

## "Blogging Outloud: Shifts in Public Voice"

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*[This is a rough, unedited crib of the actual talk.]*

First, thank you for inviting me here to speak. I can't help but think it's a bit ironic that i'm giving a keynote to a room full of librarians.

### PERSONAL ANECDOTE

I can't remember how old i was when i first got kicked out of a library, but i remember being told that what i was reading was not appropriate for kids my age. Growing up, i thought that librarians were the devil incarnate. As far as i was concerned, their sole purpose was to act as a gatekeeper to information, impose moral judgments, and execute systematic ageism. They were my enemy and i did everything in my power to disrupt their authority and drive them mad. I was a precocious kid and had no respect for condescending adults who felt as though they knew what was best for me. In fact, i still don't.

It took me 15 years before i realized that my experience with librarians does not reflect the field as a whole. When i started reading librarians' commentary on privacy issues, PATRIOT and freedom of information, i was floored. The approach was so insightful, so aware of the historical issues and their relevance. I realized that librarians had been grappling with all sorts of interesting information and organizational problems and i began placing them high on a pedestal.

Unfortunately, lately, i've been wondering if some of my worship has been misguided. I'm concerned about the librarian response to Google hegemony. As with any hegemony, there are certainly reasons to challenge it but it is not because Lexis-Nexis is or will be better. Google has gone out of its way to make information broadly available and there are reasons why people have adopted it. I have a hard time accepting warlike rhetoric against other information services, even if some of the root concerns are valid. I was kind of hoping that the librarians would find interesting ways to out-Google Google rather than declare them the enemy. Although i've been told that i shouldn't be upset by the anti-Googlezon talk yesterday, i wasn't too thrilled to read in the program that the end goal is to ["win back our rightful place as the guardians of the world's knowledge."](#) To an outsider, this attitude is upsetting. It rings of the gatekeeper attitude that alienated me long ago.

Yet, more problematic than the anti-Googlezon call to arms is the condescending and othering speech put forward by the president of the ALA concerning ["those Blog People."](#) Of course, i'm fairly biased because i am one of "those Blog People." I have been blogging for eight years about everything from my life to my perspectives on librarians. I hear that he is speaking later today and i'm hoping that my initial impressions were wrong.

I tell you this not because i want to alienate you from what i'm here to say, but because i want to make clear my biases and confusions about the world of librarianship. I'm in a school of information and my advisor was a librarian who worked hard to digitize

information to make it more accessible. He believed that technology could invigorate the field. I share his views. But i also believe that librarians do not and should not be the sole gatekeeper to access. Librarian hegemony is no better than Google hegemony.

In addition to being a graduate student in Berkeley's School of Information, i should note that i used to work for Google and i currently work at Yahoo! I recognize the techno-centric tendencies to information organization and access embedded in these companies. I also acknowledge that economic motivations create biases, but honestly, i think that unchecked elitism and condescension also inserts biases. By and large, the search companies have the same motivations as librarians - to make information widely available, to help people find, use, search and expand all of the world's knowledge. The primary difference concerns methodology - technology or human mediators - and economic support models - capitalism or government support.

I strongly believe that information is power. Having to rely on government support places libraries at risk, especially in contemporary American culture. I honestly believe that we are better off having multiple routes to information. I also believe that the more people working on freeing information, the more we can maximize people's cultural and structural access to information.

Historically, not all information could be archived and one role of the library was to determine what constituted knowledge. Librarians decided what information should be saved and worked on helping people gain access to what was deemed valuable. Computers have changed the game. Storage limitations have been radically reduced and librarian judgment no longer serves a critical storage need. Technological approaches to access such as mainstream search have put vast quantities of information into the hands of organizational novices. There has been a shift in production and consumption, distribution and translation. There must also be a shift in what we consider "valuable" information. What might be one person's information crap might provide key insights to someone else.

Some technologists argue that technological solutions are more egalitarian and less biased than librarians. Given my own childhood experiences, i can understand where they are coming from. Given the libertarian bent of many technologists, there is no doubt that gatekeeper attitudes are seen as something to detest and i know that i'm not the only one who had some pretty negative experiences with the library as a child. But as many of you in the room know, technology also has biases and we build cultural biases into our technologies. It has been my goal to make tech companies understand the implications of this.

I am not saying that the technological approach is the best one, but, frankly, search companies are here to stay. The Internet has really upped the ante with respect to making information available to the masses. Technological search is currently the cornerstone of that process. Yet, it must be irritating to watch search companies re-invent your discipline, making foolish mistakes in every which direction. I have to say that the social scientist in me cringes every time i watch a technologist try to compute human behavior. Technological search and librarian knowledge at not the same thing and it has to do with the relationship between technology, information and people.

From my perspective, the primary value that librarians offer stems from their deep understanding of the relationship between people and information. The organizational methods are intended to help strengthen this relationship. The danger is to think that any of these factors is static. Organizational methods evolve as information evolves. Furthermore, technological innovations constantly alter the relationship between people and information. Think about paper, the printing press, radio, telephony, film, television. Each radically altered how people communicated and shared knowledge. Computers and the Internet are yet another new medium that is radically shifting how people and information interact. Alongside these innovations, there are social concerns that get altered. What happens when the line between privacy and public-ness is eliminated? What is the significance of knowledge as compared to information? What happens when consumption and production become intertwined? As everything becomes "global," what is the relationship between culture and information? When and where does translation make sense? How do you organize non-textual media? What is the role of metadata?

These are all questions squarely in your domain and i'm sure many of you have answers or are working on these problems. These are also the questions that search companies are asking, albeit from a far more technological angle. Technology is changing the rules of the game, but that doesn't mean that an information and people-centric point of view is outdated. In fact, it's more essential than ever.

## WHAT ARE BLOGS

Blogs represent one of the ways in which things are changing. While only a fraction of the world reads or writes blogs, Technorati is seeing a doubling of the blogosphere every 5 months with 30-40,000 blogs and over 500,000 new posts created per day. Think about the amount of data being produced.

But what is a blog? The best metaphor i can give you is paper. Yes, paper. Some people use paper to write insightful articles; the same is true on blogs. Some people use paper to write grocery lists; the same is true on blogs. Paper has been used for journalism, diaries, scribbling, gossip, passing notes, writing letters, bookkeeping, collages, photographs, and all sorts of other practices. The same is true on blogs. Of course, we don't really have blog spitballs yet, but we're working on it.

Blogs are an open, evolving medium. Unfortunately, there's a tendency to attack the medium and the practitioners simply because it's misunderstood. The ALA president wrote an essay called "Revenge of the Blog People" where he called the blog ["a species of interactive electronic diary by means of which the unpublishable, untrammled by editors or the rules of grammar, can communicate their thoughts via the web."](#) I know that the bibliosphere has already railed him through the coals for this one. Given that, i should probably leave it alone but, honestly, i can't. Too many people misunderstand blogs and blogging, using similar inflammatory rhetoric. Setting aside the judgmental tone, let's unpack the issues and stereotypes presented in this depiction.

Two metaphors are often flung at blogs - diaries and amateur journalism. Usually, when the speaker wants to denigrate blogging, they rely on the diary model. Consider the 2004 New York Times headline: "Web Diarists Are Now Official Members of Convention Press

Corps." The term diary is meant to signal narcissistic, emotional writing that is of little relevance to anyone but the author. Anne Frank and Anais Nin not indicted. By referring to bloggers as web diarists, the New York Times is stating that bloggers have no right to be on equal footing with journalists. Usually, this attack comes from a frustration that bloggers do not abide by journalistic ethics such as neutrality, source checking, and external quotes to make points. In response, bloggers spit back that there is nothing neutral about Fox, blog sources are usually linked to, and since when have journalists ever used external quotes to say anything but what they wanted to say in the first place? I'm sure many of you in the room have had your blood boil over being misquoted by the press seeking a particular slant. Journalistic-minded bloggers feel as though it is more responsible to be reflexive about one's biases and to be far removed from an editor's desire to sell more papers.

There are quite a few bloggers who see their practice as akin to diary writing, but none of these bloggers attempted to get press credentials at either political Convention. Alien to the more personal writers, there are a handful of bloggers who see their practice as journalism. They report on news, write political commentary, and uncover new stories. Journalistic blogging can provide data for mainstream media, but it also serves as a check and balance to the press. In an era of media conglomeration, journalistic bloggers are bent on providing an alternative.

In his definition, Gorman also relies on the diary metaphor. He even continues on in his essay to note the absurdity of giving bloggers Convention credentials. Yet, there's also something interesting about his choice of words. He's not simply talking about diaries, but interactive diaries. Can a diary actually be interactive? Surely, interactive refers to the commenting aspect of blogging. But why think of this as a diary instead of a conversation? Is it solely to disregard the more personal nature of the medium?

By calling bloggers "the unpublishable," it is difficult to tell if the comparison is purely journalistic or also referencing professional authors and academics. Y'know - the ones who "publish" at the whim of capitalistic-minded publishers. On one hand, we have esteemed authors who have navigated the vetting process (translation: those who have figured out how to market their writing); on the other, we have self-involved whiney brats who bring their friends into their drama. Should we note that people publish Howard Stern and that numerous bloggers write serious commentary about everything from local politics to the process of becoming a doctor in this country? Perhaps not.

After marking the output and the practitioner, Gorman moves on to attack the practice - "untrammelled by editors or the rules of grammar." Have you ever recorded yourself speaking? People don't speak the way they write. There is a flow to our thought process that adds in all sorts of hmms, ums, uhs, and ers and skips over certain grammatical rules. There are critical differences between orality and literacy and blogging brings out some of them. Blogging, like many digital communication practices, is secondary orality. Many bloggers write in flow, ignoring t-e-h's and other writing boo-boos. The goal is to get the thought across first and foremost. It is not about publishing, it is about sharing. Editors need not apply.

In both the reference to publishing and to editors, there's an assumption that people want to be published and that blogging is second-best. What's the advantage of having your

expressions chop-sueyed into what the editors think they can market when you can self-publish on the web using your own voice the way you see best? There's an elitism to the publishing industry that my generation of do-it-yourself'ers have little appreciation for. There's a balance needed in here.

But Gorman does get one thing right - he notes that bloggers "communicate their thoughts on the web." This is the key to understanding blogging - it's primarily communication, not publishing! Most blogs are the output of individuals' efforts to share with a conceptualized audience, whether that be their future self, their friends and family, or the world at large. What people share is quite varied but at a core, they are sharing themselves and what matters to them. This may be political commentary, emotional explosions or provocative photos. Blogs allow people to perform themselves into being by communicating their ideas. There are no physical bodies, only traces of communication. As Adam Reed found, bloggers see their blogs as them, but not the whole them. What is on a blog is only a facet of one's identity, but it is the facet that people feel an urge to share. People get to document their lives while living them. Blogs are unedited because people are living and sharing in the here and now, even when there are faults. The only editing occurs from mind to keyboard, just like the editing that occurs from mind to tongue.

While blogs are persistent, they reflect ephemeral expressions. Posts are rarely written with long-term archiving in mind. They are written for the now and for a conceptualized audience. Few people know how to (or even want to) perform for all of humanity across space and time. Instead, they focus on who they think might read the entry. As a result, blog entries rarely can stand alone. They are written with a lot of assumptions built in. The reader is assumed to know the blogger's biases, motivations. There are often backstories to the post, information spoken elsewhere that underscores the intention.

Although they do exist, very few blogs are about culling knowledge into an archival form. But this does not make them worthless. Why do libraries keep letters from the 18th century? Historical artifacts tell us about the people who lived at a particular time. Anthropologists are obsessed with finding these records and understanding the culture through the voices of the people, or, in the case of subalterns, through the writings of oppressors. Blogs are generating huge archives of contemporary culture. All sorts of performances are being recorded and stored. We can only guess what may be valuable to future generations. Luckily, because of innovations in storage, we don't have to - we can simply save it for later.

Since the bulk of blogs are about people performing their lives, the persistent nature of it is quite valuable for archivists. Yet, sometimes these expressions hurt because "those blog people" are speaking their minds. Personally, i'll take the uncomfortable-ness with the increased opportunity for speech.

## **BLOGGING AND PUBLIC/PRIVATE**

Given the personal nature of many blogs, i'm often asked why bloggers put so much material out for the public to see. If you haven't visited lately, go to the local mall or any popular teen hangout in your hometown. Feel yourself twitch at the sight of teens romping around in contemporary fashion which shows off much bare skin. Teen fashion has always

given adults heart attacks. Why do teens parade around in such costumes? The reason is very similar to why bloggers put material out there. A huge part of identity development is performing for the public in order to experience reactions. You figure out the barriers, you work out what is acceptable. This is how you learn the rules of social interaction.

While this behavior is most visible amongst teens, aspects of it are prevalent in adult culture as well. In particular, think about times when you were frustrated with your boss, partner or children. Have you ever created little experiments just to see how someone would react? Tested the boundaries by doing something that was "not you"? This is part of the same psychology.

Blogs let people work through identity issues by testing things out, but giving them a mirror in which to reflect on their own performance.

Additionally, social performance games help us find like minds. We see this in everyday life too. In BDSM subcultures, handkerchiefs that signal sexual proclivities have been around a long time. If you don't know what a particular handkerchief means, that's fine - it wasn't meant for you anyhow. But even outside of subcultural signals, our dress codes and mannerisms convey a lot about us and i'm sure you've used those cues even here to find people who might share your interests and values.

Many bloggers want to find others who have something in common. They want serendipitous interactions. They perform as digital flaneurs, to see and be seen. They want to be public. But only so public.

Unfortunately, most people's model of what it means to be public comes from the public square. We know when we can be overheard in the park, but that's ok. If someone joins in, perhaps they have something valuable to say. And perhaps we'll speak just a wee bit louder than we need to in order to encourage that. But in the public park, we know the risks and we know how to make certain that the wrong people don't overhear.

The problem is that the web is not the public park. Thanks to persistence and search-ability, there are multiple degrees of public-ness. And then, of course, thanks to PATRIOT, there are unannounced voyeurs. People are not accustomed to this - how do we perform for unknown audiences or to be overheard years from now or by people that we can't see? This is not part of our mental model. We don't have an understanding of what it means to speak to all people across all time at once. Or to speak to people we can't see or even imagine.

The typical response that i get is that we need to get over it, privacy is dead. We should teach bloggers that they are in public. But bloggers aren't naive - they know they're talking in public and they view the benefits of being public as more important than the risks. Honestly, the only way to really model the potential risks is through complete and utter paranoia. And frankly, who really wants to live like that? We simply do not have the cognitive models to really understand the heightened state of public-ness that we've created. It's not about knowing what it means to be public because it's not like any public we've seen before.

So what do we do? How do we learn to negotiate layered publics? This goes far beyond PATRIOT. It is not simply about the backdoors that governments want to install to spy on their people. It's about the ways in which people can negotiate multiple social contexts simultaneously. It's about learning how to manage invisible and potential audiences instead. It's about changing every social rule that we've learned since childhood.

## **SO WHY SHOULD LIBRARIANS CARE?**

Blogging presents all sorts of interesting challenges that are relevant to librarians. The privacy issues are obvious and librarians have already set the stage through their response to PATRIOT. The question is - how do we go beyond resistance to political agendas and provide people with the necessary tools?

Beyond privacy, there are access issues. The flood of self-produced content is overwhelming, making it very difficult to navigate and find relevant or desired information. For the most part, search companies are banking on their technology to solve this access scaling problem. Unfortunately, their approach has severe limitations.

Currently, search companies do not handle inconsistent data types, make good sense out of metadata, understand the context in which information is produced, know how to handle temporally dependent data, or understand the difference between information and communication.

Bloggers have completely clogged page rank algorithms. As a result, i'm the top result on far too many things simply because i blogged about it once. Posts that i wrote in 1997 still receive daily comments because, in search, they are seen as just as significant as the post i wrote yesterday. I write about disconnected things but the algorithms collapse those items and seem to think that they are connected to each other. All of this makes no sense. While blog search tools have been on the market for years, this doesn't eliminate the problems in main search engines.

Blogs are seen as information instead of communication or identity production. This creates all sorts of peculiarities about trust and reputation. There is a difference between publishing something as original, thought-out work and performing your mental wanderings. I'm an academic - i do publish. But i don't see my blog as the same as my academic works. Yet, whenever you search for topics that i research, my blog comes up long before my published work, mostly because publishers have tried so hard to lock down this material behind walled gardens.

Search has a tendency to flatten all sorts of contexts. Think back at when Deja came out to search all of Usenet. Suddenly, a very intimate conversation about the Gaza Strip in soc.culture.israel is seen on the same page as alt.politics. Those two groups assume very different intentions, but search says that they are equally important and relevant. This is even more visible when you are searching for people. Suddenly, conversations that you're having in alt.sex.bondage and comp.lang.perl are connected. How do you expect people to work on impression management when they cannot maintain social boundaries?

Blog access is faced with this dilemma as well - how do you actually provide context and

meaning? How do you deal with the removal of temporal information? How do you explain that a post was intended for an audience when search introduces an entirely different one? How do you negotiate audiences who don't understand your intended context?

Yesterday, a stranger found my blog through a search for Kanye West. The anonymous commenter decided to tell me that i was just an "ignorant freeloader who [relies] on some b.s. 'slave story' that [my] grandmommy told [me] about her grandmommy." Having become accustomed to such comments, i just ignored this. But suddenly, all of my blog readers who know me and come to my blog because they agree with me got offended and a flame war began. How can we create safe space for conversation? Social walls have value in letting people know the context in which they are speaking.

Many of the problems presented by blogs are not new - they're simply bigger and more visible. But technology is not solving this problem. These are social information issues, not technological ones.

## **REMIX CULTURE**

There's another aspect of blogging that i think is critical and that has to do with its distribution power. Because blogs are networked identity productions, memes spread fast. Things that are of value to one person get replicated on blog after blog and it becomes a huge distribution channel. This has great implications for information distribution, but there's a component of this that is currently under attack. And that is remix culture.

Remix has been around a long time in lots of different forms. There's the above ground forms such as edited book collections and CD compilations, but there are also underground forms. Like blogs, underground remix is primarily about communication and identity production. Underground remix occurs when you take cultural elements from one source and mix it up with other sources to produce something expressive. Fan fiction is a form of remix where people write new narratives using well-known cultural characters such as Harry Potter or Buffy the Vampire Slayer. One form of musical remix involves taking recordings of political statements, slicing them up and mixing them on top of musical tracks to make a particular message. For example, the Rx has just released a new song called "White Lines" that remixes commentary by George W. Bush into a song preaching the wonders of cocaine. Remix includes every form of media, from pictures to movies, text to audio. Remix allows people to express themselves.

People often assume that remix is simply an artistic production that abuses copyright. Rather than seeing remix as bi-products of cultural consumption, we turn their creators into artists. Honestly, was yesterday's remix of "It's the End of the World" art? I would argue that remix is primarily about communication. Remix lets people react to culture and politics, share their beliefs and find like minds.

Blogs serve as a massive distribution channel for remix. Do a search for "George Bush Don't Like Black People" and you'll see blog after blog sharing the link to the Legendary K.O.'s remix of Kanye West's statement and other commentary on the state of New Orleans. The problem with this is that blogs are not underground and their persistence puts this form of cultural communication at risk. Do you think that LITA got copyright permission from

R.E.M.? What happens when a remix becomes very popular online? Those people run the risk of the attacks by copyright owners who think that they are destroying their property. Remix is cultural currency and blogs are distributors; they are engaged in acts of freedom of speech. But what if it isn't seen this way?

## **GOOGLE, BLOGGING AND REMIX - TYING IT TOGETHER**

It wasn't so long ago that librarians were seen as pirates. How dare you let people take books for free? And make copies!?!? You are all a bunch of thieves!

Guess what? The search companies and bloggers are under the same attacks right now. The lawsuit against Google Print is breaking my heart. I spent years staring at my bookshelves, trying to practice witchcraft by screaming "grep" over and over again, praying that the right book would pop out. When Amazon first launched search inside a book during my final exams two years ago, i broke down crying. Finally i could find lost references and search the 700+ toms scattered across my room. I begged every author i knew to make this service available on their books. And yet, two years have gone by and only about a tenth of my books are searchable. Why? Why? Why? We have the technology to do this but Google and Amazon are being called pirates and a thieves.

People have been using new media to communicate for as long as i can remember. In sixth grade, we gave mixed tapes for Valentine's Day. Did we think of ourselves as DJs? Certainly not! We were expressing our youthful perception of our relationship to our Valentine. Today, we are making our political values known, joking around with culture and collapsing the relationship between consumption and production. Technology is emerging to let us express ourselves through audio and video, to remix ourselves into culture. And yet, remixers everywhere are under attack because their acts have become too mainstream, too public. Technology has made culture far too visible, creating the best and worst kinds of voyeurs.

It is easy to stand back and say "not our problem" but search companies, bloggers and remixers are going through the same battle that librarians have had for years. I think about the librarians i know and the ones whose voices i read in the blogosphere. Librarians are some of the best spokespeople for civil liberties. Please, i beg you, don't turn your back on others engaged in the same information distribution activities as yourself. Google is not your enemy simply because it has capitalistic goals and is run by cocky boys with their machines. Remixers are not your enemy simply because they are primarily punk-ass kids. And bloggers are not your enemy simply because they have no shame in disagreeing impolitely in public. We all run by different rules but we all have the same goals in mind. My only request is that you don your eye-patch, practice your arrrr's and help protect the distribution of information in all its forms.