

University Paris IV Sorbonne

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2005

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Refereed paper presented to *Blogtalk Downunder*.
University Technology Sydney, 19-22 May 2006.

Summary

The promise of the mass use of the internet was that it would create a participatory political culture, where 'netizens' practised many kinds of liberating grassroots activities. Indeed, the Internet is often described as a horizontal and open structure which resists any kind of hierarchical organisation: a network, goes the argument, is by definition devoid of a centre, and hence of a central authority. This vision of the Internet and of blogspace as anarchic or heterarchic systems fails to account for a basic fact: if social networks have migrated online, it is logical to assume that the processes of differentiation, hierarchisation and control which, by all accounts, structure offline human interactions, have also done so. In this paper, I analyse authoritative statements and actions in blogspace. According to the social network analytical model, power and authority on networks derive from centrality or 'prominence', the density of ties to other more or less centrally located individuals. Sites such as Technorati make success statistically measurable, by identifying the most authoritative blogs (those that are most linked to). Social network researchers assert that the apparently highly unequal distribution of links on the web and in blogspace constitutes a 'power law' distribution model: deterministic network forces are said to favour early entrants on the blog market; linking patterns are portrayed as inherently conservative, constraining new entrants and leading to the reinforcement of authoritative actors. The 'power law' takes on the immutable qualities of natural phenomena which cannot be questioned.

These analyses, which focus on network morphology and mechanisms, suffer from an inadequate conceptualisation of human agency and culture, as well as from a tendency to consider online networks as isolated from offline social structures. What processes of differentiation and exclusion structure the social dynamics of blogspace? The antagonism between issue-based blogs and personal journals reveals oppositions as to how authority is produced and reproduced, as well as diverging conceptions of virtual space. The relatively open space of issue-blogs is based on 'quality', where authoritative statements form the basis of the bartering of prestigious links, and of mainstream media recognition. The relatively closed space of LiveJournal is based on 'intimacy', where authoritative actions (such as the inclusions and exclusions of other users into journals) constitute the subtext of many conversations. Could the scorn poured on LiveJournal by issue-bloggers be attributed to gender (LiveJournal is predominantly peopled by females whilst the influential political blog subgroup – for example – is predominantly male)? Another explanation would relate to the relationship of actors to authority. Blogging signifies the extension of networking and linking, but also that of controlling and excluding; however the second part of the equation is not usually acknowledged in issue-based blogspace. LiveJournal reveals what lies behind blogging's 'participatory' and 'democratic' rhetoric, and must, accordingly, be ostracized.

1. The internet and politics, blogs and authority

Human interactions are increasingly occurring in virtual communities facilitated by email and the world wide web (www). The original promise of the mass use of the internet was that it would promote a participatory political culture, where ‘netizens’ practised all sorts of grassroots activities. Democratisation of access to the web, went the argument, would promote equality in the dissemination and reception of information. Since then, a Babel has emerged, where it sometimes seems as if everyone talks, and no-one listens. Commentators confused *retrievability* (any page online can be accessed by any computer) and *visibility* (what pages actors are actually likely to encounter): retrievability is absolute; visibility, relative. Consequently, setting up an independent political website has been compared to hosting a public access TV show at 3.30 in the morning. The situation could be characterized as one of wealth of information and poverty of attention (Hindman 2004: 34). It even looked as if far from challenging dominant hierarchies, the net was going to have the opposite effect, that of reinforcing mass media hegemony, as only global media conglomerates were equipped with the resources to produce visually appealing new content on a regular basis. Until the arrival of weblogs, that is.

Blogs (chronologically updated personal websites) are the only sites which have bypassed mass media hierarchies – expressing directly and informally their authors’ thoughts – and, thanks to their simplification of heretofore complex web design tools, enabled the production of reasonably attractive layouts, and attract measurably large audiences. The arrival of these ‘pirate radio stations’ of the Web was heralded in 1999 on Slashdot, the popular technology-related information and discussion website, as “a new, personal, and determinedly non-hostile evolution of the electric community. They are also the freshest example of how people use the Net to make their own, radically different new media” (Katz 1999). Law professor Lawrence Lessig also focused on the democratic quality of weblogs when describing Howard Dean’s campaign in the Democratic Primaries in 2003 as the first example of ‘open-source politics’: Dean’s campaign blogs, wrote Lessig, were “a tool for building community (...) the trick is to turn the audience into the speaker... None of this works unless the blog community is authentic. And that requires that members feel they own their gabbing space.”

Taking a different approach, Internet theorist Geert Lovink (2005) states in a recent disquisition: “Networks disintegrate traditional forms of representation. This is what makes the question ‘Did blogs affect the 2004 US-election?’ so irrelevant. The blogosphere, at best, influenced a handful of TV and newspaper editors” (22). Lovink seems to be challenging the currently orthodox view of blogs as politically effective communication tools, and in particular, as inherently democratic. However, he continues: “Instead of spreading the word, the Net has questioned authority – any authority” (22). Indeed, the Internet is often described as a horizontal and open structure which resists any kind of hierarchical organisation: a network, goes the argument, is by definition devoid of a centre, and hence of a central authority. This vision of the Internet and of blogspace as anarchic or heterarchic systems fails to account for a basic fact: if social networks have migrated online, is it not logical to assume that the processes of differentiation, hierarchisation and control which, by all accounts, structure offline human interactions, have also done so?

A hierarchical structure depend on the existence of a person in a position of authority, whose legitimacy to exercise power is accepted by others. It follows that authority is never egalitarian: an authority is always a superior of some kind, to be obeyed, followed, consulted, attended to, deferred

to, or conformed to (Watt 1982: 7). In a communication network such as blogspace, authority is based on the excellence of the information being exchanged. Bloggers constantly refer to the opinions of others, in order to approve or challenge them. Political blogs, for example, consider it important to properly attribute sources, to rely on sources which are described as authoritative, and to use the network to verify sources. This 'learned' authority, contrarily to the military kind for example, is non-official. An authoritative pronouncement may give us good reasons for believing that what has been said is true, but it can never make it true, in the way that a decision in law may make something legal: "it is only personal excellence, and not the holding of any institutional office, that makes someone an authority on his subject, to call him an authority is to say that he knows it well or does it well" (Watt 1982: 46).

2. Mapping centrality on the internet

What theoretical framework can best help us understand the impact of networked communication and organization on the production and reproduction of authority? The virtues of the structural (or network) analytical model when analysing web interactions have been extolled by numerous researchers (see Freeman 1984, Garton et al. 1997, Wellman 2001, Monge and Contractor 2003, Park and Thelwall 2003). Network analysis holds that the structure of relations among actors and the location of actors on networks have important behavioral, perceptual and attitudinal consequences both for the individual units and for the system as a whole. Human behavior is understood in terms of structural constraints on activity and opportunities for gaining advantage, rather than assuming that inner forces (such as internalized norms) impel actors towards goals. An important issue is how networks allocate flows of scarce resources to system members (see Knoke and Kuklinski 1982, Wellman 1988, Wasserman and Faust 1994).

Although the idea of using a methodology based on the metaphor of a network to examine a communication medium based on the metaphor of a web seems to be so obvious that it threatens to be 'trivial' (Jackson 1997), it is clear that structural analysis offers key concepts and methodologies for the study of online networks. Moreover, structural analysis' reliance on quantitative measures has proven especially suited to the collection and analysis of internet data, which is readily available. Data mining, the use of automated procedures to discover information from large quantities of data, has enabled analysts to track the spread of information. A hyperlink from page *i* to page *j* can have many interpretations: Kleinberg (1999) refers to hyperlinks as conferrers of authority or endorsements, Davenport and Cronin (2000) argue that hyperlinks reflect trust, and for Hernández-Borges et al. (1999) hyperlinks can indicate quality. Social relationships between bloggers are explicitly stated in the form of hypertext links (Marlow 2004: 2): blogrolls (lists of links to blogs selected by the blogger), permalinks (links to items in other blogs within a post), and trackback (records of web addresses of sites that have linked to a blog) offer rich pickings for data miners.

A key concept for structural analysis is the notion of network centrality. Power and authority on networks is said to derive from centrality or 'prominence', the density of ties to other more or less centrally located individuals. Freeman (1979) distinguished several measurements of network centrality, and Park and Thelwall (1997) have shown how Freeman's approach could be applied to hyperlink analysis: 'indegree centrality' is calculated based on the number of hyperlinks a Web site receives, while 'outdegree centrality' is determined with the number of hyperlinks originating from

a site. ‘Closeness centrality’ indicates which Web site has the shortest path to all others in the group. ‘Betweenness centrality’ refers to the frequency with which a Web site falls between pairs of other sites in the group and “represents the potential for control of communication, as a broker or a gatekeeper”. How can we evaluate centrality in blogspace?

3. The blog economy: the rich get richer

The principal measure of value on the blog field resides in being linked to, and linking to, other blogs. Posts commenting on posts are key forms of information exchange in the blog economy. In addition, when linking to an interesting source of information found on another blog, a blogger is expected to credit the latter in any post she writes (Drezner and Farrell 2004: 8). Hyperlinks, the basic currency of the blogosphere, thus represent a “form of social acknowledgement on the part of authors” (Marlow 2004: 1). They signify authority and popularity (expressing bloggers’ public affiliation) and influence (when bloggers quote each others’ writing). Refusing to link to someone – breaking what Salam Pax, the ‘Baghdad Blogger’, referred to as the chain of “lynkylove” (1) – is therefore the most negative blogging action, as stated by one blogger:

I took a pass on Michelle Malkin when her book first came out because I honestly didn’t want to contaminate this site with anything as vile and hateful. Her book (which I will neither name or link to) suggests that interning the Japanese during WWII was a good idea and should be applied to Arabs and other ‘darkies’ now... ***ANOTHER UPDATE: I hate myself for linking this, but Malkin blogs about her appearance. (Cohen 2004)

The seemingly infinite multiplication of voices on the web makes it impossible for any one reader to have experienced all, or even most, of the blogs in existence, making quality an unsatisfactory or impractical measure. Mortensen and Walker (2002) contend that popularity, on the other hand, is easily quantifiable if it is interpreted as the number of other weblogs linking to a particular blog. Sites such as Blogdex, TheTruthLaidBear, Sitemeter and Technorati make success statistically measurable, by identifying the most popular blogs, that is, those that are most linked to. For example Technorati presents “the most authoritative blogs, ranked by the number of sources that link to each blog” (Technorati 2005). Blog counting sites such as these are not without their problems. For example, Sitemeter only tracks those who use its traffic meter and cannot differentiate unique visitors. As for Technorati and TheTruthLaidBear, their link-reliant counts are affected by the relative freshness of links and can be manipulated by inventive bloggers (Adamic and Glance 2005: 6).

Following the lead of physicists such as (2002), many researchers have noted that there appears to exist a severe imbalance in the distribution of web and blog linking patterns (see Huberman 2002, Hindman et al. 2003, Shirky 2003, Drezner and Farrell 2004). They characterize cyberspace as a ‘scale-free network’ in which some hubs (highly linked nodes) have a seemingly unlimited number of links, and no node is typical of the others. This inequitable distribution of links is said to follow a ‘power law’ distribution model, that is, one where there is a finite probability of finding sites extremely large compared to the average. Shirky’s (2003: 2) analysis of 433 blogs in the Blogosphere Ecosystem found a power law distribution where 3 % of the top blogs accounted for 20 % of the incoming links. As on the web, the distribution of inbound links in blogspace pushes users towards small numbers of hyper-successful sites.

This is because the number of websites (as of blogs) has been growing exponentially since the start of the web: as a result, there are many more relatively small young sites than relatively large older ones (Huberman 2002: 5). Thanks to the growing nature of real networks, older nodes have had greater opportunities to acquire links (and Bonabeau 2003: 54); moreover, historical links contribute to gross link number. The linking decisions of actors is also said to contribute to the skewed distribution of links. As is the case on the web, bloggers know of the most connected sites because they are easier to find. By linking to these hubs in blogspace, originally known as the ‘A-List’, people exercise and reinforce a bias towards them, a process and Bonabeau (2003) dub ‘preferential attachment’, meaning that the rich tend to get richer (54). In this scenario, linking patterns are an inherently conservative force, leading to the reinforcement of authority. As Shirky (2003) observes, “diversity plus freedom of choice creates inequality, and the greater the diversity, the more the inequality” (1).

4. Linkslutting, A-listers, new entrants

The ‘A-Listers’ are blogspace’s authorities. This number one cluster in the field comprises early practitioners, software producers, bloggers who show persistence. Members of the ‘A-List’, like other celebrities, may be the subjects of adulation. A blogger known as ninety-four (2004) qualifies a link to another blog thus: “caterina.net - she knows powacek (sic)! i’m so jealous.”¹ Not all links are equal. Marlow (2004) distinguishes inclusions in blogrolls, which signify a static endorsement, from permalinks which indicate that a thought transmission is in process between two bloggers. This is why certain earlier ‘A-List’ blogs place well in blogrolls but not permalinks: their names are recognized, paid homage to, but they are not writing influential or topical content.

‘A-List’ blogs are distinguished because of their early presence in the field, not quality. As a result, the ‘A-List’ may appear static and unchangeable; a certain degree of homeostasis is necessarily involved (Shirky 2003: 5). How can new entrants overcome these constraints? Being the first to comment on a ‘hot’ topic may confer status (Adamic et al. 2004). But the more common solution for new entrants will perversely reinforce the very situation they are attempting to overcome. When adding themselves to the network, announcing their existence to the blogosphere, new entrants are highly likely to create links to well-established bloggers (Drezner and Farrell 2004: 10). Indeed, they are encouraged to do so. Online ‘how-to’ columnists such as Pollard (2003), when offering advice on setting up a blog, assert that the best way to generate traffic is to be noticed, and linked to, by an ‘A-Lister’. Similarly Rebecca Mead (2000), author of a ground-breaking *New Yorker* article, “You’ve Got Blog”, wrote that being linked to original A-Listers Jason Kottke or Megnut² was “like having a book on Oprah” (82). Blogger Donohoe amplified this point:

¹ Derek Powazek has been working for the last ten years as a “web designer, print designer, writer about technology, writer of stories, photographer” (Powazek, 2004); since 1997, he has published several books and created the websites Fray, City Stories, SF Stories, DFC and Kvetch!

² Meg Hourihan was a co-founder of Pyra, the company which created the Blogger software, and which was later bought by Google. She announced in September 2004 that she was embarking on a new career as a chef. What follows is another blogger’s reaction to this news: “Meg Hourihan quits the geek life. Which removes competition from my plans to rule the geek world, so - y’know - I should be happy. But she will be very much missed. Good luck, lovely lady...” (Coates, 2004).

The belief in an A-List totally influences blogging practices. Webloggers link to other weblogs in hopes that the target site will see them in their referrer logs and come visit them, and link back to them, and that tends to be successful. Both groups of people (the collective term is 'linkwhores') look at their logs so frickin' often that it's the first thing they talk about socially.

The practice of seeking to be linked to, 'linkslutting', though generally viewed negatively (as illustrated by the previous quote), has also been defined by Walker (2002) as a logical practice, a "consensual exchange of favours" (79). Deliberations about whether to link to another blog are rarely expressed in the blogosphere; an exception is Den Beste (2002), who recounts how he was asked to link to another blog, and replied that it was impossible to link to everyone. The decision as to whether to reciprocate a link will depend on several factors: the other blog's discursive and aesthetic quality, network centrality (measured by inbound links) and outbound link structure, which is determined by the identity of the blogroll's inhabitants as well as by quantitative factors. A clear indicator of popularity is the number of comments responding to posts, but there are also unspoken rules of blogging such as keeping one's blogroll short; neverending blogrolls irretrievably devalue the currency of the listed blogs.

Blogspace's authority structure rests on the mediating function of authoritative focal point blogs, which allow less authoritative authors of interesting blog-posts to find readers (Drezner and Farrell 2004: 13). When authors of new political blogs formulate an interesting point, they will post it on their own blog, and also contact a larger blog to publicize it. For the authoritative blogger, this is more cost-effective than scouring the net for interesting nuggets of information. Authoritative blogs embody a self-enforcing equilibrium where readers look for new content, and average bloggers peddle their information. Drezner and Farrell (2004) observe that its "networked structure (...) allows interesting arguments to make their way to the top of the blogosphere" (13). As a result, in the United States, the top political bloggers' authority as purveyors of valuable information is comforted by their interaction with the national mainstream media.

5. The mainstream media's wounded authority

Against what Castells (1997) describes as the one-way communication, the "extension of mass production, of industrial logic into the world of signs" (370) which characterises the mass media, personal media such as print zines and online weblogs offer the promise of a participatory culture (O'Neil 2005). The infamous reporting of the mainstream media during the invasion of Iraq, when reporters were 'embedded' within army units, symbolises for many bloggers the mainstream's lack of independence in relation to state power. Well-known bloggers such as Rebecca Blood (2002) stereotypically assert that not only are blogs reclaiming the means of communication from corporations, but that "each kind of weblog empowers individuals on many levels". The transformation of the consumer of media into a creator of media carries the promise of rejecting alienation. This also corresponds to the strategy of a newcomer in a cultural field, whose heretical subversion attempts to partially revolutionise the field by claiming to be returning to the origins, the essence, the truth of the game, against the trivialisation and degradation into which it has since drifted (Bourdieu 1984: 145). In the United States, for example, political bloggers sometimes contest the authority of the dominant players in the media field in the name of its original values,

taking as their model the shamelessly opinionated Partisan Press of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Partisan Press editors were clearly identified as either ‘Republican’ or ‘Federalist’, and did not hesitate to viciously slander their adversaries; moreover, it was customary for newspapers to intersperse news and opinions, often within the same article.

At the same time, blogs are engaged in a complex relationship with the mainstream media. In the United States, mainstream journalists have been paying increasing attention to the ‘blogosphere’: a Lexis Nexis search of mainstream news sources conducted by Drezner and Farrell (2004: 5) found that eleven articles mentioned ‘weblogs’ between 1995 and 1999, 56 in 2000, 128 in 2001, 272 in 2002, and 647 in 2003. Moreover, when a consensus opinion is perceived to emerge on politically-oriented blogs, this in turn affects mainstream journalists, who use blogs as a source for opinion as well as the identification and framing of breaking news. Since, according to the ‘power law’ distribution model, an overwhelming fraction of traffic and links clusters around dominant nodes, journalists who focus on these blogs will obtain the general state of opinion in the political ‘blogosphere’. The top five or ten blogs function as a kind of summary statistic for journalists. Drezner and Farrell (2004) buttress this assertion with a survey of leading journalists’ use of blogspace (18). Conversely, political bloggers in the United States seek to influence mainstream news content. In the course of the ‘blogger wars’ in the United States, in which opposing bloggers supported Republican or Democratic presidential candidates, the greatest prize was seeing a story which had originated on a blog migrating to a mainstream news organisation. The so-called ‘Rathergate’ controversy began when the authenticity of documents critical of George W. Bush’s National Guard service was questioned by a conservative blogger named ‘Buckhead’ on the *Free Republic* site. This post was linked to by another blog, *Power Line*, which was itself picked up by Matt Drudge, and given an audience of millions on his *Drudge Report*. A day after they were broadcast on CBS, ABC disputed the credibility of the accusations. An unexpected result of the scandal was that (right-) ‘wingers’ or ‘freepers’ – terms used by Democrat-leaning bloggers to disparage *Free Republic*-type bloggers – proudly started calling themselves ‘pyjamahadeen’, after a CBS executive declared that bloggers work in their living-room wearing pyjamas (Devine 2004: 16).

The rise of political bloggers in the US presidential election generated a number of negative reactions on the part of mainstream journalists. The earliest took the form of amused condescension; the mass media coverage of bloggers reporting on the Democratic National Convention is a case in point (see Faler 2004; Johnson 2004). A more nuanced critique has since emerged, centered around a challenge to the moral authority of blogs to speak in lieu of the mainstream. Trust is the cornerstone of credibility, goes this line of reasoning. And transparency is a reasonable starting point for any discussion of trust (Mitchell and Steele 2005: 2). This implies that bloggers and journalists share a common aspiration, credibility with their audience. However the authority of bloggers is derived as much, if not more, from the idiosyncrasy and honesty of self-expression, than from the observation of ethical journalistic standards. Mainstream media’s dogged affirmation of such core principles as fairness, accuracy and thoroughness; and its braying of the journalist’s code of serving ‘citizens and democracy’ by reporting meaningful information about civic affairs and holding government officials accountable, is naturally blind to the well-documented impact on mainstream editorial choices of such factors as corporate culture, ownership and conglomeration issues, susceptibility to advertisers’ perception of what constitutes appropriate media content, and the attendant rise in “infotainment” (see Schiller 1989, Andersen 1995, Bagdikian 1997, Herman and McChesney 1997, McChesney 1997).

6. Spectres haunting the network

This, then, is the current state of research on authority relations in blogspace: a textbook illustration of social network theory, where nodes attempt to maximise their centrality and authority by judiciously linking to heavily-trafficked hubs. What is missing from these analyses, which focus on network morphology and mechanisms or on explicitly political campaigns and messages on the Internet, is the question of how networking affects social hierarchies, which, though present in social fields, are not necessarily explicitly defined as such. In other words, there is in much social network theory in general, and internet and blog analysis in particular, an inadequate conceptualization of human agency and culture, as well as a tendency to consider online networks as isolated from offline social structures.

Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994) have proposed a comprehensive critique of network analysis' structuralist determinism, which in their view "neglects altogether the potential causal role of actors' beliefs, values, and normative commitments" (1425). Structuralist determinism represents a reification of social relations, "transforming the important *theoretical* distinction between a structure of social relations, on the one hand, and cultural formations, on the other, into an *ontological* dualism" (1427). The reliance on graph theory results in static "map configurations" or relational "snapshots" of network patterns. Another variant of network analysis – structuralist instrumentalism – accepts the role of social actors in history, but conceptualizes their activity in narrowly utility-maximising and instrumental forms. Actors are portrayed as "utility maximizers who pursue their material interests in money, status and power in precisely the way predicted by theorists of rational choice" (1428).

How do authority structures in blogspace reflect social hierarchies? Castells (1996) reminds us that not only is access to computer-mediated communication socially restrictive, but that "presence or absence in networks and the dynamics of each network vis-à-vis others are critical sources of domination and change in our society" (500). The reliance on mechanistic explanations such as power laws is not innocent; in fact, such analytical framework mystify a social process by constantly invoking what Bourdieu (1979) calls the "natural" authority of scientific reason (451). Attributing networked and blogged authority to purely deterministic factors, removed from human agency, serves to justify the existing dominant social structure and to discourage in advance any efforts to modify it. It is revealing that Shirky (2003) refers, among other examples, to neoclassical economist Vilfredo Pareto's notion that 20% of the population holds 80% of the resources as an example of a 'power law' distribution (2). The implication can only be: what good would it do to act against such an all-pervasive occurrence? None, obviously, as the 'power law' takes on the immutable qualities of natural phenomena. This framework also removes the need to ask questions such as who is speaking, what is being said, and, who is being excluded?

Authority is a form of violence; even learned authority. The power of definition and communication implies the power of exclusion and stigmatization. In the cultural sphere, the authoritative actor, exerting symbolic violence, decides what is most 'interesting'. Bourdieu reminds us that those who feel authorized to speak out, those who master discourses and symbols, are often those who feel authorized to act politically, to lead (483). Plato (qtd. in Watt 54) had already declared that those who know should also be those who decide and command, linking learned to political authority.

Following Bourdieu's example, Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994) write that one of most important dimensions of social conflicts are struggles over their cultural and symbolic definition, when certain actors and actions are said to embody purity and sacrality while others embody impurity and pollution (1441). In cultural fields, the primary struggle over value concerns the definition of the stakes, that is to say, of the definition of the field's products: what constitutes a blog? According to Bourdieu's famous formulation, most people seek to "distinguish" their cultural consumption and production from that which they perceive to be "common", through often hidden processes of exclusion of outsiders and inclusion of insiders (1979: 17). In blogspace, how is symbolic violence exercised, and cultural authority affirmed, in the name of good taste?

7. The structural meaning of LiveJournal-bashing

Most blogs are built along the same lines: a central column for the posts, and one or two narrower sidebars featuring links and lists. Despite their relatively uniform appearance, differentiation processes are intense in the blog field. The struggles around the definition of the field's products oppose two main types of blogs: those which explore a specific issue such as technology, literature, pop culture, politics, etc., and mine the web for interesting content; and those which present a description of their author's life. Struggles over definitions reflect a hierarchy, from the most basic to the more complex blogging software. For example, it appears that 'A-Lister' Rebecca Blood (2002) was not convinced that the introduction of the Blogger software represented a wholly positive development: "Blogger makes it so easy to type in a thought or reaction that many people are disinclined to hunt up a link and compose some text around it". This differentiating discourse is particularly virulent when issue-based blogtalk turns to LiveJournal. LiveJournal is a free blogging software program which offers many features to users. LiveJournalers can enter a full user profile comprising: lists of links to other users they like ('friends'); lists of discussion forums ('communities') to which they belong, which are based on location and interests; lists of topics they are interested (which in turn lead to other communities and individual users sharing the same interest). A friends' page can aggregate all their friends' latest posts together. Users can also specify who is allowed to access their entire blog, or individual posts. Finally, LiveJournalers sometimes rely on a series of readymade fields which indicate, either via emoticons or a limited set of choices, the current mood of the blogger, the music they are listening to, and so forth. LiveJournal has since spawned a host of imitators, of which the most memorable is the darkly gothic DeadJournal, as well as GreatestJournal and Xanga.

The absence of any significant linkage pattern from issue-based blogs towards LiveJournal could lead us to assume that we are in the presence of a network 'structural hole'. Burt (1992) defined structural holes as "the gaps between nonredundant contacts" (19) which offer opportunities for actors on networks to gain advantage. When people accumulate social resources, or social capital, they invest them in social opportunities from which they expect to profit. Network holes are those places where people are unconnected in a network, and where "people can invest their social capital" (Monge and Contractor 2003: 143). In fact, the gaps between issue-blogs and LiveJournal are black holes, offering no gain, but, on the contrary, guaranteeing terminal contamination for the issue-blogger who would dare to cross the divide. This opposition: between Movable Type / WordPress and LiveJournal / DeadJournal, between the topical and the personal, between 'quality' and 'shit', constitutes the structural linchpin of blogspace. Distinctive processes in the print 'zine' review economy, though strong, did not appear to be as exclusionary as those at work in the

blogspace (see O'Neil, 2005). Though technically only a link away, there is a much greater symbolic segregation between online software suites and their attendant content orientations. This observation might tempt us to formulate a law of personal expression and personal media: the more technology integrates, the more authoritative taste separates?

Why do issue-bloggers express such vindictiveness toward LiveJournal? After all, the LiveJournal software follows an open source licence: should this not endear it to the more technically-minded issue-blogger? Is it because of the regular use of pre-set templates by LiveJournalers, generating a limited range of aesthetic choices? Or because many LiveJournal users remain enclosed within their own virtual gated community? On Slashdot, the news that sophisticated Movable Type blogging software maker Six Apart was planning to purchase LiveJournal led to a wide-ranging discussion, which generated the following comment: “ (...) I mean seriously, LJ has got to be the most hideously unusable website since Sourceforge [sf.net] - are there any usability guidelines it *doesn't* violate?” (Sanity 2005). For netizens in general and issue-bloggers in particular LiveJournal-bashing is a doxa, a belief that is assumed to be self-evidently correct and therefore impossible to question. It might be more fruitful to tackle the question from the point of view of the stigmatized. To the query “Has LiveJournal changed your life in any ways? ”, one LiveJournal user offered the following response:

I like to think that I have become more open and more honest in my writing. During the first months of having my LJ, I simply posted about my days - what I did, who I saw, what we said, and the like. My LJ friends commented upon how journalistic my writing seemed, and slowly, I became comfortable enough with this website in order to loosen up and become more honest. (M_bibliophile 2005)

Using the term “journalist” (in the sense of one who writes for a news organisation) negatively contradicts many issue-based or political bloggers’ stated intention of writing ‘quality’ material. Even discussions on such serious LiveJournal communities as Blog_Sociology are characterized by informality and frequent silliness. On LiveJournal, the interaction is what matters. The experience of friendship is equally (or more) important than the content being discussed. This sometimes translates into LiveJournal being described as a more ‘female’ environment than more ‘aggressive’ formats such as political blogs or warblogs. A discussion on a Blogger-created blog about the positive aspects of the Blogger community and its perceived threat by commercial exploitation turned to a comparison with LiveJournal, generating the following comments : “I'm not too familiar with LiveJournal-- the only blogs I've seen on there seem to be authored by 12-year old girls with a taste for anime” (Meg 2005). This was quickly followed by: “Livejournal has a well-earned reputation for being a place to whine and have others sympathetically whine with you” (Andrew 2005). The previously mentioned Slashdot discussion (see Sanity 2005) repeatedly featured the by-now familiar phrase “12-year old girls” in relation to LiveJournal. Is gender, then, the root of the cultural antagonism that structures blogspace? The patriarchal basis of authority asserting itself over the network? There is undoubtedly a danger of falling into stereotypical representations here. It is true, nonetheless, that LiveJournal is more heavily populated by females than males, as shown in LiveJournal’s own statistical breakdown (2005): on 23 april 2004, there were 2,077,136 male users on LiveJournal (32.7%) and 4,265,766 female users (67.3%). There were also 2,000,621 unspecified users; the majority of users were aged between 14 and 21. (LiveJournal Statistics 2005)

How do LiveJournalers perceive their devalued status on the Internet? How do they transcend the contemptuous value judgments of issue-bloggers as well as the aesthetic limitations of their chosen platform of expression to affirm the distinctive value of their personal media production activity? These questions, in the end, miss the point: the question of value, taste, and distinction is no longer relevant in a universe where there are no critical outsiders, only consensually selected 'friends' who offer intimate comment about one's daily life. Paradoxically, it is precisely this casual disregard for the norms of the wider blogosphere which has enabled LiveJournalers to attain the centre of the blogging process. After reading another user's response to a survey question on LiveJournal Blog_Sociology, Jimproper (2005) posted the following comment : "Hey you have a very interesting life and personality, I enjoyed reading your LJ and thus added you as a friend". Such is the narcissistic payoff for LiveJournalers: the vindication that one's investment in online communication has received the maximum return, an inbound link and a 'friend'. The blatantly public nature of this expression of pleasure hints at the cause for the cultural antagonism structuring the field of blogs.

This brings us back to authority. Blogs refer to authoritative sources; they also exercise authority. By enabling anyone to add comments and links, blogs dramatically extend the participatory process. But this means, as well, that they are rife with issues of comments administration. Since comments can easily be spammed or abused, they need to be constantly monitored. This is the power of disciplining and policing, where the authoritative actor decides what is criminal on a network, or what is acceptable. Comment abusers are known as 'trolls'. Just as on e-mail lists, online forums and so on, the term serves as a form of discipline. Being labelled a 'troll' generates a fear of contagion in others, and may result in automatic exclusion from further communication.

What is clear is that in the LiveJournal environment, issues pertaining to blog management are not, as in the rest of blogspace, somehow perceived as inferior to learned authoritative pronouncements, but, instead, brought to the forefront. On issue-blogs, linking choices and conflicts are ostensibly about substantive issues. LiveJournal linking choices and conflicts have no further referent than the LiveJournal environment itself. Indeed, exercising authority over blog management forms the main subtext of many LiveJournal discussions. Similarly, bluntly asking someone to be a friend is unproblematic on LiveJournal. There may be some etiquette to be respected, but the basic thrust is acceptable. On an issue-blog, such potentially face-losing business is always conducted by email, rather than publicly posted. LiveJournalers are upfront about exercising the authority to ban: they may, for example, restrict access to their journal or to particular posts to certain 'friends'; or prohibit specific individuals from posting comments. Members of the LiveJournal Blog_Sociology community (2005) were asked to comment on the issue of excluding others from commenting in their blogs, under the heading "What the fuck? that's a stupid thing to say, you're banned". Following is a selection of responses :

mimi_sardinia (2005-04-09 06:48) Same thing here, I have a couple of people banned on my journal because I was tired of them arguing with me in my own journal. If they want to argue they can do it on a community like the one I encountered them through. (...)
river2sea72 (2005-04-09 03:37) I just banned someone for commenting in a post I made public before I had a chance to make it friends only. It wasn't an obnoxious comment, it was just useless. After all, it's my journal, and I don't really want random people commenting in there unless I am likely to friend them or if they are writing there with regard to something I posted/commented in a community.
glamazon (2005-04-09 13:45) I did something similar. I

banned someone recently for commenting about a post I disabled comments on in my next entry. I was like "WTF?! do you think maybe I disabled comments on that for a reason, you fucking annoying fucker?" I think that's just fucking rude and crossing the line. This person was an annoying know-it-all anyway.

Some LiveJournal users even create ban lists so that others may adopt their dislikes and blacklist others, for various reasons. The point is not, of course, that the justification given for this behaviour is more or less personal, or interesting, or valid, or childish. The point, rather, is that all the incarnations of blogging – as pastimes, as software suites, as a series of social networks – embody, to various degrees, the production and reproduction of signs of influence and authority; this is mostly unacknowledged, with the exception of LiveJournal.

Authority has not been dissolved by the internet and the blogosphere. It has been, in its administrative and executive incarnations, devolved to each individual master of his or her own domain, who confers authority to others by linking to them or, in the LiveJournal environment, ‘friending’ them; who wields freedom of speech as she sees fit, arbitrarily naming those who disagree ‘trolls’. It could be argued that LiveJournal represents a semi-private sphere, a safe space of enclosure which came about as a means of resisting a male-dominated social environment: the open issue-blog link economy, based on point-scoring and demolishing an opponent’s opinion, in the name of learned authority. Within the semi-private LiveJournal sphere, issues of authority and control are not only practised, but evaluated and commented on in a group setting. This explains why the LiveJournal community is treated with such scorn by other bloggers. Blogging signifies the extension of networking and linking, but also that of controlling and excluding; however the second part of the equation is not usually acknowledged in male-dominated blogspace. LiveJournal reveals what lies behind blogging’s ‘participatory’ and ‘democratic’ rhetoric, and must, accordingly, be ostracized.

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