



# Net Gains

How have blogs and social networks transformed the LGBT movement? Executive Director Kevin M. Cathcart talks with bloggers Pam Spaulding of *Pam's House Blend* and Andy Towle of *Towleroad*.

**PAM SPAULDING:** I started *Pam's House Blend* in 2004 as an online diary of my own political thoughts, rather than a conversation with readers. But the fascinating thing is that over time, people would stop by who felt the same way (or a polar opposite) and comment. The anchor or hub that a good community blog provides is to spur conversation and debate, as well as to develop online relationships that sometimes result in offline meetings.

**ANDY TOWLE:** LGBT people became early adopters of the online world because it opened up new methods for those who may not have had the opportunity—or been afraid—to go to a gay bar to meet one another. The need for community

drew many gays and lesbians online in the early days of the Internet, and while it's still very useful in that sense, the early adopters have now gone on to be power users—both as consumers and creators of information.

**KEVIN CATHCART:** Even if we are not as socially isolated, it is hard to get good LGBT news. I read *The New York Times* almost religiously but long stretches can go by with nothing about our community. Television news is worse, as only the biggest headline stories get covered. And in most places there is no gay press, or it is not frequent enough or funded enough to cover news in a real way. So I think that part of our communal interest in or reliance on

blogs and new media is that although we live in a so-called information age, we are generally starved for the kinds of information we want or need, and blogs help fill this function.

**SPAULDING:** All of those new media tools have complicated the LGBT movement because it has shifted some of the balance of power in terms of messaging and tactics. It has become decentralized to an extent, with the relationship between the LGBT legacy organizations, LGBT media and LGBT bloggers sometimes strained.

Some of this new media chaos represents growing pains for the movement because the ground shift created by tools allowing

voices not previously heard to become influential is unsettling in a way that fosters distrust rather than collaboration in the struggle for equality. It will take time and relationship-building—along with more effective communication outside of social networks and blogs, to ensure these tools continue to effect change through inclusion, not infighting.

**TOWLE:** I think the influence of blogs and social networks on the LGBT movement has been a huge net positive. When you consider that in a matter of hours, a blogger or someone on Twitter can mobilize a large group of people to counter-demonstrate at a rally, or join a boycott or email members of the legislature. That's a kind of power that only the major gay organizations used to wield. Consider if the early gay-rights groups Daughters of Bilitis or the Mattachine Society had had something as powerful as a networking tool, instead of having to hold secretive meetings and fear raids and arrest by the police.

**CATHCART:** What is sometimes challenging is the lack of an editorial function in many of these platforms. This is not true of blogs like yours, where you do make decisions about what goes up and when to update things; I'm thinking more of sites that are endless open threads, where people with lots of time or determination to get a particular point of view across can opine or assert away on topics that they may or may not be well informed about.

But while this may create challenges for some organizations or kinds of organizing, it creates incredible opportunities for others. At Lambda Legal, for instance, we have the opportunity to get information about our cases or victories out directly to lots of people, without having to worry about

whether the editors of local mainstream media will think it important enough to devote space to. Knowledge gives us more power to protect ourselves, our families, our communities. It is a huge net good.

## "KNOWLEDGE GIVES US MORE POWER TO PROTECT OURSELVES, OUR FAMILIES, OUR COMMUNITIES." —KEVIN CATHCART



**TOWLE:** Prop 8's passage in California was a huge moment for the LGBT blogosphere as it was the first place to disseminate photos and information regarding the breadth of the protests and anger. *Towleroad* collected hundreds of photos and accounts of impromptu protests from our readers, as I know many other blogs did as well.

**SPAULDING:** I had never seen traffic like that before. The organizing around the protests was organic, almost all through Facebook, in cities around the country. It really was less about the blogs than about social networks. The blogs just tried to keep up with covering all of the action/reaction to it all. It proved that people online could in fact be activated offline, and that had to be intimidating to those unaware of the power of this form of communication.

**TOWLE:** One of the challenges of blogs I think, is a responsibility to share news accurately. I consider *Towleroad* more of a place where news is aggregated than either an opinion site or a site that delivers original reporting, and the sheer volume of material I must read through

every day is a challenge in and of itself. If I'm following a more complex story it can be challenging to deliver all the details at the speed with which I have to do it. I've published things that are wrong. But my readers will let me know immediately if something needs to be corrected, which is the blessing and the

curse of having hundreds of commenters waiting for you to hit the publish button.

**CATHCART:** I think the challenge for nonprofit organizations is that we have so many different ways to communicate with different subsets of our constituents or of the general public, and that we have to use all of them at the same time and all of the time. It used to be slow but simple: you printed a newsletter, sent direct mail via U.S. Postal Service, waited for results to come in. Now our lists, donors, public are segmented—different people get their news in different ways—and if we don't want to leave people out, we have to do all of them. And there is always a race to be the first ones out of the box with breaking news. It is great to be able to put information in people's hands so quickly, but there is a lot of pressure to be quick and that doesn't always work well with a legal culture where we want to read and analyze decisions before commenting. Being quick means we have to run more of a risk of sometimes being wrong (or at least not quite right) and that challenges us! **L**