Links, Lives, Logs: Presentation in the Dutch Blogosphere

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I must confess that much of the vibrant Dutch weblog community remained hidden from me for quite a while, even though I am Dutch, have my own weblog, and frequently use the Internet. I was aware of some of the more high profile Dutch weblogs, but as an early adopter and Internet researcher, my attention was mostly trained on the English-speaking part of the Internet. Few native English weblogs link to non-English weblogs in their blogroll and those English language weblogs that do link to non-English weblogs are usually written by non-native English speakers. Conversely, Dutch weblogs almost exclusively link to other Dutch weblogs in their blogroll, which only occasionally includes English language weblogs. In their entries, Dutch weblogs do link to English language web sites and copy or translate their news but the links of affiliation remain overwhelmingly with other Dutch weblogs. The Internet may be transnational but many communities remain bound by barriers of language.

During the past three to four years, the Dutch weblog community has developed a distinct style of online presence. A number of terms and neologisms, that go beyond the technical terminology associated with weblogging, have developed and are now in use in the community, occasionally even seeping into mainstream media reporting on the Internet. Several sites track new posts to Dutch weblogs, there is a monthly e-zine, About:blank, "by bloggers for bloggers," that hosts the annual Dutch Bloggies award shows, and there are at least two Dutch-developed weblog systems available. The Dutch weblog community draws on international developments on the web and in the blogosphere, but articulates them according to the specifics of the Dutch context, showing the process of "glocalization" at work (Robertson, 1995). I will give a brief overview of the Dutch blogosphere and present some of the salient features of Dutch weblogs and the Dutch weblog community in order to discuss issues of identity and presentation of self on Dutch weblogs and home pages.

This study is part of larger project in which weblogs and personal home pages are taken together as one case study. Weblogs of course differ from "regular" personal home pages, but they both offer the author a web-based platform to express and present her/himself. Looking at both the differences and the similarities between them sheds light on the particularities of their form and function. Weblogs are primarily defined by their format, "consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first" (Walker, 2003). This format is shaped and facilitated by a wide variety of weblog software. The weblog software lets the weblogger enter data into the system with little to no knowledge of HTML and publishes it to the web. Older entries are automatically archived and the weblog software often provides visitors with the possibility of commenting on individual entries. According to Walker,

\[t\]here 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. Examples of the [genre] exist on a continuum from [confessional], online [diaries] to logs tracking specific topics or activities through links and commentary. [...] Many weblog entries are shaped as brief, independent narratives, and some are explicitly or implicitly fictional, though the standard genre expectation is non-fiction. (Walker, 2003)
Although free and easy to use weblog providers, such as Blogger.com, have opened up web publishing for a large group of people, it could be argued that webloggers are an avant garde group of Internet users. According to a recent Pew Internet & American Life Project report (2004) a minority of 44 percent of the interviewees has contributed content to the Internet. The biggest two groups, 21 and 20 percent respectively, have contributed "ready-mades" to the Internet, making photographs and music available to others. A much smaller fraction of 2 to 7 percent reports maintaining a web diary or weblog, while only 11 percent of the interviewees have read weblogs. Interestingly, within the group of webloggers only 10 percent of the interviewees reports updating their web diary or weblog daily, while the large majority updates once a week or even less frequently. Still, webloggers have, furiously seems the word, launched new technologies, memes, and networks, both social and technological, to support their weblogging activities. They have pushed the limits of web publishing by rallying web standards, content syndication, comment and publication tools, and data mining. It seems likely that parts of the technological and the social aspects of weblogging will find their way into mainstream web usage, and, if for no other reason, that makes studying weblogs important, but it remains to be seen whether the particular and demanding form of today's weblogs will really become "tomorrow's personal home page," as one of the Dutch webloggers I interviewed remarked.

The Dutch blogosphere

Finding out how many web pages of a certain kind there are on the Internet is a notoriously difficult question and consequently, there is no simple answer to exactly how many Dutch weblogs there are. In June 2003 Phil Wolff of Blogcount.com estimated that there were between 2.4 and 2.9 million active weblogs worldwide, while recent figures at Blogcensus.net indicate that they are tracking over 1.6 million weblogs, of which they think just over 1 million are active. Interestingly, Blogcensus provides a breakdown according to language and puts the number of Dutch language weblogs at about 6,500, while the biggest Dutch weblog index, Loglijst, is reportedly tracking 2454 Dutch weblogs. If we take the Blogcensus division of about two-thirds active weblogs versus one-third inactive weblogs, we would get roughly between 1,600 (based on the Loglijst figure) and 4,150 (based on the Blogcensus figure) active Dutch weblogs, up from a couple of dozen weblogs in 2000. The number of weblogs is still growing, but for a densely populated country with some 15.5 million inhabitants, that according to a recent ITU report ranks above the USA in terms of accessibility and use of ICTs, it seems fairly modest (ITU 2003).

The purpose of all this guessing and estimating is that even in absolute numbers, the number of Dutch weblogs is quite small. Of course, no one can keep up even with "just" 1,600 weblogs, let alone with 4,000+ weblogs, but there is a small set of some 50 to 75 high profile weblogs that get referenced and linked to a lot. This set of high profile weblogs consists mostly of weblogs that were among the first and second wave of weblogs, combined with some newer weblogs that have quickly gained popularity because of their particular format and content. However, few of the maybe two dozen "old school" weblogs, that were started in 2000 or even earlier, now remain, but a lot of the "second wave" weblogs, that were started in 2001, are still actively maintained. This organization and distribution makes the Dutch blogosphere both too big for one person to grasp, but small enough for the same set of high profile weblogs to stand out from the crowd.

In terms of readership, measured by the number of hits received, there is a big disparity between the weblogs, even among the 50 highest ranking ones with a Nedstat counter. The top ranking weblog in Nedstat's top 1000 weblogs, Flabber.nl, was leading the pack with some 50,000+ hits per day, which is substantial given the relatively small size of the Dutch blogosphere, but has recently managed to push the number of daily hits far beyond that. The other weblogs in the top 10 occasionally trade places, but garner fewer daily visits, ranging from around 40,000 hits for 2nd place, down to about 5,000 hits for 10th place. For places 11 to 50
the number of daily hits drops off rapidly to some 350 hits. This compares to a number of (semi)professional English language weblogs with public counters as follows: Instapundit.com averages 96,000+ hits, BoingBoing.net averages 20,000+ these days, Gawker.com averages 35,000+, and Gizmodo.com averages 37,000+. Of the first 100 weblogs showing up in the Nedstat top 1000, 86 have their own domain name, or are hosted on a subdomain of a privately held domain name. The domain names are registered in various top level domains, such as .nl, .com, .net, .org, and less frequently .nu and .tk. Although .nl and .com are most popular, there seems to be no real preference for one or the other. The relatively low number of .nl domains (45 out of 86) may be caused by the fact that only since February 2003 it is possible for individuals to register a .nl domain with the Dutch domain name registry. Before that time only officially listed companies and organizations could apply for a .nl domain name. The 86 weblogs with their own domain name run on a wide variety of content management systems, including Blogger, MovableType, Dutch-developed Pivot and Nucleus, and custom made unreleased PHP scripts. The other 14 weblogs are hosted by weblog service providers: six are hosted by Blogspot.com, three by Web-log.nl, another three on webspace provided by ISPs, one is hosted by Bloggedup.com, and one is hosted by Skynetblogs.be.

For this study I gathered a sample of 250 weblogs that appeared frequently in Loglijst’s recently updated list and the Nedstat top 1000 weblogs over a one month period. From these 250 weblogs 25 were analyzed. The personal home pages were collected using Google to search the domains of two leading Dutch ISPs with the keyword "homepage" (spelled as one word in Dutch). The first 1,000 hits on both domains were checked to see whether the returned pages contained information, however tangential, about the author of that home page. This resulted in a sample of 300 personal home pages, spread almost evenly across the domains of the two ISPs and 30 of them were subsequently analyzed. These are not statistically representative random samples, but rather a collection of personal home pages and weblogs that provides enough breadth and depth to be explored qualitatively. In addition to the analyses, ten home page and weblog authors were interviewed face-to-face.

Dutch weblogs divided

Given the relatively small size of the Dutch blogosphere it seems all the more remarkable that it appears to be divided into two types of weblogs and webloggers. On the one hand, there are "linklogs" or "linkdumps" filled by those who call themselves "linkloggers" or "linkdumpers." On the other hand, there are "lifelogs" that are written by "lifeloggers." Linkdumpers are understood to post primarily links to other websites, usually accompanied with a title and a brief comment from the author, while "lifeloggers" post primarily about their personal life and everyday experiences. These two forms of weblogging, while not new or radically different from what happens elsewhere in the blogosphere, seem to have crystallized around their extreme forms, especially among the high profile weblogs, even to the point of a general "us" versus "them" discourse on many weblogs. In an interview one weblogger recalls that "in the old days, when you could still visit all Dutch weblogs in an afternoon, it was more of a friendly rivalry and a bit of teasing here and there." Over time, as the number of webloggers grew, and maybe because a wink and the grin on someone’s face easily get lost in written language, the rivalry turned more bitter and the teasing more serious. This even resulted, half jokingly, half seriously, in one weblogger posting, on June 4, 2003, a list of 24 weblogs belonging to the "Linkdumpers Separatist Movement: The illustrious fellowship against the 'nice weather today' lifeloggers!" complete with a vaguely militaristic logo (Spinhoven, 2003). Another weblogger countered by posting:
Any lifeloggers who want to join my club? ULR (United Lifeloggers Resistance) ... Register now! (Bareuh!, 2003)

More reactions followed over the next months, as the news spread, especially after another weblogger referenced the document, writing that most foreign (read: English/American) weblogs are of the lifelog variety and concluded that the linklogs' demise was at hand, only momentarily held at bay by Dutch backwardness (Sikkema, 2003).

The continued discussion and snide remarks back and forth seem to have polarized the two positions. GeenStijl.nl, a weblog (in)famous for its mocking, inflammatory, and often derogatory postings, wrote:

There are people who blog about their little lives without any shame. All of them little happy domestic chores, pregnancy, or, really, holiday bloggers, also known as "lifeloggers." Robbie, or "gompie," as he calls himself, is different. He blogs about his deep, deep depression. Joyce left him and drinking only depresses him more. If only he had a guestbook, we could all tell him to get a bloody job (Hartman, 2003).

But, interestingly, there was also a fairly widespread third reaction that was not about siding with either camp, but one of introspection and not belonging. A number of webloggers mentioned having a bit of an identity crisis, because they felt they didn't quite fit into either the linkdumpers or the lifeloggers category. Demos, in an entry titled "Linklifeloggers unite!" writes:

Lately I've been bothered a bit by an identity crisis. Don't freak out, it's only a virtual one. On the Net, webloggers appear to be a dichotomous species: Lifeloggers and Linkdumpers. [...] About a year ago I started this log to be able to read back what I used to be doing a couple of years down the line. Sort of an agenda cum diary then. A lifelog. In that short period of time, however, I realized that it's much more fun to occasionally share strange and silly things you encounter on the Net with others. Plus, you can go back to that yourself as well. More of a linkdump-feel then. But not just links, because fun things happen in my life that I feel like sharing every once in a while. So, I do both, but what does that make me? A Lixedumper? A LinkLifeLogger? I don't know.... (Demos, 2003).

Other webloggers echo this sentiment, like Chrizzy, who writes in an entry titled "Identity crisis:"

People who arrive on my site for the first time are sometimes a little surprised. What the heck is Chris.nl.nu? I am not a linkdump, I am not a photolog, I am not a newslog, I am not a lifelog. I'm simply a bit of everything. When I encounter a funny news item or a funny flash movie, I like to put that on my site. When I have a great experience in my everyday life then it must be blogged. [...] Dumping links is easy, yet I can't escape it. I don't experience things that are bloggable every day, besides, I regularly lack the inspiration for a fun entry. [...] So, to fill my site every day, I look for fun links. And that makes me a little-bit-of-everything-log. Sort of an identity-crisis-log. Simply Chris.nl.nu then (Chrizzy, 2003).
For many webloggers, the dichotomous nature of the Dutch blogosphere is not so much to be found in their own weblogs, but in those high profile weblogs that have been around for so long or that have been so successful that everybody knows them. As also becomes clear from Chrizzy's remark, weblogs can be categorized on other criteria, such as the main focus of the content, but these categorizations are not widely used, apart from photologs.

In considering the conundrum of who is blogging what and how in the Netherlands, several webloggers remark how the linklogs seem to be a particularly Dutch phenomenon. Popular Dutch linklogs are not the bare bones, links-only type of weblog, like for example Robotwisdom.com, although there is TheNotSoDailyCrap.nl, that serves up links without much more than a four or five word categorization as its only commentary. Dutch linklogs always try to cause a stir, either by linking to information that already is the focus of some sort of row, or that will become the focus of a row because they are linking to it. This includes sensitive information about people, shocking and doctored pictures, pictures and links of hot babes but also hardcore porn, cool flash movies and games, and, quite popular as well, opendir links. One of the defining moments for linklogs incorporated several of these interests and is known as the "Ammer webcam incident." On June 18, 2001, a high school student left his web cam running while having sex with his girlfriend and a certain Mr. Green made screenshots of the web cam while it was broadcasting on the student's website. Mr. Green then posted the pictures to his weblog and the then best known Dutch linklog, Retecool.com quickly linked to Mr. Green's weblog and mirrored the images which then became famous overnight. The incident was reported by mainstream media and also garnered quite a bit of online press. One of the interviewed webloggers remarked that for many web surfers this was when they discovered weblogs and the spike in visitors that Retecool was experiencing, rippled out over the weblogs that were linked from their pages, which at that time included a number of lifelogs. Several similar incidents combined with the continued supply of "regular programming" has given the linklogs a big audience. Of the top 50 weblogs in Nedstat's top 1000 weblogs list only 7 to 10 (depending on the finer points of your definition) slots are filled by lifelogs, with the top ranking lifelog usually coming in around the 25th place, with some 1,500 hits.

Weblogs and personal home pages

Although there are many differences between "regular" personal home pages and weblogs, they both offer the author a web-based platform to express and present him/herself. It is the format of weblogs, with the most recent, date-stamped entry appearing at the top of the page, pushing previous entries down the page and into the archives, that is the most defining feature. There are, however, two less discussed aspects of weblogs that are also very important in shaping what a weblog is: everyday practice and presentation.

Whereas many personal home pages can go for months or even years without substantial updates or alterations, the format of the weblog implies regular updates and this shapes the weblogger's everyday involvement and interaction with his or her weblog. Indeed, feeling the obligation to write yet another entry for the weblog is a regularly recurring topic on many weblogs. Some weblogs will "go on hiatus" for shorter or longer periods of time and occasionally weblogs are stopped (and sometimes removed) entirely, often after an emphatic entry explaining that the time for the weblog is over, because it became too much of a chore or obligation, or cost too much time to keep up. While the authors of personal home pages generally feel a certain obligation to keep the information on their home pages up to date, updates usually occur only when something important in their lives has changed, such as moving house or a new job, or when a substantial amount of material can be added, like a report of a holiday or a special family occasion. The personal home page is a relatively static document that for its authors doesn't imply much work or thought on a daily basis, unlike the weblog, which becomes much more embedded in the everyday life of the weblogger.
Another important difference places the weblog much more centrally in the author's everyday offline and online life. Many home pages are created with a specific purpose in mind (e.g. creating a relatively stable repository of personal information to be referenced in chat rooms or on forums, or sharing photographs with family overseas), but for many webloggers the purpose of their weblog is the practice of weblogging itself. This difference, I think, compares to the difference between game and play, which Gonzalo Frasca, quoting from André Lalande's *Dictionaire Philosophique*, explains as:

> [Play] is "Prodigality of physical or mental activity which has no immediate useful objective, nor defined objective, and whose only reason to be is based in the pleasure experimented by the player". [Game] is a particular kind of [play], defined as an "activity organized under a system of rules that defines a victory or a defeat, a gain or a loss." (Frasca, 1999)

While there is no victory or defeat in making a personal home page, most of the authors I interviewed indicated that they had stopped working on their home page because they achieved what they set out to do with their home page. The weblog authors, however, indicated that they had no “immediate useful objective, nor defined objective” for their weblog, but that the activity of weblogging itself (including linking and getting linked to, commenting and getting commented on) was the main objective.

**Presentation on the web**

The study of IRC and MUDs contributed much to theories of identity on the Internet (Bruckman 1993; Reid 1993; Turkle 1995). The synchronous and playful environments of IRC and MUDs, the role-playing and use of nicknames, in combination with a postmodern sentiment in the social sciences, lead to a conceptualization of online or virtual identity as performative, fragmented, multiple, and often subversive. The textual Internet offered a sense of anonymity, or at least pseudonymity, and hardly any means to get a peek at another person's physical appearance. Especially in chat and MUDs, where one presents a persona or a character (Schaap 2002: 41-42), it seemed that users could construct any imaginable identity with any sort of virtual embodiment. Internet researchers explored and theorized this perceived absence of the physical body and the importance of the constructedness of the virtual body in the online realm for possibilities of (playfully) challenging everyday inequalities based on supposedly inherent qualities of the physical body, such as gender and race.

Because home pages also reside in the online realm, initially it was assumed that they would provide yet another space for people to experiment with identity and play with virtual selves. However, it turned out that personal home pages are a type of online environment where postmodern identity play is far less common.

> While there are varying implications of home pages... a key feature is that they move in the opposite direction to what the postmodernists claim: rather than fragmenting the self, personal home pages are attempts to integrate the individual, make a personal statement of identity, and show in a stable, replicable way what the individual stands for and what is deemed important (Wynn & Katz, 1997: 318).

Although postmodern and psychological notions of identity were initially extended to the web, Wynn & Katz especially argue against attributing notions of self-consciousness and autonomy to
"virtual selves," noting that whatever presentations of self we encounter online; they can only exist by virtue of a real person shaping and animating them (pp. 300-305). Here they engage notions of the self as fragmented, networked, and fluid, as they believe Turkle (1995) and Stone (1995) put forward in their work. Wynn & Katz favor a more traditional, integrated, singular, but above all social view of identity. The conceptualization of the Internet as "virtual," and opposed to "real" reality, sets it up as as a radically different space and obscures the importance of the everyday social and cultural practices in which online interaction and presentation of self is embedded.

Indeed, the home pages that I analyzed are decidedly mundane and almost exclusively display the author through offline contexts of hobbies, family, work, and place of residence. Instead of spinning off virtual selves, home page authors tend to present themselves in well established categories. On family home pages each family member gets his or her own page and the site navigation always mirrors the traditional image of the family by presenting the Father or the Couple as the first navigational item, followed by the children from eldest to youngest, while sometimes adding pets to the lowest rung of the site navigation "ladder." Another example is the home page of a teenage boy who lists almost a dozen nicknames he uses in various chatrooms and channels. A nickname is an important part of one's online persona (Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Schaap 2002: 41-46), but rather than keeping them separate, they are brought together on the home page. The different parts of this boy's online life take their place among the other, offline, parts of his life, such as school, family, and work. Another find was that, per contra Miller's (1995) claim of "Show me what your links are, and I'll tell you what kind of person you are," there are few external links to be found on the personal home pages; the links that were there, support the already present offline contexts of identity, by pointing the reader to commercial, governmental, or (semi)professional websites about the author's hobby, family, work, or place of residence. Although the notion of separate virtual selves may have been a too enthusiastic extrapolation, I think that the notion of identity as performative is still very useful for understanding the presentation of self on home pages and weblogs. The articulations of identity may be banal and well worn, they still must be performed. Father does not magically appear at the highest rung of the navigational ladder but he gets to climb it first because everybody agrees that that's the natural thing.

Several authors use Goffman's theories on The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959) to framing questions of identity performance on home pages (Miller, 1995; Walker, 2000). Goffman "has described how people negotiate and validate identities in face-to-face encounters and how people establish 'frames' within which to evaluate the meaning of encounters" (Miller 1995). In Goffman's work the notion of consciously presented or "given" information and unconsciously presented or "given off" information plays a central role. Goffman emphasizes the contextual and reciprocal nature of the social situation in which the actors find themselves and the presentation of self in large part depends on what the specific context requires of the actors (a work environment is different from a gym locker room) and on the active co-construction of the overarching frame of meaning for that context (having an argument or playing at having an argument makes all the difference). The problem, that has Chandler (1998) argue that "[c]omparisons of home pages with face-to-face interaction are misleading," with translating Goffman's approach to the Internet is that his analyses depend so much on the study everyday, situated, and embodied "micropractices" and that online environments, such as home pages and weblogs, by virtue of being called virtual are understood as somehow different and separate from the physical everyday surroundings.

Poster (2000) argues that language always already mediates the world and that "[a]t every moment symbolic coding intercedes between individual consciousness and experience, rendering human culture a double world of mediated immediacy" (p. 189). His solution is to understand the virtual "as an historical articulation of the real, fully as actual as any other such articulation but one connected specifically with computer-mediated communication technologies," whereby "[t]wo tendencies above all must be avoided: to celebrate the virtual as evolutionary or
dialectical 'next stage' beyond the real or to dismiss the virtual as a false instantiation of the real" (p. 200). To paraphrase Butler (1990), understanding our everyday reality as socially constructed does not deny its existence and the factuality of its material or natural dimensions, but reconceives it as distinct from the process by which it comes to bear cultural meanings.

Goffman's idea of information involuntarily given off may be read as an indication of a more traditional, single identity "animating" the presentation of self, but Goffman's emphasis on the situatedness of that presentation leaves his work open for a more constructivist interpretation. He describes the micropractices and larger frameworks that inform the processes of "impression management" in everyday social situations and shows the amount of work that identity entails, without going so far as saying that identity is performance. The perceived radicality of Judith Butler's (1990) work on gender as a performative practice comes not so much from the fact that she deconstructs gender as a performance, but from the fact that she claims that the performance is not the outcome of an identity prior to that performance, but the source of identity:

> [g]ender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a styled repetition of acts. (p. 270, emphasis in original)

If identity is situated, reciprocal, performative, and "tenuously constituted in time" in the symbolic interaction of everyday "real life" and virtual is "fully as actual," we can ask how the technical means of reproduction transform that performance (cf. Poster 1998: 189), but more importantly we can ask which (aspects) of identity home page and weblog authors presume or call upon, which attributes of identity they claim or articulate, in short, which "stylized repetition of acts" they perform.

**Performing weblogs**

Looking at weblogs through the lens of performativity, we can see that it is not just individual identity that is being performed, but also collectivities, and indeed weblogs themselves. When Demos and Chrizzy remark that they're having a bit of an identity crisis, it not so much reflects their psychological state of mind as it is a response to a perceived process of exclusion and a reinstatement of their own weblog and weblogging practice as "true" or "real." They engage a perceived discursive construction that says that there are two and only two mutually exclusive kinds of weblogs, namely linklogs and lifelogs. Their own weblogs exhibit characteristics of both linklogs and lifelogs and therefor not only run the risk of not being as easily recognizable to the accidental visitor ("What the heck is Chris.nl.nu?") but also of not being a "real" weblog. Both webloggers explain the respective values of each approach and why they choose to perform a possibly ambiguous form. Demos asserts having started out as a "real" lifelogger and explains how he then discovered the virtues of linklogging, but he hasn't crossed over completely, because fun things happen in his life that are equally worth of blogging as the fun links he blogs. He ends his post with "I don't know..." to his own rhetorical question of whether he is a Lifedumper or a LinkLifeLogger, but this is not a defeat, because by coining these two overwrought terms he questions the very process of categorization and calls attention to its arbitrariness. Chrizzy's argument is similar and although her tone is slightly more apologetic she dismisses ambiguities about her weblog. She writes that her weblog is "simply Chris.nl.nu," implying that other categorizations don't really fit while simultaneously legitimizing her weblog by claiming a certain uniqueness and individuality. Both confront a discourse that threatens to exclude them from being a real weblogger and they show that they are aware of the "pure," ideal typical forms of linklogging and lifelogging. They claim to perform both types of logging, not
separately but alternating in/on one and the same weblog. Thus they reaffirm/re-enact their identity as a real weblogger, even if they're not a pure linklogger or a pure lifelogger.

Links to other weblogs, mentioning other webloggers, and commenting on what another weblogger wrote are means by which webloggers position themselves in the blogosphere. But lifelogs are about their authors. When asked what a visitor might learn about the author, several lifeloggers said that from reading their posts over a longer period of time the visitor might know pretty much everything about them. The lifelog clearly is by and about a certain real life, physical, embodied person. The lifelog may be located on the Web, but just as with many personal home pages it provides many links and details about the author's everyday, offline life. Adding an "About Me" page, pictures, or maybe a webcam, reinforces those links. But even without extra details, one can read about the author riding her bike through town, visiting his sick mother in hospital, or seeing a movie with friends. In fact, just like on the home pages earlier discussed, lifeloggers primarily present themselves through well-known categories like work, family, friends, musical preferences, place of residence, pets, and political opinions to name but a few. These categories, however, are rarely the focus of the presentation of self. They feature as background facts to the ongoing narrative in which the lifelogger tries to focus on his or her unique take on the happenings of his/her everyday life. In his "Lifeloggging Course" for the about:blank magazine, lifelogger Ton Zijp compares writing a lifelog entry with writing a love song:

If the songwriter wants to approach the tired, old subject [of love], that has been written about since antiquity, in an original way, he must close himself off from all that was written before. He must find unique words for his unique feelings, he must be able to name the unique qualities of his unique beloved, arranged in a unique way, without referencing anything that has been written or sung [about love] before (Zijp, 2003).

The world and the people in it, webloggers included, seem to be pretty much what they are. Occasionally being a man or being a woman, living in this town or that, having a bad day at work or a good one will be interesting enough to write about, but for the lifelogger presenting him/herself successfully comes down to finding a unique vantage point and the right words to describe everyday, mundane experiences.

Performing an identity as weblogger, vis-a-vis the requirements of linklogging and lifeloggging, appears to be a primarily virtual or online part of one's identity. Indeed, being a weblogger may begin and end on the web, but one can also be a weblogger "in real life." A problem is that a lot of people don't know what a weblog is, so the weblogger is often met with blank stares when s/he brings up the subject in a face-to-face conversation. Roze (2004) expressed her surprise that someone she met at a party knew what a weblog was in, of course, a posting to her weblog. At the party a guy asked her how she knew the host and she replied that she knew him because he regularly leaves comments.

Sometimes webloggers are people with an odd hobby, but weblogs operate in a vibrant social context. Webloggers read each others' weblogs and leave comments, of course, but they also e-mail each other, chat, visit each other privately, and organize weblog meetings. Because The
Netherlands is such a small country, no one lives more than a 2.5 hour trip away, unless they happen to live abroad. I have as of yet only briefly explored the "back channel" and offline communication and interaction, but the latest meeting brought together some 50 webloggers. Meetings tend to be organized every four to six months and planning for the next meeting has already begun. Obviously, many more webloggers don't than do attend, but among the attendants was a fair number of the better known webloggers. Not only then do lifeloggers present themselves on their weblogs, they also go out and meet other webloggers face to face, being a blogger "in the flesh." Indispensable attributes for performing weblogging offline appear to be a tiny digital camera or camera phone and a name tag with the name of the weblog rather than one's real name. Eventually the pictures are posted online and entries appear left and right about who attended and we come full circle, ready for another round.

The situation is different on linklogs. Most of the high profile linklogs are not produced by one author but by a small group. The linklog authors of the high profile linklogs give out few or no personal details about themselves and use a pseudonym or, supposedly, their first name, but never their last name. The primary author of Retecool is known as "Reet" and the author of Ransporrn.com signs his posts as "Rans." The authors of the often controversial GeenStijl.nl go by colorful pseudonyms as "Fleischbaum, De Chileen, Rombo, and Prof. Hoxha." Because of the content of the linklogs it's understandable that the linklog authors like to keep their real life identity (somewhat) separate from their online activities. However, because of the content of the linklogs, we never learn much about the authors from their postings. Linklogs appear to offer a particular genre of information and entertainment, and, in that sense, have become more like a traditional publication. Although the authors provide a particular direction and give the linklog its unique slant, their personality is secondary to the linklog's genre of "programming," which is the basis for its hits and thus for its success. However, by not giving out information about themselves and choosing colorful pseudonyms, the authors of linklogs open up their online presence to the attribution of qualities based on the content they post. Linklog authors distance their everyday, embodied identity from their online representation, and thereby relinquish a certain amount of control over the meaning attributed to that representation. This, in turn, makes even more important to keep their online identity separate from their offline identity. The linklog author appears caught between distancing him/herself from attributions based on the often dubious material posted to the weblog and claiming authorship for the success of the weblog.

Conclusions

With the spread of the Internet during the early 1990s we saw a lot of optimism about the opportunities it could offer and the changes it would bring. On the one hand, there was the idea that the Internet was inherently egalitarian and presented a unique many-to-many public sphere from which a truly deliberative democracy could form. On the other hand, the Internet brought the notion of individual freedom and the idea that a person, freed from the social and physiological constraints of the body, could be whoever and whatever they wanted to be, specifically, that they could discover and actualize their "true" self, who was held back by the constraints and limitations of the everyday world.

The promise of the web was that everyone could publish, that a thousand voices could flourish, communicate, connect. The truth was that only those people who knew how to code a web page could make their voices heard. Blogger, Pitas, and all the rest have given people with little or no knowledge of HTML the ability to publish on the web: to pontificate, remember, dream, and argue in public, as easily as they send an instant message. (Blood, 2000)
A little crack appears in that optimistic view in Blood’s remark that only people who knew how to make a web page could make their voices heard on the Web. Maybe the Internet wasn't so inherently egalitarian and enabling after all? But, new Internet technology in the form of weblogs seemed to remedy that problem. However, what was overlooked, without wanting to sound too pessimistic because I do think that the Internet potentially offers a good deal it is thought capable of, was how much the Internet is embedded in the long-standing, socio-cultural conventions of the everyday world. Change is a slow process and many people are happy to put new technology to old uses and have things stay pretty much as they were.

The Dutch blogosphere is a relatively small but busy corner of the blogosphere. The language barrier keeps it relatively separate from other parts of the blogosphere, but it's far from isolated; it's just that information from the English-speaking part of the Internet more easily enters the Dutch blogosphere while the reverse hardly seems to happen. Several dozen high profile weblogs are influential in shaping the general Dutch weblog landscape. These high profile weblogs are rather sharply divided between two ideal typical forms: linklogs and lifelogs. Because they are ideal typical the format of these high profile weblogs is rather narrowly defined. Webloggers regularly engage the norms and expectations as displayed by the ideal typical weblogs, sometimes because they feel they can’t live up to those high standards, sometimes because they feel that the norms and expectations don't allow enough room for their uniquely individual approach. When considering the presentation of self on weblogs I drew on my findings of a study on home pages and I argued that approaching identity as performance allows one to focus on the everyday micropractices that make up identity in social contexts, whether they are electronically mediated or not. The presentation of self on personal home pages happens primarily through the articulation of mundane, everyday qualities and categorizations, focusing on work, family, and hobbies. Although lifelogs sometimes mirror this approach with an "about me" page, the primary means of presentation of self is through the articulation of a unique vantage point from which the weblog author writes. What jumps out is that webloggers spend time and energy presenting themselves as webloggers, but otherwise they rely on the same mundane set of categories for presentation of self as the home page authors. Identity on the web is not about bending and blending gender, race, ethnicity, or class, as early studies of the Internet expected. Identity on the web is not so much "virtual" as mundane, which is not to say that it is not performed. Even mundane identity must be performed and making a weblog appear as the expression of a unique individual is hard work.

References


1 A blogroll is a list of links to other weblogs.

2 The 2% figure comes from the initial March/May 2003 survey, but the report notes that more recent surveys indicate that "between 2% and 7% of adult Internet users have created diaries or blogs" (Pew 2004: 3).


4 Figures available at: http://www.blogcensus.net/?page=lang, accessed 2003-12-15. Loglijst available at: http://weblog.lijst.nl, figures reported at: http://vandenb.com/?piv/entry_368.html?id=0368, accessed 2003-12-17. Note that Loglijst is an opt-in service, so the weblogs they are tracking must first have been submitted before they will show up in Loglijst's statistics.

5 The Nedstat.nl counter is the counter to have on your website in the Netherlands, as it is the first and biggest Dutch hitcounter provider. The Nedstat top 1000 weblogs' statistics available at: http://www.nedstatbasic.net/s?tab=4&link=3&id=837798&country=NL&category=3016, accessed on 2003-12-17.

6 The number of daily hits now exceeds 150,000, but this is likely not the number of unique visitors, but rather something like the number of pageviews, because pages are automatically
reloaded with the "refresh" meta tag and the same webcounter is attached to most of the weblog's subpages and not just the index page.

The counters were checked on 2003-12-17 and the number of hits over the last three months were taken into account.


The document is not dated, but June 4, 2003 is the date Blogdex first indexed the original location of the LAF document, http://blogdex.net/track.asp?url=http://www.spinhoven.demon.nl/laf.html, which is now available at: http://www.spinhoven.com/laf.html. The original title of the document is "Linkdumpers Afscheidings Front: Het illustere genootschap tegen de 'lekker weertje vandaag' lifeloggers!" Translation of this and other citations in this text are by the author. For brevity and readability the original Dutch text is only included when of particular interest.

An open directory, or "opendir," is a directory on a webserver that has no index file and isn't guarded against browsing its contents by the public, so all the files it contains are visible and accessible. These directories often hold images or personal documents, but occasionally creative URL manipulations also yield access to unlocked content management systems or databases holding customer data.


IRC, Internet Relay Chat; MUD, Multi User Dungeon. I use "MUD" as a general term for all the different adventure, social, and role-playing MUDs, MOOs, MUSHes, etc.

In Dutch the course is called "Cursus Lijfloggen." The word "lijf" is pronounced much like the word "life" in English, but actually means "body." The course focuses on how to turn bodily experiences, ranging from having a cold and bumping your little toe against the door post to feelings of love or anger, into a "better" or at least interesting post.