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studies in contemporary culture

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Blogademia / Craig Saper

Academics are not publishing their most valued thoughts about new media--the ones for which they hope to obtain tenure or promotion--in new media.

Jay Bolter (*Writing Space*, second edition, 111)

There's something about this medium that convinces us that our merest flights of fancy, our wispiest free-floating musings, are Revealed Truths, outtakes from Thus Spake Zarathustra. . . . the chattering class's presumption that it must have something, anything to say about everything? (Joan Didion famously said that she left New York because she didn't have an opinion about everything.)

Mark Dery blog (September 27, 2005)

Gossip On Blogs

<1> Academics, especially in the arts and humanities, have taken to blogs like ducks to water. At the same time, some of these blogs, especially those produced by graduate students and untenured faculty, have opened themselves to charges of wasting time gossiping about colleagues, and wallowing in

unprofessional discourse, instead of working on serious scholarship. One blogger told me confidentially,

I just password-protected my blog for the period of my job search after reading this article in the *Chronicle of Higher Ed*, I actually got in trouble with my senior colleagues last semester for making a posting about a faculty meeting.

Producing a discourse outside the bounds of professional publications and decorum has provoked one senior scholar, on a hiring committee, to note that, "job seekers who are also bloggers may have a tough road ahead, if our committee's experience is any indication"(anonymously quoted in *Tribble*). Perhaps in response to the tense situation, sites now appear, like *academic coach*, with the slogan "Earnest exhortations and random tidbits for dissertating grad students, post-doctoral job hunters and tenure-track faculty." The coach's blog, with a hubristic URL, that includes the phrase successful academic, reads like a cross between a training manual for institutional intelligence and an Ann Landers type problem solving forum codifying gossip as self-help. Some, like *New Kid on the Hallway*, begin with descriptive slogans about the life of an academic.

Partner in a long-distance marriage. Parent to three cats. Educator to the enthusiastic and indifferent alike. Runner on the tenure track. Slave to Haagen Das caramel cone ice cream. Gearing up for year two on tenure-track job #2. Still trying to avoid the bullies and hang out with the cool kids on the academic playground. Still trying to keep things new.

The *Kid's site* also has a revealing URL, including the phrase "academia in all its glory," that suggests a desire to lay-bare the machinations of academia. Some sites' figurative titles describe their tenuous positions in academia like *Academic in Exile: The Little Professor*. The *Synecdochic Prof*, with the slogan Fear and Loathing at Coca-Cola University, wants to tell the particular academic story, about the enormous amount of unrecognized work in reading and evaluating other people's work, usually missing from Vitas and promotion files.

One of the things that I like about academic blogs is that they register the work that academics perform that don't often get noticed. For me, this kind of reading (and writing the reports and comments generated by such reading) is a big part of what I do. For what it's worth, I'm trying to total up what I've read since the semester ended.

<2> Titles of many of these blogs describe similar situations in the lives of academics. In *Favor of Thinking* includes the slogan, "life in academia, yoga, movies, books, ideas, general rants." *Academic Splat!* captures the visceral reaction and comic-book cyber-punk attitude toward academia that many young academic bloggers share. A number of sites have a list of other academic blogs. Jeff Rice's *Yellow Dog* includes a long list of academic sites, mostly of those are focused on contemporary rhetoric, including Working Blue, Collin Vs Blog, Why Not Blog, Culture Cat, Earth Wide Moth, and CDB. The editor of *HyperRhiz: new media cultures*, Helen Burgess, lists a number of important blogs by, and for, academics including Profgrrl, Bitch PhD, Librarygirl, and Rudbeckia Hirta's Learning Curves. Steven Shaviro, in an email correspondence to me, discusses the political "hope" of these blogs.

There are also academic blogs that comment on the politics, labor practices, etc, of academia as a workplace (these are often written by junior faculty, hiding behind pseudonyms for obvious reasons). I'd like to think -- I mean, I hope -- that these ultimately have some influence on how academia is structured and governed, but that means the sort of change that doesn't happen through institutional channels.

Michael Benton expresses a similar hope for blogs when he explains that blogs allow for "easy access to cultural capital for those outside the confines of academia. . . . [blogs] strengthen our public culture." He continues to discuss the significance of allowing easy access to symbolic capital.

I realize that it will not do any good to have countless voices shouting out into the cyber-wilderness, but we are seeing positive moves toward collective action . . . a vital moment . . . will we allow it to remain open to the free distribution of information/knowledge in the hopes that we will reverse the trends towards apathy/silence in our public culture(s) or, are we going to allow the corporate-industrial-academic-military industries to move in and claim these open spaces as private property to be regulated, classified and controlled?

The blogademia resists the hegemonic academic machine.

<3> In her synthesis of political theory and cultural studies, Jodi Dean, in her scholarship, rather than in her popular blog, exposes the myth of the nomadic academic's networking as inherently liberating.

Other intellectuals are forced to migrate, to serve as itinerate, contingent, academic piece-workers. They teach heavy loads with few benefits and less security. Often they are pushed out of the academy altogether. They are forced into exile and deported. Those with time to write may lack the resources to attend academic meetings and to cultivate opportunities to publish their work. Those who do publish may despair at the unlikelihood that what they write will be noticed, will count, will register in the discussions that matter to them. Institutions like universities and nations are thus bars separating privileged from forced mobility. Claims to cosmopolitanism, inclusion, and significance notwithstanding, even in, especially in, the networks of communicative capitalism, there are barriers that cannot be crossed, loops that cannot be broken. Mobility depends on fixity.(n. p.)

Those blogademics often express this sense of itinerate work and uncertain futures. The blogs serve as a salve for, and a utopian simulation of, the privileged mobility of

cosmopolitanism, diverse points of view, and political networks. This view of blogademia has a certain charming pathos; considering the blogs as a desperate form of expression might avoid considering them as research, experimentation, and legitimate scholarship. Most academics, including the bloggers, do not think these blogs have any impact on scholarship, and the production of knowledge, precisely because they have no editorial review process. Helen Burgess explains the delicate situation.

Personal academic blogs may contain scholarly material but they're more likely to be a personal response to the profession. ... they may be viewed as frivolous because they're not peer-reviewed. I think most senior/non-blogging academics view blogging with suspicion.

<4> Instead of citing blogs as research in process, for example, or experiments in digital scholarship, academics, instead, fuel the tendency to keep the e-dialogue outside the bounds of the production of scholarship. The bloggers themselves seem complicit in this exclusion because the blogs, by academics, often air dirty laundry, gripes, complaints, rants, and raves, what those blogs add to research seems outside scholarship. Some blog-like sites, by academics, began in the 1990s, but the vast majority of blogademics began their web journals one or two years ago (not many before 2002).

<5> If there is an emerging discipline forming around blogs, and other intensely networked discourses, then few participants, nor the academics in e-media studies (or interactive studies, digital media studies, new media studies, performance media studies, digital cultures, texts and technology, technology and culture, computers and writing, and many more variations), seem to know. In fact, both those involved, and those who see it as an unprofessional disadvantage, think of academics' blogs as a spectrum running from angry political resistance to wallowing in banalities and trivial self-absorption. In considering *The Laws of Cool*, Alan Liu examines how websites often "chronicle the lives of persons whose most distinguishing trait from the point of the Web is that they put their lives on the Web" (189). There is a peculiar, and troubling, logic involved in media that follows

the same formula that Warren Beatty exasperatedly expressed to Madonna in *Truth or Dare*, "... its only real to you if it's on film." If print culture expressed a *logocentrism* (where privileging the sense of self-present speech over mediated writing forms the basis for rationality), then networked and interactive culture, with blogs as the epitome, express a *b-logocentrism*. *B-logocentrism*, a neologism in which the extra b stands for banal narcissism, suggests how blogs can intensify the appearance of a self-present speaker instead a de-centered subject in hypertextual webs). What if blogs' gossip demonstrated a structure (a type of knowledge), rather than expressions of speakers' situations and passions? What if the apparent opposition between scholarly knowledge and gossip was more porous than one might suspect?

Gossip Knowledge

<6> Step back from the computer. Consider the following analogy. When Sigmund Freud was building an emerging discipline, eventually called Psychoanalysis, he suggested protocols, methods, and cognitive maps all based on case studies. One of the rules of psychoanalysis, however, was to not share the details of what goes on in the sessions because it would damage the confidentiality of the patient doctor exchange. Unfortunately, one could only build a discipline from the gossip about the sessions shared among analysts. The case studies talked about the course of the therapy, the personal lives of the clients, the transference and counter-transference, and which methods produced results. When analysts published these studies, they changed names, used abbreviations, and created clever pseudonyms all in an effort to keep the actual case confidential. In the informal and formal face-to-face meetings among analysts, however, names were not changed; one could easily describe the discussion as gossip. Case studies still engage in these same voyeuristic methods toward knowledge. Gossip is not an ornamental value.

<7> Blogs are about gossip, but when academics gossip they may also lead to a new form of knowledge. When bloggers discuss infrastructure (who in your department is an idiot or a psychopath; how poorly the administration of your University functions; or simply the trials and travails of the tenure-track publish or perish mill), they also discuss, unwittingly, the

social processes of knowledge production, what counts as scholarship, and discipline formation. Obviously, spreading water-cooler comments to an elastic, anonymous, and often random group of outsiders may also appear to hurt the local institution's reputation and, therefore, that community's ability to legitimize their scholarship, add to the conversations about disciplinary knowledge, and to attract scholars and students to participate in their versions of scholarship. Steven Shaviro, in his discussion of the science fiction of our network society, argues that "the network has colonized my unconscious ... [leaving the participants] intensely involved and maximally distracted, all at once" (25-26). These qualitative effects appear when the network exceeds certain quantitative thresholds." When the network expands beyond a certain critical threshold, it sets in motion a new logic of its own. Its nodes become spontaneously self-aware" (117). The rhetoric surrounding blogs is mostly boosterism, like Andrew Sullivan's unwittingly silly "The Blogging Revolution: Weblogs Are To Words What Napster Was To Music" in the style of a puff piece for a newspaper's culture page. That essay provokes one to comment in mock earnestness, "Say, aren't blogs swell, and won't they lead to a revolution in entrepreneurial capitalism! That's great!" With cheerleaders like Sullivan, one wonders why any academic would consider building and posting a blog online. The emerging discourse on networks has a more complicated and nuanced sense of the activity. Some of that new discourse appears in what I'm calling blogademia.

Who's Blogging

<8> Many academics, who blog, have one personal blog and participate in a series of other professional blogs or blog-like websites. These professional blogs might include group discussions of digital media, production issues, and e-media studies. They often facilitate online group discussions that supplement face to face meetings. One group blog, angryyoungmedia.com, gives one a sense, even in its name, of the threat, and value, of these blogademia networks. Social change, especially in higher education, often starts with angry young people's media performances. Putting it online, and linking it to an elastic group of participants, makes it more than the smoldering rebelliousness of young activists; it makes it a genre of scholarship. Scholars may not like it; they may

dismiss it, ignore it, and especially make it have a negative effect on tenure and promotion. But, it is still out there even when the participant tries to take it down. As a senior scholar warns, "Even if you take your blog offline while job applications are active, Google and other search engines store cached data of their prior contents. So that cranky rant might still turn up" (Tribble). Some bloggers are not anonymous and relate to the production of important cultural critics like *Michael Bérubé's* site.

I teach literature and cultural studies at Penn State University. This site includes links, on the "essays" page, to about seventy of my articles to date, published in academic journals (American Literature, Social Text, Modern Fiction Studies) and in more popular venues (Dissent, the Nation, Harper's, New York Times Magazine).

<9> Academic bloggers have also created blogs for courses, MOOs that allow for virtual chats, and other experiments in infrastructure (and self-reflexive discussions of how the academic infrastructure functions). *Academic Splat!* run by a Professor Camicao, proclaimed in all caps, on Friday, September 23, 2005, that the participants were now "FIVE WEEKS INTO THE COURSE BLOG EXPERIMENT." One professor of education, resigns himself to his realization that "the vast majority of academics don't know anything about blogs. I would however, say that a higher percentage of our students do and interact with them all the time" (Helfenbein). The opening may be to consider blogademia as a translation process. Along those lines Helfenbein argues that "when cultural studies folks starting taking comic books seriously they didn't invent close readings of texts; they just moved the lens to a new type of text. I think that a lot of the same thing might go on here. But, it does raise interesting questions about mediated data. Could I make the same claims as a qualitative researcher based on a weblog entry as I could a taped interview? How does the context of blogging *matter* in the representation of the self?"

<10> If blogs impact the representation of self, then they certainly change the representation of pedagogy too. Helfenbein worries that although there is "no doubt that blogs are pedagogical in nature ... [but] you don't even know if folks

are reading ... almost an element of faith in the project and certainly the catharsis of just expressing those views." So, it is a pedagogy without certain destination; a pedagogy that has unknown, or open auditors, and interpretations. The signifiers may have begun as *b-logocentric*, but, because of the structure, the destination leads nowhere in particular. It may be a supplement to MOOS, that spatialized forum for multiple users to interact, but the spatial aspects morph into discontinuous hyper-associations not contained in any real or imagined seminar space. The speaker may intend to speak a personal truth, but the message's dissemination makes any peculiar subjective meaning contingent on an unknown spectrum of participants. Before the recent iteration of hypertext linking in blogs allowed comments to link to an elastic network of participants, hypertext's forms seemed best suited to fiction. The innovations in hypertext fiction, and the program Storyspace, fueled an interest in non-linear meaning making. When the interest switched to nonfiction and personal forms, the interest in the content and codes of the messages, from serious scholarly journals to scandalous blogs, almost effaced the now crucially important *sociopoetics* involved.

It is not simply that audiences play a role in understanding and appreciating certain formal or semantic patterns; the audience also functions as part of the code, especially when we examine texts that are dependent on networks. (5)

<11> One blog, that a number of the bloggers I interviewed for this article often cite, *jill/txt*, links to a wealth of information and includes insights on media studies especially networked discourses. *jill/txt* also seems focused less, if at all, on academic quagmires and more on scholarly issues around the emerging disciplines of e-media. Regardless, these blogs allow for an outlet for discussions about the problems of infrastructure. An esteemed rhetorician like Richard Lanham might discuss these same issues in print (for example in his book on *The Electronic Word*). He has called for an increased awareness of the infrastructure of the humanities: its reason for being and its methods of operation.

<12> Jay Bolter describes the hypertextual shuttle among

different scales of proportion from the minute detail to an elastic and vast network.

The universal electronic database may be individual or collective. The individual writer dreams of recording all his or her essays, notes, and jottings on one systematic form, while scholars and scientists imagine vast collective repositories of information available immediately to any user in the nation or the world. For some, these two visions coalesce: each writer's database is absorbed into the universal network, until all writers occupy a single vast space . . . (102)

Steven Shaviro notes, in an email correspondence, that the blog is a different genre of academic writing, and gives a clue about how blogs might become something besides rants and raves.

I use the blog precisely to write in **different** ways than I would in official academic writing, but often what I write on the blog subsequently bleeds over into my "official" writing.

Catherine Liu notes that although the blog is "a supplement to my own activities as a writer [...], I hope there is a sense of risk and outrage that I don't allow into my academic work." Michael Benton concurs and also worries that if academia accepts it as legitimate then it will become much more "formalized, regulated and restricted." Jeff Rice, in an email correspondence with me, puts a slightly different twist on the personal when he argues that "Blogs take the academic out of the single minded masturbatory feeling of working onto one's self. They enact the conversational nature of rhetoric - the give and take - the parlor sense of rhetorical discussion that Burke noted - the antagonism Lyotard highlights, the intertextuality literary studies loves." Although it does not seem academia has caught up, Rice calls for patience: "Word processing is a great example. It took time before folks realized how important word processing is to writing (most dismissed it in the early '80s). If weblogs become influential and change our practices, it will take a lot more time." He concludes by returning to the complaints discussed here (i.e., that

narcissistic anonymous exhibitionism seem key components to blogs including those by academics).

Despite the critique that blogs are too much about navel gazing, the foregrounding of the personal (or the ego) on the Web is as important as the foregrounding of the personal was to the essay. Only now we have different issues at stake: alternative identities, bravado, fragmented thought, interconnected ideas, code, association in place of fixed topos, etc. There is much to invent here in terms of academic practices or curricula choices - even if the format of the blog as it is today is not what the format will be tomorrow.

Blogs seem to be part of a larger process of rhetorical invention going on right now - one which includes wikis, audio, Flash, tagging, AJAX-driven systems, database-run systems, etc.

The challenge of blogademia is to focus on this translation process of scholarship and knowledge into the currently disparaged and debased sociopoetic form of blogs. Beyond apprehending the issues at stake in using this form, one can begin to articulate the advantages of research that uses the blog, not as an object of study, but as a vehicle to comprehend mood, atmosphere, personal sensibility, and the possibilities of knowledge outside the ego's conscious thought. The blog, podcast, and wikis may hint, fleetingly, at the future tools of academia.

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