

# rhizomes.9 fall 2004

## The Blog Report: Crisis and Transition (Winter 2004)

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[1] We live in a time of crisis and transition. Multiplying blogs might sit at the locus of this political transformation even if academia still sees this open secret, a private space for public discourse, as illegitimate rants and raves. By reviewing blogs and blogging just as we review books and exhibits, this regular column takes a step toward a critical apprehension.

[2] With the tone of rants and raves, web logs or diaries soon condensed the phrase into the contraction blogs spawning countless bloggers. If it began in the early 1990s, then blogs began geometrically multiplying in the late 1990s and has this year come into its own as the primary, if multiple, news sources on the political campaigns.

[3] Although constantly warned that blogs have no reliability, no fact checking, no promise of integrity, they have supplanted, or incorporated as one in many links, the increasingly inaccurate, partisan, and unreliable broadcast media precisely because the blogs compile, link, and allow for immediate comparison. The messages on-line are potentially more, not less, nuanced and detailed. How does the broadcast media, even the paper of record, respond to that which resists sound bites and demands background research? Not very well. In thinking about the appeal of blogs, [Jill/txt](#) (built by an Associate Professor of New Media in Norway) links to two surveys about mistrust of the media.

12/10/2004

[\[mistrusting media\]](#)

[More than half the population mistrusts mainstream media](#), according to two recent Australian surveys that confirm previous US and Australian studies. The public believes that journalists and media are often biased, that they don't check their facts well, that they invade peoples' privacy, that there is too much entertainment news and that there is not sufficient diversity in the media.

Of course, the public still buys sensationalist reports of crime, celebrity sex and simple answers. But you do see why people might find reporting from outside the mainstream media appealing.

Filed under:[blog theorising](#) — Jill @ 14:38 [ [Responses \(2\)](#)]

The appended comment by [bicyclemark](#) — 12/10/2004 @ [16:14](#) - says, "If I had a nickel...or euro...errr...a kroner ... for every friend who denounced the mass media and then had MSNBC as their browser's autostart page, I'd have a lot of currency."

[4] The broadcast news media increasingly abandon the foundations of objective journalism, fact-checking and tracking down the accurate story, in favor of the she-said/he-said peculiar model of balance. Not surprisingly, mainstream media criticize blogs for having outlier views (a blog phrase) that do not necessarily fit neatly in the binary mythology of two-sides to every story. They supposedly lack any verification. They also do not appear on a regular basis; fleeting and contingent, they lack singular time, anchored place, and perspective. You can't trust a blog to be there at 11 O'clock; instead, its is always nowhere - updated often, a real-time improvisation, a smooth line-of-flight without specific horizon instead pointers to a web of networks, sites, stories, happenings. The blogger software, first available at the same time as *LiveJournal* in 1999, means that the new posts appear at the top and the earlier posts sink to the bottom (as compost for later links). Against media corporations, bloggers often see themselves in a lineage with Samuel Pepys, Tom Paine, and the American Revolution pamphleteers. The bloggers explicitly describe their efforts at jump starting a citizen media. The best known and most elaborate of these citizen media news sources, *Daily Kos* and the [Dkosopedia](#), compiles an enormous amount of information, does not hide its partisan perspective, and includes collective commentaries, diaries, and responses as a blog's analogy for self-doubt.

[5] Cornel West's concerns about democracy in America appear as links and citations frequently in recent blogs. He expresses the concern about suffocation of democratic energies, and the bloggers find in that a call to action. Here's West: @ Cornel West: [Democracy Matters Are Frightening in Our Time](#).

Democracy matters are frightening in our time precisely because the three dominant dogmas of free-market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism are snuffing out the democratic impulses that are so vital for the deepening and spread of democracy in the world. In short, we are experiencing the sad American imperial devouring of American democracy. This historic devouring in our time constitutes an unprecedented gangsterization of America -- an unbridled grasp at power, wealth, and status. And when the most powerful forces in a society -- and an empire -- promote a suffocation of democratic energies, the very future of genuine democracy is jeopardized.

How ironic that 9/11 -- a vicious attack on innocent civilians by gangsters -- becomes the historic occasion for the full-scale gangsterization of America. Do we now live in a post-democratic age in which the very "democratic" rhetoric of an imperial America hides the waning of a democratic America?

[6] [One blog](#)'s title announces the blogger as a "Proud member of the reality-based community" an allusion to the administration of G.W. Bush's White House describing themselves as opposed to reality-based decision makers. Thinking of their activity as an epistemological decision, bloggers think of their message as embrocated upon the organizational infrastructure. Here is [netvironments' discussion](#) of the social aspects built into the design - what I've called sociopoetic:

Today, my old friend and "[perform or else](#)" theorist par excellence, [Jon McKenzie](#), pops up with commentary [on the importance of "the organizational infrastructure."](#) culling from the blogosphere and arguing that:

the most important thing about Dean may be less his issues and more the sociotechnical infrastructure he's building. As one of his supporter's sig reads: "He's the messenger, we're the message."

I couldn't agree more, both with Prem and Jon (while keeping a skeptical eye in line w/Brian Holmes, and less sanguine than Jon as to whether or not the blogosphere is predominantly left-leaning).

In discussing the implications of the defeat of the Democratic party in the US, Daily Kos posts the following argument with the title "Don't Mourn, Organize" by [Meteor Blades](#) (Wed Nov 3rd, 2004 at 10:10:13 GMT).

Still, Tuesday was only one round in the struggle. It's only the end if we let it be. I am not speaking solely of challenging the votes in Ohio or elsewhere - indeed, I think even successful challenges are unlikely to change the ultimate outcome, which is not to say I don't think the Democrats should make the attempt. And I'm not just talking about evaluating in depth what went wrong, then building on what was started in the Dean campaign to reinvigorate the grassroots of the Democratic Party, although I also think we must do that. I'm talking about the broader political realm, the realm outside of electoral politics that has always pushed America to live up to its best ideals and overcome its most grotesque contradictions.

A realm outside of electoral politics involves infrastructural political organizing. The sociopolitical and sociopoetic implications of the blogosphere even include the possibilities and politics of encomium: ways to remember, memorialize, and consider our identity in times of mourning and crisis. Take for example, the situation when the paper of record, *The New York Times*, publishes a front-page obituary without citing any friends, family, or peers of the deceased. It barely mentions the specifics of the deceased's life. Instead, the reporter condemns the deceased in the tone best described as a rant and rave. It abandons the often flaunted advantage of its reporting by failing to cite sources; not that sources are not available. Even the President of France had comments.

[7] It was Jacques Derrida's obituary that created a storm of controversy. The *Times* dutifully printed some of the letters to the editors, but still published a follow-up story, Theory, RIP, also about Derrida and changes in the humanities that would spell the death of all theoretical speculation in favor of empirical research unsullied by explanatory theory. It is fitting that Derrida seemed so close to the blog even though he did not live to see its explosive significance.

... but the example of E-mail is privileged in my opinion for a more important and obvious reason: because electronic mail today, even more than the fax, is on the way to transforming the entire public and private space of humanity, and first of all the limit between the private, the secret (private or public), and the public or the phenomenal. It is not unprecedented rhythm, in quasi-instantaneous fashion, this instrumental possibility of

production, of printing, of conservation, and of destruction of the archive must inevitably be accompanied by juridical and thus political transformations. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 17

In response to the *Times* obituary, thousands of people added their names to [a memorial blog site](#) in honor of Jacques Derrida. The eloquent letters there defend Derrida and academia in general, celebrate the importance of memorialization, and allow for a context for mourning. Perhaps mourning represents a new tier of an emerging political landscape.

The site's design includes the look of an opened book with the top segment cut off by the browser's frame, and the print appearing at the bottom of the two page spread includes the title Remembering Jacques Derrida and a quote that continues to fade and disappear (almost as if when one looks directly at it, it begins fading):

Is the most distressing, even the most deadly infidelity, that of a possible mourning which would interiorize within us the image, idol, or ideal of the other who is dead and lives only in us

Or is it that of the impossible mourning which .... refuses to take the other within oneself, as in the tomb of some narcissism?

Jacques Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Mann*

One blog, Don't Ask Me! Consumer Retorts: rants and raves on the business of self- and home-improvement at <http://www.higher-yearning.org/blog.html>, attacks the *Times* obituary and mentions a radical kind of respect.

Deconstruction is described as a perversely difficult and flippantly critical take on the venerated classics, Sophocles, Plato, etc. In fact, deconstruction makes the case for a radical kind of respect with regard to both reading and writing, a point Jonathan Kandell, the author of the obituary cannot grasp since he cannot muster up the minimal amount of respect for the subject of his own writing. Which misguided editor gave him this assignment?

Blogs allow for, even encourage, a radical kind of respect for personal fascinations and taste that appear in public and political discourse without pretending to serve a common denominator. One of the common conventions of blogs, the lists of other blogs that the diarist likes, notes, or sees as related, suggest this kind of respect. Here is the list of blogs Jill/txt, mentioned above, likes:

blogs i like

[Alex Halavais](#)

[Anders Fagerjord](#)

[Anja Rau](#)

[Anne Galloway](#)

[Blogg og bibliotek](#)

[Carsten Jopp](#)

[Caterina Fake](#)

[Christina Wodtke](#)

[Clancy Ratliff](#)

[Clement Laberge](#)

[Danah Boyd](#)

[Diane Greco](#)  
[Eirik Newth](#)  
[Elin Sjursen](#)  
[Elouise Oyzon](#)  
[Eric Rasmussen](#)  
[Finn Bostad](#)  
[Frank Schaap](#)  
[Gonzalo Frasca](#)  
[Grandtextauto](#)  
[Grumpygirl](#)  
[Hakon Styri](#)  
[Hanna Wallach](#)  
[Jane Pinckard](#)  
[Jason Rhody](#)  
[Jean Burgess](#)  
[Jesper Juul](#)  
[John Schott &co](#)  
[Julian Kücklich](#)  
[Kairosnews](#)  
[Kathleen Fitzpatrick](#)  
[Kaye Trammell](#)  
[l'oeil de mouche](#)  
[Lars Haugen](#)  
[Lilia Efimova](#)  
[Lisa Firke](#)  
[Lisbeth Klastrup](#)  
[Liz Lawley](#)  
[Marika Lüders](#)  
[Mark Bernstein](#)  
[Matt Kirschenbaum](#)  
[Matt Locke](#)  
[Misbehaving](#)  
[Nick Montfort](#)  
[Noah Wardrip-Fruin](#)  
[Oblivio](#)  
[onepotmeal](#)  
[Patrik Svensson](#)  
[Rob Wittig](#)  
[Samantha Blackmon](#)  
[Scott Rettberg](#)  
[Stephanie Hendrick](#)  
[Steven Johnson](#)  
[Tim Wright](#)  
[Torill Mortensen](#)  
[Vika Zafrin](#)

[8] The personal fascination as public theory finds many advocates including the boingboing.net blog, *A Directory of Wonderful Things*. A particularly eloquent listing blog, [vitamin q](#), suggests

the OULIPOlian wonders available to anyone willing to yield to the initiative of compiling lists and the scent or peck of the punctum.

20 words for 'nose':

1 honker

2 beezer

3 nozzle

4 snoot

5 conk

6 pecker

7 snotterbox

8 boko

9 smeller

10 button

11 hooter

12 muzzle

13 neb

14 snout

15 garden (hose / rose)

16 snitch

17 bulb

18 schnozzle

19 trunk

20 beak

posted by Roddy Lumsden at 3:20 PM

WITTERSWEET

Birds named after their songs or calls:

1 kea

2 peewit

3 kiskadee

4 chachalaca

5 bobolink

6 chiffchaff

7 hoopoe

8 chukar

9 killdeer

10 whip-poor-will

11 morepork

12 cuckoo

13 chickadee

14 kittiwake

15 dickcissel

16 curlew

17 chuck-will's-widow

18 odidi

19 kookaburra

20 towhee

21 bobwhite

posted by Roddy Lumsden at 2:58 AM

[9] The evolution of the blog as it becomes a more powerful political force may result in new governmental agencies or even departments. The current crisis and transition may have begun already at the US Department of Art & Technology, <http://www.usdat.us/>

The US Department of Art & Technology is an artist-led, virtual government agency. The US DAT functions as a conduit between the arts and the broader political and economic culture for facilitating the artists' need to extend aesthetic inquiry into the social sphere where ideas become real action. The Department proposes and supports the idealized definition of the role of the artist in society as one whose reflections, ideas, aesthetics, sensibilities, and abilities can have significant and transformative social impact on the world stage.

Randall Packer's US DAT may suggest the move toward a sociopoetic intimate bureaucracy that has already begun in blogs. It may allow for details, organizational infrastructure, and aesthetic inquiry to address politics, meaning, and questions of memory and memorialization. These are times of crisis and transition. Rants and raves won't solve the problem, they won't even mark the path to salvation, but they may suggest a new form of critical apprehension. Check back here regularly as this column updates the blog report.