

Bloggng as Participation: The Active Sociality of a New Literacy

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Introduction: A note on ‘new’ literacies

In current work we are theorising the idea of ‘new’ literacies along ontological lines (Lankshear and Knobel 2006 forthcoming). We argue that certain literacies can be identified as ‘new’ in a historically significant sense to the extent that they are constituted by what we call ‘new technical stuff’ and ‘new ethos stuff’.

The new technical stuff has to do with their digitality. Part of this is neatly captured in Mary Kalantzis’ (Cope et al. 2005) line: ‘you click for A and you click for Red’. Part of it is also captured in Lawrence Lessig’s (2005) observation that every new reading of an internet text, unlike conventional texts, necessarily involves making a copy. The new ethos stuff has to do with the fact that new literacies are affiliated with an emergent mindset that differs profoundly from the mindset that dominated the modern period. While the two mindsets outlined in Table 1 below are not the only mindsets one can hold, they are nonetheless very useful heuristically for examining new ‘ethos stuff’ concerning new literacy practices.

Mindset 1	Mindset 2
The world is much the same as before, only now it is more technologised, or technologised in more sophisticated ways.	The world is very different from before and largely as a result of the emergence and uptake of digital electronic inter-networked technologies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The world is appropriately interpreted, understood and responded to in broadly physical-industrial terms • Value is a function of scarcity • An ‘industrial’ view of production <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Products as material artifacts ○ A focus on infrastructure and production units (e.g., a firm or company) ○ Tools for producing • Focus on individual intelligence • Expertise and authority ‘located’ in individuals and institutions • Space as enclosed and purpose specific • Social relations of ‘bookspace’; a stable ‘textual order’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The world cannot adequately be interpreted, understand and responded to in physical-industrial terms only • Value is a function of dispersion • A ‘post-industrial’ view of production <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Products as enabling services. ○ A focus on leverage and non finite participation ○ Tools for mediating and relating • Focus on collective intelligence • Expertise and authority are distributed and collective; hybrid experts • Space as open, continuous and fluid • Social relations of emerging ‘digital media space’; texts in change

Table 1: Some Dimensions of Variation between the Mindsets

The ‘ethos stuff’ of new literacies is constituted by the second mindset. It resonates, furthermore, with a serious reading of a potentially useful distinction presently being mooted between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. A brief ostensive definition of what is at stake has been provided by Tim O’Reilly (2005). Once one gets beyond the clichés of ‘software business model speak’ there is much to be found in the differences between the social ‘ways’ represented by the contrasting sets of practices and artefacts.

Web 1.0		Web 2.0
Ofoto	→	Flickr
Britannica Online	→	Wikipedia
Personal websites	→	Blogging
Publishing	→	Participation
Content management systems	→	Wikis
Directories (taxonomy)	→	Tagging (‘folksonomy’)
Netscape	→	Google

(see O’Reilly 2005)

In this paper we fasten onto the emphasis inherent in both the second mindset and the concept of Web 2.0 of contemporary ‘ways’ as deeply participatory, and relate this to the case of blogging.

A short introduction to weblogs

A weblog (hereafter ‘blog’) is most easily described as ‘a website that is up-dated frequently, with new material posted at the top of the page’ (Blood 2002a: 12). Blog entries (‘posts’) are ‘arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first’ (Walker 2005: 45). For a rich phenomenological description, which captures the ongoing, evolving nature of blogs as ‘unfinished business’ (Lunenfeld 1999:7, cited Mortenson forthcoming), it is hard to best Torill Mortensen’s portrayal (Mortensen forthcoming):

A true-born child of the computer medium, the weblog may have its roots in the research journal, the ship’s log, the private diary and the newspapers, all at the same time. But like a mongrel hunting the dark alleys of the digital city, the weblog is nothing if not adaptive and unique at the same time. No fancy thoroughbred this ... but a bastard child of all personal writing, breeding wildly as it meets others of its ilk online.

Forerunners to today’s blogs began in the early 1990s as websites listing annotated hyperlinks to other websites. When someone with a website found other sites they thought contained

interesting, curious, hilarious and/or generally newsworthy content, they would create a link to that material, annotate it briefly, and publish it on their website. Readers could decide on the basis of the description whether it was worth a click to check the link out. It was an early form of insider generosity: 'I've found this stuff and you might like it too. Here is a brief description. If it sounds interesting just click here and see if you like it'.

These early 'bloggers' tended to be computing insiders, for at least two reasons. First, you needed some knowledge of webpage and hyperlink coding in order to be able to post material to the internet. Second, you needed a certain kind of cultural understanding of the Web to see it as a place where you could actually publish information relatively painlessly, rather than just 'surfing' to see what you could find, or searching to try and locate specific kinds of information. Well known early blogs of this original kind include *Camworld* (camworld.com), *ScriptingNews* (scripting.com), and the now-defunct *Infosift* (jig.net/retired/infosift) (Blood 2002b).

In 1999, however, weblog publishing tools and blog hosting services became available on a large scale through Pitas.com and Blogger.com. This made it relatively easy for internet users who were unfamiliar or uncomfortable with using hypertext markup language and the principles of web design for coding and designing their own weblogs. Setting up a blog now simply involved going to a website, signing up for a blog account, following a few fairly straightforward instructions, and in less than 30 minutes one would have some 'copy' up on the Web that was automatically formatted and laid out to the tune of your choice by means of whichever off-the-shelf template you had chosen (e.g., our own blog, everydayliteracies.blogspot.com, uses the 'Jellyfish' template created by Jason Sutter and made available through Blogger. We could just as easily use a template from this site: blogger-templates.blogspot.com. Changing the template on one's blog is a simple point-and-click process).

This quantum simplification of web publishing spawned a new mass generation of bloggers in a very short time. This new generation was much more diverse than the original blogging generation. Many began using weblogs as a medium more like regularly updated journals than indices of hyperlinks, and posts could document anything and everything from what the blogger had for lunch that day; to movie, book and music reviews; to descriptions of shopping trips; through to latest illustrations completed by the blogger for offline texts and all manner of draft texts made available for commenting upon; and the like.

Most – although not all – weblogs now are *hybrids* of journal entries and annotations or indices of links, or some mix of reflections, musings, anecdotes and the like with embedded hyperlinks to related websites. Blood describes this second-wave use of weblogs as concerned most with creating 'social alliances' (Blood 2002b: x). Weblogs are largely interest-driven and intended to attract readers who have the same or similar interests and allegiances as the bloggers. This does not mean having the same point of view but, rather, sharing a sense of what is significant so far as spending time in the blogosphere is concerned. 'Significance' is compatible with 'lowbrow' and the mundane every bit as much as with 'highbrow' and the 'effete,' and the myriad points between. That is to say, people find their meaning – their significance – where they find it, and there is no shortage of range and options in the universe of blogs. For example, Technorati.com, a popular blog search service, was tracking 30 million blogs in the first week of March 2006 (up

from 2.7 million blogs in June 2004, and 24.2 million in December 2005). That represents a lot of ‘significance.’

New kinds of purposes for blogs are emerging all the time, building on the expansive qualities of blogging software and support services, which are readily accessible, continually improving, and make it easy to publish and update one’s content.

Weblogging as participatory practice

(i) A concept of participation

Participation means involvement in some kind of shared purpose or activity – taking part in some kind of endeavour in which others are involved. The kinds of activities one might participate in may be things that are already more or less established, with more or less recognised norms and criteria. Alternatively, they might be things that are evolving and being developed, such that one’s participation becomes part of building a practice or an affinity or community that may continue to evolve. Or again, they might be things that suddenly emerge and around which people mobilise. The mobilisation might just be for a short time, if the purpose or end works itself out and the reason for participation no longer exists. The participation could be over before there is really even time for a practice to take shape. In such cases participants bring with them to a situation various procedures and understandings they have acquired elsewhere, and operate on the basis of these until the participation purposes is met. This is one broad dimension along which forms of participation within the blogosphere may vary.

With respect to more or less established purposes and routines we might think of practices like participating in formal discussions of issues or in friendship networks. An example of participation in building a practice or affinity that may continue to evolve can be found in efforts to build blog fiction – just how *might* the dynamism and interactivity and globality of the net be mobilised within creative endeavours to build new cultural forms of expression? With respect to event-driven participation, as we will describe below, bloggers also can mobilise massively at short notice to challenge an opinion or state of affairs and achieve a result – as in the case involving a televised report by U.S. television reporter and commentator, Dan Rather, that was based on what proved to be (unknown to Rather) a forged and bogus set of documents (Lankshear and Knobel 2006 forthcoming).

Participation may vary around several other dimensions and variables that are relevant to weblogging as well, such as the scale and visibility of a ‘project,’ one’s level and degree of activity, the kind of activity involved, and so on. These variables can be related in interesting ways. Writing in 2003, Clay Shirky discussed the ‘head’ and the ‘long tail’ of the ‘power law distribution’ among blogs and some of the consequences of how attention and power are distributed in the blogosphere. The point here is that a tiny proportion of the vast number of blogs that exist account for a large proportion of the inbound links. Relatively few blogs get relatively vast attention, and the huge majority of blogs get little attention at all so far as readership and inbound links are concerned. This has interesting but obvious implications for ‘participation.’ Shirky explains, for example, that the more a blogger’s audience grows the less she can read other people’s blogs, reply to their comments, link to other blogs, and so on. Such a blogger ends up, in effect, becoming a ‘a broadcast outlet, distributing material without participating in conversations about it’ (Shirky 2003: n.p.).

Shirky could have been talking about a blogger like Michelle Malkin, a U.S.-based syndicated columnist and a regular “Top-10” blogger (michellemalkin.com). The comments function on her blog has been disabled, and the only other service available for each post is a trackback link. Clicking on the trackback icon for a particular post enables the reader to see who has linked to that post in a post of their own on a blog in some other place. Malkin’s work as ‘material put out there’ enters into larger discourse by being taken up in other people’s blogs. Her material becomes a catalyst for participation by others, including others who link to the posts made by people who have incorporated Malkin into their posts. Malkin herself, however, is not in these conversations. She facilitates them but is not there as participant. This is close to pure broadcast. Meanwhile, says Shirky, things are very different along the tail of the blogosphere.

[T]he long tail of weblogs with few readers will become conversational. In a world where most bloggers get below average traffic, audience size can’t be the only metric for success. LiveJournal had this figured out years ago, by assuming that people would be writing for their friends, rather than some impersonal audience. Publishing an essay and having 3 random people read it is a recipe for disappointment, but publishing an account of your Saturday night and having your 3 closest friends read it feels like a conversation, especially if they follow up with their own accounts.
(shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html)

Besides operating a weblog and making regular posts (which is the bottom line for ‘blogging’ in any event) there are numerous ways (i.e., ‘moves’ a participant can make) in which bloggers *participate*, and different levels of intensity and involvement at which this participation might occur. For present purposes we can distinguish between participation that is directed to particular or specified others, participation that is directed toward a larger community, and participation that is directed at both. Two examples may suffice.

First, we can look at the post and comments sequence for Encaustic’s blog *Because; We are Ordinary People* for 5 March, 2006. The post is talking about attending an upcoming U.K. Education Fair. It concludes with the (lightly edited) remark:

It’s pretty sad the universities I am more interested in (Durham, UCL, King’s College, Leicester, LSE) weren’t at the fair. Oh, and the woman at Nottingham’s booth was a
laaa. **“Sorry. Due to the high competition for the very limited places in Nottingham’s Law School, the law faculty doesn’t consider a diploma as an entry alternative.”** I hate Nottingham now. (users.livejournal.com/encaustic_/15581.html; emphasis in original).

The comments sequence that follows involves an interchange between Encaustic and Sun_skittle:

Sun_skittle: Hi there, Was just blog-hopping and came across your LJ. Durham’s a great choice, and they definitely recognise and are willing to accept TP’s law diploma, although I’m not too sure what sort of grades they expect. All the best for the exams!

Encaustic: Wow. Cool. Haha I see that you were once in TP also. What course were you in? Did you also do Law at Durham? =)

Sun_skittle: Was from TP law too, and currently doing law in durham. Heh, yes...that's why I'm shamelessly promoting it.

Encaustic: OH MAN URE GONNA BE MY IDOL OR SUMTHIN. I very much wld like to go to Durham. What is the grade average for all ur subjects throughtout the 3 years? Cumulative GPA? haha. I'm sure Durham would take into consideration other factors like CCA participation, leadership positions and the likes rite? haha. sorry for hounding you with all these questions. But its like, "OMG SOMEONE'S IN DURHAMMMM!!" haha

Sun_skittle: Whoa...easy there. I can't recall offhand what my GPA was like (prob a B average?), but yeah, they do take your grades and activities into consideration amongst other things, although not as strictly as the Singapore unis do. I think there's a book at the British Council on what the various law depts look out for. It's pretty useful. But do keep your options open... :)

Encaustic: May I add you as a friend?

Sun_skittle: sure:)

This sequence shows a chance meeting on a blog that gets followed through a brief exchange of information to the point where the blogger gets permission to add the commenter as a 'friend.' This opens up possibilities for further contact and introduction to other blogging networks on the part of both participants. Equally, it might lead to nothing. The interaction is one-to-one, quite intense (at least on the part of Encaustic), related to specific matters, and unlikely to reach far beyond the two participants.

In marked contrast we might consider a short chain of links that we followed from a post made by Stephen Johnson on 2 June, 2004, under the heading 'Bloggers save the world.' Johnson said in his post (original hyperlinks underlined): 'My buddy Jeff Jarvis alerted me to the laudable Spirit of America site'. Clicking on the first hyperlink led to Jarvis' site and a post that Jarvis had made the previous day (June 1) containing information on the Spirit of America initiative, which was organizing donations of items to be sent to Iraq in the wake of the US-led invasion of that country. Scrolling through Jarvis' post one could read a list of tributes to people who had supported the initiative. At the end of the tributes there was a comment with a hyperlink: 'Surprise, surprise, surprise: Dave Winer dissents'. Clicking on the hyperlink led to Winer's posting for 1 June, on his *Scripting News* blog (scripting.com). This post concludes as follows (original hyperlinks are underlined in the following text):

Jeff Jarvis is promoting a site called Spirit of America. I don't know much about it, and I don't sign up for political causes I don't know much about. I see other bloggers singing glowing praises for it, but sheez, how could they know? I don't think bloggerdom should be used like TV talk shows. I said I don't stand up for causes I don't understand. I guess that's a polite way of saying that I don't even *like* what they're doing. I think we need to get over ourselves in America, our time is just about over, unless we stop guzzling so much gas and start electing leaders with brains, morals and courage. I feel I have to say I like Jeff, I really do, he's come through for me twice at BloggerCon, and I appreciate that. But his politics are 180 degrees opposite mine, even on tactics. I think the best thing the US can do for the world is get our own house in order and stop trying to fix the world, something we're exceedingly bad at.

Jarvis' post, replete with hyperlinks opening out to diverse blogging spaces germane to the invasion of Iraq at that time, as well as to people supporting the Spirit of America initiative can be found at: buzzmachine.com/archives/2004_06_01.html. For some of the furore that followed Winer's post see: asmallvictory.net/archives/006975.html. And for some of the fruit on higher branches of the blogging as participation tree there are pickings to be had at Britt Blaser's blog: blaserco.com/blogs/2004/06/02.html. Winer's response, incidentally, made us into regular readers of *Scripting News*. Point of view is important, and expressions of truly courageous point of view – even if polemical – can be priceless. While many of the comments that ensued were low level knee jerks and *ad hominem* comments of a kind that are common in any 'popular opinion space,' the fact remains that the opposing positions at the heart of the interchange present a context for serious and potentially fruitful dialogue that could scarcely be bettered by a formally published text.

(ii) Tools of and for participation

Strictly speaking, one can participate actively and on many levels in the world of weblogs without operating a blog of one's own – although depending on the policies and preferences of the provider of the blog one wants to comment on and/or of the blogger in question, it may be necessary to have registered a blog account with that provider. Beginning bloggers typically start out from a free hosting service like *Blogger* (blogger.com) or *LiveJournal* (livejournal.com). These (in conjunction with other freely available services, like Bloglines.com) provide the basic tools for participatory weblogging. The following account is based on Blogger.com as the standard.

The most straightforward medium for participation is the comments function, which is accessed by clicking on an icon or hyperlink at the end of each blog post (see Figure 1).

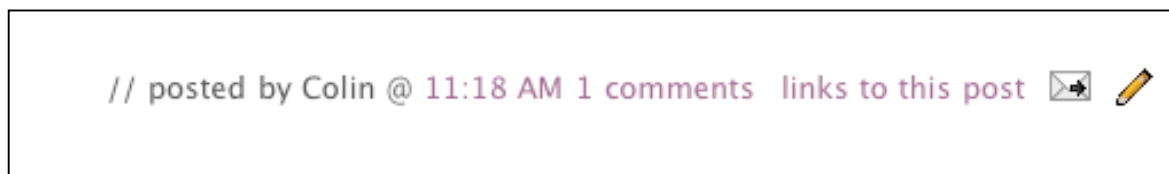


Figure 1: A sample comments link following a blog post.

As noted, whether or not one can comment may be a function of parameters that are set by the blogger or the blogger's host service. Where anonymous commenting is permitted there are no hoops to jump through. Most bloggers are keen to receive comments – other than spam and other forms of abuse – and aim at opening the door as far as possible. From a commenter's point of view, as seen earlier, this mode of participation can be extended by commenting on the blogger's response to someone's comment. From the blogger's standpoint, they can respond to comments (if they choose to) in two main ways. They can add a comment themselves in response to a comment. Alternatively, they may pick up on a comment made to a post and make it the subject of a subsequent post.

A second reasonably straightforward means of participating is by means of making a link. Links are of two main kinds: to a blog and to a specific post on a blog. In the case of a blog you find interesting and wish to be associated with – perhaps as a way of signalling to others that part of who you are is someone who reads blogs like this one – is by linking that blog to your own (e.g., adding it to your blog roll in your template sidebar, adding a blog to your 'Friends List'). In the case of a particular post you find interesting and want to follow up in a post on your own blog, it is a matter of using the 'Links to this

post function' (or the 'permalink' hyperlink in other kinds of blogs) immediately following the post to which you intend to link (see Figure 1 above). Clicking on this link opens a dialogue box where you can compose a post around the permanent URL for this blog post and then send it directly to your own blog as a complete post. In Blogger there is also an email function that allows you to email the original post directly to yourself or to some other person. In these ways a reader takes an initial step toward opening someone else's post up to a wider audience.

Incorporating a link to someone else's blog post into a post of one's own creates, in effect, an annotated link. The annotation will involve expression of some point of view the blogger has on the original post. From there, other people can 'click through' to the original post, and maybe link to that, as well as to one's own post, branching the discussion or commentary outwards. This works in a further way as well. When B makes a link to a post by A, this is signalled by a 'track back' function at the end of A's post. That way somebody else, C, reading A's post, can get to B's post by clicking on the trackback link (in Blogger, the 'Links to this post' serves this purpose as well, by listing all the blogs that link to that particular post). Where several links have been made to a post on different blogs there is already a network of participation in place, which can be accessed via the trackback function. All such links are registered by trend trackers like *Blogpulse*, search engines like *Technorati*, or aggregators like *Bloglines* or *Squeet*, which means that other people who are searching by keywords or tags in areas covered by the blogs in question have a better chance of arriving at one or other of well-linked to posts and reading or engaging more actively with what is going on in that web of links.

The final elementary tool for participation we will cover here is syndication – of which the aforementioned Dave Winer was a key developer. The process is widely referred to as RSS, or Really Simple Syndication, and involves a stretch of internet-friendly code that establishes a 'subscription feed' for a blog. The code allocates a 'syndication' address for each blog (the code originally ended in the *.xml extension, but different coding systems mean that these 'feed' URLs can also end in *.opml, *.rdf, and other extensions now). The syndication address is rarely the same as the actual internet address of a blog. For example, the URL for our *EverydayLiteracies* blog is everydayliteracies.blogspot.com, but the RSS feed URL is everydayliteracies.blogspot.com/atom.xml. Internet browsers can't 'read' syndication URLs in the way that they can read ordinary URLs. Online or harddrive based subscription software and interfaces instead 'read' syndication URLs and manage feed subscriptions (e.g., *Bloglines*, *Firefox*, etc.).

Syndication might be thought of analogously to getting on a update mailing list. So, for example, when we wanted to be kept up to date with what Dave Winer was writing on his blog we went to *Bloglines.com*, and set up a 'feed'. This involved entering the syndication URL for Winer's blog (i.e., scripting.com/rss.xml) into the feed 'subscription' window and automatically 'subscribing' to his blog. Thereafter, whenever we want to find anything new that has been blogged by Winer, or anyone else whose blog we have subscribed to, we just log on to *Bloglines* and check our 'feeds' (i.e., list of new-to-us-as-readers blog posts per blog). Using *Bloglines* involves going to the site and logging on whenever one wants to catch up on new blog entries. Alternatively, one can use a subscription service like *Squeet* (squeet.com) and have information about updates to self-selected, syndicated blogs delivered to one's email inbox. Once again it is a matter simply of setting up an account and then entering the blogs you want feeds for into a dialogue box. Thereafter, whenever an update is available you receive an email message and can read the updates in your email browser. Any hyperlinks contained in the posts can be

accessed directly from your email browser by clicking on them. Getting started on participation could hardly be easier.

(iii) Blogging participation in action: concrete examples

In this section we showcase three quite different examples of participation in the blogosphere. We begin with the ‘LiveJournal Batgirl Meme’ that took on a life of its own on 13 January, 2006, then go back to the latter part of 2004 and the ‘Case of Bloggers vs Dan Rather’s Evidence’, before returning to the present (March 2006) and ‘Blogging Project Runway’.

The LiveJournal Batgirl Meme

We can begin a few days after the event with a 16 January post on davidbau.com’s *A Dabbler’s Weblog* (davidbau.com/archives/2006/01/17/draw_batgirl_day.html) which asks if readers noticed how the previous Friday ‘everybody on LiveJournal dropped everything to draw Batgirl.’ A LiveJournal blogger, Andi Watson, posted about how another blogger’s post reminded him of some character designs he had created in the late 1990s for a ‘cute Japanese Batgirl’ (see andiwatson.livejournal.com/37925.html). He included an image in his post of some of the sketches he had come up with. This sparked a discussion among a couple of people on his Friends list, one of whom, Jamie Dee Gailey, responded with his own version of Batgirl (himynameisjamie.livejournal.com/342720.html). From that point a significant portion of LiveJournal’s web space seems to have exploded into an impromptu, high octane comic aficionado affinity space. Over the next 24 hours several hundred responses to the initial posts flooded in, each offering their own version of Batgirl. Some latecomers were still posting near the end of January. Contributions included carefully drawn images submitted by professional comics artists through to the quixotic renderings done by people clearly quite unused to drawing the human figure. The first respondent, Jamie Dee Gailey, generated a list of participants seemingly to serve as a record of the event (himynameisjamie.livejournal.com/345568.html). The early links appear to be organised chronologically and act as a kind of history trail for how the short-lived meme began.

The Case of Bloggers vs Dan Rather’s Evidence

Jason Gallo (2004: 1) claims that

[n]ews-oriented blogs have created a *real-time virtual feedback loop* that disrupts the temporality of the traditional news cycle [and] are helping to usher in a new form of hybrid journalism that merges traditional newsroom practices with the decentralized intelligence of individuals and groups spread across the Internet (original emphasis).

This real-time virtual feedback loop refers to the way in which the immediacy of blogs is linked to the relative ease of quoting from, linking to, commenting on, elaborating upon, critiquing or challenging any given post within the blogosphere.

Interconnectedness occurs not only among people with blogs who happen to know each other, but is assisted by the kinds of tools we have mentioned earlier: online indices or portals (e.g., Eatonweb.com); diffusion or popularity indices that track most-linked to blog posts on a given day (e.g., Blogdex.com, Popdex.com); email alert services that let subscribers know when the blog has been updated (e.g., Bloglet.com, Squeet.com); blog-oriented search engines that search for blogs and/or keywords within blog posts (e.g., Technorati.com, Daypop.com, Blogpulse.com); and syndication services.

This interconnectedness means that many discussions about and critiques of news reporting within the blogosphere are often collaborative affairs, with each poster building on or adding to an analysis from their particular point of view and range of expertise. Collective nouns, like ‘hive brain’, have been lifted from science fiction to describe this distributed expertise and analysis effect because common-use nouns simply do not capture the remarkableness of this phenomenon. Kelly McBride’s (2004) observation that ‘[w]e journalists are no longer the gatekeepers in the marketplace of ideas’ rings true within the blogosphere. Ironically, given journalists’ initial tendency to disparage the quality of blogposts and commentary, mainstream media journalists have increasingly found themselves reporting on blog posts as significant sources of valid opinion, analysis and critique.

An example of this occurred in the second half of 2004, when Dan Rather, anchor for the U.S. television news show, *60 Minutes*, reported on a series of memos that threw into question whether George Bush Jr had completed his National Guard service during 1972 and 1973. Before Rather had signed off on the segment bloggers were critiquing the validity of the memos (McBride 2004, Ooi 2004). Nineteen minutes into the broadcast, TankerKC (his posting name) made a post to the highly conservative Freerepublic.com, an online discussion board and news blog portal, suggesting that the style and format of the memos did not match those used when he was in the U.S. military (Ooi 2004). Four hours later, Buckhead (his posting name) posted a comment to the same discussion board critiquing the font in which the memos were printed (Ooi 2004). He pointed out that each of the documents shown on CBS was printed in a proportionally spaced font (e.g., Palatino or Times new Roman). In the early 1970s, however, personal memos within the military were produced mostly by means of typewriters, which use monospace characters (e.g., Courier, Letter Gothic). Buckhead used his knowledge of the evolution of fonts to argue that the memos were forgeries. He turned out to be right.

Buckhead’s critique spread rapidly through the blogosphere. Issues connected with the memos, the then-upcoming federal elections, and how the exposure of the fake memos effectively deflected attention from Bush’s actual incomplete National Guard service, were taken up and discussed at length within blogs spanning the political spectrum. Buckhead’s critique was subsequently reported in mainstream media, including *The Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *LA Times* *The Australian*, the *BBC*, and *CNN* among others. Many of these venues also focused on how the issue was taken up and discussed within the blogosphere itself.

Blogging Project Runway

There is a major study to be made of the Blogging Project Runway phenomenon (bloggingprojectrunway.blogspot.com). This, however, remains for others to do. All the signs in March 2006 are that this blog constitutes a significant popular culture and participation phenomenon.

For the uninitiated, BravoTV’s *Project Runway* is a ‘reality’ television show in the broad genre of shows like *American Idol* and *Survivor* that runs as a serialised competition with a focus on fashion design. For each episode the participating designers are given a fashion design challenge and their resulting creations are modelled by their chosen model (who is also up for elimination should ‘her’ designer not make the next round) and judged by a panel comprising a supermodel (Heidi Klum), a highly regarded fashion magazine editor (Nina Garcia), a famous American designer (Michael Kors) and a guest judge who changes each week. For example, Episode 9 in the second series was called ‘Flower Power’ and designers were required create a dress using only natural materials purchased in the New York Flower

District on a tight budget. The resulting dresses were then sent down the runway on each designer's model. Contestants are progressively eliminated each episode until there is an overall winner. Each week a model and a designer is eliminated. The stakes are high for the designers: a sizable cash prize, a luxury car (in the second series), a one-year apprenticeship at Banana Republic (an American clothing line), and the opportunity to show a collection of designs at the internationally famous and trend-setting New York Fashion Week. The winning model appears in an extended fashion spread in *Elle* magazine.

In early June, 2005, a blogger named Laura K made a modest initial posting on a new blog called *Blogging Project Runway*, hosted by the free provider, Blogger.com (see bloggingprojectrunway.blogspot.com). Under the post title 'I Miss Project Runway', Laura entered:

Okay, this might be a bit obsessive but I miss Project Runway [season 1] and I want to be totally prepared for next season [airing December 7]. I intend to blog away after every episode and I hope others will join me with fascinating comments. In fact...bring on the comments now if you'd like! I'd appreciate any help I can get. Please pass on any PR news or information - thanks.

Also, I'd like to keep this Rated G for ALL audiences - I have five children who enjoy reading my blogs. Thanks for your consideration.

posted by Laura K at 9:59 PM 0 comments

Assuming the comments count in the archives is correct, during the first month of the blog's operation there were only 2 comments posted (by Barb and Bethany). Both endorsed Laura's dislike of a particular contestant in the past season's line up of competing designers. During the second month most of Laura's posts got comments, and most of these were made by Barb, who was the only person to make comments during August, 2005. In September there was only one comment (Anonymous) and one comment had been removed by the blog administrator. During September and October 2005 there were more posts – with one of these posts receiving 7 comments (some of them seemingly facetious). Barb was absent, but showed up again in November. She was house sitting and had access to BravoTV again. Laura was responding to some of the comments, expressing delight – 'How great. Another fan' – when one reader described *Project Runway* as her life. There were 6 posts in November, and a total of 6 comments. Two of these were for a post that contained a photo of one of the final-three contestants from the previous season, Wendy Pepper.

The comments increased dramatically in December 2005 when season 2 of *Project Runway* began. Laura K's posts were becoming more regular and complex. She began using a high proportion of photographs in her posts as well. Copying and pasting just the posts for December into Word resulted in a 34 page print out. Posts were made on 19 days that month, and there was a total of around 140 comments posted during this period as well.

Two months later, at the end of February, there were three additional formal contributors to the blog listed along with Laura. The printout for February's posts alone ran to 138 pages and we counted 3600 comments in all. February was the month in which the competition was whittled down to the final three contestants who would show collections at New York Fashion Week before the final winner was announced. Reading the comments on the days when the episodes were running, or when some 'live'

event associated with the show was happening on the blog (e.g., people posting comments about in-process televised interviews with final candidates, or with other personnel from *Project Runway*), reveals very interesting commenting patterns – in some cases individuals are interacting frenetically with other, making comments in a manner akin to chat room conversations (for example, see Jan the Dan Fan’s comments under ‘This Post is for the Party’ on Wednesday, February 22, 2006).

What is to be said about ‘participation’ on this blog? This question constitutes a research goldmine, and patterns are likely to change between periods when each new season is running and the periods in between. A preliminary survey we have made of the blog posts and comments from June 2006 to the end of February 2006 has suggested some questions that may be worth asking. These include:

- Who abides over time? Who is still visible on the blog in, say, February or June 2006 who was there in June to December 2005 when the blog was just getting started? For example, ‘asarkees’ made comments in December 2005 and was still commenting in February 2006. Will ‘asarkees’ still be commenting later in 2006?
- In the case of individuals who make comments and who abide over time and make significant numbers of comments, to what extent does their participation reflect continuity or change? If there is change, what kind of change?
- What categories of participants can be identified? For example, those at home, people from the TV show, the designers, high profile bloggers, the main contributors, people who comment once and not again, people who comment on different kinds of issues, people who set up blogs of their own on the show (do they link to this one and participate visibly in it?)
- Can we identify patterns of interaction between participants? Who seems to be talking to who?
- Which participants seem to get noticed, or otherwise seem to bear significant power? Which ones do not?
- What categories of posts can be identified?
- What categories of comments can be identified – e.g, by theme, quality, uptake or other traces of significance?
- Do comments get taken up in posts? Which, if any? Whose? What about?
- What kinds of artefacts are generated via the posts? What might be done with them, by whom? How are they being taken up by participants? (e.g., there are embedded videos, audiofiles, transcripts, etc.)
- Does the blog go through ‘identity’ changes and, if so, do these changes seem to be associated with changes in participation?
- What might be said about Laura K (the blog founder) as participant? For example, to what extent and in what ways does the Laura K of June 2005 resemble the Laura K of February 2006 or (projecting ahead from the time of writing) in June 2006 or December 2006?
- To what extent can the participants be identified as *fans*: of the show, of particular designers, of fashion in general, of the blog? How is their participation related to their identity as fan?

The social universe of *Blogging Project Runway* participants and participation is rich, complex and interesting. In one space we have Barb, who was there at the start. Her photo that accompanies her comments reveals an open face with a happy friendly smile. She made one of the two comments to Laura’s ‘My Barbie’ post of 14 December 2005, asking: ‘Do you have a degree in Fashion design, Laura? If not, then WHY NOT? It’s not too late. I know you sell your clothes now, but why not further the process? Sounds like it was your calling all along.’ In another space we have The Scarlett, who

offers a comment on who qualifies as a socialite in response to Laura's post of 30 December, 'Is this a Socialite?' (Referring to the episode where the designers are told that they will be designing for a 'socialite,' who turns out to be Nicky Hilton, a young American woman famous for being famous), then in late January makes some candy heart icons available to the blog that are imprinted with names of key figures in project Runway (e.g., Tim Gunn, Santino, Andrae), or slogans signalling particular fandoms (e.g., 'Pick Nick', 'Dan Fan'), along with information on how to add these icons to one's profile or insert them in a blog post, and in February is a full blog contributor making regular posts. In other spaces we have some of designers themselves and key personnel (e.g., Tim Gunn) associated with the show providing material in the form of emails to Laura (with permission to post the letters to the blog) and generating a virtual carnival of comments in response. In addition, various other people interested in the show and the blog contributed a range of additional materials, included scanned magazine pages that showcase interviews with one or other of the season's designer hopefuls, video clips or stills grabbed from each episode, links to online interviews with or profile pieces on competing designers, links to spoofs and remixes associated with key figures in the show, links to photographs of the final collections shown at Fashion Week prior to that particular episode airing, accounts of real-life encounters with the designers or, even better, with Tim Gunn (by day a professor at Parsons College of Design in New York and who has acquired cult status in the design appreciation world thanks to *Project Runway*). Manolo the Shoe Blogger (shoeblogs.com; 'Manolo Loves the Shoes') also offered blogging advice to Laura, which she took and acknowledged in a post of 29 January: '[Manolo] gave me the most excellent advice for BPR, which I will pass on. He advised me to post frequently and to aim to "amuse." I think of this every day. He also sent me some valuable encouragement when I really needed it.'

And so on.

From our perspective, *Blogging Project Runway* provides a very interesting case of blogging as participation. It is one kind of case and, at least in the U.S., is a high profile case. It affords insights into particular kinds of participation. So, at a different point on the continuum, do blogs like *Because; We are Ordinary People* (users.livejournal.com/encaustic_) and the tens of millions of other blogs that constitute the blogosphere. If we are to understand new literacies well there is no better place to begin than with weblogs in all their diversity.

Conclusion

To say that new literacies are constituted in part by their 'ethos stuff' – as we have argued in this paper – is to draw attention to their affiliation with the cultural logic of the insider, or second, mindset described earlier and, more specifically, with social and ontological constructs like Web 2.0. This, in turn, is to draw attention to the deeply participatory nature of these literacies, nowhere better instantiated than in the social practice of blogging.

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