

Acts of Reading Diary Weblogs

Lena Karlsson, Lund University

The number of weblogs has increased exponentially since several weblog service providers released free and easy-to-use software in late 1999. This enabled people with a computer, Internet access and a desire to present themselves and their daily lives, and/or their political views, tech news, knitting projects for a possible audience to create and keep a blog. Yet, why do people read blogs, and why and how do they read the blogs they read? I report the results of an investigation of diary weblog reading practices. The report is primarily based on a reader survey that I conducted on four independent diary weblog sites which I have followed for the past three years and whose authors I have repeatedly interviewed via e-mail. The survey data suggests that we need to view the diary weblog as a genre, at present stabilized enough for communities of readers to have a sense of their position in the text, to the author, the text's relationship to the "real," and its use value. The most evident offline antecedent, the paper diary (and offline autobiographical writing in general), to a high extent shape these relations.

Keywords: diary weblogs, genre, reading, autobiographical acts, interactivity

Through a series of national U.S. surveys conducted since June 2002, the Pew Internet & American Life Project has studied content creation online, of which weblog creation forms a small part. The number of blog creators has increased rather slowly since the beginning of the project. In June 2002, 3 % of the Internet users report having created a weblog, in late November 2004, 7 % (representing more than 8 million people). In contrast, the number of readers has increased drastically. In the spring of 2003, 11 % of the U.S. Internet users had read blogs; in November 2004

this figure had leaped to 27 %. Blog readers, Pew reports, are a more heterogeneous group than blog creators:

Like bloggers, blog readers are more likely to be young, male, well educated, internet veterans. Still, since our survey February, there has been greater-than-average growth in blog readership among women, minorities, those between the ages of 30 and 49, and those with home dialup connections. (Pew 2005, 2)

Yet, why do people read blogs, and why and how do they read the blogs they read? How do long-term readers describe the bonds and desires that make them habitual readers of a blog? Who, demographically speaking, are the readers of a specific blog? How do they describe the text's use value? To reach readers I conducted an explorative web survey on how/when/why we read weblogs on four diary weblog sites that I have studied and written about for the past three years (Karlsson 2003; 2005; in press). The research presented here thus arises from a larger longitudinal case study of a specific cluster of diary blogs, where attention has been paid to production matters, the blog as text, and consumption.

Speculations abound about the reader of the digital text generally, and about the weblog reader, more specifically. These speculations are more often grounded in personal reflection than in empirical evidence. Most point toward the transformation of the figure of the passive reader to the active, creative reader. The blog is an expanding, ongoing process whose ending is deferred, whose boundaries to other texts are vague, and where the physical frontier between reader and writer is no longer there, as there are places within the weblog text for the reader to respond (guest-book, comment system, e-mail link to site author). The text is constantly in progress, a progress in which the reader can intervene (Walker 2005; Himmer 2004). If the reader has a weblog of her own, the place for dialogue expands further, enhanced by linking practices and by tools such as *trackback*.¹ When the diary blog reader has been discussed more specifically, the discussion has frequently been framed by notions of escapism and voyeurism (Serfaty 2004; Scheidt in press).

The respondents to my survey highlight neither the interactive capacities of the blog text nor the pleasures of voyeurism when attempting to

explain the bonds and desires that make them habitual readers of the diary blog in question. They do not speak of seeking the exceptional and the strange. Rather, they speak of seeking and being comforted by reading the prosaic relations of people like them. The autobiographical nature of the diary weblog invites readers to make assumptions about the identicalness of author/narrator/protagonist and the textual world and the “real,” assumptions which consequently influence their engagement with and activity in the text. Comparisons to the paper diary are frequent. The metaphors, the genre and media comparisons, and the readerly self constructions that emerge in the open narrative answers form the basis for my genre analysis. These provide us with a discursive chart over the modes in which readers approach, interpret, and position themselves in the text and to the site author. Format and content alone do not constitute genre. The diary weblog, I argue, is a mode of reading as much as it is a mode of writing. Centrally taking my cue from what has been called the new rhetoric/North American rhetorical school, the social and pragmatic aspects of genre will be at the forefront of this study. In their proposal for a research methodology, Anthony Paré and Graham Smart argue that to perform genre analysis four dimensions of regularities should be taken into account: semantic and formal textual features, composing processes, reading practices, subject positions of writers and readers (1994). Above all, this article offers ways to think about readerly genre enactments. In the theoretical or anecdotal accounts of the weblog reader that exists, the generic and other social conventions the reader brings to the texts have been severely understudied.

The bulk of this article discusses the empirical material; yet initially, I survey questions of genre and theories of digital reading. I begin with a description of the attempts made to “pin down” what a blog is, and then I turn to a discussion of what I view as the ancestral genres of the diary blog, to be followed by an explication of reader-oriented autobiography theory and the new rhetoric/North American rhetorical school which form theoretical starting points for this study. The main argument of this article, grounded in the readers’ writing about their reading, is that we need to view the diary weblog as a genre; at present stabilized enough for communities of readers to have a sense of their position in the text, to the author, the text’s relationship to the “real,” and its use value. I thus

call for a greater specificity when dealing with the weblog, or rather, various genres of weblogs, than has been generally proposed. At the same time, my view of genre is encompassing and relational, in sharp contrast to many blog researchers' search for the essence of blogging (Blood 2002; Boyd 2005). The diary blog, I claim, does not possess an essence, but is constructed by its play of difference and similarity to other genres, online and offline.

Having established my theoretical framework, I delineate methodological considerations before I turn to the empirical material. At first, I paint a broad canvas of whom the diary bloggers are and what their diary blogs are like, both when it comes to content and technological features. Who the diary webloggers are, demographically speaking, is important since survey respondents often describe their first stage of engagement with the blog as a moment of recognition and identification that works under the logic that it is the lives which are similar according to existing cultural figurations of the self: age, race, class, gender, occupation, place of living, which are the kinds of lives one can relate to and identify with. Sameness to the site author emerges as crucial to diary blog consumption. With this broad canvas in place, I zoom in on a discursive cartography constructed around readers' responses to inquiries about "interactivity," which I believe illuminate notions of appropriate readerly behavior – the readers' understandings of theirs' and the authors' position in/to the text. The remainder of the article focuses on *how* the diary weblog is read, which is not discrete from the why, who, what, when, and where of reading. Communities of practice and local understandings of genre emerge around specific weblog clusters. "Genres are socially constructed, so different social groups using documents with similar structural features may think about them and describe them differently," as Crowston and Kwasnik point out (2004, 4).

Theoretical Background

"A loose baggy monster": The Weblog/The Online Diary – Trajectories

Recent estimates by the weblog tracking company Technorati.com. show that there are currently around 14.2 million weblogs available online (Technorati 2005). What do the sites sharing this categorization have in

common? Most seem to agree that it is the format, the typically frequently published, date stamped entries in reverse chronological sequence that makes the 14.2 million websites on diverse topics serving various purposes for its authors and readers, recognizable as weblogs (Blood 2002; Hourihan 2002; Walker 2005).

The earliest weblogs were filter weblogs, sites in which the author linked to and commented on web content. The weblog was initially defined by its web savvy, hand coding practitioners. Jørn Barger, author of Robot Wisdom, inaugurated the usage of the term weblog to refer to (t)his kind of blog in 1997, “A weblog (sometimes called a blog or a newpage or a filter) is a web page where a weblogger (sometimes called a blogger, or a pre-surfer) ‘logs’ all the other web pages she finds interesting” (Barger 1999). The influential naming act occurred in 1997, yet it is commonly agreed that the first sites of this kind appeared in 1996.²

Flanking the filter weblog, yet different in content and to a lesser extent in form, was the online journal, known as such since 1995. The online journal/diary was also hand coded, date-stamped, and most often to be read in reverse chronological order, yet it focused on the daily life, thoughts and feelings of its author rather than on web content. Rebecca Blood, another pioneering filter weblog author writing the history of the weblog, describes her perception of the differences between the two:

At the time, journals were personal accounts chunked into individual pages – one entry per page, one page per day, as if a paper diary had been transplanted to the web. By contrast, Weblog entries were short, usually containing links to the larger Web and appearing together on one page. (2004, 54)

With the release of easy-to-use weblog publishing tools in 1999 (Pyra Lab’s *Blogger* and Userland’s *Manila*), many filter bloggers and online diarists came to use the same tools, blurring the filter weblog and online journal at the level of form. The convergence of one into the other at the level of form created controversy in both the filter weblogging community and the online diary community. Several old-school online journalers started to keep both a weblog and a journal on the sites, separating their functions. In these instances, the weblog is for spontaneous nuggets of

thought, with possibilities for readers to comment, the online journal for more crafted pieces of autobiographical writing, with no direct possibilities for reader interaction (see, for instance, aiyah.net).

The other camp, the filter weblog community, often stressed their democratizing ideals in explicit or implicit contrast to the supposedly solipsistic activities of diary webloggers. “Weblogs would be an important form of alternate media, bringing together information from many sources, revealing media bias, and perhaps influencing vision on a wide scale – a vision I called ‘participatory media’” (Blood 2004, 54).

In a series of reports, Herring et al. (2004a; 2004b; 2005) have shown how researchers, mainstream journalists, and filter weblog practitioners have forwarded the filter weblog as the prototypical weblog and more or less neglected the diary weblog (typically containing fewer links and other means of conversation between weblog sites and fewer socially interactive features on the individual weblog site), a weblog genre far more prevalent. In their random sample collected from March to May of 2003 (excluding from the data collection major diary hosting sites such as LiveJournal.com and Diaryland.com) 70.4 % were diary weblogs, 12.6 % filter blogs, 3.0 % k.logs,³ 9.5 % mixed, 4.5 % other (Herring et al. 2004a). In 2006, there are many more kinds/genres of weblogs than the filter blog, the diary blog, and the knowledge weblog. Foodblogs, photoblogs, audioblogs neither fit under the umbrella term filter weblog nor diary weblog. Also, increasingly, filter weblogs semantically contain more diary type entries amidst the discussion of web content. At present, apart from the stable basic format (frequently updated date-stamped entries in reverse chronological sequence), the weblog is a “loose baggy monster,”⁴ content-wise, tool-wise, feature-wise, author-wise, reader-wise. This has called for an inquiry into the usefulness of viewing the weblog as a single genre (Miller & Shepherd 2004; Herring et al. 2005), an inquiry that this article continues.

The Diary Blog and Interrelated Genres

Blood and other early commentators dismissed the online journal/diary weblog as simply the paper diary transplanted to the web, merely interesting on the grounds that nominally private writing was rendered public, thus challenging various public/private divides. Does it make

sense to see the online journal/diary weblog as an offline genre being reproduced on the web? I will argue that the diary weblog is neither a reproduced genre, nor an emergent genre,⁵ but a hybrid genre, drawing on an amalgam of online and offline genres (see also Herring et al. 2005; Miller & Shepherd 2004). No genre exists in its own independent cultural space, but is defined out of play of similarity and difference to other genres; “each is defined by reference to the system and its members” (Cohen quoted in Devitt 2000, 700).

I will discuss the diary blog’s interrelationship with other offline (the paper diary, “true life stories,” the personal column, various TV genres) and online genres (personal home page, web cam). Pivotal among the ancestral genres, I argue, is the paper diary, which leaves its “chromosomal imprints” (Jamieson 1975) both on the scenes of consumption and production of the diary (which the survey results gives ample evidence of). It seems beneficial to start an investigation into the hybridity of the diary weblog with a comparative discussion of the diary weblog and the paper diary.

What is, then, in the first place, a paper diary? Literary scholar Lawrence Rosenwald defines the paper diary as follows:

In form a diary is a chronologically ordered sequence of dated entries addressed to an unspecified audience. We call that form a diary when a writer uses it to fulfill certain functions. We might describe those functions collectively as the discontinuous recording of the writer’s own life; more technically we might say that to call a text of the proper form a diary we must posit a number of identities: between the author and the narrator; between the narrator and the principal character, and between the depicted and the real, this latter including the date of entry and date of composition. (1988, 5)

Typically, the diary weblog fulfills these characteristics at the same time as it fundamentally challenges age old notions of the diary. The notion that diary writing is, and always has been, the most private kind of writing, not meant for eyes other than those of its author is alive and well in the general public. Rosenwald, however, views the diary as a communicative genre with someone else than its author, “an unspecified

audience,” at the receiving end, imagined, anticipated, or potential. Diary scholars have repeatedly shown how the notion of the private diary is a late 19th and 20th century phenomenon (Culley 1985) and that even since that time many unpublished diaries have circulated among networks of friends and family (Bloom 1996; Bunkers 2001; Buss 1993). For the paper diary which is eventually published, the route to its audience is anything but direct as it generally passes through the censoring hands of family members and the gate-keeping value judgments of the literary marketplace (Carter 2002). When the manuscript diary after a considerable time lag reaches its readers it is a finished product with trimmed edges. The time lag between the scenes of production and consumption of the paper diary makes it virtually impossible for readers and possible writers of diaries to be inspired by contemporary diarists. With the immediate mode of publication of diary weblogs, the acts of reading and writing diary weblogs feed into each other in a spiraling way. Writers of diary weblogs have almost immediate access to how and what other bloggers write about their lives.

The serial, fragmentary and cumulative production process of the paper diary is a part of its definition. With the diary weblog the act of reading the diary is also serial, fragmentary and cumulative altering the scene of its consumption. Readers are not given a finished product to read. Respondents to my survey, wishing to describe the pleasures of the serial consumption of the autobiographical text, have compared it to the TV soap as other genre comparisons fail to encompass the rhythmical mode of consumption. Together with the writer the readers move through a series of moments in time. The possibilities for the reader to contribute to the autobiographical performance – render it explicitly dialogic – by leaving comments on the page or by communicating with its author behind the scenes via e-mail or instant messaging are often recognized as the most radical innovation of diary weblogs (Serfaty 2004; Scheidt in press). I would place the possibilities for serial “real-time” consumption on innovative par with the possibilities for readers to leave their marks on the text. Thus, at the most basic formal level, “dated entries, addressed to an unspecified audience,” there is considerable continuity (granted that the diary weblog is not pass-word protected); yet, the mode of consumption of autobiographical writing is significantly

new along with the formal possibilities for readers to leave their actual physical marks on the text. Thus, even if the diary may always have been a communicative genre, the scene and speed of its production, circulation, consumption are radically different in its online incarnation.

Semantically, there is also considerable continuity, the topic online and offline being the life of its writer, a very encompassing topic. With the autobiographical topic, online and offline, readerly assumptions about the identicalness of author/narrator/protagonist and “the depicted and the real” are called into place. As Jill Walker states in her weblog definition, “the standard genre expectation is non-fiction” (Walker 2005). In my survey, a mere 5 % of the respondents had ever distrusted the truthfulness of the identity presented in the weblog. This is remarkable in a medium where identity play most often is assumed in social environments (chats, muds/moos, online games). As has been much discussed, on the Web there is ample opportunity to momentarily free oneself from the shackles of one’s gendered, aged, and raced body.⁶

The diary is by tradition multimedial. Content-wise the paper diary, like the online diary, is often full of extra literary material. The paper diary often contains newspaper clippings, pressed flowers, photos, nail polish. The diary weblog most often contains photos, drawings, webcams. In her book on diary weblogs/online journals, *The Mirror and the Veil*, Vivianne Serfaty depicts the weblog sites as oversaturated:

Accumulation strategies indeed seem to be typical of Internet sites, apparently out of sheer joy and enthusiasm about the technological feats made possible by the Internet; as a result of their use, the space of internet diaries seems to be literally saturated (2004, 26).

After this comparative discussion of the paper diary/diary weblog let us more briefly turn to other related genres. Other paper ancestral genres include the confessional true life story and the personal column. The private nature of the published material makes the diary weblog connected to the “true life stories,” published in confessional women’s magazines (Greer 2004). Also, like many newspaper and magazine columnists of the personal bent, the diary weblogger often builds up larger questions from small everyday events.

We have already cast a cursory comparative glance at TV. This glance needs to be prolonged somewhat as TV – as a resolutely non-interactive medium – initially was cast as the weblog’s Other. Author/web designer Powacek, for instance, declared in 2000, “This was anti-television. Digital democracy” (2002, 3). This distancing from TV signals the dialogic possibilities of the weblog in contrast to unidirectional TV. On the other hand, the comparative embrace of TV captures the anticipated rhythmical mode of consumption that is the trademark of blog and TV serial consumption alike. Regular readers of blogs “know” how often the blog author updates and know when to anticipate a new installment; it is a continuous activity.

The personal homepage, an early web building genre, is often seen as the immediate forerunner to the blog. The personal homepage, however, generally lacks both the interactive components (typically the home page is a single authored HTML document) of the blog and the immediacy of frequent publishing, crucial to the weblog genre. The weblog is persistent and cumulative, posts are added to post. On most websites, new material substitutes old material. The webcam constitutes another online forerunner which typically does not allow for producer-consumer interaction, nor does it provide the reader with the context an accumulative archive provides. The webcam allows for transient “totally live” real time production and consumption. Yet, nevertheless, as personal websites and webcams constitute web-based autobiographical performances (Chandler 1998), they are important digital forerunners to the diary blog. Herring et al. view weblogs as a bridging genre currently placed on the middle on a continuum between standard HTML web pages (with highly asymmetrical reader/writer relations) and asynchronous CMC (with symmetric relations) while pointing out that the “interactive potential have yet to be fully exploited” (2005, 24).

Reader-oriented Autobiography Theory Meets the North American Rhetorical School

As stated, early definitions insisted on viewing the weblog as one single genre. For instance, Meg Hourihan writes, “The weblog format provides a framework for our universal blog experiences.” She continues, “When we talk about weblogs, we’re talking about a way of ordering inform-

ation, independent of its topic” (Hourihan 2002). This generic emphasis on format as key continues traditional taxonomic traditions in the fields of literature and composition studies. Yet, in this taxonomic tradition not only regularities in form but also in content have been viewed as constituent elements of genre. In my delineation of online and offline ancestors of the diary weblog, with an emphasis on the paper diary, form and content are in focus, but also elements of genre which cannot merely be traced to textual features. In the last three decades, two largely unrelated schools of genre analysis, reader-oriented autobiography theory (Bruss 1976; Lejeune 1989) and the new rhetoric /North American rhetorical school (Miller 1984; Bazerman 1988; 1994; 1997; Paré & Smart 1994), have shifted attention from form and content to more pragmatic and social dimensions of genre. In the following, I will attempt to bring these schools in dialogue with each other as both propose “an understanding of genre [which] can help account for the way we encounter, interpret, react to, and create particular texts” (Miller 1984, 151), concerns crucial to this study.

Let me begin with the reader-oriented autobiography theory school. In his definition of the paper diary, Rosenwald first describes the format as “chronologically ordered sequence of dated entries” and content as “discontinuous recording of the writer’s own life.” Lastly, he turns to a number of identities we, as readers, must posit, i.e. the identicalness of author/narrator/reader and the “depicted and the real” (1988, 5). Even if Rosenwald could not be said to be a member of what I call the reader-oriented autobiography theory school, he points to the element of genre which Phillipe Lejeune, major proponent of reader-oriented autobiographical criticism, sees as constitutive elements of genre, a communicative contract which makes readers posit a number of identities. Lejeune uses the unclear demarcation between the autobiographical novel and the autobiography “proper” as an illustrative case in point. There is nothing in the text to separate the two. They are both written in the first person and recount the life of that person. The contractual effect is achieved by paraliterary elements (cover, title page, blurb). For Lejeune, the proper name, the signature, is key in the sealing of the autobiographical pact, which activates in the reader the notion that author=protagonist=narrator. This notion, then, controls the reading that ensues. Lejeune

also speaks of a referential pact at work in all “factual” texts. This pact, he claims, is not based on verisimilitude, but on the assumption on part of both writer and reader that the text presents an “image of the real” (Lejeune 1989, 22). He concludes, “It is at this global level that autobiography is defined: it is a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing; it is a historically variable *contractual effect*” (Lejeune 1989, 30). Lejeune’s reader-based orientation relies on Benveniste, whereas Elizabeth Bruss in her comparable study, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* relies heavily on Searle and speech-act theory:

The genre does not tell us the style or construction of a text as much as how we should expect to “take” that style or mode of construction – what force it should have for us. And this force is derived from the kind of action that text is taken to be. Surrounding any text are implicit contextual conditions, participants involved in transmitting and receiving it, and the nature of these implicit conditions and the roles of the participants affects the status of the information contained in the text. (Bruss 1976, 4)

The new rhetoric/ North American rhetorical school is often traced back to Miller’s seminal 1984 essay “Genre as Social Action” which served as catalyst for a number of studies and theoretical developments mainly in the fields of rhetoric and composition studies. Principally, Miller argues for a pragmatic view of genre as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (Miller 1984, 159). Charles Bazerman, who has done considerable work on academic genres, expounds Miller and writes that generic acts are

typified so that we are all to some extent aware of the form and force of these typified actions. As we become more informed and involved with these typified literate actions, we come to share a more precise set of functional meanings and consequential relations through the kinds of texts (1994, 79).

Mainly, this school of genre analysis has been applied to generic communication in academia and the workplace. Charles Bazerman has

studied the diachronic development of the experimental scientific article (1988), Schryer communicative genres in veterinary medicine (1994), Yates and Orlikowski (1992) organizational uses of e-mail. These studies start from the assumption that studying genre involves more than studying recurrent textual features.

It is mainly through the work of Yates and Orlikowski (1992) that this school of genre analysis was introduced to new media researchers. As of yet, two major and strikingly different studies on the weblog have applied this school of genre analysis (Herring et al. 2005; Miller & Shepherd 2004).⁷ Herring et al. primarily set out to empirically investigate “what blogs are actually like or what uses of blogs are most common” (Herring et al. 2005, 143). They employ content analysis to quantitatively identify the structural features of 203 randomly selected weblogs. Importantly, their studies have shown that mainstream media and early weblog research have exaggerated the extent to which weblogs are interactive. By focusing on formal characteristics, Herring et al.’s genre analysis remains almost exclusively at the level of textual characteristics, just one of the four dimensions of genre Paré and Smart view as constitutive. Their emphasis on what is “actually there” aligns them with formalistic views of genres, despite their stated affiliation with the new rhetorical school. Herring et al. provide some demographic information of the weblog authors and also code the blog’s primary purpose, yet these elements of genre are marginal to their analysis. Somewhat reductively, the primary purpose is gathered from the nature of the content of the first page of the blog and divided into the categories diary weblog, filter weblog, and knowledge weblog. This division suggests that all diary weblogs share a communicative purpose.

Miller and Shepherd’s genre analysis does considerable work to problematize the generic purpose of the weblog and the cultural moment in which it came into existence and was deemed needed. They argue that the purpose of the weblog is not as unified as that of academic and workplace genres. They delineate the purpose of the weblog as a mixture of self-clarification, relationship development, and social control (Miller & Shepherd 2004). Centrally, their study deals with the current cultural forces that make this genre and the acts it allows needed. In sharp contrast to the quantitative genre analysis of Herring et al., Miller and

Shepherd offer an “interpretive rhetorical” analysis of the cultural moment that cultivates the weblog and of major a-list blogs (with large readership and lots of inbound links) and the practitioners’ comments about their practice. This study offers both a discussion of semantic features, formal features, and pragmatic action even if the pragmatic action of the weblog in their discussion (more analytical than empirical) resides on the part of the writer and her subject position. The pragmatic action of the reader is not in focus.

Neither of these valuable generic approaches to blogs pays particular attention to the reader as co-constructor of genre. This study takes a next step in the generic discussion of weblogs by focusing on genre enactments by readers through a robust, but not doggedly positivist, empirical grounding. This study touches on all four dimensions of genre Paré and Smart see as constitutive (semantic and textual features, composing processes, reading practices, subject positions of writers and readers), yet with an empirical and analytical focus on the latter two, the more or less invisible sides of blogging.

Reading Online

Let us now speak about reading at the level of the medium. Much has been made of the transformative potential of digital reading and writing; much has pointed towards the blurring of the distinction between writer and reader. Many critics have deemed the term reading inappropriate to digital activities and suggested that terms such as “user,” “participant,” “interactor,” “wreader” (Landow 1992) better capture the actions and choices in the new medium. I stick to the terms reader and reading as I believe the literary paradigm best characterizes the consumption of diary weblogs. Despite the multimedia dimensions, these diary weblogs retain the primacy of text. Terminology aside, if readers once were assumed to be passive, in the new medium their creative activity is assumed. In 1995, for instance, book historian Roger Chartier writes:

With the electronic text, matters will never again be the same. The reader can not only subject an electronic text to numerous processes (index it, annotate it, copy it, disassemble it, recompose it, move it) but, better yet, become its coauthor. The distinction that is highly visible in the printed

book between writing and reading, between the author of the text and the reader of the book, will disappear in the face of an altogether different reality: one in which the reader becomes an actor of multivocal composition. (20)

Chartier speaks about the potential of electronic reading in general terms. However, most theory building on electronic reading has been based on hypertext fiction and subsequently these propositions have been taken to be true of the medium as a whole. In hindsight the hypertext theory developed by Bolter, Joyce, and Landow in the late 1980s to mid 1990s could be viewed as the place of hyperbole. In *Writing Space*, Jay Bolter writes, “Now, in the electronic writing space, where every reading of a text is a realization or indeed a rewriting of the text, to read *is* to interpret” (2001, 183). Also, the new media scholars’ emphasis on the readerly pleasure involved in taking idiosyncratic preferably non-linear meaning producing paths through the text does not differ much from the conceptualization of the reader made by poststructuralist and reader response theorists of the 60s and 70s (by whom new media theorists have been heavily inspired). In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes declares, “It is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read that creates the pleasures of great narratives” (1975, 11). Reading and the potential pleasure therein is conceptualized mostly as a cognitive, meaning producing activity much concerned with formal aspects of the text, neglecting the myriad other dimensions in which readers engage with texts. Digital reading is still mostly conceptualized in line with early hypertext theory developed around a few relatively homogenous first generation hypertext fictions. As Jane Yellowlees Douglas points out,

If the earliest examples of hypertext fiction happen to represent a sophisticated play with chronology, completeness, and closure that draws many of its precedents from avant-garde print genres, it hardly follows that all hypertext fiction will resist privileging one reading of character or one set of choices for navigation through its network of potential narratives, or even that authors will plum for the conspicuously postmodern, over, say, the hallmarks of the mystery, the hard-boiled detective story, or science

fiction. Print fiction, after all, is hardly a monolithic story. (Douglas 2000, 39)

How has the reader been described in weblog scholarship? Jill Walker's definition of weblogs in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative*, deals considerably with the reader.

Most weblogs use links generously, allowing readers to follow conversations between weblogs by following links between entries on related topics. Readers may start at any point of a weblog, seeing the most recent entry first, or arriving at an older post via a search engine or a link from another site, often another weblog. Once at a weblog, readers can read on in various orders: chronologically, thematically, by following links between entries or by searching for keywords. Weblogs also generally include a blog-roll, which is a list of links to other weblogs the author recommends. Many weblogs allow readers to enter their own comments to individual posts. (2005)

Walker underlines the fact that weblogs are also hypertext. Like many other new media scholars discussing hypertext in general, Walker emphasizes weblog readers' opportunity to create their own paths through the text, by the choices made and through the links followed. She points to the interactive capabilities between weblogs and to a lesser extent within the singular weblog. Applying a strictly literary approach, Steve Himmer (2004) also points to the many hypertextual points of entry and exit to the blog text delimiting the author's ability to control the text. Arguing that in cybertextual works (including weblogs in that category) what is important is not the path/s the reader takes, but the many paths the reader could potentially take, Himmer rehearses the rhetoric of potentiality so fundamental to early hypertextual criticism, which continues to have repercussions. True enough, in weblogs the boundaries to other texts are unstable and the reader may move about subverting the chronological order. What I find problematic with this typical hypertextual focus is the neglect of forces other than the medium and the format that influence the reader's encounter with the text. As Kevin Brooks has identified, "the paths *chosen* by hypertext scholars have primarily led

around, rather than through, genre studies. The structure of hypertext has been deemed more central to its function or success than its generic affiliations” (2002, 341). This neglect is not unique to weblog research, but is in evidence in claims about the reader of digital texts across the board. Partly, this is due to the paucity of genres in the early days of the medium and the continuing reliance on theoretical claims based on a small number of rather similar early hypertext fictions. Partly, perhaps, this is also due to the desire for newness and uniqueness. Genre analysis bears the assumption that “genres come from somewhere and are transforming into something else” (Schryer 1993, 208), and, hence, paying attention to genre “denies the possibility of that uniqueness” (Bolter & Grusin 2000, 50).

Methodological Considerations

What Is This Report Based On?

This report is partly based on my presence in the field. Since November 2002 I have done what most readers do; I have read the weblog sites regularly and invisibly, i.e. not leaving any marks on the text by leaving comments or notes in the guestbook. In February 2003 I contacted the writers of aiyah.net, luckykat.com, and jaycine.com for the first time to ask for permission to do research on their sites (loobylu.com at that point was not part of my research project). Since that time the three bloggers have been most supportive of my project. To begin with I focused on their articulations of Chineseness and diaspora politics, and I have also discussed the readership solicited and maintained by various textual tactics (see Karlsson 2003; Karlsson in press). They have answered my many questions, commented upon my survey in progress and eventually linked to my survey on “how/when/why we read weblogs” while repeatedly encouraging their readers to take part in the survey. Having professionally lurked on these sites for two years, I had come to the conclusion that the only way I could reach a larger number of readers than the few giving comments on the sites and thereby leaving their e-mail address and/or site address was by constructing an online survey. Consumers of computer media are dispersed and those who do not interact visibly on the sites are difficult to reach. I deemed it more likely

that silent readers would participate in an anonymous survey rather than in an open call for readers willing to participate in e-mail interviews, which constituted the other methodological option I explored.

Structurally, the survey consisted of thematic sections. The different sections posed questions about how and why they ended up reading the weblog in question and their general reading habits of it, their possible sense of connection to other readers, their reading habits of weblogs in general, and demographics. The survey contained a mixture of closed, multiple choice, (42) and open questions (8), all in all 50 questions. The majority of questions were closed, allowing the respondents to finish the questionnaire in a reasonable amount of time. In many cases, the respondents were able to make open comments to the closed questions if they felt uncomfortable with the questions posed or the categories offered. They were also encouraged to e-mail me with any response to the survey they might want to communicate. Only a few did, yet there were many comments on the survey on the comment section on the different sites. Once my first conference report on the material had been written up and submitted, the bloggers encouraged the respondents to contact me so that I could e-mail them the then unpublished report. 59 respondents contacted me for a copy of the report.

Sample

The readers whose reading practices I investigate through the survey do not constitute a scientifically designed random sample. They are the readers of four specific independent diary weblogs, three of whom belong to a larger cluster of Chinese American diary weblog sites: aiyah.net, luckykat.com, jaycine.com. I identify these sites as a cluster based on my familiarity with the sites after having read them daily for three years. Efimova and Hendrick (2005) list six indicators of “life between buildings,” i.e. connections between individual weblog sites: meme paths, weblog reading practices, linking patterns, weblog conversations, indicators of events, “tribe” marks, group spaces and blogger directories. All six signs of “life between buildings” can be seen on these three sites. Rather slow meme paths can be seen on the sites, as topics and ideas travel these sites in an indirect conversational manner. There are rarely quotes and links to discussions at other sites. Reading and writing feed

into each other in a spiraling way, but in a slow and indirect manner. A look at the blogrolls reveals that the majority of their “daily reads” are shared. Profuse linking between the sites was prominent in the early days of the sites, the active community building phase. At present they link to each other moderately. Only occasionally do explicit weblog conversations occur, where topics broached on one weblog are referred to and elaborated by another blogger in the cluster. Linda of luckykat.com, Winnie of aiyah.net and Cyn of Jaycine.com have all met in person and written about their offline encounters on their sites. Their most important tribe mark is their connection to the webring ricebowljournals.com, a webring/online journal directory where the membership requirement involves having an active weblog and being Asian or of Asian descent. The mission statement of this webring reads: “Rice Bowl Journals is a cyber-collection of online journals written by Asians and those of Asian descent. It is a celebration of the Asian experience through online journaling and blogging, and a tribute to the wealth of Asian culture and its diversity” (ricebowljournals.com). Two of these Chinese Americans, aiyah.net and luckykat.com, are interested in crafts and link (non-reciprocally) to the Australian site loobylu.com, an “a-list” site (large readership and heavily linked to) partly about the daily life, thoughts and feelings of its author, but also very much about craft and design as the author is a freelance illustrator and partly uses her personal journal type blog to promote her art. [Loobylu.com](http://loobylu.com) is the fourth site where I conducted my survey. [Loobylu.com](http://loobylu.com) differs from the other sites partly by its more topical nature and its celebrity status and presence in other media.

As I will develop shortly, the consumption of these diary weblogs is heavily circumscribed by notions of sameness. Demographically speaking and to some extent discursively speaking, the readers constitute a rather homogenous group. In their writing about their reading, readers strongly demarcate the boundaries between the diary weblogs they like to read and those they view as poorly written, exhibitionistic, and pointless. Most can readily articulate the qualities they look for in a diary blog. Thus, the conclusions drawn from this study must only with great caution be applied to readers reading other types of diary weblogs.

Who constitutes the group of readers who actually responded to the survey? 923 valid responses were received to the survey. Numerically, the

responses from loobylu.com dominated, with 673 completed surveys. Yet loobylu.com has around 3000 daily unique visitors and an unknown number of rss⁸ feed readers. Aiyah.net, on the other hand, has around 120 daily unique visitors and no rss feed readers and I received 94 completed surveys, thus the response was comparatively high. 114 completed surveys were received from jaycine.com (around 300 daily unique visitors), and 43 from luckykat.com (250-300 daily unique visitors). Judging by the often elaborate answers to the open questions, chances are that the readers who responded to the survey are unrepresentatively committed readers. Also, judging by the great number of readers with weblog sites of their own, chances are that readers who are also weblog authors might feel more motivated to participate.

Survey Research and Discursive Cartography

Analyzing this material I employ different approaches depending on the different issues at stake. At times the material is used to map broad dispositions and usual habits. At other times, I will use the open narrative answers to reflect upon theoretical debates, here concerning the subject positions of authors and readers. The open questions have been analytically coded to identify recurring themes and metaphors. The narrative answers were analyzed employing tools and insights from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) in the main. I am less interested in what they “really” do than in the discursive schemata readily available for them to characterize, explain and evaluate their reading habits. Although I highlight variance among the answers, I focus more intensely on the most common discursive repertoires – thematics, story lines, constructions of the reading self. I perform a detailed, qualitative analysis of the narrative answers. Nevertheless, the discursive repertoires have been numerically aggregated in order for me to be able to construct a discursive cartography around the diary blog readers’ writing about their reading. Undeniably, this methodological procedure to some extent involves boxing in messy data into measurable units. Yet, there were clear thematic patterns that I believe give us the rough contours of a more “complex ideological map” (1997, 89) as Justin Lewis writes in his advocacy for non-empiricist uses of survey data.

The survey questionnaire, as a research tool, is not confined to the simple-minded search for the replication of media messages in audiences. If the transmission model of communication is replaced by a form of discursive cartography, it has the potential to map out the context in which messages are given meaning, to mark out the parameters of civic culture and the semiotics of commonsense (1997, 96).

Received survey practice tells us that surveys are used to test theory and to confirm hypothesis in a positivist manner. I constructed this survey exploratively in order to be able to interpret readers' engagement with the text. The numerical calculations you find here pertain to the readers responding to my survey – I do not produce statistics here. Even if I believe the discourses I map circulate among a larger group of diary blog readers, it is only with great caution that they can be applied to other groups of blogs and their readers.

The Broad Picture: Sociotechnical Context

Who Are the Diary Webloggers?

According to the January 2005 Pew survey, blog creators are more likely be

- Men: 57 % are male
- Young: 48 % are under the age of 30
- Broadband users: 70 % have broadband at home
- Internet veterans: 82 % have been online for six years or more
- Relatively well off financially: 42 % live in households earning over \$50,000
- Well educated, 39 % have college or graduate degrees (Pew 2005)

In some respects (broadband use, Internet veterans, relatively well off financially, well educated), the weblog creators in my survey resemble the typical weblog creator of the Pew report; in some respects (gender and age; they are females in their early 30s) they differ.

Profession	administrator within tech industries	administrator in higher education	graphic designer	freelance illustrator
Gender	female	female	female	female
Age	34	30	32	33
Place of living	Los Angeles, CA, USA	San Diego, CA, USA	Los Angeles, CA, USA	Melbourne, Australia
Urban/suburban/rural	suburban	suburban	suburban	suburban
Ethnicity	1.5 generation Chinese American (Hong Kong)	1.5 generation Chinese American (Taiwan)	1.5 generation Chinese American (Taiwan)	white Australian

Table 1. Weblog author characteristics

Claire of loobylou.com has been blogging since 1999, Winnie of aiyah.net and Cyn of jaycine.com since 2000, and Linda of luckykat.com since 2001. Thus, for some of them, their blogging activity alone makes them Internet veterans. Prior to blogging, Cyn had a personal website (created in 1997) and was an active chatter – she met her future British husband on a chat site. Winnie chatted at AOL. Linda was “addicted to” muds during her college years. Between 1994-1999, Claire mostly read but rarely joined in various music forums and e-mail lists. Thus, when starting their sites, they were no newcomers to the online environment.

Their sites, and, to a great extent, their motivations for keeping them, have undergone changes over the years, a fact which is often discussed on the actual sites and which they have also stressed in their e-mail communication with me. This is part of Linda’s story:

While surfing the web one day, I found a link to the Asian Journalist Webring as well as the Rice Bowl Journals. The curious person in me started reading a few sites and soon found myself identifying with a few of the writers who are around my age and from similar backgrounds (“1.5” generation Chinese-American women). Since I’ve always kept a written journal, I decided to start an online one because I really enjoy writing and I guess I longed for an audience. [...] One of the most surprising things

about having an active online journal has been the friendships I have forged with a few online bloggers/journalists. [...] Also, I have become a better writer since I started nearly four years ago. Reading others' blogs/journals have been very inspiring to me – sometimes when I don't feel like writing or when I feel like I have nothing to say, all I have to do is read a few of my favorite writers to be inspired. (e-mail communication, January 24, 2005)

Linda's story resonates with the others' stories about initial and continuing motivations for keeping a weblog. Self expression (which ranges from emotional outlet, exercise in putting one's thoughts together in writing, creating/finding a "voice") and community building emerge as dominant themes (see also Miller & Shepherd, 2004). These four diary webloggers do not document their life to keep their offline family and friends updated, which has been reported to be common practice (Nardi et al. 2004). They predominantly write for a circle of online friends, many of whom have diary weblog sites of their own. As seen in Linda's story concerning race/ethnicity, "sameness" looms large in the production and consumption of diary weblogs; Linda reports finding "sameness" through the webrings Rice Bowl Journals and Asian Journalist, whose membership requirement involves having a weblog/online journal and being Asian or of Asian descent. As Kitzmann writes, "Web-rings [...] play an important role in limiting the potentially alienating and overwhelming diversity of the online diary population by 'bounding' the sharing of diaries" (2004, 94).

The readers with sites of their own surface as the audience imagined. This imagined audience, somewhat separated from everyday offline life, allows the diary weblogger to cultivate a facet of the self which is quiescent in everyday life. "I have never presented a false self online, although I do present sides of me that friends in my real life may never see – or discuss thoughts and memories that simply do not arise in everyday conversation", Cyn writes in a December 6, 2004 entry she entitles "...faceted..." (jalcine.com). Not only do they speak of being able to express facets of themselves not generally shown to offline friends and family; they also stress the painstaking creative exercise involved. Winnie at aiyah.net, for instance, writes, "On Friday I wrote an entry and

changed, added and deleted it about 5 times. I couldn't get something down that I felt good about uploading. Yeah and that's what happened with Thursday's entry too" (<http://www.aiyah.net/scribble/01/jan01/012101.htm>). This comment speaks back to the generally held notion that the kind of writing we find in a diary, especially an online diary, is spontaneous, "to the moment" kind of writing, not crafted. Only very rarely do these diary bloggers post more than one post per day. Only very rarely are there markers in the text that signal that the writing is "to the moment," i.e. "I just received a phone call." As a rule, the diary writers do not post diary entries from work; they report needing a different time and place to compose their entries. "I sit down, I write," as Winnie at aiyah.net puts it in an entry (<http://www.aiyah.net/scribble/00/oct00/101300.htm>).

The Sites: Semantic Content and Technical Features

The predominant topic on the sites is the author's musings on daily life. Yet, the tone, the type of everyday events reported, and the kind of self-disclosure differ considerably between the sites. Committed readers of loobylu.com have followed the author Claire from the time when she dated her would-be husband, decided to let go of her stable design job and become a freelance illustrator, became a mother. The tone of this site is light and heartwarming, with stories and illustrations of everyday domestic life and craft pursuits. Winnie at aiyah.net initially used her site to promote various Asian American related sites and cultural events. She apologized when her writing turned personal. After a month of online journaling she writes: "So why do I ramble on about my life sometimes? That's because I haven't thought of new sites to talk about yet" (<http://www.aiyah.net/scribble/00/mar00/031100.htm>). The changes in tone, writing, and design of this site are tremendous (Feb. 1, 2000 - present). At present, her writing is highly personal, ranges from light, daily observations to less light-hearted feelings concerning discontent with work and larger life issues. In her relatively stable "about me page," updated once a year or so, Winnie describes her site to presumptive readers:

i'm not very good at writing this 'about me' page. i never have been, i never will. but yet it's an obligation of sorts since this must be one of the most clicked on pages in any given website. afterall, we all want to know about the author and creator of a personal website without having to read years of actual archived entries right? we all just want that simplified, concise, cliff notes version. unfortunately it doesn't exist here and yes, you do have to read my archived entries to get to know what I'm all about. there's about 4 years worth of writing here, so i hope you have a lot of time, patience and caffeine.

but what i will tell you is that i'm rather honest, sarcastic and have very real emotions. i like to believe that i am funny but i won't pretend to be the happy go lucky type because i'm not. i do use profanity to a certain degree so if that offends you, i'm sorry, but that's how i am. i will write based how i feel on any given day and won't compromise to be anything else but living in this very exact moment of life.

and i am not your typical asian girl next door.

(<http://www.aiyah.net/backbone.htm>)

The “about me” page is crucial for establishing a functional contract between the author and her readers. I would like to compare it to a “book jacket,” part of what Gérard Genette calls paratexts, signaling to readers if and how they should proceed. “Rather than with a limit or a sealed frontier, we are dealing in this case with a threshold, or – the term Borges used about a preface – with a ‘vestibule’ which offers to anyone and everyone the possibility of entering or of turning back,” as Genette writes (1991, 261).

Winnie separates her site into an online journal section, for frequently composed lengthy journal entries, and a blog section which is almost completely reserved to conversations with readers. This division can also be seen on Linda at luckykat.com, but their usage of the section differs. Linda uses her blog to report on her daily life, thoughts, and feelings in a frequent and brief “light” diary style and reserves her online journal section for lengthier, more crafted pieces in a more serious tone. On her site, the journal section is seldom updated. For instance, the journal archive for June 2004 contains only four entries. Cyn at Jaycine.com writes personally mainly about her domestic life and is strikingly open and

“raw” in her life reflections, as many of the readers responding to the survey note and appreciate. Her entries are of the long (typically around 10 paragraphs), crafted variety. A few months after the reader survey, she decided to password protect her site. On her newly password protected site, December 6, 2004, she comments on this development, “as with most newbies, i wanted to have anyone and everyone visit my site. then found myself feeling more private and closed as the years moved on, and i established a core readership. [...] i was feeling very protective with the arrival of sweet pea [her baby daughter] as well as my m [husband]” (jycine.com).

All four display caution about online identity management. All four protect the identity of their friends and family by using abbreviations and nicknames when mentioning them, as seen in the entry quoted above. Claire Robertson, author of loobylu.com is the only blogger revealing her full name; yet her site is a blend of personal musings and professional display. The others use their first names only. Winnie at aiyah.net sports photographs of friends and family; yet she has consistently avoided posting photographs of herself. Cyn posts photos of herself and her family in abundance, Claire and Linda post photos of themselves and their families, but do so infrequently.

	aiyah.net	jycine.com	luckykat.com	loobylu.com
First journal entry	February 2000	February 2000	May 2001	December 1999
Interval between Entries	on average 2 days	on average 3 days	on average 2 days	on average 3 days
E-mail link to site author	yes	yes	yes	yes
Notify list	yes (via e-mail)	no	yes (via e-mail)	yes (via rss)
Guestbook	yes	no	yes	no
Comments enabled	yes	no	yes	yes
Blogroll	yes	yes	yes	yes
Search function	no	no	no	no
Trackback	no	no	no	no
Links to other blogs	moderate	few	moderate	few

Links within the site	moderate	few	few	moderate
Links to other sites	moderate	few	moderate	moderate
Ads	no	no	no	yes (ads by Google)

Table 2. Site characteristics as of May 2004

Apart from links to other sites, which are scarcely to moderately featured, these sites do not carry trackback visualizing conversation between sites. Again, the predominant topic of these sites is the daily life, thoughts and feelings of their authors and while the authors seem to be highly influenced by how and what other diary bloggers write about themselves, the conversation between sites is seldom intense. The insite social interactivity enabled by the site components differs considerably within the four sites. Aiyah.net and luckykat.com have similar features; readers can interact in writing with the site author and other readers via the guestbook and the comment section, and with the author behind the scenes via e-mail. On loobylu.com the comments are actively used and readers of Claire's site can also contact her via e-mail.



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Died From
Preventable
Diseases After
the Tsunami.

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by Google

**The craft blogs I
check even if I have
to do it standing up
while I wait for the**

The fast and the furious August 27, 2005

Lately Amelia and I don't take a lot of walks. I am either working or cooking or driving us to and from shops, play dates, my mum's house, etc. Yesterday it was the most spectacular spring day and after lunch I decided we should hit the pavement and enjoy some of the springy (but unfortunately smoggy) air. Amelia climbed into her stroller and away we went. I can't remember the last time I took any exercise at all so it was a good day to start afresh.

After a good twenty minutes or so I was feeling completely exhausted and we ended up at our local playground. It's a run-down little place hidden away in a back street which we have nicknamed the 'secret park'. That makes it seem much more exciting and enticing than it really is, for in truth I find it kind of bleak and sad but it's the closest to home and Amelia enjoys it enough to visit it from time to time. I also

Site contents

[Archives](#)
[Out and About](#)
[A Month of Softies](#)
[Contact](#)

Diversions



Emiliana Torrini
Fisherman's Woman
I have this in the CD
player in my car and I
have even
contemplated driving

Image 1. LoobyLu.com

Yet, on all sites which feature comments and/or a guestbook, there is very little interaction between the posters; the readers use the comments to write to the site owner. In comparison, jaycine.com does not invite readers to participation via technological features as she does not feature a comment system or a guestbook, yet readers do contact her via e-mail. Invitations to readerly participation occur in the entries of all these weblogs, sometimes via outright questions to the readers, but mostly via the construction/invitation of a specific readership – an ideal reader (Karlsson 2003). These diarists have been present online for a long time and an explicit invitation of a readership was more evident in the early days of the site.

Who Are the Readers?

Demographics

The consumption of the weblogs with which we are concerned is severely circumscribed by notions of sameness to the site author: based on gender, age, race/ethnicity, educational level, profession, place of living. As Table 3 indicates, the majority of readers to these female authored sites are female; the readers, like the authors, are mainly suburban and urban, and the average reader age is just slightly lower than that of the site owner. They are highly educated. In the few instances where respondents have marked that their educational level is “some high school” or “graduated high school” that means that they are still in school, not that they left the educational system at that level. Most readers on all sites are professionals.⁹ Of the professional readers of loobylu.com a majority are art and design professionals (like the author Claire); of the professional readers of jaycine.com a majority are education professionals (Cyn is an administrator in higher education); of the professional readers of aiyah.net, a majority are engineers (unlike Winnie who is in business administration); of the professional readers of luckykat.com, a majority are in arts and design (like Linda, the site author). Further, the majority of readers are of the same race/ethnicity as the author (these categories are frequently blurred in the answers). Especially among the cluster of Chinese American diarists, physical location seems to be of utmost importance. There is a strong sense of U.S.-based, panethnic affiliation within this cluster of online diarists; the majority reside in California, which makes the diary sites a rather narrow diasporic meeting ground, despite the fact that the three Chinese American bloggers are connected to a webring centrally aiming to forge connections among Asians in the diaspora. I have elsewhere argued that similar experiential and discursive contexts, similar situated knowledges are of utmost importance for “getting” and wanting to follow these online lives. Discursive constraints seem to hamper the transnational diasporic connections (Karlsson 2003). Noticeable is that there are more than twice as many American than Australian readers to loobylu.com. Perhaps the topic of crafts and the site’s “a-list” status contribute to transcend national and geographical particularities in attracting a readership. Yet, in no significant way does

diversity at the national level indicate diversity when it comes to other social characteristics. Despite the Web's much-touted capacity to bring together people based on interest and other non-physical grounds for affiliation (Wellman & Gulia 1999), the readers of these sites seem largely attracted to sameness based on place, education, occupation, gender etc. Despite the odd reader declaration that supports the communities of interest hypothesis, "Loobylu means that there are more people out there than the dullards I deal with on a daily basis... it is a great way to expand your world view beyond the people you are forced to come into contact with" (30-year old female Canadian mapping technologist), most often the demographic similarities are such that the writers and readers could very well deal with each other on a daily offline basis.

	aiyah.net	jaycine.com	luckykat.com	loobylu.com
Gender	female 68 % male 30 %	female 83 % male 17 %	female 77 % male 23 %	female 93 % male 5 %
Average age	31	27	28	29
Age distribution:				
below 20	5 %	7 %	9 %	10 %
21-30	52 %	73 %	64 %	55 %
31-40	28 %	15 %	21 %	30 %
41-50	13 %	2 %	5 %	5 %
51-60	1 %	1 %	-	1 %
above 61	1 %	2 %	-	-
Nation of residence (3 most common)	U. S. 76 % (66 % of these reside in CA) Canada 4 % UK 5 %	U. S. 66 % (58 % of these reside in CA) Canada 7 % Australia 7%	U. S. 74 % (66 % of these reside in CA) Singapore 5 % Netherlands 5 %	U. S. 53 % Australia 18 % Canada 9 %
Ethnicity (3 largest categories)¹⁰	Chinese 42 % Asian 19 % Mixed 10 %	Chinese 30 % Asian 17 % White 10 %	Asian 28 % Chinese 16 % Japanese 12 %	White 71 % Mixed 3 % Asian 2 %

Urban/suburban/rural	suburban 49 % urban 43 % rural 5 %	suburban 53 % urban 41 % rural 6 %	urban 49 % suburban 44 % rural 7 %	urban 52 % suburban 40 % rural 8 %
Education:				
some high school	1 %	2 %	-	4 %
graduated high school	1 %	5 %	-	4 %
some college	21 %	21 %	16 %	22 %
graduated college	48 %	52 %	61 %	48 %
master's degree	23 %	17 %	21 %	19 %
Ph.D.	3 %	2 %	-	2 %
Occupation as of last week:				
working full time	70 %	57 %	65 %	57 %
working part time	5 %	16 %	5 %	12 %
have a job but not at work because of sick leave, etc.	2 %	2 %	5 %	2 %
unemployed	-	2 %	-	3 %
in school	15 %	20 %	21 %	18 %
keeping house, child caretaking	4 %	4 %	5 %	6 %

Table 3. Weblog reader characteristics (percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding)

Reading Histories, Patterns and Motivations

When constructing the survey, I assumed that the consumers of these diaries would also be consumers of offline autobiography in the form of print autobiographies and memoirs. My assumption was based on my years' long familiarity with the sites and their autobiographical nature with a strong narrative drive, resembling offline autobiographical writing. However, in the main, readers' responses refute this assumption. The greatest portion of aiyah.net and luckykat.com readers report seldom reading offline autobiographies, while the greatest portion of looby.lu.com and jaycine.com readers report reading print autobiographies every once in a while. On the follow-up question concerning conceived differences between diary blogs and offline autobiographical writing, a 30

year old female Chinese American administrator/aiyah.net reader comments:

interesting question. i've never really thought about it. i think i'm just really into the web/online stuff, so i like reading online journals better. i think i like a little doses that you get with an online journal. instead of a big heavy book. and autobiographies are more looking back ... as opposed to daily observations. and i don't think there are (I could be wrong) as many autobiographies that i would relate with. young, asian, geeky.:

Like the blog authors, most readers are no newcomers to the web, and a great portion participates in other social activities online, discussion forums in particular. As table 4 indicates, most have been reading blogs for quite a few years.

	aiyah.net	jaycine.com	luckykat.com	loobyly.com
Online journal site owner	yes 48 % no 52 %	yes 71 % no 28 %	yes 67 % no 33 %	yes 61 % no 39 %
Length of reading this blog: virtually since the beginning	5 %	7 %	14 %	5 %
3-4 years	9 %	13 %	-	11 %
2-3 years	32 %	26 %	-	18 %
1-2 years	24 %	15 %	58%	26 %
6 months - 1 year	11 %	20 %	9 %	15 %
1 month - 6 months	16 %	15 %	12 %	18 %
less than a month	3 %	3 %	7%	6 %
The greatest portion of readers read	everyday	a few times a week	everyday	a few times a week
Weekly hours spent reading blogs:				
0-1	12 %	17 %	19 %	13 %
1-2	27 %	29 %	21 %	25 %
2-5	33 %	25 %	23 %	37 %
5-10	18 %	14 %	23 %	15 %
10-15	2 %	10 %	9 %	4 %
15-20	2 %	3 %	-	3 %
20 +	4 %	1 %	5 %	1 %

The when of reading:¹¹				
in the morning	39 %	29 %	44 %	35 %
during the day	52 %	53 %	65 %	63 %
in the evening	40 %	52 %	65 %	42 %
just before going to sleep	14 %	19 %	19 %	10%
on the weekends	20 %	24 %	23 %	22 %
Began reading diary blogs in				
1995	5 %	4 %	-	3 %
1996	1 %	3 %	2 %	3 %
1997	2 %	6 %	2 %	6 %
1998	12 %	11 %	12 %	7 %
1999	10 %	11 %	19 %	12 %
2000	17 %	21 %	9 %	14 %
2001	18 %	14 %	19 %	12 %
2002	14 %	16 %	26 %	17 %
2003	14 %	11 %	9 %	18 %
2004	6 %	4 %	-	7 %
Participation in other social online environments:¹²				
chats	23 %	30 %	30 %	22 %
muds/moos	3 %	2 %	2 %	2 %
discussion forums	40 %	56 %	56 %	47 %
online games	18 %	14 %	14 %	12 %
other	5 %	7 %	7 %	12 %

Table 4. Reading habits

Also, importantly, a majority of the readers of loobylu.com, jaycine.com and luckykat.com are readers who also are producers of diary blogs of their own. On the question of what type of blog/online journal they read if they read other blogs (other diary blogs, filter blogs, or other) than the blog in question, an overwhelming majority (84 % of the loobylu.com readers, 91 % of the jaycine.com readers, 89 % of the aiyah.net readers, 93 % of the luckykat.com readers) answer that they mainly read diary weblogs. Many express a strong dislike for filter type

blogs, a minority report reading both types. For instance, a 39 year old female white American actor/loobylu.com reader writes,

I am an old-school journaller, I've been writing since '95 (I've actually been reading journals since '94, but you didn't have a box to check off for that), and I have in fact one of the longest running journals out there. Therefore I get all crotchety and irritated at the whole blog phenomenon. I do like some blogs, but they are mostly journals written in a blog style, the linky ones are a waste of time.

Whereas the production time and place of these diary blogs are predominantly located outside work, the consumption of them mainly (yet not exclusively) takes place during the workday. Most readers report spending a mere 1-2 hours reading blogs each week. Unlike most forms of pleasure reading/viewing (soaps, romances, women's magazines) which traditionally have separated the world of pleasure from the world of work, the reading of these blogs helps readers "get through the day," as a female 26 year old data analyst/reader of jaycine.com puts it. Weblog reading, it seems, mainly takes place in tiny interstices between work time and time for self. "It's a little escape during the day to read about someone else – it seems to be the same reason some would watch a soap opera or a movie, yet this is someone real, someone you can relate to. Loobylu experiences may help me gain insight on my own life or career," writes a US-American female 28 year graphic designer/reader of Loobylu.com.

Most often, the initial entry point to the weblog in question is another diary blog. Few respondents mention webrings or online journal directories as the places where they find out about blogs to explore. "So many wonderful journals I come upon via a string of links that when I look back, I have no recollection of how I found them" a 28 year old female American copy editor/ loobylu.com reader representatively writes. Not surprisingly, the greatest portion of loobylu.com readers report having been initially drawn to the illustratively rich site because of the design; the quality of writing comes in second place. Out of the six set alternatives design, quality of writing, humor, attitude, topics, sense of personal connection/identification, topic comes in fourth on the com-

paratively topical site, loobylu.com. The greatest portion of aiyah.net readers report immediately feeling a sense of personal connection/identification, and, for these readers too, the quality of writing comes in second. A reader of aiyah.net comments, “winnie and i are about the same age, same gender, same ethnicity, and we’re both married without children. i identified with her writing instantly” (female 31 year old Chinese American graphic designer). Most jaycine.com readers place quality of writing first and the second largest group of readers name a sense of personal connection/identification as the initial pull of the site. Most luckykat.com readers report being initially attracted to the site for the sense of personal connection and, here, too, writing is the second largest attraction to the site.

When asked to openly formulate what ingredients they found most important in an online journal, most respondents listed a number of characteristics. I have therefore numerically aggregated the desired characteristics. Below, you find the five most frequently stated ingredients.

	aiyah.net	jaycine.com	luckykat.com	loobylu.com
First most important ingredient	humor 33%	humor 40 %	humor 34 %	humor 41 %
Second most important ingredient	authenticity 28 %	good writing 33 %	nice design 31 %	nice design 31 %
Third most important ingredient	good writing 26 %	authenticity 27 %	content, topics 28 %	good writing 28 %
Fourth most important ingredient	ability to identify 18 %	photos 19 %	good writing 28 %	ability to identify 16 %
Fifth most important ingredient	photos 16 %	ability to identify 17 %	authenticity 22 %	authenticity 16 %

Table 5. What ingredients do you find essential in an online journal/weblog?

Across the board, humor emerges as the most frequently mentioned “must have” ingredient. Few, however, expand on the kind of humor they desire, or what this desired kind of humor adds to the site. Yet when you read the list of most wanted ingredients together with the qualities that make readers discontinue reading a site, a pattern emerges.

	aiyah.net	jaycine.com	luckykat.com	loobylu.com
First least wanted ingredient	infrequent updates 31 %	boring content 29 %	infrequent updates 36 %	boring topic 30 %
Second least wanted ingredient	boring content 24 %	infrequent updates 23 %	hard to relate 23 %	questionable values 14 %
Third least wanted ingredient	self-pity, complaining 12 %	hard to relate 19 %	boring content 19 %	self-pity, complaining 14 %
Fourth least wanted ingredient	bad language 12 %	misc. 16 %	bad design 19 %	hard to relate 13 %
Fifth least wanted ingredient	vulgarity 10 %	self-pity, complaining 12 %	self-pity, complaining 10 %	bad design 12 %

Table 6. What ingredients would make you discontinue reading?

Readers want “good,” “authentic” writing of an autobiographical nature, written in constant intervals and self-aware good sheer, yet not frivolity. A 24 year old female white American research assistant/reader of luckykat.com describes the ingredients she wants in an online journal in the following words: “Somewhat frequent update (a couple of times a week). Minimal frivolity (i.e. links about ‘which sex and the city star I am’). Serious content matter of a highly autobiographical nature.” A 34 year old female white American audio producer/loobylu.com reader describes the ingredients that make her discontinue reading, “occasionally I lose interest if they stop updating, or if it turns into a train wreck journal. By train wreck I mean someone who keeps making the same mistakes and doesn’t recognize that they are creating their own misery.” Hence, personal hardships can be related as long as the writer does not

get stuck with them. The words “development” and “progression” emerge again and again in the answers. Readers want just the right amount of openness and self-disclosure, not too much. “Too” is frequently used to demarcate the kind of blogs they read from others. Mainly they demarcate the blogs they read in opposition to overly personal teen type blogs and not personal enough political and academic blogs. “Too much” of this or that quality tends to take away from the carefully calibrated and much desired ingredient, authenticity:

Infrequent writing. Too much personal stuff, esp in teen blogs. (28 year old female Indian learning strategist/loobylu.com reader)

When the writer shares too much emotion or seems uncontrolled then I become uncomfortable. (36 year old female white American research scientist/reader of loobylu.com)

When one gets too detailed or goes fictional. (19 year old female Chinese American student/reader of jaycine.com)

Becomes too academic, becomes too political. (26 year old female white Australian librarian/reader of loobylu.com)

The demarcations made in the responses to the questions “what ingredients do you find most important in an online journal” and “what ingredients make you discontinue reading” present these readers as the “mid-brow” readers of the web. In Janice Radway’s *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (1997), she describes the desires of middle class subscribers to the Book-of-the-month by what she terms “middlebrow personalism,” which I think resonates strongly with the desirables expressed by this group of blog readers. Radway describes personalism as follows:

Personalism – as a way of marking the difference between their view of the human subject and those more dispassionate, highly intellectualized economic and philosophical conceptions of individualism [...] personalism evokes the sense of being personable, of exhibiting and attracting a congenial affect, of being ingratiating and attentive to the interest of others. [...] reading was considered at the club as an event for identification, connection, and response. (1997, 283f.)

Similarly, readers report how “Winnie’s site, like other online journals adds more personality and humanity to the web,” (aiyah.net reader) something which other types of blogs – “too academic, too political” – fail to do. Diary blogs provide these readers with an opportunity to momentarily connect to another human being during a busy workday. Most often, the diary blog is blurred with the person behind it, the text is the self.

Thus, readers are drawn to the sites partly by notions of sameness/identification, which surface as enhanced by the possibilities of consuming the diary blog/ the autobiographical persona in regular doses over time. The readers, desiring a carefully calibrated amount of self-disclosure and personal development, emerge as the mid-brow readers of the web.

Dimensions of Interactivity

The narrative answers I will analyze henceforth are answers to a cluster of open questions concerning insite interactivity that I believe elucidate conceptions of appropriate readerly behavior, the readers’ understandings of their and the authors’ position in/to the text.

- If you have decided to read only (lurk), why is that?
- If you have decided to be an active participant, why is that? (If you have decided to make your presence known, why is that? – jaycine.com)
- Do you feel that your presence makes an impact?

Before focusing on the answers to these questions, it seems appropriate with a delineation of my usage of the term interactive here as the term is one of the most widely used terms in studies of new media. Aarseth (2003) argues that the term has been so broadly used that it has lost its descriptive capacity; routinely and loosely the Internet is characterized as interactive. At its most basic and generally agreed upon level, “the term implies some degree of receiver feedback,” as Spiro Kiousis writes in his concept explication (2002, 357). In connection to blogs, the term has mainly signified two interactive dimensions: crossblog interactivity (conversations between weblogs, occurring for

instance by linking practices and trackbacks) and insite interactivity (ways in which readers can respond to the weblog on the actual site through comments, guestbook, e-mail link, etc.). It is the second kind of interactivity I focus on here, what Stromer-Galley calls “computer- or network-mediated human interaction. Two or more people use the channels provided by, for example, the Internet [...] to communicate with each other. The communication can occur in real-time or can occur in a time delay, as long as there is a response to the original message” (2002, 4). Hence, an (inter)active¹³ participant here is the kind of participant who visibly interacts with the site via the comments section and/or guestbook, and/or with the author behind the scenes via e-mail. Generally, commentators on the diary weblog with backgrounds in autobiography studies tend to forward the interactive possibilities as where weblogs as autobiographical acts innovate most radically (McNeill 2003; Serfaty 2004).

In my question about the activity of reading only, I invoke the term lurking, another term that needs to be addressed at this stage. Lurking is predominantly connected to asynchronous computer mediated communication (e.g. newsgroups) in which many communicate with many in an ongoing give and take and where not contributing to the discussion has been seen as detrimental to the group, as “free-riding” (Kollock & Smith 1996). I invoke the term lurking here because even if the reader/writer relationship on a weblog is asymmetrical with the writer controlling the space, in these cases much as an electronic landowner, on most sites there are spaces where many *could* communicate with many (comments, guestbook). A series of studies by Nonnecke and Preece (2003; 2004; Preece, Nonnecke & Andrews 2004) have refuted early claims about lurkers as not really part of the group and lurkers as free-riders who gain from the conversation but who do not contribute. They show that there are many silent and vocal ways of participating in an online group and that lurkers’ behavior is not detrimental to the group and is mostly accepted by other group members. Their studies shed light on the complex and situated action of not posting. They claim that the reasons for not posting are complex and idiosyncratic. In this last section, I will argue that for the silent weblog readers participating in my study, hovering silently at the edges of the text is a complex, but not an idio-

syncratic activity. It is an activity guided by assumptions of the do:s and don't:s of the genre.

Two recent studies on blogs (Herring et al. 2004a; 2004b; 2005; Gumbrecht 2004) have seriously questioned the early claims about the highly conversational nature of blogs (Blood 2002). As previously referred to, Herring et al. view weblogs as a bridging genre currently placed on the middle on a continuum between standard HTML web pages (with highly asymmetric reader/writer relations) and asynchronous CMC (with symmetric relations) while pointing out that the “interactive potential has yet to be fully exploited” (2005, 24). Gumbrecht uses the studies of Herring et al. as a starting point for an ethnographic investigation into weblog writers’ views on relations between writers and readers on the sites. She found that many bloggers view their blogs as a “protected space,” where bloggers could “have their cake and eat it too’ – they can control the content of their blogs, as well as receive feedback from their audience in a constrained setting” (2004, 2). This constraint has partly to do with the fact that only the blog authors can publish posts, the readers can only contribute in writing in the comments section and/or guestbook. Also, the blog authors Gumbrecht interviews point out the time lag in blog conversation compared to other kinds of computer mediated communication (i.e. instant messaging) as contributing to the sense of protected space. Blog authors need not immediately respond to readers’ comments.

The clearest pattern that emerges from my material is that most readers view themselves as readers only, i.e. readers who do not participate visibly in the conversational spaces on the site nor contact the author via e-mail. My main interest resides in the social, generic contract between readers and writers that create this constraint, the reasons why readers do not fully exploit the interactive capacities of the site. Deferring the analysis of the open answers for a moment longer, I find it beneficial here to unpack the “participate actively”/”read only” percentages somewhat.

As seen in figure 1, the percentage of readers who present themselves as silent readers is particularly high among the readers of loobylu.com (81 %).

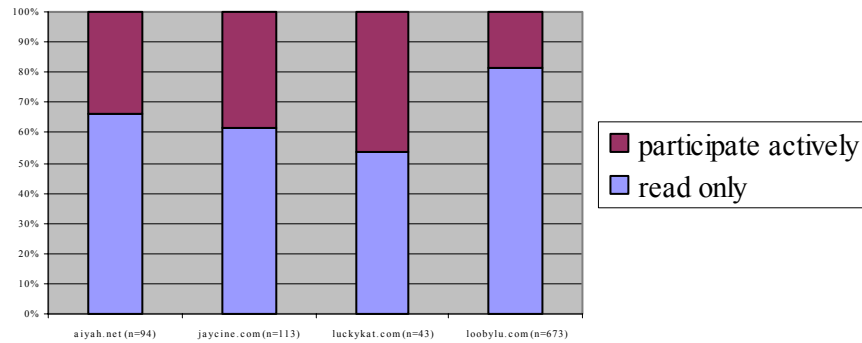


Figure 1. Do you participate in the interactive parts of the site or do you consider yourself a lurker?

In the cluster of Chinese American weblogs, readers with weblog sites of their own tend to participate more actively/visibly than those without. Loobyly.com readers with weblog sites of their own report participating actively to just a slightly higher degree than those without sites of their own, indicating that readers' knowledge of the sheer number of readers controls any impulse to visibly participate.

	total	active participation	silent reading/lurking
aiyah reader, weblog owner	45	44 %	56 %
aiyah reader, no weblog	49	24 %	76 %
jaycine reader, weblog owner	43	77 %	21 %
jaycine reader, no weblog	70	67 %	33 %
luckykat reader, weblog owner	29	62 %	38 %
luckykat reader, no weblog	14	14 %	86 %
loobyly reader, weblog owner	409	20 %	80 %
loobyly reader, no weblog	262	16 %	84 %

Table 7. Weblog owner/no weblog and active participation/lurking

Similarly, within the cluster of Chinese American weblogs, length of reading has a strong effect on the degree of active participation. Few readers who mark having read the site for less than a year report being

active participants, whereas an overwhelming majority of those who report having read the site “virtually since the beginning” or for over three years report being active participants. This pattern cannot be seen among the readers of loobyly.com. The majority of readers who report having read virtually from the beginning report being silent readers. Again, readers’ awareness of the great number of other readers influences their behavior. In addition, unlike the readers of aiyah.net, luckykat.com, and jaycine.com, several readers of loobyly.com expressed discomfort with the terms active participant/lurker and their dichotomous implications. “I mostly lurk, but on occasion, I will leave a comment,” a loobyly.com reader writes.

Narrative Answers on Interactivity

As a first step in my analysis of the narrative answers, the answers’ most prominent themes were identified. These themes point to larger discursive schemata often transgressing and making new connections among thematic categorizations. Nevertheless, I find it useful to build the discussion around this thematic analytical construct. The themes have been numerically aggregated in order to map the most prominent ones.

If you have decided to read only (lurk) – why is that?

The five themes which will be discussed here were dominant responses to the question “If you have decided to read only (lurk) – why is that?” on all sites, with just a slight variance in frequency between the sites: insecure about what to say, if/how it would be received; just enjoy reading; intrusive; don’t know her; don’t feel the need to say anything.

The discursive scheme which emerges most strongly in the category “insecure about what to say, if/how it would be received” is the various processes in which readers define their reading self in comparison to that of other readers. The commenting other reader can be too much like the self and this perceived sameness makes contributions superfluous. A 27 year old female Australian web designer/reader of loobyly.com writes,

Many sites I go to have a glut of “me too” posts – I try to avoid that by only posting or leaving a comment if I have something to say that hasn’t already been covered. However, when I find a site that attracts readers

similar to me (like Loobylu), usually someone has already said exactly what I would have said. I keep coming back because I feel at home, but I don't post to avoid repetition.

The underlying assumption is, if one finds a site one really likes, other readers will be so similar to oneself that the difference (in terms of what comments can be seen on the site) between commenting and not commenting is negligible. Concomitantly, if one perceives that one does not quite fit the mold of what, for instance, a jaycine.com reader is, the will to contribute is restrained. A 24 year old female Asian-American part time worker/reader of jaycine.com declares, "I feel uncomfortable. Cuz she's so much older than me. And she's a busy lady, I'm sure." As already stated in the section on demographics, notions of sameness are crucial to the consumption of diary weblogs. Not commenting can also involve making a strong demarcation between oneself and other commenting readers, who are seen as an adoring "syco-pack," as a loobylu.com reader puts it. As a rule, on these diary sites, if readers visibly participate, they tend to confirm the autobiographical performance. Very rarely do they engage in a critical exchange. Readers support. When asked whether she could recall any instances of offensive commenting on the site and whether she has seen the need to remove any comments, Linda at luckykat writes "I have received a few rude remarks on the blog page, but I always just left them there because my regular readers will actually jump in and speak up for me" (e-mail communication June 29, 2005).

Voice is another keyword that emerges as important here, and under most of the other thematic rubrics. The notion of voice surfaces as crucial to both the consumption and production of weblogs. A loobylu.com reader claims that she feels that she is not comfortable commenting on the site until she has "found her voice" online:

I'm still in the beginning stages of finding my voice online. I do have a journal online, but I keep it fairly private. So once I start to voice my opinions, my voice becomes louder... I'm still determining what I want my online presence to be, I think once I find my voice – then I will be heard in many forums. :) (25 year old female white American graphic designer/reader of loobylu.com)

What does finding a voice involve for blog authors/readers and what are the consequences of this emphasis on voice for the readerly/writerly subject positions deemed available? The loobylu.com reader who dares not speak until she has found her online voice, makes clear that finding a voice involves constructing a voice that will be able to monologically carry the self one wishes others online to see. As previously stated, the conversational, dialogic possibilities of the blog have been at the core of much scholarly discussion. However, outside the circles of theory, the many digital and paper manuals on how to blog that have cropped up during the last few years centre their advice on this issue of finding and keeping *a* voice. In his combined popular history of the weblog/manual for would-be bloggers, *Who Let the Blogs Out? A Hyperconnected Peak at the World of Weblogs*, Biz Stone argues

if you want some way to maintain quality control, it's best to keep in mind a core group of readers as you blog. This group will act as your beacon and keep your blogging on track. It will also help you keep your blog voice authentic. [...] Keeping your readers in mind will help you develop a consistent blogging style. In this way, your blog persona becomes a memorable brand that readers will want to visit again and again. [...] It's best to write like a real person about real stuff. (2004, 70, 72)

Consistency and keeping it “real” are keys to successful blogging, according to Biz Stone. The reader will want to sense that the autobiographical voice is grounded in a flesh and blood person, that the blogging voice is “she.” This autobiographical voice is constructed, but once constructed no marks of the construction should be in sight. This emphasis on consistency and celebration of “the one voice” clearly delimits what writers and readers, who in many cases are also weblog writers, can write. Following this stance further, on the individual sites the weblog author’s voice is paramount and the voices heard in the comment section, in the guestbook, and in the e-mails to the author should merely amplify, chime in harmoniously with the one principal voice.

The next thematic category “just enjoy consuming” is full of comparisons to other media and other genres, comparisons which explicate why these consumers prefer to consume quietly and not leave their marks

on the text. Above all, readers interrelate the diary weblog to a print book and a TV show. A reader of aiyah.net (28 year old female American financial analyst) frames her consumption in traditional readerly terms:

sometimes I have seen on other sites where there is too much interaction – the author seems to end up being afraid of writing particular things or offending specific individuals. Maybe I think that by letting her know me, it might alter her writing and really affect the wonderful writing that drew me to the site in the first place.

The reader does not want to alter anything; to author is to produce, to read is to receive without putting one's marks on the text. The comparison to TV invokes TV as a medium which does not make demands, a medium where the consumer traditionally is in no position/not required to make feedback. A loobylu.com reader stresses that she *uses* it like a regular TV show, "tune in, catch up, tune out." Similarly, another loobylu.com reader writes, "I *prefer* to read the site like a book (albeit one that is updated regularly) rather than actively participate (*italics mine*). This book comparison appears very much like the TV of the earlier comparison – a medium which does not make interactive demands, a medium where the consumer traditionally is in no position/not required to make feedback.

The two thematic categories "intrusive" and "don't know her" contain readerly fragments with a similar interpretive grid; the blog is viewed as giving the readers unmediated access to "her." It seems as if the readerly association with the paper diary, commonly considered to be the least constructed, least composed, and, time-wise the most immediate form of autobiography, lends further credence to the transparent immediacy of the blog. "It's probably because I feel that I'm intervening in her life – it's like the diary form is preventive, perhaps?" a 26 year old female Danish editor/reader of loobylu.com queries. For readers who do not have blogs of their own this is perceived as problematic, since the relationship is seen as being asymmetrical to their access to her, and with her having no access to them. This asymmetry, where readers feel they know the person behind the blog and the blogger does not know them in return, makes it a "one-sided friendship." Hence, "don't know her"

essentially means “she doesn’t know me.” And as readers without sites of their own have not channeled themselves into a blog of their own, mutual communication is deemed impossible. A 36 year old female Chinese American staff assistant/reader of aiyah.net, expresses this sentiment:

Although I have contacted Winnie in the past, I consider myself mainly a lurker now. I felt like I was being too forward. It seemed too one-sided since I don’t keep an online journal and felt it was unfair to Winnie. So, I’ve just remained a lurker for now. Perhaps when I am able to start my own online journal, I will get back in touch with Winnie.

The logic of immediacy hovers over these statements; “the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in immediate relationship to the contents of that medium” (Bolter & Grusin 2000, 24). The content is perceived to be Winnie, Cyn, Linda, Claire; persons channeled into the text. There is a desire to ignore the faceted textual construct that is the blogging voice. Again, at the same time as both readers and bloggers point out that the self to a certain extent is constructed in a faceted way, the blogging voice is nevertheless considered to be able to carry the person behind the blog.

For readers whose answers belong to the “don’t feel the need to say anything” category, communicating reciprocally is not deemed to be an essential feature of what one should do as a reader of diary weblogs. “Because I don’t feel the need to say anything. I’m her audience. I’m her silent fan. I like what she does and admire her for that, but I tend to be quiet” (23 year old Dutch female/reader of loobylu.com). Again, the ideology of the one principal voice and the perceived impossibility to speak if one does not have an established online voice support the activity of reading silently. Further, the hybridity of the weblog (most blogs contain interactive sections in addition to the authorial posts) is denied by readers who claim that they do not want to chat in the blog. None of the diary blogs I deal with is chat enabled. Yet, the reader expresses the sentiment (not unique to this reader) that the blog features beside the authorial posts comprise “extras” that can easily be ignored.

If you have decided to be an active participant, why is that?

So what are the motivations for the considerably smaller number of readers who do see themselves as active participants? The most prominent themes here were: show appreciation, support, encouragement; respond to a specific post; reach out, establish connection, make friends. The first two themes were dominant responses on all four sites. The third could only be said to be dominant in regard to the cluster of Chinese American blogs.

According to the readerly fragments in the “show appreciation, support, encouragement” category, the scriptural economy of weblogging involves “paying back” in the currency of appreciative feedback for the life stories/lives made available. A 21 year old female white Australian student/reader of loobyly.com writes, “We are invited into her life – commenting when I have something meaningful to say, or to show appreciation is a way of saying thank you.” Active participation for these respondents does not involve any more participants than the site owner and the reader, and most contact the site author to show their appreciation and support so that the writer will keep writing.

Under the rubric “respond to a specific post” fall mainly two categories of answers. One, represented by a loobyly.com reader, distinguishes her commenting behavior from those who respond to everything and anything and who do not contribute with new perspectives to the site. “I comment when I feel I can add something else to the post, or perhaps make a witty comment. I rarely post to say ‘I love your artwork’ because Claire has enough people saying that.” Note that this reader expresses that she adds to/interacts with the site, rather than with the blog author, which is the kind of interaction almost exclusively expressed by the respondents. The others speak of responding when something in a specific post hits an autobiographical chord in the reader and calls for a response, best received by the diary blog author.

I really didn't think I'd become active, but there was one entry with which I resonated to such a large extent that I did email Winnie about my thoughts and reaction. It was the first time I'd ever done something like that. Since that time, we've exchanged emails on occasion, and it's been a really wonderful experience. We've never met, but I do feel linked

to her in an interesting and important way. (33 year old female Asian-American psychiatrist/reader of aiyah.net)

These statements call to mind the already mentioned “personalism” Janice Radway speaks of in connection to “book of the month club” readers. “Reading was considered at the club as an event for identification, connection, and response” (1997, 284).

In the category “to reach out/establish connection/make friends,” readers speak of building friendships that surpass responses to the odd post. Significantly, these kinds of statements are much more prominent among the readers of aiyah.net, luckykat.com, and jaycine.com than among the readers of the “a-list site” loobyly.com. The notion of establishing a mutual friendship with a blog author with over three thousand daily visitors – “she’s almost like a celebrity in the world wide web, heh,” as a reader puts it – is deemed unlikely.

Do you feel that your presence makes an impact?

Few respondents answer in the affirmative to the question: “Do you feel that your presence makes an impact?” The few affirmative answers chime in with the motivations active participants express to explain their participation; a majority of the readers who do feel that their presence makes an impact explain that this impact is connected to the encouragement and validation they provide. The negating answers follow the logic that it is not for readers to make an impact; the impact should go in the other direction, from sender to receiver: “I don’t feel that I need to or should, it’s not for me to impact but for Claire to impact others,” an 18 year old female white British teaching assistant/reader of Loobyly.com writes.

For some, the autobiographical topic – “it’s Claire’s life” – is what makes it inappropriate for readers to make an impact. For most, the thought of readerly impact takes away credence from the authorial/autobiographical voice. The multivocality of the autobiographical act is denied. Instead, these readerly statements are allied with romantic notions of authorship and originality. According to this ideology of composition the text has one source, and that is the author. The attribution of content goes solely to her. The desire for the one source seems to be

reinforced by the autobiographical topic. The decision to write about the self and what to write about the self should not be solicited or mediated by readerly voices for autobiographical authenticity to be safeguarded.

The readerly responses to the questions on interactivity point to the endurance of the ideology of both authorship and autobiography. The diary blog form appears postmodernist (in its technologically inscribed multi-voicedness, in its relation to other texts/other selves, in its open nature whose ending is deferred); however, the readerly assumptions are steadfastly modernist. To a great extent, readers' conceptualizations of their position in and to the text and its author are framed by the autobiographical landscape of print diaries, memoirs, autobiographies informing readers what kinds of readerly positions that are available in a text where the author=narrator=subject. Just because the frontier between the reader and writer is no longer impassable does not mean that readers pass, or even wish to pass.

Concluding Discussion

The restriction of this study to the readers of four diary blogs limits the generalizability of my findings, but has facilitated my attempt to map the semiotics of common sense surrounding the consumption of diary weblogs among a certain group of readers. Speaking of blogs in an undifferentiated manner – as one genre – is misleading, as blogs span a wide spectrum of uses (for both producers and consumers). Clearly, blog is not a self-descriptive term and, accordingly, local understandings of genre emerge among various clusters of blog readers/writers.

Demographically, the readers who responded to my survey, like the site authors, are well-educated females in their early 30s living in major metropolitan areas. In the main, they look for “good” serial writing of an autobiographical nature which makes them feel that they can reach out and connect with other, similar lives. Readers want to regularly follow and connect with lives similar to their own (in terms of gender, class, occupation, etc.). Who they are – socially categorically speaking – is offered as an explanation to what diary blogs they read. They start out surfing for some degree of sameness and remain loyal to diary sites where they feel that a persistent autobiographical voice can be heard.

At the diary site, the vast majority of readers do not make their presence visible in the blog spaces allotted for readers. The diary site is described as primarily belonging to one voice, the author's, and as a reader one should mainly support and chime in with the principal voice. Weblogs have been hailed as places for collective creativity and places where dichotomies between reading and writing and reading and speaking are called into question (Mortensen 2004). Conversely, the discursive purchase of interactivity and co-creativity among this set of readers is remarkably low. As shown, these readers seem to be discursively guided by assumptions about writers' and readers' quite separate activities. The readers' statements support Bazerman's claim that "when we travel to new communicative domains, we construct our perception of them beginning with the forms we know. Even our motives and desires to participate in what the new landscape appears to offer start from motives and desires framed in earlier landscapes" (1997, 19). Even if most of these readers are not heavy consumers of offline autobiographical writing, they still draw on the idea of an "autobiographical contract" when describing their relation to the text and their preference to "read only." Genres have "long, ramified, intertextual, and inter-generational memories" (Freadman 2002, 40), motivating and constraining the reader to take up a certain position in/to the text. By referring to a system of other genres/other media, readers describe both their desire to interact with the text in the first place, as well as justify their activity in the text. My focus on the "invisible sides" of diary blog reading has illuminated the discourses readers bring to the text.

Lena Karlsson currently (2002-2006) holds a postdoctoral fellowship at the Centre for Gender Studies at Lund University, sponsored by the Swedish Research Council. Her current research focuses on a community of female Chinese American online diarists connected to a webring that seeks to foster contacts between webbloggers/online diarists of the Asian diaspora. Key areas of inquiry include: the remediation of the diary, community formation around autobiographical texts, online diaspora politics.

E-mail: lena.karlsson@genus.lu.se

Notes

1. Trackback, as defined by Wikipedia, “allows a blogger to see who has seen the original post and has written another entry concerning it. The system works by sending a ‘ping’ between the blogs, and therefore providing the alert. TrackBack typically appears below a blog entry and shows a summary of what has been written on the target blog, together with a URL and the name of the blog” (Wikipedia 2005).
2. Some claim that the very first website, created by Tim Burners Lee in 1991 in which he indeed filtered web content, was the first weblog (Winer 1999).
3. K-log is an abbreviation for knowledge weblog which is the kind of weblog kept by an organization/institution for knowledge management purposes.
4. These are Henry James’s words, used to describe the novel.
5. Crowston and Williams’s (2000) early study of genres of communication in use on the Web has been influential. They classify offline genres adapted to the web as “reproduced” and new genres, native to the web, as “emergent genres.”
6. On various forms of online identity play, see for instance Lisa Nakamura (2002) and Sherry Turkle (1997).
7. For a pedagogical approach to weblogs and genre, see Brooks, Nichols and Priebe (2004).
8. Weblog reading tools which enable readers to subscribe to blogs rely on RSS, “Really Simple Syndication” or “Rich Site Summary.”
9. Since most of my respondents are U.S. nationals I have employed the categories in the *U.S. Department of Labor’s Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2004-2005 Edition*, to categorize occupations (U.S. Department of Labor 2004-2005).
10. These categories are based on the readers’ own descriptions, not ready-made categorizations. The categories ethnicity, nationality, and race were often blurred in the answers. A minority of those who answered that they were white added nationality after having declared themselves white (this mainly pertains to the readers of looby.lu.com). Notably, readers of looby.lu.com expressed irritation or reluctance over being asked to describe their ethnicity, which, they expressed, had nothing to do with the blogs they read.
11. Here, respondents were able to mark several options.
12. Here, respondents were able to mark several options.

13. I am wary of the pitfalls of using the term active here; it might imply that readers who do not interact in writing are “passive” readers who receive the text in a straightforward way as intended by the sender.

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