Social media and personal blogging:

Textures, routes and patterns

Anne Scott Sørensen, Institute of Literature, Culture and Media, University of Southern Denmark

Weblogging (or blogging) is one the social media, characteristic of the web 2.0 generation. In this article, I will present a research on the Danish blogosphere, the focus of which has been on individual and personal blogging. Inspired by media geography, I pursue the idea that personal blogging can be understood as an embodied, collaborative and distributed practice which constitutes a digital realm to be inhabited by its users. Within media geography, the concept of “textures”, taken from Henri Lefebvre and the sociology of everyday life, designates how the self, the everyday and the mundane are spun together and mark out different cultural-material routes in and between space and place, real and virtual and in so doing create different reticular patterns of the commonplace (Falkheimer & Jansson, 2006; Jansson, 2002, 2008). By means of the concepts of textures, routes and patterns, I identify four different genres in personal blogging to be illustrated by four examples from the Danish blog community.

Web 2.0, social media and personal media

Web 2.0, social media and personal media are some of the terms used by media researchers to describe the current generation of digital media. Prototypes of this media include: social network sites, such as, MySpace, FaceBook and Twitter; photo-, video- and music sharing sites, such as, Flickr, YouTube and Albinogorilla; and sites hosting personal blogs, such as, WordPress, Blogspot or Urbanblog.

Though media scholars agree in defining the new generation of digital media by their user-orientation, they disagree on the evaluation thereof. Are we referring to a process of democratisation and empowerment, or are we talking about a process in which users are (again) made the objects of economic exploitation and/or political manipulation – maybe in the softer terms of governmentality and self-governance. Should we be discussing a process of community-building and collectiveness or a process of individualisation and personalisation?

British media scholar Nick Couldry suggests a techno-optimistic position by deeming the new media “the emerging space of digital storytelling” (Couldry, 2009, p. 372). He claims that they are used to exchange “online personal narratives” and thereby provide “the means to distribute more
widely the capacity to tell important stories about oneself – to represent oneself as a social, and therefore potential political, agent” (op. cit., p. 386). However, he also – with Roger Silverstone - acknowledges the duality of mediation as “fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical processes in which institutionalized media of communication […] are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life” (Silverstone in Couldry, op. cit., p. 380). He suggests approaching digital storytelling – at least in mediated democracies – by studying how the practice is connected to everyday life and by asking questions concerning the involved agents, institutions and social norms. He underscores that phrases such as users, networking, story circles or communities etc. can exclude more structural aspects, but he also proposes that power is not only structural and institutional, but also social, and that social media can also be used for social distinction and exclusion.

Couldry opposes the so-called mediatisation thesis: that new media are thoroughly structured by logics of power. The Dutch media scholar José van Dijck represents such a position when she warns against naïve celebrations of “do-it-yourself distribution” and “participation” (Dijck, 2009, p. 44). Her point of view is that social media has turned into big business and that users are exploited as both content providers and data providers by phenomena such as co-creation (produsage), niche marketing and targeted adds, consumer products sold as cultural resources etc. Dijck furthermore warns against what in the US has been termed “the cult of the amateur” – aimed at the way users are used as un- or underpaid labour in the digital industries. However, Dijck has also done in-depth research in social media in which she stresses their empowering effects or rather that social media are complex in the sense that they can at one and the same time be empowering and structuring (Dijck, 2007). Dijck also argues that digital media promote a recycling of cultural materials in terms of: conventions, codes and scripts through which production and consumption, original and copy merge. In digital media, originality (and memory) has become a matter of remix and design.

As to the thesis of individualisation and personalisation, it has been suggested by danah boyd (2006) and others that the differentiation of digital media and the distribution of users and activities have transformed the Internet into a locus of egocentric networks, replacing former online communities. Nancy Baym has opposed this idea and argues that it is not either or, but two related dynamics on the Internet today (Baym, 2007). Connected to this discussion is the scholarly debate on the consequences of the recent development towards web 3.0 and the so-called semantic web, which designates the personalised access to media services and the personalisation of public service in terms of the way news and other media content is selected and communicated. I shall not jump into the debate here, but address it in my analysis of the personal blog, which is by its generic constitution personal. However, the question is, how?

Textures of the self, the everyday and mundane

In the literature on (we)blogs, a genre-typology is generated along the two coordinates individual-collective and personal-professional. The individual, personal blog can again be more intimate or more factual/thematic (Herring et. al., 2004, 2005; Walker Rettberg, 2008). In my own research, I use the term “intimate blog” to designate the type of blog that refers to an autobiographical tradi-
tion and is often also termed online diary (Serfaty, 2004) or lifewriting (Eakin, 2004). It is defined by the claim of authenticity, that is, a claim of proximity between author, narrator and main character, a commitment to the everyday and the reading community and thereby also to the ordinary and mundane (Eakin, 2008). According to Eakin, lifewriting is deeply ethical in the way this commitment is bound to a sharing of social experiences. A point also proposed by Judith Butler, who defines the self-account as a speech act, called forth by a particular situation and directed at a particular community in order to address issues of common concern (Butler, 2005). Precisely because of that, the self-account is bound to cite, explore and challenge social scripts. Following José van Dijck (2007), the personal account – not least in digital formats – can be said to mime as well as “design” the everyday, the mundane and the ordinary – or rather what I, in this context, would call the commonplace.

French sociologist Henri Lefevbre has explored the interrelationship of everyday life and everyday discourse that is of interest here. He also differentiates between what he terms ideological modernity and technological modernism, respectively, when he claims that everyday life is posed in between homogenisation and differentiation, continuities and discontinuities, exposed to still new powers, hierarchies and inequalities: one of them being the growing formalisation of daily life through information technologies and the demand of self-management. This demand according to Lefevbre is dramatised, but also masked in everyday discourse through the reign of the present on behalf of presence, understood as a means of capturing the past and anticipating the future: “At the heart of daily life and its speech we find ethical values, which are supports of social life in that they make it tolerable” (2005/1981, p. 65). This notion of the present/presence seems to nail web 2.0 media on the spot. However, Lefevbre also maintains that everyday discourse is always ambivalent, contradictory and rebellious.

Lefevbre’s notion of everyday life and discourse has been examined further in recent research into the consumer or experience society. Feminist sociologist Rita Felski (2000) talks about “the cult of home”, which is part of a general aesthetisation of everyday life in consumer society, whereby it is seen as the sphere of the authentic, embodied, concrete etc. In consumer society, the everyday is filled with meaning, with history and memory, and the home has turned into a *gesamtkunstwerk* – a unique creation in and of the mundane. Drawing on Lefevbre’s terminology, Felski highlights the dialectics of the everyday in between structure and empowerment, strategies and tactics, the linear and the cyclical, and she maintains the dual quality of daily life as the realm of the ordinary (routines and customs) as well as the extraordinary (that with brakes routine and custom). According to her, this polyrhythm exposes an ongoing struggle between two tendencies, the tendency to homogeneity and the one to diversity, from which new forms of life can spring. In so doing, Felski also resonates with Gerhard Schulze, the originator of the term *Die Erlebnissgesellschaft* (1992), who defines experiences as exclusively bound to the sphere of the everyday and talks about an everyday aesthetics, distinguished by inner orientation, the subjective and pleasure. According to Schulze, the experience society designates a new interplay of state, market and civic society, of the individual and the collective in terms of an intermingling of cultural policies, public scenes and the schemata of an everyday aesthetics.
Swedish media researcher André Jansson, engaged in establishing media geography as a new academic field, explores the intersections of everyday life, consumption and (digital) media (Jansson, 2002, 2008). He is in particular interested in the concept of “texture”, developed by Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1974), as a notion of cultural-material processes or “the communicative fabric” that media users bind and which gives them a feeling of inhabiting a space or region of their own and thereby a sense of belonging and of cultural resonance (Jansson, 2008, p. 8). Jansson, with Lefebvre, talks about how such textures leave their marks in space and are made into “reticular patterns” that embody the values assigned to particular “routes” (Jansson, 2008, p. 9). Having Lefebvre’s argument of the present as opposed to presence in mind, I find that the notions of textures, routes and patterns designate the dynamic moments of everyday discourse by which the present is transformed into a continuous presence. As communicative fabrics, textures are collaborative and they create continuity in the discontinuous: “texture is something through which cultural praxis materialises according to regular rhythms (daily routines, seasons, traditions) into something deeply felt” (Jansson, 2008, p. 8).

This way of arguing seems significant to the blogosphere. According to research into the motives for creating and using blogs, not least individual and personal blogs, blogging is a collaborative thing – blogs create audiences, but audiences also create blogs (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004; Brake, 2007). This again means that the contract between bloggers and their users is constantly refined. Compared to the reader contract of printed self-texts, the contract is now based on criteria such as: availability, usability, frequency, accuracy, consistency, variation, complexity, necessity, ambition/intelligence, feedback-loop, surprise and personal voice – or, in the words of Dijck, design (Kennedy, 2003; Renov, 2002; Dijck, 2007). These criteria can be said to establish the polyrhythm of the blogosphere that is further supported by events such as blog prizes, internal surveys, tagging and making thematic chains etc., but not least generic practices. In the following, I sketch such generic practices or reticular patterns in intimate blogging in Danish.

**The intimate blog: A typology of four reticular patterns**

It is challenging to study blogs since blogging is an ephemeral media. Blogs live and die and many are not active, thereby constituting gaps in the stream of communication and in the researcher’s possibilities to keep track of material and informants (Hine, 2000; Markham & Baym, 2009). In my research into personal blogging¹, I have had to add new blogs recurrently in order to keep a sample of 30-35 blogs. Blogs not only died or became inactive, the very media changed substantially. If almost all blogs in the beginning were exclusively text-based, most are now multi-modal (textual, visual and acoustic). If most services and blogs had open access in the beginning, many are now commercial and/or protected area. Personal bloggers now use targeted ads, have sponsorships and aspire to professionalise their blogging activities. They are directed towards life style issues and promote their own products and skills, from food to design, or aspire to publish their blogs and engage professionally in the media (Sørensen, 2008, 2009). This has been going on for quite a while for instance in the US and in Sweden, where the teenager Isabella Löwengrip has become a million-
Social media and personal blogging

Anne Scott Sørensen

Social media and personal blogging

Self-branding: Single and city life

Charlotte Heje Haase (CHH) holds as Spacemermaid the blog Spacemermaid. A skydiver's adventure (Spacemermaid. En skydykkers eventyr). The blog is a so-called autonomous blog, meaning that CHH does not use the established services and predesigned formats, but leases server space and designs her own blog (in this case by means of a professional designer). In her blog, CHH discusses gender, feminism, chick-lit and also celebrates the term girlie blog. Her particular niche is young, single life in the city, seen through a female spirit. CHH is the first in Denmark to have her...
(former) blog published as a so-called blook: *Spacemermaid. 1001 tears’ girlie thoughts* (2007) – to be followed by *Spacemermaid. Skydiver without parachute* (2008)⁴. She has also been a main blogger at *Urban*, and her ‘career’ as a blogger has taken her to a job as web-editor and journalist. CHH has also integrated her blog with social network sites such as *Facebook* (a fan group) and *MySpace* (a personal profile). In this way, she has succeeded to make her blog a personal brand.

Charlotte Heje Haase is known to the public, even if she still uses different strategies to protect her anonymity, for instance by not stating her civic identity on the title page of her books or in the personal paragraphs on her blogs. The question of the intersections of author, narrator and character in her blooks/blogs has therefore been an issue in the public debate, and it has been addressed by CHH herself in several ways. In her recent blog, she has created thematic notes under headings such as “blognovel”, “blogging” and “blog identity”, and in them signalled, that if in the beginning she wrote almost without censorship, she now uses different kinds of filters in the different contexts of self-publishing in order to protect family, friends and herself. This transformation accords with the ambition to address a wider public both inside and outside the blog community. This again raises the question for her and others: How open should one be? Does being open and honest imply intimate and private details? What does it mean to be authentic? Is it something you lose when you go public/have ambitions to be a writer/author?

In “Blogging and identity” (August 2nd, 2007), CHH/Spacemermaid writes: “I suppose that one’s blogger identity is created in and through the language you use. I have always used a slightly fragmented style and was once – in *The Founting Pen* – called the “Stacato-women”’. I do not usually use that kind of language, but I think it fits with the media.” To her, there is a correspondence between civic identity and blog identity to be felt in the style and language – or rather the
modus performatively induces it and in so doing negotiates known formats (in this case, as another blogger points out in her answer, the format of chick-lit). The relevance of the discussion and its ethical implications is testified by the amount and engagement of respondents (41 to the above-mentioned post). The debate exposes how a blog is more like a space of resonance for shifting voices and porous borders between the public and the private, than a distinct unity of identity and narrative and an accordingly distinct politics of storytelling. Joining the argument of Judith Butler (2007), I would say that what is expressed here is that the individual blogger can never fully master either herself or her story. What she can do is to engage in a mutual process of self-investigation and investigation of the “commonplace” of the blog city.

The personal archive: Home, family and fashion

Mundane life. The Jules Rules (Livet i al almindelighed) is one of the best examples I have found of the anchoring of intimate blogging in everyday life and weaving a smooth texture of the real and the virtual. In reporting from daily life with all its mundane routines in an infant’s family, it has a personal and authentic voice. It demonstrates the basic genre mark of personal storytelling in maintaining an ethos-based style by which it displays a formal digital competency, proves to be solidly positioned in the everyday and ordinary, and shows a proper interest in other bloggers and users of the blog.

Julie Arndrup, the blogger, has exposed her identity to the public on several occasions; but she chooses not to reveal her civic identity directly on her blog. Instead, she signals proximity between author and teller when she uses the address julie.smartlog.dk. Jules, alias Julie, started out by joining a newsgroup, in this case a group for young mothers / mothers of babies with colic at netdoctor.
dk. Today she has 500-600 visits a day. Jules'/Julie's niche still is the role of an infant's mother, but now an experienced one – with husband and two children in a Copenhagen suburb and with a steady job as a children's librarian. Her main story is that of the everyday heroine and the approach is the art of the ordinary and mundane – stressed in the choice of the simple graphic, the almost naïve drawings, the chosen aphorisms etc. However, Jules/Julie has also been one of the first to integrate consumer content and product placement – in a very discrete way and closely related to the themes of the blog (children's clothes, women's fashion, interior design). Furthermore, she has skilfully integrated new technologies and made her blog into a truly multi-modal one with photos, videos, music etc., and she has made her blog part of a more dense presence on the net with a linked profile on Twitter.

In the run of her career as a blogger, Jules'/Julies project has changed. Starting during an acute crisis and with a need to talk to similarly disposed individuals, she now has a position in the blog-community and aspires to reach an even broader public. At the same time, she now uses her blog as a personal archive – a memoir in continuous creation and to the benefit not least to her children when they grow up. Jules/Julie thus both participates in the legitimisation strategies of the blog community (blog ratings, blog events, blog prizes etc.) and in what José van Dijck has described as the potential conquering project of the personal, digital archive (van Dijck, 2007). According to Dijck, the personal archive represents a shift from the reflexive autobiography of the writing culture to the aesthetised design-biography of digital culture – a shift that has changed not only the way we tell ourselves into being but also our means and mode of memorising.

**Getting a voice: Identity and life politics**

One of the male intimate bloggers is Mikael83, who holds the blog *Michael's corner (Mikaels hjørne)*. Mikael83 has exposed his identity to a chosen few, but prefers to be anonymous to the broader public since it is the paradox of addressing the faceless user with “raw honesty” that promotes his self-honesty and creativity. Mikael83’s unique profile is to gain a voice in writing about his daily life as a homosexual and in addressing prejudices about homosexuality. He describes collective bullying in school, a violent boyfriend, and a suicide attempt, as well as the joys, desires and hopes as a young homosexual living in the city. Nevertheless, he opposes being labeled “homoblogger” – and thereby being reduced to a category (August 2008). He thus addresses how we are all exposed to social reputation and categorisation, but how some are more exposed than others, and he accordingly states the difference between self-labeling and being labeled by others.

Mikael83 consequently explores the effects of the experiences he has had in his family as well as in school and with classmates, boy-friends etc., just as he explores emotions, sensations and thoughts provoked by actual events and environments at work, at home – and not least in the public sphere. In so doing, he both uses and negotiates well known scripts for surviving and coming out and invites his readers/users to respond and engage. February, 2008, the user Neukom asks for advice. He has been left by his wife and child and is considering taking his own life. Mikael83 responds, keeps the commentary open and continues to address Neukom, until Neukom signals...
that the crisis has ended, thanks to the support from not only Mikael83 but also other users of his blog who showed they care. In this way, *Michael’s corner* is a fine example of the ethos-based speech genre which is characteristic of the self-account as it is described by Judith Butler – embedded in the joint social reflexion. The blog is in this sense a performative tool for combining self-care with care for the social environment of the blogosphere.

*Michael’s corner* is distinguished by a rather simple and “clean” design with white text on a black background and only very few other artistic effects, which underscores the profile and its basic mood. In Jansson’s words, you may say that the fabric of communication creates a certain atmosphere to be inhabited by the visitor. As Mikael83 writes himself, it is the writing that interests him, and he has also been selected as a so-called main blogger at *Urban* – the free newspaper that also holds the blogservice. It is apparent that the positive response has nourished his creative ambitions, and the blog is in general characterised by the frequency, density and variety needed to uphold user engagement.

**Humour and gimmicks: Socialising and making friends**

Let me end this visit to Danish personal blogs with the following: *Without relevance. My thoughts without relevance to the real world* (Uden relevans. Mine tanker uden relevans for den virkelige verden). The blogger behind wants to be anonymous to the broader public, but he is part of an identifiable circle of bloggers who respond to each other and also meet IR (in real life). A steady user of the blog will soon experience that *Without relevance* not the least is aimed at maintaining an already established community – as has been proved to be the case at network sites such as *FaceBook* and *MySpace* (boyd & Ellison, 2007).
At the same time, the narrator of the blog, Grandfather, is highly popular among other bloggers and still more new readers/users find their way to the blog. Given this, the blogger has recently joined the service Google Friend Connect, meaning that the blog now has a club of friends who subscribe and have privileged access to the blog. At the same time, he has joined Google ads and, underscoring the implicit ethics of the Danish blog community, he distributes the money via MYC4, an online marketplace that connects investors from all over the world with African businesses that need loans (the so-called micro-loans).

The profile of Grandfather is the humorous approach to everyday life as a not so young single, who, besides his friends, is engaged in media, music (with a photo of Sex Pistols in the head bar) and sport (with a photo of the All-Denmark team in the head bar, too) but also at his work and with colleagues. One of the targets of his satire is the workplace – the “ditchdugger” – and how it is formed under the reign of “the new work order”. In a post from February 16th (2008), which is part of a longer serial about IT-politics, he mocks the tendency to block social network sites such as Facebook and the chatting service Messenger. Another target is the lifestyle of the middleclass, including himself and his own milieu, its consumerism and extravagancies and gendered tokens.

Grandfather is obsessed with projecting a strong, masculine and heterosexual image, balanced by a style of easy going, underscored in the motto “In my world, mistakes do not exist”, and the nickname “President of Jacuzziland”, respectively. The result is not always politically correct language and speech, and Grandfather is often confronted by offended females as well as males, heterosexual as well as homosexual identified respondents – or lovingly corrected by steady users. The user, or at least the casual visitor, never quite knows to what extent the performance is staged and part of a game. However, sometimes the self-image and the profiled role as provocateur crashes and Grandfather exposes radical changes of mood or rather glimpses thereof. A humorous approach
and (self)irony then again are the means by which the attitude of Grandfather is re-established and authenticity vis-à-vis the blog community is regained.

As Vivian Serfaty has found in her research into American blogs, the situated comic, the gimmicks, anchored in everyday life and its intersections of comedy and drama, the ordinary and the extraordinary make a distinct fabric or (in the words of Jansson) reticular pattern – or subgenre (Serfaty, 2004).

Conclusion

In this article, I have traced four different reticular patterns by which the material-cultural processes of media and everyday life, place and space, real and virtual are spun and the digital realm perceived. In so doing, I have combined media and narrative theory; ethics and the philosophy of the self-account; the sociology of the everyday, space and consumption – all inspired by new media theory and the new research field of media geography. Falkheimer and Jansson (2006) predict a spatial turn in media studies in terms of an interest in how representation and materiality melt together in new and persuasive ways in digital media. I would say that the transformation has been going on for quite a time (termed the performative turn, the affective turn or even the ontological turn) and has helped transform the concept of a brand-new cyberworld, into a concept of the ongoing dynamics of our world-making. However, following the dynamics of digital media, blogging is also already changing as it is woven into the textures of other personal and social media and users are segmented and distributed along a range of different sites and activities. As to the initial questions of structure and agency, society and the individual, I will conclude that whereas the bloggers themselves seem to think of the changes in personal bogging in terms of a loss of agency and community, I would say that tendencies such as regulation, commercialisation and segmentation are continuously counteracted by user creativity and new forms of interaction. However, I would also agree with Nancy Baym (2007) when she argues that the distribution of actors, technologies and networks within the Internet has reached a level at which we may well talk about a schism between the egocentric network and the online community.

References


Brake, David (2007): “Personlige bloggere og deres publikum. Hvem tror bloggerne at de snakker med? (“Personal bloggers and their readers. To whom do the bloggers think they talk?”), in Lüders, Marika; Prøitz, Lin & Ras-
mussen, Terje (eds.): Personlige medier. Livet mellem skærmene. (Personal media: Life among the screens), Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.


Renov, Michael (2003): “The end of autobiography or new beginnings? Everything you never knew you’d know about someone you’ll probably never meet”, in Campbell, Jan & Harbord, Janet: Temporalities, autobiography and everyday life, Manchester: Manchester University Press.


Blogs

http://julies.smartlog.dk
http://mikael83.urbanblog.dk
http://spacemermaid1001.dk
http://hvasnakkerduom.blogspot.com/
http://blondinbella.se/
http://www.slagtenhelligko.dk/
Notes

1. The project was part of the collective research project “High-tension Aesthetics. Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Media”, funded by the National Research Council (The Humanities) 2005-2008. It is a qualitative study, based on observation of the Danish blogosphere, close readings of around 90 blogs and 9 interviews with intimate bloggers (either online or offline), cf. http://www.high-tension-aesthetics.com/home_uk.htm.

2. Extracts of the report and a model based on the statistics were released on the former website http://www.primelabs.se and on the professional blog held by Danish IT-colleagues on http://blogeffekt.wordpress.com (now closed), both Sept. 11th. It was discussed – among other topics – at two Danish blogs, hovedetpaabloggen.dk and oschlag.dk, also Sept. 11th. These contributions can still be found in the blog-archives.

3. The so-called BROG-project has currently published its results on a research blog at www.blogninja.com. However, this research project has had its conflict with the local blogosphere due to the finding that blogs are less networked, less interactive and thereby potentially less influential than claimed by early research and among bloggers. The conflict seems to have had serious consequences for the research project since the blog has dried out and there have been no ‘final results’ manifestation.

4. The titles in Danish are Spacemermaid. 1001 års tøsetanker. En weblog, 2007 (Politikens Forlag) og Spacemermaid. Skydykker uden faldskærm. En weblogroman, 2008 (Lindhardt & Ringhof). The blooks are made out of Charlotte Heje Haases posts (5-10 years ago) at The Fountain Pen (Fyldepennen) – a community for people who writes and aspire to be better at writing, which demands membership.