

Cozy watchdog

OnTheIssues.org tracks candidates from home

By: Rob Harper

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It's a frigid Monday morning, and Naomi Lichtenberg sits in her home office, which is little more than a permanent desk unit built into a corner of her upstairs bedroom. She rotates in her chair as two large windows allow a pleasant beam of sunlight to enter the room, projecting a warm glow off the maple flooring.

On a bed several feet behind her, sits Molly, an affable, black standard poodle.

Molly looks on silently, and Lichtenberg turns and begins typing an instant message to her long-time friend and business partner, Jesse Gordon, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

On the white desktop in front of her sits a pile of books—political biographies mostly. A desk phone remains silent, and little noise pollutes an otherwise peaceful workplace.

On the screen comes a reply, a fast-moving commentary on Cambridge's local political scene, the impact of a recent mayoral candidate, and something about the weather—cold, no rain.

"You probably couldn't tell from looking around," Lichtenberg says, "but right now we're in high campaign season."

The calm, uncluttered mood of Lichtenberg's office—it exudes simplicity and neatness—belies the frenzied political activity across the country, a drama she observes from this desk every day.

Gordon and Lichtenberg are co-founders of OnTheIssues.org, a leading source for political information with a growing national footprint and flourishing popularity.

Any political junky visiting OnTheIssues.org would have to fight the urge to obsessively surf the entire site. Pictures of all current presidential candidates, including third party independents, top the uncluttered front page.

Click on a candidate to find their positions, voting records, and public statements on every issue from abortion to welfare. The bottom of each page summarizes their profile into a composite political philosophy.

"You can keep clicking, and keep getting deeper and deeper," says Lichtenberg, the group's CEO.

If you're uninformed about an issue, just click on it for compiled research and news articles. Want to compare a candidate from 2000 with a candidate in the 2008 race? Just click on the race. Or, if you're more interested in senatorial or congressional races, just scroll down to a map and click on a state.

The volume of information at one's fingertips becomes addicting, and the potential for comparing candidates—current or past—makes it a little



Photo by Sarah Daisy Lindmark

Naomi Lichtenberg, co-founder of OnTheIssues.org, runs an online voter information database with a national footprint from a desk in her bedroom.

like fantasy football for political addicts.

The website's substantial traffic—up to half a million people a day—keeps it afloat through modest ad sales and numerous syndication agreements with a diverse group of clients ranging from small progressive organizations to national media corporations.

“So much of my work takes place with IM and e-mail,” Lichtenberg says. “I make this sound glamorous but it's really a lot of grunt work.”

Lichtenberg's typical to-do list emphasizes research and communication—digging through books, sending e-mails, or IM conversations. She relies on her e-mail almost exclusively, and doesn't have a cell phone. But all the grunt labor—hours of tedious research, fact-checking, and endless e-mails—pays off with volumes of information voters can't get from mainstream sources.

Lichtenberg, who has a Ph.D. in American history from Indiana University, thinks people are sick of the national media's political coverage and want a better variety of political information.

She says the focus of the mainstream press “tends to be on campaign strategy, the horse race, who's leading in the polls, who's raising money, or any kind of controversy.”

OnTheIssues bucks the trend. With a staff of four and a phalanx of volunteer researchers across the country, the website catalogues a raft of information on political candidates—their positions, views, records, statements, writings, and political philosophies.

The cornerstone of the site's appeal is a 20-question political “quiz” to size-up candidates' philosophies. But instead of only showing whether a candidate is more ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative,’ the quiz—actually more of a report card—measures libertarian and populist leanings by testing candidate views of both social and economic issues.

“The mainstream media looks at things on a one-dimensional plane, showing their positions as left or right.” Says Gordon, the site's editor and chief. “We look at things on a two-dimensional scale—at both social and economic factors.”

This simple, un-spun presentation of political information gives OnTheIssues a unique niche in a crowded field of political blogs, think tanks, partisan research groups, and mainstream media outlets.

Lichtenberg and Gordon say the site's popularity has grown steadily since it started in 1999 and peaks around election season. Their biggest day came after the recent New Hampshire primaries, and they anticipate having over 1 million viewers on their site on February 5th, so-called Super Tuesday, when 24 states hold presidential primaries.

National campaigns are running full-steam right now. Candidates slug out the South Carolina primary facing a shockwave of statistical uncertainty while riding the roaring momentum of a race that began earlier than any other in U.S. history. Record-breaking sums of money pour into an expensive air-war, candidates are taking harder shots at one another, and voters are assaulting OnTheIssues.org for more and more information.

Yet none of this groundswell of national excitement is apparent in the corner of Lichtenberg's bedroom, where the hip, bookish, archetypal Missoulian spends her mornings contentedly sipping iced mochas with skim milk and quietly typing as Molly looks on.

She's carved out an enviable lifestyle revolving around relaxing walks with her dog, good coffee, and a flexible schedule, all while contributing to a 21st century innovation that's helping America's next generation of voters become better informed.

“The idea of empowering people by putting information into their hands to make decisions is very compelling to me,” Lichtenberg says. “I consider myself really lucky. It's a lifestyle where I can do what I love.”