

Laura-Elena Savu  
University of Bucharest

## **WIRED SELVES: THE FEAR AND ATTRACTION OF BLOGGING**

**Keywords:** academia, anonymity, blogging, blogosphere, character, construct, communication, community, conference, conversation, desire, discourse, gender, identity, life-writing, network, performance, post-structuralism, reading, self, subjectivity, virtual, weblogs, writing

**Abstract:** Fueled by the spread of free blog-creation software, the proliferation of blogs has been remarkable over the past ten years. To paraphrase Beth Snyder Bulik, author of “Who Blogs?” the entire world, not just America, “is going to the blogs.” But what does this mean exactly? Is blogging some kind of “epidemic,” a testimony to the encroachment of technology upon the realm of the “spirit” (Donna Haraway, 193), or rather an antidote to the demise of the “real” and to powerful global forces threatening to wipe out local, individual, and private distinctions? Does blogging, even more so than face-to-face conversation, foster the illusion of meaningful communication? Put differently, do we blog, as we dream, alone? Then why are so many people drawn to blogging, and what is the self that comes into being through this medium? Who or what do we enter in dialogue with when we blog? In pursuit of these questions, I will focus on academic blogs not only because I can relate to them more easily, but also because they allow us, people in the academia, to better understand the role of blogging in our culture, both as a vehicle for self-fashioning and as a way of living with one another in an increasingly wired world with ever more virtual/simulated aspects of experience.

There is no such thing as conversation. It is an illusion.

There are intersecting monologues, that is all.—Rebecca West, *The Harsh Voice*

“Are you a movie buff? ‘Talk to me,’ then.” Thus begins, with an indirect reference to Pedro Almodóvar’s exquisite movie, “Talk to Her,” one of my earliest blog entries posted back in the fall of 2006, when I found myself joining the millions of people out there who make up the so-called “blogosphere.” Fueled by the spread of free blog-creation software, the proliferation of blogs has been remarkable over the past ten years. To paraphrase Beth Snyder Bulik, author of “Who Blogs?”, the entire world, not just America, “is going to the blogs.” But what does this mean exactly? Is blogging some kind of “epidemic,” a testimony to the encroachment of technology upon the realm of the “spirit” (Donna Haraway, 193), or rather an antidote to the demise of the “real” and to powerful global forces threatening to wipe out local, individual, and private distinctions? Does blogging, even more so than face-to-face conversation, foster the illusion of meaningful communication? Put differently, do we blog, as we dream, alone? Then why are so many people drawn to blogging, and what is the self that comes into being through this medium? Who or what do we enter in dialogue with when we blog? In pursuit of these questions, I will focus on academic blogs not only because I can relate to them more easily, but also because they allow us, people in the academia, to better understand the role of blogging in our culture, both as a vehicle for self-fashioning and as a way of living with one another in an increasingly wired world with ever more *virtual/simulated* aspects of experience.

As a forum for personal expression and online communication, web logs (abbreviated to “blogs”) originated in the U.S. in 1997 as on-line journals, often with links to news items on the World Wide Web plus brief reader responses. Weblogs came of age in 2002 when John Battelle, a cofounder of *Wired* magazine, and Paul Grabowicz, media program director at the University of California, Berkeley began offering a class in blogging, in which students created a blog on copyright issues. Technorati, Inc., a Web site and organization dedicated to mapping and searching the blogosphere, found that by October 2005 there were 19.6 million blogs, a number that has been doubling every six months.<sup>1</sup> In Technorati's list of the top 20 blogs, only three are noticeably written by women—Arianna Huffington, Michelle Malkin and Kathy Sierra—which has led Bulik to argue that, “it’s still a man's world out there in the blogosphere.” He goes on to say that, “Although women account for roughly half of all bloggers, much like in the corporate world, only a handful of the most-read blogs are run by women.” One such network, Blogger.org, has as its motto: “You say it, we share it.” Its growing list of blogs by women (and sometimes by men, too) is organized into topics that range from art, body image, business, entertainment, and fashion blogs to feminism and gender, race and ethnicity, research and academia blogs.

One particular entry that drew my attention was posted by someone identified as “professorme,” who initially wanted her blog to serve as an outlet for airing her frustrations about her dissertation writing, but for whom the blog “quickly evolved into a more personal statement” about “my life, my family, my struggles and my triumphs.” “For the most part,” she continues, addressing her virtual readers

I’ve been pleased to share these things with you and also pleased to read about your lives on your blogs. Lately, though, I’ve felt reluctant to write and reluctant to read. Reluctant because I felt like this blog was pulling away from its original purpose and was turning into precisely the type of blog I didn't want it to be. I’ve also felt reluctant to read a lot of blogs over the past few months because the writing didn't seem honest anymore. ... suddenly a lot of blog-writing seemed artificial to me. In part, I think that's what anonymity or semi-anonymity does. I felt like I was reading (and even becoming) a blogging “character” instead of a real person behind a screen. That’s uncomfortable to me, both as a writer and a reader.

To me, this blogger’s discomfort points both to the fear and attraction of blogging. She wants to share “bits” of her personal life, yet she is also reluctant to reveal too much, especially to strangers. Where she once accepted the anonymity, or semi-anonymity of blogging, she now feels that it invites deception. Blogging has pulled her away not only from her “original purpose”—which was to reflect on her writing process—but also from her “original” self, as she conceived it at the time she started her blog. She decides therefore to close up shop on this site and move on to another, where controlled access will allow her to keep blogging but “as myself.” Not wanting to lose her long-term readers and blogging friends, she urges them to e-mail her at a given address: “That way, even if you don’t wish to reveal your identity to me, I can be very much myself with you.”

Like other bloggers who use their regular online (or even real-life) nickname for their journal, “professorme” seeks “a kind of negotiated anonymity” (Karpovich). In their comments, one of her friends finds the idea of “becoming a character” very interesting; another one dislikes anonymity because “it just doesn’t feel right” to her; and a third one writes that her nick is “a persona for me in the way that I have a teaching persona that’s different from the personae I perform elsewhere. In some ways different, but in some ways not. Confusing.” Similarly, Angelina Karpovich writes that her blog “somehow exists

---

<sup>1</sup> The most popular blog in the world, as ranked by Technorati.com, is Boing Boing, which won the Lifetime Achievement and Best Group Blog awards at the 2006 Bloggies ceremony. Its common topics include technology, science fiction, gadgets, Disney, and politics.

separately from my academic Web site and yet perhaps not entirely separately from my academic life.” “These two instances of my Internet presence,” she explains, are motivated by different impulses and managed according to different conventions. Whereas the latter follows the accepted template of academia in presenting its subject as studious and career-minded . . . the former seemingly runs riot with nonstandard English and various forms of triviality - from what I had for dinner to which TV shows I'm particularly enjoying at the moment.

Karpovich also notes that there is “a common pattern” among her blogging friends who intended to use their blogs as research logs only to see them transformed into “relationship” logs.

To keep such personae apart, one blogger, a male one this time, has divided his site into a weblog, research page, teaching page, and last but not least a personal page: “If you're looking for more personal info about me -- if you want to know what makes Daniel Drezner tick -- well, then you're one of the following: 1) Really bored; 2) Really disturbed; 3) Desperately trying to avoid work; 4) A close family relative. Daniel W. Drezner is professor of international politics at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and author, among other things, of an article on the role of blogs in hiring decisions and tenure evaluation: blogs “provoke easy doubts” because they are “an outlet for unexpurgated, unreviewed, and occasionally unprofessional musings.” Consequently, today's senior faculty members tend to look at blogs “the way a previous generation of academics looked at television -- as a guilty, tawdry pleasure that should not be talked about in respectable circles. In some ways, this problem is merely the latest manifestation of what happens when professors try to become public intellectuals. Blogging multiplies the problem a thousandfold, creating new pathways to public recognition beyond the control of traditional academic gatekeepers or even op-ed editors.”

Along similar lines, Laura Berry, Associate Professor at University of Arizona, believes that “blogging discomfits because the form itself defies categorization as either professional work or personal play.” Blogs’ hybrid form includes video and audio, as well as text, all these features “undermining any sense of the strictly personal and individual, or even the professional.” Both in form and in content, blogs bear out the poststructuralist view of subjectivity:

The performative nature of the supposedly discrete self, the permeable boundaries of that self, its incoherence, historical position, and a necessarily fluid relation between the larger and largely imagined world of people and things and commerce and our imagined selves - that's what blogs are all about. Blogs don't record or reflect on the complexities of subjectivity; blogs enact the complex self by always being several things at once and above all by making the very idea of a private self a publicly constructed, and playfully imagined, virtual object of desire. (Berry)

This proliferation of selves is rendered possible by the fact that, as Mark Edmundson has observed, Internet-linked computers are “desiring machines — machines for the stimulation of desire,” with the power “to expand desire, expand possibility” beyond the confines of traditional media. Just as “there's no shortage of colors, images, and templates to choose from in designing blogs” (Mason), there is no limit, it seems, to the selves enacted through blogging. Equally important, by creating links to other sites and to other blogs, bloggers become gatherers of “cultural capital”—perpetuating what Terry Eagleton calls a “society of petty producers” who fulfill the “‘bourgeoisie dream’ of endless discourse” (qtd. in Mason).<sup>2</sup> Andrew Keen, author of *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet Is Killing Our Culture*, warns us that what the Web 2.0 is delivering is in fact “less culture,” that is, “superficial

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the flurry of blogs hosted by *The Guardian* and sparked by the controversial decision of Nabokov's son, Dmitri Nabokov, to go against his father's wishes and publish his last work, “The Original of Laura.”

observations of the world around us rather than deep analysis, shrill opinion rather than considered judgment" (10).

To be sure, this critical judgment is not fair to bloggers who comment more or less objectively and thoughtfully on topics they are knowledgeable about. Disagreement does exist, however, not just over the intellectual value of blogging, but its social uses as well: is blogging merely self-indulgent, or meaningfully interactive/conversational? At their best, blogs provide a means of entering an ongoing online conversation, for engaging with and interrogating ideas, as well as a creative space where one can generate and experiment with original thoughts. Since many blogs are autobiographical and confessional in tone, the problem that emerges, for some at least, is that their originators seem to live "in an echo chamber." Bloggers, says Keen, are "too busy ego-casting, too immersed in the Darwinian struggle for mind-share, to listen to anyone else" (44). The scarcity, if not absence of responses to certain posts may serve to confirm this negative assessment, no matter how reader-oriented these posts may be.

Here we should probably make a distinction between blogs posted on social networks like MySpace or Facebook and those found on academic networks.<sup>3</sup> The former consist of intimate forms of community which are quite individual, indeed ego-based, in that no two people share the exact same group of friends. The ties that bind these people together have to do as much with personality as with shared circumstances and demographics (religion, race, ethnicity, etc.) As for academic bloggers, they engage in similar scholarly pursuits and professional endeavors. For them, the blogosphere is a "large and thriving social network." This social aspect, Karpovich writes, was instrumental in getting her "hooked on blogging." Regardless of whether they respond to her or not, readers are "out there," and her awareness of them accounts for the fact that "virtually every journal entry is in some way a performance." She adds that the personal (though in practice mediated) nature of her journal entries has also helped her in "online interactions that could otherwise have become confrontational."

Others have pointed out the pedagogical uses of blogging, along with ways of integrating it into the classroom. Nels P. Highberg, Assistant Professor at University of Hartford, has chosen to keep his blog under his real name, as part of his university Web space. Because his research focuses on autobiography in all its forms, he sees blogs and online journals as "primary sites of autobiographical expression." "One reason I keep a blog," he explains, "is to engage in the process and see how it works from the inside out." Likewise, Jeff McIntire-Strasburg has found that blogging has "reintroduced" him to "ideas that I once considered from a theoretical perspective in graduate school but now know from a more practical position: Writing is a social act, and a writer develops his/her skills within a social context. Rediscovering these simple concepts has reignited my passion for teaching writing, and blogging has introduced me to new tools and techniques that help me convey this passion to my students."

It bears repeating, however, that for those in the academia, blogging entails certain risks, most of them influenced by, or influencing, the blogger's status offline, that is, in the university. Eric Mason, a Ph.D. Candidate from University of South Florida, believes that the "disembodied nature of online writing" can give graduate students and adjunct professors "a sense of security and authority" that tempts them to "forget" their place in institutional hierarchies. Blogging software permits them to choose the design and content of their blog, to decide who can and cannot comment on their posts, to edit previous posts which may get them into trouble, or to erase comments *they* deem inappropriate. Again, however, being the administrator of one's own blog does not reinforce a "capitalistic notion of a unique self"; on

---

3 A blogger identified as BillyMills insists on distinguishing between academics, who "are charged with certain responsibilities in the area of education," and bloggers, who are "just expected to be opinionated and preferably to irritate the rest of us in ways that are productive of comments. They may simulate thought, but that's a by-product."

the contrary, as already noted, the portrait of the digital intellectual is more often than not multifaceted. This is because, like traditional writing, blogging does not take place in a vacuum, but rather at the intersection of individual and institutional contexts. What troubles Mason is that what he finds attractive about blogging is “not unrelated” to his dissatisfaction with what his institution fails to offer him, namely, “social relations.”

The face to face interaction is coming to feel more and more antiquated, as bloggers are constantly connecting with people and institutions far away, “creating surrogate communities that displace the potential community at hand” (Edmundson). One blog site that introduces us to an academic network is *The Literature Compass Blog: Navigating Literary Studies*. Here, under the “conferences” category, I came across a post from Sarah Brouillette, who, in March of 2008, attended a conference on Postcolonialism held at NYU. “Just before I leave NYC,” she writes, “a friend warns me that the longer I take to put together some comments about the conference the more I’ll prove that I am not in a fact a ‘real’ blogger. Blog posts are supposed to have an aura of excess reality about them – unfiltered, undeveloped ideas about some immediate happenings. I explain that my problem is that I have no idea what to cover. I went to so many sessions and can’t do justice to any of them. He says to pick a few highlights and describe what I found most interesting about those moments. And then just get on with it.” The “few highlights” turn out to be detailed summaries of the key presentations and follow-up discussions, spiced up by personal musings on various ideas that seem to have captivated, confused, or troubled the participant. One reader congratulates Mrs. Brouillette on the “great conference blog” that makes her feel “like I just relived it all over again! Brilliant event, like you mentioned [,] it was somewhat light on female representation but it did attract a lot of international participants speaking on a wide range of topics [,] so it gets plus points for that.” But what points, if any, does Mrs. Brouillette get for networking, given that in-between sessions, she attended to her students’ papers instead of seeking out like-minded people? A friend who sees her sitting at a table marking papers stops to tell her that, “really, I can’t read 27 papers in two days while attending a conference. I appreciate her warning and then soldier on.”

Fortunately for Eric Gidal, from University of Iowa, the conference in Bologna, Italy, gave him the opportunity to join other international visitors in touring the city’s “aesthetic and intellectual treasures.” The title of the conference so praised by Mr. Gidal, “(Trans)National Identities – Reimagining Communities,” refers to a world in which selves and communities have become more interlinked, more mobile, but also perhaps more vulnerable than ever before. By the same token, as more people participate in an ever-enlarging web of activities and diversions, their blogs call on us to rethink the nature and meaning of conversation across increasingly porous geographical and cultural boundaries. Still, despite the ample evidence which shows that the looser these boundaries, the tighter the connections among individuals, one can also argue that blogging often isolates people in a bubble, or “blog spot,” as it were. What Edmundson says of his students applies, at least in part, to the “inhabitants” of the blogosphere: like the “the children of the Internet,” they, too, are “Romantics,” in that they prefer to be “elsewhere”—“away from the present, the here and now” (Edmundson), but, sadly, also away from others. If that is the case, then their “conversation” can only be an illusion. Consider, for instance, the following passage from Rainer Maria Rilke: “Two lonely souls meet in the world. One of them begins to utter lamentations, imploring the stranger for comfort. And the stranger, bending toward the petitioner, whispers gently: ‘It is night for me too.’” Now try to imagine this encounter taking place on the World Wide Web: what “comfort” might the two souls find in each other?

## Works Cited

- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Right to Dream*. Translated from the French by J.A. Underwood, Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988
- Berry, Laura C. "On the Subject of Blogs." in *Lore: An E-Journal for Teachers of Writing*. April 10, 2008. <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/lore/digressions/content.htm?dis01>
- Brouillette, Sarah. "On 'Postcolonialism and the Hit of the Real'", 6-8 March 2008, NYU, March 11, 2008 in *Literature Compass Blog: Navigating Literary Studies*. May 24, 2008 <http://literaturecompass.wordpress.com/>
- Bulik, Beth Snyder. "Who Blogs?" *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. April 15, 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/>
- Drezner, Daniel W. "The Trouble with Blogs." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 27, 2008. <http://chronicle.com/free/v52/i47/47b00701.htm>
- Edmundson, Mark. "Dwelling in Possibilities." *Chronicle of Higher Education*. May 5, 2008. <http://chronicle.com/free/v54/i27/27b00701.htm>
- Gidal, Eric. "Report II: (Trans)National Identities – Reimagining Communities, CISR/NASSR conference, Bologna, March 12-15, 2008." *Literature Compass Blog: Navigating Literary Studies*. May 24, 2008. <http://literaturecompass.wordpress.com/>
- Haraway, Donna. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." *Feminisms/Postmodernisms*. (Ed. L. J. Nicholson) New York: Routledge, 190-233.
- Highberg, Nels P. "Trying It On for Size." *Lore: An E-Journal for Teachers of Writing*. April 10, 2008. <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/lore/digressions/content.htm?dis05>
- Karpovich, Angelina. "I Blog, Therefore I am." *Lore: An E-Journal for Teachers of Writing*. April 10, 2008. <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/lore/digressions/content.htm?dis07>
- Keen, Andrew. *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet Is Killing Our Culture*. New York: Random House, 2007
- Mason, Eric. "Blogging from the Bottom: A Cautionary Tale." *Lore: An E-Journal for Teachers of Writing*. April 10, 2008. <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/lore/digressions/content.htm?dis09>
- McIntire-Strasburg, Jeff. "Blogging Back to the Basics." *Lore: An E-Journal for Teachers of Writing*. April 10, 2008. <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/lore/digressions/content.htm?dis10>
- Other Blogs Cited  
[http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/04/nabokov\\_original\\_of\\_laura.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/04/nabokov_original_of_laura.html). May 31, 2008  
<http://professorme.blogspot.com/2006/11/moving-on.html#comments>. May 15, 2008