



# Who Are Those Bloggers, And Why Are They Saying Those Terrible Things?

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*They have journalistic skills, amazing technical savvy, and access to millions—and they answer to no one. Here's how to deal with the "new press" when it seems like they're out to get you.*

**By Jonathan Bernstein**

## Thousands of members of a trade association recently watched their profits erode

as the result of coordinated and vicious online attacks by a small handful of detractors on a personal vendetta—detractors with the technical savvy to get their attacks listed on the first page of a Google search.

An industry-leading financial-services company found itself on the wrong end of complaints by state attorneys-general. The complaints were fueled, to a great extent, by online—and highly inaccurate—reports from another organization. Search engine results for the company's name also motivated one insurer to deny the company liability coverage.

A school board got picked apart on the Internet by a tiny group of disgruntled parents who harbored a grudge and were completely unwilling to work within the system to resolve it. The board faced legal and privacy considerations that restricted its ability to respond.

Crisis managers used to worry primarily about bad headlines in their local newspapers or negative telephone feedback from their various stakeholders. Damage control was usually local or regional, and seldom did negative news reach the ears or eyes of people outside the immediate region or the industry.

No more.

In one recent week alone, I received four phone calls from organizations or individuals whose reputations were being maligned online. The attacks were immediately visible to anyone, worldwide, who passively or actively tracked news related to those entities.

In the past year, 25 percent of the crises to which I've responded were Internet centered. That is, the crisis was driven by the fact that there was highly visible, negative information about my clients on the Internet, as in the examples above.

In fact, the Internet has played a significant role in 90 percent of the crises I've worked on in the last five years. In many of these situations, the

client organizations have done little or no wrong. In others, there were small truths and half-truths buried in the mountain of rumors and innuendo created by what was usually a tiny number of vociferous and prolific Internet critics.

### Identifying Your Foes

Often, the critics that groups face on the Internet are their usual adversaries—activists, disgruntled customers, unhappy members, former employees, political opponents. The Internet gives these traditional foes faster communications, better organizational tools, more reach, and a longer shelf life for their accusations.

But the Internet has also created a new breed of adversaries who attack even honest and ethical organizations. These are people who damage reputations the way taggers spray their graffiti onto property—to make their mark, regardless of whom they hurt. How do you stop them? You can't. But you can soften their impact by practicing "Internet counterintelligence." Often, you'll see that many of the more vehement and nasty bloggers have only one real cause: self-aggrandizement. Your organization just happens to be a target for them to hit, because, after all, diminishing you makes the self-aggrandizer seem even more important.

Just as in a traditional dispute, your most dangerous critics have what I call a high "C-Factor." The term "Q-Factor" has become fairly well known as the measurement of a celebrity's recognition quotient. In 2005, I introduced the concept of the "Credibility Factor" as the measure of how believable individuals or organizations are to stakeholders for any particular issue.

Your most potentially damaging Internet critics will also have strong search-engine optimization (SEO) skills. They know how to create a highly ranked Web site that will appear whenever a constituent or potential customer conducts a search on terms related to your group. A critic who has both a high C-Factor and strong SEO skills can be

devastating. That critic may be providing information that is totally or largely erroneous, but if it reads credibly and is highly ranked, your stakeholders will see it—and many will believe it.

How do you know who might target your association?

First, closely track Internet "chatter" about your association and the type of members you represent. Those first message creators could become the next generation of your most vehement Web-based critics. Second, be aware of lawsuits related to your association and the industry, profession, or cause you serve. Lawsuits often breed plaintiff-side and defense-side Internet activity.

Identifying potential problems is all about awareness. You must not ignore a threat (such as "I'm going to start a Web site and go after you") if you determine that the threatening party has the capability to take such action.

### The New Internet Realities

How do you keep from making matters worse when you're dealing with such critics? Just as your IT staff must be extremely well versed in online security matters, your PR staff must be experts in neutralizing or at least minimizing damage from online attacks. To combine tried-and-true PR principles with Internet-centered thinking, they must integrate these new realities into their strategic planning and tactics.

- **The Internet gives your critics direct access to all the tools of publicity and publishing—without the filter of traditional journalism.** So you can't count on the checks and balances of editorial oversight, the quest for objectivity, or clear channels for your response. Reflexes honed by working with the mainstream media aren't enough to deal with these unrestrained, real-time opponents. There's more psychology than media relations involved in managing online detractors.
- **It is absolutely impossible to contain a crisis once it hits the Internet.** An article on a local newspaper site, or on a critic's blog, is accessible

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worldwide—instantly. If the site is properly optimized, the attack will also show up on Internet searches using search terms important to your organization.

- **The Internet exponentially increases the prospect that confidential information will be leaked.** I've seen Internet critics publish not merely confidential documents but also recordings of broadcast voicemail and video that the target organization intended for internal use only. Often, this information is leaked by disgruntled current or former employees. Sometimes it is there for the taking on insecure Web sites.
- **In the absence of clear communication, rumor and innuendo will fill the gap.** The Internet ensures that any gaps will be filled, and new gaps will appear, far more quickly. Just consider all the Internet hoax e-mails you get and how rapidly they spread. E-mails that aren't hoaxes—but aren't confirmed as the truth, either—are even more titillating and so even more likely to be passed on.

### The Basics Still Apply

What I have long dubbed “The Five Tenets of Crisis Communications” are as important as ever. Organizational response to crises, whether online or in the traditional media, must be

- **Prompt.** The longer you delay your response, the more damage will occur. Sometimes the delay itself

becomes the issue for which you're criticized.

- **Compassionate.** If people are scared or anxious or in any way distressed by “the news,” you have to address their feelings first. Otherwise they won't listen to the facts.
- **Honest.** Anything less than the truth will come back and bite you. Remember that dishonesty can be by commission, omission, exaggeration, and understatement.
- **Informed.** Give your stakeholders enough facts so that they feel you're being responsive to their need for information.
- **Interactive.** Don't just “talk at” people. Give them multiple means to offer you feedback and ask questions (via toll-free numbers, Web site forms, and so forth).

### The Necessary Precautions

So, what kind of safeguards can a smart association put in place to avoid or cope with such problems?

**Ensure that an Internet-savvy staff person or consultant is responsible for continually monitoring news related to your association and the industry it serves.** The lowest-cost (free!) means of monitoring online news and information is Google Alerts, at [www.google.com/alerts](http://www.google.com/alerts). But this tool is not as thorough as tracking by a fee-paid service such as CustomScoop ([www.customscoop.com](http://www.customscoop.com)).

**Do not rely on others to support**

**your association or industry in times of crisis.** During the Mad Cow scare in the United States, the only authority figures were government officials spouting bureaucratic and scientific jargon that didn't clearly answer the most important question on consumers' minds: “Is my hamburger safe to eat?” Since then, food industry association officials and board members have told me that they were woefully unprepared to support their members with reliable and easy-to-grasp information on Mad Cow, even though a U.S. outbreak was an “it's-bound-to-happen” threat.

**Copyright everything you publish on the Internet, including text, photos, and artwork.** This gives you legal and public relations recourse if a critic or anyone else uses your material without permission. I have an association client that successfully engaged critics who published (and in some cases ridiculed) its copyrighted materials, such as pictures of board members. The association forced the critics to remove that information and apologize for using it. Legal counsel was able, in some cases, to formally copyright some of the material long after it was originally published on our client's sites and critic sites, so it's never too late to submit the correct paperwork to the U.S. Copyright Office ([www.copyright.gov](http://www.copyright.gov)).

**Retain legal counsel who understand the growing field of Internet law.** Many don't. Look for lawyers who can give you specific examples of how the law has changed and is evolving as the result of the Internet. They should be able to refer you to clients satisfied with the counsel's credentials and experience in this area. Some lawyers just spout jargon that can make you crosseyed.

**Bolster your own C-Factor and search-engine optimization skills.** It is essential to find ways to both come across with a higher credibility at online locations of your choosing (pick your battlefield!) and to ensure that your information is picked up on any Web search that relates to the crisis. There is no excuse for allowing an Internet critic's site to rank higher than

yours. Keep in mind that search-engine optimization is a very specialized area of expertise. Although you can upgrade the skills of your most Internet-savvy staff member in this area, you are likely to need an outside specialist. As with attorneys, ensure that whomever you hire has a track record with organizations similar to yours. A lot of them talk the talk, but they can't walk the walk.

**Be prepared to engage quickly.** The best time to engage an Internet critic is as soon as he or she appears online. This puts a premium on close monitoring.

**Make sure you communicate the right attitude.** You want to convey concerned and empathetic interest to any affected stakeholders, internal or external. In other words, your message should be, "We care very much what others think of us, we respect your right to disagree or criticize, and we would like to know what kind of information we might provide to help you understand our organization better." This approach won't always work. But documenting your attempts at compassionate and ethical contact will give you a paper trail useful both for PR and legal purposes in case the critic escalates efforts to damage your organization.

### Loose Cannons in Your Own Ranks

Among the most frustrating factors for associations are well-meaning but misguided employees and members who attempt to counter critics on their own. On the one hand, the right to freedom of expression seems to entitle them to speak out. But on the other hand, there's the reality that, in the passion of the moment, speaking out without coordinating on strategy and messages can cause even more damage. Remember the following:

- All of your staff, your board members, and, potentially, all the rest of your members are PR representatives and crisis managers for your association—whether you want them to be or not.
- If you do not have a clearly defined and well-understood policy on who

is authorized to speak for the association, then a lot of people will assume it's OK for them to speak out to the media, on Internet sites, and so forth. Your policy needs to be developed by your board of directors under the guidance of your public relations staff person or consultant. Then the policy needs to be thoroughly spelled out through both orientation and training sessions for board and staff.

- If you want your members to communicate on an issue, empower them with suggested messages. Otherwise, you run the risk that they will make up their own. While you're at it, give them rules to follow, such as "no personal attacks."

### Education and Reorientation

At some point in their careers, good generals have had to learn how to shoot a rifle, march, and effectively engage the enemy. Likewise, good association executives have had to get extensive training in the wide array of skills their staff and board require to fulfill their individual responsibilities.

But most leaders in all types of organizations, not just associations, know little more about the Web than how to send e-mail, conduct a search, or book travel online. Without Internet training, how can you expect to engage, neutralize, or defeat an opponent who's smart, fast, isn't bogged down by bureaucracy, and is usually well networked with other guerilla-tactic critics who know how to play David to your Goliath?

So educate yourself. Learn the jargon and tactics unique to Internet communications. Understand the environment—the battlefield, if you will—in which you're fighting for credibility.

To start with, I would encourage association managers—staff and volunteer—to read the description of the term "Web site" you can find on Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)). In this one article, the author describes 27 different kinds of Web sites. Reviewing these will open your eyes to how you could suffer if you became the victim of negative campaigns on rating or review sites—

not to mention a targeted gripe site that might be pointed directly at your association. There are innumerable and often-free sources of information on Internet-communications-related topics available to those willing to invest the time to learn what's out there.

Finally, there are some scary parallels between what the U.S. military has learned while fighting in the Middle East and what's happening on the Internet. In both cases, old, slow (more than a few hours) decision making and implementation gives terrorists—or rabid bloggers—a real advantage. Most American organizations are not structured for rapid online response. If they don't change, their C-Factor and bottom line will continue to suffer.

A colleague of mine, Gerald Baron, wrote a book on this subject whose title summarizes the challenge you face. The book is called *Now Is Too Late: Survival in an Era of Instant News*. But if you get ahead of this nasty curve, it doesn't need to be too late for your association. **an**

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## THREE CRISIS CASE STUDIES

### HOW ASSOCIATIONS DO DAMAGE CONTROL IN CYBERSPACE.

#### Defusing a Poultry Problem by Scanning the Blogosphere

**Problem:** When ABC-TV began to tout a May 2006 made-for-TV movie called *Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America*, the poultry industry feared that the film would sensationalize the threat of avian flu, raising unfounded fears that the virus would infect people in North America.

**Approach:** Industry representatives used traditional channels to persuade ABC to add a Web site disclaimer saying there's been no avian flu or human transmission in the United States. But in addition, the National Chicken Council in Washington, DC, hired a consultant to monitor industry-related bloggers and find out their probable reactions to the film.

**Complication:** The industry wanted to get a sense of how much buzz the movie might create, without further feeding the buzz.

**Action steps:** Besides monitoring bloggers, the consultant contacted relevant wikis—Web sites that allow users to add, subtract, or change their content—and offered to provide information resources. The administrators of the wikis said that as long as the emphasis was on factual information and not marketing materials to promote poultry sales, industry posts were fine.

**Outcome:** In the end, the industry's biggest boost came from fault-finding TV reviews. (Among the headlines: "Bird Flu Movie a Sickly Effort" and "Beware of Catching 'Flu.'") Even so, "the blogs gave us an early read on public opinion on the movie—which was indeed a flop," says Richard Lobb, director of communications at the National Chicken Council. The industry is satis-

fied that it did the right thing with a restrained approach, limited mostly to press releases about the movie's factual flaws.

**Additional action steps:** To emphasize industry efforts to prevent bird flu from "going human," industry associations have created [www.avianinfluenzainfo.com](http://www.avianinfluenzainfo.com). The site provides background on safety measures to prevent infection of poultry flocks plus downloadable brochures, videos, and Web links for the public, the media, and government officials. The site is a joint effort of the National Chicken Council, National Turkey Federation, and Egg Safety Center, all of Washington, DC.

**Advice:** When your association and its members face a possible crisis, you need to know where you stand in blogs, says the poultry industry's consultant, Steve Lubetkin of Lubetkin & Co. Communications in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. "They're an early-warning system—blogger relations is a new niche in the PR world."

#### Putting Out Fires on a Member Listserver

**Problem:** When the American Industrial Hygiene Association in Fairfax, Virginia, took steps to ward off potential attrition penalties at hotels contracted for its annual meeting, several members aired their grievances about the new policies on the association listserver.

**Approach:** Although members of the staff anticipated that there might be trouble on the listserver, they didn't expect it so many months in advance of the conference. So communication and meetings staff used AIHA's crisis communication plan as a model to determine a path forward.

**Action steps:** The same day that complaints began to appear on the listserver, staff provided information to key volunteer leaders who wished to craft responses to post to the listserver. Carol Tobin, AIHA's director of meetings and education, personally called members who took part in the list discussion to answer their questions and address concerns related to the new attrition policies.

**Outcome:** Tobin's conversations with individual members were particularly helpful in identifying conference attendees' real areas of trepidation regarding the changes. The staff immediately used the information to update the overall plan for communicating about the attrition issue. The plan included providing a frequently asked questions document with conference registration materials on the conference Web site; tailoring key messages for affected groups; and offering special training for staff, board members, and anyone else likely to come into contact with concerned members and nonmember attendees.

**Additional action steps:** Staff, board, and other key contact people say they appreciated the training and felt in command of the messages they needed to communicate. During the conference itself, the FAQ document was widely available, and members who had additional concerns were quickly identified and reassured. In evaluating the plan afterward, the members of the staff felt they had come up with a useful model to follow in future emotionally charged discussions.

**Advice:** When planning to communicate about a controversial issue, be sure to keep your listservers and other member-to-member communica-



tion vehicles in mind. “Members will always express their opinions to other members if they feel strongly enough,” says Lisa Junker, CAE, senior manager of communications for AIHA. “You may not always agree with their positions, but their hearts are in the right place—they want the association to succeed. Volunteer leaders and staff should be prepared to reach out and have positive discussions when there is a difference of opinion on where the association should go.”

### Using Online Tools to Battle Aggressive Adversaries

**Problem:** A focused and well-financed movement in support of private school vouchers developed in the late 1990s and continues today. The National School Boards Association in Alexandria, Virginia, needed to create a sustained national campaign to thwart advocacy groups that were pushing for passage of vouchers. Often, these groups promote their cause through hard-hitting online media including Web sites, blogs, and e-newsletters, as well as through rapid response to news that’s negative to their position.

**Approach:** To counter voucher advocates and also be proactive in distributing antivoucher information, NSBA’s campaign works on several fronts. It includes online initiatives, traditional media efforts, and a strong grassroots

outreach program to educate state school board associations and local school board members about the issue and effective strategies for defeating vouchers.

**Complication:** The pro-voucher advocacy movement has deep pockets, is willing to spend tens of millions of dollars to promote its message, and has a network of researchers, think tanks, and favorable editorial pages. Both quick and nimble, the movement uses its online vehicles to inform supporters of breaking news and to help create buzz in the mainstream media and elsewhere via an echo chamber.

**Online action steps:** As part of its Web site, NSBA developed the Voucher Strategy Center ([www.nsba.org/novouchers](http://www.nsba.org/novouchers)). It tracks legislation, analyzes research findings, and includes rebuttal points to pro-voucher literature. It also provides key messages, strategies, and campaign materials to help state school board associations and local school board leaders defeat measures in their states.

In addition, NSBA’s daily blog, *BoardBuzz* (<http://boardbuzz.nsba.org>), carries regular entries about erupting voucher battles and the players behind them. Begun in 2004 and written by a team of NSBA advocacy, legal, and communication professionals, the blog is effective for quickly counteracting pro-voucher news and propaganda.

Unlike a press statement, in which words are carefully chosen, the blog allows for “pull-no-punches” analysis that can help energize the grassroots and allies. When it’s strategically smart to do so, *BoardBuzz* responds to other blogs and also comments on or rebuts arguments made in or by mainstream media outlets that may not print a letter to the editor or op-ed. The blog gives NSBA its own vehicle to communicate with members and others instead of relying on mainstream media. NSBA also nurtures its grassroots through regular updates and alerts sent via listservers.

**Outcome:** On a micro level—as measured by the increased media requests NSBA receives on the topic—the online tools have made NSBA a go-to resource for the latest and most aggressive stances against vouchers. On the macro level, several state associations have used NSBA’s materials and strategic advice to defeat voucher and tuition-tax credit proposals. NSBA, in collaboration with other national education organizations, has defeated several voucher proposals in Congress as well.

**Advice:** Realize that online resources are helpful for learning about key players, including funders, in campaigns that could pose a policy challenge to your organization. In addition, “continually monitor blogs and Web sites to collect insights into developments that could impact your association’s campaign,” says Barbara Hunter, NSBA’s director of communications. “Educate yourself about your opponents’ arguments so you can arm your membership and allies with the best and most current information available.”