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I Made Some Science: Massaging the Medium

By Richard Leader

We all have personal relationships with media: our individual histories of communication have shaped both how we attempt to express ourselves and the specific content—fashioned by constraint and desire—we choose to share with those around us. The language we speak has a vocabulary that serves as a rule set of sorts, purposefully and accidentally making one thing more easily articulated than another, encouraging us to think and act in specific ways. Other filters such as gender are imposed, guiding under which circumstances and to what effect our voices can be used. Even then, more personal and esoteric events in our lives inform our expression, and in turn, appear as artifacts in the things we say and create, even if the specific incidents that inspired them remain unremarked upon or unseen.

While the specificities of these boundaries are entirely arbitrary, their imposition upon us is not and serves the political exigencies of those in power. They retain the right not only to limit speech through both unfettered censorship (which occurs even in America under our First Amendment, as those with wealth can easily redefine minority subjectivities—in opposition to their own majority “objectivity”—as slander to silence them through threat of law) and through the constant revision of speech genres. Typology can control what speech is allowed to mean: this can be as simple as the divisions in a bookstore where a banner indicating “romance” or “science fiction” can signal both audience expectation for the content and the constraints under which its creator operated.

Those limits are not only descriptive of the editorial and publishing hoops the writer was forced to jump through in order to externalize that content and place it into the marketplace, but of what the author was allowed to envision given his or her own identity in society and what that vision was allowed to portend. This is not to say that fame or fortune cannot be had in “genre-work,” indeed it is often encouraged by the powers that be, only that F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* is not “romance” even though it contains many of the same elements that the average Harlequin novel provides: this is a function not just of what he said—though he certainly said it well—but of who he was saying it and the meaning and value society (then, as now, controlled by those who related to Fitzgerald as peers) wished to ascribe to it given his identity.

As identities have become ever more mutable, genres of speech have been continuously emended by those in power to preserve and defend their own elite status. This can be witnessed in the social construction of the weblog, the “blog” format for online communication. While there are a few specific elements of form and style closely associated with the blog, most of these are purely nominal: a list of hyperlinks is merely a list of hyperlinks, even if the title “blogroll” is appended to it. In that sense, ideas such as a “blogosphere” (the sum total of every blog forming a gestalt of sorts, a concept flattering to those who believe themselves within it) are more mythic than real. Such myths are ultimately political creatures.

Masculinity and a macho vision of literacy is the driving force behind the blog phenomenon. This is a literacy that privileges active generation over passive relation, where men are only required to waste just enough time reading the thoughts of others in order to form their own privileged response—both in their own blogs and in the commentary sec-

tions of other websites—agonistically wrestling to dominate others into being a mere member of an audience, a demotion the male-socialized psyche abhors. Despite the strong possibility that the formation of the blog as a genre is a direct manifestation of the antifeminist backlash in contemporary society, the possibility of this hermeneutic being arrived upon en masse has been largely precluded by the constant refrain that the blog is an inherently politically revolutionary genre: even when compared to numerous other forms of electronic communication that are no longer seen as sexy, even if they were likewise hailed as radically world-shattering a mere decade ago.

The blog phenomenon is one in name only: people have been effectively “blogging” before the word itself was ever coined and the term now exists as an expression of male power; men define, reshape, and police it. Initially, it was in men’s best interest to exclude women from the world of blogs and the power the genre—that is, the very belief that it constituted an authentic genre worthy of recognition—in order to reserve that semantic authority for themselves and their corporate interests. Women were allowed into the game as full participants only when the specific permission served the needs of both individual men (Nick Denton’s own celebrity and bank account through his creation of Ana Marie Cox into the “Wonkette” character) and men as a class, the division of male and female identities being reinforced in some fashion. This process has naturally proved contentious within the blogosphere, where female bloggers have reacted to men’s dismissal of their existence: something that came to a head in February of 2005 when Kevin Drum of the *Washington Monthly* wrote a short column on the issue, starting a recurring pattern of male writers pointedly asking “where are the women bloggers?”

Rather than a legitimate question, the “where is” signals an ironic statement, as it is generally posed by men whenever they come face to face with said women bloggers.

Drum focused exclusively on popular political blogs, arriving at the figure of about 10 percent of them being helmed by women (all of that number highly conservative in their political viewpoints), reasoning that women in general simply do not appreciate the sadomasochistic power plays—or the “food fight” mentality in his own euphemistic words—that the genre of “opinion writing” requires, especially online. Women attacked both his notion of “popular” and “political,” accusing male bloggers of being reticent to link to female writers and argued that there exists an intentional myopia when it comes to acknowledging political processes that affect primarily women as being properly political, rather than merely personal.

The watershed moment in the understanding and reporting of this phenomenon was when the Democratic Party bastion amongst blogs, The Daily Kos, decided that women’s access to abortion as a human right was an untenable fringe issue, causing many of the female participants (many of whom ran subordinate blogs under the auspices of the larger male-owned site) to splinter away from the website. The site founder, Markos Moulitsas, has found himself faced with feminist critics on many occasions, once bragging of his unflappable stance when faced with accusations of sexism for running an advertisement that objectified women. He arrogantly dismissed the “women’s studies” crowd as looking for “subjugation under every rock” instead of focusing on “the important shit.” That shit, happens to be the shit that affects men. While Moulitsas ultimately supports women’s right to choose abortion, it is not out of sympathy for women (“I’ve actually heard people say ‘abortion is a core part of the Democratic

Party’. Bullshit it is. I hate abortion. It’s a horrible, horrible thing. You make that a ‘key’ part of the party, and I’ll start looking for a third party.”), but out of his own “privacy” advocacy. This frames the debate in a way that protects men’s interests as an essential part of the argument: if women want to preserve their own bodily integrity, they must attach themselves to men’s privacy bandwagon—as subordinates—in order to accomplish that goal.

In response to such exclusion, women worked to form their own blog communities (some of which have organized conferences such as BlogHer) and have fought for acknowledgement of their existence as bloggers. It was at that moment that patriarchy, in a classic “heads we win, tails you lose” maneuver, chose to revise the very idea of the blog as a genre. Previously, somewhere around 2001, male society decided in a sudden fit that a certain variety of webpages were interesting and important. Such sites had existed all along, but it was now imperative that they should be called “blogs” in order to differentiate them from pages with less social currency. What women were and what they were doing—the content they were crafting as a result of their identity—was not considered interesting and important by male society so their work was not considered to be part of the blog phenomenon.

Now that it is in the best interest of patriarchy to widen the definition of “blog” to include more woman as bloggers (indeed, every woman who has ever used the internet even once is now a likely candidate) in order to placate feminist critics, it has done so for its own reasons, allowing men the perception that the privilege of their so-called “A-List” status in the blogosphere is the result of a meritocracy, the cream rising to the top. As Timo Honkasalo once pointed out to me, “all meritocracies eventually degenerate into elitism when the ‘cream’ starts to redefine ‘merit’ to suit their own interests.”

Thus, male bloggers are now more than willing to admit that they are a minority, a mere drop in the bucket when it comes to the staggering number of female writers who use the internet for publishing and social interaction of various sorts. As such, the many feminists who are still laboring to expand that ratio of female to male bloggers, and the public reporting of such statistics, are playing into patriarchal hands.

At the center of this is the MIT Weblog Survey, conducted over the summer of 2005. A Ph.D. project of Cameron Marlow, the poll asked a series of pedestrian questions of blog writers about their patterns of internet use (“How often do you post to your blog,” “How many separate URL addresses has your blog had,” etc.) and a number of similar queries about offline communication, making it appear as if the survey as a whole was interested in supposing some sort of dichotomy, perhaps with daily verbal communication diminishing to a degree for heavy bloggers. However, given Marlow’s historic interest in patterns of media propagation—that is, how it is popularized and transmitted by public agents—something he freely admitted on his own blog at *Overstated.net*, some began to wonder if the content of the survey itself was fundamentally meaningless, at least to the study itself, and designed purely to inspire audience participation. Christina Pikas, who keeps a blog at *ChristinasLibraryRant* at *Blogspot.org*, wrote:

It just occurred to me that the PI might be using the survey as a meme to study information diffusion. He only contacted A-listers directly, and now lots of us with >100 subscribers are responding... makes you go hmmm

Yet the MIT Media Survey became a lightning rod for the expression of gender politics, given the background events that were unfolding during this time period. As women were still fighting to win their way into the blogger nomenclature, a feminist rally cry was sounded to participate in the study, as if it were each woman’s duty to stand and be counted in it. Those who took the survey posted blog entries of their own about their participation, encouraging their readers to do the same with a precocious icon linking back to the entry page of the poll. One icon declaring “I made some science” seemed to be the favorite of the feminist community, as well as that of everyone else for that matter (though men seemed far more apt to use some of the more cryptic icons such as “I broke the power law” and “Free Cameron”), the very quaintness of the expression belying the fact that it was precisely MIT’s status as a patriarchal powerhouse that made this survey more important than the next one in the minds of respondents. After all, it was not Cameron Marlow’s Media Survey, but the MIT Media Survey, something that the shameless pleas for audience participation in it that he made on his own blog to “help him graduate” were incapable of dispelling. A study conducted at a less prestigious institution would be forced to take itself more seriously, as those locked out of the current power structure are forced to abide by more stringent guidelines for their behavior.

Surveys are an often desperate attempt to quantify data for the sake of quantifying it; patriarchy requires its own subjectivities to be shored up as unadulterated objectivity, whenever possible, and male sociologists in particular seem to be paranoid about their own genitalia when arguments over “hard” versus “soft” sciences arise. The contagious or viral model of information transmission—typically focused on

“memes,” a term that has achieved buzzword status as of late—has many useful properties. However, self-awareness of its own popularity is not one of them. The contagious framing is both easily colonized by capitalism (Blogshares.com assigns a monetary value to the importance of various blogs based on some sort of fantasy stock market) and incognizant of how patriarchy itself is typically the most useful contagion: in one viral marketing contest, *The Contagious Media Showdown*, was won by a team purporting to sell “Forget Me Not” panties, underwear men could use spy on their female partners. Due to both male mirth and feminist outrage, though numbers of each party were certainly skeptical of the product’s authenticity, the team’s entry catapulted them to the number one position in the contest-slash-science experiment, the discipline ever-agonistic. Similarly, the propagation of Marlow’s survey also took free advantage of both MIT’s esteem within a patriarchal society (based on the masculine image it cultivates) and the strife in the blogosphere due to the dismissal of women’s presence within it.

Given that background, where women participated as a deliberate political act, the gender breakdown of the survey might be of little use in determining the sex or gender ratios of bloggers as a whole; yet that information is very likely to be considered the most valuable that it produces. The crafter of the poll evidently thought so as well, a preliminary page that at one point displayed results of random questions always listed the number of male and female subjects, even when sex—and presumably gender—was not a factor in the specific results being displayed. (The feature is now removed, likely in anticipation of a full publication.) Of the 59,617 respondents, 22,083 were listed as male, with a number of 36,380 for females. A different set of figures were also given in another set of preliminary results, though the previous numbers were

also located on the exact same page, listing 16,750 males and 28,123 females responding to a direct question about their sex.

Prior to this, the most commonly cited statistic on the ratio of male to female bloggers was that of LiveJournal.com, one of many websites that freely hosts user blogs. Their statistical information is more transparent and accessible than most, given its history as a community project, rather than a corporate enterprise. For over a year the percentage of female identified writers has hovered at around 66 percent, although in raw numbers, the amount of users identifying as male and not identifying as anything at all is running neck and neck, calling into question the validity of the statistic when applied to the question it is supposed to be answering. (Ignoring for the moment the fact that the question itself as it stands concerns biological sex, a group of LiveJournal users have started a “gender petition” to get a wider swath of options listed, although their goals often seem to be self-contradictory, reinforcing gender as an ideology as much as deconstructing it: “some people feel that checking a gendered box helps to enforce stereotypes that limit a person’s ability to express their gender fully in today’s society.”) Given the public esteem for MIT’s muscles, Marlow’s statistics on the sex of bloggers is likely to replace that of LiveJournal’s when it comes to popular reporting, but the latter still presents an interesting test case pertaining to gender and the typology of the blog as a genre.

While LiveJournal’s demographics have made it an opportune example for feminists and patriarchs alike when it comes to proving that there are more female bloggers than male, the truth of that assertion has been held under a pall, given men’s ownership of language and semantics. LiveJournal is cited whenever men require a large number of female bloggers to exist, in order to prove that male writers are indeed the cream rising to the top; that argument having been

made, the semantic difference between a “journal” and a blog-proper is used to renege on that nomenclature, turning LiveJournal into a pink ghetto of teenage diarists who never write seriously about serious subjects—that “important shit” that The Daily Kos covers so well. Thus, the women who write at LiveJournal (or even elsewhere) are true bloggers only when it is convenient to male society.

The notion of public versus private writing is also particularly at flux when it comes to the participants at LiveJournal, even more so than those who avail themselves of other free hosts for their blogs. For the most part, search engines such as Google ignore the specific content of LiveJournal users, though some pages containing user-information (not specific postings) are periodically cached by such services. This is perhaps due to factors that are both accidental and intentional: the dynamically generated pages of LiveJournal, that have fostered the growth of community groups and a more social aesthetic (something that might have been a significant factor in drawing more women to the website to begin with, dangerous as such suppositions might be these days when even patriarchs can declare one an “essentialist!”), are harder for search engines like Google to accurately catalog; that Google itself purchased the rival Blogger.com and all of its Blogspot.org accounts in 2002 could have diminished its incentive to even try.

While someone searching for specific information—political or not—will almost never turn up content displayed on a LiveJournal account, in other ways, information on such pages is far more public than most of its users are ever made aware. This again suits male proclivities. Given the more private image the service has, perhaps an artifact of the same sexism declaring it a pink ghetto and its invisibility to search

engines, many of its clients possess a false sense of security: while they have the capability of restricting the access of certain content to only those logged into specific user-accounts marked as “friends,” it can often seem like an unnecessary precaution. However, LiveJournal has a “latest” feature that collates the last dozen or so posts made on the service globally into a single page. This is perhaps a vestigial function from the website’s early days, given that several hundred new entries are now made every minute; that content passes through the queue so quickly, and is hence very transient, gives users a false sense of security when it comes to the feature (a sense that has perhaps ensured the feature’s continued existence).

Men have devised several methods for specifically harvesting images from the “latest” page, cataloging them into galleries for further inspection at their leisure: photographs of girls and women being of prime interest. Despite the operation of dozens of websites collecting such images, only a very small percentage of the female LiveJournal user base is aware of them. Few have any reason to suspect how very public their publicly posted images actually are, given the rather small audiences that their blogs garner under normal circumstances. This makes it rather simple for males to latch onto specific images, their stalking habits facilitated by the community based system of LiveJournal: they can easily join groups to which the woman posting the image belongs in an attempt to interact with her, the woman having no reason to suspect his presence or how he arrived there. Or they can simply just rate the appearance of various females as if it were the “Hot or Not” website, the founder of which—James Hong—was invited to the launch party of The Contagious Media Showdown, along with Wonkette’s Nick Denton, and Jeff Mack of Alexa Internet.

Alexa, a victim of the search engine wars (eventually capitulating to Google), found a way to survive into the present through the marketing of its website ranking system to advertisers: Alexa's "traffic rank" for sites is often taken as gospel by the advertising executives who decide which sites to work with and how much money they deserve, based on their audience size and popularity. Websites such as The Daily Kos tend to do quite well in achieving high ranks. However, when it comes to advertising, the women of LiveJournal are either ignored or taken for granted. Such was the case when the agents behind the book *Cooking to Hook Up: The Bachelor's Date-Night Cookbook* decided to add a bit of contagious media to their own public relations campaign. The marketing page for the book contained a 10-question quiz that women could take to find out their own purported archetype (party girl, progressive girl, girl next door, etc.), which would then generate HTML code for the takers to post into their own LiveJournals; the service being mentioned by name and distinct from the categories of "website" and "blog" listed alongside it. Those pasting the code into their own spaces would find a large picture specific to the archetype displayed (with a link back to some fluffy pseudo-feminist text at the *Cooking to Hook Up* site), along with an exhortation for others to take the "What Kind of Girl Are You?" quiz as well.

Beyond the basic irony of men today being so deeply illiterate that a book designed to get them laid has to be marketed instead to women, it is profoundly troubling that despite advertiser's general reticence to pay women bloggers what they and their audiences are worth, that the words of feminism (so readily employed by the *Cooking to Hook Up* authors, a formerly married heterosexual couple) were used to take advantage of this fact, able to so effectively advertise their book for

free through their "meme." While some economists have debated over whether or not minority communities in urban areas actually have the same spending capacity per square foot as the less densely packed whites of suburbia, even acknowledgement of their potential as consumers has not been a call for equal treatment but for exploitation; so it goes for the pink ghettos of women's culture.

Given that female bloggers are only bloggers when male society needs them to be (and furthermore, a webpage itself is only a blog when patriarchy requires the genre to exist), playing the numbers game is a futile enterprise, as it has been for the women of LiveJournal who were not protected by their majority status: their identity is mutable from bloggers to mere diarists, their words private but their likenesses public, and they are positioned always as passive consumers, never as full participants in the capitalist system. In all three respects LiveJournal might be an extreme example, but if so, it is proof enough of what patriarchy would like to do to all women who express themselves, even those who host their own domain names and run their own file servers. Even as male society has worked to reshape the blog as a genre to suit its purposes, it is only so elastic, and the constant pull in different directions as women are systematically excluded and recruited into the genre threatens to cause a permanent tear: when it is no longer of any use to men, it will be abandoned just as the homepage and webzine were, in favor of some new format (podcasts and beyond) that is advantageous to men, being the early adopters who are first on the scene. In order to combat this in the here and now, the debate has to be centered on patriarchy—not blogs.