

Women and Children Last: The Discursive Construction of Weblogs

Comments

I have often argued that the notion blogs are 'democratic' is rubbish. In fact it is because they are not democratic but rather privately owned that blogs are as successful as they have been.

In a forum, all voices are more or less equal (at least within the communication-by-megaphone context of people who participate in forums). The format of a forum itself encourages both digression and bad manners. A forum is like a noisy public meeting attended by semi-socialised people at which they try to shout each other down.

A blog however is the private property of the blog owner. They write whatever THEY want to write about. That does not make it 'democratic' however, because the owner can and does stand at the top of a qualitative hierarchy: the demos do not get to vote on what I write. The message is simple and implicit: "Don't like what I've got to say? Well clear off then!" The commenters can comment but they are clearly subordinate to the writer of the article upon which they are commenting for that is what they are commenting about. Moreover, the blog owner can delete offensive or off-topic comments or just comments they dislike if that is how they want to run things. This is no more 'democratic' than holding a party in your house but reserving the right to throw out badly behaved guests.

No, it is the private and several nature of blogs which makes them interesting and of higher quality than forums. Democracy has nothing to do with why blogs do or do not work and neither does 'equality' for that matter. Some people simply have more interesting things and are more articulate and equality within that context is meaningless.

Posted by: Perry de Havilland at July 5, 2004 06:25 PM

It looks to me as though Mr. de Havilland has read the first paragraph of our essay -- at most. Had he read the whole thing, he would have seen that the sense of 'democracy' and 'equality' that we intend has to do with the demographics of bloggers -- who is blogging -- and how that is represented in discourses about blogs, rather than with the power dynamics within a single blog. So his comment rather misses the point.

That said, we agree with Mr. de Havilland's observation about the "private and several nature of blogs" (see our January 2004 HICSS paper, "Bridging the gap: A genre analysis of weblogs", in which we said much the same thing). The fact that blog authors maintain control over an online space which others can visit and interact with the author in on the author's terms would seem to be a big part of the appeal of blogging.

Posted by: Susan Herring at July 11, 2004 07:50 PM

i am master degree(industrial management)
i want continue in phd in your univercty
learn with teach in there

i am teaching in colege now
your friendly
jalaly

Posted by: hamzeh jalaly at July 15, 2004 10:19 AM

Susan et al: I'm interested in what you see as the role of audience in discourse around blogging.

It seems that the vast universe of personal reflection blogs go un-visited by wider audiences, whereas the male-dominated filter blogs have gained more of a following.

Is audience a function of discourse? i.e., do the dominant blogs gain audience through their establishment within the discourse? And, how important is audience in assessing the value of blogs?

Posted by: Rebecca Reynolds at July 28, 2004 09:11 PM

We (the four authors of this piece) have been talking about these issues backchannel, so I'm going to summarize a little bit.

The measurement problem. How does one measure audience - comments, links, backchannel discussions?

Does "audience" lie with the *target* of the text written by an author, or in the demographics of the actual readers who're consuming, interpreting, and responding to a hunk of text? These things aren't necessarily at odds with each other - there's quite a bit of simultenaity involved in this contrast.

Is audience omnipresent - does it (for whatever variant definition of 'audience' we choose to adopt), or can it exist independently of the author or of the readers?

Assessing the "value" of blogs is a thorny problem. To whom are these texts valuable, and for what purposes? Are the valuable as the thing-in-itself, or is the social interaction between author and reader what is actually being valued?

Are blogs valued for their content, or for the connection to a larger social network (and, in some sense, the world beyond one's own community...)? Both? Neither?

Are there differences between the audiences for personal journal weblogs and the audiences for filter blogs? Are those differences quantifiable? If so, how? Via demographics? Via ethnographic surveys in which we ask weblog readers to report their selection criteria for 'interesting' reading? Mixed methodologies?

Unfortunately, "audience" is a concept that's quite deeply entrenched into Western minds - our approach to rhetorical audience hasn't changed significantly since Aristotle. This makes it rather difficult to reimagine it, and even more difficult for those reimaginings to gain significant traction in the world.

Posted by: elijah at August 4, 2004 06:49 PM

I think your paper raises some interesting and important issues but I would like to clarify an argument you made about my presentation at AOIR. I was initially in another session (with men, I believe) but I requested to be changed as the focus of my paper changed from my initial abstract. So, I don't think you could argue we were relegated there as women. Also, to address your concern about the title of my session - my paper wasn't really about blogging, rather it was about livejournal as a community and a site of knowledge creation/sorting. At that time (and this was reflected in other papers presented there) livejournal (wrongly) was not being considered a blog. I'd also like to mention that there was a session dedicated to gender issues and technology at AOIR 2003 which I was very impressed with.

Posted by: kate raynes-goldie at November 10, 2004 07:21 PM

Kate, we weren't intending to suggest that your papers at AoIR were put in a separate session because you were female. Rather, we took it as suggestive that research on personal journals-- which happened (not coincidentally?) to be carried out by women--was outside the mainstream of blog research. True, LJ wasn't identifying itself as "blogging" yet, but that doesn't explain why none of the papers in the other sessions focused on personal journal-type blogs, which constituted the overwhelming majority of blogs even then.

Posted by: Susan Herring at November 10, 2004 08:19 PM

susan - i think that's an interesting point... Livejournal is much more associated with personal (rather than serious/professional blogs) and i think that is why it's often not counted as being a real "blogging" service.

but... i should also add that my paper wasn't really on the personal aspects of Livejournal, rather it was about knowledge creation/sorting. but then again, perhaps that area of research is also equally gendered?

Posted by: kate raynes-goldie at November 21, 2004 12:32 AM

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