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Who Do They Think They're Talking To? Framings of the Audience by Social Media Users

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This article examines the understandings and meanings of personal information sharing online using a predominantly symbolic interactionist analytic perspective and focusing on writers' conceptions of their relationships with their audiences. It draws on an analysis of in-depth interviews with 23 personal bloggers. They were found to have limited interest in gathering information about their audiences, appearing to assume that readers are sympathetic. A comprehensive and grounded typology of imagined relationships with audiences was devised. Although their blogs were all public, some interviewees appeared to frame their blogging practice as primarily self-directed, with their potential audiences playing a marginal role. These factors provide one explanation for some forms of potentially risky self-exposure observed among social media users.

Introduction

He wanted his posts to be read, and feared that people would read them, and hoped that people would read them, and didn't care if people read them.

~ Nussbaum, 2004

This quotation about a teenage personal blogger's relationships with his readers helps illustrate some of the apparent contradictions and complexities surrounding personal blogging and other forms of sharing personal information online. Though in some respects these practices resemble online renditions of earlier forms like diaries and commonplace books, they are novel because of the way they appear to combine interpersonal and mass-mediated communication. They can contain diaristic or confessional material that traditionally would be understood as meant for the author alone or perhaps for trusted intimates, but instead is disseminated openly on the Web with a potential audience of millions. To help make sense of these phenomena, this article analyzes how personal bloggers understand their relationships with their audiences.

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Of course, more or less personal revelations may take place in many different contexts on social media—some of which appear to have “ready-made” imagined communicative contexts for their users. Some bloggers or social media users, for instance, may access and use privacy controls to communicate with a limited audience in a discussion analogous to small-scale interpersonal communication.¹ Others, such as people posting personal information online in a public space dedicated to a particular group or kind of people, might be expected to focus their attention on that group and ignore others. Still others, for example newspaper columnists with an online presence or celebrities, cannot but be aware of a large audience, so their ostensibly personal communications may be self-consciously crafted to achieve a particular reputational or aesthetic end and may therefore be analogous to mass-mediated communication. This study focuses on the large middle ground of “everyday” noncelebrity bloggers, most or all of whose writings are open to any Internet reader² but whose imagined context is less clear. A growing literature addresses these kinds of personal blogging practices, but the scholars who have considered bloggers’ understanding of their own practices in the context of personal blogging have tended to rely on either survey data (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Viegas, 2005) or textual analysis of blogs (Rettberg, 2008; Serfaty, 2004; Van Dijck, 2004). This essay draws on interviews with “everyday” personal bloggers themselves to provide additional insight into their understanding of their blogging practice.

Symbolic interactionism was a useful starting point for analysis as it seeks to understand how the meanings of social practices are jointly created through interaction (Blumer, 1969). Erving Goffman’s work in particular helps focus attention on the individual’s perception of management of risk in interpersonal interactions. Several other authors who analyzed personal blogging have also drawn on Goffman (Kendall, 2007; Lenhart, 2006; Robinson, 2007). John B. Thompson’s chapter “The Rise of Mediated Interaction in The Media and Modernity” (1995) provides a useful analytical bridge from Goffman’s focus on the face-to-face to computer-mediated communication. The contributions of earlier theories of computer-mediated communication (CMC), most notably hyperpersonal communication (Walther & Parks, 2002)—also influenced by Goffman—and the SIDE (Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects) model (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998) will also be taken into consideration.

Symbolic Interaction and CMC

Goffman’s dramaturgical reading of social interaction provides a useful set of orienting concepts. The best-known exegesis of his view of social life as drama is found in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Here Goffman describes three principal spaces of interaction: “front stage” areas, where social actors are engaged in formal interactions with their intended audiences, suppressing all facts about themselves that might contradict the performance; “backstage” areas, where individuals and, particularly, teams, can let down their guard to themselves or each other; and “outside,” where

¹ As this article suggests, writers sometimes appear not to give close consideration to the actual size or nature of their audiences. But given the size of “friend” groups online, “protected” postings may go to hundreds of people—the average Facebook user in 2009 had 120 “friends” (Marlow, Byron, Lento, & Rosenn, 2009).

² According to Madden, Fox, Smith, and Vitak (2007), 60% of U.S. adults who had visible online profiles said they were visible to anyone.

individuals not presumed to be involved in the performance are expected to remain. Goffman's work presents the separation of different communicative contexts and the self-conscious control of one's self-presentation as tools to enable the preservation of "face" and the relevant control over one's informational preserve—"the set of facts about himself to which an individual expects to control access" (Goffman, 1971b, pp. 38–39).

The Internet is a communication system that does not normally allow authors control over context of reception. It does not "give off" signs to reveal that a self-presentation is not well received. Those who write online without privacy controls might thus be expected to write as if they were performing "front stage," duly ensuring that what they write is consistent with their public performance of self in other contexts since they have no control over who may be reading. It appears, however, that practices like personal blogging, personal home page creation, and other forms of social media use often feature material that would normally be shared only backstage: in one survey, 25% of bloggers said they had posted "highly personal things" (Viegas, 2005). It is therefore unclear what kind of audience the writers of such texts envision as they write.

Traditional symbolic interactionist approaches (and Goffman's in particular) tend to focus on face-to-face interaction and do not offer tools for detailed analysis of the role of the mediating technology in mediated interactions. John B. Thompson's typologies of mediated interaction, outlined in *The Media and Modernity* (1995), are of help here. He draws on Goffman, but analyzes communicators' imagined social context, which comprises the intended audience and the anticipated or desired direction of interaction—one way from communicator to receiver (monologic) or in both directions (dialogic). In this work he suggests that from the producer's perspective, mass-mediated messages are essentially monologic (though he acknowledges that the audience has always found ways to be heard, e.g., letters to the editor and broadcast phone-ins), and he alludes briefly to "new communication technologies" that "allow for a greater degree of input from recipients" (1995, p. 86).

Scholars have identified a third "ideal type" of interaction, enabled by computer-mediated communication, that follows the "logic" of this new medium. They call it "telelogic" (Ball-Rokeach & Reardon, 1988) or "many to many" (Harasim, 1989) interaction because, like the monologic mass media, it is accessible to "many" users and can reach a large audience, but it also enables those reached to respond easily, making it dialogic in some respects.

The technical features of blogs appear to favor telelogic communication, as by default a blog posting is available to an unspecified and unlimited audience, and (again by default) it enables a response from readers, either via the "comments" section to each posting or by e-mail or other means of contact that may be provided on a blog's "profile" page. As will be noted later, some scholars of blogging have suggested that such communications are therefore essentially telelogic; however, a symbolic interactionist approach to blogging focuses on the actors and their use of the tools rather than on the tools themselves.

As the introduction observes, the meaning of interactive practices or performances such as blogging is constructed and negotiated between author(s) and readers/interlocutors. The parties to an interaction can adjust their performance only in response to the impression they have of the others'

reactions—not to the others' *actual* reactions. This distinction, sometimes underemphasized, is crucial to this research: because of the mediated nature of blogging interaction, the means of social perception underlying blog authors' impressions of their readers and their reactions differ from those governing face-to-face interaction. Earlier CMC scholars (Postmes et al., 1998; Walther & Parks, 2002) have explored the implications of the relative "poverty" of information about the impression one is making in interpersonal and group communication online.

The "cues filtered out" school of early CMC research (Culnan & Markus, 1987) suggested that the lack of visual and audible feedback that keeps CMC users from getting a clear sense of their audiences would discourage anything but impersonal task-oriented communication. When it became evident that CMC was nevertheless frequently used for personal, emotionally charged messages, the SIDE model emerged, suggesting CMC users would attempt to fill in missing social cues by relying on whatever information was available (and possibly exaggerating the few cues that were available), particularly where communication took place over a sustained period (Postmes et al., 1998). J. B. Walther (1996) noted that CMC often resulted in an "idealized perception" of the other. His "hyperpersonal" model of communication suggests that these perceptions arise in asynchronous CMC because message senders take advantage of the time available to "concentrate on message construction to satisfy multiple or single concerns at their own pace" (Walther, 1996, p. 26).

These scholars' suggestion that people in CMC adapt to the lack of cues from their audiences by constructing those audiences and their reactions and characteristics in their imaginations is a useful one. However, problems arise when these theories are applied to the case of personal blogging, notably because they consider anonymity or pseudonymity and the lack of audio/visual social cues in CMC but not other changes in the social context that CMC can contribute to.

In most of the experimental studies in this tradition, the social context is a completely artificial one. Naturalistic studies tend to study more or less bounded Internet spaces, such as message boards on particular themes or mailing lists inside particular organizations. Participants in these spaces may not have met those they are communicating with and may not know their number or identities, but they normally believe that the context of the communication is mutually understood. Compared with the situations CMC researchers tend to study, the imagined social context of interaction on personal blogs appears less well-defined, so making assumptions about the others' identities and expectations is harder in blogging than it would be in face-to-face conversation or other modes of CMC. Walther's hyperpersonal model also relates primarily to two-way communication, wherein revelations are addressed to specific others and garner (carefully crafted) responses. It is not clear whom a blog posting visible to anyone online might be aimed at, or how the audience for such postings might be envisioned if all or most of them do not leave comments or otherwise interact with the writer.

The Significance of Audiences for Bloggers: Contradictions in Previous Research

In a blogging overview based on ethnographic research, boyd notes that bloggers write in relation to a conceptualized audience—generally "those that they know" and "like minded strangers"—but does not detail the basis of these conceptualizations or what form of interaction with these readers is

anticipated or desired (boyd, 2006). Much of the early literature on blogging practice has stressed its interactive nature. Mortensen and Walker, for example, say blogs are “densely interlinked . . . as part of a communal discourse” (Mortensen & Walker, 2002). This early characterization is called into question by later quantitative studies, which suggest that most blogs (particularly personal ones) are not interlinked or do not contain comments (Mishne & Glance, 2006). Nonetheless the characterization of bloggers as “open to dialogue rather than engaging in one way communication” (Schmidt, 2007, p. 1413) remains frequent in academic discourse.

Kendall, on the other hand, says in her interview-based study of LiveJournal users: “LiveJournal posts are essentially broadcasts. The audience might react, but is not expected to participate, *per se*” (Kendall, 2007). Lenhart’s interviewees were aware of the possibility of unintended readers, so their blogging was marked by a tension in their blogging practice—as she puts it, “bloggers blog simultaneously for an audience and in apprehension of them” (Lenhart, 2006, p. 102). Although Lenhart draws extensively on Goffman’s work, she does not thoroughly account for why many bloggers choose to adopt this form despite the awareness she generally ascribes to them of the presentational difficulties inherent in the medium due to its exposure to multiple potential audiences. She does, however, note that “bloggers sometimes forget exactly how public their blog really is” (Lenhart, 2006, p. 138). The present study sheds more light on the variations found in blogging practice and analyzes in more detail how personal bloggers perceive and cope with their audience relationship(s).

Study Design and Method

To operationalize this research, I used Google to find recently updated blogger-hosted blogs or LiveJournals from around London, UK, that offered personal information accessible to any Internet user. An online questionnaire was e-mailed to the authors of 237 of these blogs, both to solicit their permission to be interviewed and to request demographic information to aid in the selection of interviewees. From the 150 who answered, I chose a purposive sample (Chadwick, Bahr, & Albrecht, 1984) of 23 bloggers in an attempt to maximize relevant variety in interviewees. The number of bloggers interviewed was determined by the sense during the fieldwork that a point of saturation had been reached and by Bauer and Gaskell’s assertion (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000) that the upper limit for sensitive analysis by a single researcher is somewhere between 15 and 25 interviews.

Whereas the snowball samples other researchers have typically used to interview bloggers generally favor highly educated, middle-class users, surveys of blogging tend to suggest a more diverse blogging population (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). The sample constructed for this study therefore used the demographic information gathered to ensure a range of ages (between 16 and 64), educational backgrounds, self-reported social classes, occupations, and perceived audience sizes among interviewees.³ Semi-structured interviews lasting from 1 to 1.5 hours were conducted face-to-face. All were transcribed, and the resulting texts were analyzed thematically (Flick, 2006) through an interactive process of open

³ Brake (2007) provides more details on the methods used to construct a sample for this research, and an appendix of demographic profiles of interviewees can be downloaded from <http://davidbrake.org/intervieweesummarybloggers.xls>

and selective coding. Consistent with symbolic interactionist approaches to analysis, the focus was on understanding the different ways in which blog authors understood what types of practices they were engaged in—in particular with respect to their relationship with readers—and attempting to create a mutually exclusive and exhaustive typology (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

The interviews followed three linked lines of questioning. Interviewees were asked what they knew about their blogs' audiences, what evidence they drew on when making such an evaluation—either technical measurements such as Weblog analysis⁴ software, or online or off-line interactions—and what role their audience played in their Weblog practice.

Findings

Knowledge of the Audience

As noted earlier, when writers share texts on the Web, uncertainty about who might read them is inherent. A strategic communication perspective like Goffman's (1959) suggests that when the shared writing is personal—that is, imparting information normally shared only in a backstage setting—bloggers will attempt to reduce this uncertainty by monitoring their audiences as best they can, for example by using the available third-party Weblog analysis tools. My research, however, suggests their relationships with their audiences are more complex.

Though Weblog analysis tools are available free of charge through a number of websites, only limited evidence indicates that bloggers use such tools to track the number of visitors who read their pages. It moreover appears that few of those who do use these tools check their results regularly.⁵ It is possible that some of those without tracking tools would want them but are unaware that such tools exist or do not know how to make them work. In the case of my interviewees, however, most were asked if there were things they would like to be able to do with their blogs that they had not done, but only two (Betty, an artist in her mid 50s; and Renia, a 17-year-old student and writer⁶) evinced a desire to be able to better identify or track their readers.

Of the six interviewees who said they had used tracking tools, three were unenthusiastic about using them. Charles (early 20s, charity administrator) said he had stopped looking at his: "I did actually sort of have a hit counter because I was intrigued to see whether anyone was reading and I was you know horrified to find that pretty much nobody was." Similarly, Nancy (early 20s, student) said: "I think I used to have one but . . . I don't know . . . it's not that interesting. It's just numbers." By contrast, Harriet (late

⁴ Weblog analysis tools like Google Analytics (<http://analytics.google.com>) (as distinct from "weblogging" or "blogging" services and tools) allow Web publishers to track and measure (to some extent at least) how many people have visited their pages and where they come from.

⁵ A U.S. survey found that nearly half of bloggers surveyed had no idea how many people read their sites (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). When I surveyed personal bloggers to construct an interview sample (N = 150), only a third of respondents reported using traffic analysis tools, and a third of these said they checked their traffic monthly or less often.

⁶ Like all names given here, these are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the interviewees.

20s, ad manager) said she was “always checking my stats” but was doing it less often than before because “I don’t quite have the same time to doss at work,” and Annie (early 30s, artist) was also a regular user of such tools.

Orientations Toward the Audience

As noted above, the interviewed bloggers often appeared to envision their readerships as they would like them to be, rather than attempting to discern exactly who they might be or what attitudes they might have. Meanwhile, no single kind of envisioned or desired audience relationship was common to the interviewees. I characterize their orientations toward the audience using two axes. The “anticipated direction of interaction flow” draws on analyses of mediated communication by Thompson (1995) and Ball-Rokeach and Reardon (1988), while the division of the intended audience into specific and indefinite readers is rooted in the CMC literature. Five different orientations of bloggers toward their audiences emerged from the analysis of interviews—narrowcast, broadcast, dialogic, telelogic, and self-directed (see Figure 1). While the first four imply interaction with the readers, as previous studies and symbolic interactionist approach would anticipate, the last, self-directed category emerged from the fieldwork and describes blogging practices that do not appear primarily to have an audience in mind.

<i>Intended audience</i>	<i>Anticipated direction of interaction flow</i>		
	One-way	Two-way	Intrapersonal
Friends (specific)	Narrowcast	Dialogic	Self-directed (quasi-therapy, quasi-sociality, and blogging as an end in itself)
Strangers (indefinite)	Broadcast	Telelogic	

Figure 1. Forms of blogging practice.

It is important to note, however, that some of the interviewed bloggers expressed varied (and sometimes contradictory) framings of their practices and attitudes toward their readers at different points both in their interviews and in the evolution of their blogging practices. These categories are also ideal types—none of the bloggers interviewed, for example, appeared to treat their blogging practice as entirely self-directed.

The largest proportion of those interviewed said their blogs were primarily a way to stay in touch with friends and acquaintances, but this did not itself make their blog practice dialogic. Five of 23 interviewees seemed to be using their blogs in a narrowcast fashion—the key benefit of the blog was apparently to let others know how they were and what they were doing or what their views were, rather than to maintain relationships through a reciprocal exchange of everyday information and opinion.

Many respondents maintained that the comments they received were important to them. Perhaps this claim reflects the emphasis that mass media and online discourses place on the importance of interactivity on the Internet and on blogs in particular. On closer examination, however, a division separates those interviewees for whom comments appeared to be a necessary part of their practice (dialogic bloggers, described below) from those for whom interaction might be welcome, but appeared to be of peripheral interest.

Those characterized here as *narrowcast* bloggers apparently found it rewarding to write about their personal lives, even when there was little or no actual response—as long as they could *imagine* a favorable or interested reaction. As Charles said, “I was quite happy if someone who just met me very briefly in the pub typed me into Google to find out more about me.” He provides the clearest example of the importance of this imagined interaction. In discussing the motivation to move from e-mailing friends to producing a blog, Charles explained,

I knew I was going to be sending long, complicated emails home explaining what fun I was having, and I was going to send these to a fairly broad list of people but people's e-mail addresses change, people you know don't check them, delete them, blah blah blah.

In other words, he seemed to believe that by adopting the blog form, he could address an imagined broad circle of friends and acquaintances, even if he did not have their e-mail addresses. And crucially, while e-mail is “pushed” to people, some of whom may be indifferent to it or ignore it, the audience he appeared to envisage for his activities would all be interested because they had elected to read it.

Given the marginal nature of acquaintance Charles appeared to be assuming, it is not surprising that he reported that he found blogging quite a one-sided process.

My readers just tend to read and apart from an e-mail saying ‘oh that's interesting—how are you?’ . . . it might just start a personal conversation but even then it won't be particularly about what I've said.

Another form of narrowcast blogging is more concerned with expressing views. Three of the interviewed men produced predominantly personal blogs that nonetheless contained political content, but rather than seeking a political dialogue, they were primarily sharing their views with friends—responses appeared to be important only when it served to clarify or reinforce those views. Bruce (late 30s, civil servant), for example, reported that he had started his LiveJournal in part to discuss politics in a more controlled environment than the online message boards he used to frequent. Initially he justified this switch as fulfilling a desire to avoid “people coming on and ‘trolling’ or deliberately trying to start arguments—making personal comments all the time,” but as he admitted later, “my political stuff tends to be fairly declamatory.” He went on to say that he finds satisfaction in finding people who are “of a similar mindset . . . who can see what you mean and you don't feel so alone in your views.”

Those characterized here as *dialogic* bloggers are distinct from those practicing telelogic blogging because they seemed to intend to use their sites solely or principally to communicate with a limited number of known others and their attitudes to unintended readers ranged from indifference to suspicion.

The desire to stay in contact with friends was a common reason interviewees gave for having a blog (5 of 23 interviewees), especially for those who had widely dispersed friends and/or family. Jane's (mid 40s, librarian) use of her LiveJournal was typical of this pattern of behavior: "Almost everybody who is on my friends list is people that I've actually met. Almost all of them at science fiction conventions . . . when we run into each other we all know what we've been up to." Unlike the narrowcast communicators above, however, she stressed a desire to interact with her readers: "I like the reciprocal aspect to it. I say something, they comment on it, I know my friends are keeping in touch with me."

She did not use the features LiveJournal provides to limit access only to the online friends that she specified, but it became clear in the interview that this was not because she welcomed readers who she did not know: "I am not particularly secretive about myself. I'm a bit of a show-off and I'm quite happy for anybody who wants to fall across my LiveJournal to fall across my LiveJournal." But while she "has a lot of friends who do strike up a lot of friendships through online communities," it "just isn't particularly my thing."

Linda (early 20s, grad student) had a much more exclusive picture of her circle of readers, comprised almost entirely of a small group of fellow students who were close friends from the university she attended in Canada. She was "very open" with her site "because it is for people that I trust." The thought of strangers posting comments, even anodyne ones ("that they were happy for you or that they were amused" were examples I suggested) would make her "a bit weirded out," she said, adding that "my immediate reaction would not be comfort—it would be like . . . intruding on my little world."

Frances (late 20s, administrator) too was different. Her blog began as a way to keep in touch with family and friends overseas, but unlike the two dialogic bloggers above, she began to receive a wider audience (getting between 10 and 20 comments per post at the time of the interview, according to her). Though her posts were among the most personally revealing writings interviewees shared online (including, for example, discussion of sexual encounters)—"I pretty much blog my whole life"—in her case she accepted the attention from blog visitors she did not know. "If I was so concerned about people knowing this sort of thing then I would never have a blog," she said. She nonetheless disavowed my suggestion that she might be seeking a dialogue with people other than those she already knew: "The only comments that I look forward to getting are from the people I know really well in real life like my friends and my family."

Sharing personal information is often seen as a way to make friends or reinforce existing forms of friendship, and this use of personal blogging appears to be the dominant purpose for most interviewees. However, a minority appeared to use blogging more impersonally, aiming at an audience of people not known to the writer and not seeking a personal relationship or interaction with readers. Because this practice approximates conventional mass media, I term these users *broadcast* bloggers, although those I interviewed were not blogging in an institutionalized context.

Three of those interviewed framed their blogging practice as comparable to the growing number of confessional or personal newspaper and magazine columns in the UK—perhaps not surprisingly, as two of these three were themselves journalists and sought to use their blogs pragmatically as both a showcase for their writing skills in this genre and a means of honing their craft.

Quentin (early 20s) spelled this out clearly:

It's a well-known fact in journalism that it takes you a while before you write the fun stuff where you get to be a bit creative. . . . Now my worry has always been, well, by the time I'm 30 or older—it's a little while off—[I will have been] not writing, so how well am I going to do when I get to that stage in my career? So I need to try to establish things like tone and what have you.

Elaine (early 30s) similarly noted, "writing my blog gives me a chance to write the way that I want to rather than the way that is required for different publications."

Quentin and Elaine were aware of the framing of blogging as an interactive practice and occasionally referred to this as a desirable characteristic, but appeared to have a distanced, indifferent attitude to their readers. Early in the interviews they often characterized interaction with the audience as important, but as discussion progressed it seemed more apparent that they viewed readers in an instrumental way and saw their responses as essentially secondary to (and sometimes potentially a threat to) their own artistic or professional objectives. For Quentin, for example, his readership was "more of an exercise in as wide a range of samples—social samples—as possible if you like. I'm interested in people's knee-jerk reactions to things I write—people I don't know."

Given the relationship these journalists expressed between their career advancement and their desire for creative expression, this form of blogging practice seems to overlap with the category of blogging as an end in itself, one of the forms I have termed self-directed and will discuss further below.

Blogs appear to be precisely suited for allowing authors to reach and interact with people previously unknown to them, but this *telelogic* orientation appeared to be the primary one for only 4 of the 23 interviewees for this article.

None of the interviewees said they had set up their blog to get to know people online they did not already know, though some discovered subsequently that interacting socially with new people and getting to know them was an unanticipated benefit. Online interactions with strangers sometimes led to face-to-face contact and friendships, but in other cases it appears the aim was closer to quasi-sociality, a form of blogging practice I describe later. When bloggers have little expectation of ever meeting their readers, and when (as is normal) the comments on what they write are very short,⁷ one must consider whether this

⁷ No systematic statistical analysis of the interviewees' blogs was performed, but a large-scale survey found the median length of a blog comment was just 31 words (Mishne & Glance, 2006).

practice really involves discussion or is a novel form of phatic communion with an audience that is indefinite but perceived as intimate.

Interviewees who used their blogs primarily for feedback from unknown others said they did so chiefly for practical, not social, purposes, as artists or writers seeking to improve their work. Donald (early 30s, copywriter) began a blog by stating it would serve as a place to write short fiction and poetry. Although his blog also contained personal postings that appeared to fit a "quasi-social" framing, his primary expressed purpose was to get feedback on his writing in order to improve it.

I'd like to get people's comments on my work be it "you've spelled something wrong, this sentence doesn't make sense." To me it's about getting better at what I like to do which is to write. It's an exercise for me and I invite people to read, think and comment.

Renia's case was similar, although she wanted readers to comment on the quality of the writing in her personal posts rather than on explicitly fictional works. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, she found that most comments concerned the substance of what she posted rather than its style: "they tend to take it more as myself—a life thing . . . when it comes to writing [the writing itself] I keep asking [for feedback] and they won't say."

To refer to *self-directed* practices built around a communication medium may initially seem counterintuitive. Indeed, though some disagree (Bloom, 1996; Elbow, 1999), literary auto/biographical scholarship tends to suggest that all such writing *must* have an intended audience (Mallon, 1995). Nonetheless, given that blogging technology heightens possibilities for interaction with readers, the tenuousness of some interviewees' relationship with any audience other than themselves was striking. Three principal forms of self-directed blogging were identified—quasi-therapy, quasi-sociality, and blogging as an end in itself.

Five of the 23 interviewees appeared to be using their personal blogs as a means to feel better about issues and feelings in their lives—a form of what Harriet described as "therapy." As George (mid 30s, accountant) put it, "if someone pissed me off or annoyed me—generally if I put it down it didn't annoy me any more."

The interviewees in this study whose blogging appeared to be a quasi-therapeutic practice did not typically appear to be seeking responses from readers acting as judge, confessor, or interpreter. Some did say they sought advice, but generally it emerged that they mostly disregarded it unless it suited them, as Harriet's testimony indicates: "You've still got to remain true to yourself and follow your gut. Just because you are putting your heart out to people doesn't mean you've got to do as they say. I'm not beholden to my commenters."

This form of blogging practice seems potentially the most problematic in its consequences, as by its nature it involves sharing the most sensitive social information. If the writing itself serves as a quasi-

therapeutic process, why not simply write a paper diary or keep the writings on a hard disk? George seems to suggest an answer:

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

This response suggests that the possibility of readership in the abstract—like the idea that a paper notebook might be read by a vague posterity—keeps written self-examination from feeling meaningless or self-indulgent.

Quasi-sociality is the term I have chosen to describe the most attenuated possible form of social interaction—that is, communication with people unknown to the writer, whom the writer apparently does not really want to come to know and from whom only phatic responses are expected or desired. The following quotations from the interviews exemplify this dimension of blogging:

I think in large part I am just happy as long as I get a response. . . . To be a terrible cliché and quote Wilde, it is better to be talked about than not. (Adam, a journalist in his early 30s)

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

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

As discussed earlier, while many interviewees expected mainly to reach a specific set of others they knew before their blogging started, a minority clearly meant their blogs only to reach online others they did not already know or knew only online. Renia, for example, made sure her parents did not read her blog, and "my college friends don't know I have one because I'm scared they might seek it out and they will know all my secrets."

Studies of blogging have tended to treat it as a means to an end, whether that end is information exchange, social interaction, or self-expression. To some extent, this is also the case in symbolic interactionist framings of interaction. In several cases, however, blogging as a practice appears to be an end in itself.

One such reason for blogging is the pleasure of mastering and tinkering with a new tool. When Betty started her first blog, she said, she did "very little" with it except to practice, posting "Oh look at this, I can write in this blog" and playing with its design. Elaine, who was writing about the Internet when she started her blog, said she had started it for work, but added:

The sort of person that I am I just throw myself into something—get really really involved. It's great—it gives you a role and something to get your teeth into—so you keep your antennae out for new trends on the web and weblogs was a big trend coming out of the States.

For several of those interviewed, more important than the pleasure of blogging as a means of technical exploration was the pleasure of blogging as a form of writing and expression of creativity, as Harriet's example illustrates.

All the way through Uni I got firsts for anything that involved writing . . . I was obviously in the wrong degree . . . the blog came along and I thought this is a great opportunity for me to actually do more of the writing.

Interviewees using their sites in a broadcast fashion differed from Harriet and seven others in the interview sample. The former group appeared to some extent to regard blogging as an extension of their working lives with a practical end. The latter, however, seemed to see it more as an activity separate from their working lives. They often considered it their only means of scratching the writing itch, ascribing little, if any, extrinsic value to the product.

As was true for the quasi-therapeutic bloggers, they could have written in private, but the fact that there were or could be readers apparently encouraged them to continue. All the interviewees in this "quasi-social" group mentioned that they enjoyed being able to hear that they had touched or (more usually) amused or entertained their readers. In this regard the (mere) existence of readers appeared to be important but not central.

Discussion

A number of unspoken presuppositions appear to underlie popular speculation about why bloggers choose to share social information online. Chief among these is the assumption that personal bloggers wish to communicate with an indefinite audience and select blogging as the means because its technical features enable this form of communication. In this study, symbolic interactionism has an important role in unraveling apparent contradictions in blogging practices, as it recognizes that meanings in communicative situations are not inherent but rather arrived at in a negotiated fashion. The analysis above sheds light on several factors that add complexity to our understanding of personal blogging as an interaction.

Symbolic Interactionism and the Self-Directed Blog

First, it seems that although blogging is technically a means of interpersonal communication, neither a desire for interaction itself nor a desire to reach an audience is always central to blogging practice. Viewing blogging as a form of interaction using Goffman's interpretative lens alone thus provides

an incomplete picture, but the idea that blogging practice can be enjoyed for its own sake is consistent with a number of findings in other contexts. In an ethnographic study of purchasers of home computers in the late 1980s, for example, Murdock found that for many, "the pleasures they offered derived not from particular applications but from the possession of the technology itself and from solving the problems involved in getting it to perform" (Murdock, Hartmann, & Gray, 1992, p. 152). Rosenstein, Bober, and Hine also found this in their separate studies of personal home page creators (Bober, 2004; Hine, 2000; Rosenstein, 2000).

The idea that the creativity involved in the writing process itself can be the primary motivation for blogging practice has not been extensively studied, but evidence to support this has begun to emerge. A poll of U.S. bloggers revealed that the most popular reason offered (by 52%) for blogging was "to express yourself creatively" (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). Potentially linked to this is the symbolic power associated with media participation. This may include the sense of empowerment that some researchers suggest can come through media production (Couldry, 2010; Gauntlett, 2011; Rodríguez, 2001) (although the fact of amateur media production becoming more common online may itself dilute the sense of specialness associated with it).

Second, insofar as interaction *is* important in personal blogging, different bloggers seek and expect various forms of interaction. Although telelogic interaction with unknown others may be blogging's most distinctive feature, it did not appear to be the central form of interaction sought by most of those interviewed for this article. The largest single group of interviewees framed their interactions as being with known others rather than with an indefinite audience. Several interviewees had also shifted in their framing of their blogging practices over time and during their interviews sometimes outlined conflicting notions of what they were doing. This highlights a key difference between blogging and other "many to many" practices, on the one hand, and the traditional communicative practices covered by Thompson on the other: the extent to which social context is determinate. Mass media like radio and television are monologic by their nature, whereas the nature of the interaction in personal blogging can vary. Thus the bloggers' own imaginings or conceptions of their audiences are crucial to their definitions of their practice (unless contradictory evidence of unintended or unimagined interaction controverts their own definitions of their practice).

Varying Conceptions of the Audience

As Thompson (1995) describes it, before the popularization of the Internet, one could imagine the audience for one's actions or statements in essentially two ways, both tied to the media through which interactions took place. Most people usually interacted with a specific, bounded audience in mind, whether face-to-face or via technologies such as letters and phone calls that could reach only a few, designated people. Others might overhear a conversation or read a letter meant for another, but a degree of deliberate "disattention" was expected (Goffman, 1986/1974). Audience reactions could therefore be directly perceived or at least imagined with some accuracy, based on previous experience. A favored few with access to the mass media interacted with larger audiences whose precise composition was unknown, and the reaction of these audiences was much harder to assess. However, because of the expense and logistical complexity of communicating via mass media, messages were generally deliberately crafted with

particular kinds of audience in mind, the costs required to reach the audience were often justified (or not) by assessment of their responses, and most of these communications fell into mutually understood genres with corresponding forms of self-conscious self-presentation.

Today, personal blogging intriguingly exemplifies the contradictions and complexities that have emerged with the arrival of multiple modes of Internet-mediated communication. Communication with indefinite audiences is now available to a wide range of Internet users, but it appears that writers' orientations to those audiences can be based on earlier modes of interaction. For example, they may think unsought audiences unlikely, expecting only those with a sympathetic interest in a post's content to read, for reasons that are examined below. Because of the relative newness of these forms of mediated interaction, considerable ambiguity also characterizes how practices like personal blogging are and should be framed as a genre. Many writers, for example, may understand blogging as a new way to keep a diary, while some share of readers may consume these writings as voyeuristic entertainment (though further investigation of this aspect is beyond the scope of this essay).

Mediation, Imagination, and the Information Preserve

In principle, because of the interactive nature of the medium and the available user tracking technologies, blog writers can have a better picture of their audience than mass media professionals can. Especially given the occasionally sensitive nature of their self-disclosures, they might be expected to use tracking tools. Yet many of those interviewed did not appear to see the need. Four explanations could show why most of the interviewed bloggers did not appear concerned to protect themselves from potential harm from readers. The first is that they appeared to conceive of unanticipated or unknown readers as likely to be sympathetic. The notion that potential readers are essentially like-minded is neither new nor limited to CMC. Nathaniel Hawthorne observed a similar presumption more than a century ago:

The author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand him, better than most of his schoolmates and life-mates. Some authors, indeed, do far more than this, and indulge themselves in such confidential depths of revelation as could fittingly be addressed, only and exclusively, to the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy. (1850, pp. 1–2)

Goffman, likewise, mentions in the context of face-to-face interaction that under normal circumstances, strangers who are not the focus of an interaction tend not to be perceived as a threat in everyday life: "He [the actor] assumes that the minor dealings that he is now having with persons passing on their separate ways will not be used by them to provide the bases for unanticipated costs to him later" (Goffman, 1971a, p. 320).

A second potential explanation is that interviewees who enjoyed the practice as they had framed it avoided seeking evidence that would seem to threaten that framing—for example, as noted earlier, they often did not attempt to determine the size or composition of their audiences, and when mentioning in the interviews that they had received negative feedback in the course of their blogging practice, they sometimes appeared not to wish to acknowledge to themselves that they had potentially hostile readers.

A third explanation is that the interviewees in this study did not regard the social information they provided on their blogs as sensitive.⁸ This is consistent with scholarly arguments that people in late or postmodern society have become more willing to reveal themselves in public (Giddens, 1990). Some also argue that the increasing prevalence of personal revelations in the mass media (including mass-mediated revelations based on blog postings and social network sites) provides a platform for this behavior and normalizes it (Kitzmann, 2004; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), though arguments that young people's attitudes toward privacy are changing have been disputed (Hoofnagle, King, Li, & Turow, 2010).

A last explanation is that the medium and emerging expectations of reader behavior may have shielded interviewees from perceiving unfavorable reception of their social information. This may be partly attributable to the fact that the interviewees did not receive impressions that would be "given off" (Goffman, 1959, p. 7) in face-to-face or audio/visually mediated interactions. To be perceptible, a reader's expression of disapproval or incomprehension would have to be deliberately composed and sent to the blog producer by e-mail or as a comment on the blog, and according to the interviewees and other researchers (Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008), social conventions around blog reading discourage the writing of negative comments. Walther's hyperpersonal model, then, may well apply here insofar as the writer may construct an image of his or her largely silent readers as supportive, based on the disproportionately positive feedback received. Similarly, SIDE theory suggests that any evidence that one's readers share one's social identity tends to be exaggerated in the absence of individuating information (Spears & Lea, 1992), which may also explain the presumption often expressed by interviewees that their readers are broadly "like them."

Study Limitations, Broader Applicability, and Directions for Future Research

Because of the size and the nature of the sample (urban UK residents), the proportions of bloggers falling into any particular analytical category identified can only be taken as indicative. The sample was chosen from people who were maintaining blogs that made some personal information available on the open Internet, as this condition, as the introduction suggests, illustrates most clearly how mediation enables or encourages forms of interaction that appear problematic from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Those who were so concerned about potential unsought audiences that they chose to "friends-lock" or otherwise protect any personal postings were therefore absent, and bloggers whose primary purpose appeared instrumental and whose revelation of personal information seemed limited or incidental were likewise excluded. The findings in this study aim to illuminate primarily the subjective understandings of those bloggers whose sites are primarily personal, although its findings may also help to explain the admixture of personal details in blogs from other genres.

This research was able to focus on only one side of the interactional relationship—how personal bloggers perceived their readers. Further study of the differing expectations with which personal blog

⁸ Whether and to what extent revelations were actually sensitive or might be in future is beyond the scope of this essay and is in any case exceptionally difficult to assess, as it would depend on a knowledge of the contexts of consumption of all present and future readers.

readers approach those texts and how they perceive those whose blogs they read would help complete the picture of the whole interaction and might highlight the particular conditions in which miscommunication or loss of face most often take place.

While the fieldwork for this research involved only bloggers, its theoretical framework and some of its findings may be usefully applied to the study of other forms of CMC about the self, such as the use of social network sites. The various technical features and social norms governing different social media tools would likely affect the proportions of users falling into each framing category identified here, however. For example, a study of Twitter users had much to say about writers who appeared to use it in what I here call a broadcast fashion, but only briefly focused on what I would term self-directed Twittering (Marwick & boyd, 2010).

Conclusion

This research illustrates that while personal blogs are similar enough in their texts to be considered a single genre (Elgersma & Rijke, 2008), there is considerable diversity in the way blogging practices are framed and understood by those who maintain them. While in Thompson's work each medium implies a certain imagined relationship between communication authors and their audiences, in the case of personal blogging, the audience's role appears to be envisioned in several ways. Additionally, and unexpectedly, while personal blogging may seem to be mainly an intersubjective practice, its importance to those who are involved in the practice can be primarily intra-subjective. To the extent that this is so, as noted above in the discussion of self-directed blogging, blogging may be about the writing itself as a process, or, where blogging is a narrowcast practice, it may be about interactions with others that are largely imagined. Finally, although the composition of the audience and its reactions to self-presentation can be envisioned in the calculated way that Goffmanian conceptions of interaction imply, this study suggests that in mediated contexts where the audience is not readily accessible, its benevolence may simply be assumed, and in some cases the existence of the audience itself may be disattended. Where such tendencies exist, they can expose social media users to unanticipated interpersonal and professional risks.

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