

# **Sign Here!** **Handwriting** **in the Age of** *New Media*

Edited by Sonja Neef, José van Dijck, and Eric Ketelaar

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## Transformations in Art and Culture

The series Transformations in Art and Culture is dedicated to the study of historical and contemporary transformations in arts and culture, emphasizing processes of cultural change as they manifest themselves over time, through space, and in various media. Main goal of the series is to examine the effects of globalization, commercialization and technologization on the form, content, meaning and functioning of cultural products and socio-cultural practices. New means of cultural expression give meaning to our existence, and give rise to new modes of artistic expression, interaction, and community formation. Books in this series will primarily concentrate on contemporary changes in cultural practices, but will always account for their historical roots.

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Table of Contents

7

Sign Here! Handwriting in the Age of Technical Reproduction:

Introduction

José van Dijck and Sonja Neef

*Section One: Authentic Copies*

23

Authentic Events:

The Diaries of Anne Frank and the Alleged Diaries of Adolf Hitler

Sonja Neef

51

The Authority of Drawing:

Hand, Authenticity, and Authorship

Michael Wetzel

60

Authenticity and Objectivity in Scientific Communication:

Implications of Digital Media

John Mackenzie Owen

76

Authenticity in Bits and Bytes

Hannelore Dekeyser

*Section Two: Re-Mediating Handwriting*

95

Signature Identity Content:

Handwriting in an Age of Digital Remediation

Richard Grusin

116

Writing the Self:

Of Diaries and Weblogs

José van Dijck

134

Hands on the Document:

Arnold Dreyblatt's T Archive

Arnold Dreyblatt and Jeffrey Wallen

Table of Contents

150

Faithfully Submitted:

The Logic of the Signature in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche*

Mieke Bal

164

(Hand)writing Film History:

Saul Bass Draws Martin Scorsese in a Title Sequence and Writes

his Name Underneath

Rembert Hüser

*Section Three: Handwriting and (Dis-)Embodiment*

183

Writing on Archiving Machines

Eric Ketelaar

196

Blood Samples and Fingerprint Files:

Blood as Artificial Matter, Artistic Material, and Means of the Signature

Thomas Fechner-Smarsly

206

Writing Over the Body, Writing With the Body:

On Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah* Series

Begüm Özden Firat

221

Perfor/m/ative Writing:

Tattoo, Mark, Signature

Sonja Neef

237

Contributors

241

Illustration Acknowledgement

242

Index

# Writing the Self: Of Diaries and Weblogs

## Introduction

A cartoon that recently appeared in a Dutch newspaper shows a man and a woman lying in bed, smoking a cigarette apparently after having sex. ‘Do you keep a diary?’ the man asks his partner, and upon her response of ‘no’, he comments: ‘Good. I don’t like it when a woman immortalizes her intimate experiences with me on paper’. In the last frame, we see the woman sitting behind a computer screen and typing ‘Dear weblog...’, while the man snores away on the bed behind her. In this short cartoon, we can detect a number of preconceived notions about diaries and weblogs, but the clue to this joke is the paradox that the weblog is not considered a digital equivalent of the diary and yet it is.<sup>1</sup>

For centuries, the diary has been characterized as a private, handwritten document that chronicles the experiences, observations, and reflections of a single person at the moment of inscription. Although the diary as a cultural form is varied and heterogeneous, it typically represents the record of an ‘I’ who constructs a view of him/herself in connection to the world at large. Diary writing, as a quotidian cultural practice, involves reflection and expression; it is also a peculiarly hybrid act of communication, always intended for private use, yet often betraying an awareness of its potential to be read by others. Inviting the translation from thoughts into words via the technologies of pen and paper, the old-fashioned diary symbolized a safe haven for a person’s most private thoughts. Personal notebooks were often treasured as stilled moments of a forlorn past, and kept in safe places to be retrieved many years later – much like photographs. But what has happened to the diary as we enter the age of digital technologies?

With digitization affecting practically every domain of public and private life, the diary is no exception. ‘Weblogs’ have become a popular genre on the Internet, as millions of people (particularly teenagers and young adults) are now heavily engaged in the activity of ‘blogging’. By the end of 2004, there were about 10 million weblog users in the United States alone.<sup>2</sup> But can weblogs and blogging be consid-

ered the digital counterpart of what used to be a paper diary and diary writing? As the cartoon implies, the answer to this question is a paradoxical ‘yes and no’. Cultural practices or forms never simply adapt to new technological conditions, but always inherently change along with the technologies and the potentialities of their use. In the case of weblogs, the digital materiality of the Internet engenders a new type of reflection and communication that shows traces of the former analogue genre, but also functions substantially differently.

Richard Grusin and Jay Bolter have used the term ‘remediation’ to account for the ways in which new media forms consolidate but also change existing forms (Bolter and Grusin 1999). In a critique of this term, Andreas Kitzmann argues that ‘remediation’ does not sufficiently account for the intrinsic shaping power of technology, and proposes to focus on the wider phenomenon of ‘material complexification’ to understand the continuities and changes between old and new media, for instance weblogs and webcams (Kitzmann 2003, 48-65).<sup>3</sup> Both Bolter and Grusin and Kitzmann have a point. But I would argue that studying media changes is not a question of *either* cultural form *or* technology. In this chapter, I suggest examining not two but three dimensions of mediated cultural change: the *materiality and technology* of (hand)written diaries versus weblogs, the diary or weblog as a *cultural form* or genre, and the *cultural practice* of diary writing in comparison to the activities of so-called bloggers. While tracing the transformation of personal records in the face of new digital technologies, I will argue that weblogs are not outcomes but rather *signifiers* of cultural change as they both reflect and construct new epistemologies.

### The Technology and materiality of diaries and weblogs

Diaries are commonly valued for their contents rather than for their look or feel. Nevertheless, the materiality of diaries as well as the technology through which these artifacts have come into being are crucial factors in their signification.<sup>4</sup> Two typical concepts of diaries spring to mind: the empty diary, preformatted for daily use, which we can buy in stationary stores; and the original manuscripts of private diaries which have later appeared in print. The physical appearance of a prefab diary prefigures the functions of its intended use: empty pages, with or without lines, bound or unbound, dated or undated, offer the author stimuli to fill the more or less blank surface with personal inscriptions and thoughts. In some cases, the diary is completed by a lock and key – a potent symbol of its private nature. The preformatted diary has always been, to some extent, a product of contemporary fashion, its design and layout representing a particular style and catering to a specific age or taste. A diary’s materiality forms an essential part of its content: pages, cover, key, colors, ink and paper (its look, feel, and smell) are all part of the act of memory. Over the years, diarists often grow fond of the material look of their notebooks – fading colors, youthful handwriting, and ink blobs trigger reminiscences in a way that photographs might. The diary’s contents, when reread at a later stage in life, may either elicit nostalgic yearning or retroactive embarrassment, in some cases

even leading to a definitive destruction of the object. A reified memory object of one's past, the diary is the stilled result of a creative *and* communicative act.

Diary writing is not necessarily inspired by prefab formats: on the contrary, many diaries which were later discovered and subsequently published in print, had first been written in ordinary notebooks or scribbled on individual sheets of paper. The actual manuscript of such a diary, its original form of inscription, becomes a vital sign of authenticity – often stored in special places and only accessible to owners or researchers. In the case of Anne Frank's diary, which consisted partly of notebooks and partly of separate sheets of paper, the gradual discovery and reconstruction of the various 'versions' of the manuscript became part of the Dutch teenager's legacy.<sup>5</sup> The original manuscript, stored in Amsterdam, appeared to be in such demand that the Anne Frank Foundation had two exact duplicates made: one to replace the original on display at the museum, the other to satisfy the many requests from film directors, researchers and documentary makers for pictures of the original. The materiality of the manuscript constitutes an intricate part of the diary's genesis and, later, its controversial claims to authenticity, (uncensored) originality and completeness.

Pivotal to the materiality of diaries, up to the age of computers, has been the notion of script: the concept of a diary is commonly associated with (hand)writing, signifying not just authenticity, but personality. Handwriting has historically been believed to betray the personality of its producer – graphology being the study that yields clues to the writer's character such as age and even personality traits. Regarded as the first 'technologizing of the word', the availability of pen and paper facilitated the need to make oneself legible to the 'other' or to the future self (Ong 1982). Writing is thus intimately tied to a stage in one's personal development: a teenager's scrawls betray his or her inexperience with the prime tool of literacy – the immaturity of body or mind.<sup>6</sup> As Sonja Neef argues, handwriting is an embodied practice: moving a pen onto paper involves a direct connection between body and script, an act in which the eye and hand are intimately interwoven with the technology of paper and pen and the techniques of deploying them; the hand – a body part instrumental to the '*Verkörperung*' (embodiment) of thoughts – fixes the inner self to the outside world (Neef 2002).<sup>7</sup>

Since other technologies have gradually replaced handwriting, the tools of a diarist have changed accordingly. When Sigmund Freud wrote his essay 'A Note Upon the "Mystic Writing Pad"', in 1925, he regarded writing and technology as external aids or supplements to memory. Freud described memory *in terms of* writing, comparing it to the surface of a writing pad that allowed the scribbling of notes that could subsequently be erased and yet remain stored in the 'subconscious' layers of the pad, below its material surface. Jacques Derrida, commenting upon Freud's essay, dismisses his notion of writing as an external memory and emphasizes instead technology's instrumental relationship to language and representation (Derrida 1995).<sup>8</sup> Technologies, including writing utensils, are machines that engender representations while infiltrating agency. Pen and paper, therefore, produce different modes of writing than the typewriter or the word processor.<sup>9</sup> Handwriting never simply structures reflections or thoughts, but literally creates them;

by the same token, a typewriter constitutes a different relation between author, words, and representation. It may not be a coincidence that typewriters never became popular in connection with diary writing; unlike handwriting, the noise of fingers pounding on a machine severed the physical intimacy between body and word.<sup>10</sup> As the technologies for writing change, so does our way of creating self-reflective records. Handwritten diaries are material artifacts that are themselves memorials – traces of a past self. Memory, in other words, is always implicated in the act and technology of writing.

The advent of the personal word processor, as the successor to the (electronic) typewriter, further disembodied the production of written language, as not only the keyboard but also the screen interfered with the continuity between hand and words. Yet two essential features of word processing may have restored some of the intimacy lost with the typewriter. First, the relative silence of word processors refurbished part of the quietude inherent in solitary writing, while speeding up the production of text and maintaining standardized letter output. Even more profound has been the ability of word processors to produce tentative texts, provisional versions of thoughts, forever amenable to changes of mind; the editing of visualized words does not leave a trace in the ultimate print. Words on the screen, stored in digital memory, thus formed a new stage in the trajectory between immaterial thoughts and textual products, allowing for invisible revisionist interferences in one's memory. On top of that, digital files may never materialize into print, and they can remain stored in the black box of the personal computer, without ever being erased or retrieved (by the writer or by others). Diaries produced by a word processor, therefore, are fundamentally different from diaries produced by means of handwriting or typewriters because the personal computer provides an intrinsic textual paintbrush with which to edit one's personal records. The potential of digital editing at a later stage diluted the concept of the diary as a material, 'authentic' artifact, inscribed in time and on paper.

In the 1990s, when individual word processors gradually gave way to networked computers and the Internet became a popular medium for interaction, the diary seemed a doomed genre, incommensurable with the prime demands of ubiquitous connection rooted in digital materiality. The evanescence of the Internet appears at odds with the genre preference for a fixed material output. Moreover, the private nature of diary writing intrinsically conflicts with the connectedness of the electronic superhighway. Between body and words on paper there is no longer just a piece of equipment but a global network of connected individuals and communities. Such technological machinery is likely to hinder, rather than benefit, the privacy and intimacy of self-reflexive writing. And yet, perhaps surprisingly, the weblog is one of the most popular genres booming on the Internet today.<sup>11</sup> The weblog appears, at first sight, to be a digital descendant of the paper diary, except that there is no printed output, only a screen-based one; since computers do not smell, and the screen has no particular feel, how can we define what the digital matter of weblogs actually consists of?



Analogous to the preformatted paper diary and the diarist's handwriting, we can locate the materiality of weblogs in two different areas: weblog software and the *signature* of its users. Weblogs or webdiaries emerged in 1996, but only in the past four years has their popularity soared. Initially, blogs were typically personal websites operated by individuals who compiled chronological lists of links, interspersed with information and editorialized and personal asides.<sup>12</sup> They later became experiments in self-expression, creating blog-communities where people read each other's weblogs and cross-linked their personal websites. The first weblogs were operated mostly by digirati, but as specially developed software made blogging technically easy, more people without any specific technological skills joined the various kinds of 'blogging groups'.<sup>13</sup> Since 2000, a large number of software packages have flooded the market, enabling even the clumsiest person to become a sophisticated blogger. Today, users can choose from a variety of different packages, aside from open diaries on the web, such as Opendiary.com and MyDearDiary.com, there are also weblog services for which you need to sign up or even be introduced by a member, like LiveJournal, Blurty, Xanga, DeadJournal, Blogger, and DiaryLand. The formats may differ in layout and digital possibilities, but they all basically serve the same purpose.<sup>14</sup> To some extent, these different designs resemble the preformatted paper diaries for sale at stationary stores. Various software formats attract different crowds, catering to heterogeneous tastes and lifestyles among teenagers, much like the brand names of fashion products. Weblogs are also dynamic material artifacts; they are not meant to be printed out and their contents are constantly evolving. Actually, a blogger may decide to leave its content exactly as it was first posted (and post additional comments) but of course the possibilities for editing, erasing, storing, cutting, and pasting are endless.

Software, however, merely constitutes the technological condition for its varied individualized use. Digital weblogs may, in terms of their materiality, not even remotely resemble their paper precursor, but there is a distinct continuity in their personal *signature*. If handwriting betrayed a diary writer's character and level of maturity, the typewriter and later the word processor had already erased that trademark of personality, and yet, through word choice, style, punctuation, and the use of emoticons it is remarkable how much the entries give away a person's character. On top of that, the personality of a diarist is even more traceable by means of her prolific choices of cultural contents; the blogosphere is part of a vast reservoir of texts, visuals and sounds, and most software packages support their inclusion via links or sidebars (e.g., to newspapers, fan sites, discussion groups, political lists, etc.).<sup>15</sup> Weblogs seem particularly suited to accommodate the needs of teenagers, whose growth into adulthood is often characterized by quickly evolving loyalties to styles, fashions, and brands. Despite prescriptive software formats, weblogs offer a relatively high degree of creative freedom; users can discover their own taste by cutting, pasting, and commenting, thus exploring the relationship between the self and culture at large. Some weblog software (like OpenDiary.com) allows users to search entries by age group, gender, theme of the week, subject or cultural preferences.

Although the multimedia weblog looks very different from the preformatted lock-and-key paper diary, each materiality gives away clues to an author's personality. Just as paper diaries reflected someone's age, taste, and preference at a particular moment in one's life, the software and *signature* of blogs seem to accommodate the needs of contemporary teens and young adults to express and sort out their identity in an increasingly wired, mediated world. But technology does not tell the whole story. In conjunction with changing technologies and materialities, we need to pay closer attention to the cultural forms and practices of diary writing, to see how they change along with evolving notions of intimacy, privacy and memory.

### Diaries and Weblogs as a cultural form

Another paradox surfacing in the cartoon discussed at the beginning of this article, is the idea that diaries are a strictly private genre, whereas weblogs are private yet open to all who want to read. Both assumptions are incorrect. Over the past centuries, the diary as a cultural form has been defined in a number of ways: the diary as therapy or self-help, as a means of confession, as a chronicle of adventurous journeys (both spiritual and physical), or as a scrapbook for creative endeavors.<sup>16</sup> Beatrice Didier, a French literary theorist, articulates a more general distinction, based on the content of the entries, between the personal or private 'diary' (*'le journal intime'*) and the more public or factual 'journal' (Didier 1976). Another French literary scholar, Eric Marty, classifies diaries by their addressees: are they strictly secret or written for others as well? (Marty 1985). In general, the taxonomy of the old-fashioned paper diary tends to be based either on its contents (personal, intimate self-expressions vis-à-vis daily records of fact) or on its directionality (intended for private reading vis-à-vis public use). But how useful is this genre classification along the axes of self and others, of intimacy and openness? And how does this distinction hold up in the face of new digital cultural forms and publishing practises?

The myth that the diary is a private genre, strictly written for oneself, is as misleading as it is persistent. A binary distinction between the diary as a personal record written for private purposes in contrast to a journal of fact written to show others, is hardly tenable.<sup>17</sup> As Thomas Mallon argues, no one ever kept a diary just for himself; pointing out the continuity between the 'journal' and the 'diary', he concludes that both are directed towards an audience and 'both [are] rooted in the idea of dailiness, but perhaps because of the journal's links to the newspaper trade and diary's to 'dear', the latter seems more intimate than the former' (Mallon 1984, p. xvi). Of all the varieties within the genre, some diaries are written with a reader in mind more than others, but an essential feature of all diaries is their addressee. Whereas some authors directed their diaries to an imagined friend (like Anne Frank's 'Kitty', or André Gide's mysterious addressee), to God, or to the world-at-large, the notion of addressing is crucial to the recognition of diary writing as an *act of communication*.<sup>18</sup> Writing, even as a form of self-expression, signals the need to

connect, either to someone or something else, or to oneself later in life. William M. Decker, who theorized the evolution of epistolary writing in the United States, observes that letters, much like diaries, carry the aura of a private genre, whereas the genre encodes itself according to public standards: 'What we identify as the private life is a conventionalized and hence public construction' (Decker 1998, 6). Diary writing is, to a large extent, a cultural form firmly rooted in rhetorical conventions: intimacy and privacy are *effects* rather than intrinsic features of the genre.

Another paradox we can trace in the genealogy of diaries is the belief that their creation is usually associated with individual voice and authorship, whereas in reality the genre has often been deployed as a communal means of expressing and remembering. To many religious congregations, for instance, the diary was a semi-public record, shared within but never outside of a community. Elizabeth Yakel describes in her intriguing account of the Maryknoll Sisters' archive how, between 1912 and 1967, this religious community adapted the genre as a collective means of expression to record and exchange spiritual and intellectual journeys to each other (Yakel 2003, 142-150). Their record-keeping practices suited various goals, from expressing individual beliefs to communicating information across time and space with like-minded congregations: 'The diaries had multiple audiences – they were a means of internal communication within the community and also served as a mechanism for external communication to Catholics and others interested in their mission activities' (Yakel 2003, 143). In the history of diary writing, the genre as a communal means of expression has found many practitioners, from South Pole explorers keeping logbooks to POWs writing their war diaries while held in captivity. As Michael Piggott, archivist at the University of Melbourne discovered, Australian archives contain many such collective ego documents, chronicling important episodes from the 16th to the 19th centuries through the eyes of transient groups (Piggott 2003, 68-75). For many groups bound together by an adventurous ordeal, a joint diary was a means to trust one's personal emotions to a relatively safe medium and share the experience with mates held captive under the same conditions. Diaries have thus historically been produced by both individuals and groups, regardless of their degree of intimacy or their potential to appear in print. Since its very inception, the genre has been dialogic rather than monologic, hence obliterating the line between private and public.

Upon entering the digital era, the diary as a cultural (or literary) form appears to have survived in its many varieties and its layered complexity. Searching on the Internet today, one can find a plethora of digital forms, everything from travel blogs chronicling the climbing of Mount Everest to personal blogs commenting on books or music; from the spiritual journey of a born-again Christian to the intimate exchange of sexual experiences between teenagers, and from outbursts of psychological distress to the quotidian musings of a psychiatrist. If you search Google under 'blogs' you will find travel blogs, sex blogs, personal blogs, political blogs, religious blogs and what have you. The SlowTravelersBlog ([www.slowtravelersblog.com](http://www.slowtravelersblog.com))

slowtrav.com), including webcam pictures and essays mostly by hikers, could not be more different from the musings on Bitter-Girl.com. It is impossible to characterize some blogs as personal and others as public, and yet we typically characterize all of them as blogs. Obviously, privacy or publicness is not a standard feature of weblogs and it would be misleading to subdivide the genre accordingly.

The digital successor of the diary is as polymorphous as its paper precursor, and yet, when researching the new functions and forms of diary writing in the digital era, the old typology of the diary in terms of content and directionality still often informs the epistemology of the weblog. For instance, a 1998 Japanese study into the formal structures and uses of diaries on the Internet, departs from the notion that they can be classified according to their contents as ‘records of fact’ or ‘expression of sentiment’, or according to their directionality as ‘written for oneself’ or ‘written for others’ (Kawaura, Kawakami, and Yamashita 1998, 234-45).<sup>19</sup> This classification along binary axes results in a new typology of diaries on the World Wide Web as ‘memoirs’, ‘journals’, ‘narrowly defined diaries’ and ‘open diaries.’ The researchers’ attenuated conclusion that writing a web diary is primarily communicative behavior, however, also applies to paper diaries. Digital cultural forms are often erroneously ascribed ‘unique’ features such as interactivity or communicability. As I argued above, though, paper diaries have always shown a peculiar mixture of intimacy and publicity, of individual and communal effort, of self-expression and communication. If we look at weblogs, we can observe a similar blend. In order to explain the paradoxes and discontinuities embodied by diaries and blogs, we need to shift our focus away from genre typologies and pay more attention to how these forms are actually used.

### Diary writing and Blogging as Cultural Practices

Many researchers, like the ones discussed above, assume that the digital diary is a seamless continuation of the paper diary, thus ignoring the emergence of a new mediating apparatus. The Internet, however, is not simply an amplification of the individual word processor, but is a new tool that also encompasses many features of the old. In our focus on technology, we often tend to underemphasize how social and cultural conditions change along with the apparatus. Both diary writing and blogging are interesting cultural practices – quotidian habits or daily rituals which gradually receive a place in a person’s life. Cultural practices, in the past century, have become increasingly mediated: watching television, talking on the phone, taking pictures or writing e-mails are only a few of many potential communicative acts by means of which a person articulates herself. With the introduction of the Internet, some of these daily rituals are gradually changing, often fusing old practices with new conventions. For instance, e-mails can be regarded as ‘remediations’ of hand-written letters, but, more profoundly, the emergence of e-mail also substantially transformed one’s daily ritual of communication and interaction, along with one’s sense of physical or psychological presence – just as the telephone

changed communicative patterns along with notions of proximity and presence a hundred years earlier. It is important to note that these changes always involve both technology *and* practice, the mutual shaping of which is firmly embedded in culture.

Writing a diary, of course, never happened in a social vacuum; the ritual occupied its own niche alongside other acts of communication, such as talking, listening, reading, etc. As a quotidian habit, diary keeping gives meaning and structure to someone's life. In the case of Anne Frank, writing a journal created a zone of silence and refuge in a small space, densely crowded and heavily trafficked by human interaction. Her daily ritual was an act of self-protection as much as self-expression. By carving out a discursive space, she was able to articulate her private thoughts and define her position in relation to others and the world at large. Diary writers fashion a habit by choosing a medium; the creation of that mediated habit is always inspired by cultural conventions and prevailing fashions.<sup>20</sup> Quotidian acts such as diary writing should thus not only be regarded as stilled reflections of life, but as ways of constructing life. They always coexist amidst a number of other communicative habits and culturally determined practices.

For the contemporary blogger, the Internet is just one of a host of media through which to express agency, and blogging is one of many competing practices, such as speaking (both face-to-face and phone conversations), writing (letters, sms, e-mail), watching (television, film, photographs) and listening (music, talk). The practices that fill the mediated lives of today's youngsters are deployed concurrently and complementarily; the weblog offers a few amenities that other media lack, such as the ability to combine extensive written comments with pictures, tunes, links and clips, as well as the possibility to post something online to a large anonymous readership; blogging is potentially a multimedia practice – a combination of old-fashioned diary writing, letter writing, the exchange of cultural objects, publication, and even conversation.<sup>21</sup> New hybrid rituals always emerge in dialogue (and in competition) with already existing practices. Viewed from that angle, it should come as no surprise to find that, while about half of all personal blogs do, indeed, fully exploit the multimedia potential of the Internet, the other half contains no links at all.<sup>22</sup> As the practice evolves, these numbers are likely to change, but at this moment of transformation we can observe how conventional habits of diary writing coexists with a truly multimedia version of blogging.

The networked computer is instrumental in the way a blogger simultaneously fashions his/her identity and creates a sense of community. Blogging both complements and interferes with everyday 'live' communication: weblog entries are part of a person's ecosystem of various community circles through which they move and shape their lives. Some of these circles overlap, some do not. The by and large reflexive nature of the weblog has its place within the contact zones of everyday life that each individual constructs, and which are usually a mixture of real-life and virtual experiences. Through their LiveJournals or Xangas, teenagers do not only express themselves, but create a communal sense of values and thoughts deemed worthy of being shared. In a weblog, one may blurt out confessions of loneliness and insecurity – behavior inhibited in face-to-face encounters – despite the fact

that everyone in a peer group can potentially read these outbursts. Bloggers usually do not talk about what they say online, even though in real life they may speak to each other on a daily basis.<sup>23</sup> Online posts can be read and responded to by immediate friends and relatives, while they may also invoke reciprocity from complete strangers, adding another dimension to the small world of immediate peers. The distribution features of blogging software are a subtler version of the lock-and-key-diary; with each posting users can decide to whom they make content available – options ranging from ‘just myself’ to ‘friends only’ to ‘anyone’. Defining one’s readership is bound to define one’s sense of inclusion in and exclusion from a community, whatever shape that community may take – actual or virtual, intellectually formative or emotionally supportive. In contrast to the paper diary, the weblog is part of a mediated continuum, a lived world in which the individual is always connected.<sup>24</sup> Although reciprocity is the default mode of blogging, still half the number of internet diaries turn out to be non-reciprocal (Herring). Apparently, old habits of diary writing coexist with new connected practices, while they become gradually incorporated by a medium that shifts the technological condition from isolation to connection.

The inclusion and exclusion of (potential) readers from one’s weblog constitutes an intricate game, the stakes of which are identity formation and community construction. Identity, as Australian media theorist Esther Milne claims, is always, in varying degrees, a performance: ‘It is the result of complex cultural, technological, economic and institutional forces rather than being a natural, somatic or psychological process that is fundamentally independent of historical influences’ (Milne 2004, 8). Current ‘complex forces’ are geared towards swift and easy distribution of ideas. In the past, the ability to expose oneself to a wider audience of unknown readers was something for which a paper diarist was previously dependent on a publisher who would print and distribute the diary, usually resulting in a considerable time lag between the moment of writing and of publication. A blogger can make her own decision concerning publication and distribution at the very moment of writing. Sharing intimate narratives with an anonymous readership is no longer a future possibility but an actual choice for webloggers; the effect of this technological option is immediacy – instant distribution, without intervention by a publishing institution. From a survey performed by the MIT Media Lab Sociable Media Group, we learn that 76% of bloggers do not limit their readership in any way, and they have no idea who their readers are, apart from a core audience (Viegas, ‘Blog Survey’).

Weblogs or digital diaries are perhaps primarily about synchronizing one’s experience with others, about testing one’s evaluations against the outside world. Blogging, aside from being an act of self-disclosure, is also a ritual of exchange: bloggers *expect* to be signaled and perhaps to be responded to. If not, why would they publish their musings on the Internet instead of letting them sit in their personal files? It may be instructive to compare blogs and blogging to the use of the mobile phone. In their study of teenager’s use of mobiles, Alex Taylor and Richard Harper note how phone-mediated activities resemble established social practices such as gift-giving – the ritual of gift exchange is now extended to symbolic mes-

sages (SMS or spoken), and, like the material equivalent, rooted in a mental scheme of obligation and reciprocity (Taylor and Harper 2003, 267-296). Through a subtle system of shared norms for exchanging phones, rationing access to personal messages, and obligations to respond, users assign symbolic value to tangible or virtual objects. A similar process can be identified in blogging. Opening up one's secret diary to a selection of friends and relatives, and expecting them to do the same, is an old practice refurbished by bloggers. Attaching cultural items is quite similar to swapping music albums, books, or personal accessories – a system of sharing symbolic meanings with friends that is firmly rooted in the material culture of gift exchange. But the potential to open up this process to an anonymous and potentially large readership is new; bloggers are constantly connected to the world-at-large, and are aware of their exposure to it. Synchronization, however, does not prohibit self-reflection, just as privacy does not preclude openness. Old and new functions of diary writing thus peculiarly merge into a hybrid networked practice of blogging.

At first sight, a prime function of diary writing seems to be virtually absent in the practice of blogging: paper diaries were meant to fix experience in time, to freeze one's thoughts and ideas into words (and perhaps illustrated materials) to serve as a reminder of former experience later on in life. In contrast, blogging seems to be more about revising one's experience over time, allowing one to adjust one's former observations and reflections as time goes by and as personality evolves. This difference in function is all too easily ascribed to a material fixity of paper diaries as opposed to the evanescent quality of software or screen content. Yet if we focus on cultural practices *in conjunction with* technology or form, we may find this opposition to be quite ungrounded. For one thing, paper diaries were never 'finished' paper products; they were often exercises of writing prone to later revision, because of a changing insight, retroactive embarrassment, or due to a changing ambition or purpose in writing the journal. Anne Frank, for instance, started to write a revised version of her diary in March of 1944, several months before she was deported to a concentration camp.<sup>25</sup> The two 'versions' of Anne Frank's diary signify how time changes a person's experience as well as her memory of that experience. Revising one's diary entries is inherent in personal growth, particularly at a younger age.

Weblogs obviously meet the revisionist need of a diary writer, as entries can be endlessly edited and deleted. Yet, from the contemporary blogger's perspective, that does not obliterate the urge to fix experience. Blogging is often considered a transitory cultural practice, comparable to talking on the phone or sending short text messages. But even in the case of telephone conversations or short messages, the desire for storage and retrieval is evident. One of the teenagers included in Taylor and Harper's research admits that she would like to store each SMS exchange on a memory card because she wants to recall her experience later: the message's physical properties (form, content, time, and date stamp) all work in combination to instill meaning in the physical (Taylor and Harper 2003). We can see a similar reconciliation of seemingly opposite functions in the use of digital diaries. For one thing, the very fact that bloggers use writing as a basic form of expression indicates

a desire to secure these symbolic exchanges in some retrievable form. And even if weblogs look more like a written conversation or stream of consciousness, almost every software program contains an 'archive' holding selected entries and comments, going back to the very beginning of a person's weblog. Bloggers tend to value their archives, as their entries gradually turn into interesting memory objects of past experiences. In other words, the assumption that digital materiality inherently favors transience over permanence is hardly tenable in the face of the overwhelming popularity of weblog archives. Synchronizing experience and fixing experience in time are not at all contradictory functions, but they have perfectly merged in today's weblogs.

### Weblogs as Signifiers of Cultural Transformation

Looking at weblogs and the cultural forms and practices they engender, we can deduce an interesting reinvention of age-old rituals, newly attuned to the modalities of digitization. Like the writing of paper diaries, blogging is a process that helps express and order thoughts through rituals, thus defining a sense of self in relation to others. Diaries and weblogs are both acts and artifacts, in which materiality and technology are interdependent on their changing cultural form, their use and users. Rather than pinpoint differences and continuities, I have tried to signal how functions and features of the analogue and digital genre coexist and co-evolve. Some seemingly conflicting genre features that have always existed are now reconciled in the face of evolving hybrid practices, while other paradoxes persist. Even though pen and paper were gradually replaced by (networked) computers, multimedia materiality still reflects the personality and individuality that was formerly signified by handwriting and paper objects. The classification dilemma of distinguishing diaries as strictly private (written for oneself and by one person) or public (written to be read by others) does not disappear with the advent of weblogs, on the contrary, the ambiguity is amplified by the potential of instant publishing. And finally, the cultural practice of blogging easily blends the need to synchronize experience with the desire to fix *and* revise experience in time. However, analyzing the evolution of a single case of technology-form-practice has never been a goal in itself; rather, I would like to explain how this particular case signifies a larger techno-cultural transformation that is much more profound than its traces left on the World Wide Web. In tracking how a new hybrid practice of blogging evolves, it is crucial to acknowledge how it sustains old and constructs new epistemologies and how it indicates a transformation of important cultural notions, specifically the paired-off notions *individual and collective*, *privacy and publicness*, and *memory and experience*.

Individuality and collectivity are redefined in the face of a culture that values sharing. Weblog architecture favors a connected exploration of the personal; what the Internet does best is to create a forum for collective discourses. Although reciprocity is certainly not a condition for participating in the blogosphere, the default mode for diary writing has gradually moved from isolation to connection. Of



all the weblogs present on the Internet today, some still resemble conventional paper diaries while others have morphed into completely new interactive formats, firmly rooted in Internet culture. Through weblogs, intimate reflections and revelations about personal, intellectual, and artistic preferences are consciously shared with both known and anonymous audiences. Weblogs and blogging might be seen as part of a larger participatory turn in culture. In this culture of sharing, the weblog finds its natural habitat so that the digital diary becomes instrumental as its multimedial modality equally allows for the creation of one's personal entries as well as for the exchange of cultural contents (clippings, files, songs). Blogging software and Internet hardware, in this argument, are neither neutral technical conduits nor simple commodities, but they are cultural artifacts facilitating a social process in which generalized exchange and participation are conditions for enacting citizenship.

However, there is another side to this techno-cultural transformation that often gets underemphasized. The culture of reciprocation is not solely based on linking the self to the Net, but also on linking the Net to the self. Tracing cultural or political preferences of other bloggers, one can decide to connect to people with similar tastes and preferences; it is precisely this feature that makes weblogs interesting for outsiders. With the use of fairly simple software applications like All-Consuming.net, it becomes increasingly easy to find a correlation between bloggers and the cultural products they mention via links or sidebars: books, music, television programs, movies, etc.<sup>26</sup> Tracking software allows a glimpse of the patterns and trends that emerge out of the topics shared by a group. Coupled with vast databases like Amazon and Google, the possibilities for polling and marketing research are endless, explaining Google's eagerness to buy start-up companies like Blogger.<sup>27</sup> Whereas many diaries (like OpenDiary and DearDiary) started out as small communities of like-minded individuals, many of these services are now owned by corporations. The downside of the culture of reciprocity is instant marketability: personal taste and cultural choices become instantaneously traceable and marketable to commercial ventures. In a networked environment, where information is constantly cached, weblogs have become gold mines for data diggers. For bloggers, social norms concerning individuality and collectivity appear to be in flux; old notions of personality and belonging persist, while the new media reality prompts a keener awareness of manipulative strategies enforcing individual taste and community building.

The same ambiguity applies to the blogger's notions of privacy and openness. As I pointed out above, privacy has always been an *effect* rather than an intrinsic feature of a paper diary's content, often achieved through one's familiarity with conventions for publication and publicity. Our norms and laws of privacy protection are still based on a strict distinction between ego documents and public records; if boundaries were often crossed in the past, for bloggers they become increasingly fuzzy. Emily Nussbaum notes in her journalistic-ethnographic report that bloggers have a 'degraded or relaxed sense of privacy', depending on your perspective: 'Their experiences may be personal, but there is no shame in sharing... [and they get back] a new kind of intimacy, a sense that they are known and lis-

tened to' (Nussbaum 2004). There is not only no shame in sharing; bloggers take pride and find purpose in sharing. Privacy is an effect determined by a click of the mouse. Instant publication, however, changes the rules of the game. As the MIT Media Lab survey shows, bloggers are hardly concerned with the persistent nature of what they publish; the overwhelming majority publishes private information about themselves or other people without thinking about legal or moral consequences. Not surprisingly, more than one third of all bloggers have gotten into trouble because of things they have written in their blogs and the majority has little notion of defamation or liability when writing about others in networked environments.<sup>28</sup> Their notions of privacy and publicness appear full of contradictions: comments are personal yet readable by everyone, intimate yet public. Old and new notions of privacy are contested in the blogosphere; courts and lawyers are currently wrestling with emerging questions like whether entries posted with restricted access can be 'stolen' when they are posted on an open website? Are public officials or state employees free to speak their minds in the 'private' sphere of restricted blog communities? It will take a number of years before this hybrid practice will have stabilized and become grounded in social and legal norms.

Weblogs do not only signal altering notions of individuality and privacy, but also of personal memory in relation to lived experience. The paper diary reflected the idea that the memory object is a petrified, unchangeable relic, stored in its authentic form and retrieved to invoke a past experience. When a diary's contents were still published by means of an intermediate process of editing, printing and distribution, we were mostly concerned with how the 'original' words – assumedly the recordings of experiences – matched the words published in print. The fusion of old and new technologies results in a hybrid tool that seamlessly combines communicative and archival functions; blogging allows for exchanging, storing, and revising entries all at the same time.<sup>29</sup> Blogging itself becomes a (real life) *experience*, a construction of self that is always mediated by tools for communication and expression; in other words, the medium is the experience, not the message. If the meaning of experience is slowly changing, so is the meaning of memory. As time proceeds, memories of experiences inevitably evolve, revising one's past inscriptions is a natural part of a process of personal growth. Rather than being fixed in material paper objects, memory mutates by means of digital materiality. Although the Internet is often characterized as a transient, evanescent medium, weblogs have both the ability to fix and the potential to morph; blogging constitutes a new concept of memory, allowing for preservation and erasure simultaneously.

Bloggers are retooling the practice of diary writing, meanwhile creating a new type of cultural knowledge and social interaction via their tools. The reciprocity inherent in networked systems points at a profound reorganization in social consciousness. Media change may be traced through its technology-materiality, as Kitzman proposes, or through its specific cultural forms, as Bolter and Grusin suggest, but as I have tried to show here, it is important to examine technological *and* cultural changes *in constant connection with* socio-cultural practices, in order to come to understand larger socio-cultural transformations. In the case of weblogs, I have argued how old and new technologies, forms and practices co-exist and yet

co-evolve into hybrid practices. These hybrid practices both reflect and construct new social norms and cultural concepts, such as individual and community, privacy and publicness, experience and memory. In a period of transition, these concepts fluctuate and will continue to fluctuate, but unraveling complex transformation may help us sort out newly emerging cultural values. If we look back at the cartoon, cited at the beginning of this article, we now comprehend that the woman who starts typing her weblog just after denying her partner's question whether she keeps a diary, is not necessarily lying. In fact, the three frames of this cartoon perfectly reflect the ambiguous reality in which millions of bloggers find themselves today.



**SIGN HERE!**

## Notes

1. I would like to thank Eric Ketelaar for bringing this cartoon to my attention and for his constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank Sonja Neef for her help in sharpening my thoughts.
2. Emily Nussbaum, in 'My So-Called Blog', *New York Times*, January 11, 2004, Magazine (digital version), bases these figures on an October 2003 inquiry by the Perseus Development Corporation, a company that designs software for online surveys.
3. Kitzmann emphasizes that the concept of 'remediation' implies too much linearity and hierarchy, proposing instead to study media change in the context of the much wider phenomenon of 'material complexification', in which change is not cumulative 'but [measured by] structural shifts that may lead to growth, contraction, stasis, or a combination of all three' (51).
4. On the importance of materiality (both paper and digital materiality), see N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.
5. See also Sonja Neef, 'Authentic Events. The Diaries of Anne Frank and the Alleged Diaries of Adolf Hitler', elsewhere in this volume.
6. Jane Zhang, archivist at the University of Calgary, writes: 'Handwriting is a physical as well as mental activity, directly influenced by any change that takes place in the human body and mind. Therefore, an individual's handwriting is habitually viewed as his own personal mark, which distinguishes him not only from others, but also from his own past and future' (p. 43). Jane Zhang, 'The Lingering of Handwritten Records' in: *Proceedings of I-Chora Conference*, 38-45, University of Toronto, October 2-4, 2003.
7. Neef studies the '*Verkörperung*' (embodiment) of handwriting in relation to the '*Entkörperung*' (disembodiment) of computer-mediated writing.
8. See also Eric Ketelaar, 'Writing Archival Machines', elsewhere in this volume.
9. I concur with Belinda Barnet, who argues that we should consider both text and materiality and both representation and technology, as vital and constitutive components in the construction of written memory. See Belinda Barnet, 'The Erasure of Technology in Cultural Critique', in: *Fibreculture* 1: 1 (2004): 6.
10. Friedrich Kittler (1999), states: 'Only two things were lost during this mechanization of writing: first, the intimacy of handwritten expression, which nobody is willing to relinquish voluntarily, particularly in personal correspondence; and second, a centerpiece of occidental symbolic systems...' (186). And later in this chapter: 'The typewriter tears writing from the essential realm of the hand, i.e., the realm of the word' (198). This idea does not originally stem from Kittler, but Kittler is referring to Heidegger's Parmenides lecture.
11. Susan Herring, sociologist specializing in computer-mediated communication, quotes in her paper 'Weblog as Genre, Weblog as Sociability' the number of 4.12 million users from the statistics of the Perseus group by October 2003. This number of bloggers, which is growing exponentially, includes hosted weblog services; 34% of these logs are used actively (see: <<http://ella.slis.indiana.edu/~herring/ssc.ppt>>). Herring uses the following operational definition of a weblog: 'a frequently modified webpage (and associated pages) containing individual entries typically displayed in reversed chronological sequence.'
12. For a short introduction to weblogs, see 'The History of Weblogs' available at: <<http://newhome.weblogs.com/history-OfWeblogs>> (last checked on March 16, 2004). The personal homepage, which became popular between 1997 and 2000, is generally regarded as the precursor of the weblog. For an interesting sociological analysis of the personal homepage, see Charles Cheung, 'A Home on the Web: Presentations of Self on Personal Homepages', in: David Gauntlett (ed.), *Web.Studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age*, 43-51. London: Arnold, 2000.
13. There are few informative books on weblogs and blogging. One of the few collections of articles on the initiative of weblogging is John Rodzvilla (ed.), *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishers, 2002.
14. Emily Nussbaum, citing Perseus numbers, notes that 90% percent of bloggers are between 13 and 29 years old, meaning teenagers and young adults. Susan Herring found the producers of weblogs she included in her sample to be equally divided between male and female, teens and (young) adults.

- 15.** Susan Herring defines the 'blogosphere' as 'the universe of blogs available (mostly publicly) on the World Wide Web'.
- 16.** Thomas Mallon, author of *A Book of One's Own: People and their Diaries* (New York: Ticknor and Fields 1984), a standard work in this area, distinguishes at least seven types of diaries, labels he attributes to the profession or characterization of their authors ('chroniclers' 'travelers' 'creators', 'confessors', etc).
- 17.** Philip Lejeune (1993), inventories various types of autobiographical writing (diary, letters, autobiography) by their 'morphological' features.
- 18.** Eric Marty (1985, 87) argues that the old-fashioned paper diary was always communicative in purpose. He labels the diary's imagined addressee 'l'Autrui' to distinguish him from 'l'autre' or a real, existing person. Susan Herring defines genre as 'a distinctive type of communicative action, characterized by a socially recognized communicative purpose and common aspects of form'.
- 19.** In defense of the authors of the Japanese study of online diaries, suffice it to note the year in which their article was published, 1998, which marked the early beginning of an explosion of online blogging, a development no one could have predicted at that time.
- 20.** As David Chaney, in *Cultural Change and Everyday Life* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002) observes, everyday life is a creative project 'because although it has the predictability of mundane expectations, it is simultaneously being worked at both in the doing and in retrospective reconsideration' (52).
- 21.** 'As mediated human communication becomes more and more non-linear, decentralized, and rooted in multimedia, the distinction between orality and literacy becomes less evident and less important' argues Jan Fernback in 'Legends on the Net: An Examination of Computer-mediated Communication as a Locus of Oral Culture', in: *New Media and Society* 5: 1, 29-45, 2003. Citation on page 29.
- 22.** Herring concludes from a content analysis of 357 personal blogs that the blogosphere is densely interconnected via links in the sidebars of blogs. However, she still found that more than half of all blog-entries contain no links and that most blog entries receive no comments, confirming my assumption that the weblog is a hybrid of the old-fashioned paper diary and the new networked form.
- 23.** Emily Nussbaum, in 'My So-Called Blog' cites a number of teenagers actively engaged in blogging.
- 24.** As British sociologist John B. Tompson has eloquently argued in *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995): 'individuals increasingly draw on mediated experience to inform and refashion the project of self. Mediated rituals enable "intimacy at a distance"; for the generation living in the digital age, the continuous switching between real live and mediated communication is quite normal' (233).
- 25.** Inspired by the Dutch Minister of Education, G. Bolkstein, who, on March 28, 1944 urged citizens to keep and save diaries from the time of occupation for publication, Anne Frank decided to revise her diary and turn it into a book. As we can see from this example, the future possibility of a large unknown readership prompted Anne Frank to make revisions, as much as did new insights and personal growth.
- 26.** On the function and technology of All-Consuming.com, see Erik Benson, 'All Consuming Web Services', <<http://www.xml.com.lpt/a/ws/2003/05/27/allconsuming.html>>. (Last checked October 4, 2004). Benson favors this kind of weblog tracking over previous method like Nielsen ratings or random polls; the attraction of weblogs is that 'the data is out there, the data is free, and the data is extremely interesting'.
- 27.** Pyra Labs, one of the first start-up companies who designed Bloggersoftware, was purchased by Google in 2003. See Leander Kahney, 'Why Did Google Want Blogger?', *Wired News*, February 22, 2003, see: <<http://www.wired.com/news/technology>> (last checked 4, May 2004).
- 28.** For a website with survey findings, see Viegas.
- 29.** According to the MIT survey (see Viegas), almost 75% of all bloggers indeed edit their past entries, which varies from punctuation and grammar to contents and names.

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