



Bringing Partisan Bloggers Together on a Common Problem

A CAPE working paper on digital engagement

By Scott Bittle and William Hallowell III

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The rise of the blogosphere has been one of the most dramatic and discussed trends on the Internet. Blogs have brought new voices forward, particularly in politics. Some people who would have been unlikely to have a place at the table are now significant players, while millions more have a free platform to discuss whatever they wish. Personal expression is by far the most common reason for blogging¹. And while relatively few bloggers have or expect significant social influence, those who have built up audiences have truly become opinion leaders².

However, political blogs have proven to be highly partisan. While almost all blogs permit comments and discussion, relatively few attract readers from outside their own ideological spectrum. Blogs have certainly empowered party activists (the “blogroots”), but can they be used to promote discussion across ideological lines? Or are they inherently a tool for preaching to the choir?

The Project: Facing Up to the Nation’s Finances

Facing Up to the Nation's Finances is a unique project on the long-term problems of the federal budget. The nation’s fiscal situation is an ideal issue for nonpartisan and bipartisan work because there is little dispute that the federal budget is on an unsustainable path. Experts on both the right and the left agree that the entitlement programs, particularly Medicare, and the increasing national debt will break the budget and cause dire consequences unless something is done. This consensus on the problem – if not the solutions – is reflected in diverse perspectives of the Facing Up partners (Public Agenda, The Brookings Institution, The Concord Coalition, The Heritage Foundation and Viewpoint Learning).

The Facing Up project has both online and off-line public engagement components, including the Fiscal Wake-Up Tour and “campus conversations” around the country. At the project web site, www.facingup.org, visitors can educate themselves about the problems and engage in active discussion about Social Security, Medicare and other budgetary issues. Facing Up provides users with a five-step action plan that includes: spreading the word, working on solutions, starting to question the candidates, organizing locally, and interacting to suggest more actions.

¹ Pew Internet & American Life Project, “The State of Blogging,” Jan. 2, 2005, http://www.pewinternet.org/report_display.asp?r=144

² Pew Internet & American Life Project, “Blogging is bringing new voices to the online world: Most bloggers focus on personal experiences, not politics,” July 19, 2006, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/130/press_release.asp

The Strategy and its Application: A “Big Tent” Multi-Partisan Blog Carnival

A blog carnival, sometimes called a blog event, is simply a group of bloggers who all agree to write about the same topic at the same time. One blog “hosts” the carnival, typically recapping each contributed piece into one summary page, complete with permalinks. In this way, the audiences of many blogs can be drawn into a discussion of one topic. This technique is widely used, not just among political blogs, but also in blogs devoted to a whole range of interests.

A blog carnival, however, presupposes common interests among the bloggers. In other areas, this is not terribly daunting to the carnival organizer. A food blogger, for example, might sponsor a carnival for vegetarian recipes. Non-vegetarians might participate or they might not. In the hyper-charged atmosphere of political blogging, however, it’s rare for liberal and conservative bloggers to even know about each others’ events, much less participate. The challenge for Facing Up was whether a nonpartisan host could pull together highly partisan bloggers.

Facing Up’s first carnival launched on December 13, 2007 and focused on the U.S. government’s enormous debt. Entitled, “\$9 Trillion in Debt and Counting: The Facing Up Blog Carnival,” the initiative brought together economists, political bloggers, think tanks and other thought leaders who penned their views on America’s debt. On February 12, 2008, the second blog carnival was released. Entitled, “The First Baby Boomer, Second Blog Carnival,” this edition focused on the impending fiscal strain that would result from baby boomers becoming eligible for Social Security and other associated issues.

While our first two initiatives followed the traditional blog carnival model, we decided to change course in mid-April. Our third carnival was released on April 25, 2008. Unlike the two carnivals preceding it, this particular compilation was presented with a textual overview, but no permalinks. Instead of simply recapping each article, we permitted participating bloggers to actually post their entries on Facing Up. This gave readers the opportunity to peruse what was written, instead of simply reading a recap.

Facing Up also deviated from the former carnivals in terms of contributing authors, as the third carnival was comprised of articles from students at the American University. Andrew Yarrow, one of Public Agenda’s vice presidents and the director of our Washington, D.C. office, asked students in his class to provide their perspective on government debt, their feelings about its growth and consequences, and potential reforms that could be implemented to lower U.S. debt.

On May 21, 2008, we followed the same format for the release our fourth carnival on Medicare.

Outreach & Participation: An Overview

Conducting outreach for Facing Up was and continues to be a relatively straightforward process. Since the issues that Facing Up confronts are pointed, the need for a tailored list of bloggers was evident from the beginning. That said, with 2008 being an election year and with a number of issues taking center stage, connecting with general political bloggers to showcase the immense importance that lay in confronting America’s budget challenges was the first action that was taken. Prior to asking for blogger participation in the carnival, we asked writers to add Facing Up to their blog rolls and to cover our project in their writings. Because of this initial outreach to the general blogosphere, Facing Up has been featured by and/or linked to by hundreds of bloggers.

Outreach for the carnival was similar in nature. When the first carnival was being formulated, mass emails were sent off to bloggers who cover general political issues. Following this initial e-mail burst, a more tailored list of economics bloggers was drafted and compiled. Overall, outreach to this list of individuals proved more fruitful in nature. Since many of these individuals were and are already interested in fiscal issues, getting them to participate was a less daunting process.

In terms of numbers, for every 50 bloggers contacted, approximately ten were interested in the carnival. That said, around five bloggers for every 50 contacted actually participated in the carnivals. It is important to note that the overall goal for each carnival was to attract 10 to 20 participants, with optimal

participation solidifying itself closer to the 10 mark. While we wanted numerous contributors, we also wanted to keep the carnival simple to navigate and participate in.

Repeat participation has been an encouraging factor, as some bloggers have participated in more than one carnival. While some bloggers are more passionate about a subject such as Social Security and may shy away from participation in subjects that they are admittedly less knowledgeable about (say, Medicare), many have attempted to participate anyway. And in cases when individuals have declined to write in one of our four carnivals, they have readily connected us with friends and colleagues who they believe would be more suitable for the job. This has been encouraging as well, as it shows a snowballing effect that sheds light on confidence in and devotion to the Facing Up project. Overall, getting bloggers to stay with us has been relatively easy.

Facing Up's Project Success

There have been two additional critical elements in the success of the carnival: both the *appearance* and the *practice* of nonpartisanship. Firstly, bloggers had to believe that Facing Up was a truly nonpartisan initiative, not a stalking horse for either a conservative or liberal agenda. In this, the names of the Heritage Foundation and the Brookings Institution on the project were invaluable.

Secondly, Facing Up has shown itself to be open to all views, and even criticism of the project itself. Many of the blog carnivals have featured posts that questioned fundamental premises of the project (that the national debt is a problem, for example). We did not attempt to discourage those entries in any way and they were included in the carnival just like any others. In a political world where much time is spent worrying whether initiatives are “on message,” this gains us considerable credibility and shows Facing Up is truly committed to a “big tent” of viewpoints.

Our bloggers have been upfront with their opinions and feedback, which has been very helpful as we learn and grow from the Facing Up experience. As mentioned, we have had bloggers who have taken varying positions on Social Security, Medicare and the federal budget. For instance, a blogger who hails from the immensely popular *Angry Bear* blog wrote the following:

Upon a quick look at Facing Up, I do have a concern about how questions are framed, for example the page on Social Security, the Budget, etc.

The first question pre-supposes a crisis in solvency for Social Security, which in financial terms is simply wrong, no matter what Brookings and Heritage suggest. The essay would need to prove crisis to be a reasonable expectation, which is not born out by the numbers. Such a question is partisan to begin with.

Other aspects might create a crisis for Social Security, but solvency issues are not part of the program itself unless the bonds are defaulted. And even then it could be resolved reasonably, without crisis. A General Fund crisis is of course a different matter.

While his opinion is clearly in opposition with the mere framing of our questions, he has been an integral part of our carnivals, as he has connected us with capable bloggers who have greatly enhanced the Facing Up Blog Carnival with their intriguing perspectives. Once again, Facing Up's unique openness and non-partisanship makes working with everyone and anyone not only attainable, but also beneficial to our readers and the general public.

Remaining in touch with the contributors and discussing subjects with them has also assisted us in creating these long-lasting relationships. While most of our communications are via e-mail, these sporadic (and frequent, when a carnival is approaching) e-conversations assist in the framing of topics, driving home clarifications about what Facing Up is looking for in a particular carnival and fleshing through perspectives.

Reflections: Challenges, Adjustments, New Applications

While Facing Up has clearly been a success, there have been various issues that we have been confronted with. As stated, we have faced no real setbacks in finding participants. In fact, this has been the easiest facet of the project. However, encouraging and yielding commentary and debate has been a challenge. There are a number of issues that may be contributing to this minor setback.

The nature of a traditional blog carnival does not nurture social interaction. The purpose of the traditional carnival is to present a textual recap with links to each entry. Readers would then click the links to visit particular pieces that are published remotely. It is on these external pieces that readers would voice their opinions -- not on the Facing Up web site/blog. While this is par for the course, we decided to change our format in an effort to attract more commentary and debate. Instead of publishing the entries remotely, we are now republishing them on our site. As mentioned, we present an introduction before the heading and brief text of each piece is listed. This, we hope, will encourage more discussion and debate on the Facing Up site. In order to fully harness the usefulness of this model, we will continue to experiment with outreach mechanisms both within and outside of the Facing Up community.

The second issue that hampers commentary may be the relative apathy that Americans have had toward budgetary issues. While people are reading our site, using our debt clock/other widgets and viewing our work, until recently a general apathy has prevented individuals from truly participating in discussions about the federal budget. With that said, the issue is gaining national attention. As the 2008 election approaches, there will be opportunities throughout the summer to build upon this growing interest.

Also, it is important to consider that we are non-partisan. While this is clearly a benefit in ideological terms, it sometimes makes our blogs less "exciting" in terms of the cutthroat political banter that typically leads to increased commentary and debate on other more partisan blogs and projects. With this said, we are growing into our new format and working to attract interested parties -- be they professionals or members of the general public. Engaging these constituents has been a fruitful process. On Facing Up, the individuals who comment are typically doing so because they care about the issues at hand, not for the sake of political debate or argument. With this in mind, as we grow, so will our on-site dialog.

The Facing Up blog carnivals are available at these URLs:

<http://www.facingup.org/blogcarnivalmedicare>

<http://www.facingup.org/budgetdialogueamericanuniversity>

<http://www.facingup.org/blog/bhallowell/2008/02/facing-blog-carnival-social-security-second-edition>

<http://facingup.org/blog/scottbittle/2007/12/9-trillion-debt-and-counting-facing-blog-carnival>