

Nihilism and the News

Blogging as a Mental Condition

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In a recently published book, *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture*, Geert Lovink analyses the impact of blogging on the public sphere. This essay is an updated version of one chapter of his book, 'Blogging: The Nihilist Impulse', in which Lovink sees blogging as an attitude aimed at undermining 'the mighty and seductive power of the broadcast media'. ¹

Weblogs or blogs are successors of the '90s internet homepage. They create a mix of the private (online dairy) and the public (PR management of the self). According to *Blog Herald*'s rough estimate, there are 100 million blogs worldwide. In the first half of 2007 *Technorati* was indexing 70 million blogs. It is next to impossible to make general statements about the 'nature' of blogs. Instead of dividing them into proper genres, I will stick to the impossible task of formulating a 'general theory of blogging', starting with the software and menu choices that all bloggers have to deal with. The techno-determinist has to resist the academically correct move to differentiate in categories. Blogs are first and foremost a special effect of the underlying software architecture, no matter whether the chitchat is about cats, chocolate or the war in Iraq.

Instead of looking into the emancipatory potential of blogs, or emphasizing the counter-cultural folklore, I see blogs as part of an unfolding process of 'massification' of the internet after its successive academic and speculative phases. The void after the dotcom crash made way for large-scale, interlinked conversations through freely available automated software with user-friendly interfaces. The blogosphere echoes a collective spirit aimed at creating a public domain, a pre-1992 value that the internet once embodied and that was weakened by the greedy 'virtual class', which was no longer interested in the specificities of the 'media question' and was in the game only to sell out and leave the scene.

Web services like blogs cannot be separated from the output they generate. The politics and aesthetics defined by the first generations of bloggers will characterize the medium for decades to come. Blogs appeared during the late '90s, in the shadow of high-profile online services such as e-commerce and the portal. ² Blog culture was not developed enough to be dominated by mba consultants with its hysterical demo-or-die-now-or-never mentality. Blogs first appeared as casual conversations around a link that could not easily be commodified. Building a laid-back parallel world made it possible for blogs to form the crystals (a term coined by Elias Canetti) from which millions of blogs grew and, around 2003, reached critical mass.

Let's have a close look at what happens when we 'blog'. A blog is commonly defined as a frequent, chronological publication of personal thoughts and web links, a mixture of what is happening in a person's life and what is happening on the web and in the world out there. ³ A blog allows for the easy creation of new pages: text and images are entered into an online form (which usually has room for the title, the category and the body of the

article), and the form is submitted. As user, you stare at an empty web form and start to record your thoughts. When you're finished – on average, after writing 250 words – you push the submit button. Automated templates add the article to the home page, creating the new full article page (permalink) and putting the article into the appropriate date- or category-based archive. Because of the tags that the author includes in each posting, blogs let us filter by date, category, author or a similar attribute. In most cases, the blog administrator is allowed to invite and add other authors, whose permission and access are easily managed. ⁴

Blogging in the post-9/11 period closed the gap between internet and society. Whereas dotcom suits dreamt of mobbing customers flooding their sites, blogs were the actual catalysts that led to the worldwide democratization of the Net. To the same degree that 'democratization' means 'engaged citizens', it also implies 'normalization' (as in setting of norms) and 'banalization'. We can't separate these elements and enjoy only the interesting bits. According to Jean Baudrillard, we're living in the 'universe of integral reality'. 'If there was in the past an upward transcendence, there is today a downward one. This is, in a sense, the second Fall of Man Heidegger speaks of: the fall into banality, but this time without any possible redemption.' ⁵ If you can't cope with high degrees of irrelevance, blogs won't be your cup of tea.

Relationship with the News Industry

There is a presumption that blogs have a symbiotic relationship with the news industry. This thesis is not uncontested. A Pew/Internet survey of blogs clearly showed the diversity of topics bloggers are interested in. The report concluded that '37% of bloggers say that the primary topic of their blog is "my life and experiences". Other topics ran distantly behind: 11% of bloggers focus on politics and government; 7% focus on entertainment; 6% focus on sports; 5% focus on general news and current events; 5% focus on business; 4% on technology; 2% on religion, spirituality or faith and additional smaller groups who focus on a specific hobby, a health problem or illness.' ⁶ These figures clearly indicate that there is no self-evident relation between blogging and journalism. To label blogs as 'citizen journalism' is a noble act but suggests that bloggers see themselves as 'amateurs' or wannabe journalists. I would say that this is not the case. The lost discipline of hypertext, for instance, points at other motives. Hypertext scholars track blogs back to 1980s hypercards and the 1990s online literature wave, in which clicking from one document to the next is the central activity of the reader. If the act of blogging is centred on linking, they could be right. For some reason, however, the hypertext undercurrent lost out, and what remains is an almost self-evident equation between blogs and the news industry. It is not easy to say whether blogs operate inside or outside the media industry. To position the blog medium inside the news business could be seen as opportunistic, whereas others see this as a clever career move. There is also a 'tactical' aspect. The blogger-equals-journalist might get protection from such a label in case of censorship and repression. Despite countless attempts to feature blogs as alternatives to the mainstream media, they are often more precisely described as 'feedback channels'. The act of 'gatewatching' (Axel Bruns) the mainstream media outlets does not necessarily result in reasonable comments that will be taken into account. In the category 'insensitive' we have a wide range, from hilarious to mad, sad and sick. What CNN, newspapers and radio stations the world over have failed to do – namely, to integrate open, interactive messages from their constituencies – blogs do for them. To 'blog' a news report doesn't mean that the blogger sits down and thoroughly analyses the discourse and the circumstances, let alone checks the facts. To blog merely means to point quickly to a news item through a link and to write a few sentences that explain why the blogger found this or that factoid interesting, remarkable or debatable.

I would define blog entries as hastily written personal musings, sculptured around a link or event. In most cases bloggers simply do not have the time, the skills and the financial

means for proper research. There are collective research blogs at work on specific topics, but these are rare. What ordinary blogs create is a dense cloud of 'impressions' around a topic. Blogs test. They allow you to see whether or not your audience is still awake and receptive. In that sense, we could also say that blogs are the outsourced, privatized test beds, or rather unit tests ⁷, of the big media.

New Formats

Nonetheless, boundaries between the media sphere and the blogosphere are fluid. A detailed social analysis would uncover, most likely, a grey area of freelance media-makers moving back and forth. From the outset, journalists working for 'old media' ran blogs. So how do blogs relate to independent investigative journalism? At first glance, they look like oppositional or potentially supplementary practices. Whereas the investigative journalist works months, if not years, to uncover a story, bloggers look more like an army of ants contributing to the great hive called 'public opinion'. Bloggers rarely add new facts to a news story. They find bugs in products and news reports but rarely 'unmask' spin, let alone come up with well-researched reports. Cecile Landman – a Dutch investigative journalist, supporter of Iraqi bloggers and activist in the Streamtime campaign – knows both worlds. 'Journalists ... need to make a living too. They can't put just anything on-line. Bloggers don't seem to bother too much about this, and that does create a conflict.' According to Landman, blogging is changing the existing formats of information. People are getting bored with the given formats, which 'don't catch up with the news anymore, it no longer glues on their cervical memory stick. It is like a song that you have listened to too often, or ... a commercial advertisement: you hear it, you can even sing the words, but they are without meaning. Mainstream media start to grasp this. They have begun to search for new formats in order to attract readers (read: advertisers) ⁸ – and blogs are but a small chapter in this transformation.

Blogs are not anonymous news sites, they are deeply personal. Blog software does a wonderful trick: it constitutes subjectivity. The blogger becomes an individual (again). Even if we blog together, we still answer to the Call of the Code to tell something about ourselves as unique persons. Blogs lure us away from writing press releases or impersonal observations. As Dave Winer so precisely defines it, a weblog is 'the voice of a person'. It is a digital extension of oral traditions more than a new form of writing. ⁹ Through blogging, news is transformed from a lecture into a conversation. Blogs echo rumour and gossip, conversations in cafés and bars, on squares and in corridors. They record 'the events of the day' (Jay Rosen). Today's 'recordability' of situations is such that we are no longer upset when computers 'read' all our moves and expressions (sound, image, text) and 'write' them into strings of zeros and ones. In that sense, blogs fit into the wider trend in which all our movements and activities are monitored and stored. In the case of blogs, this is carried out not by some invisible and abstract authority but by the subjects themselves, who record their everyday lives. ¹⁰

Shocklogs

The 2004 blog hype – later eclipsed by the MySpace, YouTube and Second Life waves – could not measure up to the late '90s dotcom hysteria. The economic and political landscape was simply too different. What interests me in this case was the often-heard remark that blogs were cynical and nihilist. Instead of brushing off this accusation, I ran both keywords through the systems to test if they were hardwired values consolidated inside Blog Nation. Instead of portraying bloggers as 'an army of Davids', as Instapundit blogger Glenn Reynolds suggests,¹¹ it might be better to study the techno-mentality of users and not presume that bloggers are underdogs on a mission to beat Goliath. An additional reason is the ongoing popularity of 'shocklogs' like the Dutch *GeenStijl* ('no style'), which in 2007 won the prize for the best Dutch weblog for the second time. Dutch 'shocklogs' are an interesting subgenre of what professional optimists like Dan Gillmor call 'We Media'. Shocklogs deliberately position themselves on the border of the news industry. This is participatory culture, but with an unwelcome, nasty outcome. Shocklog entries are written to test the boundaries of the politically correct consensus culture of Western media. According to a (deleted) Wikipedia entry, shocklogs are 'weblogs that use shock and slander to sling mud at current affairs, public individuals and institutions. Authors of shocklogs usually comment on an item in a provoking and insulting way, often resulting in even more seriously offensive comments, such as threats of rape and murder. Occasionally shocklogs will incite the reader to undertake some (online) action, usually in the nature to harass or harm a specific target.'¹²

The largest shocklogs in the Netherlands are *Geenstijl*, *Jaggle*, *Retecool* and *Volkomenkut*. Unique visitors to these sites are estimated to be 25,000 to 38,000 a day. Shocklogs, also called *treiterlogs* in Dutch, do more than post offensive content; they also draw a crowd of people often interested in expressing their frustrations. These are your average outsiders who feel excluded by the progressive-liberal establishment. In many cases the delicate topics discussed on such sites reflect current sentiments in Dutch society, in particular attitudes towards Muslims and other minorities. One example is the community's response to messages posted regarding the murder of Dutch film director Theo van Gogh in November 2004. When it became clear that the suspect had a Moroccan background, and that his actions were rooted in his radical Islamic beliefs, discussions on various shocklogs got overheated. The assassination of Theo van Gogh, who had had experience in posting controversial statements on his own blog, led to numerous online debates peppered with explicit and even racist comments.

It would be ridiculous to denounce bloggers collectively as cynics or nihilists. Cynicism, in this context, is not a character trait but a techno-social condition. The argument is not that bloggers are predominantly cynics in nature or conviction, or vulgar exhibitionists who lack restraint. What is important to note is the *Zeitgeist* into which blogging as a mass practice emerged. Net cynicism is a cultural spin-off of blogging software, hardwired in a specific era; it is the result of procedures such as login, link, edit, create, browse, read, submit, tag and reply. Some would judge the mere use of the term 'cynicism' as blog-bashing. So be it. Again, we're not talking about an attitude here, let alone a shared lifestyle. Net cynicism no longer believes in cyberculture as an identity provider with related entrepreneurial hallucinations. It is constituted by cold enlightenment as a post-political condition and by confession as described by Michel Foucault. People are taught that being liberated requires them to 'tell the truth', to confess all to someone (priest, psychoanalyst, weblog), and that this truth-telling will somehow set them free.¹³ Exhibitionism equals empowerment. Saying aloud what you think or feel, in the manner of de Sade, is not only an option – in the liberal sense of 'choice' – but an obligation, an immediate impulse to respond in order to be out there, with everybody else.

There is a quest for truth in blogging. But it is truth with a question mark. Truth has become an amateur project, not an absolute value, sanctioned by higher authorities. A new

interpretation of the more common definition of cynicism might call it 'the unpleasant way of performing the truth.'¹⁴ The internet is not a religion or a mission in and of itself. For some, it turns into an addiction, but one that can be healed like any other medical problem. The post-dotcom/post 9-11 condition borders on 'passionate conservatism' but, in the end, rejects dotcom's petit bourgeois morals and its double standards of cheating and hiding, cooking the books and being rewarded with fat pay checks. The question is, therefore: how much truth can a medium bear? Knowledge is sorrow, and 'knowledge society' propagators have not yet taken this into account.

In the context of the internet, it is not evil – as Rüdiger Safranski suggested – that is the 'drama of freedom', but triviality. This triviality is a direct result of the abundance of resources made available to those with access to a computer and the internet. The freedom of the press in the 18th through the 20th centuries, if it existed in the first place, had to deal with a (relative) scarcity of paper, typesetting equipment, radio frequencies, and access to satellites and other distribution channels. The freedom of shocklogs, as seen from a historical perspective, remains unprecedented. But, as Baudrillard states, 'All of our values are simulated. What is freedom? We have a choice between buying one car or buying another car?'¹⁵ To continue Baudrillard's line of thinking, we could say that blogs are a gift to humankind that no one needs. This is the true shock. Did anyone order the development of blogs? It is impossible to simply ignore blogs and live the comfortable lifestyle of a 20th-century 'public intellectual'. Like Michel Houellebecq, bloggers are trapped by their own inner contradictions in the Land of No Choice. *The Times of London* noted that Houellebecq 'writes from inside alienation. His bruised male heroes, neglected by their parents, cope by depriving themselves of loving interactions; they project their coldness and loneliness on to the world.'¹⁶ Blogs are perfect projection fields for such an undertaking.

Cosmos of Micro-Opinions

We're operating in a post-deconstructionist world in which blogs offer a never-ending stream of confessions, a cosmos of micro-opinions attempting to interpret events beyond well-known 20th-century categories. The nihilist impulse emerges as a response to the increasing levels of complexity within interconnected topics. There is little to say if all occurrences can be explained through the politically correct lenses of post-colonialism, class analysis, environmentalism and gender perspective. Blogging arises against this kind of 'correct' analysis, through which not a great deal can be said any more. As many have already noticed, blogs revolt against the nihilist manipulations of global news corporations, but that's only half the story. Blogs express personal fear, insecurity and disillusion – anxieties looking for partners-in-crime. We seldom find passion (except for the act of blogging itself). Often blogs unveil doubt and insecurity about what to feel, what to think, believe and like. Bloggers' confessions carefully compare magazines and review traffic signs, nightclubs and T-shirts. This stylized uncertainty circles around the general assumption that blogs ought to be biographical while simultaneously reporting on the world outside. Their emotional scope is much wider than that of other media, thanks to the informal atmosphere of blogs. Mixing the public with the private is constitutional here. What blogs play with is an emotional register that runs from boredom to hate to passionate engagement to sexual outrage and back again.

Blogs are witnessing and documenting the diminishing power of the mainstream media, but they have consciously not replaced its ideology with an alternative. Users are tired of top-down communication – yet they have nowhere else to go. 'There is no other world' could be read as a response to the anti-globalization slogan 'Another world is possible'. Alternative or not, there are plenty of stories, observations, pictures, remarks and notes that float around, looking a dozen or so viewers. Caught in the daily grind of blogging, one feels that the Network is the alternative. It is not correct to judge blogs merely on the basis

of content. Media theory has never taken this approach and here, too, should shy away from this type of evaluation. Blogging is a nihilistic venture precisely because the ownership structure of mass media is questioned and attacked – without providing an answer to the looming crisis. Blogging is a bleed-to-death strategy (actiones in distans). Implosion is not the right word. Implosion implies a tragedy and a spectacle that fails to describe this situation. Blogging is the opposite of spectacle. It is flat (and yet meaningful). Blogging is not a digital clone of the 'letter to the editor'. Instead of complaining and arguing, the blogger assumes the perversely pleasurable position of media observer.

Commenting on mainstream culture, on its values and products, should be read as an open withdrawal of attention. The eyeballs that once patiently looked at all reports and ads have gone on strike. According to the utopian blog philosophy, mass media are doomed. Their role will be taken over by 'participatory media'. The terminal diagnosis has been made, and it states that closed top-down organizations no longer work, that knowledge cannot be 'managed', and that today's work is collaborative and networked. Despite continual warning signs, however, the system successfully continues to (dys) function. Is top-down really on its way out? Where are the origins of the Hegelian certainty that the old media paradigm will be overthrown? There is little factual evidence of its demise. It is this ongoing state of affairs that causes nihilism, and not revolutions, to occur.

Seen in the light of established structures of meaning, blogs bring on decay. Each new blog is supposed to add to the fall of the media system that once dominated the 20th century. We cannot downplay their supposed influence by saying that blogs are merely a 'secondary' public realm. What blogs, wikis and social-network sites question is the hegemony. Once hegemony is undermined, it cannot be repaired easily, and to a greater and greater degree power will have to rely on force. Mainstream media are losing their self-evidence. This process is not one marked by a sudden explosion. The erosion of mass media cannot be traced easily in figures indicating the stagnant sales and declining readership of newspapers. In many parts of the world television is still on the rise. What's declining is the Belief in the Message – this is the nihilist moment, and blogs facilitate the culture as no platform has ever done before. Sold by the positivists as 'citizen media' commentary, blogs assist users in their crossing from Truth to Nothingness.

Bloggers are nihilists because they are 'good for nothing'. Posting their messages on nirvana, they turn their futility into a productive force. They are the nothingists who celebrate the death of centralized structures of meaning and ignore accusations that they produce only noise. They are disillusionists whose conduct and opinions are regarded as worthless.¹⁷ The printed and broadcast message has lost its aura. News is consumed as a commodity with entertainment value. Instead of lamenting the ideological colour of the news, as previous generations have done, we blog as a sign of the regained power of the spirit. As a micro-heroic, Nietzschean act of the pyjama people, blogging grows out of a nihilism of strength, not out of the weakness of pessimism. Instead of presenting blog entries as self promotion, time and again, we should interpret them as decadent artefacts that remotely dismantle the mighty and seductive power of the broadcast media.

Geert Lovink is a media theorist, Internet critic and author of *Social Media Abyss* (2016), *Networks Without a Cause* (2012), *Zero Comments* (2007) and *Dark Fiber* (2002). Since 2004 he is researcher in the Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industries at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences where he is the founder of the Institute of Network Cultures. His centre recently organized conferences, publications and research networks such as *Video Vortex* (the politics and aesthetics of online video), *Unlike Us* (alternatives in social media), *Critical Point of View* (Wikipedia), *Society of the Query* (the culture of search), *MoneyLab* (Internet-based revenue models in the arts) and a project on the future of art criticism. From 2004–2013 he was also associate professor in Media Studies (new media), University of Amsterdam. Since 2009 he is professor at the European Graduate School (Saas-Fee / Malta) where he supervises PhD students.

Footnotes

1. Geert Lovink, *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, August 2007).
2. See Rebecca Blood's history of blogs, written in September 2000: http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html.
3. See <http://www.marketingterms.com/dictionary/blog/>.
4. Taken from *Wikipedia*'s blog definition (accessed December 21, 2005).
5. Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* (Oxford/New York, 2005), 25.
6. Pew/Internet, Bloggers: A portrait of the Internet's new storytellers, posted on July 19, 2006. URL: http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/186/report_display.asp.
7. Ed Phillips from San Francisco reports that 'unit testing is now *de rigueur* in the software world and just as it would be hard to imagine a major software effort without unit testing, it is now hard to imagine big media without the blogosphere' (email, 27 March 2006).
8. Geert Lovink, 'Interview with Cecile Landman', 17 January 2006. URL: http://www.networkcultures.org/weblog/archives/2006/01/support_iraqi_b.html.
9. Nick Gall: 'A lot of the media are thinking about blogs as a new form of publishing but it's really a new form of conversation and a new form of community.' In: David Kline and Dan Burstein, *blog!* (New York: CDS Books, 2005), 150.
10. Source: *Telepolis*, 27 December 2005. Wolf-Dieter Roth, 'Mein blog liest ja sowieso kein Schwein'. URL: <http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/21/21643/1.html>.
11. Glenn Reynolds, *An Army of Davids: How Markets and Technology Empower Ordinary People to Beat Big Media, Big Government, and Other Goliaths* (Nashville: Nelson Current, 2006).
12. The *Wikipedia* entry is no longer available, but the initial content has been copied and posted on various websites and can also be found on the web archive of the nettime-l list. Early 2007 there were some discussions and postings on nettime about 'shocklogs', see for instance 17 and 22 January, 2, 8 and 9 February, and 10 March 2007.
13. Taken from the Foucault Dictionary Project: <http://users.california.com/~rathbone/foucau10.htm>.
14. <http://www.cynical-c.com/>.
15. Interview with Jean Baudrillard by Deborah Solomon, 20 November 2005, *New York Times Magazine*.
16. Douglas Kennedy, quoted by Maya Jaggi in *The Guardian*, 5 November 2005. URL: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,1627808,00.html>.
17. Justin Cremers, *The Romanticism of Contemporary Theory* (Ashgate: Hants, 2003), 77.

Tags

Media Society, Public Domain

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