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Link by Link

A Guest Blogger, and an Unwritten Law

By TOM ZELLER Jr.

ONE could almost imagine George Clooney, robed and slippers, taking to the veranda of his Italian lakeside villa and hunkering over a laptop for his maiden voyage into the blogosphere, which appeared in the form of a passionate left-wing call to arms at HuffingtonPost.com last week.

"We can't demand freedom of speech then turn around and say, 'But please don't say bad things about us,'" the Oscar-winning actor wrote, adding his voice to dozens of other luminaries that Arianna Huffington, the columnist, former candidate for governor of California and freelance liberal gadfly, has drawn to her blog fold since starting The Huffington Post nearly a year ago. "You gotta be a grown-up and take your hits," Mr. Clooney concluded. "I am a liberal. Fire away."

But just as the great digital chinwag was taking note of the newcomer ("If Clooney blogs, does that make it sexy?" wondered the wits at Gawker), Mr. Clooney dropped a bomb, asserting that although the sentiments in the post were his, they were cobbled together from past interviews with Larry King of CNN and The Guardian, a British newspaper.

And more important, the blog was not written by him.

So was born Clooneygate, which began the week looking like a minor collision between a celebrity's handlers and a celebrity pundit's ambitions for her Web site, and ended amid knotty questions of journalistic integrity and the nature of blogs.

The basic facts are not in dispute. Ms. Huffington wanted Mr. Clooney — an outspoken critic of the war and American foreign policy — blogging on her site, but the actor, she said, wasn't familiar with the form.

So she culled some published Clooneyisms — essentially answers to questions he'd been asked in previous interviews — fashioned them into an essaylike blog entry, and added a few flourishes of her own, including the punchy "I am a liberal. Fire away" bit.

She then e-mailed it to one of his representatives, Lisa Taback. (The original post has since been removed from HuffingtonPost, but it can still be viewed here: snipurl.com/ClooneyBlog.)

"Lisa, here is a blog put together from different interviews George has given," Ms. Huffington wrote in a Feb. 17 e-mail message, which she shared to help clarify what happened. "Would love to get his approval with any changes he wants and then we'll post it on HuffPost and send to Yahoo."

Ms. Taback responded the same day, saying "I will get it to him and get back to you as soon as I hear anything," and then three days later: "Of course this is fine, Arianna! Thank you."

The scant 360-word blog posting that Ms. Huffington had put together was untouched, and that's how it appeared at The Huffington Post — packaged like every other posting there, topped with a pithy headline ("George Clooney: I Am a Liberal. There, I Said It!"), and accompanied by a picture of the author and a short biography.

The ensuing bluster signified different things for different people.

For Mr. Clooney and his representatives — and for a growing brood of loyal "HuffPo" fans who proved, over the course of the week, to be even more loyal to blog purity — it was a simple matter of honesty. Indeed, as early as Tuesday, Mr. Clooney had issued a statement that cut directly to the heart of the matter.

"These are not my writings — they are answers to questions and there is a huge difference," Mr. Clooney said.

But that difference seemed to be lost, at least at first, on Ms. Huffington, who repeatedly pointed to the clear breakdown in Mr. Clooney's public relations machinery, and then later suggested, in a post on her blog, that in any case, "the medium isn't the message; the message is the message."

And that's where, it seems, Ms. Huffington disconnected from many of her readers, blog purists and media critics — all of whom seemed to know, tacitly or otherwise, that the medium carries a message, too.

At The Huffington Post, the colors, logos, headshots, bios, rubrics and timestamps visually unify all of the blog postings and say "we are of a kind." And it is to Ms. Huffington's credit that the quirks of each individual's posting at the site — Mr. Clooney's name and picture, as well as his syntax, his supposed choice of paragraph breaks and punctuation and his gathering rhetorical pitch — have the same implications as those of any reputable publication.

They say, "Hello, I'm the person responsible for putting these ideas together in this way. I then posted them to this blog. Or I e-mailed them to Arianna. Or I scribbled them onto a cocktail napkin and sent them to her by carrier pigeon. But at some point I crafted this train of thought in this way, and now I'm sharing it with you here."

It's not printed anywhere, of course, but the medium — the blog — carries that message.

It was a point that an increasing number of Ms. Huffington's readers and fellow bloggers — from Elizabeth Snead at The Los Angeles Times to Jeff Jarvis at BuzzMachine — were looking for her to acknowledge by week's end.

"Say you're sorry, Arianna," Ms. Snead wrote at The Envelope blog (theenvelope.latimes.com). Jeff Jarvis, who blogs at BuzzMachine.com and has served as a consultant to The New York Times on Web matters, condemned the puppetry of assembling a blog post for Mr. Clooney.

"If you're not really writing your blog, if you're having or allowing someone else to do it for you," Mr. Jarvis wrote on Friday morning, "then you're gaming me, lying to me, insulting me."

And dozens of Huffington Post readers agitated for an apology. "I think that the whole George Clooney thing was appalling on your part," one commenter wrote. "Regardless of the communication that you had with George's people, you misled your readers."

On Saturday morning, admirably, Ms. Huffington came to agree, admitting in a post titled "Lessons Learned" to a "big mistake" for failing to source the quotes and for writing the post for Mr. Clooney in the first place.

This will not happen again, she wrote, because "it diminishes the amazing work of bloggers who day in and day out put their hearts and souls into writing their blogs."

Ms. Huffington also suggested that, going forward, when she comes across a published interview, or when someone prominent says something to her that she thinks is "really important and should have as wide an audience as possible," she will quote it in her own section of the blog — much as James Boswell documented the comings and goings of Samuel Johnson, she said.

Indeed, she intends to name the form for Boswell: "BozBlogging."

Or, you could just call it journalism.