



Dartmouth

Alumni Magazine

HOUSE TOUR

ON THE HILL WITH THE COLLEGE'S FIRST
CONGRESSWOMAN, KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND '88

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2007



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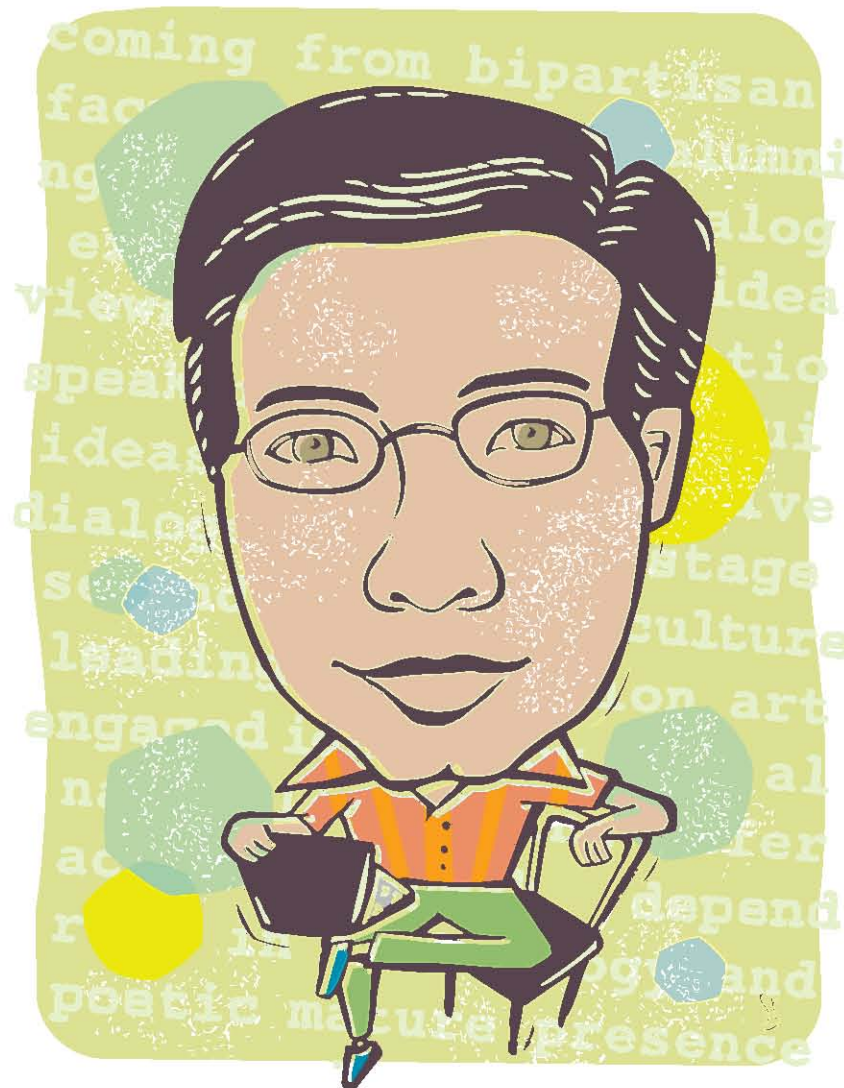


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online

No Ordinary Joe

An unassuming student turns his attention toward Dartmouth controversies—and transforms his blog into a force to be reckoned with. BY JAKE TAPPER '91



HE SEEMS AN UNLIKELY MEDIA EMPIRE, JOE MALCHOW '08, THE 22-YEAR-old senior from Scotch Plains, New Jersey. He loves the opera and jazz standards. He uses terms like “by the bye.” He professes a love of Vivaldi, Gottschalk and *Star Trek*.

His days begin at dawn in Toppliff. Malchow walks, laptop under his arm, to Lou’s for coffee.

He goes to the Hop. Surfs the Web. And then, on his Web site, Dartblog.com, Malchow blogs.

And blogs. And blogs and blogs and blogs.

Up to a dozen posts a day. Up to 3,000 visits a week, as many as 20,000 in one day on occasion. He was the first to report on the exit of popular professor Alan Stam and he provided the most thorough coverage of the drafting of the aborted alumni governance constitution and of the campaigns of petition trustee candidates.

They know him at Parkhurst. They know him at Blunt Alumni Center. Many resent his conservative take on campus politics, which they argue is unfair, uninformed, inarguably biased. But that in a way is beside the point. Malchow’s is not the only blog on campus, but it’s one of the most active and engaging. And it has had an impact, particularly among alumni.

Todd J. Zywicki '88, one of the petition trustees, says Malchow’s assistance has been invaluable.

“There’s been an extremely heightened interest among alumni over the past few years—with what’s been going on around campus and in the trustee elections—and he’s been able in this information age to harness, connect and transmit information among alumni,” Zywicki says. “Joe’s very good at it, very thorough.”

Zywicki points out that Malchow is a veritable online library of firsthand documents, whether it’s drafts of the constitution, an irate letter from the president of the University of South Dakota taking issue with the athletic director’s criticism of his school’s Indian mascot, or campus flyers.

“That’s why people have found him in general to be a reliable source of information even if they don’t share his opinion,” Zywicki says. “A lot of alumni read him regularly and a lot of alumni did rely on his careful analysis of the constitution.”

Roland Adams, Dartmouth’s director of media relations, says he has “no real sense of how influential Joe Malchow is or even if he is influential at all. We do not hear from students, faculty, staff or alumni about material appearing on Joe’s Dartblog. In fact, College research indicates that a tiny number of alumni get their news about Dartmouth from blogs.”

Perhaps, but President Jim Wright

has expressed serious concern about the College's "inability to communicate effectively with alumni about what we do at Dartmouth and the strength of Dartmouth." As the leaders of a college founded in 1769 try to negotiate their way into the 21st century, they may need to find a new way to talk to alumni. They have not figured out how to do it yet.

Malchow has.

"The gentle, subtle impact that Dart-

conservative, but generally free of the invective one can find in the publications of College conservatives.

"I've been complimented by prominent campus liberals for being the *Review* without being *Review-y*," he says.

Which is not to say that Malchow is open-minded or nonpartisan. The blog began his freshman fall as a project for English professor Alexandra Halasz's "Old and New Media" class. Launched

running the school, an enshrinement of a "consolidation of power and anti-petition electioneering."

Rightly or wrongly, his blog amplified his voice. Alumni looking for explanations heard him loud and clear.

"When I started the blog it was like 4 million other blogs," Malchow recalls. "I quoted from some offensive *New York Times* editorial of the day and tried to explain in a few sentences why I thought it was stupid. Then I realized I was unable to add value in that respect. When I turned to Dartmouth politics I found something where it seems a single student can have an impact. My words can turn into action. Or votes."

Of course, those in power would take issue with how Malchow characterizes their work, and they might not care for the fact that a media outlet with a stated, obvious bias could be turned to for information.

But discontent seems, at this point, irrelevant. Malchow's point of view prevailed and continues to prevail. Adams says the College "employs a wide range of vehicles, both electronic and paper, to keep alumni up-to-date on Dartmouth matters we hope they find of interest." But then he lists a number of publications that steer free of any mention of conflict and controversy: the alumni e-newsletter *Speaking of Dartmouth*, *Dartmouth Life* and class newsletters.

"Alumni surveys indicate that alumni feel we are communicating at about the right level for most alumni," Adams says.

But Malchow's thousands of readers seem to indicate that it depends on what you mean by "communicating."

"People don't care a whit that the news comes with opinion—it is still news, delivered faster and with more verve than the official publications,"

"It seems a single student can have an impact," says Malchow. "My words can turn into action."

blog has had over the last three years is by lengths the greatest reward," Malchow says. "Of course, no one ever assembles on the Green to hear this dean or that repudiate recent assertions made on Dartblog.com. But I think it has an impact that can be heard in President Wright's speeches; in the copy put out by the College's PR office; in the campaign materials of the other folks. It's a clearinghouse for data. It allows people to talk about what was previously secret. It confirms suspicions."

Actually, to be honest, Malchow didn't say that. He wrote it in an e-mail.


If you read Dartblog, his assertive "voice" is quite different from his actual voice, which has an erudite and privileged-sounding softness, Garden State public school upbringing notwithstanding. It's easy to incorrectly read his many exclamations ("Goodness!" for example) with an irony that was not intended.

Malchow is a lovely writer, even if one doesn't agree with his assertions or the occasional know-it-all-ness familiar to anyone who has ever been 22, bright and something of an outsider. His views are

during the height of the presidential 2004 election, Dartblog back then read like a derivative and dimmer version of national stars in the conservative blogosphere such as Powerline (operated by John H. Hinderaker '71, Scott W. Johnson '73 and Paul Mirengoff '71), Instapundit, the Volokh Conspiracy and Hugh Hewitt.

"The important news here is that Kerry's real reason for being in Vietnam—resume building—is becoming known," Malchow wrote in August 2004 as the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth started to make a splash.

It wasn't until Zywicki—who blogs at volokh.com—launched his petition trustee campaign in January 2005 that Malchow began to take campus politics seriously and his blog began to become something interesting. By the fall he was knee-deep covering drafts of the proposed new constitution. For many alumni unclear on what the debate over the constitution was about, busy with lives and befuddled by competing campaigns and obfuscating rhetoric, Malchow broke it down: This was a power grab by a liberal hierarchy that wanted only its own kind




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Malchow says. "I think that's why blogs have been so successful, especially in small communities like Dartmouth."

During his teenage years Malchow produced and worked the overnight shift at talk radio station WKXW-FM. "In high school, as in college, the curriculum just failed to fill the hours," he says. "I eventually drifted toward writing, but political writing and commercial radio are really of a piece. They're both about cadence, tone, tension—turning words to music."

His path to Dartmouth was not on a green brick road. Of the colleges to which he was admitted, Dartmouth was the best and closest to his then-girlfriend's college, Tufts. A few months after they broke up Malchow began filling some of his empty hours posting video clips of old Frank Sinatra ballads on his Web site.

Just before the most recent trustee elections Malchow attended a trustee elections roundtable at the Rockefeller Center. President Wright sat across from him. Malchow has been critical of Wright but had never had any real interaction with him. The blogger says he can tell from the host names of his blog's readers that administrators at Parkhurst are following what he writes, but he wasn't sure if Wright was among them.

An hour passed. Wright occasionally looked at him. Finally the meeting ended and Wright approached him. "Joe, I want you to know that I really like your Frank Sinatra clips," he said.

Malchow doesn't know if he wants to continue blogging. Two sophomores filled in for him during his recent summer job with *The Wall Street Journal*, where Malchow wrote editorials, and he felt relief.

He may pursue a job at the *Journal* or work for a politician after graduation, but Malchow ultimately wants to "pass the site off to some new bloggers at Dartmouth," he says. "I think there's a chance for it to become some kind of an institution."

It already has. ■

JAKE TAPPER is senior national/political correspondent for ABC News.