

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Jill Walker Rettberg. 2013. *Blogging 2nd edition.* Cambridge, UK: Polity. 195 pp. \$21.95 Paperback (9780745663654)

Weblogs (blogs for short) were a grassroots phenomenon a few decades ago but now number in the hundreds of millions. In *Blogging*, Jill Walker Rettberg's objective is to detail the history of blogs and their place in the ecosystem of the World Wide Web, as well as to provide a survey of blog-related research and theoretical literature. Rettberg also addresses scholarly debates that intersect with blogging as a form of on-line communication. As a professor of digital culture at the University of Bergen, Norway and a scholar of electronic literature and self-representation online (as well as a blogger herself), Rettberg is well-positioned to tackle this topic. *Blogging* is written in accessible language that will appeal to the scholar and lay reader alike.

The 2nd edition of *Blogging* includes updates and revisions that reflect rapid developments in the blogosphere during the five years since the 1st edition was published. Most of the examples from longstanding blogs are the same as in the 1st edition, and these continue to be relevant to the history of blogging. Rettberg has eliminated the section on how to create your own blog because instructions are now easy to find on the internet. The 2nd edition is divided into seven chapters that situate blogging within the context of socio-historical shifts in the technology, communication, journalism and marketing fields. Rettberg supplements the material with supporting examples from active blogs. The magnitude of the topic is handled skillfully, even though readers may sense a disconnect between globally diverse examples of blog-related research and occurrences that encompass everything from the popularity of craft blogs in Belgium (2013, 26) to limitations on social network usage in Iran (80).

Rettberg begins by defining blogs and provides a valuable taxonomy of contemporary blog sub-genres (personal, filter and topic-driven) (Ch. 1). This typology seems largely derivative of Herring, et al.'s (2004) similarly tripartite categorization of blogs (personal journals, filters and knowledge-logs) which Rettberg surprisingly does not cite. Rettberg uses four popular blogs as exemplars for the typology, all of which are American-based. The question of whether blogs are a genre or a medium

is addressed by dissecting the form and content component of blogs and their relationship to other genres and media.

From here, Rettberg takes an archaeological turn by situating blogging historically in the context of culture, technology and communication developments ranging from print to hypertext (Ch. 2). Attention is given to the longstanding philosophical debate surrounding the value of oral versus written communication. Drawing on a theoretical lineage extending from Plato to Jurgen Habermas, Rettberg argues that blogs (as well as other social media) possess characteristics of both oral and written forms because they disseminate ideas and information widely while being dialogic in nature. Rettberg draws again on Habermas as well as Richard Sennett to discuss the question of whether we can think of blogs as a modern public sphere where democratic debate occurs (Ch. 2). The relationship of blogs to offline social networks, the network structure of the internet and digitally-mediated social networks is also considered (Ch. 3). Rettberg persuasively argues that all social networking sites are “at root a form of blogging” (p. 14).

A particularly strong chapter details the distinction between journalism and blogging, as well as the ways they intersect and relate to characteristics of modernism and postmodernism (Ch. 4). Rettberg argues that there is a current symbiosis between the two, with blogs having the ability to empower readers by acting as gatekeepers or gatewatchers while also serving the needs of mainstream journalism for sources and content. Rettberg also addresses the increasing commercialization of blogs and details the unique ways in which blogs are becoming “branded” via advertising and sponsorship opportunities (Ch. 6).

The concluding chapter offers the least useful material, as Rettberg merely raises questions about the future of blogging and urges critical thinking about privacy issues in spite of the fact that theoretical tools for this already exist (see Dean 2010; Deibert et al. 2010). This book would be useful background reading for scholars studying blogs or those who are teaching courses covering social media, online communication, digital culture, marketing or consumption studies.

Blogging suffers from several limitations, the first of which is the inclusion of several outdated and thus inaccurate facts. For example, Technorati is described as a site that keeps a public ranking of the internet’s most popular blogs (2012, 13) but the company stopped performing this function in May of 2014. Instagram is described as a “mobile-only” social media site (78) but these feeds became available on the Web in February of 2013. Finally, the social network Pair (81) merged with another network in February 2013 and is now called Couple. To her credit, in the introduction Rettberg writes about the incongruence of creating

a stable book about ephemeral blogs. There is also a minor continuity error in regards to whether blogger Heather Armstrong has one or more daughters (the latter is correct) (18-19).

Secondly, blog readers are either overlooked or conflated with bloggers on several occasions. In the section on “Engaging Bloggers” (2012, 161), for instance, Rettberg describes how bloggers can increase traffic by linking to other bloggers’ posts in the hopes that they might return the favour (162). She then goes on to state that “the main advice is simply to engage with your readers” (164). Likewise, an anecdote about a winery that increased blog traffic by offering \$5 vouchers to *readers* who sent in photos of themselves buying the wine, includes this observation: “engaging bloggers by asking them to contribute is an effective strategy for bloggers who want to build a readership and sense of community” (163). In both of these cases, readers and bloggers are used erroneously as synonyms. Furthermore, assertions about readers are unsupported by evidence such as when Rettberg states that “we trust or distrust bloggers based on our perception of their honesty” (99). Likewise, attention to bloggers themselves (as opposed to their blogs) is scant, leading one to wonder if these are gaps in the book or the larger research literature. Rettberg mentions the high number of books on blogging and the phenomenon of blogging as a career, yet the experience of being a blogger is not illuminated further.

Thirdly, while Rettberg touts the egalitarian nature of the blogosphere, citing studies (largely based on US-samples) indicating that the gender distribution of bloggers is roughly equal (2012, 28-29, 169), research on the gendered nature of genre and content is overlooked (e.g., Lopez 2009, Antunovic and Hardin 2013). And finally, data on blog consecration is limited to link-based search-engine results as a measure of a blog’s quality and readership. Rettberg makes the unsupported assumption that “if a hundred blogs link to your site, it’s probably more interesting or important than a site that has only three blogs linking to it” (152). Other measures of audience size or reputation (e.g., blog traffic, blog awards) are not addressed.

Ultimately Rettberg’s book may be most useful as a history of a media form that is past its heyday in terms of building links or connections between internet users, but the increasing presence of blogs (and the fact that companies consider blogs to be attractive marketing vehicles) indicates that they are relevant forms of media today.

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