

# The Social Construction of Blogspace

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“In these high tech times, the question isn’t why publish, rather it’s why not?”

Interestingly, the statement above was made by zine publisher Edward Dean in 1989 in response to the question of why zine producers publish, but the axiomatic belief that technology practically demands, rather than enables, people to publish bears a striking resemblance to the stated motivations of many bloggers. [1] Similar to this understanding of zines, blogs are also generally identified by their technology and form. As historians and theorists of both zines and blogs point out, any attempt at defining them according to content proves futile. Zines are often described to be non-commercial, cheaply produced periodicals on any number of topics, from popular to subcultural, which are created and distributed by individuals. A commonly accepted definition for blogs, short for weblogs, is frequently updated websites consisting of chronologically ordered and archived posts published by individuals or small groups using an informal and personal writing style. [2]

“Blogs have made the creation and publication of content as simple as browsing the Web. Blogging tools have removed virtually all the technical barriers that previously prohibited publication by the masses.” [3]

The utopian ideals of participatory democracy found in the discourse surrounding both blogs and zines seem rooted in notions of access to communication technologies. Alternative forms of communication and distribution, allowed by increased contact with inexpensive and relatively easy to use technologies, are believed to “reactivate the memory of everyday life and reconstitute the narrative of daily practices and anonymous itineraries hidden in the thick folds of the social fabric.” [4] At the moment, blogs, unseating the deflated hype of the Internet in general, are often cited as the communicative form that best brings what de Certeau calls the “memory of everyday life” into the mediated space we call “public”. It is this rhetorical function, and potential, of the “everyday” that seems to be implicit in how blogging is framed by its proponents as progressive.

What seems to come through in the rhetoric and aesthetic of blogs is the power given to the local, the specific, the individual. In this sense, one could say that de Certeau's notions of a public sphere, one infused with informal networks of narrative and "how to" knowledge, meets the rational ideals of a Habermasian public based on consensus building through logical dialogue. But, I would argue, when one looks at the conversations both within and about blogs, the pragmatics of consensus break down into "mere opinions" as fast as ever.

The publicness exhibited in blogs is one constructed of individuated spaces, where the movement of personalities can be identified and tracked. While there may be a strong communal ethic, blogs are sites of contact for externalized egos, and are definitely to be distinguished from other forms of communicative networks currently being organized, like Wikis, where the content and structure of a website are modified by members of a community in the process of communicating. Linguistic researchers have noted that "I" is the most common form of identification used, and the overwhelming number of active (not to say the most widely read) blogs are sites of personal storytelling, ranting and journaling. [5] As one prominent blogger puts it, "a weblog used technology to bring the psychological you outside." [6]

The situation of mediated contact, or interface, between the individual and the "public," places the blogger in a position of an intermediary or mediator. For de Certeau, the transmission of communication through a network involves three levels: intermediaries, original sources, and the practices of circulation and transmission. Bloggers map quite well onto de Certeau's loose schema as mediators - those "who decode and recode fragments of knowledge, link them, transform them by generalization." These individuals are further defined as "linking agents" and "amateur mediators" who "distinguish themselves by the very particular interest and razor sharp attention that they bring to the slightest issues of life." Bloggers are valued, not for their objectivity and disinterestedness, but for their overt perspective and personality in how they filter through the haystack of media to find the needle that pricks interest.

One of the strongest ideological imperatives within zine culture remains its steadfast opposition to commercial culture. This reactionary aspect, while often part of the literary content of the medium, became a very deliberate aesthetic practice. In the 1980s, producers of punk zines made sincere claims that such publications were:

"authentic, and get to the heart of the matter. They exist outside of commodification; they are real. They come straight from the source." [7]

This sense of expressionist immediacy is most certainly found in discussions about blogging. Descriptions of blogs as the "pirate radio stations of the Web" that are "first on the scene" are common among enthusiasts and theorists alike. One of the traits common to de Certeau's intermediaries is a wariness of official language and administrative tone. For de Certeau, this caution stems in part from a conscious and unconscious attempt to avoid the formation of dependent relationships based on authority. Aversion to institutional forms of speech is not something found just in personal journal style blogging, but even in those run by academics and researchers. Even the process of peer approval is handled in a pedestrian manner, blogrolls, and other forms of interlinking among sites with similar interests, are often as much signs of "solidarity" ("shout outs") with similarly minded writers as bibliographic citations. It has even been noted that within blog networks, those sites with a high rate of "solidarity links" occupied more central locations (read: more widely read/referenced)

than did sites with more informational links, which tended to exist on the periphery. [8]

“The idea of communication immediately calls up that of the network, with all the ambiguity attached to that word. Does it mean networks materialized through an infrastructure allowing for the circulations of goods, furnishings or persons? Or networks plotting the implantation of a belief or of an ideology?” [9]

So what about the other two aspects of networked communication offered by de Certeau, the original media sources and the practices of circulation? It has been said that the “only aspect of mail art that one can state with any degree of certainty is that it is entirely dependent upon the international postal system for its existence.” [10] While the dependent relationship between blogs and the Internet is as self-evident as that between mail art and the postal system, stating this is pretty meaningless in and of itself. My Interest is how these relationships are perceived, and how that perception shapes action.

As some have observed, the potential of networks is often discussed as if they “suddenly appear out of nowhere,” despite their historical and ideological inheritance. [11] And we certainly must be critical of all claims of immediacy and authenticity, not just because such claims depend on repeatable conventions.

One of the ways that blogs as communicative tools are usually separated from more static websites, like the “personal home page”, is that they exhibit a degree of “self-organization.” Steven Johnson has explained that static websites lack the ability for self-organization because they are inhospitable to feedback. [12] But weblogs - where feedback is part of the structure - are positioned as an “emergent” form of organizing. “Emergence,” an explanation of order and regulation derived from self-organization and practice, rather than a top-down model imposed by authority, is often cited by those asserting the democratic potential of blogs. [13]

The power of “emergence” as a concept seems to come from its use of analogies to the natural world. Ant colonies and neural networks provide compelling examples of self-organization and order that seem to bypass ideological conflicts and make the democratization of knowledge not just desirable, but biologically determined. The problem to be solved is self-evident; it is the observable fact that representative forms of governance and media are incapable of managing “the scale, complexity and speed of the issues of the world today.” [14] New forms of communication, like blogs, are said to be able to generate a more natural form of direct democracy.

But I wonder about the use of concepts like “emergence” and deference to what seems “natural.” Critique of the political usage of “Nature” is, of course, nothing new, which is partly why I’m suspicious when some understanding of the behavior of ants is used to support beliefs about democracy, especially when those beliefs include technology. Weblogs depend on structure, and a fairly rigid and hierarchal one, to function as defined, both in terms of the visual presentation of information (chronological, vertical, etc.) and as it relates to the larger space of the Internet. This spatial aspect of weblogs is beginning to be discussed in terms of a political economy that includes the cultural and economic exchange of value through links. [15] The mechanisms of access are also discussed, including search engines like Google that are considered as integral to blogging as “the Otis elevator was to skyscrapers.” [16] But what of the aesthetics of management utilized by blogs? The rigid, hierarchal structure of blogs is what is said to allow for the aesthetics of immediacy within the

content. What does this understanding of content and form within weblog discourse mean politically?

“The modern world has given us ways to experience the extension into space, ways that are more accessible (maybe) than older routes of mediation... Space has become obsolete.” [17]

I certainly don't have any answers to my questions, just suggestions for discussion. The issue of space, where contact between subjectivity and social conventions occurs, is one that seems worth investigating. The dichotomy of form and content seen in blogs can be seen to intersect with how space is created and understood. If the form of distribution (blog tools and the Internet) creates an experience of public space as a field with no distance, then the content becomes a marker by which to recognize location. Blogs become “virtually local” within the communities they participate in. [18]

If de Certeau's assertion that the local has consistently been an obstacle to the historical development of communication still holds true (if it ever did), what does the current situation represent? If there does seem to be a kind of return to the local, it has a largely rhetorical function. The battle between a homogenized, ideal public realm and a network of fragmented subjectivities seems to find resolution in the naturalist metaphors of self-organization, but there are no virtual Galapagos Islands from which to observe these developments as they occur. We are certainly moving into a paradigm of standardization in communication, and this movement involves managing space as much as knowledge. It may be the motion of emergent organization, but as always, the fuel used to power its mechanisms are the desires and interests of its active agents. If there can be no communication without standards and operations, the question is “Whose standards will we practice?” Will we organize as a “plurality other than the masses consuming and repeating imposed models,” [19] or possibly “capitalize on the homogeneity found in networks to resonate far and wide with little effort?” [20] Or will we emerge somewhere more familiar? At least I can be assured that if someone comes up with any answers they'll be posted somewhere, on someone's blog. Or even better... published in a zine.

## Footnotes

1) In Mike Gunderloy's compilation for Pretzel Press called “Why Publish” available at <http://www.zinebook.com/resource/gunderpublish.html>

2) See: Jill Walker's definition drafted for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, [http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/archives/blog\\_theorising/revised\\_definition.html](http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/archives/blog_theorising/revised_definition.html)

3) Eric Janssen, “Weblogs Will Save the World,” [http://www.webraw.com/theory/weblogworld\\_050903.shtml](http://www.webraw.com/theory/weblogworld_050903.shtml)

4) From Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

5) Stephanie Nilsson, “The Function of Language to Facilitate and Maintain Social Networks in Research Weblogs” <http://www.eng.umu.se/stephanie/web/LanguageBlogs.pdf>

6) Joe Clark of JoeClark.org quoted in Nilsson.

7) Fred Wright, "The History and Characteristics of Zines", <http://www.zinebook.com/resource/wright1.html>

8) Nilsson.

9) de Certeau.

10) Stephen Perkins, "Mail Art and Networking Magazines (1970-1980)", Zinebook.com

11) Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker, "The Limits of Networking," sent to Nettime 3/15/04.

12) Steven Johnson, *Emergence*, Scribner, 2001.

13) Joichi Ito, "Emergent Democracy," v. 1.3, 2003  
<http://joi.ito.com/static/emergentdemocracy.html>

14) Ito.

15) Jill Walker, "Links and Power: The Political Economy of Links on the Web," 2002, <http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/txt/linksandpower.html>; Clay Shirky, "Power Laws, Weblogs and Inequality," 2003.

16) Tim Dunlop, "If You Build It They Will Come," Evatt Foundation  
<http://evatt.labor.net.au/publications/papers/91.html>

17) Sean Wolf Hill from "Why Publish?"

18) Gary Thompson, "Weblogs, Warblogs, the Public Sphere and Bubbles"  
<http://transformations.cqu.edu.au/journal/issue7/articles/text.htm#thompson>

19) de Certeau.

20) Galloway and Thacker.