

Broken Metaphors: Blogging as Liminal Practice

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In February of 2004, PEW reported that 11% of American adult Internet users have read the blogs or diaries of other Internet users (Lenhart, et. al. 2004: 3). While blogging is piquing the interest of mainstream media, youth, academic researchers, and entrepreneurial Silicon Valley, few Internet users even read blogs and many do not even know what the term means. As the press attempts to cover the phenomenon, it is clear that ‘blog’ is not a self-descriptive term and, as a consequence, blogs, bloggers and blogging are being constructed in conflicting and problematic ways.

The goal of this paper is to reveal tensions underlying conceptualizations of blogging. First, I introduce how metaphorical constructions of blogging are being employed and limiting research on blogging by obfuscating an understanding of bloggers’ practices. I use Ong’s ‘secondary orality’ to discuss how blogging complicates delineations between orality and textuality. Additionally, I discuss other dichotomous moves in framing blogging such as spatiality and corporeality, artifact and practice, relying on bloggers’ depictions of their practices to shed light on the tensions in each.

This paper stems from my ethnographic research on blogging, including seven years as a participant-observer and eight months of data collection. Data coming from sixteen formal interviews, hundreds of informal discussions, thousands of blogs and public statistical data inform this analysis. My experience working at Blogger and my participation in the intellectual discourse around blogging also informs this work.

To begin, consider how blogging tools define their service. Blogger, one of the earliest tools, conceptualized to blogging as “push-button publishing.” Xanga defines itself as “a

community of online diaries and journals”¹ while Typepad describes 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”². Conceptual connections to diaries and journals are embedded in the names of at least two services: Diaryland and LiveJournal. The latter has offered evolving definitions of “live journal” on its website in order to ground newcomers:

*... an up-to-the-minute log of whatever you're doing, when you're doing it.*³

*... an online journal that you can update with short entries many times a day, or with long entries a few times a week...*⁴

*... a simple-to-use (but extremely powerful and customizable) personal publishing (“blogging”) tool, built on open source software.*⁵

In articulating their offering, these services draw on metaphors for publishing and diarying or journaling, differently emphasizing the community, content and practice involved. Mainstream media employs similar metaphors, consistently emphasizing web diarying or amateur journalism. Bloggers also use metaphors to describe their practice – the aforementioned in addition to note passing, social bookmarking and fieldnote documentation.

Metaphorical descriptions are most valuable to outsiders who are trying to understand the phenomenon and to new bloggers who are trying to position their practice in light of other known practices. As blogging becomes internally naturalized, bloggers find the metaphors confusing, misleading and problematic. Just as defining email in terms of postal mail fails to capture many aspects of email, defining blogging in metaphorical terms also fails to capture its essence. Many of my subjects found defining blogging pointless, preferring to speak broadly or focus on what it is that they personally do. “Carl”, a five-year veteran, explains in an exasperated voice:

¹ <http://help.xanga.com/about/whatisxanga.htm> - November 26, 2004

² <http://www.typepad.com/site/about/> - November 26, 2004

³ November 27, 1999

⁴ May 10, 2000

⁵ November 26, 2004

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.

After indoctrination, bloggers tend to move beyond metaphorical definitions, but those analyzing blogs and blogging rely on these eschewed metaphors and categories in their evaluation. This form of evaluation is problematic because it obscures the fundamental qualities of blogging, opting to focus on the similarities and differences. In the worst scenarios, blogging is easily dismissed as an inferior or peculiar replication of prior forms rather than as a novel practice that fits with bloggers' lives.

Consider this New York Times headline: "Web Diarists Are Now Official Members of Convention Press Corps" (Lee, 2004). Although the author consistently uses the self-ascribed term blogging when discussing the practice of her interviewees, the editorial staff chose to label the article using the common metaphor furthest removed from a conception of journalism. This headline is innately political, revealing biases of the editors:

- 1) Bloggers should not be given credentials because this implies that bloggers are journalists.
- 2) Bloggers are not journalists (like us) and it is problematic (to us) that they are perceived this way.

To remedy their concern about how blogging is perceived, the New York Times chose not to use "bloggers" in their headline. By employing "web diarists," they signify that bloggers are not journalists because their content is solely about personal experiences. This headline also serves to discredit the convention press corps for allowing non-journalists to participate. Bloggers, in turn, read the headline as indicative of the New

York Times' fear that bloggers challenge the legitimacy of traditional journalism's authority.

While one might expect misrepresentation from the not-so-fair-and-balanced press, it is more disheartening to see that metaphorical depictions of blogging cloud academic research. 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 these scholars gather excellent ethnographic data and properly scope which aspect of blogging they are discussing in the introduction, their title perpetuates the cognitive connection between blogging and diarying and suggests an evaluation frame that is inherently flawed. Furthermore, for a study purporting to emphasize bloggers' perspectives, this framing dismisses bloggers and fails to convey how they negotiate their audience.

While these metaphors can be problematic, they emerge from blogging and reflect different aspects of the practice. In other words, these metaphors are not fundamentally wrong – they just do not convey the full picture and relying on them means relying on a broken image. Instead, consider why blogging is conceptualized as journalism and diarying and what this says about the underlying practice of blogging.

Blogging can be framed as journalism because some bloggers seek to find and share memes, record events and analyze non-personal data. These bloggers engage in a practice that includes mass dissemination of their entries and the audience they conceptualize is often much larger than they have in reality. They enjoy commenting and analyzing publicly available data about events, policy, technology, social life, etc. They lament mainstream media for not properly covering topics about which they are passionate, or for not covering them appropriately. They believe that blogs fill gaps of knowledge presented by media and academia. For some, blogging is explicitly an opportunity to resist mainstream culture's construction of information and knowledge in an attempt to challenge the authority of traditional publication venues. While journalists condemn bloggers for not abiding by a journalistic code of ethics, these bloggers mock journalists for being anything but fair and balanced and view the purported code as providing an excuse for journalists to not discuss the biases that are embedded in their

writing. Bloggers unabashedly recognize that their blogs represent a personal perspective and fault journalists for not being honest. These bloggers seek out others covering data of interest and develop a network of bloggers that are interested in untraditional media.

Blogging can also be framed as diarying because many blogs contain unedited personal and emotional reflections on daily life, ideas, observations and one's internal state. As a stranger, access to this raw material may be akin to reading something private, like stealing a secret peek at someone's diary. These bloggers are consciously documenting their lives, but they are doing so for friends, not for the arbitrary stranger. Unlike diaries, which are written for the future self and no one else, these blogs are very much written for a conceptualized audience, albeit a very intimate and often known one. These bloggers are not seeking mass attention, although many would love to find others who share their values, passions and perspective. It is this possibility that motivates many bloggers who could password-protect their blogs to leave them open and to join communities dedicated to particular interests⁶. Bloggers who leave their blogs open assume that uninterested strangers will just move on, but like minds will stop. In essence, these blogs are digital bodies, complete with fashion markers intended to convey cultural and subcultural signals that only have meaning to those with shared values.

By shifting the focus away from the content and onto the practice, one can see that there are commonalities in blogging, not just divisions. Bloggers are consistently producing content that they are passionate about, directed at an audience that they feel can best support them. In the process, they build up digital representations of identity and artifacts that serve as cognitive histories. They find value in the tensions between public and intimate, formal and informal, orality and textuality. To think about some of these tensions, consider how "Jennifer" defines blogging:

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

⁶ It should be noted that 25% of LiveJournal's entries are protected.

to find someone who is saying something interesting or you happen to know where your friend is on his soapbox saying something.

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 focuses on oral cultures untouched by writing, while simultaneously introducing a concept of 'secondary orality' whereby modern mediated culture creates a new orality that is simultaneously remarkably like and unlike orality (Ong, 1982: 134). Although he only addresses the properties of 'secondary orality' very briefly, it is the suggestion of something beyond the dichotomy of writing/speech that has made Ong the poster-boy for communications researchers trying to locate computer-mediated communication. With the advent of each new digital communications technology, researchers situate the new medium in Ong's 'secondary orality' by marking which features of orality are present.

Unfortunately, as a category, 'secondary orality' is effectively 'other' whereby there are no delineated properties, only an acknowledgment that these forms of communication are not truly orality, but draw from it. Even within the scope of other computer-mediated communications, there are differences in how textual/oral a given practice is. Blogging, for example, is far more persistent and potentially isolating than instant messaging. Yet, unlike traditional texts, both blogging and instant messaging can be conversational, the speaker is very present and the audience is conceptualized and negotiated.

As Jennifer recognizes, blogging is in the liminal space of both orality and textuality depending on perspective. She feels as though she is speaking while her audience experiences reading. Although the blogger speaks to a cognitively constructed audience, that audience may not actually be present or listening and regardless, only makes their presence available via access logs or explicit reactions such as comments or other communicated references to the blog material. Unlike other forms of computer-mediated communication, the roles and experiences of bloggers and readers/audience is quite distinct. Even as a lurker in a chatroom, one's presence is visible through the list of participants and one's opportunity to participate is structurally equivalent to anyone else – as text in a running discussion. In blogs, the reader is never permitted to post, only to comment and there is a clear distinction between the posts and the comments.

Herein lies one of the essential communicative features of blogging – a clear distinction between speaker and listener. With this, the speaker has a sense of ownership over their blog and a strong desire to frame the norms. Consistently, bloggers speak of it being *their* blog. 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. Bloggers have a sense that their blog reflects them and they 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.

Struggles over control are extremely frustrating, yet endemic to the practice. 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 situations around blog control. Jessica, Andi and Simon have all experienced unwanted readers and struggled with how to exclude readers who kept returning even after explicit requests to go away. Such audience presence gives them a sense of being invaded.

It is through this struggle for control that conceptions of blogs as public space break down. The "space" of a blog is constructed not by the blogger but as an artifact of the blogger's speaking and performing in the witness of a blogging tool. A blogger does not perform to the blog, but in the act of blogging, the blog is produced. Yet, the readers go to the blogger's constructed space and craft their reactions there. The blogger feels a sense of possession over their blog while simultaneously using it to negotiate communication with others. Through this possession, bloggers feel vulnerable when they struggle to maintain the norms that they desire. It is through possession, vulnerability

and the sense that the blog is an artifact of expression that makes the blog feel like an intimate site, not a public space.

Blogs as public/private space reveal another metaphorical meltdown where an imperfect comparison allows us to see qualities of blogging without being able to properly categorize them. Blogs as virtual bodies offers a complementary, although equally problematic metaphorical structure for grounding the artifacts themselves, or more accurately, revealing the tension between corporeality and spatiality.

Bloggers frequently speak about their blogs being their online identity, their digital representation. They refer to how the blog gives them a locatable voice and identity in a community. The blog is a blogger's digital 'face' in a Goffman sense, 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.

As a practice, blogging is situated between a variety of different tensions – orality and textuality, corporeality and spatiality, practice and artifact. In essence, blogging is a liminal practice that challenges other practices in effort to define itself. Metaphors allow us to make sense of the properties of blogging, but they do not provide a grounded way of analyzing the phenomenon. In order to properly analyze the phenomenon, we must move beyond comparisons to known practices and ground our analyses in the tensions of blogging, in the alterity of 'secondary orality,' and the practices of bloggers. I present this paper so that we may begin to direct our efforts away from metaphorical comparisons and into liminality.

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