

Promiscuous Fictions¹

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With little exaggeration it might be claimed that the primary emotion associated with popular thinking about blogging is *anxiety*.² The number of bloggers and blogs is unwieldy and amorphous: to my mind a sublimity that is often associated with the innumerable swamps journalistic and other commentators who believe that one must, perforce, make some generalization about blogs, all blogs, every blog. Is there something that could be said about every blog? Where would one start? I imagine it this way: it is as if "the book" was a new technology and the Library of Congress's contents were published at once. Surely there is something to be said about a phenomenon, practice, or a technology as ubiquitous and consequential as books.³ Yet most theorists (and certainly most social commentators) don't feel the need to make sweeping statements about books, all books, every book, though there are interesting things to be said about them as media, as objects. But a blog, any blog, demands such a statement, yes? A newly-coined word about an innovative form demands a new accounting of its impact, for good or ill, though one suspects perhaps most believe ill.⁴ From reading news accounts, and at times from blogs themselves, one finds oneself slogging through much apprehension and fear about the phenomenon. The nature of the threat's not known, but by many accounts the Blogosphere is a dark, murky ball; gazing into it for too long makes one lose a sense of self. It is better that the mass of humanity stop writing, creating, and re-constructing in a form that creates an unmanageable or indescribable public--if not many fragmented publics--in that way that only indiscriminate publication can do.

I don't believe this, of course. Blogs are vital, necessary. The short, impacted history of blogging is difficult to recapitulate though well-documented. It is well-documented partly because of the self-referential nature of the practice and partly because of services such as [Google](#). Google is a dense hybrid of a search space that gestures at once to a snapshot, a "now," and as well to an archive that points back to what is because of what was. Google's algorithms are interesting, but for the moment I will speak only of the form of its report. This is my reading of the form of an entry from [a search](#):

[bentkid. only free when i'm on my knees.](#)

... posted by **tyler** -- on 1/21/2004 01:00:00 PM | [link](#) | [Add a comment](#). Tuesday, January 20, 2004. ... posted by **tyler** -- on 1/20/2004 09:16:32 AM | [link](#) | [Add a comment](#). ...

[www.bentkid.com/](#) - 27k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

That first line is the "now" and the *cached* is the "then." Admittedly it is not a deep history, but it is important that at least these snapshots exist, and that something like a family likeness, the hallmark of keywords, can be traced out along those *via electronica*--each path, carefully manicured, and marked by the sign-post of "similar pages." My immediate point is that anxiety produced by the belief that something needs to be said about blogs, all blogs, is a subspecies of the reaction to the thick of information that pours out of Google's search space, and ultimately the Internet itself. There's so *much* of it, what is called up by every query. A search engine is a periscope on a complexity you can't imagine. You catch your breath and reach for an archaic language. Isn't this a vasty deep? One drowns. [That game](#) where you try to type into Google a phrase that will bring up one and only one reference, this is the obverse of this anxiety. It is a small, playful way of addressing a concern that is about managing what is, in fact, unmanageable. Take infinity and make it one.⁵

What is at stake here in accounts of the complexity-space of blogging and the structure of a Google entry is the representation of (and what amounts to the same thing, access to) what is called "the deep Web": "the great load of databases, flight schedules, library catalogs, classified ads, patent filings, genetic research data and other 90-odd terabytes of data that never find their way onto a typical search results page."⁶ What is at stake is not simply what can find its way into the top ten results or so, or even the first two pages, but rather how to make understandable to the human imagination the relationship of the deep Web to propositions about a limited field of intelligibility, bound by the finitude of human attention and comprehension. The Google entry -- indeed, all search entries -- are a shell game of sorts, the substitution of the one for the many, a not always articulated understanding that *this* entry is meant to be representative of not only the (self-reinforcing) importance of a node of information in the global information network, but stands as a metaphor for those subnets.

I believe it would be a mistake, however, to talk definitively of a "deep Web" and a "surface Web": depth is a metaphor for complexity, and complexity is the ever-shifting, never-fully-present or representable state of the world for which we need to understand that our metaphoric is *all* that there is: the battle or debate to come to a proper, normal form for representative knowledge will be an on-going discussion, and will change not only under the pressures of new technologies or new algorithms, but also of the end-users understanding of his or her finitude. *Adequacy* is thus not simple a quantifiable attribute, solved by technology, mathematics, and information theory, but come to within how we make do with the knowledge that we possess in the form we possess it.

The anxiety, though, is in fact not new. The contemporary university could be said, again with little exaggeration, to be structured along the paranoid logics laid down by these anxieties: how is knowledge to be produced out of the infinite archive? Where is the proper place of knowledge production? Is there a way of teaching, of passing it on? Universities have insisted on "universities" as the answer. This is, in part, what it means to professionalize, and certainly what

it means to create bureaucracies to manage the production of knowledge. I want to suggest, however, that the anxiety about blogs is, in part, a goading realization that the answer is, if not wrong, at least inadequate. It is the contention of this essay that blogs are a vibrant space of knowledge production, certainly outside of those protocols, such as peer review, that universities have come to use to "ensure" the standards of knowledge, but not *outside of standards as such*, as is often claimed. Blogging shares with peer review an insistence that knowledge production is a communal effort. It is an effort that depends on and creates an audience, or as I will discuss shortly, a public.

To make my point here I want to draw attention to queer blogging as a crystallization of a potent form of intellection and "theory making" that unfolds outside of the institutional and concomitant cultural/knowledge boundaries of the modern university. The production of knowledges and attendant strategies for queer living is a self-conscious attribute of the blogs that interest me. The people who write them, they write to live. I want to focus on one prominent blog. Jonno.com represents one of the best of a diverse group--in age, race, class, and gender--that have emerged from the complex and uneven textual and cultural strategies of weblogging.

It is helpful for me to entertain the notion of the net as an archive used strategically by queer sites in patterns of accretion and re-articulation--often covered by the word "queering"--of cultural artifacts that sometimes include and sometimes exclude representations of non-normative sexual and cultural subjectivities. (Though the present comments are about blogging and knowledge production, I would certainly extend this definition to other artistic practices, such as digital photography/pastiche. The pictures that I've used to illustrate this article are by one such queer practitioner/artist, [Wah Lee](#).) This strategy of accretion and re-articulation⁷ without regard to proper boundaries I will call "promiscuity," a loaded word, I realize, but one that I hope will point towards a self-protective disregard of traditional notions of [copyright and cultural power](#). Google-tools and Google's search-space, that dense hybrid of "now" and "then," is the primary archive for most of these bloggers. A blogger's decision to accept or fend off Google's incorporation of their site(s) into its archive reflects the complex negotiation of queer (in)visibility and the consequences of putting "oneself" (whatever the framing narratives or conventions of blog writing) into general circulation.

Yes. Well, perhaps you would love for me to tell you that under critical scrutiny anxiety disappears. But it doesn't. The impulse to refresh a site, to read and re-read the same page of a blog, to hit the refresh button on a site constantly, obsessively, is both symptom and cause. To hit "refresh" is to acknowledge/create/feel/manage its desires/consumption/learning/voyeurism/pleasures of, about, or around that blog. When a blogger consults his or her statistics about hits/visits/pages, s/he reinforces the need to create content that will induce those measurements of a public's attentions. (Even a public of one.) Anxiety may be the primary emotion associated with giving accounts of blogging, and perhaps of blogging itself--Do I updated enough? Why don't I write? Who is reading me? Why aren't there more? What do they think about what I say? Have I said enough about enough--but I think that it is a generating affect; it is an engine to the creation of knowledge, and a central mechanism for creating a public.

A representative controversy: the granularity of publics



Most complaints about blogging tend to focus on the criteria by which to judge them good or bad. Take the example of one much noted article, "[The Good, The Bad, and the Bloggy](#)" by law professor and creator of the widely-read website [Instapundit](#), Glenn Harlan Reynolds. Reynolds' article was itself a response to [an article](#) by Dave Winer, published under the auspices of the the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School, that attempted to define and categorize weblogs. The purpose of Reynolds's article is to formulate the proper system of valuation by which to measure blogs as good or bad. Reynolds writes,

Blogs come in many different flavors and styles - though political and tech blogs get the most attention, there are many other varieties (including the huge but largely ignored mass of gay blogs) and what makes one good or bad naturally varies accordingly.

Reynolds' formulation of the nature of the Blogosphere assumes that something like a center can be measure by a metric, "the most attention." But this gesture to blogs loosely organized around both identity (gay) and object of desire (men) is striking in part because discussions of the structure of the Blogosphere tend to sidestep how sexuality and desire organizes however loosely rings of affiliations among bloggers, gay, straight, or otherwise.

"The Good, the Bad, and the Bloggy" was much read and discussed within the on-line queer world. John D'Addario, a prominent and influential queer thinker and blogger, responded angrily in his blog [jonno.com](#) to Reynolds' aside. Jonno's [original response](#) says sharply, snarkily, "Yeah, well, [we](#) don't know who [you](#) are, either." This is a calculated, deliberately ironic statement. Buried in that "we," Jonno deploys a link to an [extraordinary catalogue of weblogs](#), loosely defined as queer, a "mass" whose size suggests that far from being easily dismissed as part of the periphery of the web, outside of some center that gets "the most attention," in fact is its own "center," or area of focus for blog readers and blog writers.

Queer bloggers, like all bloggers, rely on the *link* as the primary mode of making a gesture that is both speech and action, personal and impersonal, towards the blogs and other on-line sources that they read. These lists are mined by the readers of a blog for other points of view, stories of interest, or viewpoints that they find compelling. The lists grow large and ragged, and are constructed haphazardly, adding new blogs by sticking them at the end of the list. Often, catalogues or filters take up the need to systematize access to blogs based on content and interaction styles--such as through commenting systems or the ability to join the site to post ones own comment. (Metafilter is an example of the latter style.) [Queerfilter](#) is one such project

that extrapolated from the tangle of at times disjoint and at times overlapping set of a blogger's links to other queer blogs.

This mass of bloggers constitutes a congregation of public intellectuals whose work touches on sexuality, but also addresses political and even technological matters. Weblogs, in Jonno's terse but richly suggestive sentence, are not necessarily or even properly defined by content but rather by audience: "Seriously, for all his smarts, it seems Mr. Reynolds still doesn't get what makes blogging such a fascinating and truly revolutionary medium: it's as much about a plurality of audiences as it is one of voices. Warbloggin' ain't the only game in town, cupcake."

The campy, queer aside--calling Reynolds "cupcake"--draws Reynolds into the sphere of queer bloggers, however momentarily. But Jonno's critique of Reynolds is precisely a recognition that blogging, by the form of its address, creates its own public. I draw the word "public" from the social theoretical and critical theory work of Jürgen Habermas as rearticulated by two important theorists: feminist political theorist Nancy Fraser, especially her "Rethinking the Public Sphere: a Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," and queer cultural theorist Michael Warner in his seminal *Publics and Counterpublics*.⁸ As Warner explains, "The idea of a public, as distinct from both *the* public and any bounded totality of audience, has become part of the common repertoire of modern culture," and has some distinct features. These features are shared by blogs, and for the moment I will use the word public as a synonym for blogs. First, a "*public is self-organized*" (p. 67). "A public," Warner writes, "is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Websites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed*" (p. 67, emphasis in the original). Secondly, "*The address of public speech is both personal and impersonal*" (p. 76). And lastly, for my purposes, a "*public is a relation among strangers*" (p. 74).

Blogging generates some of its confused responses precisely because US imaginary about media culture is dominated by broadcast media, from one point to a multitude. TV journalism, PBS documentaries, conservative talk radio, FOX News diatribes, newspaper commentaries--though a presumed public is addressed and thus created, broadcast by definition lacks the interactive mechanisms that would construct those important relations not just to the creators of the shows or the writers of the articles but among strangers, those that read and consume the cultural products. Indeed, it might be argued that it is broadcast media that drew attention to warblogging and techblogging, but for whatever reason "ignores" blogging about sexuality and culture. Jonno makes [the following comments](#) on the dust-storm around this issue:

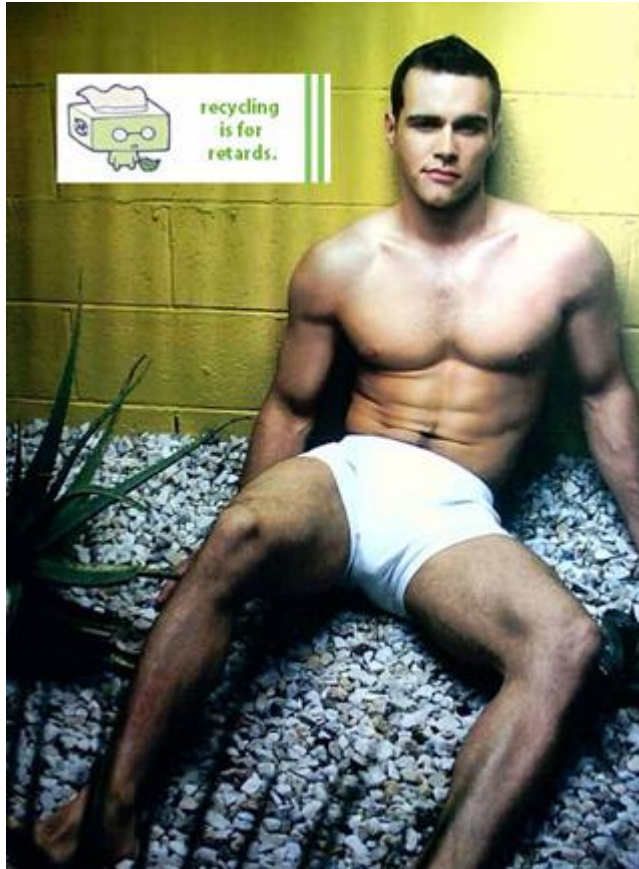
After thinking about the article over the last few weeks and having a few (unpublished) conversations and email exchanges with others (especially this righteous paisana) who've followed his writings more closely than I have, I'm willing to give Reynolds the benefit of the doubt and consider his remark as a rueful statement of fact (i.e., gay blogs are ignored, but they shouldn't be) instead of a value judgement [sic] (i.e., gay blogs are deservedly ignored): it was the word "ignored" that bought out the Bronx in me on behalf of my talented gay blogging brethren and ... er, sistren. We all have bad days when we get pissy over a perceived or unintentional slight, and that's what happened here.

But despite whatever else I may have conveyed in my initial fit(s) of self-righteous indignation, my real issue was, and remains, why "gay blogs" are (supposedly) ignored to begin with, and by whom. I think it has more to do with ignorance than anything else - as Joe points out, the blogging multiverse is akin to an archipelago (blogipelago?), something composed of many distinct elements that don't always communicate with one another, or are even aware of each others' presence. Which is a shame, because we all have something to gain from points of view which may not always coincide with our own.

I wish to draw attention to Jonno's point about the landscape of the Blogosphere, but more than that I want to claim here on behalf of Jonno's commentary on Reynolds' original article is that it is part of a system of communication where knowledge about so complex a thing as the Internet is created out of the very system of communication that makes up the object--i.e., unpublished conversations via instant messaging services and email exchanges with readers who became Jonno's interlocutors about a particular problem by reading his blog. It is dynamic, on-going, and a relation among strangers. Moreover, the question of audience, of a public, is crucial not simply because the presence of an audience might be said to justify the work that is done within the blog but because this audience is qualitatively different than others: it reads, interacts, writes to the author, who then rethinks the issue and blogs again, a cycle familiar to academics but rarely at the speeds made possible within this media. Its cycles are not smeared over weeks or months. It is not a "peer review" process as the university understands it, but it is a process of formulating an argument, sharing it with the world, and defending it or reformulating it based on that feedback. Argumentative, agonistic, conciliatory, and creative, queer blogging--and, indeed, perhaps all blogging--is a strategy of remaking and remarking, but not respecting by not questioning, the culture at large and even work that comes out of traditional academic settings, like the Harvard paper or Reynolds's remarks.

I should be explicit here that I think that the word "public" in my discussion does not describe some static, unitary collection of persons. Public is the on-going, unfolding history of readers--and within the ready and fluent power of the net and blog-tools, reader-writers--who come to interact with the blog. It is too easy to think of that public as codified by the blog-roll, or set of links at the side of the blog. Blog "rings" are certainly a convenient way to discuss the constitution of a blog's public, but I would caution that one should not mistake one for the other. In a sense a public created by a blog is phantasmic: it is a flickering, sometimes loyal but often changing set of readers and linkers. Even on one particular blog a link itself may rarely be clicked. The link might only suggest an affinity or sympathy that is rarely broached; sometimes the link on a blog, or the link in a browser is constantly (if not compulsively) clicked, even (or especially?) if the reader finds the writer challenging or infuriating.

"Public" is about reading but it also describes the incorporation by citation of writing and images that were created elsewhere, by another or others. It is the blog-makers calling to account the presence and opinions of others. One does not have to be aware of one's position in the constitution of a public to be a part of the conceptual space of that public. From my position, then, Sunstein's (2001) assertion that blogs and discussion groups can best be described by their supposed "balkanization" and "extreme points" of "like-minded people" who are "driven increasingly far apart, simply because most of their discussions are with one another" ⁹ is a mischaracterization of the complexity of the Blogosphere and the dynamics of citation, commentary, and readership. It may be true that links on a page point to like-minded sites, but in fact the ecosystem of blogs and the creation and sustenance of their publics cannot be inferred by these links alone.



Strikingly, queer knowledge making has always been a strategy of remaking and remarking: it is not simply recycling images and ideas, but rather *reconstruction*. From the publication of ['zines](#) from the 1950s onward, writing and thinking and communicating with an audience both created and bound by [non-normative sexualities, gender roles, and the problems of a hostile culture](#) are practices that have now been relocated within the academy, often under the aegis of queer theory, but that go on, vigorously and with intelligence outside the academy. Blogging, then, can fruitfully be read as an extension of an already diverse repertoire of cultural commentary, critique, and (re)creation: from drag to theater, from camp to novel writing, from photography to painting, to name only a few practices that draw on and re-present cultures hostile to same-sex pleasures and identities.¹⁰

Queer publics are in the late 20th century and early 21st century US context bound by the objects of mass cultural consumption (mass broadcast, for example) but also by the impulse to seek out that which one desires (men for men, for example) and others who will reflect, echo, or reinforce those world-views and desires. To my mind the irony about [Cass Sunstein's](#) worry that the web and its blogs are self-reinforcing, non-corrective echo chambers is that accounts such as his misunderstand the necessity of that function for the constitution, sustenance, and survival of many of the members of a group who are part of the "echo chamber." Not all members of a group occupy a static, non-problematic relationship to those cycles of articulation and reinforcement; moreover, often different members of an identity group will occupy the non-self-reflective, and deeply self-reinforcing position for a period of time precisely in order to correct other, often corrosive cultural or political problems, or to create a space for their members to be safe; or in a larger, political sense, correcting of other publics. Gay and lesbian identity politics and those who believe in (what some areas of the academy understand to be) "essentialist" positions are often necessary for those who wish to transition out of a cultural or social space hostile to the desires that are perhaps shared and articulated through that identity politics. They

also might live comfortably within those spaces. The fact of a blog and the dynamics of its publics do not determine before hand the necessary or probable history of its writer and readers.

A blog creates from the intractable cultural-archival space of the net a story about its readers, a shared cultural-discursive space, and its relationship to them. Friendships and relationships develop across words and images by people who have never met face to face, and a story emerges about a public, created from links and commentaries, thoughts, reactions, and words. It is a potent fiction with real consequences for desire and affect and learning among and from strangers. This is to say, it is a promiscuous fiction that binds us each to each, each to other; a fiction tethered to a desire to be read; a fiction that circulates among us because it gives each of us pleasure, that story that we have so many readers on such and such a day; that our hits mean we're hit on, and that we have a technology to quantify, to calculate, to graph the very measure of our desire. Queer blogging both creates and is created by a public; and its knowledges challenge those stories about what we think we know about the sublimity of the Blogosphere.

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¹All photo-collages are used by permission of Wah Lee, a blogger-photo manipulator who creates pastiches of her original digital photographs with found images, scanned magazine photos, and advertisements. Her work can be found at <http://www.freewebs.com/wahlee/>. I want to note that the upper-most piece is a photo-collage. Lee constructed the image by placing digital photographs of objects in her home in a grid pattern. I will say more about the piece shortly.

²This is certainly true in journalistic accounts of blogging: newspaper articles often spend some time explaining why it is a new medium that deserves a new word, and why anyone would do it at all. *Why* people blog is itself a different, and to my mind more complex question. An account of the production of blogs ("regular" blogs, photoblogs, group-blogs, etc.) is beyond the scope of my present comments.

³And, indeed, though the subject is deeply complex, histories dedicated to "the book" regularly attempt to negotiate statements about the implications of the materiality of books while taking into account the fact that "the book" is a complex set of objects, publication standards, social expectations, and reading practices. My point here is that rather than sweeping statements, blogs demand just as much nuance and trepidation.

⁴I won't recapitulate the history of blogging and journalistic and critical-theoretical reactions to the practice/genre. The history of blogging is well-documented, partly because of the nature of the genre and the presence of services such as Google. I will return to this subject shortly, but I want to point out that while Google is understood as a search space, to a greater or lesser extent it fulfills the function of archive. Standard accounts of the origins of weblogging have been given in Winer, and Bausch, Haughey, Hourihan, and Rebecca Blood's useful [Weblogs: A History and Perspective](#).

⁵The popular website [Metafilter](#) is an example of one such technology/site/[social practice](#) to manage and disseminate content.

⁶Wright, "In search of the deep Web," Salon, 9 March 2004.

⁷The dynamics of queer world making, accretion, are discussed at length in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You," the introduction to the volume *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (1997). Her strategy is to be "in a vastly better position to do justice to a wealth of characteristic, culturally central practices" in queer life "many of which can well be called reparative, that emerge from queer experience" in relation to a hostile culture (p. 25).

⁸See Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), and Fraser, "Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (1992).

⁹Sunstein, "Fragmentation and Cybercascades," *republic.com*, p. 66.

¹⁰Many fields share this understanding of the recycling of images and ideas, and the remaking of the world-view that holds those ideas together, or gives them their coherence. *Queer* as an adjective makes no claims to uniqueness of those techniques, moreover; it is an adjective that means to describe a radical empiricism, of sorts. It means to suggest that every description that is understood to be adequate is adequate *to or for someone*, never in isolation; that desire and identity are constantly produced and productive of other positions; and that these things unfold in time.