

Book Reviews

Blogging

Jill Walker Rettberg

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During the 2003–2004 U.S. presidential election the professional press discovered blogs. While they were around for some time, given the role they were playing in the election, especially around the candidacy of Democrat Howard Dean, journalists marveled at these new amateur voices while, more darkly, fearing that they undermined both the authority and resource base of professionals. For example, the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* during the election featured veteran political journalists R.W. Apple and Jack Germond looking quizzically at the computer screen of a mischievous Ana Marie Cox of the blog Wonkette. As the arresting image made clear, a new generation had emerged, one that looked significantly different than the staid, rumpled dress-shirt professionals of journalism's past. The implication was that with their laptops bloggers were seemingly upending the old print-bound, static way of delivering the news in the droll tones of objective authority. While the attendant article's subtitle asks what the "guiltless gossips, splenetic spewers, sleepless geeks and all the rest of the laptop-toting, news-tip-happy Web loggers" (Klam, 2004) were actually changing, there was the widespread sense that something significant was afoot.

What was novel during the 2003–2004 electoral cycle had by 2007 become so much a part of the media landscape in the United States that journalists quoted blogs in front page stories and a conference of progressive bloggers hosted a primary debate among Democratic candidates. Jill Walker Rettberg's *Blogging* goes a long way towards explaining both the widespread appeal and rapid adoption over the last decade of this new technical platform and an attendant set of communication practices. As Rettberg makes clear, blogs are much more than phenomena of electoral politics and journalism. Indeed, the political blogosphere is only a minor accompaniment to her main argument, which centers on how blogs are recasting the relationship between producers and consumers, expanding the range of voices in the public sphere, and facilitating the creation of on-line social networks. As such, blogs are part of a significant technical shift: "we have moved from a culture dominated by mass media, using one-to-many communication, to one where participatory media, using many-to-many communication, is becoming the norm" (p. 31). Through detailed analysis and the provision of Web-based resources that constitute a compelling how-to manual for would-be and even established bloggers, Rettberg considers both the history and implications of these changes with regard to how we communicate, socialize, and otherwise conduct our lives online.

While many of these arguments are familiar (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Gillmor, 2004), one of Rettberg's contributions is to situate blogging within larger socio-technical shifts in communication practices. *Blogging* draws from a number of theorists of new media in positing how digital, networked technologies are reworking and reshaping the potential for participatory communication and social connectivity. While scholars have explored participatory media broadly in the context of the Internet and cultural production, Rettberg's narrow focus on blogs allows for close analysis of the evolving technical structure of these platforms and their interplay with the genres that have grown alongside of them, from eyewitness reporting and public affairs opinion to narrative and self-exploratory writing. Above all, she argues, the affordances of these platforms and social practices of blogging have fashioned blogs into an authentic and immediate form of communication that is produced in collaboration with others. For example, popular blogging services offer platforms that publish posts in reverse chronological order and allow for hyperlinks, a central feature that facilitates networked conversations. Meanwhile, bloggers fashion their communicative practices with respect to the medium, as posts take a distinctive concise, interlinked, and immediate form that is widely adopted across the blogosphere. Given these characteristics, Rettberg argues that blogging uniquely combines forms of oral and print communication, and in so doing reworks the distinction between dialogue and dissemination (Peters, 1999).

Rettberg is also attentive to the literature detailing both the promise and

peril of these shifts in communication practices with regard to the public sphere, while ultimately moving the debate forward. On the one hand, audiences are now active participants in political and cultural production as blogs offer unprecedented opportunities for citizens to make contributions to public debate. On the other, Rettberg notes that philosophers including Habermas have posited the subsequent fragmenting of the public sphere. Yet, in the most theoretically rewarding portion of the book, Rettberg argues that such concerns are overstated. What is important are the ways that blogs are embedded in and constitute social networks that are made visible by a series of applications that help provide structure for this online public sphere and work against information silos. For example, Technorati, a blog search engine, provides an "exoskeleton" that displays links between blogs and thus maps communities of interest and affiliation (p. 58). Meanwhile, sites like YouTube and Facebook provide an "intraskelton" that convene and reveal social networks (ibid.) Importantly, this means that communication on-line is not overly fragmented or lacking in form and structure. Instead, as a number of theorists have noted, the blogosphere has a distributed network structure organized around a series of hubs and clusters.

Rettberg uses this discussion to contrast blogs with the one-to-many affordances of mass media and the professional norms that have evolved alongside of them. *Blogging* provides an especially detailed discussion of the relationship between citizen and professional journalism, a debate that has persisted over

the last decade. Given that most bloggers do not consider themselves journalists, Rettberg focuses on the ways that blogging practices can approach journalism. This takes three primary forms. The first is eyewitness reporting, which is especially promising given the geographic distribution of bloggers and the increasing sophistication and affordability of new media tools. As Rettberg notes, professional press outlets are increasingly capitalizing on this by incorporating citizen journalism into their coverage of newsworthy events. Second, bloggers can pursue underreported stories by leveraging social networks and pooling resources, as *Talking Points Memo's* Polk award-winning coverage of the firing of eight U.S. attorneys demonstrates. Third, bloggers can work to hold the professional press accountable through what Bruns (2005) calls "gatewatching." In the process of detailing these journalistic practices, Rettberg notes that blogging is grounded in different standards of authority than the professional press, as bloggers prize personal authenticity, narrative subjectivity, and conversational participation over the credibility of institutions, objectivity, and finished news products.

While Rettberg's discussion of blogging practices and their consequences for the public sphere is illuminating, there are a number of issues that receive less detailed consideration. For example, we do not know enough about the motivations of bloggers or the structure of the "networked public sphere" (Benkler, 2006) to understand if "power laws," where a small collection of blogs receive a vastly disproportionate share of attention

(Shirky, 2003), are limiting the participatory potential of online communication. While Rettberg argues that "often, an audience of fifteen close friends, or of fifteen people who are genuinely interested in what you are writing about, is quite sufficient" (p. 57), recent work has suggested that this may not be the case. For example, David and Pinch (2006) demonstrate that people have expectations of translating amateur work into paid employment and scholars have no clear sense of how many voices 'drop out' after laboring and failing to attract an audience. While it remains understudied, we should also expect these dynamics to limit the range of debate in the public sphere, as bloggers write about topics prominent on the professionally-determined public agenda or for extant communities of interest to attract audiences, especially in relation to the search terms or keywords used on sites including Technorati and Google. Meanwhile, Deuze (2007) chronicles the precariousness and risk at the heart of contemporary, individualized media work. This work is all the more poignant given a spate of news reports over the last year detailing the intense pressures of blogging and attendant serious health risks as individuals struggle to earn a living in a twenty-four hour news cycle (Richtel, 2008). While this suggests the challenges facing bloggers who approach the form as a potential means of employment, Hindman's (2008) extensive study persuasively argues that the networked public sphere is neither especially participatory or democratic, being so highly concentrated in terms of audiences that a new digital elite of professional journalists and high-profile bloggers structures political communication.

Along similar lines, *Blogging* does not address in detail the resources available for journalism, a pressing concern for many scholars as the professional news industry weathers an unprecedented financial crisis. For example, Rettberg's insightful discussion of the embrace of advertising by some bloggers, and the tension between personal authenticity and commercial success, also raises the issue of the general migration of revenue to online publications, but at lower rates than print editions, which undermines the business models of many professional outlets. There is little to suggest that these online advertising markets for professionals or citizens can secure the resources necessary for routine journalistic production or even the limited functions blogs can serve. While Rettberg provides a fascinating look into the ways in which blogs are being leveraged by professional news outlets and the intersection between citizens and the professional press more generally in a networked media environment, we are left without a sense of the sustainability of this model. Even less clear is whether these new journalistic practices help create the robust and informed debate required of democracy.

Overall, however, Rettberg provides a compelling and accessible look into blogging. Through compiling the existing literature and providing detailed examples of her key arguments Rettberg offers a comprehensive overview of blogging that contextualizes it historically and chronicles the evolution of the medium and its attendant practices over the last decade. Rettberg also advances the scholarly conversation on a number of fronts, adding to our understanding of the contemporary

public sphere, the interaction between citizen and professional journalism, and online communicative and social networking practices. Students of networked communication and collaboration will find this text a useful guide to the literature and a contribution to theories of blogging and the public sphere, while practitioners will discover a number of useful resources.

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