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BLOGGERS OF THE HUB, UNITE! (AND BRING YOUR TOYS TO DINNER)

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From the bartender's vantage point, it looked like any dinner party: a dozen people sitting down at a long table with menus and silverware, peeling off heavy coats, and moving tables to accommodate latecomers. The minister from the suburbs greeted the event planner from Somerville, who introduced herself to the video producer from Jamaica Plain.

Except that, for the most part, the people at the table were strangers. The meeting was a kind of group blind date organized through a website and arranged around the one trait all members shared: an interest in blogs. Known as the Boston Weblogger Meetup, the gathering convenes on the last Monday of every month. Though they've been meeting at different restaurants since 2002, the size and formality of the meeting vary each time.

"You never know who's going to show up, or why," said Peter Wood, a Web developer from Beverly.

"Nothing really happens here. We just yak about stuff," added Somerville's Jared Dunn, a lab manager at MIT, who was wearing dark-rimmed glasses.

How could a meeting about nothing in particular draw complete strangers out of their warm homes in the middle of winter?

The answer, it seems, lies in the skyrocketing popularity of blogs. Thanks in part to Howard Dean's Web-driven presidential campaign and to bloggers' role in discrediting memos on President Bush's military service used by CBS News, blogs are no longer a fringe technology used solely by geeks and teenagers. According to a recent study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 32 million Americans now read blogs five times more people than watched this year's State of the Union address.

What makes the Weblogger Meetup unusual is that it translates cyber connections into real-world encounters, in this case, a dinner at Christopher's Restaurant & Bar in Porter Square.

Boston offers at least one other blog group, hosted every Thursday at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet & Society. Dunn attends both and has found the meetups to be a "casual alternative" to the focused, agenda-driven Thursday group.

But the casual chit-chat got off to a rocky start this night. There were no signs to point people to the back corner of the restaurant and the table hidden beneath TV screens showing a Celtics game.

One woman approached the table, and Wood asked if she had come for the blog meeting.

"What's a blog?" she responded.

"It's basically an online journal on the Web," Wood said. "You post your own thoughts on day-to-day life, or whatever."

She stared at him blankly. She had seen an online announcement about a meeting at Christopher's tonight, she told him, and that's why she had come.

"You're welcome to stay and hang out," Wood offered. The woman sat at the end of the table but wandered away before the waiter took dinner orders.

By the time drinks arrived, conversation was flowing. Different sections of the table discussed conditions on Native American reservations, Cambridge real estate, favorite blogs, and candlepin bowling. Dunn and

Josh Darden, a graphic designer visiting from Brooklyn, even confessed their recent boredom with blogs.

"I realized a while ago that I was blogging about the same two things all the time: relationships and my job," said Darden. "Both of which I hated. I decided to give it a rest."

By the time the second round of drinks arrived, participants had begun comparing gadgets. The group was armed with multiple camera phones, at least three laptops, several digital cameras, and one videophone with tiny keys and a tiny silver pointer for typing. Bill Wendel of Cambridge, owner of the toy, spent much of the night glued to its little screen.

"All bloggers have gadgets," said Susan **Kaup** of Somerville, a coordinator of the meeting. "Lots of gadgets."

Rob Sama of Waltham, a real estate broker, had posted online photos of the gathering with his camera phone before the entrees even arrived.

Blog posts about blog meetings with other bloggers might not make a riveting read for mainstream audiences. But most of the bloggers at the table weren't interested in peddling a product for mass consumption. Wood says his readers are mostly friends and family. Wendel said he uses his videophone to stay in touch with his three grown children.

Collectively, these private journals have taken on a weighty online presence: The Boston Weblogger Group is a top result on a Google search for "Boston blogs." And together, they've assembled tiny peepholes into different Boston lives.

Steve Garfield's blog offers a multimedia portal, posting video of reality-TV-style episodes of his daily life in Jamaica Plain. Recent posts include a trip to the Boston Wine Expo with his wife, a drive to the gym, and a walk through the grocery store.

"We just turn the camera on, and it's really real," Garfield said.

Over dinner, Sama borrowed Wendel's videophone to download a sample clip of Garfield's "Carol and Steve Show."

"The picture isn't loading," Sama said, using the silver wand to touch different keys. "Oh, someone is calling you," he said, handing the phone back to Wendel.

The meeting, like many blogs, ranged from technology's cutting edge to the completely mundane. The participants came, they said, mostly because it's fun.

Garfield said attending a blogging meeting beats the alternative.

"I would just be at home watching TiVo," he said with a shrug.

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