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**NE MAGAZINE**

**Decoding the Blogosphere**

■ Navigating Connecticut's Expanding World Of Web Logs.

October 23, 2005

By JOEL LANG

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When I discovered their site (using the Google search engine), I couldn't tell what its purpose was or who was running it. Eventually I found an e-mail link and sent a query that Fausel answered, giving his telephone number. Not long after, he agreed to stop in at the Courant to explain what he was up to. I half expected to meet a pale, young shut-in. But the middle-aged Fausel arrived looking tan, fit and prosperous.

Asking "Can I drive?" he sat down at a computer, connected to his weblog and gave a tour of the site, interspersed with its history. The blog directory, or blog roll, ran out of sight down the left of the screen, and the new postings appeared in the center. "You see, there's a 'call out' to the lead article," he said. "It's all automatic. While I'm talking to you, it could be updated in the next 10 minutes."

The first blog Fausel happened to point out was devoted to letter boxing. Its enthusiasts treasure-hunt for notebook registers hidden in weather-proof boxes in scenic locations. "Brutally Honest," which Fausel judged to be a well executed blog, was by a graphic artist who explains how she does her work. Fausel was dismissive of personal blogs that are too banal - the type that might say "I came home. I had a hard day. I wanted my favorite perfume. Blah, blah, blah." A self-confessed news junkie, Fausel hesitated to identify the most popular political blogs. "The problem is a lot of it is a rant," he said.

Among his personal favorite blogs is "Connecticut Windows on the Natural World," whose title, unlike most blogs, pretty much indicates what it's about. "The reason I like this site is he's got a lot going on," Fausel said. He scrolled down the site to a photo of an electric sting ray in Block Island Sound. "I learned about this there," he said. "This thing's got 160 volts or something. It will knock you out of your boat."

Fausel said he didn't know who maintained the site. But to him that seemed beside the point. A good blog, he said, shouldn't be like a traditional website that communicates one direction, outward. It should have links to the keeper's own favorite sites, redirecting visitors their way, perhaps creating an online club of common interests.

"One of the things I'm trying to do [with Connecticut Web-logs] is I'm trying to build a sense of community," he said. "What these people really love, what all bloggers really love, is if somebody links to them."

A blog's popularity, in fact, is rated by the number of links it gets from other bloggers, not just the volume of visitors. Fausel was happy that Connecticut Weblog rated high on Technorati. But his main goal is giving "call outs" to other

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bloggers. He wants to improve the site by adding original content and recruiting the best bloggers (the ones, he said, who have "band width") "to tell us what's out there."

As of now, he and Thibodeau can't keep up with happenings in the blogosphere they are helping to create. (They have one regular collaborator, a public relations man named Harry Lew, whose photographs adorn the site.) They're certain that there are more Connecticut blogs than they've identified, even if they can't be sure all the blogs they do list actually originate here. A sign of the chaos in the blogosphere is that Fausel recently discovered that someone created a copy cat ctweblogs site devoted to advertising. "To me that's amazing," Fausel said, also annoyed.

Fausel and Thibodeau are longtime friends who attended Central Connecticut State University and stood up as best men at each other's weddings. Both are veterans of the information technology revolution. Fausel taught computer science at Central and now is a consultant specializing in the architecture of computer systems. He lives in Harwinton. Thibodeau was city hall reporter and editorial page editor at the New Britain Herald newspaper until about a decade ago when he left to become a technology journalist now based in Washington, D.C.

Thibodeau already operates a blog that is a model of what their Connecticut site might be. Called DC Blog, it recently won a "Best of the Web" citation from Forbes magazine. It has links to about 400 blogs in the Washington area and lists them by interest group: for neighborhood news; theater; food; restaurants; photography; transportation. The single largest category is for personal blogs.

As a former newspaperman, Thibodeau is predictably critical of the way papers have responded to blogging. "They ask reporters to be bloggers. They are so utterly clueless," Thibodeau said. He thinks papers should instead be reaching out to bloggers who are likely to know their communities better than reporters. "Newspapers can give bloggers what they want, which is traffic." He said weblogs like his are emerging as ad hoc newspapers, with contributors who can match professionals in quality. "What's going on is people are beginning to specialize and writing about what they love," he said.

The conversation with Thibodeau became a little incestuous and circular.

Very early in his career, he was a stringer for the Courant. When he emailed his recommendations for Connecticut blogs worthy of exploration, Colin McEnroe was on his list. McEnroe, a former Courant reporter, is now a WTIC radio talk show host and longtime Northeast columnist. McEnroe's new blog is being introduced in this issue of NE.

Thibodeau also recommended two new online Connecticut newspapers, the Hamden Daily News and the New Haven Independent, edited respectively by Sharon Bass and Paul Bass. Paul Bass worked for years for the alternative New Haven Advocate. In the e-mail, Thibodeau wrote that he found the Independent particularly impressive. He also observed, "Blogs network, newspapers don't."

On the phone, I'd asked Thibodeau about what seems to be a paradox of personal blogging: that bloggers want an audience but hide their identity. Thibodeau, whose own name does not appear on his DC Blog, agreed that bloggers do "try to be as invisible or mysterious as possible." But he said they aren't hiding.

"They don't want their names turning up in a Google search," he said. "If you start networking [with them], you'll find out who that person is." He said he now meets regularly, face to face, with a cadre of like-minded bloggers.

"I've brought them into my world. I'm meeting more people. It's become precious to me. I'm really proud of it."

He said he has no ambition to make money off his blog. "I just don't want that conflict," he said. "I don't want to go there."

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