LEA
Leonardo Electronic Almanac

Blogs, Literacies and the Collapse of Private and Public

Jill Walker Rettberg
University of Bergen
Postboks 7800
5020 Bergen
+47 55588431
jill.walker.rettberg @ uib.no
http://jilltxt.net

ABSTRACT

Recent years have shown a dramatic shift in the balance between private and public that has distressed many cultural commentators, from scholars like Habermas and Sennett to mass media journalists. This paper sees participatory media as a significant factor in this shift and compares the transition to participatory media with the transition to print and general literacy several hundred years ago. The spread of literacy and of the parallel skills of writing and silent reading led, according to scholars like Eisenstein and Chartier, to the separation of private from public and the development of solipsistic forms of thought. Likewise, this paper argues, the spread of instantaneous publication and social, shared, conversational media such as blogs is intimately connected with the collapse of private and public. What, then, will the future of participatory media, and blogging in particular, be like?

Keywords

Weblogs, blogs, public sphere, private, personal publishing, history, diaries, self-presentation, auto-biography, print

1. MORAL DISTRESS

In the summer of 2007, YouTube and CNN worked together to create a new kind of television debate between the candidates who wished to run for president in the US 2008 elections. In these debates – dubbed the YouTube debates – questions would be asked by regular citizens who uploaded their questions as videos to YouTube. 3000 people uploaded videos for the first debate, which was held between the Democratic presidential candidates. Of these 3000 videos, 39 were played by CNN and showed to the candidates, who answered the questions, with the debate moderated by a host.

A few days after the debates, the Republican Party's front-running candidates stated that they were considering not attending the YouTube/CNN debates for the Republicans, originally scheduled to be held on September 17

(Techpresident.com 27/7/2007, Washington Post 26/7/2007). Whether or not the candidates actually participated in the debates, which were quickly rescheduled for November, their distrust of the debate format is symptomatic of a greater trend: the moral distress aroused by the rapid changes in the public sphere. The difference between the YouTube debates and conventional televised debates is that conventional televised debates are controlled by the media, which is seen as part of the public sphere, whereas the questions in the YouTube debates are asked by individuals from their own homes. No matter that the mass media (in this case, CNN) still vets the questions: the unruliness of the format appears to unsettle these politicians, who are not used to participatory media like YouTube.

This moral distress about a changing public sphere has been expressed by philosophers as well as by politicians. Jürgen Habermas recently expressed a similar concern about the internet, four decades after first publishing his theory of the development of the public sphere. In a speech given at his acceptance of the Bruno Kreisky Prize for the Advancement of Human Rights (March 9, 2006), Habermas expressed a highly ambivalent opinion of the internet, not at all accepting it as the utopian public sphere of today:

> On the one hand, the communication shift from books and the printed press to the television and the Internet has brought about an unimagined broadening of the media sphere, and an unprecedented consolidation of communication networks. Intellectuals used to swim around in the public sphere like fish in water, but this environment has become ever more inclusive, while the exchange of ideas has become more intensive than ever. But on the other hand the intellectuals seem to be suffocating from the excess of this vitalising element, as if they were overdosing. The blessing seems to have become a curse. I see the reasons for that in the de-formalisation of the public sphere, and in the de-differentiation of the respective roles.

> Use of the Internet has both broadened and fragmented the contexts of communication. This is why the Internet can have a subversive effect on intellectual life in authoritarian regimes. But at the same time, the less formal, horizontal cross-linking of communication channels weakens the achievements of traditional media. This focuses the attention of an anonymous and dispersed public on select topics and information, allowing citizens to concentrate on the same critically filtered issues and journalistic pieces at any given time. The price we pay for the growth in egalitarianism offered by the Internet is the decentralised access to unedited stories. In this medium,

contributions by intellectuals lose their power to create a focus. [13]

Habermas thus argues that there is simply too much diversity, too much activity and too many people participating, and that this lessens the focus that traditional mass media were able to give to selected topics. He worries both that this will mean there are no common experiences or debates, and that the internet is simply *too* exciting: "intellectuals seem to be suffocating from the excess of this vitalising element." This line reminds us of the "ferment engendered by access to more books" [11] (p 74) that was experienced during the transition to print – although the excitement engendered by print is almost always spoken of positively. History, after all, is written by the victors.

Habermas and the Republican presidential candidates present examples of the moral distress displayed by people accustomed to a print culture with mass media when they are faced with participatory media such as YouTube, the Wikipedia or blogs.

In order to have a notion of a public sphere, whether it is in decline or not, it is necessary to also have a concept of a private sphere. If we look, it is easy to see a complementary moral distress about the collapse of the private sphere – a distress that is the mirror image of Habermas's concerns.

This distress for the decline of the private is often seen in discussions of young people and blogging. Journalist Emily Nussbaum describes it thus: "As younger people reveal their private lives on the Internet, the older generation looks on with alarm and misapprehension not seen since the early days of rock and roll" [23]. As blogs, Myspace and Facebook have become more and more mainstream, parents and the media are regularly shocked at the amount of and kind of information about themselves that young people – and an increasing number of adults – put online. How on earth can someone share their intimate diaries, people ask. And *why* would you do that?

The boundaries between private and public that were clear in the mid- and late twentieth century are collapsing. The public sphere and our notions of what public debate looks like are radically shifting, and so are our notions of what should be kept private.

This paper explores the collapse of public and private by examining the parallels between this collapse and the division into private and public that occurred some four hundred years ago. As the collapse is coinciding with blogging and participatory media, the separation of public and private coincided with another media shift: the transition to print and to general literacy.

Obviously a paper such as this does not have space for a full discussion of these issues, but I hope that my brief summaries of the transition to participatory media and of the transition to print will provide enough of a roadmap for those who are interested to be able to delve deeper in these topics themselves. This paper attempts to show connections that have not previously been explored – such as the relationship between today's idea of a mediated public sphere and the parallel development of the private sphere – and to suggest new ways of exploring and understanding the current transitions.

Importantly, each of these transitions led to the spread of a new form of literacy. The spread of print was accompanied by the spread of what we today simply know as "literacy", that is the ability of the general population to read and write. The spread of participatory media is accompanied by the spread of what I will call "network literacy", which is the ability of the general population to create, share and navigate social media forms. Following the presentation of this history of the past spread of literacy and the current spread of network literacy, I present an analysis of the relationship between the two transitions and look for suggestions as to what our future as users and creators of digital media will be.

2. THE SPREAD OF NETWORK LITERACY, BLOGGING AND MORE

Literacies never spread at an even pace. Today, nearly two thirds of American teenagers have published their own content to the internet, proof that at least one aspect of network literacy is widespread in this demographic [19]. On the other hand, the reluctance of the Republican presidential candidates to participate in the YouTube/CNN debates shows that participatory media are far from well understood or accepted in the whole population. Apart from these primarily cultural differences within a single country, large portions of the global population does not have access to the technology to learn or take part in network literacy and participatory media.

Network literacy refers to the ability to create, share and navigate through media on the network, and requires a shift from a notion of discrete, autonomous texts to seeing texts and media as interconnected, social spaces. This is the literacy required in blogging as in other participatory media. The chief characteristics of participatory and social media are that the separation between producers and audience that was so clear in traditional mass media has been largely erased. In contrast to the expense involved in producing and distributing conventional media such as newspapers, books and television, the web and digital technology make participation and production cheap and easy for those with access to the technology, and in the Western cultures, areas of the Middle East and much of Asia, that means most of the population.

In the following, I will use blogs as a lens for seeing the development and spread of network literacy. Clearly some people developed a network literacy well before the advent of blogs – for instance in the BBSes of the 80s, the Usenet discussions of the 70s, 80s and 90s. Blogs provide a useful lens, however, as they embody all the prime characteristics of participatory media, while remaining low-tech enough to be easily accessible for the general public in early phases of a transition to network literacy.

Weblogs have become part of popular consciousness with a speed that is remarkable by any standards. Until December of 1997, when Jorn Barger proposed the term [4], nobody had ever used the word "weblog" to refer to the nascent genre of websites with frequently updated posts in reverse

chronological order. The shorter form, blog, was not used until 1999, when Peter Merholz wrote in the sidebar of his blog "I've decided to pronounce the word "weblog" as wee'- blog. Or "blog" for short." [4] Later that year, Blogger.com was established, offering "Push-button publishing for the people" (Blogger.com website, October 2000)

By 2002, the Oxford English Dictionary was asking Peter Merholz for a print source for the word "blog", so they could include it in their dictionary (peterme.com, June 14, 2002). In 2004, the Merriam-Webster declared "blog" to be the word of the year, reporting that "blog" was the most searched-for word on their online dictionary that year. By then, the media was writing about blogs regularly and almost everybody seemed to have heard about them. But in a survey late that year, 62% of internet users still said they didn't know what a blog was (Pew Internet, The State of Blogging, January 2005). No wonder they were trying to look the word up in a dictionary.

By 2006, 39% of US internet users read blogs [18], and the blog tracking site Technorati reported that it tracks more than 55 million blogs, about 55% of which are active [30]. By 2007, Technorati was tracking 70 million blogs, from all over the globe. 37% of these blogs were written in Japanese, 36% in English, 8% in Chinese and the rest in numerous other languages [31].

To judge by the success of blogging in the last few years, it seems that the "push-button publishing" Blogger.com offered in October 2000 was exactly what the people wanted.

Participatory media provides frameworks within which everybody can contribute. Blogs are an example of this, but there are many other examples too, including social websites like Facebook, MySpace, Xanga and Bebo; collaborative writing sites like the Wikipedia, OhMyNews and Slashdot; social bookmarking sites like del.icio.us, Digg and Furl; media sharing sites like Flickr, YouTube and Freesound; micromedia sites like Twitter and 43 things; and sites that organise all these threads of publication like Technorati.

Participatory media has in principle been available for a long time. As Brecht wrote in the thirties, radio could have been developed as a two-way medium rather than primarily as a broadcast medium [7]. Today we might call Brecht's vision of radio peer-to-peer rather than two-way. Photocopiers are another technology that made home or office publication relatively cheap. There have been many examples of personal media production: ham radio, fanzines, self-published books such as Ted Nelson's *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*, pirate radio and television stations and so on. In the eighties and early nineties BBSes, listservs and early websites were networked examples of early participatory media.

Blogging, though, provided the first genre and technology to make self-publication and genuine participatory media really accessible to ordinary citizens. The rapid spread of blogging as detailed above demonstrates that we were a culture ready to participate in media production and sharing. The many parallel and later developments in participatory and social media show that the urge to share our ideas, opinions, thoughts and desires is strong. This paper, then, uses blogging as a main locus for understanding the trends of social and participatory media

because blogging has been such a clear and exemplary proponent of the shift to a network literacy that includes writing and producing media as well as reading and receiving it.

3. BLOGS AND THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Emily Nussbaum's article [23] gives examples of how deeply upset people well-situated in the traditional forms of print-based literacy can become at seeing how many bloggers share things about themselves that in previous times would have been relegated to the private sphere and insisted should be kept private. Interestingly, many of the critics of blogging have seen the form as too "private" despite the fact that about half of blogs are not about the blogger's life but about other topics, such as a hobby, a special interest, politics or education [18].

Yet half of all blogs *are* primarily diaries [18], and can thus be seen as a continuation of a long tradition of self-representational writing, and can also be connected to self-portraits in other media [34]. The urge for self-expression is deep-seated in humans, and is evident in the stick-figures of the early cave-dwellers, the runes carved by Vikings stating nothing but "I wrote this" and up until today, in diaries, autobiographies, letters, memoirs and to blogs, photo-sharing and videologs.

Seen as a genre, blogs clearly have a lot in common with the established genres of diaries and journals [14, 17, 21, 29, 32, 35, 36], but it is also important to remember that blogs are not simply artefacts or publications, they are also the sites of social practice [6].

Diaries are often thought of as intimate and secret, and in comparing blogs to diaries the radically different perception of privacy is often emphasised. In fact the history of diaries shows many levels of privacy were common with traditional diaries just as not all blogs are open to the general public.

The intimate, personal diary may compare well to diary-style blogs, but more topic-centric blogs (filterblogs, political blogs, commercial blogs and so on) can be closer to the inventor's or engineer's notebook, of which Thomas Edison's diary is a fine example. Edison took (and kept) notes about almost everything. The Edison National Historic Site archives approximately five million pages of notes, most of which are written by Edison himself. His writings are characterised by what Olga Dysthe calls "thinking writing", with heavy use of words like if, might, would, could and try. This style of writing has much in common with the style of writing in many blogs, where ideas are tried out and discussed rather than being simply asserted or documented [33].

Journals such as Edison's may have been primarily intended for the writer's own use but were not necessarily secret or private, as we imagine diaries to have been. An even more public form of frequent, personal writing was seen in the pamphlets and small-scale newspapers of the nineteenth century. Though best known for his popular novels, Alexandre Dumas also directed and wrote for eleven newspapers. He was fascinated by the new technology of the modern press, which was introduced in France in the 1830s. His first newspaper was

written solely by himself, and was called *Le Mois*. Its tagline must be the tagline of some blog out there*: jour par jour, heure par heure* ("hour by hour, day by day"). Dumas' intention was to write a daily chronicle of events, and he saw himself as "the universal stenographer" and a "literary worker". Many of today's bloggers would easily identify with this approach to writing.

Pamphlets were a more overtly political form of small-scale publication. In his history of political culture in Stuart Britain, Mark Knights writes of the radical nature of pamphlets:

> In the 17th century, pamphlets were the radical new form of communication, popular and widespread due to the combination of the printing press, higher literacy levels and [lifting of censorship]. As a history of pamphlets published in 1715 states, a pamphlet, being 'of a small portable bulk, and of no great price, and of no great difficulty, seems adapted for every one's understanding, for every one's reading, for every one's buying capacity and ability'. [Davies, qtd by 16]

Periodicals also became popular during this period. In Britain, this was in part because of the lifting of government censorship of publications in 1695 [16]. As with blogging, the spread of polemical printed publications led to more publication:

> [P]rint was a dialogic medium: published claim provoked printed counter-claim, vindication, denial, or agreement. Such a dialogue was easiest to sustain during periods of press freedom--either when the laws regulating the press had lapsed (1641, 1679, 1695) or when the law was ineffectually enforced. The dialogue was necessary because the best way to counteract print, it came to be recognized, was through print. The more controversial print there was, the more need there was to enter into print to engage with it. [16]

Like periodicals and diaries, blogs are not published as finished wholes, but in bits and pieces during a period of time. As Knights suggests, this episodic form of publication may encourage dialogue.

In private diaries the dialogue may be internal, apparent in the writer's conversation with her- or himself over time. José van Dijck describes a number of more or less public and collaborative forms of diary-writing. Religious groups would often share diaries, as would prisoners of war and other groups of people [32].

Even diaries, then, had a less rigorous division of private and public sphere than we tend to assume. But how did the division occur in the first place? Scholars have argued that it followed from the transition to general literacy, which was largely concurrent with the transition to print. Let's look first at some of the major changes that print engendered, and then examine the development of the public sphere and finally the private sphere. Following that, I'll return to the discussion of how this is being mirrored – or undone – in participatory media and with today's developing network literacy.

3.1 CULTURAL EFFECTS OF PRINT

Just as early web diaries, individually, don't seem greatly different to traditional diaries, the first printed books looked very similar to manuscripts. Elizabeth Eisenstein [11], a historian of the transition to print, notes that "[i]f one holds a late manuscript copy of a given text next to an early printed one, one is likely to doubt that any change at all has taken place, let alone an abrupt or revolutionary one." Early printers copied the style of hand-written manuscripts faithfully. These early print books from the first fifty or so years of print are called *incunabula*. As print became more common, however, many changes were made. Eisenstein draws a multifaceted picture of a transition that definitely affected the course of history. These transitions have many parallels to todays ongoing transition to electronic publication, not because the process is the same – print has many substantially different constraints and affordances to those of the internet – but because we can see how the specificities of the media affect the ways we are able to communicate, and ultimately, how intimately changes in media are connected with cultural developments.

Eisenstein identifies six features of print that can link print to other historical changes:

1. Wide dissemination
2. Standardisation
3. Reorganisation
4. Data collection and collaboration
5. Preservation
6. Amplification and reinforcement

Perhaps the most important feature in relation to blogs is the first: wide dissemination. This is also a major difference between print-based diaries and pamphlets and web-based forms like blogs. Eisenstein shows how the simple spread of books causes major changes in culture. Before print, a scholar would have to travel far to read a particular book. In the decades and centuries after print, books became radically more accessible. The "ferment engendered by access to more books" [11] (p 74) reminds us of the giddyness of early bloggers, intoxicated by the wealth of material on the web. As Rabelais wrote, "All the world is full of learned men, of most skilled preceptors, of vast libraries. . .neither in Plato's time nor in Cicero's was there ever such opportunity for studying. . ." (p 73)

The increased access to books meant that inaccuracies and disagreements between sources were more easily discovered, leading to corrections, to debates and in time to amplification of certain messages. A specific example Eisenstein gives is that of the *Theatrum*, an atlas edited by Ortelius that incorporated reader input in frequent new editions:

> By this simple expedient of being honest with his readers and inviting criticism and suggestions, Ortelius made his *Theaetrum* a sort of cooperative enterprise on an international basis. He received helpful suggestions from far and wide and cartographers stumbled over themselves to send him their latest maps of regions not covered in the *Theatrum*.

> The *Theatrum* was. . .speedily reprinted several times. . .Suggestions for corrections and revisions kept Ortelius and his engravers busy altering plates for new editions. . .Within three

years he had acquired so many new maps that he issued a supplement of 17 maps which were afterwards incorporated in the *Theatrum*. When Ortelius died in 1598 at least 28 editions of the atlas had been published in Latin, Dutch German, French and Spanish. . . (109-110)

This example of collaborative documentation of knowledge is strongly reministent of the collaborative editing of the Wikipedia in particular, but also of blogs with their often exploratory focus. Rabelais's giddy enjoyment of the increased access to "learned men" and "skilled preceptors" expresses the joy of having access to experts. Ortelius's use of amateurs in creating his atlas shows how experts gaining access to large networks of amateurs can be equally important.

Ortelius's *Theatrum* does show how larger communities can be fostered by print. However, it has also been argued that print caused greater barriers between writers and readers, and that print and general literacy were important in the establishment of a new concept of a public and a private sphere that were separate from one another.

4. THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The public sphere is a concept introduced by Jürgen Habermas that describes an ideal democratic space for rational debate among informed and engaged citizens [12]. While the idea that such a public sphere has ever existed has often been criticised, it is as frequently invoked, and many scholars have discussed its relevance to the web and even to blogging [2, 3, 5, 22, 27].

Habermas connects the establishment of a modern conception of private and public to the establishment of a capitalist society, where news became a commodity sold by merchants. This led to the eighteenth and nineteenth century cultures of open debate in newspapers and in the coffee shops of large European cities. The open debates that occur in such a public sphere are seen as necessary to a true democracy.

The decline of the public sphere has regularly been lamented, and the blogosphere has been proposed as a possible new and alternative public sphere. Richard Sennett [28] ties the decline to electronic media, though writing in the late seventies, he refers primarily to radio and television:

> Electronic communications is one means by which the very idea of public life has been put to an end. The media have vastly increased the store of knowledge social groups have about each other, but have rendered actual contact unnecessary. (282)

Sennett admits that this is not solely the fault of electronic media, writing that they merely fulfill "those cultural impulses that formed over the whole of the last century and a half to withdraw from social interaction in order to know and feel more as a person." (282-283) He sees this tendency as having begun in nineteenth century theatres and concert halls, where a "crowd silence" (283) was established as a norm. Electronic media, Sennett argues, intensify this: "You've got to be silent to be spoken to. (..) Passivity is the "logic" of this technology." (283)

Today, audiences are anything but passive. According to a 2005 survey reported in the newspaper *Dagbladet* (October 17, 2005), in an average week every third Norwegian publishes something online. A more recent survey found that 38% of Norwegians have appeared on television, showing that the increased participation in media is not limited to the internet (*Forskning.no*, September 22, 2006). Mainstream media publications pander to our eagerness to share our views. Newspapers have expanded the traditional letters to the editor columns to allow readers to comment on individual articles in their online editions, and often provide an infrastructure for online discussion boards and blogging, or as *the New York Times* and several other online newspapers do, show lists of the articles most frequently read, emailed and blogged. In television, phoning in to comment has expanded into SMS-TV, where talk shows, quiz shows and music shows all encourage viewers to send in SMSes that are either displayed on the screen for all viewers to see or that function as votes: which politician do you agree with, what's the answer to the quiz, which team member shall we vote out of the Big Brother house, which music video shall we play next?

In his history of communication, John Durham Peters traces two alternative ideals for communication that have co-existed at least since the Ancient Greeks: *dissemination* and *dialogue*. We can see the dichotomy today between the dissemination of mass media to a passive mass audience and the dialogue found in two-way media such as blogs, online discussion boards and chat forums. Of course, such a dichotomy is inherently false, as there will always be many ways of showing how the "passive audience" is not necessarily as passive as it appears (perhaps they go to a coffee house and discuss the passively received news, or, after passively watching StarWars and buying all the merchandise, they might go and write fan fiction about it [15]), and likewise there are many examples of lurkers and passive users of potentially dialogic media. Yet even as a false dichotomy, the imagined span from absolute dissemination to absolute dialogue can help us understand the distribution of communicative modes and apply them to the media of today, such as blogs.

In his history of communication Peters seeks to dispel the idea of the "often uncritical celebration of dialogue", writing that "[d]ialogue is only one communicative script among many [25]. The lament over the end of conversation and the call for refreshed dialogue alike miss the virtues inherent in nonreciprocal forms of action and culture."

Peters sees Plato and Jesus as our culture's prototypical spokesmen for dialogue and dissemination respectively. While Plato argues in Phaedrus that anyone who wishes to share his ideas should do so in person and in attentive dialogue [26], Jesus told the parable of the sower, who spread his seed – or words – indiscriminately, spreading out a message to the masses:

> A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 13:3-9)

As Peters points out, Plato argues for the exact opposite strategy, mocking the careless farmer who plants his seeds in unfitting soil:

> Would a husbandman, who is a man of sense, take the seeds, which he values and which he wishes to bear fruit, and in sober seriousness plant them during the heat of summer, in some garden of Adonis, that he may rejoice when he sees them in eight days appearing in beauty? at least he would do so, if at all, only for the sake of amusement and pastime. But when he is in earnest he sows in fitting soil, and practises husbandry, and is satisfied if in eight months the seeds which he has sown arrive at perfection. [26]

Both these parables or stories are metaphors for the best way of sharing ideas. The parable of the sower proposes that you should spread your message as broadly as possible and accept that not everyone will understand or wish to engage with your ideas. This, Peters writes, is how *dissemination* works (the root of the word, *sem*, refers to seeds). Even though many or maybe most seeds will be lost, the benefit will be great: "But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." (Matthew 13:23) Mass media and advertising clearly follow this model. A television broadcast will only be watched by a small proportion of the people who could potentially tune in to it, but that small group may be sufficient for the producers.

Plato, on the other hand, argues that dissemination is wasteful, and that dialogue with worthy listeners and a careful tending of communication is the best way to spread your ideas. This idealisation of dialogue has been particularly strong in modern ideas of pedagogy, where experts in the latter half of the twentieth century have moved away from previous ideas of education as a simple transferal of information (a kind of dissemination) and towards the idea that knowledge is constructed by the learner in dialogue and interaction with people and technologies. Dialogue has also been hailed as one of the key features of new media and especially of the internet.

Blogs are remarkable for combining aspects of both dialogue and dissemination. In a sense, they are as promiscuously sown as the seeds in the Parable of the Sower. Blogs are published on the internet and can be read by anybody – or nobody. On the other hand, a successful blog must be tended as a garden [20]. A reader can ask a question of a blog, by leaving a comment on the blog itself or by posting on her own blog, and quite likely, the blogger will respond. Well-tended blogs are not at all like the writings of which Plato complains, "if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence." [26]

As we saw, Plato distrusts the indiscriminate spread of words. Plato's concern is very similar to that which Jürgen Habermas recently expressed about the internet, as quoted at the beginning of this paper [13].

If we read blogs through these quotes from Plato and Habermas, it seems that the authority of blogs might not to be tied simply to who can write them (anyone) but also to who can read them. If we have too many writers and readers – we might, with Habermas' words, suffocate "from the excess of this vitalising element." Similar criticisms were in fact made in

17th and 18th century Britain of the coffee-houses Habermas lauded as the birthing place of the public sphere: "the common people talke anything, for every carman and porter is now a statesman; and indeed the coffee houses are good for nothing else." [Sir Thomas Piper, qtd in 16]

Blogs combine aspects of dialogue and of dissemination. Reading them with the Parable of the Sower, it is clear that blogs' accessibility and openness allows them to potentially find a few excellent readers and communicators, "the good soil" of the parable. In addition, blogging allows for dialogue through comments and cross-blog conversations [10].

But this free and open access clearly worries many people, from Habermas to Republican presidential candidates. Free dissemination means a lack of control, and with it a lack of authority. We are, however, starting to see how alternative markers of authority are developing in social and participatory media [9].

5. LITERACY AND THE INVENTION OF THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Much attention has been given to the relationship between blogs and our conceptions of a public sphere, but less attention has been paid to the *private* sphere and blogging.

The withdrawal from social interaction that Sennett describes in his distressed description of the decline of "public man" is equivalent to that described by Roger Chartier in silent reading several centuries before electronic media [8]. Silent reading was mastered by monks and then by university scholars in the twelfth century, followed by the aristocracy and finally becoming the norm in the fifteenth century. Although it is hard to be sure of the details of the development towards a literate population, scholars believe that while only about 20-30% of the European population was literate in the early 17th century, 70-90% was literate by the end of the 18th century [8] (page 125).

Chartier argues that silent reading and widespread literacy helped create a private sphere:

> The spread of literacy, the widespread circulation of written materials whether in printed or manuscript form, and the increasingly common practice of silent reading, which fostered a solitary and private relation between the reader and his book, were crucial changes, which redrew the boundary between the inner life and life in the community. (..) Between 1500 and 1800 man's altered relation to the written word helped to create a new private sphere into which the individual could retreat, seeking refuge from the community.

Interestingly, the time frame Chartier outlines for this development of a private sphere parallels that which Habermas proposes for the development of the public sphere, although Chartier does not refer to Habermas and Habermas does not discuss reading as creating a private sphere. On the contrary, to the extent that Habermas does deal with reading it is as a support for the public sphere, in that newspapers and citizens able to read them are a necessary part of the public sphere.

While Habermas stresses the importance of the coffee house as a space for communal reading and debate, Chartier notes the

significance of the library as a place to retreat to, as well as being a place from which the world can be seen (130). There is a sense of power, Chartier argues, in being able to withdraw from the world and yet maintain control over it.

The "solipsistic thought" that Chartier argues silent reading led to is an interesting parallel to the passivity that worries Sennett so in the mass audiences of television and other electronic media. But Chartier sees this solitude as having great positive potential.

Not only reading, but also writing is a solitary activity, as Walter Ong reminds us in his treatise on the transition from orality to literacy:

> [W]ords are alone in a text. Moreover, in composing a text, in 'writing' something, the one producing the written utterance is also alone. Writing is a solipsistic operation. (101)

In a more general sense, too, Ong argues that writing makes the internal self more prominent:

> By separating the knower from the known (..) writing makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world quite distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set. (116)

Literacy, then, has contributed not only to the development of the public sphere but also to the development of a conception of the self, of a private space. It also led us to understand thinking and the creation and acquiring of knowledge as something that happened in private and alone; with books and writing, but in private communion with them. This is a strong contrast to earlier times, when thought was communal and conversational.

6. BLOGGING COLLAPSES THE DIVIDE

Blogging is an activity that requires both reading and writing to an extent not present in earlier forms of writing. Reading is necessary for the mass dissemination that made the public sphere possible – yet that locked readers (and later, viewers) apart from one another. Writing likewise depended on solitude in a world of paper, where production was necessarily separated from consumption.

Blogging is evidence of the possibility of a form of literacy that is not solipsistic – or rather, that is both interior and social at the same time. Bloggers read and write in the same space. You read other blogs and write comments. You write in your own blog, and read comments to your posts. The immediacy is even more apparent in instant messaging and micromedia formats like Twitter.

Just as print and literacy were important factors in the development of our modern understanding of a public and private sphere, so participatory media and network literacy are significant factors in the current collapse of public and private. Of course just as print and literacy were not the only factors in the separation of public and private, just as participatory media and network literacy is not the only factor in their collapse. One way of tracing the relationship between print literacy and network literacy is by examining cultural differences in the development of these literacies.

Unfortunately there is little literature available in English or European languages about the development of blogging in Asia, so the following will focus on English language and European blogs, despite the fact that Technorati shows there are more Japanese and Chinese language blogs than there are English language ones.

The spread of literacy was culturally determined. In addition to being decided across lines of gender, class and location, religion had a great deal to do with whether people learnt to read and/or write, and what meaning they gave to these skills.

Although blogging is clearly a global phenomenon today it began in the United States, and Americans still seem to blog more frequently than most other nationalities. This does not seem to be simply linked to the accessibility of technology. The Scandinavian countries, for example, rank among the top nations of the world in terms of the percentage of the population with internet access. And yet blogs, while spreading steadily, are far from as frequent in Scandinavian countries as in the United States.

Mark Bahnisch notes differences in political blogging in various countries, and proposes that some of the difference can be traced to the political systems [2]. In the US there is a very polarised debate between two strong parties, and because elections are held at established times, campaigns last for years. This leads to a polarised and lengthy debate. In Australia, on the other hand, elections are called by the prime minister and so the active campaign period only lasts for a few weeks. This affects the political blogosphere.

A more fundamental difference between national styles of blogging may lie in the ways in which literacy spread in different countries. Viviane Serfaty argues that blogging is a particularly American form, basing her argument on the Puritan ideal of spiritual work as self-reflection through writing in a diary. The Lutheran church had an almost opposite approach to literacy and salvation. The Lutheran church saw individual reading of the word of God as the way to salvation, and so it was important to the church that the people could read. However, writing was seen as either superfluous or actually detrimental. Lutherans were supposed to receive God's word, whereas other forms of Christianity encouraged a two-way relationship with God. Because of this, Norwegians and Swedes were reading-literate almost a century before they were writing-literate [1]. The transition to literacy, for most Norwegians and Swedes, was a transition to being a passive audience member without the ability to write back. It is not surprising, then, that these cultures are taking a little longer to become network literate.

Understanding our cultural history of literacy can help explain not only our culture but our adoption of the new network literacy of blogging and related forms.

7. NETWORK LITERACY: WHAT WILL OUR FUTURE BE?

I have argued that just as the spread of literacy led to a separation of private and public, so the spread of network literacy is leading to a collapse of these two spheres. Blogging

and other participatory media reposition writing and reading as social, rather than solitary activities.

At the Media in Transition conference at MIT this April (April 27-29, 2007), Tom Pewitt presented the idea of the Gutenberg Parenthesis in an introductory keynote. His and his colleagues' argument is that we are at the end of a four hundred year "parenthesis" dominated by print and its attendant norms, such as the idea that you can have an autonomous, fixed text, or the idea that a text or cultural object is originally composed once, and thereafter passively reproduced by readers, musicians or performers. Various cultures entered the Gutenberg Parenthesis at different times, and print was not the only technology responsible for this fixing of texts. For instance, African-American culture did not see songs as being fixed or owned by anybody until the recording industry became important in recording specific versions of songs that then became fixed. Poetry entered the Gutenberg Parenthesis long before theatre, and likewise, different genres and cultural groups will exit the parenthesis at different times.

The comparisons I have made here between the spread of literacy and the spread of network literacy present a compatible view of cultural development to Pewitt et. al.'s proposal of the Gutenberg Parenthesis, although I am looking more at the meaning of the ways people *use* and become accustomed to technology than at the objects or activities the technology produces. In Pewitt's terms, then, what I am describing is "post-parenthetical".

What will happen, then, when we move away from this relatively brief historical interlude – parenthesis – where print and print literacy dominated our culture? Pewitt argues that we will return to the pre-Gutenberg privileging of the performance as a fluid happening that relies on other performances and will influence further performances, but also stated that there will, of course, be differences between the pre-parenthetical and post-parenthetical.

I see the future as being characterised by the collapse of private and public, which as I have discussed, is visible in blogs and other forms of participatory meda, but which is also apparent in the extreme customisation of what was until recently mass media.

Just three decades ago, when Richard Sennett wrote *The Fall of Public Man* [28], he saw electronic media as creating a passive audience. He wrote in the heyday of mass media, a time when a few mainstream newspapers and television and radio channels were sold to, listened to and watched by mass audiences. Since then, there has been a drastic fragmentation of even these traditional media, with an ever-expanding number of television channels and more and more niche publications. Even conventional print and broadcast media can be highly customised to their audiences. This has seldom been as clearly demonstrated as by the libertarian journal *Reason*, which in June 2004 sent its subscribers individually customised issues of the journal. The cover of each issue had a satellite image showing the residence of the subscriber it was addressed to, with a red circle around the subscriber's home. Inside, alongside an article about surveillance and the end of privacy, the journal included fact boxes with detailed demographics

about the suburb and street in which the subscriber lived: how many of the neighbours are college educated, for instance, or how many children at the local school are being brought up by their grandparents.

Yet this level of customisation in print or broadcast media is still very rare, not least because of its relative expense. When Time Magazine declared "you" the person of the year in 2006, they did so not by customising the cover of the magazine but simply by placing a reflective, mirror-like piece of cardboard on the front cover. A lot cheaper than Reason's approach, if rather less startling.

On the internet, customisation is a great deal cheaper. However, several commentators have raised concerns that customisation in its extreme form will lead to fragmentation and the loss of community, as Daniel Palmer argues:

> In short, although ceaselessly promoting the advantages of 'user control' as a form of democratic participation, dominant forms of real time media conceal their tendency to isolate and separate individuals. [24]

As the video EPIC 2014 graphically shows, the future of digital media is gloomy indeed if this customisation allows us to shut our eyes to anything we haven't already accepted and asked for.

8. CONCLUSION

I have shown how two major trends that co-occurred with the spread of print and of literacy were the development of the public sphere and in parallel, of a private sphere that was largely nurtured by individual writing and silent reading. I see this as a parallel to today's spreading network literacy, which is apparent in the spread of blogging and other personal, participatory media. The first wave of literacy caused a change from a society where knowledge and ideas were largely spread as a community, in conversations and dialogue, to a society where knowledge and ideas were developed alone, in private. Of course print-based knowledge workers always have an idea of a writer of what they are reading or of a reader for the words they are writing, but they are still fundamentally alone, as pointed out by Chartier, Ong and others.

We are living through a second wave of literacy which has an opposite movement. Today's blogging and other participatory media requires readers to be writers and writers to be readers simultaneously. While there is still a large element of solitude in reading and writing online, we see the conversational and social aspects of this literacy increasing steadily. This is evident not only in online media such as blogging; it is trickling through into all media and can be seen in many aspects of today's participatory culture: the general public participates in traditional media as well as online discussion forums and blogs. We write fan fiction, we thrive on talk shows and quiz shows and SMS television and we contribute to the Wikipedia and we love reality television.

Blogging is a particularly palpable symptom of larger changes. Sennett, Habermas, the reluctant Republicans and other cultural skeptics can be read as the last throws of a form of culture where private and public can be separated.

9. REFERENCES

1. Apelseth, Arne. Den låge danninga : skriftmeistring, diskursintegrering og tekstlege deltakingsformer 1760-1840, Universitetet i Bergen, Bergen, 2004, VI, 607 s. /.
2. Bahnisch, Mark. The Political Uses of Blogs. in Bruns, Axel and Jacobs, Joanne eds. *Uses of Blogs*, Peter Lang, New York, 2006, 139-149.
3. Baoill, Andrew Ó. Weblogs and the Public Sphere. in Gurak, Laura, Antonijevic, Smiljana, Johnson, Laurie, Ratliff, Clancy and Reyman, Jessica eds. *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*, 2004.
4. Blood, Rebecca. Weblogs: A History and Perspective. *Rebecca's Pocket*. <http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html>
5. Boeder, Pieter. Habermas' Heritage: The Future of the Public Sphere in the Network Society. *First Monday*, *10* (9). <http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue10_9/boeder/>
6. boyd, danah. A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium. *Reconstruction*, *6* (4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml>
7. Brecht, Bertolt. The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication. in Willett, John ed. *Brecht on Theatre*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1964.
8. Chartier, Roger. The Practical Impact of Writing. in Finkelstein, David and McCleery, Alistair eds. *The Book History Reader*, Routledge, London, 2001.
9. Donath, Judith and boyd, danah. Public Displays of Connection. *BT Technology Journal*, *22* (4).
10. Efimova, Lilia and de Moor, A. Beyond Personal Webpublishing: An Exploratory Study of Conversational Blogging Practices. in *The 38th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, (Hawaii, 2005). <http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpl/freeabs_all.jsp?arnumber=1385452>
11. Eisenstein, Elizabeth. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*. Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1979.
12. Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. (Orig. 1962) MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1991.
13. Habermas, Jürgen. Towards a United States of Europe. *Signandsite.com*. <http://www.signandsight.com/features/676.html>
14. Himmer, Steve. The Labyrinth Unbound: Weblogs as Literature. in Gurak, Laura, Antonijevic, Smiljana, Johnson, Laurie, Ratliff, Clancy and Reyman, Jessica eds. *Into the Blogosphere*, University of Minnesota, 2004.
15. Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Routledge, New York, 1992.
16. Knights, Mark. *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture*. Oxford UP, Oxford, 2005.
17. Lejeune, Philippe. *"Cher écran..." Journal personnel, ordinateur, Internet*. Editions du Seuil, Paris, 2000.
18. Lenhart, Amanda and Fox, Susannah. Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet's New Storytellers, Pew Internet and American Life Project, Washington, D.C., 2006. <http://207.21.232.103/PPF/r/186/report_display.asp>
19. Lenhart, Amanda and Madden, Mary. Teen Content Creators and Consumers, Pew Internet and American Life Project, Washington, D.C., 2005. <http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/166/report_display.asp>
20. Matrullo, Tom. Loci Amoeni. Commonplaces ed., 2002. <http://tom.weblogs.com>
21. Mortensen, Torill and Walker, Jill. Blogging Thoughts: Personal Publication as an Online Research Tool. in Morrison, Andrew ed. *Researching ICTs in Context*, InterMedia, University of Oslo, Oslo, 2002, 249-279.
22. Notaro, Anna. The Lo(n)g Revolution: The Blogosphere as an Alternative Public Sphere? *Reconstruction*, *6* (4). <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/notaro.shtml>
23. Nussbaum, Emily. Kids, the Internet, and the End of Privacy: The Greatest Generation Gap Since Rock and Roll. *New York Magazine*. <http://nymag.com/news/features/27341/index.html?imw=Y>
24. Palmer, Daniel. The Paradox of User Control. in *Digital Arts and Culture*, (Melbourne, 2003), RMIT University, 160-164.
25. Peters, John Durham. *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999.
26. Plato. *Phaedrus*. (Orig. 370 BC). <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/phaedrus.html>
27. Poster, Mark. Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere. in Porter, David ed. *Internet Culture*, Routledge, NY, 1997, 201-218.
28. Sennett, Richard. *The Fall of Public Man*. Faber and Faber, London, 1986.
29. Serfaty, Viviane. *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs*. Amsterdam Monographs in American Studies, Amsterdam, 2004.
30. Sifry, David. State of the Blogosphere, October 2006, 2006. <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000443.html>
31. Sifry, David. The State of the Live Web, April 2007. *Sifry's Alerts*. <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000493.html>
32. van Dijck, José. Composing the Self: Of Diaries and Lifelogs. *Fibreculture* (3).

<http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue3/issue3_vandi
jck.html>

33.   Walker, Jill. Blogging from Inside the Ivory Tower.
in Bruns, Axel and Jacobs, Joanne eds. *Uses of Blogs*,
Peter Lang, New York, 2006.

34.   Walker, Jill. Mirrors and Shadows: The Digital
Aestheticisation of Oneself. in *Digital Arts and
Culture 2005*, (Copenhagen, 2005), IT University,
184-190.

35.   Walker, Jill. Weblog. in Herman, David, Jahn,
Manfred and Ryan, Marie-Laure eds. *Routledge*

Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory, Routledge,
London and New York, 2005, 45.

36.   Wittig, Rob. Justin Hall and the Birth of the 'Blogs
Electronic Book Review, 2003.
<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/v3/servlet/e
br?command=view_essay&essay_id=wittigele>