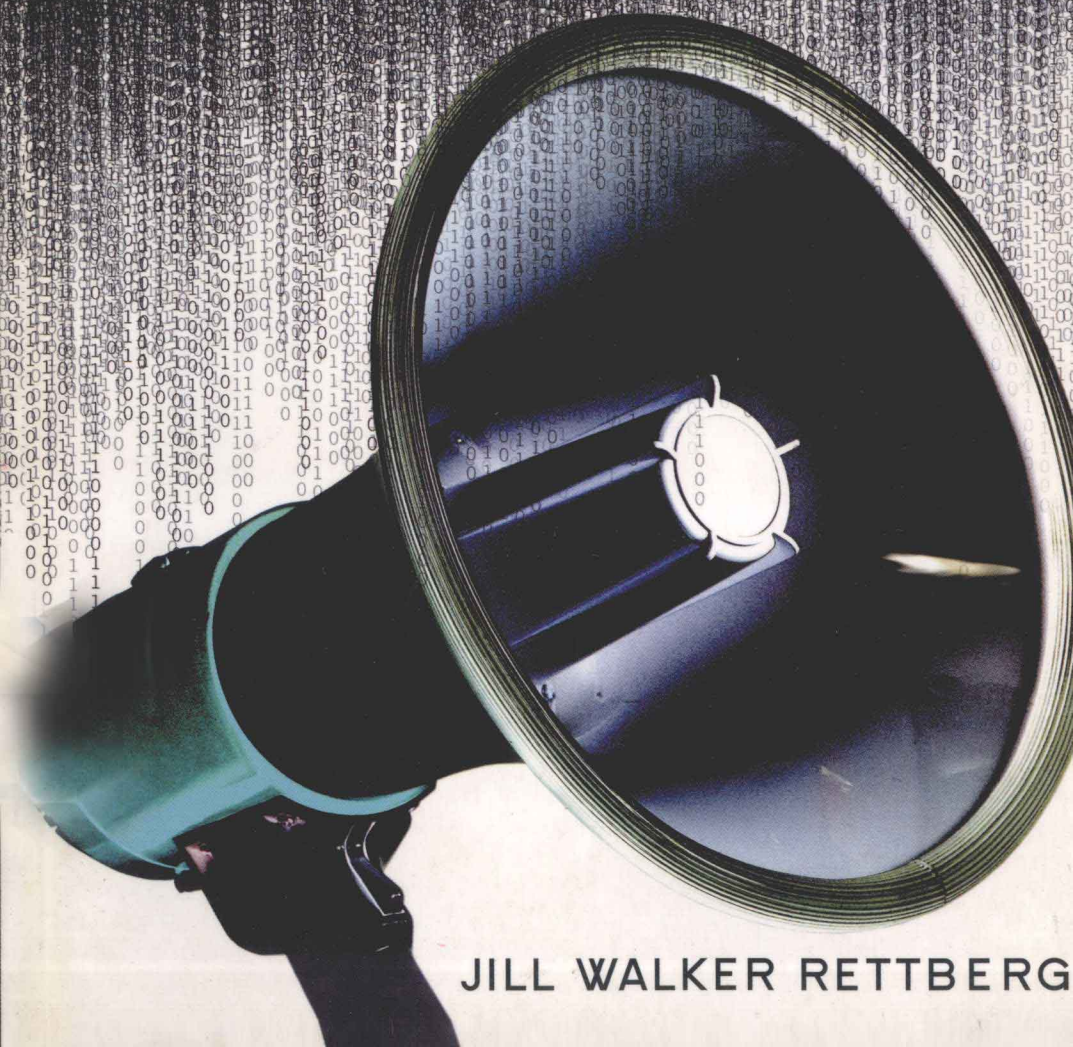


# BLOGGING

DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIETY SERIES



JILL WALKER RETTBERG

# Blogging

JILL WALKER RETTBERG

polity

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## **Blogging**

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# Introduction

Ten years ago, the word 'blog' didn't exist. Today, mainstream media routinely use the word without bothering to explain it. Weblogs have become part of popular consciousness with a speed that is remarkable by any standard. What is this new form of communication that has so suddenly entered our culture?

I began blogging in October 2000, when I was working on my PhD thesis, and I've been blogging since. Like most bloggers, I learnt about blogging by doing it. Blogging is as much about reading other blogs as about writing your own, and the best way to understand blogging is to immerse yourself in it. However, blogs are also a part of a larger context. They are part of the history of communication and literacy, and emblematic of a shift from uni-directional mass media to participatory media, where viewers and readers become creators of media. Blogs are also part of the history of literature and writing. A path can be traced from early autobiographical writing through diary writing and memoirs up to the confessional and personal diary-style blogs of today (Serfaty 2004). Blogs are part of the current changes in journalism and in marketing. They are part of the growth of social networks like MySpace and Facebook, which in their turn have roots in the social network theory put forward by sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as in the network structure of the Internet, which was designed around the same period.

Blogs are founded upon the link, building connections between related issues. Blogs are themselves related to many different contexts and can be interpreted from many different disciplines: media studies, the history of technology, sociology,

ethnology, literary studies, marketing, journalism and more. Furthermore, blogs can function as a lens with which to see how all these fields have developed up until today, and with which we can understand more about other, related, social media.

The first chapter of this book is an introduction to blogs, explaining how blogs work. We look at three blogs in detail, each of which represents a different kind of blog. We'll then discuss the defining characteristics of blogs, and finally look at the history of blogging.

The next two chapters look at blogging from two broader yet different perspectives. Chapter 2 sees blogging in a historical context, and explores ways in which major cultural shifts, such as the introduction of print, the spread of literacy, and our expanding access to the Internet connect to blogging. It also examines ways in which cultural theories of communication and writing relate to the practice of blogging. In chapter 3, we look at current research on blogs as social arenas, in particular discussing social network theory and considering how social networks like MySpace and Facebook relate to blogs.

The fourth, fifth and sixth chapters of the book deal with different kinds of blogs. Chapter 4 looks at the symbiosis between blogging and journalism. Chapter 5 considers blogs as narratives, and explores the characteristics of blog narratives both in terms of narrative structure and in terms of the uneasy relationships between fiction, self-representation and authenticity. Chapter 6 examines commercial blogging, looking at the ways in which blogs are being used in marketing and by businesses as well as at the way individuals are setting up blogs as small businesses and earning a living from advertising revenue.

Finally, chapter 7 offers speculations on the future of blogging. Blogging has very rapidly become a popular form of writing – will we still blog in twenty years' time, or will other ways of communicating have taken over by then? Will blogging continue to increase the general public's ability to speak back and

to be heard? Will it be subsumed by mass media, or change into something else altogether? What are the perils and promises of blogging?

This book contains references to many blogs, as well as to conventional sources. Blogs that are discussed are not generally included in the main bibliography, but are listed separately at the end of the book, along with their URLs at the time of writing or, in the case of blogs that are no longer actively maintained, their URL at the time they were active. However, blogs are by nature an ephemeral form, and some will have changed URLs or shut down completely by the time you read this. If so, I would recommend trying to enter the URL into The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine at <http://archive.org>. This will usually provide you with search results allowing you to view the blog as it appeared at regular intervals during the period when it was active.

This book aims to be like a blog in that it constantly links to – or refers to – actual examples of what blogs are doing and what bloggers are writing, as well as to more conventional sources such as scholarship on blogs and their context. Being a book, it can also draw upon the strengths of this slower, longer format by providing a context and a sustained discussion that would be difficult in the faster, more fragmentary medium of blogs. But although reading about blogs is valuable for those who wish to gain an overview and to think about the meaning of blogs in today's culture, anyone who really wants to understand blogs will need to start their own blog and to read other blogs. It's easy. If you haven't already tried blogging, give it a go!

## CHAPTER ONE

# What is a Blog?

To really understand blogs, you need to read them over time. Following a blog is like getting to know someone, or like watching a television series. Because blogging is a cumulative process, most posts presuppose some knowledge of the history of the blog, and they fit into a larger story. There's a very different sense of rhythm and continuity when you follow a blog, or a group of blogs, over time, compared to simply reading a single post that you've found through a search engine or by following a link from another Web site.

In most forms of print publishing, such as newspaper articles, novels or poetry, the author is not in charge of the way the text will look. The text is written in a word processor (or on a typewriter, or by hand) and submitted to an editor who, usually with a staff of designers, determines the layout. Bloggers, on the other hand, choose their own template and often spend considerable time adjusting the way their blogs look and work. A literary critic will rarely see the binding of a book as being important to its literary quality. A blog, however, cannot be read simply for its writing, but will always be seen as the sum of writing, layout, connections and links, and tempo.

The best way of figuring out what a blog is is simply to look at some examples. I've chosen three blogs for us to look at and analyse: a personal, diary-style blog, a political blog and a blog that combines expertise with a personal twist. After examining these blogs, I'll discuss some definitions of blogs and consider how well they suit our examples. One of the most important reasons for the popularity of blogging is that it is extremely easy to do – so, first of all, let's look at the mechanics

of blogging and how you do it. If you're already a blogger, you might want to skip ahead to the examples of different kinds of blog: personal blogs, filter blogs and topic-driven blogs.

## How to Blog

There are many online services that will let you set up your own blog for free, and that will host your blog for you on their server. Blogger.com was the first major service to do this, and is still one of the most popular blogging sites, but there are many others, including Wordpress.com, Livejournal.com, TypePad.com, as well as many sites that are specific to a particular country or region.

All these sites require you to create a user account. You're then asked to choose a name for your blog and a URL. Sites that offer free hosting for your blog will generally have a fixed domain for all hosted blogs but allow you to choose the first part of the URL. For instance, Blogger.com hosts users' blogs at [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com), so you could choose the URL <http://newblog.blogspot.com> or <http://myfirstblog.blogspot.com>, assuming these URLs aren't already taken. If you already have your own domain ([mydomain.com](http://mydomain.com), for instance), you can set the blog up to publish to it instead. The next step is to select a template or theme for your blog (see figure 1). Most blogging services have many different templates to choose from. Later, if you like, you can edit your template to make it just the way you want it. Some of these edits are easy to do, but more complex editing requires basic knowledge of HTML and CSS. HTML stands for HyperText Markup Language, and is the code for writing a Web page that can be displayed in a Web browser. For instance, in HTML, you put the tag `<p>` at the beginning of a paragraph, and the tag `</p>` at the end of a paragraph. The browser then knows that text between those two tags should be displayed as a separate paragraph rather than just as a long string of text connected to the text that comes before and after. CSS stands for Cascading Style Sheets, and is a way of specifying how the

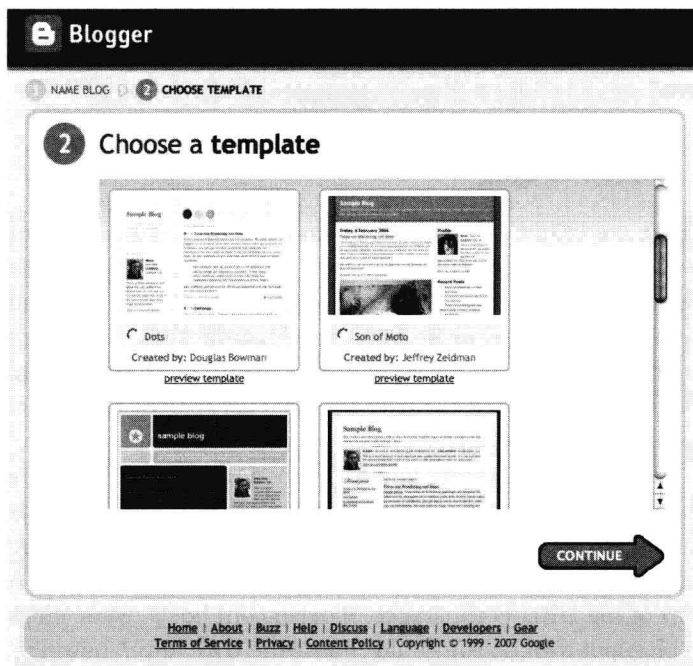


Figure 1: Selecting a template for your new blog at Blogger.com. (Screenshot taken 6 August 2007)

Web browser should ‘style’ or present pages that are marked up in HTML. So, for instance, a CSS ‘rule’ might specify that all paragraphs should have the first line indented. That would override the default of most Web browsers, which doesn’t indent the first line, but instead inserts an extra line break between paragraphs. There are numerous tutorials explaining how to tweak the HTML and CSS code for blog templates to adjust them as you wish, but there are also many changes that can be made without diving into the code.

Once you’ve chosen a template you’ve created your blog, and you simply need to fill it with content. You’re presented with a small empty box for the title of the post, and a larger box for the post itself (see figure 2). When you’ve written as much as you



Figure 2: Writing a new post at Blogger.com. The title of the blog is at the very top of the page (in this case, it is 'My New Blog'). You enter the title of the post you are writing in the smaller text box and the main content of the post in the large text box. (Screenshot taken 6 August 2007)

want to write, you simply press the 'Publish Post' button (the publish button has different names on different blogging sites) and your words are uploaded to your blog and published on the Internet.

The templates you can choose from when you create a new blog also show the elements that are expected to be included in a blog. Just as a book is expected to have a cover with its title and the name of the author or editor, a blog usually has a number of standard features. The title of the whole blog is usually displayed at the top of the page, often presented in a graphic banner across the top section. Many blogs have taglines as well – subtitles or brief descriptions of the blog. There'll generally be some information about the blogger in one of the upper



corners, often with a photo. Many blog hosting sites encourage users to create profiles about themselves, with a photo, some biographical information and links to their blogs. The default templates will then pull in information from the blogger's profile to display on their blog, thus automatically generating this 'about' section. The main content of the blog – the posts, each with its own title – will generally be in the wide central column, and there are often side columns with automatically generated links to older blog posts (the archives), to other blogs the blogger enjoys reading (this list of links is known as a blogroll) and to comments left by users.

In the last few years, blog software has increasingly incorporated RSS as an additional way of publishing. RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication, and is a version of a Web site encoded in a way that allows computers to easily manipulate the content. For instance, an RSS feed of a blog will use codes like <title> and </title> to mark the beginning and end point of the title of an individual post. The content of the post and the name of the post's author will be similarly encoded, as will the date and time it was published. While blog readers can still visit a blog using their Web browser and read it as a Web page (see, for instance, figures 3, 4 and 5), they can also choose to use an RSS reader to read the RSS feed of a blog. One advantage of this is that you can subscribe to a number of blogs and your RSS reader will automatically alert you when they have new posts. Another advantage of RSS is that RSS feeds can be embedded into other Web pages. So for instance, if I have two blogs, one about my research and one for students in a class I am teaching, I could use the RSS feed from my student blog in my research blog, showing just the titles of the latest posts in my student blog in the sidebar of my research blog.

Blogs aren't the only sites that use RSS. Newspapers, discussion forums and photo sharing sites are just some of the kinds of sites that often provide RSS feeds. I can, for instance, subscribe to an RSS feed of recent activity on my Facebook pro-