

Theorizing the Diary Weblog

by

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, the web genre that would eventually come to be known as the “weblog” (1997) or “blog” (1999) has become increasingly common.¹ According to prominent metablogger Rebecca Blood, blogs were originally annotated lists of links maintained by a small technological elite, but they soon diversified into a wide variety of subgenres, including the ostensibly autobiographical diary-style webpage (“Weblogs”). The diary weblog combined features of the online journal with structural features from the early link-based blogs, and initially it was fairly rare. However, when web-publishing services like Blogger eliminated or made optional the “link” field in their entry creation forms, bloggers increasingly moved away from annotated links, and diary weblogs quickly became the most common blog genre (Blood, “Hammer, Nail”). Today the diary weblog, also known as the diary blog, lifelog, and the personal journal, is such a universally recognized blog genre that its essential features seem self-evident to most commentators.

Blogosphere studies,² however, is an area with no shortage of definitional problems, and Wayne Booth’s warning that “even careful critics are sometimes overpersuaded by their own definitions” (31-32) should not be taken lightly. Commentators often provide a normative definition of the blog, one that fits their own interests and experience while excluding many websites that are commonly considered blogs. For blogging pioneer Jorn Barger, the “blog” is much like his own website, “a webpage where a weblogger (sometimes called a blogger, or a pre-surfer) ‘logs’ all the other webpages she finds interesting.”³ Likewise, while writing for the blog publishing service Radio Userland, Russ Lipton claimed that a blog is simply “a website with a calendar,” even though that feature is uncommon elsewhere in the blogosphere.⁴ These definitions probably seem extreme to blog-savvy readers, but broader definitions can be equally misleading. Jill Walker’s widely-accepted definition of the blog, “a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first,” contains a hidden normative aspect in its call for frequent posts (“Weblog”).⁵ In another essay, Walker goes still further, arguing that a blog without links or outside commentators is not actually a blog (“Distributed Narrative,” 20). As I will show, definitions like these are unnecessarily restrictive,⁶ but they seem plausible to

¹ As of April 16, 2006, the blog-tracking service Technorati was tracking more than 34.5 million weblogs, with that number doubling consistently every six months (Sifry).

² The blogosphere is both the core of active and engaged bloggers who habitually link to each other, and the much wider “imagined community” of blogosphere citizens. Graham Lampa provides a more detailed explanation of the latter phenomenon in “Imagining the Blogosphere.”

³ Barger, Jorn. “Weblog resources FAQ.” <http://www.robotwisdom.com/weblogs/index.html>

⁴ Lipton, Russ. “Of Weblogs and Websites.” <http://radio.weblogs.com/0107019/stories/2002/05/01/ofWeblogsAndWebsites.html>.

⁵ In “Weblogs: a history and perspective,” Blood offers a very similar definition, also widely-used.

⁶ Meg Hourihan discusses this issue in “What We’re Doing When We Blog,” probably the best blog definition article to date. <http://www.oreillynet.com/lpt/a/2474>.

most readers because their normative elements are simple features present in the most popular instances of the major blog genres.

These trait-based definitions, examples of what Anne Freadman calls the “recipe theory” of genre (52), are insufficient for building a coherent taxonomy, and so she proposes a “contrastive” approach based on differences between similar genres. However, unlike the recipe approach, Freadman’s method is limited to setting boundaries; it lacks explanatory power *within* genres. Therefore a non-arbitrary theorization of the diary weblog requires the separate application of two conceptually different approaches: a broad taxonomic approach based on differences in narrative structure and focus, and a rhetorical-interpretative approach identifying weblog traits correlated with success within the taxonomic category. The end result of this theorization will be genuinely and broadly descriptive, rather than prescriptive.

For the trait-based portion of this theorization, the seven autobiographical blogs which received the most nominations for the “best writing of a weblog” Weblog Award in 2005 and 2006 were chosen as the representative “successful” diary weblogs. In addition to serving as the corpus of successful diary weblogs, for the sake of simplicity, these blogs will occasionally be used as examples elsewhere in the essay. Most of the nominated diary weblogs were written by women. Heather Armstrong’s “Dooce” focuses on her life as a married ex-Mormon raising her first child in Utah. At “Finslippy,” the New York-based professional writer Alice Bradley blogs mostly about raising her preschooler Henry. English expatriate Michelle Fowler, aka “Mimi in New York,” blogs about her life as a would-be journalist turned stripper, living as an illegal immigrant in New York. At “Tequila Mockingbird,” Julia Montgomery posts anecdotes from her life in D.C., often transcribing long conversations she finds humorous. Stephanie Klein of “Greek Tragedy” is known for her especially frank discussions of her romantic and sexual life; unlike these other bloggers, she also often blogs about events far in her past. The blogger behind “Real E Fun,” a humanist funeral celebrant in England, writes about her job under the pseudonym Zinnia Cyclamen. Mark Cripps, the only male diary blogger in this sample, devotes most of “Londonmark” to creative fiction but occasionally writes about his life. These blogs share certain rhetorical elements that are uncommon elsewhere in the blogosphere, and by describing those elements I hope to provide the trait-based “recipe” for rhetorical success within this predefined group.⁷ However, before analyzing these blogs, I’ll need to provide the genre definition that enables me to recognize them as diary weblogs.

The blog

Though my primary concern in this essay is explicating the diary weblog, it would be difficult to attempt a non-arbitrary theorization of the “diary weblog” if “weblog” were left undefined: the blog itself presents the first definitional problem. There are, in fact, very few essential blog features. Blogs are a kind of online writing, and so must

⁷ Though as several of the “best writing” blogs have changed their format considerably over the years, any analysis only applies to the year preceding the blog’s nomination.

appear online: blogs that have been published in book form become “blooks.”⁸ Blogs are published on websites, though their content may also be sent out through another medium such as email or RSS.⁹ Though they are online and on websites, blogs are not necessarily public; some bloggers block certain visitors¹⁰ or password-protect their blogs.¹¹ Blogs are composed of one or more individual entries or “posts” which, though usually text, can also consist of still images, audio, video, or any combination of these media. Once there are multiple posts,¹² a blog is arranged so that more recent entries are displayed before older ones: this is the system Walker and others call “reverse-chronological order.” In order to make the reverse-chronological ordering perceptible, blogs “time-stamp” entries, usually explicitly (“posted at 10:46 p.m. on February 12, 2006”) but sometimes implicitly. The blog “Overheard in New York” is a good example of the latter category: when more than one post is published on a given day, individual posts are not time-stamped; instead, those closer to the date heading are presumed to be more recent. While this list of traits is somewhat preliminary – in the taxonomy section, I’ll offer a more rigorous method for defining genres – for the purposes of this paper these are the *only* features essential to the blog: blogs are published online, on websites, and consist of time-stamped “posts” arranged in reverse-chronological order.

Most commentators would disagree with this assertion, so it’s important to note some of the other features that are commonly considered essential, foremost among them the notion that blogs are “self-published.” It’s especially important to refute this idea because so many other misguided definitions, for example the belief that the blog is the honest and unmediated voice of a single blogger, stem from this fundamental misconception. Among bloggers, the idea that self-publishing is crucial to the weblog persists in part because it is well-matched to the individualistic, tech-optimist ethos still prevalent in the blogosphere.¹³ However, while it’s true that self-publishing a blog is very easy, the blogosphere contains many prominent examples which fail to live up to the term “self-published.” Most bloggers use third-party web-publishing sites like Blogger or LiveJournal, instead of writing all the code themselves. Some bloggers have handwritten their entries and had other people type and publish them online.¹⁴ At other blogs, for example those hosted by MSNBC, editors or copy editors review submissions before

⁸ Jeff Jarvis coined the term in a “Buzzmachine” entry titled “Blook” http://www.buzzmachine.com/archives/2002_12_21.html#002759. The word is now widely used, and since 2005 the “Lulu Blooker Prize” has been awarded annually to exceptional blooks. <http://www.lulublookerprize.com/faq.php>

⁹ The name for at least seven different syndication formats under various acronyms. Really Simple Syndication, the most recent format, allows website content to be accessed through a number of technologies, including the web browser, the stand-alone RSS reader, and the cell phone.

¹⁰ Ouzounian, George. “People Hate Me!” <http://maddox.xmission.com/hatemail.cgi?p=4>

¹¹ Taylor, Dave. “How do I set up a password-protected private blog?” http://www.askdaveytaylor.com/how_do_i_set_up_a_passwordprotected_private_blog.html

¹² Whether a “blog” with a single post – either because only one post was created or because all other posts have been deleted – is a blog or merely a form of proto-blog is a lingering issue in any attempt to define the weblog. No author has written on this issue, which would understandably complicate the widely-accepted “reverse-chronological order” requirement.

¹³ This ethos was memorably captured by early Blogger slogans like “push-button publishing for the people” and “the revolution will be bloggerized.” C.f. Rak, 171.

¹⁴ “Unlocked” http://www.dooce.com/archives/daily/08_28_2004.html

they're posted.¹⁵ And blogs like "PostSecret," a collection of postcards, deal exclusively in content submitted by other people and selected by an editor.

Other blog definitions exclude old, new, or unpopular weblogs. Many theorists dwell on the "frequent" nature of weblog posts, but while a blog like "Boing Boing" might have several dozen entries a day, other blogs go weeks, even months without entries.¹⁶ Rather than incorporate subjective notions of "frequency" into my blog definition, I've chosen to refrain from attempting to establish "frequently-updated" post quotas. There's no cut-off point at which "Tequila Mockingbird," currently five months into an unannounced hiatus, will cease to be a blog. Moreover, the same defense holds for archived or defunct blogs – the genre status of "ToTo247's Xanga Site"¹⁷ was not altered when the blogger's tragic death made future updates impossible.¹⁸ Any old, new, or unpopular weblog may also lack incoming or outgoing links, but restricting the definition of blog to cover only those sites which are participating in a blogosphere-level conversation would unnecessarily exclude thousands of diary weblogs.

The malleable nature of the weblog occasionally results in confusion or overlap between the blog and other web genres. Unlike the web forum, with which it shares many similarities, the blog is often assumed to have a limited, self-selected number of post authors. However, as new technologies allow people to contribute to the blogosphere through email or with their cell phones, this distinction becomes increasingly invalid. Some blogs, "Katrina Aftermath" for example, allow anyone to create new entries and comment on existing posts.¹⁹ Nevertheless, while such blogs break down the boundaries between the weblog and the web forum and create overlap between the two genres, blogs still differ from web forums in that a community of authors is still an optional rather than essential feature of the genre. With the development of the diary weblog, blogs and online journals have a similar conceptual relationship. The blog can be personal, but unlike the online journal, it doesn't have to be. Likewise, while many diary weblogs could be considered online journals, the online journal genre also includes personal webpages where posts are not arranged in reverse-chronological order.

Finally, many features now considered essential are easily revealed as optional, for the simple reason that many blogs have only recently adopted them. As early blogger Tom Coates has noted, "There are some things that become so ubiquitous and familiar to us – so seemingly obvious – that we forget that they actually had to be *invented*."²⁰ Justin Hall began blogging in 1994, and the term "weblog" was coined on December 17,

¹⁵ "Weblogging." http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june03/blog_04-28.html

¹⁶ On Kevin Davidson's "What's New?" webpage, which contains all the essential blog features, more than a year has passed between most of the time-stamped entries. Davidson refers to the page as a "glacial blog." <http://kevin.davnet.org/whatsnew.html>

¹⁷ "The Final Blog Entry of ToTo247" <http://huffcrimelog.com/?p=161> The blogger was murdered by his sister's former boyfriend shortly after his final post – the reports of his death in the New York Daily News and on other blogs are an extreme example of how a narrative outside of the blog can reveal new elements of the blog's "fabula."

¹⁸ It may seem at first like it was in fact altered, but any attempt to pin down exactly *when* the genre status of ToTo247's Xanga Site will suffice to show the flaws in this notion.

¹⁹ "Hurricane Katrina Mobcast Launched" <http://mobcasting.blogspot.com/2005/08/hurricane-katrina-mobcast-launched.html>

²⁰ "On Permalinks and Paradigms" http://www.plasticbag.org/archives/2003/06/on_permalinks_and_paradigms.shtml

1997,²¹ but according to Coates, permanent links acting as citations for individual blog posts, now known as “permalinks,” were invented years later. Likewise, Blogger users did not have built-in comment fields or titles on their posts until the summer of 2004. Many blogs still don’t make use of these features, though that hasn’t stopped theorists from conflating the essential with the merely typical. Hourihan calls the permalink one of the three “distinguishing characteristics” of the blog.²² For Jason Calcanis, comments are one of the three “main features” (qtd. in Conniff). Robert Scoble claims that without permalinks and an RSS feed, “you shouldn’t call your stuff a blog.”²³

Taxonomy toward the diary weblog

Several theorists have formulated their own weblog taxonomies. In The Weblog Handbook, Blood classifies weblogs into three genre categories: the link-focused “filter,” a collection of long personal entries known as the “notebook,” and a short-form journal to which she gives the perplexing label “blog” (6-8). In the oft-cited blogosphere survey “Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs,” Susan Herring et al. group blogs into five categories: personal journal, filter, the project-journal style “knowledge log,” mixed, and other (4). Genre classifications will always rely on the reader’s perception of the text, but in these cases that perception is the only thing structuring the taxonomy. “Other” and “mixed” exist because a pre-determined classificatory system, based on the researchers’ perception of the blogosphere, is breaking down. “Notebook” and “blog” exist for Blood because she sees a fundamental difference within the journal category, but another commentator might see that difference in the filter category. What categories like these have in common is their reliance on a list of traits, what Freadman calls a “recipe theory” approach to genre. In contrast to this method, I propose an approach to blog taxonomy that is flexible yet systematic, one that relies not on reader intuition but on finding individual points of contrast between two genres within a larger category. Anne Freadman calls this the “contrastive” approach.

To locate the diary weblog genre using Freadman’s contrastive approach, a “domain of pertinent comparisons” must first be chosen; that domain is then separated into two subgenres with a “not-statement,” which establishes a dichotomy (51). The process is repeated within one of the subgenre domains and continues down the chain. Blogs were influenced by many genres, both on- and offline – most theorists consider the diary, the homepage, and the epistolary novel relatives, and in “Bloggging as Social Action” Miller and Shepherd go on to spot genre features from the clipping service, the broadside, the anthology, the commonplace book, and the ship’s log. However, the taxonomy I propose is neither a history nor a genealogy. Rather than engage in a historical debate over weblog origins, it’s simpler to begin the taxonomy within the blogosphere and base my classification of weblogs on the definition of blog I provided above.

²¹ “Blog.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog#Bloggging_appears

²² “What We’re Doing When We Blog,”

<http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/javascript/2002/06/13/megnutt.html>

²³ Scoble, Robert. “A blog is not a blog unless...” <http://scobleizer.wordpress.com/2006/05/17/a-blog-is-not-a-blog-unless/>

The first contrast is between blogs which primarily comment on otherwise available content, and blogs which create their own content. In her essay, Julie Rak mentions the method of classifying weblogs by their focus – inward on the reader’s thoughts and experiences, or outward as a set of annotated links (171). Sandeep Krishnamurthy makes a similar distinction, separating personal from topical blogs (qtd. in Herring, 3) and charting where any given blog falls between the two axes. Theorists like José van Dijck are right to call such distinctions “tenuous.”²⁴ However, blogs like “Go Fug Yourself” or “Said the Gramophone”²⁵, though they traffic in personal opinion, are commenting on content that would be publicly available even if their respective bloggers didn’t exist. Blogs which comment on the news, sports, technology, or other topics, however original their observations, are similarly dependent on external content. I call these the epiphytic blogs. On the other hand, blogs which primarily report personal experiences or exhibit new creative works have their source in (and in the case of autobiographical blogs, they focus on) the experiences and identity of the implied blogger; they also tend to contain more explicit examples of narrative. More so than the epiphytic blogs, these blogs focus on generating original content. I call these the generative blogs.

Not all generative blogs, however, contain the presumptively autobiographical narration typical of diary weblogs and quote-submission sites like “Overheard in New York.” Most of the “Londonmark” is given over to invented narratives – alternate versions of movie scenes, portentous character sketches – which, while clearly generated content, are not presented as real experiences. Other blogs, like “Gus Openshaw’s Whale-Killing Journal”²⁶, are just as obviously fictional stories written in weblog form. The contrast, however, is not between fictional and nonfictional blog entries, but between narratives that posit an autobiographical connection between the narrator and (to adapt a term from Booth) the “implied blogger,” and narratives which don’t. Gerard Genette introduces a very similar distinction in *Narrative Discourse* (243-246). Adopting his terminology: when the implied blogger narrates a story in which she is also character, the blog is “homodiegetic,” and when the implied blogger is not present in the story, the blog is “heterodiegetic.” Invented narratives, like the statement of “quarterly objectives” Bradley pretends to have found in her child’s crib,²⁷ sometimes appear on diary weblogs, but in these cases the fiction, even when not mimetic, is a disguised reflection on the implied blogger’s reality. These are homodiegetic blogs in code. The child’s observation in the statement of quarterly objectives that “It should be mentioned that some of our members have made great strides in drastically limiting the variety of foodstuffs they allow to enter their face-holes” does not come out of nowhere. It reflects a real state of affairs: Bradley’s son Henry has been a finicky eater. What the websites in this taxonomic category have in common is not truth (the implied blogger may be a complete invention) or verisimilitude (babies don’t write quarterly statements). The blogs in this next subgenre have been grouped together because their narratives are homodiegetic.

²⁴ “Composing the Self: Of Diaries and Lifelogs.”

http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue3/issue3_vandijck.html

²⁵ The two “best writing” finalists that most clearly fall outside the diary weblog genre. A critique of celebrity fashion and a music site, respectively.

²⁶ <http://blubbertybastard.tripod.com/blog/>

²⁷ http://finslippy.typepad.com/finslippy/2005/05/i_just_have_to_.html

Though Krishnamurthy provides another dichotomy – individual or community – that allows for a further structural division of the homodiegetic blogs (qtd. in Herring 3), it would be rash to construct the next dichotomy – one half of which will be the diary weblog genre – based solely on the number of implied bloggers. The narrative distinction is more properly one of focus. Aggregated personal sites like “PostSecret” and “Overheard in New York,” which solicit the personal experiences or observations of a number of people with entries usually selected by an editor, are unified by one or more themes. Both single and multiple-author²⁸ diary weblogs, on the other hand, present the audience with one or more main “characters” to follow. On the “About” page at “Dooce,” Heather Armstrong notes that:

This website chronicles my life from a time when I was single and making a lot of money as a web designer in Los Angeles, to when I was dating my husband, to when I lost my job and lived life as an unemployed drunk, to when I married my husband and moved to Utah, to when I became pregnant, to when I threw up during the pregnancy, to when I became unbearably swollen during the pregnancy, to the birth, to the aftermath, to the postpartum depression I currently suffer.

Genette’s homodiegetic category is also instructive here: he differentiates within that category between narrators who are the stars of their narratives, and narrators who seem to merely observe a story happening around them. “It is as if the narrator cannot be an ordinary walk-on in his narrative: he can be only the star, or else a mere bystander” (245). While the difference between a blog like Armstrong’s and a blog like “Overheard in New York” is undoubtedly related to the number of contributors, the existence of multiple-author personal weblogs suggests that the more revealing contrast is between what Genette would call “autodiegetic” blogs (we’ll call them diary weblogs) and what I’ll call “observer” blogs. On observer blogs, identity is subservient to the theme – individual narrators at “Overheard in New York” or “PostSecret” are less important than the contribution they make to the blog. On autodiegetic blogs, on the other hand, the narrator is clearly the star and usually the hero. Zinnia Cyclamen’s posts may have a unified theme, but she’s blogging about her own experiences. Even on a multiple-author diary weblog, each blogger seems to be telling her²⁹ own tale.

While this genre taxonomy is not “whimsical” or “subjective,” different classificatory statements will make different features salient (Freadman 55). This paper has relied on narrative structure and focus – whether a blog is epiphytic or generative, heterodiegetic or homodiegetic, structured around a theme, or around a character – to explicate the diary weblog genre. Using the contrastive method, other writers might adopt different criteria and come up with their own equally valid taxonomies – it’s the lack of any detailed framework in which to place blogging subgenres that leads to the chaotic, ad

²⁸ For example, the married couple blogging together at <http://bandbinb.blogspot.com/> or the eight teenagers sharing a blog at <http://capstarthewonderguy.blogspot.com/>

²⁹ Throughout this essay, I’ve used feminine pronouns to describe bloggers. This choice has less to do with gender politics than the recognition that most bloggers, most web diarists, and all the “best-writing” diarists except Londonmark are female. Outside of the diary weblog genre, however, the most popular bloggers tend to be male.

hoc genre categories currently in use. The contrastive method may generate some of the same categories as the less rigorous methods, but in this case those genre categories are not merely arbitrarily defined. For the purposes of this paper, the diary weblog is any blog that generates its own content rather than commenting on other content, presents a narrative that is presumed to be reflective of the implied blogger's real experiences, and is tied together by a focus on one or more characters rather than themes.

As blogs themselves are genre hybrids, it would be foolish not to acknowledge that the diary weblog genre does not appear in a vacuum; it is contained within both the genres above it in this taxonomy and other genres outside the blogosphere, it borrows from and is influenced by countless other genres, for example the web forum and the online journal, and it can appear alongside writing of another genre, in the mixed fiction and diary entries at "Londonmark," for example. The diary weblog is one of countless genre "games" (Freadman 45) available to writers online. It's the willingness on the reader's part to allow genres to appear as games within and alongside other genres that allows such a rigid set of dichotomies to retain its descriptive power at the taxonomic level.

The blogger – identity on the diary weblog

Within blogosphere studies, there is considerable disagreement as to whether the blogger's construction of identity is a form of role-playing or an authentic attempt at mimesis. Some theorists have adopted apparently extreme positions: Raynes-Goldie, embracing postmodernism, suggests that "in this informational chaos, the question of truth is not really a useful one," whereas McNeill notes that "though these readers do not know the diarist outside of the context of her text, they believe her textual representation is 'real,' the flesh made digital" (37). Presenting a more measured view of the subject, Kitzmann writes, "that diaries and autobiographies, both handwritten and electronic, are grounded to a significant extent on real, authentic individuals is a common enough assertion." He compares the fictionalization of blog entries to a violation of Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" (59), the contract of trust formed between the reader and the writer, the autobiographical pact is based on the reader's recognition that the name of the author, narrator, and protagonist are the same, and that these three seem to share a common identity.

From the standpoint of the reader, however, it's the assumption of truth – not actual truth itself – that is the essential element of the diary weblog; bloggers often exploit Lejeune's pact to their own ends. For a diary weblog to seem homodiegetic, the narrator needs only to be perceived as reflective of the implied blogger, and so a fictional diary weblog may function just like an actual one (if it believed to be real). Indeed, many readers have sympathized with a fictional character only to later be outraged to find they've been fooled.³⁰ This assumption of truth, however, is complicated by the limitations of the format, the blogger's self-characterization, and by fictional narratives within entries.

³⁰ Perhaps the most famous blog hoax is Kaycee Nicole's "Living Colors," ostensibly written by a teenage girl diagnosed with leukemia but actually written by a healthy, much older woman. A list of other blog hoaxes and probable hoaxes is available at http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/weblog/plain_layne/

As is the case for all forms of mediated communication, the authenticity of identity on diary weblogs is limited by the medium of its presentation. For Kitzmann, a diarist's self-presentation is essentially mimetic – human actions and thoughts aren't being created or simulated, but the reader is aware that they're being "represented," and that there are limits to the representation (60). For Rak, on the other hand, the presentation has gone beyond the mimetic:

it does not matter as much that bloggers cannot ever approximate face-to-face communication, or that representation cannot approximate who they 'really' are, as it matters that blog rhetoric be made to approximate what the real 'feels' like. Blog rhetoric is an instance of Jean Baudrillard's 'strategy of the real,' a rhetoric that derives its urgency from a sense that the real is lost and must be simulated (174-175).

Whether the communication between blogger and reader is filtered or merely simulated, the divide can be both problematic and liberating. As Fowler observes, "the people here who know me by Mimi only know one side of the story, the people who know me by [Michelle Fowler] *think* they know both, but they only *hear* what Mimi gets up to, they never witness it. It's liberating, but also confusing, deceptive, strange..."³¹ Nearly all readers of weblogs will be familiar with these kinds of compromises, which may seem so commonsensical that they take the mimetic or simulated nature of the diary weblog for granted. This underscores the importance of emphasizing reader assumptions over the actual truth of a diary weblog.

As the critic Ian Watt wrote, "the accurate transcription of actuality does not necessarily produce a work of any real truth or enduring value" (32) – the truth of diary weblog entries is further complicated by bloggers' tendency to "modify what they write in direct response to their awareness of the specifics of their multiple audiences" (Sorapure 10).³² To move beyond mere transcription, at the rhetorical level most bloggers, and the "Boggie" finalists in particular, have made conscious choices about how to present their online identities. Indeed, there are often walls between the implied blogger and the flesh-and-blood author of the entries: Fowler and Cripps keep their real names off their websites, and even bloggers who share their full names are careful to avoid giving out other identifiable information. Intentional exaggeration, even to the point of self-parody, also seems to be quite common: Miller and Shepherd observe that "combined with its focused and repeated effort, the blog's public disclosure — its exhibitionism — yields an intensification of the self, a reflexive elaboration of identity." The pseudonymous Zinnia Cyclamen, implied blogger of "Real E Fun," tends to limit her blog entries to events related to her job as a humanist funeral director – presumably the flesh-and-blood blogger, regardless of her true identity, would talk about a wider range of subjects. Other bloggers, like Armstrong and Fowler, attempt to maintain a constant tone

³¹ <http://miminewyork.blogspot.com/2005/05/little-bit-of-background.html>

³² Though theorists like Walker and McNeill over-generalize when they imply that most diarists are trying to make that audience as large and active as possible. "The Blogging Iceberg," describes millions of blogs which "are only of interest to the family, friends, fellow students and co-workers of their teenage and 20-something bloggers. Think of them as blogs for *nanoaudiences*." Henning, Jeffrey. <http://www.perseus.com/blogsurvey/thebloggingiceberg.html>

over multiple posts, limiting the range of emotions available to their online personas. As is also the case with popular topical blogs like “Wonkette”³³ and “Instapundit,”³⁴ readers seem to appreciate a unity of voice throughout entries, and that unity is easier to pick up on when the voice is less subtle. Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon is George Ouzounian of “The Best Page in the Universe,”³⁵ who is known for his constant hyperbole and self-aggrandizement. So long as it doesn’t interfere with the verisimilitude of the blog for the readers, who may or may not notice any embellishment, some exaggeration of one’s own identity seems to work well for the finalist weblogs.

Unlike mere exaggerations, imagined events recounted on diary weblogs are dependent on the reader’s knowledge that, while the story is fake, the implied blogger is using that story to reveal something about herself or one of the blog’s other characters. Readers understand that Armstrong has not told her daughter “that little baby frogs have their legs torn off” when she doesn’t say “please”³⁶ – the story expresses Leta’s stubbornness and Armstrong’s bemused exasperation. Likewise, Bradley’s account of the quarterly statement, mentioned above, is meant to be read as a device to make her complaints about childrearing more interesting. It’s a combination of reader knowledge about the implied blogger and reader assumptions about truth that prevent these examples from becoming problematic.

Either of these elements can fail, however. Many of the character sketches on “Londonmark” don’t identify the narrator, and could easily be mistaken for Cripps’ actual memories or reflections, just as any tongue-in-cheek comment on a diary weblog could be taken literally by readers unfamiliar with the implied blogger’s persona. The resulting interpretation may clash with the blogger’s intent, but visitors will still believe that they’re reading a diary weblog entry – the result is a failure of rhetoric but not of genre. Alternately, an entry can be completely “in character” and yet readers may come to doubt its veracity. The “girl on a bike” hoax, in which Meg Hourihan and Jason Kottke, two well-known bloggers, posted the same story simultaneously, is a good example of this latter phenomenon.³⁷ For those who never became suspicious, the entries was unproblematic – but for readers who saw both posts (and didn’t know which of the two, if any, was true), the hoax challenged their assumption that posts would either reflect reality or (even if only implicitly) signal their departure into fiction. As noted above, it’s not the blogger’s violation of that assumption, but rather the reader’s discovery or belief that the autobiographical pact has been violated which separates the diary weblog from the various types of heterodiegetic blog.

Of course, in the vast majority of cases, the implied blogger is based on the actual author. Many theorists connect the construction of an online identity through the diary weblog to the construction of self in a diary. On the vast majority of diary weblogs which are not fictional, the writing becomes an opportunity for self-discovery; Miller and Shepherd note that “bloggers, however, seem less interested in role playing than in locating, or constructing, for themselves and for others, an identity that they can

³³ <http://www.wonkette.com/>

³⁴ <http://www.instapundit.com/>

³⁵ <http://maddox.xmission.com/>

³⁶ http://www.dooce.com/archives/daily/10_20_2005.html

³⁷ Both posts were titled “As I was walking home.” See the archived discussion at <http://www.metafilter.com/mefi/2382>

understand as unitary, as ‘real.’” The process of writing a blog entry – which needn’t be posted until the blogger is satisfied – allows the blogger time to reflect on her experiences and present herself as she chooses; the knowledge that any posts will be public is an added incentive. In addition to their actual blogging, many diary bloggers include an “about” section, a genre that can be anything from Cyclamen’s short note in the sidebar to the several pages Stephanie Klein of “Greek Tragedy” devotes to “why I write,” “favorite things,” and “the real me.” Regardless of its length, the “about” section is a meditation on identity, and it’s often the character which emerges in “about” whom the blogger is trying to approximate in the posts.

Communication is an essential aspect of identity construction on diary weblogs. For diary bloggers, the diarist’s practice of “addressing,” which van Dijck considers “crucial to the recognition of diary writing as an *act of communication*” – is, while still mediated, no longer limited to an imagined addressee.³⁸ As McNeill puts it, “online participation in this genre allows writers to carry on diary conversations that will no longer be monologic, where the response will not be just imagined but actual” (28). Often diary weblogs will provide an email address or post-specific comment field for user input; barring that, the blogger still has the sense that an audience of confessors is reading her work. So Fowler tells her readers in the initial post that “I want you to help me make the decisions about how to achieve [my] goals. Every aspect of my life will be up for discussion on this website. I want you to post your replies and your advice, criticism, encouragement, to me here.” Even if the blogger rejects user input, she’s still relating her experiences before an audience, in a public communication. The most successful diarist bloggers tend to use a certain set of strategies to make this communication effective.

Rhetorical elements of the diary weblog

Though the “recipe approach” to genre is unsuitable for taxonomies, within a pre-established genre, a catalogue of traits can point to common narrative strategies and identify the diverging practices that may eventually form the basis for still other differentiable blog subgenres. There are many different kinds of traits which this essay could focus on, but it’s the rhetorical elements – those strategies and techniques which make prose engaging for the reader – which have the most influence on the narrative. Rather than attempt to provide an exhaustive list of the rhetorical elements on the chosen diary weblogs, in each case this section will use a few representative “best writing” blogs to illustrate noteworthy rhetorical elements and describe how they affect the narrative. Elements were considered noteworthy when they had a noticeable effect and were relatively uncommon on diary weblogs elsewhere in the blogosphere. Since the blogs studied are all rhetorically successful blogs, listing these elements may provide readers with an approximate description of what constitutes good writing within the genre, but this paper makes no prescriptive claim as to the value of any trait described. The rhetorical elements of the weblogs that fall into the diary weblog taxonomy vary widely,

³⁸ Though diary weblogs are generally more public than traditional print diaries, van Dijck has shown that many of the differences we perceive between the two genres come from a faulty conception of the print diary.

but the most successful weblogs make frequent use of unified posts, a dynamic narrator, static secondary characters, dialogue transcripts, personal revelations, and ironic distance.

Post unity, through a focus on a single theme or event, is a common feature of all the “best writing” nominees. It’s by no means universal – these bloggers occasionally engage in rambling posts just like the rest of the blogosphere – but generally readers can expect a single event or topic, usually indicated in the post’s title. Posts on a single event seem to be the more common type, though they’re often justified with an introduction connecting them to a broader theme. Fowler writes about her nights at the strip club, or reproduces conversations she’s had. In “50 Men and a Boat,” she describes a night spent stripping on a boat for a bachelor party. Other posts, like “Two Hours in the Champagne Room” contain anecdotes from her work at the club. Events outside of work get their own posts as well, like the extended conversation in “All About My Mother.” At Klein’s “Greek Tragedy,” posts on a single topic or theme, like “your theme song”³⁹, are more common. In “moi got over it,” Klein compares herself to the muppet Miss Piggy, “my dramatic romantic counterpart,” and praises her for taking the “safe bet” by getting together with Kermit the Frog. The post “fuming” tells the story of Klein’s life through the various perfumes she’s worn. On both these blogs, the entries go beyond what McNeill calls “the diary’s traditionally personal functions of logbook and memoranda” – the banal approach to the diary that is common, perhaps even predominant, on diary weblogs elsewhere in the blogosphere. The unified post is not a sprawling narrative listing the events of the day: it is a story, often with a moral. The unified posts still serve as records, but their unity acknowledges a desire to entertain others. As all the “best writing” blogs make use of permalinks, post unity is also a way of acknowledging, and encouraging, the practice of linking online – other bloggers who like the story can easily share it with others without worrying that the good part will get lost in the clutter.

As mentioned above, the process of writing a diary weblog is also a process of identity construction, composing and refining the implied blogger as the narrative progresses. This construction is reflected in the writing, where the narrator is often also a dynamic character. In fact, although in Bradley and Armstrong’s cases their growing children (and Armstrong’s dog Chuck) are also fully-realized dynamic characters in the process of growing up, it’s usually only this narrator who changes in any way through the entries. There are several ways in which this change can become manifest. In one post, Klein relates a sudden epiphany about herself: “I was writing a story about my summers at camp, when suddenly the character on my page was an ex, and I realized I wanted to know about him now... realized I really always liked him for him, just as he is.”⁴⁰ Sometimes the narrator will describe a change that takes place over the course of several posts: in September of 2004, Cyclamen devoted several entries to her thought processes as she prepared to officiate at a funeral against the wishes the deceased’s wife.⁴¹ Finally, there are subtle changes to both the implied blogger and the narrator, changes which are often apparent only in hindsight. Devoted readers can track the changes in “Mimi,” who abandons her early resolution to let others help her reform and becomes tougher and less coy – but also less of a braggart – over the course of a year. Reading back over her own posts, Fowler notices some of these changes and notes “I lost

³⁹ http://stephanieklein.blogs.com/greek_tragedy/2004/04/your_theme_song.html

⁴⁰ http://stephanieklein.blogs.com/greek_tragedy/2004/01/didactic_is_sex.html

⁴¹ http://realefun.blogspot.com/2004_09_01_realefun_archive.html

my sense of humor somewhere around May.”⁴² Dynamic narrators gives the audience an emotional center; as one of the only characters changing, the narrator stands out as wiser and more interesting, clearly the protagonist in the blogger’s narrative. The presence of one or more dynamic characters also adds uncertainty to the diary weblog; these characters are constantly changing, and that growth holds the blog together, making it seem more like a story than a collection of anecdotes. Readers are also more likely to invest themselves emotionally in this type of character, rather than a “flat character” who can only appear in certain contexts.

In contrast to the dynamic “round” narrator of these diary weblogs, the many static, two-dimensional characters provide stability. These are what Forster called flat characters, “constructed around a single idea or quality” (67). Heather Armstrong’s husband Jon, though a major figure on “Dooce,” is nonetheless flat, a supportive constant in the narrative.⁴³ Jon exemplifies Forster’s claim that flat characters “are easily recognized when they come in – recognized by the reader’s emotional eye” (68). He never needs to be reintroduced; he’s simply dropped back into the narrative whenever Heather needs him to play his part in a story: the part of the funny, supportive husband. Other characters are even more recognizably two-dimensional; some of these diary bloggers describe certain characters on their weblogs with descriptive pseudonyms. Though she’s also an important recurring character, every mention of Armstrong’s mother alludes to the relentless nature that has made her the “Avon World Sales Leader.” Like Jon, Heather’s mother plays a very limited variety of roles in the narrative. Many of the less common characters, like Armstrong’s “Granny Boone,” call to mind Forster’s assertion that “a really flat character can be expressed in one sentence” (68). In Granny Boone’s case that sentence is actually provided by Armstrong: “Granny is very religious and often speaks directly to God.” Strong, simple characterization helps the reader keep track of characters who, like Granny, only sporadically appear. “They remain in his mind as unalterable for the reason that they were not changed by circumstances; they moved through circumstances” (Forster 69). Other characters are reduced to the roles they’re playing. Though it’s indicated that she shares the Republican leaning of most of Armstrong’s family, her sister September is otherwise not completely characterized as an individual: she is simply “my sister.” Likewise, Armstrong’s various doctors are “the doctor.” Like the rest of the “best writing” diary bloggers, Armstrong is generally more concerned with sharing her own thoughts and experiences than with tracking the personal growth of others. Occasionally a static character can become dynamic, as when Armstrong notes that her dog Chuck is going through “puberty” and chronicles his growing affection for her daughter, but such transformations are both rare and unexpected. By limiting evidence of personal growth to only two or three characters, Armstrong focuses the reader’s attention on those characters: herself, her daughter, and her dog. The blog is *about* these characters; the other characters are only there to fill various functional roles in the narrative.

The flat characters often show up in one of these bloggers’ more common storytelling devices: lengthy stretches of dialogue. At “Tequila Mockingbird,” for example, many of Julia Montgomery’s entries are transcribed conversations. In “alas,

⁴² <http://miminewyork.blogspot.com/2005/09/frequently-asked-questions.html>

⁴³ In contrast, Jon’s presentation of himself on his own blog is dynamic. See, for example, his entry “Refurbished,” at <http://www.blurbomat.com/archives/2004/11/10/refurbished#000396>

poor norm. i knew him not,” she recreates a telephone conversation between her and a recently-arrested drug dealer who called her cell phone by mistake. The quoted material is often very long; some conversations would fill several pages. When transcribing a story her mother told her in “lester,”⁴⁴ Montgomery brackets a lengthy monologue in quotes – but for readers who believe that Montgomery is attempting to recreate an actual conversation, such posts are unproblematic. Conversations are sometimes interspersed with asides, essentially annotations added to the dialogue. Blogging the post titled “conversations with dmV employees,” Montgomery interrupts the dialogue to describe her thoughts at that point in the conversation.⁴⁵ More often, a long narrative includes brief sections of dialogue, often setting up the material that comes afterward. In “the letter v. the spirit,” the quote “he’s talking about *lenora*” is followed by a paragraph beginning “lenora was my best friend.”⁴⁶ In “going, going, gone,” Montgomery segues from “well, then, let’s bid, shall we?” to a story about Jon, whom she met at that bachelor auction.⁴⁷ The post “happy ending” explains why Montgomery removes her clothes for massages (a necessary detail for the comedic story that follows) through an overheard conversation between two coworkers.⁴⁸ The presence of so much dialogue is a crucial difference between the “best writing” weblogs and most other diary weblogs, which deal almost exclusively in description, albeit description in a conversational tone. Like all dialogue, these transcripts break up the text and create white space for the reader. The dialogue on these blogs is also usually “abruptive” – there are no tag clauses like “she said” (Prince 1). This kind of dialogue is especially quick to read and tends towards drama, allowing bloggers like Montgomery to transcribe lengthy conversations without making the reading tedious.

Since the blog’s central character is the implied blogger herself, in order to engage the reader the blogger has to make that character both interesting and sympathetic. One of the key ways in which the “best writing” bloggers accomplish this is through disclosure. Rather than gloss over embarrassing or traumatic events, the implied bloggers seem to reveal quite a bit about themselves: they are exhibitionists. According to Miller and Shepherd,

Central to exhibitionism is the social psychology of self-disclosure, which serves four purposes, according to Calvert: self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control, and we can see all of these at work in blogs. [...] The latter two function extrinsically, turning personal information into a commodity and manipulating the opinions of others through calculated revelations. Any one, or all, of these functions, may be a factor in an individual’s willingness to “overshare” (2000, p. 83).

While Klein’s sexual activities, Fowler’s stripping, and Armstrong’s constipation stories are all good examples of this “over-sharing,” Zinnia Cyclamen’s exhibitionism on

⁴⁴ tequilamockingbird.blogspot.com/2004_05_01_tequilamockingbird_archive.html#108485043145750449

⁴⁵ tequilamockingbird.blogspot.com/2004_01_01_tequilamockingbird_archive.html#107469525200926236

⁴⁶ tequilamockingbird.blogspot.com/2004_03_01_tequilamockingbird_archive.html#107949852719855129

⁴⁷ tequilamockingbird.blogspot.com/2004_07_01_tequilamockingbird_archive.html#109104557180960605

⁴⁸ tequilamockingbird.blogspot.com/2004_12_01_tequilamockingbird_archive.html#110192512953379200

“Real E Fun” is the more typical. Her whole site publicizes, albeit with pseudonyms, parts of the funeral planning process, as well as her own private thoughts. In “Don’t Tell The Children,” Cyclamen writes that “I feel the need to offload here because sometimes I have to support families who take this decision, and be understanding, when I have never yet agreed once.”⁴⁹ Another post, “Surprise Surprise,” describes her reaction when two friends ask her to officiate their funerals when the time comes. “I was gobsmacked, astonished and flabbergasted. They know loads of celebrants; why me? Could I do it? How would I cope with one of my dear friends grieving for the other?”⁵⁰ With posts like these, Cyclamen has gone beyond merely listing the events of the day or telling funny stories – she has placed thoughts and feelings that would traditionally be private on public display, not just for any friends who read her blog but for total strangers as well. Such displays are typical of the “best writing” weblogs and seem to hold for diary weblogs in general, but Cyclamen also demonstrates that there are limits to this self-exposure. She refers to herself with a pseudonym,⁵¹ and similarly disguises the places she’s gone and the people she’s met. Presumptively honest disclosures allow these bloggers to gain their readers’ trust and sympathy within set boundaries.

Though the stereotypical diary weblog is self-absorbed and melodramatic, these bloggers often temper their disclosures by establishing an ironic distance between the implied blogger and the narrator. Like Armstrong, Alice Bradley of “Finslippy” is often criticized by readers who question her parenting abilities, and she occasionally plays with those expectations by intentionally presenting herself as a bad mother. The post “Don’t rub me like a Jedi knight” ends with the declaration “In other words, we live in filth. Which I guess means I should vacuum or clean or whatever, but I’m so tired! And self-absorbed! Oh—and drunk.”⁵² Bradley claims in another entry to have left her son with a strange man who recently approached her on the street. As she explains, the man offered, “and I needed to purchase some wine. It will interest you to know that he was returned intact, albeit with an interesting new facial tic.”⁵³ Irony can also combat the temptation to take one’s own blogging too seriously. Bradley blogs about how good it is “to finally, after years of struggling with rock-bottom expectations and crippling self-doubt and blar de blar twelve years of therapy blar, be doing what I’ve always want ed [sic] to do.”⁵⁴ Finally, many of these bloggers use irony to downplay their popularity within the blogosphere. Upon hearing that she was nominated for a “most humorous weblog” award, Bradley wrote that “I promptly curled up in a dark corner and muttered ‘Must be funny... mustn’t disappoint my audience...’”⁵⁵ Likewise, though Armstrong’s “Dooce” is by many measures the most popular diary weblog, she sometimes ironically overstates the importance of the Internet to make her status seem slightly ridiculous – “I never knew that the binky was such a political issue, and when we took away Leta’s pacifier earlier this week we apparently took away the Internet’s pacifier, and the Internet is PISSED.”⁵⁶

⁴⁹ <http://realefun.blogspot.com/2004/09/dont-tell-children.html>

⁵⁰ <http://realefun.blogspot.com/2004/11/surprise-surprise.html>

⁵¹ In the Victorian language of flowers, Zinnia means “thoughts of friends” and Cyclamen means “resignation and goodbye.” <http://realefun.blogspot.com/2004/12/frequently-asked-questions.html>

⁵² http://finslippy.typepad.com/finslippy/2005/02/dont_rub_me_lik.html

⁵³ http://finslippy.typepad.com/finslippy/2005/02/this_blog_has_g.html

⁵⁴ http://finslippy.typepad.com/finslippy/2005/12/and_heres_my_la.html

⁵⁵ http://finslippy.typepad.com/finslippy/2005/01/im_funny_ha_haa.html

⁵⁶ http://www.dooce.com/archives/daily/06_12_2004.html

The irony on these blogs checks some of the impulses that create rambling, self-absorbed writing, and by separating the narrator from the implied blogger, the ironic distance creates two characters that readers can enjoy on different levels: the protagonist, and the hip, self-deprecating observer.

While these bloggers share certain techniques – and in many cases, read each other’s weblogs – it’s too soon to reduce them to a unified rhetorical type. Doubtless, popular blogs like these inspire imitators, but it’s impossible to know which methods will become indispensable and which will become stale: the fact that Armstrong’s was the only diary weblog nominated in both 2005 and 2006 implies that the terms of rhetorical success are still being redefined and renegotiated even within this awards category. I’ve described the elements which distinguish these blogs from the bulk of diary weblogs, but as literary analysis of blogs becomes less taboo, other techniques common on successful blogs may be discovered. The amount of work still to be done in the area of blog rhetoric is staggering, and it’s for this reason that a foundation of solid, preliminary taxonomic work needs to be established.

Conclusion

It’s not enough to know what a diary weblog is, because the taxonomic definition misses some of the details which make it so interesting conceptually. As a genre, the diary weblog occupies a special conceptual space: it is ostensibly personal yet often completely public, it is situated between the past it is describing and the future toward which its readers are always looking. In his article “How Do Diaries End?” Lejeune discusses the materiality of the print diary:

The choice of material is tied to an apprehension about death. The size and thickness of the notebook selected do not merely correspond to practical constraints. If it’s too big, I’ll never finish it. The excess space is the silence of death. If it’s too small, I’ll run up against the final word. (102)

Yet the diary weblog cannot die. Some blogs do end officially, with a last statement by the writer, or, as with the blogger who was murdered, the intervention of a deep narrative (Simpson) of which most readers become aware. But obsolescence is the norm, and in this genre, obsolescence always carries with it a note of uncertainty. This strange state of affairs is created by the combination of the diary weblog’s focus on a few presumably reality-reflective characters, and the system of reverse-chronological ordering, both essential features of the diary weblog genre. Readers are always looking for the next post – thus the emphasis on frequent or new updates, the incessant, doomed urge to close the gap between the present and the future. The *fabula*, meanwhile, is anchored to dynamic characters who are presumably still having new experiences. Readers wait for those stories to be picked up again. When a blog is abandoned their hope slowly turns to frustration, but the blog is never dead, it has no fixed end to run up against, only the line of possibility stretching out into the future. As one commentator at the possibly-defunct site “Tequila Mockingbird” noted three months after the final post, “i must be a glutton for punishment. i keep coming back.”⁵⁷ Five months later readers are

⁵⁷ <http://www.haloscan.com/comments/jmo12/113398142885134603/#250843>

still visiting; for them the blog will always be about the future, while for the blogger the blog will always be about the past.

It's not enough to know what the diary weblog is, or who is writing it, or how she's writing, because these details only lay the groundwork for what's still to be said. There are other questions to ask. We can generalize about how diaries weblogs stop, but we don't have any data on how often or, why, bloggers choose to abandon them. We know how a life is blogged, but not how a blogged life is lived. And there are the other blog genres, of which only the news blogs have received comparable attention – there are other branches in the taxonomy left to map, and taxonomies with different foci to be made. These knowledge gaps are frustrating, because they illustrate how much more is to be done (instead of re-done.) It's my hope that, even if others don't agree with my descriptions, or take up my definitions, or try my taxonomic approach – they start to think seriously about the blogosphere and the questions still to be asked.

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