

Blown out of proportion

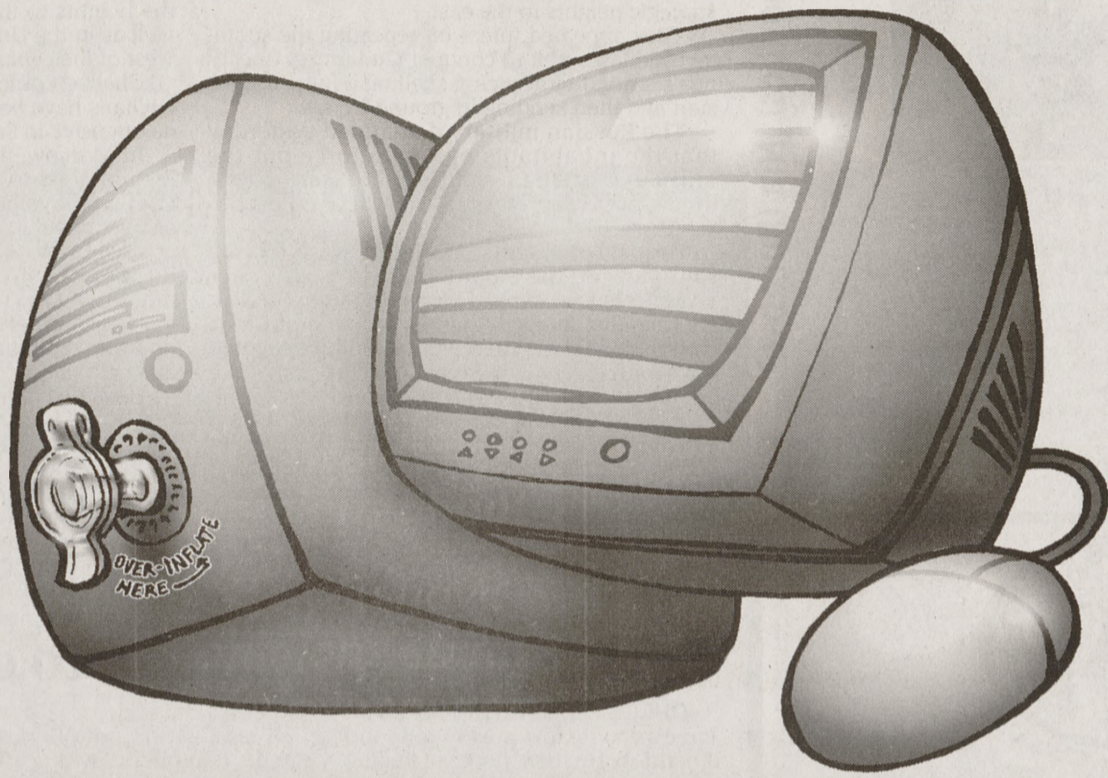
Internet chats with politicians now popular, but little more than cyber-hype



MARIANO CASTILLO

Democrats claim the ground took Nov. 8 when Bill Clinton became the first president to participate in a live Internet chat. The Democrats, as well as the media, have embraced the event as a historic foundation for the future of politics in cyberspace. But although the chat may have been a small step for politicians, it is a huge step backward for American voters. Until the number of voters with access to the Internet becomes greater than the number of voters with access to a television or radio, chats such as Clinton's will have a negative effect on democracy in the United States. Franklin Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats" and John F. Kennedy's television press conferences brought politics within the reach of the masses with, of course, the exception of those without a television or radio. Currently, out of a population of 250 million, there are 215 million televisions and 540 million radios in the United States. Such large coverage means that those who want to hear a debate or meeting can. Even if a political event is not covered by a standard channel, it will surely be on C-SPAN. Unfortunately, the Internet still is not developed enough to

be used for town hall meetings like Clinton's. It has a far-too-limited audience and is technologically incapable of reaching the masses the way the "boottube" can. The Internet is growing at an astounding pace, but only a fraction of the American population has access to it. By streaming political agenda exclusively on the World Wide Web, the audience is limited to a small sampling of mostly affluent businessmen and suburbanites. Also, there are limitations on the number of people who can participate in live chats. President Clinton's chat, on excite@home, was limited to 50,000 people. Fortunately, Clinton seemed to take the Internet experience as a novelty and did not discuss anything too serious. *The New York Times* reported that Clinton even joked about some of the chat names of the participants, including Sissy Bill and T-Love. Had he taken the stunt, er, chat seriously, the only ones able to react and ask questions would be the first 50,000 surfers that logged in. It is too early to use live chats over the Internet as a public forum. Television and radio work. And like Forrest's momma said, "Don't fix it if it ain't broke." Even if technology could make real-time interactive holograms of the president, it would still be isolating the majority because of the limited access.



ROBERT HYNCEK/THE BATTALION

It is ironic that Clinton's chat was publicized as a town hall meeting — where anyone can attend — when only those with a computer and Internet access could tune in.

Also, the privileged few who got the chance to partake of this meeting thought they might actually get to ask President Clinton the questions they wanted to. But all of the questions were

screened, and Clinton's stage manager was given the power to choose the ones he liked. While this is a standard practice in radio and other call-in shows, it is much easier to mess

with information on the Internet, increasing the chances of manipulated questions. It is the definition of hypocrisy when the president of the United States and his supporters can talk proudly about what a huge step for democracy the event was, when he screened all of the questions. At press conferences, the public can see when a reporter's questions nail a soft spot on a politician by his reaction or his lame excuse for not answering it. With live chat, the politicians can pick the questions they want to answer and toss the rest aside, along with their ethics. America is simply not ready for political Web chats. However, the Internet does not have to be free of politics. It can and does serve useful political services. It provides email access to members of Congress and has various research advantages, such as biographies, archives, transcripts and records. The difference between these uses and chat is that the research tools are an addition to what can be found elsewhere. A live chat exclusively on the Web takes away the audience. Possibly, in the future, when Internet access is as available as television, the live Web chat can become an integral part of politics. But for now, politicians should stick with what works.

Mariano Castillo is a sophomore journalism major.

EDITORIAL ROUNDUP

from U-Wire editorial reports

Bush's grasp of world affairs not distressing

From the Daily Illini at the University of Illinois.

(U-WIRE) CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — George Bush committed a major gaffe in some critics' eyes. When asked by a Boston reporter if he knew the names of the leaders of our world hot spots — Chechnya, Taiwan, India and Pakistan — Bush could barely muster a "Lee" for Taiwan's leader, Lee Teng-hui. This puts his credibility on foreign policy into question. Should it? No. What's infinitely more important is someone who has a clear vision and focus on America's role in the world, not someone who can necessarily regurgitate Trivial Pursuit answers. What's more important in a leader is whether he or she can say, "I don't know, but I will find out."

Someone applying to be the University's athletic director might be asked to name four other football coaches at Big Ten schools.

If they can only come up with, say, Penn State coach Joe Paterno's first name, that's OK. What's more important in a leader is someone who will surround themselves with experts and academics, such as those who do know the names of the leaders of India, Pakistan, Chechnya and Taiwan.

(Atal Behari Vajpayee, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, Aslan Maskhadov, and Lee Teng-hui, respectively.) So it's only been front-page news for weeks. So what? Bush asked the reporter if he could name the foreign minister of Mexico, a country whose state borders Texas. The reporter said he could not, but that he wasn't running for president. Granted, Bush is running for president, the highest office in our country and the chief of our nation's military.

But he's got a whole year to learn the names of the leaders of Chechnya, Taiwan, India and Pakistan.

The reporter is also not the governor of Texas. Bush is still governor of Texas, and to fulfill that role he must focus on Texas.

Does Chechnya have anything to do with cattle ranching?

Do India and Pakistan play a major role in explaining why Houston is America's most polluted city?

Probably not. The trials and tribulations of India, Pakistan, Chechnya and Taiwan are simply not in Bush's perspective.

People can only think of so many things at once.

Supreme Court should not hear prayer case

From the Brown Daily Herald at Brown University.

(U-WIRE) PROVIDENCE, R.I. — The U.S. Supreme Court has elected to embroil itself once more in the debate regarding the separation of church and state.

Specifically, the court agreed on Monday to grapple with the role of school prayer, after a Galveston County, Texas, school board appealed a lower-court ruling.

Galveston County would like to perpetuate a practice that can only be viewed as Constitutionally questionable — allowing students to broadcast prayer over stadium public address systems prior to public high school football games.

The separation of church and state as it relates to public schools has been delineated time and again, but the Court must now remind the nation of its clear stance on this issue.

Due to Court rulings, students are no longer required to partake in formalized prayer of any fashion.

Proponents of the Galveston cause will argue that because students, not teachers, are leading the prayer at the football games, then the prayer is acceptable.

The prayer, they say, comes not from faculty initiative or from any formal dictate, and thus the statements of religiosity impinge in no way on the secular freedoms upon which the nation was built.

But by projecting prayer across a loudspeaker, the school district violates the dictates of separation.

Members of the crowd, given no option but to sit through the prayer, must listen to it as attentively as if they were in their classrooms.

These students cannot and should not have to cover their ears or leave their seats to avoid religious messages they may not wish to receive.

If students wish to engage in prayer prior to kickoff, it is completely within their right to do so — as long as they establish purely elective groups that do not force others to listen or participate, even passively.

The Supreme Court should uphold the lower-court ruling and maintain the strict separation between church and state.

If it doesn't, Americans may find themselves on a dangerous course, overturning Constitutional precedent and common sense.



Do you have opinions about Bonfire and want to be heard?

The Battalion is currently accepting short opinion letters regarding Bonfire for a special section in Monday's issue. Comments may be favorable or critical, but they must be limited to 100 words to be considered for publication.

Because the editor anticipates receiving far more letters than can be printed, only a representative sample of the letters will be published.

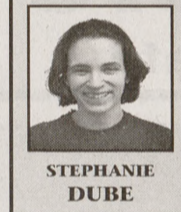
The opinion editor reserves the right to edit letters for length, style and accuracy. Letters may be submitted in person at 013 Reed McDonald with a valid student ID. Letters may also be mailed to:

The Battalion - Mail Call
013 Reed McDonald
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX
77843-1111

Campus Mail: 1111
Fax: (409) 845-2647
E-mail: battletters@hotmail.com
(Please put "Bonfire Section" in the subject line of e-mail submissions.)

Religious unity not worth compromises on doctrine

The push for unity among world religions is a growing issue, as interfaith groups increasingly seek common spiritual ground. Although such efforts may seem beneficial on the surface, attempts to unify religions could prove seriously detrimental in the end.



STEPHANIE DUBE

Recently, Pope John Paul II held two interfaith ceremonies, one in St. Louis and one in India.

Leaders of several faiths, including Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism, attended the ceremonies to reconcile different religious beliefs and strengthen interfaith cooperation for the coming millennium.

Fortunately, the pope's motives for the meetings did not appear to be a melding of religions but a call to cease religious persecution.

The day before his meeting in India, for example, he urged Catholic leaders to continue proclaiming Jesus as the only means of salvation.

Some religious leaders, however, see the pope's interfaith meetings as an open door to pursuing a stronger unity of beliefs among religions. They say such a unity would alleviate suffering, promote peace and end religious intolerance.

Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston urges this goal.

"If [interfaith] relationships are fostered, shared religious values are discovered — all keys to harmony, appreciation and respect for each other," it says on its Website.

These goals sound good enough. The benefits appear not only harmless, but overwhelmingly appealing.

But appearances can be dangerously deceiving. The immediate benefits of seeking religious unity disguise the damage such attempts would cause.

First, religions by their very natures can never be in complete unity. Some interfaith groups claim religions have the same spiritual themes of love, forgiveness, and peace. These similarities, they say, make all religions basically the same.

But this argument is lacking. The movies *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* and *The Matrix* both revolve around the search for a chosen one to alleviate the struggle between good and evil. The similar themes, however, do not make the two movies "basically the same."

Muslims, Christians and Jews do not believe in the same basic things. Muslims believe Allah is the only God, and Mo-

ammed was his greatest prophet. Jews believe a Messiah is coming, but Jesus was not him. Christians say Mohammed was a false prophet, and Jesus is the only way to heaven.

A Muslim, a Christian and a Jew could get along, but their beliefs cannot be melded. The religions by their very natures are incompatible.

Second, unifying religious beliefs is dangerous because absolute truth can be lost. Attempting to bring about a "warm and fuzzy" peace is not worth the sacrificing truth, especially when such truth could hold the key to knowing God and life after death.

Seeking to unify religious beliefs is dangerous.

If people can water down religious beliefs by simply picking and choosing the most compatible elements, they can, in essence, create their own truths. But creating truth is impossible.

If people do not have the ability to create their own truth concerning the laws of science, why should they be capable of creating truths concerning God?

For example, Galileo knew the Earth revolved around the sun. Yet people in his time believed the Earth was the center of the universe.

Their personal beliefs did not change the absolute truth.

If Galileo had been willing to water down his knowledge for the sake of unity, truth would have been lost.

The same holds true for absolute truth about God. Suppose Christianity is the absolute truth. If the religion is watered down so it is compatible with other world religions, then the teachings of Jesus would be lost. Jesus' statements that he is the only means of salvation are incompatible with other religions. Such statements would have to be ignored for the sake of religious unity.

If the statements are true, then the means of knowing God and entering eternal life would be lost in the push to reconcile them with other faiths.

Unity among religions is not worth the cost of sacrificing truth, even for the sake of greater peace and tolerance. The stakes are too high.

Stephanie Dube is a journalism graduate student.