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The Blogging of Everyday Life / Tama Leaver

<1> Writing in the early 1980s, Michel de Certeau, one of the most influential theorists of 'the everyday', warned:

Marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive; this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself. Marginality is becoming a universal. A marginal group has now become a silent majority. [1]

Throughout *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau argues for methods to resist and escape this cultural hegemony and re-empower the 'silent majority' by reasserting their active status as participants in cultural production, not passive consumers. However, as Mark Poster recently noted, the utility and potential of digital technologies is notably absent from de Certeau's work [2] (although this absence is in large part explained by the period in which de Certeau was writing). In the past fifteen years a number of writers, including media theorists such as Poster and Henry Jenkins, have applied de Certeau's tactical models of everyday resistance to the emerging realms of digital cultural production and participation. Jenkins, for example, has argued:

Over the past several decades, emerging technologies--ranging from the photocopier to the home computer and the videocassette recorder--have granted viewers greater control over media flows, enabled activists to reshape and recirculate media content, lowered the costs of production and paved the way for new grassroots networks.[3]

<2> With the shift to digital media and related communication technologies, the amateur voices of millions of grassroots online cultural producers are cohering to form a realm of participatory culture which is often exemplified in the form of the weblog or simply blog.

<3> Blogs are often characterised as either an annotated list of hypertext links or an online diary or journal of an individual's day to day existence [4]. Moreover, until very recently, the most consistent characteristic of blogs was their amateur nature.[5] While the history of blogging can be traced back to the mid-90s, the breakthrough moment for blogs as they exist today was in 1999 when a dotcom start-up called Pyra Labs released the free software platform called Blogger. While the earliest blogs still required users to have a reasonable knowledge of web design and html in order to build their blog, the release of Blogger, and a number of similar services, completely automated the coding process. Using Blogger, users simply pick a template, chose a name, and the process of making posts is as simple as writing entries and clicking a single button. In the seven years since Blogger and similar platforms became available, the number of blogs has grown from a few hundred to more than fifty million, with the 'blogosphere'--the collective term of all blogs--roughly doubling in size every six months since the year 2000 [6]. The rapid spread and ease of use of blogs attracted the same utopian rhetoric which surrounded hypertext in the early 1990s; blogs were supposedly inherently democratic, network-forming, anti-hierarchical, rhizomatic and, most importantly, empowering to that 'silent majority' who could now blog their way to active participation and cultural production of their own digital everyday. However, now that the dust has settled a little on the blogging explosion, it is an opportune time to ask whether the blogging of everyday life does, in fact, provide the sort of democratic spaces or even tactical moments of resistance that the hype promised.

<4> Before turning to this tentative questioning, I wish to locate myself in relation to the blogosphere. I've maintained my own blog for over three years; it began purely as a personal space, but has mutated into a far more academic form, punctuated with only the occasional frivolous segue. In that time I've blogged more than 200,000 words. Across the past two years I've also had the pleasure of teaching several university courses which have had blogs as a core part of their design. So, like most bloggers, in this paper I am at least in part extrapolating from my own experience. I am also drawing on the reactions from student bloggers, and, of course, from the hundred or so blogs which I regularly read. So, with that context in mind, this paper will now take a few tentative steps toward mapping the ways blogs may facilitate the intersection of everyday life and digital cultural production, theoretically framed by remediations of de Certeau.

Copyright Culture: From Cut'n'Paste to Creative Commons

<5> By all reports, one of the greatest plagues inflicted upon schools and universities in the last few years has been the dramatic increase in plagiarism. Students are supposedly turning to sources located online and simply cutting and pasting the work of others, or even using the services of web-based essay warehouses which offer to sell

students pre-written, ready-to-hand-in papers. In an effort to battle this problem, educational institutions are turning to licensed corporate solutions such as *TurnItIn.com* who offer a massive and always-increasing database of scholarly sources and past student work against which student essays can be compared and thus plagiarism detected. However, this battle between databases which provide plagiarisable materials and competing databases which detect plagiarism, works from the rather pessimistic presumption that the only thing preventing rampant plagiarism is the threat of being caught. Certainly the ethics of good academic conduct and citation are harder and harder to teach when tertiary education is increasingly marketed and packaged as nothing more than the necessary stepping-stone to a specific professional career. In this utilitarian context, the form of the blog may actually provide an alternative pathway to embedded practices of linking and citation which emerge independently of academic structures.

<6> Almost every blog, even those which are the province of the angst-ridden teenager sharing their pubescent agonies and bad poetry, is based around the fundamental structure of the link. One blogger talking about another in practice almost always links to the person being discussed. When bloggers refer to online news items, as they frequently do, they either link to the article in question, quote a clearly cited passage, or, as is most often the case, do both. In situations where a blogger inadvertently forgets to create a link, frequently a comment will appear from another blogger asking where the article is from, encouraging the link to be established. Moreover, when one blogger does cut'n'paste from another blogger without linking, the responses can often be very vitriolic and downright nasty. While often quite rudimentary, this propensity toward linking in blogs certainly creates a meaningful and personal familiarity with the importance of a form of citation. As Rebecca Blood has argued, acknowledging sources in blogs is not necessarily informed by a deeply thought-through ethics, but rather a norm of social expectations.[7] In this instance, bloggers link to their sources because not to do so goes against the social expectations of their form of communication. Yet in terms of citation, it could easily be argued that the personal is again the political, albeit in a far more narcissistic sense. Of perhaps more tactical utility is the small step from ideas of blogs-as-citation to notions of cultural ownership.

<7> One of the more daunting prospects that bloggers and other online writers and grassroots media producers face is the gauntlet of copyright law. Which online cultural artefacts can be copied, distributed or manipulated? The continual legal extensions of the length of copyright in the US, Australia and elsewhere seem to leave little freely available. Moreover, which copyright rules apply to blogs? Given that the highly publicised and policed copyright rules tend to focus more on music, television and film, which rules do blogs follow? Is there a space between All Rights Reserved and the public domain? Indeed, does posting a paper or idea on a blog implicitly position that work as free for anyone else to use, manipulate or re-work? Similarly, what happens when a blogger writes something or posts an image and wants that item to be redistributed? In this grey area of confusion, of old laws applied to new media forms, and of hulking media corporations policing greed-driven boundaries, discussions and arguments abound. As Lawrence Lessig argues in *Free Culture*, the challenges of blogging and copyright have led to a number of extremely important developments, the most notable of these being the creation of the *Creative Commons* organisation which Lessig describes as:

a non-profit corporation established in Massachusetts, but with its home at Stanford University. Its aim is to build a reasonable copyright layer on top of the extremes that now reign. It does this by making it easy for people to build upon other people's work, by making it simple for creators to express the freedom for others to take and build upon their work. Simple tags, tied to human-readable descriptions, tied to bullet-proof licenses, make this possible.

[8]

Moreover, the human-readable versions of the *Creative Commons* licenses are sufficiently clear and legally robust that they can be applied to blogs or to other digital cultural artefacts without the need for expensive lawyers to legitimate and facilitate such licensing. *Creative Commons* and related developments in grassroots copyright law are thus examples of disintermediation where, literally, the middlemen, in this case lawyers, are cut out of the loop. To use my own blog as an example for a moment: on the bottom of each page, there is a small grey logo which informs readers that I have 'Some Rights Reserved' over the original content of my blog. Clicking on that logo leads to a page which informs readers of the three central attributes of my blog's copyright status:

Attribution . You must give the original author credit.

Noncommercial . You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

Share Alike . If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under a license identical to this one. [9]

Clicking one further level after this page opens a far more detailed version of this license which is a full and operational Legal Code. For me to select the appropriate license and place a suitable link to it on my blog took less than five minutes. Thus the *Creative Commons* licenses can facilitate for bloggers a level of explicit ownership of their cultural productions that a few years ago would have been very difficult to achieve without the aide of expensive lawyers. More to the point, this engagement with copyright law means the many bloggers who use these licenses have a very personal and direct appreciation of some of the issues of cultural ownership, and thus also the importance of explicit acknowledgement of that ownership in the case of other people's cultural products.

<8> If, in de Certeau's terms, copyright law can be considered the strategic construction of powerful media conglomerates and governments, then bloggers applying *Creative Commons* licenses and purposefully redistributing their own digital cultural products are shining examples of a tactical mode of resistance. Moreover, the intersection of the practices of linking in blogs, and the related notions of cultural ownership, illuminate a social

realm where the problematics of citation and plagiarism are also being addressed. For bloggers, then, the concerns and battles fought over ownership and attribution in their everyday social practices directly parallel academic concerns about citation, referencing and plagiarism. When bloggers already enter other realms with a firm appreciation of the importance of acknowledgment and ownership informed by their social experiences, extrapolating these insights for an educational context is extremely straightforward. Thus, the tactical engagement of bloggers with copyright in a social sense directly intersects and informs a fuller appreciation of the rationale, ethics and mechanics of citation and attribution in an academic context. Concerns about blogs as cultural artefacts thus potentially inform both good academic practice and cultural tactics of resistance in the face of corporate domination over the mediascape.

Who Watches the Watchers?

<9> One of the more consistent and controversial claims made about blogs is their potential as a mode of participatory journalism. Dan Gillmor in *We the Media*, for example, argues that bloggers can revitalise journalism in the face of "big media's" dictation of journalistic direction [10], as is dishearteningly outlined in the *Outfoxed* documentary's expose of Rupert Murdoch's US-based *Fox News*. [11] However, as others have argued, asking whether bloggers are journalists is missing the point somewhat: blogging is a digital media form and asking whether it acts in exactly the same way as pre-existing media elides the specificities of the form. To explore this point, I want to examine three recent examples of the influence of blogs on US journalism and politics and extrapolate from these examples an idea of the relationship between the blogosphere and journalism.

<10> One high-profile impact that blogs have had, has been in the so-called 'Trent Lott affair'. As Lawrence Lessig tells the tale, in early 2004 Lott, then the US senate majority leader, "misspoke" at a party for senator Strom Thurmond, essentially praising Thurmond's segregationist policies, but Lott 'calculated correctly that this story would disappear from the mainstream press within forty-eight hours.' [12] However after the mainstream press failed to pick up on the story, several outraged bloggers posted the incident. Lott's offensive statement fired up the blogosphere, with hundreds of blogs re-posting Trent Lott's words and spreading the news further and further. Some blogs focused on other instances of Lott's racism; they researched public records and news archives, illustrating a pattern of racial persecution. Eventually, the mainstream press picked up the much juicier blogger-researched story and the pressure was so intense that Lott had to resign as senate majority leader.

<11> A second example of the influence of the blogosphere occurred on the back of the US current affairs show *60 Minutes* and a report which focused on a set of documents which supposedly showed that US President George W. Bush had been declared unfit for duty earlier in his career while in the National Guard. After the story aired, a collective of bloggers investigated the documents and quickly managed to prove that these were fakes. Indeed, they were such bad fakes that the typeset could not have been done on a 1970s typewriter, as was claimed in the story, but could be reproduced perfectly using the default settings of Microsoft *Word*. Despite the evidence, broadcaster CBS and *60 Minutes* refused to engage in a debate, arguing their past credibility and journalistic credentials were more than enough to dismiss the ideas of a few amateur bloggers. However, as the evidence was abundantly clear from the forensic analysis carried out by a number of blogs, the mainstream press picked up the story and the forgeries became a major embarrassment for the show and the network. The well-respected *60 Minutes* actually had to issue a retraction and an apology. [13] For *60 Minutes*, one of the most respected investigative journalism programs in the US, this was a major blow and simultaneously an important moment for bloggers, proving that there were moments when blogs could, indeed, act as a series of checks and balances even for the most entrenched mainstream media.

<12> The third and final example I wish to explore is that aftermath of hurricane Katrina in the southern United States. In the days after Katrina hit on August 29, 2005, the republican government under George W. Bush was extremely slow to act. Initially mainstream news media were urged to stay away from the affected areas, although a few, quite memorably, did get through. However, as images and stories about the level of the devastation started to reach beyond New Orleans, the response in the blogosphere was explosive. Thousands of blog posts about Katrina and the ineffectiveness of the relief efforts appeared within twenty-four hours. Online social photo-sharing services like Flickr.com had pictures of the devastation from ordinary people trapped in the floods and these images were quickly blogged and re-blogged across not just the US, but across the globe. Bloggers organised aid, set up links to the Red Cross, and even set up websites and services to help those escaping the hurricane's effects to find and re-unite with their families. Moreover, when mainstream news media did try and organise relief efforts they were confronted with popular musician Kanye West declaring publicly during a telethon that "George Bush doesn't care about black people." While the networks attempted to censor this statement, recordings of the initial broadcast quickly flooded onto blogs and the statement became something of a symbol of the anguish of many Americans. [14] In the face of the ineffectiveness of the US government, blogs catalysed public sentiment, pushing horrific real-life images and tales of despair into the public view. When the mainstream pressed quickly joined in, the expression of outrage was loud enough to get official apologies from those in positions of responsibility in the government and, more to the point, get more appropriate relief efforts underway.

<13> My argument, however, is not that any of these examples show that bloggers have become, or should be seen as a replacement for, mainstream journalists. Rather, blogs provide new spaces for new voices to critique the existing media structures. In Trent Lott affair, blogs acted more as a focal point, keeping the pressure on Lott, keeping the story alive, and supplementing the story with additional research. In the *60 Minutes* example, bloggers acted as a very specific watchdog against misleading reporting and, again, a focal point until *60 Minutes* was forced to retract the story. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, blogs had matured in such a way to carry far more video and image content, and acted as loudspeaker for the outrage of many ordinary citizens in the face

of lacklustre government relief efforts. While it is possible for blogs to undertake random acts of journalism, I contend, borrowing from Drezner and Farrell, that blogs are best conceived as 'the fifth estate', providing constant checks and balances, keeping the journalistic fourth estate honest and provoking them to action when needed.[15] Moreover, the fifth estate in question is *not* consistent; an entirely different group of bloggers focused on the false documents in the *60 Minutes* story compared with those who exposed Trent Lott. The thousands who blogged about the lack of response to Katrina's victims are unlikely to share a common cause again the near future.

<14> Thus, the potential for bloggers to act as a fifth estate illustrates moments of collective tactical resistance against mainstream media producers and traditional power holders. These tactical moments are goal-oriented, rather than consistent group activities. Once the tactical goal is achieved, groups tend to dissolve, but as de Certeau renders tactics as antagonistic with existing structures, their temporary nature does not detract from their overall success. Indeed, the tactical utility of blogs lies in that they are separate from the mainstream media conglomerates and governments. And while many bloggers may never participate in such tactical resistance, the form of blogging itself tends to mythologise and celebrate these victories, infusing the blogosphere with a sense of agency and optimism in the face of other overwhelmingly monolithic strategic governments and media corporations. The blogging of everyday life thus holds the promise of moments of tactical resistance and collective action of ordinary people in the right circumstances.

Tentative Conclusions

<15> Consistent with de Certeau's project in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, bloggers embrace the banal and the ubiquitous which characterises so much of contemporary existence. They engage in cultural production, and are concerned with their ownership of their cultural creativity. Many bloggers are *socially* motivated to recognise each other as active sources of cultural value, and these insights easily extrapolate into other contexts, especially broader educational realms. The blogosphere, far from the disillusionment of organised political resistance, still believes that it can be a place of influence and re-focalisation, juxtaposed heavily with a mainstream mediascape which has been in many senses neutered by political influence and ownership. Moreover, as Lessig argues, the non-professional nature of bloggers is often a benefit, not something lacking:

Blog space gives amateurs a way to enter the debate--"amateur" not in the sense of inexperienced, but in the sense of an Olympic athlete, meaning not paid by anyone to give their reports.[16]

Finally, while theorising resistance so often occurs in language which effectively ostracises those who might enact tactical activities, the everyday writing and resistance of bloggers far more direct the activities of writing and actually creating change. The blogging of everyday life can facilitate a space where theory, practice and the everyday intersect in dynamic ways which both illuminate theory through practice and in which practice almost organically leads to outcomes often theorised but rarely encountered. As Henry Jenkins so aptly argues:

In an era marked both by the expanded corporate reach of the commodity culture and the emerging importance of grassroots knowledge cultures, consumer power may now be best exercised by blogging rather than [just] jamming media signals. [17]

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Notes

[1] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984, p. xvii. [^]

[2] Mark Poster, "Consumption and Digital Commodities in the Everyday." *Cultural Studies* 18.2/3 (2004), p. 412. [^]

[3] Henry Jenkins, "Interactive Audiences?" *The New Media Book*. Ed. Dan Harries. London: British Film Institute, 2002, p. 167. [^]

[4] Rebecca Blood, *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog*. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 2002, pp. 114-121. [^]

[5] This has shifted, particularly in the past two years, with many businesses using blogs to put a 'human face' on corporate entities. For more on this topic see Robert Scoble and Shel Israel, *Naked Conversations: How Blogs are Changing the Way Businesses Talk with Customers*, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2006. [^]

[6] Dave Sifry, "State of the Blogosphere, August 2006," *Sifry's Alerts*. August 07, 2006. <<http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000436.html>>, accessed 19 Oct 2006. [^]

[7] Blood, *The Weblog Handbook*, pp. 114-121. [^]

[8] Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity*. New York: Penguin Press, 2004, p. 282. [^]

[9] *Creative Commons: Commons Deed*, 'Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5', <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/>>, accessed 18 October 2006. [^]

[10] Dan Gillmor, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media, 2004. [^]

[11] *Outfoxed* [documentary], dir. Robert Greenwald, The Disinformation Company, 2004. [^]

[12] Lessig, *Free Culture*, p. 43. [^]

[13] See, for example, Howard Kurtz, "After Blogs Got Hits, CBS Got a Black Eye," *Washington Post*, September 20, 2004, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A34153-2004Sep19.html>>, accessed 18 October 2006. [^]

[14] Tama Leaver, "Katrina: The Aftermath, The Politics & Citizen Media," *Ponderance*. September 03, 2005. <<http://ponderance.blogspot.com/2005/09/katrina-aftermath-politics-citizen.html>>, accessed 18 October 2006. [^]

[15] Daniel W Drezener, and Farrell, Henry. "Web of Influence." *Foreign Policy* (2004), <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=2707&print=1> [^]

[16] Lessig, *Free Culture*, p. 44. [^]

[17] Henry Jenkins, "Interactive Audiences?" *The New Media Book*. Ed. Dan Harries. London: British Film Institute, 2002, p. 168. [^]