



Personal Publication and Public Attention

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Weblogs and the Dilemma of Academia

The Internet brings that which never before was visible into the light of the day, mingling public information with private tidbits from which the public should perhaps be spared. Particularly, weblogs have been said to be private journals and diaries exposing what should rather have been kept in [a drawer](#) (Orlowski, 2003). This article is dedicated to this twilight zone of intimate confessions and professional information, and the political implications of the current academic debate concerning personal publication.

What makes weblogs a genre different from the autobiography, the diary, the researcher's journal or any other pre-Internet writing? We recognize the weblog through the connections between text fragments, within one blog, but also to other texts available online. This means both existing connections and potential connections: those made by the writer and those made by the reader, as the reader again becomes writer and links to the weblog from his or her own piece of work - frequently a weblog. While weblogs have many non-digital predecessors, blogs cannot live outside of the computer. They are ergodic texts (Aarseth 1997), and demand the assistance of technology in order to be created and used.

Academic Internet users and users with a high level of what Pierre Bourdieu calls cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 12 and 114), originally heavily dominated the World Wide Web. Through the late nineties early users could be seen bemoaning the decline of quality of online communication as "the hordes" invaded the net. One popular provider, AOL, had 4.5 million users in 1995 (AOL, 2003) and the total number of internet users at the same time was estimated to be 16 million (MIDS, 1996). It is obvious that AOL contributed heavily to the growth of Internet users from 1995 and up to 1999 and that this must have changed the communication online.

In this "barbarised" environment weblogs grew from being a free service to become the semi-commercial toy of common web users. Now the most common Internet user is still "young, white, employed, well-educated, wealthier, and suburban" ([Greenspan, 2003](#)). This means that we may expect the standards against which the common blog-user will be measured to remain that of the bourgeoisie rather than that of the avant-garde at one end or the working-class or petit-bourgeoisie at the other end. A large amount of what can be found online is still, however, rather an expression of the "middle-brow" rather than "high-brow" arts. Within the modernistic paradigm the common progression of art is from the avant-garde to the cultural elite, and, then, if it catches on, it goes from being a high-brow art to a middle-brow art, such as the photography with the mass production of the rapidly cheaper and simpler cameras. The Internet in general can be said to have taken a similar path: from the economic, political and academic elite networks to the public networks through the mass production of the necessary technology. The rapid diffusion of technology and computer know-how has changed this original direction of creativity. Weblog software and blog clients are tools to meet the needs and interests of users with a low amount of specialised knowledge of how to communicate online, and are often used by a wide range of users with little communicative sophistication. The simplicity of these tools, however, also make them very useful for specialists who have much knowledge of certain areas, but little time and opportunity to learn about online publishing - such as scholars. The academic interest of the weblog can be understood as an attempt at taking it from a middle-brow towards

a high-brow art - and through this legitimize our own claim at cultural capital and academic authority as we show mastery of what we have just elevated.

This introduces the academic paradox. When academia focuses on a certain cultural expression, this expression ceases to be characterized by its popular practice and becomes understood through the typologies of the various disciplines. This academic paradox is expressed by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in their *Reproduction* (1990b) as the twofold arbitrariness of pedagogic action: "All **pedagogic action** (PA) is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is an imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990b, p.5). In this context this means that studying and writing about a phenomenon within a pedagogic or academic setting inevitably means exercising symbolic violence: imposing meaning according to one particular system of understanding and disregarding an unknown universe of potential alternative meanings.

Blogs in Common Use

The common practice of blogging is rarely dominated by clear, touching prose, deep academic thinking or political debate. Still, while several blogs may seem to be insignificant in the larger discussions or within scholarly or ideological discourse, they play different roles within the public sphere. This public sphere can, according to Jürgen Habermas (1971), be split in a literary sphere and a political sphere. The 19th century literary sphere, with its preoccupation with expressions of culture: literature, paintings, plays, music, existed in conjunction with the political public sphere. Males of "some substance," with property or other economic means, or more rarely social and cultural capital, dominated the political sphere. Women had no "substance," and to be, for instance, a female writer in Norway in this period was considered most unseemly, offering them no accepted public arena in which to practice their skills of writing and discourse.

Among the few women who did write, we find Conradine Dunker. She used a semi-public form of letter writing for the first draft of her recollections, later published as *Gamle Dage (Old Times)*. She wrote letters to her brother, who let the letters circulate among his friends, some of whom were poets and other literary adept readers (Hareide, 1999, p. 14). It was accepted that women participated in the literary public sphere through her writing, particularly when her "official" reader and target for her writing was her brother, the astronomer Christopher Hansteen. When Jorun Hareide compares Conradine's letters to her brother with the letters to her daughter, it is quite obvious that Conradine Dunker writes the letters to her brother for publication while the letters to her daughter are private, containing intimate confessions. Interestingly the letters to her daughter are partly in French, as if writing in a different language permits her to discuss more intimate thoughts with less embarrassment (Hareide, 1999, p. 13). The letters to her brother approach the semi-public nature of the weblog: a personal and private genre that is available to a much larger group of readers, not all of them known to the writer. Even the readership is similar: a more or less loosely linked group of people with similar interests. Where the letters of Conradine Dunker were passed from hand to hand, the links to a weblog pass from site to site. Perhaps the weblogs today have the same function as the literary sphere of the 19th century: a place to train for a wider, more political public sphere.

Within the Habermasian theory of the public the main task of the political sphere is to make the ruling body appear to be legitimate and give it credibility. This is a similar point to what Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron (1990b) argue in their criticism of pedagogical authority: criticism strengthens the institution which permits criticism. The western political ideal is democracy, and one of the most important functions of democracy is the inhabitants' freedom of speech. Only through permitting criticism can any democratic authority be legitimate, and it is this understanding that confirms the importance of the independent established media.

Common blogs can be tools of political criticism, but would more likely belong in the literary sphere rather than the political sphere of the 19th century publics. The literary sphere was open to all educated participants, women, artists, academics, and not just to the businessmen and landowners. Blogs today are fairly, but not universally, available, much as the Salon of the 18th and 19th centuries (Mortensen and Walker, 2002). Blogs are only available to people of certain sophistication, comprising the ability to read and write, regular access to a computer and the training needed to structure thoughts and ideas into verbal expressions according to accepted rules. Within the western world I expect most weblog writers can be found among the petit bourgeoisie, although not a few of us have aspirations to climb and accumulate cultural, social and economic capital.

Weblogs in the Public Eye

Weblogs are part of a public arena, but exist between the personal diary and professional publishing. Technology defines weblogs only to the extent it supports a certain style and ease of publishing, unrelated to whether the writer is [Larissa in Sydney](#), writing a personal diary, [Anne in Toronto](#) developing her doctorate thesis online, or [Eric Alterman](#) of the MSNBC writing commentary at the MSN news site. The semi-publicness of blogs is used to deal with political issues, for instance, through the blogs of [presidents](#) or [civilians](#) with little formal power but strong opinions. Others play with the borderline between fiction and reality as in the case of [she's a flight risk](#). "Isabella" presents herself more aggressively real than does George Bush. The official presidential blog by George Bush's staff is signed "posted by GeorgeWBush.com." while [she's a flight risk](#) is signed simply "isabella." Isabella doesn't even use a capital letter "I"; she defaces herself through the writing of her name, as if she is trying to disappear but can't help herself, her storyline too strong not to resurface.

Isabella herself writes about her blog:

It's true, writing this is reckless. I don't know exactly why I do it. It's a catharsis of course. That's part of it. Keeping my story a little (but not totally) public is helpful. It reminds my family that it's harder than it used to be to just make me vanish into some reprogramming center somewhere. It helps me to stay in touch with the world as well. Flight is isolating. (...) I think I started writing for the company. I never expected this site to be popular or interesting. For awhile the site counter was broken and it didn't look like anyone at all was reading it. I wrote anyhow. (...) It's important that I write. I don't know why it is, but it is. That's about as much sense on the topic as I am going to make probably. (Isabella, 2003)

Despite her fantastic story, Isabella may be real. Sometimes, Internet stories "too good to be true" turn out to be real after all.

Damn the Pacific was the story of American Lane and Australian Stu, who made a website about their love affair, and blogged it while asking for support so they could travel and meet. At first glance it looked like the perfect scam. Stu had even had cancer, which seemed unpleasantly close to the Kaycee Nicole fiction. In September, 2001, the journalist Jenny Sinclair interviewed and brought pictures of Stu in Melbourne, proving the story true. However, today the only traces of this story exist in the blogs of those who [blogged about it](#) at the time (Mortensen, 2001). *Damn the Pacific* is no longer easily available and neither is Sinclair's news article.

Damn the Pacific was proved real by the news story. Isabella, or whoever the author is of [she's a flight risk](#), attempted something similar through an article in *Esquire*. The journalist John H. Richardson (2003) wrote about the reality of Isabella in "[The Search for Isabella V.](#)" In this article he described the moment when he saw Isabella: "Reading this story, you're still in that

symbolic world. But I'm not. I've stepped through the looking glass. This is real" (Richardson, 2003).

Where is Raed, *DamnthePacific.com* and *she's a flight risk* have made the public personal as well as the personal public. Readers followed the story of Salam Pax as he searched for his friend Raed in war-threatened Baghdad, and the drama of cultures in conflict became personal, subjective and understandable. Isabella spins a drama about fleeing her family where the common young adult frustration theme is lifted into a world of political conflicts and organized crime. The general and universal is made individual, and more than one critic of the Internet reads such developments as proof that the large narratives have collapsed and fragmented (Lyotard, 1979). These weblogs are, however, not a collapsed and fragmented narrative, but rather a new narrative: the story of an interconnected world, the tales of a new public sphere, the digital public.

This is part of the nature of weblogs: a personal expression of perhaps not community but an understanding of connectedness. To post online is to declare that you are part of something larger, even if the post is just in order to whine about dinner or about having lost a boyfriend. To study weblogs should not just be a study of form and technicalities, but of interconnectedness. Some research is directed towards this, and we have systems online like [Blogdex](#) revealing the spread of certain links, [World as a blog](#) making visible the geographic positions of blogs, or [Blogstreet](#) displaying connections, links and preferences. These are, however, limited, as are all automated systems, and while they display certain links, they don't display the reason for these links. The sensations behind the choices, the sensual element of blogging is beyond the tools of the pure gaze, and cannot be broken down into standardized categories or organized according to strict formal rules. These belong to the barbarians, and can only be studied by understanding and accepting involvement as a quality of the methodology and not a problem for the analyst.

Bourdieu and the Matter of Taste

In January, 2004, there was a discussion of categories in blogs among academic bloggers. Danah Boyd (2004a) excluded journals and diaries [when she talked of blogs](#), and with Liz Lawley she expressed the need for a conference on [how blogs should be classified](#) (2004b). Categories, rules of form, studies of genre and structure, these are the criteria of a pure taste as opposed to the barbaric taste (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 30-31). While the barbaric taste values sensuous enjoyment, the object of pleasure appreciated for the sake of emotional or immediate pleasure, the pure taste is for the educated and culturally sophisticated, those who have learned to appreciate the abstract values, the rules underlying an abstract painting, the play with genre and the understanding history and context.

In order to display a pure gaze while studying blogs, the weblog needs to be described and contextualized in a manner that positions it as an object of sophistication and culture. This happens through the language of learning and criticism. This article, in this collection of similar articles, is an example of this process, as is the increasingly active and at times even aggressive discussion surrounding the genre of blogs. This development indicates a phenomenon that is too useful and too powerful to leave to the barbaric assessment of "common people"; it needs to become more than "cookies or cocktails":

In the past, the masses did not have access to art; music, painting, and even books, were pleasures reserved for the rich. It might even have been supposed that the poor, the "common people," would have enjoyed them equally, if they had had the chance. But now that everyone can read, go to museums, listen to great music, at least on the radio, the judgement of the masses about these things has become a reality and through this it has become clear that great

art is not a direct sensuous pleasure. Otherwise, like cookies and cocktails, it would flatter uneducated taste as much as cultured taste. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 31)

This is a dilemma to the scholar who wishes to study new genres, particularly genres developing at the edge of the commercial, political, artistic or academic spheres. In order for an object to be worthy of study, it needs to flatter a cultured taste, and not a barbaric one. Trained to peak performance within a certain system, scholars compete to colonize the symbolic area of this new phenomenon:

In any given social formation, the agencies which objectively lay claim to the legitimate exercise of a power of symbolic imposition and, in so doing, tend to claim the monopoly of legitimacy, necessarily enter into relations of competition, i.e. power relations and symbolic relations whose structure expresses in its own logic the state of the balance of power between the groups or classes. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990b, p. 18)

In the struggle to legitimize the claim to cultured taste and symbolic power, scholars revert to forcing traditional concepts on new phenomena, rather than exploring these phenomena from their practice, reporting, not categorising, observing and experiencing rather than pinning them down. An excellent argument for the user-oriented, immersive and perhaps even barbaric approach to studying weblogs is expressed by "the wonderchicken" in this comparison between blogs and punk rock:

I felt much the same way about the weblogging thing, a couple of years back, especially when my writing began to get noticed and linked and emailed-about and commented-upon by people whose writing and thinking I in turn respected, and I started to understand how many communities there were within the greater world of the webloggers. There was a wild spirit of creativity running through the wires, it seemed to me, and I found myself a part of a loosely-joined (nudge, wink) group of dauntingly smart and well-spoken people, who didn't seem, for the most part, to object to my more outrageous turns of phrase. (Stavrosthewonderchicken, 2004)

Stavrosthewonderchicken defends [the sensual pleasure](#) of blogging. Writing and experiencing the writing, the community, through emotional and social links and a feeling of belonging, this is a description of blogging as a middle- or even low-brow art. As such it opposes the hegemony of the cultural elite, and it serves the same purpose as punk rock did in the late 1970s, early 1980s.

The development of increasingly complex blogging tools and the eagerness to define weblogs according to the software through which it is published is another expression of the opposition of pure and barbaric taste applied to weblogs. An example is the development of Movable Type, with comments' systems, trackbacks and tools for defining categories. This has become the measuring stick for the sophisticated blog, and in some definitions of weblogs these technical aspects are prominent, in the way art forms are defined by the sophistication of materials and techniques. We can understand this as another expression of the need to define weblog form rather than weblog intent or sensation. Defining weblogs through the software and technical solutions creates instant exclusion through terms that appear to be neutral and obvious, but which also work as constructions to exclude those without a certain level of technical skills or the understanding of the significance of these different software tools.

Colonizing the Net: Cultural Arrogance and Popular Use

So, is the academic attention to blogs the same as "selling out," the way punk-rockers sold out when they received public acclamation rather than evoke the sensation of disgust? The attention

given to weblogs in the media, elevating blogs to journalism or at least commentary, is one way of colonizing the field. If blogging can be defined within the known genres and boundaries, it can also be restricted and controlled according to known rules and made to submit to already predefined aesthetics.

This is not necessarily perceived as a problem at either end of the scale. The culturally dominant weblog users find the discussions stimulating, proving their knowledge and the purity of their taste, while the barbarians couldn't care less, not only unaware of the discussions of how to define and categorise a blog, but also totally uninterested. The group that cares are the socially and culturally mobile. In the quest for a voice, for power and influence and a way to define themselves in the upper middle class, or even among artists of the avant-garde, the blog can be a tool. The question is: will it be a tool for strict socialization and cultural oppression, with tight limits, or will it remain open for redefinition, for the individual expression and, not the least, for celebrating diversity and tolerance online?

There are steps scholars can take in order to preserve the understanding of the sensuous experience of weblogs. Defining weblogs should allow for the users' experiences, not just for technical or overly formal typologies. The [weblog definition](#) by Jill Walker (2003) is an example of a definition written from observing the practice of a large community generously, a definition that both describes the general practice and the most prominent features connecting certain online publications, while at the same time underlining the multiplicity of the same practices:

Weblog

A weblog, or *blog, is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first (see temporal ordering). Typically, weblogs are published by individuals and their style is personal and informal. Weblogs first appeared in the mid-1990s, becoming popular as simple and free publishing tools became available towards the turn of the century. Since anybody with a net connection can publish their own weblog, there is great variety in the quality, content, and ambition of weblogs, and a weblog may have anywhere from a handful to tens of thousands of daily readers. (Walker 2003)

Dave Winer's [definition](#) from 2001 is somewhat more formal, but also still general enough to permit for a varied user experience. The main conflict between Walker's and Winer's definitions can be found in the way that Winer in his definition *insists* that weblogs are for individuals, not for organisations. This excludes such blogs as [GeorgeWBush.com](#). A description of weblogs which defines their form much more exhaustingly appears in [Winer's 2003 description](#) where he presents in detail the many formal aspects of a weblog, making it that much more exclusive. This is an example of a definition that adheres to a pure taste, giving a measuring stick against which websites can be measured and then criticized according to certain criteria.

Weblogs: Expanding Limits

This leaves us, the scholars, facing a dilemma. Bourdieu and Passeron have studied this dilemma within academic institutions. In the educational system, the system legitimizes itself through creating tools for self-criticism. In this manner, criticism, rather than destabilising the hegemony disseminated through the educational system, reinforces it (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990b, p. 61). This study of reproduction appears to trap a scholar in an unbreakable trap, where the authority the scholar wields in her own study of the meaning of society is supplied through the doxa of the society within which study ensues. The fact that this structure permits criticism legitimates it, the same way as the criticism of the democratic government in the political sphere of Habermas legitimates the government it criticises.

How do we break out of such a paradoxical situation? Within the universe of Habermas and Bourdieu, meaning is taught at the micro-level. The knowledge of how to reveal these processes is only available to those who have gone through the academic process until they begin to understand, but also are socialized. A somewhat more optimistic approach emphasizes that this is a naturalized state of affairs, not a natural one. As long as we address a naturalized phenomenon we have options, if we can imagine them.

So, how do we imagine a way to study blogs not colonized by the dominant culture? This is a matter of conviction. To a certain degree all cultural criticism is a matter of belief. Those who find that society is gendered will claim that the solution can be found in studying gender-differences, while others find that the alternative to the hegemonic study lies with the non-dominant ethnicities. Common to these approaches is the focus on the user. Gender-studies, ethnic culture studies and Marxist theory underline the importance of the context within which a medium is used, by whom and to what purpose.

Ultimately, communication happens as human beings create meaning from a set of signals which we can call signs (or any other arbitrary collection of symbols we choose). The practice of receiving and communicating this meaning is where we need to look, if we wish to make an attempt at breaking out of the symbolic universe within which we have all been trained. Weblogs and bloggers have one advantage in this attempt. The computer brings otherwise distant cultures closer, and through the knowledge of other cultural hegemonies the scholar has a chance to, if not break out of the present cultural hegemony, then at least widen the area of what is understood as naturalized rather than "natural." While we cannot escape the codes within which we create meaning, perhaps we can expand them through learning about other meanings and practices.

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