
January 21, 2008

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Campaign Reporting in Under 140 Taps

By [NOAM COHEN](#)

“NASHUA: Just saw Bill O’reilly misbehaving at Obama rally. Shoving Obama staffer.”

With these sloppily spelled words, sent Jan. 5 by text message by John Dickerson, chief political correspondent for the online magazine Slate, did microjournalism come of age.

The encounter between Mr. O’Reilly, the Fox News host, and the campaign aide did become actual news, kind of, for a day (a brief item ran in The New York Times, for example). But it first emerged from a high school gym in New Hampshire via Mr. Dickerson’s BlackBerry.

He uses Twitter — one of a number of so-called microblogging services — to distribute his text-message reporting to his [Facebook](#) friends, as well as his readers at Slate, which reprints recent Twitter items alongside his longer-form writing.

Microjournalism is the latest step in the evolution of Mr. Dickerson, who worked for years at Time magazine, and has moved from print to online articles to blog entries to text messages no longer than 140 characters, or about two sentences. “One of the things we are supposed to do as journalists is take people where they can’t go,” he said in an interview. “It is much more authentic, because it really is from inside the room.”

Some might consider the idea of a barrage of text-messaged snippets about the presidential election the final dreadful realization of the news media’s obsession with “sound bites.” And spending time with the Twittered campaign reporting can mean wallowing in skin-deep observations, anonymous trashing of candidates and more than you would want to know about the food and travel conditions for the reporting class.

But it is genuine, and at times enlightening, which is more than you can say for the candidates themselves, who have also taken to using Twitter to update their supporters. (The septuagenarian [Ron Paul](#), for example, is an ardent Twitter user, it appears, though he has a penchant for exclamation points that would make a teenager blush. Typical Ron Paul Twitter message: “Thus far in the race, I’ve received more votes than [Fred Thompson](#) or [Rudy Giuliani](#). Freedom is popular!”)

Way back in early December, Mr. Dickerson was a solitary figure microblogging from the campaign trail, and there was less breaking news to report, so his posts ran the gamut from trenchant (before the Republican debate in Johnston, Iowa: “[Alan Keyes](#) is here. There will be yelling.”), the self-referential (“Happy the Marriott Des Moines upgraded their gym.”) to the maudlin (“[Bing Crosby](#) is singing Noel and [Barack Obama](#) is on the TV not pitting red america against Blue America all while I try to eat my 5 O’clo. ...”). The strict 140-character limit apparently took some getting used to.

Now he has been joined by at least two other political reporters, Ana Marie Cox of [Time.com](http://www.time.com), who began just before the new year, and Marc Ambinder, a political blogger for The Atlantic, who started last week. “I think I probably will just find that it is a way to direct traffic to my site,” Mr. Ambinder said.

Olivier Knox, a White House correspondent for Agence France-Presse, has also recently been Twittering, though he stresses that he doesn’t use it to commit journalism. “Right now it is more personal than professional,” he said. “Where it is professional is in trying to keep track of tools that will be useful.”

As Mr. Knox makes clear, news has always come in different sizes. Despite the new gadgetry, these journalists are actually rediscovering telegraphese — the clipped (ideally witty) style that flourished because of word limits imposed by an earlier technology, the telegraph. Today, it is the limits imposed by text-messaging.

“It’s a sign of just how impatient this generation is,” Ms. Cox said. “I don’t have to open up a computer, and it’s no more than 140 characters.” She said she used the posts to “capture the excitement” of the events she is covering — like the McCain suite on the night he won the Republican primary in New Hampshire, when he had to go to the bathroom to speak with [Mike Huckabee](http://www.mikehuckabee.com) to get some peace and quiet.

Pity the poor reader, however. When I read Ms. Cox’s concise reportage — “McCain: ‘Willford Brimmley is our response to Chuck Norris.’” — the potential for parody was high enough, and Ms. Cox engages in sufficient parody that I had to double-check with newspaper accounts to find corroborating photographs of Mr. Brimley and Mr. McCain sharing a microphone. “If you only Twittered and only read Twitters that would probably be a bad thing,” she concedes.

To Josh Tyrangiel, the managing editor of Time.com, “the business thinking is the same as almost all of my business thinking: Why not?” The more exposure to Time.com’s material, the better, and no one can afford to be choosy about the setting. So Ms. Cox also has a Flickr feed for her photographs from the campaign trail that Mr. Tyrangiel is happy to promote. Ultimately, he said, it is a hopeless fight.

“If you tell people how to consume their content, they will ignore you,” he said, a truism that experience had taught new-media executives. “Let people do what they want to do and try to be in their circle of choice.”

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