

Better living through blogging?

By Margaret Bauer
Editor in Chief

This summer, tracking service Technorati reported that new online journals, or “blogs,” were being started at a rate of about 40,000 per day. Last November, statistics released by the Pew Internet and American Life Project indicated that 8 million Americans had started blogs. With the kind of growth rate Technorati is reporting, that number is surely much higher now.

That’s a lot of people slinging ideas around in cyberspace. Blogs not only allow people to publish their opinions, but they may also be changing the substance of our thoughts and interactions.

As any Washington University blogger could tell you, hyperaware, self-conscious bloggers invent tropes and memes at a phenomenal rate. Some of the resultant terms are bandied about in the popular media. We speak of “the blogging revolution” and “the blogosphere,” using bloggers’ own terms to describe the phenomenon.

I’ve tracked the blogging community for several years now as both a participant and a facilitator. Until this year, I was in charge of daily operations for a start-up blogging site, Jablog.com. We provided a free

blogging interface until a botched software upgrade last fall left the site’s 500 users, including myself, unable to access their accounts. That pretty much ended our foray into the blogging world.

The upshot of that experience, though, was that it allowed me to spend two years observing the “blogosphere” firsthand. One of the most striking things I’ve observed is the tendency for bloggers to rewrite their lives as they occur.

Such an approach to living our lives reflects a trend toward what author Thomas de Zengotita would call “mediated” interaction. In a recent book, *Mediated: The Hidden Effects of Media on People, Places, and Things*, de Zengotita posits the idea that everyone’s actions are mediated by the culture with which they come in contact. Everyone is a method actor, says de Zengotita. Each individual is living the movie of his or her life.

Those of us who are continually in contact with pop culture—including University students—become particularly vulnerable to this mindset. Advertisers and producers continually target us, telling us that our lives and our choices are paramount. Like the backyard basketball player who whispers crowd noise and cheers to himself, we begin to see ourselves as stars of our own show.

Why not? Reality TV says it’s okay. We see ourselves through the lens of the biopic that will be written about us when we die—except we want that screenplay to be written right now. Enter blogging.

The continual process of reinventing oneself that blogging engenders may not be a bad thing. A blogger can be Perry Mason one day and John Wayne the next, evading the adoption of a set persona. His writing may vary with his mood.

Such easy familiarity with the writing process constitutes progress by itself. More people are churning out more content all the time. Put a million bloggers in front of a million keyboards, à la Émile Borel’s monkeys, and something good may come of it.

Yet blogging also puts perceptions through the mill of the writing process, subtly altering them to reflect the direction of the narrative rather than real life. As such, blogging may put distance between writers and their lives, blunting the sharp, direct experience of things as they happen. Bloggers begin to put stock in a post-hoc version of events.

I’ve witnessed situations where someone asked a blogger how he was doing, and he referred them to his blog, as it told the story the way he wanted it to be told. Bloggers sometimes assume that everyone

who matters reads their blog, so they stop telling people about their lives directly.

Not only that, but we mine conversations for kernels of thought that we can blog about, much like the raconteur who saves his best stories for a particular audience. The blogging *modus operandi* becomes “write more, faster,” and we begin to shed the caution and judgment calls that initially accompanied the endeavor. After a while, our lives are lived for the page.

Blogs can be valuable tools for self-discovery, expressing individual choice and agency. Yet in a mediated culture like de Zengotita describes, blogging becomes an expression of our socialized desire to demand continual choice and agency in all aspects of our lives.

The fictionalizing that occurs in the writing of a blog post is a way of controlling the way we perceive ourselves and, in turn, the way the world perceives us. As millions of bloggers can attest, the blogging phenomenon reflects a real change in the way we move through the world.

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