

# Democrats hit back

How the 'Dean Defense Force' is exerting pressure on journalists before the Primaries

The Internet played a stronger role than ever before during the 2000 US presidential elections. As it has attracted ever more users since then, it can be expected that the 2004 elections will turn out to be even more strongly influenced by the web. The fight in the run-up to the primaries suggests this already. One of the most prominent examples is Vermont Senator Howard Dean, who has already attained the reputation of an 'Internet star' by making extensive use of web-based campaigning. Although he does not explicitly mention issues like the information society or other Internet-related topics, his campaign is primarily shaped by the extensive use of digital media. Aside from offering a varied catalogue of issue-related home pages, which by now has

become the standard for every candidate, he also uses less common but increasingly popular tools such as blogs (electronic web diaries).

One of the most experimental of these tools is [www.deandefense.org](http://www.deandefense.org), on which his supporters can post media stories which they believe to portray Dean particularly negatively or which they feel have misunderstood and/ or misrepresented his political stands on issues. The postings contain the e-mail addresses of the respective editors and editors in chief as well as instructions on how to send letters to the editors. The idea is that visitors to the site will then flood newsrooms with protest mail and calls for corrections.

The self-proclaimed defense force wants

to make sure that Dean will not be treated as badly by the media as Al Gore was four years before him. Still, there are good reasons to doubt these conspiracy theories: In 2000, the continuous MEDIA TENOR analysis showed that Gore failed for reasons of his own making rather than because of the media (see the study "Hail to the Thief," 2001).

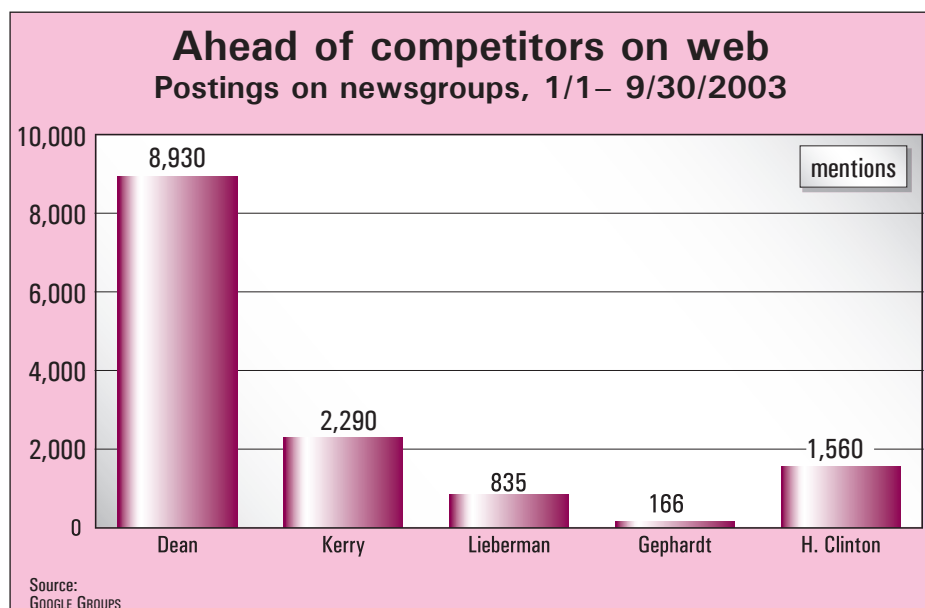
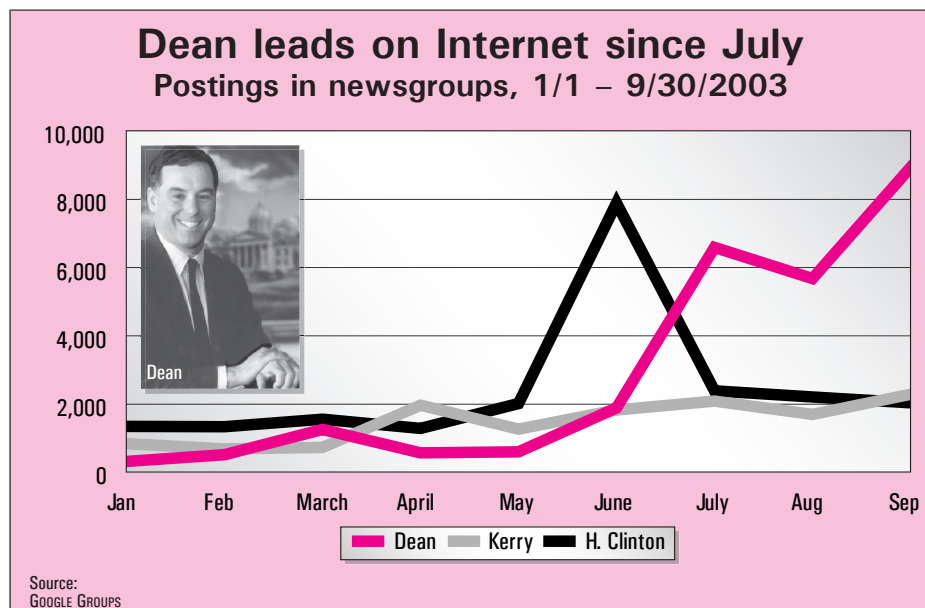
## The Internet star

At least within the web community, Dean's overall strategy seems to pay off. In June he was already mentioned more often in Google newsgroups than his, at the time, most important competitor among the Democrats, Senator John Kerry (see left chart). In that month, however, the two of them were outdone by Senator Hillary Clinton, who, thanks to the presentation of her book, was mentioned four times more often in newsgroups than the other Democrats. In the following months speculations on Clinton's potential candidature died down, while postings on Dean tripled. In September, Dean had topped Clinton's record, even as former General Wesley Clark started to emerge as a new competitor.

The Dean Defense Force only plays a minor role in this, though. Despite of the growing number of postings on the candidate, the online community did not mention his defenders more than eight times in any given month. When the subject did come up, it often appeared in a negative context, as an example of 'consumption terror' or inappropriate advertising. The WASHINGTON POST, in an article on the Dean Defense Force in July 2003, also pointed to the fact that it was only little known to the public at large. According to the newspaper, twelve citizens administered the site on an honorary basis, managing to raise the rather modest sum of 585 Dollars in private contributions.

## Importance of the defense site

The site does not appear to be very professional: With the campaign logo as its only illustration, the design is simple and matter-of-fact, consisting almost entirely of HTML text and a number of links to the media stories in question as well as to web sites on Howard Dean. The discussion forum often remains without a single new posting for weeks at a time, and additional interactive elements are hard to find. The



official sites of the candidate do not mention the Defense Force, at all. So far it has not been included in the otherwise long lists of links to sites on Internet star Howard Dean.

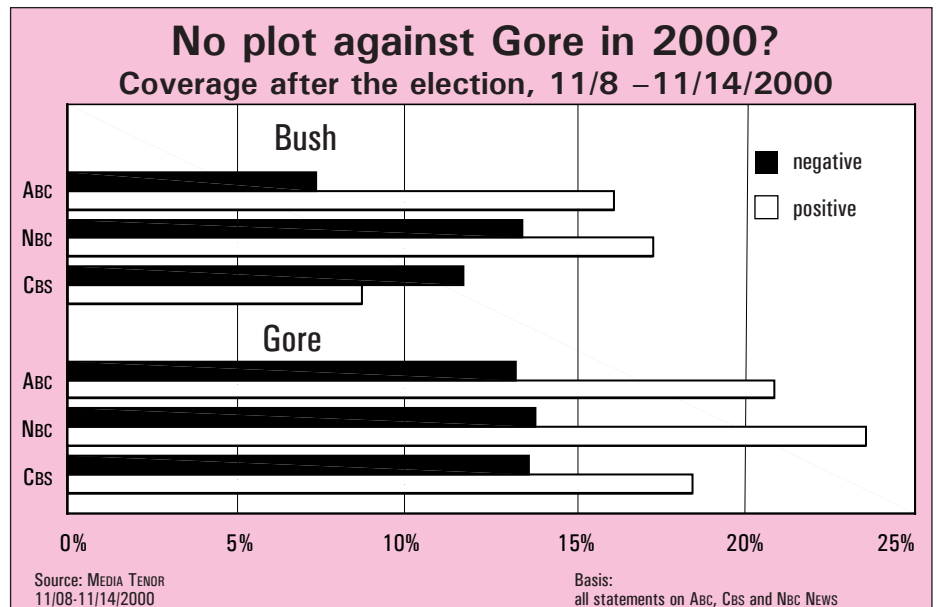
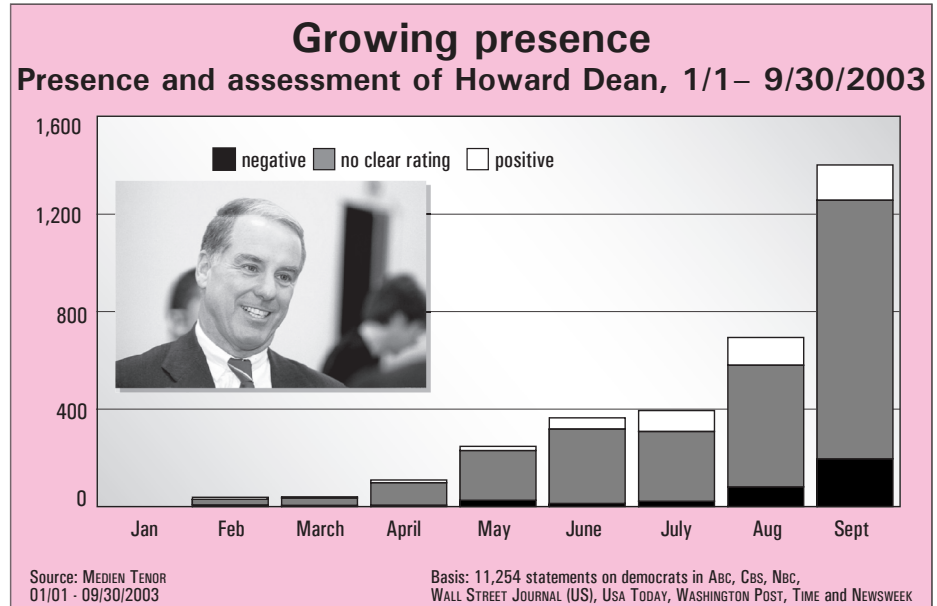
**Discovery of new potentials**

But even if the critics of the site would like to dismiss it as insignificant because of its lack of presence, this verdict turns out to be partly incorrect. One example is the above-mentioned WASHINGTON POST article. If its editors truly deemed the site entirely insignificant, why would they even bother to cover it in significant length?

The WASHINGTON POST itself answers this question in its article: "Campaigns have always tried to gin up letters to news outlets, but the Internet's hyperspeed, which has helped Dean raise truckloads of money, has also made it easier to organize such campaigns." (WASHINGTON POST, 7/26/2003)

The Dean Defense Force is apparently nothing more than a project of a handful of activists. Nevertheless, they managed to get the attention not only of the WASHINGTON POST, but also of other media, such as the NEW YORK TIMES or CBS EVENING NEWS, even though most editors were not particularly enchanted with its activities. It is quite obvious that the initiators of the Defense Force have hit a potential that gives food for further thought. This is especially true in the case of small group of activists such as the Defense Force itself. The snowball effect of the Internet allows these groups to multiply their impact significantly. Anybody who has to start the workday with deleting masses of spam mails knows how much time, nerves and disk space it costs to deal with huge quantities of data in one's mailbox.

This also raises the question of the legitimacy of this activism. Even if it seems more than reasonable that citizens address the editorial staff of media outlets when they disagree with their coverage, it is not always clear when organized action like this crosses the line between criticism and harassment. If the goal is to point out wrong facts or unjustified criticism to the editors, it can be seen as healthy activism on the part of citizens. But if mass e-mailing is used for intimidating the media and thereby preventing critical coverage of Dean, activism turns into abuse. The



overall success of the Dean Defense Force activities suggests that other candidates will jump on the wagon and use this instrument as well. It also shows that the Internet still harbors much unused potential that can be exploited with the necessary creativity. The question whether or not it helps to win the election or at least the primaries, however, will be answered in the coming weeks.

**Basis**  
**Media:** ABC, CBS, NBC, WALL STREET JOURNAL (US), USA TODAY, TIME, NEWSWEEK and WASHINGTON POST  
**Time:** 01/01 – 09/30/2003 and 11/08 – 11/14/2000  
**Other sources:** GOOGLE GROUPS  
**Analysis:** all statements about Howard Dean, John Kerry, Joe Lieberman, Richard Gephardt und Hillary Clinton; Georg Bush and Al Gore