Most people are aware of blogs as sites of social and political commentary, but the role of blogs in the arts and the emergence of blogging as an art form may not be immediately apparent. Although blogs may serve many purposes, a growing number have been created by writers and artists to serve as venue, to build community, or simply to experiment with the potentialities of this rapidly evolving modality. As blogging technology becomes increasingly flexible and accessible, entirely new genres are beginning to emerge, engaging a significant proportion of the population.

For researchers in the arts, blogs offer unique opportunities. First, as increasing numbers of artists blog about their work, post examples of their work directly to their blogs, and otherwise use their blogs as continually updated online portfolios, a vast storehouse of source material is now readily (if not always ethically) available to the researcher. Second, as artists create and sustain close-knit virtual communities through their blogs, the potential for analyzing issues and identifying trends within any of the various genres represented is greatly facilitated. Third, as a significant proportion of the general population blogs, the public attitude toward particular artists, art forms, genres, policies, and so on, can be readily ascertained and continually updated through an analysis of this spontaneous expression. Finally, although there are no reliable figures on the number of bloggers, it is clear that millions of
individuals are posting regularly; for many of these, blogging has become the preferred outlet for their artistic expression, whatever their particular genre. Correspondingly, researchers in the arts must begin to address this emergent aspect of popular culture.

Even researchers for whom blogs are unlikely to represent useful source material are finding blogs an inexpensive and efficient alternative to project management software. As with writers and artists, blogs allow researchers to establish virtual communities with those sharing their specialization, track developments in their field, manage sources, brainstorm with colleagues, document their priority in the formulation of key ideas, pace their own work, and rapidly disseminate results.

However, a cautionary note: Blogs and blogging raise a number of new ethical dilemmas and pose potential pitfalls for researchers. Human subjects research overseeing committees are only now beginning to come to grips with the thorny issue of whether blogs should be considered public "published" documents—and so exempt from ethical review—or "private spaces," and therefore subject to various protections (Bell, 2005).

**Blogs as Art**

Blogs are both a new medium through which to express existing genres and a new set of genres in their own right.

**BLOGS AS MEDIUM**

Blogs serve at least three purposes in the arts.

**Publishing Venue**

First and most obvious, many people use blogs to publish their photography, music, artwork, videos, fiction, poetry, essays, or journal entries. In this, blogging technology is doing for the literary, visual, and performing arts what Napster did to the music industry: short-circuiting the gap between producer and consumer to create a democratic, synergistic, anarchic, publishing environment.

Since there are no gatekeepers, and entry into this public marketplace is relatively inexpensive, many more individuals can participate than could through traditional publishing, performance, or exhibition venues. Consequently, a much greater proportion of the population may now self-identify as participating in the arts. Although critics may decry the quality of much of this self-publishing, many bloggers attract significant audiences, and some few have even made this a paying proposition through hardcopy sales, the direct solicitation of donations, or through carrying advertising on their blogs (Rowse, 2004).

Similarly, many established artists use blogs as an extension of their regular exhibitions, providing additional commentary, supplementary material, or exhibiting directly through the blog. As artists push the limits of how and what can be presented online, the traditional divisions between genres are sometimes blurred, as the emergent multimedia modalities become their own medium of expression.

**Marketing Strategy**

Many established artists and writers maintain blogs about their careers and work as a marketing tool. A survey by Spier New York, for example, found that 23% of readers polled (35% under age 35) have visited an author's site (FW Daily, 2006). Similarly, in the visual and performing arts, complex networks of mutually referential blogs create discourse networks in which self-promotion, reviews, commentary, and responses create not only "buzz" but a synergistic environment in which influence can
rapidly evolve into virtual trends and artistic movements. For the researcher, such blogs not only provide a constantly updated stream of current information, but also often include considerable autobiographical commentary about both the artist and the evolution of his or her work.

**Virtual Community**

There are many reasons why writers and artists seek out community, but the most compelling is simply that most work alone, without the job-place interactions others take for granted. Consequently, many writers and artists use blogs to establish community, either through private networks of peers (such as available through Live Journal.com) or by attracting regular subscribers (many of whom will correspond through the blog’s comment function) to their public blog. The asynchronous nature of the medium allows artists to put down tools and take a social break at their convenience, with minimal reciprocal commitment. Although all of the authors and poets interviewed in my current research commented on the need to strictly ration the time allotted to writing, reading, and responding to blogs—lest their real writing not get done—most considered blogging fundamental to maintaining their sense of connectedness within a community of writers.

Additionally, many artists use the networking potential of blogging to stay atop developments in their field, identifying marketing and grant opportunities, and so on. Collaborative efforts are also greatly facilitated by such online communities (as these benefits are also available to the researcher, they are discussed in some detail later).

Others use communities of bloggers in specific ways to move their projects forward. For example, many novelists, poets, and playwrights maintain semiprivate blogs accessible only to peers who serve as first readers and a focus group for early drafts. Such writers often motivate themselves by publicly committing to some deadline or quota, post scenes they are struggling with to their blog for feedback, direct esoteric questions to the encyclopedic knowledge contained within the collegial network, and so on. Similarly, many beginning writers use blogging software to establish on-line writers’ workshops.

One perhaps surprising application in the literary arts, though typical of the many latent functions of blogging, is the rant blog. Several authors I interviewed in the current study mentioned maintaining a blog for the expressed purpose of providing a venue in which to rant other than in their current work for publication. These authors expressed that prior to blogging, they had had difficulty in keeping themselves from pursuing personal hobbyhorses within their fiction or documentary work, even where they knew this to be inappropriate. The rant blog provides a safety valve through which “to get it off their chest” without contaminating the work at hand.

**THE MEDIUM AS MESSAGE**

As new genres emerge, the blog and its descendents have to be taken seriously as art forms in and of themselves.

The video blog (vlog), for example, is a new but increasingly popular art form with members of the digital generation, who take access to digital video recorders and video cell phones for granted. Constantly making the conscious choice whether to “roll tape” as they move through the environments and events of their lives, they are essentially engaged in interpreting their lives through the lens of their camcorders. Here the vlog serves not just as a convenient venue for the distribution of short videos (YouTube would serve that function better); rather, the
implicit continuity and ongoing commitment renders the vlog its own particular art form, and the vlogger an artist.

With millions blogging daily, a significant portion of the population has now taken up creative documentary as a filter through which to view their own lives (Runte, 2000), thanks to their regular blog/podcast/vlog. This would be a fascinating sociological phenomenon were these narratives merely private diaries, but given the expectation of audience, and the critique implicit in number and responsiveness of subscribers, this new interactive genre is clearly an art form, duly subject to review and research.

As one delves deeper into the popular culture of blogging, as blogging technology continues to evolve, and as the online community continues to grow and diversify, the temptation is to identify each new subcategory as its own genre. The key, however, is simply to recognize that blogging is more than merely the sum of its roles as a medium for the transmission of the arts; rather, the gestalt of these roles, and the blogger's self-identification as writer, artist, or performer, renders blogging an art form.

♦ Blogs as Source Material

For researchers in the arts, the rapid spread of blogging provides an abundance of formerly unavailable source material. Better yet, all this material comes pre-typed, formatted, date-stamped, archived, and indexed. Researchers can identify and then efficiently track very large numbers of relevant blogs, as freely available software informs the researcher when any of the blogs under study are updated, thus eliminating the need to monitor each blog individually.

Until now, diary-based research has been a relatively minor methodological stream, limited by the logistical difficulties of obtaining sufficient diaries for review. With the emergence of blogging as a mass phenomenon, this has changed, and an explosion in the number of studies using anecdote, journal entries, autobiography, photographs, vlogs, and the like may be anticipated.

Another factor that makes blog-based research so attractive is that postings are date-stamped and archived, facilitating comparisons over time. Cohn, Mehl, and Pennebaker (2004), for example, were able to bypass the usual methodological obstacles in trauma research to provide a detailed analysis of the time line of trauma response by analyzing the linguistic differences in 1,084 American blogs for a period of 4 months spanning the 2 months prior to and after the September 11th attacks. Researchers could similarly track trends and issues in the arts.

Blog-based research is facilitated by the highly searchable and cross-referenced nature of the medium. Public blogs are indexed by Internet search engines like any other Web page; bloggers typically self-identify key themes by titling each post, for which Google can “advance search” separately; bloggers often register their blogs by type, topic, or interest with one or more of the many blog-specific indexing services, and they often include a detailed personal profile. Each of these provides the researcher a way of defining and identifying the target sample. On Blogger.com, for example, any phrase entered into the “interest” field of the blogger’s profile automatically becomes clickable, so that one can pull up the profiles of all other Blogger.com clients who also listed that interest, which can be literally anything, from “photography” to “left handed” to the title of a particular exhibition.

Thus, just as diary research takes on renewed importance with the emergence of blogging as a mass phenomenon, snowball sampling takes on an entirely new functionality. Once having identified a few relevant blogs, those blogs are likely to provide leads
to other blogs sharing the target characteristics: First, bloggers usually make explicit reference (with clickable links) to other blogs they find relevant, which are therefore also likely of potential interest to the researcher. These blogs can then lead the researcher to further relevant blogs, until one with the precisely desired characteristics has been identified, or the sample has "snowballed" to the desired critical mass. Second, most blogs invite comments, and most comments include a link to that individual's own blog, thereby allowing researchers another way to identify members of their target community. Finally, some blogs incorporate a "trackback" feature that automatically links to any other blog that makes direct reference to the current entry, thus providing a third avenue to identify or expand one's sample.

Notice that this indexed and interconnected environment provides access to three different types of samples: those defined by blog content, those defined by the characteristics of the blogger, and those defined by the linkages between blogs/bloggers. For example, a researcher interested in Chopin could sample discussions about Chopin, or could sample individuals who have self-identified as Chopin enthusiasts in their profiles, or could study how often blogs about Chopin or by Chopin fans include links to blogs about Metallica. Even if the Chopin devotee never comments directly on Chopin, the researcher may gain insights into the relationship between classical music and, say, political orientation, by observing how often and with what slant politics turn up in their blog.

Because the blog entries are not produced within a research context, the commentary may be considerably more forthright and revealing than when directly solicited. Van House (2004) notes, for example, that "the norms of blogging promote a high degree of self-disclosure" (p. 2), even where bloggers were using their real identities. The effect, therefore, may be even more pronounced where bloggers retain anonymity or conceive their primary audience to be contained within a sympathetic discourse network.

◆ Ethical Issues

At first glance, blog-based research does not come under the purview of human subjects research review committees because blogs constitute "published" material. This interpretation is supported by four key aspects of blogging software: Bloggers can remain anonymous, can designate the level of privacy they wish to maintain, can choose whether to include syndication, and can choose whether to register with various indexing services.

ANONYMITY

Anonymity becomes a somewhat slippery concept within the context of the World Wide Web, however. Whereas it is often sufficient with interviews or surveys to simply remove identifying names from a quotation, this is clearly not the case with blogs: Any unique phrase from the quotation typed into Google will immediately yield a link to the original posting. Thus, researchers must proceed on the assumption that anonymity cannot be guaranteed, or limit the use of quotation to sufficiently brief or generalized comments that cannot be traced through search engines, or include only anonymous or clearly pseudonymous blogs in their sample.

Even when pseudonyms are used, however, anonymity is less well protected than might be assumed. First, many bloggers repeat their aliases from other contexts (such as online role-playing games, chatrooms, etc.) and so are known to peers, even though the obvious pseudonym may suggest to the researchers that the blog is anonymous.
Second, the cumulative detail provided in hundreds of postings over time is often sufficient to give the blogger’s identity away (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2005). Third, most bloggers fail to take advantage of anonymizing technologies, exposing them to identification (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2005). For example, deconstructing the file address of photographs or artwork contained within a blog will often reveal the blogger’s home campus, organization, or regional computer network. Consequently, researchers may not be able to guarantee respondent anonymity.

INFORMED CONSENT

Most blogging software allow the blogger to indicate who should have access. Blogger.com, for example, asks new bloggers if they wish their blog to be “public” or “private”; if they choose “private,” the software adds invisible tags to their blogs that prevent them being indexed by search engines. Consequently, it could be argued that if a blogger chooses the “public” option, registers the blog with one or more blog lists or indexing services, and includes syndication, then the blogger’s explicit intention is to make the blog accessible to the public, and researchers may therefore make use of these blogs without further consent.

There are, however, several difficulties here. First, many bloggers may not adequately understand the implications of the “public” tag and be unaware that it allows their postings to be indexed by various search engines.

Second, bloggers routinely quote, refer, and link to other blogs without necessarily respecting, or even being aware of, whether the cited blog is public or one to which there is only limited access. Thus, researches following a series of links in an expanding snowball sample could easily, if inadvertently, include blogs or postings that the originator believed to be private.

Third, many bloggers erroneously believe that if they delete a blog posting it disappears from the net. This is often not the case: Google and other search engines may still include access to pages as they existed when initially indexed through the “cache” button; archival sites attempt to preserve a significant proportion of the net, and so may retain permanent records of deleted postings; and other bloggers may have quoted extensively from material the originator subsequently retracts but cannot then remove from others’ blogs. Consequently, ethical researchers need to attend to whether postings have been subsequently deleted and to treat such deletions as the subject withdrawing from the study.

Finally, it is not clear that choosing the “public” software setting is synonymous with “agreeing to participate” in a particular research project. It is therefore arguably well within the purview of ethical review committees to ensure that bloggers are informed and willing participants in any study using even their “public” materials, lest abuses lead to the emergence of norms within the blogging community that foreclose any future research participation.

And that is just for explicitly “public” blogs. Researchers accessing “private” postings would obviously have to obtain informed consent.

♦ Blogs as Research Tool

RESEARCHER-INITIATED METHODOLOGIES UTILIZING BLOGS

So far the discussion has focused on blogs as preexisting sources, but of course
blogs can also be used to create or solicit material. The “sustained asynchronous focus group,” in which researchers initiate their own topical blog to solicit postings or comments, and “directed journal entries,” in which researchers identify a sample population and require them to keep a topical online diary, are two examples. Both approaches retain all the logistical advantages of blog sources (pre-typed, date-stamped, automatically archived and threaded responses, accessible asynchronously from any computer with an Internet connection) and may even encourage a similar degree of self-disclosure if respondents have had previous experience with blogging norms. Hessler et al. (2003), for example, noted that even though the daily journal entries in their study had been solicited, in the absence of direct questioning from the researchers, the respondents seemed to write what was on their minds. Theoretically, the behaviors and issues that got the most attention would be the most salient parts of the respondents’ everyday lives. (pp. 122–123)

Another possible application would be in ethnographies or other qualitative approaches that require the researcher to go back to the research site to allow study participants to respond to the researcher’s initial interpretations. Where the participants have Internet access, a blog could provide a vehicle for the researcher to present, and the participants to respond to and discuss (with each other as well as with the researchers), (re)interpretations through several iterations, each stage automatically documented, archived, and validated.

Blogs may also have a role in heuristic and narrative approaches, as the software lends itself to generating and interrogating autobiographical and collaborative texts. By keeping a journal online, one not only gains the logistical advantages of instant archiving and convenient access, but one can also grant access to colleagues whose observations and queries in the comments section may facilitate the identification of confabulations, selective recall, or other manifestations of false consciousness, and so allow the researcher to dig deeper.

Finally, blog sampling techniques could be combined with traditional data gathering methodologies, that is, using Internet searches and snowball sampling within the blogging community to quickly identify a sample of, say, left-handed musicians, to whom one could then e-mail relevant surveys or requests for in-depth interviews.

PRIVATE RESEARCH BLOGS AS PROJECT MANAGEMENT TOOLS

Whatever the potential for identifying sources, the widest applicability of blog software in research may be for knowledge management, both for oneself and as a collaborative tool. Researchers dissatisfied with expensive, overly complex project management software may find the research blog the answer to their needs.

Most blogging software may be set to allow more than one individual to post, such that all members of the research team can be given access to the same private research blog. The software can be set to notify team members when any member posts to the blog, allowing everyone to stay in touch efficiently; indeed, Reichardt and Harder (2005) argue that because blogs are archived, searchable, and continually accessible to all team members, blog communication eliminates many of the frustrations of e-mail correspondence.

The daily research blog allows team members to report what they have accomplished each day; to back up their work on a remote (blog host) server; to pose questions,
make suggestions, or debate issues with the rest of the team; and to track their progress toward projected targets.

Many researchers also find that blogging "forces them to write" as "the periodicity of the blog helps to establish a rhythm for writing" (Nardi, 2004, p. 17). This in turn facilitates analysis and theory construction, as blogs serve as "an 'outlet' for 'thinking by writing'" (Nardi, 2004, p. 17). As one posts one's thoughts to one's blog, and ideas begin to build upon the other, the evolution of one's thinking becomes more explicit, and thereby facilitated (Efimova, 2003).

As each team member observes what everyone else is doing on a regular basis, it not only motivates everyone to meet their project commitments, but also generates a synergistic energy: The continual exchange of ideas and information between collaborators can turn the team blog into a permanent online brainstorming session. Since everyone's contribution is automatically date stamped and archived, it is easy to track and credit who came up with which ideas first, thus ensuring that credit is retained where due. Thus, the daily research blog encourages a high level of trust and commitment among team members (for the same reasons, the team blog can be an effective discussion and student project tool in seminar courses).

Similarly, the daily blog allows one to motivate and monitor graduate research assistants without constantly hovering at their shoulders. The graduate assistants are in turn mentored in the actual thinking and research processes of their supervisor through access to their privately shared blog.

PRIVATE RESEARCH BLOGS AS PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT TOOL

Even working alone, however, one can benefit from the research blog. Researchers use their blogs as their commonplace book to file online searches, citations, relevant quotations, conference notes, musings, Web bookmarks, charts, photographs, and so on (Efimova, 2003). The attraction of a private online diary is the convenience of accessibility from any computer, and that it is categorizable and searchable—in contrast to paper notes, which may be harder to keep organized, which are never with one when one needs them, or which simply go missing.

PUBLIC RESEARCH BLOGS AS NETWORKING AND DISSEMINATION TOOL

The greatest benefits are realized, however, when the research blog is public. In this case, one's methodological and analytical musings can generate useful feedback from colleagues, peers, graduate students, practitioners in the field, and so on. Indeed, it is not unusual for researchers faced with a particular conundrum to pose it in their blog, triggering a productive brainstorming session with input from across the Internet.

Such exchanges represent a "non-intrusive emergent collaboration" (Efimova, 2003) unique to the blogging community. Each researcher may begin by making notes on some esoteric subject for their own purposes, but by making them public, the notes are likely to quickly attract the attention of others working in the same specialty. As one notes breaking news, grant opportunities, links to relevant blogs, interesting quotes, and so on, in one's working blog, other academics may come to rely on these postings so that they may stay on top of developments in a field in which they have an interest but may not be as current. As these researchers become, first, regular readers and then either occasional or regular contributors (through the comment function), vast collegial networks—unconstrained by geography, funding, or status—can rapidly
emerge. Indeed, using free sites such as Bloglines, one can track any number of colleagues’ blogs from a single Web page, a more efficient networking tool than previously available.

Since blogs emphasize work in progress, one can track trends and be aware of significant developments long before they appear in published journals. In the future, establishing a virtual presence on the Web may become key to documenting the research process and so legitimizing the research product (Majava, 2005). Consequently, to not monitor relevant colleagues’ blogs is to be left behind.

Of course, the objection can be raised that the self-published blog cannot replace the authority of a refereed journal, and there is obviously still a need for journal publication as the final “version of record,” in contrast to the preliminary musings of the research blog. Nevertheless, blogs also undergo an informal peer review through the simple mechanism that readers only return to those blogs they find worthy. Readership is therefore one key measure of relevance, credibility, and utility; the other relevant measure is how often a particular blog is cited and linked to by fellow academics. Peer filtering quickly identifies emergent opinion leaders through citation and direct linking (Efimova, 2003), whereas unworthy blogs attract few readers and so languish in obscurity.

Indeed, researchers may “test” their ideas by posting them in their blogs: Worthy innovations may flow across the Internet to become commonly cited knowledge within hours (Efimova, 2003); flawed reasoning is likely to receive useful feedback in one’s comment section, but excite little comment in others’ blogs. Nardi’s (2004) study of bloggers, for example, found that highly charged negative comments, such as an accusation of racism regarding one post, were quickly taken out of public view and resolved privately through e-mail while the disputants continued to present a civil face in their public postings.

Naturally, one has to exercise reasonable care to ensure that postings neither betray confidential information nor slander colleagues (through citation out of context or too vitriolic a review), but as these norms are part of professional socialization, they should not prove overly burdensome.

Whenever one advocates taking research blogs public, the initial reaction from colleagues is inevitably the objection that someone might “steal” their ideas. This is exactly the opposite: Posting an idea to one’s blog automatically date stamps and therefore documents one’s priority. Posting to the Web is the quickest way to disseminate and establish credit for worthy ideas, as academics worldwide read and cite one’s blog, or the blogs of others cite one’s original posting. In contrast to valid ideas languishing unread in too specialized journals, blog postings may disseminate much more rapidly and to a more diverse academic community.

♦ Summary

I have tried to make a case in this chapter for the utility of blogging as both research tool and source material. Blogging makes supervising, coordinating, and documenting research activities easier; I know of no better tool for personal knowledge management, data transfer, and collaborative brainstorming. Blogging creates a “visible web of interpersonal trust” (Paquet, 2002) and is a more efficient networking tool than e-mail, the telephone, or sporadic contacts at conferences. Depending on the nature of one’s research, blogs may also provide an unlimited source of anecdotal, life history, or narrative materials, or a similarly rich
vein of exemplars from the visual or performing arts. At a minimum, blogs represent an emergent art form that engages a significant proportion of the population and so is deserving of attention.

References


