

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium

danah boyd

School of Information

University of California-Berkeley

dmb@sims.berkeley.edu

Introduction

While blogging is piquing the interest of mainstream media, youth, academic researchers, and entrepreneurial Silicon Valley, only a fraction of Internet users read blogs and many do not even know what the term means. Reports on how many people read blogs vary (Rainie 2005, Comscore 2005), but even in the United States, less than 50% of Internet users read blogs and many do not even know when they do (Buchwalter 2005). Numerous tools have been built to support blogging and people have extended those tools to do a wide variety of things that may or may not be considered blogging. While the term has been used to hype a new phenomenon, people are not always clear about what it references. *Blog* is not a self-descriptive term and, as a consequence, blogs, bloggers and blogging are being conceptualized in conflicting and unclear ways by both press and academics. The goal of this paper is to uncover and analyze the variable ways in which the term is being used in order to highlight how relevant social groups are talking past one another and inserting bias into the analysis of blogs and blogging. Rather than arguing for a definitive definition, this paper invites scholars to conceptualize blogging as a diverse set of practices that result in the production of diverse content on top of a medium that we call blogs.

This paper begins by exploring how tool developers, media, researchers, and practitioners have conceptualized blogging. Blogs are often seen as a genre of computer-mediated communication that can be evaluated in content and structure terms. Variations on styles are viewed as sub-genres; these sub-genres are typically devised by drawing parallels to pre-existing genres of textual production such as diaries and journalism. Seeing blogs as a genre obfuscates the efficacy of the practice and the acts of the

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

practitioners. The use of metaphor to capture sub-genres introduces problematic methods for evaluating blogging.

The second half of this paper introduces a framework for understanding blogging as a diverse set of practices that result in the production of diverse content that we call blogs. Moving away from content-focused approach, this section argues that blogs must be conceptualized as both a medium and a bi-product of expression. This shift allows us to see blogs in terms of culture and practice. Furthermore, this provides a framework in which to understand how blogging has blurred the lines between orality and literacy, corporeality and spatiality, public and private.

A study of blogs must draw from the practice of blogging, not simply analyze the output. By reconceptualizing blogs as a medium and bi-product of practice, it becomes possible to understand the diverse intentions that produce diverse output and analyze blogs even when the output itself is inconsistent in terms of style and content.

Reflexive Methodology

This paper stems from ethnographic research on blogging, including twenty months of participant observation and nine months of formal and informal interviews. During nine months of interviews, I engaged in hundreds of informal discussions with a diverse range of bloggers including early adopters and newcomers, college students and working mothers, people who blog professionally and those who do so in their free time. Most of my discussions took place in major metropolitan areas in the United States or through email and instant messaging.

I read a diverse collection of blogs to understand the range of output typically included under the umbrella of blogging. I used tools like Technorati, Blogger's Next Blog and the "recently updated" feature on Xanga and LiveJournal to find a wide range of blogs. While I kept note of the number of non-English blogs I encountered, I only read English blogs for content.

Using a combination of snowballing, public advertisements on Craigslist and cold emails to random bloggers, I chose sixteen bloggers who represented many of the diverse

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

practices I observed and heard about during my informal discussions and daily blog surfing. I interviewed each for an extended period in a formal, recorded setting. Of the sixteen subjects chosen, eight identified as male, six as female and two as transgendered. Their ages ranged from 19-57 with a mean of 29.4. All lived in major metropolitan areas, with nine located on the west coast of the United States, four on the east coast and three around London. All but one blogged in English. Twelve identified as Caucasian, three as Asian-American and one as Latino. Although teenagers blog in droves, I did not formally interview any teens due to external limitations. The lack of representation of rural regions, non-English speakers, people of color and non-Western cultures limits my understanding of the full breadth of practices, but this paper is not trying to articulate all blogging practices. The diversity of practices found in my relatively homogenous subject pool still shows a variety of experiences and attitudes.

I have been engaged with blogging long before studying it. I created what is now labeled a blog in 1997 and have worked on and advised the development of blogging-related tools, most notably Blogger. My position as an insider has given me greater access to bloggers and data about blogging. While such access puts constraints on my neutrality, I have worked diligently to avoid contaminating my analysis with my personal views or the views of my employers.

Formal Definitions

Different interested parties have attempted to define *blog* and *blogging*, including practitioners, technology companies, academics, and mainstream media. According to Wikipedia, Jorn Barger coined the term *weblog* in December 1997 and Peter Merholz coined 'blog' in April/May of 1999 when he "broke the word weblog into the phrase 'we blog'" on his site (Wikipedia 2005). Both terms were devised to identify websites that had a particular look and feel distinct from homepages. Blogger, an early blogging tool, was unveiled by Pyra Labs in 1999 to make it easier for people to create blogs. Its popularity helped spread the term across the web and to solidify the look and feel of blogs.

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

Following Blogger's lead, other tools were developed to support blogging. Many added additional features (like comments) but replicated the layout and general style put forward by Blogger. Other services like LiveJournal and Diaryland were not built on Blogger's model and were not initially conceptualized as blogging tools and their users do not always conceptualize their practice as blogging.

The most explicit definitions of blogging come from the companies who built tools to support it. These definitions are devised as marketing pitches, intended to explain why people should try their service and thus the practice embedded. When they launched in October 1999, Blogger described its product as "an automated weblog publishing tool," assuming that users had pre-existing knowledge of weblogs. Six months later, their tagline became "push button publishing" and the description of their tool changed to "Blogger offers you instant communication power by letting you post your thoughts to the web whenever the urge strikes."

Created with a journaling practice in mind, LiveJournal's evolving definition of "live journal" shows how it became a blogging tool:

... an up-to-the-minute log of whatever you're doing, when you're doing it. (October 1999)

... an online journal that you can update with short entries many times a day, or with long entries a few times a week... (March 2000)

... a simple-to-use (but extremely powerful and customizable) personal publishing ("blogging") tool, built on open source software. (November 2004)

Typepad, a newer blog hosting service, uses known self-expression practices to market its tool, describing itself as "a powerful, hosted weblogging service that gives users the richest set of features to immediately share and publish information -- like travel logs, journals and digital scrapbooks -- on the Web" (November 2004). Alternatively, Xanga defines itself as "a community of online diaries and journals" but offers a tagline of "the weblog community" (November 2004).

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

In an effort to capture users who are engaging with the new practice, blogging companies consistently rely on the recognition of the term itself while implicitly connecting it with known content production forms like publications, journals and diaries, and logs of one's actions.

In March 2003, the Oxford English Dictionary added blog (both noun and verb) and web log to its corpus, drawing from an eclectic set of definitional references. Their definition of blog notes that, "Blogs... contain daily musings about news, dating, marriage, divorce, children, politics in the Middle East..or millions of other things or nothing at all" and "To blog is to be part of a community of smart, tech-savvy people who want to be on the forefront of a new literary undertaking" (OED 2003). They define the verb as "To write or maintain a weblog. Also: to read or browse through weblogs, esp. habitually" and *web log* as "A frequently updated web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary" (OED 2003). Other dictionaries also added the term. In the year 2004, *blog* ("a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer") was the most frequently requested entry in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Merriam-Webster 2005)

In addition to dictionaries, topical encyclopedias also sought out definitions for blogs. Jill Walker used her blog to solicit feedback as she was defining web log for the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory (Walker 2003). By doing so, she turned the definition into a more collaborative project, evolving her definition so that it resonated with the people who were engaged in the production of what she was defining. Her definition focuses primarily on the content and structure.

Formal definitions frame blogs as a genre that can be demarcated through structure and segmented through content type. Structural inconsistencies are analyzed as deviations from a normative prototype while the variations in content are seen as representative of sub-genres. While the content produced by blogging can logically be categorized in

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

terms of genre, defining the blog itself as a genre obscures its role in distributing and representing expression.

Researcher Definitions

As researchers began analyzing blogs and publishing articles on the topic, each defined the term at the beginning of their papers, indicating that no consistent definition is operating amongst researchers. Consistently, researchers rely on the same type of structural definitions as put forward by the technological and dictionary definitions. For example, blogs are "frequently updated webpages with a series of archived posts, typically in reverse-chronological order" (Nardi, et. al. 2004: 1) and "modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence" (Herring, et. al. 2004: 1). These definitions also frame the research objectives. In their paper, Herring, et. al. argue that "blogs are the latest genre of Internet communication" (2004: 1). They frame blogs as a genre that can be analyzed in temporal (i.e. post frequency) and structural (tool used, post word count, quantity of links, presence of features like calendars) terms. Based on perceived intention as seen in the content, they also account for the blog's purpose. While this approach offers metrics for measuring blogs, it says little about the phenomenon or why the variance in blogging practices is so wide.

Other researchers have given some attention to the practice, but usually by comparing blogging to other practices that produced literary genres. Consider this title of a recent academic paper: "Blogging as Social Activity, or, Would You Let 900 Million People Read Your Diary?" (Nardi, et. al. 2004). Although this paper contains excellent ethnographic materials, their title invites the reader to equate blogs with diaries and evaluate them on the same terms. Doing so obscures the differences between the practices while simultaneously introducing a judgmental quality to their research. By asking a question that would garner an "of course not" response, the authors imply that blogging deviates from acceptable social norms. In other words, bloggers are either naïve or crazy. By framing the paper this way, the authors dismiss the cultural values of bloggers while also misleading the reader into believing that blogging is about letting 900

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

million people read a digital diary. This approach limits researchers' ability to understand blogging.

While metaphors are a valuable linguistic tool for introducing new concepts, heavy reliance on them distorts the concept that is being introduced. Through metaphor, people cognitively attribute the properties of an old concept to the new one. Metaphors work when two concepts share many properties. Yet, the differences are what separate the concepts. To evaluate a new concept in the terms of the old one obfuscates ways in which the practices differ in the minds of practitioners. This also obscures any differences that emerge in terms of production because it requires researchers to make sense of divergent output into the old concept. By evaluating blogs on diary's terms instead of on blog's terms, Nardi., et. al are depleting blog of any agency as a concept.

Metaphors are used prolifically in the process of defining blogs. From the services to the media, bloggers to researchers, people consistently frame blogs in terms of diaries and journals, journalism, bookmarking and note taking. While this is valuable for introducing the concept to newcomers, it complicates both evaluation and identification. People are more likely to force new information into early models than to reevaluate their initial models and see differences (Aronson 1995). By using metaphors as evaluation schemes, researchers are building inflexible models, invoking a biased frame and limiting the ability to do meaningful analysis.

Mass Media Definitions

While academic publications are not known for the sensational titles, the mass media is. Thus, it is not surprising that their coverage of blogging also includes troublesome titles. The most egregious abuses of definition by metaphor occurred during the coverage of the 2004 American presidential election. After bloggers were given press passes to the Democratic National Convention, the New York Times ran with the title "Web Diarists Are Now Official Members of Convention Press Corps" (Lee 2004). While the diary metaphor is helped novices understand bloggers, the New York Times began covering blogs in 2000 (Gallagher 2000) and frequently uses the term blog in their headlines without employing the diarist metaphor. Furthermore, New York Times coverage of

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

blogging had referred to multiple metaphors, including amateur journalism. By choosing the diary metaphor instead of the journalist metaphor, the New York Times reveals its bias in this article. This headline suggests that readers should evaluate the new members of the press corps as diarists, not amateur journalists or, simply, bloggers. Just as with the academic title, this headline is judgmental, implying that bloggers are not worthy of journalist credentials.

The relationship between bloggers and journalists is complicated. On one hand, journalists feel intimidated by bloggers' ability to rapidly cover new material; on the other, journalists are dismissive of bloggers' lack of code with respect to neutrality and checking of sources. While most bloggers do not identify as journalists, some do. Journalist-identified bloggers view their practice as journalism and their blog as their journalist publication. They are actively involved in setting ethical codes and standards, although many do not believe that those set forth by mainstream media organizations are quintessential to the practice. Given their identification and practice, they believe that they should be given journalistic protections under the law. In the case of *Apple vs. Does* (EFF 2005), bloggers feel as though they should have the journalistic right to protect their sources. At stake in this case is whether bloggers can be journalists as well as whether journalists can blog as their means of production.

The emergence of journalist bloggers brings the separation between practice and medium to the forefront. Not all blogs are journalism, but the same can be said for paper, radio and TV. While journalists can produce stories for any of these traditional mediums, can they produce stories for blogs? In other words, is a blog a genre like news or is it a medium like television?

Practitioner Definitions

In order to really get at what blogging is, it is important to turn to the practitioners not just those who are evaluating the practice. When explaining blogging to newcomers, bloggers also capitalize on metaphors, often the same ones used by those invested in formal definitions. Yet, they also recognize that limitations to these metaphors. When I asked bloggers to define a blog, many would use metaphors but immediately qualify

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

them and try to explain the differences. For example, I frequently heard statements like, "It's kinda like my online journal, but..." When outsiders and media try to pigeonhole their practices into a particular genre, bloggers often eschew the metaphors and speak out against the comparison on their blogs. This rejection of metaphors emerges when outsiders attempt to judge blogging in terms of these metaphors. As blogging becomes internally naturalized, bloggers find no use for the metaphors and they become a hindrance rather than a cognitive support.

Beyond the metaphors and structural definitions, practitioners often refer to the sociable aspects of blogging and blogs. They talk about the conversational qualities of blogging and the desire to share with others. They talk about community and how blogging helps them engage with a community of people. Few definitions take the sociable side of blogging into consideration, but this is essential to the practice of most bloggers.

More seasoned bloggers frequently find the definition question either irritating or futile. For every blog post trying to define blogging, there are just as many dismissing the effort itself. This dismissal comes from a frustration over being labeled and categorized in narrow terms. In a very exasperated tone, a six-year veteran explained:

I've given up on definitional questions and gone for these tautologies. Like blogging is what we do when we say, "We're blogging." And not worried much about what's a blog, and what's a journal, and what's a whatever, link log, and a photo blog, and whatever. I think that they're not particularly meaningful categories. ... It's a blog because a blogger's doing it. It's a blog because it's caught up in the practice of blogging. It's a blog because it's made on blog tools. It's a blog because it's made up out of blog parts. It's a blog because bloggers are engaged with it, and everyone points at it and says, "It's a blog!" - Carl

Carl has an internal model of blogs, bloggers and blogging, divorced from any metaphors that newcomers or outsiders use. Asking him to define a blog is akin to asking a Supreme Court justice to define hard-core pornography. The only response that can be mustered is "I know it when I see it."

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

Reframing Blogging and Blogs

Early efforts to define and analyze blogs in terms of structural features or the content are most valuable to outsiders and machines trying to understand how the output compares to the broader concept of a webpage or other practices of communication and textual production. Yet, they fail to capture the actual practice of blogging, why blogging has become popular, and how the output is evolving as more people begin to blog. Shifting the foci of analysis to the practice and the resultant medium provides critical insight into the phenomenon.

The practice of blogging involves producing digital content with the intention of sharing it asynchronously with a conceptualized audience. It is an *n-to-?* practice where some discrete number of bloggers share with a unknown number of readers. An *n-to-?* model is not unique to blogging; the practices underlying radio, television and print publication also take this form. In all *n-to-?* practices, there is the potential for the audience to be in the millions, but in actuality there is a power law distribution in audience where the vast majority of bloggers are producing content for a very small number of readers (Marlow 2005). While some bloggers aspire to a large audience, most are concerned with blogging to those that they know and the potential of like-minded strangers who stumble across their site. The content that they choose to share varies as widely as communication, ranging from reflections to to-do lists, philosophies to references to found digital objects.

The practice of blogging is an active one, where the blogger produces semi-regular expressions that build on top of each other under the same digital roof. Each new expression is connected with earlier expressions. The collection of these expressions is captured by the blog. Yet, a blog does not capture just anyone's expressions – each blog only captures the expressions of the bloggers who are affiliated with a particular blog. The vast majority of blogs capture the voice of only one blogger, although there are some that capture the expressions of a group.

Blogs differ from static webpages because they capture ongoing expressions, not the edits of a static creation. They differ from community tools because the expressions are

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

captured locally, not in a shared common space. In this way, bloggers identify with their blog, seeing it as *them* (Reed 2005). While the blog is not equivalent to the blogger, it is the facet of them that is captured through the practice of blogging.

What complicates analyses of blogs is that they are both the product of blogging and the medium through which the blogger produces their expressions. Blogs emerge because bloggers are blogging. And yet, what they are blogging to is the blog itself. Consider this in terms of another medium. Radio is a medium in which people express themselves, but the act of speaking to be broadcast is not radio-ing, nor is the product of speaking radio. Radio only exists when people's speech is broadcast through radio waves. And yet, blogs are the bi-product of expression and the medium itself.

In the context of communication, a medium is the channel through which people can communicate or extend their expressions to others. Examples of mediums include paper, radio, and television. In McLuhan's terms (1964) a medium is an "extension of man" that allows people to express themselves. Blogs are precisely this; they allow people to extend themselves into a networked digital environment that is often thought to be disembodied. The blog becomes both the digital body as well as the medium through which bloggers express themselves.

By conceptualizing the blog as a medium instead of a genre, it is possible to see how blogs are more akin to paper than to diaries. It is not the conventions or content types that define blogs, but the framework in which people can express themselves. Using paper, people document their lives. The same is true in blogs. Using paper, people take notes. The same is true in blogs. Paper and blogs are used for everything from creating grocery lists to publishing innovative research, drawing pictures to advertising furniture for sale, tracking personal bills to writing gossip columns. Mediums are flexible, allowing all different sorts of expressions and constantly evolving.

Mediums are also connected to and built on top of other mediums. Language is a medium and its output in a mediated environment produces paper, radio, television and blogs. Conceptualizations of mediums have typically focused on the channel of distribution, although some mediums have multiple channels of distribution. Television,

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

for example, has been distributed by satellite, cable and radio waves. More recently, it is also being distributed through the Internet. The Internet has altered the distribution potential for most mediums, with radio and telephony being obvious examples.

While mediums have been strongly shaped by their distribution channels, they are not synonymous with them. Tools for access have also played a critical role in shaping mediums, but they too do not define the medium. The medium of radio survived the shift in radio devices including large furniture items, vehicle components and portable devices. Mediums are partially distinguished by their format (e.g., text, audio, image, video), but the format does not define the medium (i.e., not all audio is radio). For McLuhan (1964), a medium is defined by what it enables and how it supports people to move beyond the limitations of their body. The medium is defined by the practice it supports and the ways in which one identifies with that practice. As Carl noted, "*blogging is what we do when we say, 'we're blogging.'*"

The boundaries of blogs are socially constructed, not technologically defined. Yet, the technology plays a heavy role in shaping the resulting forms. Because of this, the features present in common blogging tools have framed definitional efforts. Yet, as researchers trying to define categories learned, property-driven definitions of categories are limited and flawed (Lakoff 1987). Efforts to define the category *game* through its properties consistently fail. Neither categories nor mediums can be defined in terms of properties, although there are prototypical examples of both. The prototypical blog has many of the features supported by the most popular tools: commenting, links, trackbacks, time stamps, reverse chronological posts, and syndication feeds. While prototypes have communicative efficacy, they should not be the basis upon which analysis is built. The properties of the prototype do not define the boundaries of the medium nor do they convey value or normative practice. As technology changes, the properties of the prototype will also change.

The practice of blogging is also not bounded and does not signal a set of shared values and goals, even if there are some common ones. Early adopters believed that blogging is about the ability to speak freely to a large audience with no limiting authority or editorial

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

control. As institutions become interested in blogs as a potential market, blogs are emerging with controlled content, and yet these are still blogs. While there are prototypical values in blogging, there are no universal ones embodied by all bloggers. For example, some believe that one should not quote private conversations without permission while others blog entire IM chats, arguing that since it is their blog, they have the right to do so. Much consternation arises amongst journalist-minded bloggers over whether bloggers should edit their posts, how attribution should work and whether or not bloggers have a responsibility to announce their affiliations and economic incentives. These are values prototypical to bloggers with a particular practice, but they are not universally shared. The goals and intentions of individual bloggers affect their practice and, in turn, the medium.

As previously discussed, tools have shaped the style and properties of blogs. Tools are developed to support specific values and practices. Some, like Wordpress and Movable Type, are designed to meet the needs of more audience-driven practitioners while services like LiveJournal and Xanga focus on community-minded bloggers and Blogger focuses on providing simplistic interfaces to support novice bloggers. The features heavily influence the blogs produced by each of these tools, but bloggers also choose particular tools to meet their needs. While the vast majority of bloggers use the most common tools, use of these tools is not necessary to participate in the practice and produce a blog. Because the tools are so common and so recognizably shape the medium, it is easy to mistake their structure for the structure of the medium itself. Yet, the tools are evolving alongside the practice and diversifying as more people engage with blogging.

By reframing blogs as a culture-driven medium upon which the practice of blogging can occur, it is possible to understand the diversity in structure and content. As McLuhan noted, the message is not the medium – "It is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium" (McLuhan 1995: 152). While such a reframing resolves many tensions and confusions about blogging, it also offers a framework in which to consider how blogging is blurring textuality and orality, corporeality and spatiality, public and private.

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

Blurring Textuality and Orality

You're basically standing on a soapbox and reading something out loud only with a blog it feels like there's a big community square and everyone's got a soapbox and they're about the same height and everyone's reading at the same time. So it's a matter of people going and listening to one and oh, I don't like what you're saying and blogging with someone else and listening to what they're saying until you happen to find someone who is saying something interesting or you happen to know where your friend is on his soapbox saying something. – Jennifer

Jennifer's depiction reveals a set of issues that are critical to conceptualizing blogging beyond structure and metaphor. By using terms like *reading* and *listening* interoperably, she signals fluidity between the literary and oral qualities of blogging. She also highlights the performative and social aspects of blogging, the ways in which blogging is intertwined with community participation.

In exposing how writing changed oral culture, Walter Ong categorizes oral speech and textual writing based on their properties to discuss psychological and cultural effects. He analyzes the shift from oral culture to written culture, discussing how textuality does not simply introduce a new medium of communication, but alters the culture and even oral practices. In doing so, he briefly introduces the concept of *secondary orality*, suggesting that mediums are emerging to complicate the notion of a textual culture. These new mediums have both textual and oral qualities and the emergent modern mediated culture creates a new orality that is simultaneously remarkably like and unlike orality (Ong 1982: 134). Blogs are one of these new mediums.

By introducing secondary orality as the suggestion of something beyond the dichotomy of writing/speech, Ong has become the poster-boy for communications researchers trying to locate computer-mediated communication. Unfortunately, as a category, secondary orality is effectively *other* whereby there are no delineated properties. The value of the term is as a marker for a shift in culture that is emerging as the clear separation between text and speech collapses. In order to make sense of secondary orality, researchers have often attempted to classify what attributes of a medium are oral and which are textual.

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

This provides a continuum in which one can say that one medium is more oral than another. For example, instant messaging can be conceived as more oral than email. While this approach is fruitful for categorization, it fails to capture how orality and text are being blurred and creating a shift in culture.

Bloggers are intimately aware of how this distinction is being blurred. Jennifer feels as though she is speaking, performing her thoughts to a conceptualized audience. Her audience experiences reading because they are accessing her performance in an asynchronous form. Although the blogger speaks to a cognitively constructed audience, that audience may not actually be present or listening and regardless, they only make their presence available via access logs or explicit reactions such as comments or other communicated references to the blog material. The negotiation of communication in blogging has a different pattern than either text or speech, and yet it draws from both.

Variable (a)synchronicity and power differences between performer(s) and audience are attributes of computer-mediated communication mediums that contribute to the cultural changes present in secondary orality. In an oral culture, synchronicity is assumed while asynchronous mediums are available in written cultures. More recently, new mediums have emerged that are simultaneously both synchronous and asynchronous. There is fluidity between the two, as some engage synchronously and some engage asynchronously. The latter are not simply engaging with an artifact of the former, but the actual original communications.

In computer-mediated communication, there is also a variable relationship between the performer and audience. In most chat-based mediums, all lurkers and speakers are visible to each other through a list of those present in the room. The structure of the space implies that all performers are equal, as their speech appears as another line in a running dialogue. For the most part, any participant has equal opportunity to speak, although there are typically social limitations to what is acceptable. Yet, the structure of blog-based dialogues is fundamentally different. There is a distinction between the blogger(s) and the audience, whereby the blogger(s) can write new entries or comments

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

but the audience may only respond in the comments or through other communicative mediums.

Blogs blur the line between orality and textuality, altering both the mechanisms for performance the power dynamics between performer(s) and audience. The medium creates a dynamic that is synchronous and asynchronous, performative and voyeuristic. Yet, it is unclear how the blurring of the lines in this medium may affect the relationship between orality and textuality in other mediums.

Blurring Corporeality and Spatiality, Public and Private

The power dynamic between the blogger and the listener invites the question of how blogging affects conceptions of corporeality and spatiality. Architecturally, there are two dominant models in computer-mediated communication. The first is a spatial one, where individuals are directed to a location (URL, IRC channel, newsgroup server); upon arrival at a given location, individuals can communicate with others who are there. The second structure is people-driven where individuals are given a reference to another person (email address, IM handle) and can connect directly to the person. Even though the latter involves logging into a *place* such as the IM server or the email server, the model is driven around person-to-person. Of course, with the IM window and the email client, the individuals are still given a graphical location to contain the conversation. Spatiality dominates the social structure of computer-mediated communication. Whether it is the place where one goes to access others, or the place delineated by the computer to contain the conversation, all communications have a world in which they live.

Blogs too have an addressable location, but unlike rooms set up for conversation, bloggers speak of it being *their* blog. Bloggers discuss their blogs as though it is their home and others are invited to come over, provided that they abide by the norms devised by the blogger. The speaker controls the style, access, and whether or not listeners can comment. While anyone can access most blogs, it is this sense of ownership that makes the blog feel like a personal space.

Yet, it is not just a personal space. Bloggers also speak about their blogs being their online identity, their digital representation. They refer to how the blog gives them a

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

locatable voice and identity in the digital world. In his ethnographic work on blogging, Reed (2005) found that bloggers view their blogs as *them*. This introduces a sense of corporeality to blogging, whereby blogs are the bodies of bloggers, offering a representation as well as a space for the embodied digital individual. In a Goffman (1959) sense, the blog is one's digital *face*, showing the traces of past expressions, revealing both what the blogger brings to the front stage and what aspects of the backstage slip through. Of course, just as with any virtual corporeality, the act of having to type oneself into being results in gaps that trouble any clean reading of digital bodies (Sunden 2003: 3). Yet, that very act of intended corporeality resists traditional concepts of the body as well as traditional understandings of what constitutes a container of textual expression.

Bloggers see their blog as a reflection of their interests and values. They also contend that the blog does not show them in entirety, but only what they choose to perform in that context. This corporeal relationship deeply affects the way in which people choose to manage their blogs. There is a sense of ownership, a sense that a blogger has the right to control what acts and speech are acceptable and to dictate the norms in general. Part of this stems from the sense that whatever others write affects the representation of the blogger, not simply of the blog. In other words, people's additions are like graffiti on one's body. As a result, bloggers have varying degrees of openness to how others shape their blogs. Concerns are more present in people who are negotiating larger audiences or audiences with different expectations.

Both Carl and John have large, diverse audiences that have high expectations concerning their blogs. Carl often resents his audience's expectations and is very leery of creating a "*You are my audience. I owe you something,*" relationship. "*I feel like I really need to narrowly, and tightly define what I owe to my audience, and what my audience owes to me.*" For John, the social dynamics and expectation of interactivity made him hesitate to begin. "*[It's] kind of like inviting all of your least socially functional friends into your living room and giving them plenty of beer. Blogs have a way of attracting all kinds of uneven social behavior. And I wasn't sure I wanted to be at the mercy of it.*" Bloggers with smaller audiences are not immune to awkward social

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

situations around blog control. Three of my subjects who have small audiences expressed frustration over negotiating unwanted readers and struggled with how to exclude readers who kept returning even after explicit requests to go away. Given a corporeal nature in blogs, unwanted audience presence gives people a sense of being invaded.

A tension between spatiality and corporeality emerges when there are differences in perception between bloggers and readers. For the blogger, the blog is corporeal, but for the reader, it is a space for conversation. In transition, the *space* of a blog is constructed as an artifact of the blogger's performance in the witness of a blogging tool. A blogger does not perform to the space, but creates it as an artifact. Yet, in future engagements with the blog, they do not see it as a space they visit, but as a part of themselves. Conversely, the reader addresses the blog like a space. The more intimately the reader is connected with the blogger, the more they will respect it as an extension of the person.

The blurring of spatiality and corporeality introduces the blurring between the public and the private. While outsiders are frequently horrified by what bloggers say under the impression that they don't realize they are speaking in public, most bloggers are quite aware of the public nature of their performance. The difference is that this conception of the public is an embodied one. Everyday, people walk into public and talk about what is on their mind, what they are passionate about to their friends. Intimate conversations can be overheard on buses, philosophical ones in cafes, and playful ones in the park. The target audience is not the public at large, but those for whom the topics of discussion matter. For most people, the idea of speaking to a constructed audience in public is not a fearful one because a conception of public does not mean all people over all time and space.

In the physical world, there's a desire to attract those of like minds by talking in public. There is often something joyful about having a person at a neighboring table join in an intellectual conversation or getting support, even in the form of knowing eyes, from a stranger on a bus. These kinds of interactions can introduce us to new friends. The practice of adorning oneself with fashion markers is often a call for potential like minds to come forward. We perform in public to see and be seen.

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

In the digital world, we use search to seek out strangers with similar conceptions of the world. We decorate our corporeal blogs and wander out amongst other blogs as digital flâneurs. The blogosphere is the imagined public sphere, the space inhabited by all of the public digital bodies.

And yet, even in the public world of blogging, there is an understanding of a private body. By entering a public square, we do not expect to be molested; likewise, in blogging, we do not expect to be attacked simply because we are in the public. We view our bodies as private space in public, just as we view our blogs. And yet, the relationship between private and public is quite blurred, particularly considering that the public square of the blogosphere is not ephemeral, but across space and time.

While spatiality and corporeality are blurred in blogs, issues of control create a tension between these two conceptions. The willingness to be public and engage in conversations brings out the spatial aspects of blogging, while the more private protective tendencies emphasize the corporeal nature. Through blogs, the public and private are also blurred and the public is simultaneously expanding across space and time. As a medium, blogs are challenging accepted dichotomies and inviting practitioners to explore the boundaries of these limits through engagement and performance. Yet, the effects of these shifts is not fully understood.

Concluding Remarks

Early definitions of blogs focused on the structure and content of the output, often using metaphors to connect the emergent with the understood. This approach introduced analytic biases that complicated people's ability to follow the evolution of blogging and how the practice and values of bloggers shaped the output. By shifting focus to the practice, it is possible to see how blogs are not a genre of communication, but a medium through which communication occurs. This reframing offers a framework in which to analyze how blogging has helped blur accepted distinctions such as between orality and textuality, corporeality and spatiality, private and public.

This paper has only begun to introduce the issues present in these blurrings, leaving plenty of room for future research and analysis. Yet, this work must all begin with an

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

understanding that blogs are a medium and this medium has and will continue to shift the communicative and social assumptions that ground everyday life.

Bibliography

Aronson, Elliot. 1995. *The Social Animal*. New York: WH Freeman.

Buchwalter, Charles. 2005. "The Blog Universe: Influencers, Early Adopters and Online Tenure Rolled into One." Talk at *Word of Mouth Marketing Association*. 13 July.
http://www.womma.org/metrics/pres/womma_research_buchwalter.pdf

Comscore. 2005. "Behaviors of the Blogosphere: Understanding the Scale, Composition and Activities of Weblog Audiences." August.
<http://www.comscore.com/blogreport/comscoreblogreport.pdf>

EFF: Electronic Frontier Foundation. 2005. "Apple vs. Does." 11 September.
http://www.eff.org/Censorship/Apple_v_Does/

Gallagher, David. 2000. "Invasion of the 'Blog': A Parallel Web of Personal Journals." *New York Times*. 28 December.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Herring, Susan; Lois Ann Scheidt; Sabrina Bonus; Elijah Wright. 2004. "Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs." *Proceedings of HICSS*. Hawaii.

Lakoff, George. 1987. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lee, Jennifer 8. 2004. "Web Diarists Are Now Official Members of Convention Press Corps." *New York Times*. 26 July.

Marlow, Cameron. 2005. "The Structural Determinants of Media Contagion." Ph.D. Dissertation. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Citation: boyd, danah. 2006. "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium." *Reconstruction* 6(4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
(This is part of a special issue on *Theories/Practices of Blogging*, eds. Michael Benton and Lauren Elkin.)

McLuhan, Marshall. 1995. *Essential McLuhan*. Eds. Frank Zingrone and Eric McLuhan. New York: Basic Books.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Miriam-Webster. 2005. "Merriam-Webster's Words of the Year 2004." 12 September. <http://www.m-w.com/info/04words.htm>

Nardi, Bonnie; Diane Schiano; Michelle Gumbrecht. 2004. "Blogging as Social Activity, or, Would You Let 900 Million People Read Your Diary?" *Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. Chicago, Illinois: ACM.

OED: The Oxford English Dictionary. 2003. "Blog" and "Web log."

Ong, Walter. 1982. *Orality and Literacy*. New York: Routledge.

Rainie, Lee. 2005. "Memo: The State of Blogging." PEW Internet.

Reed, Adam. 2005. "My Blog Is Me': Texts and Persons in Uk Online Journal Culture." *Ethnos* 70.2: 220-42.

Walker, Jill. 2003. "Final Version of Weblog Definition." *jill/txt*. 28 June. http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/archives/blog_theorising/final_version_of_weblog_definition.html

Wikipedia. 2005. "Weblog." *Wikipedia*. 18 July. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weblog>