

washingtonpost.com Personalize Your Post | Go to mywashingtonpost.com

Home News OnPolitics Entertainment Live Online Camera Works Marketplace Jobs

E-MAIL NEWSLETTERS | ARCHIVES SEARCH: News Search Options

- News Home Page
- Nation
- World
- Metro
- Business
- Technology
- Sports
- Style**
- Book World
- Post Magazine
- Sunday Arts
- Television
- Weekend
- Columnists
- Media Notes
- Comics
- Crosswords
- Entertainment News
- Photo Galleries
- Live Online
- Index
- Education
- Travel
- Health
- Real Estate
- Home & Garden
- Food
- Opinion
- Weather
- Weekly Sections
- News Digest
- Classifieds
- Print Edition
- Archives
- Site Index
- Help

Media Notes

Howard Kurtz



Robotic Journalism: Google Introduces Human-Less News

By *Howard Kurtz*
 Washington Post Staff Writer
 Monday, September 30, 2002; 8:44 AM

Who needs reporters?

Why spend money on whiny, self-centered, 401(k)-obsessed human beings when you can produce a nice news Web site with quiet, easy-to-abuse computers?

That's the thinking at Google.com, the popular search engine, which just rolled out a spiffy, up-to-the-minute [page](#) with hundreds of links to news stories – untouched by sweaty hands.

Which raises an intriguing question: Is news in the Net age just a bloodless compilation of electronic connections to global media outlets, allowing users to point-and-click their way to bleary-eyed nirvana? Or does it require sharp editing judgments, seasoned beat reporters, provocative columnists and a small dollop of personality?

In entering the news wars with "4,000 continuously updated news stories" – labeled "25 minutes ago" or "4 hours ago" – Google is trying to lure eyeballs from MSNBC.com, CNN.com, nytimes.com, washingtonpost.com, usatoday.com and the like. Typical headlines last week offered links to "Fox Sports and 450 related," or "Hartford Courant, Toronto Globe and Mail, Boston Globe, Bloomington

— More Media Notes —

- [Panning For Gore](#) (The Washington Post, Sep 30, 2002)
- [The Endless Battle for Position](#) (The Washington Post, Sep 27, 2002)
- [Mount Daschle Erupts](#) (The Washington Post, Sep 26, 2002)
- [Dirty Tricks in Des Moines](#) (The Washington Post, Sep 25, 2002)
- [Gore Gets Back in the Game](#) (The Washington Post, Sep 24, 2002)
- [Archive](#)

— OnPolitics —

- [Today's Political News](#)
- [Elections 2002 Coverage](#)
- [Daily E-mail Updates](#)

— mywashingtonpost.com —

Add Media Notes to your [personal home page](#).

- [E-Mail This Article](#)
- [Printer-Friendly Version](#)
- [Subscribe to The Post](#)

Pantagraph and 242 related."

This is news on the cheap, using the one-stop shopping model pioneered by Matt Drudge, and updated by InstaPundit for those writing Web logs. By contrast, readers who check out washingtonpost.com basically get the work of Post staffers, supplemented by wire services (although your humble Media Notes columnist provides links to plenty of other publications and sites).

"There is no human intervention," says Google product manager Marissa Mayer. "We're flying without a parachute."

Even decisions on what should be the site's lead story, what should be displayed on the home page and which links should be featured are made by computer chips. This is based in part on what Mayer calls a "source credibility measure" – some formula plugged into the machines by, yes, humans.

Does that mean the New York Times is rated more highly than, say, Billboard or Rolling Stone? Mayer won't say. "It's part of our secret sauce," she says.

[Slate's](#) Jack Shafer sees the Google model as a winner, writing: "Unless you're a New York Times fetishist or employed by MSNBC.com, Google News or a similar site will soon become your first stop for breaking news. No team of human editors can compete with 24/7 robots."

But can everything be too much? (It takes 15 computer screens, by the way, to peruse 450 related links.) When readers look at the Los Angeles Times online, they get not only a battle-tested group of foreign correspondents, metro reporters, sportswriters, movie critics and so on – they also get the editors' judgment on what should be the lead story, what's of minor importance and what isn't worth including. Google says its links are driven "solely by computer algorithms" and makes no attempt to suggest which of the thousands of links might be worth your time.

Sometimes it shows. Google yesterday trumpeted a San Francisco Chronicle story that turned out to be a wire rewrite of a Boston Globe poll on the Massachusetts governor's race; the Globe story was only a secondary link. Someone with two eyes might have noticed that.

The four-year-old Silicon Valley company has been tremendously successful, with 150 million searches a day. Men and women now talk of "googling" each other to check for any dirt before a first date. Washingtonpost.com features the search engine on its site.

But readers know who to blame if The Post or CBS or Fox News runs something they deem wrong or irresponsible. Google is a mere conveyor

belt that delivers all kinds of info-matter without the slightest judgment.

Mayer's take is that Google is "harnessing" the judgments of editors everywhere – and lots of folks want in. "We've been contacted by literally thousands of publications around the globe who hope to be included in Google News," she says.

By the way, the highly technical term for what Google does is "crawl." While some sites, such as the New York Times, were not set up for such access, Mayer said the two companies have reached an agreement "allowing our robot to crawl them."

Sounds like a horror flick, doesn't it?

Google clearly helps other news organizations by driving traffic to their sites. But it is less lucrative for news outlets to draw readers for a single story than those who come in through the "front door" because they're exposed to fewer ads. Google hasn't yet tried to sell ads but will try to "monetize" the new service, in Mayer's word, in the future.

Of course, there's nothing to stop the media big boys from larding their sites with endless links as well. But if that becomes the dominant online model, the Web will become more of an endless smorgasbord, to the dismay of the name-brand restaurants.

Now for some human-selected stories. If anyone saw the George Stephanopoulos Show yesterday, there was a stunning performance, live from Baghdad, by a couple of Democrats.

"Rep. Jim McDermott, Washington Democrat, said in Baghdad yesterday that he believes President Bush would lie to the nation to win support for a war against Saddam Hussein," the [Washington Times](#) says.

"I think the president would mislead the American people,' Mr. McDermott said on ABC's 'This Week' about the president's campaign for support for a military campaign against Iraq.

"In interviews on political talk shows yesterday, Mr. McDermott and Rep. David E. Bonior, Michigan Democrat, who also was in Baghdad, denounced the Bush administration while saying nothing negative about Saddam. . . .

"Senate Minority Whip Don Nickles, Oklahoma Republican, said the two Democrats were spreading Saddam's message. Mr. Nickles also said he was 'really troubled' by Mr. McDermott's assertion that Mr. Bush would mislead Americans. 'They both sound like spokespersons for the Iraqi government,' he said."

George Will compared them to Jane Fonda in Hanoi.

In the [Los Angeles Times](#), Ron Brownstein finds a similarity between 43 and 41 that has nothing to do with Iraq:

"When it comes to the economy, the Bush family is on an intergenerational losing streak.

"Nearly halfway through his term, President Bush's economic record is beginning to look a lot like that of his father, former President George Bush. That isn't good news for the younger Bush. Or for the economy.

"Most key measures of economic well-being for average families declined under the first President Bush. Then, after an unsteady start, almost all of those same measures improved during Bill Clinton's eight years in the White House. Now, under the second President Bush, the trend lines are pointing down again.

"The pattern was dramatically underscored last week when the Census Bureau released its annual reports on income and poverty in America. . . . The news was grim – and a throwback to the economy's performance under the first President Bush."

Get ready for some conservative columns on how the recession began under Clinton.

The [New York Times](#) finds the last hurrah of soft money:

"The passage of the most sweeping campaign finance measure in a generation has set off an explosion of fund-raising for the November elections that is likely to pump more than twice as much unregulated money into Congressional races as the last midterm campaign four years ago.

"The McCain-Feingold campaign finance law, passed in March, outlaws national political parties and federal candidates from having anything to do with raising and spending soft money. . . . But lawmakers delayed putting the restrictions on soft money into effect until after the Nov. 5 elections. That has spurred lawmakers and fund-raisers from both parties to move more aggressively than ever to pressure donors and wring the last bit of money from the system.

"In the Senate, Trent Lott, Republican of Mississippi, recently urged a gathering of Republican senators to lean on corporations and business lobbyists for more donations. 'We're keeping tabs on the K Street crowd and what they've been doing,' Mr. Lott said, according to one person at the meeting. Fund-raising may be even more frenzied among Democrats."

[National Review's](#) Jay Nordlinger is ticked at Maureen Dowd:

"Remember when some Republican congressman, fighting with his

opponents in the House, referred to Clinton as 'your president,' and the Democrats and the media went nuts? I knew what the guy meant; but he was branded a virtual traitor.

"I read Maureen Dowd's column in the New York Times, proving that I'm an idiot. As you may know, Dowd's principal belief is that everything concerning W. and his men is psychological, a matter of macho, or 'testosterone,' as she often writes. In this latest column, she says, 'W., who was always the Roman candle and hatchet man in the family, has turned his father's good manners upside down – consulting sparingly, leaving poor Tony Blair to make the case against his foes for him, and treating policy disagreements as personal slights.'

"It's pointless to pick at Dowd, but, to begin with, Bush certainly hasn't left Blair, who is not 'poor,' to make the case against Iraq. Both have done so, and have done so convincingly. But what I love is 'his foes' – Bush's foes. You see, strictly a personal matter, with Saddam, Osama, and the rest of the boys lined up against the ill-mannered Texan, if only in his mind. Bush's foes, Bush's bogeys – whatever.

"Whether she realizes it or not, terrorists and their state supporters are Dowd's foes, too. When it comes to their bombings and other evil acts, they will not exempt her, on the grounds that she thinks it's all a joke."

[Josh Marshall](#) questions the administration's latest claims on Iraq in his Talking Points column:

"What struck me was a comment from Colin Powell. Powell told a Senate Committee that while there was evidence of Iraqi-al Qaida cooperation there was still 'no smoking gun' connecting Iraq to 9/11. I would hasten to note that there is also still no definitive proof that the author of Talking Points lives in a mansion in Georgetown or even that he owns the villa in Capri. But somehow stating this undeniable fact in such a fashion strikes me as a touch misleading. . . .

"When you say there's no smoking gun, the obvious implication is that there is a lot of information, a lot of clues pointing in that direction, but no real slam-dunk evidence. But of course there simply isn't any evidence pointing to an Iraq-9/11 connection, and a lot of circumstantial evidence – to the extent that one can ever prove a negative – to the contrary.

"So why the endless attempts to fudge? Why the resistance to having this debate on the basis of the very serious facts and threats at hand? Though the rationale for liberating Kuwait was powerful in 1990 there was also testimony before Congress at the time about Iraqi atrocities in Kuwait which was later demonstrated to be entirely bogus. The immediate trigger for our involvement in Vietnam – as opposed to the larger rationale for our involvement – was later revealed to be based on exaggerations so great that they basically amounted to lies. . . .

"In this case, and from someone like Colin Powell, can't we do better?"

[ABC's Note](#) tries to deconstruct Clinton and Iraq:

"Don't forget in trying to figure out Bill Clinton's position on this possible conflict with Iraq what the then-Arkansas governor classically said about Congress' vote on the American war against that same country in 1991: 'I guess I would have voted with the majority if it was a close vote. But I agree with the arguments the minority made.'

"Which is to say: we watched him Friday morning (including when he took a pass on commenting on Gore's speech) and we can't really tell you where he stands on all this."

Presidential candidates are often viewed very differently at home, as this [Charlotte Observer](#) piece reminds us:

"The self-described 'people's senator' from North Carolina is trading in his Washington mansion for an even bigger one in a better neighborhood.

"Sen. John Edwards and his wife have signed a contract on a \$3.8 million home in Georgetown, Washington's historic neighborhood of narrow, fashionable streets.

"This just feels like a family home,' said Elizabeth Edwards. 'There's a pool next door and you can hear the sounds of children playing.'"

Mitt Romney is no longer the gubernatorial shoo-in that many pundits believed, says the [Boston Globe](#):

"With a solid base among women and registered Democrats, Shannon O'Brien holds a slight lead over Republican Mitt Romney in the race for governor, according to a new Boston Globe/WBZ-TV poll that also suggests Romney's effort to tie O'Brien to patronage on Beacon Hill is not swaying voters.

"O'Brien receives 42 percent to Romney's 36 percent, with 12 percent undecided and 2 percent declining to answer. . . . She beats Romney, 48 percent to 30 percent, among the female voters surveyed."

What some are now calling "Iowatergate" is starting to hurt Tom Harkin, as the [Des Moines Register](#) reports:

"Sen. Tom Harkin's campaign manager resigned abruptly Friday, becoming the second casualty in an unfolding controversy stemming from a tape-recorded meeting of Republican rival Greg Ganske and his financial supporters.

"The departure of Jeff Link from the Democratic senator's campaign

came as Harkin acknowledged a junior research staffer asked a former Harkin congressional aide to record the Sept. 3 Ganske meeting at the Hotel Savery in Des Moines. The aide then passed the tape and a transcript to a newspaper reporter."

So the Harkin campaign set it up!

"While apologizing for the incident, Harkin downplayed its significance as 'shenanigans' and the product of 'youthful exuberance.'"

New Jersey Sen. Robert Torricelli is still hobbled by accusations from a now-imprisoned campaign donor, Chang, [Newsweek](#) reports:

"The Torch has had an inordinately difficult time changing the subject. Indeed, some of Chang's latest allegations sound like scenes from HBO's north Jersey-based mob opera. The senator would drown out a 'bug' with his kitchen radio when Chang made his regular cash deliveries, Chang alleges. He also claims he was once followed into a 7-Eleven by Torricelli and a 'prominent New Jersey waste-disposal contractor' – Tony Soprano's stated profession."

A Newark Star-Ledger poll shows Torricelli trailing Republican Doug Forrester by 13 points.

Finally, some defenders of ex-Chicago Tribune commentator Bob Greene are coming to the fore, including American Spectator Editor R. Emmett Tyrrell, writing on [Townhall.com](#):

"I have a fat file of news reports about well-known journalists caught plagiarizing, fabricating stories and lying about their misdeeds. A surprising number of these journalists have landed right back on the pages of newspapers and magazines, and continued to appear on television as authoritative witnesses to the national scene. None has suffered Greene's ignominy. Greene's misconduct was personal. These other columnists' misconduct was public and a breach of ethics.

"What is the point that the Trib is making? Is it that adulterous sex with young women is intolerable, though it happened 14 years in the past – even if Greene's act was criminal, the statute of limitations has run out? Is it that a writer has an obligation to inform readers when he is writing about someone he knows intimately ('Full disclosure, I have known Miss Toots carnally,' or, 'When I think of her I have lust in my heart')? . . .

"Or is Greene just a victim of the society's swinging pendulum? When our lying and lecherous president was exposed four years ago, the pendulum had swung to the outer regions of toleration. Now it is swinging the opposite way."

We knew he'd get around to Bill Clinton sooner or later.

"Perhaps that is why I would rather put my faith in the rule of law than the swings of public opinion. I believe Clinton should have been impeached because he broke the law. I believe Greene should at most have been reprimanded. He broke no laws. The offense took place long ago. Since then, his behavior has been unexceptionable, though his writing is hooley."

© 2002 The Washington Post Company

