BLOGGING AMERICA

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The New Public Sphere

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When I tell any Truth, it is not for the sake of Convincing those who do not know it, but for the sake of defending those that do.

—William Blake

It is because they are compelled to act without a reliable picture of the world, that governments, schools, newspapers and churches make such small headway against the more obvious failings of democracy, against violence, prejudice, apathy, preference for the curious trivial as against the dull important, and the hunger for sideshows and three legged calves.

—Walter Lippmann in 1922

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PREFACE

When he had finished looking over the manuscript of my last book, *The Rise of the Blogosphere*, Dan Harmon, my editor at Praeger, felt that he only had half the story. What I'd given him was a history, the backgrounds in American journalism leading up to the blogs—but with little on the blogs themselves. I think he felt a little cheated. Though he did like the book, he wanted more.

What Dan had been hoping for was something that also explored the blogs as they have become today—but that, we soon agreed, was too much to try to add to the one book. Another book was needed, a different one and with a new focus, a book on what the blogs are doing today, and why.

With that in mind, I began this project, which I first envisioned as simply a look at the blogs as they were in 2007. But, as usual, I was drawn to the past, for I cannot see the blogs or any aspect of any culture existing alone simply as part of a particular time. Therefore, though I have kept my look at the blogs fairly focused on what is going on as I write, my search for understanding often takes me back to earlier times.

It is impossible to cover all of the blogosphere. It is too big, too dynamic, and too responsive to change for anyone to say much about it beyond "this is what I found in this particular place at that particular time."

In fact, the blogosphere is way too big for even a brief survey in any one book. For that reason, I have limited my examinations in a number of ways, many of which will become apparent as one reads the book (the only blogging community I really provide any sort of portrait of, for example, is that of Christian bloggers).

One of the areas I have avoided is that of the big commercial blogs. Even many of the small blogs, these days, do make a little money out of advertising, but it isn't much. Some of the larger blogs, however, are commercial enterprises from start to finish. I do mention MySpace and Facebook in passing (while making distinctions between social-networking blogs and those dedicated to extant, offline communities, for example), but do not delve into them. The intersection between the blogs and commerce, fascinating though it is, still has not shaken itself out into a form that I am comfortable drawing conclusions on. That, I think, will not happen for a couple of years.

In addition, the commercial blogs operate on premises different from those of the individual. Though I do look at ChronCommons.com, part of the online presence of the *Houston Chronicle*, in relation to place-based citizen journalism, I do not really explore the blogs that have become such important parts of commercial news media entities in general. These deserve a book or two by themselves, preferably by someone with a background in both journalism and business.

The blogs have also become much more of an important part of the online presence of businesses in general. They can be used to generate interest in product roll-out, for complaints, and for all sorts of other discussions relating to products as they are, as they have been, and as they may be. Because blogs are not so tied to temporal immediacy and sequence, they are beginning to replace the phone connection between the business and its customers. No more waiting on hold! Simply place a query on the blog, and a response will come. This has advantages even over email, for its public nature proves useful to both the business (it doesn't have to repeat the same thing endlessly) and the user (who may just be able to find their answer through a search of the blog).

The focus in this book is on that most notorious aspect of the blogosphere, the personal blog. To me, these blogs are the most interesting, for they show an aspect of individual relations to technology that could not really be seen until the advent of the World Wide Web and the rise of the blogs. If the blogs are changing our culture, it is because of the individual bloggers, not because of the other uses that have been found for the blogs, no matter how fascinating these may prove to be. If nothing else, the blogs are changing our relationships with technology, making them more personal and active than ever before—in the political realm, certainly, but elsewhere as well.

Chapter 1 presents a background for understanding the blogs in terms of political discussion and language, using the work of Jurgen Habermas, B. F.

Skinner, and Walter Ong as a background to understanding just what is going on in terms of the blogs and the Web. It is here that I talk of *neteracy*, a new set of skills that do not replace literacy, but that will be increasingly necessary as more and more human activities acquire Web-connected aspects.

Neteracy is more than skills, carrying with it an entirely new set of attitudes towards ownership of the items carried by the new communications media. While copyright and patent regulations are revised to cover the Web, they still reflect older ideas of protection and rights, ideas that are already clashing with what is becoming standard usage on the Web. It will be a long time before this conflict is resolved, for each side has strong arguments in its favor.

The second chapter presents the blogs in the larger American society and as they are seen by those who are not directly involved in them, either as writer or as reader. Because of their high visibility in the media (and their impact on political discussion), the blogs fall victim to descriptions that often have little to do with their reality. Some of these descriptions arise from those who feel threatened by the blogs and the Web, though the truth of the matter is that the Web doesn't really increase the danger to anyone on its own.

In chapter 3, I discuss the blogs from a view within the blogosphere, trying to capture just how the bloggers see their relationships to the wider communities around them. Bloggers don't view themselves as entering a virtual world when they write, but simply as the utilizers of a new set of tools for dealing with situations in the "real" world. On the other hand, their imagined expansionism sometimes is little more than a new way to talk to the same type of people they would be talking to anyway, the expansion being only in number and not in type. This does not mean, however, that the blogs do not have impact—they have, and will continue to—simply that it will rarely be in converting an audience to the blogger's belief.

Also in this chapter is discussion of the fact that no blog exists alone—that is, each is part of a greater conversation that includes comments, links, and other blogs (among other things). The blogger creates no discrete work, but adds to conversations already in progress.

As a great deal of discussion concerning the blogs has focused on their impact on journalism and politics, chapter 4 presents a picture of just how those interact. Professional journalism certainly is not going to die as a result of the blogs, but it will not remain the same as it has been for the last several decades. The same is true of politics.

What is happening through the blogs, for both politics and journalism, is the carving out of a new place in the universe of organization and authority. Over the past century and more, both have become increasingly hierarchical, top-down. The blogs, much more egalitarian in focus, are forcing recognition that the old model of organization will no longer suffice, that there needs to be a way of encompassing individual ideas and initiatives while not giving up all control. This is a process that is probably still in its early days, and the

tensions between the "grass roots" of the blogs and the established journalists and politicians have yet to be completely resolved—if they will be at all.

In chapter 5, I focus on communications technology in popular culture (with an eye on the blogs), comparing the views of fifty years ago with the situation today. At that time, communications technology (outside of the telephone) was primarily one-way, coming from a centralized point of creation and dissemination to members of a public that were seen as little more than passive receptacles. Today, of course, those same individual audience members have become part of the creative process, taking more and more power each year.

Finally, in chapter 6, I present a survey of one blogging community, that of Christian bloggers. In some respects no different from other blogging communities, this one shows great breadth and depth, along with a great desire to use the blogs for personal and community growth.

The importance of what is happening in the blogosphere was brought home to me just as I was finishing this book, when I ran across a post on the blog of Andrew Keen, a critic of the blogs who blogs himself. After participating in an online panel, Keen wrote:

> I learned that blogs are boring. I learned that we need to get beyond arguing about blogs versus *The New York Times*.… But all anyone wants to discuss, it seems, is the well trodden terrain of bloggers versus traditional news reporters.
>
> Enough of blogs and enough of bloggers! It's bad enough that there are 70 million of them out there, littering the Internet with fast breaking news about what their authors ate for breakfast. But blogs are just one piece in the digital media revolution. They are boring to write (yawn), boring to read (yawn) and boring to discuss (yawn).
>
> What I really want to discuss is the impact of Web 2.0 on truth, education, memory and power. I want to debate the increasingly Orwellian role of Google in our information economy. I want to talk about the way in which the Internet has unleashed a plague of pornography, gambling and intellectual dishonesty on our youth. I want to discuss the future of the book.[1]

Enough? Let us tease apart what Keen is saying to see if there is any substance there:

First, he assumes a rivalry between the blogs and *The New York Times* that no one cares about any longer. "Been there, done that," he seems to be saying regarding the tensions between bloggers and commercial news-media entities. But he does not seem to recognize that the debate has been a good one for our American public sphere, that the boundaries of journalism have been expanding, and that we are developing new means of research, information retrieval, and debate that are, as yet, not fully formed. What seems to him "well trodden terrain" is really just preamble to a new type of journalism not based at all on an either/or between the amateur and the professional but on a

melding of the particular possibilities each brings to news gathering, analysis, and distribution.

It is easy to disparage something (especially something new) through undemanding stereotypes and the simplistic conceptions presented by a commercial news media that looks for the quick and easy phrase for encapsulating any new phenomenon. The pajama'd blogger writing of cereal bowls is as rare as the image is common—and would only be an example (and a poor one, at that) of one type of blogger out of many, the social networker. Most bloggers have a point to make, something to say to a group wider than friends, family, and colleagues.

Though many blogs are *bad*, poorly written and researched, and often thoughtless, they are never boring. If they create a yawn, the cause is probably inside the yawner. As our mothers told us when we were young and complained of being bored, "Use your imagination! Boredom is your responsibility; it comes from within you. Find something to do, and do it." A blog is boring to write only if you haven't explored yourself carefully enough to find something to say, then explored outside, to see what others have said. A blog is boring to read only if you think you've found all the answers already, and won't discover anything new. A blog is boring to discuss only if you aren't open to discovery and new ways of approaching a topic.

A blog is only as boring as any piece of writing.

I would argue that there's a subtext in calling the blogs boring, and that is belief that there's an elitism to knowledge. The only ones who really "know" are those with the certification from the establishment. The blogs, with so many millions coming at almost any topic from so many different levels of skill and knowledge, are always going to be difficult to plow through, but any worthwhile search is difficult, taking diligence and patience. They are only boring if you believe nothing will really be found there.

If Keen wants to discuss "truth, justice, and the American way" in terms of Web 2.0, adding in "education, memory, and power," he certainly can do so. He could quickly come across statements like this about Web 2.0: "In the early days the web was a static medium. Early web shops were like a shop front or foyer leading to vast operations out back. In contrast, web 2.0 is about fluidity and change; the web itself is the business."[2] The implications of this statement on education and memory are tremendous. Or he might find this: "The open source dictum, 'release early and release often' in fact has morphed into an even more radical position, 'the perpetual beta,' in which the product is developed in the open, with new features slipstreamed in on a monthly, weekly, or even daily basis."[3] The implications here, too, are extensive, on truth and power and on much more. Want to discuss Google and Orwell? Out of the thousands of posts discussing both, you will find many asking if Google really springs from Orwell's imaginings in *1984*: "Google's motto is 'Don't be Evil' but its ubiquitous presence on the Internet is near

monopolistic and history has shown that monopolies, whether government-sponsored or private enterprise do not have a good track record."[4]

If Keen wants discussion on the Web that's not boring, he need only Google himself and his book *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet Is Killing Our Culture*. The day after its release on June 5, 2007, there were already several hundred blogs that had written on it. Much of it was negative and dismissive, with the reactions, at their best, being on the level of this, addressed, really, to Keen:

> As the wise Heraclitus once wrote, "much information does not teach wisdom."
> So do not be afraid of much information. Or much mess for that matter.
> It's a sign of a healthy culture.
> Free presses are messy. They are supposed to be. Democracy is messy. They are also supposed to be. It is fine, in fact it is healthy to have lots and lots and lots of voices, as opposed to a few state controlled or corporate controlled "voices of truth."
> As Justice Louis Brandeis wrote, the answer to bad free speech is more free speech.[5]

Not exactly boring, uneducated, or referencing breakfast.

Clearly, countering someone like Keen concerning the blogs is like shooting a gnat with a cannon—if the conversation continues online. But, as *Wired*'s Jeff Howe writes, Keen isn't really addressing the blogosphere: "Keen's arguments will sound mightily persuasive to a significant constituency who *do* believe the Internet is primarily a repository of porn, spam and corrosive amateurism. Failing to recognize that the choir to which Keen preaches might just be larger than our own congregation is an arrogant, and potentially irreversible blunder. While Web 2.0 insiders might love to hate Keen, many in the world at large will love to love him."[6]

One purpose of this book of mine, though most of it was written before Keen's book appeared, is to bring discussion of the blogosphere to those who might not be in the choir Howe refers to. Though there is much here that might be of interest to those of us perfectly comfortable online, I want to expand the universe of discourse to include everyone in America and everywhere else where the blogs have become an important force. One of my main points is that there is no real divide between "reality" and "virtuality," and so I don't want to address people as if they are so divided in their interests and possible knowledge.

Keen's premise, that the Internet is killing "our" culture, is paltry in its implied conception of knowledge and culture, containing within it the same logical fallacy behind the argument that increased literacy weakens culture, for it lowers the average level of knowledge and skill among the literate. Neither

argument recognizes that expansion does not actually make the people counted stupider or less learned—it simply brings more people into the equation. The Internet does not limit culture. On the contrary, it expands it by increasing possibilities.

One of the bloggers quoted previously references Brandeis on the fact that the way to counter bad speech is not to limit speech, but to increase it. The same holds true for other aspects of our culture—as this book, I hope, demonstrates.

Chapter 1

An Introduction to the Blogs

Blogs and Other Online Entities Discussed in Chapter 1

The Academic Blog Portal, http://www.academicblogs.org/wiki/index.php/
    Main_Page

Assignment Zero, http://zero.newassignment.net

The Club for Growth, http://www.clubforgrowth.org

Daily Kos, http://www.dailykos.com

Diaryland, http://diaryland.com

Drew's Marketing Minute, http://www.drewsmarketingminute.com

Grasping Reality with Both Hands: Brad DeLong's Semi-Daily Journal,
    http://delong.typepad.com

Informed Comment, http://www.juancole.com

The Little Professor: Things Victorian and Academic, http://littleprofessor.
    typepad.com

LiveJournal, http://www.livejournal.com

Pixel Press, http://www.pixelpress.org

Second Life, http://secondlife.com

Startling Bleats of Tomorrow, http://lileks.com/bleats/index.html

TPMCafe, http://www.tpmcafe.com

University Diaries, http://margaretsoltan.phenominet.com

The Weblog Awards, http://2006.weblogawards.org

Any understanding of the blogs becomes more fulsome when it includes a little background in language and culture, for blogs are not simply a function or result of the technology that distributes them. Nor are they merely a new trash pit, a place for all the detritus of human thought that amounted to nothing and had previously been hidden from sight. Internet development may have unleashed them, but blogs are also a new and original cultural phenomenon, reflecting more the changes and needs in society than simple realization of technological possibility.

For the purposes of this introductory chapter, I've chosen to provide a little of the cultural background that has led to the rise of the blogosphere through

glimpses (along with other discussions) at the thoughts of three twentieth-century scholars, Jürgen Habermas, B. F. Skinner, and Walter Ong. Other thinkers could be used as easily, but these three connect neatly and together cover a great deal of the relevant ground. Through a look at them, it should be clear that the blogs are not only changing our cultural landscape, but that the direction may be much more positive than many have assumed. Each scholar has a unique perspective, yet, taken as a trio, they provide a context for effective understanding of the contemporary communications revolution in its cultural, though not its technological (that is another topic completely), aspects. Because the subtitle of this book, "The New Public Sphere," is taken from a phrase Habermas created, I will start with his work.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* Habermas describes and defines the "public sphere" through an examination of cultural shifts and developments in eighteenth-century Europe when, he argues, the public sphere first developed. Though the public sphere, as he claims, has been tremendously constricted since, his definition stands today: "The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people coming together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor."[1] Habermas illustrates what he means through a chart:[2]

Private Realm		Sphere of Public Authority
Civil society (realm of commodity exchange and social labor)	Public sphere in the political realm	State (realm of the "police")
	Public sphere in the world of letters (clubs, press)	
Conjugal family's internal space (bourgeois intellectuals)	"Town" (market of culture products)	Court (courtly-noble society)

The public sphere exists within a tension between what might be called "private" or "familial" or "personal" authority (what I will call, later in this book, the horizontal) and public authority (which I look upon as the vertical)—once the private has gained a certain parity with the public. It covers matters of politics, the arts, and commerce—or about all that might fall under the rubric "culture,"—and it is where, today, the blogs reside. The weakness of the public sphere is that it is protected only by the will of the public and not by any institutional structures. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, for example, doesn't guarantee a public sphere; it merely protects it from government interference.

As Habermas reiterates throughout his book, the public sphere, though it may have evolved out of the tensions between states and society, remains firmly within the "private realm." Governments could not and did not protect the public sphere as commercial forces grew to dominate western societies. Yet the private sphere could have evolved "into a sphere of private autonomy only to the degree to which it became emancipated from mercantilist regulation."[3] This is a central conundrum of the public sphere: it can't be a creature of government, but it needs government if it is to exist at all.

Left pretty much to its own devices, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the "public sphere in the private world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of cultural consumption."[4] In the United States, this was most noticeable in the growth of centralized communications media that eventually took control of the public sphere, leaving much of the public only as passive observers of actions on a commercial stage. "When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unraveled into acts of individual reception, however uniform in mode."[5] Possibly, the advent of the blogs, a free, easily used, and accessible venue for public discussion, is changing that, technology acting as a buffer (temporarily, at least) against public-sphere domination by commercial forces and even allowing it to be opened up again. It is too early in the life of the blogosphere to assess that absolutely, but that does seem to be the current direction. However it may prove, Habermas's examination of the constriction of the public sphere in the past provides the basis for my argument, made elsewhere,[6] that the taking back of the public sphere through the blogs is, in some respects, nothing more than a return to the type of debate and journalism practiced in the United States before the tremendous growth of the commercial news media starting in the 1840s.

Beyond that, what exactly is this "public sphere"? In discussing eighteenth-century coffeehouses and other nodes of the growing public sphere, Habermas identifies three "institutional criteria" that can also apply to the modern public sphere:

> *First*, they preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether.[7]

Just so, status (professional or otherwise) doesn't matter on the blogs—not, at least, in terms of access. Reputation, of course, is as important on the blogs as it is elsewhere, but status coming *into* the blogs can only take one so far. Blogs operate through the words on the screen, and these become the movers of judgment, all supposedly equal, though there are plenty of means of heightening their exposure, most requiring either money or extensive work within

the blogosphere but outside of the particular blog (commenting on other blogs, providing links, manipulating search-engine searches, etc.).

Well-known politicians may post on a group blog such as Daily Kos, but their posts will look like any other, and commenters will react to them in a manner not far removed from how they react to any other poster. The fact of expertise established outside of the blogs (possession of a Ph.D., for example) is always trumped by expertise *demonstrated* through the blogs. The "democratization" of discussion broadens debate far beyond what can be found in traditional news media, where the only venue for most people's expression is a letters-to-the-editor ghetto. Were a group blog like Daily Kos a newspaper, it would have a front page of featured opinion pieces, a body of nothing but letters-to-the-editor, and a reference section consisting of things like AP wire stories.

> *Secondly*, discussion within such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned. The domain of "common concerns" which was the object of public critical attention remained a preserve in which church and state authorities had the monopoly of interpretation.… To the degree, however, to which philosophical and literary works and works of art in general were produced for the market and distributed through it [they, and the ideas contained, became] … in principle generally accessible.[8]

Discourse in the late twentieth century tended to fall more and more to chosen pairings of disparate views, generally represented by figures raised from and by the news media. Before the blogs, these were on the way to becoming the representatives of a new authority, one representing the state but provided through commercial venues. The blogs are an overt rejection of this trend, an unconscious attempt to bring discussion back under popular (and not centralized) control.

In addition, before the blogs, the topics for debate, more and more frequently, were brought *to* the public rather than arising *from* the people. In the blogosphere, stories arising through popular interest and exploration, called "crowdsourced" by *Wired* magazine's Jeff Howe and journalism scholar Jay Rosen[9] (whose "Assignment Zero" is an attempt to experiment with crowdsourcing and provide it the framework of professional support that he believes will help sustain it), develop cohesion and popular interest together, providing the sense of drama sometimes lacking in stories force-fed to the public by the commercial and professional news media.

> *Thirdly*, the same process that converted culture into a commodity (and in this fashion constituted it as a culture that could become an object of discussion to begin with) established the public as in principle inclusive.[10]

The very nature of commerce makes it nearly impossible, at this point, for political or economic forces to curtail the blogs. When culture has become