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# Blogs as a “third place”: The emergence of online alcoves sharing common interests

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## ABSTRACT

An abbreviated case study in narrative form of a weblog is presented. Preliminary observations in an ongoing longitudinal study suggest that the blog, whose discourse engages in the niche interest area of film music appreciation, is a representative example of an emergent social network dubbed in sociological terms as a “third place.” This is deemed to be an unanticipated consequence for a medium originally intended primarily for personal publishing.

## Keywords

Blogs, social networking, case study

## INTRODUCTION

Happiness is an elusive concept to define but the positive psychology movement would suggest that this state of well-being is correlated with social commitment (Seligman, 2002). The capacity to interact with others and form bonds often leads to the contentment of belonging to a group. The social environments that we inhabit when not occupying either the home or the workplace can be a nurturing place for this kind of therapeutic networking. The sociologist Ray Oldenburg defined the notion of the “third place” as a physical space that lends itself to becoming both a stimulus for community engagement and a catalyst in establishing a personal sense of territorial attachment (Oldenburg, 1989). This kind of oasis could be a public bar, coffee shop or library. The common attributes shared by these locales are usually that they represent a collective source of intellectual and/or emotional fortification for those who congregate there. They are also ideally neutral ground where disparities in social and economic status are ignored due to the egalitarian climate of the surroundings.

In the early days of the Internet, advocates such as Schuler (1994), for example, campaigned for the creation of community networks within the virgin digital frontier that would become meeting spots to rival the physical equivalents mentioned above. Nevertheless, parts of the Internet are fast becoming a new kind of third place: “Web 2.0” is an extended term given to internet-based applications that facilitate or promote collaboration (Stephens, 2006). Social software, as it is also called, includes such well-known social networking icons as MySpace and Facebook, in addition to wiki tools and weblogs (or blogs). Many of these social software applications are open to casual perusal of content that can lead to snippets of revelation, being either trivial or profound. It is the contention of this paper that blogs, in particular, provide their participants with a third place in which ad-hoc discussions and impromptu postings generate a fertile ground for spontaneous formation and grazing of knowledge within the online communities they nurture. The humble blog, once a utilitarian tool that was primarily envisaged as an innovation in personal publishing (Crystal, 2005), has become in some quarters of the Internet a true social networking system, albeit minimalist in appearance and function.

## THE ALLURE OF BLOGGING

Blogs appeal to unique interest groups in this era of information overload where the economics of attention is at a premium. This, of course, has implications for publishers and companies that target their products and services at markets that are not mainstream (Bar-Ilan 2004). The public endorsements posted by bloggers with regards to the inherent charm of a creative product, such as a novel or a music recording, have a greater impact on the intended audience than do reviews in conventional print media. Blogging also offers writers a shared platform to herald their opinions to all who might care to read a posting (Blood, 2004; Nardi, et al, 2004). Hsu & Lin (2008) applied innovation diffusion theories to understand the motivation behind participating in blogs. They discovered that *ease of use* and *perceived enjoyment* were important factors that motivated participation in blogs. When it came to participation on the part of blog visitors, altruism, reputation of the blogger, and community identification influenced positive attitudes (Hsu & Lin 2008). However, perceived usefulness, often associated with IT use in the work place or for work-related matters (Davis, 1989), did not play a part in influencing attitudes

towards blogs. This may suggest more of an aesthetic and/or hedonic motive in their use. According to Guandango et al (2007), blogging can be a favoured medium for creative individuals, who are generally more likely to explore the unknown.

Blogging as a pastime is comparable to the act of maintaining a diary but one that is potentially visible to all readers in its one-to-many dialogue format via an interlinked hypertext network (Bolter, 1991). Theories have been advanced that the on-going production of a diary has therapeutic benefits to the self given that reflective writing can provide one with the security of a sense of place. (Stone, 2006). If the private undertaking of diary-keeping can cultivate a community of one through internal dialogue, what would the consequences be with the implementation of a networked incarnation? A paper-based diary can become a "third place" for the writer, perhaps a blog can function in the same capacity. Indeed, this factor could be one of the driving forces underpinning the boom in blogging as a pastime: The weblog is a tool for the creation of social networks where the shared sense of place forges a community bonded by a common, often idiosyncratic, forte. Johnson (2005) contends that popular culture, by and large, has evolved over the past 30 years to become more complex in intellectual depth. Typical contemporary examples would be television dramas such as "*Heroes*" and "*Lost*" whose allusive plotlines are almost philosophical in sub-text. Blogging is a tool that is forging communities of interest dealing with popular culture, providing a platform for multi-layered analyses of television, cinema, graphic novels and music of all genres.

Blogging has been acknowledged as a democratic tool in that it can facilitate research by amateurs who are not in the employment of an academic institution (e.g Brady, 2005). On the other hand, some critics of open source styles of development would argue that blogging promotes mediocrity (e.g. Keen, 2007). But this paper would argue that blogs provide a framework for the sustainability of miscellaneous categories that would otherwise be consigned to the forgotten realms of history (Weinberger, 2007). Blogging, in effect, nurtures the "Long Tail" of knowledge, creating a networked infrastructure with a distribution power that can disseminate a greater number of otherwise hard-to-find nuggets of wisdom in small quantities than more popular chunks of knowledge that are available en masse (Anderson, 2006).

## BLOGS AS BRICOLAGE: A MOTIVATION FOR RESEARCH

Design in general has been suggested to be a form of bricolage related to postmodernism (Louridas 1999; Lyotard 1984). Levi-Strauss (1966) originated this term in denoting the performance of a creative task based on improvisation and the opportunistic use of limited resources that are subject to constraints. Software design in the style of open source development (Raymond, 2001) can promote self-actualisation in its practitioners through the interlacing of bricolage and aesthetics: In the former, creation is driven by inquisitive experimentation, while in the latter innovation is due to the pursuit of elegance and the satiation of associated hedonic impulses. Ciborra(2002) interpreted bricolage within the domain of information systems as being the dynamic reordering of people and resources in development work. Allied to this is the courage to embrace a continuous sense of studied improvisation during the course of systems development. Though blogging is a more utilitarian task than software design, similar arguments apply. Namely, that blogging, by its very diary-like nature, is an act of personal improvisation that offers a patina of informality to otherwise staid academic knowledge. However, because of the transparent nature of the medium, blogging allows for both personal and communal improvisation with regard to the content that is posted. This mass tendency towards extemporization is one aspect that can initiate the formation of an online community.

The research strategy outlined in this paper follows a multiple case study methodology as espoused by Yin (2009). Furthermore, case studies are appropriate when a phenomenon is inadequately substantiated in theory, or when contextual factors need to be captured (Benbasat, et al, 1987; Darke, et al, 1997; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Siggelkow, 2007; Walsham, 1995). The focus of case study research is on developing a detailed account analysis of one or more cases. It involves the exploration of a case (or multiple cases) over a period of time by means of elaborate and in-depth data collection from "multiple sources of information rich in context" (Creswell 1998). Yin (2009) describes the explanatory potential of even a single-case study, using Graham Allison's (1971) study of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis as an example. Now this is an in-depth examination of a unique historical event, however the single-case study mode of research can also be applicable to the analysis of individual blogs that deal with niche interests. In essence, a case study is a narrative of depth that can provide philosophical and practical insight.

We chose to investigate one example from the burgeoning realm of music blogging, namely an exemplar from the niche genre of film music. The latter is deemed to be a cultural prototype within the broad spectrum of music and we anticipate that the selected case examined would provide valid generalizations. The blog in question shall remain anonymous to protect the privacy of those who use it and shall be identified herein as Film Music Blog X. What shall be described and commented on in this paper, due to the limitation of word count, is a kind of abbreviated narrative case-study, gleaned via participant observation, of an unexpected social network with a culture all its own that evolved in a medium often only considered a conduit for the publishing of personal journals.

## MUSIC BLOGS

Nearly since the inception of the LP record, Marshall (2003) notes that bootleg collectors and traders of music deal with creative product that has usually never been released commercially on a legitimate label. These collectors are differentiated from "pirates" or "counterfeiters" who reproduce and distribute music that have already been released on authentic commercial record labels. In fact, it can be argued that bootleg collectors have always been an active force in keeping niche areas of music alive. With blogging a new tool exists to build geographically-disparate communities that can embrace and rejuvenate moribund artforms: Chinen (2006) comments that jazz music experienced a resurgence of interest that can be directly attributed to the power of the blogosphere. Ross (2008) offers a similar argument with respect to the classical music genre. Blogs, in the main, are then a new distribution platform for the bootleg collector and this is especially true with respect to world and film music.

One of the earliest music blogs, Fluxblog, was established in 2002 (Tremblay-Beaumont and Aïmeur, 2005). Music blogs typically contain biographical information regarding the artists or their songs, and discussions about their releases. Also present are links to the artist website, their label, similar artists and downloadable sample tracks in mp3 format (Goldstone, 2006). Music blogs differ from peer-to-peer file-sharing services in that they discuss and contain mp3 samples of songs by alternative artist and rare music, and can induce readers to purchase music. While this does not fare well major record companies and certain legal bodies, these blogs can be a useful promotional tool for alternative artist and record labels. In many blogs, the links to mp3 downloads are either sanctioned by the labels and the artists, though bloggers have been known to disable these links upon complaints from these parties.

## CASE STUDY: THE FILM MUSIC BLOG

Since the advent of the LP record, instrumental film music has maintained a steadfast cult following amongst its small but loyal band of aficionados (Karlin, 1994; Thomas, 1997). Because of the niche demand for this artistic product the major recorded music companies tend not to release these on compact disc for mass consumption. A film music enthusiast is more often than not both a listener with an eclectic knowledge of a particular movie genre and/or composer, as well as a die-hard collector of soundtrack CDs. To cater for this market, specialist recording labels emerged in the 1970s, primarily in the U.S., to produce these film music soundtracks. These are frequently in limited pressings of 1500-3000 units per titles and available only via mail-order or internet-based commercial distribution channels. When these CDs sell out their value often increases in the secondary market many times their original worth. In one sense, even before the advent of Web 2.0 and its ilk, the cult of film music as an aural pastime evoked a kind of informal social network.

In a 2007 interview, published in *Film Music Weekly* (Carlsson, 2007), Robert Townson expressed major concern about the business impact of film music blogs. Townson who is currently head of *Varese Sarabande*, the major US recording label for film music compositions, noted that the traffic in sharing commercially-available soundtrack via blogs and free file hosting services was clearly an illegal activity that could also affect the future release of niche-market scores. Given that some bloggers argue that the free distribution of bootlegs and promotional CD content online promotes the work of the artist, Townson countered with the remark that this practice could actually negate the eventual legitimate release of such product in a more high-quality format.

Film Music Blog X has been active since May 2007 and 1332 comments were posted in that month alone. Many film music blogs have come and gone since its inception, shut down mainly as a result of being reported to copyright authorities, but Film Music Blog X is rare in its sustainability. In June 2007 comments spiked to a high of 1656 and they haven't dipped below the August 2008 low point of 583, making this blog one of the more popular ones amongst film music devotees. These figures and the observations that follow apply to the general area of Film Music Blog X. Due to the increasing popularity of Film Music Blog X, it has subdivided into sections: General, Science-Fiction, European, American Western, Asian, Computer Game Scores and the Golden Age of Hollywood. There are also sections that are only related to film music in a tangential sense, namely Jazz, Classical Music and Vinyl (being a forum for the exchange of LP-record albums converted to mp3 file format.) These sections should not be construed as being separate blogs with the overarching blog. Rather, they are a means to categorize the growing traffic in comments being posted in the original blog. Casual visitors often discover the blog by accident and, once exposed to the online congeniality therein, are sometimes seduced into becoming contributing members.

Each month there are spirited discussions on often obscure aspects of film music soundtracks and related topics, but the primary function of the blog is to act as a platform for the exchange of out-of-print and promotional soundtrack albums (with some exceptions as will be noted.) Members identify themselves via a nom-de-plume with identities being submerged. Clues sometimes emerge as to the ethnic background of participants but the primary characteristic evident is a shared passion for film music as a community of interest. While tracking the discourse on Film Music Blog X other narratives also arise of a

more personal nature, such as the trials and tribulations of the blog moderator's accommodation woes: To stave off an impending eviction from his dwellings, the moderator has sought online donations via micro-payments from the blog community. In response there were several postings of genuine concern and support as well as financial offerings. Blog regulars have revealed quite serious health issues affecting their lives and obtained words of support from others. Others have talked about the death of loved ones and been comforted by postings of condolences.

Has Film Music Blog X become an online community that is representative of the sociological phenomenon known as the "third place"? Here is an excerpt from a posting by a regular reader, addressed to the creator of the blog, which almost answers this question: *"I hope people, at least repeat visitors, think of this as a community and not just an all you can download buffet. For instance, it was pretty sweet when you saw some of your original friends come back here recently, <blog creator>, and it was clear how happy it made you. It was about more than grabbing the music. We all share a passion for a really obscure hobby and you built us a clubhouse. Hope people enjoy it as much as I do."* This sentiment is echoed in other postings.

Members make requests for mp3 versions of film music soundtracks, mostly those that are out-of-print or bootleg, either as LP records or CDs. Other members then post a comment providing a URL link to a web-site that facilitates the sharing of these files, chiefly via free uploads and downloads that are subject to certain time-limit restrictions. (Often these files are reported by anonymous scrutineers and then the online storage enterprises delete them from the respective web-sites for reasons of copyright infringement.) Peer-to-peer sharing is not used as a mechanism of distribution by this blog. Music files sampled at a high-bit rate are of particular value in this community with 320 kbps being most sought after in download traffic. The provision of scanned CD or LP record covers of the soundtrack is also an asset. Some music files are produced as "rips" from DVD source material with the resulting content being edited into individual tracks. At times, producers of these derived soundtracks endeavour to clean up the sound quality. This is especially true if it is the case of a LP record being digitized.

The blog maintains a de facto code ethics with one central precept being that only out-of-print soundtracks can be shared. Comments have been made defending the rights of independent film music soundtrack manufacturers such as Intrada and Film Score Monthly and the respect accorded to these enterprises manifests itself by no public sharing of currently available products. Exceptions are made to this ad-hoc rule: During Christmas 2007 a narrow window was opened to allow unrestricted sharing. At times, at the discretion of the blog moderator, a currently available soundtrack posted by a member was made available for a few days and then the URL was removed. (Private sharing appears to have no restrictions with a "Private Share Directory" available on the blog featuring a list of e-mail addresses of members willing to exchange any available soundtrack via URLs.) A recent custom established by this blog community has been the "Saturday Night Special," which despite the name, is a weekend-long window in which the de facto code of ethics is suspended and members share currently available film music soundtracks.

Apart from the ethical aberrations outlined above, it must be stressed that Film Music Blog X is not merely a web-site to obtain free soundtracks. Their distribution is couched in critical dialogue that both informs and educates in a succinct fashion. The works of nearly forgotten film music composers, destined unjustly for obscurity, are resurrected for new audiences in this forum. Even devoted followers of mainstream film music can discover something of worth that they may have overlooked. A case-in-point being American film composer Mort Garson, whose death in January 2007 prompted the blog moderator to create a special tribute section where samples of his work were available for download.

One individual is the moderator of blog A and his duties include the monthly categorization of contents (i.e. "November 07 Requests", "December 07 Requests", etc.) The moderator also initiates monthly projects within the community soliciting compilations of specific aspects of film music (e.g. a collection of the best score-only tracks from "James Bond" films). These projects constitute a series of group-generated "mixtapes" (Drew, 2005); albeit a particular variety that is available only by mp3 downloads. Mixtapes constitute a personal collection of music assembled within some sort of thematic framework and were originally compiled on audiocassettes. In his exposition on mixtapes circulated within the Bay Area underground hip-hop movement in San Francisco, USA, Harrison (2006) conjectures that these assembled recordings can be construed as unique technologies that at the same time accept the progressive politics of subculture tolerance while protecting the subculture from being usurped by the mainstream.

## DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The ongoing scrutiny of Film Music Blog X has revealed that music bloggers appear to be motivated by their enthusiasm for the music or composer, rather than personal financial gains. While they may violate established copyright laws in their sharing of film music, they do so as a reaction to the marginalization of the art form that they love. In bonding as an online community of interest through this blog they promote film composers, past and present, and act as amateur archivists in the

process. In her exposition on the current renaissance of the analogue LP record, Dell (2008) observes that part of its appeal as a musical artefact is the social experience factor: Congregating around a record player is a physical act conducive to discussion about the shared listening event. Live concerts of all musical genres evoke a similar communal passion channeled towards a directed interest. Music blogs are a similar social platform for appreciative expression.

Lovink(2007) advances an interesting theory that comments posted on a blog should be employed as a metric of sustainability for this medium: Zero comments would thus imply that one is doomed for extinction, since a blog is meant to be read by the masses. Traditionally this would imply that the initiator of a blog dictates activity through directed postings that elicit responses if they stir interest in the reader. In the case of Film Music Blog X, it has been observed that the role of the blog creator is subdued in initiating discussions. Instead, responsibility for the traffic in comments is distributed amongst the blog readership, with members having developed a genuine online camaraderie in their transactions. How does one measure a sense of community in a quantitative manner, though, without discounting in the process the experiential nature of the emotional bonds that forge it? An appreciation of aesthetics, as in the case of music, is a feeling that is at once individual and common. In the case of Film Music Blog X, the comments to the originally lone moderator and creator have taken on a life of their own and are no longer simply postings but tags that signify membership of a "third place," a virtual home for those with a mutual interest.

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