blogosphere is emerging as seen when bloggers responded to comments of a second Holocaust made by Margot Wallström, vice-president of the European Commission for institutional relations and communications, in response to nationalistic, anti-euro sentiments. Even leaders like Wallström have a blog.

Perhaps one of the most profound examples of the influence of blogs came after bloggers criticized errors reported by CBS' Dan Rather on President Bush's military record, which panelists said demonstrates bloggers penetrating "accurate" reporting to find the truth. This criticism over points in articles is also known as "fisking" termed by the British.

"I thought back to Watergate when the media said 'we warn you and we have the power to destroy you,' said Szamuely, saying that the media was now on the other end of that.

Panelists agree that bloggers will and should continue to be a large part of the politic debate and journalism accountability, as bloggers may foresee some problems as those in the U.S. seek some type of journalistic protection and those in Europe seek protection from strict libel laws for what they write.

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