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# The Psychology of Blogging

## You, Me, and Everyone in Between

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The phenomenon and practice of blogging offers a rich environment from which to look at the psychology of the Internet. By using blogging as a lens, researchers can see that many predictions and findings of early Internet research on social and psychological features of computer-mediated communication have held true, whereas others are not as true, and that the psychology of the Internet is very much a sense of the one and the many, the individual and the collective, the personal and the political. Blogs illustrate the fusion of key elements of human desire—to express one's identity, create community, structure one's past and present experiences—with the main technological features of 21st century digital communication. Blogs can serve as a lens to observe the way in which people currently use digital technologies and, in return, transform some of the traditional cultural norms—such as those between the public and the private.

**Keywords:** *Weblogs; psychology; identity; private; public*

The December 25, 2006, cover of *Time* magazine features a flat-panel computer screen naming “You, yes you” as the Person of the Year. Contrast this cover with the January 3, 1993, cover, which names the computer as the “Machine of the Year.” The earlier cover shows a ghostly white, papier-mâché-like person, sitting in a chair, staring at some sort of line graph (probably created by Lotus 1-2-3), whereas in the recent 2006 cover, the computer screen is a mirror reflecting your own image back to you. The subtitle, “You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world” is in contrast to the 1993 cover, “The computer moves in.” Although even then, the Internet was ready and waiting to become the people's voice, built as it was on a nonhierarchical, networked transmission protocol, there are many reasons why, after 13 years of having the computer as live-in companion, control has shifted from the box to the humans: The dot-com era helped create standards for software, downloading and other protocols, interface design, e-mail applications, html coding, Web addresses, and so on. As the Internet went increasingly commercial, prices for both hardware and software went down, too. And as bandwidth increased, modems disappeared and broadband became more and more commonplace; according to a Pew Internet and American Life Project (2006b) survey in April 2006, approximately 42% of Americans have broadband at home, up from 29% in 2005.

Another very real reason why “you control the information age” is the impact of the phenomenon known as blogging. Short for Weblogs, blogs are both a technology and a genre. They are a technology in the sense that the format, layout, linking, and other conventions are standardized and require little to no technical expertise on the part of the user. They are a genre because they invoke certain forms of discourse and shape the outcome of the text. Just as letters usually begin with “Dear Madam or Sir” or some other salutation, with the salutation being a marker of what is to come (and prescribing the format and style of the text itself), blogs offer standard features for how to enter text, how to insert links, how to track back to other blogs, and so forth. These conventions make the blog quite simple to use, and they also invite a sense of self and of self in relation to others that has always been present on the Internet but is quite visible, very standardized, global, and relatively well mainstreamed when compared to the Internet in 1993. Blogs, while still used widely, were the precursors to today’s popular social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Myspace, and Flickr.

Blogging, therefore, offers a rich environment from which to look at the psychology of the Internet circa 2006. By using the features of blogging as a lens, we can see that many of the predictions and findings of early Internet research have held true, whereas others are not as true. We can also see that the psychology of the Internet is very much a sense of the one and the many, the individual and the collective, the personal and the political. We will begin this review by noting some of the earliest work in computer-mediated communication as background for the features illustrated in the use of blogs today.

## **Early Social–Psychological Features of Computer-Mediated Communication**

The features we have come to take for granted in today’s Internet technologies and with blogs in specific were considered rather remarkable and potentially empowering when they first began to emerge as a result of early users of networked digital communication. In 1978, Hiltz and Turoff published their groundbreaking book *Network Nation*, which was re-released by MIT Press in 1993. Their observations of how users interacted with this very new medium still ring true and provide a basis for describing the psychology of blogs and bloggers. Their work articulated key features such as impersonality and the freedom to “be one’s self” in a digital environment (p. 27). Hiltz and Turoff also noted the social and psychological differences in online and face-to-face communication; for instance, the use of pen names and anonymity online (p. 94); the insertion of gestures and other forms of spoken discourse, which they called “written vocalization” (p. 90) and which would later come to be considered an example of “secondary orality” based on the work of Walter Ong. As many early observers and inventors of Internet technology noted, these features created both challenges and opportunities

for human communication, with almost all early observers noting the potential for what Hiltz and Turoff, citing futurist Gordon Thompson, called the ability to “ease the access to stored human experience” (p. 469) or what Licklider and Taylor (1968) called “distributed intellectual resources” (p. 28). A quote from their 1968 article is worth reading in the context of today’s world of blogging:

We have seen the beginnings of communication among people at consoles located in the same room or on the same university campus or even at distantly separated laboratories of the same research and development organization. This kind of communication—through a single multiaccess computer with the aid of telephone lines—is beginning to foster cooperation and promote coherence more effectively. (p. 28)

Although the cooperation and coherence they were referring to at that time was the ability for technical people to share computer programs and technical data, the phenomenon is the same as today’s bloggers who share personal stories, recipes, technical information, opinions, and news stories.

Research continued, and the publication of the now classic 1984 article by Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire in *American Psychologist* articulated the social aspects noted in earlier work and put a concise face on the major linguistic and social-psychological features of this new medium. They note, for instance, that the speed of e-mail (which they called “computer mail” at the time) puts increased pressure on others to reply quickly. They also note the lack of nonverbal behavior and other “status and position” cues and “social anonymity,” a feature that would come to be characterized in 1993 by the famous *New Yorker* cartoon by P. Steiner: “On the Internet, no one knows you’re a dog.”

Yet the lack of social cues seemed to be no barrier for people expressing a range of emotions and opinions in online communication. Flaming and the relationship of this behavior to the medium, to gender, to social cues, became an interesting topic for many (Rice & Love, 1987). As these features followed the maturation of the technology in the late 1990s, and, with the development of the World Wide Web, we began to see hints of the psychology of blogging. Tucked away in the architecture of the Internet, embedded in e-mail and Web browser technology, and impressed on the humans who were learning the language of cyberspace, the genotype of digital communication began to express itself fully. One of the most interesting features was the sense of community around common topics, across vast geographic distances, among people who would never meet each other in person. The power of online community would lead in turn to a blurring of public and private, leading us directly into the psychology of the blog.

## Online Social Action, Cyberliteracy

In spring 1990, Lotus Development Corporation announced a product called MarketPlace: Households. MarketPlace was to be a direct mail marketing database

for Macintosh computers. It would contain name, address, and spending habit information on 120 million individual American consumers from 80 million different households. After MarketPlace was announced, computer privacy advocates began investigating what they believed was a product that crossed the line in terms of privacy. From Lotus's first announcement until months after it canceled the product, newspapers, news and computer magazines, and the cyberspace of the Internet and various electronic bulletin boards and e-mail were full of discussions about MarketPlace. People posted Lotus's address and phone number, the e-mail address of Lotus's CEO, and also gave information about how to get names removed from the database. Some people posted form letters that could be sent to Lotus. Notices were forwarded around the Internet, reposted to other newsgroups, and sent off as e-mail messages. In one case, a discussion group was formed specifically to talk about the product.

As a result of the Internet-based protest, more than 30,000 people contacted Lotus and asked that their names be removed from the database. The product, which had been scheduled to be released during the third quarter of 1990, was never released. In previously published work (Gurak, 1997), this and another online protest are closely analyzed for the rhetorical and social features of online communication. Keep in mind that at this time (1990), there was no World Wide Web or Web browser, only e-mail and other very simple text-based systems. Yet the strength of the sense of online community provides a snapshot of what was to come as the technology matured and the user base widened. The power of individual personalities, individual e-mail messages, and what is now called "social networking" were features of these protests that have continued into today's world of blogs, Myspace, YouTube, and the like.

In the late 1990s, it was possible to illustrate these and other features of what was then Web-based communication. In previously published work (Gurak, 2001), one of the authors characterizes these features as the key aspects of Internet communication: speed, reach, anonymity, and interactivity. Harkening back to the early research of the 1980s, these features provide the backdrop against which blogs developed. In particular, these four characteristics emphasize the nature of the individual and the blending of public and private. It is these final aspects—blending public and private—that become the most interesting lens through which to view blogging.

### **The Psychology of the Blog: Public or Private?**

A recent Pew Internet and American Life Project (2006a) report concludes that the most popular topic among bloggers is "me." Speed, reach, anonymity, and interactivity all provide the base for blogging. Yet the blur between private ("me") and public (everyone who is—hopefully—reading about me and writing to me and linking to me) are truly the most interesting psychological features of blogging. Miller and Shepherd (2004) point out that blogs invite "the peculiar intersection of the public and private," in a way that can often be contradictory (par. 1). According to the authors, the genre of blogs appeared in "the cultural moment . . . that has shifted

the boundary between the public and the private and the relationship between mediated and unmediated experience” (par. 16). Badger (2004) makes the same point, stressing that although “the first person narrative [of Weblogs] . . . can make us feel that we are partaking in a one-on-one exchange” (par. 5), blogging also promotes a high level of self-exposure to the audience often large and largely unknown to the author. The cornerstones of Internet communication—speed, reach, anonymity, and interactivity—promote and facilitate such a dichotomous character of blogs. Miller and Shepherd observe that on Weblogs “people are sharing unprecedented amounts of personal information with total strangers, potentially millions of them,” concluding that “the technology of the internet makes it easier than ever for anyone to be either a voyeur or an exhibitionist—or both” (par. 16).

The character of blogs as simultaneously private and public enables the formation of both individual and group identities. Through extensive narratives and often highly personal descriptions of day-to-day activities, and through the use of images, a blogger reveals and creates—intentionally or not—his or her unique online identity. Through the use of blogroll, links, and comment features, and through development of communal norms (see Wei, 2004), the blogger reveals and creates his or her group identity. In the same manner, a specific blog community often emerges. For example, The Julie/Julia blog, which was one of the most popular blogs with more than 7,000 hits per day, depicted both the daily activities of the author, Julie Powell, and experiences of the Julie/Julia blog readership, enabling thus formation of a blog community (see Blanchard, 2004).

Being at the same time private and public, individual and collective, Weblogs invoke the notion of a contradictory genre and activity, with “you,” “me” and everyone in between being brought into a single, semiprivate or semipublic space and experience. However, this notion of contradiction can be understood as stemming from tendency to perceive blogs as *objects* rather than *events*. When perceived as written objects, Weblogs do give the impression of ambiguity. Who is the author of this written object, one might ask. Is it the blogger, the audience, or both? Why would a person want to create a private written object, day after day, and then offer it for public scrutiny? Finally, why would the audience want to scrutinize, day after day, a private written object of an unknown person? Seen in this way, blogs invoke, almost automatically, the ideas of voyeurism and exhibitionism. When observed as communicative events, though, Weblogs give a different impression.

To understand more fully this feature of blogs as communicative events, let us recall that blogs are commonly interpreted as online diaries. Regardless of its content, a blog is always a record, a (reverse) chronological trace of one’s activities, experiences, and/or thoughts. Blogs, therefore, enable temporal structuring of a person’s activities, experiences, and/or thoughts, which is the function of traditional diaries. As Harris (1995) pointed out, “The diary is not just an adventitious by-product of writing, but a highly significant application of it,” the one that “produces evidence that is not memory-dependent” (p. 43). Diaries, thus, enable integration of one’s past and present

experiences, which is the need deeply rooted in human psychology. Weblogs have the same role. Even when the blogger's online identity is fake—as in the case of a Kansas housewife posting as a fictional cancer patient Kaycee Nicole, and/or in the case of a Serbian blogger posting as the ex and late Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic—the blog integrates a person's (fictional or real) experiences in a chronological narrative. That is what blogging is about. Unlike personal Web presentations, structured around “the essence of me,” blogs are structured around “the process of me.” Unlike chatting, pointed toward “hear me out at this moment,” blogging is pointed toward “hear me out throughout time.” Blogging, thus, is a twofold communicative event. On one hand, it is the event of “writing oneself” through continuous recording of past and present experiences, just as in the case of traditional diaries. Harris also notes that “the diary [as event] tends to be overlooked by theorists who assume that communication is essentially a process of linking two or more individuals. Indeed,” as Harris concludes, “the notion of a single individual being both a sender and receiver of the same message is sometimes regarded as problematic or paradoxical” (p. 38). On the other hand, blogging is the event of “rewriting oneself” through interaction with the audience. Unlike writing a traditional diary, blogging is a process of linking two or more individuals.

This is why blogs are *both* private and public. This is why blogs cannot be *either* private or public. And this is why blogs are *online* diaries, that is, both a technology and a genre of computer-mediated communication. Just as other social phenomena that have gone digital, the phenomenon of writing oneself through chronological narratives incorporates both an old human need—the need for temporal structuring and integrating of past and present experiences—and a new way of doing that—relying on speed, reach, anonymity, and interactivity of Internet communication. “The fact is that once again, as in the past, the introduction of new technologies has extended the boundaries of writing. What lags behind is our conceptualization of the change” (Harris, 1995, p. 41).

### **The Psychology of the Blog, Myspace, Other Public Social Sites: Identity Construction**

In her classic work *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle (1995) invited us to consider what identity will come to mean in an age where users can have multiple screen names and pose as multiple people. Writing as she was during the time when Internet technology was primarily text-based, Turkle nevertheless points us toward a third feature to include in the duo of public–private, and that is the feature of *identity*. Blogs are both public and private. They are also sites of identity formation, with one person potentially the voice and ethos behind dozens of blogs. Blogs allow us to engage in conversations with certain aspects of a person's life, and with the identity that person chooses to construct. Sometimes, in the case of a journalist or an academic, that identity is closely connected to the person in real life. Take the case of

Professor Lawrence Lessig, law professor at Stanford (<http://www.lessig.org/blog/>). His blog is a space for his opinions about legal matters, excerpts from his publications, and so on. Contrast this with a blogger named Meg Hourihan, described by Rebecca Mead (2000) in a *New Yorker* article as “in a bad mood” because of bad weather and the lack of a boyfriend. The former (Lessig) is an accurate representation of the professor’s academic life, opinions, and projects related to intellectual property law. The latter is a tell-all tale of private information in a public space, but it is impossible to know with this site or any personal diary-like blog whether we are seeing a reasonably accurate representation of the person or, more likely, a particular identity created to be displayed as a public glimpse into someone’s private life.

The rise in today’s social networking sites is based on similar features. For instance, in what one might call the video incarnation of blogging, YouTube, a woman named Stevie Ryan, who becomes “Little Loca” on her YouTube site, was “outed” when viewers noticed that her facial features (created with make-up) looked different from video to video (McGrath, 2006). Text-based identity construction is one thing; visual is quite another: It is harder to hold up an invented identity when you have to dress the part. And yet, with the larger cultural blur between public and private all around us, promoted through reality television, confessional talk shows, and the like, it does not seem to matter that Loca is really Stevie or anyone is really someone else. As a student in Sherry Turkle’s study said, way back in the text-based days of MOOs and MUDs, “RL [real life] is just another window.” Social networking sites, such as MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, and others, have added new wrinkles to the psychology of online identity. Like blogs, many social networking sites are a blur of public and private, of professional and personal, and of real and unreal. Yet the sense of audience among users of these sites is usually more focused. In Facebook, for example, only those people who the user has chosen as a “friend” can see that person’s entire profile. Both Myspace and Facebook reinforce existing social networks; students, for example, use these sites to keep in touch with their friends and work on class projects. But as with YouTube, these sites present multimedia spaces for identity presentation. A typical page would include a photograph of the person, other uploaded photos, information about that person’s hobbies, musical preferences, and so on. On social networking sites, access is less public, and people appear to be willing to make specific personal details available to others in their circle. It will be interesting and important for researchers to study the social and psychological uses of these social networking sites over the next few years.

## Conclusion

Some of the earliest of the social–psychological features of computer-mediated communication, noticed by research in the late 20th century, can be seen as part of what we can call the psychology of blogging. For instance, the freedom to “be one’s self” in a

digital environment (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978, p. 27); “social anonymity” (Kiesler et al., 1984); the potential for what Hiltz and Turoff (1978), citing futurist Gordon Thompson, called the ability to “ease the access to stored human experience” (p. 469) or what Licklider and Taylor (1968) called “distributed intellectual resources” (p. 28).

The example of the Lotus MarketPlace study provided later evidence for the power of the medium (the Internet) to promote individual voices, and to facilitate social networking and the sense of community; both elements can be identified as the main features of today’s blogging culture. In addition, the privacy concerns raised by the MarketPlace case take us back to the first cover of *Time* magazine: This is perhaps the moment when “the computer moved in,” and people struggled to get control over the information age. Blogging, on the other hand, illustrates the moment when users got some sort of control over the information age, and a decision to share private information—to blur the line between the private and the public—became *their* decision.

Blogs (and social networking sites in general) illustrate the fusion of key elements of human desire—to express one’s identity, to create community, to structure one’s past and present experiences temporally—with the main technological features of 21st century digital communication (speed, reach, anonymity, interactivity, broadband, wide user base). In this sense, blogs can serve as a lens to observe the way in which people currently use digital technologies and, in return, transform some of the traditional cultural norms—such as those between the public and the private.

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