



## **Introduction: Weblogs, Rhetoric, Community, and Culture**

**Laura Gurak, Smiljana Antonijevic, Laurie Johnson, Clancy Ratliff, and Jessica Reyman, *University of Minnesota***

### **State of scholarship on weblogs**

During the past two decades, we have witnessed the introduction of many new digital spaces for writing and communicating, from hypertext, to chat rooms, to newsgroups, to discussion boards, to MOOS and MUDs, to wikis, to peer-to-peer file sharing networks. The proliferation of new spaces for communicating via the Internet has evoked scholarship in the fields of communication, rhetoric, composition, and writing studies from researchers seeking to address the social, rhetorical, and discursive implications. Recently, there has emerged a new object for study of great rhetorical impact: the weblog. The scholarly exploration of weblogs is still new, having up to this point taken place primarily at conferences. Some examples include [Computers and Writing 2003 and 2004](#), [Conference on College Composition and Communication 2004](#), the [Association of Internet Researchers 2003](#), and [Harvard Law School's BloggerCon](#), a conference devoted to "the art and science of weblogs." At these conferences, scholars have recognized that blogs are more than mere tools for communicating online; rather, they provide new possibilities for the Internet as a rhetorical space. Blogs, some would argue, have revolutionized the way we receive information and connect with each other in online environments. Enthusiasts claim that blogs allow anyone's voice to be heard and resist hierarchical modes of information dissemination and communication. While this idealist egalitarian model of the Internet has often been criticized, we find value in the power of blogs to forego the institutionalization of communicative practices and offer spaces for writing that are more collaboratively constructed than other online spaces, as bloggers freely link to, comment on, and augment each other's content. In this way, blogs allow for the possibility of developing new cultural practices of online communication in relation to previously established modes of ownership, authorship, and legitimacy of content and access to information.

Looking at blogs as rhetorical artifacts allows scholars to examine the ways in which they contribute to changing what it means to communicate online. To this end, the articles presented here view the blog through the lens of their social, cultural, and rhetorical features and functions. Through study of the language, discourse, and communicative practices of bloggers, the authors provide insight into weblogs as a means of representing and expressing the self, forming identity, facilitating student-centered learning, building community, and disseminating information. Research approaches range from personal reflections, to critical analyses of segments of blogs, to corpus studies of blogs, to quantitative studies of blogging activity. Building on each other by offering both in-depth descriptions and broader pictures, these articles provide a wide-ranging look at the rhetorical implications of blogging.

### **Definition of weblogs**

Before introducing the articles in this collection, we would like to take a moment to define what we mean by "weblogs," or "blogs" as they are often called. Of significance is the emergent nature of the blog as a genre; as Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd note in their article, "The appearance of a new genre is an event of great rhetorical interest because it means that the 'stabilized-enough,' a negotiated balance between innovation and decorum, has broken down

and a new one is under development." At this point in their development, blogs are best described as web sites that are updated frequently, most often with links to other sites and commentary on the other sites' content. The content of blogs combine musings, memories, jokes, reflections on research, photographs, rants, and essays, though we would argue that it is not the nature of the content that defines it. Blogs can be devoted to only one topic, or they can reflect what the author is interested in at any given time. They can have one author--authors of blogs are known as "bloggers"--or multiple authors. What characterizes blogs are their form and function: all posts to the blog are time-stamped with the most recent post at the top, creating a reverse chronological structure governed by spontaneity and novelty.

The first blogs were launched between 1994 and 1998. In 1997, Jorn Barger started using the term weblog to refer to his online journal, *Robot Wisdom*, and other authors of sites similar to his followed suit. Justin Hall's blog, *Links from the Underground*, dates back to 1994 (Bausch, Haughey, & Hourihan, 2002, p. 9). Bausch, Haughey, and Hourihan's book and Rebecca Blood's essay in *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture* describe the explosion of the blog when, in July 1999, several no-cost, easy-to-use weblog content management tools were released: Pitas®, Blogger®, and Gropsoop®. Before the tools were released, most bloggers were web designers, software designers, and computer scientists, and keeping a blog required knowledge of hypertext markup language (HTML) and Java® tools. The new content management systems for blogs made posting to a blog no more difficult than sending an e-mail, which enabled many people at various levels of computer skill to create and maintain a blog. Evan Williams, the co-creator of Blogger®, addresses the growth in popularity of blogs in a February 28, 2001, interview with Giles Turnbull in *We've Got Blog*:

For the first couple months [after the release of Blogger®], we got 10-20 new users a day. We launched a new version in November of '99, after which we got a relatively large influx and were up to about 2,300 by the end of the year. Through last year, we averaged 20 to 40 percent growth per month, and that continues today. As of right now, there are 117,970 registered users. 19,582 of those signed up in January [2001] (Turnbull, 2002, p. 80).

With the introduction of new, easy-to-use content management systems, the popularity of blogs proliferated. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 also spurred many people to start "warblogs." One significant contributor to the popularity of blogging is Salam Pax, the Iraqi architect who began the now famous blog, *Where is Raed?* In September 2002, Pax began his daily blog on life in Baghdad post-9/11, in which he openly criticized Saddam's regime. Pax's blog attracted worldwide readership and global media attention, and also served to launch a public understanding of the power of blogging.

Some critics argue that blogs are still widely unknown, and that their popularity has been inflated by the media, and by individual bloggers themselves. In fact, a recent (2004) [report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project](#) indicates that only between 2 and 7 percent of adult Internet users in the United States host blogs. What has gone largely unrecognized, however, is that this report also reveals that eleven percent of these same users indicate that they visit blogs daily. Considering that blogs do not rely on marketing, it is not insignificant that they attract such a wide readership, probably more than any other form of self-publishing online. Readers of blogs participate in their sustenance by responding to, commenting on, and contributing to blog posts, and it is in this way that blogs make a significant contribution to the fostering of online community.

## Publication model

This collection represents the first of its kind to focus on the weblog as rhetorical artifact. It is also among the first in its innovative approach to scholarly publishing. As blogs represent the

power of regular people to use the Internet for publishing, the editors have chosen to use the blog as a publication model, forgoing reliance on an academic publisher in the production of this collection and presenting the work in blog format entirely online.

The traditional model of academic publishing requires charging fees to libraries and readers for access to works, and, subsequently, particularly for electronic publication, restricts use from anyone who has not paid those fees. In order to provide more open access to the articles in our collection, increasing the ability for our readers to view, copy, search, and download material, we have assumed a less traditional model for publishing. Rather than rely on access fees and/or an academic publisher, we have assumed responsibility for managing peer review, providing editorial oversight, and publishing the collection entirely via the Internet. In addition, the collection will be presented in the form of a blog, complete with dated entries by readers and contributors, categories pages that encourage readers to find new themes in the articles, and a blogroll. This format allows for interaction among authors, editors, and readers, and for conversations about the articles to be ongoing.

## ***Into the Blogosphere: the articles***

The articles in this collection are presented in alphabetical order. As much scholarship in the field of the rhetoric of technology, these studies resist classification, presenting interdisciplinary approaches to the topic of the rhetorical implications of blogging. We have chosen not to provide categories for the articles on the main page, and have instead offered a variety of categorization schemes from which the reader can choose. Readers will find that several of the categories overlap, and many articles appear in more than one category. We invite readers to consider these categories, and to find new ones on their own. However, we do see some commonalities in the articles, and present them in the following categories below: pedagogy, public vs. private spheres, genre, visual design, virtual community, identity, and mass communication.

Early adopters of weblogs in the field of rhetoric and composition studies have explored weblogs' potential in the writing classroom, and two essays in this collection reflect on the value of blogging in composition pedagogy. Charles Lowe and Terra Williams compare weblogs to a hybrid of commonplace book and diary, and they claim that making student writing public provides a way for students to "externalize their invention process" and solicit comments from readers during all the stages in the writing process, thus facilitating a more collaborative environment and supportive sense of community. Kevin Brooks, Cindy Nichols, and Sybil Priebe present the results of an empirical study of students' perceptions of blogging. Hypothesizing that weblogs remediate three print genres (the personal journal, the notecard (used for annotating information sources), and the academic research notebook, they set out to learn whether or not blogging motivates students to do other kinds of writing.

The public and private spheres emerged as a salient concern for many contributors to this collection. Because of the varied nature of the weblog, from personal journal to political soapbox, and because of the very public nature of the weblog as online text, the public and the private often overlap and conflict within the blogosphere. Three contributions center on Habermasian public spheres and the weblog. Andrew O'Baoill's contribution, "Weblogs and the public sphere," applies a Habermasian framework to blogs specifically in the political and legal domains. He evaluates the blogosphere according to the criteria of inclusivity, rank, and consensus through rational debate. Trish Roberts-Miller's piece, "Parody Blogging and the Call of the Real," considers the public sphere in the context of the invasion of Iraq. The author had expected the Internet, and specifically weblogs, to facilitate argumentation and a "public sphere in which hegemony was more difficult to achieve and dissent less vilified," but finds instead that blogs "facilitate the expressive public sphere and enclave-based discourse." Torill Mortensen's "Personal publication and public attention" explores the way in which many weblogs "have made the public personal as well as the personal public." Central to Mortensen's analysis is the role of

the scholar and the role of criticism: as academics begin to study and use weblogs, we impose meaning through our own systems of interpretation, to the exclusion of other possible meanings and interpretations.

Steve Himmer's "The Labyrinth Unbound: Weblogs as Literature" stands as the only contribution to address the weblog from an explicitly literary perspective. Himmer argues that many definitions of the weblog are insufficient, as they rely on categories such as content or mode of delivery, which are not adequate to encompass the large variety of texts that may be called weblogs. Instead, Himmer suggests we approach the blog as a literary artifact. The weblog is literary, Himmer states, in the sense that a blog calls attention both to what is read and to the way in which we read. Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd's article "Blogging As Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog" also examines the blog as it functions as a genre. With a foundation in the work of leading genre theorists, including Miller herself, the article addresses the relationship between the emergent genre of blogging and the particular cultural context in which it appeared. Discussing the content, formal features, and purpose of blogging, Miller and Shepherd show that blogs have "multiple ancestors," in reality TV, memoirs, filtering and directory services of the Internet, clipping services and edited anthologies, political journalism, and diaries/personal journals.

Two essays presented in this collection examine visual aspects of weblogs. Meredith Badger looks at the ways in which "images shape and alter how we view blogs and how blogs shape and alter the way we view the images placed within them," studying interrelationship between textual and visual elements of weblogs. Scheidt and Wright examine visual trends in the blogosphere, analyzing design features of a random sample of 154 weblogs. Both studies highlight the increasingly visualized character of blogosphere, stressing the importance of analyzing the visual grammar of weblogs.

The theme of virtual communities is also addressed in this collection in several essays. Anita Blanchard and Carolyn Wei present two empirical studies on the formation of norms and sense of community within weblogs. Nicholas Packwood and Graham Lampa examine this issue from theoretical perspectives of imagined communities and cultural geography of the blogosphere. Finally, Frank Schaap studies the Dutch weblog community. The essays provide both theoretical and empirical insights into the notion of community in the blogosphere, bringing to light better understanding of this important phenomenon of Internet studies.

Several researchers address the issue of identity in relation to blogging. Susan Herring, Inna Kouper, Lois Ann Scheidt, and Elijah L. Wright look at the issue of identity through an empirical study of gender. They address the claim that blogs are democratizing: their study shows that while studies show that many women and female teens blog, dominant discourses on blogging in mainstream media, scholarly communication, and among bloggers themselves, continue to privilege filter blogs, kept mostly by men, and marginalize journal blogs, which are statistically the most popular blogs in all demographic categories. Tyler Curtain examines the queer blogosphere in terms of the production of knowledge and the creation of a shared cultural space. Using queer blogs as a case, Curtain argues that through writing, reading, and linking, publics are created; such publics remake and re-articulate the "culture at large." Kylie Jarrett explores the construction of a Self (or Selves) through blogging practices. Through a case study, she sets forth the concept of "database subjectivity," "defined by its temporary, and selective representation of the life of the user." The blog, which uses the database form, affords a temporary and changing presentation of identity, to be continually changed as posts fall into the archive.

Three essays in this collection address the blog as a form of mass communication. Jason Gallo looks at the blog as journalism, addressing what others have coined a revolution. Arguing that blogs serve to augment traditional journalistic practices rather than overthrow them, Gallo asserts that they nevertheless will provide lasting changes to the construction of media reports

and the dissemination of news. Christine Boese's article focuses on knowledge-weblogs, or "klogs." Boese examines these blogs appropriated by companies as content-management tools by looking at the work of two blogs, one Iraqi warblog maintained by Joshua Kucera and another intranet blog launched by the author within CNN Headline News. Also examining the blog vis-à-vis traditional journalism, Brian Carroll compares the values of traditional journalism, "accuracy, fairness, timeliness, precision, clarity, and comprehensiveness," to the values embodied in blogs, such as debate, interaction, dialogue, and reciprocity. He suggests that traditional print journalism can benefit from combining these values and taking a cue from the communal ethos of the blogosphere.

## Invitation to readers

Throughout this collection, the contributors have attempted to reveal the rhetorical importance of the weblog to online communication by analyzing the discourse of bloggers, providing critical readings of blogs, and considering the generic, political, cultural, and social implications of blogging. While it is our hope that this collection makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on blogging, we also realize that these articles are not the complete story (see other resources on blogging). We invite our readers to please use the interactive features of this site to post comments, begin conversations, and contribute to future research on the topics presented. In this way, our efforts toward a more comprehensive look at the weblog as rhetorical artifact can be truly collaborative.

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