FCJ-012 Composing the Self: Of Diaries and Lifelogs

José van Dijck, University of Amsterdam.

Introduction

2 A recent cartoon from a Dutch newspaper shows a man and a woman lying in bed, smoking a cigarette apparently after having sex. 'Do you keep a diary?' asks the man to his partner, and upon her negation, he comments: 'Good. I don't like it when a woman immortalises her intimate experiences with me on paper.' In the last frame, we see the woman sitting behind a computer screen and typing 'Dear weblog...', while the man snores away on the bed behind her. In this short cartoon, we can detect a number of assumptions about diaries and weblogs, but the clue to this joke is the paradox that the weblog is considered a digital equivalent of the diary and yet it is not.

3 For centuries, the diary has been characterised as a private, handwritten document that chronicles the experiences, observations and reflections of a single person at the moment of inscription. Although the diary as a cultural form is varied and heterogeneous, it is typically thought to represent the record of an 'I' who constructs a view on him/herself in connection to the world at large. Diary writing, as a quotidian cultural practice, involves reflection and expression; yet it is also a peculiarly hybrid act of communication, supposedly intended for private use, but often betraying an awareness of its potential to be read by others. Inviting the translation from thoughts into words via the technologies of pen and paper, the old-fashioned diary symbolise a safe haven for a person's most private thoughts—even if they are published in print later on. Personal notebooks are often treasured as stilled moments of a forlorn past, and kept in safe places to be retrieved many years later—much like photographs—as precious objects of memory.

4 With digitisation affecting practically every domain of public and private life, the diary seems no exception. 'Weblogs' have become a popular genre on the internet, as millions of people (particularly teenagers and young adults) are now heavily engaged in the activity of 'blogging'. By the end of 2004, a recent survey predicts, there will be about 10 million weblog users in the United States alone. [1] Weblogs or 'blogs' is a rather general container for a variety of genres; the so-called lifelog seems to come closest to the traditional diary genre. But can lifelogs and blogging be considered the digital counterpart of what used to be a paper diary and diary writing? As the cartoon implies, the answer to this question is a paradoxical 'yes and no.' Cultural practices or forms never simply adapt to new technological conditions, but always inherently change along with the technologies and the potentialities of their use. In the case of lifelogs, the digital materiality of the internet engenders a new type of reflection and communication. This shows traces of the former analogue genre but functions substantially differently.

5 Richard Grusin and Jay Bolter (1999) have used the term 'remediation' to account for the ways in which new media forms consolidate but also alter existing forms. In a critique of this term,Andreas Kitzmann (2003) argues that 'remediation' does not sufficiently account for the intrinsic shaping power of technology, and proposes to focus on the wider phenomenon of 'material complexification' to understand the continuities and changes between old and new media, for instance weblogs and webcams. [2] And in their illuminating analysis of the phenomenon, Miller and Shepherd (2004) regard blogging as social action—a'new rhetorical opportunity' that needs to be examined in terms of its use. Each of these authors places a different emphasis, respectively on cultural form, technology, and practice. In this article, I suggest to examine these three dimensions of mediated cultural change in conjunction: the diary and lifelog should be studied both as a cultural form or genre, while also taking into account the materiality and technology of (hand) written diaries and lifelogs, as well as the cultural practice of diary writing in comparison to the activities of so-called bloggers. Tracing the transformation of personal records in the face of new digital technologies, I will argue that lifelogs are not outcomes but rather signifiers of cultural change, as they both reflect and construct new epistemologies.

Diaries and weblogs as cultural form

6 The cartoon cited above displays three recurrent myths or misperceptions about the old-fashioned paper diary, that appear to persist into the digital era. In contrast to weblogs, the paper diary is commonly referred to as a uniform genre, a private kind of reflective writing produced by a single author. Yet if we closely look at how paper diaries were used in the past, the characteristics

of uniformity, privacy and single authorship are, to say the least, disputable; it is surprising to find, though, how these accepted notions about diaries still affect today's theorisation of weblogs.

7 Over the past centuries, the diary as a cultural form has been anything but homogeneous. The genre has been defined as therapy or self-help, as a means of confession, as a chronicle of adventurous journeys (both spiritual and physical), or as a scrapbook for creative endeavours. Thomas Mallon, author of a standard work in this area, distinguishes at least seven types of diaries and labels the various types according to their author's profession or character: 'chroniclers' 'travellers' 'creators', 'confessors', and so on (1984). Philip Lejeune (1993) inventories various types of autobiographical writing (diary, letters, autobiography) by its 'morphological' features, whereas Beatrice Didier, a French literary theorist, articulates a more general classification, based on the content of entries, between the personal or private 'diary' ('le journal intime') and the more public or factual 'journal'(1976). Yet another French literary scholar, Eric Marty, classifies diaries by their addressees: are they strictly secret or also written for others? (1985). In general, the taxonomy of the old fashioned paper diary tends to be based either on its contents (personal, intimate self-expressions vis-à-vis daily records of fact) or on its directionality (intended for private reading vis-à-vis public use).

8 The myth that the diary is a private genre, strictly written for oneself, is as misleading as it is persistent. A binary distinction between the diary as a personal record written for private purposes in contrast to a journal of fact written to show others, is hardly tenable. As Mallon argues, no one ever kept a diary just for himself; pointing out the continuity between the 'journal' and the 'diary', he concludes that both are directed towards an audience and 'both [are] rooted in the idea of dailiness, but perhaps because of the journal's links to the newspaper trade and diary's to "dear", the latter seems more intimate than the former' (1984: xvi). Of all the varieties within the genre, some diaries are written more with a reader in mind than others, but an essential feature of all diaries is their addressee. Whereas some authors directed their diaries to an imagined friend (like Anne Frank's 'Kitty', or André Gide's mysterious addressee), to God, or to the world at large, the notion of addressing is crucial to the recognition of diary writing as an act of communication (Marty, 1985: 87). Writing, even as a form of self-expression, signals the need to connect, either to someone or something else, or to oneself later in life. William M. Decker, who theorised the evolution of epistolary writing in the United States, observes that letters, much like diaries, carry the aura of a private genre, whereas the genre encodes itself according to public standards: 'What we identify as the private life is a conventionalised and hence public construction' (1998: 6). Diary writing is, to a large extent, a cultural form firmly rooted in rhetorical conventions: intimacy and privacy are effects rather than intrinsic features of the genre.

9 Another misperception we can trace in the genealogy of diaries is the belief that their creation is usually associated with individual voice and authorship, whereas in reality the genre has often been deployed as a communal means of expressing and remembering. To many religious congregations, for instance, the diary was a semi-public record, shared within but never outside a community. In her intriguing account of the Maryknoll Sisters' archive, Elizabeth Yakel describes how this religious community, between 1912 and 1967, adapted the genre as a collective means of expression to record and exchange spiritual and intellectual journeys to each other. Their record-keeping practices suited various goals, from expressing individual beliefs to communicating information across time and space with like-minded congregations:

10 > The diaries had multiple audiences—they were a means of internal communication within the community and also served as a mechanism for external communication to Catholics and others interested in their mission activities. (Yakel, 2003: 143)

11 In the history of diary writing, the genre as a communal means of expression has found many practitioners, from South Pole explorers to POWs held in captivity. As Michael Piggott, archivist at the University of Melbourne, found out, Australian archives contain many such collective ego-documents, chronicling important episodes from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries through the eyes of transient groups. For groups bound together by an adventurous ordeal, a joint diary was often a means to trust one's personal emotions to a relatively safe medium and share the experience with mates held captive under the same conditions (2003). Diaries have thus historically been produced by both individuals and groups, regardless of their degree of intimacy

or their potential to appear in print. Since its very inception, the genre has been dialogic rather than monologic, hence obliterating the line between private and public.

12 How persistent is this idea of a uniform genre when it comes to weblogs? And how is the rather paradoxical genre-classification along the axes of self and others, of intimacy and openness, sustained? Upon entering the digital era, the diary as a cultural form appears to have survived in its many varieties and its layered complexity. Weblogs or webdiaries have emerged since 1996, but only in the past four years has their popularity soared (Rodzilla, 2002). Initially, blogs were either personal homepages operated by individuals, mostly people who were interested in sharing technical and personal knowledge, or they were websites consisting of chronological lists of links, interspersed with information, editorialised and personal asides (Cheung, 2000).In practice, lifelogs later became experiments in self-expression, with people reading and cross-linking other lifelogs, thus creating blog-communities. Searching on the internet today, one can find a plethora of digital diaries, everything from travel-blogs chronicling the climbing of the Mount Everest to personal blogs commenting on books or music, from the spiritual journey of a born-again Christian to the intimate exchange of sexual experiences between teenagers, and from outbursts of psychological distress to the quotidian musings of a psychiatrist. Frank Schaap, exploring the Dutch 'blogosphere', distinguishes lifelogs from linklogs; linkloggers primarily post links to other websites, whereas lifeloggers primarily post details about their personal life and everyday experiences. Although Schaap comments on the 'dichotomous nature of the Dutch blogosphere,' the distinction between lifelogs and linklogs is as tenuous as the taxonomy of the paper diary (2004).

13 While intimacy and privacy were often thought to be unique features of the diary genre, in practice this characterisation is hardly tenable. This applies to an even greater extent to lifelogs. The digital equivalent of the diary is as polymorphous as its paper precursor, and yet, when researching the new functions and forms of diary writing in the digital era, the old typology of the diary in terms of content and directionality stubbornly informs the epistemology of the lifelog. For instance, a 1998 Japanese study into the formal structures and uses of diaries on the internet, departs from the notion that they can be classified according to their contents as 'records of fact' or 'expression of sentiment,' or according to their directionality as 'written for oneself' or 'written for others' (Kawaura, Kawakami, and Yamashita, 1998). In defence of the authors of the Japanese study, the year in which their article was published marked the early beginning of an explosion of blogging, a development no one could have predicted at that time. Yet it is significant that the researchers' classification along binary axes results in a new typology of diaries on the world wide web as 'memoirs', 'journals', 'narrowly defined diaries' and 'open diaries.' Their attenuated conclusion that writing a web diary is primarily a communicative behaviour equally applies to paper diaries. Later studies continue to classify weblogs along axes of self and others, of personal and public (Blood 2000), but there are also theorists who acknowledge the multiple ancestors of the weblog—commonplace books, clipping services, pamphlets, diaries, shiplogs etc—precluding any classification of the lifelog on the basis of content or directionality (Miller and Shepherd, 2004).

14 In addition, digital cultural forms are often erroneously ascribed 'unique' features such as interactivity or community building. Weblogs are defined by some as virtual communities enabled by technologies, particularly the internet (Blanchard, 2004). As I argued above, paper diaries have always shown a peculiar mixture of individual and communal effort, of self-expression and communication. If we look at weblogs in general or so-called lifelogs in particular, we can observe a similar hybrid aptitude. [3] The constitutive function of diaries in terms of community formation is thus by no means an extension of digital technology, but was already common practice in the days of pen and paper. This does not imply, however, that technology plays a minor role in the 'remediation' of the diary; on the contrary, as I have argued, changes in cultural form need to be examined in conjunction with the technologies.

The technology and materiality of diaries versus lifelogs

15 Diaries are commonly valued for their contents rather than for their look or feel. Nevertheless, the materiality of diaries as well as the technology through which these artefacts have come into being is crucial factors in their signification (see also Hayles, 2002). When referring to paper diaries, two typical concepts spring to mind: the empty diary, preformatted for daily use, which we can buy at stationary stores and the handwritten manuscripts of diaries that have later appeared in print and become widely read. The physical appearance of a prefab diary prefigures the functions of its

intended use: empty pages, with or without lines, bound or unbound, dated or undated, offer the author stimuli to fill the more or less blank surface with personal inscriptions and thoughts. In some cases, the diary is completed by a lock-and-key — a potent symbol of its private nature. The preformatted diary has always been, to some extent, a product of contemporary fashion, its design and lay-out representing a particular style and catering to a specific age or taste. A diary's materiality forms an essential part of its content: pages, cover, key, colours, ink and paper (its look, feel, and smell) are all part of the act of keeping a diary. Over the years, diarists often grow fond of the material outlooks of their notebooks—fading colours, youthful handwriting, and ink blobs trigger reminiscences in a way that photographs do. The diary's contents, when reread at a later stage in life, may either elicit nostalgic yearning or retroactive embarrassment, in some cases even leading to a definitive destruction of the object. A reified memory object of one's past, the diary is the stilled result of a creative and communicative act.

16 Arguably, diary writing is not necessarily inspired by prefab formats: on the contrary, many diaries published in print, had first been written in ordinary notebooks or scribbled onto single sheets. The actual manuscript of such a diary, its original form of inscription, becomes a vital sign of authenticity—often stored in special places and only accessible to owners or researchers. In the case of Anne Frank's diary, which consisted partly of notebooks and partly of separate sheets of paper, the gradual discovery and reconstructionof the various 'versions' of the manuscript became part of the Dutch teenager's legacy. The original manuscript, stored in Amsterdam, appeared to be in such demand that the Anne Frank Foundation had two duplicates made: one to replace the original on display at the museum, the other to satisfy the many requests from film directors, researchers and documentary makers for pictures of the original. The materiality of the manuscript constitutes an intricate part of the diary's genesis and later its controversial claims to authenticity, (uncensored) originality and completeness.

17 Pivotal to the materiality of diaries, up to the age of computers, has been the notion of script: the concept of diary is commonly associated with (hand) writing, signifying not just authenticity, but personality. Handwriting has historically been believed to betray the personality of its producer—graphology being the study that yields clues to the writer's character such as age and even personality traits. Regarded as the first 'technologising of the word,' (Ong, 1982) the tools of writing facilitated the need to make oneself legible to the 'other' or to the future self. Writing is thus intimately tied to a stage in one's personal development: a teenager's scrawls betray his or her inexperience with the prime tool of literacy—the immaturity of body or mind. As Canadian archivist Jane Zhang claims, 'an individual's handwriting is habitually viewed as his own personal mark, which distinguishes him not only from others, but also from his own past and future' (2003: 43). Sonja Neef confirms that handwriting is an embodied practice: moving a pen onto paper involves a direct connection between body and script, an act in which the eye and hand are intimately interwoven with the technology of paper and pen and the techniques of deploying them; the hand—a body part instrumental to the 'Verkörperung' (embodiment) of thoughts—fixes the inner self to the outside world (2002).

18 Since other technologies have gradually replaced handwriting, the tools of a diarist have changed accordingly. When Sigmund Freud wrote his essay 'A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad',' in 1925, he regarded writing and technology as external aids or supplements to memory. Freud described memory in terms of writing, comparing it to the surface of a writing pad that allowed the scribbling of endless notes, which could subsequently be erased and yet remain stored in the 'subconscious' layers of the pad, below its material surface. Jacques Derrida (1995), commenting upon Freud's essay, dismisses his notion of writing as an external memory and emphasises instead technology's instrumental relationship to language and representation. Technologies, including writing utensils, are machines that engender representations while infiltrating agency; pen and paper, therefore, produce different modes of writing than the typewriter or the word processor (Barnet, 2004). Handwriting never simply structures reflections or thoughts, but literally creates them; by the same token, a typewriter constitutes a different relation between author, words and representation. It may not be a coincidence that typewriters never became popular in connection to diary writing; unlike handwriting, the noise of fingers pounding on a machine severed the physical intimacy between body and word (Kittler, 1999). [4] As the technologies for writing change, so does our way of creating self-reflective records. Handwritten diaries are material

artefacts that are themselves memorials—traces of a past self. Memory, in other words, is always implicated in the act and technology of writing.

19 The advent of the stand-alone word processor, as the successor of the (electronic) typewriter, further disembodied the production of written language, as not only the keyboard but also the screen interfered with the continuity between hand and words. Yet two essential features of word processing may have restored some of the intimacy lost with the typewriter. First, the relative silence of word processors refurbished part of the quietude inherent to solitary writing, while speeding up the production of text and maintaining standardised letter output. Even more profound has been the ability of word processors to produce tentative texts, provisional versions of thoughts, forever amenable to changes of mind; the editing of visualised words does not leave a trace in the ultimate print. Words on the screen, stored in digital memory, thus formed a new stage in the trajectory between immaterial thoughts and textual products, allowing for invisible revisionist interferences in one's memory. On top of that, digital files may never materialise into print, and they can remain stored in the black box of the PC, without ever being erased or retrieved (by the writer or by others). Diaries produced by a word processor, therefore, are fundamentally different from diaries produced by means of handwriting or typewriters: the personal computer provides an intrinsic textual paintbrush with which to edit one's personal records. The potential of digital editing at a later stage diluted the concept of diary as a material, 'authentic' artefact, inscribed in time and on paper.

20 In the 1990s, when stand-alone word processors gradually gave way to networked computers and the internet became a popular medium for interaction, the physical artefact of the diary seemed incommensurable with the prime demands of instant, ubiquitous connection rooted in digital materiality. The evanescence of the internet appears at odds with the genre's preference for a fixed material output. Moreover, the time lapse between writing and potential publishing of the diary in print intrinsically conflicts with the immediacy and connectedness of the electronic superhighway. Between body and words on paper are no longer just a piece of paper, but an intricate technological network of connected individuals and communities; and between paper and published print are only a few seconds before the inscriptions enter the virtual realm. And yet, perhaps surprisingly, we still consider the lifelog to be a digital descendant of the paper diary, except that there is no printed output, only a screen-based one. How, then, should we consider the new materiality of the lifelog? Since computers do not smell, and the screen has no particular feel, how can we define the digital matter of lifelogs?

21 Analogous to the preformatted paper diary and the diarist's handwriting, we can locate the materiality of weblogs in two different areas: weblog software and the signature of its users. The first weblogs were operated mostly by digerati, but as specially developed software made blogging technically easy, more people without any specific technological skills joined the various kinds of 'blogging groups.' Particularly since 2000, a large number of software packages have flooded the market, enabling even the clumsiest person to become a sophisticated blogger. Today, users can choose from a variety of different packages; besides open diaries on the web, such as Opendiary.com and MyDearDiary.com, there are also weblog services for which you need to sign up or even being introduced by a member, like LiveJournal, Blurty, Xanga, DeadJournal, Blogger, and DiaryLand. Although they all basically serve the same purpose, the formats may differ in lay-out and digital possibilities. To some extent, these different designs resemble the preformatted paper-diaries for sale at stationary stores. It seems like the various software formats attract different audiences, catering to heterogeneous tastes and lifestyles, much like brand names of fashion products appeal to a particular style. As Emily Nussbaum points out, their formats only vary slightly ('A Livejournal is a Blurty is a Xanga is a Diaryland'), but because of certain technical features, users may select a certain software package (2004). For instance, sites like Xanga contain the possibility to give 'aProps', a kind of gold stars for particularly good posts, whereas LiveJournal allows for selecting features such as 'current mood music' and 'embedded polls or surveys.' In a way, blog software is like a pair of jeans: nuances in style and brand name are important to individuals who are seeking to belong to a group.

22 Software, however, constitutes only the technological condition for its varied individualised use. Digital weblogs may, in terms of their materiality, not even remotely resemble their paper precursor, but there is a distinct continuity in their personal signature. If handwriting betrayed a

diary writer's character and level of maturity, the typewriter and later the word processor had already erased that trademark of personality; and yet, through word choice, style, punctuation, and the use of emoticons it is remarkable how much the entries give away a person's character. On top of that, the personality of a diarist is even more traceable through her prolific choices of cultural contents. A blogger may attach references to songs, pictures, movies, books, etc.Despite prescriptive software formats, weblogs offer a relatively high degree of creative freedom; users can discover their own taste by cutting, pasting, and commenting, thus exploring the relationship between the self and culture at large. Some weblog software (like OpenDiary.com) allows users to search entries by age group, gender, theme of the week, subject or cultural preferences.

23 Although the multimedial lifelog looks very different from the preformatted lock-and-key paper diary, each materiality gives away distinctive clues to an author's personality. Just as paper diaries reflect someone's age, taste, and preference at a particular moment in their life, the software and signature of blogs seem to accommodate the needs of especially contemporary teens and young adults to express and sort out their identity in an increasingly wired, mediated world. Digital technologies are imperative to the creation of blogs, as Mortensen (2004) rightly assumes, but technology does not tell the whole story. In conjunction to changing technologies, materialities and cultural forms, we need to pay closer attention to the practices of diary writing and blogging, to see how they change along with evolving notions of intimacy, privacy and memory.

Diary writing and blogging as cultural practices

24 The internet is not simply an amplification of the stand-alone word processor, but it enters a new mediating apparatus that significantly impacts the use or function of familiar forms. In our focus on technology, we often tend to underemphasise how social and cultural conditions change along with the machinery. Both diary writing and blogging are interesting cultural practices—quotidian habits or daily rituals which gradually receive a place in a person's life. Cultural practices, in the past century, have become increasingly mediated: watching television, talking on the phone, taking pictures or writing e-mails are only few of many potential communicative acts through which a person articulates herself. With the introduction of the internet, some of these daily rituals are gradually changing, often fusing old practices with new conventions. For instance, e-mails can be regarded 'remediations' of handwritten letters, but more profoundly, the emergence of e-mail also substantially transformed someone's daily ritual of communication and interaction, along with one's sense of physical or psychological presence—just as the telephone changed communicative patterns along with notions of proximity and presence a hundred years earlier. It is important to note that these changes always involve both technology and practice, the mutual shaping of which is firmly embedded in culture.

25 Writing a diary, of course, never happened in a social vacuum; the ritual occupied its own niche alongside other acts of communication, such as talking, listening, reading, etc. As a quotidian habit, diary keeping gives meaning and structure to someone's life. In the case of Anne Frank, writing a journal created a zone of silence and refuge in a small space, densely crowded and heavily trafficked by human interaction. Her daily ritual was an act of self-protection as much as self-expression. By carving out a discursive space, she was able to articulate her private thoughts and define her position in relation to others and the world at large. Diary writers fashion a habit by choosing a medium; the creation of that mediated habit is always inspired by ultural conventions and prevailing fashions. As David Chaney observes, everyday life is a creative project 'because although it has the predictability of mundane expectations, it is simultaneously being worked at both in the doing and in retrospective reconsideration' (2002: 52). Quotidian acts such as diary writing should thus not only be regarded as stilled reflections of life, but as ways of constructing life. They always coexist amidst a number of other communicative habits and culturally determined practices.

26 For the contemporary blogger, the internet is just one of a host of media through which to express agency, and blogging is one of many competing practices, such as speaking (both face-to-face and phone conversations), writing (letters, sms, e-mail), watching (television, film, photos) and listening (music, talk). The coexisting practices that fill the mediated lives of today's youngsters both complement and compete with each other; the weblog offers several amenities that other media lack, such as the ability to combine extensive written comments with pictures, tunes, links and clips, as well as the possibility to post something online to a large anonymous readership. Blogging

may be a combination of both oral and literate practices, such as diary writing, letter writing, the exchange of cultural objects, printed publications, and even conversation. Jan Fernback has remarked that

27 > as mediated human communication becomes more and more non-linear, decentralised, and rooted in multimedia, the distinction between orality and literacy becomes less evident and less important. (2002: 29)

28 New hybrid rituals always emerge in dialogue (and also in competition) with already existing practices, as they gradually create a new balance in the ecosystem of quotidian cultural practices, both oral and literal.

29 The networked computer is instrumental to the way in which a blogger simultaneously fashions her identity and creates a sense of community. Blogging both complements and interferes with everyday 'live' communication: weblog entries are part of a person's web of community circles through which they move and shape their lives. Some of these circles overlap some do not. The by and large reflexive nature of the lifelog has its place in the contact zones of everyday life that each individual constructs, and which are usually a mixture of real-life and virtual experiences. Through their LiveJournals or Xangas, teenagers not only express themselves, but create a communal sense of values and thoughts deemed worthy of being shared. In a lifelog, one may blurt out confessions of loneliness and insecurity—behaviour inhibited in face-to-face encounters—despite the fact that everyone in a peer group can potentially read these outbursts. In her sharp journalistic ethnography, Nussbaum (2004) observes that bloggers usually don't talk about what they say online, even though in real life they may speak to each other on a daily basis. Online posts can be read and responded to by immediate friends and relatives, while they may also invoke reciprocity from complete strangers, adding another dimension to the small world of immediate peers. The choice of audience is a typical example of how technology and cultural practice interlock—the digital version of the lock-and-key-diary.For example, the distribution features of LiveJournal, allows the user to decide with each posting to whom they make this content available—from 'just myself' to 'friends only' to 'anyone.' Defining one's readership is bound to define one's sense of inclusion in and exclusion from a community, whatever shape that community may take—actual or virtual, intellectually formative or emotionally supportive. In contrast to the paper diary, the weblog is part of a mediated continuum, a lived world in which the individual is always connected. [5] Just as isolation appeared the default mode of paper diaries, reciprocity is now coined as the default mode of blogging. However, just as the solitary basis of diaries turned out to be a myth, reciprocity is not a standard feature of blogs: still half the number of internet diaries turns out to be non-reciprocal (Herring 2004). Although the very medium that enacts blogging shifts the technological condition from isolation to connection, this does not mean that the cultural practices take on a new 'pure' default mode; on the contrary, old habits of diary writing coexists with new connected practices, while they get gradually incorporated by a new medium.

30 The inclusion and exclusion of (potential) readers from one's weblog constitutes an intricate game, the stakes of which are identity formation and community construction. Identity, as Australian media theorist Esther Milne claims, is always, in varying degrees, a performance:

31 > It is the result of complex cultural, technological, economic and institutional forces rather than being a natural, somatic or psychological process that is fundamentally independent of historical influences. 2004: 8)

32 Current 'complex forces' are geared towards swift and easy distribution of ideas. In the past, the ability to expose oneself to a wider audience of unknown readers was something for which a paper diarist used to be dependent on a publisher who would print and distribute the diary, usually resulting in a considerable time lag between the moment of writing and of publication. A blogger can make her own decision concerning publication and distribution at the very moment of writing. Sharing intimate narratives with an anonymous readership is no longer a future possibility but an actual choice for webloggers; the effect of this technological option is immediacy—instant distribution, without intervention from a publishing institution. From a survey held by the MIT Media lab Sociable Media Group, we learn that 76% of bloggers do not limit their readership in any way, and they have no idea who their readers are, apart from a core audience (Viegas, 2004).

33 Weblogs or digital diaries are perhaps primarily about synchronising one's experience with others, about testing one's evaluations against the outside world. Blogging, besides being an act of self-

disclosure, is also a ritual of exchange: bloggers expect to be signalled and perhaps to be responded to. If not, why would they publish their musings on the internet instead of letting them sit in their personal files? It may be instructive to compare blogs and blogging to the use of the mobile phone. In their study of teenager's use of mobiles, Alex Taylor and Richard Harper (2003) note how phone-mediated activities resemble established social practices such as gift-giving; the ritual of gift exchange is now extended to symbolic messages (sms or spoken), and, like the material equivalent, it is rooted in a mental scheme of obligation and reciprocation. Through a subtle system of shared norms for exchanging phones, rationing access to personal messages, and obligations to respond, users assign symbolic value to tangible or virtual objects. A similar process can be identified in blogging. Opening up one's secret diary to a selection of friends and relatives, and expecting them to do the same, is an old practice refurbished by bloggers. Attaching items of cultural contents is quite similar to swapping music albums, books or personal accessories—a system of sharing symbolic meanings with friends that is firmly rooted in the material culture of gift exchange. But the potential to open up this process to an anonymous and potentially large readership is new; bloggers are constantly connected to the world at large, and aware of their exposure. Synchronisation, however, does not prohibit self-reflection, just as privacy does not preclude openness. Old and new functions of diary writing thus peculiarly merge into a hybrid networked practice of blogging.

34 At first sight, a prime function of diary writing seems to be virtually absent in the practice of blogging: paper diaries were meant to fix experience in time, to freeze one's thoughts and ideas into words (and perhaps illustrated materials) to serve as a reminder of former experience later on in life. In contrast, blogging seems to be more about revising one's experience over time, allowing to adjust one's former observations and reflection—even the ones stored in the 'archive'—as time goes by and as personality evolves. [6] This difference in function is all too easily ascribed to a material fixity of paper diaries as opposed to the apparent evanescent quality of software or screen content. Yet if we focus on cultural practices in conjunction to technology or form, we may find this opposition to be quite ungrounded. For one thing, paper diaries were never 'finished' paper products; they were often exercises of writing prone to later revision, because of a changing insight, retroactive embarrassment, or due to a changing ambition or purpose in writing the journal. Anne Frank, for instance, started to write a revised version of her diary in March of 1944, several months before she was deported to a concentration camp. Inspired by a government official on the radio, who advised citizens to keep and save diaries from the time of occupation for publication, Anne Frank decided to revise her diary and turn it into book. The two 'versions' of Anne Frank's diary signify how time changes a person's experience as well as her memory of that experience. Revising one's diary entries is inherent to personal growth, particularly at a younger age.

35 Weblogs obviously meet the revisionist need of a diary writer, as entries can be endlessly edited and deleted, even though the ethicality of this is a matter of some controversy among bloggers (Blood, 2002). Yet, from the contemporary blogger's perspective, that does not obliterate the urge to fix experience. Even though blogging is by many considered a transitory cultural practice, just as talking on the phone or sending short text messages, the desire for storage and retrieval is evident. In the case of phone and sms-conversations, Taylor and Harper (2003) found that some teenagers included in their research express the wish to store each sms-exchange on a memory card in order to recall the experience later: the message's physical properties (form, content, time and date stamp) all work in combination to instil meaning into the physical. We can see a similar reconciliation of seemingly opposite functions in the use of digital diaries. For one thing, the very fact that bloggers use writing as their preferred mode of expression indicates a desire to secure these symbolic exchanges in some retrievable form, as their entries gradually turn into interesting memory objects of past experiences. Moreover, almost every software program contains an 'archive' holding selected entries and comments, going back to the very beginning of a person's weblog. Although this has never been empirically tested, it would be no surprise to find that bloggers, like teenagers using sms or the phone, would value their archives as much as their log's communicative functions. In other words, synchronising experience and fixing experience in time were never completely contradictory functions, but they have perfectly merged in today's weblogs.

Weblogs as signifiers of cultural transformation

36 Looking at lifelogs and the cultural practices they engender, we can deduce an interesting reinvention of age-old rituals, newly attuned to the modalities of digitisation. Like the writing of paper diaries, blogging is a process that helps express and order thoughts through rituals, thus defining a sense of self in relation to others; diaries and lifelogs are both acts and artefacts, in which materiality and technology are interdependent on their changing cultural form, their use and users. Rather than pinpoint differences and continuities, I have tried to signal how functions and features of the analogue and digital genre coexist and co-evolve. Some seemingly conflicting genre features that have always existed are now reconciled in the face of evolving hybrid practices, while other paradoxes persist. Even though pen and paper are gradually being replaced by (networked) computers, multimedial materiality still reflects personality and individuality that was formerly signified by handwriting and paper objects. The classification dilemma to distinguish diaries as strictly private (written for oneself and by one person) or public (written to be read by others) does not disappear with the advent of weblogs; on the contrary, the ambiguity is amplified by the potential of instant publishing. And finally, the cultural practice of blogging easily blends the need to synchronise experience with the desire to fix and revise experience in time. However, analysing the evolution of a single case of a technology-form-practice nexus was never a goal in itself; rather, I would like to explain how this particular case signifies a larger techno-cultural transformation that is much more profound than its traces left on the world wide web. In tracking how a new hybrid practice of blogging evolves, it is crucial to acknowledge how it sustains old and constructs new epistemologies and how it indicates a transformation of important cultural notions, specifically the paired-off notions individual and collective, private and public, and memory and experience.

37 Individuality and collectivity are redefined in the face of a culture that values sharing. Weblog architecture, through encoded features such as ‘my current mood’ ‘mini biography’ and ‘my interests’ on the one hand, and ‘friend groups’ ‘syndication’ or ‘communities’ on the other (LiveJournal), favours a connected exploration of the personal; what the internet does best is to create a forum for collective discourses. Although reciprocation is certainly not a condition for participating in the blogosphere, connecting and sharing is definitely written into the technological condition. Of all weblogs present on the internet today, some still resemble conventional paper diaries while others have morphed into completely new interactive formats, firmly rooted in internet culture. Through weblogs, intimate reflections and revelations about personal, intellectual, and artistic preferences are consciously shared with both known and anonymous audiences. Weblogs and blogging might be seen as part of a larger participatory turn in culture. In this culture of sharing, the weblog finds its natural habitat: the digital diary becomes instrumental as its multimedial modality equally allows for the creation of one’s personal entries as well as for the exchange of cultural contents (clippings, files, songs). Blogging software and internet hardware, in this argument, are neither neutral technical conduits nor simple commodities, but they are cultural artefacts facilitating a social process in which exchange and participation are conditions to enacting citizenship.

38 However, there is another side to this techno-cultural transformation that often gets overlooked. The culture of reciprocation is not solely based on linking the self to the net, but also on linking the net to the self. Tracing cultural or political preferences of other bloggers, one can decide to connect to people with similar tastes and preferences; it is precisely this feature that makes weblogs interesting for outsiders. With the use of fairly simple software applications like AllConsuming.net, it becomes increasingly easy to find correlations between bloggers and the cultural products they mention via links or sidebars: books, music, television programs, movies, etc. (Benson, 2003). Tracking software allows a glimpse of the patterns and trends that emerge out of the topics shared by a group. Coupled onto vast databases like Amazon and Google, the possibilities for polling and marketing research are endless, explaining Google’s eagerness to buy start-up companies like Blogger. [7] Whereas many diaries (like OpenDiary and DearDiary) started out as small communities of like-minded individuals, many of these services are now owned by corporations. The downside of the culture of reciprocity is instant marketability: personal taste and cultural choices become instantaneously traceable and marketable to commercial ventures. In a networked environment, where information is constantly cached, weblogs have become gold mines for data diggers. For bloggers, social norms concerning individuality and collectivity appear

to be in flux; nostalgic notions of personality and belonging still persist, while new media reality prompts a keen awareness of technological strategies directing individual taste and community building.

39 The same ambiguity applies to blogger's notions of privacy and openness. As I pointed out above, privacy has always been an effect rather than an intrinsic feature of a paper diary's content, often achieved through one's familiarity with conventions for publication and publicity. Our norms and laws of privacy protection are still based on a strict distinction between ego-documents and public records; if boundaries were often crossed in the past, for bloggers they become increasingly fuzzy. As Nussbaum explains, bloggers have a 'degraded or relaxed sense of privacy,' depending on your perspective: 'Their experiences may be personal, but there is no shame in sharing... [and they get back] a new kind of intimacy, a sense that they are known and listened to'(2004). Not only is there no shame in sharing: bloggers actually take pride and find purpose in sharing. Privacy is an effect determined by a click on the mouse. Instant publication, however, changes the rules of the game. As the aforementioned MIT Media Lab survey by Viegas shows, bloggers are hardly concerned with the persistent nature of what they publish; the overwhelming majority publishes private information about themselves or other people without thinking about legal or moral consequences. Not surprisingly, more than one third of all bloggers have gotten into trouble because of things they have written in their blogs and the majority forgets about defamation or liability when writing about others in networked environments. Their understandings of private and public appear full of contradictions: comments are personal yet readable by everyone, intimate yet public. Old and new notions of privacy are contested in the blogosphere; courts and lawyers are currently wrestling with emerging questions like: can entries posted with restricted access be 'stolen' when they are posted on an open website? Are public officials or state employees free to speak their minds in the 'private' sphere of restricted blog communities? It will take a number of years before this hybrid practice will have stabilised and grounded in social and legal norms.

40 Lifelogs do not only signal altering notions of individuality and privacy, but also of personal memory in relation to lived experience. The paper diary reflected the idea that the memory object is a petrified, unchangeable relic, stored in its authentic form and retrieved to invoke a past experience. When a diary's contents were published through an intermediate process of editing, printing and distribution, we were mostly concerned with how the 'original' words—assumedly the recordings of experiences—matched the words published in print. The fusion of old and new technologies results in a hybrid tool that seamlessly combines communicative and archival functions; blogging allows for exchanging, storing, and revising entries all at the same time. Blogging itself becomes a (real life) experience, a construction of self that is always mediated by tools for communication and expression; in other words, the medium is the experience, not the message. If the meaning of experience is slowly changing, so is the meaning of memory. As time proceeds, memories of experiences inevitably evolve; revising one's past inscriptions is a natural part of a process of personal growth. Rather than being fixed in material paper objects, memory mutates through digital materiality. Although the internet is often characterised as a transient, evanescent medium, weblogs have both the ability to fix and the potential to morph; blogging constitutes a new concept of memory, allowing for preservation and erasure simultaneously.

41 Bloggers are retooling the practice of diary writing, meanwhile creating a new type of cultural knowledge and social interaction via their tools. The reciprocity inherent in networked systems points at a profound reorganisation in social consciousness. Tracing media change through its technology-materiality, as Kitzman proposes, through its specific cultural forms, as Bolter and Grusin advocate, or through an analysis of blogging as social action, as Miller and Shepherd prefer, are all valuable prisms to look at this recent phenomenon. In this article, however, I have attempted to examine technological and cultural changes in constant connection to socio-cultural practices, as an index to understanding the larger socio-cultural transformations. In the case of lifelogs, I have argued how old and new technologies, forms and practices co-exist and yet co-evolve into hybrid practices. These hybrid practices both reflect and construct new social norms and cultural concepts, such as individual and community, privacy and publicness, experience and memory. In a period of transition, these concepts fluctuate and will continue to fluctuate, but unravelling such complex transformation may help us sort out newly emerging cultural values. If

we look back at the cartoon, cited at the beginning of this article, we now comprehend that the woman who starts typing her lifelog right after denying her partner's question whether she keeps a diary, is not simply lying. In fact, the three frames of this cartoon perfectly reflect the ambiguous reality in which millions of bloggers find themselves today.

Author's Biography

José van Dijck is a Professor of Media and Culture at the University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands) and Chair of the Department of Media Studies. She has a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of California, San Diego. She has published widely on science and media and on media technologies. Her latest book is The Transparent Body. A Cultural Analysis of Medical Imaging (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004). She is currently writing a book on media technologies and cultural memory. [J.F.T.M.vanDijck@uva.nl]

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Eric Ketelaar for bringing the cartoon to my attention and for his constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank Sonja Neef and the anonymous referees of Fibreculture for sharpening my argument. Thanks to Esther Milne for her editorial help.

Notes

[1] Emily Nussbaum (2004) takes this prediction from an October 2003 inquiry by the Perseus Development Corporation, a company that designs software for online surveys. Susan Herring (2004), sociologist specialising in computer-mediated communication, quotes the number of 4.12 million weblog users from the statistics of the Perseus group. This number of bloggers also includes hosted weblog services; 34% of these logs are used actively.

[back]

[2] Kitzmann (2003) grounds his approach in theories by Hansen (2000) and Lyotard (1991). He emphasises that the concept of 'remediation' implies too much linearity and hierarchy, instead proposing to study media change in the context of the much wider phenomenon of 'material complexification', in which change is not cumulative 'but [measured by] structural shifts that may lead to growth, contraction, stasis, or a combination of all three' (51).

[back]

[3] For the remainder of this paper, I will use the term 'lifelog' to refer to the personal weblog, but with all the caveats mentioned in the previous three paragraphs: lifelogs can never be clearly separated from weblogs in general in terms of content, referentiality or directionality.

[back]

[4] Although Kittler (1999: 198) states that the typewriter disrupted the intimacy of handwritten expression, as it 'tears writing from the essential realm of the hand, i.e., the realm of the word.' It should be noted, though, that this idea does not originally stem from Kittler; he is referring to Heidegger's Parmenides-lecture.

[back]

[5] As British sociologist John B. Tompson (1995: 233) has eloquently argued, individuals increasingly draw on mediated experience to inform and refashion the project of self: 'Mediated rituals enable intimacy at a distance; for the generation living in the digital age, the continuous switching between real live and mediated communication is quite normal.'

[back]

[6] According to Viegas (2004), almost 75% of all bloggers indeed edit their past entries, varying from punctuation and grammar to contents and names.

[back]

[7] Pyra labs, one of the first start-up companies who designed blogger-software, was bought up by Google in 2003. For details on this transaction, see Kahney (2003).

[back]

References

Barnet, Belinda. 'The Erasure of Technology in Cultural Critique', Fibreculture 1 (2003), https://journal.fibreculture.org/issue1/issue1_barnet.html

Benson, Erik. 'All Consuming Web Services', (2003), https://www.xml.com.lpt/a/ws/2003/05/27/allonsuming.html

Blanchard, Anita. 'Blogs as Virtual Communities: identifying a Sense of Community in the Julie/Julia Project' in Gurak et al. (eds), Into the Blogoshphere. Rhetoric, Community and Culture of Weblogs, (2004), https://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/

Blood, Rebecca. 'Weblogs: A History and Perspective', (2000), https://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html

____. 'The Weblog Handbook', (2002), https://www.rebeccablood.net/handbook/excerpts/weblog_ethics.html

Bolter, Jay D. and Grusin, Richard. Remediation: Understanding New Media (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

Chaney, David. Cultural Change and Everyday Life (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002).

Cheung, Charles. 'A Home on the Web: Presentations of Self on Personal Homepages', in David Gauntlett (ed.) Web.Studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age (London: Arnold, 2000), 43-51.

Decker, William M. Epistolary Practices. Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

Derrida, Jacques. Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Didier, Beatrice. Le Journal Intime (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1976).

Fernback, Jan 'Legends on the Net: An Examination of Computer-mediated Communication as a Locus of Oral Culture', New Media and Society 5:1 (2003): 29-45.

Hansen, Mark. Embodying Technesis: Technology beyond Writing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

Hayles, N. Katherine. Writing Machines (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

Herring, Susan. 'Weblog as Genre, Weblog as Sociability', (2004), https://ella.slis.indiana.edu/~herring/ssc.ppt

Kahney, Leander. 'Why Did Google Want Blogger?', Wired News, (2003), https://www.wired.com/news/technology

Kawaura, Yasuyuki; Kawakami, Yoshiro; and Yamashita, Kiyomi. 'Keeping a Diary in Cyberspace', Japanese Psychological Research 40:4 (1998): 234-45.

Kittler, Friedrich. Film, Gramophone, Typewriter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

Kitzmann, Andreas. 'That Different Place: Documenting the Self within Online Environments', Biography 26.1 (Winter, 2003): 48-65.

Lejeune, Philip. Le pacte autobiographique (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993).

Lyotard, Jean-François. The Inhuman. Reflections on Time, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

Mallon, Thomas.A Book of One's Own: People and their Diaries (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1984).

Marty, Eric. L'ecriture du jour. Le journal d'André Gide. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1985).

Miller, Carolyn R. and Dawn Shepherd. 'Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog' in Gurak et al. (eds), Into the Blogoshphere. Rhetoric, Community and Culture of Weblogs, (2004), https://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/

Milne, Esther 'Email and Epistolary Technologies: Presence, Intimacy, Disembodiment', Fibreculture 2 (2003), https://journal.fibreculture.org/issue2/issue2_milne.html

Neef, Sonja. 'Die (rechte) Schrift und die (linke) Hand', Kodikas/Ars Semiotica 25: 1 (2002): 159-176.

Nussbaum, Emily. 'My So-Called Blog.' The New York Times Magazine, 11 January 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/11/magazine/11BLOGhtml

Ong, Walter. Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (London: Routledge, 1982).

Piggott, Michael. 'Towards a History of the Australian Diary' Proceedings of I-Chora Conference (International Conference on the History of Records and Archives), University of Toronto, (October 2-4, 2003): 68-75.

Rodzvilla, John (ed.). We've Got Blog. How Weblogs are Changing Our Culture (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus, 2002).

Schaap, Frank. 'Links, Lives, Logs: Presentation in the Dutch Blogosphere' in Gurak et al. (eds), Into the Blogoshphere. Rhetoric, Community and Culture of Weblogs, (2004), https://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/

Taylor, Alex S. and Richard Harper. 'The Gift of the Gab? A Design-oriented Sociology of Young People's Use of Mobiles', Journal of Computer Supported Cooperative Work 12: 3 (2003): 267-296.

Tompson, John B. The Media and Modernity. A Social Theory of the Media (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

Viegas, Fernanda 'Blog Survey: Expectations of Privacy and Accountability', (2004), https://web.media.mit.edu/~fviegas/survey/blog/results.htm

Yakel, Elizabeth. 'Reading, Reporting, and Remembering: A Case Study of the Maryknoll Sisters Diaries', Proceedings of I-Chora Conference (International Conference on the History of Records and Archives), niversity of Toronto, (October 2-4, 2003): 142-150.

Zhang, Jane. 'The Lingering of Handwritten Records', Proceedings of I-Chora Conference (International Conference on the History of Records and Archives), University of Toronto, (October 2-4, 2003): 38-45.

The Fibreculture Journal (ISSN 1449-1443) — Issue 3, 2004-11-03. This article is published under CC BY-NC-ND. The author retains copyright.

This PDF is an archival offprint generated from the journal's text archive on 2026-11-15. It is not the publisher's version of record; the published article is at https://three.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-012-composing-the-self-of-diaries-and-lifelogs/. Page numbers here are not the published pagination. Where paragraph numbers appear in the margin they are the journal's own and are the citable unit.