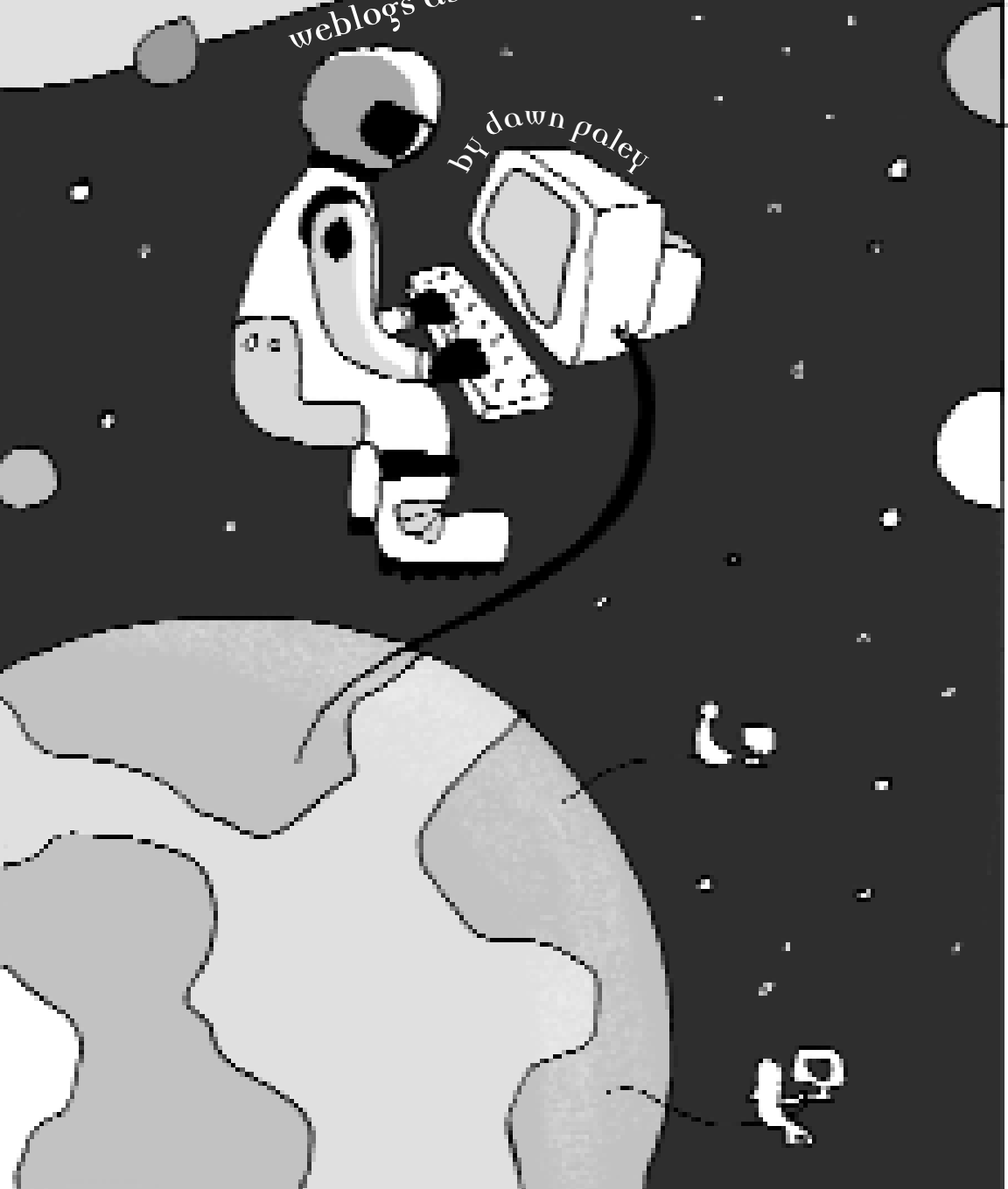


# RE/WRITING

weblogs as autonomous spaces

by dawn goley



# MEDIA



Since 1998, a new form of communication has emerged and flourished, encouraged by the combination of internet users wishing to share information and the development of free, easy to use platforms. Wedded to self expression and existing mainly outside of the monolith of mass media, weblogs—commonly called blogs—are a new form of media whose uses are just beginning to be understood and theorized. Blogs have become important tools for activists and independent thinkers around the world, allowing for the creation of new spaces for self expression, knowledge sharing, and networking online.

A weblog is basically an online journal, a space where ideas and actions can be documented and shared without restrictions around format or major technological know-how. The new possibilities that weblogging offers as a form of autonomous media are worth considering from an activist's perspective—as space for self-publication and as a new medium for information gathering. Weblogs can be conceptualized as the ultimate form of autonomous media, whereby an individual completely controls the content of her or his own blog. However, most bloggers (or blog editors) are working complex online and offline networks, which mediate and determine, at least in part, the content of their weblog.

With the rapid development of information technology in the twentieth century, there has been a return to the idea that these technologies will benefit the masses. A few years ago, some folks started talking about blogs as the beginning of online freedom, and the term “blogging revolution” actually had currency for a while. But it is vital that in addressing the values and possibilities of blogs, we remain grounded in practice, not off in some online utopia. That said, to properly introduce the blog as a tool for activists will also require an analysis of the limits of weblogs and of their usefulness for media activism.

## welcome to the blogosphere

The first weblogs began to appear in 1998, in what was then a realm confined to true techies for whom the main topic of discussion was technology and web development. Seven years later, most blogs use free platforms, which allow them to update a simple interface with text or images without having to manipulate complicated html or javascript codes. The development of this user-friendly software late in 1999 led to an exponential growth in weblogs, and today there are an estimated three million weblogs online.

from: rebeccablood.net  
subject: weblog description

message: 

The weblog is at once a scrapbook, news filter, chapbook, newsletter, and community. <sup>1</sup>
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The name weblog reflects the original use of the technology—blog editors would comb the internet for sites and information that caught their attention, and then post it, keeping a sort of online logbook. The form and style of blogs changed as they became widely adopted as modes of self-publishing. Blog editors post comments or links that are of interest to them, on any topic that they please. There is no such thing as an expert blogger, people with blogs come from many subjectivities to share information online. Many blogs take the form of online journals, with links and text, however, the diversity and number of weblogs in existence today makes any generalization of what constitutes a blogger style difficult to justify.

The distinguishing feature between weblogs and websites is that a weblog is updated more frequently—often more than once a day—with the newest entries appearing at the top of the page. Weblog entries, called posts, are the main content of the blog, the idea being that if you find a weblog you like, you can check back the next day for a new post. Returning to the same site numerous times can result in an exchange of information between the blog editor and the visitor, creating links between them, and expanding blogger networks.

Another feature which was initially unique to weblogs is the easy to use comment form, where blog readers can leave their response to a post

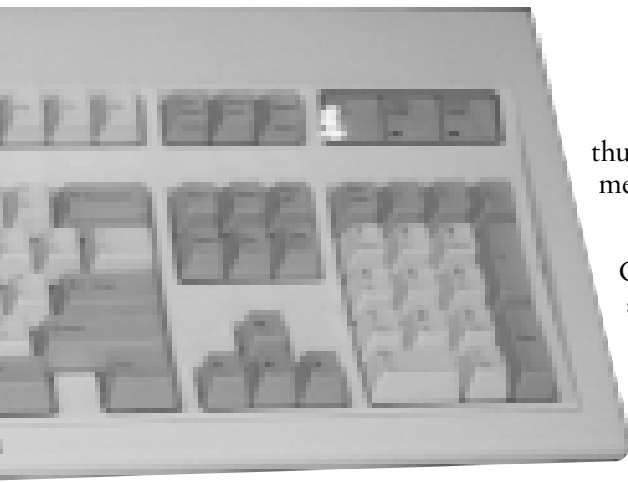
instantly and easily. Popular blogs may receive dozens of comments on each post and blog editors often use their own comment form as a method of replying to those who have left comments on a given issue. Posting comments can be an anonymous and safe venue for people who wish to have their say but are not ready to reveal their political stripes, or it can be a personalized way of asking the writer to visit your own blog.

Blog users today range from school teachers posting activities for their students to corporate media reposting their top stories in a keep-'em-coming-back weblog style. Part of the mainstream discussion around blogging is centred on the ambiguity of the word blogger, which is as open to interpretation as the word writer. Instead of getting into a debate on semantics, I would like to concentrate on conceptualizing weblogging as a participatory, autonomous media with the capacity of encouraging social change. Central to this possibility are activists; for whom weblogs can serve as tools for self-publishing, archiving, and the documentation of struggles.

### **a view from the inside**

Since there are no rules or definitions for how to write a weblog, subjectivity is both a strength and a limitation of the medium. The majority of weblogs are personal journals and diaries that do not move beyond intimate life stories and day-to-day events. However, for activists interested in publicizing their struggles or for independent journalists posting from the field, blogs offer a space for more serious discussions. Through links to primary sources, organizations, and other media, activist bloggers can legitimize their own content at the same time as they raise awareness about other resources on the web.

Activists using weblogs to post material related to the organizations they belong to and the struggles in which they are involved are keeping a public record of their activities while at the same time archiving their thought process. The dual nature of this type of content results in unprecedented possibilities of sharing often private struggles with a larger public, and asks that our traditional ideas about who makes media be thought through again. This is particularly true because activists who do not consider themselves writers in any traditional sense, are contributing to new media production online. Furthermore, they are challenging the supremacy of mainstream media by producing their own subjective media, and are



thus participating, indirectly, in the media democracy movement.

I started blogging about British Columbian politics in early 2002, a time when I was also very active with community groups and grassroots organizations in the greater Vancouver region. My weblog was useful as a tool to document and archive the sources that I was using to arm

myself with knowledge against an information manipulating government. I was able to make links directly to sections in the HANSARD index (transcripts of parliamentary proceedings) or corporate annual reports to back up my arguments, and would often restyle text from my weblog and post it on Vancouver Indymedia or send it to my local newspaper.

Through cross linkages with bloggers working on political issues in British Columbia, I came to know other people in my region writing on similar issues. This virtual network allowed me to read citizen and activist perspectives on what was actually happening in B.C. politics and allowed my readers to access a young feminist's written work, which may otherwise not have been available.

Opening on the global, blogs have allowed marginalized voices to emerge online as seeds of resistance against information monopolies. The best example of this is likely that of the Baghdad blogger, known as Salam Pax, an Iraqi who updated his blog from Baghdad during the U.S. invasion that began in 2003. Writing in his blog titled *WHERE IS RAED?*, Salam Pax offered a subjective, on the ground view from occupied Baghdad that was missing in mainstream media. His links and writing referenced other Iraqi bloggers and information sources, allowing visitors to his blog, to access independent information coming out of Iraq.

Another fine example of an activist blog is *librarian.org*, where Vermont-based librarian and anti-censorship activist Jessamyn West has been posting since 1998 about issues of concern to librarians and readers in general. Explaining the content on her blog, which she updates daily with an inside

view of the way libraries work in America today, she writes, “I’m not a reporter, but I like to think that I help people access the news.” To this she adds, “The explosion of library weblogs and websites over the last several years makes me happy; news is less likely to fall through the cracks.”<sup>2</sup> This comment points to the strength of weblogs from an activist’s view—they provide information that is otherwise missing from the mainstream media.

In B.C.’s Okanogan Valley, activists working to start a campus radio station have been using a weblog to disseminate information about their media project to a wider public. Cameron Baughen, who’s behind the weblog, explains that their “weblog allows people to quickly see what we have accomplished, keeps a history of our exploits, and means people don’t have to rely exclusively on email.”<sup>3</sup> Posting links and minutes from meetings allows the group to stay organized and to pass its link to newcomers, reporters, or other people interested in their project, bringing them up to speed on the status of the organization.

Some go so far as to argue that blogging is journalism, however the real stuff of journalism—working on the terrain, doing interviews, and using quotes—is most often missing from blogs. In the world of blogs, the burden of proof is on the writer, and in terms of ethics, Rebecca Blood has suggested six standards bloggers should strive for. These include linking to online references, posting only what you believe to be true, correcting mistakes but never deleting or rewriting any entry, noting questionable or biased sources, and disclosing any conflicts of interest.<sup>4</sup>

That said, a blogger is not automatically a journalist, but weblogs have been used by independent journalists as permanent or temporary spaces to publish their writing and work. The patagoniaboliivia.net project is a serious but alternative independent journalism project I worked on with a colleague journalist in Latin America. We used a blog template to publish our work, included links to alternative media groups in the regions we visited, and we posted everything from researched journalistic articles to free flowing poetics and photos for our readers. The value of blogs as a tool for journalists (and especially independent/alternative journalists) is



immense, as they bring to fruition instant self-publishing accessible to a wide audience, a feat which was unthinkable ten years ago.

## spinning the web

The idea of a weblogging community stems from the practice of bloggers checking other blogs and commenting on them, using a hyperlink to allow the reader to visit the blog in question. Linking between blogs is a form of networking, by which a blogger can record her or his feelings on the usefulness or accuracy of another blog or information source. It is also a way of inviting readers to check out other blogs and information sources. Each blog therefore acts not only as a storehouse for information but also as a point of connection with other blogs, and in this way organic, non-hierarchical networks of weblogs are formed.

from: <Jessamyn West> librarian.net  
subject: community use for weblog

message:

I'm not a wide-eyed evangelist about it, but I think [weblogs] can serve a useful purpose for a community organization like the library, to communicate to people so they can use the organization more effectively.<sup>5</sup>

Keeping with the initial tradition of blogging, some blog editors concentrate on linking to other weblogs as priority number one, and thus aim to be a central network node based around a particular theme or region. The lefty directory is one of the few activist blog directories currently online, offering links to over 600 weblogs that, according to it, are “not part of the dominant Conservative/Libertarian blogosphere.”<sup>6</sup> Using this type of site as a launching pad allows a curious reader to browse a wide variety of progressive weblogs and to access independent information from around the world.

Many activist collectives are currently using blog templates to publish news and information in a way that allows group maintenance of an activist news portal, a space for alternative news with an emphasis on networking between activist groups. Autonomy and Solidarity, for example, was started by a network of activist groups across Canada, whose members post news stories onto a main page on a daily basis. The Autonomy and Solidarity page functions as, to use their words, a “political network through which to explore the questions and debates that have

been raised within the new anti-capitalist movements.”<sup>7</sup> Guests can log-on to the site, which is linked to other news sites as well as to regional groups, and leave comments for each article. Clicking on one of the featured regions results in news-feeds from activists in that region, as well as links to regional activist groups.

One of the differences between weblogs and other autonomous media like Indymedia is that with Indymedia, there is an open publishing policy that lets anyone post. How to manage open publishing has often dominated internal discussions in Indymedia, as folks dedicated to a truly open media site grapple with trolls overloading the server with comments or posting hate material. Most blogs are less open. They let guests post comments, and others, like collective blog metafilter, let people post threads (new topics) after they have registered and made a few comments, in the name of “getting a feel for the place.” If someone is posting material that the editors of a weblog consider inappropriate, it is up to the editors alone to remove those postings and ban that person from publishing.

Group-edited blogs are, in some instances, kept by friends living in the same region. These blogs represent another kind of online network, where a chorus of complementary voices can converge and offer varying viewpoints. Other times, editors may not know each other and have decided to join forces in order to strengthen content and have a more regularly updated blog. Znet, one of the heavyweights in activist media today, has recently started a blog where major left/radical thinkers and journalists are given space to post writing and commentary on current events. Checking the Znet blog is one way of tapping into the thoughts and ideas of people working for change, without necessarily reading a formal article or a long essay.

### millions of blogs, millions of missing voices

Despite the many positive aspects of weblogging, it is important not to forget that this is a new medium with an uncertain future and that although weblogs are tools that contribute to online media participation, they are not stand alone strategies for activism. Looking at some of the weaknesses of weblogs can help in the development of theories on what a more inclusive future for online media and activism may look like.

from: <loboy> lowcolabs.com  
subject: techies only

message: 

If you don't have the tech, you're basically not invited. <sup>8</sup>
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The first and most serious weakness in regards to all forms of online media is accessibility. The online public is relatively small, and the so-called digital divide in Canada alone attests to the many barriers still standing between online media and marginalized communities. Most internet users with time to burn online updating and reading blogs are young, urban, and financially stable, resulting in what some have called an incestuous community of online media activists. To help narrow the gaps created by age, gender, language and income in internet use, technological skill sharing needs to be a parallel strategy alongside all types of online alternative media activism. Weblogs are an ideal vehicle for exchanging skills, because they are relatively simple to update and use, and they're free—at least for the moment.

Another serious limitation to alternative media proponents online is the corporatization of the internet. The recent release of the omnipresent search engine Google's shares on the stock exchange, combined with the company's purchase of Blogger, a top blogging interface, is a distressing concentration of online information and services in the hands of a corporate few. Many companies are beginning to introduce paying versions of blogging software, further restricting the number of people who will be able to blog. In their free (and ad free) form, blogs as they exist today are accessible tools for wired activists, and the end of free weblogs would mean a sharp decrease in blogs for budget writers.

The individual nature of blogs, in that they are normally updated by one person, may also be a factor dissuading activists from contributing and using this form of expression, and tending towards bigger online projects such as Indymedia. Conceptualizing blogs as functioning within a wide ring of autonomous information sources, and encouraging multiple editor projects and strong networks can reclaim collective spaces using the simple and accessible tool that is a weblog.

from: <David Weinberger> hyperorg.com/blogger  
subject: community use for weblog

message:

What is the whole truth about blogging?  
There isn't one, any more than there's a  
whole truth about conversation or book  
publishing.<sup>9</sup>

A fourth limitation revolves around language. Blogs and blogging platforms are available in many languages, opening the channels of communication to the online public in many parts of the world. However the vast majority of online resources are in English, Japanese, and European languages. This adds to massive global imbalances in online participation and can create problems in initiating a truly international solidarity online. Moving towards a more multilingual online environment by encouraging activists to work on translations as part of their writing is another possibility for a more effective information network through weblogs.

Lastly, the sheer number of weblogs out there is a hindrance to the effectiveness of blogs as a medium for activists. Someone seeking out blogs for the first time will likely get stuck in a quagmire of personal blogs that have their own value, but that do not fit the description of media or political activism. This weakness reaffirms the need for stronger blogging networks and activist blog databases that facilitate a “progressive navigation” through weblogs.

### looking forward, linking back

The big question is whether weblogs, when used by activists, have the potential to upset the status quo. Sharing information online and reading information written by citizens can help advance particular causes, but not without parallel action outside of the online sphere. Investing large amounts of time online, or confining one’s actions to online endeavours is indeed likely to result in one’s actions reinforcing dominant media and beliefs. A blog can easily be lost among a flood of others with no net benefit to society as a whole.

Yet, we cannot underestimate the social implications of a form of media that, whatever the content, represents a challenge to the corporate mass



media machine. Media democratization is about the re/claiming and re/creation of spaces within which to communicate. Blogs are changing the way information is seen, created, and consumed.

Publishing online as one part of a range of political activities can be a very effective way of raising awareness of any given cause. Macro examples of this include Indymedia coverage of anti-war demonstrations, which works both to notify people of the event, as well as to provide alternative coverage of these demonstrations, thereby creating a memory of these events, and buoying spirits. On a micro level, an activist's blog may lead someone—searching for a particular local issue—to a view point and links to other sources that are alternative to the information they receive in other media.

Strengthening the online facet of struggles for social and environmental justice means widening the base of activists that use blogs—as more activists start using weblogs to document their struggles, the possibilities for solidarity and learning across issues and across borders multiply. Working together, an effective network of activist weblogs can bring the experiences of people working for change onto the screens of many. Tighter and more comprehensive links between activist weblogs is the next step, as all the tiny cells organize into a force capable of encouraging great change.

If access to the internet can be improved, there is a distinct possibility that publishing online will have greater impact on wider communities. If social justice movements are to gain sustained, broad-based momentum over the internet, it will come as a result of hard volunteer work on behalf of many people working face-to-face in communities with grassroots activists, sharing technological skills. The accessibility of blogs creates the possibility of learning and teaching technology that allows self representation, and opens the door to moving marginalized voices into the public sphere.

## notes

<sup>1</sup> Blood, Rebecca. "The Revolution Should Not Be Eulogised," Published online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/online/weblogs/story/0,14024,1108306,00.html> [accessed January 15, 2005].

<sup>2</sup> West, Jessamyn. "About librarian.net," Published online at: <http://www.librarian.net/about> [accessed January 15, 2005].

<sup>3</sup> Email interview with Cameron Baughen. March 15, 2005. Published online at: <http://ouc-radio-crtc.blogspot.com/> [accessed January 15, 2005].

<sup>4</sup> Blood, Rebecca. "Weblog Ethics," Published online at: [http://www.rebeccablood.net/handbook/excerpts/weblog\\_ethics.html](http://www.rebeccablood.net/handbook/excerpts/weblog_ethics.html) [accessed January 15, 2005].

<sup>5</sup> Chaney, Keidra. "Catalog This: An Interview With Activist Librarian Jessamyn West," Published online at: [http://www.frictionmagazine.com/politik/wave\\_makers/west.asp](http://www.frictionmagazine.com/politik/wave_makers/west.asp) [accessed January 15, 2005].

<sup>6</sup> Linse, Brian. "Sunday, July 18, 2004," Published online at: <http://newleftblogs.blogspot.com/> [accessed January 14, 2005].

<sup>7</sup> Autonomy and So. "An Introduction to Autonomy & Solidarity," Published online at: [http://auto\\_sol.tao.ca/node/view/2](http://auto_sol.tao.ca/node/view/2) [accessed January 14, 2005].

<sup>8</sup> Loboy. "11.04.2004," Published online at: <http://www.lowcolabs.com> [accessed January 14, 2005].

<sup>9</sup> Weinberger, David. "Comments, February 17, 2005." Published online at: <http://www.hyperorg.com/blogger/mtarchive/003704.html> [accessed March 25, 2005].

## web resources

Autonomy and Solidarity: [auto\\_sol.tao.ca](http://auto_sol.tao.ca)

Indymedia: [indymedia.org](http://indymedia.org)

Lefty Directory: [newleftblogs.blogspot.com](http://newleftblogs.blogspot.com)

Librarian.net: [www.librarian.net](http://www.librarian.net)

Lowco Labs: [www.lowcolabs.com](http://www.lowcolabs.com)

Metafilter: [www.metafilter.com](http://www.metafilter.com)

Okanogan University Radio Project: [ouc-radio-crtc.blogspot.com](http://ouc-radio-crtc.blogspot.com)

Patagoniabolivia: [www.patagoniabolivia.net](http://www.patagoniabolivia.net)

Rebecca's Pocket: [www.rebeccablood.net](http://www.rebeccablood.net)

Where is Raed: [dear\\_raed.blogspot.com](http://dear_raed.blogspot.com)

For more links and details on how to start you own free weblog, visit Dawn's weblog at: [inkflip.net](http://inkflip.net)