



On blogging: Q & A with Dave Oliveria

Dave Oliveria started his journalism career in the days of hot type. Now, he's one of *The Spokesman-Review's* most popular bloggers. As his blog, Huckleberries Online, neared its third anniversary in February 2007, Oliveria reflected on this growing medium and how it's changed him and the journalism industry.

When it comes to blogging, Oliveria says, interaction is key.

Q. Why did you decide to start blogging?

A. In 2004, we had the presidential election and I was probably one of the few in the newsroom who supported Bush. I wanted an outlet. I wanted to provide a conservative voice online to counter some of the liberal voices.

Over the course of time, the blog really got to be comment-driven. Although I steer the discussion, I don't so much run the discussion. I let the community – the posters and the commenters – do that.

Q. How would you describe your blog?

A. It's sort of an eclectic online magazine.

Q. What makes your approach to blogging different?

A. Well, with normal blogs, you post a thought or an opinion. I look at mine as sort of a hodge-podge, all of it intending to get interaction. That's the goal. I post questions to get folks engaged in community-type topics. And some of it is patterned after my weekly newspaper column, which is a three-dot column in the form of Herb Caen. It goes through the whole column with bits or pieces that may not be related at all.

One element to me is I like to have fun. I'll be going along real serious and all of a sudden, you'll see a two-headed calf or somebody will Photoshop something. I don't know from one minute to the next what I'm going to throw out there. The whole thing is that, by the time you

get to the end of the day, you've learned something and had a good laugh.

Q. Why did you adopt that approach?

A. The idea of Herb Caen was, if you don't like one item, go to the next one. And that's my philosophy; I keep throwing stuff out there until I can hit on something that drives comments. Sometimes, I use my bloggers. There are about 42 bloggers here in North Idaho . Sometimes, when I'm tapped out, I go through their stuff. And what I've found out is: If you promote others, they'll promote you.

Q. Where do you get your ideas?

A. I go online. I visit some national Web sites. I like throwing polls out there. If you have a good question, that'll get interaction.

Then there's my life experience. I do slice of life. It can be anything. It's whatever's rumbling around in my head. Like I had a problem with a parking machine in Spokane and it cost me \$20 and it may cost me \$40, so I wrote about that.

Also, people call and e-mail me with stuff. If it's interesting, I'll put it out there. My best idea is the Best of the Northwest, a compilation of newspaper articles and blog posts. I go through the online newspapers and post the best stories and online commentary. I run the [Best of the Northwest](#) daily right before 1 p.m.

Q. How has the blog changed since you started it in February 2004?

A. The biggest thing is it's gone from a conservative political blog to a community blog that is intensely interactive. It's far less political today, although I'll throw out political subjects every once in a while because it's like nectar to these guys. I try to keep my opinions to myself. If you read it for any length of time, you'll know what I'm talking about. But I don't throw it in your face.

Q. How have you changed since writing the blog?

A. I don't get quite as excited about politics any more because I see the benefits to both sides, but I also see the down sides to both sides. I don't think the nation is going to be saved by Republicans or

Democrats. I guess where I'm at is that I just don't get as excited about politics and I'm more interested in what's going on locally.

Q. Why did your views change?

A. Because of the monster difference in interaction between newspapers and blogs. For example, right around Christmas a couple of years ago, I got fed up with the Christmas-bashing and I wrote a column in the newspaper about all these things that tick me off as a conservative. I got all kinds of response, but when you write a column, you get the letter to the editor three days later. It all takes process; it's a one-on-one thing and it takes weeks to be discussed.

Online, you write something and you get an immediate response, an intense response. By the time something works through the newspaper, it takes weeks to digest. With blogging, you've done it in an afternoon.

Blogging is not for the faint of heart because, at any time, somebody can get in your face. As print journalists, we're protected. When we write about something controversial, we can hide behind our telephone and our editors. As a blogger, they can get to you.

Q. What does that mean in terms of critics who say blogs allow people to rant and grow more entrenched in their views?

A. I think some blogs are like that. I think the political blogs tend to not only be one-sided but attract people of like mind. Like the Daily Kos, (LINK) what conservative is going to go on there and beat their head into the wall to challenge the guy there? Michelle Malkin, (LINK) why would a liberal go on there and beat their head against that wall?

Where somebody's writing a political blog to attract like-minded people, to me, is an old form and not a very courageous form. I'm extremely proud that my blog has liberals and conservatives; we have evangelics and gays; we have a witch. We have a line-up that's just wild. I had a lot of trouble with flame wars, but that's more or less gone away.

Q. How did that happen?

A. I interact with the comments section quite a bit. I don't keep a tight, tight rein. After three years, people know there are certain things you can't do. I'll let 'em blast each other and blast public

figures. But if they're going toward libel or slander, I'll take it down and send them a warning.

I can kill out comments, and I used to block people who got too carried away. But a computer-savvy guy can get around a block. So I've developed a 50- to 60-strong community of posters and they have a pretty good way of putting the muscle on people who are being inappropriate. They get on it pretty quickly.

I'll still apply a brake every now and then. I'll get on and comment pretty quickly. But most of it I just let go. Every now and then, if somebody's being too much a fool, I'll have fun with them. Sometimes, I'll tell them they're an idiot. Sometimes, I tell my editor, "You know, the customer isn't always right."

Q. You've spent about 13 years as a member of the editorial board. How does writing the blog differ from writing editorials for the print newspaper?

A. They're totally different. When you write an editorial, you're thinking of sentence structure, nouns and verbs. You're concentrating on an idea and trying to be persuasive. You're also writing for people who are expecting the piece to be technically sound and grammatically correct.

On a blog, you're flying by the seat of your pants. You're not sitting there proof-reading. You slam it in there and you make mistakes. I always hear about it in the comments section. My response is: "Look, I'm blogging at the speed of light. Would you rather me not blog as much and spend more time editing?"

Q. What's the response to your blog?

A. In terms of page views, we're up to pretty regularly over 6,000 page views a weekday. It's pretty dynamic. There are some that don't like it and there are some that don't like me. That's OK.

Q. Why do you think it's so popular?

A. Just because it's so eclectic; you can always find something that will interest you. Local discussion interests the local chamber types. They want to know what people think about the proposed new library or the budget. There'll be questions about that. State questions, local politics. Then there's stuff for the folks that are not from North Idaho . There

should be one thing in there, no matter where you're at, that will interest you.

Q. How does your blog create community in Northern Idaho?

A. We certainly have a community in the North Idaho blogosphere. There's definitely a group of people who have come to like each other online or enjoy bantering online. It's like having an online coffee shop. I serve as a linchpin by providing the material that gets the conversation going, but there's definitely an organic thing going, too – with individuals forming relationships among themselves online and otherwise. So, it's a mix. I don't want to take total credit for what's happening, because the 42 other North Idaho bloggers are doing their part, too. There's also a group called the Inland [Northwest Bloggers Association](#) that consists of several individuals on my blogroll that's doing its part.

A lot of the commenters are just average people. It's funny because they've sort of made a name for themselves by being regular posters. I think of this one fellow who was just a taxi cab driver here in Coeur d'Alene . He became a regular favorite because he was like Joe Average. He recently moved to Oregon and my commenters were bummed that he was leaving the area. And there are several like that who have really become community personalities on the blog.

Another thing we do as far as community interaction is we have "blog fest." There've been two or three of them, where they get together in a restaurant and discuss what they do and how they do it. It's pretty cool to see some of this stuff.

Q. Do you do something to foster that sense of community or does it happen on its own, organically?

A. Oh, no. I foster that. Almost daily, I pull out good comments from people; this is from Digger or so and so. I'm constantly promoting these guys. That's part of it; I really believe in promoting these guys.

Q. How big a role does geography or a sense of place play in creating community on your blog?

A. I think when you're online it's a different animal because you can be part of any community. The world is your community. I have one poster from England . I have people from Seattle , Western Washington , Oregon , Boise . A lot of folks that have lived here and

now live elsewhere just want to keep in touch. As far as the community goes, there are no boundaries.

Q. What impact has this blog had on your connection to community?

A. I think I'm far more in touch with the community today than I ever have been because blogging interaction is so intense. I even have people reporting stories going on in their communities, breaking news. They'll get online and say, "This is going on in my neighborhood." Very few things sneak by without us discussing them. I'm constantly giving tips to the newsroom on stuff coming through the blog.

Q. How much time do you spend out on the street?

A. That's one of the down sides. I've been attached to my desk for about three years. I'm attached by the phones and the computers and faxes.

Q. How much time do you spend online?

A. Too much. Way, way too much. Weekdays I can spend six hours. I've been trying to rein myself in. That's the biggest problem. It's just consuming and addictive. On Sundays, I try my darndest to just go there to make sure there's no spam or stuff. I'm struggling to separate myself little bit and take time off. It's hard; it's an addictive medium.

Q. What's your advice for how to get people involved (and coming back) online?

A. That's the reason I approach the blog the way I do and post so much. I have three periods of posting. That forces an addictive reader to look in the morning, look in the afternoon and look again at night. It just forces you to keep coming back. You've got to post a lot and post things that are interesting to people.

Q. What is your advice to journalism students who are interested in connecting with the communities they cover?

A. I think few newspapers would provide the freedom I have to do what I do. I was given carte blanche. And a lot of that was [my editor] Steve Smith. He hasn't interfered with my blog at all. Of course, I come from the editorial side, not the news side. You have to be more careful on the news side. I think a reporter would have a built-in

problem with blogging. I can do what I do because I come from the opinion side.

I would say there would be a problem in a newspaper allowing a young reporter to write a blog unless they have some pretty strong guidelines. I've had 40 years in the business. I've been an editor, a news editor. It's not like they have to look over my shoulder, I know what's right and what's wrong. I think they'd have a rough time doing what I'm doing. And then finding an editor that even knows what a blog is would be another challenge.