

# Your blog of blogs

Universal Hub's Adam Gaffin may be the most influential editor you've never heard of **BY DAN KENNEDY**

**HERE'S WHAT ADAM GAFFIN** finds frustrating. He's in his car, heading for a meeting in Framingham, where he works in tech publishing. He's got the radio tuned to WBZ. And news is breaking—a fire, a shooting, a derailment on the MBTA, whatever.

What he'd like to do is park himself in front of his computer and start searching for posts from the hundreds of local blogs he tracks. Is there an eyewitness account? A few photos? A video that someone uploaded to YouTube? If so, he'll round them up and link to them on Universal Hub, the website he launched in 2004. Instant citizen journalism, all gathered in one place.

Except he's got that meeting he has to go to. Universal Hub will have to wait.

At 49, the bearded, soft-spoken Gaffin may be the most influential editor you've never heard of. Or perhaps you have. Maybe you're one of the 3,000 or so people who visit Universal Hub ([www.universalhub.com](http://www.universalhub.com)) every weekday. Maybe you read about him in the *Boston Phoenix* in early March. Or maybe you caught a reference to Universal Hub while checking out a new local blog you'd heard about. An obscure Internet media activist for more than a decade, Gaffin is becoming less and less obscure all the time.

The idea behind Universal Hub is pretty simple. Every day—during breaks at work, while he's on his exercise bike at home, or sitting in front of the television with a laptop—Gaffin tries to stay current with some 600 to 700 blogs in Greater Boston, looking for items that are unusually newsworthy, quirky, or poignant. He links to the best of them, along with an excerpt, some commentary, and a headline. He cites mainstream news sources as well, offering words of praise or disparagement.

What emerges from all this is something approaching a community-wide conversation. It's like talk radio, only better, richer, more diverse, with people able to talk not just with the host but with each other through the comments they post. Universal Hub isn't exactly an alternative to the *Boston Globe* and the *Boston Herald*, but it's become an essential supplement—a source for hyperlocal and offbeat

news you won't find elsewhere, and a place to hash out the big stories of the day.

"It gives you a place to have a discussion with folks who you might not otherwise be talking to," says Gaffin in the living room of his Roslindale home, where he lives with his wife and his daughter, a fourth-grader in the Boston public schools.

Adds Lisa Pollack, an account director at the Boston public affairs firm Denterlein Worldwide: "Every day, at least once or twice a day, I check in just to see what's going on in people's heads. What he has done so successfully in my mind is to give a sense of community. There are people who love this city as much as I do, and care as much about this city as I do, and they're funny and they're smart and they're out there."

(Now for the obligatory disclosure. My own blog, Media Nation, is frequently featured on Universal Hub. Media Nation is also part of the Boston Blogs advertising network, another Gaffin project, which offsets my Internet access fees by about \$20 a month.)

Local bloggers say that a link from Universal Hub—sometimes referred to as "getting Hubbed"—guarantees a jump in traffic to their site. Paul Levy, president and CEO of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and the author of the Running a Hospital blog, estimates that a mention is good for a 10 percent jump. The anonymous former journalist who blogs as the Outraged Liberal says he's seen his own daily readership jump from 50 to 200 page views whenever he gets Hubbed.

"It comes to the point where I try to think about whether I write something that will attract Adam's interest and attention," says Mr. Liberal. "Because I know that if I do, I'm going to see my numbers go up."

**IF YOU WERE** checking in with Universal Hub on a mid-afternoon in early March, here are a few of the stories you would have found: A construction worker in Charlestown who shot himself in the head with a nail gun while trying to outrun a meter maid. (Police later reported it was only a BB.) Photos



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of an arrest in Somerville. A South Boston blogger known as Queen Dee ruminating on local pronunciation quirks. An “alleged dumbass,” in Gaffin’s felicitous phrase, involved in a car accident in West Roxbury. Mentions of new community websites. A woman attacked on the T in Brookline. And some striking photos of the city, a regular feature.

To invoke the old cliché, such homely fare makes up a whole that’s greater than the sum of its parts. From these pieces a picture of the city begins to emerge. And it’s a very different picture from the suburban-mom/urban-slickster duopoly you often find in the *Globe*, or the seamy underbelly portrayed by the *Herald*. Rather, the Boston of Universal Hub has none of the artificial coherence the traditional media try to impose on it. It’s just people talking.

Gaffin, a Brooklyn transplant who stayed after graduating from Brandeis University, is one of Boston’s online-media pioneers. He launched a site called New England Online in the early 1990s, at a time when, he recalls, he could track down every website in New England in an afternoon. A couple of years later it morphed into Boston Online ([www.boston-online.com](http://www.boston-online.com)), a still-thriving directory and search engine for all things local.

Universal Hub began life as Boston Common in 2004, when Gaffin and Steve Garfield, a Boston-based video blogger, decided to try to capture the flavor of some of the local blogs they were reading.

“I was seeing a lot of interesting blogs in the Boston area, and I thought, hey, if I think they’re interesting, someone else might think they’re interesting, too,” Gaffin says. “So I started aggregating the interesting posts. I also wanted to see if we could play with more of a group blog, where you get more people involved than just me. Get the community involved. Because there are so many people out there who are blogging or who just want to participate and talk about the day’s news, or the interesting stuff that they’ve read online.”

Garfield says he continues to provide advice and ideas, although Universal Hub has clearly emerged as Gaffin’s project. Indeed, though it’s possible for anyone to set up a blog on Universal Hub, the vast majority of the posts you’ll find are Gaffin’s.

Though much of the content on Universal Hub is more slice-of-life than it is earth-shattering news, the site has had its moments.

After the massive Danversport explosion of Thanksgiving 2006, Gaffin rounded up a voluminous amount of material from local bloggers, including photos and videos shot, in some cases, before news photographers could reach the scene. Gaffin points to Danversport as an example of both the strengths and shortcomings of citizen journalism.

Amateurs, he says, can and frequently do beat the professionals on the first day of a story. But when the second day rolls around, it’s the traditional news organizations that are going to dig in and find out exactly why the neighborhood

blew up in the first place. “I’m not one of those people who thinks you can replace a news organization,” says Gaffin, who began his career as a reporter for the *Middlesex News* (now the *MetroWest Daily News*) in Framingham.

Sometimes, though, the news media are clueless, giving citizen journalists an opportunity for a little one-upmanship. Consider the Mooninite scare of January 2007, when

## Bloggers quickly figured out the ‘Mooninite’ scare.

a couple of local artists were paid to plaster the city with electronic cartoon characters to promote an upcoming movie. City and state officials at first thought the blinking circuit boards were bombs, and the media went into meltdown. But local bloggers quickly figured it out—and, as Gaffin put it in a headline, “Was the city paralyzed today by ads for a stupid cartoon?”

“That was just old media really not getting it,” Gaffin says

now, adding Universal Hub set a record of 20,000 visitors that day.

It’s not all snark at Universal Hub. Just a click away from the “French Toast Alert”—a difficult-to-explain, easy-to-grok system in which the predicted severity of a winter storm is measured by how aggressively shoppers will buy out all the milk, eggs, and bread from their local supermarket—is a Google map plotting every murder in Boston for the past several years, along with comments and tributes from the families and friends of victims.

Gaffin takes crime and its effects on city life seriously, often highlighting posts from the Boston Police Department’s blog and from a blog written by John Daley, a Boston police officer and photographer.

“I think Adam does a couple of things that are important in reporting crime,” says Daley by e-mail. “First, he often covers things that the larger outlets only barely mention, and, second, he puts those stories into perspective, often personalizing them. There’s a tone of ‘This is what happened



near where I live and this is what I think about that...and this is what happened near where you live, and I can't imagine that you would be very pleased about it.' It's an antidote for apathy."

Daley adds that in contrast to mainstream coverage of crime, which he characterizes as "humorless and sometimes overly careful," Gaffin emphasizes what is "funny, bizarre, weird, or just sad."

Gaffin's relationship with the local media might be described as mixed. Universal Hub is dependent on the media for much of its news. Yet it galls Gaffin that the media—and especially the *Globe*—would rather run stories about urban professionals turned Vermont cheesemakers (a front page story that still galls him several months after it was published) than delve into the life of the city's neighborhoods.

"The *Globe* increasingly drives me nuts," says Gaffin, who, for a time, wrote a column for the paper's City Weekly section consisting of highlights from Universal Hub. He gives the *Herald* credit for being more on top of crime and certain types of city stories, but adds, "The *Herald* is the *Herald*. They have limited resources."

Yet David Beard, the editor of the *Globe's* Boston.com

site—and, thus, something of a competitor with Universal Hub—has nothing but good things to say about Gaffin. "I think he's an essential stop for people," Beard says. "It's not just the aggregation, but it's the smart tone and his selection of topics. I think the site covers the funny, tough, love/hate thing that we have in Boston, depending on the weather or the fortunes of our sports teams."

## Journalists often 'scramble to catch up' with Universal Hub.

As for Gaffin's criticism of the *Globe*, Beard says, "If I were him, I'd make the same critique. In a sense he's right, but in a sense he's wrong because of the selection process. There's always going to be room for more. If a couple of *Globe* reporters use him as a bit of a tip sheet, then he's contributed to broader news dissemination."

Oh, yes. The tip-sheet thing. With the exception of a tiny handful of online superstars, most bloggers have exceedingly small audiences. The aim of many is to attain influence by reaching the right handful. Some years back the proto-blogger Dave Weinberger twisted the old Andy Warhol maxim by saying, "In the future, everyone will be famous for 15 peo-



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ple.” The idea is to target the *right* 15 people.

“It’s no secret that reporters and editors read Universal Hub every day. There have been plenty of times when something interesting pops up at Adam’s site and journalists scramble to follow up,” e-mails *Herald* business reporter Jay Fitzgerald, who writes the popular Hub Blog.

Former *Globe* reporter Sasha Talcott, now at Harvard’s Kennedy School, says by e-mail that she regularly monitored Universal Hub to “add to my sense of what was going on in the various neighborhoods all around the city,” and that she got several story ideas from reading it.

But can Universal Hub be more? Should it be more? This spring, the *Globe* is going through another painful round of downsizing. The *Herald* is already a bare-bones operation. Is it possible for a volunteer or mostly volunteer community news site such as Universal Hub to take over some of the traditional functions of a daily newspaper? Perhaps. But that would be quite a leap.


**A DAILY NEWSPAPER** is a theory of what’s important. On its pages (or on its website) is the news that its editors think is most worth knowing, reported in a fair and neutral manner, and corrected when there’s a mistake. If it’s not in the

paper, it’s not important—or, at least, you hope that it’s less important than what *is* in the paper. By contrast, bloggers write what they feel like writing about, and if they miss the most important part of a story, or distort it beyond recognition, well, you get what you pay for.


“One of the things that you get out of a newspaper, or you hope you get, is coherence. I’m not going to read the *New York Times* and miss Katrina, whereas bloggers don’t really have the sense that they must produce a complete whole,” says longtime Universal Hub devotee Lisa Williams, founder of the groundbreaking community blog H2otown (see “Watertown’s Net Gain,” *Mass.Media*, *CW*, Winter ’06), who also tracks local blogs from around the world at Placeblogger.com.

There are some community news sites that are more proactively journalistic than Universal Hub. One is LA Observed, founded by *Los Angeles Times* refugee Kevin Roderick, which keeps a close eye on all things LA—especially the long, sad decline of the *Times*. Another is the New Haven Independent, which isn’t really a blog, but, rather, a nonprofit news site begun several years ago by Paul Bass, former editor of the alternative *New Haven Advocate*.

Bass draws a distinction between the Independent, which he sees as more of a traditional news organization, and




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Universal Hub, which pulls together other sites' content. "The value of the aggregator is someone who is going to have trust and help people navigate the Web," Bass says of sites like Universal Hub.

Adds Bill Densmore, director of the New England News Forum (see "Full Disclosure," *Mass.Media*, *CW*, Summer '07), via e-mail: "Universal Hub is a placeholder for what community media will become. The challenge is finding a technology and organizational structure which combines the best of professional journalism and info-tech with the wisdom and passion of the public."

Gaffin is intrigued by the idea of doing more. He says he'd like to take on Universal Hub as a full-time job if there were enough revenue coming in. Down the line, if he could, he'd hire an editor, a photo/video editor, and a general-assignment reporter. The idea would be to combine professional and citizen journalism into some sort of coherent whole—into a theory of what's important, rather than a round-up

## Can professional and citizen journalism work together?

of the best of what comes in over his RSS reader.

Like any editor—or, for that matter, any blogger—Gaffin has his obsessions and his turn-offs. He follows the MBTA in all its dysfunctional glory, even though he rarely takes the T, because he sees it as an essential element of living in the city. As for sports, well, he admits he has an agenda.

"I happen to be a Red Sox fan, so I cover that a lot," he says. "But you know, there's this basketball team that's doing pretty well this year, I hear." Not that you'd know it from reading Universal Hub.

And he offers something of a mission statement: "There's a lot more stuff happening out there than you might see in the daily papers. Here's a place not only where you can read about it but you can talk about it, how are you affected by it."

Not exactly *All the News That's Fit to Print*. But in an age when media institutions are crumbling and journalism seems to have lost its way, the conversational, decentralized community that has formed around Universal Hub looks like a vital, vibrant part of whatever it is that's next for the media. **CW**

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