



Geert Lovink

Blogging, the nihilist impulse

Media theorist and Internet activist Geert Lovink formulates a theory of weblogs that goes beyond the usual rhetoric of citizens' journalism. Blogs lead to decay, he writes. What's declining is the "Belief in the Message". Instead of presenting blog entries as mere self-promotion, we should interpret them as decadent artefacts that remotely dismantle the broadcast model.

"An der rationalen Tiefe erkennt man den Radikalen; im Verlust der rationalen Methode kündigt sich der Nihilismus an. Der Radikale besitzt immer eine Theorie; aber der Nihilist setzt an ihre Stelle die Stimmung."
Max Bense (1949)

Weblogs or blogs are the successors of the '90s Internet "homepage" and create a mix of the private (online dairy) and the public (self-PR management). According to the latest rough estimates of the *Blog Herald*,¹ there are 100 million blogs worldwide, and it is nearly impossible to make general statements about their "nature" and divide them into proper genres. I will nonetheless attempt to do this. It is of strategic importance to develop critical categories of a theory of blogging that takes the specific mixture of technology, interface design, software architecture, and social networking into account.

Instead of merely looking into the emancipatory potential of blogs, or emphasizing their counter-cultural folklore, I see blogs as part of an unfolding process of "massification" of this still new medium. What the Internet lost after 2000 was the "illusion of change". This void made way for large-scale, interlinked conversations through freely available automated software.

A blog is commonly defined as a frequent, chronological publication of personal thoughts and Web links, a mixture of what is happening in a person's life and what is happening on the Web and in the world out there.² A blog allows for the easy creation of new pages: text and pictures are entered into an online form (usually with the title, the category, and the body of the article) and this is then submitted. Automated templates take care of adding the article to the home page, creating the new full article page (called permalink), and adding the article to the appropriate date- or category-based archive. Because of the tags that the author puts onto each posting, blogs let us filter by date, category, author, or other attributes. They (usually) allow the administrator to invite and add other authors, whose permissions and access are easily managed.³

Microsoft's in-house blogger Robert Scoble lists five elements that made blogs so hot. The first is the "ease of publishing", the second he calls "discoverability", the third is "cross-site conversations", the fourth is permlinking (giving the entry a unique and stable URL), and the last is syndication (replication of content elsewhere).⁴ Lyndon from *Flock Blog* gives a few tips for blog writing, showing how ideas, feelings, and experiences can be turned into news format, and showing how dominant PowerPoint has become: "Make your opinion known, link like crazy, write less, 250 words is enough, make headlines snappy, write with passion, include bullet point lists, edit your post, make your posts easy to scan, be consistent with your style, litter the post with keywords."⁵ Whereas the email-based list culture echoes a postal culture of writing letters and occasionally essays, the ideal blog post is defined by snappy public relations techniques.

Web services like blogs cannot be separated from the output they generate. The politics and aesthetics defined by first users will characterize the medium for decades to come. Blogs appeared during the late 1990s, in the shadow of dot-com mania.⁶ Blog culture was not developed enough to be dominated by venture capital with its hysterical demo-or-die-now-or-never mentality. Blogs first appeared as casual conversations that could not easily be commodified. Building a laid-back parallel world made it possible for blogs to form the crystals (a term developed by Elias Canetti) from which millions of blogs grew and, around 2003, reached critical mass.

Blogging in the post-9/11 period closed the gap between Internet and society. Whereas dot-com suits dreamt of mobbing customers flooding their e-commerce portals, blogs were the actual catalysts that realized worldwide democratization of the Net. As much as "democratization" means "engaged citizens", it also implies normalization (as in setting of norms) and banalization. We can't separate these elements and only enjoy the interesting bits. According to Jean Baudrillard, we're living in the "Universe of Integral Reality". "If there was in the past an upward transcendence, there is today a downward one. This is, in a sense, the second Fall of Man Heidegger speaks of: the fall into banality, but this time without any possible redemption."⁷ If you can't cope with high degrees of irrelevance, blogs won't be your cup of tea.

The motor behind the expansion of the blogosphere is the move away from code towards content. There is no more need for empty demo design. Blogs are not a test or proposition. They actually exist. From early on, blog culture has been the home of creative and social content producers. I hesitate to say journalists and academics, because despite the fact that many have such a professional background, it would be false to locate pioneer bloggers inside institutional setups. Yet they weren't anti-institutional either. Much like '90s cyberculture, the first generation of bloggers possess colorful biographies. However, a dominant culture, such as the Californian techno-hippies, failed to emerge and if it exists, it is tricky to label. Blogging comes close to what Adilkno once described as "vague media".⁸ The lack of direction is not a failure but the core asset. Blogging did not emerge out of a movement or an event. If anything, it is a special effect of software, constituted especially by the automation of links, a not-overly-complex technical interface design issue.

There is a presumption that blogs have a symbiotic relationship with the news industry. This thesis is not uncontested. Hypertext scholars track blogs back to the hypercards of the 1980s and the online literature wave of the 1990s, in which clicking from one document to the next was the central activity of the

reader. For some reason, the hypertext subcurrent lost out and what remains is an almost self-evident equation between blogs and the news industry.

It is not easy to answer the question of whether blogs operate inside or outside the media industry. To position the blog medium inside could be seen as opportunistic, whereas others see this as a clever move. There is also a "tactical" aspect. The blogger-equals-journalist might get protection from such a label in case of censorship and repression. Despite countless attempts to feature blogs as alternatives to mainstream media, they are often, more precisely described as "feedback channels". The act of "gatewatching" (Axel Bruns) the mainstream media outlets does not necessarily result in reasonable comments that will be taken into account. In the category "insensitive" we have a wide range, from hilarious to mad, sad, and sick. What CNN, newspapers, and radio stations the world over have failed to do — namely to integrate open, interactive messages from their constituencies — blogs do for them. To "blog" a news report doesn't mean that the blogger sits down and thoroughly analyzes the discourse and circumstances, let alone checks the facts on the ground. To blog merely means to quickly point to news fact through a link and a few sentences that explain why the blogger found this or that factoid interesting or remarkable, or is disagrees with it.

Blog entries are often hastily written personal musings, sculptured around a link or event. In most cases, bloggers simply do not have the time, skills, or financial means for proper research. There are collective research blogs working on specific topics, but these are rare. What ordinary blogs create is a dense cloud of "impressions" around a topic. Blogs will tell you if your audience is still awake and receptive. Blogs test. They allow you to see whether your audience is still awake and receptive. In that sense we could also say that blogs are the outsourced, privatized test beds, or rather unit tests⁹ of the big media.

The boundaries between the mediasphere and the blogosphere are fluid. A detailed social analysis would, most likely, uncover a grey area of freelance media makers moving back and forth. From early on, journalists working for "old media" ran blogs. So how do blogs relate to independent investigative journalism? At first glance, they look like oppositional, or potentially supplementary practices. Whereas the investigative journalist works months, if not years, to uncover a story, bloggers look more like an army of ants contributing to the great hive called "public opinion". Bloggers rarely add new facts to a news story. They find bugs in products and news reports but rarely "unmask" spin, let alone come up with well-researched reports.

Cecile Landman, a Dutch investigative journalist and supporter of Iraqi bloggers with the Streamtime campaign, knows both worlds. "Journalists need to make a living. They can't put just anything online. Bloggers don't seem to bother too much about this, and that does create a conflict." According to Landman, blogging is changing the existing formats of information. "People are getting bored with the given formats; they don't catch up with the news anymore, it no longer sticks to their cervical memory stick. It is like a song that you have listened to too often, or a commercial advertisement; you hear it, you can even sing the words, but they are without meaning. Mainstream media is starting to grasp this. They have to search for new formats in order to attract readers (read: advertisers)" — and blogs are but a small chapter in this transformation.

A weblog is the "voice of a person" (Dave Winer). It is a digital extension of oral traditions more than a new form of writing.¹⁰ Through blogging, news is being transformed from a lecture into a conversation. Blogs echo rumours and gossip, conversations in cafes and bars, on squares and in corridors. They record "the events of the day" (Jay Rosen). Today's "recordability" of situations is such that we are no longer upset that computers "read" all our moves and expressions (sound, image, text) and "write" them into strings of zeros and ones. In that sense, blogs fit into the wider trend in which all our movements and activities are being monitored and stored. In the case of blogs, this is carried out not by some invisible and abstract authority but the subjects themselves, who record their everyday lives.¹¹

The blog hype cannot measure up to the dot-com hysteria of the late 1990s. The economic and political landscape is simply too different. What interested me in this case was the oft-heard remark that blogs were cynical and nihilist. Instead of brushing off this accusation, I did a trial and ran both keywords through the systems to test if they were hardwired virtues, consolidated inside Blog Nation. Instead of portraying bloggers as "An Army of Davids", as Instapundit blogger Glenn Reynolds' book title suggests,¹² it might be better to study the techno-mentality of users and not presume that bloggers are underdogs on a mission to beat Goliath.

Historically it makes sense to see "Internet cynicism" as a response to millennium madness. In January 2001, the dot-com magazine *Clickz* wrote: "Among investors, consumers, and the media, there's a pervasive sense that all the promises about the Internet have amounted to one huge, bold-faced lie — and that we're now paying for the sins of yesterday's over-exuberance."¹³ In *My First Recession* (2003), I mapped the post-dot-com hangover. In this light, cynicism is nothing other than the discursive rubble of a collapsed belief system, cold turkey after the Market Rush, the retrospectively optimistic-innocent Clinton years of globalization (1993–2000), so well embodied in Hardt/Negri's Empire.

It would be ridiculous to collectively denounce bloggers as cynics. Cynicism, in this context, is not a character trait but a techno-social condition. The argument is not that bloggers are predominantly cynics in nature, or vulgar exhibitionists who lack understatement. It is important to note the *Zeitgeist* into which blogging as a mass practice emerged. Net cynicism is a cultural spin-off from blogging software, hardwired in a specific era and resulting from procedures such as login, link, edit, create, browse, read, submit, tag, and reply. Some would judge the mere use of the term cynicism as blog bashing. So be it. Again, we're not talking about an attitude here, let alone a shared life style. Net cynicism no longer believes in cyberculture as an identity provider with related entrepreneurial hallucinations. It is constituted by cold enlightenment as a post-political condition and by confession described by Michel Foucault. People are taught that their liberation requires them to "tell the truth", to confess it to someone (a priest, psychoanalyst, or weblog), and this truth telling will somehow set them free.¹⁴

There is a quest for truth in blogging. But it is a truth with a question mark. Truth has become an amateur project, not an absolute value, sanctioned by higher authorities. In lieu of a common definition, we could say that cynicism is the unpleasant way of performing the truth.¹⁵ The Internet is not a religion or a mission in itself. For some it turns into an addiction, but that can be healed like any other medical problem. The post-dot-com/post-9/11 condition borders on a "passionate conservatism", but in the end rejects the dot-com

petit bourgeois morals and their double standards of cheating and hiding, cooking the books and then being rewarded fat pay checks. The question is therefore: how much truth can a medium bear? Knowledge is sorrow, and the "knowledge society" propagators have not yet taken this into account.

Net cynicism is frank, first and foremost about itself. The blog application is an online commodity with a clear use-by date. Spokker Jones: "Forty years from now when the Internet collapses in a giant implosion of stupidity I want to be able to say, 'I was there'." It is said that Internet cynicism has given rise to sites like Netslaves.com, which is dedicated to "horror stories of working the Web". It's a sounding board for those "burned by the incompetence, moronic planning, and hysterical management of new-media companies".¹⁶ Exhibitionism equals empowerment. Saying aloud what you think or feel, in the legacy of De Sade, is not only an option — in the liberal sense of "choice" — but an obligation, an immediate impulse to respond in order to be out there, with everybody else.

In the Internet context, it is not evil, as Rüdiger Safranski suggested, but instead triviality which is the "drama of freedom". As Baudrillard states: "All of our values are simulated. What is freedom? We have a choice between buying one car or buying another car?"¹⁷ And to follow Baudrillard, we could say that blogs are a gift to humankind that no one needs. This is the true shock. Did anyone order the development of blogs? There is no possibility to simply ignore blogs and live the comfortable lifestyle of a twentieth-century "public intellectual". Like Michel Houellebecq, bloggers are trapped by their own inner contradictions in the Land of No Choice. The *London Times* noted that Houellebecq "writes from inside alienation. His bruised male heroes, neglected by their parents, cope by depriving themselves of loving interactions; they project their coldness and loneliness on to the world." Blogs are perfect projection fields for such an undertaking.

Italian theorist Paulo Virno provides clues to how we could use the term cynicism in a non-derogative manner. Virno sees cynicism as connected to the "chronic instability of forms of life and linguistic games". At the base of contemporary cynicism Virno sees the fact that men and women first experience rules, far more often than "facts", and far earlier than they experience concrete events. Virno: "But to experience rules directly means also to recognize their conventionality and groundlessness. Thus, one is no longer immersed in a predefined 'game', participating therein with true allegiance. Instead, one catches a glimpse of oneself in individual 'games' which are destitute of all seriousness and obviousness, having become nothing more than a place for immediate self-affirmation — a self-affirmation which is all the more brutal and arrogant, in short, cynical, the more it draws upon, without illusions but with perfect momentary allegiance, those same rules which characterize conventionality and mutability."¹⁸

How is cynical reason connected to criticism? Is cynical media culture a critical practice? So far it has not proven useful to interpret blogs as a new form of literary criticism. Such an undertaking is bound to fail. The "crisis of criticism" has been announced time and again and blog culture has simply ignored this dead-end street. There is no need for a "new-media" clone of Terry Eagleton. We live long after the Fall of Theory. Criticism has become a conservative and affirmative activity, in which the critic alternates between losses of value while celebrating the spectacle of the marketplace. It would be interesting to investigate why criticism has not become popular, and aligned itself with such new-media practices as blogging, as cultural studies

popularized everything except theory. Let's not blame the Blogging Other for the moral bankruptcy of the postmodern critic. Instead of conceptual depth we get broad associations, a people's hermeneutics of news events.¹⁹ The computable comments of the millions can be made searchable and visually displayed, for instance, as buzz clouds. Whether these maps provide us with any knowledge or not is another matter. It is easy to judge the rise of comments as regressive compared to the clear-cut authority of the critic. Insularity and provincialism have taken their toll. The panic and obsession around the professional status of the critic has been such that the created void has now been filled by passionate amateur bloggers. One thing is sure: blogs do not shut down thought.

Wikipedia amateur encyclopedians describe cynics as "those inclined to disbelieve in human sincerity, in virtue, or in altruism: individuals who maintain that only self-interest motivates human behaviour. A modern cynic typically has a highly contemptuous attitude towards social norms, especially those which serve more of a ritualistic purpose than a practical one, and will tend to dismiss a substantial proportion of popular beliefs, conventional morality, and accepted wisdom as irrelevant or obsolete nonsense." In a networked environment, such a definition becomes problematic as it portrays the user as an isolated subject, opposed to groups or society as a whole. Net cynicism is not a gateway to drugs or anything nasty. To talk about "evil" as an abstract category is irrelevant in this context. There is no immediate danger. It's all fine. The idea is not to create a dialectical situation. There is only a feeling of stagnation amidst constant change. We could call it "romanticism of the open eyes". According to Peter Sloterdijk, cynicism is "enlightened false consciousness".²⁰ A cynic, so Sloterdijk says, is someone who is part of an institution or group whose existence and values he himself can no longer see as absolute, necessary, and unconditional, and who is miserable due to this enlightenment, because he or she sticks to principles he or she does not believe in.

The only knowledge left for a cynic is trust in reason, which, however, cannot provide him (or her) with a firm basis for action, yet another reason for being miserable.²¹ Following Sloterdijk, cynicism is a common problem. The question of whether it is universal or limited to Western societies is too big to be discussed here, but most certainly we see it on a global scale in knowledge-intensive sectors.

We're operating in a post-deconstruction world in which blogs offer a never-ending stream of confessions, a cosmos of micro-opinions attempting to interpret events beyond the well-known twentieth-century categories. The nihilist impulse emerges as a response to the increasing levels of complexity within interconnected topics. There is little to say if all occurrences can be explained through post-colonialism, class analysis, and gender perspectives. However, blogging arises against this kind of political analysis, through which a lot can no longer be said.

Blogs express personal fear, insecurity, and disillusionment, anxieties looking for partners in crime. We seldom find passion (except for the act of blogging itself). Often blogs unveil doubt and insecurity about what to feel, what to think, believe, and like. They carefully compare magazines, and review traffic signs, nightclubs, and t-shirts. This stylized uncertainty circles around the general assumption that blogs ought to be biographical while simultaneously reporting about the world outside. Their emotional scope is much wider than other media due to the informal atmosphere of blogs. Mixing public and

private is essential here. What blogs play with is the emotional register, varying from hate to boredom, passionate engagement, sexual outrage, and back to everyday boredom.

Blogging is neither a project nor a proposal but a condition whose existence one must recognize. "We blog," as Kline and Bernstein say. It's today's *a priori*. Australian cultural theorist Justin Clemens explains: "Nihilism is not just another epoch amongst a succession of others: it is the finally accomplished form of a disaster that happened a long time ago."²² To translate this into new-media terms: blogs are witnessing and documenting the diminishing power of mainstream media, but they have consciously not replaced its ideology with an alternative. Users are tired of top-down communication — and yet have nowhere else to go. "There is no other world" could be read as a response to the anti-globalization slogan, "Another world is possible".

Caught in the daily grind of blogging, there is a sense that the Network *is* the alternative. It is not correct to judge blogs merely on the basis of their content. Media theory has never done this and should also in this case shy away from this method. Blogging is a nihilistic venture precisely because the ownership structure of mass media is questioned and then attacked. Blogging is a bleed-to-death strategy. Implosion is not the right word. Implosion implies a tragedy and spectacle that is not present here. Blogging is the opposite of the spectacle. It is flat (and yet meaningful). Blogging is not a digital clone of the "letter to the editor". Instead of complaining and arguing, the blogger puts him or herself in the perversely pleasurable position of media observer.

The commenting on mainstream culture, its values and products, should be read as an open withdrawal of attention. The eyeballs that once patiently looked at all reports and ads have gone on strike. According to the utopian blog philosophy, mass media are doomed. Their role will be taken over by "participatory media". The terminal diagnosis has been made and it states: closed top-down organizations no longer work, knowledge cannot be "managed", today's work is collaborative and networked. However, despite continuous warning signs, the system successfully continues to (dys)function. Is top-down really on its way out? Where does the Hegelian certainty come from that the old-media paradigm will be overthrown? There is little factual evidence of this. And it is this state of ongoing affairs that causes nihilism, and not revolutions, to occur.

As Justin Clemens rightly states, "nihilism often goes unremarked, not because it is no longer an issue of contemporary philosophy and theory, but — on the contrary — because it is just so uncircumventable and dominating."²³ The term has dropped almost completely out of establishment political discourse. The reason for this could be the "banalization of nihilism" (Karen Carr). Or to rephrase it: the absence of high art that can be labeled as such. This might have changed with the rise of writers such as Michel Houellebecq. Andre Gluckmann explained the 2005 migrant riots in the French suburbs as a "response to French nihilism".²⁴ What the revolting youth did was an "imitation of negation". The "problem of nihilism", as Clemens notes, is the complex, subtle, and self-reflexive nature of the term. To historicize the concept is one way out, though I will leave that to the historians. Another way could be to occupy the term and reload it with surprising energies: creative nihilism.

Blogs bring on decay. Each new blog is supposed to add to the fall of the media system that once dominated the twentieth century. This process is not one of a sudden explosion. The erosion of the mass media cannot easily be traced in figures of stagnant sales and the declining readership of newspapers. In many parts of the world, television is still on the rise. What's declining is the Belief in the Message. That is the nihilist moment, and blogs facilitate this culture as no platform has ever done before. Sold by the positivists as citizen media commentary, blogs assist users in their crossing from Truth to Nothingness. The printed and broadcasted message has lost its aura. News is consumed as a commodity with entertainment value. Instead of lamenting the ideological color of the news, as previous generations have done, we blog as a sign of the regained power of the spirit. As a micro-heroic, Nietzschean act of the pyjama people, blogging grows out of a nihilism of strength, not out of the weakness of pessimism. Instead of time and again presenting blog entries as self-promotion, we should interpret them as decadent artifacts that remotely dismantle the mighty and seductive power of the broadcast media.

Bloggers are nihilists because they are "good for nothing". They post into Nirvana and have turned their futility into a productive force. They are the nothingists who celebrate the death of the centralized meaning structures and ignore the accusation that they would only produce noise. They are disillusionists whose conduct and opinions are regarded worthless.²⁵ Justin Clemens notes that the term nihilism has been replaced by such appellations as "anti-democratic", "terrorist", and "fundamentalist". However, over the past years there has been a noticeable renaissance of the term, though usually not more than a passing remark. Significant theorization of the "condition" was done in the mid-twentieth century, which included reworking sources from the nineteenth century like Kierkegaard, Stirner, and Nietzsche. Existentialism after the two World Wars theorized Gulag, Auschwitz, and Hiroshima as manifestations of Organized Evil that resulted in an overall crisis of the existing belief systems. For those still interested in Theory, Arthur Kroker's *The Will to Technology & The Culture of Nihilism* (2004) is a must read as it puts Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Marx in a contemporary, techno-nihilist perspective.

We're faced with an "accomplished nihilism" (Gianni Vattimo) in that bloggers have understood that the fulfillment of nihilism is a fact.²⁶ Gianni Vattimo argues that nihilism is not the absence of meaning but a recognition of the plurality of meanings; it is not the end of civilization but the beginning of new social paradigms, with blogging being one of them. Commonly associated with the pessimistic belief that all of existence is meaningless, nihilism would be an ethical doctrine that there are no moral absolutes or infallible natural laws and that "truth" is inescapably subjective. In media terms, we see this attitude translated into a growing distrust of the output of large commercial news organizations and the spin that politicians and their advisers produce. Questioning the message is no longer a subversive act of engaged citizens but the *a priori* attitude, even before the TV or PC has been switched on.

Nihilism designates the impossibility of opposition — a state of affairs which, unsurprisingly, generates a great deal of anxiety. Nihilism is not a monolithic belief system. We no longer "believe" in Nothing as in nineteenth-century Russia or post-war Paris. Nihilism is no longer a danger or problem, but the default postmodern condition. It is an unremarkable, even banal feature of life, as Karen Carr writes is and no longer related to the Religious Question. Blogs are neither religious nor secular. They are "post-virtue". The paradoxical temporality of nihilism today is that of a not-quite-already-Now. Following

Giorgio Agamben, Justin Clements writes that "nihilism is not just another epoch amongst a succession of others: it is the finally accomplished form of a disaster that occurred long ago."²⁷ In the media context this would be the moment in which mass media lost their claim on the Truth and could no longer operate as authority. Let us not date this event in time, as such an insightful moment can be both personal and cultural–historical. It is the move from the festive McLuhan to the nihilist Baudrillard that every media user is going through, found in the ungroundedness of networked discourse that users fool around with.

Translating Karen Carr's insight to today's condition, we could say that the blogger is an individual "who lives in self–conscious confrontation with a meaningless world, refusing either to deny or succumb to its power."²⁸ Yet this does not result in a heroic gesture. Blogging does not grow out of boredom, nor out of some existential void. Carr rightly remarks that "for many postmodernists, the presence of nihilism evokes not terror but a yawn".²⁹ Compared to previous centuries, its crisis value has diminished. If bloggers are classified nihilists, it merely means that they stopped believing in the media.

"The global always–on, always–linked, always–immediate public conversation" speeds up the fragmentation of the media landscape. Kline and Burnstein disagree here (they ain't no nihilists). "Rather than seeing the proliferation of specialty blogs as an indicator of the fragmentation of our society, we should see this trend as providing a way for citizen–experts to emerge and to bring together global constituencies in many disparate fields."³⁰ Seen from the political class perspective, hand–picked bloggers can be instrumentalized as "opinion indicators".³¹ However, they can just as easily be dismissed the next day as "pyjama journalists" and ignored as noise. As every hype necessarily has to crash, the wave of negative PR is pre–programmed. Bloggers might communicate what issues people tell the media they want to think about. But once the hotness has worn off, who cares? The nihilism starts there, after the fall of the blogs, the stolen laptop, crashed server, unreadable back–up files, disappeared online service provider, "comments (0)". That's when we can truly show off our *Pathos des Umsonst*, the gesture of Being in Vain.

Business writer David Kline just can't help but take up his New Age tone when he explains that despite all the existing nihilism, blogging is not in vain. "The truth is that these are not just the tiresome ramblings of the boring written to the bored. Though for the most part not professional writers, bloggers are often eloquent in the way that those who are not self–consciously polished often are — raw, uncensored, and energized by the sound of their newly awakened voices. And by keeping a daily record of their rites of passage, bloggers often give a shape and meaning to the stages and cycles of their lives that would otherwise be missed in the helter–skelter of modern existence."³² Foucault scholars would say something similar, namely that blogs are "technologies of the self".³³ But what if the "self" has run out of batteries? With Dominic Pettman we could say that blogging is a relentless pursuit in the age of exhaustion.³⁴ Blogs explore what happens once you've smashed the illusion that there is a "persona" behind the avalanche of similar lifestyle choices and pop identities within online social networks.

No matter how much talk there is of "community" and "mobs", the fact remains that blogs are primarily used as a tool to manage the self. With management I refer here as much to the need to structure one's life, to clear up the mess, to master the immense flows of information, as to PR and promotion

of *Ich AG*, as it is called in crisis-ridden Germany. Blogs are part of a wider culture that fabricates celebrity on every possible level. Some complain that blogs are too personal, even egocentric, whereas most blog readers indulge in exhibitionist insights and can't get enough of it. Claire E. Write advises blog writers not to offer the possibility to leave comments. "A few bloggers maintain that blogs that don't allow reader comments are not 'real' blogs. Most bloggers don't follow that line of thinking and believe that reader comments turn a blog into a message board. The essence of a blog is not the interactivity of the medium: it is the sharing of the thoughts and opinions of the blogger. Adding comments to your blog opens up a host of problems: you will spend a great deal of time policing the posts, weeding out spam and trolls, and answering endless technical questions from registrants."³⁵ This advice obviously goes against the core values of the A-list bloggers. Isn't it interesting that blogging services offer the possibility to switch off comments after all? For instance, *Cluetrain Manifesto* guru David Weinberger states that "blogs are not a new form of journalism nor do they primarily consist of teenagers whining about their teachers. Blogs are not even primarily a form of individual expression. They are better understood as conversations."³⁶

Are bloggers risk takers? Of course blog culture is different from the entrepreneurial risk cult embodied by management gurus such as Tom Peters. Much like Ulrich Beck defined risk, bloggers deal with hazards and insecurities induced by never-ending waves of modernization. What is blogged is the relentless uncertainty of the everyday. Whereas entrepreneurs colonize the future, energized by collective hallucinations, bloggers expose the present they find themselves caught in. Blogging is the answer to "individualization of social inequality". It hits back, not so much with collective action, but with massive hyper-individual linking. This is the network paradox: there is simultaneous construction and destruction of the social at hand. The timid internalization ends and transforms into radical revelation. No website anticipated this practice better than the Fucked Company website,³⁷ a predecessor of blog culture where employees of New Economy firms anonymously post rumors and complaints, and even more interesting: internal memos. Bloggers disrupt the disrupters. They override the constant talk about "change". It is remarkably easy to attack the post-modern corporation as it solely depends on a hollow public image, developed by third-party consultants. Online diaries, rants, and comments so easily defy the manufactured harmony that community engineering aims at.

In Cornel West's 2004 *Democracy Matters* is a chapter called "Nihilism in America".³⁸ West distinguishes between the evangelical nihilism of the neo-conservatives around Bush and a paternalistic version practiced by Democrats like John Kerry and Hillary Clinton. A third form, the so-called "sentimental nihilism", prefers to remain on the surface of problems rather than pursue their substantive depth. It pays simplistic lip service to issues rather than portraying their complexity.³⁹ This tendency to remain on the surface, touch a topic, point to an article without even giving a proper opinion about it apart from it being worth mentioning, is widespread and is foundational to blogging. How many of the postings, we can ask with Cornel West, are Socratic questioning? Why is the blogosphere so obsessed with measuring, counting, and feeding, and so little with rhetoric, aesthetics, and ethics? We should not end with moral questions. The wish to overcome nihilism goes back to Nietzsche and is also relevant in the context of blogging. How to overcome meaninglessness without falling back into centralized meaning structures is the challenge that the blogging millions pose.

"Try to build up yourself and you build a ruin" (Augustine). This also counts for blogs. What seems to be a standard yet customized, user-friendly medium turns out to be unreliable if you are at it over a longer period of time. Most blogs which users haven't touched for three months are wiped from the server. The liquid self may have thought to find refuge in providers such as blogger.com or blogspot.com, but most blog services prove to be unstable when it comes to archiving the millions of blogs they host. The average age of a webpage is 6 months, so it says, and there is no reason to believe that this is not the case with blogs. As Alex Havias writes, "many weblogs are short-lived, and in any event, we can assume that all weblogs are likely to be kept in operation for a finite amount of time. These local archives need to be duplicated elsewhere. At present there is nothing as simple as RSS that allows for these archives to be duplicated."⁴⁰ The popular saying that the Internet will remember everything is turning into a myth. "If your website is not simple to update, you will not update it." That was a problem in the 1990s. The problem now is: "If you don't update your blog, we'll delete it." Even if the corpse of the blog can be reconstructed, for instance through archive.org, the problem remains of highly duplicated multimedia content. Alex Halavias suggests that instead of a centralized server, the model of a peer-to-peer archive could be a solution.

How can blog culture transcend the true, yet boring accusation that it is only interested in itself? Having a thriving scene of anonymous personas, like in Iran, is exciting, but not a real alternative for the rest of the world. Role playing is not going to provide us with a way out either, even though it might be interesting to investigate how blogs and MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) relate. At the moment these are large parallel universes.⁴¹ Instead we could speak, after Stephen Greenblatt, about online self-fashioning. The theatrical pose is made explicit in this term and brings together elements of the self (diary, introspection) with the spectacle of the blogocratic few that fight over the attention of the millions. In the context of blogs, Matthew Berk speaks about "digital self-fashioning". According to Berk, "online people constitute themselves as assemblies of documents and other data designed for people to read and establish some relationship. The more structure in and between this content, the greater is its action potential."⁴² The self is defined in a normative way as the capacity to craft links between content chunks.

Nicholas Carr has called the Web 2.0 hype, blogs included, "amoral".⁴³ "Of course the mainstream media see the blogosphere as a competitor. It *is* a competitor. And, given the economics of the competition, it may well turn out to be a superior competitor. The layoffs we've recently seen at major newspapers may just be the beginning, and those layoffs should be cause not for self-satisfied snickering but for despair. Implicit in the ecstatic visions of Web 2.0 is the hegemony of the amateur." This political empowerment move is captured as a computed "wisdom of crowds". What individual blog owners proudly see as a great post is, seen from the larger picture of the Internet, with its one billion users, an ever shifting collection of buzzword clouds, consisting of trillions of clicks and micro opinions. The more we know about this meta level, through sophisticated software tools, the more depressed one can get about the overall direction. Blogs do not arise from political movements or social concerns. They have an "obsessive focus on the realization of the self," says Andrew Keen of the *Weekly Standard*. Keen foresees a pessimistic turn: "If you democratize media, then you end up democratizing talent. The unintended consequence of all this democratization, to misquote Web 2.0 apologist Thomas Friedman, is cultural 'flattening'." And Nicholas Carr adds:

"In the end we're left with nothing more than 'the flat noise of opinion' – Socrates's nightmare."⁴⁴ Interesting to see how fast the animosity inside Web 2.0 communities is changing.

George Gilder, the Carl Schmitt of new media, once stated: "As capitalism releases creative energies everywhere, it leads to much greater diversity, including diversity of media. The whole blogosphere is an example of how transcending the top–down hierarchical models of old–media technology with new–media technology releases diversity and new voices and creations."⁴⁵ Against this commonly held view that diversity is a good thing, we can hold the loss that comes with the disappearance of familiarity and common references. Blogging alone (after Robert D. Putman's *Bowling Alone*) is a social reality which cannot easily be dismissed. Most blogging is what Bernard Siegert calls "ghost communication". "Networking begins and ends with pure self–referentiality,"⁴⁶ Friedrich Kittler writes, and this autopoiesis is nowhere as clear as in the blogosphere. Social protocols of opinion, deception, and belief cannot be separated from the technical reality of the networks, and in the case of the blogs, this turns out to be a treadmill.

Once upon a time, back in February 2004, the meme of the Internet being an "ego chamber" showed up. Searls, Weinberg, Ito, and Boyd... they were all there. Danah Boyd wrote: "One of the biggest motivators for a lot of people to get online in the 1990s was to find people like them. The goal wasn't to solidify or to diversity, but to feel validated. Suggesting solidification/diversification implies that the primary motivation behind engaging online is to participate in purposeful dialogue, to be educated and educate. Frankly, I don't believe this to be true." Shelly Parks had noted earlier about blogging: "Do you write to be part of a community? Or do you write to write, and the community part either happens, or doesn't?"⁴⁷ In this context Danah Boyd referred to social networks and the homophily concept (that birds of a feather stick together). It seems that in the blogging context, explicit self–referential group building is still a new concept. Blogs create archipelagos of inward links but these ties are very weak. On top of that, not only do bloggers usually refer and answer only to members of their online tribe, but they have no comprehensive idea of how it could look to include one's adversaries. Blogrolls (link lists) unconsciously preassume that if you include a blog you agree or at least sympathize with its maker. We link to what's interesting and cool. This is a key problem in the Google and Amazon model, in which links are traded as recommendations.

Because of the vastness of the blog plain, it is not a contested space. First of all, differences of opinion have to exist already and do not fall out of sky. Manufacturing opinion is a fine art of ideology creation. Debating should not be mixed up with a netwar style of campaigning in which existing (political) flights are being played out on the Net. The pushy tone is what makes blogs so rhetorically poor. What lacks in the software architecture is the very existence of an equal dialogue partner. The result of this is a militarization, expressed in a term such as "blog swarm", defined by Christian rightwing blogger Hugh Hewitt as "an early indicator of an opinion storm brewing, which, when it breaks, will fundamentally alter the general public's understanding of a person, place, product, or phenomenon."⁴⁸ It is communality of bias, or let's say conviction, that drives the growth of blogging power and its visibility in other media.

Can we talk of a "fear of media freedom"? It is too easy to say that there is freedom of speech and that blogs materialize this right. The aim of radical

freedom, one could argue, is to create autonomy and overcome the dominance of media corporations and state control and to no longer be bothered by "their" channels. Most blogs show an opposite tendency. The obsession with news factoids borders to the extreme. Instead of selective appropriation, there is over-identification and straight out addiction, in particular to the speed of real-time reporting. Like Erich Fromm (author of *Fear of Freedom*), we could read this as "a psychological problem" because existing information is simply reproduced and in a public act of internalization. Lists of books that still have to be read, a common feature on blogs, lead in the same direction. According to Fromm, freedom has put us in an unbearable isolation. We thus feel anxious and powerless. Either we escape into new dependencies or realize a positive freedom that is based upon "the uniqueness and individuality of man".⁴⁹ "The right to express our thoughts means something only if we are able to have thoughts of our own."⁵⁰ The freedom from traditional media monopolies leads to new bondages, in this case to the blog paradigm, where there is little emphasis on positive freedom, on what to do with the overwhelming functionality and the void of the empty, white entry window. We do not hear enough about the tension between the individual self and the "community", "swarms", and "mobs" that are supposed to be part of the online environment. What we instead see happening on the software side are daily improvements of ever more sophisticated (quantitative) measuring and manipulation tools (in terms of inbound linking, traffic, climbing higher on the Google ladder, etc.). Isn't the document that stands out the one that is not embedded in existing contexts? Doesn't the truthness lie in the unlinkable?

Based on a lecture given at Berlin Institute of Advanced Study, the Wissenschaftskolleg, Berlin, March 27, 2006.

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- ¹ For regular updates on this figure, go to www.blogherald.com. All researchers involved in blog counting admit how arbitrary and unreliable the available statistics are as closed and abandoned blogs are not taken into account. Nonetheless, the tendency is clear and undisputed.
- ² See www.marketingterms.com/dictionary/blog/
- ³ Taken from Wikipedia's blog definition (accessed 21 December 2005).
- ⁴ David Kline, Dan Burstein, *Blog!*, New York: CDS Books 2005, 130.
- ⁵ "Ten Tips for Writing a Blog Post", posted at *problogger.net*, 30 December 2005. www.problogger.net/archives/2005/12/30/tens-tips-for-writing-a-blog-post/
- ⁶ See Rebecca Blood's history of blogs, written in September 2000: www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html
- ⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, Oxford/New York, 2005, 25.
- ⁸ Adilkno, *Media Archive*, Brooklyn, Autonomedia, 1998. URL: <http://thing.desk.nl/bilwet/adilkno/TheMediaArchive/04.txt>. "Vague media do not respond to success. They do not achieve their goals. Their models are not argumentative, but contaminative. Once you tune into them, you get the attitude."
- ⁹ Ed Phillips from San Francisco reports that "unit testing is now *de rigueur* in the software world and just as it would be hard to imagine a major software effort without unit testing, it is now hard to imagine big media without the blogosphere." (email, 27 March 2006).
- ¹⁰ Nick Gall: "A lot of the media are thinking about blogs as a new form of publishing but it's really a new form of conversation and a new form of community." In: David Kline, Dan Burstein, *Blog!*, New York: CDS Books 2005, 150.
- ¹¹ Source: Telepolis, 27 December 2005. Wolf-Dieter Roth, "Mein blog liest ja sowieso kein Schwein". www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/21/21643/1.html.
- ¹² Glenn Reynolds, *An Army of Davids, How Markets and Technology Empower Ordinary People to Beat Big Media, Big Government, and Other Goliaths*, Nashville: Nelson Current 2006.
- ¹³ Greg Sherwin and Emily Avila in their *Clickz* column, 12 January 2001. www.clickz.com/experts/archives/ebiz/ecom_comm/article.php/835141

- 14 Taken from the Foucault Dictionary Project:
<http://users.california.com/~rathbone/foucau10.htm>
- 15 www.cynical-c.com/
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- 18 Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Semiotext(e), Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 2004, 86–88.
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www.tabvlarasa.de/20/sorgner.php
- 22 Justin Clemens, 93.
- 23 Clemens, 88.
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- 26 Clemens, 89.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Karen Carr, 3.
- 29 Carr, 7.
- 30 Kline, Burstein, xxv.
- 31 A typical blogs as agenda-setting theory would be Aaron Delwiche's "Agenda-setting, opinion leadership and the World of Blogs", in: *First Monday*, 10/12.
www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue10_12/delwiche/index.html. See also the work of Kaye Trammell: <http://kaye.trammell.com/>
- 32 Kline, Burstein, 249.
- 33 See Terje Rasmussen's paper "Media of the Self". www.media.uio.no/personer/terjer/
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- 36 Summary of David Weinberger's lecture "The Shape of Knowledge", Helsinki School of Economics, 1 December 2005.
- 37 See: www.fuckedcompany.com
- 38 The chapter mirrors a chapter with the same name, "Nihilism in Black America", in Cornel West's *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press 1993, 11–20).
- 39 Cornel West, 39.
- 40 Alex Halavias, *Blogs and Archiving*. 16 September 2004. <http://alex.halavais.net/?p=825>
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- 44 Nicholas Carr, "The New Narcissism", *Rough Type*, 17 February 2006.
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⁴⁷ <http://weblog.burningbird.net/archives/2004/02/11/community-member-or-writer>

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⁴⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1942, x.

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