UNSTABLE TEXTS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC LOOK AT HOW BLOGGERS AND THEIR AUDIENCE
NEGOTIATE SELF-PRESENTATION, AUTHENTICITY AND NORM FORMATION

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UNSTABLE TEXTS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC LOOK AT HOW BLOGGERS AND THEIR
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Chapter 1. Preface

"What is the point of having experience, knowledge or talent if I don't give it away? Of having stories if I don't tell them to others?" –Isabel Allende[1]

If one of the potential markers for credibility in the blogging world is transparency, then I have a confession to make. I am a blogger, and I have been since March of 2003, first on Blogger.com and later at Typepad. I initially became aware of blogs through my work as an internet researcher at a Washington, DC-based think tank, and began to keep one as a way of better understanding them as a phenomenon. It was through my experiences there on the blog, and in relationships established, maintained and re-connected via the blog that this project was born.

I started asking questions that most bloggers, I think, ask themselves at some point in their blogging lives. "Who reads this thing anyway?" "Why am I doing this?" Later, a painful blog-related misunderstanding with a friend proved both instructive and cathartic. I realized that what something meant to her on her blog was very different than what that very same blog item meant to me. I also realized that the practice of blogging had become important to me, as a creative, personal and relatively

safe outlet, a place to practice the craft of writing for myself, rather than for a

professional or an academic audience. My blog had become a place to be another part

of myself: slightly silly, a little morose, "earnestly brainy," all without fear of censure

or mocking. The blog was a place where I could revel in my own interests and follow

my whims. The narrative *I chose* to tell was the central narrative. Readers could come

along for the ride if they liked, but they weren't required to stay. In fact, my blog was a

site of expression of myself, and a site of conversation with others that was entirely

under my own control, or at least felt like it was. I could decide whether it was

important to me to have an open discussion where comments remained available

regardless of what was said and all commenters were welcome. Or I could alternately

decide to delete negative comments and ban certain people from the website as a

whole. Blogging was my own little quasi-public dictatorship, a site of control of

presentation and interaction unlike any other in my life. My blog is a place where I am

empowered in ways unavailable or unattainable in other parts of my life. And yet,

simultaneously, I am often not aware, nor do I control how others perceive the blog.

This project explores the dynamics of blogging as use of the tool achieves rapid

growth. At issue is a blogger's interaction with his or her audience, and the kinds of

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[1] Allende, Isabel. (2005). "In Giving I Connect With Others," *All Things Considered*, Washington, DC: National Public Radio, April 4, 2005. Accessed from http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4568464 on April 4, 2005.

assumptions that the reader and the author each make about how meaning is encoded in elements of a blog and the kinds of obligations engendered through participation in the conversation found there. This project will take up the question of what happens when readers and authors don't see eye to eye over the codes and norms on the blog, and will ask the broader question of whether blogging's social and political location outside of institutions is part of both its power and its problems.

Blogs have become increasingly important in recent months as they are acknowledged to be a site of unfiltered information transfer, most often on the most quotidian, minute level. Major institutions have turned their sights on the blog as an area of interest. The media wants to understand blogs to ensure that they don't destroy the business and news model of that institution, and to figure out how to make blogs a part of that institution. (MacKinnon, 2005) Politics, governments and businesses want to harvest blogs as seemingly word-of-mouth grassroots promotional tools. Citizens and the average internet user, however, generally want to use blogs to tell their own stories. (Herring, Scheidt, et al., 2004) Bloggers blog to affirm their existence by writing about it, photographing it (and sometimes even talking about it[2]) with and for others. *Blogito ergo sum* is a somewhat trite (at least in the blogosphere) way of summing up what is for many authors their reason for blogging. For the moment,

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[2] Here I mean audioblogging where audio files can be called into blogs from telephones of various types.

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blogging is external to most institutions of control. There is no defined etiquette

surrounding most blogs, no code of ethics that governs their use. Blogs are free and

easy to set up and use. Blogs are often hailed as a democratizing force, given that they

allow anyone with a computer and an internet connection to publish their thoughts to

as large an audience as wants to visit. Blogs are both wonderful and frightening for the

ways they work outside of institutions that have been established as gatekeepers for

information. Very much like the rhetoric surrounding websites until institutions like

education and the family applied concepts of the legitimacy, accuracy and credibility

of information to them under the rubric of media literacy, blogs are a way to have your

voice heard, as frequently as you wish, and uncensored. And the consequences are

yours…

But institutions, like the media, and the university are turning their sights upon

the blog, as a site of competition but also as a useful tool. Nevertheless, regardless of

how the institutions engage with the universe of blogs, their instinct is to regulate and

to control, to bring blogs in line with the values embodied within the institution. In the

case of the press it means imposing values of transparency, and credibility. In the case

of universities it means imposing the values of rigor and research, accurate citation

through hyperlinking to sources.

Still, bloggers themselves relish their location outside of institutions—free of gatekeepers deciding what is important or meaningful enough to publish, but also free of people and organizations whose livelihoods are based on the accuracy and compelling nature of the information they present. In the next few years it will be interesting to see how blogging and institutions negotiate with each other. Will blogs become an institution of their own, complete with codes and ethics of their own creations? Will they be subsumed into another institution? Or will blogs fragment and be absorbed by all types of institutions based on content, gathered as a tool to forward and foster certain public goals of any given institution? Or will blogs successfully remain completely outside of institutions? Or all of these things at the same time?

Chapter 2. Introduction: A Primer on Blogs and Blogging

Suddenly, it seems, blogs are everywhere; on television, in the newspaper, on screen. My grandmother, who does not use email, even mentioned them at Thanksgiving dinner. Overcome with fascination at this new tool of broadcast and interaction that seems to horn in on their function as transmitters of information to the citizenry, the media has begun covering blogs in minute detail: political blogs, "mommy" blogs, grief blogs, running blogs, knitblogs, business blogs, marketing blogs, ad nauseum. Luckily for journalists, there is almost an endless supply of different subject matters encapsulated within the structure and practice of blogging. Indeed, blogging is best defined through the structure and practice of it, rather than through any type of content upon it.

Definitions

What is a blog? Perhaps as a factor of their newness, there is still a significant debate about the exact definition of a blog. Blogs have been described as everything from "microportals" (Barrett, 1999) to "*WunderKammer*" or "cabinet of wonders" (Dibbell, 2002), to a "transparent and public web-based soapbox and feedback system" (Jacobs, 2003). Most definitions contain the idea that a blog is a website that is

updated frequently, and in which the entries are posted and displayed in reverse

chronological order, with the newest material at the top of the page. But debate

continues over the importance of links to the blog's definition. Early blogs were built

around annotated lists of links. Indeed, Rebecca Blood, one of the first historians of the

blog, writes that "the original weblogs were link driven sites" (Blood, 2002), created as

a way of "pre-surfing" the web for others by pointing out new and interesting sites.

While link-heavy blogs, now called "filter-style blogs" still exist, the vast majority of

blogs now inhabit a more narrative, personal-journal style genre. (Herring, Scheidt, et

al., 2004) Blood points to the development of *Eaton's Web Portal* as an important

definitional moment. Brigitte Eaton kept a list of blogs on a website called *Eaton's*

Web Portal. Her criteria for inclusion was simple: "A site must consist of dated

entries" (Blood, 2002), and because her site was soon the most complete and up-to-

date listing of blogs, her looser, non-link focused definition prevailed.

Though Evan Williams, creator of Blogger.com, takes a different and

compelling definitional tack, when he reflects that the core concepts of blogging are

"Frequency, Brevity and Personality," (Mortensen & Walker, 2002) for the purposes of

this project I will use Herring's reverse chronological order definition that defines

blogs as: "frequently modified webpages containing individual entries displayed in

reverse chronological order." (Herring, Scheidt et al., 2004)

History of Blogs & Blogging

Not only is there a lack of consensus about the definition of blogs, but the hazy early history of blogging is difficult to trace. Rebecca Blood points to 1997 as the moment when Jorn Barger coined the term "weblog" as a combination of "web" and "log" to refer to a collection of sites that were already "logging" the annotated links that marked the roamings of an individual around the World Wide Web. (Blood, 2002) Shortly thereafter in 1999, Peter Merholtz announced that he was going to start pronouncing it wee-blog, and to refer to weblog editors[3] as "bloggers." (Blood, 2002) Alternately, Joanne Jacobs (2003) points to a seminal 1999 essay by early blogger Cameron Barrett titled "Anatomy of Blog" as the moment that blogs were formally defined.

When trying to identify the "first" blog, some scholars point to Tim Berners-Lee's original site, one of the very first sites on the World Wide Web, which for the first few years of the Web's existence, kept track of new sites added to the network in the first filter-style blog (Rodzvilla, 2002). Others suggest that "Simon Firth (1998) in

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[3] Note also the use of the term "editor" to describe the keeper of a blog—implying that a blog collects, alters, directs and polishes the work of others. In this paper, I use the term "author," as I focus on blogs which are more of a personal narrative rather than a collection of externally constructed materials.

an essay posted on *Salon*, credits Carolyn Burke with the first online journal in January 1995." (Langellier, 2004, p. 160)

The framework for blogging's current popularity was laid in August of 1999, when a company called Pitas launched a web-based program that simplified the process of keeping a weblog. Blogger.com followed a month later with its free offering, sparking an explosion in blog creation as well as diversification in blogging software programs and hosting packages.

Blogging continues to grow in popularity and impact. As of January 2005, the Pew Internet & American Life Project reports that 7% of internet users or close to 9 million adults 18 and over keep their own blog. Teenagers 12 to 17 report even greater percentages of blog creation: 19% of American adolescent internet users report having ever kept a blog, which translates to about 4 million blogging teens. (Lenhart, 2005) (Rainie, 2005) It is important to note, however, that many of these users may not be currently blogging, may have started and abandoned a blog, or may have created and post to multiple blogs, so the number of people who blog does not necessarily equal the number of active blogs.

While a relatively small number create blogs, a much larger number of internet users report reading blogs. Twenty-seven percent of adult Internet users and 38% of adolescent internet users read the blogs of others. For adults that represents a 58%

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increase in readership since early 2004. The increase indicates a greater general awareness of blogs among Americans. (Lenhart, 2005) (Rainie, 2005) (Lenhart, Fallows et al., 2004)

Some of the most popular blogging programs currently in use include Blogger, Moveable Type/Typepad, WordPress, LiveJournal, Xanga, RadioUserLand, 20six, Bloxsom, among many others. Blogs can be hosted in two main ways. First, a user may take advantage of free or for-pay sites that offer all-in-one blogging. These services (like Blogger.com, Typepad, LiveJournal, Xanga & 20six) all provide webspace on a server as well as web-based software interfaces[4] for users to create a blog and upload content to the Web. The other main way to create a blog is to either purchase or acquire free software (like Moveable Type or WordPress) that you install on your computer and use to create a weblog that you host at your Internet Service Provider (ISP) or on your own web server. The latter of the two methods for hosting generally allows for greater customizability of a blog and more user control, but also requires a much greater level of technical knowledge and skill.

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[4] Basically, simple content management systems (CMS). A CMS is essentially a series of webpages or text-field based interfaces that streamline the addition of content to a website by eliminating the need to hand code in HTML for every piece of content entered.

Anatomy of a Blog

The visual expression of a blog may be divided into three main parts: A header,

a post column and a sidebar or sidebars.

Header

The header appears at the top of the weblog page. It contains the title of the

blog, and often a subhed or a quotation.

Example 1

Depending on the design of the blog, the header may also contain an image or a

graphical element (see Example 3 below). The graphic serves as a background for the title, or as an additional element adjacent to the title.

Posts

Below the header, blogs often use columnar layouts of one, two or three columns. If there is more than one column in the layout, usually the largest or the central column contains the frequently updated posts, or blog entries created and uploaded by the blog author. This is the part of the weblog that makes a blog different from a static website. The posts generally have a date at the top of each post, followed by a title that describes the content of the entry. Below the title is the body of the post. The example posts in Examples 1 & 2 are all text, though posts may contain images, or be exclusively composed of an image or images.

April 16, 2005

Marathoning

This coming Monday is the Boston Marathon, traditionally held on Patriots Day each year. Patriot's Day for those not in the know is an exclusively New England holiday.

I've been training to run the Marathon for the past 12 weeks, but really I've been training for the past 2.5 years, as it took me that long to get fast enough to make the qualifying times for my age group. My training partner, Susan, has been blogging about our training runs from time to time.

Wish me luck! I hope my knees hold out.

Now Playing: *Orange Crush* from *Green* by R.E.M.

Posted by BobBunny at 4:23PM | Comments (3) | TrackBack (1)

[Example 2]

The example post above also contains links within the body of the post, generally represented by underlined text of a different color from the main text. These links can be external links, linking to other blogs (note "Susan" link), other websites ("Boston Marathon" link) or external documents like PDFs hosted on other servers. Links may also be internal links, linking to previous posts within the blog, serving as a reminder to the reader of when a topic has been covered before, and allowing new readers to quickly come into a conversation without the blogger needing to repeat him or herself. Bloggers may also link internally or externally to audio or video files. The

"Now Playing" line is a less typical element of a blog entry. It uses a script that scans the author's computer for music files that are playing, grabs the information about the song, and automatically enters it at the bottom of each post when published.

Blog postings are usually signed, here with the pseudonym of the blogger. The bottom bar of each blog post also often contains a permalink, a comment link and a trackback link.

As the name suggests, permalinks are permanent links to specific blog entries and they allow the author or other bloggers to refer back to a specific post in their own entries, or to share the entry with others by forwarding the link through other means like email or instant messaging. Most blogs usually identify permanent links to an entry with the text "permalink" or "link" or by making the date and time of each entry into a hyperlink (as in Examples 1 & 2 above).

The comment link, adjacent to the permalink in the example above, connects readers and the author with the textual feedback area for the post in question. By clicking on the link, interested parties can post their own comment in response to the blog entry, and can read the comments posted by other readers. Comment features generally open in another window, or are displayed below the entry, visually subordinate to the post written by the blog's author. (Nardi et al, 2004a) Some bloggers, in acknowledgement of their readership, and to counter the subordinate

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nature of the default comment display, will include automatically generated links in the

blog's sidebar to the most recent comments. By bringing the comments to the top part

of the main blog page where they are constantly visible, the blogger puts reader

comments on the same expressive footing as the author's own blog posts. One blogger

in the study said of his "recent comments" feature

> …it's at the top of the blog, because I think that the comments that are posted
> to the various entries are just as important a part of the blog as the entries
> themselves. So I want them up there at the top, so that someone reading it will
> read the post and having the recent comment features right there. They will see
> that people made some remarks about this, and hopefully it will snowball and
> they'll add their remarks. That's why that's up there, it's for readers to use, but
> it's also my way of saying 'what you say is important to me,' I want it at the
> top, I want it featured, it's an important aspect of the blog. (Blogger 8)

Other bloggers reported feeling that their blog is a site of their own personal

expression and control, and that comments should remain conceptually and visually

subordinate to the author's entries. Said one bloggers "I generally don't comment in

the comment section. I feel like that space is for readers." (Blogger 9) She continues

that she'll only jump in to clarify what she sees as misunderstandings of her posts, or to

keep the blog a "safe place," by chastising readers for verbal attacks on other readers.

Trackbacks are another element that appear frequently on blogs, though it is not always enabled or a part of the blog's functionality.[5] Trackbacks, also sometimes called "pings" are a function whereby a blogger writes about something they saw or read in another blog and then sends a notification back to the first blog with a link to their post. If the first blog author had trackbacks enabled, a link to the entry on the second blog is posted on the related entry in the first blog. In most blogs, the number adjacent to the comment or trackback link indicates the number of times a reader has posted or sent a ping to the blog for that entry.

Sidebars

In addition to the header and the post column, most blogs contain at least one sidebar, and sometimes more. Sidebars are the repository of important, but less frequently updated content. Sidebar content is generally expressed in lists or short phrases, often because of space constraints. Sidebars may contain (but are not limited to); an image or other graphical representation of the blogger; a list of links to other blogs also sometimes called a "blogroll"; lists of favored or currently consumed books, songs, albums, movies or other entertainment content; links to other websites; small graphic buttons or links indicating connections to or affinities with other blogs through groups or blog "rings;" lists of internal links to other content on the blog, like

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[5] Though it should be noted that even if it is not offered by a blogging package, it can often be

categories of blog postings, recent posts, or recent comments; links to archives of

previous posts; tagboards and guestbooks; and RSS feeds.

The sidebar serves many functions. On one level it serves as a navigation tool

for the blog itself, allowing users to read old posts in the archives, or only posts on

certain subjects by clicking on category links,[6] for example. It can serve as a portal for

the blog's owner, allowing the author to use the blog as a repository of information for

herself, helping her visit favorite sites or remember items easily. Links to archived

material can serve as memory tools for the author. One blogger in the study used his

blog as portal for finding information both on his own site and on the Web, posting

links to favorite blogs, favorite news sites, programming tools and other work-related

utilities, even posting travel dates for business trips.

A sidebar, coupled with a header can also serve a scene-setting function, giving

a sense of "context" to the author of the blog, by locating them culturally, intellectually

or geographically. The content of a blog sidebar can also give the reader more of a

glimpse into the activities, hobbies or proclivities of the blog owner, including perhaps

the books, and the blogs they read, the kind of music they listen to, and an overall

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implemented by using a third party service. This is true of comments, trackbacks, guestbooks, tagboards and "ring" features.

[6] Category links are used when bloggers "tag" each of their posts with a specific category. The blog software then groups all tagged blogs together and generates a link for the sidebar that connects to the page with the grouped entries.

sense of their interests. Many bloggers even have an "About" or "About me" link in the sidebar that takes the reader to a biography page with more information about the author. Images in the sidebar and header can give a sense of what the blogger looks like, how he or she thinks of themselves or the blogger's physical location. Sidebars and headers serve as stabilizers for the blog, as the content within them changes much less often than narrative posts. Sidebar content is generally undated, contributing to the sense of permanence, especially in relation to the date and often time-stamped main body content.

Tagboards, a sidebar-based space for reader interaction on the blog in a manner unrelated to any particular post, and guestbooks, a counter that records reader visits often found in sidebars, were not used by bloggers in this study, though they will be mentioned briefly in later chapters.

RSS

RSS is a content format that alters how audience members interact with a blog. RSS stands for "Really Simple Syndication." It is a content format which, when used with an RSS aggregator or reader, updates users whenever anything on a specific Web page is updated. Commonly used on weblogs (blogs), news Web sites and other places with frequently freshened content, RSS "feeds" allow the user to collect feeds from sites that interests them in one place, then have the aggregator/reader check the feed

link at predetermined intervals for new content. RSS feeds are often indicated by links that say "RSS," "Syndicate this site," "Atom" or a square orange button with the text XML within it. Some newer browsers like Firefox include a small orange square in the lower right hand corner of any webpage with an RSS feed on it. (Pew Internet, n.d.)

RSS feeds are collected by the user in an RSS aggregator,[7] either a desktop or web-based utility that shows the reader all recently updated links. Some examples of aggregators include Bloglines, Feedreader, NetNewsWire, (for Mac) and Newsgator, among many others. (Pew Internet, n.d.)

RSS feeds and aggregators change the way readers interact with blogs by taking the blog entry text out of the context of a blogs design and layout and instead rendering it the standard layout of an RSS aggregator page. RSS aggregators generally do not include comments or trackbacks, so readers who read a blog exclusively through an aggregator also miss out on the public interactions between an author and her readers. The impact of these tools will be addressed more fully in later chapters.

Metaphors for blogs

When trying to understand blogs, metaphors can be helpful when visualizing or understanding the blog in relation to other genres, expressive sites and concepts that

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[7] Aggregators are also sometimes referred to as "readers."

have come before. Understanding how previous academic inquiry has conceptualized and contextualized blogging helps to lay the framework for this current project.

Kylie Jarrett writes that "a recurring theme in discussion of blogs is the manner in which blogging functions as an externalization of the individual psyche of the blogger." (Jarrett, 2004) Jarrett makes the case that a blog is actually similar to a database. She posits that the "textual and formal structures of the medium…allow for the selective interpretation and re-interpretation of [the blogger's] identity akin to the interpretation and re-interpretation of data enabled by the database." (Jarrett, 2004) Indeed, the archiving of blog entries allows bloggers easy access to past expressions and earlier versions of themselves.

Blogs have also been conceptualized as pastiche. Research on the creation of identity on personal webpages (of which blogs are a subset) suggests that the author of a webpage is a "bricoleur," or someone who deliberately constructs something with whatever is close at hand. The webpage author is a bricoleur who assembles their online identity through "specific inclusions, allusions, omissions, adaptations and arrangements" (Chandler, 1998, p. 10-11) (Jarrett, 2004). An examination of blogs bears this out—authors snap photos, grab images and links and post observations of their daily experience, all deliberately selected for inclusion in the assemblage of the blog.

Research parallels have also been productively drawn among paper diaries, autobiographies and blogs. Lois Scheidt begins her research into adolescent blogging by drawing parallels between offline diary keeping and blogging, both of which are "life-writing" (Coleman, 2000), and which both feature dated entries focusing on the life and interests of the author. Each may take a tone that varies from the confidential to the confessional, (Scheidt, in press) and depending on the software or "hardware"[8] in use, with varying degrees of privacy. (Park, 2003) But blogs differ from diaries in that they are not usually a monologue conducted exclusively in private, but are generally a type of conversation where the reader is permitted to become involved in the open and publicly accessible space through a variety of methods (comments, tag boards, email addresses). Scheidt puts it memorably when she suggests that the blogger "invites the audience's gaze." (Scheidt, in press)

Lena Karlsson suggests that with the broadening of the definitions of autobiography by feminist and post-modernist scholars in the past 30 years that we should study the online journal not just as a diary but as an autobiographical text. Many aspects of autobiographical writing, including the idea that the audience is always "hovering at the edge of the page" (Bloom, 1996), are literally true in the web environment. Still, Karlsson notes, the readers of weblogs define themselves as

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[8] Such as a hardbound paper diary with a metal lock.

"readers" rather than as participants, despite the bloggers' attempts to make the blog space one of conversation. (Karlsson, 2004)

Blogs as diaries also serve a life-affirmative purpose. Laurie McNeill writes in her essay for special issue of the journal *Biography* devoted to online diaries, that by "bypassing the commercial, aesthetic or political interests that dictate access to traditional print media, and that decide whose life stories deserve to be told, online diaries can be read as assertions of identity and arguments for the importance of an individual's life. Even as their authors retain a degree of anonymity, these texts make very personal connections to a reading audience that recognizes and confirms these individual life assertions." (McNeill, 2003, p. 26) McNeill connects the affirmation with feedback from the audience, one of the features of the blog that differentiate it from the traditional paper-bound journal or diary.

Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht connect blogging to more modern technologies than books and diaries. They use the metaphor of the "radio show" for blogs. They conceive of a blog as a site of individual creative expression that is publicly "broadcast" and which invites limited feedback from listeners or readers in the form of calls or comments. (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004a).

Bloggers themselves have metaphors that they employ for blogs. One notable metaphor used by one blogger in the study is that of the mosaic. She thinks about her

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blog and its posts as "these are small windows on my world. By showing you the windows on my world you learn a little bit about my lens. It [is] like looking at someone's photo album, and by learning about what they like to take pictures of you learn something about them." (Blogger 9)

Another study blogger uses the metaphor of the front porch, imagining her blog as a place where family and friends can come and visit "sit on the swing," and hear the news about the author's life. (Blogger 16) This blogger's metaphor encapsulates the sense of sharing, neighborliness and easy familiarity that blogging to a known audience brings. This blogger mentioned in the interview that he or she views the blog as substitute for a mass email—a way to keep in touch with far-flung family and friends, but in a way that does not disturb them with an obnoxious ping to their inbox, but which holds her thoughts and experiences for them for whenever they have the time to engage with her.

<div align="center">*   *   *</div>

Whether a blog is an online diary or a radio show, a mosaic, front porch or a database, one unifying characteristic of blogs is that regardless of their subject matter, they are a site of expression. The very nature of a space of expression is that it generally holds the expectation of an audience to express oneself to, and it is these

expectations of expressiveness and audience, and the breakdown in those expectations

that I will address in the remainder of this project.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This project examines through ethnographic interviews how bloggers interact with their audience, and focuses on points of conflict over meaning and expectations in blog display and interaction. What do I mean when I say that I am undertaking an ethnographic project? I mean that I am undertaking a qualitative research effort focused on understanding the culture around a technological tool. If culture is set of shared symbols, expectations and meaning, (Murphy, 1989) then is there a culture developing around blogs? I set out to do participant-observer research, in which I interviewed my subjects about their blogs and their experiences around them, read their blogs and kept a blog of my own. Most traditional ethnographies are documents that attempt to explain, understand and reflect upon the culture or an aspect of the culture of a community in a particular geographic location. But the "blogging community," if one can be said to exist, is non-geographic. Bloggers and readers do not interact in real space and often not in real time. This detachment from time and place means that instead of traveling to a particular place to immerse oneself in a culture in order to write about it, the ethnographer interested in understanding blogs must conduct her ethnographic work virtually.

Virtual Ethnography

What exactly is a virtual ethnography? In its most basic sense, a virtual ethnography is the written product of ethnographic research conducted in a virtual space—one divorced from usual conventions of geography and corporeality and embodiment, but nevertheless a space or place of communication or interaction. The phrase virtual ethnography is also marked by another meaning of the term virtual as a synonym for "almost." A virtual ethnography is not quite the same as a non-virtual ethnography, and it should not be expected to be (Hine, 2000).

Why do a virtual ethnography? Christine Hine in her book *Virtual Ethnography*, points out the strength of ethnography for studying technology: "An ethnography of the internet can look in detail at the ways in which the technology is experienced in use. (Hine, 2000, p. 4). With a research question that focuses on how users experience the weblog as an expression of self and as a site for interaction with an audience, an ethnographic approach is warranted.

In her book, Hine lays out a framework through which this virtual, ethnographic project may be better understood. First, this project takes as its starting point a postmodern view, believing that "the new communications technologies are part of the process where doubt is cast on authenticity, representation and reality, the unitary self and the distinction between self and society" (Hine, 2000, p. 7). Blogs in particular problematize and make explicit many of these questions of authenticity,

representation and the self, a topic that shall be addressed in detail in the following chapters.

Hine also reminds us of the conversation between technological determinism and social constructivism. This project walks a line between the two, believing that technologies both impact society and reflect it. Blogs in particular are a site of both social change and social expression. Building off of the determinism/constructivism foundation, Hines also sets up a dichotomous way of conceptualizing the internet and thus applications upon it, by asking whether the internet is "an artefact of culture or is it a culture in its own right" (Hine, 2000, p. 14). In other words—is the internet a "space" where culture may be created or a "product" of an external culture?

In the end, this thesis will take the view that the internet, and a blog are both of these things—both a space for interaction, where changes to culture, particularly surrounding personal expression and the dissemination of information, are being enacted on a daily basis, as well as product of our cultural moment—one filled with reality TV shows, a culture of confession and therapy, and a greater tendency toward and acceptance of exhibitionistic and voyeuristic behaviors (Jacobs, 2003). More specifically, this project will also adopt the view put forth by Grint and Woolgar (1997) "that what we perceive as the impact of technology accrues not in virtue of some intrinsic quality of the technology itself, but as a result of contingent sets of

social processes. The so-called inherent qualities of technology are built in during the design process as the upshot of negotiations about the nature of users" (Hine, 2000, p. 7 discussion of Grint & Woolgar, 1997). The design of a technology is based around choices made by the designer and the way that he or she envisions that the product will be used. Of course, the users of the technology must be taught to use the technology (through FAQ's or Frequently Asked Questions, User Manuals and "Help" functions or by observation of or explicit assistance from other users) and do not always use it in the way the producers envisioned. Again Hine discussing Grint and Woolgar make this explicit: "The apparent impacts of the technology depend on users being taught to use the technology in appropriate ways. The process is contingent on the successful performance of sets of social relations between designers and users through and around the machine. It is indeterminate: users are in principle free to understand the technology in quite different ways from those that the designers intended" (Hine, 2000, p. 8).

Methodological Details

Participants

Participants for the study were recruited via blog postings and emails. A request for research subjects was posted on the author's personal blog and was then picked up

by readers of other blogs. The posting (available in the Appendix) was eventually posted at five different blogs and yielded a total of seventeen participants. Seven of the participants were men and 10 women. Participants were mainly centered in the vicinity of Washington, DC or New England, with other participants located in the Upper Midwest and Midwest, the South and one American temporarily overseas in France. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 57, and are generally well-educated professionals and business owners; people involved in higher education or actively pursuing new educational opportunities. Lawyers, law students and people considering law school are somewhat over-represented in the sample due to the types of blogs that posted the call for participants and the nature of their readership. Data about the race and ethnicity of the participants was not actively collected, though some of this information was gleaned through observation.

Recruitment language required that bloggers be over the age of 18 (though this was not independently verified), keep a personal diary or journal-style weblog, and have an audience feedback mechanism active on their site. This included comment features or prominent email addresses or "email me" links.

Interviews

Participants were first asked to complete a short pre-interview screener survey (available in the Appendix) that asked basic questions about how long they had been

blogging (from 2 months to more than 3 years on their current blog platform) and

screened to ensure that each blogger met the following criteria: older than 18 years of

age, single author of a personal, diary-style blog that had an interactive comment, tag

board or email feature enabled on their blog. In some cases, the participants disabled

the comment feature between the date when they agreed to an interview and filled out

the pre-survey information and when they were finally interviewed. In most cases the

blogger had an alternate mode of interactivity enabled on their blog, such as a visible

email address. Most bloggers who took this action reported disabling their comment

feature because of problems with large amounts of comment spam.[9]

Participants were also asked in the initial email to fill out a consent form and

return it via email to the author. Once consent had been received, a time was

appointed to conduct interviews by telephone, face-to-face or in one instance via email.

Each interview lasted anywhere from 50 to 100 minutes, and was audio-recorded with

the interviewee's knowledge and consent. Interviews were conducted with the use of a

protocol of questions (available in the Appendix), but were allowed to flow naturally

and so did not always cover the same question in the same order. Each interview was

tailored to focus on the particular concerns, interests and observations of each blogger.

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[1] Comment spam is where non-readers of the blog use scripts to send advertisements, unrelated messages or unintelligible strings of characters. Often these spam messages include a URL that the spammers wish to have appear higher in search results on search engines. They use the traffic to the blog to make it seems as though their website has many links pointing to it which boosts their results in some search engine.

During the course of the interview, the participant's blog was examined live on a computer screen, if possible, or on a paper print out of the front page of the respondent's blog captured on the day of the interview.

The responses of all the bloggers who participated in this study have been anonymized to protect their privacy. Any images of blogs used in this paper are used with the express consent of the blogger and have not been linked with their comments.

The bloggers in this study used a variety of software and hosting combinations to bring their blogs to life. Bloggers used Blogger,[10] WordPress[11] and Typepad.[12] Others used Moveable Type[13] or WordPress software hosted on their own or their ISP's servers. One respondent built his own blogging software to work with the specifications of a server he had after he realized that other over-the-counter software involved system requirements that his server could not meet. Note, one weakness of the sample is the fact that it does not include any bloggers who use Live Journal[14] or Xanga,[15] two blogging software and hosting providers who have a predominantly younger, female user base (LiveJournal, 2005) and are thought to create a greater sense of community among bloggers due to certain aspects of their functionality and early

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[10] http://www.blogger.com
[11] http://www.wordpress.org
[12] http://www.typepad.com
[13] http://www.sixapart.com
[14] http://www.livejournal.com
[15] http://www.xanga.com

beginnings—LiveJournal began as an invitation only service—a user had to be invited to start a blog by someone who already had one hosted at the service.[16]

Why Ethnography?

I undertook ethnographic research because I was most interested in the stories that bloggers would tell about their experiences blogging, and the nuances of understanding and relationship that formed in the venue of the blog. Ethno-methodological work is not without its challenges, and doing ethnographic research in a virtual space is problematic in its own ways.

In virtual ethnographies specifically, the disembodied quality of interaction brings the authenticity of participants into question. For the participants that I did not meet face to face (approximately half), I cannot verify that they are who they say they are. I can only piece together the nuggets of information they gave me through their blog, via email and over the phone, and listen to my own gut sense of whether they are presenting an authentic self or not. It is this disembodiment of the subject that contributes to making this study a virtual ethnographic project, the term virtual embodying the uncertainty inherent in a project that takes places in a mediated, non-

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[16] However, I would argue that LiveJournal and Xanga are qualitatively different types of online journaling software, with a much greater focus on community formation than other types of blogging software. Indeed, many users of LiveJournal and Xanga do not call what they do blogging. When a group of relatively tech-savvy teens in a focus group were asked whether any of them or their friends kept a blog, the question was greeted with silence and curious stares until one young woman spoke up and asked "Oh, is that kind of like a Xanga site?" (Lenhart, unpublished research).

geographic, and disembodied environment. But Hine counsels "But rather than treating authenticity as a particular problem posed by cyberspace that the ethnographer has to solve before moving on to the analysis, it would be more fruitful to place authenticity in cyberspace as a topic at the heart of the analysis" (Hine, 2000, p. 49). Heeding Hines, I have done exactly that, examining the steps bloggers take to establish authenticity and how audience members evaluate it.

As for the authenticity of the ethnography itself, as mentioned in the *Preface*, I have involved myself in the world of blogs and blogging as both a reader and an author for more than two years. I began reading blogs in late 2002 and began my own early blogging efforts in March 2003. After gathering my cadre of participants and interviewing them, I have also continued to follow their blogs after the interview moment, checking some as often as every day or every other one.[17] I have also been able to verify the authenticity of some blogger's self-representations through my face-to-face meeting with them, or my first-hand knowledge of their lives.

Unlike other virtual ethnographies, like those discussed and performed by Christine Hine, the phenomenon of blogs can only be studied in a virtual mode. As shall be discussed further in later chapters, blogs can be a virtual embodiment or virtual

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[17] Of course, even in the most carefully crafted research, the impact of the ethnographer or the research is almost unavoidable. In the case of this research, it is evident by some of the recent changes study bloggers have made to their blogs that the questions that I asked as a researcher raised awareness of elements of a blogger's blog that they had not thought of before, and then hastened to change after our interview.

expression of a person's offline self or experience. And so while details of a person's experience are best contextualized with offline information (location, age, sex) the main expression studied exists only in a virtual world, and so any study of it must take place there as well.

And finally, as ethnographic projects around technology are increasingly detached from exclusive existence in an offline world, ethnographies become more of an "indefinite project" (Hine, 1998). This concept has great applicability to this project and others, as culture of all kinds is "slippery" and constantly changing. When examining culture and communication expressed through a technological medium of expression and transmission, the pace of change accelerates. In practical terms, this means that this project can only ever be a snapshot of a moving thing, blurred ever-so-slightly as the technology and the blog continues to advance even in the midst of the construction of this essay.

Chapter 4. Blogs as a Site of Expression

Part of this thesis project is to understand blogs as expressive vehicles, so first we must ask how a blogger expresses herself through elements in her blog. To understand this more fully, this chapter will lay out ways in which the various parts of a blog share similar expressive functions. A blog is made up of interactive elements, connective elements, visual elements and content. And as with many other aspects of blogs and blogging, here too the boundaries between categories are fluid and the categories themselves unstable, not so unlike the postmodern subject who at least in part is created through blogging itself.

Expressive Elements

Blogs contain specific elements that connect them either uni-directionally or multi-directionally to other blogs, websites, people or documents. Uni-directional elements are connective features and multi-directional elements are interactive. Interactive elements are spaces where authors and readers can exchange information; such spaces include comment features, tagboards and email address links. Connective elements are one-way indicators that display or otherwise connect a blog to an outside document, idea, place or person or to an archived element of the blog itself. Connective elements are usually links to other bloggers, websites, or internal documents, and can

be embedded within an entry or in a sidebar. Visual elements include colors, layout, images, and other design choices. Content encompasses the meat and meaning in the blog, the stories told and observations recorded, all displayed through the other expressive elements.

Interactive Elements

Interactivity refers to sites of two-way communication. In a digital space, users create interactivity through text, audio conversations or video conferences. In blogs, bandwidth and technological limitations confine interaction to a text-based expression. Since many users do not have state of the art equipment or fast internet connections, audio and video exchanges are not feasible given their bandwidth and processing power demands.

The most common interactive feature on a blog is a comment space where readers can post their reactions to specific posts or conduct a discussion with other readers related to the post topic. Other blogs use tagboards, a less common feature that allows readers to converse with each other independent of any particular blog entry. In both spaces the readers may converse with the author or with other readers. Interactive features create spaces for multi-way connections (one author to many readers or one reader to many other readers) and facilitate two-way, conversational communication.

There is some debate over whether blogs are truly interactive. Joanne Jacobs states firmly that blogs are interactive and that this interactivity motivates authors. Readers, whom she calls "cybervoyeurs," post encouragement, flames[18] or other reactions to the blog, motivating the original blogger to continue posting. "The very interactive nature of blogging makes it innately supportive of both exhibitionistic and voyeuristic behaviors…" (Jacobs, 2003, p. 2).

Other scholars disagree with Jacobs' theory of blogs' wholesale interactivity, positing instead that bloggers want only enough interactivity to reassure them that the audience is actually there (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004a). Comments can be seen as "threats" to the author's control of the space. As mentioned previously, Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht use the metaphor of the "radio show" for blogs—a blog is a site of individual creative expression that is publicly "broadcast" and which invites limited feedback from listeners or readers in the form of calls or comments (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004a). These authors view blogs as only minimally interactive. This is likely an accurate, yet time-bound assessment of the state of blogging at the time of their research and writing in 2003, given the lack of built in comments in some of the most popular blogging software at the time.

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[18] To flame is a term meaning to post inflammatory, derogatory or otherwise nasty comments with the intent to incite anger or response from the original author.

Today, most bloggers have the ability to make their blog interactive through text-based features, though not all choose to make their blogs interactive. Bloggers do not have to enable comment features or provide email links, and indeed many have disabled comments in recent weeks and months due to significant problems with comment spam.[19] Others still view blogs as more of a personal "poster" for display than a forum for discussion. Nevertheless, most bloggers embrace interactivity and enable the easy-to-use commenting features. The potential for interaction with an audience draws bloggers to blogging. Many blog authors in the study cited the desire to "create a conversation" on a blog as a reason for starting one, and pursuit of online conversation and interaction with others as a reason to continue.

Connective Elements

Connective elements are features of a blog that in some way link or connect the blog with internal archives, external files, websites, blogs or people. In contrast to the interactive multi-directional elements like comment functions and tagboards, connective features are generally uni-directional (with some exceptions noted below), and quite literally "connect" a post or a blog element with something else. These features can be located in the sidebar of a blog or embedded within the blog entries.

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[19] Comment spam is a relatively new phenomenon, where persons totally unknown to the blogger use automated tools to post advertisements or gibberish to the comment boards in an attempt to drive traffic to their own site and increase their rank in search engines. Spam is also now infiltrating all modes of blog feedback, including trackbacks as well.

Uni-directional elements are almost always hyperlinks, including regular links, "blogrolls" (a list of permanent links to other blogs usually found in a sidebar) and trackbacks. Trackbacks and permalinks are generally uni-directional, though they do serve the purpose of facilitating interaction, rather than strictly serving as contextualizing elements in the manner of links. Most links in blogs flow out from the blog itself and connect it with the world at large. Trackbacks are the exception to this as they flow in from readers with their own blogs who are flagging their own discussion of another blogger's particular post in their own space. It is hard to think of an offline analog that might compare to the trackback—perhaps the penciled-in annotations of another reader in a library book, though the trackback differs from these scribbles as it takes the conversation out of its original context and moves into the space of another blogger. Trackbacks form an almost bibliographic web of reference and show the development and spread of ideas through the universe of blogs.

Blogs also feature internal uni-directional connective links such as a link within an entry that connects it to some other piece of relevant information within the blog. This link could connect to an archived entry, a photograph, a sidebar element or another document that resides on the blog. In this case, the connection is self-referential, relating to the blogger's own history, and establishing the context of the particular post as well as the blogger's overall voice. In this way the blog shares a

function with the centuries-old diary genre. The diary and now the blog functions as a real-time memoir that gives the blogger a window back into the experiences and emotions of his or her self in an earlier time.

Fluid Elements

While most links are generally uni-directional, certain connective elements embody a potential for interactivity that can problematize the distinction between connective/uni-directional and interactive/multi-directional categorization. For example, a link to an email address is an ostensibly connective/uni-directional element because it opens a pathway for a reader to initiate contact with the blog author. However, such a link is also potentially multi-directional, as it allows for non-post-specific private interaction with a blog's author, should she choose to respond. Similarly, permalinks and trackbacks,[20] while still strictly uni-directionally linking a blog with another post,[21] enable other bloggers to share information with one another. Trackbacks do this by showing how an author is using or addressing the content of another blog on his or her own site. It should be noted that while the trackback is initiated outside of a blog, it is recorded and displayed inside the blog of the originator

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[20] For a definitions of a permalink see p. 14, and for trackbacks please see p. 16 in Chapt. 2.
[21] Both permalinks and trackbacks connect a blog post with something else. A permalink does this by providing a durable link to a single blog entry that maybe copied and shared. The trackback connects two blog entries to each other, but is instigated by the reader of the initial blog post who is "telling" the original author of his own blogged response to the post. The notice of the trackback is displayed in the post of the original author.

of the idea or post being commented upon. The originating author has the option of commenting on the trackback-linked entry, creating a conversation among bloggers on a particular topic. Each blogger adds to the discussion by posting in his own space, or by moving the discussion into the interactive fields in one, both (or all) of the conversing blogs.

Permalinks facilitate the sharing of content with others by creating a durable link to a web page that contains a single, specific post. Permalinks allow others to link directly to a particular post on a specific blog. This link may be posted to another blog, or shared via email or instant messaging, allowing ideas to spread and discussion to grow.

The original author of the content, after seeing the trackback or finding evidence of the dissemination of her work, can continue the "conversation" by trackbacking, or commenting or simply posting responsive material on her own blog. These links ostensibly make one-way connections, yet they also create pathways for multi-directional exchanges of narratives, ideas and information as well as driving more visitors to a blog.

All of these connections are part of what make a blog a compelling space—a blog is a space of connection and interaction that often visibly displays its context and

the networks in which it is embedded through the linking elements of the hypertext of which it is composed.

Visual Elements

The visual parts of a blog include all of the (relatively) static design elements that contribute to the overall appearance of the blog. These elements include color choices; blocks of color, their size and position; line weight and position; font size, color and design; page width; header; and graphics, among others. These elements "tailor the [homepage] garment to fit the individual," (Badger, 2004, p. 1) and personalize the blog to be visually representative of the owner.

Though up to this point this study has taken a social constructivist stance, meaning that people impose their choices on the technology, it is important to remember that expression through a weblog is also affected by the structures and the choices coded into the software that brings it to life. Bloggers are often constrained by the templates available in their blogging software. However, most blogging packages offer enough customization options that bloggers can choose a color scheme, and a

basic layout (one column, two columns or three), and sometimes a font.

[Example 3]

Most bloggers in the study picked or designed templates for maximum readability and user-friendliness, revealing an awareness of and concern for audience in the creation and display of the blog. Bloggers selected color schemes based on the amount of contrast they provided, the author's favorite hues, or to create a mood or theme. These choices can influence the messages sent by the layout of the design on

the blog—spare white designs with black line drawings conveys a serious and

professional demeanor, stripped down and lean. (Example 3) A pink template shows a

"feminine" side, or a playful nature, or a bright and cheery sense of personality. Some

bloggers choose the look of their blogs based on the subject matter; others choose

merely on a whim.

[Example 4]

One blogger in the research sample for this project mainly focuses on a craft hobby in her blog, while her design template has a diner theme, complete with 1950s era clip art of a perky waitress and image of an empty bowl and spoon.

[Example 5]

Even though the blogger's design is not explicitly related to the theme of her blog, the diner theme creates a sense of a warm, almost homey place, where anyone is welcome.
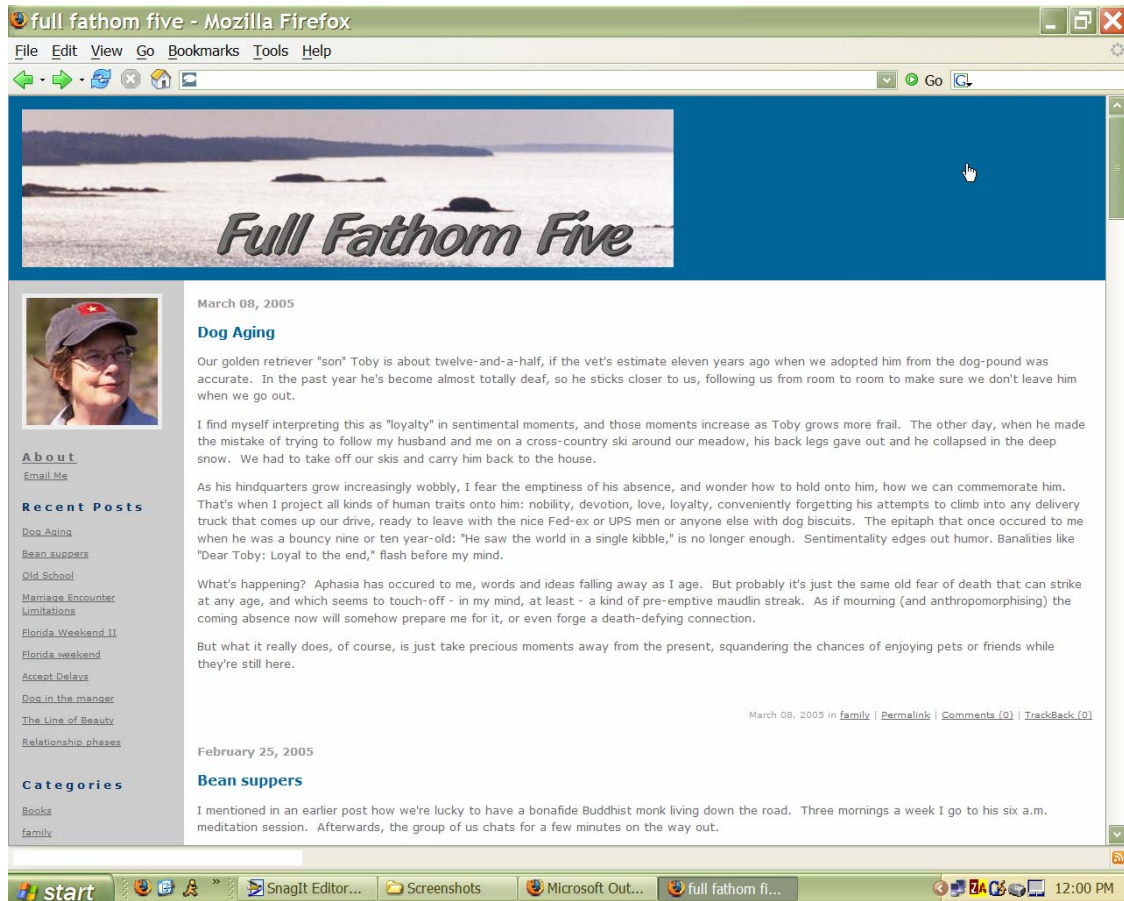
[Example 6]

The theme creates a mood and establishes the blog as a "gathering place," rather than explicitly signaling the blog's subject.

Images

Beyond the layout choices that an author makes, a blogger may include images in the design of his or her blog, as part or the entire content of a blog post, in a sidebar, in a header, or on an "About Me" page as illustration of themselves.

In some cases bloggers will use images in the headers of their blogs as decoration, but also to help locate the blog geographically, thematically or expressively.

Full Fathom Five (above) is an excellent example of both the use of a graphical header and the use of an image (in this case a photo) to illustrate the author. She uses the header image and title text together to suggest an ocean theme. Another blogger in the study uses an image of Vermont at the top of the blog (where an image of the author might go), to show his location as a Vermont blogger. Superimposed on the image of the state of Vermont is a red star, which indicates the location of an enormous and well-known music concert, rather than the star symbol's more common function of illustrating the location of the state capitol. In fact, the image is drawn from the literature surrounding the concert, and would be recognized by other attendees. The image marks the author as a fan of the music

Example 7

played at the concert referenced. By including the image, the blogger subtly conveys more information about himself to a select subgroup of readers and potential readers. The author also plays with the notion of a representation of himself by posting the image in the space in the template of his software earmarked for an image of the author.

Most blogging software includes in its template a place to host and post an image of the blogger,[22] as Example 6 illustrates. Example Seven shows that some bloggers use this space to post different kinds of images. The possibilities are almost endless. In the sample and in other blogs, I have seen images of everything from artwork, non-portrait photos, a graphical representations of a state (as mentioned above), to cartoon or hand drawings, and photographs of animals, landscapes, or objects. Like our Vermont blog author, bloggers may or may not choose to include an image of themselves or a representative image. Bloggers may also leave that part of the template blank and include no personal image at all. Even when a photo is posted, there is no way to verify whether or not the image is representative unless the reader meets the blogger face-to-face. Even "real" photos of the blogger can be easily altered in the digital age, with no visible trace of edits. Though photos are often considered to

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[22] Or an image alleged to be representative of the blogger. See pp. 57-58 for a discussion of blog hoaxes.

be "perfect" representations of what they depict, in the digital age, images are no longer reliable, and have always been shaped by the photographer.

Over the course of the research term, one study participant agonized about whether to upload a picture of herself to her blog. She had posted photos of herself within blog posts wearing things that she had made, but had never shown her face in any of the images. During our first interview, when asked whether she had considered adding an image of herself to her blog, this particular blogger demurred. As a woman of color, she had some concerns about how she would be received in the theme blog community of which she was a newer member. She enjoyed her interactions with fellow hobbyists and did not want any latent racism clouding her new-found and generally pleasant exchanges. In the end, however, she decided to post an image of her face to her blog in the sidebar, adjacent to her other posts and directly above an "about the author" section. She posted the image as a way of increasing the authenticity and honesty of her blog, by connecting it explicitly to a real person. She was gratified by the number of other hobbyist bloggers of color who approached her via comments or email to welcome her.

Bloggers do not need to post portraits to reveal things about themselves; they may do so through other images they select and post. Meredith Badger discusses the

power and the meaning inherent in the choices of other images used in a post, sidebar

or header of a blog. She writes:

> Often…the images contained within blogs do not show the blogger at all but we
> can still construct an impression of who the blogger is based on the subject
> matter they choose. Viewed over time, photographs in weblogs create a
> composite image of the blogger, a portrait that builds incrementally (2004, p.
> 2).

Independent of the choice to publish a personal photo, a blogger's use of such

elements as perspective, choice of subject matter, photographic style

(photojournalistic, impressionistic, etc.), reproduction of other photos, use of drawings,

and serialized use of photographs to tell a story constructs an individual (Badger,

2004). One blogger in the study talked about her craft-oriented theme blog community,

and mentioned how she felt that the photos that bloggers shared gave her insights into

their personalities.

> Some people will show you "look at this, can you guess what's wrong with this
> picture?" And they tell you that they made a mistake and they show the mistake
> that they made and then they show you how they fixed it. Some people would
> never show anything that's not perfect before they put it up… In some cases
> you learn that people are budding designers and they'll post a picture of
> something they designed...you can definitely see peoples' personalities in that
> respect (Blogger 3).

For example, there is a whole subgenre of blog posts known as "catblogging"

in which bloggers write about and post pictures of their cats. A recent *New York Times*

article discussed a group of rabidly political bloggers who take Fridays "off" from

political commentary. They devote those days to posts about their cats, showing a softer, perhaps even fuzzier, and non-partisan side of themselves in the process (Terdiman, 2004).

Constrained Design

It is important to remember that much of blogging's popularity arises from its simplicity. To become the author of a blog, one only needs about five minutes, an internet connection and a bare understanding of word processing software. Part of what makes it so simple to create a professional-looking and attractive web presence is the fact that almost all blogging software and hosting sites provide design templates for authors to use as repositories for their content. As previously mentioned, these templates limit the choices bloggers have in terms of features and design styles. Only the most technologically knowledgeable users can extensively modify the existing templates or create their own. Therefore, regardless of the ostensibly independent choices made by the blogger in designing her website, most bloggers' creativity is at least partially constrained by the choices allowed in her blogging software or host (Gustafson, 2004)(Thompson, 2003).

For instance, until May 2004, Blogger.com, one of the most popular free blogging software and hosting providers did not offer a built-in comment function. (Google, 2004). Technologically savvy users could use (and sometimes pay for) third

party commenting systems (like Haloscan and Enetation) to enable comments on their blogs, but for those without significant HTML knowledge, it was difficult to enable comments on a Blogger blog. These technical limitations initially created the blog for Blogger users as much more of a broadcast medium than an interactive one.

Content: Types and Management

The content of a blog is another element that overlaps with the other three elements of expression in blogs. The content of a blog may be text or image, and it may include links. Blog content may be created both in the main blog postings and through the interaction occurring in the comments section or tagboard of a blog. The design of a blog constrains and impacts how a blog's content is expressed.

Because in some ways blogging is better defined by the repeated *act* of keeping a space for expression rather than by the location or type of expression, a blog's content is one of its least stable and generalizable elements. Nevertheless, Susan Herring and her colleagues at Indiana University have established a typology of blog genres through an examination of the content and features of blog entries. Pulling from traditional models within the study of rhetoric, Herring et al conclude that "blogs are neither unique nor reproduced entirely from offline genres, but rather constitute a hybrid genre that draws from multiple sources, including other Internet genres" (Herring, Scheidt et al., 2004, p. 2). Blogs are a new "hybrid" genre of expression and

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themselves may be further divided in sub-genres or types of blogs. These genres of blog types help us to better understand the varied nature of blogs, and differentiate what is currently treated in most academic discussion and the media as the monolith of "blogs." Breaking blogs into genres is critical for a nuanced understanding of a blogger's focus and the make-up of the universe of these different things that share the name "blog."

Blog Genres

Author Rebecca Blood established a typology of blogs that includes three basic types: filters, personal journals and notebooks. Herring and her colleagues expand and modify the typology to include filter blogs, personal journals, k-log or knowledge-logs, mixed purpose blogs and other types of blogs. They eliminate Blood's "notebook" category, believing that her definitional criteria of long entry length is "problematic" as "entries can vary significantly in length with in a single blog" (Herring, Scheidt et al., 2004, p. 4).

As mentioned earlier, filter blogs focus on content external to the blogger, with numerous external links and commentary about news and other events occurring outside the blog. Personal journal blogs focus on the events of a blogger's life and her thoughts about them. K-logs are blogs that focus on the exchange, documentation, or creation of new knowledge. Often used in a professional context, they often serve as

repositories of information for the author, as well as a knowledge base that the author is sharing with others. Mixed genre blogs include elements of all or some of these three categories (Herring, Scheidt et al., 2004).

The vast majority of blogs are of the personal journal genre. In their sample, Herring and her colleagues found that 70 percent of the blogs surveyed were personal journals, and another 9 percent were mixed types (Herring, Scheidt et al., 2004, p. 6). Nevertheless, the blogs that get the most media coverage, and have the largest readerships (sometimes called the "A-list" of bloggers) are mostly filter blogs. It is partly for this reason that this project focuses on the personal-journal type of blog, in an attempt to understand the blogging experiences of the vast majority of the "rest of us" who blog.

Management of Content & Authenticity in Blogging

The management of a blog's content is another area of authorial control—what an individual chooses to post, how frequently, the tone taken, whether a post is archived, or removed, or edited and whether the author indicates that he has done so are all variable elements of blog expression.

Text in blogs is inherently unstable. Readers often perceive entries as immediate (a perception facilitated by date- and time-stamping of entries) and more "authentic" because the author has not had time to "'alter' the 'true' vision of the

experience" (McNeill, 2003, p. 37). However, the author also has the equally immediate ability to make "seamless" emendations to entries, or remove them all together without "the telltale signs of a ripped page" (ibid). This ability to change the text without the reader's knowledge reduces the level of authenticity in blogs—after all how "real" can a narrative be if it is edited after posting and the reader does not know that it has been edited? In a case study from her research Laurie McNeill describes readers' attitudes towards textual instability and authenticity. "To Schalchlin's audience, his going back and changing entries that cast him in an unfavorable light would be "cheating"—inauthentic, inaccurate. His readers seek a text that cannot be altered after the fact, a "finished" version that would most resemble the fixed nature of the entries in a published diary" (McNeill, 2003, p. 37). As McNeill states, readers believe that a writer's immediate, unperfected thoughts are more authentic and more reflective of the author's experience (McNeill, 2003). It is these voyeuristic impulses searching for the "real," the unedited, perhaps similar to what lures viewers to reality television programs, which contributes to the generally increasing readership of blogs. Yet, this voyeurism also yields tensions between bloggers and readers because even as readers demand authenticity, a blogger wishes to present an idealized version of an authentic-seeming self.

To counteract this tension, some bloggers have attempted to increase authenticity by signposting changes to entry text. Additions might be slugged "update" and appear in brackets below the initial text. Bloggers also use the strikethrough device to show, generally for amusing effect, what was written previously (i.e., "my ~~monstrous~~ charming mother-in-law…") And in some cases, bloggers will leave a title of a post as a residual marker of its existence, but remove the entire text of the post, leaving a note saying that the post has been removed. Part of the motivation for leaving the title is that RSS functionality makes it possible that "original" versions of a published post may still exist in the RSS aggregators of other blog readers even after the post on the site itself has been altered or removed. RSS feeds pull blog entries at certain pre-determined intervals, but may not grab any revised content that a user may add to or delete from the blog entry. So if a blog author revises an entry after the fact, that entry may have two separate, equally "real" versions of the same post, one, revised that rests on the blog page itself, and one "original" that was pulled into someone's RSS reader/aggregator before the author decided to make the change (Scheidt, 2005).

Still, not all bloggers follow these conventions of content management or do not follow them all the time, rendering blog text and its meaning inherently unstable. As later chapters will show, this instability of text and meaning further influences expectations and interactions within and through blogs.

Of course, even though technical features affect the perceived authenticity of a post, it must also remember that a blog entry and the person represented through it are always constructed. An author may be comfortable adopting a "natural" or casual tone for his or her posts, but also be very deliberately crafting a studied nonchalance or an "authentic" self. In every post, a blogger, no matter how casual, makes representational decisions regarding subject matter, scope, language and tone.

Authenticity & Identity in Blogging

The mediation of the technologies has important effects on the conversation of blogging. Reader and author participate in a disembodied conversation lacking its usual non-verbal cues, problematizing the authenticity of their identities. Gary Thompson observes that the ease with which online identities and the "institutional markers of authenticity" can be simulated contributes to the instability of an "authentic" online identity. Thompson suggests that given the web's fluidity, we "need to regard authenticity as a textual function: textual features create the basis of a (sometimes literal) dialogue between author and reader, which establish and sustains authenticity" (Thompson, 2003). For Thompson, authenticity is created over time through sustained dialogue and interaction.

Weblog hoaxes problematize Thompson's conception of authenticity through sustained conversation. The Kaycee Nicole weblog hoax featured a middle-aged

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woman masquerading as a young girl dying of leukemia. She kept up the façade for over two years, going so far as to carry on email and even phone conversations with others in the guise of Kaycee. When Debbie Swenson finally tired of her ruse and killed off Kaycee, the community that had sprung up around the fictitious blog was consumed with an outpouring of real grief, and then anger as the hoax was revealed. (Geitgey, 2002). As mentioned earlier, McNeill writes that audiences expect authenticity in self-presentation in the seemingly intimate and immediate space of the blog, and when readers' expectations prove false, conflict erupts and readership may be lost.

Kristen Langellier and Eric Peterson make the point that blogs, beyond problematizing authentic identities, have a different kind of informative authenticity because they are narratives, rather than composed of information. The blog's informative authenticity arises not from the accuracy of the information it conveys, but from the perception of interpretability. In storytelling, "the psychological connection of the events is not forced upon the reader. It is left up to him [or her] to interpret the way he [or she] understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude than information lacks" (Walter Benjamin in Langellier & Peterson, 2004 p. 175). Narratives, and thus blogs are always going to be perceived by their readers and writers as one person's "take" on an issue, one person's perspective on a story, left open to the

interpretation of and evaluation by the reader, rather than as an unbiased source of information. "What weblogs share with daily life is a disposition to trust in appearances, all the while remembering that "appearances can be deceiving" (Langellier & Peterson, 2004).

Blogs as Self-Expression

This chapter has addressed the idea of blogs as a site of expression, but what exactly do blogs express? Most bloggers in the study agree that a blog is an expression of self, or at least a partial representation of themselves. Expressive elements of the blog serve a variety of purposes, but mainly convey some information about the author to the reader, and about the author to him- or herself.

Recently Susan Herring and her colleagues suggested that blogs are a new genre of online content, specifically "a de facto bridge between multimedia HTML documents and text-based computer-mediated communications" (Herring, Scheidt et al., 2004). In other words, a blog is both a document and a conversation. Indeed, the interactive features of the blog bring it out of the realm of static purveyor of information or narrative and into the realm of conversation, enabling the exchange of ideas through a modified type of dialogue. Erving Goffman's work suggests that it is through conversation that self/identity is presented and constructed (Goffman, 1957).

By this definition, blogs as a space of individual public presentation and conversation, are an ideal venue for the presentation and performance of the self in the digital age.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman lays out his theory of the self as presented and constructed through interaction with others. He tells us that the self is produced in the performance of a character for others. He defines performance as "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his [or her] continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (Goffman, 1957, in Lemert & Branaman, 1997, p. 98). The presentation itself, the scene around it and the interpretive audience are all parts of the creation of a self.

More specifically, Goffman breaks down the performance of the self into two elements: what the performer "gives" in the presentation and what he or she "gives off." A conversation partner or observer may desire certain knowledge of a speaker that is not generally spoken aloud, or falls outside the boundaries of a particular conversation. But a keen observer obtains some of the desired information (such as, "Am I making a good impression?") by reading cues and signs "given off" rather than "given" explicitly through deliberate speech or gesture. While Goffman initially suggests that "giving off" information is an involuntary act, he later problematizes his

own definition by suggesting that clever presenters (like actors, or con artists) can manipulate both the given and the given off equally well.

Goffman also posits that frequently this performance of self is an idealized one. He suggests that by performing our selves as we would like them to be, our audience(s) often believe us to be just that. An example might be that of a young professor stepping in front of her first class. If she consciously projects the impression that she is a knowledgeable scholar, worthy of respect, her students are that much more likely to react positively and give respect in return. Goffman goes on to quote Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of women and self-presentation in *The Second Sex,* which suggests that social pressures contribute to these practices of transformation to an idealized self:

> Through social discipline, then a mask of manner can be held in place from within. But, as Simone de Beauvoir suggests, we are helped in keeping this pose by clamps that are tightened directly on the body, some hidden, some showing:
>
>> "Even if each woman dresses in conformity with her status, a game is still being played: artifice, like art, belongs to the realm of the imaginary. It is not only that girdle, brassiere, hair-dye, make-up disguise body and face; but that the least sophisticated of women, once she is 'dressed,' does not present herself to observation: she is, like the picture or statue, or the actor on the stage, an agent through whom is suggested someone not there; that is, the character she represents, but is not. It is this identification with something unreal, fixed, perfect as the hero of a novel, as a portrait or bust, that gratifies her; she strives to identify herself with this figure and thus seem to herself to be stabilized,

justified in her splendour" (de Beauvoir, *trans*. 1953, in Lemert & Branaman, 1997, p. 103).

In other words, the very act of performing a consciously constructed, socially acceptable version of a self is a way of convincing yourself and others that you have attained the level of perfection you are performing. The act of blogging is, in essence, a digital age interpretation of this age-old process of performing, convincing and (re) creating the self.

Most of the bloggers in this study agree that blogs are a site of expression and presentation of self. When asked if the blog reflected something about him, one blogger responded "Sure, how could it not?" (Blogger 12) Some bloggers pointed to the fact that the presentation in a blog was very similar to the presentation of a "public face." One blogger made the point that his blog is "not necessarily the inner me, perfectly, but I think it's as much the public me as someone would get in person" (Blogger 10).

Other bloggers describe a similar sense of a public self, or at least a partial self displayed in a blog. Said one author of his blog, "I think of it as a personal space…but it's decidedly public. I put it in my email sig. I definitely recognize it as a public space." He continued, "Readers might learn a few things about me in the blog, but not deeply personal things" (Blogger 14). Another blogger states: "It's definitely a *part* of

my self-expression: it's not a total big brother camera into my life. There is stuff that doesn't make it onto the blog, there's a lot that doesn't make it onto the blog" (Blogger 7). As mentioned earlier, one blogger describes her blog as a mosaic, made up of carefully selected small bits that together form a picture of her, but which also consciously omit elements from the picture presented. Another participant in the study explicitly viewed her blog as a performance space: "Here I am, performing in virtual space for anyone to see" (Blogger 16). A few bloggers don't think the blog represents them, but is more a reflection of their interests. "The blog reflects my interest in writing, in the art of writing, particularly the essay" (Blogger 17).

As the comments of the above bloggers suggest, blogs are very much like garments that we wear. Consciously or not, and like de Beauvoir's well-dressed woman, a blog portrays some idealized versions of ourselves to the larger public of blog readers. Through the choices that a blogger makes in presenting or performing herself to her audience—through design choices, images, topics and tone, the author conveys a constructed, idealized and public version of herself (even if it is idealized as "not constructed" or "true to my offline self") to her audience. Author Hugh Miller's observations about self-presentation in websites also apply to blogs. He discusses how information may be "given off" in a web environment, describing "given off" information as "para-linguistic" or "para-communicational," encompassing the above

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mentioned tone, word and topic choice, links, etc (Miller, 1995). These elements, while not necessarily an explicit part of the self-presentation, all contribute to the presentation of the public self through the blog.

Blogs also serve a self-affirmative purpose for bloggers, as encapsulated in the phrase used frequently in the blogosphere "*blogito ergo sum*," or "I blog, therefore I am." While most bloggers were not explicit about this purpose, the very nature of keeping the blog gives an author a sense of himself, for as the blog and its archive grow, the author can see the development of that self over time. Blogs provide a way to understand ourselves by inscribing ourselves into a new type of text.

Blogs themselves may be what Goffman terms a "personal front." He defines the term this way:

> One may take the term "personal front" to refer to the other items of expressive equipment, the items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself [or herself] and that we naturally expect will follow the performer where ever he [or she] goes. As a part of personal front we may include: insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex; age and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like. Some of these vehicles for conveying signs, such as racial characteristics, are relatively fixed and over a span of time do not vary for the individual from one situation to another. On the other hand, some of these sign vehicles are relatively mobile or transitory, such as facial expression and can vary during a performance from one moment to the next (Lemert & Branaman, 1997, p. 98).

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This definition of a front might also describe, albeit loosely, the blog. A blog "gives" and "gives off" information through its design and link and content choices. Word choices in a blog are a large part of creating a "character" in the blog. Does this blogger use profanity? Is this blogger given to the use of particular colloquial expressions that identify a geographic location or indicate cultural identification or affinity (i.e., the use of "y'all" as a way of identifying with the American South)?

And what do other design or expressive blog elements tell us about the blogger? How many elements of a blog that readers might perceive as "given off" by the blogger are actually a product of the limited choices of a blog template? Might bloggers be even more deliberate in both their "given" and "given off" presentations on a blog than they may be in their offline lives? A blogger alters physical elements of her self-expression on the blog, changing the "look" of her "front." Or she may alter a personal photograph in ways that she could not easily accomplish on her physical person. Additionally, the blog allows its author to keep records of past expression and interaction that previously would have required recording devices or hidden cameras to document. The blog is a case where the human personal front is mediated by the technology to create a front hybrid, with new mutabilities and new durabilities.

Blogs, like personal fronts, do have both a durable part of their expression, like the URL for a website, and more fleeting components like a particular blog post or

comment. In some ways a blog is like a slowed-down version of a face-to-face conversational presentation of self. While in a conversation, a facial expression and an interlocutor's reading of it and reaction to it occur in a split second. On a blog, expression and interaction occur on a slower scale, over a period of minutes, hours or even days. Fewer elements of the blog are as durable as the physical characteristics of a person, even allowing that a face-to-face conversation/self-presentation is rarely archived for later perusal in the way that blogs can be. Plus, the design of a blog can change incrementally or completely at a moment's notice, in ways that its author would be hard-pressed to achieve on his or her physical appearance.

Comparatively, websites are spaces for an even slower presentation of self. Websites, both the precursors of blogs and a category of which blogs are a sub-type, are also locations for the presentation of a self. But blogs are generally updated much more often than personal webpages. Through these frequent updates and additions, the blog's self-presentation can be more like a conversation, where the self is constantly adjusted and re-presented. Consequently the blog becomes a more adaptable and immediate presentation of the constantly changing self than is possible with the less mutable web page. While webpage authors do make adjustments, the time lag is much greater than in blogs, which are already a slow-motion version of a conversational self-presentation.

Language

Just as conversation offers people an opportunity to present themselves as what they wish to be (rather than what they are), blogs exist as spaces for idealized presentation of self. Often, bloggers present this idealized self through language conventions, some unique to blogs and others drawn from other genres of narrative or expression. Langellier and Peterson write of language choices made by their case study blogger:

> A blatant disregard for the quality of her language guarantees the sincerity of *clinkclank's* unguarded and open response. Something more aesthetically pleasing, polished and clever, would be seen as studied or composed and thus false and insincere. Of course her response *is* composed; that is—in the broadest sense of the word—a fiction, a making she performs" (2004, p. 178).

The tone and word choice selected by the blogger, as mentioned earlier, both locate and authenticate the blog author. Langellier and Peterson suggest (when discussing a case study in their research) that "spoken colloquialism…establishes the sincerity of her response…it suggests unrehearsed, unplanned—hence, genuine reaction." (ibid) Bloggers are caught in a "creative double bind" (Langellier & Peterson, 2004, p. 179). They wish to create a seemingly unconstructed presentation of an authentic self to keep their audience. But they simultaneously want to keep the audience engaged in the narratives they tell by using literary conventions (plot twists,

denouements) to construct compelling tellings of their everyday stories (Langellier &

Peterson, 2004, p. 179). The most "tellable" stories are those that describe an out-of-

the-ordinary experience in ordinary terms, thereby making it sincere or believable in

the context of the casual voice of the blog. (ibid, p. 178) Even as a blogger attempts to

present a "real" version of herself, most often what she chooses to present is the best,

most intriguing and dramatic version of her real self.

Blogs and Conversation

When asked whether he or she felt that his or her blog was a site of

conversation, most bloggers in this study felt that *other* blogs created conversation, but

generally not their own. Many bloggers in this study, though not all, aspired to create

conversation. Most felt that their own blog wasn't quite at the level of creating a full

conversation—it was more *in conversation* with other blogs, rather than a site of

conversation in its own regard. Bloggers felt that their blogs were highly connected to

other blogs, trading, exchanging and discussing ideas from blog to blog, but that the

forums for discussion on their blog did not generate as much conversation with readers

as they might have wished. It should be noted that the exchange of ideas between blogs

is under the control of the blogger, whereas the decision of readers to converse on the

blog is not. The relationship between authors and their audience will be addressed

more fully in the following chapter.

Though blogs may not exactly replicate face-to-face or telephone

conversations, they provide many similar opportunities to perform a self and to receive

feedback from others. Consequently, even if blogs don't create conversation, they

remain self-presentation. Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of utterance reinforces this concept.

In Bakhtin's construction, all utterances (here defined as communication that may be

responded to) are uttered in dialogue—meaning that all utterances are created with the

expectation that there is an audience of some kind to hear it, or alternately that the

utterance is in dialogue with all the other utterances that have come before it. No

utterance exists without reference to its current and historical context (Morson, 1986).

From Bakhtin's perspective all blogs are always in conversation regardless of whether

a reader comments or the author is responding to a specific idea from another blog, as

no post may be written or blog created that does not refer to its historic or current

context. Additionally, the public nature of the blog means that there is always the

possibility of an audience to respond, and that the author, through the act of

establishing the blog, posts in dialogue with an imagined, if not actual audience.

Conclusion

Blogs are a new site of self-expression. Similar to an offline conversation in

which the self is publicly presented and constantly altered for an audience, the blog

replicates this self-presentation at a slower speed, in a technological milieu that simultaneously captures that expression for posterity, even as it makes it vastly and often undetectably more alterable. The blog gives the author greater control over her own self-expression, even as she has a weaker understanding of exactly to whom she presents herself at any given moment. In the following chapters, this project will address what the blogger does know of the audience and how he or she negotiates expression and meaning with that audience.

Chapter 5. Blog Authors and Audience: Conceptualizations and Tensions

One of the unique features of blogging is that it is not a private space, and yet it "feels" like one. Blogs are posted publicly, and for the most part are displayed for anyone who stumbles across them to see. Blogs are created for an audience, and most bloggers function with a constant awareness of that audience in the back of their minds as they compose entries, add photos and tweak their blog's layout. Blogs become a site of Goffman-style self-presentation because of the audience's gaze. However, for a variety of reasons, it is difficult for a blogger fully to know their audience, which proves complicating as bloggers struggle to present themselves in a digital environment. Additionally, blogs are generally created and consumed in a private setting, with one person at a computer composing the blog, and another person alone at a computer reading it, yielding a sense of blogs as private documents. The technical nature of blogs, both how they are distributed and archived, as well as in the data they gather and interactions they allow, all impact how a blog author knows and interacts with his or her audience. These issues and a blogger's approach to his or her audience is the subject of this chapter.

Audience Composition: Know Thy Reader

How does a blogger understand who makes up her audience? Bloggers have a variety of methods for learning about the composition of their readership, both internal to the blog structure and external to it. Bloggers have technical means for understanding their blog traffic, through computer-generated statistics, feedback features where readers may leave hints of their readership as well as non-technical means of knowing who is reading their blog. Non-technical means include conversations outside of the blog itself indicating readership. And in order to fully understand how a blogger conceives of her readership, we must also look the audience to whom she promotes her blog—who does she invite to read? Combining these means of understanding an audience, later in this chapter I will organize how an author views her audience through a typology of readers.

Internal means of gathering readership information are sometimes provided through blog features designed to allow for technical or personal feedback. These features may be broken down into passive features, where the reader is automatically recorded as a reader of the blog, or active features, where the reader must deliberately indicate readership.

Passive Features

Passive features are generally traffic statistics about who visits a blog, though not all bloggers have these statistics. These statistic might give the number of visitors per day, the referring URL for the blogger (answering the question of 'where did they come from' or 'how did they find me?') and the IP address for the visitor (which can identify the specific computer that the reader is using, depending on whether the reader's Internet Service Provider (ISP) uses static IP addresses or dynamic ones that are generated for each new internet session).

Another passive mode of gathering information about blog readership is through a site meter—a graphic posted the blog that contains a piece of HTML code that counts visitors and then displays the number who have visited since the date the counter was installed (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004a). The site meter is a type of traffic statistic, but different from standard statistics in that the meter is displayed on the front page of the blog so that the readers and the author may understand the popularity of the blog. This function also falls into the category of indirect measures of blog traffic, meaning the blog reader does not have to make a special effort to be recorded by this feature.

Active Features

Beyond these technical statistics and footprints, the blog has other, active ways of recording who is reading. Different from traffic statistics recorded through no effort on the reader's part, active features require the reader's participation. The reader must want the blog author to know that they are reading. Active features include comments, trackbacks, tagboards and guestbooks. The most obvious of these deliberate audience records is the comment function. Bloggers who have this function enabled (initially a pre-requisite for participation in this study) can see who has been reading a particular post and who was moved enough to respond to it. Some blogging software gives authors the option of preventing anonymous posting if they so choose. More and more frequently, bloggers are requiring commenters to register with a name (though it can be pseudonym and often is) and an email address. A reader may also optionally provide their blog address to be linked to their name at the base of the comment text they have posted. By commenting, even if their comment does not make a contribution to a discussion, they make their presence known as at least a one-time reader of the blog. Indeed, comments by unknown readers often spur authors to think more specifically about their audience and its composition.

Certain blogging packages offer other, non-textual ways for readers to announce their support or readership of a particular post. Xanga, a blogging site used

most frequently by teens and young adults offers "eProps"[23] as a way for readers to show their support for a post by name, but not necessarily leave any additional text comments (Xanga.com, 2005). This assumes a similar function (only in eprops it is more streamlined and embedded within the blog structure) of brief, phatic comments on a post like "nice post!" or "great blog!" that serve to display readership and support rather than add to any discussion or conversation.

Another way readers actively indicate their readership is through the trackback function. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, trackbacks (if a blog has trackback functionality and has it enabled) are a function whereby a reader with their own blog writes an entry that references the entry of another blogger and then sends a notification back to the first blog. If the first blog author had trackbacks enabled, a link to the entry on the second blog is posted on the first blog.

The original blog post would then look like this:

> February 16, 2005
> *Chicken Fried Rabbit*
> Rabbits are fabulous! They're tasty AND they make great pets!
> Posted by BobBunny at 7:15pm | <u>Comments</u> (4) | <u>Trackbacks</u> (1)

Clicking on the trackback link takes you to a page that shows the exact web address of the post on a different blog that refers to BobBunny's post titled *Chicken Fried Rabbit*. While comments create and mark conversation within a single blog,

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[23] Note that Xanga allows users to rename "eProps"—into names like "Hugz" or "thumbs up."

trackbacks connect conversations between blogs. Trackbacks also reveal readership

and intellectual connections both to the blog's author as well as its readers.

Another interactive method of understanding a blog's audience comes through

what is known as a tagboard. Blogger.com defines tagboards in this way: "Tagboards

are like little messages attached to your blog, where your readers can leave you notes.

They differ from comments, which are attached to individual posts, in that you just

have one tagboard for your whole site, and visitors can read the messages right on your

homepage" (Blogger, 2005). Blogger suggests that installing a tagboard creates a

sense of community around a blog, by allowing commenters to interact with the blog

author and each other. While Blogger itself does not provide tagboard functionality,

bloggers who use Blogger may add code to their blog that allows them to use third

party tagboard software/services. Tagboard posters, like commenters, display their

readership of the blog by posting in the interactive space.

Other ways readers indicate their presence on a blog are through guestbooks.

Guestbooks, like tagboards, are independent of specific blog postings. Similar to their

offline analogs, a guestbook is a place to sign your name to a blog and leave a short

message. E-props in LiveJournal software serves a similar function. They are not

generally used to create conversation. Guestbooks may be a built-in or an added-on

feature depending on a user's software package.

Still internal to the structure of the blog, but pulling the interaction outside of the blog itself, email is another way that blog authors may learn about their audience. Many bloggers provide their email address on their blog, often with a mailto: link that places their email address directly in a mail program for easy emailing. While the address is provided on the blog, the act of emailing removes a reader's response from the public response forum of the comment, tagboard or even trackback features and moves it into the private channel of email. By posting an email address, bloggers allow the strangers in their readership a way to bring private thoughts or conversation to them or to have a one-on-one discussion. Similar types of feedback conversations can happen when a blogger posts an instant messaging program screen name to their blog, allowing users potentially to contact them through that more conversational, yet still generally private media. Other readers known to the blogger in their offline lives may also mention reading the author's blog incidentally within email messages or instant message conversations that center around other topics.

Online but external to the blog, RSS feeds and aggregators can both reveal and disguise a blog's readership. Some RSS aggregators include a specific username in the URL they leave each time it visits a blog or website. These "public" feeds allow determined users to trace specific readers who have loaded an author's blog into their aggregator. However, RSS subscriptions are often not traceable to a specific

individual or referrer. Unlike traditional modes of entry to a site, where a web server

records the IP addresses[24] of visitors and the URL of the referrer that sent them there,

an RSS feed if not deliberately made public simply shows the aggregator URL, and the

blog author cannot tell how many readers one standard aggregator referral represents.

By revealing, but more often obscuring the nature of the audience, RSS changes the

nature of an author's relationship with their readers.

Other feedback about the nature of a blog's audience comes from offline

acquaintances of the blogger, through other off-blog media, like telephone calls, or

face to face conversations. Bloggers in the study report that family members, friends

and even co-workers will mention reading their blog in conversation. "Hey, I saw your

photos of Puerto Rico on your blog!" In some cases the blog author did not know that

the reader had been reading the blog. Blogs have multiple channels for authors to

request feedback and for readers to interact with the author and with each other.

Enabling these audience recording/interactive functions on a blog also signals

to reader a blog's openness to conversation and interaction, and yields a greater sense

of authenticity for readers of the blog. Particularly email mailto: functions give the

reader the sense of being able to interact with a "real" person and verify aspects of their

identity through repeated contact.

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[24] IP addresses are unique identifiers, at least for those who use Internet Service Providers that give the user's computer a static IP address when logged into the internet. Some ISP's use dynamic IP

Shouts and Whispers: Promoting a Blog

In the previous section I have discussed active and passive ways that readers tell the blogger that they are reading the blog. But authors are often more active promoters of their blog, inviting others to drop by and read. Some bloggers in this study had advertised their blog widely, telling friends, family and co-workers about their online space. A few even went so far as to include a link to their blog in their signature at the end of every email they sent. Other bloggers took an opposite approach, and told almost no one in their offline lives of their blog's existence, hoping to keep their blog a highly personal and private space. And others relied on reciprocal linking and posting of their blog's URL to traffic building sites like BlogExplosion, BlogClicker, or blog directories like Technorati to build traffic among unknown readers, in the hopes that random web users would come across their site, like what they saw, and stay to become regular readers. Most bloggers took a middle road. The majority promoted their blog to their friends and family members of their age cohort, like siblings, cousins and spouses.

Parents were the most fraught potential audience members. Of bloggers with living parents, roughly half in this sample had either told their parents about their blog, or their parents found out about it by other means. Many bloggers reported mixed

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addresses that are newly assigned each time a person logs in to the network.

feelings about this, feeling like they could not necessarily be as open as they might like with their parents reading, and yet still appreciating that their parents took an interest in their life and thoughts as expressed on the blog.

Most bloggers also had a similar view of co-workers. With the increase in employment consequences like dismissals and reprimands for blogging in a manner distasteful to one's employer (often a hard estimation to gauge), many bloggers do not want coworkers to know about their blog, particularly not supervisors or others in positions of power over them. In fact, a term has emerged in popular usage that specifically means to be fired for your blog: the verb is "to be dooced" referring by name to the title of a popular blog, authored by a woman who was fired for it (Urban Dictionary, 2005).

Most bloggers in the study understood that blogging comes with risk. What one posts to one's blog becomes a part of a permanent record of expression on the web. Web sites like the Internet Archive,[25] search engines, and RSS feeds capture and keep snapshots of content from a moment in time, even if the entry or other content is quickly removed from internet. Even if these websites do not archive a blog, or an RSS feed is not enabled or does not grab the entry between initial posting and editing, there is no guarantee that an enterprising reader has not cut and pasted a copy of your

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[25] The Internet Archive a.k.a. "The WayBack Machine" is available at
http://www.archive.org/web/web.php

content onto his or her webpage, and now provides it from his or her personal server. A specific instance of this was recently chronicled by *The Washington Post*. A popular political blog called *Wonkette* captured the salacious and explicitly sexual postings of another blog titled *Washingtonienne*. The latter blog, ostensibly about the sexual exploits of a young female Capitol Hill staffer and the powerful, often married men she dated, eventually came to the attention of the blogger's employer. Even after Washingtonienne's blog was removed by its author after scandal erupted and she lost her job, *Wonkette* continued to display the content of *Washingtonienne* for all to read (Witt, 2004). The mobility and reproducibility of digital content makes creating new digital content a task that is not to be undertaken lightly. As Jane Jacobs states in her essay, "Whilst blogs may eventually be abandoned or even deleted, archives of posts made to blogs can be stored long after the interface for content has been removed, and citations of blogger's comments can be copied and storied without the knowledge of the original blogger in an unbounded array of blogging mimicry" (Jacobs, 2003, p. 8).

One blogger describes the phenomenon of his mindfulness while posting as "writing for Google," acknowledging that search engines and website recording tools capture blog postings, often out of context and keep them potentially in perpetuity in a place outside of a blogger's control. Decontextualization of blog posts by human readers or search engines can have negative repercussions, and a momentary lapse can

return to haunt the author as Google and its ilk enable a readership vastly larger than what the author envisioned.

Writing for Google in practical terms meaning being aware of what you write. In some cases, this means writing long narrative explanatory pieces, so that when people search Google for a particular subject, your writing will be returned as a result, hopefully in its entirety. But in most cases, writing for Google means adopting a level of anonymity—not using your own full name, not using the full names of other people (which would render your blog as a result if someone, including the actual person, searched for the name),[26] maintaining a level of privacy about one's personal life that you would not wish to see cataloged online in perpetuity.

Nevertheless, many bloggers feel relatively confident in their online anonymity, reasoning that connecting their offline selves to their online selves would be a more difficult process than the average person would undertake, and that the large number of other weblogs and personal websites makes it unlikely that theirs will be found by people they hope do not see it. This sense of being anonymous within a crowd gives bloggers the freedom to express opinions, and tell stories online that they might not ordinarily tell to everyone that they know.

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[26] Often bloggers will refer to others on their blog through their initials, or through a meaningful pseudonym, or title, e.g. "Sister" for referring to your sister, rather than her first or even full name. Many bloggers adopt pseudonyms to refer to themselves online, and often these will be used when other bloggers refer to them. eg. "Fish" for the author of *This Fish Needs a Bicycle*, http://thisfish.com.

Audience Conceptualization: A Typology of Audience from the Blogger's Perspective

Even with commenting, trackbacks and traffic statistics, there are still strangers and unidentified others who visit any given blog. Bloggers must reconcile this unknown part with the known part of their audience, often through their imagination. Who makes up the imagined audience of the blogger? Unlike audiences to "performances" in the past, bloggers and their audiences are not collocated, and as noted above, bloggers must take advantage of other information to determine the composition and nature of their audience. Even with all the other sources of information, there are still audience members not captured or unknown, and the blogger fills in these "real" or "hoped for" readers through his or her imagination. The construction of a typology of audience helps us to better understand the nature of an author's perception of her audience. Other scholars have proposed typologies of imagined audiences based on the role of the audience as encapsulated in the tone and content of the entry text and as evaluated by other readers of the blog (Langellier, 1998, Scheidt, in press). However, my typology is a simple look at blogger's reported relationships and beliefs about the nature of their audience, rather than the role they wish the audience to play. I offer the typology as a structure for future thinking about audience effects on the display of a blog.

A blogger's audience may be split most easily into two basic axes: known

audience members versus unknown, and wanted audience members versus unwanted.

Different bloggers, of course, have different relationships with each of these categories

of readers, and in some cases define the contents of each category differently.

Known

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Wanted--Unwanted

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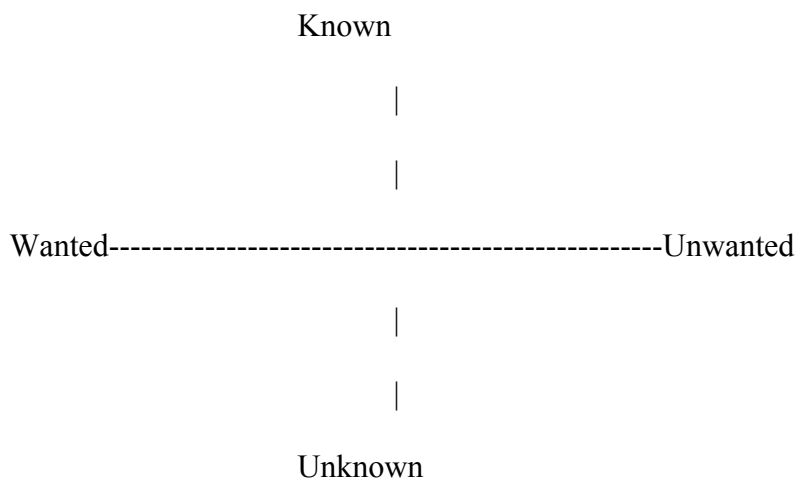
Unknown

Known and wanted readers are people to whom the blogger has promoted the

blog—online or offline friends, and sometimes close family of the same generation like

siblings or spouses.[27] The wanted and unknown audience may be people who the

blogger does not know in their offline lives, but who are interested in the blog and

become repeat visitors and contributors. Or it may be that these are people who reach

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[27] Thanks to Susannah Stern for suggesting the idea of "promoting" a blog to friends to me in a personal email discussing potential research among adolescent bloggers.

the blog through a link in a person's email signature—who the blogger potentially knows in some capacity, but to whom the author has not explicitly promoted the blog. Some of these wanted and unknown readers can become wanted and known readers when the author and reader connect via email, IM or telephone and establish a rapport that culminates in a face-to-face, offline friendship.

The known and unwanted reader category includes some family members, such as parents, whose readership makes the blogger uncomfortable because of expectations and family roles. This category may also include co-workers and supervisors—other people known in the offline world whose readership may compromise the ability of the author to be explicit or truthful about certain aspects of their life or personal experiences. Readers in this category are a source of great concern to many bloggers because of the compartmentalization of offline lives. We are not necessarily the same people to our friends, our family and our colleagues. We are not the same person to friends from elementary school as we are to friends from our recreational adult sports team. We are not the same person to our sister as we are to our grandmother. We are not the same person to our peers that we are to those who supervise or grade us. Most blogs,[28] including all of the blogs in this study, do not allow for different readerships for different blog entries on the same blog, leaving the author either defaulting to their most public self, or causing discomfort to author with possible offline relationship

repercussions. Readers may also suffer from discomfort or from a sense of

awkwardness over revelations or writing on a blog that feels deeply personal and more

intimate than the reader's actual knowledge of the author would warrant in a face-to-

face interaction with the same person. One reader of my own blog recently wrote to me

"and here's where I feel somewhat inappropriate—sorry to hear about your [personal

matter]. I don't like to assume familiarity with people who don't know me, but I can

totally relate…I was surprised you chose to write something so personal on your blog –

I don't think I'd have the guts to" (personal communication to author, 2005).

The fourth loose category of readers is those who are unknown and unwanted.

These readers are sometimes called trolls—people who are not (known to be) a part of

the blog author's offline life, and whose presence on the blog is of concern to the

author. In some cases it could be that the author is simply uncomfortable with *all*

unknown readers, expecting the blog to be a site for keeping in touch with interested

friends, like one study blogger who believes that her blog is a superior alternative to

keeping touch with far-flung family and friends than the mass emails she had used

previously. (Blogger 16) In some cases it is because the reader makes himself known

as a reader, but in a negative way—criticizing the author, the blog or other readers who

have commented. Many of the bloggers in the study sample told of critical and often

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[28] LiveJournal and Xanga are two specific exceptions.

outright nasty readers saying hurtful things in their blog's comments. Authors

responded to these readers in a variety of ways. Some used the features built into a

blog that allows an author to block a reader, either based on the name or pseudonym

they use, or through the IP address that identifies the particular computer this person

uses.[29] Other authors go further, by disabling comments altogether on the blog. But

others have a different conception of the blog. These authors feel that their blog is a

site of discussion and that it is not up to them to quash any voices, no matter how ugly

or unpopular. "If it's a person who is trying to express their opinion…I don't respond,

but I don't delete it or block it, I just let it stand." (Blogger 12) Some bloggers report

selectively editing comments, removing flaming posts that do nothing other than insult,

but leaving posts that contribute in some way, however minor, to the conversation on

the blog. Said one blogger "I've taken to deleting comments I don't like on my blog."

(Blogger 2) When asked about negative comments, another blogger replied:

> I have had two [comments], one that was negative, and its still in there
> and one that was just vitriolic, and I think it was just a flamer and after a
> lot of debate, I took it out." She elaborated, "I really debated. One of the
> things that I like on a philosophical level is to be able to have this open
> discourse. But on a practical level, philosophy's nice, but it doesn't
> always work so well…The primary reason that I took the one out that I
> took out was because he wasn't adding anything to the conversation.
> The one that I left in, that I still think was a flamer, I left it in because it
> could've created some useful conversation…(Blogger 4).

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[29] As mentioned elsewhere, this blocking is not as effective if the offending commenter is using
an ISP that uses dynamic IP addressing, meaning that the IP address is assigned anew to each user every
time they log into the internet connection service.

In theories of computer-mediated communication, it is well documented that mediated communication loosens the inhibitions of interlocutors in the mediated communications environment (Nielsen & Haythornthwaite, 2004). Where body language, facial expression, tone of voice or fear of censure or wide disapproval serve to give feedback and keep well-socialized individuals from abusive or "inappropriate" or hurtful behavior, in a screen-mediated interactive environment the barriers to inappropriate behavior appears to be lower (Kiesler et al, 1984 in Rheingold, 1993).

Some bloggers report a sense of bewilderment over repeated comment flames. Said one blogger with a tendency towards liberal political content of his conservative flamer "There's at least one guy…who disagrees with me on everything. Or almost. He feels free or he seems to enjoy periodically saying "here's why you're wrong" and often in a name-calling way. And sometimes it's really hard to take. But I try to respond as reasonably as I can…I could easily say, 'we disagree on everything, why don't you just shut up?'" (Blogger 12). While this blogger generally tolerates negative comments, most bloggers agree that they wish that chronically negative commenters would just leave them alone. In blogging, authors are empowered by the software to remove and ban unwanted commenters, though some bloggers do not use these tools out of a dedication to open dialogue.

Some bloggers report that those readers who interact with them on their blog anonymously fall into the unknown and unwanted category for them, regardless of the tone or tenor of their interactions. One blogger in particular found the act of anonymous commenting to be "creepy." She felt it was unfair for a reader to hide their identity when she had been so forthcoming with details about herself in her blog. She found it cowardly, and not in keeping with the feeling of community that she otherwise experienced on her blog and other blogs that discussed similar topics. "Even before I had a blog, I would least put my first name or an email address when I commented, something to say that I mean well. An anonymous comment, it just makes me wonder who's out there looking at me. It unnerves me." (Blogger 3)

Audience on My Mind: Public versus Private

While the public nature of the blog and the fact that it has an audience is part of what makes a blog a unique space of expression, many bloggers take the stance that they do not often think of their audience. Many mentioned that they felt the blog was a personal space, and that the audience was incidental. As one blogger mentioned in regard to his negative readers—if they didn't like it, they could take it or leave it. Others found themselves paralyzed by concerns over audience perception when they thought too explicitly about their audience and who might be in it, and so they chose to

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only think about the audience when the audience interacted with them in a notable way, such as a comment from a new reader.

But other bloggers did think about their audience. These bloggers conceptualized their blogs as soapboxes, but also sites of entertainment. Members of their audience needed to be entertained and drawn to returning to the blog. These bloggers were very aware of their audience and that awareness colored what they posted.

Some bloggers found that they were not willing to post certain thoughts and observations that reflected more private sides of themselves. One blogger with a significant public professional reputation in a technical field remarked that he switched his blog to a more photography-focused blog with much less text, because he blogged under his own name and he felt that it was too hard to be constantly mindful of his public self when blogging. Captioned photos were a much safer form of personal expression, as they did not contain words or phrases that could be taken out of context and used against him. "The photoblogging is a big change. I post a lot less text now than I did originally. If you go back to some of the older things, there's a lot more text and thoughts put down…I think I've grown a lot more reserved…more conscious of my public face." (Blogger 14). Photos are a way of expressing oneself creatively in a

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public space, but which, at least for this blogger, come with a greater sense of security. For this blogger, photos feel less controversial and less dependant on context than text.

Other bloggers with a significant awareness of audience found that they deliberately posted entry content that they felt would be entertaining to the reader. A number of the bloggers in the sample have "All Request Days" where they take questions provided in comments or by email from readers and answer them in the posts on that day. Said one blogger "I love comments" and she admits to "pandering to readers" to get them. (Blogger 9) Occasionally this pandering to audience backfires and creates a sense of entitlement among readers. In one case, a study blogger received a comment from an impatient reader who began demanding personal information from the blogger that he felt was being withheld. The reader of this particular blog felt that he knew the blogger well enough that he was within his rights to make critical and demanding statements regarding personal information he felt that the author was withholding. Laurie McNeill describes a similar situation with one of the case studies in her essay. "By inviting readers into his personal or "private" life, Schalchlin sets up reader expectations not just of honesty but of total exposure" (2003, p. 38). While such demands speak to the skill with which both of these bloggers have created a sense of an authentic online persona, it also reveals the "popular conception of the diary as unmediated, artless and therefore honest, and somehow less manipulative than other

autobiographical forms" (McNeill, 2003, p. 38). Blogs as "online diaries" take this so-called "artless, honest" form into the public arena.

Some bloggers in this study were very specific and deliberate about whether and when they thought about their audience. Some bloggers described writing posts for particular members of their audience—sometimes just a single person. "I actually had a specific person in mind, who I don't know. I was responding to a comment on a previous post." As this blogger notes, these posts can be in response to comments through public or private channels, or simply speaking to a known personal interest of a member or members of the audience. Themed blogs take this to an extreme. The knitting bloggers in the study told of expectations within the knit blogging community that all posts on a blog would be related to knitting, spinning, design or other parts of the practice of the craft. There has been much discussion on blogs devoted to knitting of this very subject—whether all posts must be about knitting or whether personal life details or other interests could also be "appropriate" subjects of entries. One blogger in the sample after taking some flack for her political posts to her knitting blog, established a second blog devoted specifically to the exploration and venting of her political views. In this blogging subculture, there is a strong sense of writing for a very specific audience, and one lured to the blog because of shared interests, not because of shared experiences, values or politics.

Public versus Private

Almost all frustrations or concerns over audience can be traced to the tension in blogs between the public and the private spheres. While on the one hand, certain bloggers suggest that they keep a blog for themselves with the audience as a peripheral feature of the online journal, other bloggers feel keenly that a blog is a public space, created if not for the benefit of, then at least with an audience in mind. Blog authors conscious of their blog's place in the public sphere acknowledge that a blog is an informal space where they have freedom to take on a more casual voice, even as they believe that they must be mindful of the language they use and the subject matter of their entries. When asked about how much he thought about his audience when posting to his blog, one blogger responded "I'm not terribly interested in posting offensive material, so that's not really a concern." (Blogger 14) This blogger does not worry about his audience because he already adopts a public tone that he knows will be inoffensive to all possible readers.

The blog may be addressing a group of individuals, but it does so in an intimate way. The mediation of communication on a weblog—where the computer screen stands in for the audience and the audience is not seen when the post is written or the self performed—encourages revelation and intimacy. While in our face-to-face lives,

we may selectively reveal personal information to some people and not others, most blogs do not allow for this narrow tailoring of expression.

Design constraints impact the level of privacy a user has with regard to their blog, and whether or not they have the option of revealing posts to various subsets of individuals in their personal network (Lessig, 1999, Gustafson, 2004, Park, 2003). Blogging software like LiveJournal and Xanga allow users to create blogging "buddy lists" and gives authors the option to make any given blog post completely private, for friends or buddies only, or completely public. However, most other blogging software only allows users to make a post public or consign it to private "draft" status. As danah boyd has pointed out, this lack of revelatory nuance even in the three or four choices that Xanga and LiveJournal offer does not reflect the subtleties and levels of public and private relationships we have in our real life with friends, colleagues, classmates, and family. While we can calibrate privacy in our face-to-face lives depending on the specific person we're speaking with, most blogs can only have one, or a few levels of public-ness or privacy (boyd, 2004, Park, 2003).

Park reminds us that the quality of utterances can also be dependant upon expectations of privacy "The vast majority of people express themselves in greater quantity and often greater quality if they are allowed to freely choose the public-ness of each of their utterances. In the real world, you almost certainly feel more

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comfortable discussing certain topics—political controversies, or the shortcomings of your company's management team or your marital problems—in an environment where you can control who hears you." (Park, 2003, p. 3)

All in all, most bloggers feel a significant tension over their audience. While on one hand a blog is a personal space, it is also a public space that is created with an expectation of an audience. Bloggers must come to grips with how much they want a readership, how much they want it to increase and how that desire impacts how they will express themselves online. And frequently, they find themselves conflicted, uncertain and uncomfortable, and yet simultaneously supported and affirmed by the thought of or the actions of virtual (actual or envisioned) visitors. Bloggers must continually navigate the line between being authentically themselves (or a version thereof), protecting their privacy and entertaining their readers.

How Blog Authors Address an Audience: Distribution and Tone?

Blogging is an intimate space of self-expression. Journal-style blogs in particular focus on individual expression and personal experiences. Scholars Kristen Langellier and Eric Peterson write: "Weblogs emphasize similar performative values of the particular and the personal….weblogs are written by ordinary people, not extraordinary ones; in a personal voice or register of discourse, not a public one; to be

read by one person at a time, not many people all at once" (Langellier & Peterson, 2004, p. 176).

Blogs, because of their mode of distribution and consumption, have a different "register of discourse" than more public forms of communication. Blogs have a different voice than a speech to an audience. The power and the nature of the audience influences the type and tone of the language used on a blog. Referencing the research of Paddy Scannell, the authors write that the audience can easily walk away from a blog or other broadcast media like TV, radio or newspapers without any formal or informal leave-taking, with its attendant potential for embarrassment and misunderstanding. Barriers to exit are low, so content and presentation must be particularly compelling, and not particularly challenging.

To further explain this point, Langellier and Peterson locate blogs for us in the wider arena of performative media and expression. "…broadcasting, conversation and weblogs are all performances of one sort or another." (Langellier & Peterson, 2004. p. 176) Their differences lie in the types of performative conventions they employ, which spring from the nature of their audiences. The authors pull their understanding of audience from Scannell and his different understandings of audience for different types of media.

> Thus even when weblogs are published to a public, they are
> differentiated from what Paddy Scannell (1996) has called the 'for-

anyone structures of publicly available anonymous (mass produced) usable things" (Scannell, 1996, p. 174). Scannell uses this distinction between a text written for-someone and a text written for-anyone to characterize how radio and television programs have an embedded orientation or directionality. Such programs address their audiences as particular someones and not as group or public. In a public event, such as a political speech or a theatrical performance, there is a one-to-many structure to communication in which the audience is addressed as a collective. By contrast, Scannell argues, broadcasts address the audience in a one-to-one fashion, an audience member is not addressed as part of the many, a collective nor as an eavesdropper on someone else's conversation. Broadcast programs he concludes, have a "for anyone-as-someone structure (Scannell, 1996, p. 13)(Langellier and Peterson, 2004, p. 170).

In short, the audience for a blog is addressed as though they are individuals who make up a larger collective whole. This is the case because of the nature of an audience's interaction with the blog. The reader of a newspaper, or a blog or a viewer of a television or radio program may leave at any time without the author's (or broadcaster's) knowledge, so the tone of voice used in the broadcast must be more appealing, more understandable, and more colloquial to keep the audience engaged (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). In the cases of more formal speeches, academic classes or conversations, social codes dictate that the individual may not leave with out some ritual of "leave-taking" and potential for embarrassment. With the barriers to exit set so much higher, an audience member is willing to remain in interaction with someone or some broadcast that is less enjoyable or comprehensible.

This bears out in an examination of posts from blogs in this study. The language used by study participants in their blogs takes an informal tone. One blogger addresses his readers "Word up to my blog thugs" in a post. Another writes about school cafeteria food: "while the food in the school's cafeteria is relatively good, they always cook the shit out of the spinach. and there's nothing worse than limp, bleached-out spinach." And writes about the weather: "it wasn't freeze-my-butt-off-cold today, which was a relief. it's still cold enough to want a hat and gloves, but i was able to skip the longjohns. and it's march!! yay! i really loathe february. it's always my hardest month, so i'm glad it's finished!"

Returning to idea of weblogs as broadcast, Langellier and Peterson also hasten to clarify that even as blog readers are addressed by what is basically a broadcast media, in the case of blogs, it is not a many-to-many relationship. Instead is it a one-to-one relationship, collected as many. Readers of blogs tend to read blogs as an individual exercise and are not grouped together in any way except through their sheer numbers. There are a few exceptions to this, specifically blogrings where blogs interconnect with each other, and themed subgroups. In both cases blogs tightly interconnect and form a discourse community. Blog rings connect through small graphic "buttons" on their blog that when clicked, use a short script to take the reader to the homepage of another blog randomly generated from a list of the members of the

ring. Other groups of friends or acquaintances may create a less formal sense of community around a blog or a group of blogs where most of the readers keep their own blogs and all read and comment on the blogs of the others within the group or where they share a common theme or focus. These groups may not read blogs physically together but they do have group-type feedback interactions, where people converse, influence and play off of the comments of others, albeit again on a slower scale than if they were actually physically co-located. It should be noted, though, that certain other group textual exchanges like email correspondence in a digital environment also may take place at an equally slow, if not slower rate, not to mention offline exchanges such as the exchange of letters. Nevertheless, group conversations on blogs do not occur at the same rate as face-to-face or group telephone conversations.

Laurie McNeill also weighs in on the importance of the audience to the blog, but she describes the interaction of the audience and the author as together constructing a text. "The reader of an online diary therefore actively participates in constructing the text the diarist writes and the identities he or she takes on in the narrative. Though active and even intimate, however, that participation remains virtual, disembodied" (McNeill, 2003, p. 27). The disembodiment of the audience helps authors continue the confessional tone of a diary in the blog. Nevertheless, disembodied or not, the fact of the blog audience means that the diary is no longer monologic, but dialogic, and that

authors are "acutely aware of their readers, whose desires, expectations, and reading

practices shape the texts that bloggers produce" (McNeill, 2003, p. 29, 31-32).

RSS Content and Audience Effects

Other technological innovations alter how a reader and a blog author interact.

RSS is a content format that changes how audience members interact with a blog, and

has a particular effect on a reader's perception of the blog. As mentioned earlier, RSS

stands for "Really Simple Syndication." It is a content format which, when used with

an RSS aggregator,[30] updates users whenever anything on a specific Web page is

modified. (Pew Internet, n.d.)

RSS feeds and aggregators change the way readers interact with blogs. Many

authors feed the entire text of each post, which means the reader may read the post in

the aggregator, and may not see the layout or design of the blog, or see or read any of

the comments made on the post or the entire blog. For authors who only feed a short

blurb from each post, it may mean that a person who reads the blog through an RSS

aggregator does not read the whole post, or may skip posts until they see one that looks

particularly compelling. The RSS content system also means that a reader may only

visit a blog when there are new posts, rather than visiting more randomly and

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[30] An aggregator is a web page where a user has placed links to RSS feeds for content on web pages that interests him. The aggregator checks each link at a pre-determined interval and if it finds new content, pulls that content to the aggregator and displays it the next time the user visits or refreshes the page.

encountering other new kinds of content on the blog like comments, trackbacks, fresh

sidebar content or new design elements. RSS facilitates a reader's consumption of

many blogs by aggregating all the posts of bloggers selected by the reader in one place,

saving the reader the time and energy of roving around the web to their favorite sites to

see if anything has been updated recently. But RSS also measurably changes a

reader's level of interactivity with a blog as they do not necessarily need to visit the

specific blog site to read the content, but then also miss the interactive and

conversational elements of a blog, which are generally not fed on an RSS feed.

Conclusion

As we've seen, different bloggers have different attitudes towards and different

relationships with their readers. One thread that runs through the experiences of all

bloggers is that tensions mark their relationship with their audience. While on one hand

authors want an audience—crafting posts, picking layouts, adopting the best version of

themselves to put forth in their admittedly public personal venue—the blogger also

worries that the audience is not always benign, and sometimes not even human, like

search engines, and may archive or decontextualize content in disastrous ways.

As has been discussed, the difference in potential nuance between ham-handed

blogging software and the intricacies of face-to-face human interaction mean that a

blog is trying to stand in for a vastly more complicated system than its code and

capabilities can handle. Between specifics of expression and gradations of privacy that allow us offline to be different parts of our self to different people, and to constantly calibrate our self-presentation to the feedback we receive, blogs constrain and limit us in subtle but important ways.

Blogs are by individuals and for a collective of individuals, outside of the sanction and protection of the publisher, the university or other institution. Despite their one-to-many mode of distribution, they are engaged with in a one-to-one manner, one person authoring from a keyboard, and another reading and responding at another terminal. This public yet individual presentation has important effects on the tone, language and self-presentation an author adopts within their blog.

Bloggers blog simultaneously for an audience and in apprehension of them. The next chapter unpacks the root of this apprehension, and notes that in many cases there are no social codes governing meaning, expectations and interactions in the blog space, which in certain instances yields conflict.

Chapter 6. Norm Formation in a New Technology: Contested Meanings and Etiquette in Blogging Practice

As has been discussed, blogs lack both an agreed upon definition and a definitive history of development. Beyond these uncertainties, blogs themselves are unstable texts,[31] a product of a digital environment and thus easily altered or deleted without residue of such changes, but also just as easily archived or retained and re-rendered outside of their initial context in ways unanticipated by the author. This instability problematizes the authenticity of the author's blogged self-presentation. Bloggers attempt to mitigate this problem of authenticity by flagging or otherwise noting instances of textual alteration. The instability of the blog text is both its beauty and its burden.

With much this uncertainty surrounding blog definitions, development and textual stability, it is unsurprising that blogs have become contested sites of meaning in and of themselves. This chapter asks how meaning is created in a blog and how norms and social codes around a new public and interactive technology/space are created, transmitted, and normalized. This chapter will examine how codes and norms are established to clarify contested meanings and regulate behavior. Further, this chapter will explore how the act of norm development may contribute to the contesting of

meanings, by looking at semiotics, and what it tells us about how meaning is made in language and through social interaction, and by reviewing historic examples of norm development in other new technologies. This chapter will also examine the conflict and confusion that bloggers meet as they attempt to understand how to operate in an unstable and personal space of self-presentation and interaction.

Understanding Meaning

As discussed in the earlier *Methodology* chapter of this project, the approach of this study is ethno-methodological. Ethnography is the written rendition of the study of a culture. If culture is "an integrated system of meanings, values and standards of conduct by which the people of a society live and which is transmitted between generations through socialization" or "a system of expectations," encapsulated in "a system of symbols endowed with general or abstract meanings" then this project seeks to understand the culture of weblogs (Murphy, 1989, p. 24, 26). The project also takes as its starting point that the internet, and by extension, blogs, are both a space of cultural determination as well as a product of their cultural moments. Focusing on the blog as a space of cultural determination, does blogging have a "culture" or is it playing out larger cultural norms? Are blogs themselves assumed to a have a commonly understood culture which users are expected to intuitively grasp? Or are the

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[31] Here "text" is used to indicate anything that may be "read" or interpreted.

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manifestation of culture, those norms and codes around the technology, still developing? Or is blogging simply reflecting the fragmenting of cultural norms in American society as a whole?

In order to understand meaning in weblogs, we must look at where and what kind of content is created on weblogs, and how it conveys meaning. Blogs are made up of images and text, posted, tweaked and blended in endless combinations, even as they are constrained by the technological tools that make blogging so simple and so popular. It is this text, and the images that surround and accompany it that convey meaning in blogs.

*   *   *

Semiotics is the study of meaning in language and expression. First presented by Ferdinand de Saussure, semiotics examines the understanding of meaning through codes, which encompass languages, gestures, images or other modes of communicating meaning. These codes are systems of signs or units of meaning. Signs are made up of the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the sound, word, image or item that is being used to indicate something. The signified is the thing indicated. Together, the signifier and the signified make up the sign (Barthes, 1972) (Chandler, 2001). Not everyone understands every code (or groups of signs) and not every signifier points to the same signified for every person. Most codes vary culturally, so that gestures or

words in one culture or language may have radically different meanings in another. Groups with common codes are called speech communities. Mikhail Bakhtin expands upon Saussure's concepts by stipulating that these codes (which he calls utterances) are created out of their particular historical, social and communicative context (Morson, 1986, p. 63).

But codes must be shared within groups for society to function (Stuart Hall, 1980 in Chandler, 2001). If "codes are interpretive frameworks which are used by both producers and interpreters of texts" (Chandler, 2001, p. 6), then readers of blog texts use codes to establish and limit the potential range of meanings that "they are likely to generate when read by others (Turner, 1992, p. 17). Codes helps to simplify phenomena in order to make it easier to communicate experience. (Gombrich, 1982, p. 35)" (Chandler, 2001, p. 6).

Do bloggers and blog readers make up a "speech community" of shared meanings? Blogs do share certain characteristics based on structures that people have come to associate with blogs, and most blog authors think of themselves as "bloggers." But not all blogging software packages use the same terminology to refer to similar elements of the blog,[32] and as we shall see in greater detail later in this chapter, one

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[32] For example, LiveJournal users generally use the term "friends" to indicate something similar to a blogroll on other blogs. LiveJournal documentation uses the term 'memories" to indicate what appears to be a generally non-public archiving function. http://www.livejournal.com/support/faqbrowse.bml?faqid=47. On Xanga, tagboards are also called chatterboxes. http://help.xanga.com/chatterboxhelp.htm.

blogger may use the same term as another, but have a very different idea about what it signifies. Blogging feels like a speech community with a shared language, but in reality it is not always one. If blogging does have its own speech community, it is a tenuous one at best.

We already see confusion in meaning just over the name itself. Even within the larger, ostensibly unified English-speaking speech community there is no fully shared definition of the term "blog." Within the blogging "speech community," we see confusion over what a list titled "links" means, or over the nature of norms for post topics and reasonable responses to them. A blog's topic or theme (if it has one) and norms that may accompany the subgroup sharing that theme may also influence meaning in the blog (Wei, 2004). And because there is no central repository for norms in blogging and little means or inclination for enforcement, a blogger must learn about norms for blogging behaviors and meaning as they emerge through feedback and observation, and then decide whether or not to adhere to them. As one study blogger states "Generally, my use has been determined not by what the software does, but how I've seen others using it." (Blogger 1)

These emerging norms are a part of a transitional moment in the life of blogs. Blogs are a technological and expressive tool so new that they barely existed prior to

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1999. At this writing, blogs are in a developmental moment where meanings

surrounding blogs are still emerging and being negotiated and solidified.

How is meaning transmitted? Berger and Luckmann, in their seminal book *The*

Social Construction of Reality, (1966) discuss how humans create their social order

through human activity. To reduce energy expended in decision-making, people

streamline their behavior through the creation of habits and patterns, all of which

eventually become imbued with meaning for the individual (Berger & Luckmann,

1966). Eventually these "habitualizations" become institutionalized "when these

actions become typified by certain actors." Once the structure is created "we

internalize it and it becomes a part of our consciousness, it becomes invested with

personal meaning, [and] it affects the availability and legitimacy of meanings" (Harris,

n.d.; discussion of Berger and Luckmann) While people find that "the world thus

shaped appears transparent to them" these structures and meanings "thicken and

harden" (Berger & Luckmann,1966, p. 59) when transmitted to the next generation,

both for the next generation and for the generation that created these institutions.

Blogs may be at a point where meanings are being created by the individual,

but where institutions have not yet been created and meanings have not yet begun to

thicken and harden in the transmission to the next generation of users.

Norm Types

Meanings can be transmitted in a variety of ways; through the users of a technology to one another, by the creators and promoters of the technology and by the constraints placed and opportunities enabled by the technology itself. Scholar Jan-Hinrik Schmidt, in his blog *BamBlog*, sets out three categories of norms[33]: explicit norms, emerging norms and architectural norms (Schmidt, 2004). Explicit norms are the written or spoken rules or standards for behavior laid out in places like FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) or How-to documents. Emerging norms are norms that arise and become know through observations and interactions, by way of repeated feedback. Architectural or structural norms are norms imposed by the technical architecture of the system, (e.g., including a "subject" or title for an email message because an email program provides a field for it.)

We can see some of this transmission of meanings and norms. Explicit norms are visible through places like the blog "How to Blog for Fun & Profit," a self-styled "how-to" site with articles aimed at new bloggers with titles like: "How to Blog" and "Blog Marketing" and posts titled "Blog Commenting Etiquette?"[34] Sites like these perform a normative function for new bloggers and readers who stumble across them, and for those who are not inclined to discover behavior norms through observation and

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[33] Schmidt's term is "base of norms" to distinguish it from "scope of norms"
[34] http://blogforfunandprofit.blogware.com/ accessed on March 24, 2005.

interaction. But knowledge and use of these sites is not widespread. Journal-style

bloggers get into the act on a smaller scale, with posts about the craft of blogging, and

posts where they give advice to new bloggers, or in other ways document their own

experience of blogging. One blogger wrote a post addressed to a friend who was

contemplating starting his own blog about her preferences and beliefs about blogging.

She recommended reading other weblogs, noticing what the author likes about other

blogs so that these qualities may be emulated and suggests that new bloggers keep

posts short, with a distinctive voice, and cover one subject rather than rambling.[35]

Aside from these examples, a written or explicit series of widely read and held

norms, rules or acceptable behaviors does not exist in the decentralized online world.

Even though bloggers usually keep to interconnected online networks of blogs

(Herring, Kouper et al, 2005) rarely are norms explicit within these groups—as the

groups are formed through a series of highly interconnected nodes rather than because

all blogs link to each other through a central location. So there is no one place to post

explicit norms for users to read. Blogs are also so simple to create that it is possible to

establish one without delving deeply into the blogging software's educational material.

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[35] Note that any textual material drawn from the weblogs of study participants has been paraphrased to protect the anonymity of the blogger, as blog text is generally searchable in internet search engines.

Blogs are such a new phenomenon that meaning and acceptable behavioral practices are still being created through practice and observation, and are solidifying through transmission from longer-term users to newer ones.

The "culture" of blogging is also transmitted by the companies and organizations that provide the blogging software. Blog software makers are in the business of telling potential users about what they can do with a blog, to get people to use and eventually purchase their product. While not as explicit as the above-mentioned "How to Blog for Fun and Profit" website and its ilk, many of the blogging software companies do publish explicit norms in FAQ sections and explanatory information for new users. Blogging tools aimed at non-technical users, like Blogger, Typepad, LiveJournal and 20six, have pages on their websites addressing "What is a blog?" and most also have an FAQ. In most cases these sections do not address niceties of etiquette, but they do define terms. Since these terms are often not standardized from blogging product to product, these glossaries become vital even for those who have a measure of experience with blogging software.

Norm Formation in New Technologies

In the past, other technologies have modeled this process of norm formation through explicit, emergent and architectural modes. In particular, the roll-out of the wireline telephone system serves as a potent example of adaptive structuration in

technology. Adaptive structuration theory posits that both architectural/structural norms embedded within a technology, and emergent norms that arise as people interact with technology, engage in a feedback process that socializes newcomers into the norms of a group or community (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). Adaptive structuration highlights the interplay between organized "education" and indoctrination of consumers by a technology provider and consumers exerting their own preferences on and ideas about the technology, and how these structures helped users to better understand what was meant and expected of them in conversations over the wires. Also, email has been profitably studied as the site of socialization through norm formation among small groups.

The Telephone Case Study

First constructed by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876 (Fischer, 1992, p. 35) the wireline telephone is one technology of communication and interaction for which the development of norm formation has been traced. It is important to note that most historians of the phone have relied on paper records found mostly in promotional materials, old phone books and memos to salesman, which while informative, encompass the beliefs and experiences of the creators and sellers of the technology and not necessarily the experience of the user. While some scholars have endeavored to do interviews with elders who can recall the introduction of the telephone into their

household, in many cases memory is faulty at this great remove. Nevertheless, the development of the telephone and social codes surrounding its use sheds some light on norm formation around a new technology.

Originally, the manufacturers and sellers of the telephone technology envisioned it strictly as a device for conducting business—a serious instrument for serious tasks. The business-oriented history of the telegraph, from which most telephone companies and their early workforce sprang, meant that phone companies could not and did not envision the telephone as anything other than a device for business efficiency. Also hampered by limited resources, phone salesmen and advertisements discouraged social calling, as it tied up the telephone lines so that they could not be used for more "important" business (Martin, 1991). Early in the life of the telephone system, there was a constant influx of new users coming fresh to the technology, and the technology itself was evolving rapidly (from operator-transferred calls to automatic exchanges, from party lines to individual ones). To educate a frequently ignorant user base, phone books and other user materials contained instructions on how to use the telephone. "Speak directly into mouthpiece, keeping mustache out of the opening" (Fischer, 1992, p. 70). Another small phone company "placed ads and stories in the press asking customers to turn the cranks more rapidly and answer promptly" (Fischer, 1992, p. 70).

The telephone companies also tried to teach telephone courtesy. Fischer notes that around 1910, "AT&T distributed cards labeled 'The Telephone Pledge,' to be attached to instruments and reading 'I believe in the Golden Rule, and I will try to be as Courteous and Considerate over the Telephone as if Face to Face'" (Fischer, 1992, p. 70). Telephone companies even went so far as to try to "script appropriate conversation," (Fischer, 1992, p. 70) and enforce their own etiquette by cutting off and fining abusers, and even flexing their monopolistic muscle by having some thrown in jail (Fischer, 1992, p. 70).

External to company documents, popular media also tried to address and allay confusion over telephone use. One 1926 magazine article tackled the topic of knowing how to end a telephone conversation. The article "determined that the caller should signal the end, unless a man and a woman were speaking, in which case termination was the prerogative of the 'second sex'" (Fischer, 1992, p. 71).

Party lines proved especially troublesome for etiquette. Phone companies wanted users to feel comfortable with the technology and repeatedly counseled users not to eavesdrop on the line, and to only use the telephone for short periods. Nevertheless, most party line users expected that someone else would be listening, and in fact used the telephone with an expectation of a group conversation. Companies "printed notices, had operators intervene, and sent warning letters to particularly

talkative customers who tied up the line for long periods of time" (Fischer, 1992, p. 71). The phone manners that the phone company attempted to convey to its customers were based on the dominant middle class or ruling class manners at the time (Martin, 1991 p. 135), reinforcing the power of that group. Party line users were instructed not to eavesdrop as a way of enforcing Victorian concerns with personal privacy (Martin, 1991). And while many people aspired to individual lines to their homes, party line users coped with their lack of privacy by not having any expectation of it. Interviews with users elicited remembrances of conversations occurring between two people that would be interrupted by others listening in on the line jumping in to give their 'two cents.' Other users would organize meetings and hold them over the party line (Martin, 1991, p. 48).

But despite the initial marketing and intent of the sellers and promoters of the technology, customers, and women in particular, began to use the technology for their own purposes. Starting in the 1920's, phone companies embraced the idea of the telephone as tool for sociability in a way they had not before. Research indicates that prior to that time, women had begun using the telephone to place personal, social calls (rather than for shopping and conducting the business of the household as the phone companies suggested) to reduce isolation, and seek comfort, friendship and advice. (Martin, 1991, Fischer, 1992) Some of this use of the technology for social purposes

was a product of the increasing penetration of the telephone into more households, giving customers more people to talk to. But it was also particular users of a technology, in this case women, thinking outside the company parameters for the use of the technology, and adapting use of it to meet their own needs. After expending energy trying to enforce their own notions of "proper" use of the telephone technology, eventually the telephone companies and society at large began to regard the telephone as an item that could be most profitably marketed and used as a tool for sociability. The companies eventually embraced what users were actually doing with the technology and in turn used that understanding to sell the technology to others.

In this case study, some of the norms for telephone use arose from explicit educational and "rule-making" materials from the telephone company, while others emerged out of user behavior, expectations and familiarity with the capabilities of the technology.

The Email Case Study: The Development of Norms in Email Groups

Norm formation has been examined in other newer technologies as well. In the article "The Formation of Group Norms in Computer-Mediated Communication" authors Tom Postmes, Russell Spears and Martin Lea (2000) examine how norms form in small groups over email. By studying students using an email function in an online

statistics course, they were able to chart the formation of norms in eleven small groups

of students who emailed each other. They found that over time, communications

among the groups became more normative towards a "prototype" of behavior

established early on for the group. Groups would set up norms of serious conversation,

or jokes, or insults, or other norms of tone or content, and the emails exchanged as the

semester progressed would move the communication in the group more and more

towards strongly expressing the prototype established.

The findings suggest that "social influence shapes medium usage within

groups" (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 2000, p. 364). And even when groups exist prior to

contact with the technology, these groups must still "develop their own way of

interacting" in or on the new media.

These findings establish the idea of emergent norms around a digital

technology. Further, the authors noticed that in-group and out-group communications

were different. Group norms for communication had no impact on the content or tone

of communication with others outside of the group, such as teaching staff available to

students for academic assistance. These findings suggest that "changes in the social

context [in this case the audience] have a drastic impact on computer-mediated

communication (CMC) use, and this implies that the norms for the use of CMC are

specific to the group in which they emerge" (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 2000). The

authors define norms as "communications norms, which differ from general social norms such as laws and custom, but can be conceived as emergent properties of the group that organize behavior" (p. 364). The authors further suggest that these norms only seem to impact the content of the communication, not the form of it (e.g., rudeness, rather than exclamation point use) (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 2000). Other studies have shown that in computer-mediated communication contexts with clear norms at the outset do not display the same kind of development of behaviors over time (Walther, 1997, Postmes, Spears & Lea, 2000).

Further, the authors connect norm formation to the construction of a social identity. They point to the interplay between the individual and the group, and the social and the dynamic relationship between the two. They hold that "social identities are not fixed prescriptions that exist as contextual givens, but that these may be subject to social construction and change in a similar fashion to the emergence of norms," and that in fact these two functions, group/social identity and normalization of behaviors are intimately connected.

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What do these two examples of the development of norms in a technology illuminate regarding blogs? While neither example forms a perfect analog to the type and nature of the interaction in blogs, they both provide useful insights. Both case

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studies point to the emergence of norms in the context of social use of a technology. Given that blogs and email exchanges are the site of the presentation of an identity to others, it makes sense that in both arenas that presentations and norms would evolve in constant response to each other. Particularly in the case of the telephone (but also prevalent, though not discussed as explicitly in email) the technology imposed its own architectural norms on the user. With the telephone, the companies purveying it attempted to make the technology more palatable to the user by educating the user. They trained the user through explicit rules and norms for use of the technology that conformed to the Victorian values of the ruling classes, and gave people as sense of the "correct" behavior to encourage and smooth use by reducing embarrassment. Both technologies show, in a broad example (telephone) and a narrow one (email), how in the absence of explicit norms, and sometimes in contradiction of them, users will adopt specific behaviors and impose them upon themselves. In a Panoptic moment, users observe the behaviors of the group and then reimpose them on themselves, normalizing the behaviors to greater and greater extremes over time. Even when norms are explicit, users, through the practice of using the technology, find new and creative uses for it beyond what its creators imagined.

Norms in Blogs

In blogging there is a lack of formalized norms and also a less concerted effort on the part of the technology creators to educate and normalize the behaviors of users. The vast majority of blog users have very little interaction with explicit norm documentation. Most users are forced to rely on emerging or non-explicit normative information to regulate their behavior and "fit in" to the perceived norms of the blogosphere. An exception to this may be found within some specific subgroups of blogging, such as Carolyn Wei's example of explicit norms in knitting blogs (Wei. 2004). Also since much of the normative behavior in email groups relates to a sense of "group" identity, created through interaction, and because blogs, again with the exception of subcultures, lack a sense of coherent group identity, the formation of norms becomes a slower and more fraught process. As Postmes, Spears and Lea (2000) discuss in the case of email, "multiple constructions of a technology coexist and evolve simultaneously, but relatively independently. Communications is thus shaped socially, even in the apparent absence of clear social cues" (p. 367).

In blogging, part of the conflict is multiple and unclear group members, as well as an inability to tailor one's normative expression for a particular audience. While emailers and telephone callers have a good idea who will be receiving their message or

communications and can tailor the content to the norms that function in that particular interaction, a blogger does not have that kind of control or awareness of his or her audience (as discussed in the previous chapter) and thus cannot tailor his or her expression to adhere to norms that function for all audience members. How bloggers cope with audience uncertainty and the inability to narrowly tailor expression impacts the nature of the content, authenticity and privacy of the blog.

Emergent Norms in Blogs

When a reader first approaches a blog, there are conventions of meaning and rules of interaction that he or she must learn. Generally a reader's first encounters are with architectural norms. First, the reader must apprehend and try to understand the layout of the blog. Where is the most frequently updated content? Where do I look to find out what information, if any, the author provides? After getting a general sense of how an individual blog is laid out, then the reader makes determinations about the type of content the author writes about, the veracity and authenticity of the author's voice (an easier determination to make if the author already knows the blogger in an offline context).

The reader also looks for clues about how much of a conversation the blogger wants to have—does the blogger address readers directly in blog posts? Does the author ask for feedback or comments? Does he or she respond to comments that

readers have left in the comments section? Does the author have an email address or instant messaging screen name where feedback may be moved into a personal or less public arena? Is this person explicitly a member of any particular subgroup or speech community, within blogs or external to them? Together, navigating these architectural and emergent norms helps a reader begin to paint a picture of the blog author.

Blogrolls: Sites of Contested Meaning

Moving away from the central content of a blog—the posts—a reader looks to the sidebar, if a blog has one, for more information about the author. One major component of most sidebars is the list of links to other blogs or websites, also called a "blogroll." Links lists with descriptive or generic headers, convey information about the blogger—but what do they convey? Some scholars, like Halavais and Marlow, have recently posited that links indicate a relationship with the item linked to, or at least a social acknowledgement of the author. However, when discussing the meanings inherent in link lists (as well as in sidebars, personal images and blog layout) with my study subjects, I found that there were moments with little or no agreement between bloggers. Most interestingly, most bloggers assumed that other blog authors applied the same general meanings or values to their blog as they held, which given the variety of ideas held even with in my relatively small sample, turns out to be an incorrect assumption, and one with ramifications for interactions between bloggers.

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Without a repository of explicit norms, bloggers must gain an understanding of the normative expectations for their behavior and content through observation of emergent norms and through the structural norms made explicit through the technology itself. A surprisingly large number of respondents in our sample told stories of fractured friendships, misunderstandings, and frustrations surrounding blogrolls.

Most link lists are generally headed with the title "links," or "blogroll," which refers to the practice of "logrolling" or "the exchange of assistance or favors" (Merriam-Webster, 1993). The association with logrolling suggests that links are reciprocal with another blogger, generally with the intent of driving more traffic to each site (Marlow, 2004).

Blogrolls are frequently found in the sidebars of weblogs. As mentioned in earlier chapters, Marlow (2004) has suggested that blogrolls represent "social acknowledgement" of the other bloggers listed, as well as serving "navigational" functions to assist readers in finding other blogs that may be of interest. Halavais (in Scheidt, 2004) posits that links "are clearly a distant approximation of social ties," and that particularly links to celebrity or well-known blogs are more often about indirectly "expressing personal opinions or attitudes," rather than an indication of a personal relationship. (Halavais in Scheidt, 2004)

Study findings suggest that while some bloggers do hold views similar to the ones attributed to them by Marlow and Halavais, others express a surprising variety of nuances of meaning for their blogroll. Links are said to indicate everything from a blogger's reading preference or hearty recommendation, and a guide to similar blogs, to reciprocal favors for the purposes of mutual traffic building.

Some study bloggers suggest that links only portray "what I read" rather than people who are known to them. One blogger mentioned that his list of blogs and links "are blogs that I read and that I like." (Blogger 11) Because this blogger uses an RSS aggregator, he reads his blogs in the aggregator rather than navigating using the links on his own blog, so the blogroll on the blog serves the purpose of telling other people about what he reads and reflecting information about the blog author to his readers, similar to the purpose that Halavais ascribes to links to political or "A-list" blogs. (Halavais in Scheidt, 2004)

Still other bloggers suggest that links indicate relationships, but not necessarily recommendations. These bloggers only link to friends and family, or other bloggers that they have come to know in an online or offline context and with whom they feel they have a relationship. For one blogger with a blogroll composed exclusively of links to people he has met in person, "these blogs are a lot more personal," and meaningful in contrast to the impersonality of "humongous blogrolls." (Blogger 14) This blogger

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also felt that his blog was as much a personal tool and navigation portal for himself as it was for his readers, so the display of personal connections was as much for himself as it was a way of telling his audience about "other blogs they might like."

Links may also serve as recommendations, with the blog author sharing favorites with readers. For bloggers who believe in links as recommendations, the link list does not necessarily represent relationships or even regular reading on the part of the blogger, but rather blogs that they find interesting and their that their readers will find compelling as well. This type of link seems to be most prevalent in blogs with a distinct subject matter or themes (like knitting or mathematics). This recommendation function of the blogroll is not a discrete category—bloggers who believe that their blogroll reflects friends or relationships also understand their lists to have a recommendation element. When asked what he thought his blogroll was telling his readers, one blogger replied: "I'm telling them that these [blogs] are really interesting, and that I keep up with them. Basically I just like the writing on this blog, I think it is excellent, and this is the best of the best, this is the section that I read. The list is a way of telling other people what I think, what I think is great." (Blogger 11) Another blogger stated firmly that a blogroll endorsed the blogs on it, and as such made public the recommending blog author's taste and opinions about the quality of other blogs. (Blogger 9)

A study blogger with very specific blog themes simply felt that linking to the blogs of friends or even romantic partners who did not blog on that theme was outside the scope of the blog's topic and would not be of interest to her readers. "It's very sweet, my [friend] who has a blog, has a link to my blog on his blog. His blog has *nothing* to do with the topic of my blog. And to be frank, I don't think that I'd put a link to his blog on mine, because the people who are reading this, I don't think they'd have any interest in reading his blog." (Blogger 3) In this example, the blogger views her blogroll as a promotional tool, driving traffic to the websites and blogs she has selected and also as a tool for readers to discover other related blogs. This blogger's comments highlight the question of whether a blog exists to reflect the author or serve her readers. Or perhaps in this case, reflect that the author wishes to serve or be perceived as serving her readers?

Some bloggers have links of the "reciprocal," traffic-building, acknowledgement variety, but most bloggers in the study primarily have one-way links to blogs (or links that are not deliberately posted for traffic-building purposes, even if both bloggers link to each other), generally to blogs as obscure as their own. Bloggers in the study with reciprocal link lists, many of which have tens and even hundreds of entries, assume that most readers who see a blogroll list of such length will automatically realize that the blogger is not making any guarantees or representations

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about the blogs on the list. One blogger reflects on what he believes the reader thinks of his lengthy blogroll: "If they look at it and they see how many links there are, I think they can pretty much figure out that this doesn't mean a lot to him. I mean this is not the crème de la crème as far as he's concerned. They're a little bit ambivalent." (Blogger 12)

Some bloggers with long list of reciprocal links found themselves making more distinctions in their link list—breaking out offline friends or personal favorites from the extra long list of links with the intent of making the lists more explicit, useful and personally meaningful. Bloggers in the study made distinctions like "Fellow travelers" and "Other blogs" with sub headings within the second category of "My Heroes" "Group Blawgs" and "Grownups."

Few of the bloggers in this study agreed on the meanings of links on their blogs or on the blogs of others. Indeed many bloggers professed their belief in their own blend of the above possibilities of meanings. This lack of shared meaning proves problematic when blog readership becomes interaction. When the meaning of a link for a blogger clashed with the meaning of the link for a reader or another blogger, discomfort and conflict erupted.

Some bloggers have sensed the ambiguity in the link lists themselves and have taken steps to be more explicit in their blogrolls, starting the process of creating new

norms that better address the meanings users give to their own blogroll. One blog author divides his blogroll into two sections, titled "People I know" and "People I don't know, but read anyway," as a way of being more explicit about the nature of relationships and the nature of the recommendation. The first group is bloggers the blog author knows, organized in the order in which he met them, but whom he does not necessarily recommend to other readers. The second group is people with whom he does not have a relationship, but whose blog is well-written enough or compelling enough to bring him back and keep him reading.

Other bloggers, as a result of trouble caused by the ambiguity of blogroll links, have attempted to distance themselves from their blogroll. Instead of explicitly posting a full blogroll in the sidebar of their website, they post public links to their RSS syndication aggregator. By posting a one-step removed link, the blogger implies that "these are the blogs that I like enough to pull into my aggregator." Some bloggers go further by subdividing their syndicated lists even more explicitly than the blogger mentioned above with headings like "Neat People," "Cool Lawyers," and "Thinkers Who Make Me Think."

This RSS aggregator function can help bloggers who feel conflicted about their blogroll. One blogger spoke of trying to come to terms with "enjoying reading blogs of people I don't like," as well as feeling guilty about enjoying reading blogs she

wouldn't want others to know she read and simultaneously not enjoying the blogs of people she liked. The RSS aggregator made it purely about "the blogs I read" and "less personal, less fraught with conflict." (Blogger 9)

Other bloggers had thought consciously about how to best represent their blogroll. One blogger toyed with the idea of simply including a link to his RSS aggregator page with all of the blogs that he read, as other bloggers in the study have done, but he eventually decided that he did not want to reduce his link list to a single link. He wanted the blogroll to be explicit, to show that he was a part of a larger community of people engaged in similar experiences. From a technical perspective, bloggers may keep links on their weblogs so that the author of the linked-to blog can see the traffic that the initial blog is sending, as some blog traffic statistics packages will show the URL from which a reader comes to the blog. Linking to someone, then, may be thought of by some as similar to paying a compliment to someone offline.

Some bloggers who have experienced trouble with hurt feelings or misunderstandings over their blogroll have simply removed it altogether, to avoid any more of the confusion and conflict that can result. A study blogger told this story about her decision to remove her blogroll:

> I used to have a blogroll—on the front page of my site I had links to other [craft] sites. And I eventually took that down because it just became like a contest for people to see if they could get their name up there, and then if I got tired of the site, or they weren't posting or if I

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just wasn't interested in reading them any more, and then I took their link off, there'd be the hurt feelings and I just decided after a while it wasn't worth it to have that kind of public thing, but I did for a long long time….it promotes almost high schoolish behavior. Especially when you have a lot of traffic, and when people recognize you as a site that gets a lot of traffic, I think it does become a contest among people. I thought it started to generate bad feelings, and then I'd feel bad, and think, geez maybe I should have everybody up there. And so I got tired of the whole political side of [craft] blogging, so I wanted to remove myself from that. (Blogger 15)

This blogger's comment points to the tension in the blogroll and in the blog as a whole: is this blog for the authors benefit or for the readers? Is a blogger's obligation to present a whole consistent picture on the blog that accurately represents his or herself, or do the opinions and feelings of the readers come into play in the decision to include or remove content or features?

Other bloggers speak of a sense of obligation in links lists, which suggests some early norm formation as the perception of obligation among these bloggers is intricately tied to social expectations. Study participants described feeling as if they were required to keep people on their blogroll, or as though to not include someone on their blogroll would give offense. One blogger cut down his blogroll and eliminated some people after it got unwieldy, but he did it during a redesign of his entire blog, and so he "didn't think that people noticed" that he removed them from the blogroll. But

then he added: "A couple of people have said something, like 'why aren't I on the blogroll,' but then I just add them and it's ok." (Blogger 12)

And yet another study blogger told of a "dust-up" on her blog when she delinked someone. In thinking and posting about the experience, she felt that "having a blogroll has a social meaning," which for some people is perceived as implying "approval" of a particular website. Consequently, removing a link is viewed as withdrawing approval, and all that that socially entails, even if that's not the intent of the blogger. In her post on the matter she discussed the differences in linguistic terms between locution, or the literal significance of an utterance,[36] illocution, or what the linker means, and perlocution, or what the link-receiver/reader understands and does, and how the difference between the latter two causes conflicts. Blogger 6 also makes the point that unclear locutions that leave these gaps between illocution and perlocution are not confined to the universe of blogs. However, it should be noted that the speaker and listener in a digital environment may have less additional information—such as tone of voice, facial expression or body language—to assist with the interpretation. Blogs suffer from the additional interpretive complication of having fewer explicit norms to direct understanding of norms and behavior.

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[36] linked from bloggers site,
http://www.csun.edu/~vcoao0el/de361/de361s62_folder/tsld014.htm

In the end, this blogger removed her blogroll over this experience. The blogroll became "a can of worms I don't want to open. I don't want power over other people's self–perception." The blogger does still make her Bloglines (an RSS aggregator/reader) blogroll available by a link. She feels that this one step of removal says "this is what I *read*, rather than this is what I approve of." (Blogger 6) At its essence, this conflict is about whether the blog is for the author or for her audience, a wavering line that bloggers and readers are constantly negotiating.

Clearly, there is a lack of agreement over link list norms. The conflict arises because bloggers have not yet established whether a link constitutes an endorsement or approval of a blog or not, and consequently whether removing a link constitutes a withdrawal of endorsement. In this instance norms have not yet successfully emerged, complicating interactions between bloggers and readers. Part of the problem is that some users are asking blogs to stand in for relationships that are in reality vastly more complicated and nuanced than a blog can express. There is no equivalent in blogging to gradually allowing your phone calls and meetings to become less and less frequent, or subtly showing your disapproval of someone through body language or facial expression. There is little opportunity for authors and readers to negotiate the relationship. Interactions are less nuanced. Again the mediation of the interaction, combined with the loss of many physical cues in text-based interactions, and the

constraint of the tools, yields fewer inhibitions and more blunt behaviors. There is no easy way to clarify "unclear locutions." And as blogging continues to diversify in content and blogger intent within its same general structures, more and more "locutions" in blogs will be unclear, until users step in and make changes to the terminology to make it more explicit and specific, and norms for the blogging community "thicken." Additionally, most blogs do not impose specific structural norms on blogrolls. In some instances, software packages make them very simple to create and modify through purpose-built management structures which by their very existence normalize the inclusion of blogrolls on blogs. Architectural norms in this case help determine the existence of the roll, but not its meaning.

Confusion and Conflict in Comments

Emergent norms and the confusion they cause are not confined to blogrolls. Interactive content features also lack explicit or even architectural norms other than normalizing these interactive features by making them available through the software.[37]

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[37] Though some additional architectural constraints are beginning to be implemented as security measures.

As was touched on in the *Author and Audience* chapter, for some bloggers there

is significant frustration or confusion about the etiquette of commenting. One blogger

told this story:

> There's at least one guy… who disagrees with me on everything. Or
> almost. He feels free or he seems to enjoy periodically saying "here's
> why you're wrong" and often in a name-calling way. And sometimes
> it's really hard to take. But I try to respond as reasonably as I can…I
> could easily say, 'we disagree on everything, why don't you just shut
> up?' But I don't because I do learn things from him…I could easily say
> go away….He could say the same thing without being such a jerk. But I
> can still learn something about him. Just because someone says
> something you don't like, doesn't mean you should shut them down.
> (Blogger 12)

Even as this blog author tries to create a forum on his blog defined by beliefs in

openness and civil, rational discussion, he is plagued by an individual who does not

seem to hold the same values. As Carolyn Marvin points out in her discussion of the

introduction of the telephone, "Here, the focus of communication is shifted from the

instrument to the drama in which existing groups perpetually negotiate power,

authority, representation and knowledge with whatever resources are available. New

media intrude on these negotiations by providing new platforms on which old groups

confront one another" (Marvin, 1988. p. 5). Whether it is Democrat versus Republican

as in Blogger 12's blog, or sparring between other conflicting social, political or

economic groups, the blog with its interactive features has become not just a tool for

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groups to fight over its regulation, but yet another arena in which these negotiations may be played out. The blog is something not just to fight over but a space to fight in, only in blogs, the rules for engagement are less clear. Where this difficult commenter might in a face-to-face circumstance apprehend through body language what the blog author is thinking and wishing but not saying, in the current forum, there are no non-verbal cues to guide the commenter. Nor does the blog author take all the technical actions available to him, like blocking the address of the commenter or deleting his unwanted comments, all in the name of the blog owner's ideals of an open forum.

The coda to this story is that this same irritating commenter had sent an email to the blog author saying that he would no longer be reading or commenting on the blog after he was verbally attacked by another blog reader in a comment forum. "There's [a commenter] who at one point sometime last year sent me an email after a comment exchange, not with me, but with another reader. He sent me an email saying he was no longer going to read my blog because I couldn't control my commenters." (Blogger 12) Blogger 12 went on to say that he wasn't sure what the commenter wanted from him—did he want him to post something on his blog laying out the ground rules for commenting? The disgruntled reader wanted emergent norms to be made explicit, to protect him from the very attacks he himself makes upon the author of the blog, enabled by his own ignoring of the very same norms he now wants

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explicitly enforced. Eventually, this disgruntled commenter, despite his email and protestations, returned to the blog and has resumed posting, generally negatively, in its comment fields.

This anecdote highlights the sense of confusion over comments in blogs. Does the blogger need to lay explicit ground rules for his comment forums to establish behavioral norms? It may also be that this is an example of a breakdown between philosophy and practice. A blogger who suffered from a similar experience with an unwanted commenter said: "I really debated [whether to remove the negative posts]. One of the things that I like on a philosophical level is to be able to have this open discourse. But on a practical level, philosophy's nice, but it doesn't always work so well." (Blogger 4) Without explicit norms and the method or will to enforce them (another significant issue), blogs lose some of their potency as fora for open dialogue. As Lincoln Dahlberg has discussed, the computer-mediated public sphere, of which blogs are a new part, offers great promise as a site of deliberation, yet it suffers from limitations around a lack of critical reflexivity and a lack of "respectful listening to others with a minimal commitment to working with difference," (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 19) as well as from limitations around identity verification concerns and the exclusion of certain voices from online discussion reflective of offline social inequalities (Dahlberg, 2001). All these contribute to the degradation of online discursive space,

and lack of agreed upon norms and an inability to enforce them were they to exist

underlie much of this loss of quality.

Picking up on Dahlberg's notation of the problem of online identity

verification, two other bloggers find that many comments make them distinctly

uncomfortable.

> Sometimes [the comments] are cute—an aunt or uncle encouraging me
> if I'm having a bad day, but sometimes they're totally annoying! One
> guy went off on me about why French culture is the best in the world
> and degraded me for liking American culture; another guy said he
> wanted to see the rest of my body because I always talk about food and
> he could imagine my mouth and wondered if I was fat. I deleted all
> these comments…Sometimes it's [a relief] when I don't [have
> comments]. I've thought about removing the comments altogether
> because of the shitty ones I've received. But then I just delete them.
> Comments are weird -- they take away the anonymity (Blogger 2).

Comments "take away the anonymity" by making the author feel more

vulnerable when she realizes that she really does not know all the people who are

reading her blog, and that they may not always have positive intentions toward her.

Another study blogger shares similar feelings of discomfort over her audience.

Blogger 3 has concerns over anonymous commenting on blogs: "I will say that it

bothers me when they're anonymous, I find it creepy. Because I don't know who they

are….Even before I had a blog, I would least put my first name or an email address

when I commented, something to say that I mean well. An anonymous comment, it

just makes me wonder who's out there looking at me. It unnerves me." (Blogger 3)
Both of these bloggers are butting up against the public/private tension inherent in blogging, and the inability to thoroughly understand his or her audience. Though the blog is a personal space, one of intimate reception and self-presentation, it is still a public one.

Because their interaction with the computer is so solitary, bloggers sometimes forget exactly how public their blog really is. Anyone can read a public blog on the internet, and sometimes being explicitly reminded of that is not always a positive experience for a blogger. They are reminded of the difficulty of their self-presentational position—attempting to conform to norms that must be gleaned and observed rather than easily known, without knowing which norms are appropriate for your audience at any given moment.

Lately, architectural norms have come to bear on comment functions. Initially a free-for-all where anyone could comment anonymously, some blogging packages have begun eliminating anonymous commenting. Spam fighting tools are changing comment space interactions by removing the option of anonymity, and in some ways bringing conversation through blogs closer to its offline analogs, in which it is very difficult to converse and remain anonymous. As comment spam becomes more prevalent and problematic, frustrating blog authors and readers alike by slowing down

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or even crashing entire blogs, new technical solutions are being implemented to address the problem. In many cases, bloggers have begun to fight back against spam by forbidding anonymous commenting, requiring that an email address be provided before a comment is posted, or stipulating that a reader must register with the blogger's service provider before a comment will be accepted. Comments are now often moderated, so that the author chooses which comments will be posted. This eliminates spam, but also eliminates any comments the author does not wish to post for other reasons. Given too, that anonymity is thought to contribute to incivility in computer mediated communications, (Nielsen & Haythornthwaite, 2004) it is possible that a decrease in opportunities for anonymous commenting will simultaneously decrease public rudeness and hurtful interactions.

Another study blogger has wrestled with other elements of appropriate behavior in comments and in blogs. In her interview, she discusses the etiquette in her blogging subculture about reciprocal commenting: "There is a sort of etiquette that if someone comments that you should comment back, although I have to admit that I have not always done it." (Blogger 3) She further muses on her confusion over the best way to respond to a comment—need it be responded to in a public forum, or is a private "backchannel" email appropriate? She says: "If someone comments to me, I'm still struggling with what I should email someone about and what I should comment about.

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And then if I write back, should I comment, or should I email them?" (Blogger 3).

Again, a blogger confronts the public/private question in relation to blog

communication. Is it important to a sense of authenticity or community to have

exchanges with readers who comment be visible? If a blogger believes that all blog-

related discussion should be public, should that blogger then give notice on the front

page of their blog (as one blogger in the study does) that anything sent to their email

account may be posted to the blog?

One blogger described in her interview how she fought back against a nasty

anonymous comment. Similarities between the IP addresses of past, named

commenters and the current anonymous comment revealed that the anonymous

commenter had commented before under his own name, and registered with a

functional email address. The blogger composed and sent a "zinger" of an email

thanking the poster for his comment, and then calling him out on both the cowardice of

the anonymous comment as well as for the substance of his comment. The commenter

replied with an apology. (Blogger 9)

While not every blogger shares these particular concerns or the strength or

option to address them, it is important to note that interaction in blogs is still a

contested territory. As more people who lack experience in the disinhibiting effects of

disembodied fora for exchange establish interactive, yet personal spaces on the World

Wide Web, these types of questions will continue to arise and create conflict. In some cases, bloggers are searching for structures, norms or rules and consistent meanings, without realizing that beyond what the tool itself imposes or norms which are imposed by voluntary groups like webrings as a condition of membership, there are no explicit norms nor an effective means to enforce them. Norms for blogs are in a state of developmental fluidity, where the blogger may attempt to impose whatever values he or she sees fit, and the reader may choose to abide by them or not.

Appropriate Blog Entry Language and Content

Confusion over norms is not only over behavior in blogs but also in the expression of content. Many bloggers in the study are mystified by which posts draw comments and which are ignored by the audience. "The ones where I don't expect comments I get them and the ones where I do expect them I don't get any." (Blogger 1) But Blogger 1 hastened to add that this sometimes happens in real life—sometimes he'll make a comment in a group conversation, expecting that everyone else will have something to say on the matter, and no one does. And at other times, he tosses out an offhand remark without expectations of conversational stimulation, and everyone has something to say about it. This blogger's comment makes the point that some of the confusion and difficulties in blogs are not unique to the space. Meanings are contested, and norms develop and change in our offline lives as well.

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Another blogger muses on the unpredictability of feedback in the blog, "Comments are not indicators of my best posts." She continued, "People love to comment on the easy stuff, but I get a lot of email about posts with no comments." (Blogger 9) Responses to posts that are particularly personal are often emailed privately rather than posted publicly. Another blogger reported:

> You know it's funny, because lately, the only post I had where no one commented was this one where I basically said that I was not feeling in the holiday spirit. It was a little bit sad sack, I admit it. But it was true, it was what I was feeling. And I also made a point of saying was that thing that I was enjoying was [crafting]. Which is the subject of my blog. So I felt that it wasn't in a way "oh here's this depressing girl who is writing about things which aren't at all a part of the subject of which she's [generally] writing about." But nobody commented, and I felt a little like "ooo, maybe I've crossed some sort of invisible boundary?" It's the expectations of my readers that lead me to feel like I'm crossing some sort of boundaries. (Blogger 3)

Blogger 3 again illustrates the difficulties of understanding emergent or non-explicit norms. Her blogging subculture is notable for its discussion in blog posts of its norms, but nevertheless, this blogger finds herself wondering whether she has transgressed a norm she is not even sure exists. Her statement highlights the difficulty with emergent norms—that even as they are guides to interpretation they are also open to interpretation themselves.

Bloggers who participated in this research also wrestled with the appropriateness of their posts, both in terms of content and language choice. Bloggers

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struggled with making their posts "authentic" and expressive of a particular moment,

but also appropriate for the varied nature of their perceived and actual audience. One

blogger tells this story:

> It's hard—sometimes I just don't care and want to write whatever I want
> to write and if someone doesn't like it, they don't have to read. Other
> times... one time I titled an entry "motherfucker" because I was at an
> internet cafe and had just written this whole entry and the computer
> crashed and I was so frustrated and motherfucker was exactly what I
> wanted to title the immediate next entry. My mother was stunned and
> even my dad (who's quite liberal) told me it was a little harsh... but I
> didn't change it. (Blogger 2)

Again the author expresses the challenge for bloggers of applying norms for an

unseen audience. Expression appropriate for friends, former co-workers, and other peer

readers may elicit shock and dismay from family members. While bloggers may look

to other bloggers for social cues over appropriate expression, the varied nature of the

audiences of each blogger as well as the blogger's unique self-expression make the

social development of norms more difficult. One blogger's audience may be perceived

to be composed of certain people by the blogger, and may in fact, be made up of a

relatively different band of readers. This perception may be different from the

perception of her readers held by another blogger. And while one blogger may use

language that self-presents themselves one way, another blogger may need to tailor that

presentation to both her own self concept as well as her perceived audience.

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Conclusion

The preceding chapter has made clear that norm formation in a new technology is not necessarily a smooth process. Past history shows that three different types of norms come into play in the socialization of a users around a technology—explicit norms, emergent norms and architectural norms. In the case of blogging, very few explicit norms exist, particularly for blogging as whole. Some subcultures of blogging, like knitting blogs, or blogs linked through webrings, have explicit norms laid out in written documents to which their members may or may not adhere. But for the most part, structural and emergent norms are the most operative in the blogosphere.

Architectural norms operate in blogs by suggesting normative structures through the options available in the software. When blogging software includes commenting functions, or information on how to add or build them, it suggests that interactivity is a norm of blogging. When blogging software includes the option to build a blogroll, it suggests that inclusion of links to other blogs on blog page is "normal." Architectural norms contribute to much of what may be agreed upon in blog—the structures of blogs are what defined them as such, not the content or intent of the author.

But architectural norms are limited, and in the case of blogs, much of the meaning conveyed through structure is open to interpretation. Emerging norms arise to fill in the gaps in understood normative meanings. As illustrated by studies of email,

norms emerge through routine observation and interaction between and among bloggers. Bloggers learn what is "expected" and normal for blog expression and interactions in blogspaces, and alter their own behavior accordingly. More experienced bloggers and more popular bloggers may help to normalize behaviors in blogging through the choices that they make and display.

Norms are easier to apprehend in situations of specific interaction, like comments, than in blogrolls. In comment fora, a method for giving feedback about meanings, and contesting and protesting behaviors publicly are built into the space. In the case of blogrolls, emergent norms are harder to understand since rarely is a blog author ever called up to make his or her personal meanings for the blogroll explicit.

Emergent norm formation in blogs proves challenging because of the nature of the author's understanding of his or her audience. Given that a blog author has imperfect means for understanding his audience, and that social norms of interaction are often tailored to the audience, the blogger struggles to understand the nature of the emergent norms. Furthermore, he must work to understand how these norms might be appropriately applied in the absence of knowledge about his own audience and how his audience differs from the audience of other bloggers from whom he is gleaning his norms.

This lack of understanding by the author of his or her audience creates an imperfect loop of feedback over norms and behavior. If bloggers are looking to other bloggers for norms, and those bloggers are thinking both about how to self-present themselves for their imagined audience, and also about the appropriate way to self-present in the context of other blogs they read, bloggers may not be apprehending the impact of the variation in audiences on the types of self-presentation and expression selected by a blog author. Further, blog authors may not always read each other's blogs, thus the feedback that creates norms travels in one direction, rather than two. In groups that form through email the feedback on group identity and norms is tight, as the audience members are the people from whom you glean your norms. However, in the case of blogs, the audience is not always participating in the conversation in the same way. Not all people who read or comment on a blog keep a blog themselves, and not all of the blogs read by the author necessarily read that blogger's blog. So the feedback loop of norms is a lot looser in blogs, and thus norms are less easily apprehended and perhaps slower to form.

There is also the question of whether norms can form is in such a large, diverse body. It may be that norms in blogging will develop in sub-cultures and then normalize out into the larger population of bloggers. Given that bloggers generally interact and read within a fairly tight group of other blogs/bloggers (Herring, Kouper et al., 2005) it

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appears that norms may have a better chance at forming if bloggers are mainly reading and reacting to a select subgroup rather than a large universe of varied blogs. It may be that this desire for consistency in norms is a part of why bloggers generally connect to a small network of other bloggers.

Norms will begin forming within more cohesive subgroups of bloggers because bloggers will have greater similarities and incentives to adhere to norms. Carolyn Wei points out in her study of norm adherence among knit-bloggers in a webring that membership in the webring, a voluntary act, requires adherence to certain norms set out for membership in the group. In exchange for following these rules regarding posting frequency, topics of posts and the posting of the link that allows for webring navigation, ring members get increased traffic from others with similar interest in knitting and access to group activities and a sense of community (Wei, 2004).

Since blogging is such a new technology, and one that has become widely adopted so quickly, it is unsurprising that norms are not emerging rapidly enough to forestall conflict between bloggers and readers. It is also possible that the rubric of "blog" encompasses such a vast groups of people from different places, with different experiences, different offline cultural and moral values, using the blog for different purposes and posting different kinds of content, that conflict is natural. The

blogosphere is bringing together, in relatively anonymous fora, people who would not ordinarily interact. As bloggers percolate and clump into online communities of blogs, and start creating their own norms within those smaller and more homogenous communities, emergent norms will "thicken" into explicit or structural ones.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

In the introductory section of this paper, a look at the definitions of weblogs revealed a contested arena, with agreement on only a few narrow threads—that blogs are webpages and contain dated content posted in reverse chronological order. Nevertheless, even these threads are disputed and debated. What the definition of the blog also tells us is that a blog is more defined by its structure than its content. And yet, there is enough of a shared understanding of what a blog is that people can hold conversations and write papers about them without a constant need for definition.

Blogs can address almost any conceivable subject, with a variety of intents or angles. Blogs can be written with the intent of telling a story, or making news, or revealing information. Blogs can be promotional devices for a product, a person or business. Blogs do not always even have to be written with text. As technology marches forward, blogs may now be composed of audio files, photographs, images or video clips, some of which may even be posted from a mobile telephone.

The sample for this research bears this out. In the sample, there are blogs about hobbies, blogs about small businesses, blogs by law students, blogs by ex-lawyers, promotional blogs for a manuscript or business or person, blogs by students or researchers posting about their work and idea development for classes or papers. And

yet, none of these blogs is just about any of the above mentioned subjects. Even within the ostensibly promotional, professional, hobbyist or academic blogs, other parts of life intrude or are welcomed. The personal-journal style blogs in this study are un-measurable mishmashes of the unique interests, observations and life happenings of individuals. They chronicle everything from bad colds, favorite recipes, photographic travelogues, wildlife observation, knitting projects, idea development, loneliness, graduate school acceptance and rejection, sheep-shearing and interpersonal relationships of all kinds. Bloggers have posted class notes, photos of funny things they observed, jokes, obscenities, movie and music reviews, ruminations on something they have read, diatribes about noisy neighbors…the list could go on for pages, even drawing solely from the postings of the 17 blogs that make up the study, let alone the 9 million others who have ever kept a blog (Rainie, 2005). A blog is merely a vessel for the imaginative uses of its users.

The history of blogs and blogging was also discussed and revealed to be a contested and fluid narrative. Complicated by an amorphous definition, and an organic beginning, there still is no single narrative that fully describes how blogs came to be what they are now in 2005.

Beyond the definitional and historic uncertainty surrounding these things called "blogs," the blog itself is an unstable text. Created in a digital environment, a blog may

leave very few traces of any editing, retraction or removal (Langellier, 2004, McNeill, 2003). RSS feeds complicate the situation further, making it possible for different versions of a text to be left in the aggregators of certain RSS users, even if only briefly (Scheidt, 2005).

For many bloggers, the potential instability of the text affects the reader's belief in the immediacy and authenticity of blog. The date-stamped structure of the blog creates a feeling of immediacy and authenticity for readers. An author's choice of language and a casual "voice" in a blog also yield a sense of authenticity for the reader.

The audience's manner of engagement with the blog contributes to this sense of immediacy, authenticity and intimacy. A blog is a broadcast of sorts, but the reader engages it one-on-one. As both the creation and reception of the blog are done individually, through a personal computer, the tone the author takes reflects this intimacy of reception. Some authors have tried to counteract the possibility of textual and representational instability by flagging any changes to a post. The author notes her changes by appending new text, often titled "notes" or "updates," in brackets above or below the meat of a post. Even with such signposting, the question remains as to whether anything in a digital environment can ever be truly authentic, given the ability to change without leaving a trace of its former incarnation.

Mutability is nevertheless one of the beauties and features of the blog environment. Don't like the layout of your blog? Change it by simply selecting or unselecting a template, a process sometimes involving no more effort than a few clicks of a mouse. Regret an ill-conceived post? Delete it immediately.

A blog's broadcast-type distribution of content can yield other problems. Blogs may be unexpectedly archived online or rendered by search engines long after a blog or post has been deleted, and then presented outside of its original context. This decontextualized reappearance of long deleted content is the flipside of the blogger's ability to erase content—unwanted or regretted content may linger in undesirable ways.

With all of this uncertainty surrounding blog definitions, development and textual stability, it is unsurprising that blogs have become contested sites of meaning in and of themselves. As a part of the dance between a blog author and his or her audience, authors are confronting unknowns. First, the blogger does not necessarily understand immediately the norms of blogging, but learns them over time; waiting and watching them emerge through his or her interaction with and observation of other bloggers. Because of the newness and the rapid adoption of the communications tool, there are many bloggers new to the interactive and expressive space, simultaneously trying to apprehend behavioral norms and codes of meaning in a space that lacks many

of the physical and auditory cues that we rely on for interpretable information in face-to-face moments of self-presentation.

Second, the blogger must confront the fact that he or she will never fully apprehend his or her audience. Audience members may be wanted or unwanted, known or unknown, but the moment a blog becomes public, it becomes possible for people to access a blog in a way that does not leave an informative trace. Since blogs are spaces of self-presentation, and since self-presentation exists because there is an audience to present the self to, presentation of the self becomes more difficult when you cannot quickly or easily calibrate or modify your presentation based on feedback from the audience. Certainly, the audience does give feedback in a blog, through comment features, other interactive spaces or through their own blogs, but it occurs much more slowly than it would in a face-to-face conversation, and makes it impossible for a blogger to adjust their presentation at the time of its performance (Scheidt, 2005).

When one does not fully know his or her audience, it is also harder to know when one is presenting oneself according to the norms or expressive standards shared by your audience. When the audience is potentially fragmented—made up of people from different parts of an author's life, or from different experiential, geographic or moral backgrounds, the bloggers still must only present one identity through the blog. The blog itself does not allow for audience fragmentation (except under certain limited

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circumstances with certain software packages), instead forcing the author to fabricate one "authentic" blog persona that will ring true to both the body of readers who know him or her offline, as well as readers with an exclusively digital interaction with the author. However, given the instability in blog texts, establishing an authentic persona is quite a challenge as the blogger must carefully construct something to seem unconstructed.

Blogs as they exist today are unstable textual realms of expression, with uncertainties of audience that yield presentational challenges to an author. Because norms are still emerging in this first generation of use, blog readers and authors together have the challenge of trying to understand unclear speech in blogs. What does this instability and undeveloped normative framework for interpretation mean for blogging as whole?

Over the past two years, blogs have launched themselves into the imaginations of citizens, scholars and the media. Blogs are increasingly seen in media circles as a challenge to traditional journalism and the mainstream media (MSM), as they have begun to serve as an alternative information and news source for many Americans (MacKinnon, 2005, Rainie, Cornfield & Horrigan, 2004). However, blogs are generally independent, rather than backed by the millions of large media conglomerates or the endowments of universities or foundations, and thus lack an

incentive to maintain high standards of accuracy or fairness because they do not have a

business interest or large organizational reputation to protect. In the case of the MSM,

it protects its reputation as the guardian of "unbiased" information, built on the ideal of

factuality and impartiality (even if these ideals are in reality chimeras). In the case of

the university, it has its reputation as a guardian of knowledge to protect. From the

media and the university's perspective, blogs should not be credible enough to stand in

for their knowledge and information products.

But from the perspective of many of the enthusiastic readers of blogs, bloggers

give them what the media and perhaps the university cannot. Bloggers are outside of

institutions, and therefore are thought to be better equipped to reflect critically upon

them. Bloggers do not pretend to be unbiased—the very point of blogging is to be a

site of public, individualized expression. Blogs do not pretend to be fully formed, but

rather show ideas and people as they develop. Blogging software is free and can be

used by anyone with a computer and internet access.[38] Blogging, unlike the media or

other publishing industries, lacks a gatekeeper. Rather than having to meet some test of

importance, reliability or credibility, any thoughts, ideas, facts, opinions or creative

outpourings may be published through the blog. For this reason, blogs have been

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[38] It is important to note that this is a limitation of blogs—while they are free, open and
available for anyone who has internet access, there are still many people in the United States and around
the world without meaningful or even any access to the internet. This group is excluded from the
opportunity to blog, though the EDC Center for Media & Community is innovating processes that would

identified as a method for increasing democracy in the world, by allowing those who are traditionally silenced by institutions to have their voices be heard at large. Bloggers are particularly well-positioned to serve as critics of the media empires that currently control the dissemination of information through our culture. Generally, though not always, functioning outside of an institution of meaning and knowledge creation or other institutions (like government, business, and education) allows bloggers to criticize that institution with greater legitimacy.

Still, because of the lack of checks and rules in blogging, bloggers have posted materials not printed by journalists, either because it could not be immediately corroborated, or because it was potentially slanderous/libelous. Heady on the power that has been ceded to them by certain media outlets and their readers, who give credence to and report on stories that circulate in the blog realm, bloggers who aspire to be information purveyors have begun to walk a dangerous path between providing a valuable service in digging up information unsought by the MSM and unethical, slanderous acts. Litigation is currently pending on cases where bloggers and others have disagreed on the nature information published on a blog. Bloggers have been sued and cases are pending on whether bloggers should be considered journalists, and therefore entitled to all the protections that such a designation entails. Still, journalists

allow people all over the world to blog from cellular phones through audio files. Nevertheless, for

and lawyers have come to an agreement that basic protections are extended to the press in exchange for certain standards of conduct. However, the current strength of the extra-institutional position makes it unlikely that bloggers will exchange their maverick credibility for legal protection.

Beyond whether a certain small subset of bloggers makes news or not, most bloggers are not attempting to change the world with their blogs. Bloggers in this sample blog for mundane and sublime reasons. For many, the blog is a way to reach out to a wider world, to share their life experience, to affirm their existence in the world. Bloggers read blogs to expand their own horizons, to "take a vacation from my life" by learning about the life of someone else. Bloggers become engrossed in the real-life narratives spun out in blog posts. Blogs are the new serialized novel, or perhaps a textual and more intimate version of reality TV. Bloggers blog to have their voices heard.

While blogs have been held up as new sites of personal expression and national or even global discourse, others have already established that digital forums are not always ideal places for the creation of a greater level of citizen involvement and national discourse. Some of the very features that encourage people to speak more openly online also degrade the quality of the discussion. Lincoln Dahlberg points to a

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practical purposes there are hundreds of millions of people who cannot blog.

number of factors in his critical analysis of earlier computer-mediated public spheres. He points to the increasing commodification of cyberspace as a "threat to the autonomy of public interaction online" (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 19). Blogging appears to be suffering from a similar shift, as reports increase of businesses setting up their own blogs for promotional purposes, sometimes going as far as to create fake persona to flack products. Companies have also begun to pay real people to mention their products positively in their blog. While this does not necessarily impact the nature of online discourse, it does create additional problems of authenticity in the blogosphere as suddenly blogs become more of a marketing vehicle and less of an authentic personal experience.

Indeed Dahlberg also points to the inability to verify claims or identities online as a problem for creating trust in online deliberations. Verifiability is compromised because of the mediation of the communication. Visual confirmation of a developed online identity is only possible in interactions outside the virtual space. This mediation of the communication also means that users have fewer inhibitions against inappropriate behavior because of a lack of norms and physical cues to help interpret the text-based interactions. The breakdown of trust in these interactions degrades any type of online discourse, from the globally important to the mundane.

The lack of explicit norms in blogging is again a source of its appeal and its limitations. Because few explicit norms for blogging exist, bloggers are free to use the basic structure of architectural norms as a vehicle for whatever stories, opinions or ideas they might wish to display. But lack of norms significantly complicate the interpretive process, making it difficult for bloggers to share an understanding of what each is expressing. These misunderstandings can lead to greater conflicts, and affect the utility of the blog space as a site for productive or meaningful discourse. Yet, the need for shared norms should be measured relative to the purpose of the blog and its intended audience.

While it is true that many of these issues are shared with other digital environments, up until now, there has been no space of personal expression and self-presentation with the combination of relatively wide and rapid adoption, emergent norm formation complicated by unclear nomenclature and an unknown audience. Architectural norms form the foundation of shared understanding. Emergent norms arise to fill in the gaps left by architectural norms, and will eventually become more explicit and more widely known as meanings thicken and harden in transmission to the second generation of users. Technologies for understanding a blog's audience will improve, but users will need to adapt to the notion that an individual act of creation can also simultaneously be a public one. And readers will need to learn that even the most

"true," "real" and authentic blogs are just as constructed as other forms of self-presentation. In the end, blogs are rarely a space of local, national or global discourse. Instead, the vast majority of bloggers use blogs to share the ongoing narratives of their daily lives, one entry at a time.

Of course, there is still much to learn about bloggers and their audience. Future research might expand this particular project to a larger, more random sample. Research may also look more explicitly at the modes of norm formation among groups of bloggers connected by a web of links rather than by a structured webring linked by shared, explicit norms. In particular, a longitudinal study of norm formation over time might shed light on the exact process by which bloggers form and understand norms and shared meanings. Regardless of the form of future research on this topic, one thing seems certain: that blogs and blogging is not a "flash in the pan" phenomenon, but one that is sure to remain popular, filling in a niche of its own between personal diary and public broadcast.

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Chapter 9. Appendix

A. Recruitment Language for Blogging Project

Blog Postings:

[Please note: blog authors may alter the recruitment language to match the voice of their blog, and other bloggers whom I have not necessarily asked to post a recruitment post may do so, even without my knowledge or control. However, most bloggers will link back to the standard language of the original post, the first posting listed below.]

Blogging Project

I am writing a thesis for the Program. I'm looking to interview bloggers who keep journal-style blogs--in which they blog relatively frequently about something or many things that are important to them. Blogs must also have a comment function of some kind currently enabled.

I want to talk with you about why you do what you do, why it is important to you and the kinds of expressive choices that you make on your blog. Do you feel constrained

by the tools in your blogging software? Who do you tell about your blog? What do you say about yourself in your blog? Who do you think reads it? And more.

If you think you might be interested in participating, please let me know in the comments or send an email to me here.

[A shorter version]

Bloggers wanted

If you haven't done so already, please read and consider this request for interview subjects.

B. Pre-Interview Questions for the Blogging Project

Please intersperse your responses below. If you have more than one blog,

please answer the relevant questions (5-11) for each blog.

1. What is your name (first and last)?

2. How old are you:

3. What is your sex?

4. In which city and state do you live?

4a. Please describe your occupation:

5. What is the URL(s) for your blog or blogs? Please indicate the URL for your main

blog (if you are able to specify) if you have more than one.

6. Do you have a feedback function (like comments or a tagboard) enabled on your

blog? If yes, please describe.

7. How long have you been blogging? Years _____ months_____

8. How long have you kept your current blog(s)? Years _____ months_____

9. About how frequently would you say you post to your blog?

10. Does your blog have a theme? (e.g.; knitting, running, weight loss etc), if yes, please describe the theme.

11. Do you post to your blog under a pseudonym? If yes, what is it?

C. Email Text to Potential Participants and Consent Language

Dear_____ ,

Hello! Thanks again for your interest in my thesis project. As you already know, I am conducting a study of bloggers and blogging for my Masters Thesis project at Georgetown University, in the Communications, Culture and Technology department. The study involves answering this email, and participating in a recorded interview of approximately an hour in length, with me. Below I have included a basic consent form and a consent form for my use of an image of your blog in any write up I do of this research. I have also attached a Word file to this email with a few short questions about you and your blog. Please answer the questions and then attach the file to your reply email. If you are uncomfortable with or have problems with the attachment, please email me and I'll cut and paste the questions into an email for you.

In order to participate, I must have your consent (indicated by replying to this email with an "x" next to the appropriate statement in the interview consent document) for the interview. The second consent statement is for the capture of an image of your blog. You can still participate without consenting to the use of an image of your blog.

Please add an "x" next to the appropriate statement on the image use consent form and return it along with the interview consent statement in an email. Please reply to both statements and include both in your reply email, regardless of whether or not you wish to participate in each. And finally, please include the entire text of the consent statements in your reply to me.

I look forward to hearing back from you! As soon as I get your reply email (to alenhart@gmail.com), we'll set up a time for our interview.

Consent to participate in an interview:

I agree to a personal interview with Amanda Lenhart. I understand that my participation in this interview is entirely voluntary, and I may discontinue my participation at any time. My identity will remain confidential to the extent that I will not be identified by name in scholarly work that incorporates the interview.

____I agree to participate   ___I do not agree to participate (if responding by email)

_____Signature (if responding by fax or letter)

Consent for images from your weblog to be captured and used in the research:

I agree that Amanda Lenhart may capture an image of my weblog and use it for illustrative purposes in her research and any publications of it. My consent to the use of images from my blog is entirely voluntary, and I understand that I may revoke my consent to the use of images from my blog at any time. I also understand that I may still participate in the interview portion of the research without consenting to the use of images from my blog.

I understand that my identity will remain confidential to the extent that I will not be identified by name in scholarly work that incorporates the image, provided that I do not provide any identifying information on my personal weblog. My identity will be protected to the extent that I myself protect it on my public weblog.

_____I agree to have an image of my weblog used in this research

_____I do not agree to have an image of my weblog used in this research.

Thanks again and please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Best,

Amanda Lenhart

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D. Interview Questions for Ethnographic Research with Bloggers

Intro: *Hello! I'm Amanda Lenhart. Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this research. This research is being conducted as a part of a Masters Thesis project at Georgetown University. Everything that you tell me today will be kept confidential in so far as I am able and you request. Your responses will have identifying information removed and maybe pseudononymized.*

*Today you'll either need you to have a printout of today's front page of your blog, or you'll need to have access to the internet and a computer so that you can view your blog on screen, so that you can answer specific questions about it. (**Phone interviews—record consent**)*

First, can you give me 5 adjectives to describe yourself—just off the top of your head?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

So, tell me how and when you decided to start your blog?

Is this the first blog you've kept?

Do you feel that the blog reflects you, or something about you? Or a part of you?

What do you feel it says about you?

Can you give me 5 words to describe your blog?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Who have you told about your blog?

Who do you think reads your blog? How do you know?

Do you think that people you don't know about read your blog?

How many comments do you get on an average post?

How do you feel about the comments—do you like them?

Do they ever upset or annoy you?

How do you feel when you don't have comments?

Let's look at your blog for a few minutes. Can you look at a printout of your blog from today or view it on screen?

Did you use a template to create your blog?

How much were you able to modify the template?

What did you change or choose on your blog's layout and design?

Why did you pick this template?

Turning to the sidebar...

Tell me about how you decided what to put in your sidebar?

Tell me about your list of links? Who or what is on it?

How did you decide to put that link on the list?

Does that list of links say anything about you? What does it signify or mean to you?

Let's talk about your most recent blog entry. What motivated the post?

Do you ever think about your audience when you post?

Does it change what you write?

Has it impacted your design or layout?

Has your blog changed at all since you started it? How has it changed? (template or content or audience)?

What motivated or provoked that change?

On a slightly different topic:

Do you read other people's blogs?

Does what you read on other blogs influence what you post about?

Do you link to others blog postings online?

Do you feel like you "know" other bloggers?

Would say you have a relationship with other bloggers whose blogs you read?

How would you characterize that relationship?

What do you like about blogging?

What are your future plans for your blog?