Personal webloggers and their audiences: Who do they think they are talking to?

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Introduction

"He wanted his posts to be read, and feared that people would read them, and hoped that people would read them, and didn't care if people read them. He wanted to be included while priding himself on his outsider status. And while he sometimes wrote messages that were explicitly public -- announcing a band practice, for instance -- he also had his own stringent notions of etiquette. His crush had an online journal, but J. had never read it; that would be too intrusive, he explained." (Nussbaum 2004 p. 546)

As that New York Times profile of a teenaged personal weblogger ("blogger") suggests, the relationship between the blogger and those who read their blogs is often a complex and even contradictory one. While there has been some academic research in this area, many scholars have tended to ascribe attitudes about their audiences to the authors of weblogs based on readings of their texts or – worse – have assumed that the 'public' nature of personal disclosures on weblogs which are in principle readable by millions necessarily indicates a desire by the authors for a broad public to read what they have written. While it may be possible to infer motivations and understandings of a practice from the product of those practices, it seems more fruitful to start with the reflexive accounts of those involved in the practice itself. Accordingly, the research on which this chapter is based consisted of 23 face to face semi-structured interviews with bloggers themselves, providing access to the accounts they provide of their own practices and expectations. While weblogs are used for many purposes, this research concentrated on personal or journal-style weblogs rather than topic centric ones. Google was used to find weblogs in the London area of the UK. From this group 'personal' weblogs were chosen (those offering significant information about the authors themselves and their views) and a authors were contacted for interview based on their responses to a short questionnaire. They were purposively selected to provide a range of sociodemographic and weblogging characteristics (for example they ranged in aged from 17 to in their fifties and in educational attainment from basic vocational to postgraduate qualifications). The text of their weblogs has not been included in the analysis in order to preserve the authors' anonymity. (Bruckman 2001)

In 1985, Joshua Meyrowitz took a symbolic interactionist approach and applied it to the impact of television on society (Meyrowitz 1985), and ten years later John Thompson took a very similar approach to mass communication more broadly (Thompson 1995a). This research is in part a similar attempt to see how new communicative practices – in this case the practices of personal weblogging - can be viewed as both extensions of existing practices and as new forms of interaction and what the consequences might be of the increasingly widespread adoption of these practices.

Studies of the relationship between communicators and the recipients of their messages have focused on three broad contexts - 'one to one' (dialogic), 'one to many' (broadcast) and most recently 'many to many', which has also been dubbed telelogue communication. In this context 'one to one' includes face to face interactions or telephone calls and communication with small groups, 'one to many' describes mass media from newspapers and books to radio and television and 'many to many' describes computer mediated communication that can be *used* by many (because it lacks the distribution cost barriers of conventional mass media) and can *reach* many people. 'Telelogue' - coined by Ball-Rokeach and Reardon (1988) and used by Voiskounsky (1997) refers in this case to the new kinds of interactions enabled through the Internet – in particular I use it to describe online interaction between people who had no prior 'offline' connection.

Researchers have tended to study communication in a single one of these contexts (eg social psychologists studying dialogic interaction, media studies scholars studying the broadcast media) but these are not 'pure' categories – particularly now that digital technologies are blurring communicative boundaries. The case of personal weblogging is illustrative of the manner in which drawing these boundaries is increasingly difficult. This research reveals that not only is the personal weblog used in all three of the modes outlined above – and sometimes the same author uses or envisions theirs in different ways at different times - it is also used in ways that are not easily reducible to one of the three modes of address envisioned in the literature – a practice I have referred to as 'a-communicative' weblogging.

The differing orientations of communicators towards message recipients have tended to be consistent in studies of the first two communication modes – briefly, dialogic communicators generally expect to interact with those who hear or read their messages, while broadcasters do not (Burns 1977, Gitlin 1994, Silverstone 1985). Such expectations are in part formed because of the characteristics of the spaces in which communications of each kind take place – it has historically been difficult for people addressed through broadcast means to respond to those addressing them. Although on the Internet pure "broadcast" of messages is possible (from a website that doesn't provide an email address for its creators for example) in practice the opportunity for the web page reader to respond is very often available. Dialogue is therefore frequently depicted in CMC studies (and weblog studies) as an essential characteristic of 'many to many' communication (Herring *et al.* 2004).

The results of this study tend to question this technologically determinist perspective, emphasising the importance of individual and social expectations as well as technological affordances in shaping actual use. In practice, the bloggers interviewed sometimes used the technology as if it were a *dialogic* technology through which they addressed specific others and expected a response, sometimes they used it as if it were a *narrowcast* technology – normally also addressing a specific imagined audience but not expecting a response, sometimes (though rarely) they used it in a '*telelogic'* way as a means of reaching others not previously known to them, and engaging (some of) them in 'multilogue', and, as will be outlined below, sometimes they used their weblogs with no clear communicative intent at all.

Crucially, the way in which the bloggers interviewed saw their relationship with their readers frequently bore little relation to what the technology used in each case enabled. In particular, in many cases, webloggers wrote either for a group of known individuals or for a specific kind of reader and could be indifferent to or even hostile to other readers. They tended to write in this case as if the unwanted readers did not exist even though they either had no way of restricting access or did not use the tools available to restrict access to those audiences. Interviewees were chosen from among users of two different weblog software platforms – LiveJournal (which offers its users the ability to control who is able to read individual posts) and Blogger which at the

time of the interviews (2004) did not. No LiveJournal users said that they chose that software to give control over access to their postings and no Blogger users said they would like more control. Some of the Livejournal users used the privacy facilities to hide some of what they wrote but the sample was drawn from among webloggers whose sites had a substantial number of 'open' postings.

The seeming unconcern about unknown readers accessing their weblogs could be attributable to a perception that the authors' identities would not be discernable, thus insulating them from any non-virtual repercussions of what they wrote. It is true that 14 of the 23 interviewees used some form of pseudonym instead of their names on their weblogs, but of these at least eight were more or less easily associable with their owners. It is difficult to be clear about how identifiable a weblogger might be from their weblog postings without knowing about what others might already know about them in other contexts – a mention of a seemingly commonplace detail could reveal a blogger exactly to a particular person. In addition, the degree of self-revelation evinced in the weblogs themselves did not appear to bear any strong relation to the degree of perceived or desired anonymity. Two of the bloggers most open in their weblogs were also open about their identities – Annie gave her name and profession in order to promote her business, and Frances gave her (unusual) first name and (small) country of origin on her weblog.

Although the four orientations towards the audience into which this analysis is divided help to visualise the variety of practices and to link them to related literatures, it should be noted that the interviewees and their sites often did not fall neatly into a single weblog use or audience orientation. In several cases motivations to write and attitudes towards readers varied both at different points in the interview and at different points in the evolution of their practice. In the most extreme example of the latter shift, one weblogger, Elaine, started her weblog as a way to hone her writing skills with no desire to reach an audience at all and no notion that she actually was reaching one. Later she began to conceive of her weblog as reaching a wider public – she now reveals her real name on the blog for example so she can capitalise on her newfound popularity. Yet despite this shift she confesses elsewhere in the interview she often has had difficulty remembering that she is not writing it just for herself.

> I listen to what people have to say and I welcome it and draw it in but I kind of filter it back
> out to suit my own thing because I think if you've got - at the moment on average - about 15 or
> 20 comments on a post if I take in every single thing and take every single comment to heart I
> wouldn't know my arse from my elbow. - Harriet

For the largest proportion of those interviewed, their weblogs are primarily a way in which they can stay in touch with friends and acquaintances, but this does not itself make their weblog practice dialogic. For many it appeared the key benefit of the weblog was to let others know how they were or even to impress others rather than to maintain relationships through a reciprocal exchange of everyday information and opinion. In the case of those who shared their political views, most (despite occasional protestations to the contrary) were not looking for meaningful debate about them – the most they sought from readers was praise for their efforts or agreement with their views. More typically they were happy just to know that there *were* readers.

Most respondents maintain that the comments they receive (whether through email or on their sites themselves) are important to them – possibly because the importance of interactivity on the Internet and on weblogs in particular has been stressed in media depictions and by weblog pundits themselves. On closer examination, however, there is a clear division among those between those for whom comments are a necessary part of their practice and those for whom they may be welcome but are of peripheral interest.

Keeping friends in touch

> "I was quite happy if someone who just met me very briefly in the pub typed me into Google
> to find out more about me" - Charles

Most of those interviewed who were writing about their personal lives appeared to be doing so not in order to convey useful or even interesting information but as a form of phatic communication with their friends. It was clear from the interviews that this could be rewarding even when there is little or no actual response *as long as a favourable reaction can be imagined*.

Charles provides the clearest example of the greater importance of this imagined interaction. His weblog (in its earlier stages) began as a space for political discussion but the use he stressed was as a replacement for an emailed bulletin to friends about an extended stay in the US. In discussing the motivation to move from an email to a weblog form, Charles explained, "I knew I was going to be sending long, complicated emails home explaining what fun I was having, and I was going to send these to a fairly broad list of people but people's email addresses change, people you know don't check them, delete them, blah blah blah." In other words by adopting the weblog form he could address a broad imagined circle of friends, acquaintances and people he had met – even if he did not have their email addresses. And, crucially, while email is 'pushed' to people, some of whom may be indifferent to it or ignore it, he would be able to envision an audience for his doings, all of whom would presumably be interested because they have elected to read it. Instead of a circumscribed imagined readership of specified individuals some of whom he could imagine rejecting his messages, the weblog could provide Charles with a much broader audience of interested people (including people he didn't know would be interested and therefore who he wouldn't bother by sending them an email). He said he saw the weblog as something for "the people on the very sort of edges of your life who drift in and out. I thought it would be useful for them because I wasn't emailing them."

Given the marginal character of the level of acquaintance he is assuming, it is not surprising that he finds it "quite a one-sided process. My readers just tend to read and apart from an email saying 'oh that's interesting - how are you?'…" He says in any case "the idea of a long conversation [on the weblog] doesn't interest me" – at least in part because he finds computer mediated communication "very time consuming."

A number of interviewees suggested their weblogs were, to a significant extent, spaces for boasting. Here, too, an audience is necessary but real dialogue is not, as long as the writer can assume a favourable or impressed reaction. Nancy for example, who is just leaving school (6th form college), is honest about her intent to impress. She remarks about her blog, "I think its mostly to get people to think that I have an interesting life but - not feel jealousy obviously - but to think 'wow that's cool' and 'she's doing fun things'."

Interestingly, as well as wanting to impress friends she would like to impress some of her readers who "live in tiny little towns" in the Midwest – "I do play up the way that I am lucky like 'oh my God I live in London and it's so cool!'" In her case and that of Charles above (and others), their 'narrowcast' sociality observed above can also shade into what will be discussed later as 'quasi-sociality' – a phatic pseudo-conversation with a group of others who are largely unknown.

Even among those who are trying to impress, however, contradictory motivations for blogging can undercut the impression management and boasting can yield to its close relative, conversational confession. Annie, for example, spoke of how what she wrote is intended in part for both her (then-estranged) husband, his girlfriend and ex-boyfriends, "I have a good life so… I just want them to know that I've moved on, that I'm keeping on, that I'm not in the gutter somewhere". On the other hand she has posted when depressed and though she noted her family has expressed some concern about her drinking as described on the weblog she continues to talk about it and even says "I kind of play towards it." In her case, the desire to express herself humorously – to tell a good story - and to vent her feelings frequently overcomes the impulse to present herself as successful and happy. George's case was similar – "I really took as much enjoyment out of anything as putting my flaws down onto the page - writing them out".

Expression of views

Potential interviewees whose weblogs were solely or primarily about politics were excluded because of the emphasis in this research on those writing weblogs containing personal content, but three of the men interviewed produced personal weblogs with some political content. For the most part, however, they did not correspond to the ideal 'telelogic' form of the political weblog – one that is intended to spur and react to political debate in an entirely open and unbounded public arena. Instead, those I interviewed used their sites to state their views – reader response was only deemed important when it served to clarify or reinforce those views. Charles, for example, openly admitted that his weblog was to an extent a substitute for political discussion:

> "I did have more of a political network and I shed it because it was hard work because they kept expecting me to go to protests and demonstrations and running meetings and blah blah blah. And I think partly it does function as a substitute. It gives me a way to feel that I am promoting these causes that I believe in without the responsibility of entering into dialogue with people."

He said rather than a political weblog his was, in part, a campaigning weblog – "urging this imaginary audience – or not so imaginary – to do these things" and he is "restricting it to issues where there doesn't seem to be much of a question, like I don't know anyone who really actively opposes the 'Make Poverty History' campaign." Charles had a history of political activism in his student days but he, like most of the others interviewed, did not produce a political weblog in a committed way because, "I didn't think anyone was reading it and someone was always doing it better somewhere else… setting up something that was dedicated to my political opinion would always seem a bit geeky and a bit sort of arrogant."

Bruce deliberately started his blog in part in order to have political discussions in a controlled environment (the perceived importance of having control over who participates in weblog discussion has also been highlighted in other studies (Boyd 2004, Gumbrecht 2004)). Initially he justifies this as a desire to avoid in "people coming on and 'trolling' or deliberately trying to start arguments - making personal comments all the time but as he admits later, "my political stuff tends to be fairly declamatory" and goes on to say he finds satisfaction in finding people who are "of a similar mindset… who can see what you mean and you don't feel so alone in your views." In other words, consistent with the warnings of Gitlin, Sunstein and others (Chin 1997, Gitlin 1998, Sunstein 2001), both seem to be seeking to speak only with those who already agree with them on the issues at hand.

The personal blog as media outlet

A few of those interviewed – media professionals or writers – saw their weblogs as directly analogous to conventional media productions like newspaper or magazine columns. Despite alluding to the interactive possibilities the technology offers they displayed a distanced, indifferent attitude towards their readers strikingly similar to those reported in studies of mass media journalistic production (Burns 1977, Gans

1980, Gitlin 1994, Schlesinger 1978, Silverstone 1985). Readers were, of course, necessary, in their view and interactions with them were often characterised early in the interviews as important but as the discussion progressed it became clear that they viewed the readers at bottom in an instrumental way and saw their response as essentially secondary to (and sometimes potentially a threat to) their own artistic or professional objectives.

Quentin – a journalist - is one of only a few (mostly male) interviewees who expresses a desire to engage in debate with his readers and is the only one to provide an example of his use of this discussion to examine his own views. This expressed attitude, however, must be seen in the overall context of his framing of his weblog in which he distances himself from the persona he projects there - "a great deal crueller and opinionated and arrogant and boastful and all sorts of things which I can't be in my day to day life" – and stresses the site's use as writing practice, depicting the readers as essentially people to practice on rather than partners in discourse – "you need to be able to manipulate people's emotions if you want to be an artist and writer". His distanced relationship to those who read his weblog resembles that of mainstream media journalists to their audiences (unsurprisingly, since he is just such a journalist), but is in some respects an even more extreme distillation of this attitude.

Journalists may (in their heart of hearts) write largely for themselves but this tends to be tempered by a perceived need to serve, please and grow the public that pays their wages. Quentin abandoned his early hopes that the weblog could be a source of work directly - "if you ask me could someone become famous and get renown and enhance their career as a writer through an online weblog I would probably have to say right now I don't think so. So my aim has changed". For him, therefore, the key is not to grow his audience but to maintain "just the right number of readers" – enough to provide him with feedback but "not so many that the comments become things I don't like." In other words, as he says himself, for him his readership is:

> more of an exercise in as wide a range of samples - social samples - as possible if you like.
> Just.. I'm interested in people's knee-jerk reactions to things I write - people I don't know - and
> that's... so I've not really thought about it in any other way than that.

Since he has not attracted a mass audience from which he might gain money directly, and since he does not (to his knowledge) have a readership of people who could commission him to write, he is free to use his audience instrumentally – if they are alienated he has nothing to lose.

Likewise for Kevin, a writer, his weblog is strictly promotional:

> "I guess I went to LiveJournal because it was actually an easier tool for me to do the regular updates and to keep track of things rather than fiddling with my own web pages and adding to it and it's all there and the tools are easy and it's presentable and it's a nice easy way to do it. Because it has a far more public presence than actually going into and searching a website I think it's more useful to me in terms of public presence. Is that against the grain of how it's intended to be used? I don't know. It's a networking tool…"

It contains fairly frequent discussion of 'personal' issues and in many ways resembles weblogs used to connect people to their friends but in this case the implied invitation to interaction is actually seen by Kevin as a burden:

> I don't actually expect responses on LiveJournal. If I do get responses it's often a chore. Because then I feel the need to - I have to actually acknowledge that somebody has actually responded to the post and make the appropriate comment which is again another time sink.

Similarly, he "scans" the people he has "friended" and while he sometimes posts on other people's journals (consistent with the interactive expectations of the LiveJournal 'community'), he sees this activity as a "combination" of supportiveness and "it would be a good thing to have my presence in this particular discussion" – or as he put it, "I'm here, I'm still around, and don't forget me." In many respects this use of the tool resembles the "narrowcasting" discussed above, but I have grouped it here with uses of the weblog as media because the readers are meant to feel themselves to be interacting socially while Kevin sees his audience purely instrumentally. In this sense his weblog is a kind of ongoing PR campaign.

Elaine's relationship with her readership is complex and has changed over time. For the most part she has tended to deliberately ignore the fact that she had a readership – despite the fact that she wrote about her site in a print publication with a circulation of tens of thousands. A few weeks before her interview for this study, however, she was approached by a professional blogger who invited her to write as part of a larger,

commercial group weblog. The way she frames her own weblog seems now to have become essentially a promotional venture, like Kevin's, but this instrumental use has been simply added to the earlier more expressive postings on the site itself. The archives, which contain personal references that may not be consistent with a 'professional' image, remain intact.

If in these cases the use of the weblog is primarily professional, why do these weblogs sometimes contain personal disclosures? Two possible explanations suggest themselves – first that the emergent genre expectations around this form of weblogging encourage personal revelation and secondly that society as a whole encourages increased personal revelation even in business relations as a substitute for trust in institutions (Giddens 1990 p. 121, Rosen 2005). I will return to this question in the context of personal weblogs for self expression later in this chapter.

DIALOGIC WEBLOGGING - KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS

> The main reason [for my weblog] is for keeping up with a community of friends. Almost everybody who is on my friends list is people that I've actually met. Almost all of them at science fiction conventions. I just find it wonderful to be able to … I don't have to work to keep up with their lives, they don't have to work to keep up with mine and yet when we run into each other we all know what we've been up to and what the most important things that have been happening in our lives are. - Jane

Those pursuing this form of weblogging seek to interact with those who are reading and appear to value such interactions as ends in themselves (rather than 'necessary evils' as in the case of narrowcasting bloggers). I distinguish them from those practicing 'telelogic' weblogging because these bloggers intend to use their sites solely or principally to communicate with a limited number of known others while the definition of 'telelogic' weblogging suggests going 'with the grain' of the medium, using it primarily to reach and communicate with online others who were not already known to the writer.

The desire to stay in contact with friends is the most common reason given by interviewees for having a weblog. For several of them it was their primary expressed motivation, especially for those who had widely dispersed friends and family. Jane's use of her LiveJournal described at the start of this section is typical of this pattern of

behaviour. Like others, she doesn't use the features LiveJournal provides to limit access only to online friends she specifies but that does not mean her intended use is 'telelogic'. For her and for the others who use their weblogs in this way, attitudes towards unintended readers range from indifference to suspicion. Jane says, "I am not particularly secretive about myself - I'm a bit of a show-off and I'm quite happy for anybody who wants to fall across my LiveJournal to fall across my LiveJournal" but while she "has a lot of friends who do strike up a lot of friendships through online communities" it "just isn't particularly my thing".

Linda has a much more exclusive picture of her circle of readers (almost entirely a group of fellow students from the university she attended in Canada). She says she is "very open" with her site "because it is for people that I trust". The thought of strangers posting comments, even anodyne ones ("that they were happy for you or that they were amused") would make her "a bit weirded out" – "my immediate reaction would not be comfort - it would be like.. intruding on my little world."

Frances is different again. Her weblog began as a way to keep in touch with her family and friends overseas but unlike the other two she began to receive a wider audience (getting between ten and twenty comments per post at the time of interview according to her). Though her posts are among the most personally revealing of any of those interviewed (including discussion of sexual encounters) - "I pretty much blog my whole life" - in her case she accepted the attention from those she hadn't already known. "If I was so concerned about people knowing this sort of thing then I would never have a blog", she said. She nonetheless disavowed any idea that she was seeking a dialogue with people other than those she already knew:

> The only comments that I - don't worry about but that I look forward to getting are maybe from the people I know really well in real life like my friends and my family. Partly because it's really rare to see say my sister pop up and comment so when she does it's like 'oh my God'. Those are the people I am more interested in commenting rather than people I don't know.

TELELOGIC SOCIALITY

> I found that throughout my blogging career is that I really do appreciate people actually giving their feedback on the situation you are in because sometimes it just reiterates what you are

thinking and sometimes it is completely the opposite and you have to think 'am I thinking about this wrong or am I going about this the wrong way' – Isobel

There are many ways weblog technology can be used by authors, and as we have seen most of them arguably do not take full advantage of the affordances that weblogs offer. As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, it appears that the communicative practice weblogs are most precisely suited to technologically is enabling their authors to reach and to interact with people previously unknown to them in an online forum that they control. While it only seems to be the primary motivation for the blogging practices of four of the 22 interviewees in this study, it is among the motivations for several others. In addition to telelogic sociality there are a number of other telelogic weblog practices that have been observed in other studies - like political activity aimed at a wider public sphere than just one's friends and acquaintances – but these were not observed among those interviewed.

A few of those interviewed set up their weblogs deliberately in order to 'meet' new people but most set them up with a variety of other purposes in mind and said they only discovered subsequently that interacting socially with and getting to know new people was a key benefit of their blogging practice. Several of these now assert that this is now the main motive for them to continue to have a weblog – a result consistent with other studies of weblogging and of personal home page creation (Menchen Trevino 2005 p. 9, Rosenstein 2000 p. 80).

The expected or desired nature and development of the relationship between blogger and reader does vary within this group. For some the new people they meet online who live locally become friends face to face. Bruce, for example, says his use of LiveJournal, "has tied me in to a community of people in London… you do feel part of a community and part of something so that's good. And that's come about from using LiveJournal definitely." For others like Phillippa it is the prospect of 'meeting' people from other countries they might otherwise never know that appeals, even when this is not particularly likely – a fellow artist based in New York linked to her weblog and she remarked, "It was good that I got the hits but it was also good that I had this sort of dialogue with her ... if I ever go to there… I could send him an email and say,

'do you want to meet for coffee, or let's go see a show or something', and we could do that and that's huge. I mean how else would that have happened without this?''

In the latter case, it is open to question whether despite the claimed desire for social interaction with readers, what is sought is really closer to the 'quasi-sociality' described shortly. When the blogger has little expectation that they will ever meet their readers, and when (as is normal) the comments to what they write are very short[1], one must ask is this really discussion or merely a monologue that is validated by the knowledge that readers exist?

'A-COMMUNICATIVE' WEBLOGGING

This final grouping of practices is the most problematic. To refer to 'a-communicative' practices built around a communications medium seems counter-intuitive, but the interviews clearly revealed a wide variety of motivations to start and to continue weblogging that had only a tenuous connection to communication.

The 'therapeutic' motivation appears to be a powerful one for some and is both novel and potentially the most problematic in its consequences for those who practice it. Of course there is a long history of people from all walks of life keeping self-reflexive diaries in which they may write about matters that could harm themselves or others if made public – Foucault argues written self performance was already "well established and deeply rooted" when Augustine published his Confessions in 397 (Foucault 1988 p. 27). Hitherto the disclosure of the contents of personal diaries has generally been under the author's control and even unintended circulation has normally been limited to those who might gain physical access to a single paper copy – at least during the author's lifetime. The personal weblog by contrast is published contemporaneously (not posthumously), to a very wide potential audience - including those the author would least like to read it - and in a form that could be preserved online (or saved on others' computers) indefinitely.

A number of scholars studying online diaries (Paccagnella 1997, Serfaty 2004 p. 12, van Dijck 2004) have asserted that the intention of online diary authors *must* be to

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[1] No statistical analysis of the interviewees' weblogs was performed but a recent large-scale survey found the median length of a weblog comment was just 31 words. (Mishne and Glance 2006)

make what they have written public, but this research suggests the truth is more complex. For the most part those interviewed rely on 'security through obscurity' (the sheer number of weblogs and web pages in general) to ensure what they write is not read by anyone save the 'innocuous' passing stranger. The consequences when, counter to expectation, their weblogs are read by those who are not their desired audience can be severe, ranging from embarrassment to loss of employment (Armstrong 2002, Barker 2005, BBC News Online 2004, Hanscom 2003, Pollitt 2003) One of my interviewees, for example, was fired from his job because of comments he made on his weblog, another was threatened by an online group who disagreed with something she said, and a third complained on her weblog about her failure to negotiate a higher fee for a piece of writing only to find that those who commissioned the work were reading her weblog.

Therapy

> People become like their blogs, and the way in which that's something I've seen, with a lot of people, it drags them down, when it can be something that you could take advantage of. If you're writing yourself as a character, even if you're being truthful, you're never going to be telling the whole truth. So I do think it's a brilliant opportunity to become more like yourself, almost to fine tune, upgrade, come up with a kind of ever-evolving version two point whatever of oneself. And - to other people that would sound sort of bizarrely occult - but it can also be understood in terms of the kind of self-help book type stuff almost. Except without having to do anything quite as embarrassing as doing the kind of looking in the mirror and saying, 'every day, in every way, I'm getting better.' Adam

Several writers speak of a need to express emotions and impressions to purge them and four of them suggested that this was in some way 'therapeutic'. This is not the familiar sense of therapy as a form of self-reflection guided by others. The idea that the home page or weblog can be used in that way – as a Foucauldian 'technology of the self' (Foucault 1988) for example - is found in a number of studies (Chandler 1998, Germann Molz 2004) The interviewees here however generally were not really seeking response to their writing from their readers whether as judge/confessor or interpreter. Some did pay lip service to wanting advice – perhaps to legitimate the fact that they used a communicative medium – but generally it emerged that they did not actually take such advice to heart. Harriet's reaction is typical:

> You've still got to remain true to yourself and follow your gut. Just because you are putting your heart out to people doesn't mean you've got to do as they say. I'm not beholden to my commenters.

In any case as noted before weblog comments tend to be brief and therefore superficial. Rather than using the weblog to invite comment or, through writing, to enable self-reflection, the dominant use appeared to be purgative. That is by writing down thoughts or feelings – particularly those that bothered them – the authors could then put these feelings behind them. As George put it, " if someone pissed me off or annoyed me - generally if I put it down it didn't annoy me any more." If the writing itself is the therapy, however, why not simply write a paper diary or keep it on your hard disk? George seems to suggest an answer:

> For years I tried to type a journal as opposed to write it - just in Word - but there was something really unfulfilling about it... I guess it's because it wasn't tangible perhaps - it was just on the screen …whereas with blogs you seem to get... you seem to be online on a different format and there's always the possibility that someone was reading it.

This response suggests that the possibility of readership in the abstract – as with the idea a paper notebook might be read by a vague 'posterity' – prevents the practice from feeling meaningless and self-indulgent.

This was often complicated by a half-suppressed desire among several interviewees for a post containing the author's point of view or emotional state to be read by specific others – particularly if what they wish to convey is too sensitive for face to face communication. George, for example, said:

> You get it off your chest and... I guess there's partly the hope that they would read it and understand what went wrong… I think I did indirectly address things in the hope that they read them and realised more perhaps where I am coming from.

The 'un-directed' nature of the weblog medium allows them the possibility of imagining that the person *could* read it but without the embarrassment of contacting them directly. The possibility that many others including family, friends and work colleagues could also be reading tended to be either downplayed or ignored.

Quasi-sociality

> It's just nice to know that there are people out there paying attention to what you're doing. We're all not alone. Annie

> The Internet became a channel through which I could meet like-minded people, have a really good conversation for an hour and then not have to worry if I upset them because I would never meet them again. Donald

> [In everyday talk] the response we often seek is not an answer to a question or a compliance with a request but an appreciation of a show put on. (Goffman 1986)

I have coined this term to describe the most attenuated possible form of social interaction – that is, communication with people not known to the writer, who the writer does not really want to get to know and from whom no meaningful response is expected. [1] 'Quasi-sociality' as I use it here should not be confused with the 'para-social' relationship identified by Horton and Wohl (1956) between some television viewers and the characters they watch on the screen. Both represent a kind of mediated imagined social relationship but as will become apparent the dynamics of the relationship are very different in each situation. It bears some similarity to Thompson's idea of 'mediated quasi-interaction' (Thompson 1995b), though in his definition such communication is generally monological by the nature of the mass media themselves, not as in the case I discuss by choice. He recognised that technologies like the Internet could enable new forms of interaction but the mass adoption of the Internet began just as his book was published so he was unable to fully explore its implications.

This practice was not one I expected to find, given the central place of interactivity in the rhetoric of Internet studies generally, and I arrived at it by a process of elimination. While most of those weblogging expected to mainly to reach a specific set of others who were known before their blogging started, as we have already seen a minority clearly meant their weblogs only to reach online others who they don't already know. Renia for example makes sure her parents don't read it and "my college friends don't know I have one because I'm scared they might seek it out and they will know all my secrets." Isobel likewise finds weblogging embarrassing, "my offline friends don't really know anything about it. I don't think I want to go around

parading the fact that I have a life online as well because I don't think they would be quite ready for my sad and geeky quiet side."

I have already dealt with those who see this as an opportunity to meet new people or to socialise with them online, but there are several who either don't evince a desire to get to know their readers or who appear to actively want to keep their distance – for example Donald (above) or Renia, who often writes about her problems, but doesn't look for sympathy – if someone offered that, she'd "just say I appreciate it - that's it really. I wouldn't really elaborate on it because I don't want sympathy - I just want someone to chat to - friends really."

The Internet provides a number of outlets for such 'quasi-social' behaviour – chatrooms, messageboards and mailing lists often appear in part to fulfil such a role, for example, and several of those interviewed had participated in such forums before starting their blogs. But for those wishing to talk about themselves and receive support or validation they present three key difficulties. Firstly, the frame of the interaction is defined by a third party – chatrooms and discussion boards tend to be given a set topic and off-topic conversation may be ignored or criticised. Secondly, the writer's postings are competing for attention with those of others. And finally, the norms of conversation and formal controls on it are not normally in their control. As noted by some of Gumbrecht's respondents (2004 p. 4), The personal weblog solves all three of these problems – the owner has total control over the topic, comments are generally made in relation to what the owner writes (though commenters may also comment on others' comments) and even without comments, readers are assumed to be attending primarily to what the site owner has to say, and the owner can establish their own norms and may refuse to publish any comments they choose (in practice most commenters appear to have internalised the norm that they should be polite or supportive).

Expression of creativity

All the way through Uni I got firsts for anything that involved writing anything… I loved the [assignments] where I was writing - I was obviously in the wrong degree… the blog came along and I thought 'this is a great opportunity for me to actually do more of the writing and find out if I really really do like it'. As it turns out I actually still do… Harriet

Studies of weblogging have tended to treat it as a means to an end – whether that end is information exchange, social interaction or self-expression. Until recently, however, the idea that the creativity involved in the writing process itself could be the motivation has been under-studied. A recent poll of US webloggers revealed that the single most popular reason offered (by 52%) for weblogging was "to express yourself creatively" (Lenhart and Fox 2006) – a motivation that was also noted in Menchen Trevino's interviews with webloggers (2005 p. 9). The distinction between this group and the group using their sites as a media outlet is that for the former group it is an extension of their working lives with a practical end while for this group it is an activity more separate from their working lives – often providing what they consider to be their only means of 'scratching the writing itch' and without any extrinsic value.

Certainly, this was the case for Harriet (quoted above) and even more so for George. He had been keeping a paper journal already and in addition to its 'cathartic' value, he said "it also seemed like a very productive process - it seems you had something creative at the end of it". He wished he had studied English or creative writing in further education "what I've got a lot of heart in - a lot of enthusiasm for is writing", but instead became an accountant.

As with the therapeutic webloggers, they could as easily have written what they wrote in private, but the fact that there were or could be readers helped to encourage them to continue. All mentioned that they enjoyed being able to hear that they had touched or (more usually) amused or entertained their readers. But all were clear that this was not for them a form of collaborative artwork or performance. They frequently distanced their work from its reception, making it clear that they did not wish to 'play to the crowd' – Donald puts this most clearly:

> I would like other people to maybe get something out of it but it's certainly for me - I started it for me. I didn't start it really for anybody else and even saying things like "I want people to read this - I want people to comment" - that's for me - it's selfish in that sense. It's not for any other reason. I don't think you do anything creative in the sense of writing or art or music because you want to make somebody else happy or sad. You hope that it will affect them in a way but you certainly always do it for yourself.

Why have these authors used their everyday lives as material (even in a distorted form) given the inherently risky nature of doing so? This question was not addressed explicitly in the interviews, but it is telling that both of the journalists saw their weblogs – initially at least – as broadly similar to the newspaper columns of journalists like Julie Burchill, who often write about their daily lives. Many scholars and commentators have remarked on the increasing prevalence of personal revelations in the media, which, it is argued, makes self-exposure more acceptable (Calvert 2000, Rosen 2005, Shattuc 1997). Personal weblogs may both feed off and encourage this trend. There may also be a more pragmatic reason – the events of their lives are the materials closest to hand for would-be writers. Or as Goffman put it, "although a performer can run out of lively traditional materials, he cannot want for one particular out-of-frame resource - his own current effort to stage a performance." (Goffman 1986 p. 388)

Conclusion

This analysis of the differing ways in which authors of personal weblogs understand their their practices and their relations with their readers reveals that even within what appears to be a single form of practice there is a wide variety of different motivations and understandings of what is occurring among the actors. It is also apparent that while the technology that underpins these practices allows certain practices and precludes others - like all technologies – the users do not necessarily use it in the way in which it appears most natural or suitable to its designers. Weblogs enable individuals to communicate with anyone on the Internet but only a minority of those interviewed wished to do this – or thought they were in fact doing this.

This brings us to the weakness of Goffman's approach to symbolic interaction – his under-estimation of the unconscious influences on the framing of an interaction. In his analysis, participants in an interaction can be deceived about what is going on or mistaken but there is little space in his work for self-deception - except in the extreme case of mental illness (Goffman 1986 p. 111). This is to some extent understandable in the case of face to face interaction when under normal circumstances at least the question of who is being addressed by whom is clear. But it is the nature of

weblogging practice that there is room for ambiguity about who – if anyone – is being communicated with. Bloggers do not see who is reading what they write either as it is being posted or afterwards (though they may get comments or count the number of readers they get using 'hit counters'). It is apparent that while they were all aware *at some level* that anyone who was online could read what they wrote, they generally chose to believe that only those they would wish to read it would come across it.

Many of those interviewed felt that their practice was enjoyable and sometimes even valuable and self-enhancing in some respect. For those who did not have a meaningful outlet for their creativity, for example, this provided a plausible means of reaching an audience. Several unexpectedly found their weblogs helped them to meet new friends. But there were also real dangers to their weblogging practice – some which emerged even during the limited period of this research. And because weblogs can remain online – both on their original sites and in archives - long after their authors lose interest in them, it is possible that as their authors' circumstances change these sites may be seen in a different and more embarrassing or harmful context to the one in which they were written.

The technologies used to enable this practice continue to change - among young people, social networking software like MySpace seems to be gaining ground (Dodson 2006, Neilson/NetRatings 2006), and both still pictures and video seem likely to play an increasing role in the production of personal sites. Whatever the particular technological platform used, the use of the Internet by individuals to discuss more or less personal matters in more or less public online spaces seems likely to continue to increase. Educators in particular need to build an examination of this phenomenon into their curricula in order to help and encourage young people to express themselves while making them more aware of the potential risks of their doing so.

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