The Blog: Perfect Subversive Storytelling

There is a private place on the Internet. There is a place where one can record feelings, wants, emotions, unpopular opinions, and groundbreaking revelations with an assumption of confidentiality. Imagine a giant box made of one-way mirrors that hold the writer inside. He or she is completely satisfied in the understanding that all writing done in that box is on public display, across the globe, but only in the (perhaps nameless) context in which the author presents it. Inside, the only world is that which the writer creates, and he or she can create that world to be as similar or dissimilar to the reality on the outside. In reality, on the reverse side of that box, viewers are left to interpret the world that the writer shows them. They can do what they want with the information that they’re given, with the story that they’re told, but the only responses that the writer hears are the ones that she wants. Imagine now that the writer’s means of sharing that personal, yet not-so-personal, story is through blogging.

For thousands of years, humans have used the rich art of storytelling to affect change in both their personal, professional, and political lives (and often in all at once). These stories are often vessels for subversive discourse that seeks to unravel outdated social mores, empower political movements, and subtly undermine even those beliefs that are at the core of a cultural foundation. In blogging, the public has developed and discovered a protected venue to proliferate that political discourse in the most affective way, by creating a credible blend of opinion, emotion, and fact in which clear lines are rarely drawn and the end result has the potential to be the most powerful story, ever.
Researchers, like Gina Masullo Chen, have only recently sought to understand the motivations and social outcomes of personal blogging. Chen’s article “Why Do Women Write Personal Blogs?: Satisfying needs for self-disclosure and affiliation tell part of the story” examines the innate needs that fuel some women’s drives to be heard. Taking Chen’s conclusions about a woman’s need for self-disclosure one step further, one might arrive at the next logical step, which is to understand blogging as a powerful platform from which a woman can use that self-disclosure to assume a position of influence in the civic eye. Indeed, this option of blogging for civic influence was examined by Yong-Chan Kim and Kyun-Soo Kim in their article “Online Storytellers: Blogging in South Korea,” which documents actual instances in which social movements precipitated by the blog community in South Korea may well have been the determinate factors in political outcomes. Also concerned with the power of blogging to affect social and political change is Oreoluwa Somolu, who wrote “‘Telling our own stories’: African women blogging for social change” after studying the ways in which blogging by African women can be used as “a tool to contribute towards gender equality and women’s empowerment” (Somolu, p. 478). A participant in Somolu’s blog study survey agreed that “personal journal type” blogs have credibility in fostering a discussion of change by “contributing to the conversation in a stream of consciousness sort of way” (p.484). These writers have already begun to layer the implied power of personal blogging in powering change in all types of situations, from sexual politics to shifts in economics and government.

The Oxford English Dictionary documents the first use of the world “blog” (as a shortened form of “web-log”) in 1999, but the practice of keeping personal journals on the Internet had been around long before the creation of monolithic platforms like Blogger and Wordpress, that made the process accessible to Internet laymen. The attraction to personal
blogging is similar to that of journal writing in that it provides an outlet for those thoughts that one would rather not share but the recording of which is a process of validation and acceptance. The notable difference is that blog content is accessible to the general public, in most cases. This “universal” access is one of the most valuable attributes of the subversive blog. The Internet does not have political or economic borders that are included in its infrastructure. The same Universal Resource Locators (URLs) that are available in the United States of America are also available in Ghana, North Korea, and Russia. In many countries, the idea that a woman’s words are available to be seen by the public eye at all is a subversive one. Even though, as Somolu suggests, the African women who might have the most to say on the subjugation of women are instead writing about fashion and celebrity gossip, their voices alone in adding a layer of presence to the collective voice of Africa is an important shift in what is tradition, a challenge to the status quo. As a forum for “ordinary people” (Somolu, p.478), blogs as venues for storytelling are unique in giving voice to those who have previously been kept (or kept themselves) silent.

There are, of course, very real barriers to access for people in most places of the world. Whether they are result of poverty, physical location, or fear of the accountability that accompanies any kind of writing, many lack the electronic access that is necessary for blogging. Others lack the instruction needed to create a level of comfort with blogging that is (arguably) necessary to share in a real, directed way. Somolu wonders if gender inequality may actually be reinforced by the fact that women (as a demographic) “have less access to, and hence lack skills in using, ICTs (Internet Communication Technologies)” (p.478, information in parentheses added). Of course, there will always be groups of people who do not have access to information media, for one reason or another. Language barriers are another problem that Somolu notes, as
most blogging platforms are in English (p.485). As the medium gains popularity, however, many of these problems will be solved. Efforts are already underway to write new blogging software in some of the more common languages spoken in Africa, and no doubt there are similar efforts being made for languages spoken in other parts of the globe, as well.

As for Somolu’s concern about lack of access widening the gap of inequality (which is probable in a multitude of contexts besides sexual inequality and includes class-based and racial inequality, as well), it is a valid problem, but not one that lessens the positive effect of blogging in giving voice to the voiceless. If the effect of blogging, as sharing personal stories of minorities, is that it makes inequality more apparent by displaying the inaptitude of users who are historically marginalized, then it is only one more benefit of a medium that stretches across the globe: to publicize and make a problem that much more apparent. It would be a shame to confuse the emphasis of a problem with growing that problem.

Like the invention of the printing press all over again, entire classes of people are being given tools with which they find they can have an opinion by merit of their personal stories. The mere presence of that opinion in public forums, presented on an even keel with the voices that have always been heard, is a subversive and disconcerting diversion from what has always been understood about politics and culture. What’s more, personal stories are now being shared across the globe in a way that has never been possible before, without the powerful gatekeepers of publishing houses and wealth, which are rarely driven by commitment to social change. This discourse is responsible for sharing and altering ideas that may be innocent of intention but that may have extremely strong implications when shared with those for whom they are novel and revolutionary.
The concept of “sharing” works in tandem with that of universality. By staying connected, in a network of bloggers who encourage like-minded others, a writer can encourage his or her readers to share a story, to spread it to the full reach of the community. Most blogging platforms offer options for publishing posts to accounts on other social networking sites, like Facebook and Twitter. The publicity works both ways, as well, with viewers often visiting the social networking sites of the author after reading the blog. Plus, search engines like Google now have software through which viewers can subscribe to the “feeds” of multiple blogs and read the most recent posts in one place, which streamlines the sharing process even more. Large groups of bloggers with a common focus are often link together through sites like “BlogHer” (which specializes in blogs written by women) and “Afrigator” (which tracks African blogs) (Somolu, p.479). Chia said it well in “Welcome to Me-Mart: The Politics of User-Generated Content in Personal Blogs” as “Welcome to Web 2.0… where everything is viral and everyone is linked” (p.422).

One reason that the following and sharing of blogs works so well in the way of proliferating personal stories (as opposed to factual information, which might be more overtly beneficial as a shared resource) is by merit of a subversive writer’s need for “affiliation” (Chen, p.171). Although Chen refers to the need for affiliation as it drives women’s personal blogging, it makes sense to understand that need as a drive for any subjugated person. Aside from providing the support that comes from reading and being read by authors of blogs that validate one’s feelings, these communities provide authors with a chance to share their stories with key individuals who have influence in the subject matter realm that concerns the author.
Another key attribute of blogging that attracts subversive storytellers is the innate anonymity of the community. When creating a blog, one is free to decide between a real name and a fictitious handle (as is a pseudonym), and whether to publish blog comment publicly or privately, in a manner that requires the blog administrator/author’s approval. Often, authors are proud to be associated with their personal stories as testimonies to certain kinds of lives and social situations. Whether they imply a need for change or are simply written out of appreciation for the status quo, those blogs possess a level of credibility that can only be gained through an author’s complete ownership of his or her story.

That isn’t to say that those who publish without using their legal names are less successful at changing the social climate or are in some way “lesser.” In some places, like South Korea, most mainstream media outlets require legal names and national identification numbers from individuals before they can comment on electronic articles, video excerpts, etc. (Kim, p.13). Their version of bloggers, “non-gaek,” work on blogging platforms and then upload to “online newspaper sites” like OhmyNews, which allows for another layer of anonymous commentary on both current events and personal stories. Often, the most critical commentary of news media in South Korea happens in the blogosphere, because of the anonymity that is possible there, but those comments still have the effect of keeping media outlets in check for accuracy and bias. As Kim described it, “online storytelling is a means to provide the public with space to share their own stories in their own voices while bypassing suspicious middlemen, the mainstream news media” (Kim, p.15). For those people, and bloggers in other, similar political situations, blogging provides one of the only, truly anonymous outlets for personal opinions.

Finally, and perhaps the most attractive reason for subversive blogging, is the element of personalization that occurs through the creation and development of one’s blog. From physical
appearance to voice, subject matter, and comment-control, the author of a blog has control of a
discursive platform of which he or she has complete control. As a medium of subversive
storytelling, there are few options that offer more potential for the proliferation of ideas.
Sometimes, an author opts for a straightforward approach to offering his or her opinions. Bettina
Elias Siegel, at her blog, The Lunch Tray, is effective in using a smooth blend of her thoughts
about school lunch reform in conjunction with her own efforts, as a mom, to feed her children
nutritious, well-rounded meals. She offers plenty of warming (and sometimes not-so-warming)
anecdotes that describe she and her children’s forays into the lunchroom alongside hard-hitting
articles critiquing current food legislation and links to other blogs and journals with similar
opinions. The result is that her blog entries take on the extremely credible tone of a concerned,
impassioned mother who has the personal experience of feeding children to support her opinions.

Alternatively, there are blogs that choose to rely heavily on opinion and
inflammatory language, without much support (or credibility) gained from factual information or
metadata. It is unnecessary to label this sort of writing as “bad” or “wrong,” because it exists as
another option for effective subversive blogging, regardless of its factual merit. If the author
offers strong dissenting opinion or even information that is erroneous, his or her success as a
blogger hinges on the support that comes from others who believe the same things. Sometimes,
the most supported, followed blogs are ones that use the most effective, emotional tactics of
discourse, and nothing more. The most attractive aspect of many of this type of blog is their
reliance on personal experience to illustrate personal conviction. In many of the instances that
Oreoluwa Somolu discovered among blogs written by African women, these personal stories are
unassuming instances of self-disclosure, written without agenda. Their counterparts are those
blogs that use similar methods of self-disclosure (and eloquence) to gloss over their use of inaccurate information.

No matter the physical location, personal conviction, experience, or social situation of the author, the act of blogging provides the means of the ultimate subversive discourse. It is effective without being overbearing, engaging yet unassuming, and able to bring entire communities of thought together across continents. At the same time, bloggers are now moving outside of the realm of being unaccountable for what they write because of the anonymous, personal nature of blogging. Yes, they can remain anonymous writers. Yes, they can artfully weave their personal experiences in with their personal convictions. These things make the blog as much a weapon as a tool, and it is to be respected as such: as a vessel for the subversive, destructive potential of storytelling. Plausible deniability is no longer an option for those who would begin dramatic discourse without an understanding of the consequences of their actions. Stories are being shared instantly, across thousands of miles, by amateur authors and researchers, and without clear distinctions between fact and fiction. The implications are profound.

References


