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### The web as exception: The rise of new media publishing cultures

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## 5. Blogging as web-native cultural form, 1998–2002

In this final case study, I continue to explore how notions of the web's displacement of mass and mainstream media are tied to articulations of "web-native culture." So far I have used the latter term as a shorthand for media practices, technologies and forms considered to have a close connection to the web's essence, whether called its nature or purpose, the internet's logic, the inherent capacities of the medium, or other similar notions. Here, however, I turn to the prominence of the actual term 'web-native' (as well as its variants) in early bloggers' definitions of the blog as distinct from prior media. My claim is that this genealogy of blogging's emergence as web-native reveals how it is shaped by historical and cultural context. Where other theories have de-emphasized the formal properties and generic conventions of blogging and described it as a flexible means of communication, I build on this genealogy to instead propose a theory of blogging as cultural form - or what Roger Silverstone called "a particular institutionalization of culture."<sup>1</sup> But in place of the 'web-native' designation given to it by practitioners, I highlight its continuity with previous (new media) publishing cultures: specifically, I argue that blogging may be defined formally as a logic of 'exposure,' one that recalls the cool reflexivity of *Mondo 2000*, *HotWired* and *Suck*.

### 5.1 Introduction: Why web-native?

Commentators have called the emergence of blogging as a popular web publishing format in or around 2002 significant for a number of reasons, each of which ties into a narrative about blogging's connection to the "nature" or original purpose of the web. For some, the rise of blogging represented a novel form of public conversation, in particular a means to share personal perspectives on key events. In this view, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, provided a watershed moment in which the value of blogging's public intimacy became apparent.<sup>2</sup> Nick Denton, the journalist who would later found the Manhattan gossip-blog *Gawker*, praised this quality in the weeks following the attacks:

Only through the human stories of escape or loss have I really felt the disaster [...] These stories, some laced with anecdotes of drunken binges and random flings, have a rude honesty that does not make its way through the mainstream media's good-taste filter.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Silverstone, 2003: xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Andrews, Robert. 2006. "9/11: Birth of the Blog." *Wired*. <http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/news/2006/09/71753>; Rosenberg, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Denton, Nick. 2001. "Second Sight: The Atrocity Through the Eyes of Weblogs." *The Guardian*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2001/sep/20/internetnews.onlinesupplement2>.

A few years later, during the U.S. presidential elections, Howard Dean's surprisingly competitive campaign to become the Democratic nominee was attributed to his ability to "listen" to the web and the people using it: blogs, along with web services like Meetup, were credited with giving people a voice in the political process and impacting the course (if not the outcome) of an election.<sup>4</sup> This ties into a third, more general account of blogging as "participatory journalism," importance centered on 'citizen journalism' and its antagonistic relationship with corporate media. Dan Gillmor, the technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury-News, situated the emergence of blogs within a history of "personal journalism," from the work of pamphleteer Thomas Paine to the Washington newsletters self-published by I.F. Stone - a history of "individuals who found ways to work outside the mainstream of the moment."<sup>5</sup>

Underlying these accounts of blogging's significance - as personal perspective, political participation and citizen journalism - is a broader argument about how blogs revealed, restored or otherwise invigorated the web's original purpose. This is an argument made, for example, by the journalist Scott Rosenberg, whose book *Say Everything* documents the experiences of prominent early bloggers and is one of the most comprehensive accounts of this history.<sup>6</sup> For Rosenberg, blogging showed that the web's promise of interactivity was not about "cool buttons," or bells and whistles, but something more fundamental, namely "each reader's ability to be a writer as well."<sup>7</sup> He writes that this "*was the whole point of the Web*, the defining trait of the new medium - like motion in movies, or sound in radio, or narrow columns of text in newspapers."<sup>8</sup> According to Rosenberg, part of the reason it did so is because it was built upon a "native" structural feature of the web, rather than an extension of a foreign format. He argues that the essential formal feature of blogging - its reverse chronological order of updates - is part of "the medium's DNA" and could be traced back to the first web page (<http://info.cern.ch>), which was a frequently updated list of web servers with the newest at the top.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Gillmor points to the fact that Tim Berners-Lee's original browser was both an html editor and reader - blogging was a way of restoring this read/

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<sup>4</sup> Wolf, Gary. 2004. "How the Internet Invented Howard Dean." *Wired*, January. <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.01/dean.html>; Trippi, Joe. 2005. *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet, and the Overthrow of Everything*. New York: HarperCollins.

<sup>5</sup> Gillmor, Dan. 2004. *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By The People, For The People*. Sebastopol, CA, O'Reilly: 3.

<sup>6</sup> Rosenberg, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*: 13.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*: 12-13, emphasis in original.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*. 9.

write capacity.<sup>10</sup> In making these claims about blogging's significance, however, Rosenberg and Gillmor not only ignore other, arguably more central formal features of blogging - most notably, the fact that blogs are built with a database rather than flat text files - they also misrepresent the 'original vision' of the web, as there was nothing in Berners-Lee's proposal for information management that suggested uses for personal expression or journalism.<sup>11</sup>

What is particularly relevant about the conflation of blogging with the web's original purpose, historical inaccuracy notwithstanding, is that this definition was not 'pasted on' after the fact, but actually coincided with the format's early development. Reflections on blogging during its maturation from a handful of self-identified blogs to the widespread phenomenon discussed by Rosenberg and Gillmor - a period that runs roughly from 1998-2002 - often implicitly and explicitly identified blogging as something native to the web.<sup>12</sup> Practitioners argued, for example, that the publication format was "of the web itself," that blogs were written by "web people" (as opposed to "dot.com" types), and that they represented the "inclusive nature" of the medium.<sup>13</sup> This sense of identification with the web, of its inner logic and inherent capacities being revealed and fulfilled, suggests a definition of blogging as a web-native cultural form - as a form of cultural expression that arises naturally from the medium. It also suggests the kind of distinction that Denton, Gillmor and others would later describe: if blogging is "of the web," then it is easy to understand it as something opposed to traditional media. But where it succeeds in describing blogs as exceptional, 'web-native' fails to give any rich description of the specificity of the format. The definition is tautological: blogs are exceptional because they reveal and fulfill the web's exceptional nature.

This vague understanding of blogs as web-native suggests some of the general difficulty involved in defining them beyond a web publishing format (which I've called them so far) - a problem that has been exacerbated as the format has become so widely used. As danah boyd argues,

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<sup>10</sup> Gillmor, 2004: 24.

<sup>11</sup> Berners-Lee, 1989. On the significance of blogging's back-end database and content management system, see especially Alan Liu's discussion of "social computing": Liu, Alan. 2013. "From Reading to Social Computing." *Literary Studies in the Digital Age*. <http://dlsanthology.commons.mla.org/from-reading-to-social-computing/>; see also my discussion of Slashdot's custom content-management system in chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup> A more specific periodization would be somewhat arbitrary, but what is important is that the first reflections on weblogs as a cultural phenomenon, such as Cameron Barrett's "Anatomy of a Weblog," appeared in 1998, while various milestones marking blogging's emergence as a popular web publishing format and source of media criticism can be located in or around 2002. These would include the use of blogs after the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks, as well as the role blogs played in Trent Lott's resignation as U.S. Senate Majority Leader in December 2002. See e.g. Shirky, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Blood, Rebecca. 2002. "Introduction." In *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*, ed. John Rodzvilla. Cambridge, MA, Perseus: xi; Hourihan, Meg. 2000. "I've Been Thinking a Lot." *Megnut*. <http://megnut.com/2000/04/ive-been-thinking-a-lot.html>; Powazek, Derek M. 2000[2002]. "What the Hell Is a Weblog and Why Won't They Leave Me Alone?" In John Rodzvilla, ed. *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA, Perseus: 3-6.

the first bloggers may have celebrated blogging as a medium free of editorial control, but today there is no shortage of professional and corporate blogs that appear to contradict this idea.<sup>14</sup> More generally, boyd argues against definitions of blogs as genre (i.e. as diaries or journalism), instead drawing on Marshall McLuhan to conceptualize them as a medium: blogs, she argues, are as flexible as paper in terms of the content they can carry, and discussions of their effects should tend towards what McLuhan called the “the change of scale or pace or pattern that [a medium] introduces to human affairs.”<sup>15</sup> In this view, for example, blogs are important for how they blur orality and textuality - something reflected in commonplace descriptions of blogging in terms of “voice” and “conversation.”<sup>16</sup> boyd’s definition, it should be noted, does not oppose that of blogging as web-native - in fact, she uses the term “web-native genre” elsewhere to describe blogging, social network sites and other social media that allow for the creation of what she calls “networked publics.”<sup>17</sup> Although I agree with boyd’s primary motive for defining blogging as a medium - that analytical models based on analogies with existing genres such as diaries are insufficient - I would argue that in her attempt to avoid such constraints boyd goes too far in removing blogging from its history, conventions and the meanings that have been attached to it over the years. As boyd herself points out, prototypical blogs tend to shape our expectations of blogging more generally. I would add that early definitions of blogs as web-native and opposed to mainstream media may have more staying power than boyd assumes. For example, the most influential blog today according to the search engine Technorati is The Huffington Post, a news website that is certainly a professional operation but also happily retains an “outsider” status derived in part from a perception of it as ‘webby’ media (a perception it seeks out, for example, by calling itself “The Internet’s Newspaper”).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> boyd, danah. 2006. “A Blogger’s Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium.” *Reconstruction* 6 (4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>.

<sup>15</sup> boyd, 2006; McLuhan, Marshall. [1964]2001. *Understanding Media*. London, Routledge: 8.

<sup>16</sup> boyd, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> boyd, danah. 2008. “Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics”. Berkeley, CA, University of California: 94. <http://www.danah.org/papers/TakenOutOfContext.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://technorati.com/blogs/top100/> (accessed 12-02-13).

Admittedly, the example of The Huffington Post (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/>) muddles the situation a little more, since the site paradoxically describes itself as the “Internet’s newspaper” while featuring blogs - often written by celebrities and professional columnists - as one of its main types of content. The takeaway, however, should be that as a blog, or blog-like media, The Huffington Post opposes itself to traditional media such as newspapers and identifies with the new medium (the internet) in the same move. Internet- or web-native, here, means something distinct from previous media.

An approach that re-introduces history and generic conventions - that is, that avoids the pitfalls of defining blogging as “web-native” or a flexible medium - would be to understand blogging as what Raymond Williams calls a “cultural form.”<sup>19</sup> In his canonical analysis of television, Williams distinguishes between “received” (or what today might be called “remediated”) cultural forms such as televised drama and sport on the one hand, and new or mixed forms on the other.<sup>20</sup> Of these new forms, the most significant is the meta-category that Williams calls “flow.” A description of the organizational logic of television rather than one of its genres, flow refers to the juxtaposition and interstitial sequencing of content through interruptions like advertising and trailers for other programs (as well as such juxtapositions within individual programs). For Williams, flow marks television’s novelty, but his point was that this was not inherent to the technology, but rather developed according to specific intentions - in this case, a desire to “capture” viewers for an evening of programming.<sup>21</sup> As cultural form, television flow was thus not “native” to the technology, then, but “a particular institutionalisation of culture.”<sup>22</sup>

In this chapter, I revisit the articulation of blogging as web-native in order to arrive at an understanding of blogging as cultural form. Asking why blogging emerged as ‘web-native’ in the period 1998 to 2002, I turn to influential definitions and reflections of practitioners from the period and show how these described the exceptional qualities of blogging as renewals of the web’s promise, understood as transparency, community and meaningful communication (as opposed to the ‘noise’ of mainstream media). But included in these reflections are a number of disavowals of blogging’s promise - as much as practitioners articulated blogging as an exception to commercial and mainstream practices on the web and in other media, they also sought to expose blogging as unexceptional: transparency is revealed as performance, community as celebrity, and meaningful communication, or signal, as more noise. Where this might be interpreted as a cycle of hype and debunking that attends any new medium, I argue that this pattern points to a basic logic of exposure underlying the formal features and generic expectations of blogging - from revealing the self to uncovering the best links on the web, from scrutinizing media narratives to deconstructing blogging itself, to blog is to expose. As a formal logic that characterizes blogging without specifying its content, exposure is akin to Williams’s concept of flow, and I argue that its significance is similarly found in how the logic of exposure captures bloggers and their audiences. In pointing to blogging-

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<sup>19</sup> Williams, [1974]2003.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*: 39; c.f. Bolter and Grusin, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, [1974]2003: 91.

<sup>22</sup> Silverstone, 2003.

as-exposure, this genealogy does not situate its formal properties and conventions in relation to an inner logic of the web, but rather within a history of prior publishing forms and practices.

## 5.2 Blogging as cultural form

How to conceptualize blogging as cultural form? Here I propose to treat blogging genealogically, focusing on how early practitioners and commentators conceptualized and attached meaning to blogging's qualities, features, conventions and (imagined) functions as the form was popularized from 1998 to 2002. As Ignacio Siles has shown, the weblog had been articulated as a technology and practice from 1997 to 1999, when a small community formed around the term and the shared format of posting interesting links with short notes or commentary.<sup>23</sup> This process of articulation, Siles argues, accounts for how blog technology was "stabilized" in blogging software, and thus made it possible for blogging to become a widespread practice. According to blogger and blogging historian Rebecca Blood, there were only 23 known weblogs in early 1999, but this number reached hundreds after easy-to-use blogging tools such as Pyra's "Blogger" were introduced later that year, and many thousands by 2001.<sup>24</sup> The technology's stabilization, however, appeared to destabilize what up until then had been a relatively cohesive, coherent understanding of blogging's form and function as a frequently updated "log" of interesting links with commentary. The rapid growth in terms of the number of blogs, the variety of genres (from diary-like blogs to those that focused on specific topics) and the level of media attention blogging received, all contributed to the removal of the kind of overview that had briefly characterized the weblogging community.<sup>25</sup> The link-plus-commentary weblog had been conceptualized by one of its inventors as a way of bringing order to the web, but soon achieved quite the opposite effect.<sup>26</sup>

The popularization and destabilization of blogging did not end attempts to define the publishing form, but rather multiplied them, with perspectives ranging from the original sense of blogging as a 'filter' to those that considered it personal voice, organic community, a form of

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<sup>23</sup> Siles, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*; Blood. [2000]2002; Denton, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Brigitte Eaton attempted to keep track of every blog - defined simply by dated entries - from early 1999. By February 2000, the Eatonweb Portal had grown from under 50 to over 500 blogs, while registered users for tools like Blogger and Dave Winer's "Manila" publishing tool numbered in the thousands. See Kahney, Leander. 2000. "The Web the Way It Was." *Wired*. February 23. <http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2000/02/34006?currentPage=all>.

<sup>26</sup> References to the weblog as the organization and cataloguing of the web are found, for example, in Dibbell, Julian. [2000]2002. "Portrait of the Blogger as a Young Man." In John Rodzvilla, ed. *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA, Perseus: 69-77.

“disintermediation” or a meaningful engagement with news and entertainment media.<sup>27</sup> To perform a complete analysis of these definitions, their circulation and influence during this period, one might consider collecting such self-reflections from the archives of blogs known to be active at the time, and snowballing outward to include definitions found on other (perhaps previously unrecognized) blogs and from accounts in other media, expanding that search to include the blogs and external accounts that no longer exist but to lesser and greater degrees remain accessible through the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, performing in-link analysis to measure influence and so on.<sup>28</sup> Although such ‘big data’ approaches to the history of blogging have begun to take shape, here I have chosen to limit such collection to what might be called an ‘expert list’ of available resources.<sup>29</sup> Published in 2002, the blogging anthology *We’ve Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*, is a collection of “early reflections on the weblog phenomenon,” or “real-time responses to the formation and expansion of the community as participants and observers attempted to make sense of the phenomenon that was growing around them.”<sup>30</sup>

*We’ve Got Blog* provides a rich description of blogging’s early development and popularization in various ways. For example, a cursory reading provides insight into the early blogging subject: the large majority of the “pioneers” - including Jason Kottke, Meg Hourihan, Derek Powazek, Dave Winer, J.D. Lasica, Brad Graham and others - are web and media professionals using blogs as an outlet for their work-like activities (from web design to journalism) outside of the norms and institutional contexts of their occupation. Others, like Jorn Barger, aspire to professional quality while consciously avoiding perceived constraints.<sup>31</sup> Early bloggers, in other words, may be seen to extend the lineage of “outsiders-inside” and “insiders-outside” that I have emphasized in my descriptions of new media and web publishing in this dissertation. More importantly for the purposes here, the volume is most concerned with how these early bloggers conceptualized their practice, often grounding the distinctions they make with prior media in terms like “web native.” What emerges from their considerations is a picture that is quite different from

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<sup>27</sup> Examples of each of these can be found in the collection *We’ve Got Blog*, as discussed in the rest of this chapter, as well as other accounts by well-known bloggers during the period. See Rodzvilla, ed., 2002, especially the entries by Rebecca Blood and Jon Katz. For “disintermediation,” see Winer, Dave. 1999. “Dave the Disintermediator.” *Davenet*. July 24. <http://scripting.com/davenet/1999/07/24/daveTheDisintermediator.html>.

<sup>28</sup> On the methods available for researching the “archived blogosphere,” see Weltevrede, Esther, and Anne Helmond. 2012. “Where Do Bloggers Blog? Platform Transitions Within the Historical Dutch Blogosphere.” *First Monday* 17 (2) (February 2). <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/3775/3142>.

<sup>29</sup> Weltevrede and Helmond, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Blood, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> Dibbell, [2000]2002.

notions of blogging as (simply) a publishing format or danah boyd's later definition of blogs as a flexible medium that resists generic traits.<sup>32</sup> Instead, *We've Got Blog* sooner suggests similarities with the establishment of a literary or artistic movement. The volume is not a collection of posts so much as insightful definitions, manifestos, commentaries, myths, histories and so on - that is, a collection of posts and commentaries that seem to be on the outside looking in.

If *We've Got Blog* resembles the formulation of a common 'web-native' aesthetic or form, however, it should be noted that it is an especially self-conscious one: a clear tendency among the posts presented is how these reflections oscillate between accounts of blogging's virtues and profound significance - its exceptional qualities - and, through qualifications, dismissals and reversals, the exposure of blogging as thoroughly unexceptional. Alongside enthusiastic accounts of blogging's potential for "electronic community" is the satire of "Credo of the Web Log Writer," which takes aim at the fame-seeking behaviors of both "A-list" bloggers and their "wannabe" fans.<sup>33</sup> Alongside the manifestos are rants, and alongside earnest statements about enlightenment and self-fulfillment are those that characterize blogging as a source of mediocrity and pettiness. This oscillation might be attributed to the fact that blogging - as a new and little understood phenomenon - invited relatively extreme reactions during this period, or to an editorial decision to present 'both sides.' However, I would like to argue that it is representative of a more fundamental reflexive impulse in blogging. In the following subsections, I discuss some of the tensions and paradoxes that pervade these early reflections on blogging, noting how accounts of blogging's exceptional qualities are continually 'revealed' to be otherwise. After discussing the inherent tensions between blogging as transparency and performance, as community and celebrity, and as signal and noise, in section 5.2.4 I zoom out from this genealogy to propose a more general theory of blogging as a logic of exposure.

### 5.2.1 Transparency and performance

"Read any weblog for a few weeks and it is impossible not to feel that you know its writer."<sup>34</sup> Whether as public diary or in the original link-plus-commentary format, the blog is conceptualized in first instance as the transparency of author. Throughout the collection, there are references to how blogs reveal their authors. Writing in May 1999, Cameron Barrett discusses his plan to link less and focus more on commentary and the occasional essay, because of the realization that "CamWorld is

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<sup>32</sup> boyd, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Geekman, [2001]2002. "Credo of the Weblog Writer." In John Rodzvilla, ed. *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA, Perseus: 119-121.

<sup>34</sup> Blood, 2002: xi.

about me. It's about who I am, what I know, and what I think. And it's about my place in the New Media society. CamWorld is a peek into the subconsciousness that makes me tick.”<sup>35</sup> Jason Kottke notes that laying one’s thoughts bare is not simply a side-effect of blogging, but of an impulse he feels to share his personal life on the web rather than in a diary: “Somehow [a diary] seems strange to me. For a lot of the Web publishing crowd, the Web is the place for you to express your thoughts and feelings and such. To put those things elsewhere seems absurd. Or is it just me?”<sup>36</sup> A poetic way of describing this impulse comes from Joe Clark, whose definition has an uncanny resemblance to McLuhan’s “extensions of man” media theory:

A blog is a form of exteriorized psychology. It’s a part of you, or of your psyche; while a titanium hip joint or a pacemaker might bring technology *inside* the corporeal you, a weblog uses technology to bring the psychological you *outside* of it. Your weblog acts as a new limb, a new mouth, and a new hemisphere of the brain. Once those new organs come into being, you’re no more likely to remove or amputate them than the original organic equipment they augment.<sup>37</sup>

Clark’s definition is actually in reference to the link-plus-commentary weblog (rather than its diary-like “variant,” as he calls it).<sup>38</sup> This ‘original’ type of weblog is often described in terms of a soapbox: Jesse James Garrett calls blogs the “pirate radio stations of the Web, personal platforms through which individuals broadcast their perspectives on current events, the media, our culture, and a basically anything else that strikes their fancy.”<sup>39</sup> At the same time, however, the link-plus-commentary weblog lends itself to the same kind of transparency that marks the diary blogs. As Rebecca Blood argues in the introduction to *We’ve Got Blog*:

Every weblog has a point of view, and even those that contain no personal information reveal, over time, detailed maps of their creators’ minds. It is captivating to see the biases, interests, and judgments of an individual reveal themselves so clearly.<sup>40</sup>

For both types of blog, transparency and authenticity contribute to blogging’s distinction from older media and the mainstream web. Derek Powazek, a journalist and web producer who began blogging

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<sup>35</sup> Barrett, Cameron. [1999]2002. “More About Weblogs.” In John Rodzvilla, ed. *We’ve Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA, Perseus: 29.

<sup>36</sup> Kottke, Jason. 2000. “A Lot of Stuff Happens.” *Kottke.org*, March 24. <http://kottke.org/00/03/a-lot-of-stuff-happens>.

<sup>37</sup> Clark, Joe. 2002. “Deconstructing ‘You’ve Got Blog’.” In John Rodzvilla, ed. *We’ve Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA, Perseus: 68.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*: 59.

<sup>39</sup> Rosenberg, 2009: 46-73. Jesse James Garrett’s definition is quoted from Katz, Jon. [2001]2002. “Here Come the Weblogs.” In John Rodzvilla, ed. *We’ve Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA, Perseus: 21.

<sup>40</sup> Blood, 2002: xii.

in 1999, writes that while initially wary of blogging's hype, he warmed to the practice as he saw it extended his understanding of the web's basic promise: "Here was the mother lode of personal expression - the one place in our lives that we (as people lucky enough to have access) can say whatever we want about anything we want. This was the anti-television. Digital democracy."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Blood argues that along with the reverse-chronological, link-plus-commentary format and the interconnections between blogs, the form's "immediacy" is derived from that fact that blogs are "native to the Web."<sup>42</sup>

Where tying blogging's transparency to the web's inherent logic implies an inevitability, other explanations suggest locating this quality historically and culturally. In a *New Yorker* article called "You've Got Blog," Rebecca Mead tells the story of how bloggers Meg Hourihan (who co-founded Pyra Labs and helped create Blogger, the blog-publishing tool, together with Evan Williams) and Jason Kottke calls blogging "the CB radio of the Dave Eggers generation."<sup>43</sup> Mead's analogy suggests multiple layers - the San Francisco-based author is well known for the confessional style of writing that marked his first two novels but also for his outspoken opposition to mainstream publication practices (especially regarding publicity) and a self-conscious presentation of his work.<sup>44</sup> Most of all, the analogy is more telling than "web-native" because it highlights a tension in blogging between transparency and performance. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Eggers's first novel (and the reference in Mead's analogy), is a reflexive memoir that continually plays with the blurred categories of authenticity and artifice, a theme it explores in reflexive devices like an "Incomplete Guide to Symbols and Metaphors" and throughout the plot, for example recounting Eggers's attempt to be cast for MTV's *The Real World*.

As in Eggers's novel, blogging's capacity to reveal the self is itself continually revealed to be caught up in the requirements of public exhibition and performance. Joe Clark, in a widely circulated post about Mead's article (called "Deconstructing 'You've Got Blog'"), argues that "counterblogging" - what Mead called the conversational, or CB radio, quality of blogging - "pretends to function as a conversation, but, unlike email or instant messaging or any kind of threaded discussion forum, the effect is one of talking at people rather than *with* them."<sup>45</sup> The

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<sup>41</sup> Powazek, [2000]2002: 3.

<sup>42</sup> Blood, 2002: xi.

<sup>43</sup> Mead, Rebecca. [2000]2002. "You've Got Blog." In John Rodzvilla, ed. *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA, Perseus: 50.

<sup>44</sup> Brouillette, Sarah. 2003. "Paratextuality and Economic Disavowal in Dave Eggers' You Shall Know Our Velocity." *Reconstruction* 3 (2). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/032/brouillette.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> Clark, 2002: 63.

contradictions between blogging the self and blogging as performance are clear in Cameron Barrett's rejection of the criticism that there is nothing new about weblogs:

Others have dismissed it as nothing more than people rediscovering the power of a quality home page. I disagree. Home pages are places where you put pictures of your family and your cats. It's a place to distribute information to a close circle of family and friends. Weblogs, however, are designed for an audience. They have a voice. They have a personality. Simply put, they are an interactive extension of who you are.<sup>46</sup>

Here, "voice" and "personality" are located in public exhibition rather than in the domestic space of the homepage: blogs do not invite readers 'in' but are "interactive."

The most incisive description of transparency-as-performance comes, perhaps surprisingly, from Jorn Barger, whose weblog *Robot Wisdom* displayed a somewhat notorious archivist's passion for meticulous logs and concise descriptions.<sup>47</sup> Where one might expect Barger, whose main interests are hypertext theory and the work of James Joyce, to cite the likes of Ted Nelson and Tim Berners-Lee in his description of weblogs, he describes instead how he was "inspired by Ana Voog's Anacam, by the whole aesthetic of being on the Net twenty-four hours a day, and being as transparent as possible."<sup>48</sup> By comparing blogging to Voog's infamous ongoing webcam performance - where cameras set up in her home allowed viewers to voyeuristically follow her activities, however mundane or sexually explicit - and equating this kind of mediation with transparency, Barger's description suggests a richer foundation for the formal qualities of blogging than a description as publication format or medium would allow.

### 5.2.2 Community and celebrity

In addition to transparency, "community" appears in *We've Got Blog* as one of the form's central functions and promises. In "Here Come the Weblogs" (originally published as a Slashdot column), John Katz sees in blogs the "biological evolution of electronic communities."<sup>49</sup> Perhaps with Slashdot's own concerns with community management in mind, he sees the move to "small and exclusive" - where the blogger focuses on a limited audience and controls the flow of communication - as an improvement: "Because the site creator limits and approves membership, they don't need to be defended as intensely as bigger sites, nor do they attract - or permit - posters

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<sup>46</sup> Barrett 1999: 29-30.

<sup>47</sup> Dibbell, [2000]2002.

<sup>48</sup> quoted in Dibbell, [2000]2002: 75.

<sup>49</sup> Katz, [2001]2002: 20.

who abuse others. One obvious payoff is that the flow of ideas is strong, uninterrupted, and impressive.”<sup>50</sup> Brad Graham and Jorn Barger similarly see in blogging an answer to problems they encountered on discussion forums. With blogging, Graham “rediscovered” a “sense of community” that he’d lost while spending time on Usenet.<sup>51</sup> Barger turned to blogging in part because of the distraction of flame wars.<sup>52</sup>

The emergence of blogging-as-community, then, was in some sense a renewal (or revision) of an earlier internet promise. But as with transparency, community is continually exposed as something else. Derek Powazek recalls his initial reservations toward blogging, when he sensed that “the weblog community circled its wagons almost immediately.”<sup>53</sup> This reservation would show up again when Powazek encountered what he called the “dark side” of blogging. After being labeled a “jock” by a fellow blogger (“which would be hysterical to anyone who knew me in high school”) and subsequently mocked by another, Powazek wrote:

It saddens me because, over the last year, weblogging really matured as a genre. And as a community. We should strive to stay true to the inclusive nature of the web. We should be welcoming and encouraging to new voices and ideas, because, in the end, that’s how the Web evolves [...] And innovation comes from people who do things a little differently. Anyone who forgets that and clings to narrow-minded ideologies will take their rightful place in a forgotten history.<sup>54</sup>

For others, exclusivity is not a matter of deviation, but the essence of the blogging community. In his deconstruction of “You’ve Got Blog,” Joe Clark instituted what would be a long-standing practice of calling the top bloggers the “A-list.”<sup>55</sup> Clark’s criticism - that bloggers like Jason Kottke and Meg Hourihan are not appreciably better at digging up links or commenting on them than many others who do not get profiled in *The New Yorker* and other mainstream media - recalls Daniel Boorstin’s critical definition of celebrity as “a person who is known for his well-knownness.”<sup>56</sup> In Mead’s article, the potential for community among bloggers was encapsulated by a meme that began when Kottke and Hourihan posted near-identical, detailed posts about a girl on a bike and the childhood memories she triggered - within days, the couple’s coded display of affection was copied

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid*: 19-20.

<sup>51</sup> Graham, Brad L. [1999]2002. “Why I Weblog: A Ruminaton on Where the Hell I’m Going with This Website.” In John Rodzvilla, ed. *We’ve Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA, Perseus: 39.

<sup>52</sup> Dibbell, [2000]2002.

<sup>53</sup> Powazek, [2000]2002: 4.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*: 5-6.

<sup>55</sup> Clark, 2002: 59.

<sup>56</sup> Boorstin, Daniel. [1962]2012. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York, Knopf Doubleday: 57.

and pasted by other bloggers in what might be called an early, coded form of “public displays of connection.”<sup>57</sup> For Clark, however, the event amounted to a “publicity stunt,” one that unintentionally “highlight[ed] the incestuousness and insularity of the crème-de-la-blogging-crème.”<sup>58</sup>

Clark’s demystification of blogging-as-community is itself a recurring theme in *We’ve Got Blog*. The A-list metaphor is deployed regularly, as is an analogy to a high-school-like obsession with popularity. The entry “Credo of the Web Log Writer” is especially notable for how it satirizes the A-list’s arbitrary acts of distinction and the plight of the unknown blogger (who, of course, wants only to join the A-list).<sup>59</sup> Here is the first of four verses:

I want to be a Web Log Writer.

I will create an ugly website using warez software and ad-infested free web hosts.

I will write something every other day about my boring and uninteresting life.

I will write in “Hackerese” and forego the use of initial caps, for caps are for the weak and non-l337.

I will become an avid reader, loyal fan and devout worshipper of the most popular ‘A-List’ Web Log Writers.

I will learn how to do what they do, only not as well.

I will purchase gifts for them via PayPal and their Amazon Wish Lists.

I will frequent their CafePress stores.

I will submit my site for review by any Internet critic with a website.

I will not become discouraged when they fail to reply to my emails or notice my website or me.

I will never give up in my quest.<sup>60</sup>

Such satires, of course, could themselves be seen as shameless attempts to generate publicity - this was part of the joke. In much the same way the makers of Suck would strategically target highly-visible figures in the emerging web culture (and then self-deprecatingly highlight this strategy), this was an ironic participation in the logic of celebrity, but nonetheless one that served to reveal the promise of egalitarian community in blogging as lacking.

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<sup>57</sup> Donath, Judith, and danah boyd. 2004. “Public Displays of Connection.” *BT Technology Journal* 22 (4): 71–82.

<sup>58</sup> Clark 61-62.

<sup>59</sup> Geekman, [2001]2002.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*: 119.

### 5.2.3 Signal and Noise

Alongside transparency and community, blogging's promise is identified as its capacity to filter information and provide an alternative or complement to mainstream media. Often using the flexible terms "information," "data" and "signal" (over possible alternatives like news, entertainment, publicity, product, and so on), descriptions of this promise tend to ground their claims in the computational metaphor, a move that de-contextualizes the problems blogs aim to solve. For example, if the problems of hype or media saturation are envisioned as a matter of distributing information differently - rather than problems embedded, say, in commercial aims and cultural practices - then it makes sense to understand the weblog as a solution. But to level this criticism is in some sense to simply repeat what early bloggers themselves acknowledged: both relatively enthusiastic reflections and more cynical responses in *We've Got Blog* ultimately display an ambivalence regarding new media solutions to failures of mainstream media - a trait that evokes similar attitudes seen in *Mondo 2000*, *HotWired*, *Suck* and *Slashdot* (see chapters 2-4).

As "the original web filter," the link-plus-commentary weblog would 'pre-surf' the web, bringing light to its darker continents.<sup>61</sup> For Julian Dibbell, the weblog is a modern-day version of the *Wunderkammer*, or the "random collection of strange, compelling objects" that, during the Renaissance, "reflect[ed] European civilization's dazed and wondering attempts to assimilate the glut of physical data that science and exploration were then unleashing."<sup>62</sup> The weblog-as-*Wunderkammer* is thus above all a romantic symbol among a larger range of efforts - including indexes and search engines - aimed at "taming the data storm."<sup>63</sup>

Blogging's function in relation to mainstream media was similarly described in terms of a filter, and as a temporary respite from the 'noise' of mass and mainstream media. One can see the argument that weblogs would supplant the mass media's gatekeepers as early as June, 1999:

An old maxim states that editors separate the wheat from the chaff and then publish the chaff. As the weblog movement matures, our sites will wrest editorial authority from the few editors of today and divide it among the many.<sup>64</sup>

Complementing Brad Graham's vision of a distributed effort to manage the flows of media is one that positions blogging as the practice of exposing the flaws in mainstream reporting. Within filter blogs, Rebecca Blood writes, "links are nearly always accompanied by the editor's commentary. An

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<sup>61</sup> Dibbell, [2000]2002: 69.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid*: 73. The *Wunderkammer* definition continues to resonate, for example, with the well known blog *Boing Boing*, which is subtitled "A Directory of Wonderful Things." See <http://boingboing.net>.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*: 73.

<sup>64</sup> Graham, [1999]2002: 40.

editor with some expertise in a field might demonstrate the accuracy or inaccuracy of a highlighted article or certain facts therein; provide additional facts he feels are pertinent to the issue at hand; or simply add an opinion or differing viewpoint from the one in the piece he has linked.”<sup>65</sup> In this way, blogs would offer a space of reflection and “critical evaluation” within the “deluge of data” that constitutes the contemporary media environment.<sup>66</sup>

Like transparency and community, blogging’s function as a media filter is tied to a renewal of the web’s promise. J.D. Lasica writes that corporate media appeared to have disbanded groups of “starry-eyed Net denizens,” however:

a funny thing happened on the way to the Web’s irrelevance: the blogging phenomenon, a grassroots movement that may sow the seeds for new forms of journalism, public discourse, interactivity and online community.<sup>67</sup>

But also like the promises of transparency and community, visions of blogging transforming media are continually undermined in *We’ve Got Blog*. The “may” in Lasica’s rupture-talk is telling, because it reflects a cautiousness and ambivalence that marks other entries. Blood, for instance, tempers her argument that blogs will provide an “antidote” to mainstream media by noting that “[o]ur strength - that each of us speaks in an individual voice of an individual vision - is, in the high stakes world of carefully orchestrated messages designed to distract and manipulate, a liability. We are, very simply, outnumbered.”<sup>68</sup> Still others satirize blogging, preaching that “painfully mediocre blogging is an inevitable part of existence.”<sup>69</sup> Such satire feeds into further criticism that, in the end, blogging achieves an opposite effect than the one intended - that blogging does not locate signal but generates more noise. Neale Talbot’s rant against hype in and around blogging begins, “First, let’s get one thing straight. Weblogging (or ‘blogging’) is not a revolution.”<sup>70</sup> Talbot explains that blogging adds very little to publishing formats that were already available, and that many of the most popular weblogs are merely side-projects for their owners. But the form, he writes, has

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<sup>65</sup> Blood, [2000]2002: 8-9.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*: 16.

<sup>67</sup> Lasica, J.D. [2001]2002. “Blogging as a Form of Journalism: Weblogs Offer a Vital, Creative Outlet for Alternative Voices.” In John Rodzvilla, ed. *We’ve Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA, Perseus: 163.

<sup>68</sup> Blood, [2000]2002: 15.

<sup>69</sup> Fishrush. 2002. “The Four Noble Truths of Blogging.” In John Rodzvilla, ed. *We’ve Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA, Perseus: 135.

<sup>70</sup> Talbot, Neale. [2001]2002. “Weblogs (Good God Y’all) What Are They Good For (Absolutely Nothing - Say It Again).” In John Rodzvilla, ed. *We’ve Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA, Perseus: 130.

become about competition (e.g. linking the fastest, receiving the most links) and “self-importance.” All of this is then “only inflated in a terrible manner by the media, who have fallen into the trap of believing the future may just be bloggerized.”<sup>71</sup> He goes on:

The media, in its wonder of the instantaneous way petty thoughts can now reach the Web, has forgotten that personal publishing on the Web has always been possible; it’s now just a lot easier than before.

With their attention a vicious cycle of hype has started. Weblogs, once the landfill of the brains of those with better things to do, have become the voice of a new generation. And with that, everything the detractors have been bitching about is coming true: the writing, design and overall quality of weblogs has dropped since a year ago.<sup>72</sup>

Here, in a circular logic, Talbot displays the kind of reflection and savvy media criticism that supposedly marks blogging’s potential for disruption, only to reveal that potential as another media fiction.

#### 5.2.4 Blogging and the logic of exposure

So far in this section, I have discussed how blogging is considered in *We’ve Got Blog* both in terms of transparency and performance, community and celebrity, signal and noise. I should stress that my aim is not simply to reveal blogging as something other than advertised, but rather to argue that this act of revealing is the reflexive logic that organizes blogging itself. I would argue that to blog is to *expose*, in the various rich (but bounded) senses that the term affords. Blogging makes the self visible and uncovers hidden gems on the web. Bloggers seek to expose biases in the news and reveal politicians’ flaws; they aim to fact-check reporters and parody clueless columnists. They speculate about what is beneath George Bush’s jacket, and how a letter exposing him as AWOL was faked. They make an art of media criticism, taking pleasure in revealing the essences, themes, tropes, and logical flaws of their favorite shows. Bloggers deconstruct themselves just as they deconstruct media. Blogs famously uncover worlds we’d otherwise not see: the sex worker’s blog, the blogger living under occupation, the blogger evading state censorship. In the minds of science fiction writers and the prototypes of “design fiction” engineers, the “blogjects” and “spimes” formerly known as products expose their entire production histories, and this hidden world of objects provides glimpses into the complex realities of globalization and climate change.<sup>73</sup> In its

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<sup>71</sup> *ibid*: 132.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid*: 132.

<sup>73</sup> Sterling, Bruce. 2005. *Shaping Things*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Bleecker, Julian. 2006. “Why Things Matter: A Manifesto for Networked Objects—Cohabiting with Pigeons, Arphids and Aibos in the Internet of Things.” <http://www.scribd.com/doc/14748019/Why-Things-Matter/>.

utopian register, blogging-as-exposure is extreme Enlightenment: bringing light to the dark corners of the mind and the outside world. But the same logic of exposure is also how this utopia is continually compromised. Blogs overexpose, their digital traces hanging like a shadow over the teen's future; public exhibition devolves into exhibitionism; quality suffers in the pursuit of more hits, more inlinks and more exposure. And most of all, blogging exposes blogging itself as unremarkable - bloggers expose the promises of transparency, community and meaningful information as the inevitabilities of performance, celebrity and more noise.

As these examples suggest, I would also argue that this overarching logic of exposure - while perhaps most visible in early attempts to define the form - remains key to understanding blogging and the general set of conventions and expectations attached to it, even (or perhaps especially) in the professional and mainstream blogs that are often portrayed as a departure from blogging's underground roots. This persistence is clear, for example, in Emily Gould's excellent 2008 essay "Exposed." In a cover story for the *New York Times Magazine*, Gould recounts her history of "over-sharing" on her personal blog (called "Emily Magazine"), a subsequent job as a highly-visible editor at the Manhattan gossip-blog Gawker, and the various detrimental effects all of this had on her personal life: relationship problems, attacks on her character from hundreds of anonymous readers, panic attacks and an upended career.<sup>74</sup> It would not be a stretch to say that the memoir touched a collective nerve: within 24 hours, the online version generated more than 700 comments, many of them angry, and the *Times* (likely anticipating this) invited Gould respond to some of the issues raised a few days later.<sup>75</sup> The feature is above all a cautionary tale for those with a predilection for over-sharing, an exposé on the dangers of blog-enabled exposure (thus the redundancy in the teaser text "Blog-Post Confidential"). Gould writes, for example, that the panic attacks she developed while subjected to constant scrutiny from commenters as a Gawker editor "were about a desire to be invisible, but if I showed any sign that I was having one, everyone would pay attention to me."<sup>76</sup> But the magazine feature, along with the unprecedented response it received, also shows how a logic of exposure in blogging is hardly reserved for those who write for Gawker or blog about their sex lives, instead operating at a more fundamental level. Consider, for example, the hundreds of negative comments that seek to summarize and dismiss the piece in a single move, reproducing the sarcastic, pithy tone Gould herself employed at Gawker. The first comment posted

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<sup>74</sup> Gould, Emily. 2008a. "Exposed." *The New York Times*, May 25. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/25/magazine/25internet-t.html>.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid*; Gould, Emily. 2008b. "Emily Gould Responds to Readers." *The New York Times*, May 27. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/27/magazine/27gould.html?ref=magazine>.

<sup>76</sup> Gould, 2008a.

establishes this basic format: “At first, I thought I was reading the sophomore page of the student newspaper at Harding High in Yokelville, Ohio. Then I realized that it was the New York Times. Just awful.”<sup>77</sup> In addition to revealing Gould’s memoir to be drivel, these comments express anger and disgust with both Gould and the Times editors who had the nerve to expose the public to the story. In their mass expression of indignation, though, the comments recall Gould’s source of pleasure in working at Gawker: “At my old job, it would have taken me years to advance to a place where I would no longer have to humor the whims of important people who I thought were idiots or relics or phonies. But at Gawker, it was my responsibility to expose the foibles of the undeserving elite.”<sup>78</sup>

At this point, one might ask - along with the commenters on Gould’s piece and the bloggers who expose blogging as unremarkable - why Gould’s story should be considered significant beyond its merits as autobiography, or why a theory of blogging-as-exposure might be useful or necessary. The reason, I would argue, is found in similarities with Raymond Williams’s discussion of flow as a televisual “cultural form.” Williams, as mentioned above, saw flow as the overarching (or in today’s terminology, “meta-”) formal logic of interstitial sequencing in television, marked by the seamless cuts between programs, advertising, trailers, and so on, as well as by similar kinds of juxtapositions within programs (his prime example of this being how news programs cut from one story to another, sometimes suggesting a conceptual continuity among diverse topics). Williams’s assessment of flow’s significance is simultaneously his critique of McLuhan-style media formalism - flow is an “intrinsic visual experience,” but should not be considered the realization of television’s inherent nature.<sup>79</sup> Rather, he argues, it is something that developed intentionally, even if such intention was diverse and dispersed: it developed within and alongside production practices and commercial aims geared towards “capturing” viewers.<sup>80</sup>

If flow is the basic formal logic that captivates and captures television viewers, exposure is its analog in blogging. Exposure in blogging is a formal feature, arriving built-in: blogging software, for example, automatically pings (notifies) search engines when new content is added, while detailed traffic statistics and other analytics immediately measure impact. Exposure is the source of pleasure and captivation for bloggers and their readers. Gould explains this first from her perspective, as the will to blog:

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<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Williams, [1974]2003: 75.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*: 91.

The will to blog is a complicated thing, somewhere between inspiration and compulsion. It can feel almost like a biological impulse. You see something, or an idea occurs to you, and you have to share it with the Internet as soon as possible.<sup>81</sup>

She also mentions this compulsion from the reader's perspective: "Other people's mistakes, which is to say, their impulsively revealed thoughts and opinions, can be fascinating" and are the "best and worst thing about the blogosphere."<sup>82</sup> It would seem the commenters on her memoir agree, whether implicitly by reading and commenting in spite of their anger, or explicitly, as the minority of positive comments attest. Gould's description, meanwhile, echoes that provided by Rebecca Blood six years earlier, who argues that the fascination with how blogging exposes its author holds for whatever kind of blog it is, including those that are simply lists of links with spare commentary: "It is captivating to see the biases, interests, and judgments of an individual reveal themselves so clearly."<sup>83</sup>

The overarching logic of exposure - as conventional practice, as generic expectations and formal features, and as the means by which bloggers and readers are captured - should be seen as a counter-weight to descriptions of blogging as "web-native." Where web-native articulates a distinction in media practice, exposure emphasizes continuity with existing (web) publishing practices. These range from the basic act of publication to the suite of tools for measuring circulation and syndication. It is a "counter-weight" because, as the practitioners' accounts in *We've Got Blog* continually show, the qualities that supposedly reveal the web's nature or renew the web's purpose (transparency, community and signal) are revealed to be the qualities that extend the excesses of mainstream media (performance, celebrity and noise). Exposure is both blogging's promise and its reflexive deconstruction.

The genealogy of blogging outlined here may also be seen to contextualize more recent theories of blogging. In particular, the logic by which blogging seeks to expose the flaws in mainstream media but uses that same logic to fold back in on itself, subverting its own position as an alternative, resonates with Geert Lovink's theory of blogging as the "nihilist impulse." Lovink situates blogging in opposition to mass media, but also argues against romantic notions such as citizen journalism or open news. Blogs 'witness' and 'facilitate' the implosion of mass media without offering an alternative. As Lovink writes:

Blogs bring on decay. Each new blog is supposed to add to the fall of the media system that once

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<sup>81</sup> Gould, 2008a.

<sup>82</sup> Gould, 2008b

<sup>83</sup> Blood, 2002: xii.

dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This process is not one of a sudden explosion. The erosion of the mass media cannot be traced easily in figures of stagnant sales and the declining readership of newspapers. In many parts of the world television viewership is still on the rise. What is declining is ‘Belief in the Message.’ That is the nihilist moment, and blogs facilitate this culture as no platform has ever done before.<sup>84</sup>

For Lovink, blogging serves so well as an entry-point for studying this culture because the practice is the clearest expression of what he calls “Internet cynicism,” a response to the dot.com bubble and “millennial madness.”<sup>85</sup> Here, I would argue that the genealogy of blogging and web exceptionalism offers a different take. Blogging’s ambivalence and cynicism was visible in its early development at the height of dot.com bubble, and this ambivalence resonates strongly with previous articulations of new media and the web as exceptional - from Mondo 2000 to HotWired and Suck.

What Lovink calls a decline in “Belief in the Message,” meanwhile, Jodi Dean has theorized as a decline in symbolic efficiency: blogs are emblematic of a culture in which the circulation of images and messages is rapidly increasing but the capacity for these symbols to carry the same meaning from one context to another is eroding.<sup>86</sup> Declining symbolic efficiency leads to a media environment in which reflexive criticism continually undermines any message, where an attitude of ‘You have your facts, I have mine’ prevails. As Dean argues:

The contemporary setting of electronically mediated subjectivity is one of infinite doubt, ultimate reflexivization. There’s always another option, link, opinion, nuance, or contingency that we haven’t taken into account, some particular experience of some other who could be potentially damaged or disenfranchised, a better deal, perhaps even a cure. The very conditions of possibility for adequation (for determining the criteria by which to assess whether a decision or answer is, if not good, then at least adequate) have been foreclosed. *It’s just your opinion.*<sup>87</sup>

This reflexivity is paraded as ‘democratization’ by those who stand to profit from more traffic, eyeballs, links, comments, tweets and so on, but for Dean signals how “communicative capitalism” exploits this decline and short-circuits the kind of critical thought that would provide an alternative.<sup>88</sup> The genealogy of blogging-as-exposure explored in this chapter suggests how the relationship between blogging and communicative capitalism may be further explicated, but it also raises questions in this regard. How, for example, might one reconcile Dean’s critical theorization

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<sup>84</sup> Lovink, Geert. 2008. *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture*. New York, Routledge: 17.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid*: 12.

<sup>86</sup> Dean, Jodi. 2010. *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*. Cambridge: Polity.

<sup>87</sup> Dean, 2010: 6.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid*.

with the fact that blogging developed largely outside of the commercial contexts (platforms, marketing budgets, advertising, and so on) that it is now undoubtedly a part of? I would argue that this may only be done by tracing the discursive and material connections between blogging and existing media; that is to say, in the genealogy of blogging as a media practice, technology and form.

### 5.3 Web exceptionalism and web cultural form

Why web-native? As I have shown here, early bloggers used this term to distinguish blogs from prior media forms and practices, as well as to mark a renewal of the web's supposedly original promises of transparency, community and meaningful communication and reflection. In this chapter, I revisited this articulation of blogging as exceptional, but also described how these same accounts continually 'exposed' blogging as an exacerbation of the problems it supposedly addressed. These unexceptional should not be seen as separate from blogging's utopian promise - as simply correctives to misunderstandings of the form or to the false hopes attached to it. Instead, I argued that exposure - as public exhibition, as publicity, as the disclosure of the self and the unearthing of interesting links, as the deconstruction of media, and ultimately as the exposure of blogging itself as unremarkable - is the organizational logic that defines blogging as cultural form. As with Raymond Williams's description of flow as an overarching formal logic of television, exposure is how blogging captures - that is, how it captivates and fascinates users and readers.

For early bloggers, 'web-native' was meant to distinguish their practice from what came before, but in fact it is what directs attention to blogging's ties with earlier visions of the web as an exceptional medium and previous new media publishing cultures. In their somewhat contradictory distinction from the mainstream - e.g. rebel journalists acting outside of industry norms, amateur web and media critics seeking a more professional outlet for their commentary - many of the early bloggers discussed here fit within a lineage of "outsiders-inside" and "insiders-outside" in new media publishing that goes back to *Mondo 2000*. With their ambivalence regarding blogging's ability to actually form an exception to the perceived failings of mass and mainstream media, the reflections analyzed here also echo the mix of utopianism and cool sensibility in *Mondo 2000*, *HotWired* and *Suck* (chapters 2-3). In many ways, blogging follows in the footsteps of *Suck*, where the homepage served the newest essay and where sarcasm exposed the distance between pretense and reality (as *Suck* co-founder Joey Anuff put it, "We're not being cynical, we're being honest."<sup>89</sup>).

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<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Steinberg, 1996.

These resonances with previous new media publishing cultures may be seen to contextualize an influential definition of blogging as participatory media and an extension of a spirit of ‘openness’ - a definition that simultaneously placed blogging at the center of descriptions of Web 2.0.<sup>90</sup> In 2005, for instance, when Kevin Kelly grouped blogs together with Wikipedia, open source software and peer-to-peer technologies to describe blogging as a sign of the “new cultural force of mass collaboration” at the “heart” of the web, his definition ignored key elements of blogging’s past. The suggestion in such accounts is that blogging applies a technological ideal of openness to publishing and media more generally - a ‘foreign’ ethic that would imply transparency, inclusive community and the uninhibited flow of information. What I would like to suggest is that more or less the opposite is true: as exposure, the formal logic of blogging arguably extended key techniques, norms, conventions and styles from existing publishing cultures into an increasingly generalized socio-technical practice. As similar rhetoric is used to describe newer web-native forms such as social media - including Mark Zuckerberg’s stated goal to create a more “open” world with Facebook - it is worth recalling the genealogies of the practices, forms and technologies underlying such openness, and in particular the emergence of blogging as a *publishing* logic of exposure.<sup>91</sup> However positively or negatively one views such developments, I believe that, in some sense, Rebecca Blood was correct in her early assessment of blogging’s legacy: “weblogs have made all of us publishers.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> O’Reilly, 2004; Tapscott and Williams, 2008.

<sup>91</sup> Vogelstein, Fred. 2009. “The Wired Interview: Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg.” *Wired*. June 29. <http://www.wired.com/business/2009/06/mark-zuckerberg-speaks/>.

<sup>92</sup> Blood, 2002: x.