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# Weblogs and the Technology Lifecycle: Context, Geek-Chic and Personal Community

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Weblogs and the Technology Lifecycle:  
Context, Geek-Chic and Personal Community

by

James M. Milne

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
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## Dedication

As we are all the sum of the supports, great and small, that we have received our whole lives, I am the result of the blessings showered upon me. This is dedicated to the family and friends who provided me with the inspiration, capabilities and the freedom to explore the mysteries that life has in it. Through their love, I am created as the man I am. I hope we are all the better for it.

## Acknowledgements

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James M. Milne

**ABSTRACT**

Weblogging is an Internet social practice that became known as a technology. This project investigated weblogging (blogging) as an example of a media technology that arose under particular historical circumstances. To investigate this, blogs were examined in detail, participant-observation was used to construct and run a blog, and practicing bloggers were interviewed. The study found that blogging, like all technology, originates within existing social practice (context); has a diffusion process that causes it to spread between people (Geek-Chic); and leads to certain social outcomes (Personal Community). This is seen as a general pattern for the lifecycle of technology, serving to argue the case that shifts in social practice lead to technology, not the other way around.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### *Background – The Mass-Mediated Life*

It's no surprise to anthropologists to note that society is global, cultures are overlapping, and the whole framework is a dynamic whole, stable, but shifting. As always, no single individual is disconnected from others, and our cultures mirror our selves in their multi-layered interrelationships. The sum of all these forms the transnational whole of human society, as it always has. In this current version of human society, there are vast, explicit connections between everything and everyone, due in no small measure to the existence of the mass media. For those living the so-called "western lifestyle," the mass media are not merely an adjunct or optional component. The media are fundamental to the existence and operation of individuals, groups, cultures, and society itself, in so many ways that we sometimes become blind to the very obviousness of it. For an individual to extract herself from the media mix is literally, to cease being a member of society. For an organization, group, business entity or other collective to refuse media involvement is to commit suicide-through-invisibility.

This is a study of a media technology, weblogs, commonly known as blogs, that connects individuals and institutions in multiple ways. A weblog is a media technology that comprises the construction of an online Web-page personal journal, in reverse chronological form, with hyperlinks and loosely standardized formatting. Hundreds of thousands of weblogs exist, serving as personal forums for self-expression and for filtering mediated reality.

In this life, we immerse ourselves in the media flow, in the torrent of information that roars around and through us. In that immersion, we grow, we play, we dream, we mate, we thrive, we live, we die. At some level, we define ourselves, within and without, by our media. What do we 'consume,' with whom do we identify, what's the latest scoop?

### *Study Overview*

While this is a study of blogging, the study itself isn't about blogging, it's about technology. As a study about technology, this focuses on the processes behind the technology lifecycle – the development, growth, adoption and decline of a set of practices and tools that comprise a particular technology. The focus is on blogging in order to illustrate and define those processes.

This study is comprised of three avenues of exploration. First, there is an exploration of the background of the rise of the technology. In the context that predates the technology are the answers to questions surrounding why the technology originates, and how it comes to have the form that it does. Second, there is a series of interviews with current bloggers. These interviews reveal the bloggers' understanding of their practices, giving form and voice to their view of what it is they do. Third, is a reflexive view of my own experiences as a blogger. To best understand what motivates and constrains bloggers, I adopted the practice with an eye toward understanding my own impulses and reactions to it.

In the specific case under study, blogging, there's a strong degree of technology-of-the-month. Blogging may be evolutionary or revolutionary, innovative or mundane, but there are good reasons to believe that it is simply the current form of the ongoing 'participatory' practices surrounding Internet use in general. People disagree about this, of course, and the study will show that the past of blogging and other technologies suggests the future course for blogging, and for other technologies as well. That is, blogging follows a paradigmatic lifecycle that is shared by many other technologies.

The outcome of this study is a redefinition of technological innovation. The study shows that the tools and techniques that come to be known as a technology *follow* the creation and adoption of the practices they contain. If technology is not just artifacts and production processes, but also the contexts of the use of that object, and the practices engaged in by people using it, then the complex of emergent meanings that describe and explain it precede the technology itself. Paradoxically, the practices come to exist, and then the tools are developed to accomplish them. This redefinition of technological innovation is meant to refute the notion that technology 'causes' social change. More correctly, social practices change, and technology shifts accordingly.

While this is not a strictly 'applied' study in itself, this is an easily applied set of concepts, with special relevance for commercial organizations in general. The findings from the study can easily be applied to technology forecasting, trend analysis, or social analysis of groups. As such the target audience for this are media organizations, information technology companies, nonprofit associations, and anyone else interested in the development and decline of various technologies.

## ***Research Questions***

What is the origin of technology? It's a simple question, but one that connects to and illuminates a host of other questions. From the fundamentally basic (what is technology?) to the sublime (how does technology allow the fulfillment of human potential?), these questions underlie much investigation and understanding of humanity. As a result, an investigation of technology can be a very direct avenue into the way people and groups function, and application of the lessons learned can lead to benefits for individuals, groups and societies.

In the maelstrom of technological innovation that is twenty-first century America, it's easy to lose sight of a central question. What is technology? Like any other definition at the heart of a research question, this sets an overall direction. For my purposes, the simple definition of technology as 'applied knowledge' turns out to be insufficient. By that definition, everything from speech to dancing, paperclips to space stations, are technologies. This is true, but useless. As an anthropologist, what compels me more are the social aspects of these technologies. That is, technology is embedded within, and fosters the ongoing construction of, social contexts that cause and are caused by the technology. So the more useful definition of technology is one that encompasses the relationships between knowledge, applied knowledge, social context, and individual or group practices.

For my purposes then, an operating definition of technology is this: *the applied knowledge of cultural practices and technical skills used by individuals and groups to accomplish specific needs in the context of life for those individuals and groups*. There are a variety of implications that derive from this seemingly simple definition. For instance, it's clear that technology is a kind of social relation. It is a practice-based relationship that links together people and things, within a larger framework that describes overall meanings and goals. Technology answers the question of "how" – social context answers the question of "why". Another point is that technology, *per se*, encompasses much more than just the technological things (objects), which often become fetishized as a goal in themselves. Technology includes the patterned activities and processes that individuals and groups perform as part of daily life – that is, their social practices. Finally, technology is a moving target. As the cultural elements comprising a technology change (for instance, the socially-acknowledged goals), the technology is changed, even when the embodied artifacts identified with the technology haven't changed. Remove a technological object from its originating social context, and it's a different object. Today's tool is

tomorrows kitsch, next week's art. Objects or practices outside of their originating social context get evaluated for a host of primary and secondary characteristics, which may or may not have been relevant in their creation. The social relationship in a technology is unique to the circumstances of its creation and ongoing use. My technologies are not yours, and Jane's today are not Jane's tomorrow.

At a nuts-and-bolts level, technology plays out as a set of practices surrounding the lives of individuals and groups. These practices exist as part of interconnected webs of technologies and social contexts, past, present and future. This shifting "technoscape" changes over time and context, is socially constructed, and varies by need, group, and society (Appadurai 1990:297).

For example, it's axiomatic to note the explosion of overlapping information technologies across the globe in the last few decades. This explosion, in some ways, defines the current historical age. It is an ongoing revolution whose future-term steady-state operation is by no means clear. No understanding of individual lives, group behaviors, or the functioning of societies can be complete without detailing out these technologies. But the family of communication/information technologies commonly called IT was created within this current historical age, and the meanings of those are unique to this age. Whether a culture uses smoke signals or the Internet as a technology is an historical irrelevancy. What matters is how the technology is defined by the culture.

This work is an examination of the lifecycle of technology. In it, I take a look at the end-to-end "rise" and "fall" of a technology, or a set of technological practices. I use that technology to illustrate salient points that refute some of our commonsensical notions of what technology is, how it originates, how it's used, what it means, and how it evolves. In this examination, I find several things. First, at a basic level, technology is an 'effect' of social change, not a cause. Next, the purposes it serves have little to do with the overt immediate application of the technology. Third, the meanings constructed for it are artifacts of the context that gives rise to it. Finally, the future direction of innovation in technology is not written in past innovations, but in present social practice. It's obvious that this has widespread applicability in analysis and forecasting, in many domains in our culture. The point of this work is to develop a better view of how these disparate elements work in human culture.

In examining these relationships, I'm aided by the rapid development and social-adoption cycle known as 'Internet Time'. This phenomenon compresses the entire lifecycle of socio-

technical evolution down to a period of months (or shorter), and thus constitutes a real-world laboratory of sorts, suitable for this kind of investigation. The crucible of innovation that is the World Wide Web, and related objects, are now cross-connected to virtually every other domain in American culture, so investigating this serves a double purpose. Understanding any aspect of American life now *requires* understanding how it plays out on the Web as well. The particular phenomenon I use to examine these structures and processes of technological innovation and adoption is the Weblog, or blog, but the underlying processes are not specific to either blogs or the Internet.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### *Introduction*

It's the twenty-first century. The world has changed, as usual. In the domains of the mass media, journalism, culture, politics, and technology, things are 'different', as they always have been. The hype of the 1990's Internet revolution has become the ubiquity of the Web as a resource. Concerns over the demise of journalism as an irrelevant past-century practice have given way to interest in how to manage information as a commodity. We've been through the 'End of History' and the 'Death of Discourse' and yet, here we are, talking to each other in ever-more inventive ways, in ever-growing amounts. While the cultural landscape undergoes upheaval and reinvention, human needs don't change radically. We still seek connection, involvement, solace, companionship or stimulus. We still need information, avenues of expression, or the unexpected. We still experience hatred and fear, boldness, humor or love. What has changed are the myriad ways in which we do those things.

One way that expression is transformed is the emergence of the 'weblog,' or blog. A weblog, in the broadest definition, is a public journal, kept as a website. While technically a blog is just a simplified website, blogging has emerged full-force as a set of practices, norms, conventions, and themes that are separate and distinct from other web practices. Blogs cover an innumerable variety of styles and subject matters, and while blogging itself doesn't limit subject matter, in practice many blogs focus heavily on media and politics. The practices and procedures surrounding blogging therefore constitute a fascinating avenue by which to explore the ever-changing roles of journalism and media in United States society. In them are exhibited the forces, shifts and drifts driving cultural practice in the current timeframe.

This paper is an exploration of the patterns surrounding blogging. It contains an examination of the context of blogging, a view of the environment in which the practice originated and thrives. As always, everything is connected, so a full description of blogging could entail an attempt at a full-scale ethnography of U.S. culture, an admittedly hopeless endeavor. Therefore,

this context description limits itself to three interrelated domains with obvious relevance to the practice: mass media journalism, the Web and society.

### ***The Mediascape: Mass Media/Journalism***

Journalism and the mass media are enormous global industries whose concentration of wealth and capital imbue them with a “traditional” kind of power. That is, the wealth of these industries enables them to influence and even control, governments, societies, and groups. They can marshal resources to assure profitability, dominance, and power in the sense of ‘getting others to do their will’. But these industries have a kind of “nontraditional” power, in that their involvement in the production and dissemination of cultural messages give them a unique ability to shape ideas, cultural forms, and social practice. Various norms and practices (e.g., journalistic ‘objectivity’, or traditions of media-criticism) recognize this power, and shape and control it. Using Appadurai’s formulation, this is the “Mediascape,” or the globalizing but decentered terrain of mass media/journalism in which “the world of commodities and the world of ‘news’ and politics are profoundly mixed” (Appadurai 1990:299).

The Mediascape is lacking neither its problems nor its critics. “In sum, a market system of control limits free expression by market processes that are highly effective. Dissident ideas are not legally banned, they are simply unable to reach mass audiences, which are monopolized by large profit-seeking corporations that offer programs supported by advertising, from which dissent is quietly and unobtrusively filtered out.” (Herman 1999:18). Herman, like others, is pointing out that the Mediascape, as an organ involved in the social reproduction of reality, overwhelmingly favors social elites and the status quo. Studying the Mediascape is also difficult. For instance, Bird notes that “text-based response studies are seen as inadequate in capturing the kaleidoscopic quality of our media culture” (Bird 2003:4). Her focus is on the audience, and on the shortcomings of research traditions like ‘content analysis’, but the image of the ‘kaleidoscope’ is a vivid reminder of media patterns within patterns that fracture and distort our view. The media is our object of study, but itself distorts what we study.

In the Mediascape, historical development gave rise to overlapping practices that assign various weights to different roles within the domain. These are explored in more detail in literature on the mass media and journalism. Since this itself comprises an enormous body of literature on media theory and practice, sociological and anthropological exploration, and of course,

the enormous historical body of media texts themselves, my focus here is specifically on the roles that turned out to shift in the development of blogging. If blogging is itself a change to the operation of a common media role or practice, then something about that role or practice presumably needed to change because it didn't meet practitioners' needs.

### **Production Practices**

The "systematic inquiry" at the heart of journalism (Dewey, in Hickman 1997:21) is part of the society-wide public discourse that helps make community life possible (Carey 1989:81-82). Journalism and the mass media are "culture industries" whose "concentrations of economic and cultural power" (Traube 1996:140) are inescapable in this society. To fully understand the content of the mass media, it's necessary to examine the "material conditions of production" (Brennen 1995:103), though that's not always feasible or even a goal. The media can be understood on many levels.

One such level is that of a gargantuan industry. Superlatives abound to describe the large and growing empires that make up the "Big 9" (Nichols and McChesney 2000:28). Recent decades have seen a continual process of mergers (McChesney and Nichols 2003:16-20) and acquisitions in the industry; the "Big 5" might be an appropriate current name. However, media mergers have been going on forever in journalism (Alger 1998:29-95). Along the way, the public and analysts have continually questioned the ongoing concentration of media power into fewer hands (Hickey 2000a:17), with the inherent problems of self-censorship and bias. Results are mixed, though. Analysts originally wondered whether Time Warner was smart, stupid, or criminally stupid, in accepting AOL's merger buyout (Rogers 2002; Siegel 2002:27). Subsequent events (Dowd 2003:13A) have shown that the deals made at the height of Internet mania were foolish and error-prone.

Clearly, though, the centralizing tendencies of mass media control carry power with them (Carey 1989:167), concentrating wealth and power in the hands of a few large institutions. This "concentration of ownership has historically led to a reduction in creativity because, when that's the case, content control rests in the hands of a few" (Horowitz 2002:15). Norman Horowitz should know; he's a media consultant and former president of Columbia Pictures Television Worldwide Distribution, Polygram Television and MGM/UA Telecommunications, and an executive with CBS/Viacom.

An aspect of media mergers with even more dangerous implications for society is found in this: “the messages in mainstream news media generally support the goals of established elites and dominant value systems, often to the detriment of challenging groups” (Demers 1998:572). That finding, according to Demers, “is one of the most strongly supported propositions in the literature on media effects.” This “dominant policy and/or ideological basis for decisions about newsworthiness in a number of areas of newsmaking in the U.S. mass media often overwhelm professional values” in producing journalism (Herman 1999:58). That is, media organizations are explicitly political in their messages, the political orientation of the messages supports the status quo of society, and these politics overwhelm journalistic production norms designed to nominally prevent them from occurring. This is distinctly at odds with mass media journalism’s self-image as muckraking defenders of democracy.

The politicism of mainstream journalism is embedded solidly within the ongoing social conflicts and dichotomous visions that are the partisan struggles between the American ‘right’ and ‘left.’ Within those red/blue, conservative/liberal battles, the media are both a pawn and a tool, a weapon and a prize. The struggles over media messages are highlighted in definitions of the “...so-called ‘Liberal Media’ (SCLM)” (Alterman 2003:2). Alterman, a “columnist for the Nation and an independent Weblogger for MSNBC.com” (Alterman 2003:9-10) finds that both the ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ media contain both ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ journalists producing so much media that are overtly or covertly ‘conservative’, that the very idea of liberal dominance of newsmaking is “ridiculous” (Alterman 2003:10). Alterman backs up his findings with years of experience and anecdotes, and suggests that this is true, in spite of the comparatively ‘liberal’ social viewpoints personally held by most journalists. The source of this is adjudged to be the “massive conservative media structure that, more than ever, determines the shape and scope of our political agenda” (Alterman 2003:11). And yet, the notion infests journalism and journalists, and the public, that journalism is inherently ‘liberal’, to the left of the public.

This is a prime example of the kinds of bias that inflect the processes of producing journalism. Edward Herman also agrees that the social infrastructure of the conservative “echo chamber” repeats and amplifies conservative messages in the media until they become accepted as truth (Herman 1999:4). He notes how this particular political agenda has hijacked the ability to stamp authenticity on ‘findings’ through bogus (but almost laughable) ‘studies’ (such as that by Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman) to ‘prove’ the assertion that the media are liberal, when in fact the

opposite is true (Herman 1999:5). Evidently, the form and processes of academia can be used to prove that black is white.

Bias itself has generally been considered to be subtle, because journalistic norms held it to be forbidden. Nevertheless, it's a fundamental part of journalism itself. Herman detailed out some ways that bias is exhibited in news content/coverage. His findings: "Differential Tone and Language"; "Double standard in intensity of coverage"; "Double standard in the application of relevant principles"; "Politically biased selection of facts"; "The Gullibility quotient and the transmission of lies"; "Lack of Investigative Zeal"; "Unwillingness to correct error" (Herman 1999:61-65). However, "As cultural studies scholars have long argued, we cannot presume to read the cultural meaning of anything through textual analysis alone." (Bird 2003:87). For one thing, Herman agrees that "word meanings, connotations, and applications are fluid and change in the course of struggle" (Herman 1999:283). So bias is evident in news coverage itself, but in this fluid system, the coverage isn't always the final determinant of what is biased. In any case, it's clear that there is a problem with bias within the processes of journalism.

Other related problems lie at the heart of journalistic practice, such as the notion of objectivity. Objectivity is defined in a multitude of ways, such as David Mindich's framework that defines it as a set of five practices that control journalistic processes (Mindich 1998:16-137), or Jay Rosen's set of tools for accomplishing social goals (Rosen 1993:48-50). These practices or tools are only some of the multiple definitions of objectivity used by journalism. These definitions carry multiple meanings, and connote issues of trust, reality, and faith in repeatable processes (Ogles 1999:398; Schiller 1981:196; Schudson 1978:6). Professional journalism generally dreads the prospect of introducing bias in reporting. This presumes that a state of "unbias" can somehow exist (Schiller 1981:5), and even as far back as 1930, newspaper journalists have analyzed and tried to come to grips with bias (Roshco 1975:46).

The conflict comes from the realization, by journalists and the public, that objectivity is largely (or wholly) a *fiction*: 'objective' processes are now widely understood to contain embedded subjectivity, in selection, interpretation, application, underlying values, and more (Herbert 2000:288; Lipari 1996:821; Mindich 1998:5; Rosen 1993:48-49). In a kind of journalistic oxymoron, Lisbeth Lipari's analysis of the use of adverbs used in reporting reveals that, when followed to the highest standards of journalistic practice, conventions create specifically subjective modes of knowledge in news story sentences (Lipari 1996:821). The result is that news stories

*don't make any sense* without the subjective portions of the stories. The nominal objectivity of the newspaper story form depends on its opposite, subjectivity, to succeed. Herman backs this up, with his dossier of word tricks of the ways in which language can be subtly used to shape impressions: “Purring”; “Snarling”; “Putdowns”; “Playing down violence”; “Obscuring appeasement of client state terror”; “Facilitating innuendo”; “Personification and use of collective words”; “Falsely imputing benevolent motives”; “Removing agency” (Herman 1999:285-291). To some extent, this is how language works, of course. But the point is that there are not really any such things as ‘objective’ language or ‘objective’ journalism.

While journalism standards value processes that are inherently or nominally unobjective, such as favoring ‘official’ spokespersons (Bagdikian 2000:179; Schudson 1978:162), they persist in the “illusion” that journalism is a “value-free discipline” (Bagdikian 2000:130-131). Thus a kind of self-aware hypocrisy permeates mass media journalism today, as the conflicts and contradictions pile up. This is confirmed, for instance, by findings like this: “The Pew Research Center reported in 1998 that public criticism of the press for inaccuracy, unfairness, intrusiveness, and sensationalism is at an all-time high. The irony is that the more the media try to respond to audience demands, the more they erode their increasingly tenuous position as a focus for serious public debate” (Bird 2003:181). Perhaps this is a result of the slow realization by media consumers that mass media are just one more element of society caught up in the forces that permeate all other aspects of society.

### **Consumption Practices**

It’s a fair question whether consumers of mass media journalism know (or care) about the conflicts and contradictions at the heart of the production process. This begs the question of just how such consumption happens in the flood tide of information swamping the average American.

Doris Graber’s classic study of American media consumers suggests some keys to this process. She finds that people use “schemas” to interpret and organize mediated information. A schema is a “cognitive structure consisting of organized knowledge about situations and individuals that has been abstracted from prior experiences. It is used for processing new information and retrieving stored information” (Graber 1988:28). The schemas rely on underlying “themes” to summarize a general stance and guide processing: e.g., “People are greedy” (Graber 1988:234-235). As a result, people ignore most specific stories, and create a “substantial backlog of information” on individuals and issues, so that new information serves as “filler and refresher”

(Graber 1988:3). This makes sense, anyway, since original source data in journalism is lost, fragmentary or contradictory, so it is skipped anyway (Graber 1988:8).

This suggests that much of the consumption process is automatic, disengaged, reflexive, or unnecessary. Graber seems to suggest that our frontal lobes are not terribly involved in media consumption, which begs the question of why we do it. She asks, for political campaign media: “why do people go through the motions of monitoring news stories when they gain nothing from the process?” Her answers: “habit,” “sense of obligation” (duty as citizens), “looking for cues to specific information they wanted to monitor” (Graber 1988:100).

This underscores the ritualistic nature of the media consumption process. When researchers have looked, they’ve found that “news consumption is intricately bound up with daily routine”, and that people are generally doing something else along with watching the news (Gauntlett and Hill 1999:64). That is, “the often overlooked context of watching television news” (Gauntlett and Hill 1999:52) is key to understanding how news consumption rituals help to structure the family. Traditionally, much research “...fails to consider the politics of the sitting room” (Gauntlett and Hill 1999:54). Consuming the media, it seems, is not a single-minded activity. It accompanies other activities, or is itself, a ritualistic comforting activity.

This is sharply at odds with the research tradition that finds the “active audience” (Lull 1995:90-112), to be one practicing interpretation of the “the multivocality and indeterminacy of media” (Spitulnik 1993:296). That is, some theorists who analyze audiences find that their interpretive activities create experience, identity, and even reality as they construct their social reference world from mediated landmarks (Neumann 1999:165-172). Whether audiences are passive or active, whether our minds are turned off, humming a mantra, or creating our world, media consumption is a big part of our daily lives as Americans.

Of course, all people don’t consume all media the same way. “As individuals, we experience media in non-predictable and non-uniform ways” (Bird 2003:2). Our choices are idiosyncratic, and vary over time and circumstance. As a whole, society doesn’t even respond to media events uniformly. For instance, Bird notes how a cycle of jokes coincides with some media events, so they “become an integral part of the public discourse on major news events, whether disasters or scandals” (Bird 2003:46). Not all stories become associated with jokes, and those that do, follow patterns of development and decline.

Efforts to control or improve the way that media are consumed are generally fraught with problems: “Audiences do make active choices about the news they can use, and berating them about what they should be interested in is unlikely to have much effect” (Bird 2003:179). Academia and critics don’t have nearly enough influence over the choices of individuals. Nevertheless, there’s a great need to understand what happens in the audience of people consuming media.

### **The Audience**

Our daily life is frequently measured, poked and prodded. We are studied and analyzed, interpreted and marketed, by media companies. After all, they are businesses; like most corporations, they have to understand their markets. This is problematic for understanding the processes at the heart of being a media consumer, though. “While the active audience tradition has taught us that we, the audience, have a significant role in creating and operationalizing [the effectivity of media], we cannot pretend that the power of corporate media producers can somehow be vaporized by the magic wand of audience creativity.” (Bird 2003:168). The media create messages tailored to us, that we dutifully consume, and to at least some extent, take as givens.

The social science of demographics is widely used in categorizing people and groups, even though “demographic categories such as sex, ethnicity, age, and economic status are spurious variables when it comes to the analysis of thinking processes. In many ways, their use as if they were relevant variables is dangerous” (Graber 1988:245). That is, demographics are statistical shorthand for “those who think and act like X.” The operating assumption, provably true, is that people of similar measurable external characteristics (demographics such as age, socioeconomic status, or gender) have similar internal characteristics (psychographics such as respect for authority, or belief in religion). Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to measure the innately personal characteristics of psychographics, demographics are widely used to predict or control aggregate behaviors resulting from psychographic characteristics, based on the corresponding demographic characteristics.

An essential problem with this system is in the disconnection between measurable external characteristics and idiosyncratic internal characteristics. That is, demographics are not always perfectly correlated with psychographics; behavioral responses do not always accord perfectly with external measurable qualities. If they did, all people of the same demographic

background would behave in the same robotlike fashion. This doesn't stop anyone from using demographics, however. The same techniques that have made a science out of researching an audience have begun to creep into the Internet, such as Annette Markham's "User on the Net" interviews (Markham 1998:62). The more we do, the more we are studied. The more we are studied, the better we are understood en masse, although the science drives further and further away from understanding us as individuals.

In truth, the very concept of the audience as an entity presents analytical problems. "We cannot isolate the role of media in culture, because the media are firmly anchored in the web of culture, although articulated by individuals in different ways. We cannot say that the 'audience' for Superman will behave in a particular way because of the 'effect' of a particular message; we cannot know who will use Superman as some kind of personal reference point, or how that will take place. The 'audience' is everywhere and nowhere." (Bird 2003:3). The audience is fluid, ever-shifting but *being* an audience member is part of what it means to be a member of this culture. In this way, "media images are naturalized into everyday American life, just as spiritual and mythological images are naturalized into oral cultures" (Bird 2003:6). Jones makes the suggestion that "indeed, it may be necessary to reconceptualize the notion of the audience... beyond 'active' or 'passive'" (Jones 1999:8). Other researchers have made the same observation: how 'the audience' isn't somehow separate or distinct from everyone else – we are all audience members. Mediated reality *is* reality in America, and that reality is created through our participation in audience processes, our consumption and interpretation of mediated images.

Cultural studies posits that the 'active' audience creates its own meanings in the interpretation of images. This 'resistance' is seen as partial and imperfect, but if true, has an insidious side. The "patina of progressivism as [proponents of cultural studies viewpoints] celebrate individual accomplishments and 'resistance' is therefore pollyannaish, and complements perfectly the individualism of the New Right, which also argues that individuals have more resources than liberals imagine...." (Herman 1999:276). Herman argues that "the postmodern celebration of popular culture as the locus of subversion and resistance ignores its increasing integration into the lifestyle of the shopping-mall world and takes the domination of consumer capitalism as a given" (Herman 1999:277). If true, this argues yet again for the role of the media in the social reproduction of reality. Even in our 'active' selves, our participation as audience members reifies the system that produces audiences in the first place. The elements that make up

the Mediascape are too important to ignore; the more we examine them, the more critical they appear to be.

### **Criticism & Punditocracy**

At least the public returns the favor of attention. While media companies study the public, members of the public focus their gaze on the media to answer questions about the quality of coverage. Criticism of the news media has probably always been a popular armchair sport; as part of the social process of interpreting and understanding reports from far away, people have always questioned the messenger. In this mass media age, they are legion. For examples from 2000, see (Boylan 2000; Clark 2000; Gartner 2000; Goozner 2000; Hall 2000; Heath 2000; Kelleher 2000; Larsen 2000; Ledbetter 2000; Overholser 2000; Yagoda 2000). Media criticism is also a basic web-sport, enabled by the widespread availability of commodified, readily-digestible news headlines. Indeed, “the Web is a magnet for this kind of nitpicking” (Weinberger 2002:85) of facts and interpretations, across genres and technologies.

According to Douglas Rushkoff, this “house of mirrors within mirrors is the American Mediascape. It is more than a mirror of our culture; it *is* our culture. It is where we spend our time, our money, and our thought. But as we examine the nature of the datasphere more closely, we find it is a self-referential cut-and-paste of itself. Most of media is media commenting on media commenting on media. Even if one real event just happens to occur... it soon becomes part of the overall self-reflexive pastiche of media.” (Rushkoff 1996:20). In Rushkoff’s view, this is intentional (Rushkoff 1996:317), because only by being in the media can something become *real* in American life. This observation paradoxically lends some degree of relief to the worry that society is too media-centric, by noting that it is something of a closed sphere.

Media criticism takes a variety of forms, which vary by technology. For instance, criticism of Web media is helped by the ready availability of media texts and convenient hyperlinking, but simultaneously made problematic by the very vaporousness of the medium: “one of the reasons Web news content isn’t adequately examined is that so much of it no longer exists” (Siegel 2002:27). Without archives, Web news stories simply vanish, as though they never were. In media criticism, blogs emerged early in their development as a source of those who “like to play ‘gotcha’ with the established media” (Leo 2002:8A).

Media criticism reaches its zenith in practices surrounding the “pundits,” a legion of individuals who appear often and with agendas on the Sunday morning talk shows, editorial pages,

think tank interviews, and sound bites that make up much of media journalism and analysis. Pundits take many forms. They can be those individuals doing a “full Ginsberg” on all 5 Sunday morning talk shows, shows that “may bore many Americans, but... are crucial vehicles for the White House in setting the news agenda for the week” (Tierney 2002:13). They may be nonprofit organizations like Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), or any of thousands of Websites and blog sites on the Internet. The pundits form both the mainstream media status quo and its opposition, conventional wisdom and hidden agendas, idea proponents and policy flacks. The thousands of second-guessing politically-minded individuals that make up the “blogosphere” use the pundits as their raw material. They “swarm all over... news columns searching for errors and bias” (Leo 2002:8A). They are the visible symbols and mouthpieces of social discourse.

### **Dissatisfaction**

As a rule, critics and pundits rarely chime in to congratulate jobs-well-done. The historical role of the critic gives token space for kudos, but reserves the bulk of its energy and interest for negative criticism. In both journalistic and Internet history, traditions of inflammatory rhetoric and harsh criticism exist covering a wide range of subjects, from newspaper book and film reviews to public-forum “flame wars”. So there are natural reasons why most mediated discourse on public issues is oriented to finding fault; “eyeballs” follow humor and name-calling at least as readily as reasoned debate and dispassionate argument.

The sheer volume of mediated discourse that criticizes other media events or personalities is so large, so ingrained, that something else may be going on, however. No less than Columbia Journalism Review opined that “the circumstances in 2003 include a deep dissatisfaction with Big Media, a hunger for connection and community, and a yearning for political passion and for the writer’s voice” (Columbia Journalism Review, September/October 2003 p. 20). Individuals don’t necessarily care for the stories that traditional news produces. As Bird points out regarding the coverage of scandals: “if news audiences generally prefer lively, dramatic, human interest stories over news about political and economic issues, this is not necessarily a terrible thing” (Bird 2003:48). The processes of traditional journalism are not necessarily designed to produce stories that are compelling or lively; they serve other goals. The tone of much media criticism reflects the realization that individuals are often *very* unhappy about the content of the mass media.

If this has become the conventional wisdom among journalists, then it reveals deep, structural dissatisfactions in the current practices of media and journalism. Those dissatisfactions

serve as a clue to the rise of blogging and other practices in the Mediascape. Not all of those practices are overtly mediated, but in this era, where all roads lead to the “Information Superhighway,” there inevitably must arise mechanisms to mollify these dissatisfactions, or the conditions that produce them.

### ***Webworld: Internet Technology***

The second major contextual domain of interest is the WebWorld, the whole collection of technologies that allow for the construction, placement, and viewing of Web pages. No place embodies today’s community discourse more than the Internet, of course. The growth of E-mail, the World Wide Web, and numerous other Internet applications (Usenet, chat, IM, etc.) need not be charted here. The emergence of this common space is the emergence of a new-generation town square. This public space has tremendous implications for society, ones that emerge in ways both obvious and subtle.

In Webworld, American ideals of technicism and progress are given free reign and material expression. This is the embodiment of the “strong belief that computers more or less directly transform society” (Hakken 1999:16). To understand this, we have to investigate not just society, but how those computers are used, specifically, in that society. When we do, we find that issues are continually rediscovered as ‘new’ in WebWorld but turn out to be historically repetitive (e.g., see Bird 2003:55-56). There is historical precedent for issues such as people’s strategies for having higher-quality lived experience via mass-mediated events rather than real-life ones, for marshalling attention to handle a glut of information, the search for community/local focus, ways of shaping media content, and the creation of social identities through performance.

### **Hyper, Virtual & Mega**

Mass culture has adopted language to describe the complex of ideas and practices surrounding the emergence of digital media, and the changing informational landscape. The language and buzzwords highlight the underlying ideas. For instance, consider the ubiquitous prefixes “hyper-,” “virtual-,” and “mega-.” Each is borrowed from science, and used to describe the qualities of something. In their computer-science usage, they have specific technical meanings. Sociotechnical systems are marked by the circumstances of their origin (Burawoy 1979:243), and the ideas underlying these regularly cross over to everyday language and pop culture.

What is happening here? Consider “hyper.” On the web, a hyperlink is a clickable URL, one that displays a new web page in a browser window. With the ease of magic, a simple click takes you “to” a new “place.” Once the novelty of this effortless “transportation” wears off, what remains is the idea that things can be better, faster, cheaper to do. In the ideal case, things are perfect, instantaneous, and free. Seen in this regard, the idea of “hyper” leads to a perception of the non-Web world as place where, in comparison, things work badly, slowly, and with great difficulty. Similar perniciousness exists in the idea of “virtual” realities: paralleling the real world, they coexist but all the rules are different, and “mega”: regularly trafficking in gargantuan quantities reduces their meaning and impact, so that people may be desensitized to the implications of social problems. This may be considered an over-reading of semantics, and perhaps it is. But the point is that, like the language of the Web, the ideas flow throughout society, affecting even those without direct involvement.

For example, consider the observation, from pop-culture, that in mass media, a Luciano Pavarotti recording costs no more to press than any other operatic tenor (Frank 2000:28). The sharp contrast between the experience of hearing the “best” possible tenor cheaply or paying a lot to hear another tenor “live”, can make my lived experience less. My standards, my norms, have been raised to impossibly high levels; lived experience will never be able to match the sustained nature of the “reality” I can experience through the mass media.

This happens with much more ease on the Web. Annette Markham observes that “we presuppose a binary composition and opposition between real and virtual. This helps us integrate various communication technologies into current vocabularies and ways of thinking” (Markham 1998:119), although we know that such mutually exclusive distinctions are false. Why are they false? Because, as her research shows, all experience is real: “terms such as *real*, *hyperreal*, *not real*, or *virtual* are no longer valid or meaningful as definitions of our experiences because our experiences are not easily separated into these binary oppositions” (Markham 1998:120). As a result, experience on the Web changes our ideas about things as fundamental as space and time, and ideas such as perfection, togetherness, knowledge, matter, hope or morality in sometimes surprising ways (Weinberger 2002:24-25).

### **News as Commodity**

One way that ideas about news have shifted is that news is, today, a commodity. The modern concept of news as it is now practiced was invented during the era of the “penny press,”

along with the “detached” editorial stance, the “human interest” story, journalistic processes, and advertising-supported media (Bird 1992:14; Mindich 1998:16-18; Schudson 1978:22-25). Among other things, news then was a scarce resource, one that was valuable. In truth, information is a capital good, in Bourdieu’s analysis, useful for manipulating social networks, control of symbols, or cultural elements (Yelvington 1995:31).

From the days when news was valuable and useful, it is now seen by media professionals and analysts as “ubiquitous, a commodity” (Fulton 2000:30). This applies across the board, to headlines, newspapers, television and all other forms (Hickey 2000b:18; Tucher 1997:27). There is no shortage of news available to mediated individuals, and if those individuals regularly use the Internet, news is, simply, everywhere.

This leads to some interesting effects. For instance, news website audiences are notoriously fickle. Some analysts note that “no matter how many bells and whistles a website boasts, if the journalism is shoddy, then the audience will go elsewhere. And recent evidence supports this assumption” (Siegel 2002:28). While the act of consuming news media may be ritualistic, and the information structured schematically, the actual content of the journalism is generally the same; the building-block factoids that make up a commodity-news “story” are identical. Individual pieces of journalism are rarely distinguished by their exclusivity – the “scoop” is a romantic artifact of the past. Instead, commodified news has to distinguish itself from its competitors using other factors, such as even-better availability, contextualization, customization, or analysis and interpretation. Put another way, in the brave new world of commodified news, ideas about what distinguishes journalism (as good, popular or successful) are specifically non-journalistic elements that were traditionally avoided or off-limits. The idea of the news “story” itself thus begins to change.

### **Documents & Genres**

The change in the way news is consumed and constructed signals a change in a fundamental genre of social communication. Levy analyzed the subtle nature of documents, which are “talking things. They are bits of the material world – clay, stone, animal skin, plant fiber, sand – that we’ve imbued with the ability to speak” (Levy 2001:23). While ‘dumb,’ such objects are powerful in their role as appointed speakers for us. Levy notes that genres are the “social identity of our talking things” (Levy 2001:160). Because of the tight associations between society, technology, documents, and document genres, he notes that genres will and must change

when any of those elements do (Levy 2001:166). Thus, the emergence of new forms, such as the blog, signals socio-technical changes.

During their initial experimental phase, new document genres take almost limitless forms, that sometimes “hover uneasily between parody, experimental art, and just plain weirdness” (Levy 2001:35). That certainly sounds like blogs! At the heart of this, however, is the striving to be noticed by other people.

### **The Infoglut**

Doris Graber found that, for political news “much of the available information is ignored from the start” (Graber 1988:100) because it doesn’t even rise to the level of conscious awareness. Her work “focused primarily on the way in which people select and process information to form opinions about current political issues” in an era of too much information (Graber, 1988:viii). Generally, people forget, or never even bother to capture, the actual events in most political news stories or their source; this is “a parsimonious way of dealing with information overloads. People want to know the gist of a story; they do not want to memorize it” (Graber 1988:151). More clearly, the “fact that people tend to store conclusions drawn from evidence, rather than the evidence itself, explains why they are frequently unable to give reasons for their opinions” (Graber 1988:151)

Graber’s work was before the rise of the Internet, and the corresponding hyper-glut of information. Todd Gitlin analyzed how people make sense out of the torrent of media in all arenas of American pop culture (Gitlin 2001:7-9), finding that many varieties of human desire are fulfilled in this “circus maximus” (Gitlin 2001:27). His work rejects many pat explanations of the current information overload, noting that complaints of it are historically grounded, and that there are emergent, personality-driven strategies for coping with the “torrent” (Gitlin 2001: 42, 67, 119 & passim).

Various tools exist for coping with the overload. For example: “Blogging is also seen as one way to control that information deluge” (Bird 2003:184). By filtering or customizing news feeds to personalized web-portals, readers of blogs have essentially narrowed down the size of the infoglut. Interestingly, “this process is not fundamentally different from the way people already consume news, in that we filter out the stories that bore us” (Bird 2003:184). Within that task is “the enormous onus... to work to assess the context and credibility of everything we read” (Bird

2003:184). Echoing Graber, Bird has described a behavior that all consumers of media must do: work to select and limit information.

Postman notes how the role of many control institutions in society is *also* in limiting available information. This is done through a variety of means, for a variety of stated reasons (Postman 1992:71-80). It's an interesting observation, and one that lends credence to the realization that information-coping strategies are neither new nor unusual.

Graber's "information overload," Gitlin's "torrent," and Rushkoff's "data ocean" (Rushkoff 1996:41) all illustrate Levy's focus that coping strategies are "a question of how we use one of our most precious resources: our attention" (Levy 2001:102). Jones also notes how "the resource that is scarce and desirable in cyberspace is attention" (Jones 1999:20). In this environment, those who can marshal and organize the information glut are valuable. In handling this "superabundant flow... the scarcest commodity turns out to be not information but the human attention needed to cope with it" (Levy 2001:112-113). This marshalling and management of attention has a flip side, for the content of information; the competition for the scarce resource of attention leads to a kind of arms race in content. On the Web, measures such as 'eyeballs' or 'stickiness' translate directly into status and revenue, and therefore, assuring viewers and repeat visitors becomes an ongoing challenge.

Weinberger notes that "the techniques of making written materials interesting are well known and highly developed. In short: if you want your site to be sticky, write interesting stuff" (Weinberger 2002:55). Silly advice, of course – if only it were that easy to do – but it illustrates the point that producing content for the Web is not intrinsically different than producing any other compelling work.

### **Disappearing Localism**

In one way, the not-so-secret methods for generating Web 'stickiness' do lead to changes in the information diet of news consumers. The local disappears. The Web, that quintessentially global phenomenon, is subtly biased toward issues of national or global import. Local concerns, local issues, are, by definition, not as appealing to as many people, and they are harder to produce and monitor. The result is that it's far easier to read news stories about the next hemisphere than about the next county.

In blogging, as in many web-communities, this leads to a curious pattern: the local simply doesn't exist. In blogging, as in, say, e-mail communities, someone's physical location is not only

irrelevant, it may be literally unknowable. To focus on the local is to alienate those individuals not in the same place; as a result, places are rarely mentioned. In blogs, the outcome is often that events only exist at the national or supra-national level. All politics are national or international; ‘government’ means the Federal government, and countries are anthropomorphic actors. And national politicians have to appeal to the bloggers to survive (Dowd 2003:P13A). Obviously, this is a generalization; blogs of local concern do exist, but in the drive to gain the most relevance, to appeal to the broadest subset, is the motivation to reduce locality to invisibility.

The disappearance of local concerns from the world that is the Web is a concern; key parts of the democratic process are, by definition, local in scope, as of course, is government. Their vanishing causes special worry for the democratic process itself in the United States (Bagdikian 2000:174-179). Even media criticism inevitably tends toward the national, disregarding the local scope of most news (Overholser 2000:65). Overholser notes that a decentralized media system requires a decentralized media watchdog. When even the media favor the national over the local, then other concerns, such as what is the nature of community, come to the forefront.

### **Virtual Communities**

Traditional social-science notions of small, bounded communities dictated by geography and/or genealogy have long since faded in favor of interlocking multi-tier communities composing each other. Communities aren’t viewed as separate entities, but instead exist within the context of larger scale communities. Those, in turn, are composed of multiple overlapping sub communities (Spindler and Spindler 1983:49). Yet the idea of community still carries a trace of its geographic roots. Community is “the interconnected relationships among people who share a common goal, neighborhood, and/or relationship. Communities overlap and individuals may be members of multiple communities” (Kurpius 2000:340).

In 21<sup>st</sup> century America, these ideas seem almost quaint. That is, geography and place are still wholly important parts of class membership and social group. Where one lives and works is very much determined by income, education, social background, etc. And the reverse is true: demographics shows that the equation can be run ‘backwards,’ giving a good picture of who lives where, based on statistical aggregates built through standard practices. So in a sense, individuals do absolutely live in the ‘community’ of their neighborhood, town, city, state, region, country, etc.

More important than that, however, is the concept of the ‘community of interest.’ This concept was blooming full-force in America before the Internet, but the Internet has fostered it

fully. My community of interest is the individuals who share my interest on a topic (or complex of topics), without regard to geography. The Internet, of course, is a place to do this, where we can “reshape ourselves, adopt different personae for different communities and environments, and experience more fleeting moments of convergence” (Jones 1997:27).

This signals the creation of whole new forms of community. “So the Web version of a traditional real-world group is different in the nature of membership that makes it a group, how it acts as a group, and in the “when” of its existence. In short, the Web has kicked down most of the fencing that lets us recognize a group as a group” (Weinberger 2002:113). Online, groups are formed using a different standard: “what holds the Web together isn’t a carpet of rocks [i.e., the physical Earth] but the world’s collective passion” (Weinberger 2002:56). The passions of individuals are exhibited in the identities they construct and use on the web.

Ultimately, this begs the question of what, exactly, *is* community. Any definition will probably reject some number of formations that can reasonably be called ‘community’ in some context, for some purpose. Nevertheless, I use this definition as a way of thinking about community: “*Community*” is a social technology for bonding people together through shared characteristics that leads to a sense of belonging. Of course, “community” naturally refers also to the people themselves so bonded. Emphasizing the “social technology” aspect of community highlights for me the most relevant element; finding or forming community is a way (a technological “how”) of fostering a sense of belonging-to (a social relation “why”). Communities formed in this way serve a dramatically wide range of human needs, and it is not even remotely overstated to note that they are a basic survival strategy for individuals and groups.

The shared characteristics that delimit in-group/out-group community membership can be, literally, any characteristic. People organize themselves by characteristics that range from the intrinsic to the ephemeral. The phrase “community of interest” recognizes this community-formation process for a specific subset of the universe of available characteristics. They are, specifically, the characteristics of being “interested in” a particular topical area. The “community of interest” as a self-organizing community principle is one that is particularly well suited to formation in cyberspace. Quite plausibly, the ability to organize into communities of interest is one engine for the ongoing growth of the importance of the Internet in western culture.

Fernback notes that these “communities of interest” function differently than the more classically-organized place-based communities. Communities of interest can be “closed places –

they can become self-seeking, atomized, even solipsistic communities that lack a social role in the larger collectivity. Members don't necessarily have a sense of belonging to anything larger than the community itself, which adheres to an agenda shaped by the content of a discussion group. Roots in a virtual community are shallow at best; with a small investment of time and frequency of 'virtual' interaction, members can establish themselves forcefully in a community" (Fernback 1997:41). This harkens back to previous notions of the boundedness of communities, an idea whose time came and went. Fernback does point out that norms emerge, and people are known in their communities through their performance of these norms – all hallmarks of small communities anywhere.

Of course, virtual communities are not exactly the same as communities in all regards. "Cybercommunity is not commensurate with physical community in every dimension except the spatial. Virtual communities have their own cultural composition.... they have their own collective sense, their own virtual ideology. Cybercommunity is not just a *thing*; it is also a *process*. It is defined by its inhabitants, its boundaries and meanings are renegotiated, and although virtual communities do possess many of the same essential traits as physical communities, they possess the 'substance' that allows for common experience and common meaning among members" (Fernback 1999:217). This point is easy to overlook. Geographic communities have many physical aspects that help to shape and define them. Virtual communities emerge primarily from the process of interacting itself. While the interaction may be confined to a particular site, it is the interaction that gives rise to the identity of the community. This is true off-line, of course, but in a much less pure sense. I can be a 'member' of my town if I never speak to my neighbor, but I cannot be a 'member' of a Web community if I never interact with anyone there.

The multi-threaded identities that I construct, exhibit and perform through my online actions have offline implications, in subtle but distinct ways. For example, if I'm outraged by the comments made by the chat room moderator in my antique car collector's website, I might not worry or focus too much on the comments made by the PTA secretary at my child's school. The creation of virtual communities of interest is, on the surface, a social good that brings together like-minded individuals. But this multiplication of the avenues of participation simultaneously fragments the social space, and distinctly disadvantages the local, the boring-but-necessary, and the unpublicized. Quite simply, individuals can only attend to so much.

The methods of Anthropological inquiry can investigate these communities and group identities, just as they have been used to investigate other human phenomena (Hakken 1999:4). The identities may be more fluid, and the communities are nonbounded “virtual” ones, but there’s still people there, experiencing their lives.

### **Performing the Self**

It’s a commonplace to observe that social identities are constructed on the Web. Markham notes that, to a large degree, this identity is *performed*: “most people I met online perceive self to be a performance controlled by the sender of the message” (Markham 1998:125). Put another way, “on the Web, each person is present only insofar as she has presented herself in an individual expression of her interests” (Weinberger 2002:120). While this may make the Web a “global vanity press” (Harnand 1995:320), it’s in line with Parkin’s observation that speech systems, no matter how formal, always contain rhetorical ‘spaces’ for creative self-expression (Parkin 1984:349-351).

The meaning of these performances is not, however, obvious. Individual communications don’t have intrinsic meanings. For any given set of conditions, discourse shapes meaning differently for the people involved (Hanks 1989:114). As a result, on the Web, as in life, people’s experiences are radically different from each other, so that their descriptions of them sound like they’re of totally different things (Markham 1998:85).

In blogging, these differences in performed identity are sharp and distinctive. Contrasting the home page and blog of a single individual, Weinberger notes that they “differ in the types of disclosures they publish. It’s almost as if they were the views two different friends might have of her, each site drawing the line between public and private differently” (Weinberger 2002:17). Blogging can’t eliminate the potential or actual “tyranny of the majority” (Fott 1998:206) that can exist in public discourse, but it does allow for a multitude of selves to be presented. This notion of layers of public and private ‘self’ are sharply different than more normative ideas of a binary public/private identity. In the creation of these kinds of layered identity, an aspect of social identity is illustrated: apparently, this meets a need.

### ***Lifeways: Society***

Characterizing the state of society can be an exercise in futility. Even were it possible to be omniscient, infinitely fast, with unlimited resources (Perfect, Instantaneous and Free) and thus,

see a snapshot of all of society, such a snapshot would be true only for me, immediately outdated, and of no value. The effort here is only to describe elements of the socio-cultural system that are particularly relevant to studying the rise of blogging.

Social lifeways in the United States grapple with a variety of conditions that influence the daily life of individuals. Some that come to the forefront for the creation of blogging practice/technology include: the ubiquity of commercialism; shrinking domains for interpersonal political discourse; apoliticism; demographically-designed media programming; fetishized notions of progress and technicist corollaries; creolization processes diffusing innovations between sub-cultures; the individualism/communitarian push/pull; and the ongoing cycle of resistance and co-optation between individuals and society.

### **Ubiquitous Commercialism**

Commercialism in the United States is so pervasive, so normal, that it is invisible. It is part of the “mythic” background that governs reality (Barthes 1972:129). In the mass media, one of commercialism’s dominant visible forms is that of advertising. The commercial institutions that generate mass media are in the business of selling, as George Gerbner has been pointing out for years (Cohen 1998:7). They are not in the business of political discourse, community-building, or creating society; those are incidental money-making opportunities. Ads are ubiquitous in American life (Manning 2001:55), even appearing in areas previously off-limits, such as schools.

For journalism, this truth is troubling. “The current historical moment in journalism is hardly a happy one. Journalists trying to do honest work find themselves under siege from several sides simultaneously. Corporate conglomerates increasingly view journalism as ‘software’, valuable only insofar as it contributes to the bottom line. In the mad pursuit for audience and advertisers, the quality of the news itself becomes degraded” (Alterman 2003:262). This happens because the American system of free expression “has yielded a system in which private rights of free expression are protected, but rights to public access... are not. Decisions about access are left to the marketplace and those who control it” (Herman 1999:14). As a result, journalistic media access is something that is very strongly *not* spread evenly across society.

Ubiquitous advertising follows the same logic as the information glut: it competes for attention. The “law of diminishing returns” in advertising assures that “commercial inundation [is] a clear and persuasive call for more – and more intrusive – advertising” (Klein 2002:9). It’s a process in which “consumers are like roaches – you spray them and spray them and they get

immune after a while” (Klein 2002:9). Therefore, the logic of advertising is continually to refresh the message, make it ‘new’ again.

The Internet isn’t spared this. The existence of corporate websites is now a given. From the largest media behemoths, to exotic boutique specialists, corporate websites are no longer novelties or specialist marketing tools. They are *required*. While your corner deli may not yet have its own website, virtually every business above that size has by now, built a site. Why? Corporations have websites as “a beachhead from which to expand into other non-virtual media” (Klein 2002:43). Businesses that don’t exist on the web don’t exist in a major slice of reality.

The ubiquity of corporate websites, the digitization of all information, and the endless hype machine of the 1990s drove immense energy into the web presence of corporations. If I develop a curiosity about business X, I know that I can probably find it on the web by typing X.com in my browser, or use a search engine. In moments, I will be viewing the public face of that corporation. I have implicit expectations about what information I can find on that site, and if I find that information, and nothing else, I’ll probably view it, and never come back. That is, a key component in repeat visits is *change*. This demands continual resources from corporations, of course. In addition, for those corporations (such as media companies) whose business is information, I may expect the website to change from *moment to moment*. The best possible outcome may often be surprise, however.

It’s in this space that blogging fits so naturally. A personal/public journal, kept daily or even, hourly, is dynamic and changing. In reading the insights of a relative stranger, there is categorical surprise and, simultaneously, the developing comfort of visiting an old friend. In the networked connections of the blogosphere, I can always take a random ‘spin’ through someone else’s blog, to discover, with minimal effort, new and different outlooks. In short, blogging easily fills a need of corporate websites to humanize, dynamicize and revitalize their corporate web presence.

### **Apoliticism**

The public face of corporate websites is, broadly speaking, apolitical. Corporations, born in the legal fiction of being “persons,” are innately political, but the ethos of American culture dictates public personae of cool remove, calm perfection, and genteel, bland good will. The language used is “omniscient, unflappable, precise, elevated, and without accent or personality”

(Weinberger 2002:90). Oddly enough, these same apolitical characteristics exist in the public personae of real people in America.

For instance, Bird notes how younger media consumers “use the media in creative, active, and very pleasurable ways” – the people of this “media generation” are “comfortable with images, and find them pleasurable. And they often seem relatively unconcerned about the relationship of image with ‘reality’” (Bird 2003:174). Media consumption for these people is an end in itself, fun. It is not necessarily done to fulfill uninteresting civic duties, and the need to keep track of obscure elements in the current news domain simply doesn’t exist. Stories about Yassir Arafat and Britney Spears are both equally ‘useless’ to ordinary individuals, but which is more ‘fun?’ The apoliticism of some younger media consumers seems to originate in this orientation.

Older generations of Americans are not, however, always gung-ho debaters in the public sphere. In the particular conventions of American social interaction, place-based etiquette dictates that discussion of politics is avoided (Eliasoph 1998:10), or kept “narrow” (Eliasoph 1998:230). Public dialogue is not about public issues, a peculiar convention that may actually be “rooted in the contexts available for political conversation” (Gamson, 1999:566). This finding, that American political discourse has more or less *ceased* in public strongly violates long-held ideals about participatory politics in the American town-hall style democracy.

### **Public Withdrawal**

Other ideals also seem to be changing. Among these are the patterns of consuming the news. The size of news audiences is shrinking, across technology, geography and generation. The everyday audience for all news declines year after year (Hickey 2001; Putnam 2000; Rosenstiel et al 2000:48; Schudson 2000; Stempel et al 2000; Tucher 1997). This shrinkage is a primary focus for analysts of media and journalism, to determine why, and what ameliorative actions (if any) can be taken.

Robert Putnam credits “generational succession” as a major reason why newspaper audiences are declining fastest, as older readers die off (Putnam 2000:219-220; see also Stempel et al 2000:71; Tucher 1997:27). Putnam’s research illustrates one little-realized facet of media consumption: habits are acquired young, and stick around for a lifetime. Bird notes that “younger people in my study were also the most likely to be cynical and untrusting of *any* news or any ‘facts’” so that “any viewpoint, any ‘fact’ is as likely to be as ‘true’ as any other” (Bird

2003:178). This would certainly contribute to reduced news consumption by these people, in whom the effect is largest, but the pattern is widespread.

Many see this trend of shrinking news audiences as indicative of a larger withdrawing from the public sphere. For example, “social life has become so large in scale that we cannot function as a ‘public’ in any real sense, only in a symbolic, rhetorical sense. The notion of the public as an aggregate of citizens has less salience and meaning in a multicultural, diverse conglomeration of factions and identity politics. In large measure, our participation in public life has been reduced to our media consumption; we maintain an ersatz sense of political activity based chiefly on our absorption of televised discourse we find in news programming and daytime talk shows” (Fernback 1997:37). While this may be overstated, the outlook isn’t unusual.

This has particular relevance for blogging, as opposed to newspapers: because the life-long habits of millions of individuals in the Internet-savvy younger generations are supplanting their newspaper-reading parents and grandparents in the economic mainstream of American life. Expect advertising dollars to follow, as businesses “target” these populations.

### **Community Fragmentation**

Target marketing is a conscious, visible example of a widespread, subtle process: the fragmentation of society. James Carey notes that the operation of national communications systems has both universalizing and fragmenting effects (Carey 1998:29-33). These effects help to create nationwide identities, and fracture those identities along the fault lines described by social subgroups. These same effects continue with transnational and global systems. Joseph Turow calls these “society-making” and “segment-making” media (Turow 1997:3) and notes that the fragmenting segment-making media have come to dominate media.

“Segments” are not created only by the media. The ‘melting pot’ of American culture has always been something of a smorgasbord; more properly, American cultural life might be described as a meta-culture, or culture-of-cultures. Mass media, as usual, both reflect and enhance this pattern.

Interestingly, the media are sometimes described as doing the exact opposite: “traditionally, the mass media have been criticized for homogenizing global culture in the creation of mass audiences serving mass markets in mass societies” (Vacker, 2000:235). This was either applauded or vilified, depending on the political outlook of the analyst. But: “now, the hypermedia of the Web are fragmenting society and social discourse, creating a chaotic marketplace of

cultures that prevents the centralized construction of consensus and social unification” (Vacker 2000:236).

Whether the media unify or fragment, a truth is that audience fragmenting seems to lead toward a lack of empathy for others (Turow 1997:198-200), as the shared sense of membership in a community evaporates. At times, events such as ‘9/11’ transcend segment-squabbling, to unify the meta-culture, however briefly or shallowly. The trend is inexorable, though, in the media and on the Web. “The computer and the World Wide Web represent a new style of media that is transforming the substance of culture; the result is a chaotic landscape populated by industrial global villagers amidst an emergent postindustrial ‘world bazaar’” (Vacker 2000:236). Vacker’s imagery may be strained, but his point is taken: the Web enhances the trend toward selective, eclectic identity-formation through symbolic consumption.

### **Technicism & Progress**

The trend toward unifying or fragmenting is one of several classic American sociocultural patterns. Another major pattern is the constellation of beliefs around progress and technology. American belief in the “arrow of progress” has deep roots (Escobar 1994:211; Trachtenberg 1982:26-27). Technology is a small part of the larger systems of society. “Technologies constitute and are constituted by networks of interacting human, organizational and artifactual entities or actors” (Hakken 1993:110). That is, technology is the item, the people using it, their practices, their discourse, and the network of social institutions affected by it. It is a “site at which discursive formation intersects with material practices” (Crary 1990:31). Unfortunately, much work on understanding technology has focused on objects; anthropology has begun to recognize “that isolated artifacts should not be studied with a goal of solving problems” (Binford, 2002:1249), but that the relationships between technology and other domains are relevant.

Many of these beliefs collide in the Internet. Of the many truisms about the Internet, one that is most telling is the belief that *the Internet changes everything*. This statement, while true on the surface, is false in its deeper meaning. Yes, the Internet has changed the mechanics of interacting in society, it’s changed opportunities, and needs, and resources for those living in the U.S. In a million-plus ways, it’s changed everything about our lives; *the Internet changed everything*. And conversely, it’s changed nothing. In the macrostructures of society, the same institutions still perform the same roles, with the same power dynamics and same outcomes. In the microprocesses of people’s lives, individuals still live and work, play, love and dream, singly

and in combination with others; they seek and find others, or live lives of isolation and desperation. We're still the same, after all; *the Internet changed nothing*.

Of course, one fallacy in this argument, is the belief that one technological form must compete with another. "We limit our possibilities, when we assume that one technology, or one form of activity, must necessarily replace another" (Levy 2001:198). The evidence suggests that older media continue to exist side-by-side with newer forms (Herbert 2000:17), imitating them for awhile (Stephens 2000:58), until both forms are mature and continue to be used (Press 1981:36-47; Streckfuss 1998:89).

This cycle happens because, contrary to conventional wisdom, the technology emerges in response to social change. In a broad sense, the emergence of a particular technology is an *effect* of a social-change *cause* (Levy 2001:198). This is seen over the course of media history, in examples as diverse as the penny press (Schudson 1978:31-44) and cable television (Turow 1997:39) and, implicitly, blogging.

This belief in the primacy of technology is sometimes termed technicism (Hakken 1993:108; Hakken 1999:18-19). It's particularly visible in the history of the mass media (Hardt 1995:3), but really forms part of society's "Standard View of Technology" (Pfaffenberger 1992:493-495). Such language is reflected in the millennial descriptions of the Internet so popular during the 1990's. Hakken attributes American culture's "naïve technological determinism" to the need to "avoid taking individual responsibility for social developments, which instead are viewed as something compelled by the nature of the artifacts and therefore beyond influence." (Hakken 1999:18). He notes that technicist ideas about computers are often not sufficiently examined by analysts. The sway of these ideas "in influential political rhetorics, its powerful performance in advertising, its echoing of largely unexamined technicist tropes, the failure of scholars to examine it critically, and its logical vulnerabilities are all grounds for skepticism" (Hakken 1999:22).

Neil Postman saw the rise of Technicist thought embedded into sociocultural thought, leading to a kind of rule-through-technology he called "Technopoly." He attributes the rise of technopoly to 4 historical trends in American life (Postman 1992:52-54):

- 1) American ideals linking newness and improvement
- 2) 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalist "Robber Barons" profiting through technological innovation

3) 20<sup>th</sup> century technology that obviously improved convenience, comfort, speed, hygiene and abundance

4) Older sources of belief that came under siege throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These trends are observable in historical documentation of the time period in question. Postman's findings, while strained, do identify that American ideals of progress and technology ramify through the economic and political systems. These are not simply personal beliefs, or new ones, but ones held by, and acted on, by generations of people.

Regardless of whether society is ruled through technology, "social processes are inherent to technological innovations" (Escobar 1994:212). Technology and society make room for each other, so that "technological innovations and dominant world views generally transform each other so as to legitimate and naturalize the technologies of the time" (Escobar, 1994:221). Thus does a new practice like blogging come to seem familiar, or natural, to its practitioners.

### **Creolization**

A familiar social process in anthropology is 'Creolization,' a process by which new things (groups, languages, traditions, cuisines, etc.) develop from the intermixing of distinct subgroups (Hakken 1999:85). In a Creole, what is created draws on elements of the past, but creates something distinctly new, with its own logic, rules, conventions – in short, a culture. Hakken sees the emergent sociotechnical systems of the Web (what he calls TANs, 'Technology Actor Networks', terminology from Actor Network Theory) as kinds of creoles. "Each time technological artifacts are introduced effectively into a new cultural setting, the resulting TAN is best understood as a syncretic response to the attributes of both the 'spawning' techno-science and the 'receiving' social formation" (Hakken 1999:85). Hakken points out that in the process of Creolization, the interaction of both groups is needed: "Creolization perspectives stress the roles of both superordinate and subordinate social groups in the development of something which, though drawing on preceding practice, is itself distinct" (Hakken 1999:85).

Since the theory that Hakken is using specifically equates people and objects as active entities in the construction and operation of systems, this is a logical perspective. Introduction of new technological artifacts (such as computers, or the Internet) into a system is no different than including a new person, group, or practice. Any such change to the mix results in a change to the system. A large enough introduction or change causes a correspondingly larger shift, such as the "creolization" that ends up producing everything from blogs to "reality television".

Actor Network Theory may be useful as an analytic perspective, but the perspective of objects-who-act-with-intention is sharply at odds with everything from commonsense notions of reality to anthropological notions of tool usage. But the identification of the creolization process that is at the heart of sociotechnical adaptation is a strikingly useful idea. It points out how seemingly innocuous changes to technical artifacts may lead to sweeping social change, the emergence of groups or communities, and political, ideological or sociocultural shifts. While these “apparently new forms of identity formation and content are often strongly dependent on preexisting social arrangements” (Hakken 1999:89), they have their origins in the particular sequence of events leading up to and through their creation. Once created, however, practices, and the groups and communities formed around them, become part of the larger sociocultural system, and are subject to the same forces as other practices. In this regard, a sociotechnical practice “struggles” for survival in a chaotic, competing smorgasboard of other practices.

### **Resistance & Co-optation**

The process of legitimation is a fundamental key to understanding the Web, and the rise of blogging. The struggle for authority, or authenticity, occupies a key piece of how identity, information, news and other content are presented and controlled on the Web. A major element in this is the resistance/co-optation cycle.

Resistance, as a behavior, and a stance, is a distancing mechanism, a label that stamps “Not X” on the forehead of its practitioners. Resistance movements sweep through society regularly, as a kind of cultural revitalization (Gamson 2000:46-47). These movements acquire names, strategies and histories, as they attempt to wrestle with issues of authenticity and truth. It should be no surprise that even the *stance* of resistance is a marketable commodity (Rushkoff 1999:208-214), even before the “cool hunters” did such a good job of co-opting resistance movements (Klein 2002:63-65). This is a classic co-optation cycle.

Co-optation, as the mass-culture uptake process for incorporating the ‘new,’ is essentially a process of diffusion, a key part of how ideas and practices spread from a small group to a larger one. When the “cool hunters” find the hot new thing, and pick it up from one group, sanitize it, and socialize it out to the larger group, the co-optation cycle is at work. Social groups are not bounded entities, and in heterogeneous societies, there are always connections between groups. This has always allowed the spread and adoption of ideas and practices between groups, though there is some evidence that this kind of spread only occurs when there is some cultural resonance

to the ideas being spread (Bird 2003:152). Co-optation is a very specific type of diffusion, as a process often (but not always) fostered by those with something to gain.

Ultimately, the 'subversive' nature of the initially outcast cultural idea, initially "hailed as revolutionary heroes" eventually join the mainstream, such as infamous Napster's recasting as a legitimate corporate citizen (Bird 2003:174). The system requires both the peripheral outcast and the core mainstream to function – each needs the other. It's not so much that resistance is futile, or that all outsider social phenomena 'want' to move mainstream; more accurately, the update/appropriation cycle conjures up both mainstream and resistance through its functioning.

Blogs fit the basic model of a "resistance" outlet in the media (Downing 1990:181-187) enabling alternative debate, potentially leading to social change by linking together like-minded individuals outside mainstream ideology. They provide a space to enable resistance to the "mind colonization" of the hegemonic state (Nader 1997:716-720). Although the "production of consent" normalizes behavior so that even resistance strategies legitimate social hierarchies (Traube 1996:130), resistance still seems like a need for a healthy democracy. Ultimately, however, resisters "...may feel empowered, but that does not change their subordinate position in the class structure" (Bird 1992:205). The stance of resistance is part of the "cultural suit of armor" enabling consumers to fend off the "eight-hundred-pound culture industry gorilla" (Klein 2002:83). This is a symbolic protection only, however.

Ultimately, the "cool hunters reduce vibrant cultural ideas to the status of archeological artifacts, and drain away whatever meaning they once had for the people who lived with them – but this has always been the case" (Klein 2002:84). Klein notes that while styles are easy to co-opt, true meaning, self-worth and dignity cannot be co-opted. There are strategies for enabling co-optation while remaining removed from it, to preserve the illusion of self-determination (Traube 1996:138). In "complex, power-laden circuit of appropriations, transformations, and reappropriations" (Traube 1996:131) between dominant and subordinate groups, the dominant culture copies the forms and styles of subgroup discourse and provides it to other subgroups (Hristova 2003:5). This gives an air of inevitable doom to any rising trend in American life, as its Early Adopters cringe, waiting for the Disney version. For blogs, there can be no doubt of the ultimate fate.

### ***Internet Research***

The Internet is a large, growing, and apparently permanent part of life going forward. That is, “life on-line is becoming simply another part of life in the twenty-first century” (Bird and Barber 2002:133). It is a perfectly natural site of research if we want to understand the life Americans live. Anthropologists and other social scientists have been examining aspects of Internet phenomena for years, even before the Internet existed. Various traditions of research have evolved, methods of research reworked, and tentative understandings built.

For instance, Hakken has identified these streams of contemporary ethnography relevant to cyberspace:

1. A Braverman-influenced hybrid of critical computer science combined with ethnographically informed sociology, interested especially in the political correlates of computing.
2. A practice of ethnographic study integrated into some forms of contemporary information systems development and social psychologically oriented “field” studies of human-computer interaction.
3. That sociology of techno-science as interested in the day-to-day reproduction of actual technology networks as in their historical development.
4. More general popular, postmodernism-influenced, approaches to cyber-issues like Computer Mediated Communication (CMC).
5. An anthropologically oriented tradition based on transferring older models of fieldwork into new venues, like computerized workplaces, occupational groups, MUDS and MOOS, and larger cyberspace communities like on-line chat groups.

[Hakken 1999:43]

This covers a lot of territory; my own research interest in blogging fits into several of these traditions.

Of course, other current concerns of anthropology still apply to research on the Internet. Jones illustrates the continuing importance of reflexivity, and interest in community and processes: [Researchers must]...“first be sensitive to, and aware of, their own experiences on-line. Second... focus not only on community but on individuals within social groups as well.... And we must understand the Internet in terms of processes engaging individuals and those that individuals engender as precursors to emergent... ‘fugitive’ communities” (Jones 1999:18). This highlights the widespread belief that there are all kinds of social phenomena happening on the Internet, from

individual experience to ‘fugitive communities’. The need for and interest in careful study of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has accelerated with the creation and spread of the Internet. Quite simply, we can’t afford *not* to understand the Web and related phenomena; they are to remain a significant aspect of our lives.

### **Internet Research: Issues**

Social science researchers aren’t the only professionals working on the Web. It wouldn’t be an understatement to note that every professional academic discipline is working to understand Web phenomena. Each of these disciplines has specific research interests and methods. There is a large and growing body of this research, across disciplines, which I can’t hope to summarize. Those I describe here are the concerns that have commonly recurred for Anthropologists and other social scientists, and that seem particularly relevant for the phenomenon of blogging.

Steve Jones notes that Internet research been somewhat ad-hoc, so that “much Internet research is itself motivated by scholars ‘discovering’ e-mail, Usenet, and so on.” (Jones 1999:8-9). He notes the need to be cautious about methods, because they bring with them expectations and experience-limiting boundaries. James Costigan sees the history of social science research on the Internet as historically dividing up into data-mining exercises into the storehouses of the Internet, and in the new forms and meanings of interactive communications made available by it (Costigan 1999:xvii-xix). Others study things such as the functioning of social networks as they move to the Web, considering the relationships between members of networks (Garton et al 1999:78). Theorists and practitioners have examined issues such as the relationship between gender and dominant communication styles (Bird and Barber 2002:132), or the effect of cyberspace social relations on micro, meso, and macro level social relations, and what it means to be human (Hakken 1999:8-10). After all, “In an important sense, computing is a central myth or story of our times” (Hakken 1999:10), so we’d better get about the work to “shed light on how people interact with media to create meaning in their individual lives” (Bird 2003:8).

While all of these may have relevance for blogging, my focus is on issues of identity and community.

From earliest research (e.g. Turkle 1995) the issue of identity has emerged as a major trope of research. Questions about community continually recur, such as “do the same normative roles and modes of behavior that govern our physical social world also apply to the virtual world? ... Is there cybercommunity?” (Fernback 1999:205). In examining these two main issue threads,

we discover a great deal about how anthropology and the social sciences have come to understand the Internet.

### ***Internet Research Issues: Identity***

It's been very clear for some time that identity on the Internet is different than in daily life, although the differences turn out to illuminate the similarities between off-line and on-line life.

On-line anonymity, in particular, prompts a range of behaviors and effects at the individual and community level that are not commonly seen offline. "Researchers are trying to find out how communication is changed when we know so little about the person with whom we are communicating. More broadly, they are asking whether people's own senses of identity are likely to change in situations where they can become anyone they choose" (Bird and Barber 2002:132). The use of anonymity varies by virtual location and group norms, of course, but it engenders ripples back into those group norms and to the experience of people interacting in that site.

A second major front of research on identity concerns its performed nature. Because so many secondary identity markers are removed from web interaction, online communication makes it clear that our identity there is determined by what we "say" or "do" – we are what we do. This is true offline, of course, to a larger or lesser degree, but on the Web it's critical.

On-line participation enables the creation of multiple personas, facilitating various presentations of self. "Some researchers have suggested that this experience of simultaneously inhabiting both off-line and on-line environments results in understandings of the self as multiple (Stone 1995; Turkle 1995). While this does provide evidence of identity fluidity and multiplicity, people similarly engage in different presentations of self to different audiences in other arenas of everyday life and did so prior to the existence of on-line forums.

Kendall notes that we seek continuity even in this strange new environment: "My research on BlueSky indicates that even on-line, where the performative nature of identity seems almost unavoidably obvious and where tales abound of multiplicity and fluidity, of deceptions and revelations.... people persist in seeking essentialized groundings for the selves they encounter on-line" as they "continually work to reincorporate their experiences of themselves and others' selves into integrated, consistent wholes" (Kendall 1999:62). It's a strange world on-line, but the reason it doesn't seem strange is that the performed nature of multiple identity is still perceived to be that of a single individual, whether self or other. On-line, we know that someone may not be who they

say they are, or we may not be who we say we are, but at some level, people still perceive the continuity in individuals.

Blogging is an example of an on-line environment where identity is performed. Issues of trust seem to be important to bloggers. Bausch et al note that trust simply can't be generated in a completely anonymous environment (Bausch et al 2002:49-50). Issues of identity in fact, have to be carefully presented and managed. For instance, explicit (pictures, names, addresses) and implicit (secondary Web elements, background disclosure) identifying information has to be made available in a blog in order to generate trust by the readers of the blog (Bausch et al 2002:50-53). That these things have to be strategized is remarkable. These tactics make sense, however, in an environment where people actively search for clues to identity.

### ***Internet Research Issues: Community/Virtual Community***

'Community' is a word bounced around in many contexts, with a presumed common definition that is sorely lacking. There is no commonly agreed-to meaning of what 'community' is: "Like the terms *religion* or *culture*, the term *community* has proven difficult to define. These terms have mutable definitions that can vary widely in different disciplines and among different individuals" (Fernback 1999:204). Fernback references Raymond Williams definition that community is "the quality of holding something in common, as in community of interests, community of good.... a sense of common identity and characteristics." (in Fernback 1999:204). This is specifically focusing on the non-geographic characteristic of what community is commonly understood to be.

Other careful researchers and analysts make a distinction between community and other forms of connecting. In an examination of American social life, Robert N. Bellah and others describe community as:

"A community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision-making, and who share certain practices... that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past." (Bellah et al, 1996:333)

This is explicitly distinguished from another term they use to describe most things that are called community, but aren't:

"A lifestyle enclave is formed by people who share some feature of private life. Members of a lifestyle enclave express their identity through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities, which often serve to differentiate them sharply from those with other lifestyles. They are not interdependent, do not act together politically, and do not share a history. If these things begin to appear, the enclave is on its way to becoming a community. Many of what are called communities in America are mixtures of communities... and lifestyle enclaves." (Bellah et al, 1996:335).

In Bellah et al's view, "whereas a community attempts to be an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all, lifestyle is fundamentally segmental and celebrates the narcissism of similarity." (Bellah et al, 1996:72). This may be logical outcome of the American norm of individualism (Bellah et al, 1996:73). Nevertheless, it accurately describes many things that acquire the label "community" in common discourse.

Lack of a common definition doesn't stop researchers or individuals from building, seeking, finding, enjoying or analyzing communities. At the core of this is a common concern for many to investigate and isolate the nature of 'Virtual' community, a concept that is even more loosely defined.

Many questions have arisen regarding what is variously called "Virtual", "On-line", "Non-place based", "electronic", "CMC" or "chosen" community. For example, Bird asks: "What are the limitations and the potential of the electronic community – a question that goes beyond the more narrow issue of fan communities in particular?" (Bird 2003:53). Hakken wondered: "How are communities different in cyberspace? Are they substantially more network-oriented and even less group-oriented? In the long run, will communities no longer involve proximity – or how much does cyberspace accelerate the decoupling of space from place?" (Hakken 1999:96). These ideas are only the surface concerns to understand what virtual community will eventually become. Again, that doesn't stop anyone from being interested in or working on virtual community.

While this research, like the communities it studies, is still in its infancy, efforts to understand it have begun to reveal that virtual community is not (of course) exactly the same as offline community: "community relationships formed on-line allow an access and intimacy not transferred to other situations.... [the] level of access does not transfer to face-to-face situations where different social, personal and community rules exist" (Costigan 1999:xxii). That's not much

of a stretch to accept. The different conditions that prevail on-line create conditions that don't migrate offline with the relationships created there.

Other researchers have tried to leverage our understanding of offline communities, to better approach understanding community online. Fernback notes how we can see CMC communities as similar to:

- ? CMC Community as place: *Gemeinschaft*, & *Gesselschaft* (Fernback 1999:206-209).
- ? CMC Community as symbol: meaning about culture and selves (Fernback 1999:209-211)
- ? CMC Community as Virtual: all communities are constructs of the imagination (Fernback 1999:211-212)
- ? CMC Community as Real: CMC is socially constructed space, map geographic, symbolic and virtual characteristics against it (Fernback 1999:212–215)

This short list highlights the realization that virtual communities, *like all communities*, are socially constructed. Online, the burden (and opportunity) is to create the community through the interaction of its members. Sometimes the rules and processes are physically coded and constructed into the Internet “place” as in a chat room. Other times, they serendipitously emerge from the organic interaction of the people in the community, as in Bird's DQMW-L (Bird 2003:73).

In blogging, there has been from the beginning a focus on the relevance of community. “Communities are groups of people who identify with each other and come together with common interests and beliefs. Webloggers are especially aware of online communities because they not only often participate in them, but they also create communities through their weblogs” (Bausch et al 2002:58). Efforts by blog community leaders (like Meg Hourihan) to foster appreciation and awareness of the impact of individual behaviors on the larger community illustrate this overall focus. Community was neither accident nor afterthought in blogging, even if it is only unevenly successful.

Cameron Marlow built a web tool (Blogdex) to track the spread of ideas through the blogging community. He notes that “as Howard Rheingold would support, communities have existed online since an online has existed, but in most cases, those with a real sense of togetherness were just mirroring an offline community” (Bausch et al 2002:70). That is, virtual community isn't a given online. Sometimes, the online community builds on offline relationships. Sometimes, something different happens, such as: “the blogging community is... more of a

collection of communities sharing a common way of communicating” (Bausch et al 2002:58). Whether blogging ultimately fosters the development of a single virtual community, or becomes a kind of meta-community lodged in a process of communicating, it’s a highly active site of real-world experimentation in the forms and processes of community.

### ***Internet Research Issues: Communication Processes***

At the heart of these issues investigating identity and community is a renewed focus on the processes of communication. After all, the Internet is a form of mediated communication. By narrowing the range of behaviors that accompany the communication, and generating wholly new forms of it, Internet communication processes foster different outcomes. This was long the domain of interest for researchers in communications, mass communications, sociology and anthropology, but its relevance increases with each new Internet user.

Jones notes that “what the Internet has connected is not only computer networks but ideologies and ways of life that have, thus far, seemed disconnected, perhaps even beyond connection” (Jones 1999:23). These connections result in flows between the people bearing those ideologies, or living those ways of life. That is, ideas and communication spread between people who are members of previously-disconnected communities. Marlow said that the spread of ideas between weblogs is “the ‘hey, have you heard?’ effect” (Bausch et al 2002:69). Because, as he notes, blogs are inherently a peer-to-peer network, information spreads in a decentralized manner. Inevitably, this spread violates community boundaries.

Communities, having boundaries that are sometimes fuzzy, and sometimes quite distinct, aren’t generally so rigid as to be destroyed by unplanned data flows. Since the people who make up communities are individually members of multiple communities, it has always been the case that information, resources, ideas, and more flow between communities. People are the links in the diffusion process. What blogging and other Internet technologies do is to create other mechanisms of flow that simply and easily transgress layers of community borders and boundaries. Blogs are a shortcut between people.

This demonstrates what Lori Kendall noted: “The various social contexts [on-line] demonstrate some of the ways in which off-line realities impinge on and intertwine with on-line interaction” (Kendall 1999:70). Put more simply, online communication processes and offline communication processes are simply two aspects of the larger reality of the communication

processes engaged in by people in society. The two affect each other, and one can't be considered to be separate from the other.

### **Blogging: Overview**

In case it wasn't clear what is meant by a blog, short for weblog, first think of a journal. Like a journal, a blog contains entries penned by the author, in roughly chronological order (reverse chronological in the case of a blog). Like a journal, these entries ("postings") may consist of content on absolutely anything.

Unlike a journal, a blog is a web site, and there are distinct differences in content and presentation, beginning with the fact that presentation exists at all. That is, a blog is public by definition – it's on the World Wide Web, available for anyone to peruse. Additional significant differences exist in the content. For instance, a blog posting can link to other sites or other blogs, or include other content directly. A blog can also maintain lists of links, and photographs, and control content, color, presentation fonts, etc. In fact, it can take advantage of the entire panoply of web technologies that allow the inclusion of everything from interactive quizzes to the ability to respond back to the author's postings, to shopping carts, and more. In short, a blog is a web site, with all that entails. It is through the norms of content and practice that it is a blog; these norms dictate a certain "look and feel" to most blogs, and practice dictates a certain range of behaviors.

Bausch et al (2002:61-65) classify blogs as being in two main categories of genres: Format genres (short bursts of text and journal) and Content genres (Link-driven; single-topic; news opinion; journal and photoblog). These categories and genres are somewhat flexible, and a given blog may have elements of all of them. Format genres are categorized by the way text is organized and posted in the blog. Content genres are categorized by the contents of the postings themselves. Within those genres, content is generally categorized as a personal weblog or a filtering weblog. A personal weblog is "A reflection of its author, and provides a view into the writer's life and mind through the content the author chooses to reveal and share with the audience" (Bausch et al 2002:28). A filtering weblog is one that filters other information from the world and the Web, into its own content.

No matter which category a blog exists in, it is generally linked to other blogs. Through various protocols of linking (e.g., blogrolling), the interconnections allow people (visitors) and ideas to flow freely between blogs. This leads to their startling ability to transgress boundaries. Indeed: "Weblogs spread memes like no other medium. More ideas are being pushed around the network

of minds connected by blogs than any other set of communications. It's like a petri dish for knowledge.” (Bausch et al 2002:69). This ‘petri dish’ provides space for the exploration of ideas and issues, and frequently encourages it.

In the mainstream world of media and politics, blogs have come to play something of a highly visible role. “Blogs have an exhilarating capacity to deconstruct the texts of the powerful.” (Bird 2003:183). This capacity is rooted in the earliest traditions of blogs, as “filtering” blogs reprocess and reanalyze published news articles. This questioning deconstruction is what drove much of the first florescence of blogs, and continues to drive their emergence into mainstream journalism.

Perhaps no case illustrates this better than the story of Salaam Pax. Salaam Pax is the blogging pseudonym of a blogger in Iraq who, for much of 2002 and 2003, was easily the most famous blogger in the world. His postings during the runup to the second U.S.-Iraq war were a media phenomenon around the globe. His daily postings, especially as war drew near, became an object of intense focus around the world. He became famous, even within his pseudonym, as scarce information about the conditions in Baghdad became hot news.

Salam Pax still publishes his blog, at [http://dear\\_raed.blogspot.com](http://dear_raed.blogspot.com). But it changed his life; he no longer works as an architect, but has become a mainstream journalist. Even more strangely: his blog has been printed *as a book* (2003) by Grove Press. That is, this quintessential online media was gathered up and published as that most mainstream of media, a book. In that simple example lies a lesson on the historical trajectory of blogging’s future and past.

### ***Blogging: History***

For details on how blogs arose, and how the practice evolved, the natural location to look is, of course, the web. Historical accounts of any event are always suspect, because they are written from within the context and worldview of the writer, who may be far removed in time and thought from those who were there at the time. Histories are still valuable, however, because they reflect the ‘official’ story a culture tells about itself. In the case of blogging, I’ve reproduced some of the histories from the web, in the appendices. Please consult those for more information, including such subtleties as the rise of ‘filtering’ style blogs before personal journals.

At a basic level, blogs were created in recent time by adapting existing tools and modes of interacting. This has begun to be analyzed by the people involved, for the mainstream media.

That is, as blogs have entered mainstream cultural consciousness, corresponding mainstream cultural signs and signals are evident. For example, bloggers begin to write books.

Paul Bausch, Matthew Haughey and Meg Hourihan wrote a book (Bausch et al 2003) that is partly history, partly a field-report from the blogosphere, and partly a how-to manual for bloggers. This, like others in the burgeoning blog-book genre, may simply be an attempt to capitalize on the current widespread popularity of blogging. But this is significant in a couple of interesting ways. First, Hourihan was one of the creators of Blogger, the first widely used (but not the very first) blogging software. Second, it is significant that the book exists *at all*.

The creators of Blogger (Pyra Labs, aka Evan Williams and Meg Hourihan), like other small software companies of the late 1990's, were participating in an explosion of Internet-based innovation across society and industry. The big bang of the 'dot-com' explosion eventually imploded, taking much of this innovation with it, but leaving people and resources free to explore and enhance the Internet infrastructure then built up. This is when the blogging phenomenon began its expansion through the Web. Williams and Hourihan are considered by many bloggers to be something like the founding parents of blogging, and they have remained heavily involved in blogging, even as Pyra Labs joined the mainstream (by being sold to Google). So a book by Hourihan et al represents the perspective of a founding mother of blogging.

More importantly, the odd thing about books on blogging, is that blogging itself is a wholly on-line medium and mode of communication, with virtually no offline pedigree or analogues. Somehow, it became necessary and/or profitable to produce books offline about this online phenomenon. Consider how strange a book on, say, how-to-email would seem now. At an earlier stage in the development of the Internet, thousands and millions of people found such books useful. Presumably, some still do. Blogging is at a similar stage in its development. Widespread enough that there is a demand for information about it, not so widespread that a book is moot. Of course, what's known about it is a moving target, as the practice itself expands and changes.

### ***Blogging: What We Know***

Bausch et al's historical view of blogging is aware that the earliest blogs were 'filtering' type blogs. "Though early weblogs were often links and commentary, as opposed to online journals, it was often the commentary (in addition to the choice of links) that distinguished one site from another. As the weblog phenomenon exploded, the definition of weblog content expanded (Bausch et al 2002:28). The first 'need' that was fulfilled by blogs was links and commentary, or

filtering the media reality of Western journalism for a private audience of readers. Later, the format found another application, in the sharing of the self that is at the heart of the personal-journal blog.

In both cases, what is presented is something real, something personal: “Weblogs provide an alternative to the corporate-produced content found online, and offer up their very own Web-based versions of reality programming. Weblog posts, with all their misspellings and typos, and unedited rush of emotion, resonate with readers searching for that authentic human experience online” (Bausch et al 2002:29). Reality programming for the web... the word choice is apt. The blog represents a distinctly non-corporate take on experience, whether that experience is that shared in the public domain (as in a filtering blog) or private (as in a personal blog). This is part of the key to what made them become so popular.

Bausch et al offer a variety of reasons why they think people read other people’s blogs, summarized as these (2002:30-32): “the look into another person’s life”; “the stories [others] share”; “the opinions proffered on articles and events”. At the heart of this is *content*. That is, blogs provide kinds of web content that simply weren’t available in another format. While Bausch et al acknowledge the “culture of popular voyeurism” (2002:30) that fuels the popularity of personal blogs, they note (2002:31-32) the content that thrives in the filtering-blog world: “Experts offering opinions”; “Storytelling”; “Peer-to-Peer [Amateur] Journalism”. So in both cases, there is a particular kind of content that people find interesting, compelling, or useful, and that drives readership.

But what drives ‘writership’? Why do people bother to create a blog and post to it? This is a major focus of my questioning. Bausch et al summarize their take on why people blog as this (2002:34-36): to “improve writing skills”; “share a story”; “share expertise”; and “assert individuality”. This is, admittedly, a somewhat simplistic answer; it doesn’t explain why people need or want to share a story, or assert their individuality, or anything else. It simply moves the question backward one layer.

It’s not much of a leap to realize that various characteristics of blogs are shared with other kinds of media, in other times and places. For instance, blogs are “like” diaries, and they are “like” newspapers and they are “like” gallery-shows and they are “like” coffee-houses and on and on. They are not identical with any of those things, nor are they intended to be. But the similarities serve similar purposes. For instance, in another historical age, a motivated politically-

oriented might find himself penning newspaper editorials, or even owning a newspaper. While this of course limited the “mass” participation in such an activity to the lucky few able to own or work for a newspaper, the motivation and processes aren’t that different. Historical “conversations” between newspaper editors have eerie resemblance to cross-linked blog posts mutually commenting on historical events.

In any case, it’s clear that both reading and writing blogs carries some personal meaning with it. Like what Bird noted about her Email list communicants, “it may not be the same kind of communication as that experienced in daily personal interaction, but it is difficult to dismiss it as meaningless” (Bird 2003:65). Meaning is experienced at a personal level, of course, but all of the dialogues on blogs emphasize the joy, the sharing, the personal-touch experienced by those reading and writing blogs. In this are the seeds of the communitarian ideals that underlie so much of blogging.

Cameron Marlow has been deep inside the blogging phenomenon since its inception, and he notes how special it is. “Weblogs are the first example I’ve encountered where people are meeting each other in masses, and forming real social bonds, the type of relation you’d call your friend” (Bausch et al 2002:70). Because of this, he “typically wouldn’t give this type of [real-world assistance] to people who live in my neighborhood, but for some reason I am perfectly comfortable giving it to other blog authors. There’s a real sense of solidarity in the relationships we’re forming writing in our journals.” (Bausch et al 2002:70). They may just be websites that people post and read, but clearly, something else is happening. Bloggers quickly leap to the word ‘community’ to describe what that something is.

Fernback notes Rheingold’s (1993) definition of cybercommunity as ‘social aggregations that emerge from the [CMC/Internet] when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Fernback 1999:215–216). Clearly, these webs of personal relationship have to be loaded with meaning. Simply exchanging information or opinions seems unlikely to evoke cybercommunity. The practitioners of blogging claim that the exchanges fostered by blogging are deeper than that, leading to the kind of community described by Rheingold.

### ***Blogging: Demographics***

Practices, like blogging, don’t arise without practitioners. Blogging is a practice of the Internet, so a working assumption is that identity of the mass of bloggers reflects the identity of

Internet users in general. Any differences are presumably due to the characteristics of blogging itself. Anecdotally, the bloggers I interview often specifically said that bloggers represented the more advanced, cutting-edge users of the Internet. My impression is that technically proficient computer science students and journalistic-minded semi-professionals are dramatically over-represented in blogs. This has been the case of other on-line communities studied, such as Bird and Barber's "predominantly male, middle-class, technically literate professionals and students" (Bird and Barber 2002:132). Of course, online communities have varying memberships, so this is specific to the type of community studied.

Beyond this observation, generalizations about blogger class and other demographics are difficult, at best. For one thing, socioeconomic clues are quite difficult to come by on the Web, and self-reported data are suspect to the point of meaninglessness. Additionally, the rapidly-expanding practice of blogging clearly has to transgress narrow boundaries of class and demographics to become the widespread phenomenon it has. Whatever class the original bloggers were (and there's good reason to believe that they were technically-savvy and politically-oriented), the mainstream phenomenon of blogging clearly swamps that initial core.

At least one study of bloggers did attempt, though, to establish basic demographics (Henning 2003) for blogging as currently practiced. This studied blogs "hosted" by the eight largest blog-hosting services: Blog-City, BlogSpot, Diaryland, LiveJournal, Pitas, TypePad, Weblogger and Xanga. This study excluded self-hosted blogs which are technically more demanding. The authors of those are presumed to have quite different demographic characteristics. This quantitative study sampled bloggers identity data reported to the hosting services, server-logged update histories, blog link characteristics, and blog content to arrive at these conclusions:

- ? By the end of 2003, an estimated 5 million blogs existed on these hosting services.
- ? By the end of 2004, an estimated 10 million blogs will exist on these hosting services.
- ? 56% of bloggers self-report as female.
- ? Self-reported ages: 51% are teenagers; 40% are age 20-30, so 92% of bloggers are under 30.
- ? Blogs have high "abandonment" rates of "tire kicker" blogs, leading to 8 overall average posts-per-blog .

- ? Ideals of daily blog updates are somewhat mythical: most are updated, on average, once every two weeks.
- ? Approximately 10% of blogs are “filtering” type (many links to news sources). 90% seem to be personal journal blogs.

The study concludes that most blogs are personal journals, produced by young women for a small group of known intimates, for a period of a few months. These “nanoaudience” blogs are wildly different than the relatively few blogs known to exist as “pundits” in the “blogosphere”, but are the pattern for the widespread adoption of blogging across the Web. Bloggers are blogging for their friends and strangers, creating posts to be read as a kind of “permanent instant message.”

### ***Conclusion: Why Blogs?***

So why blogging, why now? Beyond the inevitably random nature of some events occurring on the cultural landscape, the forces and phenomena that give rise to blogging are fairly easy to discern. The media, the news, the Internet, global capitalism, technology, even ‘9/11’ and the so-called ‘death of irony:’ all of these, and more, contribute. One answer, borne out by my research, is the obvious joy of connecting to others. As Todd Gitlin put it, “You are wired, plugged in; you click, you transmit, you retrieve, you download – therefore you are” (Gitlin 2001:106). That answer doesn’t explain everything about how blogging came about, and is sustained, but it does reveal one of the underlying sources of motivation for bloggers.

More to the point, blogging has purposes and roles. Blogs are part of the communicative process, that “tie men together and make associated life possible” (Dewey in Carey, 1989:22). This process is part of the social construction of reality, as community life is conjured up from the interaction of community members. Over time, of course, ideas circulate through society; media are not one-way communications (Bird 1992:162), but circulate ideas in networks of mutual influence. Influences flow between groups, making the rigid analytic boundaries between them appear somewhat artificial.

In this regard, blogging serves as one of the range of “forum media” options available to Western citizenry. This kind of media “calls upon the intelligence of its viewers and participants” and “depends on the interpretive and evaluative skills of its audiences, even if it does not demand knowledge of facts or history” (Rushkoff 1996:65). Rushkoff identifies this kind of interaction as one way that a “media virus” may spread, meme-like, through cultural systems. From the

beginning, blogging has been evangelized as accomplishing the original vision of what the Web was to be (Utne 2003:87), fostering interaction between individuals and institutions.

Through this kind of media, where people are engaged in thinking and feeling “together” with others in the same position (such as a village or a blogosphere) a community (concrete or virtual) can arise. But it might not. One potential reason for the emergence of blogging is that it provides community to its members. That remains to be seen, but Watson gives a cautionary note: “As often as Internet scholars argue that they have discovered a virtual community, it is also argued that those researchers are uncritical about the notion of community. Their detractors often accuse them of being overly excited to assign “community” as a descriptor for their favorite and newly discovered online-discussion group” (Watson 1997:102-103). Ouch.

Blogging, as a kind of cousin to journalism, serves in the “political battleground” that Herbert Gans identified for journalists in American society, such as “managers of the symbolic arena” (Gans 1992:91-95). This helps to “signalize events” (Woo 2000:16) in the seeking of truth. Weinberger asks “why do we care enough to want to read this person’s page or that person’s weblog?” (Weinberger 2002:142). The answers, of course, vary with the individual. The corollary question, “why do we want to write a weblog?” illustrates a truly fascinating aspect of weblogs: their existence at the intersection of the media producer/consumer dichotomy. In this aspect, the truly subversive nature of blogging emerges. While this subversiveness is ripe for co-optation, for now, the idea is revolutionary.

My review of literature led me to realize that the multiple social practices that surround emergent technical practices are generally implicated in social reproduction; technology and technological change do not exist somehow ‘outside’ of society itself. How technology is experienced by individuals and described by society (such as, in the media) may indeed make it seem as though technology is imposed. In the macroscopic scale of cultural meanings, however, technological innovation is one of those things that give shape and coherence to ongoing definition of groups within cultures, and society itself. There *is* no ‘outside,’ at least for this kind of technology, in this culture. This led me to an analysis that includes the milieu in which this arose, the spread through various cultural groups, and the underlying motivational process at work. I call these, respectively, context, Geek-Chic, and personal community.

### CHAPTER 3: REVIEW OF METHODS

This chapter describes the methods I used investigating blogs. It's true that any effort to analyze and understand a virtual phenomenon like blogging is hampered by the furious pace of change on the Internet. That truth, and the drinking-from-the-firehose nature of data research on the Web are, nonetheless, facts of life. This is the environment, the context of society today, and blogging, as a child of the Web, is created and sustained in that environment. I used three methods for investigating this. When the three methods converged on the same set of principles and processes, I concluded the investigation under the belief that I had gained a good understanding of the practice and technology.

This research was conducted over a period stretching from roughly, May 2002 through December 2003. During the early parts of that time period, blogs were an emerging practice, initially practiced by only a few individuals. By the end of that time period, blogging had become a common practice, engaging millions of people on a daily basis. At some later date, such as the time when you are reading this, blogging may be passe, cliché, or "so five minutes ago" to use the current jargon. And a new phenomenon will have emerged.

This study contains two main thrusts, an investigation into blogging itself, and then into the people who do it. In the first thrust, I employed two main methods. The first is in reading blogs, surfing them, visiting the sites and getting to know the sites, and the people behind them. In this research, the goal is to detect the patterns of behavior and content, and learn about the bloggers from their specifically blog-derived personae. The second area of pursuit in researching blogging, is to blog. That is, to understand this in a first-hand way, I constructed a blog and posted to it for a period of about ten months. Creating a weblog and posting to it gave me a reflexive view of my own experiences as a blogger, as I was forced to go through the same kind of issues faced by bloggers in every aspect, from initial design through daily support. This area of pursuit is a reflexive record of my own experiences in doing this.

The second major thrust of this research is a series of interviews with bloggers. These interviews were conducted in written form with a selection of bloggers, from roughly March 2003

through December 2003. I interviewed and interacted with bloggers online, through direct email correspondence and postings, revealing the bloggers' understanding of their practices. This used an initial interview protocol that, for key informants, branched out into ongoing email exchange and interaction.

For chapters that describe the analysis and understanding of what I learned from this research, please see elsewhere in this document.

### ***Internet Research Methodology***

This research is an examination of an Internet-based phenomenon, so necessarily includes studying things that happen on the Internet and the World Wide Web. This is a recognized site of exploration for anthropology and the social sciences. It's a significant and growing slice of reality for Western culture, and studying it is a natural outgrowth of the role of traditional social sciences. Doing social research on-line turns out to be not always fundamentally different than doing it off-line. After all, people are there, doing what people do; research is just a manner of systematic observation that generates data.

Methods matter. They matter, but not necessarily for the reasons usually assumed. The uncritical belief that correct application of methods yields 'correct' data is fading. Instead, in the "dynamic between researcher, method, and conclusions", the "choices made, along with the very characteristics of the researcher, play into and ultimately shape the conclusions of any research" (Bird 2003:9). How I chose to approach this study of blogging has as much to do with the conclusions drawn as any data found.

The traditional path for research in a new domain is to pattern after work done by others, or in other domains. That hasn't always worked out for the best: "As I read the work of others interested in cyberspace, I encountered multiple, diffuse, disconnected discourses. I hoped initially that coherence might emerge on its own, but this has not happened" (Hakken 1999:6). There are many logical ways to approach the study of cyberspace phenomena. Good ones draw on the characteristics of the domain, but harken back to other research traditions.

Steve Jones has been thinking about this a lot, editing several works (e.g., 1997, 1998, and 1999) on the matter. One of his core strategies is based on the realization that qualitative study is just qualitative study, even in the brave new world of cyberspace. Drawing on the research traditions of mass communications, he recommends (1999:15) studying cyberspace as "product,

process, or commentary.” Studying the Internet as product means studying on-line communication as symbolic forms that let people create meaning. Studying it as practice means looking at cultural processes that compose and surround it. Studying as commentary means understanding how it illuminates culture itself.

These suggestions are quite worthwhile, and they closely mirror the strategies I ultimately used. The product (blogs themselves), the process (of blogging) and the commentary (by bloggers) comprise the three main avenues of exploration herein. As a qualitative exploration, there are a variety of specific methods available to investigate the product, process and commentary of blogging. Two main variants seem particularly relevant and valuable, when transported to cyberspace, at least for blogging. They are “virtual” ethnography, and participant observation.

### **Internet Research Methodology: Virtual Ethnography**

The virtual ethnography is a natural outgrowth of traditional social science methods to the on-line world. The methods of qualitative research that were built up over the last century were discovered, over time, to be those that allowed entry into a community and understanding of the lived experiences of the people in it. On-line, the nature of the ‘community’ might appear at first to be different, but the differences turn out to be mostly on the surface.

Ethnography is fraught with difficulties and analytic problems; it is not the solution to all problems. For one thing, even online, “The risk of ethnography is that any knowledge remains tied tightly to its space of production” (Hakken, 1999:41). Put another way, ethnography done poorly is simply the story of one unique community, a story that illuminates nothing and no one else. Ethnography done well is a description of a community that refracts knowledge about other communities, in other times and places.

What does it mean that ethnography describes a community? As the previous discussion of community pointed out, community means many different things. For me, one relevant aspect of community as Fernback put it, is this: “the essence of community is *commonality* (e.g., of interests or physical location), but community is difficult to observe empirically because its boundaries are continually renegotiated” (Fernback 1999:204). Whatever community is, it has something to do with commonality, a bonding together over something shared. But this is dynamic, shifting, a “fuzzy” boundary.

Ethnography excels at locating that shared commonality, at figuring out what glues people together in a community. Certainly, the method may have evolved in studies of community bound by kinship and tradition, but it's equally at home where the bonds may be electronic and ephemeral.

A second aspect of ethnography makes it both attractive and dangerous for me to use investigating blogs. This aspect is summarized by Bird: ethnographic "research is inevitably refracted through [the researcher's] personal identity" (Bird 2003:20). Here is why anthropology has embraced the reflexive variant of ethnography. There can be no ethnographic knowledge produced without regard for the ethnographer, whose own life experience and outlook shades the results he produces. Ethnography is a powerful tool, in "real" or "virtual" garb, but it cannot produce value-free knowledge. Data are never independent of the process that produced or gathered them.

In the case of virtual ethnography, my own knowledge of myself led me to believe that there were a variety of good reasons why this method would be the right one for me to apply to a study of blogging. Among them were some of these points: my own background as a computer engineer; my intense desire to try to understand why, exactly, people would bare their selves online; my interpersonal sense of shyness; my comfort with the written word; my fascination with news and politics; my belief that society and individuals are generally highly functioning, when viewed in the right way; and my wanting to unravel the mechanics of cycles of hot-and-cool fashion that permeate the web. These and other reasons made it clear that virtual ethnography was a valid methodological choice for me. Logic and tradition made it clear that it was a valid choice for bloggers.

### **Internet Research Methodology: Participant Observation**

The hallmark method of anthropological research is participant observation. Its use generates a 'win-win' in anthropological research. There is no need to summarize all of the points that support the use of participant observation offline. By entering a community and doing over time what the community members do, a researcher generally builds trust and rapport, and eventually learns first-hand the 'inside' perspective to community life. Coming to understand the life in a way that no short-term, drop-in researcher can, the participant-observer comes to understand life in the community as the people themselves understand it.

Online uses of participant observation are a kind of no-brainer extension of this. To understand what bloggers do, do what bloggers do.

There are other reasons to utilize participant-observation online, however. Perhaps because of the ease of ‘armchair analysis’ afforded by the online research, too many researchers simply focus on *content* online. Kendall called for all research to include components of participant-observation, done “in hopes of countering tendencies in the new and growing field of on-line research to ignore important social contexts of on-line communication and interaction.” (Kendall 1999:57). Participant-observation counters this tendency, by forcing researchers to focus on the processes engaged in by individuals, at the most minute level. The social context (real or virtual) that gives rise to online content shouldn’t be ignored, but sometimes is, since the content is conveniently waiting to be analyzed. Taking that shortcut is a huge mistake: it allows the generation of conclusions in the absence of any data to support them.

There is nothing intrinsically “on-line” or “off-line” about this participant-observation of a community or practice. The methodology presumes that communities or practices pre-exist the involvement of the researcher. That is, the object of investigation (blogging, or the blogosphere) has to be ‘out there’ somewhere in cyberspace to be investigated. These cyberspace entities are, fundamentally, human practices. They are fair game to be investigated by the anthropology of the Internet.

### **Anthropology of the Internet**

The most salient realization for methodological concerns in researching life on-line is that, a single method just won’t do. Off-line, anthropologists and other social scientists have slowly come to the realization the multiple methods are complementary, that different methods have different strengths in different contexts, and that multiple sources of multiple kinds of data paint the most complete picture of the object under study. “The message from anthropology these days is that methods should be chosen not using some standard of ethnographic ‘purity’, but because they are appropriate for a particular project.” (Bird 2003:7). The same true holds on-line. Methods (and they should be plural) should generally be chosen because they fit the project, not the other way around.

David Hakken (1999) has thought seriously about how anthropology should approach on-line environments. His work is a careful study of various processes behind on-line phenomena, such as how a community approaches the requirements for a new system, but the real power

behind his work is the carefully reflexive awareness he has of the process of research on-line. That awareness leads him to make various claims about the research; these are summarized below (Hakken 1999:4)

1. Ethnography an effective way to study cyberspace.
2. People are becoming entities (“cyborgs”) whose social formations include both online and offline components.
3. It’s unknown what cyberspace will ultimately turn out to be, so don’t assume anything.
4. The long-term trend is toward “delocalized” relationships
5. Not just any ethnography would work, but the reflexive kind practiced by anthropology is best suited to use online.
6. We can draw on traditional anthropological research approaches, but they should be reappraised.
7. Ongoing ethnography online can even help shape the present and future of cyberspace.

These careful claims are reasoned approaches to the present and future dynamics of online environments, and what role anthropology can play in understanding and shaping them. At first blush, Hakken’s work, with its talk of “cyborgs” and strange community-computing projects may seem far-fetched. But Hakken’s central points are that the future of social formations is both offline and online, and anthropological methods are as equally well-suited to working in these environments as they are in remote villages or urban centers.

This is not to suggest that an on-line chat room is ‘the same’ as an immigrant community gossip network, or that a blog is somehow like an offline diary. Different things *are* different, and require different methods. “Central to the challenge of audience research in the West is the development of an adequate understanding of the uniquely media-saturated cultural conditions in an advanced capitalist society” (Bird 2003:188). Bird notes that anthropological research in the West has to consider the cultural conditions of the West, without ignoring the overwhelming media saturation that’s normalized into the fabric of life here. She repeats the call for methods that flexibly interpret the central data-gathering practices of anthropology in new ways.

Researchers using anthropological methods online must be aware of the unique conditions that prevail both offline and online in America. More subtly, they must adapt these methods to those conditions. For example, Lori Kendall (1999:70) almost succumbed to a misguided use of a survey instrument in an online community, not realizing a bias that existed against such research in

that community. This experience, and that community's two-tiered distinction between anonymous users and those known to the community, caused her to wonder if, in various communities, "researcher emphasis on anonymity may stem from an oversampling of newbies" (Kendall 1999:70). Again, the data gathered are a product of the researcher. Those who participate online under the cloak of anonymity will, clearly, gather different data than those who integrate into a community and become functioning members of it.

An anthropology of the Internet would use multiple variants of existing methods, sensitively tailored to local circumstance. This seems a lot like anthropology, period. But what is the focus, the object of study? As the study of human culture, cultural anthropology examines the inner workings of human socio-cultural phenomena. The Internet is nothing if not a giant human socio-culture phenomenon, so is an ideal research site and lab, research object and context. It's what we study, and where we can study it, and the focus is limited only by the imagination of the researcher.

The recurring central focus on community is a recurring concern of anthropology in general, and the anthropology of the Internet in particular. Some research questions even straddle the boundary: "Do the same normative roles and modes of behavior that govern our physical social world also apply to the virtual world? ... Is there cybercommunity?" (Fernback 1999:205). Community is a natural focus for the anthropology of the Internet, and like many things, it's easy to find it when you look. People 'find' communities all the time on the Internet, which makes it seem as though the Web is a kind of nursery for them. Not all researchers are so fooled: "This [DQMW-L email list] is not to suggest that the Internet builds community by its very nature" (Bird 2003:73). Bird reminds us to be cautious about being too glib with the notion of community, to be careful not to find what we seek just because we seek it. The Internet might not be a particularly effective community nursery, but until we carefully apply our methods, we can never be quite sure.

A final confirmation of this warning comes from Marlow, who compares the social bond webloggers have to Milgram's "familiar stranger" on a train (Bausch et al 2002:70). Clearly, 'community' has to be something more than people having the same experience together. Our research methods have to disentangle what happens as an activity separate from interpreting it to attach value-laden labels like 'virtual community'.

## ***Blog Research Methodology***

Blogs are a thing, a web site. Like all other things, their meaning is culturally constructed. The meanings they have are given to them by the cultural conditions, the body of norms and practices which gave rise to them. In this way, they are like any other constructed artifact. Unlike some other artifacts though, they contain direct statements. There's a huge difference between a book and a sculpture. A blog is more like a book in that it contains direct statements, words, that describe and create itself.

This is an advantage in research, and a trap as well. Like a book, a blog can be read, for its direct statements of itself. It informs us very directly, of its place in the process of social construction of reality. Also like a book though, a blog can misinform, disinform, mislead, lie, obfuscate and confuse. No anthropologist would rely only on the information in a book to understand it, but would also examine everything else about the book to get a truer picture. She would read other books, or read about the books, or examine the context that gave rise to books, and many other activities. A truly motivated anthropologist might even try to write one.

This analogy points the direction for how I chose to research blogging: by reading blogs, and by writing one.

### **Reading Blogs**

This section describes my efforts to investigate systematically the blogs out on the web. At the beginning of this research, this task was easier: there were fewer blogs. Today, like other websites, they number in the millions. Along the way, tools and other resources have come along to assist in finding and reading blogs, and that has made the process easier.

### ***Finding blogs***

Like any other website, blogs are faced with an essential conundrum: how to get viewers? Note that there is nothing in the blog form that requires readership. As later interactions with bloggers bears out though, there is status very much associated with higher readership. And in truth, the idea of a public venue with no one in it is somewhat oxymoronic. So blogging practice developed ways to drive up readership.

The first of these is a "blogroll." A blogroll is one or more lists of links to other blogs. Generally, these are blogs/bloggers the linker likes, reads, or respects, though they might also be those that the linker dislikes, avoids, or vilifies, or that are important to her for other reasons.

Generally, these get characterized in one or more ways by the linker, so are stamped with a kind of recommendation by her.

In the history of blogging, it turns out this kind of collection of links figured prominently. From the early beginnings of the practice, early bloggers such as Cameron Barrett and Brigitte Eaton, were collecting and building lists of blogs that were consulted by other bloggers. Consult the appendices for lists of resources and links to various sites. This practice is especially useful for readers wanting to “snowball” their way through the blogosphere. Find one blog, and you find a dozen, a hundred, the whole blogosphere. This was historically a key way to locate blogs, and continues to be so.

Another way has evolved to find blogs that is considerably more random. These are the real-time “ping” lists that detect changes to blogs and show them online. For examples, see <http://weblogs.com> or <http://blo.gs>. These sites, and others like them, use “ping” (a way to send a packet of information from one place to another on the Internet) to detect that a blogger has posted a new entry on their blog. That blog is then listed in a chronological list along with all the other blogs that were updated “now.” Therefore, visit these collector sites, and, at the top of the list, will always be the list of links to blogs that were *just now* updated. This subtle organization turns otherwise dead text into a kind of live conversation.

Throughout my research, I found the collector sites to be my preferred way of locating blogs. They not only have immediacy about them, and have the virtue of being *un*-connected to any other blogs I may read regularly, there’s simply something unexpectedly entertaining about taking a random, low-risk jaunt through some other blog.

Of course, the simplistic and inherently random nature of this kind of collection was soon eclipsed by more subtle and useful approaches, such as that characterized by Blogdex, at <http://blogdex.net>. Begun as a research project at MIT, Blogdex, according its creator “is meant to be an index of the zeitgeist of the greater weblog populace” (Bausch et al 2002:67). This site (and others like it) track the links to a story tracing its way through the blogosphere, by tracking the hyperlinks that appear on thousands of individual blogs. It is “a fairly reliable indicator of what people on the Internet are reading” (A. Cox 2003:12). This is a kind of a blog-focused endeavor similar to the link-in page popularity rankings made famous by Google. In any case, this allows a viewer to simultaneously see all the bloggers focusing on a particular topic, even if they aren’t

linking to each other. It's a clever strategy that allows a view of the spread of ideas (embodied as links) across the blogosphere.

Finally, it's easy enough to find blogs in the same way as other web pages. Through search engines, media references, personal references, and assorted other ways, an individual is directed to a website that they choose to visit (or not) and revisit (or not).

### ***The importance of names***

What's your name? Who are you? As anthropologists know, the simplicity of these questions are belied by the staggeringly complex ways societies have developed of answering them. The web is no exception. While personal names and identities are important parts of human existence, in the web, they're even more so.

In offline existence, a person's name defines some important things about their identity. But in a meeting of persons offline, a great deal of contextual and identifying information is inevitably known or conveyed when two individuals meet for the first time. By the time one can ask another their name, much of this identifying information is known, presumed, or obvious. Online, the name often comes first. That is, it's not uncommon to see a reference to a website (or blog) and know 2 and only 2 things about it:

- The link name
- The context of the link.

Depending on how the linker has chosen to construct a reference on their site, of course, the link name may not be visible on the page, but is accessible in the browser window.

So online, by necessity, a name is meant to convey a great deal of information about who or what the site is. By convention, the name must also impress some ideas about the content or views to be found there. Since identity-construction and naming are fundamental online activities, this is often the single most important creative act a blogger must perform.

The result is a staggeringly diverse selection of self-chosen monikers that simultaneously capture who the person is, what their world-view is likely to be, and some ideas about what's on their site, generally wrapped up in a pithy, humor-laden name of approximately 40 characters or less. That's quite an important load for a name to serve; view a site like <http://weblogs.com> to see how well most bloggers understand this need, without it ever being explicitly stated anywhere. This conundrum is faced by anyone building a web page, of course. In blogging, it's especially critical because of the myriad ways of finding a blog and viewing it.

I eventually came to include the name of the blog as part of the criteria I used to decide whether to view it, and whether to pursue interacting with the blogger.

### *First impressions*

So a web surfer finds a reference to a blog, and clicks on it. This simple activity suggests a number of things about her at that moment. For example, it implies that she has some time free to use a computer with an Internet connection. It implies that she has some curiosity to know what's at that site. It implies that she has no vested stake in this knowledge, generally, because until a few seconds ago, she probably didn't know this site existed.

What this highlights is that blog-surfing is, for the most part, a *leisure* activity. While there is a large and growing class of professional or semi-professional bloggers, odds are, that's not why most surfers click this link or that link. Readers are *playing*, in one way that the technology-filled Western lifestyle makes available. This playing implies a subtle contract between the surfer and the website: "Engage Me!" is the command; "I have what you want" replies the site, and thus interaction is born.

Much research by anthropologists on people's media has identified the overriding importance of the context of consumption. As a media technology, web sites really aren't that different. The context of surfing is not identical to the context of reading, listening or viewing other media, but context is still preeminent. This leisure context helps explain the overwhelming importance of first impressions for a blog.

So there on the web, a surfer clicks on the blog link. A number of things can happen then. The site doesn't come up. It comes up slowly. It comes up with difficult fonts, unpleasing colors, or unappealing design. It requires browser plug-ins or generates some cryptic and scary security warning from web browser or anti-virus software. Or the site comes up and the surfer starts to view it. Those first impressions, those first few seconds of interaction between him and a blog, are critical, even before he has a chance to view the page. The question is, will he abort the interaction? As a leisure activity, a surfer may abandon it before it begins if the site doesn't meet minimal, unstated requirements for interactivity, matched to the person's tolerance for variability at that *precise* moment.

Assume that the hurdle is passed, and the surfer begins to view the site. There is a certain "benefit of the doubt" open-mindedness implied during the next few seconds of interaction. During that time period, he will decide whether he wants to continue. This is the first-impression

period of viewing a blog. Like any website user, he may decide at that moment whether to continue, or to continue later, or in most cases, to leave and *never return*. After all, there are hundreds of millions of websites clamoring for attention, and people have to be parsimonious with their leisure time.

In my own blog-hopping experiences, I found thousands of reasons to stay or leave a blog I had just clicked on. These reasons varied by time of day or week, by mood, by my goals or length of free time. One day, a trite, cliched, garish clumsy blog would be compelling, where another day, tried and true favorites weren't enough. Eventually, the blog-hopping experience itself came to be part of the engagement. Echoing Gauntlett and Hill, the *ritual* of blog-hopping itself came to be part of the leisure pastime. In that regard, the "stay/go" decision in the first few seconds of blog viewing, or even after hours on a single site, become part of my overall pattern of interaction.

### ***The importance of bookmarks***

Inherent in the experience of visiting a blog is the choice of whether rapport will develop between the blog viewer and his impression of the blog author. That is, for most interactions, there isn't the "real" rapport that comes from interacting with someone in the "real" (offline) world. There is a "virtual" equivalent where the viewer forms an impression, a kind of relationship, with the blog author. This seems quite similar to the kind of para-relationship millions of fans develop with media celebrities, with some major differences. The blog authors are sharing themselves first-hand in a public forum, rather than through the character-driven or role-oriented presentation for most media celebrities. And the viewers can respond, in most cases, directly to the link, or (often after a hunt for the link) through e-mail. The truth that most viewers do *not* respond makes blogging somewhat lopsided in terms of interaction, unless and until a viewer becomes a blogger themselves.

If and when rapport does develop, or even if it doesn't, the bookmark (or "favorite") feature of a browser is part of how the relationship can develop. Without it, a viewer is forced to remember or re-find a site. Note that by virtue of the tools used by most bloggers, the "name" of the blog and its URL are usually quite different, or even unrelated. Finding needles in haystacks would be easier. With bookmarks/favorites, the daily ritual of blog-hopping has a starting or continuance point.

For me, a knowledgeable and experienced web surfer such lists became invaluable. I learned to trust my own instincts, when, for instance, clicking on bookmark I saved six months prior. Often, I might have only foggy or indistinct impressions of the site by the time I revisit it, months later. But I know that I had learned to only save things I might want to revisit. Bookmark-management is a periodic activity for me anyway, on the 3 computers I use on a daily basis.

### ***The importance of links***

There's another major source of information, trust and credibility available to the blog-hopping web-surfer. It's the list of links on a blog. The list of links (or "blogroll") is nominally there to provide access to other bloggers or sites the blog author finds worthwhile. As such, it seems to have evolved into a kind of club-membership card, an identifying marker displayed for all viewers. Depending on the blogroll, this can lend authority to the postings, provide clues about the writer's postings before reading them, and generally set expectations. That is, the blogroll marks the blogroller with a stamp that carries impressions from the other bloggers back.

Given this, in my blog-hopping it wasn't long before my "first impression" phase of blog evaluation began to look at the site's blogroll. This was especially critical for the politically-oriented or media-oriented blogs. In the more personally-oriented blogs, it also mattered – I discovered relationships between bloggers, outside interests, tools, and a host of subtleties that enhanced my interest in the blogger.

The blogosphere is aware of this, of course. Remember that the blogosphere is, itself defined by these links. The bloggers I communicated with ultimately recognize this, of course, although the importance that they placed on the links varied depending on the nature of their blog.

### **Writing Blogs**

To understand blogging, why not blog? It's not a radical stretch. Participant-observation demands interacting with those being studied, and to understand an activity like blogging means, simply, being a blogger.

### ***Constructing a Blog***

Everything I had learned about blogs before beginning the process suggested it would be an easy, five-minute task. That turned out to be true, but as an Information Technology professional, I also wanted to understand the mechanics behind the blog. Had I taken the five-minute approach, I could have had a site up in five minutes, with only marginal differences in

appearance and content. I wanted a site with no advertising, and one where I controlled the domain, and the code that produced it. Had I chosen another tack, I could have had a free site within Blogger.com (or any of several other blog sites) without any difficulty. By having my own site, I could have a blog-name and domain-name the same, and I was protected from any changes in blogger. By the time I created my blog in December, 2002, I knew what options I had in terms of tools. Blogger, Movable Type, and Pitas were then the three most widely used blogging tools.

Later, I came to realize that my wish to control space and machine, while not the norm, was not unusual either. For the large subset of bloggers who seem to work as IT professionals, that seems to be a general pattern; some even demand to *own* the servers and network connections providing the blog. The mass of ‘casual’ bloggers don’t usually set up their own sites, instead using the blogging tools directly. Even at the early point of setting up the blog, I had become aware of differences in status and ranking that derive from the characteristics of the tool and placement of the blog. For instance, Pitas/Diaryland is the oldest blogging tool, but had clearly fallen out of favor by 2003; the blogs hosted on Pitas, then are generally long-lived early-adopters. While there’s no harm in hosting the blog on one tool or another, versus hosting it on a personally-controlled virtual server, by doing it in the way I did, I felt comfortable saying it was “mine.”

### **Blog name**

The first challenge in building a blog was thinking of a name. As discussed in the section on blog-hopping, a name is a critical component of a blog. With a bad name, no one will visit you; with the wrong name, they’ll be unhappy when they get there. I wanted a name that:

- reflected my identity, which I perceive to be comprised of several unrelated but interlocking threads
- was specific and terse enough to be a domain name
- was not currently used as a domain name
- was not currently used as a blog name, as far as could be determined, since no single registry exists
- was vague enough to take in almost any kind of content
- would suggest that the content was about my blog
- was memorable enough to be grasped instantaneously
- had some humor in the title.

With this much burdening it, one could agonize forever over a name. Going through this process also gave me a deeper appreciation for the blog names I did see. This is especially true, given that, in most cases the name exists before the object it names is created. So later choices of content are, to some extent, shaped by the name of the environment in which they find themselves.

Eventually, I chose the blog name “A Multitude of One.” This name, or something like it, didn’t appear in any of the indexes I found. It also satisfied all the criteria I had for the name, except one. As a domain name ([www.amultitudeofone.com](http://www.amultitudeofone.com)) it felt clumsy and strained.

Therefore, I chose the domain name [OneMultitude.com](http://OneMultitude.com) as the host for the blog. Remember that it wasn’t necessary to have my own domain. During surfing though, I found I automatically respected bloggers who had their own domain, a little more than those who didn’t. So I set out to build my blog.

### **Servers & Services**

It’s strange to admit, but here’s the truth: I’m a degreed software engineer, who has worked in software development and support for twenty years, the last 4 building internal corporate websites, but until now I had never registered a domain or built a public web site. Internet software and hardware products and services are notorious in the IT industry for their confusion, hype, and bewildering range of options. Knowing that, I was still overwhelmed when I first went to “buy” a domain and contract for web-hosting services. How many? What kind? Unix or Windows? POP mail? MySQL? PHP? Encryption? Parked Domains? 5, 10, 15, or 20 Meg storage? 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup> domains? Support contracts? Shell scripts? Spam filters? CGI? PERL? ASPs or JSPs? FTP or SSH? Up-time ratings? Stats services? These and a hundred other questions needed answering, again, before having constructed anything.

I was able to answer all of these questions, and buy the domain name, and contract the service. But the bewildering battery of questions was certainly off-putting. The only reason the questions made any sense to me is because of my professional experience the last 4 years. I’ve no doubt that people with non-IT backgrounds would find this a huge hurdle.

Ultimately, the services weren’t expensive. Buying the domain (actually, leasing it) for one year was about \$16. An inexpensive web hosting service cost about \$11 for the year. The mysterious process by which the domain name ([www.onemultitude.com](http://www.onemultitude.com)) became attached to the

contracted web host server (global DNS name server updates) was free, and included in the domain lease.

So after about a week of wrangling, I had a place for a website. In the “control” panel options for my website, I created two email identities (jim@onemultitude.com and onemultitude@onemultitude.com) for whatever purposes I would need on the blog. All I needed now was a blog.

Next I set up a free account with Blogger (<http://blogger.com>) under the same name, OneMultitude. Within that account, I created a blog, “A Multitude of One.” I could have chosen to have Blogger serve my blog, in exchange for the display of advertising on my page. Instead, I told Blogger that “A Multitude of One” would be hosted on [www.onemultitude.com](http://www.onemultitude.com). That process worked, and Blogger was as easy-to-use as had been touted. But subtly, the blog itself still “lived” on the servers at Blogger, but a copy of it was “published” to my server at [www.onemultitude.com](http://www.onemultitude.com) when I choose to do so.

If this sounds bewildering, it was. In the final tally, I constructed the following ids and accounts just to build this site:

- 1 email address for interacting with services, on my home Internet service provider
- 1 account with the domain-registration company (<http://www.hostdime.com>)
- 1 account with the web-hosting company (<http://www.hasweb.com>)
- 1 account for hosting my web page on Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>)
- 2 email addresses on my domain for interacting with blog readers

Each of these ids has their own name, password, and relevant use. So in order to construct 1 public persona, I had to construct 6 different identities. I guess the domain name was well-chosen!

### **Look & Feel**

Now that I had a blog, I had to give it a face. This is commonly known as the “look & feel” of software, a characteristic way of appearing and reacting that is distinctive, known, and consistent. It’s a hallmark of good design, and assists people in using something, if they can guess how a system will behave, based on visual cues or known standards.

In any case, to assist this, Blogger offered a library of templates from which to pick. I knew that I wanted my site divided into a 3x3 grid. That is, one with 9 separate zones on the page for different types of content. There were no templates available at that time that had the layout I

wanted, so I picked one with a 2x2 grid, in colors that were distinctly unappealing to me, and immediately set about changing it.

In Blogger, this is done through a push-button interface to inspect or change the blog template. Using that screen control presents the blogger with.... HTML. HTML (HyperText Markup Language) is, of course, the basic language of web pages. It is sometimes called a “simple” programming language, and once, maybe it was. Today, after 10 years of enhancement, the language is complex and riddled with subtleties. In the template pane presented by blogger was the source HTML of whatever the original page template designer had included.

I wanted to change the page’s content from a table containing 2x2 entries, to one containing 3x3, and change the colors. I did this by constructing my own HTML by hand, to enhance the template, and reposting it to the Blogger database. When I “republished” it to my site, it was updated on the web for anyone to see. This was very easy for me, given that I’ve coded HTML many times, but I doubt that others would find it as easy to do.

Here is an approximation of the ultimate layout I chose, in a pleasing (to me) mix of greens and blues:

Mission statement	Blog Title & Subtitle	Links about myself
Blogroll for the political left	Blog postings, in reverse chronological order	Blogroll for the political right
Additional Links	Blogroll for the political center Additional resources Blog Archives	Courtesy link to Blogger.com

Ultimately, I found that I would occasionally “tweak” something about the presentation of the site. In this structure, Blogger controls the content of the center square, and all the other squares are contained in the site template. To add permanent links to my blogroll required editing the template. Again, this was something that I found simple to master, but which could be overwhelmingly complex for nontechnical users.

## ***Using a Blog***

Ultimately, how is it that a blog is used? For the author, who posts to it, there's one set of uses, and for readers, there are other uses. As the author of a blog, I found myself engaging in some surprisingly unanticipated behaviors in conjunction with the site.

### **Posting**

Of course, it wouldn't be a blog unless I posted to it. Using Blogger turned out to be remarkably simple. From any web browser, I simply had to bring up the Blogger site (<http://www.blogger.com>), enter my login id and password, select my blog (in case I had more than one), and I was in a maintenance panel for A Multitude of One. That panel contains multiple controls, and a large, empty box for typing in a posting. It's very simple. When complete, I'd push the button marked <publish>. The site would ask for my web site ID and password (which it offered to remember for me), and the whole site would be rebuilt right then. Using tools provided on the control panel for my website, I could observe what the Blogger did to my server at the time I published – it simply replaced the files comprising the website, using the FTP Internet protocol.

In constructing postings, from the beginning I knew that I wanted to include emphasis markers (bold, italics) in the text, and simple, straightforward links to other pages, nested within the page content. At the beginning, the Blogger site didn't offer any tools to do this, so I encoded the necessary HTML tags by hand. Later, the site was enhanced to make this easier.

I could have chosen to include many kinds of references or other tools in my blog, and many people do. Instead, my posts were kept simple and straightforward. I would occasionally go back in time and edit or remove a post, as blogger allowed, but I generally avoided doing so. It seemed unfair, somehow, to alter the stream-of-consciousness after the fact.

### **Driving Usage/Pinging**

After posting, and posting, and posting.... a blogger wants some feedback. After my blog had been up for awhile, I learned to check the "site visit" statistics available on the control panel of my site. I discovered, unsurprisingly, that I had been visited by.... no one. No one other than myself, that is. I based this conclusion on the "originating domain" of visitors, which corresponded exactly with where I was when I visited, and no other visits.

In order to get visitors, then, I added blogrolls. I included a few dozen blogs that I had visited, and thought more or less highly of. I believed that through the use of "web crawlers," "back trackers" and other tools, at least those bloggers would come to know of me, and visit my

site. Eventually, I realized that I had no way to know when someone would link my site, so how could other bloggers know I had linked to them? Tools like that do exist, but I never did master their usage.

So I did the tried and true thing to drive site visits: I registered my site with Google. As the dominant web search engine of the period, it drives usage worldwide. Through the site visit statistics, I could see when the Google web crawler visited my site, and I could see when someone visited my site as a result of a search they conducted on Google. That process itself (analyzing Google searches) became something of an entertaining art form during this period, so the tools were then enhanced to amplify and clarify the nature of the searches.

Finally, I learned to ping. For many years, “ping” has been used as a troubleshooting method in analyzing computer networks. A ping is simply a round-trip packet information request sent between networked computers. It’s a very simple protocol that boils down to something like: “Are you there?” “Yes, I’m here.” Blog aggregators work by testing the timestamps on lists of blog URLs held internally; when the timestamp changes, the blog has been updated and is included on the list. But this process is imperfect for mysterious reasons, so often fails to register an update. So the aggregator sites offer a “ping” interface that lets you, the blog author, tell them that your site has been updated by pinging it. In this way, after creating a post, I would ping the site, and a reference to the site would appear on the aggregator site. The aggregators even offer snippets of code to include in web pages that can be run when needed (such as, upon posting) that perform the ping automatically.

The effect of all this: a jolt at seeing my site pop up on Google or weblogs.com. A rush at seeing in incoming visitor. A thrill at finding a reference to my site in another blogger’s posting. An unaccountable joy at finding my site on someone else’s blogroll.

It’s true that the creative act involved in building and constructing the postings is an emotionally investing act – the blog becomes an extension of the self, so there’s a pleasure in seeing it be noticed, and well-received. For me, and no doubt, for many people, it’s rare to be able to change something out in the world.

## **Spam**

Spam, or unsolicited commercial email, afflicts everyone in cyberspace, of course. In conjunction with creating the blog, I created 3 new email addresses. With those, came 3 new opportunities for spam. Since the web hosting service I contracted was quite cheap, with minimal

filters, and the explicit tradeoff was in customer support, I expected a flood tide of spam. Instead, I got a few a week, but learned a few interesting tidbits.

The first was that, during the process of building the blog site, I had, through a typo, accidentally created a fourth email address, that *I* didn't even know about. Much later, I stumbled across this address, one that certainly had never appeared, anywhere. Of course, the mailbox for this address contained spam. This was proof of the power of web crawlers in creating spam.

The second thing I learned, is never to post an email address on a web site. It's an open invitation to automated web-crawlers. These simply look at the pages, and extract all the email addresses they find (flagged by the characteristic 'name@domain' structure. For all my blog postings, I had the blog template sign them "posted by Jim at [date/time]" where the word "Jim" is an active "Mailto:" link to my blogger email address (jim@onemultitude.com). In other words, I posted my email address on the page. As a result, that email address received, and continues to receive, massive amounts of spam.

It's for this reason that many bloggers (and other web site builders) have begun to do two things. Either they remove any reference to their email addresses from their page, or they encode it in ways designed to trick web crawlers (such as 'name-at-domain' or 'name@domainREMOVETHISPART'). The latter strategy simply looks like a late skirmish in the war on spam, but works today. The former strategy is one that caused me to waste considerable time during my research.

On many occasions, I would study a blog, read the postings, and conclude that this was someone I wanted to correspond with. I would then be confronted with – no email address. From experience, I learned that email addresses would frequently be hidden on a site sub-page, or encoded, or buried in comments on the HTML of the underlying page, so I would search. An hour or more later, frustrated, I would give up, cursing the scourge that is spam, but also worrying for the future of a public forum like blogging.

## **Hacking**

I can safely report that web site hacking is alive and well. Once I visited my site, only to find it replaced by a courteous and amusing page from a hacker. The replacement page took credit for the hacking and greeted a number of other hackers using their code names. It also included this message: "Don't Worry Admin ... Nothing was deleted.. all ur indexs r backed up..."

Check \*.bak files in the www directory.” Incredibly, this was true, and even more incredibly, the hacked web page included the hacker’s email address.

I consider myself fortunate, oddly enough, to have been hacked by someone so polite and thoughtful. No damage was done, and I was able to restore my pages (and change the site passwords) without difficulty. Suddenly, the design choice I had made earlier looked like luck, or genius. Since Blogger hosts my blog on their server, and “publishes” the web page to my server, hacking my server would not cause any lasting harm. Had I chosen another strategy, such as that used by Movable Type (another hosting product) I would have had a private database on my server (and no where else). In that arrangement, a hacker could have destroyed my site without a backup.

While losing my site was in the long-term plan anyway, the hacking made me realize that the postings contained within it do represent an emotional investment. They may be silly, narcissistic, vain, or trite, or deep, meaningful and wise. No matter: they are *mine*, in a uniquely personal way.

### ***Posting – content choices***

The process of actually writing posts, described earlier, was simple enough. In my everyday life, I generally always have access to a computer with a broadband Internet connection, and the freedom to be able to go anywhere on the web. So accessing <http://www.blogger.com> was never difficult or forbidden. The tricky part of the posts turned out to be the content, or what to post. My first post was intentionally, a statement of purpose that I found so valuable in other people’s blogs. Here was my first blog post:

It’s a multiple-minded day, what to do?

Welcome to the birth of my weblog!

What’s the focus of this blog? It’s intended to focus on the things most interesting to yours truly, which may or may not be interesting to anyone else, though experience says otherwise. At a minimum, these are (in no particular order):

blogs (natch)

media & politics

communities (real and virtual)

anthropology (cultural, not the archeology all of my friends and family seem to think I mean)

human rights

the menace of capitalism to human society (oops, did I say that out loud?)

science & technology

my own life (duh...)

Naturally, this is just a brief list. Like everyone else, I'm about 100 different individuals all crammed together inside one person. Don't worry, it's quite comfortable in here.... The names may be the same, but the roles, identities, motivations, behaviors, goals and relationships vary. I'm looking forward to sharing the multitude with you.

Ultimately, I think that this reflected both my intent with the blog, and what actually came to pass. That outcome was constructed by the choices I made along the way.

### **public or private?**

The question that plagued me from the beginning of posting was, would my postings represent things of public concern or private, inner thoughts? There exist both models of blogs throughout the blogosphere. A public blog, know as a “filtering” site, has postings which frequently include links to mass media news or commentary, and include the author’s thoughts on the item. Such blogs make the author’s viewpoints more or less obvious, but often restrict themselves to items of public concern. Details of the life or day-to-day issues of the author are frequently all but invisible. Private blogs, also known as “personal” sites, are much more like traditional journals or diaries. The records the thoughts, feelings, events, and ideas of the author. These are much more inner-focused.

In my research about blogs, I had learned that “filtering” sites were the original format of blogs – only later did the personal blog emerge. Interviewing bloggers, I found several takes on the motivation toward both forms. One noted:

“I think it's clear why political blogging is increasing: politics is the kind of discussion that engenders itself to public outlets more so than diet and sex-life. There's a good deal of social and cultural commentary amongst bloggers going on as well for much the same reason, so the self-selection here is more of 'what do people get on soapboxes about!'.”

Another noted that his

“Blog entries generally point to actual journalism, since a large portion of my blogging is just filtering through what I've read during the day, or if I'm writing opinion/analysis links

are to corroborating opinion or corroborating evidence, with some number of links to opinions/analysis.”

That is, the filtering-type blog is not only easier to produce, and naturally derives from daily online activity anyway, it’s also publicly defensible. The personal blog turned out to have a completely different motivation, summarized by the blogger who said: “I’d rather be an open book than bottle stuff up inside.” These blogs were clearly and solely self-focused, and exist for the personal benefit of the blogger. There are not trappings or rhetoric concerning the public sphere or civic worthiness.

Obviously, these categories are not hard and fixed, but are flexible. Rarely would any blog correspond to just one of these types. Throughout my blog surfing, I found both types interesting. Initially, I thought the filtering-sites were more “important” for the understanding of blogging, the media, and technology. During the course of research, I came to the opposite belief, for reasons explained later.

The question for me was what kind of a blogger did I want to be? Did I want to scoop up news or life tidbits off of the web, and add my two cents to the discussion around it, or did I want to publicly navel-gaze, detailing my inner monologue for everyone? My answer was to try both. As I found public things to post, I’d add my thoughts to them. If something significant or unusual occurred in my life, I’d post it.

My reaction to posting for both types, was an initial and growing discomfort. I’d create a posting, and feel badly about it, for reasons that took awhile to discern. What I found was that I was *embarrassed* posting to my blog.

When I posted something of public interest, and posted my views of it, I felt kind of silly. In every case, I knew that “pundits” and other specialists were already commenting on it. For example, consider this post from my blog:

“I Like it.....

Conceptual Guerilla is on to something, How the beat the Right in 3 Minutes [<http://www.conceptualguerilla.com/beattherightinthree.htm>] is very clever. Yup, the right is filled with cheap-labor conservatives, a hate-filled small-minded view. However, that strategy still leaves political progressives in a reactive mode, responding to the right and cutting them down, rather than creating something that will lead people. “

There are people who make their living understanding and writing about things in the public sphere. At some level, I thought “who am I to comment on this?” I’m a person with normally high self-esteem, and I have a good recognition of what my skills and strengths are, so this caught me with some surprise.

When I posted something of private interest, or told about my life, I felt somewhat narcissistic. I knew that this was my blog and that I had every right to post things in my blog about me, but I felt like a cliché. Consider:

“Ready for my closeup....

Yes, it's name-in-lights time. Did something completely different last night, volunteered as an extra in a movie. Filmed it in a local watering hole, I got to star in the role I've played my whole life: anonymous dancer number 43. Was kind of interesting how much stupid work by so many people goes into even the shortest of movie scenes. And if I ever hear that stupid song again, I'll scream. And next time I do this, it won't be for one that starts at 2am. At least we made it home before the sun came up (barely). But baby's dragging at work today, will be a long one.... “

Is my life really that interesting? Frankly, no, not to anyone except me or to those who know me. I found later that other bloggers also experienced this. For instance, one told me that

“Yeah it is a kind of private pleasure for me. I like that only a handful of people who know me offline know I do it. I actually kind of regret telling the few people I did. I'm just a fan of secrets in general. Being in on them of course. I hate secrets kept from me.”

This statement reveals fractures in the notions of public and private, online and offline. Blogging straddles these boundaries, forcing participants to either be comfortable in multiple domains, or to pick one. The offline anonymity expressed above was quite widespread, though not universal.

The process of blogging forced me, and most bloggers, to acknowledge consciously my notions of what is public, and private, and how much my online and offline identities coincide. In later interviews with bloggers, I found that this public/private conflict was handled by every blogger, but isn't apparent in most weblogs. The blogger just creates her postings, and her blog is what it is. Behind the scenes, the bloggers described to me how they negotiate this divide, sometimes altogether ignoring the private, sometimes the public domains. Others freely intermix.

I found a few hybrid solutions, such as the blogger who posts a public blog, and maintains a private, password-protected area within it, for friends and family.

My own solution was not so sophisticated. I tried blogging both types of post, eventually realizing that both types made me uncomfortable. Eventually, I came to believe that my personal notions of privacy prevented me from being too forthcoming in a personal-type blog, and that I while I might find my own voice interesting in a filtering-type blog, but don't really care if an anonymous reader thinks I'm clever or thought provoking. By dint of personality, makeup and personal life situation, I'm not a 'natural' blogger. Nevertheless, I kept at it for about ten months - long enough to be certain of my thoughts and feelings about it.

### **trite or deep?**

Closely related to the public/private decision for each post was the trite/deep decision. Here the conundrum was whether to make the posting about the here and now, or something more timeless, deeper. It may seem strange to imagine, but the burden of consciously trying to make something... meaningful... was hard to escape. It seems easy to think that I should just post what I wanted, but what I wanted was both shallow and deep.

For example, shortly after I started my blog, a close family member died. There was no doubt in my mind that my blog, which was "about" my life, should include something about that. But what? Details of her struggles with cancer, our group efforts to care for her, the agony of her death, the misery of the long holiday season with her unburied, the grieving, and the slow resumption of normal life? Or spritely, unemotional references to what happened? How to mark the moment without dwelling on it or cheapening it, or the memory of my loved one? Here was one post that resulted from that:

"How to say goodbye

Lose someone. Feel the hole where they were. Remember what they loved. Remember what they taught you. Find others they loved. Join together. Dress somberly. Choose a brilliant bluesky day of cool air. Go to the greenforest restplace, and celebrate the life shared with all. Locate final rest, and wish them well. Reconvene at home, eat, laugh, cry, and hug. Say goodbye. Sleep. And remember."

Ultimately, no approach was satisfactory. This is probably a reflection of my own relationship to emotional revelations. In general, my normal emotional state is one that is upbeat,

cheerful, happy. It illuminated that, for me at least, no blog posting, no web site, was going to change this state of affairs. It didn't matter what I posted, it would be unlikely to help me.

This experience did at least show me that blogging *could* be meaningful, helpful, emotionally deep. I suspect that I could have/would have found this to be more of a helpful, emotionally-fulfilling experience, if I

- Did not have a well-developed emotional support system offline, who were sharing the experience

and - Had been blogging longer, so had developed more of an online support system.

In other words, for the parts of my life that have deep connections, the cosmic, the emotional, the painful, the serious, I am unable or unwilling to trust the blogging medium sufficiently to release these to. There's safety in triteness.

### **cryptic or open?**

One way of coping with my perceived need to keep an emotionally safe space in the blog was to touch upon the deep or important issues, but to do so cryptically. In this way, those who know me and my life would recognize the references, and those who didn't know me would be left out of the loop. This "inside joke" approach was a reliable way for me to use the blog, to share my life without sharing it. For example, consider this post I made:

"Things change....

My father-in-law changes his house. My partner changes his mind. The weather changes its pattern. My work changes its focus. The more I look, the differences aren't even different, though. They're the same. "

In reading other people's blogs, and rereading my own, I find this approach to postings to be distinctly annoying. When I found myself forced to "read between the lines," my immediate reaction was generally "Why should I?" I know that I don't personally know the individual on a blog, so wonder why they refuse to share themselves, hiding behind intentional obfuscation.

Oddly, what would have helped me to share more was the certain knowledge that my blog would *not* be read by anyone in my personal life. That is, I found this prospect to be quite inhibiting. At the beginning of blogging, when asked, I gave people the blog website name. Later, I wished I hadn't. Even though there were no postings that couldn't be read aloud in public, the possibility that they might be, and that someone I cared for in my life might be hurt or offended was problematic.

In this way of writing a personal blog, it seems quite similar to how I would feel with a journal or diary. I've never kept one of those, but if I did, it would seem preferable that, if it had to be read, better by a stranger than a friend.

### **verbose or taciturn?**

A lot or a little? Well-constructed wordplay or shooting straight from the hip? As an individual with strong verbal and written communication skills, this was something that was easy for me to do either way. In personal and professional life, I express myself quite well when being succinct. While I prefer being able to shade nuances of meaning in ways that can only be accomplished at length, I know that each style has its place. Note that blogging easily accommodates both. For instance, the post shown below is 2 paragraphs, longer than most of my postings:

“The End of Time

Or at least this year's stream. As usual, thank goodness, can't wait, good riddance. Ended the year on strange dreams, conflicted and unpleasant. Happy to finish 2002, though in many ways it was ideal; it also sucked, in ways too numerous to mention. Surely next year will be better, though the impending war[s] will surely turn into a global disaster. Is the only thing we can do is to put our heads down and live our little lives, hoping nothing too bad happens to us or our world?”

“Someone told me this week that "an activist can be born out of boredom." Okay, they were describing a senior Pagan activist discovering herself through the Internet, not exactly my forte but relevant nevertheless. Passion's roots can come from the most unlikely sources, but Passion itself is the source of almost everything that moves the world forward, good or bad, public or private. Remember that, the next time some inner voice says something that conflicts with your notions of normal behavior.”

There's an emergent convention that long pieces (say, more than a few screenfuls) should be pulled out into a separate essay, but postings can take any form from a few brief words to ornate, complex pieces of analysis and extrapolation. I knew from reading other blogs that I enjoyed both kinds. Many bloggers mix both, such as the one who told me:

“I write a lot of short postings on various subjects. Many of them are what I would refer to as "blats" -- a quick posting of early ideas on a given subject, or random thoughts about

something. [A blat] refers to a sudden, often rather sharp, usually rather aggressive post which just lays out a bunch of stuff without supporting arguments (it's not a debate, it's an emotional outburst). Some of my blog posts are like that -- especially the political ones. Probably comes from reading too much BuzzFlash....”

Yet this same blogger posted long treatises, extended debates and exchanges with other bloggers, and calmly reflective political analysis. In short, it reflected his personal range of communicative styles.

So, this should have been easy, right? Post what I wanted. The form is malleable. One problem for me was that I didn't know who my audience was. Through years of writing prose for various reasons, I had learned to anticipate my audience, to hold a mental image of my average reader. On my blog, on the web, it could be anyone. There was no “model” reader. There was no one to shape my messages for, no one whose reactions I could anticipate and control. I was a writer without an audience.

As time wore on with my blog, this came to matter less. Initially, it was quite inhibiting. Eventually, it became something that didn't matter. As I wrote more and more, the blog became about me, not about the audience. If it was something I thought to be interesting, funny, thought-provoking, I posted it.

I never did develop a “model” reader profile. I doubt whether my inconsistent (and small) readership had any common characteristics that could lead me to generalize about them. Had I been able to sustain a group of loyal readers, I would have tried to learn more about them. Without such a group, I was simply a blogger, posting to the wind.

### **connected or alone?**

The issue of whether to try to define myself as a blogger, connected to others through his blog, blogroll, or blog readership may seem rather pointless, or overwrought, but it is an essential part of what makes up blogging. By itself, blogging is a glorified vanity web page, a view of me, me, me, that doesn't lend itself to any interaction with others. The emergent convention, however, places emphasis (for certain categories of blogs) on blogrolls, linking, cross-linking, backtracking posts, the spread of ideas across blogs, and relative status determined by how often one's blog is linked or referenced by other blogs. In the extreme case, this leads to the emergence of the pundits.

The pundits are the aristocracy of the blogosphere, the short list of generally conservative (Alterman, 2003:77) blogs/bloggers that “everyone” knows. Through luck, timing, or quality of work, the pundits emerged as the best known bloggers. For many bloggers, they may be the first blogs stumbled across; for people outside the blogosphere, the pundits may be the *only* bloggers that ever get read.

In my blog, I started by linking some of the obligatory pundits, then began linking in others who I found interesting, compelling, or fun. In a very short time, even with the assistance of bookmarks, and the public bookmarks embodied in a blogroll, I learned that it’s a lot of work to stay connected to the other bloggers. Keeping up with what’s going on, everyday, for even 5 or 10 blogs, is quite a time commitment. To put it this in perspective, realize that even small blogrolls might contain 100 blogs. So while the connectedness of a blog to other blogs is an important part of the relative status of the blog, evidence suggests that this may be something of a fictive marker. I can certainly put 300 blogs in my blogroll, but it doesn’t mean I’m really connected to the bloggers, nor they to me.

The standards of linking and blogrolling, the status rankings, the archetypal nature and central roles for the pundits, all point to a certain realization: it’s not “really” a blog if it’s not linked to others. Technically, the form of a web page known as a web log doesn’t require links, any more than any other web page requires links. But just as in that larger domain, the whole reason for its existence is inextricably bound up in the connections to others embodied in the links. It may technically be a web page, or a web log, without links to others, but structuring pages that way entails a rejection of all that a web page, or a web log stands for. To reframe Todd Gitlin’s take on it – “You link, therefore you are.”

### **who do you link to?**

In weblogging, then, you’re known by the company you keep. Whether a blog “really” is connected to other blogs or not, the practice of blogging demands links. Consider a metaphor: imagine a cocktail party, where each guest must attend wearing a list of names of people who they (generally) respect or admire, or (sometimes) loathe or revile. The names on that list may or may not be at that party, and each guest is wearing their own list.

In that regard, the blogroll can be seen as an identity marker. The contents of the blogroll are intended to say something about the blogroller, not really about the individuals appearing on the list. Obviously, the blogger who creates the list is expected to be familiar with the blogrollee’s list,

and any categorization made by the blogger should be coherent and consistent, by whatever criteria they wish to use. But the purpose of the blogroll emerges as a kind of long-term statement of *values* that are expressed in varying degrees in the individual postings.

For example, as I constructed my blogroll, I found that there were a few categories of blogs that I wanted to blogroll. First, there were the pundits. These were included as a kind of entry-criteria table stake, a public signal that I know who the “players” are in the blogosphere, who matters to many bloggers and external society. Consider the statement that I make if I link to famous “journalist” pundits such as Glenn Reynolds ([www.instapundit.com](http://www.instapundit.com)), Eric Alterman ([www.altercation.com](http://www.altercation.com)), Virginia Postrel ([www.dynmist.com](http://www.dynmist.com)), Andrew Sullivan ([www.andrewsullivan.com](http://www.andrewsullivan.com)), Joshua Micah Marshall ([www.talkingpointsmemo.com](http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com)), James Lileks ([www.lileks.com](http://www.lileks.com)) or Matt Drudge ([www.drudgereport.com](http://www.drudgereport.com)), who has claimed to have more than 100 million site visits a month (Alterman, 2003:77). The link makes a statement about who I’m aware of, and this forms an oblique reference to the kind of subject matter that interests me. Subtly, selecting other, lesser-known pundits is part of the art and practice of defining the self through links.

Next, were those whose postings revealed a similar range of interest to my own. For example, I posted this:

“Trend alert...

The first sighting of a new trend, er, fad: Leetspeek

[<http://www.straightdope.com/columns/030110.html>]. Thanks to Cecil Adams, now I, too can type like a 15-year old IM addict. More to the point, "l33t5p33k" embodies, in a rather pure form, the you're-not-in-my-club nature of the early-adoption phase of a new Tech trend. What better way to signify membership than by inventing a jargon; here, the jargon defines membership. I predict translator websites, references in popculture magazines and print media, declining coolness, and migration to a new fad.”

At the time, I was exploring ideas about how jargons are identity-markers for group membership. So the link was an expression of that.

In linking, the individuals expressing an interest in the media, politics, social change, technology emergence, and alternative world-views were automatically interesting to me. Realize, though, that this includes (roughly) the majority of all bloggers. These interests are central to the

blogging experience, a key part of what makes a blog a blog, or what makes a blogger blog. This was borne out by the blogger who told me that his linking strategies were:

“Static links to other bloggers are based on whether or not I’ve read something from the blogger in question that would give me reason to want to read them again. Other static links are to sources of information I use semi-regularly. I also link to discussions I’ve engaged in on other forums and my non-blog politicking.”

“Reason to want to read them again” is a succinct summary of the motivation behind linking. This is the normative, “expected” kind of linking. The sheer number of blogs that I read and enjoyed regularly, discussions engaged in, and used regularly made keeping up with these daunting. So to be included, a blogger needed something “else.”

I could claim that there were explicit criteria for blogroll inclusion, as some bloggers do claim for their blogroll, but my experience was that the final decision was inevitably based on arbitrariness or subjectivity: a whim. It might be the mood I was in upon first encountering a blog, or it might be that one great post that made me laugh out loud, or some cool technical feature of the blog page, or a pleasing color palette, or any of a thousand things. In every case, there had to be something I *liked* about the blog, for itself. Later, I would find that I might not even be sure of what attracted me to that blogger in the first place. Or if I knew, later I would find better, much more sophisticated examples of them. But never, ever, did I remove a link from the blogroll. They represented a kind of commitment. By honoring the blog with inclusion in my blogroll, my own honor demanded that I keep them there. The implied assumption was that if I were fickle enough to remove a blogroll honoree, I had no business putting them there in the first place.

### **who links to you?**

Presumably for all, or most bloggers, there exist similar processes of selecting, including and changing (or not) blog linkages. Therefore, the key question emerges: whose blogroll includes your blog on their list? At the metaphorical cocktail party, seeing a name on the list of 20 different individuals is going to mean something significant. What exactly it means depends on the stated context of the inclusion, the stated and performed values and practices of both individuals, and more. But without a doubt, it raises the status of the blogrollee, even when the context is negative.

For instance, the extensiveness of the inclusion of pundit Andrew Sullivan on blogrolls makes him, certainly, one of the top five bloggers. He has emerged as a major break-out figure in

journalistic blogging. He is an A-list global journalist (biography available at <http://andrewsullivan.com/info.php?artnum=00000bi>) who now blogs full-time. Sullivan's influence exists even though, for a variety of reasons, he is the blogger that many other bloggers and journalists seem to hate. That is, political-columnist Sullivan is roundly criticized, mocked or flamed, by a huge number of bloggers of all political persuasions. This just serves to entrench and enhance his importance, thus proving again the tongue-in-cheek axiom that "there's no such thing as bad press."

The vitriol that journalist-bloggers send to Sullivan, in my estimation, originates from three sources. First, Sullivan was something of a favorite son of the political right, until he generated personally embarrassing ethical and political problems for several media outlets, leading to his current insider/outsider status (Alterman, 2003:67-69). Second, is a kind of professional jealousy, as Sullivan now makes his living as a free-lance blogger, addressing issues of global concern to a global audience, without answering to any editors. It's a kind of dream-job for some journalists, who can only imagine the freedom they sometimes see Sullivan squandering. Third, beyond the purely-journalistic boundaries, Sullivan's very identity (Conservative, Gay, English, Christian) provokes those who are dogmatically partisan in their understanding of the world as divided into two camps. Liberals and conservatives alike seem to be annoyed by Sullivan, and insulting him seems to be something of a parlor-game played by the inner core of the blogosphere. Nevertheless, he continues to be linked and cited both inside and outside of the blogosphere.

Most bloggrollings are positive, however, a kind of gift given by the bloggroller to the bloggrollee. It's a gift that generally raises the status of both parties, however, so there's something self-serving about it. Regardless of any ulterior motives, however, I can safely report that there's something undeniably thrilling about seeing your blog show up on another bloggers bloggroll. There's the realization, not just that your ideas have touched someone (another blogger), but even more, that person is sharing it with the world. For example, at one time I made this post:

"Normal = So Little Time

Yeah, my life seems to be resuming its normal state. It's very simple, I can do anything. All I need are 48-hour days and the no-need-to-sleep pills they promised us. Those are out there with the flying cars, the harmonious global society, and the nuclear family: Figments of imagination, past or future. Anyhow, prioritize this list, please: life, research, relationships, work, friendships, downtime, housework, surfing, assisting, gymming,

thoughtful-being, reading, writing, blogging, planning, traveling, web-paging, politicking, thinking, playing, visioning. Geez, no wonder I feel pressed for time. Thank God I don't have a dog. So, okay, I hear the violins: me, you, everyone else, join the club, what am I whining about? Actually, this is helpful: it confirms just why I feel so frazzled. “

This particular post produced a link on a blog that was on my blogroll. The blogger commiserated on my feeling-pressed-for time comment, and expressed sympathy. But the public acknowledgement by her that she had read my blog served as a kind of validation-by-response.

That thrill of public recognition carries a reverberating responsibility, however. It simultaneously recognizes value shared between bloggers, but also serves as a kind of a call for more-of-the-same. For instance, when I found that my blog appeared on someone's blogroll, my not-so-subconscious reaction was to figure out what they seemed to like about it. That doesn't mean that I would blindly start doing more of that, but it generally wasn't an incentive to do less. The blogger who cited my posted lament about being stretched for time, indirectly made me more likely to complain of it again. Thus, do bloggers help to shape each other's postings, in subtle, indirect ways.

### **Non-blog inclusions**

Other things also shape blog inclusions, which may have nothing overtly to do with other bloggers. Like many other areas of pop culture in general, and the web in specific, blogging is subject to fads and trends. Things sweep through the blogosphere in a day or week or a year, and the cognoscenti make a reference to it. It might be the latest quiz from Quizilla, the inclusion of the Weather Pixie, a clever JavaScript snippet, the Friday Five, or a “100 things about me” list. These things, too, are highly visible markers for how knowledgeable the blogger is, how connected, how *cool*. Even more critical is the timeliness of these inclusions. 100 things about me? Oh, that was *so* 2002. Quizilla? Very this-summer. In my posting, I created a permalink to the “100 things about me” post, and I posted this as a blog entry:

“Oh great, I'm officially "Twisted"

I generally think these internet quiz thingies [<http://home.att.net/~slugbutter/evil/> ] but given all the evilness romping around geopolitics these days, twisted doesn't seem so bad.”

Each of these were an implicit claim of “membership” in a “group” who defines what's trendy.

Of course, this kind of faddishness is not unique to blogging. In blogging, though, there are a bewildering number of them, and the blogosphere is by no means monolithic in its display of

these markers. There's no way it could be, they are too diverse and too dynamic, as is the blogosphere. No, the diversity is again, part of the point. Status and self-definition are partially defined by what's excluded, as well as by what's included, and how. Just like links say more about the linkee than the linker, non-blog matter included in the blog is more identity marking of the blogger.

In my blog, like in my life, I found that I had neither the desire nor the stamina to be a great follower of fashion. If a trend became so widespread that I took notice of it, I might include it, but I wouldn't work too hard at it. In my life, like in my blog, this means that I'm a very late-adopter for fads. Being a hokey blogger, like being a frumpy dresser, is a mark of self-hood, part of *who I am*. There are no accidents.

Of course, boring blogs or geekish fashion don't acquire fans. Or do they?

### ***Stats***

The whole question of who is a fan of a blog is far more important to bloggers than might be obvious, if you read only blog postings. Because blogs are a web technology, the extreme relevance of site-visit statistics, or stats, comes into play. Serious, sophisticated bloggers not only monitor their stats, they "game" them, or take steps to increase them. Bloggers end up being small-scale analysts, determining what drives traffic, what doesn't, and why.

The philosophical cliché regarding the existentiality of unperceived reality goes something like "if a tree falls in the forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?" The blog equivalent would be something like "If I post something and no one reads it, is it a blog?" The answer, like in pop philosophy, says more about the definitional framing of the problem. In philosophy, that frame is the objectivity/subjectivity debate, and the rise of post-modernist ideas of the centrality of perception. In blogging, that frame is about the role of the audience in validating selfhood through repeat visitations.

Thus stats are not just something used for tuning and optimization of postings. Stats are the external validation of blog worth, comfortably quantitative and available in a number of pleasingly colorful statistical charts, all available a few short clicks away on your blog domain server. In this reframing of Gitlin's ideas, "I have visitors, therefore I am."

### ***Blogger Interviews***

The heart of my inquiry into blogging consisted of a series of virtual interviews with bloggers. These interviews were conducted via email. The methods of selection, contact and interview described below led to a variable set of results, ones that depended highly on the blogger.

### **Blogger Selection**

There's a universe of bloggers, just as there are of people. Which ones are good interview candidates, and how to find them? The question of selection actually shapes the results of the investigation, so has to be faced early. Multiple issues exist, from basics such as who, exactly, qualifies as a blogger, to fine gradations of involvement and motivation as exhibited in the blog. In my approach to this, I tried to be systematic in my selection methods. This in no way implies that the selected bloggers are 'representative' of anything. This was not intended as a quantifiable sample, nor selected to produce any kind of statistical measures of blogging activity. Another researcher would produce a very different study. Done the same way at another time in the life-cycle of blogging, totally different results would be brought forth. The evanescent quality of the web in general, and blogs in specific, is part of what I was interested in pursuing.

### ***Blog Selection Tools***

In selecting which bloggers to contact, I relied heavily on <http://weblogs.com>. As a collector site, it's simply one of several. I appreciated the real-time quality of the blogger listings that it provided, time-stamped and easily clickable. Using this collector, I sampled many hundreds of blogs over roughly a year and a half. The web is always 'on' and someone is always blogging; the collector site always has someone blogging, right now. As with other web technologies, activity "follows the sun" around the globe. So the character of postings varies depending on the time of day or week, and the geographical location of the poster. Of course, with a mechanism as diverse as this, there are posters late-night, early-morning, midday, midnight, anytime, and in many languages and countries (though like other web technologies, English dominates).

The second major mechanism I used to select blogs was of course, blogrolls. As discussed earlier, almost all bloggers include at least a few other blogs on their blogroll. Many bloggers include a moderate or even very large number of blogs – 50 or 100 is not at all uncommon. In surfing blogs, it was not uncommon to find a treasure of a blog, a delight, hidden on

a lackluster or uninteresting blog. The status conferred by including a blog on a blogroll is enhanced by the quality of the included blog; if a blog can't be charming, witty, or interesting, at least those on its blogroll can be.

### ***Blog Selection Rules***

Faced with this embarrassment of riches, how to proceed? I quickly realized that I was using heuristics to decide which bloggers to pursue, and which to avoid. Whether those heuristics were an assessment of the charm, wit, or interest of a blog, or something more rigorous, I needed a system. It's impossible to visit all of the millions of blog websites. Yet I wanted to find ones completely unknown to me, in environments where every site contains links to dozens or even hundreds of other sites.

For one thing, I was implicitly parsing blog names to determine which ones I wanted to visit. After some experimentation, I realized that I was searching for names that suggested a set of characteristics that I thought would be useful and engaging. This is, no doubt, what draws many people to click a link. Therefore, I eventually made these criteria explicit, choosing to visit links that, somehow, suggested this about the blog/blogger:

- Humor
- A reflective stance toward the socio-political world
- A mastery of the basics of language
- A minimal adult age, and not a student

These criteria are vague, of course, and I visited many blogs that violated some or all of these. And I found rewarding blogs by serious, inwardly-directed, terse children. And pointless, vapid sites by witty, engaged adults with dazzling wordplay. And vice versa. In other words, these criteria couldn't serve to *optimize* my surfing experience, they could only provide a rationalization for choosing one from many. Other criteria, or none, could have served equally well. It does remain true that any conclusions that I may draw about blogging could theoretically have been colored by my parsing strategy. In truth, after visiting so many blogs, I know that this strategy was *imperfect* enough to almost guarantee that I've seen a considerable cross-section of blogs.

### **Blogger Familiarization**

Once I stumbled across a blog that I found interesting, novel, compelling or that I wanted to know more about, I first made it a point to read thoroughly through it. This meant scanning all

the entries, reading thoroughly to get a good sense of the person behind the blog. Depending on the way the blog is organized to “archive” older entries on a separate sub-page, this may have involved clicking through dozens of web pages. Getting to know the blogger may also mean clicking on the various other links on the blog. For more elaborate blogs, these links would be to other blogs or to webpages authored by the blogger, various “about me” links, or a variety of other links. Not all blogs include such content, but many do.

My purpose during this familiarization was to get to know the blogger as they have expressed themselves publicly in the blog. If identity on the Internet is performance, then the blog postings are the first Act. In the postings, the blogger creates himself. The range of material in the postings is as diverse as the universe of bloggers, of course. So each one is the fingerprints, the DNA, of the blogger, unique and special.

In each case, during the familiarization, I also looked for a few different kinds of postings. First, in every case, I always looked at the very first entries in the blog archive. These oldest entries often serve as a kind of statement-of-purpose. There doesn't seem to be a requirement or convention to do this, but there's a self-organizing process at work. My own blogging experience led me to understand that, as the first entries are made, there's no guarantee or knowledge about the future entries, and generally, there are no readers – this blog hasn't yet existed. The statement of purpose, while directed at the readers, is really a statement by the blogger *to himself*. The statement ultimately defines his intentions in blogging, what he wants out of it. This was of essential interest to me, because the direction of major parts of my blogger interviews concerned the very same issue.

A second kind of posting that I searched for was something that reflected on the nature of blogging itself. Most bloggers ended up saying something about their blog, but I wanted to find bloggers who had publicly thought through the meaning of blogging in a more general sense. Such postings would often take the form of statements about the relationships between blogging and the media, politics, or social trends. Since my study was designed to examine some of these relationships, I looked for a willingness to explore these ideas. Certainly, bloggers who did not have such postings nonetheless might think about these issues and might share those insights, but the fact that they hadn't in a forum they *controlled* signaled to me that it wasn't a primary focus.

A third kind of posting I searched for was pragmatic, but also meaningful. I wanted to find an email address. Surprisingly, not all blogs include one (or not so surprising, for anyone

who's been engulfed by the tsunami of spam on the Internet). Many blogs include a facility to reply to postings, a mechanism that allows non-email contact with the blogger. But I wanted an email address for two reasons. First, my interview protocol assumed contact via email. Second, it gave a name, an identity, to the blogger in a way that was an invitation to respond. More than once, I searched a blog to find an email address, only to realize, belatedly, that the blogger did not want email. Those individuals who did not post an email address, while protecting themselves from web-crawling spam-bots, were really making a choice to reject interaction. On a few occasions, I did use the "reply to posting" feature on blogs which included this facility but not an email address. Most bloggers ignored my reply, but some did reply via email to correspond.

### **Blogger Contact**

From the perspective of the blogger, one day they receive an email from me. Like me, most of the bloggers who posted an email address seemed to have created one for just that purpose; frequently, the addressee or the email domain matched, more or less, the blog name.

In the initial contact protocol I developed, the first email contained an introduction, a request to correspond, credentials, disclaimers, and the first round of questions authorized by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of USF. The responses to these emails were underwhelming – very few bloggers responded. On reflection, the email seemed to be too much, too generic, too much like a shotgun-blast questionnaire.

My solution was to split the contact into two phases. The initial contact email contained just the introduction, and a request to correspond. This essentially asked the blogger if they would be willing to correspond with me. If they assented, then the second email contained a reintroduction, credentials, disclaimers, and the first round of questions. Together, these two emails were more or less identical to the first one, but much more effective in getting people to respond.

I suspect that separating the email into two pieces provoked more interest in the interview, and personalized it more. It may have made the bloggers realize that this was not a widely-broadcast survey, but was a commitment of time and interest on my part, in them, personally. By doing it this way, I established a basis for rapport to develop.

## **Blogger Interview**

The texts of the first and second emails are reproduced in the appendices. These emails, and the response to them, comprise the first “round” of the interview. The responses are discussed in later sections of this paper. In most cases, though, the bloggers responded more or less directly to the questions being asked. Sometimes they grouped questions together, and other times answered them individually; most cut-and-pasted my original questions together with their answers, so the context was quite clear.

The depth of the responses was, generally, truly remarkable. As a rule, they were fully-thought out, well-crafted responses. These people *thought* about what they wrote, and they spent a respectable amount of time doing so – 2 to 5 page-length responses were the norm. Of course, as participants in a text-based medium, they are, clearly, quite comfortable with the written word, so this should not come as a surprise.

In the initial emails, I had stressed that this would ideally be a dialogue, not a one-sided conversation. Some bloggers took me up on that, replying with questions of their own, mixed in with their responses. In every single case, where they did ask me questions, the questions universally included at least these two: How did I find their blog? and, Why them? I took this as a reflection of the underlying drive-to-be-read, and as basic curiosity on their part.

Whether the blogger replied with questions or not, I always replied to their reply. Of course, if they did ask me questions, my reply included the answers to whatever they asked. I also included repeated thanks and statements of gratitude, and expressed appreciation for the valuable insights they’d given me. Couched in that context, I always asked follow-up questions. These questions were based on the response, so they were unique to each blogger. Generally, I asked for deeper answers to topics or themes they introduced, or asked them to reflect on the larger meaning of patterns they described in their answer, or pursued new tangents with them.

This second phase of the interviews were where the surprises, the value, the insights really originated. After contacting a few dozen bloggers, the responses to the initial email tended to fall into certain patterns of response, patterns that I ultimately learned to anticipate. For the bloggers that replied to my second-phase emails, there was a greater level of opening-up, and honesty that exceeded the sometimes-guarded responses in the first emails.

This pattern continued, until attrition or lack of interest ceased the correspondence. In every reply/reply cycle, I always thanked the blogger for their participation and insights, reflected

on what they had shared, and asked follow-up questions. Often, the bloggers would spontaneously include other insights that they assumed I would find interesting. Occasionally, they would point me toward another blogger they thought I might find engaging, or even forward our exchanges to them. Eventually, the cycle would wind down, and our correspondence would cease.

### **Blogger Profiles**

The bloggers that responded in these decreasing cycles became my key informants for this investigation. That is, they inevitably are the ones whose insights and experiences shaped my findings, analysis and conclusions. Because of the nature of my investigation into blogging, I came to “know” many more bloggers than I interviewed. Nevertheless, these key informants were those with whom I had extended email “conversations” lasting over extended periods of time. Generally, these were from a few weeks to a few months in duration.

Who were these key informants? In theory, the email interview protocol lends itself to fakery and misrepresentation. However, in all cases, I had the informant’s blog to confirm or contradict their self-reported personal characteristics. Individuals could still “invent” an identity (though I don’t believe that any did so) and apply it consistently, thus fooling me. However, even if they had they done so, the results of the interviews would still be enlightening as a record of what the alter-ego of that individual would be. Nevertheless:

- N: There were 27 individuals. (Where counts below vary, it’s due to lack of response).
- Gender: 14 said they were female, 13 said they were male.
- Age: 6 said they were 18-25; 9 said they were 26-35; 9 said they were 36-45.
- Education: 18 said they were college graduates; 6 said they had “some college”
- Occupation: 6 said they were website developers; 6 said they were students; 6 said they were consultants; 1 said he was a technical journalist
- 24 said they serve as computer “wiz” for others, serving as a technical resource for their peer groups
- Online: 6 said they were online for 1-2 hours daily; 6 said 2-4 hours; 6 said 8-10 hours; 6 said 10-12 hours.
- Media use: 6 said they use other media 2-4 hours daily; 12 said 4-6 hours; 6 said 6-8 hours.
- Favorite media: 6 said that they most-preferred media are newspaper or print; 2 said music; 18 said the Internet.
- Other online: 15 said they were current or former participants in online social groups.

This haphazard laundry list of demographic characteristics can't hope to summarize these people, of course. These don't describe who these people are, how they think or feel, or what led them to think as they do, or do as they do. This selection isn't even random. The normative individual that emerges from this is that of a college-educated woman in her thirties, who works as an information technology specialist, spending her working and free time in a media-saturated environment.

The bloggers themselves don't necessarily perceive this statistically average group. Their perceptions of other bloggers are shaped by their own experiences with them. For instance, one blogger described other bloggers to me as:

"Definitely, a white, male, 30-to-50s phenomenon in my technical/journalist circle. At the Supernova 2002 conference, which was packed with bloggers, there were maybe four or five women out of 100 attendees and speakers. One was Meg Hourihan of MegNut; another was Mena Trott of Movable Type. Meg and another women were both speakers, too."

This blogger sees blogging as dominated by white males, but acknowledges that it is particular subset of people ("technical/journalist"). Others perceive similar demographics:

"I think that the community overall is younger and tech savvy and pretty thoughtful as a whole. And certainly above average in income and better educated than the public at large.... Bloggers tend to be younger (say 45 and under), more white, more male than society as a whole. They also tend to be better off."

As blogging has become a mass-culture phenomenon, narrow slices of demographic subgroups presumably expand to parallel Internet usage in general. It's clear that perceptions by bloggers or Internet users of "who" is blogging will affect the overall experience for bloggers. Perceived similarities or differences foster feelings of community membership or outcast status, perceptions that may or may not have statistical support in the wider society.

### ***Methods: Conclusions***

The methods used to investigate blogging are natural outgrowths of existing qualitative-research methods. They were adapted for use on the Web, but not radically so. The methods were chosen to triangulate on the "process, product and commentary" of online experience, in order to demonstrate various dimensions of the experiences. There was good reason to think that these dimensions were relevant to the understanding of the lifecycle of the technology of blogging.

How well did they work? As discussed in other contexts, results were clear, but surprising. Using multiple methods was a good idea, as various insights sometimes emerged only in one dimension of research. Where this occurred, probing in another dimension usually revealed the truth or falsehood of the insight. My view of the overall strengths and weaknesses of the methods are described below:

#### Reading Blogs: Strengths

- There is a huge volume of blogs available.
- Many, many bloggers had surprisingly deep and self-analytical statements on why/how they blog.
- Able to see the variety of blogs available, and see how individuals and trends change over time.

#### Reading Blogs: Weaknesses

- Is often only the public face, what the blogger wants to say to the world.
- Some blogs have no personal data at all.

#### Writing Blog: Strengths

- Best understanding of the blood, sweat and tears going into the blog postings.
- Sense of opportunity and obligation.
- Many surprises - it's harder than it seems just by reading.

#### Writing Blog: Weaknesses

- My blogging experience is unique to me. Others would make wildly different choices.
- My personal characteristics prevented me from being a highly effective blogger.

#### Interviewing Bloggers: Strengths

- It was the best opportunity for bloggers to open up outside of the blogging format.
- Most are very comfortable with writing, often more comfortable than in-person.
- Fairly deep and analytical results, that illuminate the process and history in their blogs.
- Explains where they came from on their life trajectory. Doesn't necessarily show in the blogs.

#### Interviewing Bloggers: Weaknesses

- Written gives only a good forum for those willing and motivated to share. Many didn't.
- Question/Reply format isn't really an unstructured interview, so difficult for blogger to introduce topics (though many bloggers did do so).
- There was no way for me to verify blogger statements, other than on the blog.

Of course no method or collection of methods can ever be perfect. In the case of this investigation into blogs, I believe that the web-tailored methods were well-chosen to find out the social mechanics of the technology of blogging. The multi-pronged approach also helped to correct analytical errors that occurred in one or even multiple areas. By being able to check my findings and results against other areas, I could confirm or rethink my emerging understanding and analysis.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

A recurrent finding of both basic and applied research on cyberspace is that one can account for the emergent patterns only by recourse to multiple practices. This contrasts strongly with the presumption of unidirectional determination typical of ‘tech talk’ – that science discovers, technology gives scientific knowledge material form, and humans adapt. Rather, to understand them, AIT [Advanced Information Technology] innovation and the multiple facets of techno-related social change must be conceptualized by broader patterns of social formation reproduction. [Hakken 1999:216]

In attempting to understand the rise and flourishing of blogging as a technology/practice, the efforts converged on blogs themselves, my first-hand exploration of blogging, and direct interviews with bloggers. These findings lead me to an analysis that includes the milieu in which this arose, the spread through various cultural groups, and the underlying motivational process at work. I call these, respectively, context, Geek-Chic, and personal community.

Of course, field data on blogging aren’t labeled with such neat categories; these are analytic categories of information. A person’s experience with blogging is simultaneously the product of a thousand contexts, processes and motivations. My interest in analyzing these this way is in applying the lessons learned to other technologies, to grapple with the observed and intensifying rates of technology change occurring in the Western/global society.

David Hakken’s quote, above, reminds us that technology and technological change do not exist somehow ‘outside’ of society itself. Instead, they are integral parts of the process of social reproduction. How technology is experienced by individuals and described by society (such as, in the media) may indeed make it seem as though technology is imposed. In the macroscopic scale of cultural meanings, however, technological innovation is one of those things that give shape and coherence to ongoing definition of groups within cultures, and society itself. There *is* no ‘outside,’ at least for this kind of technology, in this culture.

### ***Findings: Context***

Context is key, of course. The paramount importance of the social context that originates a social practice is obvious. In any discussion of social trends, a detailed examination of the context in which something arises goes a long way towards understanding it. The tough part is in knowing which parts of the context are relevant. Aspects of the macro-level social context, for all their importance, are meaningless except in ways that the context affects specific individuals. The personal dimensions of context are what matter, how it affects an individual here and now.

In the case of the practice/technology of blogging, my literature review suggested three related broad areas of inquiry, or domains of contextual relevance. The *Mediascape* is the lived practice of the current operation of the institutions of Mass Media and Journalism. *WebWorld* is the current state of integration of the World Wide Web and the Internet into social life. *Lifeways* are the day-to-day lives experienced in the larger context of American life. These domains are interrelated, of course. Technology/practices like blogging exist squarely in all three domains; but so do many other technology/practices. Again, what matters are how individuals experience these, not their macro-level status in society.

#### **The Mediascape: Mass Media/Journalism**

The mass media and journalism are interrelated institutions. Journalism, of course, is a subdomain of the larger universe that is the mass media. Different subdomains in the mass media have their own traditions, histories, processes and issues. Journalism is very separate and distinct from, say, Hollywood movies, children's cartoons, or popular novels. In other words, the umbrella that is "mass media" covers a lot of very heterogeneous terrain.

Within this terrain, though, journalism holds a unique position, one that is so deeply embedded into American notions of democracy and government, that the position is enshrined in the American Constitution. Journalism is about seeking the "truth". With that privileged position come processes and institutions, structures, rights, obligations, practices and histories that are uniquely highly-developed toward a certain kind of outcome. The journalism that results reflects each current generation's beliefs about such subtleties as the nature of truth and reality, the limits of civic engagement, or the role of the people in government. To many journalists, the forms and processes of journalism have acquired sacrosanct nature: it's "Journalism", answering to a higher call than sheer crass commercial mass media.

Through the 1980's and 1990's, well-marked trends toward overlapping form, content and style began to collapse these separate categories into one. The resulting quasi-religious debates over "infotainment" and similar issues reflect the current adjustments being made to the very-cultural notions of what, exactly, is "journalism." For instance, Alterman claims we have "a media culture that is increasingly giving itself over to tabloid fluff that distracts as it simultaneously disinforms" (Alterman 2003:262). Harsh criticism, and there's much harsher out there. But the history of journalism is marked by wide evolutionary swings in style and content. The mass media is a kind of cultural poster-child for malleable style and content. Through history, both have strongly altered direction in the case of technological innovations. What's more, historical understanding of both has always shaped and been shaped by their current cultural "niches."

Bird notes that the terrible debates over journalistic form and content may be somewhat overwrought: "I have tried to place scandals in cultural context, seeing them as playing out moral dramas in extravagant terms. If news audiences generally prefer lively, dramatic, human interest stories over news about political and economic issues, this is not necessarily a terrible thing" (Bird 2003:48). If the current tendency is toward a kind of journalism that was out of favor in past years, Bird's sanguine view is that the narrative structure of scandal-driven "human interest" story is one that people relate to better, with better retention and understanding. Perhaps the real message here is that journalism isn't giving people what they want or need.

There is a danger, however, of one form eclipsing the other: "My concern, then, is that 'story' news, instead of being one element in news, is moving toward becoming the only element" (Bird 2003, 49). If infotainment is the domination by personality-driven stories over the traditional inverted pyramid, it's perhaps an ironical justice: for years, only the traditional form was considered by journalists to be valid. If nothing else, the rise of infotainment to parallel 'news' has driven the realization that both have their place in culture.

In this discussion of the context that gave rise to blogging, I deliberately collapse the boundaries between the two separate institutions of the mass media, and the journalistic subdomain. Why? Because, for many people, *those boundaries don't exist*. Perhaps this is what drove the academic concern of the last 20 years. An article of information is "on TV" or "on the Web," or "I read it somewhere." Does source matter? Does the reputation of the source matter? Of course, and certainly, and more to some individuals than others, or more in certain contexts. But it is also true that for many people, in most contexts, the origin of dissociated

information is *irrelevant*. Factoids rule. In this world, there is not the mass media and journalism; there is simply the Mediascape. And the size and influence of the Mediascape is growing rapidly.

In the Mediascape, the overlapping and disjunctive world of global and local mass media has components that helped give rise to blogging. These include the “torrent,” or sheer volume of information in the media, the commercialism conundrum, the hunger for connection, the convergence of digital media, and the changing direction of media flow.

### ***The Torrent***

The mass media “torrent” to use Todd Gitlin’s formulation, refers to the enormous rise in volume of media experienced in mainstream American life. While this is primarily an experience revolving around electronic media, especially visual media, there is crossover between print, audio, and visual media in electronic media. The growth of the volume of media is historically measurable, in a large variety of ways. Work like that of Robert Putnam (Putnam 2000:216-246) shows that what matters is not simply that there’s more television watched, or fewer newspapers read, or any of a number of other measures of the torrent, but that this consumption ramifies through other domains of social life. Others note that “we should not be abandoning the goal of understanding real people, living real lives, in which media play an ever-increasing, if certainly problematic, role” (Bird 2003:190). This increasing role relates to both the volume and meaning of media in our media-saturated lives.

For my purposes, the relevant aspect of the domain of the Mediascape is the *perception* of the torrent itself, by both the media and by individuals. Society and the mass media regularly recognize the torrent, as a stated and perceived norm of daily life. The perception of the torrent is part of the immediate, personal context that drive drives individuals to feeling overwhelmed, or to writing a blog. Regardless of whether television watching has increased or decreased within the recent past, or if magazine sales skyrocket while newspaper sales plummet, what counts is the experience of the torrent. For individuals in the Mediascape (and who in America escapes it?) the mainstream ‘norm’ of perception is that there is a new, overwhelming media presence in the lives of, simply, everyone.

In my interviews with the bloggers, this was simply, a given. For these individuals, the torrent is as real as the Web. Consider these replies from bloggers, describing their experiences online, and their characterizations of other bloggers.

- ? “I’ve had a web presence since the mid-90’s and I’ve been on the internet since the late 80’s. There are still existing M.U.S.H. logs (multi-user shared hallucination) with dialog and content from that era, if you know where to find them. I still have all of my AOL IRC sessions from the early 90’s that I’ve occasionally pulled out for friends.... If you’re defining it as a way to share online content with a group of people, I’ve been doing that ever since college.”
- ? “I can actually relax online better than I can in my own life.”
- ? “Personal characteristics of bloggers seem to be extremely diverse but the ones I do know seem to enjoy Japanese anime, graphics design and games quite a bit. I do too.”

Of course, the World Wide Web is media itself. As a group, bloggers spend a lot of time online, managing their media consumption. One illustration of this was a series of questions I asked in my initial round of interviews concerning media use rates, and querying what one media they would keep, if they had to give up all others.

With very few exceptions, the bloggers said they would keep online as a media, because all other media can be found there. Interestingly, though, most also listed all their media consumption on a weekly basis, but including as “media” such activities as gaming, chatting, and emailing, as well as more traditional sources. For example:

“There has always been some in the other online fora I attend. Some of those fora permit or encourage political discussion, some forbid or discourage it. A blog (or web site in general) is under my control and I can discuss what I choose to expose to the world (a common thought about edgy topics is “what would I think if my mother-in-law read this?” <g>).”

Clearly, then, the media torrent for bloggers is, if anything, even larger than for most of mainstream America. They thrive on it. A blogger wrote to me:

“The more I think about it the more I think a prime motive for myself and for most of the bloggers I enjoy reading is to reverse the knowledge hoarding pattern in our lives. I think many of us are sponges way past our saturation points. We both want to tell other people things we know that we think should be more widely known and to show other people how much we know.”

“Sponges way past our saturation points” – it’s a vivid image, one that repeats the floodwaters metaphor so common in discussions of the “torrent”.

The contextual clues given by this experience, and other aspects of the rise of blogging, reveal that the media “torrent” is both perceptual and real. That is, the experiences of many people suggest that media activity is a large and growing part of their daily lives. The people who blog, in my interviews with them, convey a definite sense of enjoyment in this torrent. This isn’t misery. These people thrive on the sea of mediated information available to their eyeballs and mouse clicks.

By extension, I propose that this holds true for many of those who don’t blog as well. Presumably, the Mediascape wouldn’t thrive and expand if it only spread misery and stress. In the context of American life, the Mediascape torrent is real, is perceived, and is enjoyed, by millions.

### ***Commercialism***

The Mediascape is, unmistakably, a commercial enterprise. Commercialism doesn’t simply creep across media content or influence its development. Commercialism and the media are conjoined twins, each requiring the other. In many contexts, noncommercial media simply do not exist, and in others, they are irrelevant to the point of vanishing.

This provides an important clue about the rise of blogging. Of course, non-commercial media have always existed, and will presumably continue. From community radio stations to neighborhood newsletters, to the debatable characteristics of publicly-funded television networks, and a thousand other permutations, there have always been mass media that didn’t strive to make a profit. These kinds of media share certain characteristics with each other, and with their commercial brethren. Chief among these, and at the core of what media content itself is, is the “selling” of a viewpoint. In all cases, content authors create a worldview, and propagate it forward in the content. While the aims of commercial and noncommercial media may be different, their fundamental processes are similar.

The commercialism of the Mediascape is much maligned in the blogosphere (a name for the blogging social realm), but bloggers also rely on commercial media for raw material. Much blogging (especially in “filtering” blogs) is relinking or reanalyzing real-world mass-mediated events. It’s hard, virtually impossible, to link and reflect on real-life events that are not distributed via the commercial mass media/journalism corporations.

Some bloggers don’t care, but many see creeping commercialism infesting the pristine blogosphere as a terrible inevitability. A number of them referred to “greedy corporations,” and

many expressed the realization that “Co-option is a serious long-term threat, but to the Internet as a whole rather than just blogging.”

The commercial aspects of reliance on the mass media create a kind of love/hate relationship with journalism. The existence of these commercial ventures at this key juncture in intra-society communications seems to grate on many of the bloggers. There seems to be worry about the commercial co-optation likely to emerge in blogging’s future, as well. That take was summarized by the blogger who wrote to me:

“Unfortunately, I see the greedy eyes of corporate America looking at blogs and seeking to exploit them. They’ll continue to find ways to hook products into blogs (there are instances of product-driven blogs). I also think that corporate America will seek to squelch blogs, or try to limit them or their influence among online readership. Most people aren’t afraid to express their opinions about products and Corporate America sees that as a threat. Corporate America doesn’t want innovation, they want marketing avenues they can exploit.”

These beliefs about commercialism were commonly expressed to me as worries surrounding the future of blogging, democracy, or society itself:

- ? “I’m concerned about tools like blogger (I paid for the professional version) that are, at present, free. People will get hooked and then advertising will take over, services will become limited, you’ll have to pay for features you’ve become used to, or you’ll have to pony up more personal information in order to use their service. The best tools will get bought out (as you saw with hotmail), and maybe the basic tools (like domain registration -- brought to you by McDonald’s?).”
- ? “I think you’ll see advertising directed at bloggers based on what their entries are. Google has started to do the pay-for-placement ads with their searches, they’ll find a way to extend that blogs.”
- ? “I also think that corporations will become more militant about independent bloggers giving product reviews. You already see corporations suing over misuse of keywords and meta data, and lawyers scrubbing usenet groups and review sites looking for people who speak against brands (gasp!).”

- ? “The fight for search engine placement and placement in blog aggregators will go to those who can pay for it (corporations), and blogs that don't have corporate backing will become marginalized.”
- ? “I'm also concerned about the government's increasing interest in the web. I shudder to think about this aspect.”

This complex of beliefs may or may not hold true for the mass of non-blogging public. But the contextual significance suggested by this is in the phrase “Corporate America.” Commercialism is seen as a real thing in society, a living force (much like Hakken’s “actant”) with motivations, goals, strategies, behaviors, and capabilities. The commercial media are simply a concrete embodiment of Corporate America, and one that those thriving in the media torrent must engage in this love/hate relationship, if they want to participate.

Mass Media/Journalism, too, suffers from this kind of relationship. If the needs of the public for non-commercialized involvement and personal experience were not being met in the torrent, then something had to change. Either those drives had to be met another way, or the torrent itself had to change.

### ***Convergence***

One change in the contextual practice of the Mediascape was already hinted at by the bloggers. It concerns “convergence”, or the mutation of all forms of mediated information into digital information, stored, transmitted and received electronically. In media-industry parlance, this also includes the merging of organizations with previously different histories and missions, and the resulting culture shock/adaptation/reformulation cycle.

On the web, convergence is old news. It is a *fait accompli*, embodied in the hyperlink, the reality of which allows a surfer to jump from a BBC video clip, to a downloaded Britney Spears single, to an *Atlantic Monthly* analysis article, to streaming radio, to community discussion boards, to the *New York Times*, at will. Consider this interview response from a blogger:

“Having a computer and being online, because these days there's little that you can't find out online. For years now, I've turned straight to the computer and the Internet when I had a question. I haven't thought about checking a book for reference for ages. The Internet is really cool cause it's easy to find the answers to a simple question without having to go to the library and look through indexes to try and find pages that might have

the answer to your question. Search Engines work so much better for that. Heck, Ask Jeeves was all about that.”

Information digitized is information made clickable, as servers and web pages don't “care” what format content is, or what organization produced it. Blogging, like web surfing, thrives on this; indeed, it would be impossible without it.

The significance of this is still ramifying through media industry and social institutions. Witness adaptive strategies such as the recorded music industry suing its customers, to realize that confusion still reigns in certain sectors for how this will ultimately play out. It's much clearer for the day-to-day web surfer. The Mediascape of the web is, at some level, the superset of all other media. Regardless of the origin of a particular piece of media content, it, increasingly, must be on the web or it simply doesn't matter. As a journalist, if my piece only exists for its brief day of sunshine on quickly-fading newsprint, not only can it not factor into larger social debate, its audience is limited, it's forgotten and gone. I can't even use it on my resume.

The ultimate direction is clear. Media that aren't yet on the Web, will be. Most are already there. Holdouts (book publishing, recorded music, local media) must adapt, die, or be relegated to obscurity. While business issues such as pricing models exist across multiple industries, in the current context, it appears that little can derail the current drive toward universal digitization.

### ***“Mass” Media Directional Flow***

The process of universal digitization that is apparent in the mass media and on the Web reveals a subtle aspect of the current context that turns out to have large implications for the emergence of blogging. It concerns the direction of flow of information in the mass media. In the pre-digital days, there was little doubt about this. Mass media absorbed information from the public domain (reporting) and distributed information in one direction (printing) with short-term and long-term cultural feedback loops to adjust content to changing tastes and concerns. The contours of that theoretical structure have been the subject of debate throughout the history of journalism and mass communications studies, and will be for some time.

The convergence phenomenon ultimately created the possibility of reformulating this model. The directional flow of information on the Web is, of course, one-to-many, or many-to-many. Information has always been able to travel in this way (witness: gossip networks, black-

markets, or chain mail). The web has simply made such flows dramatically easier. In the process, what came under review was the potential meaning of the “mass” in mass media.

In the earlier formulation of “mass media,” the unstated assumption was that the vehicle of communication (newspaper, book, radio or television station, etc.) required both an institutional infrastructure and stratified access to it. For it to be mass media, it had to be distributed using a mass-production technology. For a message to be embodied into that media, it had to be placed there by someone with control to this limited resource. As digitization and convergence have lowered the barriers to media content production and distribution, a new conceptualization of “mass” media is emerging: it is, simply, media seen by masses of people. Therefore, mass media do not require a physical or social infrastructure, though, clearly, it’s an advantage when producing and distributing content.

For bloggers, this seems to be still a fresh concept, and one that many take delight in. To begin with, many express a variant of this rationale for their blogging:

“Why blog? Notice me/ To make something out of the culture/information I've been sucking in forever.”

In this simple reversal of direction, there is joy:

“It's a feeling I hardly ever got reading any newspaper or magazine and certainly never got watching Peter Jennings et al. I got it from books by my favorite writers, and now I get it from blogs. Which leads to the one likely danger of the blog habit. The possibility that the backup brain will supercede the mainframe. Too many interesting voices saying too many interesting things. So where's your own voice in all this. Maybe another good reason to start a blog, it forces you for at least part of the day to think and say something for yourself.”

Many bloggers explained their involvement in blogging as related to their intrigue and interest in this ability to produce and publish their ideas. Generally, these are the politically involved “filtering” blogs:

? “I was intrigued by the idea of personal publishing. A blog, for me, is rather like a personal newspaper. I'm an active participant on several mailing lists. Blogging is a natural step forward. The opportunity to write and publish my own work was too good a chance to pass up. It provides a venue for any creative writing I have, a public "diary" if I choose, and a place to publish technical articles I can't place elsewhere.”

- ? “Especially now, we need all the voices we can get. The US government is going rogue, it was never elected in the first place. The world seems to be getting more dangerous, with more and more fundamentalist movements everywhere (overseas and locally), so voices of reason (and of course MY voice is a voice of reason <g>) are valuable.”
- ? “Although the individual publishing is exciting (after all, when everybody can own a newspaper, then everybody can take advantage of freedom of the press), it's the interconnections that suggest new forms of publishing and communication. The Link Cosmos (<http://www.technorati.com>) and the blog stock game (sorry, don't remember the link) suggest possible new ways of looking at these "personal newspapers".”
- ? “I was reading a lot of election oriented blogs at the time and I realized after commenting for a few weeks that I had something to add for political junkies. Most of my postings are political in nature and especially concentrate on state and local politics in Illinois and Saint Louis. I tend to either report part of the story that is below the media's radar or analyze the politics behind the story. I especially focus on those things that are left unsaid by reporters, but are pretty common knowledge among those familiar with political leaders.”

There is something dizzying about producing a message (a blogging post? a photograph?) that, literally, anyone can access (given access to the Internet). Numerous bloggers expressed joy at taking over and shaping part of the media stream. Suddenly, anyone can easily *produce* mass media, not simply consume it.

### **WebWorld: Internet Technology**

Internet technology is a facilitator for all of the changes that derive from the World Wide Web. By Internet technology, I mean the whole collection of technologies that allow for the construction, placement, and viewing of web pages. But technology is never just an artifact, or the process that produces it: it is also the context of the use of that object, the practice engaged in by people using it. A particular Internet technology is, by itself, meaningless and useless. The complex of meanings that grow up around a technology derive from the complex of meanings that are associated with the practices, not the object.

Before the technological object are the set of practices that gave rise to it; before those practices are a set of emerged meanings, and before all of those there is the context in which the meanings emerged. In the WebWorld context, components that influenced the development of

blogging include the technological infrastructure, Moore's Law, the veneration of innovation, the concept of The Next Big Thing, and official goals of subversive empowerment.

### ***Moore's Law - The technology plateau***

The technical aspects of the cycle of innovation in digital technology are neatly captured in "Moore's Law." Gordon Moore's 1965 observation about the speed of doubling of density in silicon (every 12-18 months) has held true over almost 40 years of silicon innovation. It is the accepted conventional wisdom, demonstrably true for computer hardware. The possibility of this is due to the physical characteristics of silicon, and the continually expanding technical capabilities of design and manufacturing. But that doesn't explain the meaning or motivation for the truth of the "Law."

The significance for Moore's Law in the current context is more closely associated with the observation that it is the expected truth for speedy evolution to be the norm, everywhere in WebWorld, not only in silicon development. There is an expectation, a demand, that today's technology will be outmoded tomorrow. Plateaus are always temporary, whether they are in silicon or social practice.

If this expectation only applied to the technology of computer hardware, it would be an interesting historical footnote on the march toward development of maximal information content storage on silicon. But it's not just about hardware. The idea in Moore's Law permeates all Internet technologies, to varying degrees. Hardware, software, applications, practices, standards: all are moving targets. Change is not just a norm, it's a kind of maxim. Consider the outlook held by this interviewed blogger:

"I enjoy it, it's relaxing. I didn't think that I'd be doing this for as long as I have. Usually I find that I master something and then move on -- I'm easily bored. However, there's always interesting people and things going on in my life and I haven't tired of documenting them. I also get enough feedback from friends and strangers that I know what I'm doing is good stuff. If it were crap, I think I'd walk away."

She enjoys it, but knows that she will bore of it eventually. In the meantime, it's a compelling practice because there is sufficient change within the technology/practice of blogging her life.

If a practice isn't changing, it must be dead – there will "always" be better, faster, easier, cheaper, cooler ways, right around the corner. Focusing on near-miraculous scientific development

rates, WebWorld expects, *demands*, that today's technology will be outmoded tomorrow through development and innovation.

### ***Innovation***

WebWorld is a place that officially venerates innovation, though it doesn't seem to reward it systematically, rationally, or objectively. The engine of change that drives the cycle of innovation isn't innovation *per se*, but the *belief* in innovation. Quasi-officially, if a practice/technology is more than a few months old, it's outmoded, obsolete, old. There "must" be a "better" way. What this means is that the requirement is change, *not* improvement. Thus American ideals of "Progress" are fulfilled and given material expression in the Web. Progress implies change; therefore, to be progressing, things must change. Ultimately, in WebWorld, perfectly servicable practice/technologies are "innovated" out of existence, simply because they are "old."

Even within the framework of a practice/technology, this pattern shows clearly. In the history of blogging, each adaptation – from blogrolls to feedback controls to meme tracking – has had a cycle of innovation/adoption that brought it from the edge of the blogosphere to the center. This shows up in the bloggers' responses to questions about the use of their blogrolls, and about the meanings attached to them. Other aspects that invite this view include the cycle of innovation associated with the blog-hosting services themselves. A blogger wrote to me:

"I originally used weblogs.com, but found it slow, tedious, and prone to developing system errors. I migrated to Greymatter, but it had an insecure password process, used text files, and could corrupt itself. Recently, I switch to Movable Type in part because it uses a database and is actively developed by its makers."

For each of the switches, the blogger had a justification. That migration across toolsets was described by multiple bloggers as they recounted their blogging history to me. Partially, this is explained by their own developing skills or features demanded from the toolsets. Frequently, though, no explanation was given.

In this environmental context, the mantra is "change," and the culture is de-centered, everywhere and nowhere at once. The result is a cycle of innovation that has a certain *apparent* randomness. Lightning strikes and results in: email. Or "Leetspeak". Or Flash Mobs. Or "social networking software." Or Blogs. The rewards (material and nonmaterial) that accrue to the innovators who back the *right* innovation can be substantial, so this is a serious endeavor. Right

at this moment, there are thousands of individuals pushing, attempting to foster the next innovation, the next Next Big Thing. Some will be successful. Most won't.

### ***The Next Big Thing***

In this context, the emergence of new social adaptations isn't just expected, it's required. This is exemplified by the WebWorld phenomenon of the Next Big Thing, also known as the "Next Killer App" (a formulation that emphasizes the commercial profit potential of socio-technical innovations). *Spotting* the emergence of the Next Big Thing early is the goal of hundreds of thousands people looking to be the new early adopters, and thus, high in status in the future. Therefore, the techno/cultural milieu is under constant scrutiny and manipulation in order to generate and commandeer the creation of the next Next Big Thing.

In its time, each innovation in practice/technology relied on the current technological context to create an innovation in practice, an adaptation of current practice/technology. Eventually, this adaptation gets swept through the whole Technology Lifecycle, where innovation mutates, spreads, become formalized, accelerates, and eventually becomes the current practice/technology. Applying this going forward, many bloggers described the future of blogging as lying in the expansion of multi-author group blogs, in responses such as this:

"I think blogs and other CMSs [Content-Management Systems] are eventually going to bring forth new things. Things like "groupware" if you'll excuse the marketing-speak. Collaboration in writing and decision making in ways that we don't do yet. BBSs are part of it, too. These communities of interest I keep mentioning need tools for decision making and passing information that communities of locality don't need. What exactly will come forth I don't know."

This blogger is describing the shifts in practice, with corresponding emergent jargons, that apply to current social practice. This eventually provides the context for the next cycle of innovation, development of specialized tools, and geek-chic processes that will foster the spread of the "groupware" Next Big Thing.

As a practice/technology transitions through the Technology Lifecycle, society acquires a consensual understanding of it that shifts over time. For example, "the founders of file-sharing sites were hailed as revolutionary heroes, using 'subversive' technologies, when in reality, they were merely offering more opportunities for consumption for those with the resources to benefit. And Napster's founder now has a deal with a media conglomerate" (Bird 2003:174). By making

the leap to respected business partner (with a bad-boy-past), Peer-to-Peer file sharing organizations like Napster create the opportunity for the *next* Next Big Thing.

There are, to be certain, innumerable practice/technologies that never make it to the status of the Next Big Thing. Important clues as to what makes something the Next Big Thing exist in the social histories of these trends. Blogging, by any measure, is a pop-culture Next Big Thing like few other practice/technologies. This is proof that the flourishing of a practice/technology has little to do with the details of how or whether it innovates over current practice.

There must always be a 'Next Big Thing.' And yesterday's Next Big Thing is over, done, passe, although it never disappears. In some ways, this is a nonlinear social equivalent of Moore's Law. Moore's Law concerns innovation along a single thread of scientific research. The logic of the Next Big Thing is somewhat more fickle, or arbitrary, almost seeming to be random.

But the Next Big Thing isn't random. In WebWorld, each Next Big Thing comes with a mission, a vision, a complex of social goals, sometimes stated quite clearly. The Next Big Thing is always subversive of power, is always empowering the underdog, is always opening up boundaries and creating a new world. The Next Big Thing is always what will save democracy, de-stress our lives, recreate work and family, connect us to our true nature, foster community, and lead us back to our pristine (pre-Web) past. The Next Big Thing will save us from ourselves.

### ***Subversive Millennialism***

This millennialist rhetoric would be funny, were it not so serious. The history of the Internet is *littered* with practices/technologies that did not reshape us or remake the world. Gopher. BBSs. MUDs. Usenet. IRC. E-mail. Instant Messaging. Online Gaming. HTML. Web Pages. Online Shopping. Java. Telecommuting. Day-Trading. Online Dating. Vanity pages. Online auctions. Shopping agents. Avatars. Portals. Online Bill-payment. E-books. Search Engines. Open-source. There are dozens, or hundreds of practice/technologies that count as yesterday's 'Next Big Thing.'

For some, Blogging is today's 'Next Big Thing.' Blogs are "revolutionary" (Bird 2003:183), with the potential to dramatically change journalism itself. Tomorrow, no doubt, blogging will be *yesterday's* 'Next Big Thing.' It follows in the lineage described above. Bloggers are not unaware of this, of course. It's hard to ignore that a sustained, long-term activity on the Web might last.... months. The bloggers I asked about the future universally saw the

possible, probable, mutation of blogging practice/technology into something else. Few seemed to think that blogging, as currently practiced, would continue for a long time.

The blogosphere expresses the millennialist rhetoric of the norms of the Next Big Thing. The joy bloggers have in taking over the media stream is clearly expressed, palpable throughout the blogosphere. A trajectory is apparent, however, where the language becomes more tempered over time. In that are the seeds of the cycle of the emergence of the next, “truly” subversive Next Big Thing.

### **Lifeways: Society**

Bloggers may be drawn heavily from the ranks of the Internet elite – broadband users who worship at the altar of change – but this only reminds us that such elites have offline existence, as members of the larger society. In the case of the context of blogging, that offline existence “IRL” (in real life) is all of society. Given that, there are aspects of the lifeways of American society that influence the how blogging evolved and is perceived.

A number of relevant lifeways components emerged that seem to influence blogging, such as the need for self-expression, the tendency toward anomie and atomization, the need to “connect” with others, nostalgic views of life, the norm of multitasking, and the “globalism” of the current time. In interviews, bloggers gave me a great number of reasons why they or other bloggers participate. For example, one gave me the following list:

- ? “They seek to establish themselves as some sort of authority by giving personal movie reviews, expounding on a particular subject they feel they have some expertise in, expressing political agendas, etc.”
- ? “They want to 'stir the pot' to see what trouble they can cause or see if they can get a rise out of folks.”
- ? “Aggregators or long-lists-o-links people who scrub the net looking for interesting things, news items, etc. so their page becomes a landing page or portal for a particular subject. They like the hits or pseudo-notoriety they get from blogging.”
- ? “I know people who blog just get the skill set or to have a web presence to show potential employers. I think this is valid reasoning because I know employers who won't hire you if you don't have a web presence.”
- ? “They are lonely or shy and this is a 'safe' outlet for them.”

? “They want to try the latest thing.”

I examine ideas such as these in detail in the sections of this document describing personal motivation. But note that the quotes above speak about online activity that is very much related to offline lifeways.

Why blogging, why now? As Todd Gitlin put it, online “you are wired, plugged in; you click, you transmit, you retrieve, you download – therefore you are” (Gitlin 2001:106).

### ***Constructing the Self***

In the individualistic, self-centered, self-actualized West, the answer to the question ‘Who Are You?’ is of utmost importance. It’s also very tricky to answer. There is no single way of answering this question, for self or for others, but there are some common shortcuts. The geographic/community approach, historically appropriate, seems to be losing relevance. The occupational self-definition is a primary and growing method, as is the family structure/role definition. But a primary, and often overlooked way, is that people define themselves by what they choose or avoid *consuming*. The list of products and services that factor into my existence are a shorthand, a *lingua franca* of pop-culture that conveys quite succinctly my lifestyle enclave, or where I fit into the current milieu.

For example: Who am I? My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I live in \_\_\_\_\_. I work for \_\_\_\_\_. I drive \_\_\_\_\_. I \_\_\_\_\_ married. I exercise \_\_\_\_\_. I \_\_\_\_\_ Starbucks. I \_\_\_\_\_ newspapers. I think the President \_\_\_\_\_. I vote \_\_\_\_\_. I \_\_\_\_\_ fast food. For fun, I \_\_\_\_\_. I think \_\_\_\_\_. I watch \_\_\_\_\_ television... Clearly, this kind of thing can go on *ad nauseum*, and it does, daily, in American lifeways. Trivial accidents of history or preference originate for random or motivated reasons, and are aggregated together to form a self. I, the whole, am somehow the sum of my preferences.

In blogs, many of the hidden messages in people’s postings are just this kind of definition through choices. Consider this blogger’s laundry-list of interests, in response to my question regarding what kind of posts he makes:

“What kind of things do I post? My current topic list is: Family & Parenting; Games & Game Programming; Mac(intosh); Media; News; Personal; Politics; Sex; Work.”

In blogging, the subject matter itself is part of the self that is being constructed. The above individual “is” his blog, and his blog “is” his take on these listed topics. The self thus constructed is a clear statement of some subset of the interests of the individual.

But one blogger asked me, not rhetorically at all:

“Since the Internet lets you be someone else, why not be someone else? Why drag your old identity into a new context that doesn't require it?”

There is not the same expectation of continuity and coherence online, and the underlying belief seems to be that people can be their “true” self (or at least a different one) online. For example:

“Adopt a new identity, new name, new persona for part of your day. I don't get gaming but I've known a couple people who have the obsession (ultima online, everquest). It seems to me, as an outsider, that the essence of these games is they give you a chance to be someone else. Computers do that in general, I think.”

Getting the “chance” to be someone else.... it's one alternative way to look at selfhood, as an opportunity for unencumbered reinvention. One blogger who was quite happy about *not* carrying his offline identity online wrote this to me:

“Clearly not everyone uses blogs the same way. Many, even most if you count the journal and diary blogs, are about celebrating, publicizing the real world persona, not creating some new net identity. But then again, the other me is still me, so who knows. Think I'm lost in the mirror here.”

Lost in the mirror is an apt description.... the self that bloggers choose to construct online is simultaneously not their “real” self, but obviously very real; it's them, after all.

What makes a self? Who are we, anyway? As individuals, we define and construct our inner and external self not just through categorical, unchangeable attributes, but through performance. These performances take a range of forms, from the lifestyle choices sampled above, to communication protocols and every range of human behavior. In blogging, three main avenues for performing the self exist. These are the post or link, the blogroll, and the direct expression.

The blogging post is a direct statement by the blogger, mediated through the standard constructs of blogging. A large part of this revolves around the link. A link is a hyperlink, included in a blog post, that links in another Web site, story, article, posting, anything the blogger wants. The blog post then reflects on, amplifies, or gives other information about the posted item. The link in a post is a way of suggesting what the blogger has been doing, finding to be ‘cool’ on the Web. It's what the blogger is consuming, so serves as a statement of self. When I asked bloggers how they decided what to link, I got a range of answers that revolved around a spark of

interest, humor, or 'cool.' There was no single answer, but the idea was summarized by the blogger who said that when she "howled with laughter" on reading someone else's post, she'd link it.

The second, and next most important way for constructing the self in blog posting, is blogrolling. A blogroll is the list of other blogs that the owner of a blog routinely visits, admires, or otherwise thinks to be important. When I asked bloggers how it is that they constructed their blogroll, deciding who to link, I got a range of answers. Some bloggers indicated basics such as "It's mostly places I visit a lot," and "I use blog rolling for convenience, not because I have a personal relationship with the person blogging." Some focused on the pragmatic and shifting nature of allegiances, such as "I link to friend's sites and several other sites that I like. The sites I link to depend on my interests at the moment of designing." The official ethos of blogrolling suggests a connection, a bond, in worldview, attitude, outlook, or shared group affiliation. This shows up clearly in the tone and content of many blogrolls. In most cases, there is some coherence to the type of blogs appearing on a blogroll. The pattern of attitudes and interests reflected in the blogroll, in turn reflect those of the blogger.

A third and most inconsistent way of performing the self in blog posting, is through including content that are a series of more-or-less direct statements of self, in a standardized but flexible format. Each of these formats passes through the blogosphere as a temporary fad or fashion, which never completely disappears. For some formats, the standard demands including it in blogrolls (or "permalinks" for those who keep separate categories). Others demand inclusion in the postings, so they naturally "age out" of relevance. Examples of these kind of fads include: "100 things about me;" "Friday Fives;" "What I'm [reading/listening to/watching] now;" "Amazon.com wishlists;" "Which [movie/dwarf/color/emotion/etc.] am I," various "quizzes," and many, many, others.

Most bloggers include at least some of these kind of postings in their content. It's clearly seen as a kind of fun by most, a harmless and interesting self-pursuit. Like the chase of change, the idea of these is to always find the new, most innovative, the most-unusual way to convey the blogger's sense of self to the world. Numerous examples of these fashions have swept through the blogosphere; even the choice of which of these to participate in, as well as what is posted, is a performed self-construction. For example, one blogger sniffed that "some blogs, that's all you'll see... that's not content, that's crap." Another wondered why people posted these: "because it's

cool, maybe? It has the tinge of fad about it, and I think you'll see it die down and go the way of pet rocks." This viewpoint seems to imbue the bloggers who take their blogs more seriously, or who have been at it longer – the elite of the blogging world.

It's readily apparent that blogging means different things to different people. Consider what this blogger told me:

"I'm not entirely unique, but am in the minority of bloggers in that I have multiple blogs with discrete foci and audiences. It's a rare person who would read the three blogs I write, but I do encounter them. Some folks read the Wi-Fi and personal blog because they have some interest in me. But most of the folks I know well blur all their interests into a single blog[...] which has good and bad points to it. I would never have become authoritative on Wi-Fi if I had stuck Wi-Fi tidbits among my personal and other professional interests."

Having multiple blogs and multiple websites is not uncommon for these heavily-engaged individuals, who wrap much of their professional and personal lives into their online personae.

The visible identity construction that goes on in linking, blogrolling and posting are an expression of the self, performed outward for self and others. They are the public face of the blogger, similar in impact the issues of 'look and feel,' but imbued with more direct meaning. They are the blogger's first-person statements of self. In American society, identity-marking through consumption and branding is, after all, relatively indirect, with shades of meaning. If product "x" is proudly used by one person and proudly avoided by another, the meaning those positions depends on people's shared understanding of the characteristics of "x." These meanings are imperfectly shared across individuals and groups, though, so there is still plenty of room for misunderstanding. In American culture, the publicly-constructed self is of paramount importance, but can be a frustrating ordeal in misfired communication.

### ***Anomie & Atomization***

As noted, Americans are expected to be individuals, but also members of communities, with little regard for realistic options available to most people. While definitions of those two terms vary, the expectation is applied more or less universally. Of course, in the variety of lifeways realistically available to people, there can never be perfect individualism or communitarian participation. The result: when things work well, individualistic norms push people

toward an atomized sense of self that makes community participation difficult. When things don't work well, frustration leads to a kind of anomie that dissociates people from each other.

The context of American lifeways that most forcefully fueled the development of blogging is this tendency toward anomie and atomization. It's a difficult context. Opposing forces push people together and pull them apart, with little regard for personal characteristics or predilections. As a result, various mechanisms exist or evolve to assist people with the conflict. Some strategies help people to perform the expectations better while others assist people in eliminating the drive to perform the expectations.

Bloggers expressed to me many statements that touch upon the idea of trying to stay connected to others, but also private, separate and unencumbered.

- ? "Mainly [I post] about the day-to-day life and things of interest that come to my attention. I also especially try to record visits with the family or vacation or anything that is out of the ordinary for me. Lastly, I also will use the blog as sounding board for myself to work out feelings about relationships and more personal internal things. The latter sometimes means I post things of a much more personal nature and is more revealing than most people would ever think to get in a public blog."
  
- ? "Keeping in touch with friends -- I get a kick out of my friends quoting my blog back to me, and they enjoy showing up on my blog. There are threads that run through my life that are difficult to share consistently with friends and family, especially since I don't see folks every day -- stupid, common threads, but they're the stuff that's the glue between people. I've run into friends after not seeing them for six months or longer and they know, generally, what's going on with me. However, I don't put the extremes on my blog (like my recent break-up with my boyfriend). The people who need to know that sort of thing find out in person."
  
- ? "In the course of group therapy for having been sexually abused by a stepparent, I learned how valuable it can be to share your own story because nothing helps a victim more than to be confronted with cold hard details that it happened to another person you know. Sadly I've come to find out that a number of my friends had also been molested when I shared my own story. Some of these have never really told anyone else but others weren't close friends but my own openness about it led them to share their story with me. And why the sharing of these stories is a good thing is because the other thing that I believe very strongly in for helping

survivors to heal is to share the story as many times as you can. With each telling the pain gets less and every sympathetic listener is a chip away at the mantle of self-guilt that often is what keeps the survivor from healing. I've posted very rarely about my own case but I do so when the need arises because it helps me to get past it faster. The more I put it out there, the less power it has over me. And because I post about this, the other personal stuff doesn't seem to be as big a deal so I post that too. I'd rather be an open book than bottle stuff up inside.”

These people consciously see their blog as a convenience in achieving the goal of staying close, but not too close; personal, yet removed. The blog lets them share exactly the amount they determine they want to, and no more.

It's my belief that blogging helps as a coping strategy by helping people to better perform the normative expected behaviors. It assists people in being more individualistic, *and* connecting them together. The connections between people are obvious, such as the process signaled by the blogger who wrote me:

“It's fun. It also allows me to update my god sister on daily events. She's moved to Japan. Hers updates me on her life.”

The individualistic thrust in blogging is found in the use of the blog itself to ‘construct’ the individual, to perform the self for public view. But it connects people together – literally, in the case of linking and blogrolling, more indirectly in the simple construct of poster/reader that several bloggers referred to as the “conversation with readers.”

Blogging is an expression of the need to connect individuals together, and it's a direct outgrowth of the existence of insufficient ways of doing so in American lifeways. Bloggers know this, of course. When I asked one blogger how blogs fit into his life, he replied:

“At the moment I see blogs as personal newspapers (as I've noted before), but with the advantage of links, so conversations can go on between blogs.”

The “personal newspaper” is an interesting take on this, having relevance for both individualism (the newspaper author) and connection (the readership). But the fascinating idea is that blogs themselves acquire identities (separate but overlapping with the identity of the blogger), and the blogs then converse. This image of blogs conversing, rather than being a kind of cocktail-party-for-robots, is instead, seen explicitly by the bloggers as what *community* is.

The context demands connections, and blogging offers one avenue of connecting. Whether or not blogging leads to emergence of something as significance-laden as “community” is a topic I address in another section. From the point of view of context, however, there is definitely a perceived need for both individual self-expression, and connection between individuals.

### *Nostalgia*

The conflict between individualism and communitarianism ultimately influences other lifeways, such as the tendency toward nostalgia, or reglamorization of past times. Closely related to issues that result from disconnection with larger communities at the personal level, is the discontinuance of previously-held beliefs. Consider this the “down” side of the American lifeways belief in the “arrow of progress.” More or less, that which is ‘new’ results in the end of the ‘old’.

Whether anything in life ever truly disappears is a question for historians and sociologists. It’s true that virtually every practice/technology ever engaged in by humans still continues, although perhaps in ‘boutique’ manner. The nostalgia that imbues American culture for a putative yesterday, when things were somehow better, leads to a curious complex of beliefs. For example, for many bloggers, the late 1990’s remain defined as an era of greed, short-sightedness, cynicism, and irony. And yet they express nostalgia for those early days of the Internet, when connecting with people was more honest, more sincere. Interestingly, the short period under review there was itself, a brief cultural moment, one that came and went quickly. In pop-culture, this is bracketed historically by the Clinton administration and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Irony and its “death” serve as proof that nostalgia doesn’t need a distant or even desirable referent on which to operate.

This kind of paradox frequently exists when nostalgic views of history are propagated. The “good ole days” are always golden, always better, in manifest contrast to real evidence or memory to the contrary. But it doesn’t stop any part of American culture from glamorizing the past. Community. Meaning. Irony. History. Music. Thought. Media. Reading. Movies. Families. Leisure. Work. Consider this the retrospective view of the millennialist rhetoric of The Next Big Thing. In virtually any domain, a common thread, a nagging worry is that “today,” things just aren’t as “good” as they once were.

### *Multitasking/Short-Attention Spans*

One thing that has definitely changed is what’s commonly called attention span. Some trace its emergence to the stylistic quick-cuts of the MTV influence on video programming.

Whether such stylistic trends are cause, effect, or third-trait cofactors, reduced attention spans seem to be a reality in multiple domains in American culture. The rise of so-called “multitasking” as a norm of behavior both offline and online amplifies the drive to focus short, distracted bursts of focus on tasks of all kinds.

Have attention spans really shortened? Must we really do five things at once? Being wary of the nostalgia trap that says “before now, people paid attention,” I note that it doesn’t really matter whether or not this phenomenon is measurable, what matters is that American culture believes it to be true.

Part of the context of the rise of blogging, then, is that there’s a belief that there is *insufficient time* in people’s lives to do all the things they need and want to do, so courtesy demands brevity. “Everyone” is distracted, “everyone” has obligations, “everyone” has stress, too much to do.

Blogging meets this contextual requirement in multiple ways. As a child of the Internet, it was created for quick-in-and-out, for snapshots of attention, for digestible nuggets in 15 seconds of time. The etiquette that has evolved for posting, while applied inconsistently, clearly suggests that postings above a certain (variable) size are pulled out into a separate place, out of the mainline blog postings. In this way, those readers who have the relative-luxury of time can read them, without annoying the supposed majority of blog readers, who have neither the time nor the inclination to do so.

In the nostalgic frame for time, the past is seen as a time when there was “more time” for virtually everything. Cultural lifeways now dictate that there is “less time” to do tasks, give attention, or focus on the self and others. In this context, short attention spans and “multitasking” are expected. They are emergent norms of behavior and description. Blogging meets this contextual requirement; it was created for snapshots of attention, for digestible thought in a few seconds of time; posting etiquette and other norms enforce this. Multitasking is seen as one of those characteristics of the “new” global world.

### ***Global Society***

On the Web, it’s a global world. It’s also a distinctly American one (perhaps mirroring conditions offline?). There’s no question that the Internet is everywhere, but that the wired west dominates. For American lifeways, the term ‘globalization’ has a complex of meanings that are partially imbued with nostalgia for some previous America-centric world. More importantly,

'globalization' is seen as an irresistible force, a inescapable fact of the present and the future. Sooner or later, this affects the lives of individuals, such as this blogger:

"I've been involved in online communities since the late 80's. I know a lot of people from all over the country and around the world and I enjoy meeting new people via the Internet. The downside is keeping in touch with people. I'm a horrible e-mail correspondent -- it's hard for me to repeat the same information to several people. I hate composing letters, and if it comes down to it, I'd rather pick up the phone and call someone than write to them."

The Internet is a facilitator of this kind of spreading globalism. Of course, individual people embrace or mourn the 'new' fact of globalization, depending on their viewpoints, but none deny its reality.

This reality is brought home by view of the blogs that show up in the blog-aggregators. Blogs that show up in the blog aggregators "follow the sun" around the globe, as a globalized phenomenon, but the content is normalized so that geographical cues are often nonexistent. While it's not always clear where a blogger is physically, non-English blogs seem to be more likely to show up when it's night in the United States, though any blog is likely to be updated at virtually any time.

For blogging, the relevance of the globalization of culture is that blogging is not an American-only phenomenon. This was reinforced for me when, corresponding with a distinctly ordinary blogger, for a period of several days, I was stunned when I realized that she was in Singapore. In all my interactions with her, there had seemed no major cultural differences; in her blog postings, her life seemed pretty much like that of any other mainstream, middle class American. Even subsequent re-evaluation of her communications didn't shake this impression. The lesson: blogs and bloggers are a product of the globalized net culture that is surely coming to dominate mass-mediated international life.

### ***Society as sub-societies***

Is there such a thing as the American way of life? There are accepted norms of practice, behavior, and belief, that are shared to a greater or lesser degree by individuals and groups. There are characteristic jobs, economic relationships, family structures, group memberships, and institutions. There are multiple ways to statistically paint the macro picture of American lifeways, as well as a plentitude of ways to demographically slice-and-dice these numbers into more-finely

tuned details. But does that mean there's one American way of life, or multiple ways? A blogger wrote to me this:

“Ahhh. In my opinion, the wonder of the Internet is that it brings us together in communities of interest instead of communities of spatial locality. Not only does this bring support to people like rural gays in America, who are often deeply isolated, but it allows us to define ourselves as part of many different communities instead of just saying that "I come from ...." (which is, I realize, a simplification -- even on spatial locality I was a member of Half Moon Bay, an employee of Adobe System, a helper dad in the local Little League, and so forth -- but the Internet allows us to be members of communities that we share no meatspace with).”

These non-“meatspace” communities aren't really comparably similar groups. Bellah et al, might call these lifestyle enclaves, but even that seems incorrect; the selection of items in the lifestyle are unique to this blogger, not shared by other members of a lifestyle subgroup. This blogger is noting that he is a member of multiple communities, but those communities aren't related to each other in any meaningful way. On the web, of course, this situation is made dramatically more noticeable, as even lingering geographical or demographic commonalities are obliterated or made irrelevant.

I'd propose that the norm for American existence is actually a collection of sub-societies sharing a common infrastructure. The infrastructure is both physical and institutional, and different parts of it service different sub-societies. This arrangement is the logical outcome of the individualistic focus, writ large as “lifestyle enclaves,” “communities of interest” or some other term. As an American, I am partially defined by my consumption choices, but those choices alienate me from people with different consumption choices. Enough differences, and it can safely be said that I have virtually nothing in common with another person. Beyond sharing “meatspace” with them, we live in effectively different societies. Of course, the mass media knit these sub-societies together at some level, but a primary identity referent is in the choice of mass media to consume, so even in this domain, there is not necessarily a unifying, shared experience.

Exploring the concept of “community” with bloggers, two shared with me these definitions that I think speak to the problems with our current conceptions of it:

- ? “A community is any group that defines itself as one. I realize that's tautological (or at least alarmingly close to it), but it's the best I can do. It may come into being because

other people begin to define it ("you are XX"), but the critical state is when it accepts some definition ("we are XX")."

- ? "Once a community forms a sense of identity, it collectively begins to set boundaries, and that setting of boundaries is perhaps the most important act of definition it ever performs (yes, even more than formal definitions of purpose or mission). It's an act that can be performed more than once, and it's often a rather fuzzy act, which leads to a boundary region where there are people who both are and are not considered part of the community. It can even be fuzzy enough that there are two entirely separate communities (internally), each of which thinks it is "the community", but which are seen collectively from the outside as "the community". Something like this happened to our church, so I'm speaking from a bit of experience."

Blogging would seem to fall naturally within the net-culture sub-society. At an earlier stage in the development of the Internet, the forerunners of blogging (BBSs, USENET, message boards, and vanity pages) did just that. Today, as net culture has expanded, and blogging became the Next Big Thing, I think it's fair to say that blogging doesn't any longer represent one sub-society.

This makes analysis and understanding of the process difficult: what sub-society is a given blogger a member of? Is there a blogging "lifestyle enclave"? At the same time, questions like this become unnecessary, because a blogger is, simply, a member of one of the sub-society that blogs. There may be more than one of these, but what they have in common is the experience of blogging.

### ***Findings: Geek-Chic***

The growth and spread of a practice/technology is a process that takes place over time. A global context that includes strong influences of the media, digital technology, and social changes ultimately led to the rise of a set of practices that came to be known as blogging. Without a process to spread that practice amongst people, it couldn't have taken root. One day, an individual finds himself taking part in a practice that he previously didn't engage in. How does that come to happen? I propose that a major component of that is a high status associated with in-group knowledge that becomes associated with the practice. Call it cool, or buzz, or Geek-Chic:

somehow, an association of the practice/technology becomes joined in a subcultural assessment to a high status as an insider.

Geek-Chic specifically refers to the high status accorded to those with mastery and control of arcane digital technologies. This adaptation of traditional mainstream outlooks occurred during the 1990's and early 2000's, during the same period as the wide dissemination of inexpensive and networked desktop computing. Blogging Geek-Chic is a continuation of the kind of disdain associated with AOL domains circa 1995, the browser wars circa 1997, the eternal Mac/PC conflicts, fetishized views of PDAs, laptops and cell phones, and more. In other words, tool-envy and geek-chic have always been part of Net culture. Geek-Chic is also the general term I use to describe the lifecycle process by which a practice spreads and develops into a technology.

My suggestion is that attitudes such as Geek-chic and the successful deployment/adoption of technology are not separate. The assignment of high-status to a practice is a requirement for its widespread adoption. It doesn't matter if it's couched in a faddish underground or in a mainstream status quo, the message is still the same: *the cool people do this*.

For something like Geek-Chic to arise and foster the spread of a practice/technology requires several components. For instance, the basic mechanisms of the practice/technology have to be working; an assessment process for evaluating the "chicness" of the practice has to exist; and a process for communicating that between individuals has to be worked out. These mechanisms and processes may develop even *before* the practice/technology is formalized, acquires a name, or specialized tools to accomplish it. First comes Geek-Chic, then comes popularity, and the formal boundaries associated with widespread usage. While my focus here is specifically about blogging, the central mechanisms are technology-independent.

This section studies the mechanics of the rise of blogging as a kind of Geek-Chic: the intrinsic "coolness" of blogging defined as an attractive and worthwhile pursuit, and its subsequent growth and spread throughout the Web and pop-culture. While this is specifically about blogging, the central mechanisms are technology-independent. The "Chic" for blogging may be "Geek," but there must be "Chic" of some flavor or another for a practice/technology to spread and be adopted.

### **Nexis/Lexis**

The mass media are part of the Geek-Chic process. Word-of-mouth may be a primary mechanism for the spread of ideas from person-to-person, but the mass media's role in spreading

ideas quickly and efficiently between otherwise-unconnected groups is key. In a mass mediated society like the United States, practices that are excluded from publicity in the mass media may have a “chicness” associated with a kind of rebel identity, but by definition, media-excluded practices will be self-limited to the sub-groups and sub-identities.

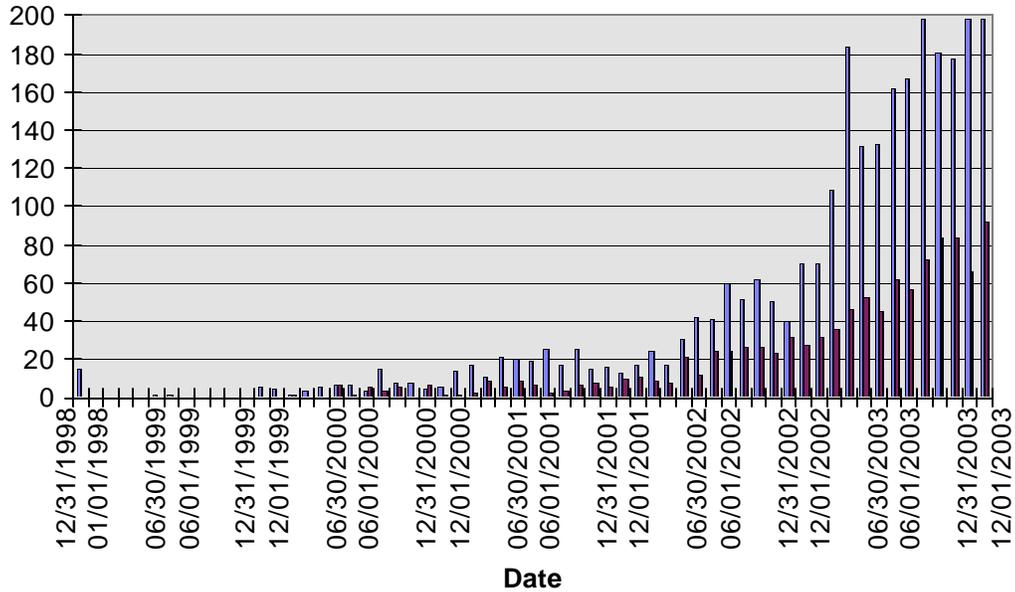
When something like blogging arises and sweeps through the lives of millions of individuals, a parallel phenomenon blazes through the mass media. The two are related. To illustrate, I used Lexis/Nexis (a print media full-content database that tracks mainstream publications) to count references to blogging terms in major newspapers and magazines, month-by-month over 5 years. Those counts, summarized:

**Table 1 - Lexis/Nexis Search - Blogging References by Date**

Lexis/Nexis Search – Blogging References by Date						
Period	Newspapers	Magazines		Period	Newspapers	Magazines
All 1998	15	0		01/2002	17	11
01/1999	0	0		02/2002	24	9
02/1999	0	0		03/2002	17	8
03/1999	0	0		04/2002	31	21
04/1999	0	0		05/2002	42	12
05/1999	2	0		06/2002	41	24
06/1999	2	1		07/2002	60	24
07/1999	0	0		08/2002	52	27
08/1999	1	0		09/2002	62	27
09/1999	0	0		10/2002	50	23
10/1999	1	1		11/2002	40	32
11/1999	1	0		12/2002	70	28
12/1999	6	0		01/2003	70	32
01/2000	5	1		02/2003	109	36
02/2000	2	2		03/2003	184	46
03/2000	4	1		04/2003	132	53
04/2000	6	0		05/2003	133	45
05/2000	7	7		06/2003	162	62
06/2000	7	2		07/2003	167	61
07/2000	4	6		08/2003	198	72
08/2000	15	4		09/2003	181	84
09/2000	8	6		10/2003	177	84
10/2000	8	1		11/2003	198	66
11/2000	5	7		12/2003	198	92
12/2000	6	2				
01/2001	14	2				
02/2001	17	3				
03/2001	11	9				
04/2001	21	6				
05/2001	20	9				
06/2001	19	7				
07/2001	26	3				
08/2001	17	4				
09/2001	26	7				
10/2001	15	8				
11/2001	16	6				
12/2001	13	10				

**Figure 1 - Lexis/Nexis References to Blogs**

**Lexis/Nexis references to Blogs in Major Newspapers and Magazines**



There's a delightful paper-trail buried here, a detailed record of the history of the emergence of blogging as a practice, its refinement into a named practice/technology, and widespread adoption and mainstreaming into American culture.

There is no necessary causal connection, however. Mass media publicity and the rise of blogging don't have a simplistic cause/effect relationship. The mass media didn't cause blogging to become popular through publicity, nor did the popularity of blogging cause its emergence into the mass media. These two things are related, and both are a reflection of the processes associated with Geek-Chic.

A thought experiment reveals the relationship. Could blogging have become widespread without the assistance of the mass media? The conjecture, almost certainly, is yes-but: yes, it could have, but not as easily. More importantly, the question is foolish: mainstream phenomena in

the United States *are* mass media phenomena. Even if the traditional media weren't involved, the Web is a mass-media phenomenon.

### **Lifecycle Stages**

The reflective record laid out in the Nexis/Lexis citation history is a chart of the transformations that Geek-Chic undergoes. Analytically, I'd propose the rough, overlapping stages below to break out the lifecycle of technology. In these stages, I also note as an example, the general period of time during which blogging passed through it.

**Table 2 - The Technology Lifecycle**

<b>The Technology Lifecycle, with examples drawn from blogging</b>		
<b>Stage</b>	<b>Events</b>	<b>Blogging</b>
Enabling Technologies	In a new or changed social context, existing practices and technologies are recombined in novel ways. The new practice is created and named.	Late 1998 – Early 1999
Early Adoption	Individual persons adopt the practice/technology for their own, unguided purposes; as the ideas spread by word-of-mouth through sub-cultures; jargons develop; meaning is standardized; specialized mass media take note.	1999
Technology Specialization	Critical mass of early adopters use original tools; specialized tools develop, are fetishized as technology; outsiders see tools as 'new'; still specialized media.	Late 1999 – 2000
Florescence	Much larger secondary groups adopt practice using the new tools; adoption is widespread, but still via interlocking subcultures; mass media begins widespread attention; serendipity brings in new people outside of interlocking groups; forms mutate in the practice/technology.	2001

<b>The Technology Lifecycle, with examples drawn from blogging</b>		
Stage	Events	Blogging
Mainstreaming	Practice/Technology becomes The Next Big Thing; barriers to adoption fall significantly; core group becomes mythical, nostalgia shades early history; mass media regularize treatment.	2002 - 2003
Co-Optation / Backlash	Commercialism seeks profit niches in the practice/technology; “reverse chic” attitudes drive early adopters away; nostalgia frames history and media coverage	2003 – future
Integration	Cycle of innovation ceases; practices become integrated as components of other social practices; tools multiply while intrinsic differences between them lessen; mass media sees the practice/technology as a given.	future

### ***Enabling Technologies***

Practices and technologies exist that can be recombined in new ways, in a new or evolving context. These constitute the actual practice/technology in the early stages, even before naming. In this stage, the basic operation of the practice/technology is established. For the example of blogging, I’d propose that this occurred in late 1998 through early 1999; this is verified by the histories appearing in the appendices. During this time the basics of web-journaling in reverse chronological order were established, and standardized. The mechanics of linking and filtering-type blogs appeared, although they weren’t necessarily called that.

### ***Early Adoption***

In technological parlance, an “early adopter” is the user of a new product in the early stages of mass marketing, when costs are high and tradeoffs are uncertain. These individuals are usually highly valued, because they become opinion leaders later. Subtly, the “early adoption” stage happens even for practice/technologies not fostered by corporations. That is, individual persons adopt the practice/technology for their own, unguided purposes, as the ideas spread by word-of-mouth through sub-cultures. During this time, jargons develop and meaning is

standardized. At this stage, only specialized mass media will note the existence of the practice/technology. For the example of blogging, this would clearly have taken place during the bulk of 1999 and into 2000. The individuals who adopted blogging during this stage went on to become the pundits, the technical core of the blogosphere.

### ***Technology Specialization***

At this stage, a critical mass of *Early Adopters* have adopted the practice/technology, using the original *Enabling Technologies*. Eventually, someone tailors a new artifact, a new ‘thing’ to accomplish the practice/technology in more efficient way. To outsiders, this is the “invention” of the technology, the time when it begins, in manifest contrast to the developed history that led to this point. For blogging, this is certainly the invention of specialized tools Pitas/Diaryland and Blogger.com. These significant events will not necessarily have been noted by the mass media outside of specialized outlets; certainly the significance of the events can’t have been known at the time.

### ***Florescence***

Once specialized tools have been developed, a much larger group of secondary adopters begin to use the practice/technology. Adoption becomes widespread, but still confined to various interlocking subcultures. A kind of “leakage” into leading-edge areas of the mass media become apparent, as practices become formalized, innovations are quickly proposed and adopted, and more and more people take notice. By this time, word-of-mouth runs much of its course, and the mass media come to be more important in publicizing the existence of the practice/technology; serendipity comes into play, as individuals stumble over references to the practice. For blogging, this was clearly the majority of 2001. During this period, the “blogosphere” acquired a name and an identity, defining boundaries between blogging and other kinds of online practice/technologies. Specialized formats emerged, such as the differentiation of “personal” type of blogs from the original “filtering” type blogs. Mass-media reporting of blogging during this period acquired a certain breathless hot-off-the-presses tone. This is when the patina of fashion is assigned most clearly to the leading-edge of practitioners.

### ***Mainstreaming***

At this stage, the seemingly random nature of pop-culture popularity swoops onto the practice/technology, and anoints it as the Next Big Thing. As discussed in context, of course,

there is nothing random about this at all – the practice/technology meets certain needs, in a unique or particularly well-suited way. As a result, large number of people adopt the practice/technology, now well-established. By this time, norms of behavior, jargons, technological artifacts, sub-communities, histories and traditions are all well-established. New adopters are welcomed, and the barriers to adoption are low and well-understood. For blogging, this is unquestionably the period covering 2002/2003, when mainstream mass media regularly “discover” blogs again and again, and they begin to find their permanent ‘niche’ in the mass-media framework. For blogs, this eventually evolves into the role of media fact-checkers and independent analysis.

In blogging, mainsteaming results in the anointing of the elites of the blogosphere as de-facto mass media journalists; the pundits became part of the regular ‘beat’ of journalism, along with government officials, corporate spokespersons, campaigning politicians, celebrities, and others. This is true even though, by this time, the original community of users has swelled to gargantuan size, no longer bearing any resemblance to the original cohort of similarly-motivated individuals who made it what it was. This period saw the creation of thousands of “warblogs,” thousands upon thousands of blogs created in response to (for or against) the second U.S.-Iraq war, including the highly-publicized blogging of “Salaam Pax” (Massie 2003:7D) the “Baghdad blogger” up to and through the war.

### ***Co-optation/Backlash***

Eventually, the gears of capitalistic profit-seeking mesh, and attempts are made to commandeer the “chic” of the practice/technology. Any behavior engaged in by thousands or millions of individuals has enormous profit potential, so organizations (generally, corporations) seek ways to integrate themselves into the behavior. Simultaneously, a backlash begins, specifically (but not only) because of the over-hype. If something is too popular, it can’t be “chic” anymore, and the surest sign of that is the horning in on it by corporations. No event is more certain in the lifecycle of technology, though, so the *Co-optation/Backlash* stage is a certainty – later nostalgia will always refer back to the stages before co-optation as the golden age of the practice. Specifically, the nostalgia will glamorize whatever the earliest stage of practice/technology the bemoaner first became aware of. For blogging, the crystal-clear signal event of the arrival of co-optation was the February, 2003 purchase by Google of Pyra Labs, authors of the Blogger.com tool.

For blogging, the backlash may already be gathering speed. The possibility of commercialized blogging alienates some, such as the blogger worried in her correspondence with me that “corporate America will seek to squelch blogs, or try to limit them or their influence among online readership.” In that statement is an assertion of values and an explanation of their origin. It becomes the rationale of the backlash itself, when it happens.

### ***Integration***

Sooner or later, the lifecycle of rapid innovation and adoption runs its course. The practice/technology continues to provide value to its practitioners, but it ceases to be new or exciting. It’s no longer Geek-Chic, but it continues to be practiced. In fact, growth of practitioners continues, as the co-opted, mainstream practice/technology gets integrated into the everyday framework of people’s lives. It becomes just something else that people do.

I asked many bloggers what they saw for the future. Most had ideas similar to this: “I think that this form of expression will continue to exist. If you’re interesting and have something to say, you will have an audience for it, even if that audience is only a few people.” The stylized forms incorporated into blogging are simply another way of expressing things – as the blogger observes, there’s always a role for good communication.

This is why virtually no practice/technology from stone-polishing to DNA-art ever disappears; it becomes part of everything else. It’s a mistake to assume that something comes along to ‘replace’ a practice/technology. A given practice/technology originates within a certain cultural context, and is that culture’s answer to needs existing at that time – it’s a “custom” solution that never repeats, but also never completely disappears. Later practice/technologies evolve to meet needs that exist at that later time. Because of this, histories that focus on the fickle and arbitrary rise and fall of technological artifacts miss the point.

### ***Lifecycle Summary***

These lifecycle stages use blogging as an example, but apply to technologies of all kinds. While I make specific allowances for the mass media that might not apply to other practices or technologies, the same stages of “chicness” rules apply, along with the communicative processes to spread them. Ultimately, the contexts and processes that spread ideas, like “Geek-Chic” spread blogging, are themselves practices/technologies operating on longer lifecycles. These processes create the contexts that later technologies exploit. Put another way, Geek-Chic itself

has been going through the *Florescence* and *Mainstreaming* stages of its lifecycle; just about the time of the Dot-Com implosion in 2000, the *Co-optation/Backlash* stage emerged full force.

In interviews, bloggers pointed me toward the idea of Tipping Points (Gladwell 2000) as one current view of how social phenomenon spread through a population; blogging is a kind of case-study for the ideas. Drawing on epidemiology, it proposes specific roles (Mavens, Connectors and Salesmen) and thresholds that govern the rates of spread and success of ideas from a few individuals to a mass movement. It does give emphasis to roles and the originating and propagating contexts that foster change, but I consider the theory to be an artificially narrow and populist view of the basic lifecycle stages. Of course, people engage in different types of activities in spreading ideas. More useful is the analysis of the overall trajectory of idea generation and deployment.

When is something Chic? As identified in the section on lifecycle, the answer varies depending on context, and where in the lifecycle a practice-technology is. In the case of Geek-Chic, the answer specifically also lies within the long-term cycle of “fashionable” control of digital technologies. As discussed earlier, American culture has been in a cycle of honoring all-things-digital since approximately the early 1990’s.

This illustrates yet more, that the context of the emergence of any practice/technology is specific, and not reproducible. The long-term lifecycle of the idea of Geek-Chic became the *Enabling Technology* for the emergence of blogging. In turn, no doubt, blogging will serve as the *Enabling Technology* for the next stage in evolution of the construction of personal-media/personal-community building technologies, an idea discussed in the next chapter.

### **Identity Marking**

Participation in a practice that has a stamp of fashionableness confers some of that fashionableness on the participant. The nature and degree of that fashionableness varies depending on the lifecycle point in time of the adoption of the practice. A participant in a practice/technology may have multiple reasons for participating – primarily, to accomplish whatever the practice/technology can do. In the case of blogging, that is the journaling/viewpoint-airing/interconnecting benefit that the practice/technology fosters.

But some people will adopt a practice/technology, especially during the “mainstreaming” segment of the lifecycle, for reasons other than the primary benefit that accrues from

participation. The Next Big Thing acquires its own momentum, and the maxims of fashion dictate their own logic. Some people don't want to blog, they just want to be a blogger.

Bloggers described some aspects of the conspicuous marking of identity that recognize the shifting nature of who does what online. One interviewee described how this plays out:

“Geeks have always found a way to circumvent corporate tactics and there will always be portions of the Internet that are free from corporations and government. If you're willing to pay your own way (buy your own domain and software, set up your own linux box, pay for your t1 line, etc.), then you can be free of their sticky influence. There's more cache by doing it yourself anyway. You'll see a pecking order of people who do it themselves versus those who've sold out or went the easy corporate path.”

These ideas about status ranking are key to understanding Geek-Chic; the quote reminds us that the particular traits that are considered “chic” depend on the sub-group involved, and change over time.

What this means is that, as the technology lifecycle progresses, a divergence in the basic goals of participation will change. After all, the *Early Adopters* often have the greatest need to participate – that's why these highly-motivated individuals created the practice/technology in the first place. Later adopters are not necessarily driven by the same needs.

This showed up in the bloggers through various markers of identity. For instance, when I asked bloggers if they told people offline about their blogging online, very few answered yes. For them, it served as a marker, a group-affiliation. Similar patterns existed in the use of jargon, both offline and online. Those with a drive to participate because of Geek-Chic seem to be more inclined to make their participation explicit to others.

### **Summary: Geek-Chic**

A practice/technology can't spread by itself. Technological artifacts don't appear out of thin air, nor rain down on unsuspecting potential users out of the blue. Processes exist that give rise to these things, and spread them between people. These processes are those that I lump under the rubric “Geek-Chic,” to illustrate that there's a strong element of fashionableness to the spread of practices, and thus to the emergence of technologies, between people.

Geek-Chic in the technology lifecycle is not intrinsically different than the lifecycle for other kinds of social phenomena. *Technology* is a social phenomenon. The unfortunate focus on

technological artifacts in most discussions of technology misses the underlying mechanisms by which those artifacts come to be created, and how their use spreads through a population. While the creation of a blog may not seem the same as the faddish cycles of hemlines, they share more in common than not.

Of course, not all technologies are created equally. A life-altering practice/technology like a farming technique or medical technique will likely spread at very different rates, among very different populations, than will a highly specialized communicative one like blogging. But the essential nature of the process by which they are created and spread will be fundamentally similar.

### ***Findings: Personal Community***

My investigation into blogging was (in retrospect) a rather naïve search into so-called “virtual communities.” Much of the anomie and atomization discussed in the section on context, and concern over communitarian idealism, motivated me to want to unravel how these communities of the present and future work. Remember that “Not all virtual social gatherings are communities. Without the personal investment, intimacy, and commitment that characterizes our ideal sense of community, some on-line discussion groups and chat rooms are nothing more than a means of communication among people with common interests” (Fernback 1999:216).

Is there such a thing as a virtual community? Perhaps, but as Fernback notes, not all online interaction results in such a thing. Bird notes that “Internet communities, like place-based communities, do not just happen. They develop in response to particular circumstances and to the needs of a particular set of individuals” (Bird 2003:74). So there are conditions and processes that (may) give rise to Internet-/Cyber-/Online/Virtual/Electronic/CMC/Non-geographic communities.

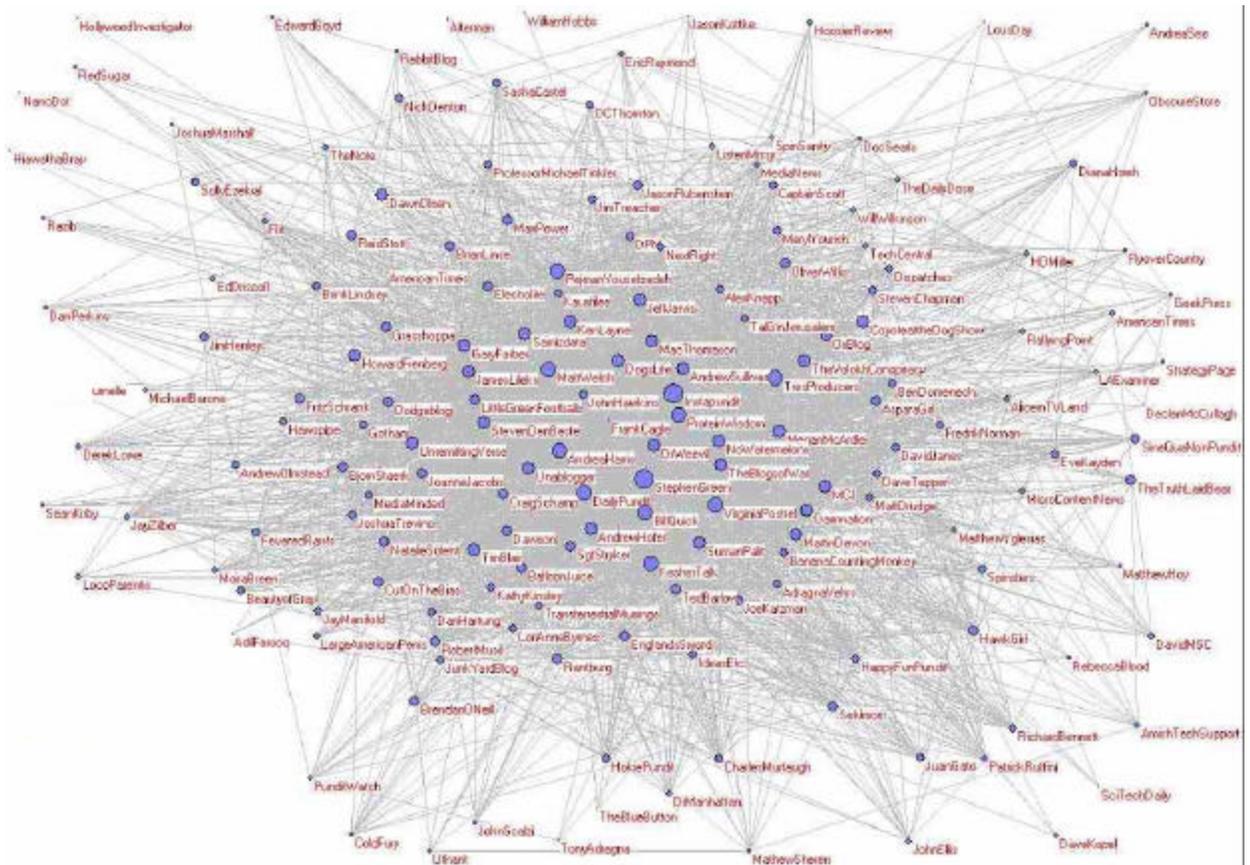
Like many other researchers, I located named communities, and individuals who named themselves as members of them. Like other anthropologists, I immersed myself in the life. I documented the experiences of individuals, looking for patterns that signal the experiences of groups. I was all set to find, expected to find, wanted to find, people expanding their lives, their connections, their membership in communities of like-minded people. And I did. But I’m convinced it’s not “community,” in the traditional *or* virtual sense. It’s not even something partial, as in Bellah’s notions of a “lifestyle enclave”. It’s something different, something that establishes or enhances the “community” that is formed around an individual, comprising all the individuals

and groups that person is associated with. Personal community may not be “community,” but it may be what American cultural life demands.

### **The Blogosphere**

Here is a “picture” of the Blogosphere in June, 2002, taken from <http://beartruth.blogspot.com>.

**Figure 2 - The Blogosphere, June 2002**



What does this image convey? It's an attempt at humor, but it also conveys the interconnected nature of the blogosphere. This image was made during the early "Florescence" stage of the blogosphere, a time when it was (theoretically) possible to list all "important" blogs. What's an important blog? By this definition, it's one with many inbound links. It's arguable, of course, whether that definition is relevant (and bloggers argue about that all the time), but the image conveys the central nature (literally) of the small group of "pundits" that make up the core of the blogosphere.

When I first heard of the "blogosphere," I was tantalized. A community that's forming in real-time! With an identity, and, like a small-town, the ability to chart all the connections in a network! Surely, here is a virtual community, with such neat boundaries, barriers to entry, and standards of behavior. And here is a picture of it. For most of the bloggers I interviewed, though,

this picture suggests something else. Reflected repeatedly in their responses is a reality that, for them, the blogosphere *doesn't exist*. Or, at best, it's not relevant.

### **Meaning to Individuals**

When I asked bloggers lines of questions regarding the existence and functioning of a “community of bloggers, like the blogosphere,” the results surprised me. Initially, some answered, too breezily, ‘yes’. For example consider the exchanges below:

[jm] Is there a “community” of bloggers, like the “blogosphere”?

[ab] Sure

[jm] If so, do you feel you're a part of it?

[ab] Somewhat

Also:

[er] I feel like there is a blogosphere. I guess I'm part of it, but I'm not deeply linked. In interviews, most bloggers said “no” to questions about whether a community existed. One elaborated response:

“No, I would say not. There are a few blogs that are 'popular', but I don't think they've created a community. By their nature, blogs are a vision that an individual shares. The comment features, I think, do add to a sense of community, but these are now being edited by bloggers. You can't have a community without an honest exchange of information. I don't think blog rolling really creates community, either.”

In my followup questions to this, I asked how membership was experienced, how participation was allowed or governed or noted, and other ideas. Eventually, I focused questioning toward what participation in blogging meant to the blogger, in the areas of connecting or involving others. The few bloggers who said that something like the blogosphere exists, generally also said that it didn't matter to them. They either were not a part of it, or it was simply irrelevant. The bloggers who felt that it didn't exist were generally aware of the communitarian ideals surrounding language of the blogosphere. Most also seemed to know that the explicit ideals of a blogroll held the theoretical implications of a relationship between the bloggers. Most seemed to think both of these were a sham, or a nostalgia-framed impossibility.

In interviews, bloggers met head-on the question of what, if any, community exists. One blogger told me that:

“I think you see a 'Birds of a Feather' pooling of blogs; people who write about the same things or have similar interests that cross-link/blog roll each other. I don't think these people necessarily know each other or otherwise correspond. Sometimes they do, but I get a sense that they knew each other before the blog.”

One observed the processes behind the formation of a community, observing that “a community forms itself when it says ‘we are XX.’” The opinion, repeated, was that “community,” even one with “fuzzy boundaries,” was not what was experienced as a blogger.

Significantly, most of my interviewing took place in 2003. By this time, individual bloggers repeatedly claimed they did not get any psychic or social benefits out of perceived membership in a virtual “community” of bloggers. They consistently said that there was not a community of like-minded individuals, just accidental demographic similarities that reflect the patterns of Internet usage in general. Bloggers described those other bloggers as “Middle-class white folks, computer-savvy”, or “the ubiquitous demographic of the net at large, which stems from the relationship between race and access to technology.” Another: “a white, male, 30-to-50s” activity.

By 2003, the original blogosphere shown in the network diagram from 2002 had swollen almost beyond recognition, were it even possible to chart it. Significantly, though, the same core pundits would have shown up. At this point, in the *Mainstreaming* part of the practice/technology lifecycle, the small-community blogosphere that emerged during the *Early Adoption* phase was, simply, drowned in the hundreds of thousands of blogs.

So if the bloggers were not getting a group-affiliation out of blogging, which was one of its putative draws, what were they getting? This became a primary focus of my questioning for many of the bloggers – getting inside their motivation. A great deal of my interviewing was devoted to understanding what it is that they got out of the experience, what drew them initially, and what continued to draw them into the process.

Bloggers themselves suggested a number of reasons why they blog. A pattern of answers emerged that eventually regularized into the motives described below. Remember that the discussions of context and lifecycle show that the inter-related rise of a practice/technology can be charted across the macro-level scope of an entity like American culture, but that it actually occurs one-by-one in lives of individual persons. For instance, though it's a professional activity for some, most of the bloggers said something like this answer to the question of why:

“Why blog? At first, for fun. I didn't think I'd actually maintain the online journal for long. Then, I started using it to vent frustrations and relax.”

Noting that blogging was “fun” (or similar terms) positioned it in a space of leisure activity/play for bloggers. Below is the deconstruction of what bloggers said about blogging, or what was “fun” about it. While the results of this were as individualistic as the people involved, the results fell into a few broad categories, summarized in the table.

**Table 3 - Why Blog? Categories of Individual Meanings**

<b>Why Blog? Categories of individual meanings</b>	
<b>Individual Meanings</b>	<b>Motivation</b>
Meeting new people	To connect and interact with people previously unknown. Generally a fulfilled expectation, but the relationships were generally lightweight, obligation-free and confined to online interaction, even for those bloggers who had made other “IRL” connections via online interaction.
Meeting old people	To stay in touch with people previously known in offline contexts. This allows easier interaction, using asynchronous catch-up styles. Generally the most personally satisfying motivation, and the one that keeps the bloggers going.
Showing off	Prominent display of a variety of technical skills. Sometimes computer-related skills, but more often writing, media-analysis, or interaction as a member of the blogosphere.
Feedback	Communication or acknowledgment of the value of the blogger’s postings either directly (through email, “reply” controls, or others) or indirectly through linking and blogrolling. Responsible for the “rush” bloggers feel at affecting others via the work.
Creativity	A public forum to practice the creative arts. For bloggers who are poets, writers, visual artists or musicians (or the converse), an artist-controlled space.
Vanity	The “engine that never quits” for bloggers, the feeling of pride and self-worth that derive from seeing the quality of the work they produced, by viewing it online.
Awareness	An extra layer of sensitivity to the subtleties and ramifications of real-life that derive from the knowledge that it would later emerge as a blog-posting. Has both positive and negative connotations, as bloggers view posting as both opportunity and obligation.

<b>Why Blog? Categories of individual meanings</b>	
<b>Individual Meanings</b>	<b>Motivation</b>
Personal Archive	The creation of a portfolio of work that embodies the inner world view of the blogger, one that (it's believed) will be useful or enlightening, far in the future. The personal archive isn't for posterity, it's for the blogger, when they are "old and decrepit."

The motivations summarized above are individualistic in the extreme. While there is connection to other people, there is little internally expressed drive towards enhancing the commons; these are things done for intrinsically self-benefiting reasons. Social benefits do accrue, however, to groups and to society even while these individuals pursue their avenues of self-enhancement.

### ***Meeting New People***

This was commonly stated by most of the bloggers as a major reason why they initially started blogging, or what motivated them to continue. The basic impulse was to connect and interact with people previously unknown to the blogger. And most bloggers said that they had developed online relationships (of a kind) with other bloggers. Significantly, however, none of the bloggers claimed that these online friendships were significant in their life; most were discounted heavily, such as the one who wrote: "I make friends with people through the blog. However most of them are in other parts of the world. Those that are in the same country are few." Most bloggers I interviewed had not met any of their blogging friends offline, "in real life," but several knew second-hand or third-hand of localized attempts to do this.

The bloggers told me that there was some amount of success in doing this: "I've actually met a few folks (via e-mail) because of my blog and one or two in person." Another noted that: "At first it seemed a great way to have a "social voice" if you wanted to be a commentator on things but weren't already a TV/radio personality with an audience. But these days there are so many bloggers out there, how do you find your audience? I'd like to think that one day my blog will be read regularly by others that I don't know but at the same time I don't feel that I write about anything that would merit such an audience of strangers. Regardless, I'll keep doing it for myself since I enjoy it and it's useful for me."

For both personal-style blogs and filtering-style blogs, the success the blog engendered at meeting new people was limited in scope and intensity. And yet the bloggers, as a group, were

quite open to it: many told me they used Internet dating services, and one who met “both of [her] significant others through online communities.” Even they expressed mixed dismay at the difficulty of meeting people via blogging.

In other words, while the bloggers “met” new people, the relationships with those people were the lightest, most casual of associations, with minimal amounts of mutual obligation and interaction. It’s a safe bet that the vast majority of these relationships are never anything but electronic in nature.

### ***Meeting Old People***

The social interaction with friends that did motivate most of the bloggers was to keep up with people who were already in the blogger’s social circle. This was something of a surprise to me. Over and over again, bloggers remarked on what a great way blogging was to ‘catch up’ or ‘stay in touch’ with friends. A sampling of the responses:

- ? “I can’t really comment on the community as a whole. Several of the blogs I visit regularly are of people I know.”
- ? “The Blog supplements IRL community.”
- ? “Keeping in touch with friends.”
- ? “I’m not in community, is with others already known except for 3 ‘celebrity’ ones.”
- ? [Do you feel you’re a part of the blogging community?] No. I’m part of the community I’ve created. My blog supplements that community, blogging hasn’t created it... I’ve been friends with these folks prior to the blog phenomenon.”
- ? “Blogging keeps me close to the friends I already have. We may never meet regularly but seeing an update reminds me that the person’s still around. Therefore, I feel that blogging enhances rather than enlarges.”
- ? “Why blog, staying in touch with friends and family. Personal.”
- ? “No politics. no community. group of online friends.”

The bloggers often specifically enjoyed reading the blogs of their friends, and writing for them. This freed them from the obligation to write emails, or make phone calls:

- ? “Community of bloggers, not really. I do have a group of online friends that visit the blogs I usually read daily. It nice to actually talk to them with regards to any matter.”

- ? “I’ve got one friend who does a sporadically updated journal at blogspot, mostly where she tosses up poetry or yaps at friends from her own social circle.”
- ? “I know from reading the blogs of my friends & family that do, I feel a sense of knowing them better and being more in touch with them even though they may be unaware of when I check the blogs.”

In a sense, these bloggers are using their blogs, and those of their friends, to time-shift their friendly interactions. From the synchronous offline rituals of spending time together, these relationships are experienced asynchronously, at the convenience of the participants.

Interacting with friends was clearly the most emotionally-involving aspect of blogging for many of the bloggers. They were fully-engaged with people in their lives already, and some of those relationships were carried online. But the reverse never seemed to be true. Put another way, one blogger said “blogging is a shorthand for conversation, it’s not a substitution for friendship.”

It was this phenomenon, the associating with previously-known people, that led me to begin to realize that blogging doesn’t create a community, as normally understood. It creates a personal community, a community of one. The blogger understood this, who told me, referring to social relationships, “blogging doesn’t expand – it enhances.”

### ***Showing Off***

The norms of Geek-Chic require a mastery of certain technical skills. Many people don’t care to master the technical arcana of web pages, Javascript, or other computer languages. But blogging provides a variety of avenues to “shine” in fairly direct ways. There are filtering bloggers who mine the resources of the mass media, daily, hourly, even minute-to-minute. Elite blogger Instapundit is the pacesetter for these bloggers (Welch 2003:24); status is earned by the flavor of analysis and sieving that the blogger specializes in. Bloggers develop a “beat” and become known for it. There are bloggers who find the latest in online or offline ephemera, who run contests and surveys, who sift and sort the entire online universe in ways ever more narrow and specialized. There are personal bloggers whose poetry or photography become famous, or whose “rants” make their way through the blogdex to get cited by other bloggers far and wide. There is that narrow elite of bloggers, who, working from their armchairs, get cited by the AP, Reuters, or, most valued, the New York Times.

In short, the blog is itself a venue for demonstrations of prowess. Whether technical, analytical, creative, or some combination of ineffable personality, bloggers are strutting their stuff on an international stage, at once immensely public and profoundly personal. For instance: “on my personal blog I’ll write about technology, philosophy, and politics. I only post things that I think are interesting for others to read; it’s not a personal journal made public.”

For many casual observers of blogging, the emphasis on political involvement is a surprise. In blogging, the twist is that this is politics performed, an elaborate display of political thought and analysis that is sometimes more about the display than the thought: “This is a way to get my voice out. It may be that not many people are reading it, but it’s there nonetheless.” Some bloggers would recognize the truth of this interview response, only partly tongue-in-cheek:

“So part of the urge is mimetic reproduction--infect others with our ideas and influences, so that others will become more like us. And part of it is just to show off.”

In this environment, the quality of the work matters – several pointed out to me that if an author is funny, or interesting, or writes thoughtful commentary, then that’s all it takes to be famous. Bloggers see blogs as a way by which to do that specifically. What this could lead to, was elaborated to me by the blogger who observed “David Weinberger’s re-working of Warhol’s insight: On the internet everyone will be famous to 15 people.” Showing off in blogging is designed to achieve this limited kind of fame.

### ***Feedback***

The beauty of blogging is that it is not simply casting brilliant observations or personal content to the Web. That would be just building a web page. The norms of blogging demand a certain amount of feedback, as readers are expected to blogroll or link their favorites. As it turns out, there are multiple ways to receive feedback on a blog – simply being visited (as tracked by the stats), direct responses in a comment-feedback web control, email replies, citation or linking in another blog, being blogrolled.

Bloggers often mentioned the “rush” that derives from receiving feedback:

- ? “All that being said, I think a little bit about how to get more people to read my stuff (or, let’s be fair, to *\*comment\** on my stuff -- it’s really feedback I’m craving), but I do not tailor my material for that purpose.”
- ? [Why blog?] “habit, feedback, pride, vanity.”

- ? [How community perceived?] “shared interests and in print acknowledgements, compliments from and to other bloggers I read and appreciate.”
- ? “It *is* a rush to get very flattering emails or mentions in other posts. Hell it’s a rush to get perfunctory emails saying ‘I read your page. But it’s a moderate rush, very hard to get too strung out on it.”

In varying degrees, it’s described as addictive, but limited in scope. The feedback is what drives some bloggers. It’s because of the rush that people “game” the stats to drive more traffic; many blogroll just in hopes of being blogrolled, linked, or visited.

### ***Creativity***

A blogger told me that “creativity takes practice, practice, practice.” For the subset of bloggers who view themselves as artists, the blog serves as a kind of public workshop, a display case for their writing, music, poetry, visual art, or other media. It is a niche, carved out of cyberspace that the artist and only the artist controls. For the artistically inclined, it seems to be a powerful draw.

Many bloggers, not just those who self-identify as an artist, have adopted some norms that seem to have originated in the more artistically-inclined blogs. Specifically, they set aside some space on their blog home page for a kind of “best of” links. Frequently, these links will take the viewer to a specific, archived posting (days, weeks or months in the past) of which the blogger is especially proud. Sometimes these posts are in a separate, non-chronological space. On occasion, when a particular link has become so popular or well-known that it drives traffic up to the site, the blogger will post a special link, generally near the top of the page, “Looking for x? Click here.”

Different bloggers see different purposes in the creative expression that abounds in blogs. This was expressed succinctly by the blogger who said “I think that, in the long run, non-political material will draw readers more than political material will. But writing the political material keeps me from fleeing the country, frankly.” The reality being expressed here is that some individuals express their creativity in various ways (political or non-political), but that the political material (while inherently less interesting) serves other purposes. But for the artistic types, it’s a heaven-sent performance space.

### ***Vanity***

What this illuminates is that a consistent draw for bloggers is pride in their own work. I can attest that there is something nauseatingly satisfying about seeing my words appear on the web. More than once, I found myself reading my own blog. The feelings of pride evoked by reading my own cleverness or sensitivity were quickly swamped by feeling silly about indulging narcissism, but the feelings were nonetheless real. If words are children of the mind, then the blog is their nursery, their safe space, and occasionally, the blogger beams proudly at them.

The blogger who responded to my question on what keeps him blogging with “Habit, feedback, pride, vanity” also wrote that “vanity and the urge or recognition are engines that never quit.”

Other bloggers noted that personal blogs are, in substantial ways, an outgrowth of the “vanity pages” of Web culture circa 1995 “Having a blog now isn't all that different than what having a vanity page was a few years ago, except it's actually in some way useful. I guess I don't consider it as a particularly new or radical phenomenon. People still use it to talk about their cats the way they used to use their vanity page to talk about their cats.” The similarity is not accidental – that practice/technology did not go away. Its current form of expression is the personal blog. After all, one blogger told me, the blogosphere is populated with “notice me/creative types” of people. The web page that mirrors the blogger reflects him out to the world, but also back to himself.

### *Awareness*

In some of the more rarefied exchanges I had with bloggers, they would identify a kind of heightened awareness that blogging brought them. This they described as seeing the world differently. For most, it seemed to be related to their realization that every real-life experience would later be blogged. They knew that they'd be analyzing or relating the experiences for others, so it changed the experience in real time for them.

- ? “I find that I listen more closely to people and pay more attention to situations around me. I'm often surprised how good my memory is when I reproduce bits for my blog.”
- ? [why blog?] “I didn't really know why I was keeping a journal when I did it. Or I should say my original reason faded pretty quickly. I wanted it to be a record of ideas, but I quickly discovered it was more interesting just to recount the day.”

- ? “I like the idea of *the backup brain* that somebody offered as the feeling blog reading gives you. (A backup brain to me is a brain like mine, but a brain that knows different things than mine.)”

No blogger said that they started blogging in order to heighten their sensitivity to lived experience. But many of them found it to be something they realized over time. This was clearly an enhancing experience, a fine-tuning of human sensibilities that made real-life experience more enjoyable.

The flip side of this was the observation, by multiple bloggers, that they had to set a goal to continue to post, or force themselves, or make it a routine of their day. If not, they would fall out of the habit. For many of these bloggers, it was a kind of chore, or self-obligation: “I make an effort to post daily” or “I try for one post a day” were the most common way this was expressed. Some put this in altruistic terms: “An economy of trust and reputation [is] being build up online in the blogging community.” Regardless of whether the benefit was for self-actualizing reasons, or community enhancement, there was the underlying realization that a post would have to be made, day in, day out; the ‘radar’ was tuned for bloggable experience at all times.

### ***Personal Archive***

A surprising number of bloggers mentioned the creation of a personal archive as a major reason for blogging. Several cited the tricky unreliability of personal memories, and noted how the blog served to check and verify it. Many expressed ideas similar to this interview response:

“I want a digital record of this content so when I’m ninety and decrepit, I can read how witty I was in my thirties. I can put my blog on a CD, and along with my photos, music, etc., keep a skinny, cohesive record of what I’m doing.”

Most didn’t start out trying to create an archive, but discovered its value later, in the untrustworthiness of memory:

- ? “I’ve always wanted to keep a regular journal to record my thoughts and stuff and that is even more important to me now with the way my brain has seriously suffered from my depression in the form of impact on memory as well as critical thought processes. My blog is a memory supplement for me now.”
- ? “It was only after I stopped keeping it and looked back on what I’d written that I realized why it was worth doing. I was amazed out how much I’d forgotten. I’d read about incidents that I couldn’t independently recall at all. I had no memory of them and no memory of recording them in the diary.”

? “I also came to realize, mostly startlingly of all, that some memories I was absolutely certain of were mistaken in basic ways, on the evidence of the record I’d made of them right after they occurred. It gave me a whole new perspective on memory and knowledge. I now know they are more slippery than I ever would have believed without the lesson I took from rereading my journal.”

? “You’ll have that same snapshot of yourself to refer to in the future.”

The impetus to create a personal archive didn’t seem to be something that drew people *to* blogging, but it seemed to be something that came to be valuable after doing it awhile. Of course, an archive has to have something in it, so it makes sense that it becomes valuable only after time has fostered an accumulation of content. But it surprised me how many people, working in the most ephemeral of media, are nonetheless thinking ahead to the end of their lives, and seeing value in that ephemera.

### **Meaning to Groups**

Groups aren’t persons. As anthropologists, we strive to understand groups of people, detailing out the macro and micro picture of the life of a group. So in the sense of an aggregate, a group has thoughts, motives, wants, dreams, all of the characteristics of an individual. Like an “actant,” a group can behave, feel, or strive. While I still believe that this is something of an analytic fiction, it has real utility. A mob, a subculture, a generation, or a demographic cluster does have a characteristic way of being. It appears to have a lived experience, to need meaning and value, even if those don’t consistently happen to specific individuals.

Consider that the definition of a “group” of people online is problematic. Whether a group is defined as a named entity imposing rights and obligations on members, or an anonymous mass of like-minded individuals, or something in-between, changes what we might learn by studying that “group”. However defined, though, individuals are always member of multiple groups. Participation online in blogging does lead to cross-group linkages and the spread of membership in them, the connections between them, and the increase in their importance to members. In other words, blogging helps groups to get larger, better organized, and better linked to other groups.

Is there a community of bloggers, like the blogosphere? I asked bloggers that question all the time. If there is one, did they feel they were a part of it? How do they experience that membership? As discussed, most bloggers said “there is no blogosphere”. Others described the illusory or limited nature of this association, such as the blogger who said:

“There's definitely a ‘hail fellow, well met’ phenomenon when I meet fellow bloggers. Some of it is forced: somebody in Seattle keeps trying to put together meetings of bloggers, but I haven't been very interested because it's too general. Many of the journalist-cum-bloggers I know have a loose confederation. We read each other's work, write about each other in print, write to each other, and have meals together at conferences.”

While this blogger struggled to see the need or relevance of connecting his online “community” to offline events, embedded in it is already the idea that the online community is an enhancement to an existing, offline “confederation” – that is, a community. I found similar patterns repeated many times, ranging from the Burning Man community, to local political organizations, to a very large number of college students maintaining offline friendship networks online.

The experiences had by members of a group ultimately shape the experiences of the group. In aggregate, my life-experiences contribute to the life experience of all of the groups of which I'm a member. So it is with blogging, but not in the way I anticipated. For the majority of bloggers, the named group that is the blogosphere is (at best) external to their daily life. It is decidedly, someone *else*. This doesn't mean that there is no impact to social groups by blogging, however. The answer to what blogging means to groups lies in the context that fostered the creation of the practice/technology in the first place.

It's my contention that blogging may not have created one group, or even very many “real” groups of people on the web. But it has connected people. A blogger told me, “A 'blogosphere' makes blogging sound so exclusive. As for whether it enlarges my social-circle, yes and no. It has enlarged my circle somewhat but not overwhelmingly.” One at a time, in a low-impact link, cite, or blogroll. Two at time, in mutual linking. Snowball-surfing from link, to link, to link, the various communities, sub-cultures and groups on the Web slowly become “aware” of each other.

Identity in American culture is performed as a variety of role-specific behaviors. As a result, each person is a “member” of multiple “groups” based on their various lifestyle choices and characteristics. These groups may never acquire names, meeting spaces, habits, or traditions, but they are no less real. I'm a member of the “groups” of people who finds the moon attractive and police dramas repellent, and a thousand other similarly-constructed groups.

Is this something as simplistic as “taste?” While it sounds uncomfortably similar to Bourdieu’s ideas on distinction, a truth is that group affiliation is clearly and commonly demarcated along lines signified by lifestyle choices. It may have no intrinsic meaning that I prefer American cars, or it may be deeply significant in my system of values – it’s completely unclear. But it’s not at all unclear that this places me in another “group” than someone who has no preference, or who prefers another type.

What blogging encourages is the expression of these viewpoints, along a dramatically broad range of subject matters. These are not simply consumer choices, but intrinsic world views, political analysis, and everything from the microscopically personal to geopolitics to cosmic spirituality. The upshot is that individuals can find the “groups” they didn’t know existed, and that they didn’t know they were “members” of. It may not be individual linkages, but finding like-minded soul-mates is rewarding, empowering, fulfilling.

In short, blogging works toward alleviating the anomie and atomization that are chronic in American life.

I may not need to have a particular blogger as a personal friend, but there’s something of a relief in stumbling across a blog post that also thinks like I do. It validates my viewpoint. It empowers. And it does so, over, and over again. As time goes on, these “groups” may begin to create real-world linkages, motivating masses of people to behave in certain specific ways. Arguably, it already has. From the absurdist pretentiousness of “flash mobs” as performance art, to political organizing through the Web, groups find themselves. Blogging provides a direct mechanism of doing just that.

### **Meaning to Society**

If groups aren’t persons, but can act as them, what about society? By simplistic extension, society is just a large group. I’ve argued that American society is more properly viewed as a collection of sub-societies sharing a physical and institutional infrastructure, which is another way of saying it’s a collection of groups. So it would be hard to argue that the same benefits that accrue to groups don’t also accrue to society. Realistically, of course society, and the interlocking network of societies that exist across humanity operate in ways that are far more complex than simple groups scaled up to fit global culture. But my point is that, at the unit level of improving linkages between individuals and groups, and between groups, benefits *must* accrue to the coherence and functioning of societies comprised of those groups.

They do, of course. Other social benefits derive from blogging's very real increases in communications between people and groups on matters of social and public policy. In this "public conversation" at the heart of democracy, the core of American ideals of democratic process actually takes shape. Engage any blogger who displays even a shred of political awareness, and this subject will spontaneously arise. Consider this: "It's a nice way to waste time and an asset to the armchair activist, those who argue that it fulfills some of the promise of the net as a democratic forum are entirely correct." In my interviewing with bloggers, I let them lead me toward these notions of democracy and activism; it happened quite commonly, especially amongst the more politically-aware "filtering" bloggers.

Even democracy is subject to nostalgia. When I asked bloggers to guess about the future of blogging, their answers referenced both the past and future: "Despite some early hits during the mid to late 90s I think the situation looks pretty good right now for online democracy". Note that the blogger equated the future of blogging with democracy, and looked to the past for the difficulties it was surmounting. Bloggers believe, they know, that they are "doing" democracy in ways that had been denied or unavailable in the recent past.

In a very real sense, this is true. Regardless of the technological format of the conversation, millions of people are engaging in dialogue about life, ideals, events, dreams, hopes, truth, power and experience: if that doesn't lead to democracy, it's hard to see what would. Blogging does foster a type of political participation that enhances involvement and organization, such as the blog-fueled involvement of the groups MeetUp.com and MoveOn.org (Franke-Ruta 2003:A7) in influencing the 2004 presidential primary-season campaigns.

Even without the noble-sounding mantle of democratic validation, there's a significant benefit to society when millions of individuals meet new people, or enhance their networks, their creativity, or even their day-to-day awareness. Social benefits accrue from the processes. They are summarized by this blogger's tongue-in-cheek quasi-spirituality:

"In my most subservient moments I think of what an honor it is to be a temple slave to google, helping to connect everything to everything by lending my mind and the hyperlinks lodged in my brain to the google overmind."

The "google overmind" may not have a physical manifestation offline, but online, the great mass of individuals comprising and improving their individual linkages to others forms the mechanism by which societies are conjured.

In other words, healthily engaged individuals are themselves a social benefit. Those benefits are carried offline by individuals, where they influence the “real world” society. Of course, the online world is a rapidly expanding domain of American culture, and having millions of highly-functioning individuals there is a good thing too. As groups of these individuals form and connect online, their offline counterparts acquire identities, goals, coherence and power. But the online/offline distinction is increasingly false, as people are, and society is, in both domains.

### **Summary: Personal Community**

Ideas about ‘community’ have come a long way. From the tyranny of identity and geography, through the various directions of demography and virtual community, it’s time to realize that collectivizing and aggregating impulses in human culture can be satisfied in a wide variety of ways. As we debate and strategize how to maximize ‘community’ in Western society, the very definitions of the term expand, shrink and mutate. What do we mean when we say ‘community’? What is ‘virtual community,’ and how is it different/better/worse/etc. than more traditional notions of community? It’s clear that ‘community’ and ‘virtual community’ both have ongoing roles in American life, and ‘community’ in some form is universally accepted as a social good. So our task becomes oriented toward understanding and optimizing this social good for the greatest number.

In these debates, realize that the average American may be a member of, literally, *no* communities, as traditionally defined. There may be a multitude of Bellah’s “lifestyle enclaves” involved, but nothing that constitutes a traditional community. But people aren’t as divorced from community membership as they may seem. While definitions of such a heavily overloaded term as “community” will always be shifting, these bloggers are noting the importance of names, boundaries, and the processes by which those boundaries are constructed and challenged. In an environment where it’s quite common for people to be members of exactly zero named, boundary-laden groups, this definition is insufficient. Humans survive and thrive through their linkages to others, so clearly, other kinds of linkages exist. Perhaps this is why bloggers so resoundingly found the existence of the blogosphere community to be an irrelevant myth. It’s not a community that really exists for them.

At the leading edge of cultural change in the United States is the Web. As it winds down its first full decade in the public consciousness, it remains the place where the new is tried first, where all things are or seem possible. It’s the zone of experimentation. And there, at the apex of

that leading edge, there stands blogging. And what do we find people doing there? Connecting. Grouping. Affiliating. Allying, self-actualizing, and democratizing.

The facilitation of these things may not lead to the emergence of formal communities like clubs, unions, political parties, or religions. Well, they might, eventually, but not reliably, not at this time. What is reliable, is that an individual can find others like herself on the Web. A blogger wrote this to me:

“I’m aware of blogging communities... the friend who got me started blogging in the first place has talked about face to face meetings with other bloggers as well but for me I don’t see how that comes about cause of all the blogs I read on a daily basis, 3 of them I don’t already know. I admit to feeling a desire to somehow hook up with people myself but I don’t understand yet how my friend found those other people and got to be friends with them. I haven’t seen the "path" yet.”

She hasn’t seen the path for offline community yet, but she is building *her* personal community. And with a practice/technology like blogging, she can construct them, literally, on her home [page]. “Personal Community” isn’t simply an analytic tool, or a way of understanding experience: it’s the places I go on the Web. It’s who’s on my home page. It’s who I’m happy to read, and who looks for my thoughts on the latest news. It’s the community formed around “me” for each individual.

No one else will ever share another’s personal community. In that way, it’s the logical extension of American norms of individualism, perfected. The personal community is the social incarnation of the mandatory selection of idiosyncratic viewpoints that American culture requires, so that each and every individual can be stamped as “unique.” It is the development of this unique personal community that blogging fosters.

### ***Analysis: Blogging***

Blogs emerged at a particular historical moment, in a particular cultural context. Like all historical moments in their cultural context, this was a unique occurrence. Blogs serve multiple purposes, noted throughout this examination of the context. They help to revitalize interpersonal contact, in a new web-enabled way. They help journalism with its ongoing redefinition as a commodified component of the Mediascape. They provide for increased involvement by individuals in matters of socio-political concern.

### **Blogs: Cultural Context**

These macro-level functionalist interpretations of what blogs accomplish, and the micro-level ones that play out in people's lives, are, it should be clear, very specific to the needs of Western (specifically, American) culture, circa 1998. That is, these functionalist needs are those of American culture. It seems unlikely that the specific combination of historical forces that gave rise to blogging will be generated in any other context. For instance, as the developing world joins the Internet, the contexts of other cultures don't replicate the conditions that gave rise to blogging in the U.S. The phenomenon is not likely to be repeated, unless some combinations of needs are also be addressed by adoption of a large-scale blogging paradigm.

This is proved again by the curious case of 'Salaam Pax,' the world-famous "Baghdad Blogger" of the second Gulf war in 2003. On the surface, his blog was a textbook example of a personal-blog, which was picked up by the blogosphere and the traditional media as an information source through the war. The very uniqueness of this blog illustrates the point. For example, for most of 2003, his was literally the only blog produced in Iraq, and even he abandoned his attempts to blog in Arabic, because no one would read it. Unraveling the identity of 'Salaam Pax' (a thoroughly Europeanized apolitical gay Iraqi architect/translator) reveals that this was a Westernized blogger. Even the most extremely 'foreign' kind of blog turns out to be an extension of the cultural context of the United States.

### **Blogs: Back to the Future**

If "personal community" is the model of communitarian behavior for the next generation, there are potentially real ramifications for shared experience, issues of the commons, political participation, and other long-term trends. Not to worry. Remember that an overwhelming need in the cultural meta-cycle is the need for change. While blogging meets the contextual needs of the current time in a particularly elegant way, it has no impact on the eventual cycle of adoption and rejection. Eventually, this too shall pass.

This was understood by the blogger who told me "what goes on in blogging is just an extension of what was already going on elsewhere, it's 'self-limiting' in the same way a powerdrill is 'self-limiting' in comparison to a screwdriver". Another said that "so long as human discourse continues I doubt it will disappear, and I don't know what else it would evolve into". Obviously, human discourse can't cease – we would figuratively and literally die. These bloggers know that some practice, some technology must/will always exist to connect people as they share their

viewpoints. Historical circumstances to the contrary ultimately shift, because the underlying requirement is a basic human need. So blogging or something like it, will continually re-emerge.

But what happens, when something like blogging emerges, that meets the needs of the place and time particularly well? When it fades away, or becomes no longer “geek chic”, what happens to those who engaged in that activity, who depended on it? If it was so good at ‘x,’ does that mean ‘x’ doesn’t get done anymore? Not at all. I’ll illustrate by example. A significant number of bloggers told me that they saw the future of blogging lies heavily in “community” blogging, shared blogs, possibly peer-evaluated, possibly “gated” or open to anyone. I remarked to one blogger that this sounded strikingly like.... Usenet, one of the very oldest Internet sharing protocols. Her response: “Yes, all things are usenet. Geeks have known this for years. Community blogs are just usenet with lower barriers to entry and cool graphics.” This is an eye-opener, a realization that 20 years of Internet development has led back to where it started.

So the future of the Internet may look a lot like the past, or other pasts. I asked every blogger I could find, what they thought the future of blogging would be. Most expressed the complex of beliefs summarized by this “general expansion and increasing diversity in both readership and authorship. I don't think it will become significantly more influential than it already is (pretty limited) except, one hopes, in terms of it's role as productive use of the public commons.” That is, all saw it approaching evergreen integration into other social practices. A significant number emphasized the emergence and growth of “community” blogs, where multiple individuals post and comment on a single site (again, like Usenet):

- ? “I see things like 'community weblogs' becoming bigger, or those devolve back into bulletin boards.”
- ? “Most of my interaction has taken place on group forums such as slashdot.org or nowarblog.org, with extraneous conversations in the comment sections of other blogs.”
- ? “I was thinking you may want to consider the concept of credibility networks. Blogs that aren't really communities or related to each other but rather a collection whose opinions you consistently value.”
- ? “I think every [multi-blogger] site will have its own character. Some, like slashdot, will be lots of news and commentary, with little personal material. Such things are more like BBSs, I guess. Some will tend more toward personal material and fewer authors, and are

more like blogs. Some will straddle the middle, with a small group of authors and a variety of content.”

- ? “The best community based sites (non-blogs like slashdot) are those that have peer rating systems that let others know the value of the postings that were made.”
- ? “I expect group-blogging in various forms (single-issue group-blogs like standdown, personally selected group syndications of separate blogs and other variations on syndications from multiple blogs on single pages - such as warbloggers:cc or blogcritics, and the like) to become more prevalent as blogging increases in scope, size and variety - which is just one way to deal with vastness.”

“Deal with the vastness” – an altogether apropos description of the Web and the world, and how we handle life in the information torrent. This wasn’t invented here, or now. Practices and technologies for coping with too much or too little are part of the feedback loops that make life possible.

### ***Analysis: The Technology Lifecycle***

In sum, computered organizations tend to replicate earlier dynamics.... Since the specific mediators stressed are the same as [earlier formations] and despite the occasional CR rhetoric s, early AIT/work anthropology is not indicative of a new social formation. [Hakken 1999:120]

The technology lifecycle integrates the contextual needs of a cultural group, with the emergence of a set of practices to meet that need, the evolution of specialized artifacts to accomplish tasks, and the processes that popularize and spread the practices and technologies through the cultural group. It’s for this reason that I refer to “practice/technology,” to emphasize that it is a non-artifactual performance that exists at the core of this.

### **Practice/Technology**

This is the heart of the argument I make about the technology lifecycle. The current cultural context drives the creation of practices to meet needs in that context; those practices evolve into technology that follows a certain trajectory, eventually to be superseded by new practice/technologies.

The thing is, the adoption of the practice/technology *doesn't alter* the underlying context. When the practice/technology has run its course, and is no longer widely practiced, the underlying needs that drove the original adoption are usually still there, driving the creation of new forms. Ultimately, these forms, which evolve to meet particular needs, will likely have certain shared characteristics.

Needs like the human need to connect never entirely disappear. Hence, blogs evolved to meet a contextual need to connect people, and blogs are eerily like Usenet, which was like BBSs, which were like electronic Kiosks, which were like coffee houses, which were like gossip networks, which... This is a somewhat functionalist argument, but it's hard to ignore the similarities in form and function of these somewhat disparate institutions.

Of course, a practice/technology, like blogging, that arises to facilitate the interconnection of people is something that exists there at the core set of characteristics of what it means to be human. Not all practice/technologies meet such a fundamental need. For those practice/technologies, the lifecycle may be more variable, partial, cyclical, or otherwise aberrant. The rapid-fire crucible of cultural innovation that is the Internet may also force the lifecycle of practice/technologies through an abbreviated cycle, or may not allow for the full exploration of the potentialities of the practice/technology in society.

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

### *Summary*

Blogging is a practice that evolved into a technology. In the context of the society in which it was born, it makes perfect sense. People and institutions in that society at that time were experiencing a variety of disconnections and alienations from themselves and from each other. There were long-term developments in mass media, online environments, and social life that provided Web-enabled environments for experimentation in social form and practice. Blogging developed as an extension of these forms and practices, one in a lineage. As the practice developed and regularized, it evolved standardized and specialized technological forms and formats that fostered its development into a mainstream technology, where it continues to undergo evolution.

Context may have been the source of initial practice, but ideas about relative status enabled through participation in practice were responsible for the spread of the practice throughout society. This process is a necessary component for the ultimate success of any technology, and in the case of blogging, came in the fashionable form of “Geek-Chic” as a way for individuals to be viewed as cutting-edge participants in social life.

The practice of blogging is ultimately enhancing to the individual. While ancillary benefits accrue to collectivities such as groups and to society itself, the central motivations are selfish in nature, even when masked in the language of altruism. These benefits don’t create “community” in any traditional or even virtual sense, but instead create and enhance a person-focused collection of people and places to benefit just that person. This “personal community” makes elegant use of the resources of the individual and society, and almost accidentally, benefits everyone else at the same time.

### *Conclusions*

Blogging isn’t going to revolutionize anything. There is no evidence that this minor variant of existing technological practices is anything more than the current form of an ongoing set of practices. This particular metamorphosis has some particular appeal to a fairly large cross-section of individuals; as time moves on, and cultural fads come and go, blogging will rise and fall with

them, eventually becoming integrated into the baseline set of cultural practices that are available to functioning members of western society.

Blogging has some particular utility as a journalistic adjunct. As is often the case, this is an example of something old becoming new again. The long/slow and short/fast feedback loops between practitioners in the institution of journalism and the public-at-large require mediators. With the rise of segment-making media and the widespread acceptance of the norm of atomized individual life, separate from collective or group action, the traditional channels of communication between journalism and the public have not been working well. The blogging “pundits” fill this gap in multiple ways, not the least of which being the direct linkage between “top” (e.g., *New York Times* editorials) and “bottom” (yesterday’s blog on today’s newspaper). This linkage function is again, not revolutionary; all generations of journalists have had to find a way to stay linked with public thought and sentiment, or they went out of business.

Blogging’s prospects for a renewal of democratic process are incremental at best, wishful thinking at worst. The ‘journalistic adjunct’ role seems to be the biggest potentiality. The lifecycle stages of cooptation/backlash insure that the limits of change plateau early. Each “new” capability fostered by blogging, such as hearing a politician’s own thoughts, are an implementation of an existing sociopolitical practice; they are not a reinvention of it. Blogging may be a means to an existing or emerging democratic end, but it cannot overhaul the existing sociopolitical system.

The lifecycle of technology is both simpler and more complex than usually imagined. Technology itself is more than objects and their uses. Social context provides the medium in which individual lives are experienced. Individual experiences provide the incentive and means to adapt social practices in new ways. When sufficient numbers of individuals adopt and normalize these adapted practices, specialized objects and systems are developed to accomplish them. These “technologies” don’t fundamentally change the underlying social practices, nor even the contextual circumstances that gave rise to them. For all our technologies, we are more or less doing the same things, for the same reasons, as before.

Technological change is something of an illusion. It’s true that technology itself changes. It’s even true that we change, as individuals and as a society. But it’s an error to think that the former causes the latter. If anything, our changes cause technology to change. Certainly, specific technological changes may enhance or simplify existing social practices in such radical or efficient ways that “new” capabilities emerge or become widespread. Thus, and particularly for outsiders,

change appears to arrive from outside and derive from technology. But the changes were already in place and the technology is a direct result of them. When we do change, it's not because our technology changed us, but because we changed ourselves.

Even the appearance of technological change is an illusion. The objects and systems that emerge from current and emerging social practice become the embodied forms of technology at each current historical moment. Because the "Geek-Chic" process is a necessary component for the diffusion of technology, these objects and systems become fetishized, the "must-have" symbols for those who are conspicuously in touch. But these specialized objects are, each, simply the latest incarnation of a system to meet human needs. Human societies excel at producing such systems, as thousands of years of human society attest. Most human needs are fairly basic, and fairly well-understood: our systems emerge to meet these needs, but can never eliminate most of them. The more our technology changes, the more we must realize that it not only doesn't change us, it cannot.

The environment, processes and benefits of blogging are specific to it, but are exemplary of the development and adoption of technologies in general. Technologies, even state-of-the-art computered ones, are social phenomena. Applying this to social contexts, it's apparent that technologies have lifecycles, patterns of development and adoption that follow predictable stages. Technology reflects the particular lifecycle stage of the overall practice/technology. The social world precedes and lives on after the particular technological artifacts that it generates, uses and discards.

## CHAPTER 6: APPLICATIONS

Hindsight is easy. Examining the emergence of a social phenomenon in retrospect automatically lends a cast of inevitability to it. *Of course* blogging emerged to meet the needs that existed at the time of its emergence. *Of course* it used existing practices and tools to shape something new. *Of course* that something new was just something old, in a new guise. Given the existence of the Mediascape, WebWorld, and American Lifeways, it may seem like blogging couldn't have *not* emerged. It had to be.

Of course, we know that nothing in culture is inevitable, and many, many things are random, or at least arbitrary. Blogging was no more a required social trend than speed-dating or SUV-backlash. But blogging did arise, as did so many other social trends. The benefit of the model described by the technology lifecycle can be applied at all times. Especially in the hothouse change-oriented culture of the West, the technology adoption cycle is running now, on cycles long and slow. The model can be applied forward, to show what hasn't yet emerged, but is in the process of emerging.

Put another way, the technology lifecycle may be a predictive model as well as a descriptive one.

In the case of blogging, the emerging, practically real-time historical events allow us to see the multiple influences that came together to foster the emergence of the practice and the technology. In the major cues of ongoing changes in media life, digital capabilities, and macrosocial trends were the seeds of what emerged as blogging. In the processes of Geek-Chic the competitive jockeying for non-living but curiously alive trends sought and gained footholds in collective and personal consciousness. In pursuit of individualistic gain, accidental social benefits accrued, amplifying the gains.

The point is, this cycle is occurring all around us, all the time. We can use the model of the technology lifecycle to understand this and to describe the future outcome of the next set of changes, and the next after that. While this won't be sufficient to pinpoint-predict future developments, it's enough to show the overall form and direction of development.

Since my area of focus has been on domains connected with the media, digital technology, journalism, and personal/political meaning in social life, I find those areas to be ripe for further development. In each case, there are contextual clues for what is developing that are well-known to practitioners in those domains. For example, journalists have a pretty good sense for what journalism will be like next year, and the year after that. Similar patterns hold true within any domain, from web technologies to farming. The interesting surprises (like blogging) occur where separate or unrelated domains meet and converge, thus fashioning a specialized hybrid. For example, the “blograising” phenomenon (L. Cox, 2003:9) is an experiment in practice that alters newsgathering processes; if successful, it could propagate through its own form of “Geek-Chic”. If the domains are large enough, or key enough, or meaningful enough, then “suddenly” thousands or even millions of individuals are engaged in a new practice, one that then mutates into a specialized technological form.

Consider, for example, photography. For more than a century it’s been possible to produce and mass-produce photographic images, and the rules and roles for photography are well-written into American life. Incremental innovations in technique over decades kept it a stable and important practice/technology. Over the last 10 years or so, the wave of digital innovation sweeping through other domains of society has engulfed photography, and the ensuing shakeups in practice and technology are only just now (pardon the pun) ‘developing’. Photography can serve as a relatively easy test-case for the technology lifecycle as a predictive model.

It’s outside my scope to conduct a full examination of the history of photography, with an emphasis on the rippling influences of digital technology. But buried in that history, I suspect would be found innovations, years ago, by small-but-motivated subsets of people, in creation, storage, editing, processing, sharing, and using photographs. At first, as digital techniques were applied to these things, there were haphazard attempts, early standards. As time went on, the *Enabling Technologies* lifecycle stage gave way to later phases. Jargons developed, standards stabilized, tools were formed, media publicity brought in more users, and the whole lifecycle moved forward.

Today, digital technology is highly developed, fully within the *Mainstreaming* phase of the lifecycle. The main-line of innovation is clearly laid out – the broad future of photography is digital, and analog film will eventually be another “boutique” graphical technology like photolithography, etching, or woodblock carving.

But innovation doesn't cease, in photography or any other technology, for the reasons outlined earlier. At the junctures between separate domains are the places where surprises happen. In that regard, there's a very interesting future ahead for photography (and videography). Specifically, combine these separate elements:

- cheap digital cell-phone cameras/video-phones
- mass networking and universal cell service in the urban areas of the globe
- the dearth of socio-technical infrastructure in many places of the world, beyond cell-phone service
- "indymedia," or the emergence of non-affiliated global news networking
- the ongoing financial market pressure on media organizations to reduce journalism expenses
- the continuing discontent expressed by urban populations in the various qualities of media coverage

Each of these separate trends (and other, similar/related ones) has its own logic, histories, and influences. All of them are at various stages in their respective technology lifecycles. But all of them are ripe for socio-practical innovations in news reporting that relies on masses of individuals wielding cell-phone video-cameras to document real-life events as they unfold, and broadcasting those events to the globe in real-time. The model of the technology lifecycle tells us that, if true, that innovation would be spreading now, among the most-motivated subset, the core group of early adopters. Our job as social analysts is to examine the world around us, and find that subset.

We don't have to look far. The widespread use of satellite video-phones by the mainstream news media of "embedded" reporters during the U.S.-Iraq war of 2003 is the prototype practice for the next wave of technology emergence. Using existing technologies, put together in a new way, to meet an existing need, those media organizations prototyped a new way of communicating. As the technology lifecycle progresses, specialized and usable video-cell phones are just a few small tweaks away. The huge mass of potential users outlined above will be in the first group of *Early Adopters*. By the time *Mainstreaming* and *Integration* kick in, our notions of "reporter," may be reshaped beyond recognition. Already, an early form of backlash against cell-phone cameras is leading to their banning by different organizations, ranging from health clubs to Saudi Arabia.

As an example of the technology lifecycle in action, cell phone video-cameras are almost too simple. After all, the trends are extremely well-marked, and in 2004, the technological innovations are already in production. “Camera blogs” are an early manifestation of this. The social motivations for adoption are clear, and only the clockwork mechanics of Geek-Chic stand between us and CNN’s having a correspondent in (literally) every corner of the globe.

The technology lifecycle is most usefully applied to problems where the ultimate direction is unclear. I don’t attempt make the specious argument that technology is value-free. On the contrary, the entire point of the discussion of Personal Community (in the case of blogging) was that the service of a private social goal is, in fact, the motivation for the development and deployment of a practice/technology. So using the technology lifecycle to predict or shape the form or direction of the development of a practice/technology must implicitly assume social goals. These goals, or motivations needn’t be lofty, moral, or ethical; they may not be perceived, expressed, or even felt. They may not even be shared. But they are what will drive development.

In the current environment, it’s the discontents, the fractures, the problem areas, and the pressures that will fuel the development of the next wave of practice/technologies. The people whose needs are being met by current practices are not generally the ones who would normally build the next wave.

To use the technology lifecycle going forward, look at the present. It’s always in the current context that the motivation exists for change. By the shape of their discontent today, you’ll know tomorrow’s early adopters. In the hunt for what’s marked as trendy today, you’ll find tomorrow’s everyday habit. In the tools that exist today, you’ll find the reshaped practices of tomorrow.

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## APPENDICES

### *Appendix A: A brief history of blogging*

This text is reproduced in full from Rebecca Blood's history, dated 7 September, 2000. It is available at [http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog\\_history.html](http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html) .

In 1998 there were just a handful of sites of the type that are now identified as weblogs (so named by Jorn Barger in December 1997). Jesse James Garrett, editor of Infosift, began compiling a list of "other sites like his" as he found them in his travels around the web. In November of that year, he sent that list to Cameron Barrett. Cameron published the list on Camworld, and others maintaining similar sites began sending their URLs to him for inclusion on the list. Jesse's 'page of only weblogs' lists the 23 known to be in existence at the beginning of 1999.

Suddenly a community sprang up. It was easy to read all of the weblogs on Cameron's list, and most interested people did. Peter Merholz announced in early 1999 that he was going to pronounce it 'wee-blog' and inevitably this was shortened to 'blog' with the weblog editor referred to as a 'blogger.'

At this point, the bandwagon jumping began. More and more people began publishing their own weblogs. I began mine in April of 1999. Suddenly it became difficult to read every weblog every day, or even to keep track of all the new ones that were appearing. Cameron's list grew so large that he began including only weblogs he actually followed himself. Other webloggers did the same. In early 1999 Brigitte Eaton compiled a list of every weblog she knew about and created the Eatonweb Portal. Brig evaluated all submissions by a simple criterion: that the site consist of dated entries. Webloggers debated what was and what was not a weblog, but since the Eatonweb Portal was the most complete listing of weblogs available, Brig's inclusive definition prevailed.

This rapid growth continued steadily until July 1999 when Pitas, the first free build-your-own-weblog tool launched, and suddenly there were hundreds. In August, Pyra released Blogger, and Groksoup launched, and with the ease that these web-based tools provided, the bandwagon-jumping turned into an explosion. Late in 1999 software developer Dave Winer introduced Edit This Page, and Jeff A. Campbell launched Velocinews. All of these services are free, and all of them are designed to enable individuals to publish their own weblogs quickly and easily.

The original weblogs were link-driven sites. Each was a mixture in unique proportions of links, commentary, and personal thoughts and essays. Weblogs could only be created by people who already knew how to make a website. A weblog editor had either taught herself to code HTML for fun, or, after working all day creating commercial websites, spent several off-work hours every day surfing the web and posting to her site. These were web enthusiasts.

Many current weblogs follow this original style. Their editors present links both to little-known corners of the web and to current news articles they feel are worthy of note. Such links are nearly always accompanied by the editor's commentary. An editor with some expertise in a field might demonstrate the accuracy or inaccuracy of a highlighted article or certain facts therein; provide additional facts he feels are pertinent to the issue at hand; or simply add an opinion or differing viewpoint from the one in the piece he has linked. Typically this commentary is characterized by an irreverent, sometimes sarcastic tone. More skillful editors manage to convey all of these things in the sentence or two with which they introduce the link (making them, as Halcyon pointed out to me, pioneers in the art and craft of microcontent). Indeed, the format of the typical weblog, providing only a very short space in which to write an entry, encourages pithiness on the part of the writer; longer commentary is often given its own space as a separate essay.

These weblogs provide a valuable filtering function for their readers. The web has been, in effect, pre-surfed for them. Out of the myriad web pages slung through cyberspace, weblog editors pick out the most mind-boggling, the most stupid, the most compelling.

But this type of weblog is important for another reason, I think. In Douglas Rushkoff's *Media Virus*, Greg Ruggerio of the Immediast Underground is quoted as saying, "Media is a corporate

possession...You cannot participate in the media. Bringing that into the foreground is the first step. The second step is to define the difference between public and audience. An audience is passive; a public is participatory. We need a definition of media that is public in its orientation."

By highlighting articles that may easily be passed over by the typical web user too busy to do more than scan corporate news sites, by searching out articles from lesser-known sources, and by providing additional facts, alternative views, and thoughtful commentary, weblog editors participate in the dissemination and interpretation of the news that is fed to us every day. Their sarcasm and fearless commentary reminds us to question the vested interests of our sources of information and the expertise of individual reporters as they file news stories about subjects they may not fully understand.

Weblog editors sometimes contextualize an article by juxtaposing it with an article on a related subject; each article, considered in the light of the other, may take on additional meaning, or even draw the reader to conclusions contrary to the implicit aim of each. It would be too much to call this type of weblog "independent media," but clearly their editors, engaged in seeking out and evaluating the "facts" that are presented to us each day, resemble the public that Ruggiero speaks of. By writing a few lines each day, weblog editors begin to redefine media as a public, participatory endeavor.

Now, during 1999 something else happened, and I believe it has to do with the introduction of Blogger itself.

While weblogs had always included a mix of links, commentary, and personal notes, in the post-Blogger explosion increasing numbers of weblogs eschewed this focus on the web-at-large in favor of a sort of short-form journal. These blogs, often updated several times a day, were instead a record of the blogger's thoughts: something noticed on the way to work, notes about the weekend, a quick reflection on some subject or another. Links took the reader to the site of another blogger with whom the first was having a public conversation or had met the previous evening, or to the site of a band he had seen the night before. Full-blown conversations were carried on between three or five blogs, each referencing the other in their agreement or rebuttal of

the other's positions. Cults of personality sprung up as new blogs appeared, certain names appearing over and over in daily entries or listed in the obligatory sidebar of "other weblogs" (a holdover from Cam's original list). It was, and is, fascinating to see new bloggers position themselves in this community, referencing and reacting to those blogs they read most, their sidebar an affirmation of the tribe to which they wish to belong.

Why the change? Why so many? I have always suspected that some of the popularity of this form may be a simple desire to emulate the sites of head Pyra kids Ev and Meg. As the creators of Blogger, their charming, witty blogs are their company's foremost advertisement for its most popular product.

More than that, Blogger itself places no restrictions on the form of content being posted. Its web interface, accessible from any browser, consists of an empty form box into which the blogger can type...anything: a passing thought, an extended essay, or a childhood recollection. With a click, Blogger will post the...whatever...on the writer's website, archive it in the proper place, and present the writer with another empty box, just waiting to be filled.

Contrast this with the web interface of Metafilter, a popular community weblog. Here, the writer is presented with three form boxes: the first for the URL of the referenced site, the second for the title of the entry, and the third for whatever commentary the writer would like to add. The Metafilter interface instructs the writer to contribute a link and add commentary; Blogger makes no such demands. Blogger makes it so easy to type in a thought or reaction that many people are disinclined to hunt up a link and compose some text around it.

It is this free-form interface combined with absolute ease of use which has, in my opinion, done more to impel the shift from the filter-style weblog to journal-style blog than any other factor. And there has been a shift. Searching for a filter-style weblog by clicking through the thousands of weblogs listed at weblogs.com, the Eatonweb Portal, or Blogger Directory can be a Sisyphean task. Newcomers would appear to be most drawn to the blog rather than filter style of weblogging.

Certainly, both styles still exist; certainly the particular mixture of links, commentary, and personal observation unique to each individual site has always given each weblog its distinctive voice and personality; and certainly the weblog has always been an infinitely malleable format. But the influx of blogs has changed the definition of weblog from "a list of links with commentary and personal asides" to "a website that is updated frequently, with new material posted at the top of the page." I really wish there were another term to describe the filter-style weblog, one that would easily distinguish it from the blog. On the principle of truth in advertising, this would make it much easier for the adventuresome reader to find the type of weblog he most enjoys.

So, what of the weblog? Is it of interest or importance to anyone who does not produce one? Well, I think it should be.

A filter-style weblog provides many advantages to its readers. It reveals glimpses of an unimagined web to those who have no time to surf. An intelligent human being filters through the mass of information packaged daily for our consumption and picks out the interesting, the important, the overlooked, and the unexpected. This human being may provide additional information to that which corporate media provides, expose the fallacy of an argument, perhaps reveal an inaccurate detail. Because the weblog editor can comment freely on what she finds, one week of reading will reveal to you her personal biases, making her a predictable source. This further enables us to turn a critical eye to both the information and comments she provides. Her irreverent attitude challenges the veracity of the "facts" presented each day by authorities.

Shortly after I began producing Rebecca's Pocket I noticed two side effects I had not expected. First, I discovered my own interests. I thought I knew what I was interested in, but after linking stories for a few months I could see that I was much more interested in science, archaeology, and issues of injustice than I had realized. More importantly, I began to value more highly my own point of view. In composing my link text every day I carefully considered my own opinions and ideas, and I began to feel that my perspective was unique and important.

This profound experience may be most purely realized in the blog-style weblog. Lacking a focus on the outside world, the blogger is compelled to share his world with whomever is reading. He

may engage other bloggers in conversation about the interests they share. He may reflect on a book he is reading, or the behavior of someone on the bus. He might describe a flower that he saw growing between the cracks of a sidewalk on his way to work. Or he may simply jot notes about his life: what work is like, what he had for dinner, what he thought of a recent movie. These fragments, pieced together over months, can provide an unexpectedly intimate view of what it is to be a particular individual in a particular place at a particular time.

The blogger, by virtue of simply writing down whatever is on his mind, will be confronted with his own thoughts and opinions. Blogging every day, he will become a more confident writer. A community of 100 or 20 or 3 people may spring up around the public record of his thoughts. Being met with friendly voices, he may gain more confidence in his view of the world; he may begin to experiment with longer forms of writing, to play with haiku, or to begin a creative project--one that he would have dismissed as being inconsequential or doubted he could complete only a few months before.

As he enunciates his opinions daily, this new awareness of his inner life may develop into a trust in his own perspective. His own reactions--to a poem, to other people, and, yes, to the media--will carry more weight with him. Accustomed to expressing his thoughts on his website, he will be able to more fully articulate his opinions to himself and others. He will become impatient with waiting to see what others think before he decides, and will begin to act in accordance with his inner voice instead. Ideally, he will become less reflexive and more reflective, and find his own opinions and ideas worthy of serious consideration.

His readers will remember an incident from their own childhood when the blogger relates a memory. They might look more closely at the other riders on the train after the blogger describes his impressions of a fellow commuter. They will click back and forth between blogs and analyze each blogger's point of view in a multi-blog conversation, and form their own conclusions on the matter at hand. Reading the views of other ordinary people, they will readily question and evaluate what is being said. Doing this, they may begin a similar journey of self-discovery and intellectual self-reliance.

The promise of the web was that everyone could publish, that a thousand voices could flourish, communicate, connect. The truth was that only those people who knew how to code a web page could make their voices heard. Blogger, Pitas, and all the rest have given people with little or no knowledge of HTML the ability to publish on the web: to pontificate, remember, dream, and argue in public, as easily as they send an instant message. We can't seriously compare the creation of the World Wide Web itself with the availability of free technology that allows anyone with a web browser to express their unique, irreproducible vision to the rest of the world...can we?

In September of 2000 there are thousands of weblogs: topic-oriented weblogs, alternative viewpoints, astute examinations of the human condition as reflected by mainstream media, short-form journals, links to the weird, and free-form notebooks of ideas. Traditional weblogs perform a valuable filtering service and provide tools for more critical evaluation of the information available on the web. Free-style blogs are nothing less than an outbreak of self-expression. Each is evidence of a staggering shift from an age of carefully controlled information provided by sanctioned authorities (and artists), to an unprecedented opportunity for individual expression on a worldwide scale. Each kind of weblog empowers individuals on many levels.

So why doesn't every bookmark list contain five weblogs? In the beginning of 1999 it really seemed that by now every bookmark list would. There was a bit of media attention and new weblogs were being created every day. It was a small, quick-growing community and it seemed to be on the edge of a wider awareness. Perhaps the tsunami of new weblogs created in the wake of Pitas and Blogger crushed the movement before it could reach critical mass; the sudden exponential growth of the community rendered it unnavigable. Weblogs, once filters of the web, suddenly became so numerous they were as confusing as the web itself. A few more articles appeared touting weblogs as the next big thing. But the average reader, hopefully clicking through to the Eatonweb portal, found herself faced with an alphabetical list of a thousand weblogs. Not knowing where to begin, she quickly retreated back to ABCnews.com.

I don't have an answer. In our age the single page website of an obscure Turk named Mahir can sweep the web in days. But the unassailable truth is that corporate media and commercial and governmental entities own most of the real estate. Dell manages more webpages than all of the

weblogs put together. Sprite's PR machine can point more man-hours to the promotion of one message--"Obey Your Thirst"--than the combined man-hours of every weblogger alive. Our strength--that each of us speaks in an individual voice of an individual vision--is, in the high-stakes world of carefully orchestrated messages designed to distract and manipulate, a liability. We are, very simply, outnumbered.

And what, really, will change if we get weblogs into every bookmark list? As we are increasingly bombarded with information from our computers, handhelds, in-store kiosks, and now our clothes, the need for reliable filters will become more pressing. As corporate interests exert tighter and tighter control over information and even art, critical evaluation is more essential than ever. As advertisements creep onto banana peels, attach themselves to paper cup sleeves, and interrupt our ATM transactions, we urgently need to cultivate forms of self-expression in order to counteract our self-defensive numbness and remember what it is to be human.

We are being pummeled by a deluge of data and unless we create time and spaces in which to reflect, we will be left with only our reactions. I strongly believe in the power of weblogs to transform both writers and readers from "audience" to "public" and from "consumer" to "creator." Weblogs are no panacea for the crippling effects of a media-saturated culture, but I believe they are one antidote.

### ***Appendix B: Initial contact emails***

#### **Initial Contact**

To: []

Subject: Dissertation Research: Blogging

xxxx -

This email is being sent to you because I've seen your weblog, and I'd like to start a dialogue with you about it. If you don't wish to have any kind of exchange with me, by all means, delete this email. If you'd like to help me, this email is a request for you to take part in a voluntary open-ended "interview" as part of a research project.

My name is Jim Milne. I am a doctoral candidate in Applied Anthropology at the University of South Florida, in Tampa, Florida. As part of my dissertation research, I'm interested in learning about blogging and bloggers. This is not a survey, nor is this a widely-broadcast message; this is a "qualitative" study, designed to find out details about the experiences of a select few individuals. I also include a few, basic informational questions about your personal background. The information I learn in this way will be used to analyze blogging itself, as a social phenomenon and technology trend.

If you're game, I can send you some questions to focus the ideas. Your experiences matter, and your understanding of them is what I'm looking for. Just say the word.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Jim

jim@onemultitude.com

### **Initial Data Request**

To: []

Subject: Dissertation Research: Blogging

xxxx -

Thanks much for your willingness to respond; it means a lot to me.

To help me out, you can reply to this email, answering the questions below. This will take about 30 minutes of your time, more or less. If you prefer, I can call you, at a number and time of your choosing, if that makes you more comfortable. In answering these question groups, please consider them "open-ended". My goal is to understand your experience, and if a question doesn't fit something that seems relevant to you, just change the question.

Legalese:

While this research does not bring direct benefits to you personally, I believe it will contribute to scholarly and public understanding of the nature and potential of weblogging as a cultural phenomenon. It will not place you at any risk, since your participation is voluntary and confidential. You should be aware that, as with any Internet communication, it is possible for e-mail messages to be “intercepted” by unauthorized third parties, although this is highly unlikely. I will try my best to protect your privacy, but no absolute guarantees can be made. However, you have my assurances that 1) I will not use your name, either in my dissertation or in any subsequent presentations or publications, and 2) that your privacy, responses and research recorded will be kept confidential to the extent of the law. However, authorized research personnel, employees of Department of Health and Human Services and the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board may inspect the research records.

If you prefer not to use email, you may print out the questions and answers, and mail the completed interview to:

Jim Milne  
Department of Anthropology  
SOC 107, University of South Florida  
Tampa, FL 33620

More legalese:

*This research project/study and informed consent form were reviewed and approved by the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects. If you have questions about your rights as a person who is taking part in a research study, you may contact a member of the Division of Research Compliance of the University of South Florida at 813-974-5638.*

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact me or my Faculty Advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Bird, at [ebird@chumal.cas.usf.edu](mailto:ebird@chumal.cas.usf.edu), or by phone at (813) 974-0802.

Thanks much!

Jim Milne

jim@onemultitude.com

Each topical area can be answered as a whole, or the individual questions can be addressed. In all cases, you can consider the question as a springboard to any related topics that interest you. Your blog itself answers some of these questions, but I'm more interested in your perspective on it than the sheer facts and figures.

### **Topical Area: Motivation**

When did you start blogging?

How did you go about deciding to be a blogger?

Why blog?

### **Topical Area: Nature of Involvement**

How do you characterize your postings? What kind of things do you post?

Do you consider yourself political? Do your politics show up in your blog?

Do you have any other web pages or sites you maintain?

Are you technologically savvy? Are you a computer "wiz" for others?

Do you use your real-life identity on your blog?

### **Topical Area: Process**

Did you set up your blog? What about the mechanics of domain, templates, color schemes, etc.?

What tools do you use in maintaining your blog? Blogger, Movable Type, other development tools?

What time of day/week do you typically post? How much time does maintaining your blog take (daily/weekly)?

### **Topical Area: Community**

Is there a "community" of bloggers, like the "blogosphere"? If so, do you feel you're a part of it?

How do you experience that membership? What kind of people are members of that community?

Have you noticed whether bloggers tend to be similar in terms of personal characteristics like age, gender, ethnicity etc.?

Are you a member of any other online communities, and if so, which?  
Has any special blogging jargon crept into your other communications?  
Do you tell people offline about your blog online?  
Do you know any other bloggers personally? Are you and they very similar?  
What about other bloggers online, are you “like” them?

### **Topical Area: Tech/Trend Lifecycle**

Who do you link to? How do you decide to what to link?  
How do you organize your links? How frequently do you change that organization?  
How do you decide what to post?  
What keeps you posting? Why do you continue doing it?  
Do you blog more or less frequently as time goes on?  
Have you gotten others started blogging?  
What do you see as the future of blogging?

### **Media Life outside Blogs**

On average, how much time do you spend on-line each day (not just on your blog)?  
On average, how much time do you spend with other media? (e.g. TV, music, video games etc.)  
Which media are most important to you and why?  
What is your most important source for news, whether local or national/international?  
If you had to give up all media except one, which would you keep and why?

### **Anything else?**

Is there anything else you'd like to say about blogging?

### **Personal Background**

Your age is:

18-25 .... 26-35 .... 36-45 .... 46-55 ... 55+

Are you:

Male ... Female ...

Occupation? ..

Highest Level of education:

Some high school .... Graduated high school ... Some college ....

Graduated college .... Graduate or professional degree .....

Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up phone interview ?

Yes .... No ....

Thanks much for taking the time to do this. If you're willing, this can be simply the first stage in an ongoing dialogue.

Sincerely,

Jim Milne

[jim@onemultitude.com](mailto:jim@onemultitude.com)

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

James M. Milne received a Bachelor's in Computer Engineering from Tulane University in 1983, and a Masters in Engineering Management from Old Dominion University in 1987. He has worked since 1983 in computer systems development for various corporations. While in the PhD program at the University of South Florida, Mr. Milne has continued to work full time in this capacity. He is interested in issues beyond the narrow confines of computers as software/hardware devices, instead seeing the relevance of their roles in culture, media and technology. He lives in Florida with his life partner, Ken Geary.