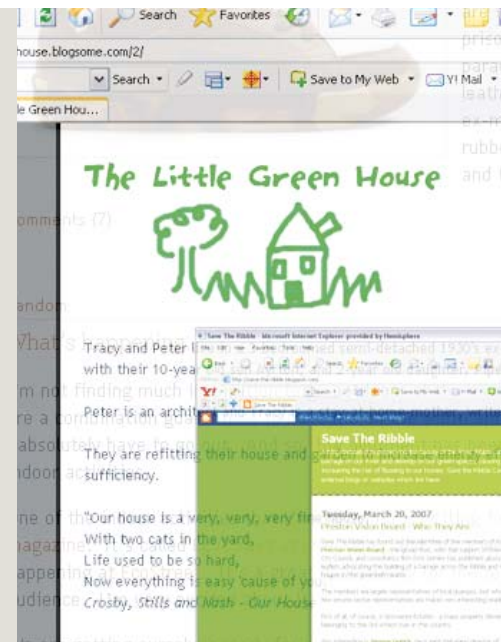


THE KEYBOARD IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Thanks to blogs, any environmental campaign can now be fuelled by the vast power of the internet.



If you've got a bee in your bonnet about something, what do you usually do? Let off steam down the pub, chew it over with your partner, write a letter to the paper, harangue your MP, or fume furiously in private?

Well, you might have done any or all of these in the past, but if you're going to move with the times, setting up a blog is now where it's at. Whether it's "Disgusted of Stockton Heath" getting cross about dog poo on pavements, or a primary school class demanding that the council impose a 30-mile an hour speed limit outside their school, launching your issue into cyberspace via a weblog – or in its shortened form, a 'blog' – is now de rigueur as the way for active citizens to air their views.

There are literally millions of blogs out there, ranging in quality from inspiring and compelling to self-indulgent and dull. Many are set up by individuals who simply want to chronicle the minutiae of their daily lives, and most, frankly, lie at the poorer end of the quality scale. But a good blog can be a powerful way to get your opinion across, and if you have an issue you want to protest about, blogging is a way of reaching an audience bigger than you could ever imagine.

Green issues are no exception: greenmummy.blogspot.com and littlegreenhouse.blogspot.com are just two examples of blogs set up by ordinary people who want to bring up their babies and live their lives in a more eco-friendly way. Environmental journalist George Monbiot has a much-visited blog and international charities such as Greenpeace run their own highly successful campaigning blogs that get hits from all over the world.

It's caught on fast because it's simple. A blog is basically a website that you create, name, and post your views on as often as you like. You can offer a facility whereby anyone who reads the blog can comment on what you've said. And blogs can include photos,

drawings, audio and film. The very essence of a blog however is that it's absolutely up to the minute, which gives readers a reason to keep coming back to see what happens as the "story" progresses.

One of the UK's most successful green blogs was started by activists in Lancashire who formed the Save the Ribble campaign. Initially anxious about the technicalities of setting up a blog, Jane Brunning, who describes herself modestly as a "complete techno-prat", was reassured by a colleague that the group could use www.blogger.com, which is entirely free.

"Blogging is all about free speech and democracy, giving power to voices that have previously been ignored – it is a tool that no campaign should be without."

"Basically you just set up an account, choose a template, make your first post and you're away," explains Max Lorraine, one of the four founder members of the Save the Ribble campaign.

"You can choose how easy it is for people to post comments and you can invite other people to become posters to your blog. We've involved local people who are interested

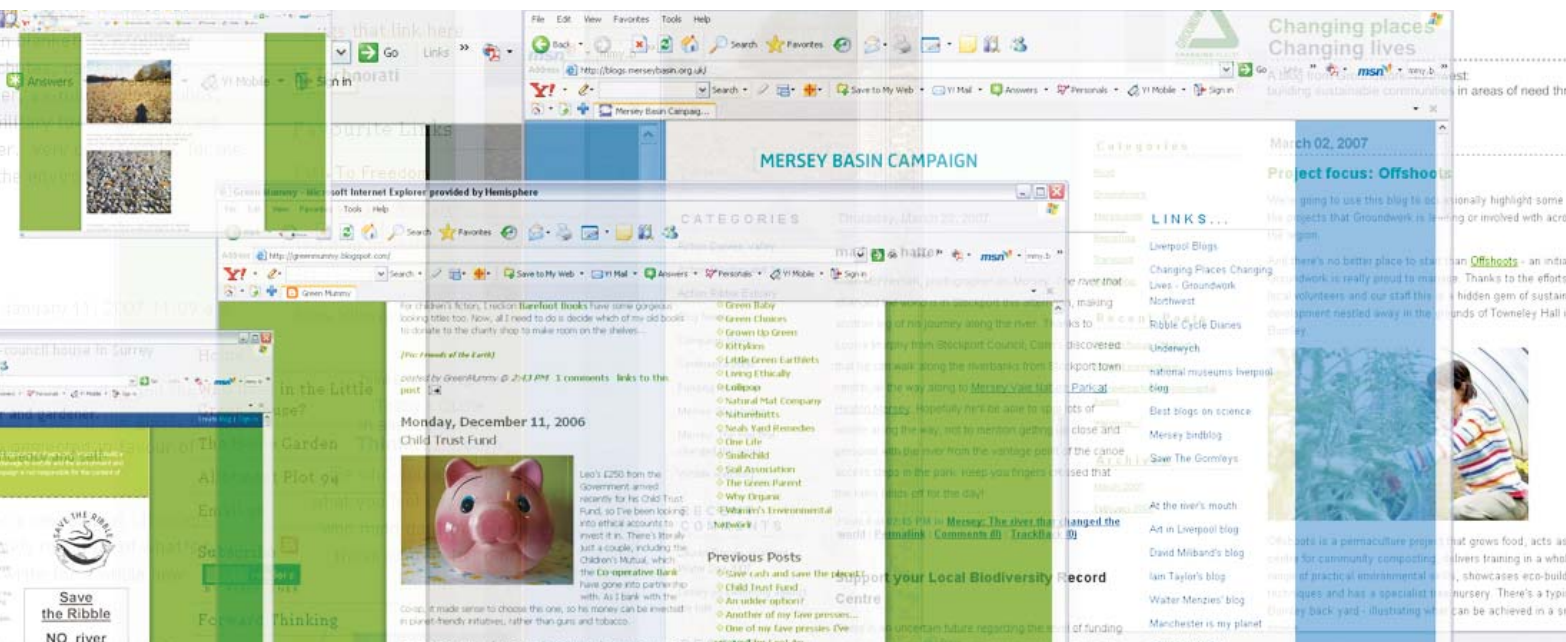
in protecting the environment, allotment keepers, fishermen and birdwatchers: none of us are brilliant at computing, but we find it reasonably easy to post."

The Save The Ribble blog gets around 2,000 hits a month and recently came thirteenth in a survey of the UK's most popular green blogs. What is it that makes it so compelling?

"We treat it like a magazine," says Jane Brunning, "and make a commitment to upload at least two new articles every week so that people keep coming back. That's really crucial. Plenty of people out there don't keep their blogs up to date, but that's fatal. And it's got to be interesting. There are a lot of blogs where people are just rambling on, which is tedious."

A successful blog requires a clear issue – a specific theme that makes it different from all the others. Late last year Sefton Council provoked a public outcry when it ordered the removal from Crosby beach of the 100 iron men that make up artist Antony Gormley's Another Place. Within 24 hours several blogs appeared to fight the decision.

One was started by Kate Fox, new media co-ordinator at the Mersey Basin Campaign. "The blog received comments from around the world. It enabled us to respond



quickly to an unfolding situation, and to gauge public opinion about the issue. We've gone on to set up other blogs and they turn our website from a source of information into an electronic conversation."

For Save The Ribble, the local council's Riverworks proposals to develop the waterside in Preston is the issue. The campaigners argue the plans will threaten wildlife, destroy green space and leave homes vulnerable to flooding. By creating a completely open forum they've ensured that their blog is read by all sides of the argument.

"Our blog has become a way that local people can clearly express their views, and be listened to, whereas local councils have tended to sideline and ignore them," explains Max Lorraine. "This diversity of viewpoints, along with photographs and up to the minute news – we often post photographs of events within a couple of hours of them happening – makes our blog a very compelling read."

The efficiency of a blog as compared to a traditional campaign is remarkable, both in terms of the speed and the massive reach of the internet – as long as you can get people to visit your site.

The best way to get traffic to your blog is to link to other blogs that you find enjoyable, or that discuss topics

related to your own area of interest. Often fellow bloggers will link back to you, and it's easy to see how a community of like-minded people is created.

There are pitfalls to be avoided though, and the scariest of those is the danger of libel. Just because something is published on the web does not mean it is exempt from the libel laws: fall foul of these and it can be an expensive day in court.

Libel is a particular bugbear of course when there's a hot issue under debate: it is all too easy to fall into exactly this trap when readers post their responses to information they've read on a blog.

"When people feel that their homes are being put at increased risk of flooding...they can get very angry," notes Max Lorraine.

To protect your blog – and your campaign – he says, it's important to ensure that you don't post any statement that can't be backed up by evidence. It is also good practice to screen all comments before they go up on the site.

Libel aside, the benefits of blogging are many and powerful. It's an unrivalled way of providing current news and facts about your topic of interest, it enables you to respond almost instantly to events, and means you can put forward arguments in a way that can be heard locally, nationally and internationally.

"People who previously could take hugely important decisions affecting our environment and our lives without much scrutiny from local people are finding that they are now being held to account much more publicly and democratically – something a lot of them feel

really uncomfortable about!" Lorraine points out.

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BLOGGING FOR BEGINNERS

There are now roughly 50 million blogs in the world. In the time it takes you to read this sentence several more will have appeared – one is created every second.

The word 'blog' is a shortening of the word web-log: literally, an online log or diary.

Blogs have caught on with incredible speed because they are free, easy to set up and use, allow readers to post comments, and can be linked together into communities.

There a few golden rules for campaigning blogs: have a clear issue you want to talk about; update the blog regularly; report any new developments promptly; use photographs; invite people to leave comments; build a community by linking to similar blogs; beware of the libel laws; and, not least, remember that the blog is just one tool in a armoury. You still have to go to meetings, organise events and talk to the local press.

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