

Blogs are new battleground for civil rights

Monday, 02 June 2008

By Howard Witt
Chicago Tribune (MCT)

HOUSTON -- The first time Eddie Griffin set out to fight for civil rights, back in 1972, he joined the Black Panthers, picked up a gun and robbed a bank in Ft. Worth. The crime landed him in federal prison for 12 years.

Today, Griffin's weapon is an Internet blog. And his incisive commentary regularly lands him atop the rankings of the most influential African-American bloggers devoted to issues of racial justice and equality.

"As activists, we can be so much more effective now," Griffin said. "We are not alienating a lot of people like we did back then. And we've learned some things over the years in the art of communication. One thing I learned in prison was to write persuasive arguments."

Half a century after Little Rock, the Montgomery bus boycott and the tumultuous dawn of the modern civil rights era, the new face of the movement is Facebook, MySpace and some 150 black blogs united in an Internet alliance they call the AfroSpear.

Older, familiar leaders such as Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rev. Al Sharpton and NAACP Chairman Julian Bond, are under challenge by a younger generation of bloggers known by such provocative screen names as Field Negro, thefreeslave and African American Political Pundit.

And many of the newest struggles are being waged online.

After black bloggers criticized the Democratic National Convention Committee over its decision to issue elite credentials for this summer's convention to a corps of 55 political blog writers, nearly all of them white, the party leaders quickly expanded the blogging pool to include AfroSpear members and other ethnic minorities. Meanwhile, ColorofChange.org, an Internet-based rights group with 400,000 members, recently sent 30,000 letters to Democratic leaders and superdelegates warning them against handing the presidential nomination to Sen. Hillary Clinton "against the will of the voters."

The march through Jena, La., last September, which drew more than 20,000 demonstrators from across the country largely on the strength of a blogging campaign, demonstrated the potency of the new Internet movement, many analysts say — and the waning influence of traditional civil rights groups.

"The NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the National Urban League and other old-line civil-rights and advocacy groups are badly out of touch with the activism of today on civil rights and social justice issues," said Earl Ofari Hutchinson, an African American political analyst and president of the Los Angeles Urban Policy Roundtable.

"Bloggers and younger activists have the means and the access to a vast network of readers to jump on issues on a speedy and timely basis," he said.

For their part, old-line leaders scarcely agree that their relevance is diminishing.

"Our struggle today is that we are free, but not equal," said Jackson, one of America's most recognizable civil rights leaders. "You will not close that gap with a YouTube mobilization."

Jackson and other civil rights veterans contend that lasting structural change, such as pressuring corporations to give minority-owned businesses more contracts or persuading Congress to pass new hate-crimes laws, requires the kind of sustained lobbying that only established groups like the NAACP or the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition can provide.

"Internet bloggers can serve the meal better than they can farm," Jackson said. "Farming requires tilling the soil, removing the debris, planting, being patient, letting it germinate. That's the strength of labor unions and churches and civil rights organizations."

Yet Jackson acknowledges that bloggers "can get issues to the marketplace faster" — a fact he said he used to his advantage after a recent trip to Haiti to draw attention to a hunger crisis there. He gave the first accounts

of what he saw to the Huffington Post, a widely read political blog.

The NAACP, meanwhile, has responded to the challenge posed by black bloggers by starting a blog of its own and appointing as its president Benjamin Jealous, a 35-year-old activist who promises to reinvigorate the 300,000-member organization.

“I don’t see any tension with the black bloggers,” said Dennis Hayes, the group’s chief executive officer. “The NAACP applauds the bloggers. But there is also the need in civil rights to produce warm bodies to bring to a cause, and traditional civil rights organizations like the NAACP are still able to do that most effectively.”

Not necessarily, counters Antoinette Pole, a political science professor at Southern Connecticut State University who studies African-American blogs.

“Black bloggers really stand out because they are organized in a way that many other groups are not,” Pole said. “The Latino blogosphere, for example, is really fragmented, which is not unexpected given that there are Cubans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, etc. But black bloggers are very cohesive and they are talking to each other.”

That unity of purpose — bloggers in the AfroSpear link to each other generously and amplify each other’s messages enthusiastically — can generate tens of thousands of petition signatures and hundreds of thousands of dollars in fundraising in a matter days for issues that strike chords of racial injustice.

Last year, for example, pressure generated by the bloggers helped lead to the firing of radio’s Don Imus after he broadcast racial crudities on his talk show. Another blogging campaign, on behalf of Shaquanda Cotton, a 14-year-old black girl from east Texas who was sentenced to juvenile prison for shoving a hall monitor at her high school, spurred Texas authorities to grant her early release.

Yet despite their demonstrated influence, black bloggers — many have professional day jobs as attorneys, accountants and technology workers — find themselves struggling for respect from the mostly-white liberal blogging establishment, which rarely picks up black blog postings.

“Just because we are soul mates ideologically, we don’t necessarily have the same issues we want to fight about,” said Wayne Bennett, a Philadelphia lawyer who blogs as Field Negro. “Our issues are things like crime and stuff that goes on in public schools. Their issues are the Iraq War and illegal immigration. And for a lot of the liberal progressive blogs, it’s more like recreation for them. With us, it’s more personal. This is our life.”

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