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### **Blogs: distributed documentaries of the everyday.**

What the average citizen needs is not a steady stream of facts, passed on by organizations fearful of going out on a limb, but interpretation, which might in other arguments be called editorialising, persuasion, orientation, ideology, propaganda, or, as here, representation.<sup>i</sup>

### **What is a blog?**

A blog is an Internet based, personal publishing system. It is different to writing traditional homepages, or managing personal web sites because these activities generally require pages to be written individually using specific software, the individual management of links, individual design across all pages, and the development of relatively sophisticated understandings of information architecture, style sheets (and style sheets have only become a recent option), and so on. However, even with these simple procedures, site maintenance of home pages and personal web sites was time consuming and 'good' sites required a lot of technical knowledge. Then blogs came along.

Blogs use what is called a Content Management Systems (CMS) to author, build and maintain content. A CMS is not used to produce single web pages, but as its name implies, allows the management of content across an entire site. Blogs generally store content within a database, which exists separately from its Web pages and republishes the entire site into new Web pages each time a change is made.<sup>ii</sup> This makes it simple to redesign your entire site, because everything is now template driven: change your templates, republish, and every single page in your site now expresses your new design and includes new content. No more changing by hand ten, 100, or even a 1000 pages.

Furthermore, blog systems have automated most of the simple 'information architecture', access, and design problems that we face when wanting to maintain content online. This has been achieved through the development of various conventions within blogs, and any standard blog engine will adopt these features. For

example, blogs recognize that online content is generically volatile and dynamic. The front page of a blog is therefore expected to routinely change as new posts are made. However, blog architecture also understands that all material needs to be permanently available so that it can be linked to and found in the future. This 'linking to' is after all what binds the Web together (it isn't called the Web for nothing). Blogs have developed the convention of a permalink, which is attached to each post on the front page, and indicates the permanent URL for each entry. This permalink is automatically generated for each blog post, and allows others to locate the permanent address of individual entries, facilitating future reading.

In addition blogs, much like the diary that is one of its antecedents, automatically archives each entry according to date and time of publication. It may also include individual posts within themed archives as well. Blogs usually have an option allowing public comments on individual posts, provide a search engine to find specific content, and let you modify and customize each of these features. Finally, most modern blogs support a function called 'trackback'. Trackback ensures that if someone else writes a blog post specifically mentioning your blog post, then your blog will know about it. Trackback is achieved by all sorts of 'invisible' communications going on behind the scenes between various blogs. This 'back end' communication is one of the key aspects that have allowed blogs to grow as a genre, as it helps provide the glue that binds all these pieces into loose affiliations. Unlike a diary, a blog is not thought of as an individual site, but as a discursive event that participates in a collection of relations to other sites, and other people. It is a writing that binds parts into wholes as blogs are not only a collection of fragments within one site but also participate in network ecologies. The relations established between blogs (as evidenced in individual blogrolls) and between posts (evidenced via commentary across blogs), is fundamental to the genre. It is a distributed, networked writing and reading practice. This adds up to a lot of sophisticated technology, something that most of us simply wouldn't have the skills, time or resources to make. Blogs are not in themselves particularly complicated, but rather, a very good implementation of a very good idea.<sup>iii</sup> As a result, blogs have blossomed into a significant genre. They have recognized that content online should consist of small idea based chunks. This content can be written in a variety of styles and voices, should be readily accessible using existing technology, and is about weaving connections, pathways, and commentary between distributed parts.

While the technical infrastructure of blogging is crucial to the genre, and has materially informed and defined many of the key aspects of blogging praxis, the blogs' over riding governing discursive quality is the manner in which it is embodied within the life world of its author. This is what brings blogs into the orbit of documentary, a connection which to date has probably been most strongly expressed in the recognized affinity between blogs and journalism.<sup>iv</sup> However, while quite a few journalists maintain blogs, and there have been several prominent news 'effects' attributed to blogs,<sup>v</sup> this relationship is determined more particularly by the manner in which blogs utilize indexical markers and verisimilitude to participate in the economics of representation that is common to documentary.

### **Blogs As Documentary**

Published in 1991, Bill Nichols' *Representing Reality*<sup>vi</sup> remains a canonical work in relation to documentary. It provides a strong definition of documentary practice that pays particular attention to the implications of structuralist and poststructuralist theory. Nichols' argues that documentary utilizes an indexical medium to make claims about the world that are subject to verisimilitude, and that the form exhibits a groundedness in 'the' world that is subject to numerous discursive contexts that are not only an attribute of film's indexicality. These relations of context, indexicality, and verisimilitude will also be made for the documentary economy of blogs.

My interest in exploring the relation of documentary to blogs is twofold. On the one hand, literary and cultural theory, while sophisticated, does not provide a very good heuristic for considering non-fiction work. In fact, the contrary is probably generally the case, since much of this theoretical work has tended to concentrate on demonstrating the fictional tropes present in non-fiction, and therefore the illegitimacy of general claims for 'truth' or 'objectivity' in traditional non-fiction forms. In cinema studies, documentary theory provides ways through such theoretical impasses, and it is hoped that similar methodologies will be useful to engage with blogs as non-fiction practice.

On the other hand, it is clear that as blogs become increasingly media rich they will offer new forms of web based documentary practice. Having a theoretical methodology that recognizes the affinities between what has been generally understand as a literary genre, and an existing audiovisual documentary practice, may assist in the critical and creative development of these emerging genres.

## **Modes of Documentary**

It would be relatively easy to demonstrate an affinity between documentary and blogs via the modes of documentary that Nichols defines.<sup>vii</sup> For example, the four dominant representational modes of documentary: expository, observational, interactive and reflexive, and the characteristics of each, are clearly attributable to blogs in general. However, blogs depart from this typology in typically combining all of these modes within a single 'text'. While some blogs could be seen to tend towards a specific mode (for example political opinion blogs are probably more expository than reflexive), as a hypertextual<sup>viii</sup> and networked genre, a blog will routinely entertain all four modes. This is not a zero sum game of theory where blogs become a catch-all theoretical category, but is rather the expression of the polyvocality that network cultures and literacies afford discursive praxis.

Blogs emphasize this plurality and it forms a basic condition of the genre. This is as much a product of the formal material qualities of blogging — a 'document' made up of irregular fragments — as of its historical location at the end of the 'late age of print'. Modes, in Nichols' definition, are no longer that which separates works, but are now accommodated within genres that anticipate, recognize, and authorize the continual mixing and recombination of these modes.<sup>ix</sup> Not only does this describe blogs, but it would also be a reasonable description of contemporary post-whatever documentary practice.

## **Index, quotidian, verisimilitude**

Documentary arose with the advent of appropriate technologies of record. Today, we are considerably more sophisticated in our understanding of the relations between images (analog or digital), what they purport to represent, and what they may mean. However, what appears untroubled by this discursive complexity is the continuing desire to engage with the world in meaningful and significant ways through the agency of non-fiction. The world is increasingly recorded and replayed, in numerous and volatile contexts. While the 'objectivity' of this indexical record is no longer assured, or even particularly relevant, the ability and desire to engage with the world and to then author identity experientially in such contexts, appears as the benchmark for 'prosumer' technologies.<sup>x</sup> It is also their potential.

The distinction between consumption and production in this context traces a line between each of these points. At one end is the consuming individual, satisfied with the minor spectacle of their own media production. At the other end is the

authoring individual, allowing these tools to be interrogated by, and to interrogate these technologies, via the shift from analog consumption to the pluralities of digital authoring and reproduction. Blogs are located in the threshold between these two points. It is the difference between situating the self as participant in and of the simulacra, versus the possibility of experiential and individuated modes of engagement. It is a writing in, versus a written by.

What is apparent in these new constellations of recording-as-writing, or recording-as-rewriting, is that a groundedness in the world remains. For example, in their everyday use, outside of the realm of the professional media industries, these technologies are used primarily as apparatuses of the everyday. They are used to document the quotidian of the consumer, but in this digital moment, also become amenable to appropriation for uses along or outside of existing media institutions. In other words, these reproductive technologies support the rise of alternative media practices and genres, where their common feature is a change from reproduction to configuration; that is a writing *with*.<sup>xi</sup>

These practices are qualitatively different to pre-digital media use, where authoring was largely constrained to methods of record (photographing being the major form), and the writing of more complex media forms was the preserve of media industries. Blogs are clearly a participant within this change, where the most popular of media, that is writing, has mutated into a discursive practice that exists in an indifferent relation to existing media forms.<sup>xii</sup> Hence blogs, like contemporary digital technologies in general, herald and facilitate a return to broader technologies of writing. Such practices, while amenable to fictional genres, also orientate themselves towards the world in a desire to make claims of, or to document this world. An indexical intent is expressed within these new technologies of writing.

This is a key intersection between documentary and blogs. Documentary appropriates the agency granted by the indexical to facilitate the claims it desires to make. Likewise, blogs have embedded within their generic methodology, networked specific indexical 'markers'. Blogs emphasize an indexical relation between author and world, between what is written and the world. This is not to ignore or discount the regular appearance of subjective writing within blogs. Rather, it is a recognition that blogs ordinarily regard such subjective writing as a consequence of their groundedness in the world of the individual author, which is what separates such entries and the larger genre in general from fiction.

Just as there are subjective and essayist documentaries, <sup>xiii</sup> which in no way lessens their status as documentaries, blogs not only accommodate but privilege the subjective engagement of individuals with or in the world. Indexicality in this context appears not as a literal condition of a recording medium but via the elements that surround and are included in blogs. Blogs generically include a viable email address, a descriptive paragraph (or link to a biographical homepage), links to other blogs that constitute a discursive community, and the use of textual markers such as proper names, geographical locations, and date and time stamps. **As with** the supplement of the signature, these ‘collateral’ indexical markers operate as a naïve authenticity, but they also provide that verisimilitude which is an engagement with the world.

This ‘everydayness’ of blogging grounds practice in the lifeworld of the writer, and tends to assist in legitimating the blog in terms of its purchase upon the world. The claim that blogs are documentary-like because they express authentic voices could be viewed as idealistic, but that would be to misread the argument.<sup>xiv</sup> More simply, blogs routinely contain linguistic, extra-diegetic markers which have the effect of locating the blog, and blogs in general, in the world. The notion of authenticity here is related to the indexical markers described, so that these textual markers operate much like the analog indexical relations evident in film. This is not to overstate the point, but is to insist that when a blogger mentions a place, time, or person, such places, events and people do exist.<sup>xv</sup> What is of interest here is not the possibility or impossibility of textual markers grounding such authenticity, but the desire within this environment for such rhetorical and material practices to develop.

Again, this brings blogs close to documentary in their mutual desire to demonstrate connectedness to the world. This is not the same as saying they are objective statements about the world, nor that they are true in the factual sense. But they are making truth claims, and like documentary, blogs have developed an argot that assists in grounding and legitimating these claims. The point is not how secure such actions may be, but simply that both expend considerable semiotic or discursive energy in the obligation to do this.

These textual markers are a form of verisimilitude. This is the economy of documentary argument where, as Nichols’ demonstrates, the documentary ‘effect’ is less a product of the indexicality of the image than a series of contexts that are employed, and read, granting purchase within the world.<sup>xvi</sup> This purchase is not factual in the quaint sense of being objective, but is understood to be a view about

the world that is evidentiary, representational and argumentative.<sup>xvii</sup> They are claims made about the world and as such are subject to contestation, but they do nevertheless remain claims about the known, or a knowable world.

It would appear then that documentary and blogs share similar representational economies in their engagement with the world. While blogs appear to be more personal than documentary, this does not discount the connection between them. However, the affinity is perhaps more significant not merely because we can demonstrate that both make arguments about the world (all non-fiction does this after all), but that the manner in which this is conducted bears specific and shared formal qualities. In other words, it is productive to consider blogs not so much as a form of non-fiction writing but as a networked documentary practice. What documentary and blogs have in common is the development of specific rhetorical and representational strategies to legitimate themselves as non-fiction. These strategies involve more than the propositional phrases common to non-fiction writing, and extend into specific ways of indicating and grounding themselves within the world. In documentary film, this might be as simple as relying upon the indexicality that is the excess of analog recording media. In blogs, these strategies include proper names and network specific markers (such as email addresses) that attempt to secure the blog in its verisimilitude.

This is why blogs have so rapidly adopted, or been co-opted by, existing recording media, including photos (photoblogs), audio (audioblogs), and video (videoblogs).<sup>xviii</sup> The accelerating movement of blogs into mixed media is not because blogs facilitate the distribution of these expressive forms, but because they are an immanent medium of record, argument, and representation.

### **Documentary blogs**

Blogs propose a non-fiction, media rich practice that provides a viable model for network specific documentary practice. In this model it is apparent that existing work flows of preproduction, production, exhibition and distribution are irrelevant. In networked writing and production, the distance between creating or doing the work and its dissemination is radically diminished. Additionally, the problem of distribution and exhibition shifts from one of where to exhibit, to ensuring sufficient bandwidth to support possible audiences. The idea of audience now changes. These documentary blogs would now be constituted by small parts that can be interconnected, generally by other practitioners.<sup>xix</sup>

The documentary 'work' now emerges from the relations established internally and externally by this broader documentary community. Similarly, the use of syndication, now a significant feature of blogs, might allow individual documentary authors to produce subscription 'feeds' about specific content.<sup>xx</sup> This can be done across a range of different documentary blogs, and individual feeds are then aggregated in a single web page.<sup>xxi</sup> In other words, there could be multiple documentaries, made up of multiple parts, with multiple author–producers, each syndicated and then collected within a different networked location. These feeds can contain text, image, sound and video. Imagine a documentary that consisted of such video fragments, with descriptive metadata<sup>xxii</sup> that could be reconnected in multiple contexts.

An example is provided by podcasting, <sup>xxiii</sup>a blog technology that has developed recently. Podcasting is where audio content (for example interviews) is self-produced and published via a blog. Where it departs from being the usual audioblog is that a specific RSS feed is generated from the blog that includes pointers to the audio entries. Client software, similar to an email client, is used to subscribe to these syndicated feeds. Relevant audio files are automatically downloaded to your computer, and in some cases synchronized to your iPod for listening on demand. In the case of podcasting, a grass roots audio documentary and music practice is developing that allows work to be easily distributed and consumed using existing portable audio devices. This is already suggesting interesting possibilities for alternative radiographic and audio–documentaries, particularly in terms of production and distribution. Similar systems are currently under development for video distribution and aggregation.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Another example is offered by the recent development of flickr.com<sup>xxv</sup>, a networked photo sharing and cataloguing CMS. In this system, each subscriber is able to post photographs, include metadata, and it produces individual RSS feeds. This allows you to place your photo album within an existing blog, to search for photos according to tags<sup>xxvi</sup> and to aggregate content. Using flickr and RSS, it is possible to view on a daily basis, all new photos for any given tag. At the time of writing, a search for 'Melbourne' indicates that there are 434 photos. I can view this online as a slide show or subscribe to this via RSS. By subscribing, I could then embed this visual content into other web pages, or simply view the material via a RSS client.

The work in each of these examples is produced by individuals and distributed globally. The content is unedited, in all senses of the term, and it should be apparent



how communities of interest and new connectivities may emerge from these processes. These developments pose exciting futures for documentary practice because the same activities can be accomplished using video content. Imagine shooting brief video sequences, editing and publishing them electronically, and then distributing and aggregating this content. What kinds of documentary could be made if content is separated by place, produced by individuals distributed in time, and able to be aggregated according to specific themes in varying combination? Is it still documentary? Of course. Does it have a director? Not really.

This imagined, micro documentary practice, where the medium of production, distribution and publication allows these micro documentaries to be collected and presented more or less 'together', would express significant differences in tone, content, style, manner and engagement within the individual works. Such a project would be blog-like, and would be a combination of individual works that may be primarily expository, observational, interactive or reflexive (to borrow Nichols' terms). But the experience of the work, as the collection of these separate parts, would clearly be of a plural, mixed mode genre and discourse.<sup>xxvii</sup>

At such a moment, documentary has shifted from being mediacentric (video or film for example) and fixed (in length, format, location and so on), towards being networked, open, pluralist, polyvalent and dialogic. This is the threshold we face today. While existing media forms will continue and even thrive, it should be obvious that these technologies afford new genres, styles, and methodologies. This future needs to be created. It offers an alternative documentary practice that is, to borrow some rather fashionable intellectual argot, nomadic, deterritorialised, and smooth. It awaits invention.

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<sup>i</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991. p. 189.

<sup>ii</sup> This is to simplify how the CMS works, but indicates the broad scope. While many CMS' republish material into 'static' **web pages** on demand, it is also common for a CMS to dynamically publish material. The difference is that in the former, all material at the time of publication is embedded within a series of web pages so visitors view

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that page. In the latter, each request made by a viewer dynamically generates that page. Pages only 'exist' when they're requested.

<sup>iii</sup> For a very accessible introduction to this issue see David Weinberger, *Small Pieces Loosely Joined: A Unified Theory of the Web*, Perseus Books, New York, 2002.

<sup>iv</sup> . There are numerous blogs maintained by journalists, and some commentary on blogs by journalists. See for example Gilmour, Dan, 'Dan Gilmour eJournal' <http://weblog.siliconvalley.com/column/dangilmor/>, Accessed October 21, 2004, for an example of a journalist using a blog.

<sup>v</sup> . See for example 'Media, Blogs, Truth and Consequence', *Dan Gilmour eJournal*, <http://weblog.siliconvalley.com/column/dangillmor/archives/010801.shtml#010801>, Accessed October 21, 2004, for a discussion of the role of blogs in relation to CBS and *60 Minutes*.

<sup>vi</sup> Nichols, Bill, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991.

<sup>vii</sup> Op.cit. pp.32–75.

<sup>viii</sup> . 'Hypertextual' is assumed to do considerable work in this context. It means more than a writing practice that utilises links, but includes the sorts of poly- and multivocality that first generation hypertext theorists celebrated. See for instance, see Landow, George, *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997.

<sup>ix</sup> Nichols. op.cit. pp. 32–75, for his discussion of the modes of documentary.

<sup>x</sup> The 'prosumer' category is a recent invention. It encompasses the idea of the end user as no longer a consumer but as also now a producer. Consider, for example, Apple Computer's iLife 'digital hub' suite of tools. See 'Apple iLife', <http://www.apple.com/ilife/>, Accessed October 17 2004, for an illustration of this lifestyle marketing.

<sup>xi</sup> See Moulthrop, Stuart, 'From Work to Play: Molecular Culture in the Time of Deadly Games', *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2004. pp.56-69 for a discussion about the significance of the change from a culture of interpretation to configuration. Here, it is apparent, writing is being used generously to include all media practices that enable or facilitate what can be characterised as an authoring function.

<sup>xii</sup> Blogs were developed and are more or less indifferent to existing media forms. It is apparent that many institutions are now attempting to use or appropriate blogs to other ends. What is significant is that the genre pre-exists its hegemonic appropriation which is possibly novel in terms of the history of institutional media genres.

<sup>xiii</sup> Media rich blog documentaries would exhibit the qualities attributed to the essay film as described in Biemann, Ursula, ed. *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, Edition Voldemeer, Zurich, 2003.

<sup>xiv</sup> Writing, particularly personal writing, has tended to be inwards orientated (see for example Ong, Walter J, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Methuen, London, 1982 for a discussion of writing and subjectivity). However the networked and public nature of blogs also provides writing with an external orientation.

<sup>xv</sup> . This does not mean that you cannot have fictional blogs, or blogs that contain untruths. However, just as there is mockumentary which relies upon the conventions of documentary to succeed, in blogs it is pragmatically a given that they are describing actual events. A significant blog hoax (as opposed to a fictional blog) is the

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Kaycee Nicole case. Geitgey, Adam, 'The Kaycee Nicole (Swenson) Faq,' *Rootnode.org: Music Magazine and Community*, <http://www.rootnode.org/article.php~sid=26>, Accessed October 17

<sup>xvi</sup> For example, see the discussion in Nichols in the section 'The Indexical Bind'. Nichols. op.cit. pp. 149–55.

<sup>xvii</sup> As Nichols, op.cit, discusses in relation to documentary, the problem is less one of veracity than of specific forms of rhetoric, interpretation, and argument.

<sup>xviii</sup> A list of photoblogs is available at <http://photoblogs.org/list>, audioblog information at <http://radio.weblogs.com/0100368> and videoblogs at <http://www.videoblogging.info>.

<sup>xix</sup> As new media theory likes to indicate, the audience in these environments changes to become 'users'. This implies a qualitative change where the audience now ranges across a scale from where they may now be peers in the system (and so also producers), to leaving comments, through to simply reading and viewing content.

<sup>xx</sup> Syndication in blogs is achieved through the use of RSS (Really Simple Syndication). It is a file that is published automatically in a blog that can be subscribed to. It is the blog equivalent, and largely identical in function to, the syndicated feeds that traditional news agency provide.

<sup>xxi</sup> Bloglines, located at <http://www.bloglines.com/> is a web based free syndicated aggregation service.

<sup>xxii</sup> . Metadata is data about data. It is increasingly being used to indicate content categories for material that is published online and is then used to manage this content.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See Miles, Adrian, 'Podcasting and Vogcasting' *Vlog 2.1*, [http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/vog/vlog/vlog\\_archive/000488.html](http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/vog/vlog/vlog_archive/000488.html), Accessed October 21, 2004, for discussion of podcasting.

<sup>xxiv</sup> See for example Kinberg, Joshua, 'Vipodder.Org', <http://www.vipodder.org>, Accessed October 26, 2004.

<sup>xxv</sup> See <http://www.flickr.com> for examples and further information.

<sup>xxvi</sup> . In flickr, 'tags' are metadata, simply text descriptors that you use to describe your photos. To view all the Melbourne photos visit <http://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/melbourne/>.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See Hoem, Jon, 'Videoblogs As Collective Documentary,' *Diablog*, <http://infodesign.no/diablog/index.php?p=190&more=1>, Accessed October 21, 2004, for a discussion of a "collaborative editing" and "community documentary" project.