

Only Connect

The Impact of Blogging on the Field of ADR

By Diane Levin

We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibres connect us with our fellow men; and among those fibres, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects.

—Herman Melville

In his 2006 book *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art*, author Stephen Miller evoked a golden age of discourse that England enjoyed in the 18th century. The seat of that renaissance of conversation was the coffeehouse, where wit and aphorism flourished. Men gathered to warm themselves with a dish of coffee, transact business, gather news, enjoy the latest gossip, and of course converse.

Although the British coffeehouse has largely faded from public memory, a spiritual descendant has emerged possessing many of its ancestor's most distinctive attributes: the blog. Like its 18th century predecessor, the blog is simultaneously marketplace, library, and public square, with a wealth of views and ideas clamoring for consideration, attracting businesspeople, scholars, thinkers, writers, celebrities, and ordinary citizens.

ADR professionals and scholars perhaps would have felt at home in the 18th-century coffeehouse. We and the coffeehouse share similar virtues: ours is a field that promotes and pursues the exchange of ideas and information. It is fundamentally about conversation. And, like England in the 18th century, the ADR field is enjoying its own renaissance in discourse, one that flowers lushly online, thanks to the phenomenon of blogging, drawn to its capacity for bringing people and fresh thinking together.

For four years as a blogger, I have chronicled the impact that blogging has had on ADR. I began blogging at MediationChannel.com¹ when I was one of only a handful of men and women blogging about dispute resolution. During that time I have also served as the ADR blogosphere's taxonomist, tracking blogs worldwide at ADRBlogs.com,² a blog catalog that today lists almost 200 blogs from 29 countries.

During those four years—a long time on the Internet, where change happens rapidly and yesterday is old news—I have witnessed firsthand the changes blogging

has brought to our profession and to the work that many of us do. For ADR bloggers and our readers, the phenomenon of blogging has dramatically affected us and the way we practice in three key areas: the business of ADR, the dissemination and discussion of information and ideas, and professional networking. I invite you to explore them with me, following a brief introduction to blogs.

Understanding the Blog

A blog, for those of you not familiar with this popular social media tool, is a content-rich, frequently updated website containing articles (known as *posts*) appearing in reverse chronological order. What makes blogs so remarkable is that anyone with access to a computer and an Internet connection, regardless of technical ability, can create one. Because many blog publishing sites offer free blog hosting, blogs are within easy reach for anyone with a message.

What further distinguishes blogs from ordinary websites are several key features. Blog software creates individual URLs or web addresses (*permalinks*) for each blog post, making it easier for readers to find posts through online searches. Blogs can also be syndicated, relying on a technology called RSS (real simple syndication). Syndication enables blog content to be delivered to readers quickly and easily, allowing readers to subscribe to a blog's RSS feed by means of tools called newsreaders, which track and retrieve blog content automatically, either to the reader's computer desktop or to a single location online. For example, I use Bloglines.com,³ a web-based newsreader, to monitor updates for the 175 blogs I track. Otherwise, I would have to visit each site individually to check for updates, a time-wasting chore. Bloglines.com allows me to quickly scan headlines in moments, letting me read only the content relevant to me.

In addition, unlike ordinary websites, blogs make two-way conversation between blogger and reader possible because blog software allows readers to post comments, creating the opportunity for freewheeling discussion and debate. As a result, blogs serve as the locus of dialogue and stimulate the exchange of ideas and viewpoints, making blogs a powerful communication and relationship-building tool.

The Impact of Blogging on the Business of ADR

According to the 2008 report⁴ of Technorati, the leading blog search engine, in the United States alone blogs command an audience of approximately 77.7 million unique

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visitors, with 346 million readers worldwide. Bloggers, even those in a relatively small niche like dispute resolution or negotiation, have attracted the attention of part of that audience.

Successful bloggers develop their own unique voice, establishing themselves as a trusted authority. The conversational nature of blogs facilitates the development and deepening of relationships between blogger and reader. One regular visitor, contacting me about a speaking engagement, told me, “I feel as if I really know you from your writing,” a comment familiar to many bloggers. In addition, because they are updated regularly with new content, blogs tend to rank highly in search engine results. This heightened visibility makes blogs easier for prospective clients in search of professional services to find.

In August 2006, conflict resolution expert and author Tammy Lenski made history when she turned her popular blog, “Mediator Tech,”⁵ into a platform for writing her book on mediation marketing, *Making Mediation Your Day Job*.⁶ Visitors to “Mediator Tech” watched Lenski’s book unfold, chapter by chapter. The experiment paid off, a win-win for Lenski and her readers: as a writer, Lenski benefited from the immediate feedback readers provided to improve the book and make it more responsive to their needs, while readers benefited from Lenski’s advice as she posted each chapter. When Lenski ultimately published her book, it was a highly polished product accurately matched to the needs of its target audience and road-tested by numerous careful readers. Her exercise in transparency also earned their loyalty, transforming readers into evangelists for her book.

Other ADR bloggers have achieved perhaps less dramatic but nonetheless gratifying results. For a number

of bloggers, blogging has attracted clients and business opportunities from around the globe; resulted in speaking engagements both real-world and online; and led to teaching and training gigs. Blogging also translates into free swag: bloggers add to personal libraries when authors send copies of their books to review, or enjoy the chance to test-drive new online tools and software before general release.

Dissemination and Discussion of Information and Ideas

ADR bloggers have been producing insightful, honest writing about many of the big issues that confront our field—from credentialing for mediators to contemporary political issues to ethical challenges to changes in ADR law. Ever on the alert for news, ADR bloggers are often the first to break stories about advances in the field or alert readers to trends or issues. No longer dependent on subscription-only journals or other professional publications, readers of ADR blogs have a front-row seat on breaking news and cutting-edge ideas and developments—whether discussion on neuroscience applications for conflict resolution,⁷ job opportunities for the organizational ombuds,⁸ or dispatches from strife-torn Sri Lanka.⁹ Meanwhile, students of dispute resolution who follow blogs gain in-the-moment access to the thinking of practitioners and scholars.

In a recent email to me, Geoff Sharp,¹⁰ commercial mediator, barrister, and blogger in Wellington, New Zealand, captured the impact blogging has had for him:

I have much more theoretical knowledge than I ever thought I would—as you know that simply comes from being ahead of the curve on new articles and other think pieces by the global mediation community. As an aside, I

Diane Levin, who monitors dispute resolution blogs at ADRblogs.com, identified five essential blogs for the ADR community to follow, in addition to those referenced in this article. They are:

Title and URL	Author	Description
Settlement Perspectives www.settlementperspectives.com	John DeGroote, Esq.	Practical advice on getting the deal done from an attorney with nearly a decade of experience as chief litigation counsel of a global company.
Florida Arbitration Law floridaarbitrationlaw.com	Christopher Hopkins, Esq.	In-depth analysis of arbitration news and decisions from Florida and throughout the United States.
International Dispute Negotiation www.cpradr.org/TrainingEvents/Podcasts/ tabid/261/Default.aspx	Michael McIlwrath, Esq.	A high-quality podcast series featuring conversations with leading thinkers and practitioners with a global perspective on ADR.
PGP Mediation Blog www.pgpmmediation.com/articles	Phyllis Pollack, Esq.	Litigators and consumers of ADR learn when a mediator opens the door for an up-close look at the dynamics at the mediation table.
Cross Collaboration www.crosscollaborate.com	John Folk-Williams	Discussion of methods of public policy collaboration as well as commentary on leading issues and innovative practices.

have surprised myself at how I have been able to translate knowledge picked up from my reading into at-the-table-skills in the sense of reading an article and deciding that I would try and include some of the ideas from it in my at-the-table-work.

Changing Our Practice: Networking and Community

Blogging is ultimately designed to connect not simply ideas but people. For many of us, blogging has given us a closely knit community of neighbors to turn to for advice on ethical dilemmas, career changes, or moral support during economic hard times. Blogging has also collapsed distances and time zones, allowing bloggers across the globe to connect with each other and overcome geographic isolation to share practice tips or the latest web-based productivity tool.

In writing this article, I reached out to my network of fellow bloggers and asked them what difference blogging has made for their professional and personal networks. One, Victoria Pynchon, a former commercial litigator turned mediator and arbitrator blogging at "Settle It Now,"¹¹ expressed it with her typical eloquence:

[Blogging] gave me community rather than simply colleagues. The type of community we urban dwellers continue to believe must exist in some small Iowa town. A community where no one locks their doors; where you shout across the fence to borrow a cup of sugar; where people rally around you in hard times and celebrate your successes in good ones. . . . Think this is sentimental or over-blown? It is my actual lived experience in the community of legal and ADR bloggers I have joined. In the blogosphere, as in life, I've found that material success (which blogging has helped me achieve) is nothing compared with the spiritual satisfactions steadfast human relationships supply.

Pynchon should know. When her father was dying of Parkinson's last year, Pynchon blogged about the experience, sharing publicly with thousands of readers a daughter's private grief.¹² In solidarity, fellow bloggers and readers reached out, responding with posts of their own, acknowledging her family's loss, or expressing condolences through comments.

Unimaginable Communities

Eighteenth-century coffeehouses were famous for the quality of discourse they promoted. But these vibrant public spaces were just as remarkable for their egalitarian spirit, where lords and commoners mingled. Like the 18th-century coffeehouse, the ADR blogosphere draws no distinction between luminaries and lesser mortals, judging all solely on the merit of their ideas and not on academic pedigree. You will find Michael Moffitt¹³ and Jeffrey Krivis¹⁴ standing cheek by jowl with the likes of, well, me and other mediators, arbitrators, peacemakers, and ombuds.

Unabashedly public, transparent, open, and free in all

senses of the word, for half a decade ADR blogging has been busily producing fine writing, mutually respectful but vigorous debate, and close connections between professionals. Although our numbers remain small in comparison with an allied field, the law, which boasts some 5,000 bloggers, we are diverse in terms of subject matter, geography, and perspective. Our efforts have drawn the attention and support of well-known online dispute resolution resource, Mediate.com, which created a section on its site to highlight the blogs it features weekly,¹⁵ and of the International Mediation Institute,¹⁶ which lists notable blogs from around the globe on its site and to which I owe thanks for the quote that begins this article. Other ADR blogs, published in English, Spanish, German, Turkish, and other languages, can be found listed by category and country at ADRblogs.com.

Today, we can pull up a chair and join in the conversation simply by powering up a laptop and launching a browser. Lexicographer Samuel Johnson, a coffeehouse regular, might have had the blogosphere in mind when he wrote, "Sir, I look upon every day to be lost, in which I do not make a new acquaintance." Like the social spaces throughout history that have preceded it, the blogosphere not only stimulates the open communication of ideas but draws people into new associations. Technology, not caffeine, is now the stimulant. Through the rapid transmission of viewpoints and information, blogs knit together those of us cast far apart by geography, allowing us to form communities unimaginable even a decade, let alone centuries, ago.

During the heyday of the English coffeehouse, commoners and lords mingled with poets, clergy, and merchants. The air filled with the hubbub of many voices talking as people tried their thoughts out loud, with the parry of debate or shout of laughter. If only we could pull up a chair and sit among them, warm by the fire, listening or boldly joining in. ♦

Endnotes

1. <http://mediationchannel.com>.
2. <http://adrblogs.com>.
3. www.bloglines.com.
4. <http://technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogosphere/>.
5. <http://mediatortech.com>.
6. <http://mediatortech.com/blog-plus-book-equals-blook/>.
7. Stephanie West Allen, "Brains on Purpose," http://westallen.typepad.com/brains_on_purpose/.
8. Tom Kosakowski, "The Ombuds Blog," <http://ombuds-blog.blogspot.com/>.
9. Sanjana Hattotuwa, "ICT for Peacebuilding," <http://ict4peace.wordpress.com>.
10. <http://mediatorblahblah.blogspot.com>.
11. <http://negotiationlawblog.com>.
12. www.negotiationlawblog.com/articles/negotiating-lifes-end/.
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