Blogging and the Politics of Melancholy

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Abstract: Blogging, the publication of on-line diaries with links to other Web sites, is a recent activity and yet is already producing its celebrities. The author analyzes diary entries posted over five years by one master blogger, and his relations with his readers, to try to originate preliminary hypotheses on the politics of blogging. Observation of blogging in one of its most glamorous manifestations suggests that the new emancipation achieved by self-representation on the World Wide Web may be associated with what Scott Lash has called “the politics of melancholy,” here characterized by preference for virtual reality, formation of a cult-like community, and political passivity.

Résumé : Le blogage, qui consiste à afficher son journal personnel en ligne en y incluant des liens vers des sites connexes, est une activité récente et pourtant elle a déjà ses célébrités. L’auteur analyse les entrées de journal d’un maître bloggeur sur une durée de cinq ans ainsi que ses rapports avec ses lecteurs, en vue de développer des hypothèses préliminaires sur la politique du blogage. L’observation du blogage dans une de ses manifestations les plus attayantes suggère que l’on peut associer la nouvelle émancipation que permet la représentation de soi sur le Web à ce que Scott Lash appelle « la politique de la mélancolie », caractérisée ici par une préférence pour la réalité virtuelle, la formation d’une communauté ressemblant à un culte et la passivité politique.

Keywords: Democracy; Multiculturalism; New media; Political communication

Introduction

Blogs, a short term for “weblogs,” are on-line diaries with links to Web sites of presumed interest such as traditional media outlets and other blogs. This means of communication came into being in the mid-1990s when Web designers put up personal journals on their home pages and linked to each other. In 1999, tools were introduced that enabled people who were not skilled in Web design to create and manage their own weblogs and the phenomenon burgeoned. Today, hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of blogs are produced on all five continents (Bausch, Haughey, & Hourihan, 2002; Blood, 2002; Nunberg, 2001; Sorapure, 2003).

Blogs came to public attention during the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington when they provided first-hand images of and personal per-
perspectives on the traumatic events, informing disoriented audiences about the shaky world around them. During the Iraq War of March-April 2003, many bloggers turned into alternative-press journalists by sorting out information from other media and providing commentary. Although this “do-it-yourself journalism” was criticized for being produced by people who often did not leave their computers, it became clear that a new medium of information gathering and sharing had come into being (Curling, 2003; “One Year Later,” 2002).

Blogs are receiving increasing attention in the mainstream media. In a Newsweek article (August 2002), Steven Levy spoke of “blogosphere” as an alternative universe created by the aggregation of hundreds of thousands of blogs, tying the creation of this universe to the desire among ordinary folk to speak out after September 11 (Levy, 2002). In a UPI publication, James C. Bennett predicted that “[the] weblog, a sort of amalgam of commentary, diary and reference, may be to the Anglosphere’s traditional modes of power what the printing press was to the medieval church and its intellectual monopoly 500 years ago” (Bennett, 2001). In the Ottawa Citizen, David Warren referred to blogs as a revolution in journalism, listing many occasions in which bloggers drew public attention to mistakes by the mainstream media. In several such instances, bloggers exposed misquotations by journalists (of Bush administration officials) through links to original transcripts; they forced one newspaper to retract a story about a meeting between American and British officials that had not taken place and showed that a journalist’s report from “behind Iraqi lines” could not have been accurate because the town he reported from had been occupied by the U.S. Army at the time (Warren, 2003).

On several occasions, blogs seemed to have actual political impact, as in late 2002 when bloggers linking to a C-span video clip of allegedly racist comments (made by then U.S. senate majority leader Trent Lott at a birthday party) kept the story alive until Lott was forced to resign. The resignation in June 2003 of New York Times executive editor Howell Raines and managing editor Gerald Boyle over the Jason Blair scandal was also attributed to continual pressure by bloggers. In the 2003 U.S. race for the Democratic presidential nomination, several candidates—Howard Dean, Dick Gephardt, John Kerry, and others—made use of the blog format in their Internet campaigns.

One major story that caught the media’s attention was that of a blogger known as “Salam Pax,” believed to be a 29-year-old Iraqi living in a Baghdad suburb. His silence at the end of March 2003, when the Iraqi capital came under heavy American bombing, became a major news story, as was his return to cyberspace two weeks later. During that war, news organizations became alarmed when writers ranging “from American naval officers to biological-warfare specialists and women soldiers posting their entries on the Internet from tents in the desert” (Grimson & Baxter, 2003) bypassed them and when some of their own journalists, “embedded” with U.S. military forces in the field, posted their reports in blogs. As Ted Landphair puts it, if the Spanish-American War was the “newspaper war,” World War II the “radio war,” and the war in Vietnam the “television war,” the Iraq War was the “Internet war” due to the blog phenomenon (Landphair, 2003).
The rise of any new medium in the public sphere raises questions about the political norms associated with it. Can the familiar statement about the press as a “watchdog of democracy” be applied to this new medium? Is blogging a democratic phenomenon or does it enhance populism? What is the political reach of a medium constrained by the digital divide? How does its blurring of the private and public spheres affect political discourse? What is the political meaning of the exposure of large numbers of people to an unprecedented amount of news selected for them by trusted virtual figures? And what societal and political norms are emerging in the communities of bloggers now forming on the World Wide Web?

It is not easy to answer these questions because of serious methodological difficulties involved in the study of blogging. During the 2003 annual meeting of the Association of Internet Studies (when some of the first fruits of communication research on blogging were presented), it became immediately apparent how careful one has to be in applying traditional research methods to this new medium. Standard attempts to generalize about blogs on the basis of random sampling turned out to be quite inappropriate in the absence of a clear, stable, finite universe of blogs to be sampled. Moreover, on-line diaries come and go, and communities of bloggers are mostly formed ad hoc. Certainly, Web sites such as diarist.net or LiveJournal may bring diarists together, but many others float freely in cyberspace. Communication studies in which traditional sampling techniques are used to make general statements about the gender or socioeconomic composure of bloggers are therefore misleading. This is particularly so in light of the fact that the phenomenon studied is located in virtual reality. While research on such subjects as the politics of newspapers deals with individuals and institutions whose identity can, in principle, be traced, we know little about the producers of blogs besides their nicknames. The person presented in the diary may be in part or in full a fictional character and for all practical purposes, ought to be treated as such. Therefore, any statement about the nature and politics of blogging does not necessarily apply to an identifiable group of off-line actors.

One useful approach to blogging can be found in life-writing research (Egan, 1984; Roberts, 2001), which derives theoretical and historical statements from autobiographical works whose unique character is acknowledged and whose range incorporates both real and fictional writings. It is assumed that a systematic analysis of Winston Churchill’s autobiography, for instance, might generate important insights on the political world even though it does not constitute a sample of leaders’ autobiographies. It is similarly assumed that a systematic analysis of George and Weedon Grossmith’s novel *The Diary of a Nobody* (Flint, 1998) might generate important hypotheses on political life in Victorian England despite the unique nature of this fictional diary. Applying life-writing methods to the blogging phenomenon is quite natural because blogging is of course a form of life writing. Tristine Rainer (1998) has subdivided life-writing genres into any number of categories including autobiographies, memoirs, confessions, spiritual quests, meditations, personal essays, travelogues, autobiographical short stories and novels, portraits, complaints, conceptual writings, works of humour, and
family histories. Because blogging involves all these genres, we can view this new medium within the long tradition of life writing.

Since ancient times, individuals have had an urge to express and disseminate their ideas and experiences, however, the voice most often heard in autobiographies was that of people who had achieved public prominence. Today, the Internet allows non-prominent people (although only those on one side of the digital divide) to express a unique voice on an ongoing basis and, in some cases, to achieve prominence. Blogging may thus be seen as a mark of emancipation. In Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body, Sidonie Smith (1993) has linked autobiography and emancipation, stressing in particular the present change from a human rights regime based on traditional liberal values that were disseminated in autobiographies to a contemporary regime based on a new subjectivity. Traditionally, she writes, autobiography has been the story of a universal “I,” which obscured through a grey and shapeless mist everything colourful that lay within its vision. She refers to the Enlightenment’s abstraction of the individual as a rational being transcending subjective differences for the sake of a model of Man that is universal and exclusionary at the same time.

The “universal individual” of the Enlightenment seems to Smith an arid figure because it excludes everything colourful; that is, everything that becomes identified culturally as “other, exotic, unruly, irrational, uncivilized, regional, or paradoxically unnatural” (Smith, 1993, pp. 8-9). To secure the universality of the self, cultural practices set various normative limits of race, gender, sexuality, and class identifications. One of these practices was autobiography, which consolidated its status as one of the West’s master discourses—one in which the distinction between centre and periphery had been set. However, although autobiography promoted a unified vision of the universal subject, Smith also considers its role in serving those formerly excluded from the vision.

However problematic its strategies, autobiographical writing has played and continues to play a role in emancipatory politics. Autobiographical practices become occasions for restaging subjectivity, and autobiographical strategies become occasions for the staging of resistance. Purposeful, bold, contentious, the autobiographical manifesto contests the old inscriptions, the old histories, the old politics, the ancien régime, by working to dislodge the hold of the universal subject through an expressly political collocation of a new “I.” (Smith, 1993, pp. 156-157)

Blogging may be seen as one of the strongest expressions of this emancipatory trend. The search for subjective expression by those formerly marginalized in the public sphere is facilitated by software allowing hundreds of thousands of individuals, however “colourful,” to publish their life stories. Whatever their motivations to do so, and however varied the forms and shapes of their diaries, blogging provides individuals with a way to overcome exclusion and express their “true” selves (or some other identity of their own choosing). It also provides them with an audience who may follow their life stories as they unfold. It is therefore of great importance to try to understand the various routes the new emancipation may take.
Here, I am proposing the “politics of melancholy” as one such route. In what follows, I define this concept and spell out some of its parameters by following one of the first on-line diaries—Kottke.org—whose writer, Jason Kottke, may be seen as a figure most closely fulfilling Smith’s vision of emancipation. The blogger’s skills as a Web designer allowed him, even before the introduction of more accessible blogging tools, to employ the freedoms of self-expression, a point that was not lost on the many Internet surfers piously following his diary on a daily basis. Thus, this observation of celebrity blogging in one of its most glamorous manifestations may be as useful to the study of blogging politics as the observation of a Ronald Reagan, Jesse Ventura, or Arnold Schwarzenegger might be to the study of media politics. As with these individuals, Kottke.org is also a case of a master communicator whose relations with his followers spark important thoughts on contemporary political life and the directions it may take.

The politics of melancholy

In one of the first studies of blogs, Torill Mortensen and Jill Walker (2002) considered the Internet, in which individuals are given the means to write their private thoughts for the world to see, as a rebirth of Habermas’ public sphere. To Habermas, the public sphere is the discursive arena of civil groups demanding freedom of expression, due process, constitutionalism, and other democratic rights. He associates these groups with the bourgeoisie living within the absolutist regimes of early modern Europe. According to Habermas, the liberalization of the market since the High Middle Ages brought about the crystallization of “civil society” as a private realm, a process enhanced by the rise of forums bringing individuals together, such as the coffee house and literary salon, where they engaged in issues beyond those sanctioned by economic patrons, church patriarchs, and state leaders. Habermas lamented the loss of these forums with the rise of the mass media in the late nineteenth century (Habermas, 1992).

Mortensen & Walker agree that in the modern world of mass media, individuals have largely lost the means to participate in public discourse. On television, for instance, the private, personal view no longer has any real potential for influence; it has been made part of the public show. Blogs, however, revive the early-nineteenth-century salon or coffee house, where private concerns could be discussed and consequently turned into public issues. The authors see the blog as standing where the salon once stood: a buffer zone between the private and public spheres. A blog expresses the attitudes and convictions of its individual writer while being in the public domain and raising questions that may be of public interest. The blog connects the public arena with that of individuals (Mortensen & Walker, 2002).

It must be remembered, however, that the individual of the twenty-first century is very different from the idealized bürger of the coffee houses and literary salons of early modern Europe. Just imagine what the bourgeois actor of Habermas’ public sphere went through in the past 200 years—being mobilized by grand ideologies, only to be ground under the wheels of overwhelming technologies and subdued by huge bureaucratic structures. Ideology, technology, and orga-
nization transformed the life of individuals as they went through the world wars, the rise and fall of totalitarianism, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, decolonization, the Cold War, and so forth. In those 200 years, the coffee houses were filled with shining-eyed revolutionaries promising people a redemptive future while unknowingly turning them into slaves of the gigantic power structures of Fascism, Communism, and Capitalism. The literary salons were replaced by the new meeting places of the Industrial Revolution: factories and railway cars; bars and jazz clubs; laboratories and bomb shelters; shopping centres and office buildings. The universal ideals proposed by the Enlightenment were often discarded and the bourgeoisie was seen as “public enemy number 1” by almost every social movement and political philosophy. Marx abolished it, Nietzsche mocked it, Freud exposed it, Kafka feared it, Hitler mobilized it, and Fanon fought it fiercely. In a letter to George Sand, Gustave Flaubert expressed the attitude of many bourgeois intellectuals toward their own class: “Axiom: Hatred of Bourgeois is the beginning of all virtue” (quoted in Gay, 1998, p. 26).

Thus, as we observe the rebirth of the public sphere we must also be sensitized to modes of expression representing the changes the actors in that sphere have undergone in the past 200 years. This is where emancipation meets melancholy. Melancholy, the “unappeasable attachment to an ungrievable loss” (Comay, 1999, p. 51), has been identified since ancient times as a medical and psychological condition. It has long been a symbolic motif of art as well as a familiar literary theme, notably in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (see Enterline, 1995; Soufas, 1990). It has also been treated as a sociological phenomenon, representing a form of social withdrawal stemming from the loss of a solid normative base. In *Melancholy Dialectics* Max Pensky introduced a sociology of melancholy based on two major characteristics of the melancholic: solitude and the inability to act. Since its pre-Socratic origin, he explains, melancholy has been closely associated with solitude stemming not only from the melancholic’s sad temperament but also from insight into the structure of the real: “Melancholy isolates; conversely, the enforced isolation from social institutions and practices produces both melancholic sadness and the alienation necessary to gain a critical insight into the structure of society itself” (Pensky, 1993, p. 33).

This critical insight is not constructive and active but destructive and passive. Pensky argues after Robert Merton that melancholy constitutes a specific form of rebellion: the despair and hopelessness of the melancholic arise from the concrete or imagined condition of utter helplessness in the face of a social order experienced as oppressive or stifling. From this perspective, melancholia is a retreat from and a total rejection of society, due not only to the repressive function of social norms but also to the total effect of society, which the melancholic experiences as suffocating. The melancholic’s rebellion is therefore a passive one. Under the conviction, whether justified or not, that all avenues toward effective action have been closed off, the melancholic rebel recedes into a resigned interiority, brooding over the very conditions of the impossibility of action themselves. (Pensky, 1993, p. 34)
In his *Critique of Information* Scott Lash has characterized the melancholic from a political perspective. In the past, he wrote, politics was embedded in the good life—one had to be a man of substance to be a citizen. The melancholic, on the other hand, unlike Aristotle's virtuous and noble man, is a person not of the mean but of the extremes. Melancholics are not virtuous but vicious, and they are inactive: “The politics of speed, of melancholy, of indifference, is a politics of the outcasts, of the wild zones. The melancholic leads not the good life, but the bad life…. This is not a politics of those living in the margins as undecidables or unclassifiables, but of people living on the other side of the margins, abjected or extruded into the wild zones” (Lash, 2002, p. 139).

A modern prototype of the melancholic can be found in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, whose protagonist forcefully represents the reversal of the rational, enlightened citizen. While that citizen is marked by a readiness to compromise with fellow beings and serve the community, Dostoevsky's Underground Man feels total aversion toward other human beings and society. He lives his life in a corner, in a mouse hole, and knows that this is a form of existence a serious person could never aspire to change. He also knows that only fools can expect to avenge the punches they take from a hostile environment. Thus, he accepts his hyperconscious existence in the mouse hole: “There, in its nasty, stinking, underground home our insulted, crushed and ridiculed mouse promptly becomes absorbed in cold, malignant and, above all, everlasting spite” (Dostoevsky, 1960, p. 10).

Why is Underground Man writing the “notes”? Mainly because he is bored, he says. Anyone who found himself confined underground for 40 years would look for something to do. He does not wish to be hampered by any restrictions in compiling his notes; he just wishes to jot things down as he remembers them.

What precisely is my object in writing? If it is not for the public, then after all, why should I not simply recall these incidents in my own mind without putting them down on paper? Quite so; but yet it is somehow more dignified on paper. There is something more impressive in it; I will be able to criticize myself better and improve my style. Besides, perhaps I will really get relief from writing. (Dostoevsky, 1960, p. 36)

This literary figure is of course only an “ideal type”—no blogger can be expected to feel or behave like Underground Man, and no resemblance between the literary figure and any real person can be assumed, especially since, as I claimed before, the analysis of blogs focuses on representations of individuals, not on the individuals behind them. However, the politics of melancholy, epitomized by Dostoevsky’s narrator, may serve as a useful frame of reference. It is one that sensitizes us to the characteristics of blogging that remain invisible when observing this phenomenon only from its emancipatory angle. This new form of emancipation in fact promises not only opportunities for political activism, as has been rightly noted (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Meikle, 2002), but may also represent a trend toward melancholic politics whose parameters I would now like to explore. Observation of the hundreds of entries published in Kottke.org over a
five-year period, from March 1998 to April 2003, reveals three elements that I propose as building blocks of the politics of melancholy in its updated twenty-first-century version: preference for virtual reality, formation of a cult-like community, and political passivity.

Preference for virtual reality

One of the main characteristics of Kottke.org is the writer's location at the forefront of a brave new world inhabited by cyber-citizens whose lives are played out in virtual reality. In *This Virtual Life*, Andrew Evans defined “virtual reality” as the illusion of participation in a synthetic environment that either simulates the real world or creates realistic fantasy worlds (Evans, 2001). The hundreds of people following on a daily basis Jason Kottke’s life story are exposed, as in *The Matrix*, to a life that is mostly taking place in “cyberspace,” defined as the arena, composed of computers and telecommunication, in which the above simulation is played out.

In his very first entries in 1998, the on-line diarist realizes, at some distance, the existence of a real world. In one of these, he goes grocery shopping at the local superstore and notices a young couple in the parking lot hugging, kissing, and oblivious to the 10 or so people watching them. “I was happy. Because I was witnessing True Love,” Jason reports, “like in the movies” (20.3.98). Even in this early entry, however, the 26-year-old Twin Cities boy, who admittedly never experienced true love before and whose life seems to him as “just sort of floating nonchalantly along” (18.8.98), associates love with the fantasy world of the movies.

Occasionally, the diary mentions sensations associated with real life, i.e., with life away from the computer. In September 1998, Jason posted an entry on shingling as “a welcome change from the computer. You're outside, getting a tan, wind in your hair, pounding nails, scraping up your knuckles on the shingles until they bleed, hoisting 75 pounds of shingles on your shoulders and climbing up a ladder. Ahhh … that's the stuff” (2.9.98). However, such entries become quite rare as the diarist gradually confines his life to the Web. Consider the entry of April 2000 titled “spring is in the air.” The reader expecting a spring sensation is faced with the following statement: “Spring is in the air and that means leafy green Web sites are popping up all over the web” (26.4.00). Although this entry is ironic, in many others the abandonment of real-life experiences for simulated ones is stated in all seriousness. A “great day” for Jason is one in which his experience on the Web is fulfilling: “Today is one of those days. No, not one of those days, one of those good days for finding neat and interesting things on the Web. So much to link to and discuss” (5.4.02).

Cooking and exercising do not normally fit into his daily regimen and when he goes out to play basketball he admits: “I pretty much sucked because, well, all I've been doing for the last, oh, 6 months, is sitting around on my ass doing nothing” (13.9.00). And yet, doing nothing—that is, writing diary entries and answering hundreds of e-mail messages—is the essence of life in cyberspace in his perception, as illustrated in an entry written upon his return from an “Emerging Tech Conference” held in May 2002. He wrote that, just like in col-
lege, when new syllabi handed out on the first day of classes determined his life for the entire 14 weeks of the semester, he now felt “like this is my world, and not just for the next 14 weeks. I’ve been given a syllabus to follow; the future is uncertain but the path is clear” (17.5.02).

Sometimes, a conflict between the old reality and the new cyber-world can be identified. In one entry, Jason describes his difficulty to return to the Web after a vacation in the beautiful Alaskan wilderness. He assures himself, however, that this feeling will be over soon: “I’m sure I’ll forget all about it in a few hours when the digital crack starts talking hold” (30.4.02). The purpose of this diary entry, he writes, is to remind him of that feeling once it is gone.

Life in cyberspace is an escape for many Internet users and this diarist is no exception. At one point he quotes from an article by another blogger, Jonathan Rauch, whose declared introversion resonates with how Jason feels as a person: “The Internet has helped me a great deal in this regard. Email, IM, and my weblog allow me to communicate with people when I want and how I want, without worrying about all the things introverts worry about when interacting with people: small talk, first impressions, awkward silences, etc. With the web, I can carry on a conversation with a whole group of people and stare down at my shoes at the same time. That’s an amazing and special thing for me” (Rauch, 2003). As a Web designer, Jason makes the most of the opportunities opened to him by his virtual presence. If in real life he may look at his shoes while engaged in conversation, in cyberspace he controls his presence to such a degree that he turns the introvert into an extrovert. What can be more fulfilling than placing a Web cam at his home for people to peep? “People seem to think the webcam is about me entertaining you,” he writes in his diary. “That is incorrect. The cam is all about me establishing myself as a major Web microstar” (18.11.99).

Over the years, the Web cam is used to enhance his new—virtual—identity. At one point, he pulls a trick on the readers by replacing his own picture with that of an impostor. At another, he produces an image of himself for the readers to manipulate. The readers are invited to “play with Jason” (16.1.00). They can put sunglasses on his eyes and earphones on his ears, make a female figure kiss him or put a preprogrammed sentence into his mouth. Many people sent in the images they formed of their admired blogger, but what is most interesting about the game is the sentence Jason chose to be placed in his mouth: “I am a big loser” (16.1.00). This may seem strange in light of the celebrity status he acquired but it makes sense in light of the model of the melancholic. However cute the person behind the diary seems to his readers, and perhaps is in real life, as an actor in cyberspace (which is the only angle from which he is analyzed here) he shows defiance toward the real world. Jason does not live in a late-nineteenth-century mouse hole but in some “reloaded” version of it; he is the resident of a new world in which many of the joys and sorrows of the old one are rejected. It is easy to imagine the following Kottke.org entry as having been taken from Dostoevsky’s Notes: “I was helped by the singing cashier last evening at the local grocery store. He wasn’t really singing … he was just very melodic. It sure cheered up the toddler with the
couple in front of me in line but it really didn’t do much for me but annoy me. Bad singer and wasn’t funny, even though he thought he was both” (15.1.99).

The singing cashier and the cheerful toddler, characters belonging to the ancien régime, are annoying to the resident of the new world, yet even when a daily experience is not annoying but sparks feelings of happiness, or a memory of such feelings, an effort is made to translate these feelings into cyber-language. For example, in June 2001 Jason, wandering in the park, saw two teams playing baseball. According to his diary, he found himself rooting for one of them that was not quite up to the task but nevertheless enjoyed playing baseball on a nice summer day. Three days later, he felt uncomfortable about the story, which, he wrote, did not capture his feeling at the time. He never said what that feeling was but rather subjected the whole experience, which seemed so genuine when initially reported, to one of those exercises conducted on the Internet: “Instead of taking it down or just leaving it the way it is, I’m going to make a creative writing exercise out of it. Every week or so, I’ll revisit the story and write a new version of it. The hope is that I will eventually arrive at a version of the story that gives you a sense of the feeling I had that day” (6.6.01).

One scene described in April 2001 is particularly striking in its resemblance to the Notes. Dostoevsky’s narrator describes an encounter he had with an officer who pushed him without even noticing his presence, and expresses his frustration over his inability to take revenge for such rude behaviour. Now here is the entry in Kottke.org:

I was accosted by a Big Arm Swinger on the street today. You know the type, arms tracing full 180 degrees swathes in the air, taking up three times the space they should be on the sidewalk, making it nearly impossible for someone like myself to maneuver around them. A mobile windmill at maximum flow. Anyway, this particular BAS appeared in front of me without warning (I wasn’t paying much attention) and caught me in the crotch with her backswing. Stumbling and wincing slightly, I sped around her rather than leaving myself open to further attack. Lost as she was in the freedom of her arm swinging, I don’t think she even noticed hitting me. (3.4.01)

Dostoevsky built the character of the loser who fails to avenge the pushing and beating he suffers and subsequently places himself in a mouse hole. Jason Kottke, repeatedly referring to himself as a loser, constructed the figure residing in cyberspace. In doing so, both the nineteenth-century writer and the twenty-first-century blogger pose a challenge to the model of the emancipated citizen who is not expected to escape reality but rather to make use of his/her new freedoms and engage in a constructive dialogue in the public sphere.

**Formation of a cult-like community**

Although the writing of on-line diaries is mostly an individual activity, the writers often form communities, in that they are aware of each other, post comments in or link to each other’s sites, exchange information, and so forth. The community surrounding Kottke.org can be characterized as a cult. Cults have been generally defined by three variables: an enchanting leader, a devoted group of followers, and
a strong emotional bond between them. In blogosphere, Jason Kottke is as great a celebrity as those created by other media of popular culture, such as television or rock music. There is hardly an article on blogging that does not mention him or interview him. In one article he was labelled “über-blogger” (Johnson, 2002). In another: “some sort of web god” (“We’ve Got a Crush on You,” 2002). A special site titled “obscure logs” offers refuge to bloggers identified as beings other than Jason Kottke. His picture can be found in off-line advertisements, and women often announce the crush they have on him: “If you haven’t heard of Jason Kottke, you haven’t surfed the web enough. [H]e is one of those brilliant designers whom everyone seems to know and adore. Cutting edge. Revolutionary. Sharp. I go to his weblog every single (week) day and pretty much take what he says as gospel” (“We’ve Got a Crush on You,” 2002). There are profiles drawn of him in on-line and off-line journals, notably a feature by Rebecca Mead in The New Yorker in November 2000 where his romance with another “über-blogger,” Meg Hourihan, was presented in a fashion reserved for royal couples: “She is tall and athletic-looking, and has cropped spiky hair that last spring she bleached white-blond after polling the readers of her blog about her hairstyling options” (Mead, 2000).

There are various mechanisms that contribute to Jason Kottke’s celebrity status—his frequent referral to himself in third person (“You can watch as Jason sneezes, scratches himself in inappropriate places, yawns, sits in the same place for a very long time, and, most importantly, shudders uncontrollably as the 3 pm post-caffeine depression sets in and the subsequent dash for a Pepsi,” 6.4.01); his mention of every piece written about him (“look Ma, I’m in a Book,” 7.1.00); his hiding of self-indulgence behind a veil of irony (“Kottke.org: Bigger Than Jesus,” 14.4.02); his self-presentation as an ordinary guy facing big corporations (“The Internet today is increasingly in the hands of people concerned only with power and money. I’m going to do my small part to keep the spirit of the Internet founders alive,” 14.4.99); and his capacity to activate his readers (“Our household was all abuzz last night for the season premiere of The West Wing. At two hours the episode was a little long and not as neatly packaged as the show usually is. A bit disappointing, but still the best thing on network TV. My questions to you are: 1) what do you think?; and 2) where’s the best place on-line to discuss episodes after the fact?” 26.9.02). It goes without saying that answers kept pouring in for six days and nights.

The readiness to respond to Jason’s queries is amazing even in view of the familiar phenomena of call-in radio shows, responses to news items in media Web sites, or the March 2001 pilgrimage of thousands to a Web page on which the Virgin Mary was believed to appear. Jason Kottke’s followers respond to any question, even if it sounds like a bored soldier’s riddle on night guard, e.g., “You know when you wear an outfit with a black tie on a black shirt with a black coat? Or a white tie on a white shirt with a white coat? What’s that called?” The cult responds en masse when Jason asks them to vote for him in some Internet contest or when he asks for drafts of his victory speech should he win such a contest. He despises the “sheer stupidity of the masses” (5.9.00), but this does not discourage the
masses from sending him greetings for his birthday or for the anniversary of his blog. When he found an old pre-Internet diary of his, other bloggers not only posted selected entries from that diary on their own sites (e.g., “life is the mayonnaise through which we squirt,” 9.8.01) but sent in their own childhood diaries wanting him to post them on his site.

When Jason moved from San Francisco to New York, hundreds of people in cyberspace were holding their breath, reading all about the packing, the journey, the search for housing, the unpacking, the furnishing of the house, and so on. In October 2002, no fewer than 126 comments were posted on Kottke.org wishing him good luck, advising him where to find cheap housing, sharing with him various experiences about moving, showing sympathy over the difficulties that lay ahead, and providing information about New York traffic rules, restaurants, street security, and what not. Although the community meets on the Web, bloggers from San Francisco expressed their regret that Jason was leaving town and New York bloggers rejoiced he was joining their city: “I am psyched to welcome you folks to my home city, even if I live in New Jersey now. You’ve got a friend in the Garden State (exit 165)” (20.10.02).

The cult-like behaviour of the community seems to be enhanced by Jason’s presentation of himself as an ordinary person. In one of the accounts of his past he writes: “I mainly recall coming home from school and watching Scooby Doo reruns whilst eating Nutty Bars. Come to think of it, that pretty much describes my current existence as well” (4.1.00). The worship of the ordinary has its foundations in all religions but its special cyberspace version deserves notice. Here, one has greater choice over the object of worship. Just as Jason allows his readers to manipulate his Web cam picture, so also can they decide who the person behind Kottke.org is to them—the ordinary guy, the loser, the professional, or the celebrity. The appeal of this on-line diary may have something to do with its simplicity, which makes it easy for many to identify with Jason. As “Cam” expressed it in October 1999, “I think Jason and I are living parallel lives. My favorite book as a kid was also ‘Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs.’ I also recently saw ‘The Mummy’ on DVD, and it did indeed suck” (Camworld, 31.10.99).

But the cult-like behaviour may also be related to the nature of the new medium. David Weinberger presents the Web experience as a way for strangers to develop communal ties while remaining strangers.

In our culture, we’re suspicious of strangers. They’re a threat. They lurk in shadows. On the Web, however, strangers are the source of everything worthwhile. Strangers and their utterances are the stuff of the Web. They are what give the Web its matter, its shape, its value. Rather than hiding in our tents and declaring our world to exist of the other tents near us—preferably with a nice wall around us—the Web explicitly is a world only because of the presence of so many strangers. (Weinberger, 2000)

Jason sometimes conveys a real-life loneliness as well as awareness of the community formed by all the lonely people who happen to link to each other’s Web site at the same time, thus forming what he calls “Linky love”: “I bet if I link to a
bunch of people here, that most of them will link back to me. They’ll look at their logs and say: ‘hmmm … this Jason guy linked to me’ and then they’ll write about it in their journal or weblog. Let’s see what happens. And if I link to you and you’re reading this, there’s no harm in playing along, is there?” (14.8.99).

Whereas in traditional social contract theory such mechanistic connections between isolated units were seen as the foundation of a rational community, here rationality is replaced by what Ralf Dahrendorf called in a different context “a steam bath of popular feelings” (Dahrendorf, 1990, p. 10). Strangers linking to each other’s Web sites develop emotional bonds not because of any human contact between them but because of their very participation in the same endeavour at the same time. This is a new version of collectivism—a community feeling love while remaining estranged, as if a community of ants would begin to develop emotions by nature of their work on a common project. It is interesting to follow Jason’s description of the workings of blogosphere. He sees it as a complex system in which individual bloggers, acting in their own self-interest, post bits of information to their weblogs. Then a feedback loop starts; other bloggers take those initial bits of information, rework them, and feed them back into the system in the form of weblog posts or comments. At the end of the line, a story may emerge that has been collectively edited by the system. Repeat this process millions of times a month with hundreds of thousands of participants, he writes, and you will get a few such stories a month. He rightly asks whether this means that the whole is smarter than its parts: “Is some higher level of structure or intelligence coming out of these 500,000 monkeys at their typewriters?” (25.2.02).

Whatever the answer, the perception of many individuals that they are part of a complex system generating a higher intelligence creates a new kind of bond. In contrast to the participants in an Aristotelian assembly of citizens, they do not have to develop their personalities, relate to each other’s interests, negotiate, compromise, form coalitions, elect officials, fight wars, or make peace. They can, rather, hide behind nicknames, appear and disappear at their choosing, make far-fetched statements and take no responsibility for the information they post. As suggested by the title of Jerzy Kosinski’s well-known novel (1971), all that is required of them is “being there,” a precondition of the formation of cults and the worship of demigods.

Political passivity
A common theme in Kottke.org is the threat felt by the ordinary guy facing big business, big government, big Hollywood, and other giant forces. Here is an example: “Business may be changing, but the power is still in the hands of the people who have been in control of things for quite some time. The more things change, the more they stay the same” (25.3.00). Another example can be found in an entry on the ubiquitous little cups for extra pennies placed by the register in gas stations. Although this is hardly an earth-shaking issue by any standard, it sounds like one: “Let’s stop to think about this for a minute. This means somewhere there is a machine (or possibly a whole factory of machines) punching out these custom penny cups. There are engineers designing bigger and better share-a-penny cups.
Teams of marketing people are trying to build share-a-penny mind share in the heads of gas station owners. Share-a-penny cup salespeople are out there going gas station door to door to gas station door selling their product. An army of delivery trucks are delivering these cups around the globe. Does this seem odd to anyone else?” (17.2.99).

This esoteric entry espouses populism, i.e., the political ideology of the ordinary person threatened by exploitative economic and political forces. The blogger appears to be threatened by the phantom armies of delivery trucks he pictures roaming around the globe. There is, however, very little indication of public action (on any issue—large or small) in this blog throughout the five years of its existence, as if the on-line recording of one’s life becomes a substitute to changing it. Months may pass without any reference to elections, policy debates, leadership scandals, international crises, or any other political matter. Jason is uneasy, for example, about the marketing of certain products of popular culture to teenagers but his response, as always, remains passive: “I’m not exactly sure what I can do about the situation, but I do know that as time passes, I get more and more uneasy about mass media, advertising, and marketing in general” (6.3.01). His uneasiness does not make him leave the computer in order to take political action in the real world. To the contrary, in one of the rare comments on political affairs, he reports a “burning rage” over Elizabeth Dole’s dropping out of the 2000 presidential race for lack of funds. To him, “it’s all about money and winning, packaged in an egg-shell-thin concern for the well-being of America and her constituents.” His conclusion: “Politics makes me want to puke” (20.10.99).

Although many bloggers are politically alert and encourage political consciousness among their readers, it is hard not to feel that such expressions of disgust and apathy toward politics may be partly related to the nature of blogging as an activity demanding long hours at the computer, perhaps with the hope that the new medium of blogging would itself make a difference by its sheer mass. Jason, at any rate, conveys a clear sense of political passivity, which is nicely reflected in a mention of the old fable about the tortoise and the hare. While the fable’s common moral is that a slow but steady tortoise wins a foot race against an overconfident hare, the diarist insists that “the race was not won by the tortoise; it was lost by the hare” (27.10.98). The tendency to wait for evil forces to disappear rather than search for the strategy needed to defeat them can be found in this blog again and again.

In light of this political passivity, it is interesting to observe the blogger’s response to the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. A report on “September 11 and the Internet” prepared by a study group a year later noted the function fulfilled by blogs on that day. With CNN alone receiving more than nine million requests for its main Web page every hour, the servers for major news outlets shut down. Blogs were subsequently reoriented and became alternative news sources. The report says that most bloggers were not particularly interested in becoming “real” news sources, but rather connected large audiences to sites they would not ordinarily visit (“One Year Later,” 2002). Jason
referred his own readers to a large number of sites in which videos of the disaster and other updated information could be viewed. His interpretation of the events, however, was quite consistent with the apolitical nature of his blog: “All this talk of America vs. the world by our politicians is making me sick and uneasy,” he wrote as early as September 11 at 10:17 a.m. “This is a human issue, not an American, democracy, or a freedom issue. Someone attacked us all, all of us on the Good Earth” (11.9.01).

Jason felt that being positioned at the computer at this critical hour was important: “Some people cope by hearing and distributing information in a crisis. I’m one of those people, I guess. Makes me feel like I’m doing something useful for those that can’t do anything. Or something.” During the day and the next few days, he distributed information and made statements such as one expressing fear that acts of revenge against Arabs might take place and calling for Americans to refrain from them. He published on-line sites through which donations could be made to the Red Cross or Salvation Army, called for blood donations, and demanded that the United States not respond in haste. He mentioned the usefulness of blogging in providing eyewitness accounts and photos by people who were at the scene and thus lent “a more human take than all the analysis and politics on the television.”

After the crisis, Kottke.org became part of the process of return to a normal routine. While mainstream news media continued to stir the 9/11 tension by rerunning the images of the day and filling the airwaves with analysis, Jason spoke, for instance, about games he played in an arcade: “They even had a Bubble Bobble machine, one of my all-time favorites. Good, clean, dorky fun” (16.11.01). He explained the need to return to such themes by his restlessness vis-à-vis the mainstream media, assuring his readers he was not apathetic or desensitized to the situation. Whereas the initial media reports on the attacks had seemed to him honest and true, now he felt their spin: “The PR machines of our government, large corporations, special interest groups, various agencies, and political parties have had time to mobilize. Everyone now has an ‘angle’ appropriate to their political/corporate/religious/cultural affiliation. It feels like I’m not hearing the truth from humans anymore, I’m hearing careful crafted and sanitized PR from government/company/agency/media spokespeople” (2.10.01). He declared he would nevertheless continue to apply a critical mind to the information surrounding him, an act that he felt might help some of his fellow citizens out.

During the Iraq War of 2003, Kottke.org also served as a source of information. It advertised the time and place of demonstrations and published the phone numbers of New York city officials who might be contacted in order to reverse a decision not to issue a permit for some demonstration or other. But political passivity continued to prevail. Even when Jason found himself in an anti-war demonstration in New York, he insisted he went there merely in order to observe rather than protest. He simply zipped along the outskirts of the crowd taking pictures. He noted that “the enthusiasm of the crowd was impressive; they really believe in what they were marching for” (23.3.03), but from his Dostoevskian position in
cyberspace, he did not share in that political enthusiasm. As he wrote on March 18: “If you’re a regular reader of my site, you’ll notice that I don’t write about current events or world news much. And in spite of the impending U.S. war with Iraq, I’m going to continue to write about other things because war & politics are a means to an end and there’s more than one way to get there” (18.3.03).

Conclusion

The channels opened by new media to individual self-expression have raised hopes for the reinvigoration of democratic practices worn out in the age of centralized mass media. As noted by Jenkins & Thorburn: “The current diversification of communication channels … is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard in a national debate, ensuring that no one voice can speak with unquestioned authority” (Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003, p. 2). Much emphasis is put on the pros and cons of Internet use as a way to revitalize citizen-based democracy (Katz & Rice, 2002; Rheingold, 2000). The various views of the Internet as enhancing democracy were divided by Lincoln Dahlberg into three “camps”: a communitarian camp, which stresses the possibility of the Internet as enhancing communal spirit and values; a liberal-individualistic camp, which sees the Internet as assisting the expression of individual interests; and a deliberative camp, which promotes the Internet as the means for an expansion of the public sphere of rational and critical citizen discourse. Dahlberg (2001) is optimistic about the prospect of on-line deliberative democracy, believing that under appropriate structural management of the discourse, the Internet may become a means to expand the public sphere.

Benjamin Barber, on the other hand, is less optimistic. He remains skeptical as to whether virtual communities formed on-line can actually be seen as fulfilling the requirement of a democracy incorporating strong participatory and deliberative elements. As he puts it, “Lolling in your underwear in front of an electronic screen while accessing with your dancing fingers the pixels generated by anonymous strangers across the world is not my idea of forging a community of concern or establishing common ground, let alone cementing a trusting friendship” (Barber, 2003, p. 39).

The debate over the new media and democracy has only begun, and it is still early to assess the impact of new media such as blogging on deliberative democracy. It clearly opens up new avenues of expression. As a fairly frequent, impromptu manifesto of bloggers has it: “Let us use our weblogs to define ourselves individually as we move forward together as a community, joined by our shared commitment to self-expression, free speech, and the vigorous exchange of ideas” (Blood, 2002, p. 164). As suggested in this preliminary study, blogging can be considered part of an emancipation process in which individuals formerly precluded from public discourse are becoming part of it, a process conducive to deliberative democracy.

While recognizing the emancipatory nature of blogging, this study also warned, however, of a dimension of blogging that is less promising from a democratic perspective. The politics of melancholy, some of whose parameters were
identified here, may become quite salient in the emerging political world. We must of course be careful in drawing conclusions about the emerging political world. As tempting as it is to build scenarios showing how blogging will transform the polity, it is safer to assume that like every medium, blogging will become part of the larger communication systems in society. It is however worthwhile to realize, as we analyze this new medium, that the hundreds of thousands of individuals engaged in writing their lives for the world to see cannot be treated merely as a renewed version of Enlightenment projects or ideals. As they indulge in their new freedoms, they can also be expected to display the resentful detachment, cult-like behaviour, and political passivity characterizing the politics of melancholy. And if this hypothesis is true, then deliberative democracy cannot be salvaged by the present emancipation, for democracy involves deliberations between active citizens rather than emotional bonds between the ephemerally situated and politically passive.

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