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'Entering the blogosphere': some strategies for using blogs in social research

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ABSTRACT Since 1999 blogs have become a significant feature of online culture. They have been heralded as the new guardians of democracy, a revolutionary form of bottom-up news production and a new way of constructing self and doing community in late-modern times. In this article I highlight the significance of the 'blogosphere' as a new addition to the qualitative researcher's toolkit and some of the practical, theoretical and methodological issues that arise from this. Some of the key ethical issues involved in blog data collection are also considered. The research context is a project on everyday understandings and experiences of morality.

KEYWORDS: *blogs, computer-mediated communication, online research, online research ethics, qualitative research, social research, weblogs*

Introduction

The emergence of the Internet and other forms of computer-mediated communication has been accompanied by a substantial body of scholarly writing concerned with interpreting the types of interactions and social worlds now being built within cyberspace (Danet, 1998; Featherstone and Burrows, 1995; Jones, 1998; Porter, 1997; Rheingold, 2000; Turkle, 1995; Wellman et al., 2001). Most of this research has focused on what Silver (2000) calls the 'twin pillars of cybercultural studies': virtual communities and identities. Much of the debate on virtual communities has centred on the extent to which cyberspace offers an answer to the (post)modern problem of 'bowling alone' (Putnam, 2000) while the discussion of online identity production has addressed the question of how the virtual world's 'culture of simulation' (Baudrillard, 1983; Danet, 1998; Turkle, 1995) facilitates a type of postmodern realization of the 'decentred' and 'disembodied' self.

While social scientists have been occupied with the question of how and to what extent cyberspace shapes social life, they have also become interested in

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the question of how cyberspace can expand the social researcher's toolkit (Jacobson, 1999; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005; Mann and Stewart, 2000; O'Connor and Madge, 2001). Although the research possibilities and issues involved with online research methods are relatively unexplored (Hewson, 2003; Mann and Stewart, 2000), it is generally recognized that cyberspace offers a new and exciting frontier for social research. Recent edited collections by Batinic et al. (2002), Hine (2005), Johns et al. (2004) and Jones (1999), together with works by Coombes (2001), Hewson et al. (2003) and Mann and Stewart (2000), have made significant practical, theoretical and methodological contributions to the development of this field. In particular they have highlighted how traditional research methods might be transferred to the online context, how the Internet sets up new research possibilities and the issues and difficulties, including ethical and legal, encountered when conducting online research.

In the social sciences, quantitative survey style applications have made the most extensive use of the Internet as a medium for data gathering (Best et al., 2001; Coomber, 1997; Dillman, 2000; Solomon, 2001). Qualitative research, while a little slower to take up Internet methods, has gained momentum in the last few years (Hessler et al., 2003; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005; Selwyn and Robson, 2003). This research has addressed how existing qualitative techniques of data gathering such as interviewing (Beck, 2005; Davis et al., 2004; O'Connor and Madge, 2001), focus groups (Franklin and Lowry, 2001; Gaiser, 1997; Williams and Robson, 2003), and ethnography (Hine, 2000; Paccagnella, 1997) can be adapted to Internet technologies. Other mediums of Internet communication such as email (Hessler et al., 2003; Selwyn and Robson, 2003), Internet home pages (Walker, 2000) and bulletin boards (Herzog et al., 1997) have also been drawn upon as qualitative data sources.

One area that has yet to be developed by social scientists as a rich source of qualitative data is the weblog. Rivalling web pages as the favoured medium of online self-representation, a weblog, or 'blog' as they are more commonly known, refers to a website which contains a series of frequently updated, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common web page, usually written by a single author (Bar-Ilan, 2005; Herring et al., 2005; Serfarty, 2004). Blogs are characterized by instant text/graphic publishing, an archiving system organized by date and a feedback mechanism in which readers can 'comment' on specific posts. Blogs are typically housed by software programs that enable users of low technical competence to present attractive and regularly updated online material (Thelwall and Wouters, 2005).

Blogs offer substantial benefits for social scientific research providing similar, but far more extensive opportunities than their 'offline' parallel of qualitative diary research. First, they provide a publicly available, low-cost and instantaneous technique for collecting substantial amounts of data. Further, blogs are naturalistic data in textual form, allowing for the creation of immediate text without the resource intensiveness of tape recorders and transcription

(Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005: 232). The anonymity of the online context also means that bloggers may be relatively unselfconscious about what they write since they remain hidden from view. Like the majority of online research strategies, they also enable access to populations otherwise geographically or socially removed from the researcher (Hessler et al., 2003; Mann and Stewart, 2000). Their global nature means they are well positioned for conducting micro-comparative research, and may have empirical applications for contemporary discussions of globalization. Moreover, the archived nature of blogs makes them amenable to examining social processes over time, particularly trend and panel type longitudinal research. These qualities of practicality and capacity to shed light on social processes across space and time, together with their insight into everyday life, combine to make blogs a valid addition to the qualitative researcher's toolkit.

I aim to cover three main areas in this article. First, I introduce the 'blogosphere' and discuss how it might be treated as an online extension of diary research. I also raise some of the methodological issues involved in doing blog research, particularly in terms of impression management and trustworthiness. Second, I outline some practical techniques for researchers entering the 'blogosphere'. I look specifically at finding relevant blog sites, and sampling and recruiting participants. Finally, I canvass some of the ethical issues involved in doing blog research.

Into the blogosphere

Over the last 20 years, cyberspace has spawned a range of text-based, digital genres – from chat rooms, to multi-user domains, to peer-to-peer file sharing networks – in which Internet users can write, communicate and interact with each other (Gurak et al., 2004: 1). The newest online genre to enter popular consciousness, being touted as the 'next evolution of web-based experience' (Kahn and Kellner, 2004: 91), are blogs.[1] The rapid growth in the popularity of blogs has been driven by the twin motors of free, user-friendly blogging applications such as Blogger and LiveJournal and the global media exposure of 'A-list' bloggers like Salam Pax (aka the 'Baghdad Blogger') and Wil Wheaton (Blood, 2002; Gurak et al., 2004; Mortensen and Walker, 2002; Serfarty, 2004: 458). Current estimates of the number of blogs online are varied: conservative estimates are in the range of 2.8 million (National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education, 2006) while more liberal ones suggest the existence of 31.6 (Henning, 2006) to 100 million blogs (Riley, 2005). Riley (2005) claims that there are over 450,000 hosted blogs in Australia, 2.5 million in the UK and anywhere up to 50 million in the USA.

There are a number of weblog genres in existence from pure filter blogs (literally filters of one's web surfing), to warblogs and celebrity blogs, through to educational, professional and pornographic ones. Typically however, blogs take the form of online diaries or what I call 'self-narratives', where private and intimate content is posted in daily, monthly and yearly snippets (Herring et al., 2004). The online diary is generally light on links with the focus being on the 'drama' (Goffman, 1959) of everyday interactions, selves and situations. The narrative structure produced is linear, rigorously defined by chronology and has no sense of an ending. The personal and candid nature of online diaries combined with their open-endedness – in many ways reminiscent of the form and content of soap operas – gives them their addictive and captivating quality (Serfarty, 2004).

The increasing popularity of blogs is reflected in their growing presence in popular and academic discourse. Like earlier forms of technological innovation blogs have been credited with a socially transformative capacity, conceptualized as a new genre of open-access, participatory journalism (MacDougall, 2005; Wall, 2005) as reinvigorating a flagging 'public sphere' (Ó Baoill, 2004), encouraging civic and political engagement (Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Kerbel and Bloom, 2005), creating new forms of community (Blanchard, 2004; Wei, 2004) and identity (Bortree, 2005; Hevern, 2004), and as a new medium for facilitating knowledge production within education (Brooks et al., 2004; Huffaker, 2005; Sade, 2005) and business sectors (Dyrud et al., 2005; Festa, 2003; Scammell, 2006). Despite the growing research on blogs and blogging – most of which has been produced by information/computer science and media/rhetoric/communication studies – the research opportunities they afford for the social sciences, particularly qualitative research practices remains unexamined.

Going online: from the diary to the blog

This article stems from my decision to use blogs as a research technique for exploring the question of how contemporary urban Australians experience morality in their everyday lives, particularly how actors try to live a 'good life' and what that standard of the 'good' actually means in relation to the process of everyday moral decision making. In this section I outline the substantive and practical reasons for why and how I came to choose blogs as an empirical technique for investigating this question. I also raise some of the methodological issues involved with doing blog research.

Research that invokes 'everyday life' as its conceptual focus needs to be tailored to questions of 'what happens in reality' (Johnson and Bytheway, 2001: 183). This raises the methodological question of how to capture empirically the moral reality of everyday life. As Phillips and Harding (1985: 93) suggest, asking people directly about their moral beliefs and actions is difficult, raising issues of validity. Traditional techniques such as interviews rely on participants' willingness to talk candidly about the processes and experiences of moral decision-making. Even if trust and rapport is established, there remains the problem of bridging the gap between informants' socially situated subjectivities and their actual practice. There is also the problem of how to contextualize the topic in meaningful and morally neutral ways. A common technique in psychological research has been to present respondents with hypothetical moral situations, Kohlberg's (1981) use of vignettes being the classic example. The difficulty with this technique is first, that it denies the lived and situated experience of moral decision making and second, it leaves open the potential for impression management. Like survey research, these techniques are open to the possibility that responses are conveyed through a normative screen which minimizes the potential for feelings of moral guilt or 'sin'. This problem is compounded by methodologies that rely on memory and are therefore susceptible to memory impairment and retrospective reconstruction. While there undoubtedly is a place for such methods, techniques that capture situated action unadulterated by the scrutiny of the researcher are advantageous. One data source that overcomes these problems is the diary.

Diaries are an established research strategy in historical and anthropological research and are increasingly finding their way into social research (Plummer, 1983, 2001; Toms and Duff, 2002). As the 'classic articulation of dailiness' (Juhasz, 1980: 224), social scientists have used diaries as a technique for collecting data on daily life and as a means for understanding social actors both as observers and informants of social life (Toms and Duff, 2002: 1233). By no means exhaustive, diaries have been used qualitatively to investigate health behaviour (Elliott, 1997; Johnson and Bytheway, 2001; Verbrugge, 1980), gender and sexuality (Coxon, 1994; Hampsten, 1989), sleep (Hislop et al., 2005), daily expenditure (Silberstein and Scott, 1991) and to conduct surveys on how people spend and use their time (Avis et al., 2001; Gershuny, 2002). One of the key advantages of diary research is that it can help avoid problems associated with collecting sensitive information using traditional survey or interview methods (Corti, 1993; Elliott, 1997; Hampsten, 1989; Juhasz, 1980). Another benefit is that they capture an 'ever-changing present' (Elliott, 1997: 3) where there is a tight union between everyday experience and the record of that experience (Toms and Duff, 2002). This proximity between event and record means that diaries are less susceptible to problems of memory impairment and retrospective reconstruction than interviews and focus groups (Verbrugge, 1980).

There are a variety of diaries that can be used as raw material for research. They can be clustered into two main types: unsolicited 'documents of life' (Allport, 1943: xii), which are spontaneously maintained by respondents and solicited 'researcher-driven diaries' (Elliott, 1997: 22), which are created and maintained at the request of a researcher. Each of these has their problems in terms of meeting the goals of this research project. The unsolicited diary presents the difficulty of identifying potential participants and the problem of matching the diary content to the research aims. Second, the solicited diary, while overcoming issues of identification and relevance, poses the problem of 'participation willingness' – how many participants would be prepared to record their moral decision making over a set period of time, especially without monetary compensation? In addition, we are back to our original problem of impression management – the research diary after all is a document explicitly maintained for the purposes of the researcher (Toms and Duff, 2002: 1233).

Weblogs offer a viable alternative, giving diary researchers the best of both worlds. On the one hand, blogs help overcome issues of finding and accessing unsolicited personal diaries, while on the other hand, they are not 'contaminated' by the predating interest of a researcher. Nevertheless, while blogs are naturally occurring text they are still typically written for an implicit, if not explicit, audience. It is this potential presence of an audience and its immediacy to authors that is one of the key ways in which blogs differ from traditional forms of personal diary keeping – not to mention that blogs enable dialogue and even co-production between authors and readers.[2] I would like to consider how this affects the validity of data that one can collect from blogs, particularly in terms of impression management and trustworthiness.

Impression management, anonymity and trustworthiness

Although there are varying degrees of online exposure with blogging, the practice fundamentally involves placing private content in the public domain. Researchers may therefore need to recognize the role of potential discursive display or performance in blogging. Drawing on the work of Goffman (1972), blogging might be conceptualized as a disembodied form of 'face-work', concerned with the art of self-representation, impression management and potential self-promotion. Taking this line of argument, bloggers may strategically select and write into existence convincing life-episodes that frame themselves as having desired qualities, such as 'good', 'moral' and 'virtuous'. Blogging in this scenario is just another 'stage' for what Goffman (1959: 244) refers to as the 'the very obligation and profitability of appearing always in a steady moral light'. In other words, the result of using blogs as a way of 'getting at' everyday expressions of morality may be no different to my argument about Kohlberg's use of moral hypotheticals – you end up with another form of impression management!

I would argue, however, that the anonymity of the online context disrupts this picture of blogging. Goffman's notion of 'face-work' is restricted to the interactional order of face-to-face relations overlooking the social conventions of online anonymity. If you like, the stage is there and the audience are in their seats but the social actor is masked. This online mask enables bloggers to write more honestly and candidly, mitigating potential impression management. The anonymity of the online context means that bloggers may be relatively unselfconscious about what they write since they remain hidden from view. Thus there seems to be a paradox built into blogging: bloggers are writing for an audience and are therefore potentially engaged in a type of 'face-work' but at the same time they are anonymous, or relatively unidentifiable. This tension between visibility and invisibility gives blogging a confessional quality, where a less polished and even uglier self can be verbalized. One can express one's faults, one's mishaps – whatever might be difficult to tell as we 'enter the presence of others' (Goffman, 1959: 1) in face-to-face relations.

Although the online anonymity of blogging potentially sidesteps problems of 'face-work', the flipside is that it raises issues about potential identity play and deception. This is of course not specific to blogs as an online genre with there being somewhat of a moral panic regarding the predatory potential of the Internet. Here people going online, typically conceived of as paedophiles or old men, can disguise their identities to prey on vulnerable young people. This picture of the predatory 'stranger' lurking in the dark alleys of the Internet has been fuelled by a lot of early Internet research, which focused on the social implications of online anonymity, particularly in terms of simulated identity production (Danet, 1998; Turkle, 1995). In these accounts, the Internet supposedly allows for a type of 'bunburying', where an illusory, playful and deceptive self can dominate – for example, men can pretend to be women and vice-versa.

How trustworthy then are the expressions of self that bloggers provide? How do you know what bloggers are telling you is true? They could be an elaborate fiction. In fact, this is typically the first question I am asked when I tell people I am using blogs as a data source. While I do not – and cannot believe that I can definitely answer this question – what I can do instead is animate a series of questions that are worth considering in response to *this* question.

The first question is 'does it really matter?' Even if bloggers do not tell the 'truth', these 'fabrications' still tell us something about the manner in which specific social and cultural ideas such as morality are constructed. Here issues of 'truth' are not really at stake as the emphasis is on how the constitutive elements of blogs work to produce 'particular effects' (Silverman, 2001: 122). The issue of deception might however be an important consideration for a researcher who wants to read off external realities from the textual data – for example, a researcher who wants to undertake a more systematic analysis (men vs women, older vs younger, etc.) of how the construction of certain cultural ideas in blogs are affected by sociological variables such as age and gender. The validity of the 'does it matter?' question first depends then on whether a researcher is looking at how blogs work to produce particular effects or whether they are looking at how blogs correspond with an 'offline' reality.

The second question is 'how can the truth be ensured in any research scenario?' How do you know, for instance, if someone is being honest in an interview, and for that matter, how someone ticks boxes on a survey questionnaire? The question of whether you can trust what people are saying in their blogs seems to reflect not only an exaggerated vision of online identity play but also the tendency for data unprovoked by a researcher to be treated with a degree of suspicion (Silverman, 2001: 120). This attitude is indicative of how textual data are often approached as 'background' material with the real research only beginning when the researcher starts asking questions. One cannot help thinking then, that the stubborn mistrust of naturally occurring data like blogs is reflective of living in what Silverman (2001) calls the 'interview society' – a society occupied by social scientists, media presenters and journalists who are convinced that the only path to individual 'authenticity' is through the face-to-face interview.

In the next section I put some of these methodological issues aside, focusing on the personal process of making sense of this relatively new aspect of the online world and some of the steps taken to order it for the purposes of social research. First, I look at entering the blogosphere; second, I address the practical questions of finding and sampling weblogs on the Internet, including navigating the visual and textual content of blogs; lastly I comment on the process of recruiting blog participants and some of the ethical issues involved.

Blogs and social reseach: a path less travelled

Entering the blogosphere as a blog 'newbie', was like gazing into a dark and tangled labyrinth. The endless criss-crossing hyper tracks and trails of the blogopshere were overwhelming. 'It' seemed unwieldy and unmanageable – words that immediately arouse anxiety in the social researcher. The volume of blogging sites and the 'seemingly infinite multiplication of voices' (O'Neil, 2005: 7) – let alone their visual complexity – was staggering. As O'Neil (2005: 7) notes, it is 'impossible for any one reader to have experienced all, or even most, of the blogs in existence'. Establishing a road-map in what felt like the 'black hole' of the blogosphere represented a serious challenge.

The experience was a concrete example of what social theorists like Baudrillard (1988) and Jameson (1991) are getting at when describing the disorientating and anxiety-provoking effects of postmodern spaces: forms which they argue disable the individual's capacity to map oneself cognitively and perceptually in space, removing totality and a sense of the whole from one's grasp. But this was not a physical environment like the Los Angeles Bonaventure hotel or a shopping mall but a mediated world of text, graphics, video, audio and hyperlinks. Reaching the desired goal meant discovering how to navigate and interact within that world.

Finding blogs

The first step was to establish where and how to locate blogs. The majority of weblogs are hosted by blog content management systems (BCMS), so an initial scoping exercise of such applications was undertaken. Taking prompts from my previous blog research and websites such as 'weblogs compendium', 'yahoo weblog hosting' and 'about.com', an initial pool of 13 BCMS was identified: (1) Blogster; (2) LiveJournal; (3) Xanga; (4) Typepad; (5) Diaryland; (6) Blogit; (7) Blogharbour; (8) Squarespace; (9) Blurty; (10) Blogger; (11) Opendiary; (12) Journalspace; and (13) Whitepage (an Australian BCMS).

These were assessed according to two main criteria: (1) their hosting of personal diary style weblogs and (2) the availability of a search engine that enabled identification of weblogs according to location (including country, state and city) in addition to demographic information such as age and gender. In fact all these sites hosted diary, or personal journal style weblogs.

Sampling blogs

The majority of blog content management systems include a search feature, which allows readers to find bloggers according to demographic information such as age and location as well as interests and hobbies. This feature can also be appropriated by social researchers to sample participants. Of the thirteen BCMS trialled, nine include a blog searching device. Four of these are restricted to content based searching (Blogster, Blogharbour, Blogger, Journalspace). In this case, searches are limited to the content of blog posts with no means of selecting bloggers by social variables such as location, age, ethnicity or gender. For example, performing a query for 'Australia' with Blogster's search engine, though netting some bloggers from Australia, produces any blogger who has used the word 'Australia' in their posts. This is problematic if researchers are interested in examining a social process within a particular geographical territory.

Nonetheless, this kind of generic blog content searching can aid purposive sampling. For instance, a social researcher may use a BCMS search engine to search for key terms that bear on a particular social process or phenomenon. An example might be a researcher who is interested in investigating body governance by looking at men and women's dietary habits as revealed in blogs. This could be achieved by performing a search query based on key terms such as diet, food and weight loss/gain.

Web based services such as 'Pubsub', 'blo.gs' and 'technorati' are also good for such purposes, tracking and matching a large number of blogs held on multiple BCMS. PubSub (2006), for instance, claims to monitor over 23 million blog postings in real time, meaning that a search query is continually matched against newly updated postings. Scheidt (2005), for example, used PubSub as a technique for sampling eight 'teen' weblogs in her study on the performative metaphors used in adolescent blog names. Such services have also been employed for random sampling. For instance, Herring et al. (2004) used the Blo.g service to produce a random sample of 203 blogs for the purposes of undertaking a genre analysis of weblogs. However, because these services search by post content they still suffer from the problem of being unable to confine blogs to particular sociological co-ordinates such as location, age, gender or ethnicity.

Xanga, Diaryland, LiveJournal, Blurty and Opendiary have the most comprehensive and 'research-friendly' search features. Xanga and Diaryland both include a search feature that enables 'location' (country, state and city) and 'interest' based queries[3] while LiveJournal (upon paid membership), Blurty and Opendiary enable searches by location, interest and age. None, however, allow searches by gender and ethnicity. Since the aims of the research required a sample that approximated the general Australian population the last three websites were the obvious choice. However, in order to simplify the process of data collection, LiveJournal became the main data source. LiveJournal was deemed to be the most appropriate because it had the following features: (1) user-friendly interface; (2) systematic search engine which enabled identification of blogs by location (country, state, city) and age; (3) a sizeable share of the blog market in Australia[4] and (4) a reputation as a site purely for online diaries (O'Neil, 2005: 14).

Establishing an online presence

After selecting LiveJournal as the primary source for generating research-relevant bloggers, an online presence was established as a means of entering the world of potential research participants. This was achieved by the creation of a LiveJournal blog and a research website. The weblog (http://nicholas 8976.Livejournal.com) included a brief biographical sketch of the research, research interests, a photo and a link to the research website (http://www.utas.edu.au/sociology/students/hookway/). The website contained more detailed information about the project and a further chance to 'meet the researcher'. This worked not only to complement the researcher's 'offline' identity through provision of contact details such as physical address and phone number but also as a way of establishing legitimacy. As one LiveJournaler commented in an email communication with me, 'I googled you and found http://fcms.its.utas.edu.au/arts/sociology/pagedetails.asp?lpersonId=3035 so you seem legit.'

Data collection

Data collection comprised two main phases: a passive phase of blog trawling and an active phase of blog solicitation. The first phase involved examining Sydney and Melbourne blogs, of different ages, for concrete incidents of moral decision making or more abstract discussions about the nature of the 'good life'. Specifying age groups helped ensure variation of age within the sample. This is important in light of suggestions that most bloggers are between the ages of 13 and 19 (Bortree, 2005; Henning, 2003) – a trend that is also reflected in the demographic characteristics of LiveJournal users. These criteria were met by using LiveJournal's advanced search feature. For example, a search would be performed for LiveJournalers from Melbourne between the ages of 30–40 who had updated in the last month (at 4 April 2006, such a search produces about 270 blogs).

The trawling phase of data collection proved time consuming and relatively ineffective. This was in part due to inexperience and unfamiliarity with the world of blogs but also because of the nature of the content sought. The initial approach involved reading the blogger's entire back catalogue, which on average was three to four years' worth of posts. It could take up to three or four days to read one blog – often to find that the blog was not relevant. Eventually reading was limited to the first two or three posts to determine background information. If this content contained material that indicated some reflexive moral content then the latest year of posts was perused. The search was also impeded by the absence of appropriate cultural knowledge that a substantial number of blogs are demarcated 'friends-only'. Many of the more self-representational and personal kind of blogs were out of reach; as one blogger put it: 'all the good stuff's under friend and key'.

Over a 4-month period, approximately 200 blogs were read, which translates to an incalculable number of individual posts and comments. Of these, only 11 diaries from Sydney and Melbourne were deemed relevant. This dogged pursuit of an elusive goal can perhaps be best understood through the analogy of the gambler. There is a compulsive quality to blog searching which researchers must be aware of. Careful search parameters and guidelines should be established to deal with the irrational sense that the next post or the next blog will 'strike gold'. Nonetheless, although this time was relatively unproductive in terms of participant numbers, some random exploration of the blogosphere is essential in establishing 'a feel' for both the visual design and content of blogs.

Learning how to look at blogs

One of most striking things about blogs is their diverse, and sometimes, complex visual designs and layouts. While blogs are textual, unlike their offline cousins, they are simultaneously visual documents (Scheidt and Wright, 2004). Blogs encourage not only textual expression but also visual expression via user icons, memes, template selection, design and colour scheme, titles, sidebars, selection of images and typeface (see Figure 1). As Badger (2004: 1) claims, 'if we think of weblogs as being homepages that we wear then it is the visual elements that tailor the garment to fit the individual'.

Since this was largely virgin territory there was no established framework for interpreting the visual layout of blogs. However, over time it became easier to locate profile information (userinfo or by clicking on username), past entries (archive), how to make (speak) and read existing comments (remember). Familiarity with the way in which bloggers would use graphics from external sources, like Internet quizzes ('quizilla' is particularly popular on LiveJournal), as a way of expressing themselves also helped. As this framework for understanding the visual layout of blogs was developed the easier it became to 'scan' – a style of viewing that Badger (2004) assumes we automatically adopt when

FIGURE 1. *Visual layout of a typical LiveJournal blog*

'reading' blogs – the content of blog pages. It is almost like one needs to learn not only how to read blogs but also how to view them.

Musings on the everyday

In terms of textual content, blog posts, like diaries, were primarily a reflection of everyday happenings and events. As Gumbrecht (2004: 2) points out, the 'blogged-about universe' can be on almost anything: daily appointments, work, partying, romantic interests, dreams, friends and daily interactions. Scattered among these descriptions and analyses of the minutiae of everyday life are references to various forms of popular culture, be it the music they are listening to (sometimes playing in the background of the blog), books they are reading or movies and TV they are watching.

The online diaries of LiveJournal vary greatly in degrees of self-reflection and analysis. At one end of the 'self-reflection continuum' are purely descriptive blogs, which non-reflexively recount the events of the day, from what the blogger has eaten for breakfast to who they have seen that day. At the other end of the continuum, are highly confessional and self-analytical blogs in which bloggers make sense of their identity and relationships with others. For my purposes, I trawled for the latter style of blog as they were more likely to be of a morally reflective nature. The following quotations illustrate these two extremes:

> *32-year-old male*: Things i've done recently: been to ikea, been to my local furniture shop, been to ikea again, been to ikea yes i know, ... again ... bought a rug, bought a lamp, bought a bigger lamp ... dug my lawn up, re-sown lawn, bought some shredded bark ... walked along the beach, moved the shelving unit from the lounge to the kitchen, paid for my flight, cut my hair ... had a performance review at work, asked for a pay rise, got laid, filed a years worth of bill ... thats all for now

> *36-year-old male*: I wish i had the magic to give Janine the life i stole from her. of all the people i've hurt in my life, it's her that i feel most dreadful about. she put so much trust and faith in me ... and i really loved her. i still do. yet i screwed her over

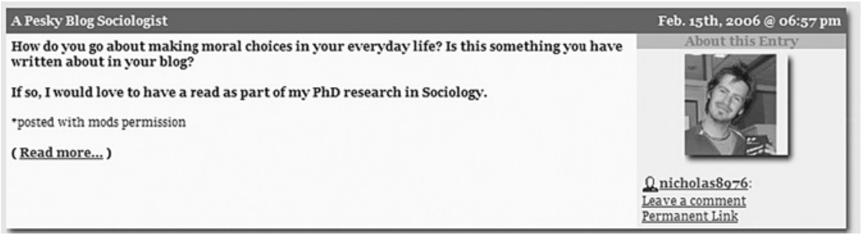

FIGURE 2. *Blog invite*

> and tore that wonderful heart in two. if only i had some way to make it so i'd never happened to her life ... if i could just patch up my era [*sic*] with a big sander bandaid ... so that it had been him that she'd met and not me. admittedly, i'd lose a part of my life that means a lot to me ... but i'd really rather never to have hurt her. and no matter how sorry i am, and how deeply i feel the grief, the apologies i give her can never unhurt her.

Phase 2: soliciting bloggers

The second phase of blog data collection encompassed a more active form of recruitment. Frustrated with the 'trawling' approach, a new strategy of recruitment was devised. Similar to offline forms of recruitment an invite (see Figure 2) was constructed and posted on Australian LiveJournal (LJ) communities. An LJ community is an online forum where multiple bloggers can post into a shared journal page about a similar topic or interest.

Selecting and advertising within a blog community

The first step was to identify the relevant communities to advertise within. Using LJ's advanced search feature, an exhaustive list of generic place based communities for Melbourne and Sydney was established. Only five were found: *Melbournians*, *Sydneysiders*, *Sydneyfemales*, *Sydneysingles* and *Melbournemaniac*. Due to the limited number of such communities, it was decided that subcultural and lifestyle communities like *Melbourneslash* (fan fiction community) and *Sydneygoths* should be included. Thirteen such communities were located for Melbourne and Sydney.

Once a community was selected, the moderator (who oversees the running of the community) was emailed a copy of the invite and permission to post was sought. If an email contact or one-way chat program username was not provided (e.g. MSN or ICQ), a comment was left in the moderator's blog. If permission was given, the researcher then joined the community. This was necessary as posting access is restricted to community membership. Posting required some basic skills in HTML coding, such as using an LJ cut,[5] creating a hyperlink, bolding text and uploading a user icon. Instructions for doing this are provided by the LJ help service. LJ also provides online technical support for its users.

To maximize participant response further, the decision was made to extend sampling to other major Australian metropolitan centres. I posted to place based LJ communities such as *Adelaideains*, *Brisneyland*, *Perthnuts*, *Canberra*; lifestyle communities like *Altadelaide* and *Perthindie*; and broader Australian communities such as *Aussieaddme*, *Aussielj*, *Asylumaustralia* and *Queeraustralia*. University based communities such as *Perthuni's*, *Anustudents* and *Sydneyuni* were also included in the sampling frame. At last count, invites have been posted to forty-seven communities. At this stage only two moderators have declined my offer to post the research invite.

Researcher/respondent interaction

Typically participant/researcher communication proceeds along the following three steps. First, the interested blogger makes contact by either leaving a comment on the post or by emailing.[6] At this time, interested participants who have a 'friendly only' account grant access to hidden posts by adding the researcher to their 'friends list' (referred to as 'flist'). Second, the researcher responds either via email, if provided, or by the comments section. In this communication, the respondent is thanked for their interest in the project and any questions regarding the project are answered. Bloggers are also asked to identify any specific posts in their blog where they have discussed or reflected upon moral issues, particularly as they relate to their own decision-making process.[7] Lastly, the respondent either fulfils the request by emailing a list of URLs to relevant posts or suggests that their blog is trawled for such instances. Sometimes the request is ignored.

Despite fears that the posting would be ignored or even incite anger in the communities, this technique was highly productive, generating forty-nine responses and a further eight recommendations for other possible blogs. The major benefit to solicitation over trawling is its obvious time efficiency. Getting the 'blogger to come to the researcher' rather than the other way around, frees the researcher from the time commitments of trawling and finding content relevant to the focus of the research. Nevertheless, relying on such an approach depends on the availability of community forums like those held on LiveJournal.

Ethics of blog research

With the emergence of online tools like blogs for conducting research come new and challenging ethical dilemmas and controversies (Bowker and Tuffin, 2004; King, 1996; Sixsmith and Murray, 2001; Walther, 2002; Waskul and Douglas, 1996). The discussion of the ethical problems of online research has recently occupied the content of journals (e.g. *The Information Society*, *Ethics and Information Technology*), institutional reports (e.g. American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)) and working committees (e.g. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR)). At the centre of this emerging dialogue is the question of the adequacy of conventional 'offline' ethical guidelines for conducting research in online contexts.

An important aspect to this question is what the conventional notions of private and public mean in online research venues. This is pertinent to the collection and analysis of blogs. Do blog researchers need to gain authorial permission from bloggers when recording their posts? Is blog material academic fair game or is informed consent needed?

While there is no consensus among social scientists, responses to the broader question of what is private and what is public online tend to fall into one of three camps (Hutchinson, 2001). First, there are researchers who argue that archived material on the Internet is publicly available and therefore participant consent is not necessary (Sudweeks and Rafaeli, 1995; Walther, 2002). This position often rests on an analogy between online forums and public space, where the observation and recording of publicly accessible Internet content is treated like research on television content, a piece of art in a public gallery or letters to the editor. Second, some researchers claim that online postings, though publicly accessible, are written with an expectation of privacy and should be treated as such (Elgesem, 2002; King, 1996; Scharf, 1999). Lastly, there are those who argue that online interaction defies clear-cut prescription as either public or private. Waskul and Douglas (1996: 131), for example, argue that cyberpsace is simultaneously 'publicly-private and privately-public'. They warn online researchers of mistaking public accessibility of online forums for the public nature of the interactions, instead emphasizing how actors themselves construe their participation in online environments.

There is a strong case for blog researchers to adopt the 'fair game–public domain' position. Blogs are firmly located in the public domain and for this reason it can be argued that the necessity of consent should be waived. Further, blogs are public not only in the sense of being publicly accessible – and heeding Waskul and Douglas' (1996) warning – but also in how they are defined by users. Blogging is a public act of writing for an implicit audience. The exception proves the rule: blogs that are interpreted by bloggers as 'private' are made 'friends only'. Thus, accessible blogs may be personal but they are not private.

Alongside privacy issues, blog researchers need to be aware of copyright law (Jacobson, 1999: 137; Walther, 2002). In Australia, the UK and the USA, Internet content is automatically copyrighted (Australian Copyright Council, 2005a; UK Patent Office, 2006; US Copyright Office, 2000). Copyright protects a range of original literary, dramatic, musical or artistic 'works', including those posted on the Internet. This means that the moment a blog entry is uploaded onto a content management system it is protected by copyright. Bloggers therefore have exclusive rights over the reproduction of their work. While this would appear to be significantly limiting for researchers, there are special provisions built into the copyright act(s) which allow for 'fair dealing' of copyrighted material for the purposes of study or research. The Australian Copyright Act (1968), for instance, sets out five factors in determining whether use of copyrighted material can be deemed 'fair': (1) 'the purpose and character of the dealing'; (2) 'the nature of the work'; (3) 'the possibility of obtaining the work within a reasonable time at an ordinary commercial price'; (4) 'the effect of the dealing on the potential market for, or value of, the work'; and (5) 'the amount and substantiality of the part copied in relation to the whole work' (Australian Copyright Council, 2005b: 2). Considering that use of copyrighted material in this context is for a non-commercial purpose, the work is arguably of low skill, the work is not available commercially, there is no effect on the market value of the work and the extracts used are small and non-substantial, use can be deemed 'fair'. While fair use needs to be determined on a case by case basis, it would seem that blog researchers are relatively unrestricted by 'fair use' restrictions.

In addition to understanding 'fair use' provisions for scholarly activity the question of whether to preserve anonymity or credit bloggers for their work is another area of ethical consideration. In Australia, the Copyright Act (1968) stipulates that creators of 'works' have 'moral rights' which includes right to attribution of authorship (Australian Copyright Council, 2005c). There is an evident tension therefore between the norms of protecting participants' identity and acknowledging blog authorship. I adopted a position of 'moderate' disguise that privileges the protection of participants' identity over credit to the author (Bruckman, 2002: 229). This means that online pseudonyms (blog usernames) are changed and any potentially identifying information in blog quotations are disguised. This decision is also consistent with section 195AR of the Australian Copyright Act, which states that there are certain conditions in which non-attribution to an author can be deemed 'reasonable'. This is determined by the purpose, nature, manner and context in which the material is used. In this case, considering that use of blogs is for the purpose of research; the work is a blog (rather than something more substantial); authors are not disadvantaged in any way; the manner in which the work is used calls for anonymity and there is no financial gain involved, non-attribution seems 'reasonable'.

Conclusion

While 1999 may well be remembered as the year blogging exploded, it is yet to be seen how this newest addition to online life can be utilized as a qualitative social research technique. The aim of this article then was to make an important first step in building this knowledge base. Alongside indicating the research potential of weblogs, it has provided a researchers' guide to accessing the blogosphere, looked at what blogs are, where they are hosted and how to use blog search tools for sampling. It has also identified some of the methodological and ethical issues associated with blog research.

Like all methods of social research, blogs have their pitfalls and benefits. On the one hand, entering the blogosphere, with its endless maze of blogs and blog voices, can be a disorientating, time-consuming and overwhelming experience that only reluctantly yields relevant data. Further, some researchers – though I have argued against this position – may worry about impression management and the general trustworthiness of blogs. There are also issues with identifying potential participants and the problem of finding blogs relevant to research aims. However, from my experience, these issues can be addressed by using one blog content management system like LiveJournal and using community forums to solicit specific blog content.

In terms of benefits, blogs offer a low-cost, global and instantaneous tool of data collection. They also provide a very useful technique for investigating the dynamics of everyday life from an unadulterated first-person perspective and offer a research window into understanding the contemporary negotiation of the 'project of the self' in late/post modern times. With adequate research parameters in place, blogs can have an important and valuable place in the qualitative researcher's toolkit.

NOTES

1. Historical accounts of blogging typically credit software developer Dave Winer as creating the first weblog in 1996 while the coining of the term is attributed to Jorn Barger, who described his online journal *Robot Wisdom* in 1997 as a 'weblog' – literally a 'log of his web surfing' (Gurak et al., 2004: 1). The abbreviation 'blog' was subsequently applied by Peter Merholz in 1999 (Herring et al., 2004: 1).
2. It is important not to treat 'public' as a blanket concept when approaching blogs. For instance, most blogging applications allow bloggers to control their level of exposure on a post-to-post basis from 'private' to 'friends-only' to 'public'.
3. Xanga achieves location searches by 'Metros' and interests/themes by 'Blogrings' (blogs that are connected by a shared theme or interest such as 'arts and humanities', 'health and medicine' and 'entertainment') whereas Diaryland allows keyword, taste in music, authors and music based searches.
4. According to LiveJournal's own statistics (31 March 2006) they host over 10 million accounts, of which, about 2 million are active in some way. There are over 92,000 accounts in Australia alone.
5. An LJ cut is a link that conceals part or all of a post. Most of the moderators I have contacted have requested that a majority of the invite be put behind a cut in order to minimize space used in the forum.
6. In both cases, I receive an email. LJ includes a function where bloggers can be notified of comments to posts by email. This is helpful as it saves having to check each community posting individually for comments.
7. It is worth mentioning that being so accessible means that a researcher is susceptible to both research specific and unspecific questions. For example, respondents would ask general questions about the research such as the type of morality I was referring to, why I chose blogs and how I was protecting confidentiality and anonymity while others wanted me, with no particular intention of participating in the project, to explain questions like what sociology is and how you fill out an ethics application. The latter raises questions about 'netiquette' and the expectations

around behaviour for researchers going into online settings: should they ignore such queries or are they in some way obliged to help out?

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