

## BLOGGING AWAY

By JORDAN BARAB

I'm a blogger—a workplace safety and health blogger to be precise. The word “blog” is short for weblog, a term for online diaries covering subjects from teen traumas to political analysis. Their main characteristic is that they are updated more frequently than a standard Web page, on a daily or sometimes hourly basis.

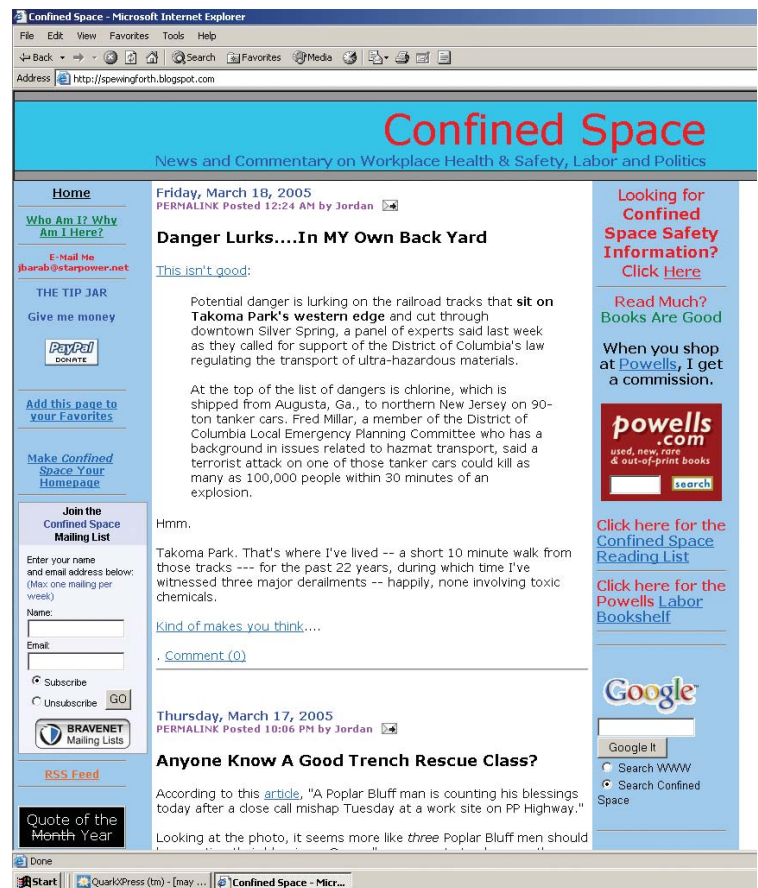
Blogs are also known for their interconnectivity—often blogs will cross-link to each other to continue a particular discussion—and for their interactivity. At many blogs, users can comment directly on each entry made by the “host.” Businesses, associations and advocacy groups have begun to test the blogging waters, but so far the vast majority of blogs are hosted by individuals.

I started my blog Confined Space (<http://spewing-forth.blogspot.com>) almost two years ago. I needed a constructive outlet to vent (and hopefully spread) the outrage that I felt at what politics and politicians have done to workplace safety in this country. I also wanted a way to communicate basic safety and health information to workers in a livelier form than the typical Web page. But most important, I wanted a way to educate people about the connections between what happens in Washington and what happens in their workplaces. Workers and practitioners outside Washington have little idea of how decisions made in Congress, the White House or the Department of Labor affect their working conditions and their safety; likewise, few in Washington who are writing the regulations or making and enforcing the laws have a good understanding of the daily struggles of workers.

As the director of the health and safety program for the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees for almost 16 years, I had a unique perspective on working conditions facing this nation's employees. And as a political appointee at OSHA during the last years of the Clinton administration, I witnessed and occasionally participated in the machinations of government agencies and politicians in Washington.

### BECOMING A BLOGGER

The technical aspects of starting the blog were easy. There are now dozens of free Web-based services that enable people to create a blog within minutes. There are also more sophisticated applications that charge small amounts for extra features. Five minutes after I brought Blogger.com up on my browser, I was ready to blog—along with millions of others, thousands more every day. As of last October, experts estimated that 12,000 new blogs were created on a daily basis.



The next challenge was to get people to read the thing. Luckily, I already had a mailing list of several hundred health and safety activists, mostly from labor unions, universities and COSH groups, to whom I mailed an announcement (and who I continue to alert, along with several hundred others, on a weekly basis). My “hits” have climbed from about 1,500 in my first month to more than 12,000 every month two years later. It's a far cry from the tens or even hundreds of thousands of hits that the biggest bloggers get every month, but such traffic still puts me in the upper tier of the blogosphere (a collective term for the interconnected universe of blogs).

The main problem with blogging is that it takes over your life. I can't blog at work and I have a family (for now), so most of my writing gets done between 9 p.m. and midnight. Postings range from factual pieces about accidents or political issues (such as updates on asbestos compensation legislation) to “riffs” on news stories, rants about subjects that anger me and occasional spoofs of government programs.

One of the features of Confined Space is a biweekly list of workers killed on the job that I call “The Weekly Toll,” assembled in partnership with an activist in Indiana whose brother was killed in a workplace accident. You will only

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need a few moments on Google to find the names and dates of death of every American killed in Afghanistan and Iraq. But you can search in vain for the names of the more than 5,000 Americans killed in the workplace last year.

It's a dreary list, but surprisingly, it has become one of the most popular features of Confined Space. Even though I am able to identify less than half of the workers killed in the United States, and almost none who die as a result of occupational disease, the sheer numbers and descriptions of the events surrounding their deaths seem to resonate. Some of the most moving mail I've received as a result of Confined Space is from the wives, siblings and children of workers killed on the job. They are angry about the deaths of their loved ones, and they find some solace in knowing that there's someone else out there who is just as angry.


## PASSION AND POLITICS

I am often told that I spend too much time covering the attacks on OSHA and the labor movement by the Bush administration and its corporate allies. "Your blog is full of so much good information. It's too bad there's so much politics in it," is a common refrain.

My belief is that those who argue that politics should be kept out of workplace safety and health discussion are living in a dream world. Enforcement of standards, issuance of standards, the general "environment," company decisions about how much to spend on safety and health, laws and policies made with the intention of improving working conditions for workers, questions of whether scarce government funds will be devoted to worker training as opposed to voluntary programs—these are all political issues, ultimately controlled by the voting booth. The bottom line is that your vote influences your chances of coming home alive and healthy at the end of the day.

I don't expect to convince many Republicans to become Democrats based on what they read in Confined Space, but I do try to help workers and occupational safety and health practitioners put their experiences into a political context.

Working people need more workplace

health and safety resources like fact sheets, health and safety manuals and material safety data sheets—but they also need opinion and commentary on the politics of workplace health and safety. That's what motivates me to spend much of my free time blogging. 

Barab was director of health and safety for the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, Washington, D.C., from 1982 to 1998 and served as special assistant to the assistant secretary of labor for occupational safety and health from 1998 to 2001. He can be reached at (202) 261-7673 or jbarab@starpower.net.

## Resources

If you are interested in launching your own blog, some of the following resources may be of interest to you:

- **www.blogger.com, www.msnspace.com, www.livejournal.com and www.blog-city.com:** These Web sites allow you to quickly set up a blog, based on standard templates, for no cost.
- **www.typepad.com:** Typepad allows you to set up a blog with more sophisticated features, for a monthly fee.

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